

Resurrecting a Minimalist Masterpiece: Julius Eastman's "Evil Nigger"

Evil Nigger by Julius Eastman's is an open instrumentation work, composed in 1979. This work represents Eastman's mature form of minimalism which he called "organic music." This essay is the companion to the first critical edition of *Evil Nigger* and was created with two primary goals in mind: to provide context through historical and musical analysis and prescriptive instructions on the execution of the piece. This piece, along with Eastman's *Gay Guerilla*, *If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Rich?*, is musically and politically subversive and explicitly aimed at elevating solidarity among African Americans and homosexuals.

Julius Eastman (1940-1990) was a minimalist composer, pianist, and singer whose work has remained largely unknown until recent years. Few details about Eastman's life were recorded for posterity. The leading Eastman researcher, Mary Jane Leach wrote: "One of the problems of writing about Julius is that it is difficult to state anything with certainty."¹ Eastman's life and career will be only briefly summarized here.

One of Eastman's claims-to-fame is his vocal performance on the Grammy-nominated recording of Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. His skills as a composer and performer garnered him some attention during his lifetime, but his eccentricities may have been just as well-known. One outrageous example comes from a

¹ Mary Jane Leach, "The Julius Eastman Project," last modified November 8, 2005, accessed September 15, 2015, <http://www.mjleach.com/eastman.htm>.

1975 performance of John Cage's *Song Books* by Julius Eastman at the Eastman School of Music.

During a performance of Cage's theater piece *Songbooks* that was chaotic in the best sense of the word, Eastman performed the segment of *Songbooks* that was merely the instruction, "Give a lecture." Never shy about his gayness, Eastman lectured on sex, with a young man and woman as volunteers. He undressed the young man onstage, and attempted to undress the woman, who resisted. The next day, the ever-mild-mannered Cage gave an angry lecture about the misuse of performances of his music, and, before our incredulous eyes, pounded his fist on the piano to punctuate his words: "the freedom in my music does not mean the freedom to be irresponsible!"²

Eastman's sometimes shocking behavior, his outspokenness, and his unwillingness to conform contributed to Eastman's inability to support himself towards the end of his life. "Julius Eastman ... died in 1990 and [his] final years ... spiraled out of control to the point where he was living in Tompkins Square Park."³ It is fortunate for the musical community that Mary Jane Leach has compiled surviving manuscripts and other Eastman related documents on her website.⁴

When addressing the life and career of Julius Eastman, one must be made acutely aware of his race and sexuality. Eastman was a homosexual African American man living in a musical community dominated by white heterosexual males. The decade in which this essay is being written (the 2010's) has seen drastic socio-political disturbances, the likes of which have not been witnessed since, perhaps, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. In the 2010's the Supreme Court of the United States legalized same-sex marriage, the United States elected an African-American as president for the second time, police

² "Unjust Malaise Liner Notes," accessed September 15, 2015, http://www.newworldrecords.org/album.cgi?rm=view&album_id=15097.

³ Leach, "The Julius Eastman Project."

⁴ Ibid.

brutality against the African-American community is becoming increasingly visible due to the internet and the ubiquity of camera-phones, and the War on Drugs that has put millions of African-Americans in prison for non-violent drug offenses may be coming to a close with both liberal and conservative politicians calling for the legalization of marijuana. For those living through these 21st century events, it is important to consider what life may have been like before the progress made in this generation for someone like Julius Eastman. His pride and convictions can be heard in his music and through the transparent titles he gives his pieces like *Gay Guerrilla*. Eastman clearly wanted his music to not only mean something but to do something. It must also be said that if Eastman were alive today, writing music as dangerous as his was, he may be just as much of an outcast due to the challenge he poses to the status-quo.

Julius Eastman let his social circumstances effect his music. Louis Andriessen wrote elegantly about the role social conditioning plays in an artist's life:

Many composers view the act of composing as, somehow, above social conditioning. I contest that. How you arrange your musical material, the techniques you use and the instruments you score for, are largely determined by your own social circumstances and listening experience, and the availability of financial support. I do agree, though, that abstract musical material – pitch, duration and rhythm – are beyond social conditioning: it is found in nature. However, the moment the musical material is ordered it becomes culture and hence a social entity.⁵

Eastman's social and material conditions led him to fight through his music for the marginalized demographics that he represented. About his piece *Gay Guerrilla* he says, in no veiled terms, that if there were an uprising of homosexuals against the oppressive

⁵ Tom Service, "A guide to Louis Andriessen's music," *The Guardian*, last modified October 15, 2012, accessed September 15, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2012/oct/15/louis-andriessen-classical-music-guide>.

majority, he would gladly sacrifice his own blood for the cause of homosexual rights.

When referring to *Gay Guerilla*, *Evil Nigger*, and *Crazy Nigger*, Eastman said: “These names, either I glorify them, or they glorify me.”⁶ Eastman sought to glorify his gayness his race and his ancestors through his music.

Interest in the composer Julius Eastman has been increasing over the past decade. This is due to several factors including Mary Jane Leach’s discovery of several original manuscripts of Eastman’s music, the release of an anthology of his recorded works titles *Unjust Malaise*⁷, and several interested musicians have begun digging deeper into the composer’s life and music, both of which are equally compelling.

Mary Jane Leach was perhaps the first person since his death to believe that Eastman’s music was important enough to resurrect as evidenced by a very long and difficult journey she has been on since 1998 to rediscover Eastman’s scores and recordings to secure his legacy. Eastman’s music was raw, transparent, and honest. Transparency in structure and clarity of content are traits belonging to most minimal music, but, according to Mary Jane Leach, honesty was something lacking in the music scene in which Eastman was a part of in the 70’s and 80’s. She writes:

I didn't know Julius all that well, but I did have conversations with him about composers of that time, and he was dismissive of a lot of them. I think that what it boiled down to was integrity. He had radar that could detect bullshit (and there was a lot of that going around, a lot of posing [in the Downtown New York music scene in the early 80's]). He greatly admired Meredith Monk's music, for instance, perhaps because it was so honest. Indeed, I just looked at the program notes for the premiere of [*The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc*], and the first sentence is "Find presented a work of art, in your name, full of honor, integrity, and boundless

⁶ Julius Eastman, *Unjust Malaise*, New World Records, 2005, compact disc.

⁷ Eastman, *Unjust Malaise*.

courage." That could be Julius's manifesto, a dedication to creating works of art with integrity...⁸

There is certainly no evidence of dishonesty in Eastman's works. Eastman gave very clear, descriptive, and simple names to his works as other minimalist composers did; like *In C*, *Violin Phase*, *Trio for Strings*, etc. Eastman's titles went beyond musical descriptions with

The Title of the Piece

There is valuable musical knowledge that analysis of *Evil Nigger* will yield, but more important are the political-economic discussions that may be sparked by such a piece. The honesty of pieces like *Evil Nigger* is of acute relevancy in the 21st century, the time of the Black Lives Matter movement and the resurgence of militant black organizations.

Bringing this piece back to life is a delicate task due to a few factors: Its controversial title, the lack of instruction on the original manuscript, and the imperative of keeping this piece dangerous; avoiding academic whitewash. Before attempting to understand any extra-musical meaning *Evil Nigger* may have, one should read the following portion of the transcription of Julius Eastman's spoken introduction from a concert at Northwestern University in which he and three other pianists performed *Gay Guerilla*, *Evil Nigger*, and *Crazy Nigger*:

[In the beginning of the introduction, Eastman discusses the musical components of the works that are to be performed. Next, he explains the extra-musical intent of the pieces]: Now, there was a little problem with the titles of the piece. There are some students and one faculty member who felt that the titles were somehow derogatory in some manner, being that the word Nigger is in it. These particular

⁸ Leach, "The Julius Eastman Project."

titles, the reason I use them, is because, in fact, I use, there's a whole series of these pieces. And they're called, they can be called a "Nigger series". Now the reason I use that particular word is because, for me it has a, what I call, a basicness about it. That is to say, I feel that in any case the first niggers were of course field niggers and upon that is really the basis of what I call the American Economic System. Without field niggers you wouldn't really have such a great and grand economy that we have. So that is what I call the first and great nigger, field niggers. And what I mean by niggers is that thing which is fundamental. That person or thing that attains to a basicness, a fundamentalness, and eschews that thing which is superficial or, can we say, elegant. A nigger for me is that kind of thing which is, attains himself or herself to the ground of anything, you see. And that's what I mean by nigger. So there are many niggers, there are many kinds of niggers. There might be, there are of course, 99 names of Allah but then there are 52 niggers. And so therefore, we are playing two of these niggers.⁹

Eastman goes on to explain the meaning of *Gay Guerrilla* which is equally fascinating. I encourage readers to listen to this introduction which can be heard on the *Unjust Malaise* anthology.

My interpretation of Eastman's explanation of his "Nigger Series" is as follows: He is essentially utilizing the method of re-appropriation that other oppressed groups have used that involves taking a symbol or word used by oppressors and turning it into an icon of pride. A "star of David" was used during the Nazi holocaust to identify Jews and now the same symbol adorns the flag of modern Israel.¹⁰ Pink triangles were used by Nazis to identify homosexuals and others who were seen as sexual deviants and now an upside down pink triangle is an official symbol of the gay pride movement.¹¹ "Nigger" was (and unfortunately still is) a derogatory term used to demean and dehumanize African-

⁹ Eastman, *Unjust Malaise*. Partial transcript from Track #8: Julius Eastman's spoken introduction to the Northwestern University concert.

¹⁰ "Judaism: The Star of David - Magen David," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed September 15, 2015, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/star.html>.

¹¹ Tina Gianoulis, "Pink Triangle," GLBTQ Archives, last modified 2004, accessed September 15, 2015, http://www.glbqtarchive.com/ssh/pink_triangle_S.pdf.

Americans. The term was first applied to those slaves brought from Africa to the New World to tend to the fields in lieu of the type of heavy machinery that makes mass production possible today. Eastman wants to glorify his ancestors by making a statement to White America that those racists who called and still call African Americans Niggers were special and without them the United States of America would be far cry from the great nation it is today. Julius Eastman fought, through his art, to glorify the race that is simultaneously responsible for and systematically undermined by the powerful economy of the United States of America.

The instrumentation of the piece

Nearly every source one will come across regarding *Evil Nigger*, *Gay Guerilla*, and *Crazy Nigger* identifies these pieces as being written for multiple pianos. According to Eastman, *Evil Nigger* is an open instrumentation work for 10-18 instruments, ideally instruments within the same family (i.e., strings, brass, etc.) Eastman briefly discusses his vision for the orchestration of this piece in his opening talk at the Northwestern University concert:

Now, these are three pieces that can be played by any number of instruments. ... If melody instruments are playing probably a good number would be somewhere in the area of maybe ten instruments, ten to eighteen instruments; usually of the same family. So therefore, another version could be for, let's say, eighteen string instruments.¹²

¹² Eastman, *Unjust Malaise*. Partial transcript from Track #8: Julius Eastman's spoken introduction to the Northwestern University concert.

When creating a critical edition score of this piece, one may be tempted to create a score for four pianos that will reflect the performance given of this piece at Northwestern University. The power and beauty of the piece are captured on the recording but mimicking that performance would not reflect the open nature of the piece.

Kyle Gann has written that *Evil Nigger*, *Gay Guerilla*, and *Crazy Nigger* are scored for four pianos in multiple publications.¹³ Others have written the same; simply do a quick online search for these three works and you will find that most describe these pieces as being for four pianos. I hope to correct this common and reasonable error. In a pleasant and informative conversation I had with Dr. Gann via e-mail, he gives his rather convincing reasoning behind his statements on the instrumentation of these works despite Eastman's own intentions:

Well, obviously we can't deny that Julius's intentions must have been what he said they were. But the three pieces were only played on pianos during his lifetime; the scores use both treble and bass clefs; *Crazy Nigger* (I think) ends with a harmonic series played across a seven-octave range, with quite a few extra performers brought in on the last page; and there are very few other instruments I could imagine using. I managed *Gay Guerrilla* with guitars, and it wasn't an easy transition. It had been popular since [Terry Riley's] *In C* to write pieces for open instrumentation, but I think Julius was kidding himself somewhat if he really thought these scores could be played with oboes and bassoons, or a brass complement. Strings possibly, but you'd have to do a lot of arranging, whereas the piano performances took place directly from the surviving scores.¹⁴

In this portion of our conversation, Dr. Gann addresses *Gay Guerrilla* and *Crazy Nigger*; this essay will only directly address those issues pertaining to *Evil Nigger*.

¹³ Kyle Gann, "The Miraculous Revival of Julius Eastman," *Post Classic*, last modified September 4, 2005, accessed September 15, 2015, http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2005/09/the_miraculous_revival_of_juli.html.

¹⁴ Kyle Gann, e-mail message to author, June 17, 2015

Part of the power and beauty that comes from the original recording of *Evil Nigger* is due to its fast tempo, which is around 144 B.P.M. Dr. Gann is correct to believe that playing this piece with any wind instrument would be difficult; however, one must consider the following: 1) Though Eastman's original manuscript for *Evil Nigger* does contain instances of different adjacent clefs, there is not one instance of different clefs being connected to suggest the type of grand-staff one would use for a piano composition 2) the original manuscript contains no tempo markings. If an ensemble of violins, violas, and cellos were to attempt a performance of this work, they could (with a bit of endurance training) perform *Evil Nigger* at the tempo heard in the recording from the Northwestern University concert. The performance of this work at 144 B.P.M., as Dr. Gann alludes to, by wind instruments would be significantly more difficult than a performance by an ensemble of percussion or string instruments.

The amount of solo and ensemble repertoire with extreme technical challenges for wind instruments has increased dramatically over the past century. With the early to mid-20th century avant-garde compositions came an increasing need for players of all instruments to be able to read and perform music that would be inconceivable to musicians of the 19th century. Underselling the abilities of wind instrumentalists may be ill-advised considering modern wind virtuosi and repertoire. Consider Michael Gordon's piece for seven bassoons, *Rushes*. The first ten minutes of *Rushes* (along with much of the rest of the piece) contain nearly constant 16th notes. This type of motion is made physically possible by the dovetailing of measures of silence with measures of 16th notes between the various players. The tempo of *Rushes* is 125 B.P.M., which is 19 B.P.M. slower

than *Evil Nigger*. Even if an ensemble of double-reed instruments attempted to perform *Evil Nigger* at 144 B.P.M., despite the absence of a tempo marking in the original manuscript, Eastman's prescription of an ensemble with 10-18 instruments would make this relatively easy; the musicians would have ample time to tank up on air without creating any gaps in sound production

The tempo at which it is performed in the original recording effectively energizes the music, so it may be wise to not go significantly slower than 144 B.P.M. If an ensemble wishes to perform this piece significantly slower than 144 B.P.M. it should be for good reason, i.e., if an ensemble consists of mostly of low brass instruments or double reed instruments. It is also important to remember that the structure and length of the piece will remain exactly the same regardless of the tempo due to the time-based construction of the piece.

Expanded Performance Instructions

There will be concise instructions on how to play the piece immediately preceding the score.

This piece is motive-based, time-based, and improvisatory. What “motive-based” refers to is music that is void of the transitional and developmental elements that are found in other types of music. The motivic and time-based nature of *Evil Nigger* are explicitly related; during this piece musicians play musical gestures for a specified amount of time and once that time has passed musicians move on to the next group of musical gestures which are referred to as sections. In this edition of *Evil Nigger*, sections will be denoted with large Arabic numerals. Sections refer to the timeframes specified in

the original manuscript, i.e., section 31 begins at the 15-minute juncture and ends on the 15-minutes and 30-seconds juncture which also marks the beginning of section 32, and so on. There will be one or more motives in every section, and any of these motives can be performed by members of the ensemble at any point in the section they are within. *Evil Nigger* is improvisatory; one is given musical material that can generally be played in any octave, can start or stop at any time, and musicians can decide to play several different motives within a section or, in the case of players of polyphonic instruments, play multiple motives simultaneously.

This edition prescribes a minimum of 10-13 players and this prescription is based on two factors: 1) Eastman's description of *Evil Nigger* as a piece for 10-18 instruments and 2) at the densest sections of the piece, there are 13 motives available to performers. If polyphonic instruments are used, i.e., piano, classical guitar, etc., there should be at least 4 musicians in the ensemble.

In the original manuscript for *Evil Nigger*, Eastman wrote in no rests nor any other indication in regard to rests or silence. There should be no silence for the majority of the piece; however, from section 47 until the end of the piece instances of silence are acceptable due to the sparse nature of the musical material. The motives present in sections 47, 48, and 49, are predominantly long tones. If an ensemble consists of wind instruments, players should hold the long tones as long as they can healthily do so while gradually fading away.

There should be a large time-counter at the front of the stage facing the musicians or each player should have a stopwatch of some kind. The players should be as

synchronized as possible, so a large clock that everyone can see is preferable. Ensembles will surely come up with creative ways to deal with this issue. Ensembles that perform *Evil Nigger* need either a conductor or leader who plays within the ensemble. A conductor's role for the piece will entail keeping everyone on the same pulse and signaling the changing of sections. A leader who plays within the ensemble can attempt to take on the tasks assigned to a conductor. If a group has a significant enough amount of rehearsal time, the only task an ensemble leader might need to carry out is signaling the beginning of *tutti* sections.

Black note-heads are the equivalent of 16th notes (4 notes per pulse). When black note-heads are marked with dashes, performers may repeat that particular pitch indefinitely with a 16th note duration before moving on to the next note of the motive or to a new motive. If there is more than one note in a motive that contains dashed notes, one may repeat a note as often as one wishes before moving on to the next repeated note. In the original manuscript, there are open note-heads with stems in the first three sections of the piece with a "2" written above them; this is an indication that what appear as half notes are the length of two tied black note-heads. A "2" never appears above another note after the first three sections. Eastman did not bother writing a "2" above the half notes after the first three sections, but every subsequent half note should be treated the same except for the half notes with a "3" written above them. Half notes with a "3" written above them are the duration of three tied black note-heads.

Towards the end of the piece, there are motives that have a note in parentheses above a lower note. Whenever possible, one should play the lower note. If the note is out of an instrument's range, one should play the next closest octave. Eastman deliberately

wrote notes with several ledger lines; he would not have gone to that trouble unless he wanted something played in a specific register. For example, in section 47 he wrote a C₁ which is written with five ledger lines below the bass clef.

Motives and Form

Eastman constructed *Evil Nigger* using simple motives; the five principal motives he uses are (A) a descending minor third with a stepwise passing-tone, (B) a descending thirds progression, (C) a second inversion G-minor chord¹⁵, (D) a major second, and (E) a minor second. The seconds of the (D) and (E) motives appear in both ascending and descending forms but due to the repetitive nature of the performance of the motives, the listener will most likely not be able to discern a difference between a motive that begins with ascending motion and one that begins with descending motion.

All other musical material outside of the five principal motives consist of just one note, with the exception of the two triadic motives (an F-major and A-minor triad) in section 9. The addition and subtraction of the one-note motives generally reinforce the tertian harmonies of *Evil Nigger* because, typically, the pitches of the added one-note motives are a third away from the one-note motive(s) of the preceding section. The intervals of major and minor thirds are essential to the form of this piece, and they are the basis of the A and B motives.

Evil Nigger contains three distinct segments. Segment 1 lasts until section 21 or 12'15", segment two consists of sections 22 through 37, lasting from 12'15" until 16'45", and

¹⁵ The (C) motive highlights the goal-notes of the D-minor descending thirds progression

finally segment 3 consists of sections 38 through 49, lasting from 16'45" until 21'05". The first segment encompasses over half of the piece while the proceeding segments each have less sections than the segments that precede them. A gradual reduction in rhythmic activity begins from the outset of segment 2. It is not entirely clear why Eastman chose to close out the piece in a rhythmically anticlimactic manner, though in much of segment 3 the lengths of each section are generally shorter than preceding sections, which results in a faster harmonic motion due to the addition of pitches throughout this segment.

The ostinato-like application of the A and B motives permeate the structure of *Evil Nigger*. From the beginning of the piece until around the half-way point of the piece (section 20), the A motive occurs in every section while other notes and motives are added and subtracted. The B motive is also infused into the piece in various ways and creates cohesion; it appears in 13 of the first 20 sections. In section 20 both the A and B motives are to be played in every key. There is an alternating sequence of 3 sections with the B motive and without the A motive followed by 1 section with the A motive and without the B motive from section 22 to section 37.

In segment 1, the B motive is the dominant musical motive; it functions like a refrain from a popular song or as the first section of a rondo as it occurs in its *tutti* form at regular intervals throughout segment 1. There is a gradual decay of the influence of the B motive after segment 1. It is a powerful force in the first 21 sections; not only does it appear 13 times, but it is also performed by all players simultaneously 5 of these times. *Tutti* performances of this motive are not performed at any point after section 18. From section 22-36, the B motive appears more often than the A motive; however, when the A

motive appears in these sections it is the only motive being played. Conversely, while when the B motive appears in these sections it is always accompanied by other material. The B motive is not heard again in its melodic form after section 36. Every appearance of the A motive between sections 37-45 are unaccompanied by other material.

Sections 19-21 are crucial structural markers for the piece; they mark the transition into Segment 2. In section 19 and section 20 the A and B motives occur in all keys. The chromatic saturation that begins in section 19 and ends at the conclusion of section 20 is the apex of the accumulation of notes a third away from one another that began in section 13. The last section of Segment 1, section 21, is the B motive in its original D-minor form.

Segment 3, which begins at section 38, marks the first time that Eastman instructs players to hold notes indefinitely. The set of long tones in section 38 contains only the notes of the (B) motive. With each new section after section 38, a new pitch is added to the set of long tones with the exception of the sections where the A motive interrupts this development. The set of long tones is paired with a consistent six-motive collection that had begun its construction in section 32. The only motives performers are left to choose from in section 47 are long-note motives. At section 47 the set of long tones has grown from the five notes of the B motive to 10 different notes. Eleven different notes are present in the set of long tones in the final section in addition to the A motive.

Competing Tonal Centers

The B motive occurs in two distinct tonalities: D minor and D-flat/C-Sharp minor. The first instance of the B motive in D-flat/C-Sharp minor occurs in section 15 and is preceded by four sections in which notes belonging to the new tonality are added. The various motives that occur in sections 11 through 18 are a mixture of the two tonalities. Eleven distinct tones are present among the one-note gestures in section 18. The chromatic saturation that occurs in sections 19 and 20 is the outcome of gradually adding notes that began in section eleven; when combined, the D-natural minor and D-flat/C-sharp natural minor scales encompass all 12 tones. C-sharp plays an important role in segment 3; it can be heard distinctively as the only note of the entire piece which receives a duration equal to the length of three 16th notes. In section 38, which is the first section of segment 3, there are eleven different motives and only two do not contain notes from the D natural-minor tonality which makes the juxtaposition of the repeating C-sharps in this section and others like it quite striking.

Jacques Attali wrote: “[The musician] is one of society’s first gazes upon itself...”¹⁶

What should society wish to see when gazing upon itself in the mirror of its art?

¹⁶ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi, fifth printing, 1996. (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 12.

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