**‘James Brown’, ‘Jamesbrown’, James Brown: Black (music) from the getup**

**Abstract**

The following article addresses the question of the blackness and radicalism of James Brown’s musical performances during what was arguably the peak of his career between 1964 and 1971. Using analytical frameworks from the fields of black studies, performance studies, and cultural theory, the article presents an argument for listening to Brown’s music in terms of the modalities of rupture. The activity of rupture is tracked through the preface to his autobiography, the stage performance he developed in the early part of his career, and the experiments in rhythm he orchestrated with his band in 1964. The article culminates in a close listening of the 1971 record ‘Super Bad’ as the aesthetic height of a black radicalism Brown was producing through his music.

**Introduction**

How did James Brown make black music? Was the music black because he was, or because of the way it was put together? How, in the period between 1964 and 1971, was he able to make a radically new form of black music? The aim over the course of this article is to interrogate the category ‘black music’, the name ‘James Brown’ and the relationship between them. The case will be made that Brown’s music used various modalities of rupture to destabilize the category ‘black music’ and the name ‘James Brown’ through violently propulsive performances that can only be understood as ‘black music’ made by ‘James Brown’. The modalities of rupture at stake in these performances function as part of the psychosocial resonances of racial slavery in North America and the cultural aesthetics of rhythm. Specifically in this article attention will be given to the work of Hortense Spillers on the violent formation of the black slave as a ‘zero degree’ flesh object in the New World, and John Mowitt’s conception of drumming as the broken tactility of an aesthetic and psychic exchange between the skin of the body and the flesh of the instrument (Spillers 2003, 206; Mowitt 2002). The work of these theorists will offer a way to engage with Brown’s musical and performative aesthetics. It was through his crosshatching of numerous ruptural effects that Brown made black music which was determinedly new and radical because it forcefully opened up the ground of the category ‘black music’.

Beginning in the mid 1950s black music in the U.S., especially in its mass-market form, underwent a number of rapid changes. Not only was there a confident visibility around the presentation of artists, but also labels such as Motown and Stax, and the successes of Sam Cooke and Aretha Franklin, saw the emergence of entirely new black musical styles (Guralnick, 2002; Smith, 2009; Ward, 2002). Between 1964 and 1971 James Brown was able to push the notion of the new in black popular music to a radical limit. He did this by using rhythmic textures to activate a ruptural dynamics that had been imminent to his mode of performance. The resulting sonic force which emerged over this seven year period of sustained experimentation in the mass market place, I want to argue, operates within the rubric of Fred Moten’s naming of the history of blackness as ‘testament to the fact that objects can and do resist’ (Moten 2003, 1).

I will map out how James Brown used rupture to refuse to allow his practice to settle by tracing a path from his autobiography, to the stage performance style he developed in the early part of his career, in order to listen to select recordings that were released between 1964 and 1971. What will emerge is that whilst Brown was often resistant to the idea of James Brown, the name ‘James Brown’ became the counter-signature for a new mode of music deemed to be undeniably black.

Addressing Brown's use of rupture in the production of a radical black aesthetic requires an understanding of the ways in which, as a theorist of rhythm, he was also always a theorist of blackness. This is why John Mowitt, Hortense Spillers and Fred Moten’s theorizations of rupture, rhythm and resistance allows them to serve as interlocutors for the knowledge of blackness locked into Brown's music, a knowledge which incessantly threatened to unlock all that held his musical project together.

All of these preoccupations will culminate in a close listening of Brown’s 1971 release ‘Super Bad’. The record marks a moment where blackness and/as rhythmic rupture – the constitutive elements of Brown’s *new thing* experiments – combined to reach a peak of intensely organized dearticulation. Whilst I recognize studies of ‘Super Bad’ are already in circulation – primarily authored by David Brackett – the musicological framework that tends to dominate these analyses is not the defining feature of this article (Brackett, 2000). Instead what will be prioritized in the encounter with Brown is phonic substance as a means of tracking black performance (Moten, 2003). This means listening to the sonic effects of Brown’s music not as a set of technical calculations, but aesthetically empirical registers of the distinction Cedric Robinson makes between actual being and historical being when theorizing the nature of the black radical tradition (Robinson, 2000).

**Marked from the getup**

Brown's rupturing of the name ‘James Brown’ can be found occurring in the preface to his 1987 autobiography *The Godfather of Soul*. It is an example of how Brown was able to unsettle his own authority, but he does so in a way that makes it recognizably a ‘James Brown’ preface. The preface has textual significance (in terms of what Brown says) and structural significance (in that Brown chooses to say what he says in the preface). What Brown records textually *and* structurally in the preface are the tensions around the question of form that shaped his career:

I was marked from the getup. You might say that I’ve got a mark on my back that I never knew was there. That’s because they fixed it where I couldn’t see it myself. But now that I can look back on my life, I realize that what I’ve done was no accident.

I was marked a lot of different ways. With names, for example. I was marked with a lot of different names. And each one has a story behind it.

As a kid growing up in a whorehouse, I was known as Little Junior. After I broke my leg a couple of times playing football, I was nicknamed Crip. In prison I was called Music Box.

The name of my first group, the Famous Flames, caused Little Richard to say, ‘Y’all are the onliest people who ever made yourselves famous before you *were* famous.’

As a performer, I’ve had names like Mr Dynamite, The 'Please Please Please' Man, The Hardest Working Man in Show Business, Soul Brother Number One, The Sex Machine, His Bad Self, The Godfather of Soul, and The Minister of the New New Super Heavy Funk.

My full legal name is James Joe Brown Jr. Ben Bart, my manager for many years and a man who was like a father to me, always called me Jimmy. Today, I prefer to be called *Mr.* Brown.

But of all the names I’ve been marked with, James Brown is probably the most mysterious. In school the kids and the teachers always called me by it like it was one word: Jamesbrown. Just like that. But originally my name wasn’t supposed to be James Brown at all. It should have been something else. (Brown 1987, preface)

The ‘mark’ Brown carried ‘from the getup’ is the figurative centrepiece here, and he immediately identifies it as a physical phenomenon, something that Spillers would call a flesh wound. Brown realizes this wound had always been in place, and therefore ‘James Brown’ as a formal entity is at stake in this preface. The mark, implying physical rupture, did not appear once Brown was made, but it seems it was constitutive of him. He was always *marked* as ‘James Brown’.

Brown spends the preface translating the corporeality of the mark into the acquisition of names. It appears that ‘as a performer’ Brown had multiple names, and as Brown lists each name, although they are recognizably his, the name ‘James Brown’ is deferred. This does not mean the name ‘James Brown’ is absent, rather it is marked within each title. The name the reader waits for throughout the preface though is ‘James Brown’. Brown goes to work on undermining this name because it is ‘mysterious’ and has always threatened to fall in upon itself. The name has been cut to sound like ‘it was one word: Jamesbrown. Just like that’. Ultimately Brown rejects the precedence of the name the reader has been anticipating throughout the preface. His name, he claims, ‘should have been something else’.

Textually Brown's preface to his autobiography raises several issues. At its centre is a self-identified ‘mark’ which introduces instability around the status of Brown's body. It seems there was an insecurity pre-occupying Brown, of which the mark was the source. The mark also places the name ‘James Brown’ on a teetering edge. It was dispersed into several names that pointed to the proper name ‘James Brown’, but when using ‘James Brown’ he felt the name was always on the verge of collapse. The temporality of the ‘getup’ and its relationship to the mark is fundamental to the way the preface works. Brown was not marked, wounded, cut, or dispersed, after his formation as ‘James Brown’. Instead he seems to be saying the mark - as an effect of rupture - was his means of emergence. It is important to recall that Brown's name is the counter-signature for all that is said in the preface. Something has emerged from the mark on his back which operates under the heading ‘James Brown’, even though he is doing everything he can to disrupt all that ‘James Brown’ signifies. Locked in this preface is not only evidence of how Brown used the modalities of rupture to place a strain upon the coherency of his body and name, but also a method for listening to the elements which made Brown's music black.

**Assembling James Brown**

The question of how Brown the performer was made has also been taken up by Cynthia Rose. In her *Living In America: The Soul Saga of James Brown*, she interviewed those who were witness to his practices. Each of her interviewees noted that in putting together his stage act, Brown was always working in the space between his constitution and dispersal. One of the central members of Brown's band, saxophonist Maceo Parker:

When James was building JAMES BROWN almost everyone offered potential to him.…. His life became so amazin’ – he went all the way to the top, and beyond. But he could never accept arriving. He always had one more place to go. (Rose 1990, 37)

Brown was able to split himself in order to put together James Brown the performer, but there was a restlessness that meant the building of James Brown never seemed to stop. Parker highlights how Brown used deformation and reformation simultaneously, and therefore Brown’s ability to rebuild himself continually rested upon a threat of dissolution. In her interviews with Brown, Rose discovers how he countered this threat:

'Thing about it is', he now says proudly, 'I always *doubled myself.* Whatever it was, I tried for twice over.' (37)

From Rose's interviews it seems dissolution was a consistent issue for Brown. The cut was something he was always responding to, in order to cover its dangers. Yet the process of covering became necessary to Brown as a performer, in that it allowed for the production of doubles (‘The Please Please Please man’, ‘The Sex Machine’, ‘His bad self’). The threat of collapse carried by the mark became the source for an insistent (re)productivity at work in Brown’s performances.

To give her readers a grasp of how Brown doubled himself in the restless making of James Brown, Rose describes the experience of seeing him on stage:

He takes his transformed self, the highest, baddest, hippest character he can construct, and - in a gesture which pierces the crowd to its heart – *destroys* it just for them. In the frenzy of his demanding and pleading, even the most elaborate do starts to cascade. And within minutes, wet curls will be clinging to Brown’s face and neck, flopping onto his forehead. Within seconds, sweat has softened the sharpest lines and creases of his elegant clothing. Eventually, it will fill his shoes, anoint his back and legs. Off come his glittering cuff links (often flung into the audience). Shirt-sleeves hanging, knees stained with blood, James has visibly ‘given it up’ – for the listeners before him in the dark. (73)

Through this description Rose implies that Brown was *making* himself before entering the spotlights, yet his act was about the destruction of the performer he took such care to build. Brown's stage career was about more than the performative dichotomy of assembly and deformation though. He was replaying these manoeuvres with such intensity that it was difficult to tell which came first. The mark was both constitutive and disruptive of James Brown.

During a conversation with Brown's hairdresser Leon Austin, colour and racial difference are also introduced into an analysis of Brown's reproductivity. Rose notes how Austin uses gradations of colour and racial status to discuss the transition between the meticulousness with which Brown made himself, and the violence with which he took that making apart on stage:

Let me run it down for you. James is dark, he is *ugly.* He made the ugly man pretty because he made himself pretty. But, first of all that has to do with colour. He made himself pretty in spite of being dark. (72)

Brown's self-evident darkness, according to Austin, is a source of disgust. At the same time Austin also implies Brown used this darkness to counter-intuitively transform himself into something pretty. But Brown did not simply move in one direction, from a darkness which was ugly to one which was pretty. As Rose makes clear in her description above Brown confused the line between making and unmaking himself on stage. His passage, by way of his darkness, from ugliness to prettiness was always a means of finding a route back to something more spectacularly compelling through an ecstatic inability to call off the performance. On stage during the early part of his career Brown was seemingly stuck in a circuit where he repeated his own collapse, reassembly, and collapse over and over again.1 In many ways Brown’s performative modality can be seen as part of a continuum of the presentation of black male artists during the period. Whereas Sam Cooke and the Motown recording company sought a more polished and palatable look, Brown’s stage show can be seen as the radical edge of a tendency exemplified by vocalists such as Otis Redding (Guralnick, 2002; Smith, 2009; Ward, 2002).

There is a link between the mark in Brown's preface and his darkness as a kind of mark. The mark on Brown's back had been there from the getup and it destabilized his name. He had a series of names that stood in for his proper name, which when announced could not hold. The mark, being on his back, also went to work on his body. On stage Brown looped between an ornately made James Brown and the excessive disruption of the James Brown he had made. The process occurred with such frequency that even his destruction appeared to be transformative. Finally there is the mark of Brown's darkness, we might even call this his blackness. This inflection of the mark also had transformative qualities. Whether it was ugly or beautiful, Brown's blackness was always making him. It was constitutive of all those different James Browns, even the one that sounded like it was one word. His blackness, we could say, had been with him from the getup.

**Blackness, marking and Hortense Spillers**

What are the implications of thinking of blackness as a constitutive instance of a priori marking? What does this line of speculation do to an understanding of Brown's blackness and the blackness of his music? When hypothesizing on Brown's mark as the mark of his blackness, it is important to focus on how he goes about announcing this phenomenon. Brown only ever names the mark in the preface of his autobiography, which makes it possible to situate Brown's naming of the mark within a wider consideration of marking in the field of Black literary studies. Although there is a range of research on this issue, I want to make the case for a particular echo between Brown and the work of Hortense Spillers.2

In her essay ‘Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe’, Spillers examines the tensions surrounding black bodies as an outcome of marking. These tensions emerged initially through the rupturing of black flesh, which was then translated into troubled subject status for Black people in the New World. Spillers’ starting point is the Atlantic slave trade, where the capture of Africans and their movement through the middle passage was part of a project designed to figure the ‘enslaved as *property*’ (Spillers 2003, 217):

The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness….which open[ed] the Atlantic Slave Trade….We write and think, then, about an outcome of aspects of African-American life in the United States under the pressure of those events. (209)

To designate slaves as quantities raised fundamental questions of their constitution as legitimate subjects, and securing the racial mechanics of slavery required the maintenance of this incoherency. The focal point for this process was the enslaved black female, as she became the engine for blackness as a site of marking. The control and restructuring of her reproductive uses ensured the ‘genetic reproduction of the enslaved’ (217).

The control over the reproductive capacity of the black female was enforced through the flesh: ‘the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange’ (220). Blackness for the enslaved female was about the ‘anatomical specifications of rupture’ (207). The intensity of marking led to experiences of a ‘seared, divided, ripped-apartness’ (206). Under such conditions it is not only flesh as the surface constitution of the body refigured as object which is jeopardized, but also reproduction. As the prime site of marking the gendered specificity of the enslaved female was ruptured so as to create the condition of possibility for the black as slave. What the female becomes in such a situation is a machine reproducing blackness as a mark. The attention given to the female was central to the practice of enslavement because, as Spillers notes, the slave always followed the condition of the mother. If the female reproduced blackness and the slave followed that condition, the slave always remained illegitimate. Captive offspring could never have access to paternal law, the security of which was the sole possession of the subject:

We might well ask if this phenomena of marking and branding actually ‘transfers’ from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments. (207)

What Spillers schematizes in her essay is a theory of blackness as a mark. To be marked as black, which is a process of being marked as an object, means that at the moment of constitution as a black object rupture is the structural condition of possibility for blackness. To be black means to have troublesome access to a body, name, and gender, because blackness is a supposed reduction (but really a privileged access) to surface flesh.

In many ways it is possible to think of Spillers' essay as a set of expansive notes on Brown's preface. But I want to reverse the order of seniority here and claim that Brown's passage of writing is a beautiful concentration of all that Spillers is trying to say: I was marked from the getup. Either way what the synthesis of Brown and Spillers allows for is to move away from thinking about Brown's black musical performance as an endless replay between making James Brown and ripping that making up. Instead, ripped-apartness was the site of black (re)production for all those performances which operated under the heading ‘James Brown’.

**Return to Brown's preface**

So far Brown's preface has been analysed solely in terms of its textual content. What was identified earlier as the structural significance of the preface has yet to be taken into account. Brown's use of the preface as the stage for his announcement of the mark also needs to be considered because there is no reference to it elsewhere in the autobiography. There is a case to be made that his use of the preface in this way allows it to function as a resonating chamber for the effects of the mark as they have been set out above. To grasp how this is so requires thinking about how a preface is made and its connection to the text it announces.

In her translators preface to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Spivak examines the process of preface making. She states that despite preceding the main body of a text, the preface is always an act of reflection upon what is about to be read. Although it is positioned before the text, intending to secure it as a site of authority, it can only ever be written after the event of the text’s production. Therefore as a reading of the text before the event of the text’s reading, a preface operates in a spatio-temporal flux. It is out of sync with yet dependent upon the text it announces:

A written preface provisionally localizes the place where, between reading and reading, book and book, the inter-inscribing of ‘reader(s)’, ‘writer(s)’ and language is forever at work. Hegel had closed the circle between father and son, text and preface. He had in fact suggested, as Derrida makes clear, that the fulfilled concept – the end of the self-acting method of the philosophical text – was the pre-dicate – pre-saying – pre-face, to the preface. In Derrida’s reworking, the structure preface-text becomes open at both ends. The text has no stable identity, no stable origin, no stable end. Each act of reading the ‘text’ is a preface to the next. The reading of a self-professed preface is no exception to the rule. (Spivak 1976, xii)

For Spivak the preface as a formal device contorts the text it announces and it reveals that both are open. Contrary to convention a preface is unable to stabilize the text it announces, and the attempt to use it in such a way exposes the flux between text and preface. Spivak's analysis of preface making is relevant to James Brown's autobiography because it is only inside the preface that he uses the mark to unsettle the singularity of his body and name. Considered in light of Spivak's theory of preface making it seems that within his preface Brown is not only troubling his own name and body, but that that act is redoubled by its staging there. In effect Brown's preface as a formal device is refusing the authority his autobiography lays claim to. Brown makes it clear he was marked from the getup and an a priori violence, something like his blackness, was constitutive of him. By naming the mark as a priori to the autobiography, and its absenting from the remainder of the text, it becomes more than a descriptive marker; it is transformed into an action. Brown is marking the main body of the book. Before Brown can be read autobiographically, he has already refused that reading. In short James Brown is prefaced by his status as Jamesbrown. The mark is already at work - it always has been - from the getup.

Extending this out into the analysis of his early career, Brown performed the content and form of his preface. He was never able to settle as Brown at any level because the rupture of the mark was always at work. It dissolved the coherency provided by the proper name, the body, and the self-narrative. Whatever he produced though also carried the indisputable mark of James Brown. It was the generative force for the blackness that was James Brown. The mark, as a ripped apartness which for Spillers is the reproductive texture of blackness, emerged from a legacy of beating which Brown used to make James Brown. Therefore this legacy of beating was always a condition of possibility for him. I want to focus on the ways Brown transformed the theatricality of beating into the phonic materiality of a beat. This involves thinking about how the mark on his back became what Fred Moten calls an ‘open rhythmic space’, from which emerged a new black music - we could even call it a new blackness - unified by modalities of resistance, even as it produced phono-material resistances to itself (Moten 1999, 230).

**The new thing**

Brown's transformation of the spectacle of beating into the phonic substance of a beat took place in 1964. Over the course of this year there was a dramatic shift in the character of Brown's act, the direction of Brown's music, and the constitution of his blackness. Rather than being scored solely onto his body and name, the mark became the aesthetic framework for the practice of the band as a whole. The use of the mark as a sonic source for the group allowed Brown to open up a set of possibilities that seem to have been set out in the autobiographical preface. Brown was using the tension of the mark to implement different principles of sonic organization. This shift in emphasis meant a change in the arrangement of the group, which in turn meant the production of a new kind of blackness, but one that was still identifiably James Brown's.

When discussing the sonic shift that took place in 1964, Brown is very specific about how he and the group forged their alternate musical parameters:

I was still called a soul singer – I still called myself that – but musically I had already gone off in a different direction. I had discovered that my strength was not in the horns, it was in the rhythm. I was hearing everything, even the guitars like they were drums. I had found out how to make it happen. On playbacks, when I saw the speakers jumping, vibrating a certain way, I knew that was it: deliverance. I could tell from looking at the speakers that the rhythm was right. What I’d started on ‘Out of Sight’ I took all the way on ‘Papa’s Bag’. Later on they said it was the beginning of funk. I just thought of it as where my music was going. The title told it all: I had a new bag. (Brown 1987, 149)

Rhythm became the organizing principle for a new version of the band. Brown felt new possibilities lay in getting each of the instruments to play ‘like they were drums’. The new group which emerged from the ‘different direction’ Brown decided he could see in the vibrations of the speakers were much tighter. Now organized along rhythmic lines, the differences between the group’s parts were no longer so marked. Even the distinctions between Brown as a vocalist and the instrumentality of the group were reduced.

Eventually Brown’s speculative theorizations of rhythm became known as funk. This feature has been mapped out in detail by Ricky Vincent and Anne Danielsen, particularly in terms of the resonances Brown’s experiments had with the field of free jazz (Vincent 1996; Danielsen, 2006). During the period immediately after its creation the group’s new sound did not have a settled name. It was referred to as the new thing, the new bag, ‘James Brown Anticipation’, a move in another direction, and was described as being ‘ahead’ (Rose 1990, 59). The flux implied by the inability to give the new practice a settled name is significant. It is worth thinking about how the new sonic practice, despite not being given an identifiable title, became attached to the category of blackness.

Beginning with the release of ‘Out of Sight’ the group’s drive towards a unified beat did not reduce the scope of the music they played. Brown's introduction of a singular principle meant the group's sonic palette was instead enhanced by what were seemingly musical constraints. The new rhythmic dominance manifested itself as a series of specific sonic traits which were indistinguishable from musical themes. A relationship developed during this period between what the music was doing, the way the music was experienced, and what it seemed to be about. Post 1964, if James Brown's music was of anything it was determinedly tactile and textured, it sounded like an attempt to manifest a new object in the world through a coordinated collective manipulation of rhythm. If James Brown's music was about anything, it was about blackness. The new object the group were attempting to phono-materialize was a black object.

The first three years of the new sound were released on a set of near exemplary pieces of what Amiri Baraka would go onto call ‘New Black music’ (Jones / Baraka, 2010). Recordings such as ‘Papa's Got a Brand New Bag’, ‘Cold Sweat’, ‘I Got the Feeling’, and ‘I Don't Want Nobody To Give Me Nothing’, saw the band stripping down the arrangement to a set of core rhythmic elements. They were introducing a new found density and weight by building up tangible blocks of rhythmic texture to assemble their new sonic object. But due to a tension which preoccupied the music, the making of the new black phonic object also always sounded as much like its pursuit as well as its production. The tension between pursuit and production arose out of the group’s inability to fully realize the sound object, no matter how close they got to its manifestation. The phono-material disruption they enacted on their instruments in order to play them like they were drums, which became a rupture internal to the music, could never quite reach its conclusion in the constitution of a new breed thing that was the focal point of Brown's new blackness. The result was a musical frustration, which both interrupted and propelled these series of post-1964 records. It was a frustration with the sound object and a frustration emanating from it. The groups collective rhythm orientated drive towards the new black object experienced blockages at crucial moments, but these blockages or refusals seemed to function as the ground of the new music, and therefore the ground of the new blackness Brown was generating. This sound effect, which was also a sonic process, points towards Maceo Parker’s earlier noted observation that when building ‘JAMES BROWN’, Brown ‘could never accept arriving. He always had one more place to go’. (Rose 1990, 37)

The sound object would generally take up three characteristic types across these records. It would appear as a generalized but cryptic musical entity (with references to the new bag, or new thing); it would be figured as feminine, and therefore became a source of sexual desire (e.g. ‘Mother Popcorn’ and ‘Give It Up Or Turn It A Loose’); or the object would be politicized as the demand for black self-determination. Brown's propulsion towards these various musical, erotic, or militant forces would be accompanied by a groundswell of sadomasochism at ecstatic moments on the records. This sadomasochism slipped between sounding like a frustration with the objects refusal to be revealed, and the very ground of that refusal from the object itself. A self-destructive violence, seemingly directed against the music, would often come in as a point of frustration to both interrupt and make the record.

The sonic slippage between disruption and constitution is the key point here. On these recordings the musical, erotic, and political resistance coming from the object, and the resulting violence directed at it, was not external to Brown's band. It was always emanating from within the group, being produced by their music as the accelerated stutter of *baby baby baby* on ‘I Got the Feeling’, or Brown's breaking out in a cold sweat. In the attempt to reduce the mark to a beat, it seems that the group produced an amplification of beating.

With the post-1964 experiments, rhythm became a formative principle of the new James Brown group, but it was a rhythmic dominance inextricably linked to the modality of the mark. Something emerged out of those new vibrations which were the ground for the new thing Brown could feel ahead, but at the same time refused the constitution of that thing. Getting all the instruments to play like they were drums was constitutive of, and resistant to, James Brown's new phono-material blackness. In this sense it was not as if Brown's musical project was a failure. It was anything but. Yet it seems that what Brown was generating when he saw the speakers jumping was a set of possibilities for the creation of a new black sonic object which had a bass driven connection to rupture.

**The skin of the drum**

The case I am making is for a connection in Brown’s music between beat and beating. In many ways this connection can read like a semantic game or a simple anthropomorphic analogy, but there is too much going on between the mark on Brown’s back, blackness as a history of marking, and the phonic materiality of his new thing, for it not to demand a stringent sonic theorization. To work through the significance of the transferences between Brown’s preface, his blackness, and his rhythmic experiments in 1964, it is necessary to follow the movement between instrumental and corporeal beating.

In *Different Drummers* Martin Munro discusses James Brown's use of rhythm as a practice of the Black Consciousness movement. After the release of ‘Out of Sight’ he believes Brown's music showed that ‘rhythm is not a static element of black music but a dynamic, evolving force for innovation that projects forward into the future, imagining new functions for the beat and inventing new musical styles’ (Munro 2010, 188). For Munro Brown's focus on the rhythmic one marked out a form of blackness for which, at the time, there did not seem to be an available discursive language. The claims for dynamism that Munro makes with regards to Brown’s use of rhythm in 1964 I want to ascribe to a transference between the beaten body and the mechanics of his rhythm experiments. Such an analytic framework can be found in John Mowitt’s account of drumming. His *Percussion: drumming, beating, striking* is an attempt ‘to come to terms with the sense made in and of senseless beating’ (Mowitt 2002, 2). Rhythm, for Mowitt, troubles the difference between musical sense and senselessness. To frame his analysis he establishes ‘the concept of the percussive field’ which is defined by three areas, the musicological, the sociological, and the psychoanalytic (3). The drum relays the divisions of this field:

By that I mean not only that the drum must be abused to be played, but also that in possessing a body, a skin, a head, and a voice, the drum has long represented the expressive interiority that we call the subject, the human being insofar as it intones ‘I’. It is as though the drum cannot be represented without figuring it through the body; in this sense the drum links the musicological with the psychoanalytical. By the same token, of course, the body has also long functioned as a site of percussive beating.

He continues:

In a more aggressively violent register, flogging, flagellating, scourging, whipping, and spanking all exemplify the same phenomenon. Whether beaten by others or by oneself, the body, and specifically the skin, hinge the individual and the social, serving as the site of social contact in its most banal and intractable sense. (6)

For Mowitt rhythm is the materialization of an exchange between drum and human, human and drum. Violence is at work in the movement between them. The beating of the object, in this case the drum, becomes its means of constitution and a beating of the skin also achieves the same thing for the body. But Mowitt’s ‘percussive field’ is not about seamless flows between the body and the drum. His notion of rhythmic hinge works on the basis that beating is also a site of disruption. For Mowitt’s reading to work rhythm also needs to be thought of as a process which violently marks the differences between human, drum, and object. The pathway from human to drum to object and back again is disrupted by a ‘striking sound’ (6).

It is at this point that Spillers’ analysis of blackness as marking comes into play. Her essay centred on the systematic transformation of captive Africans into black objects through the orchestrated physicality of violence. This form of beating was primarily disseminated through the female, whose flesh was ruptured in order to stimulate the reproduction of slaves. Her reproductivity though had none of the material, sexual, gendered, and psychic reassurances that accompanied legitimate maternal practices. For Black diasporans in the New World this became an inheritance. The rupture was passed on and became the condition of possibility for the production of blackness. As Spillers makes clear the ‘displacement of genitalia’ was key to this process of making sure blackness, as an affect of violent beating, was always in place from the getup.

The rhythmic exchange between human, the drum, and the object maps onto the psycho-material-sexual legacy of blackness as a reproduction of beating, and it does so in a way that becomes applicable to James Brown. Filtered through the work of Mowitt and Spillers the mark in the autobiographical preface becomes the generative device for the post 1964 rhythmic innovations. The scene of marking in the preface was an acknowledgement of blackness as inherited anatomical distortion, but it was also the activation of that blackness as rupture. What Brown was able to do was to use the a priori marking and allow it to propel his excessive, incessant, theatricality as a performer.

His attempt to cut everything away bar the rhythm in 1964 could be thought of as the rematerialisation of beating which had marked him from the getup, and it was a beat(ing) which was black. Brown’s use of the mark was crucial to the way the music became a pursuit of a black object, because the black object also enacted a refusal. The act of moving ahead in a whole other direction to create a new thing was never resolved. This manoeuvre was an important aesthetic and political procedure for Brown and the band, because it meant their use of the mark, and consequently their production of blackness, never settled down. Instead of recording a fully realized black object, James Brown and his band’s drive towards blackness as rhythmic thing could not avoid a resistance from the object.

**James Brown's ‘Super Bad’**

As was made clear in the introduction to this article, the study of James Brown has been undertaken in order to act as preparation for listening to his 1971 release ‘Super Bad’. It was also made clear that the type of listening at stake in this article is not informed by the scholarship of David Brackett. Instead what I have done is track the phonic substance of Brown’s music through the field of black studies as it intersects with critical theory, performance studies and cultural studies. This approach has been taken up in order to amplify the radical rupturing force of the blackness Brown was producing during this period of his career. As a result the argument I now want to make is that the constitutive elements of his musical performance that have been set out so far feed into the phonic materiality of ‘Super Bad’. Understood in terms of both the historical and immediate conditions of its production, ‘Super Bad’ constitutes an exemplary piece of black music.

Released originally as a three part continuous single, ‘Super Bad’ arguably represented the peak of Brown’s ruptural experiments in rhythm. This record could be thought of as the final flux before the process which started out in 1964 settled down into what are now recognized as the formal elements of funk. In this respect I would argue on ‘Super Bad’ Brown leads the band in the production of intensely organized dearticulation. They use rhythm as a dominant practice and through it the band make the new thing Brown desires, whilst at every point the new thing refuses to be made. This is not to say that Brown's proposition for a new black music falls apart. Instead it is that the simultaneity of making and its refusal – i.e. rupture - is the ground of the new music.

‘Super Bad’ was a prime example of the principle Brown had installed in 1964. It is a piece of rhythmic systemization where every instrument is playing like a drum. The horns, organ, bass, drums and vocals are all aligned in a solid formation. The track rolls on a disciplined but open beat, propulsively building from chorus to bridge, providing Brown with the platform to make his demands. At four minutes though, after another bridge, Brown undertakes an act of willed self destruction which it turns out is nothing but a reconstruction of his already new thing. This moment centres on an exchange with Robert McCullogh on the alto-saxophone. He pulls McCullogh out of the rhythmic patterns the rest of the group are working on, and calling the alto into the centre of the performance, Brown commands him to take the band apart. Brown wants the alto to puncture the new sonic unity of the band. He implores McCullogh to do it. He commands the instrument, the musical object, to be disruptive. He wants McCullogh to rip through the collective rhythm the band are producing.

During this two minute segment of ‘Super Bad’ what we hear is the ruptural counter-proposal for a different type of music in the midst of the making of a new black music. Brown had spent the previous six years developing a sonic principle of beat(ing) that had allowed him to form a new sound. This new sound was a new thing. By tearing a hole in the new wholeness the band were reaching for, Brown was staying attuned to even newer modes of existence, newer ways of understanding, newer forms. These possibilities were marked within the new black thing Brown had begun to hear in 1964, but they also lay beyond its grasp. He had found a way to another type of music, which he could hear the possibilities for in the midst of producing what at the time was considered *the* new black music. Both the new music and the tearing of a hole in that newness could only be made when everything, every object, was beaten like it was a drum.

**Conclusion**

The terms of this article were that James Brown produced black music through phono-material modalities of rupture. He did so in a manner which enacted the rupturing of the very basis of the category of black music. The deployment of such forces to destabilize the basis of what we choose to locate under the heading of black music was the necessary ground for its production. James Brown, it seems, had known this from the getup.

It is clear that Brown's music deployed rupture as the condition of possibility for the production of blackness in the new world. He paid close attention to rhythm as a theoretical and sensory device to amplify this modality of rupture. It allowed him to make black music that operated on the cusp of both the realization of a new black thing and an intense resistance from that same thing, which in turn became another proposition for a new music. This was due to the way in which in Brown's music the resonances of beat were barely differentiated from those of beating.

As evidenced on ‘Super Bad’, the performance never settled on simple associations of blackness and/as rhythm. There was a constant pushing at the parameters of the black sonic object. Brown both urged the band to incessantly build the new thing and to incessantly tear it apart. What this meant was that there was something at stake in the formal arrangement of Brown's sound which made it not only black, but also insurgent because of the blackness it produced. Brown's music was black both because he was and in terms of its construction. He amplified the psycho-sexuality of the mark on his back – which was the ruptured mark of his blackness – and redeployed it as the basis for a collective black rhythmic program.

This communalized attempt to construct a black thing, by way of sound, also came under pressure from the very blackness that was being assembled. Each time the parameters of the object were being marked out they came into contact with, and were troubled by, a counter-proposition which broke apart the disciplinary rhythm of the group, but also made them make another new music.

To put all this in much simpler terms, what occurred under the heading ‘James Brown’ was perhaps the most important set of sonic innovations to emerge in the late Twentieth Century: No James Brown, no black music. Which is really another way of saying: No James Brown, no music.

**Notes**

1 See ‘James Brown and The Famous Flames’, The Tami Show: 1964(2011). Universal. U.S.A [Video: DVD]

2 Also see Henderson 2002; 2009

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