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## CHAPTER 9

# Musical marginalization processes: Problematizing the marginalization concept through an example from early 20th century American popular culture

SVEN BJERSTEDT

[A]ll African-American music making is driven by and permeated with the memory of things from the cultural past. (Floyd, 1995, p. 10)

As a supradiscursive phenomenon interwoven with the discourses that socially constitute it, black music resonates across the sites and sounds of public culture, from black to white and back again. (Radano, 2003, p. 12)

An analytical approach influenced by cultural studies may help us see how meanings are generated and spread through the practices and structures in a given culture. For instance, by relating musical sound to categories such as class, ethnicity, body, and sexuality, these kinds of studies have provided a broader and deeper picture of meaning production in jazz music (Townsend, 2000; Ake, 2002).

Marginalization as a cultural phenomenon and as an analytical concept is closely related to and highly dependent on meaning production. Clearly, marginalization both as a concept and as a phenomenon is neither monolithic, stable, nor unambiguous. Several examples from popular music show how, even though music forms may start out being identified – and actively identifying themselves – as marginalized, they often quite soon display a remarkable change of identity. The route from *underground to mainstream* has been travelled by blues, rock, and hip

hop artists, as well as many others. The transition enables you to prosper by being “down and out”. The relations of identity and authenticity to marginalization will often prove quite paradoxical in the commercialized world of popular music.

## THE DOUBLENESS AND INSTABILITY OF THE MARGINALIZATION CONCEPT

The very concept of marginalization is indeed an intricate one. While concrete exemplifications of marginalization in a large number of fields abound in research literature, explicit theoretical problematizations of the concept as such are scarce, to the best of my knowledge. An important and influential text by Spivak (1988) is highly relevant in its problematization of the study of the third world subject. Spivak argues that knowledge is never innocent; it always expresses the interests of the knowledge producers. In particular, she holds, Western academic research is always colonial, produced in order to support Western interests. In this and other aspects, Spivak’s critical study “Can the subaltern speak?” (1988) clearly does deal with the marginalization concept. The points I wish to make here, however, are slightly different in that the case I put forward displays a certain doubleness and instability that seems to me to be intrinsic to the concept of marginalization. In the case I present, I argue, this becomes visible through processes of transculturation.

I will focus on an instance of musical marginalization: a concrete, narrow object of study retrieved from American popular culture of the early 20th century. I take this case to exemplify the doubleness and instability of the very concept of marginalization. It is not just a “success story” of swift transitions from suburb to glamour; rather, it encompasses the complete watering down of several thousand years worth of cultural/mythological meaning production.

My object of study is W. C. Handy’s “Aunt Hagar’s Blues”. On examining this song, a number of questions present themselves and will be discussed rather extensively. Who was this Hagar? What meanings have been ascribed to her? How have they been shaped and reshaped? Before dealing with such questions, a number of relevant concepts ought to be presented and operationalized in the present section, for instance, identity, meaning production, transculturation, deconstruction, and ideological power.

### *Identity: A strategic, positionistic, non-essentialist concept*

Identity is a crucial concept for any researcher who wishes to apply perspectives that are influenced by critical theory and cultural studies (Frith, 1996). It is not a question of how music reflects those who play it or listen to it, but rather how they are constructed and produced by music. Identity is perceived as a non-essentialist concept: a process, not a thing; a becoming, not a being.

It works strategically, positionistically. Our experience of music is part of this identity process. According to Frith, music helps create people as a net of identities. An identity works as an ideal, but at the same time identity is real, performed in musical activity.

*Meaning production:*

*The role of history and culture in a process of becoming*

The strategic, positionistic concept of identity is at the core of discourse theory. This perspective shows how history, language, and culture are used in processes of becoming: identities come into existence through the meanings that are produced. The question is not what we are but what we can become. Foucault (2011) describes how the subject is submitted to practices of classification: systems of differentiation and instrumental methods. Hall (1996) points out how the subject according to Foucault is historicized as an effect of and through the discourse: a genealogy of the technologies of the self.

*Transculturation: Forms of culture travel through time and space;  
hybridization and indigenization as creative processes*

Musical practice is characterized by an ethnical pluralism which is difficult to relate to 'top down' perspectives on ethnicities (Stokes, 1997). Lull (2000) points to the heterogeneity of culture: it oscillates between tradition and change. When its bonds with a certain geographical area are untied, the deterritorialized culture survives in a modified form. The migration in time and space of cultural norms is usually termed transculturation. It is a creative process which is facilitated by modern communication technology. Cultural hybrids come into being (hybridization); imported cultural elements assume local characteristics (indigenization, glocalization); people resume a cultural home in every new place they live (reterritorialization, which is an active socio-cultural synthesis) and form diasporic public spheres. Culture can be actively reterritorialized through the ability of communication technology to facilitate social interaction over physical distances.

*Deconstruction: Culturally determined, dynamic meaning production in a  
transcultural world; Blackness perspectives*

In recent decades, phenomena such as meaning and meaning production have been problematized. Dyndahl (2009) sums up some predominant lines of thought. Following Wenger (1998), learning is often viewed as negotiations of meaning. Kristeva (1980) has formulated the notion of intertextuality: text in her view should be viewed as a productive combination and transformation of semiotic codes, discursive genres, material and significance. Bendix (1997) has problematized the concept of authenticity, putting forward the view that no distinction can be maintained in a transcultural world between real and false, pure and hybrid. At the core of such

perspectives is the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida (2001). Derrida questions Saussure's description of the relation *signifié–signifiant*; it is not unambiguous, for language constantly refers to itself. Derrida coins the concept *différance*: a linguistic system is never complete; rather, it is always open to dynamic meaning production through letting existing meanings create denotations for new (ambiguous) *signifiés*. In the Western tradition, our existence is understood through dualistic pairs of opposites: nature/culture, subject/object, practice/theory, content/form, original/copy, etc. Derrida's perspective undermines our view of such structures as accepted truths. His deconstruction of what seem to be binary opposites shows that these are not absolute. Instead, they ought to be seen as arbitrary relations based on socially constructed value hierarchies. The centre of philosophy is thereby moved from ontology to epistemology. Language and text are in focus. Knowledge of the world, in Derrida's view, is knowledge of the signs in the world. There is no original meaning beyond or before the signs. Derrida deconstructs the opposition between experience and thought; it is culturally determined. He also deconstructs the expression "literal meaning". According to Derrida, all language is metaphorical. Derrida does not contend that only text exists – but he holds that the real world must be interpreted in the same way as texts are interpreted. Deconstruction promotes anti-essentialist, discursive, social constructionist thought: skepticism towards that which seems stable and permanent.

Lines of thoughts like these have proved relevant to many fields, among them those of musicology and music education. The very concept of music has met with critical analysis in Derrida's footsteps.

Radano (2003) maintains that no music can be considered a stable phenomenon, isolated from its historical context, and that the concept of music cannot be presumed to carry an ontological meaning which is independent of social forces: "the very concept of 'music' is grounded in a peculiarly European history that reified sound as form" (p. 41); "to name the many versions of acoustical knowing 'music' is to impose onto a diversity of experience a peculiarly western European socioartistic construct" (p. 103). Referring to Goehr (1992), Radano points out that

'Music' as we know it emerges as a local European concept that becomes a marker of an increasingly racialized conception of civility in the early modern era. This signature of value would be specified to its written, composed manifestations that gain special primacy as 'works' with the emergence of romantic aesthetics. (Radano, 2003, p. 325)

Neither ought the concept rhythm to be perceived as absolute or monolithic. Radano (2003) argues that "'rhythm' is itself constituted in an unstable discourse rather than being something natural and attributable to all music" (p. 42) and that "the discrete European category of rhythm

was not likely a part of the slaves' musical epistemology [...] the social power of rhythm was invented within the discourses of colonialism as a way of defining African difference" (p. 103).

Culture is not identical with ethnicity, and cultural patterns do not necessarily coincide with national borders. In his analysis of black culture, Gilroy (1993) advocates *the Atlantic* as a cultural and historical unit of analysis in order to attain a perspective which is neither ethnocentric nor nationalist, but "transnational and intercultural" (p. 15). *The sea* and *the ship* become his means to elucidate "the inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas" (p. xi):

the histories of borrowing, displacement, transformation, and continual reinscription that the musical culture encloses are a living legacy that should not be reified in the primary symbol of the diaspora and then employed as an alternative to the recurrent appeal of fixity and rootedness. (p. 102)

In Foucault's assertion that the modern soul is produced permanently within the body by the functioning of power that is exercised, Gilroy (1993) finds support for an anti-anti-essentialism that sees racialized subjectivity as the product of the social practices that supposedly derive from it (p. 102). Accordingly, Gilroy views black identity as a question of "outcome of practical activity": "Black identity [...] is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self" (p. 102).

To an extent, Radano (2003) finds himself in sympathy with Gilroy's view: the distinctive feature of black music is "the musically articulated resistances to an overarching white racial supremacy" (p. 39). But he questions the existence of a transcendent, purely musical force beyond the instability of discourses. To maintain that black music possesses certain definite properties (for instance, "soulful, rhythmically affecting, based on collective engagements of call and response") depends, he argues, on "presentist assumptions" (p. 5). Radano's argument is decidedly anti-essentialist: firstly, he questions that black music would "play by a different set of rules, distinct from the traditions governing American social history" (p. 35), secondly and more importantly, he questions the thought of what he terms the myth of a black identity ("the myth of a consistent and stable socio-racial position of 'blackness'", p. 3), since "the sound of black music has acquired meaning through discursive representation" (p. xv). Black music is the product of a social process in relation to white norms, not the symptom of some sort of "racially based" property (p. 8).

In his anti-essentialist analysis of black music, Radano (2003) points to how the meaning of this concept lacks a firm core. On the contrary, in accordance with Amiri Baraka's notion of "the changing same" (Baraka, 1967), he finds it to be the subject of constant renegotiations. Radano

finds a concept of “strangeness” or Otherness, developed on the basis of white norms, to be an essential ingredient of Blackness:

The conception of difference records that which is both real and unreal. It designates the places that musical Africanness can inhabit as it inevitably translates those expressions into forms of strangeness that only then become accessible to European-based determination. This logical paradox is the core of black musical hermenutic, for no one side of the tale can be accounted for without the other. (p. 44)

Swedish literature, too, may provide examples of such *discursive instability* regarding black music. Starting in the 1920s, jazz poetry has been an important subgenre in Swedish poetry. Saxophones and cymbals became prevalent metaphors of the noise and ecstasy of modernity (Everling, 1993). However, there was one very early bird among these jazz poets: Emil Kléen, who used the word “negermelodi” (Negro melody) already in 1888. (This was possibly a *Lese-frucht*, originating in some continental poet’s encounter with the Fisk Singers.) In his lines

kände längtans timmar långsamt glida  
som takter i en negermelodi  
[felt the hours of longing gliding slowly  
as measures in a Negro melody]

Kléen focused on the tardiness, rather than the rapture, of the music (Bjerstedt, 2008; my translation).

Agawu (2003) remarks that every analysis focusing on cultural *differences* (for instance, between “black” and “white”) will always depend on concepts that are socially constructed: “Differences [...] are not simply there for the perceiving subject. We do not perceive in a vacuum. Categories of perception are made, not given.” (p. 232) Agawu advocates an alternative ethnomusicological stance: “Contesting differences through an embrace of sameness might also prompt a fresh critique of essentialism” (p. 235).

### *Ideological power:*

#### *The struggle for access to instruments of meaning production*

Without doubt, racist labels have often been decisive for the ways in which African American music has been perceived: “however inaccurate and exclusionist the formations of black music as ‘race music’ may be [...] it has greatly determined modern constructions of musical meaning and experience” (Radano, 2003, p. 20).

Both feminist and postcolonial theory have been inspired by Derrida’s deconstruction of the dichotomy central/peripheral. To view the other as something other, not only a second-rate

version of the predominant, entails an ethical research dimension (Dyndahl, 2008). With the aid of deconstruction, female culture has been recontextualized in relation to (male) society; it becomes possible to point at “the otherness” in being a woman in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, deconstruction of the relation master/slave can render it clear that neither the colonial power nor the colonized culture can be expressed in a pure form (Spivak, 1988).

Hall (2009a) discusses how the power to signify entails ideological power. Which kinds of meanings are construed systematically and regularly regarding certain events? How are certain meanings actively made to achieve preference? How do media institutions organize a societal practice in order to produce a symbolic product? *Signification* differs from other modern work processes in that the social practice produces a discursive object.

According to Hall (2009a), the ideological power to signify events in a particular way (significations) is a societal power which affects the outcome of controversial social issues. Ideology cannot be viewed as dependent on a reality that is given beforehand. Neither can the outcome of ideology be predicted in accordance with any deterministic logic. Both the ideology itself and its outcome depend on the power balance in a particular historical context: “the politics of signification” (p. 124). When meaning no longer depends on how things *are* but on how they are *signified*, it follows that the same event can be signified in different ways. To signify is to produce meaning. Meaning is determined by how signification is carried out in a social practice. Language is not fairly distributed regardless of class and socio-economic position. Key institutions play an important role in how “cultural capital” is distributed. Different classes use the same language; the sign becomes an arena for class struggle. The struggle over the meanings of words is also the struggle for the instruments of signification. Language creates meaning. In the words of Hall: “Speakers were as much ‘spoken’ by their language as speaking it” (p. 126). Ideology is a function of discourse and the logic of societal processes, rather than of the agent's intention. The discourse speaks itself through the agent; the ideology works.

Radano (2003) points out that “there are qualities to black music [...] that draw us into uncharted realms beyond the limits of language” (p. 15). The postcolonial literature scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988) has employed the rhetorical concept Signifyin(g) in a radical intertextual approach of broad cultural applicability. His analysis of the cultural manifestations of black Americans point at the physical, material aspects, among other things: “the *how* of a performance is more important than the *what*”; the instrumentalist's movements are “the physical signifiers that are part and parcel of the black musical experience [...] it is in the material manifestations of Signifyin(g) that reside many of the clues and cues to the perception of black music and its evaluation” (Floyd, 1995, p. 96–97). However, Radano (2003) also warns of the temptation to let



the tools of analysis guide and limit the conception of jazz music as only a matter of allusions: “the temptation of fixing jazz practices into a Procrustean bed of indirection” (p. 303).

In the following sections, concepts such as *identity*, *meaning production*, *transculturation*, *deconstruction*, and *ideological power* will be employed in an analysis of the case of Aunt Hagar.

## THE CASE OF “AUNT HAGAR’S BLUES”: FROM GENESIS TO HOLLYWOOD

There are many examples of spirituals where heroes from the Old Testament function as sources of inspiration and motivation for oppressed African Americans; from the story of the Flood, “Didn’t it rain?” through “Go down, Moses” and “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho” to “Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel?” (The Spirituals Project, 2004/2011). Our object of study here is a female example, not from the spirituals but from the African American popular music of the early 20th century.

### *W. C. Handy’s “Aunt Hagar’s Blues”*

W. C. Handy appeared early as composer of songs that both adhered to and differed from the blues tradition, and that soon were to become part of it, for instance, “Memphis Blues” (1912) and “St. Louis Blues” (1914). Handy eventually became known as “Father of the Blues”. In 1921 he wrote the song “Aunt Hagar’s Blues” (with the alternative title “Aunt Hagar’s Children Blues”). In it, Hagar is portrayed as the mother of all African Americans:

Just hear Aunt Hagar’s children harmonizin’ to that old mournful tune!  
It’s like a choir from on high broke loose!  
If the devil brought it, the good Lord sent it right down to me,  
Let the congregation join while I sing those lovin’ Aunt Hagar’s Blues!

The song has become part of the standard repertoire of traditional jazz. Louis Armstrong’s 1954 version may be the most well-known recording of Handy’s composition “Aunt Hagar’s Blues” (<http://www.jazz-on-line.com/a/ramt/TS487634.ram>).

### *The biblical background*

The expression “Aunt Hagar’s children” has long been used as a collective allusion to African Americans; Aunt Hagar is the symbolic mother of all African Americans, a personification of black womanhood (Yardley, 2006). The origin of this symbol is the story of Abraham in Genesis. (The Bible quotes below are from the King James Version.) When Sarah cannot conceive a child, Abraham turns to his slave Hagar, who bears him the son Ismael. After that, God lets Sarah bear the son Isaac, but Sarah is angry when she sees the boys together and demands that Abraham banish Hagar and her son:

Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.

And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son.

And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called.

And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed. (Genesis 21:10–13)

Hagar wanders about with her son in the desert. When she is out of water, she leaves him beneath a bush. As she cries, God's angel speaks to her and leads her to a well:

And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is.

Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation. [...]

And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. (Genesis 21:17–18, 20)

Furthermore, Paul writes in his epistle to the Galatians:

For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman.

But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise.

Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar.

For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.

But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. (Galatians 4:22–26)

Many people have identified with the banished Ishmael: for instance, August Strindberg in his autobiographical novel *The son of a servant (Tjänstekvinnans son)*. The New Testament lines have probably been perceived as an additional reason for African Americans to pick Hagar as a symbol of enslaved black people.

### *Aunt Hagar in African American culture*

Early on, Hogan (1942) points out that Handy's song is "traceable to folk ancestry". Thelwell (2002) calls attention to the fact that "Aunt Hagar (and Handy) was evoking an ancient discourse within African cultures".

There are several examples of Hagar's different roles and meanings in literary contexts. In the description of the slave auction in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's cabin* (1852/2010) there is an Aunt Hagar. Old, half blind and crippled, she has but one child in life, fourteen year old Albert.

The mother held on to him with both her shaking hands, and eyed with intense trepidation every one who walked up to examine him.

'Don't be feared, Aunt Hagar,' said the oldest of the men, 'I spoke to Mas'r Thomas 'bout it, and he thought he might manage to sell you in a lot both together.'

'Dey needn't call me worn out yet,' said she, lifting her shaking hands. 'I can cook yet, and scrub, and scour, – tell em dat ar, – you tell em,' she added, earnestly. [...] 'He an't gwine to be sold widout me!' said the old woman, with passionate eagerness; 'he and I goes in a lot together; I's rail strong yet, Mas'r and can do heaps of work, – heaps on it, Mas'r.'

'On plantation?' said Haley, with a contemptuous glance. (pp. 76–77)

The African American sculptress Edmonia Lewis wished to create a symbol of the African mother in the United States with her famous marble sculpture Hagar (1868) – as well as a symbol of the oppression of African women (Robinson, 2001). In the only novel by Langston Hughes, *Not without laughter* (1930), Aunt Hagar is the maternal grandmother of the main character Sandy. This Aunt Hagar has been described as "one of those strong black Christian women who behind a strong physical form hides a humble, understanding heart" (Erkerd, 2011).

When the African American anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney published a collection of "urban narratives", *Drylongso: A self-portrait of Black America* (Gwaltney, 1981), he dedicated it to "Lucy and all the other flowers in Aunt Hagar's garden", and he included a note of explanation, describing Aunt Hagar as a "mythical apical figure of the core black American nation" (Williams, 2006, s. 172).

According to an interview with the author, the title of Edward P. Jones's Pulitzer award-winning short story collection *All Aunt Hagar's children* (Jones, 2006) emanates from an expression he grew up with: "The phrase, 'all Aunt Hagar's children' is one my mother used for black people" (Elliott, 2006).

Martin-Ogunsola (2004) expands on the symbolic function of Aunt Hagar and contributes further literary examples:

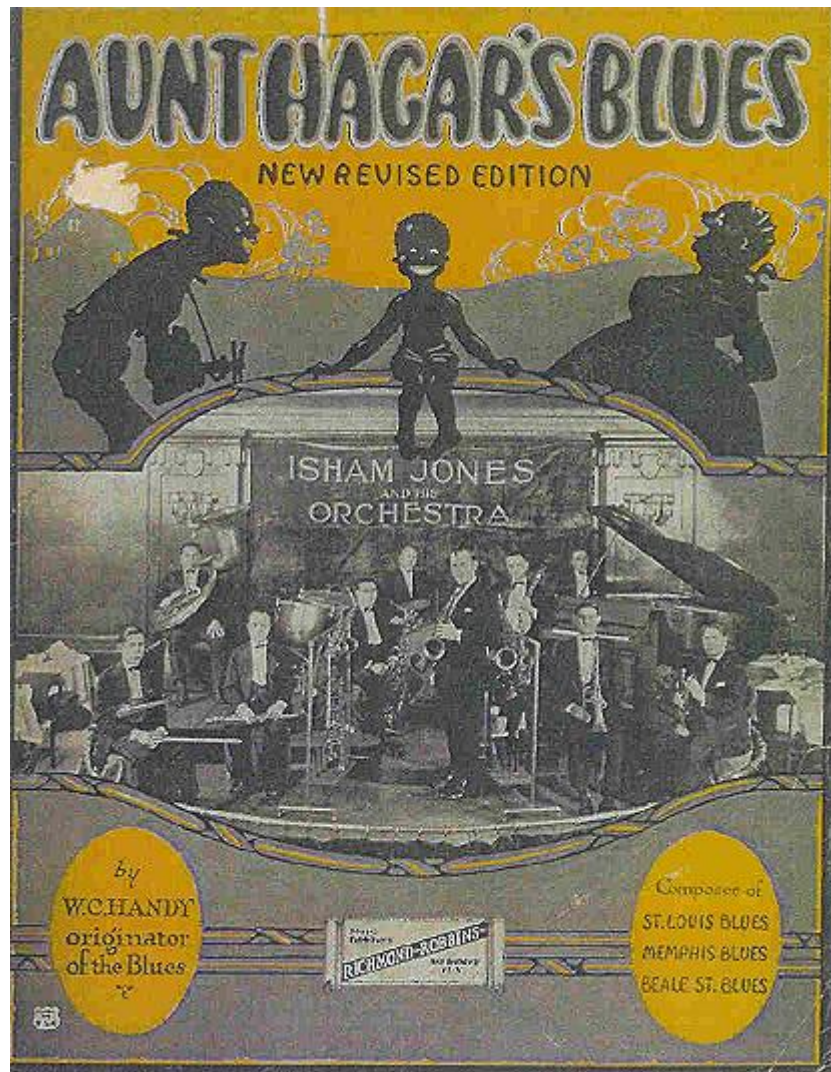
Hagar is a strong link between the Old and New World cultures. For example, in the African American oral tradition Aunt Hagar, a former slave and matriarch, becomes a symbol of everyone's mother, grandmother, auntie, and the like – the great nurturer of the black community. [...] In written literature, Hagar is a figure of richly textured dimension in the works of African American writers such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison, among others who pay tribute to her. (p. 6)

Williams (2006) points out that African Americans have appropriated the biblical Hagar for more than two centuries “in many different contexts, supporting a variety of meanings” (p. 172). Aunt Hagar has been a subject of analysis by several black American feminist theorists (Scholz, 2004).

In the two ensuing sections, I present two examples of how Aunt Hagar, through the mediation of W. C. Handy, appeared in white American popular culture.

#### *Aunt Hagar in the dance parlours*

One of the most successful American dance bands in the early 1920s was led by the white hit song composer Isham Jones. On November 1st, 1922, his orchestra made one of its many recordings on the Brunswick label: “Aunt Hagar's Blues” (<http://www.redhotjazz.com/ishamjones.html>). When this recording was issued, a new sheet music issue of W. C. Handy's composition was published as well, with a new front page. The centre of this front page is a photograph of “Isham Jones and his orchestra”, a traditional, public relations oriented orchestra picture including tuxedos and an urban music stage environment. Above the photograph, in stark contrast, there are three black caricature cartoon figures.



### *Aunt Hagar in the film factory*

W. C. Handy's life was made into film in Hollywood in 1958. The Paramount Pictures film *St. Louis Blues* was directed by Allen Reissner and presented singer/pianist Nat "King" Cole in the main role as W. C. Handy. One of the film characters was called Aunt Hagar. The film makers, however, completely disavowed the African American tradition of this name. Instead, script writers Ted Sherdeman and Robert Smith furnished the main character with an aunt called Hagar. The part of Aunt Hagar was played by Pearl Bailey. In the film story, her bluesy way of singing angers the father of young Will, the methodist pastor Charles Handy. The main conflict of the film is between father and son: is blues "the devil's music" or "our people's music"? Eventually, father and son are reconciled when the New York symphony orchestra performs W. C. Handy's most well-known composition, the title song "St. Louis Blues". The song "Aunt Hagar's Blues", however, does not occur in the film (IMDb, 2011a & 2011b).

## DISCUSSION

In this section, the two representations of Aunt Hagar presented above are studied and analysed with concepts such as identity, meaning production and ideological power as a point of departure.

### *Hagar's identity and meaning along her way through cultures*

Hagar is part of a pattern of meaning creation on several levels: in society, religion, and music. Through thousands of years, Jews, Christians, and Muslims have interpreted the Genesis story of how Hagar and her son are banished into the desert. As a symbol of definitive marginalization, it must be considered archetypal. During the last centuries, Aunt Hagar has also come to carry a central symbolic function in African American culture. Radano (2003) observes that "Christian-based ecclesiastical interpretations have been part and parcel of the broader construction of black musical meaning" (p. 31). Aunt Hagar is one of many examples. Through its prehistory and history of reception, "Aunt Hagar's Blues" also interestingly exemplifies *multidirectional trans-cultural loans* of materials and themes. One line goes from Judaism via Christianity to the picture of the black mother such as she is portrayed in a long series of African American cultural manifestations, one of them being Handy's song. Another line goes from Otherness culture back to predominant culture: from the symbolic manifestation of the black mother in Handy's song to white popular culture's reappropriation (and watering down) of its meaning. In this section, this will be studied with reference to a 1922 sheet music cover and a 1958 film plot.

### *Hagar as an example of cultural meaning production*

Above the photograph on the sheet music cover is a caricature sketch of three black people: a male banjo player, a grinning boy and a laughing woman. This picture might reasonably be interpreted as carrying an ambition to sum up in a visual concentrate something of the predominant stereotyped conception in the United States of the black (Southern) population in an agrarian environment at that time; the picture seems to ascribe to the black population characteristics such as primitive and contented. Such conceptions were wide-spread in Western culture. Bjerstedt (2004) shows how in a 1929 Swedish overview of human geography, a picture of a black musician has been provided with these notes: "A plantation Negro with his banjo. [...] When an American Negro feels pleased, he likes to make noise." (My translation.)

The sheet music cover strengthens the dichotomy white/black through the mediation of other dichotomies such as central/peripheral and culture/nature: through the geometrical placing of the pictures, through the representation of urban versus rural environment (the differences regarding musical instruments should be noted!), as well as through the contrast between visual media (photograph versus caricature drawing).

Gates (1988), in his analysis of the cultural manifestations of black Americans through the rhetorical concept Signifyin(g), points to (among other things) the physical, material aspects of meaning production: “the *how* of a performance is more important than the *what*”; the movements of the instrumentalist are “the physical signifiers that are part and parcel of the black musical experience [...] it is in the material manifestations of Signifyin(g) that reside many of the clues and cues to the perception of black music and its evaluation” (Floyd, 1995, pp. 96–97). It may be interesting to apply these perspectives to Isham Jones’s recording of “Aunt Hagar’s Blues”. An analysis of the sounding material must confine itself to a few subjective impressions. It seems possible to perceive a non-academic, “black” idiom both in the clarinet playing throughout and in the cornet solo (from circa 1:18 to 1:53). In brief, advances towards black music culture are discernible not only in the choice of material but in the execution of it as well. To my knowledge, there remains no 1920s footage of Isham Jones’s orchestra, but a conjecture based on the photography might be that the orchestra’s public appearances were characterized by “physical signifiers” comparatively fit for the drawing-room, and that its “material manifestations of Signifyin(g)” had little in common with the music culture represented by the cartoon.

As a biography of W. C. Handy, the film *St. Louis Blues* (1958) is rather incongruent with other biographical sources. It uses blues music as a point of departure for a pure Bürger–Künstler conflict, the dramaturgy of which, in all its one-sidedness, could be perceived as a lightweight version of, for instance, the *Bildungsroman* of Goethe or Thomas Mann, with *American dream* spices added. On the other hand, the film reflects rather well black jazz and entertainment of its own time: it contains performances by Pearl Bailey, Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Mahalia Jackson, and Eartha Kitt.

In the light of Hagar’s history as an archetypical marginalization symbol, the symbolic value ascribed to Aunt Hagar by the film script is minimal. The real W. C. Handy did not have a relative of that name. The choice to include an aunt in the story must be interpreted as an intellectual wink to Handy’s song “Aunt Hagar’s Blues”, possibly also to the Aunt Hagar founded in myth; the film part can certainly be described as a strong African American woman. But its function in the film has nothing to do with the Hagar myth; its only task is to serve the Eurologically based dramaturgy. Consequently, the fictitious film aunt can be seen as a renunciation of the African American mother symbol. Based on the film fiction, Handy’s reasons for writing a song entitled “Aunt Hagar’s Blues” could be perceived as quite commonplace: he had an aunt by that name. The Eurological dramaturgy puts the Afrological mythology to death.

### *Hagar as an example of ideological power*

Neither Isham Jones’s version of “Aunt Hagar’s Blues” nor the part of Aunt Hagar in the film *St. Louis Blues* would exist but for the African American mythological background presented above.

However, neither representation acknowledges this position of dependence; on the contrary, it is denied. In a racist society such as the United States of the 1920s or the 1950s, indirect and narrow representations of the relation of white cultural manifestations to black culture are hardly surprising.

In brief, the perspectives presented on the meaning production of the figure Hagar (staged in the story of Hagar's banishment to the desert) have to do with *marginalization*. The Isham Jones sheet music cover can hardly be said to contribute to a 'marginalization' interpretation in the same way as the Aunt Hagar symbol in African American culture; this symbolic value, rather, is completely neglected, even though it was essential to the creation of the song. On the other hand, as noted above, the sheet music cover can be said to marginalize African Americans from entirely different perspectives (the perspectives of racist American society and the predominant white popular culture) and by entirely different means (visual representation). In this way, the sheet music cover serves to illustrate the doubleness in the marginalization concept: its meaning depends on which agent is connected to the production of meaning.

When Eurological film dramaturgy puts Afrological mythology to death, this gives life to several processes that have to do with the production of meaning with respect to the concept of marginalization. Even though the film plot is enacted in an African American environment, the signification that produces meaning has been radically recontextualized when Aunt Hagar passes on from the mythical function as the symbolic mother of all African Americans to the commonplace function as the protagonist's aunt. By means of this recontextualization, signification becomes completely watered down. The paradoxical result is that while African American culture nominally is at the centre of the film, it is utterly marginalized through the neglect of the Hagar myth. The relation of the film to African American culture is double: it places the culture both in periphery (the Hagar myth) and at its centre (a narrow and distorted picture). This signification is carried out in a social practice that, with regard to the black/white dichotomy, must be said to be complex: the originators of the film are white throughout (script, direction, production); the actors are black throughout; while the film audience is racially mixed. The meaning production in different phases from intention to reception is characterized by the same complexity.

The two representations of Aunt Hagar presented at length above point to an *intrinsic doubleness and instability in the very concept of marginalization* – ironically, the concept which essentially sums up the meaning production traditionally associated with the Aunt Hagar figure! This phenomenon gives rise to interesting questions regarding the marginalization concept in relation to a deconstruction of the central/peripheral dichotomy. This is not the forum for a further approach to such problems, but I will conclude this article, taking these observations as my point of departure, with an attempt at a formulation of a number of more general questions.



To signify somebody or something as “marginalized” seems to take it for granted that a process of evaluation has taken place. Any such process must be problematized since it presupposes that a certain relation between centre and periphery, text and margin, discourse and concealment, has been taken for granted. What agent has the power to place somebody or something in the margin? Who defines the central position? Who draws the boundaries to the periphery? Is not every agent the centre of her own world? What does it mean for an agent to define herself as peripheral? What consequences will this kind of marginalization have for the agent? These kinds of questions would seem to call for continued discussion and analysis.

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