

***Bamboula!*: Dada Performance as Sonic Blackface**

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In his 1920 memoir, *Zurich Chronicle (Chronique Zurichoise)*, the Romanian Jewish poet and co-founder of the dada movement Tristan Tzara described the group's second public performance on February 26, 1916, at the Cabaret Voltaire: "The [audience's] appetite for the mixture of instinctive meditation and ferocious *bamboula* that we managed to present forced us to give it" (328). The French term *bamboula*—referring to both a small drum and the syncopated musical cadence developed by enslaved Africans trafficked to the Americas, analogous to the Afro-Cuban *clave*—was frequently used as a catch-all to refer to Afro-Caribbean religious rituals, sometimes conflated with Vodùn (*The Oxford Dictionary of Music*). Tzara's use of the term "bamboula" exemplifies how European stereotypes about African diasporic art forms foundational to modernist art were folded back into the language deployed to describe their own artistic interventions, suggesting how the dadaists' performance at the Cabaret Voltaire can be understood as a form of sonic blackface.

Art historical scholarship on the dadaists' interest in *arts nègres*—the term used to refer collectively to artistic forms from Africa and the Pacific Islands collected by Europeans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and subsequently contested by Francophone intellectuals of African descent (Hays Edwards)—has largely overlooked the role of sound and

music. Indeed, a focus on elements of performance ensembles pilfered or traded by colonial officers in West Africa and transformed into “sculpture” by dealers in Europe and the Americas such as Paul Guillaume and Marius de Zayas (Goldwater; Rubin; Shannon; Mileaf; van Hoesen; Grossman) risks reifying the ways in which African meanings were erased in favor of European formal interests. Relatedly, studies of dada performance have downplayed the historical context of colonialism—perhaps most notably in the recent traveling exhibition organized by the Museum Rietberg entitled *Dada Africa*—by focusing on the specificities of the group’s engagements with the burgeoning field of ethnography, rather than the physical and epistemological violence that rendered such distorting accounts possible (Veit; Kauffman). This essay aims to undo conventional understandings of dada by examining the premiere of the first simultaneous poem, “The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent (*L’Amiral cherche une maison à louer*),” through a Black feminist theoretical lens. I will identify the specific Afro-Atlantic musical sources for Tzara’s innovation and then chart the material and ideological mechanisms by which the dadaists’ use of Afro-Atlantic cultural forms has been obscured.

The poem, which premiered at the Cabaret Voltaire on February 26, 1916, consisted of Tzara and his colleagues Marcel Janco and Richard Huelsenbeck reading phrases aloud at the same time in multiple languages: French, English, and German, respectively. The Cabaret Voltaire’s convener Hugo Ball articulated the overall effect of the trio’s performance, recalling, “That is a contrapuntal recitative in which three or more voices speak, sing, whistle, etc., at the same time in such a way that the elegiac, humorous, or bizarre content of the piece is brought out by these combinations” (57). The words, overlapping one another, rendered the meaning of each phrase unintelligible to the listener, weaving an abstract aural tapestry.

The depiction of the lyrics in the group’s first publication demonstrates how Tzara and Ball utilized Western musicological conventions to document and translate the ephemeral sonic dimensions of “The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent” into a visual representation. The performance is rendered similarly to an orchestral score with the words of each speaker arranged in lines evocative of sheet music (Demos). Yet the illustration in the journal *Cabaret Voltaire* (see fig. 1) provides no clarification of the generalized terms “bamboula” and “contrapuntal” used by Tzara and Ball, respectively, to describe the cadence of “The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent.”



Fig.1. "L'amiral cherche une maison à louer," *Cabaret Voltaire*, 1916. Cabaret Voltaire, edited by Hugo Ball. Zurich: 1916. International Dada Archive, Special Collections and Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

Click [here](#) to listen to the recording of L'amiral.

The retrospective nature of both artists’ accounts may have influenced their choice of terminology, particularly Tzara who was writing in 1920 shortly after having arrived in Paris amid *le tumulte noire* (Blake). As Tyler Stovall, Brett A. Berliner, and Petrine Archer-Shaw,

among others, have demonstrated, the white European public was increasingly enthralled by art forms originating from the African continent and the American diasporas in wide circulation following the conclusion of the First World War. This so-called *vogue nègre* was perceived as pervasive, exemplified in the commentary of the anonymous correspondent of *Le Journal Amusant*, writing in 1919, who observed that the whole world dances the *bamboula* and identified “Cubisme, art nègre, jazz-band, bolchevisme” as being touched by it (“L’art nègre” 14). The *bamboula* thus grew to be associated with not just African sculptural forms and Haitian Vodún but also American jazz music, contemporary European painting, and international socialism; myriad new ideas in art and society thus became amalgamated into a form of generalized blackness. How, then, can we understand Tzara’s invocation of *bamboula*? Was this merely an attempt to reframe the history of dada as more relevant to the Parisian milieu?

Consider the source material for the poem itself. Janco’s lines in English are, in fact, derived from two ragtime songs: “I Love the Ladies,” published in 1914 by the tin-pan alley firm Waterson, Berlin and Snyder (Schwartz), and “Everybody’s Doing It,” released in 1911 by the influential composer and lyricist Irving Berlin. Both songs exemplify ragtime’s main distinguishing characteristic: its innovative use of continuing syncopation, or accenting the offbeat notes. Developed by Black American pianists beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the right hand played the melodic embellishment over the left hand as it kept regular 2/4 time (Waldo). This was deployed explicitly in Berlin’s composition—“see that ragtime couple there”—and selected by Tzara for Janco’s contribution to the performance. The word ragtime is a contraction of the phrase “ragged time,” referring to music that essentially tore classical European musical time to shreds. It also connotes its precursors, the cakewalk performances of

enslaved Africans satirizing white society as well as the blackface minstrelsy industry of the antebellum United States that popularized the adapted innovations of Black musicians (Lott).

Given the negligible presence of individuals of African descent in Zurich prior to the end of the First World War, it is entirely possible that Tzara never actually experienced a performance by musicians of African descent when he composed “The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent.” However, the wide circulation of sheet music enabled Europeans to perform ragtime compositions such as “Everybody’s Doing It.” Thus, Tzara’s utilization of the term *bamboula* to refer to the first simultaneous poem was accurate insofar as the work incorporated direct citations of contemporaneous compositions derived from Afro-Atlantic musical forms. However, contemporary performances of the “The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent” remain so cacophonous as to obscure the syncopation associated with ragtime.

Comparing the so-called “chantes nègres” that immediately followed the premiere performance of “The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent” offers a possible explanation for Tzara’s choice to hide ragtime within the simultaneous poem. As Ball recounted in his diaries, published in 1927 as *Flight Out of Time*:

“Chante nègre (or funèbre) No. 1” was especially prepared and was performed as if in a Vehmic court in black cowls and with big and small exotic drums. The melodies for “Chante nègre II” were composed by our esteemed host, Mr. Jan Ephraim, who had been involved with African business for some time a while ago, and he was helping eagerly with the performance like an instructive and stimulating prima donna. (57–58)

Ephraim, the owner of the bar located at SpiegelgaÙe 1 where the group convened, was a merchant marine who had traveled to sub-Saharan Africa, marking him as the only member of

the dadaist circle of immediate friends to have visited the continent. While the details of Ephraim's time in Africa remain undocumented and thus lost to historians, it is evident that Ball and Huelsenbeck understood him as an authority on African culture. The dadaists' interest in information about Afro-Atlantic cultures reflects the central paradox of the appropriation of those cultures by European artists during the colonial period: the reliance on secondary accounts by non-Black sources.

This practice is exemplified in Henry C. Rowland's short story "The Bamboula," published in the September 1904 edition of the New York City-based weekly magazine *Outlook*. Rowland relates a fictional conversation between the narrator and a German botanist, Dr. Leyland, aboard a ship anchored at harbor in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Sparked by the sound of percussive instruments offshore, Dr. Leyland describes an encounter in which members of the island's Black Creole elite, Dr. Fouchère and his wife, secretively eluded him in order to participate in the *bamboula*. Ultimately, Rowland frames their participation as evidence of the immutability of race: even the most white-assimilated people of African descent in the French colonies cannot refrain from participating in Vodùn rituals.

Tzara's enfolding of ragtime lyrics and melodies within "The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent" can be understood as a self-conscious mimicry of the essential but often downplayed role of so-called *arts nègres* in the development of European modernist art. Like Rowland's story, Tzara's incorporation of the rhythms of popular ragtime—itsself an appropriated form of Black American music—into the simultaneous poem represents a thrice removed form of racialized parody. The first simultaneous poem thus implicitly problematized the notion of "the avant-garde," subsequently popularized by Peter Bürger, that falsely equates European whiteness with innovation and simultaneously effaces the modernity of Black

makers who produced the works that artists of European descent appropriated. Furthermore, Tzara's trespass on the divisions between fine art and popular entertainment, academic study and colonial extraction, reveals the contours of these divisions and thus their ideological limitations. "The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent" thus subtly identifies the fundamental imbalance in the rhetoric of "inspiration"—so slyly, in fact, as to be overlooked by contemporary critics as well as several generations of art and performance historians. Nevertheless, exhuming such gestures remains a prerequisite to understanding the impact of the early twentieth century's constructs on the artworks, actors, institutions, and discourses with which we grapple today.

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