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Denial, Fantasy, and Erasure in Five Hundred Years of Music Discourse

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Abstract

This article traces five hundred years of European and American academic and public music discourse through two disparate examples: Vicente Lusitano, a sixteenth-century Portuguese composer of African descent, and anti-Black comments directed at musicians Herbie Hancock and Quincy Jones in the 1984 documentary *I Love Quincy*. These threads converge in the present day, as discourse involving Lusitano increasingly contains a form of anti-Blackness that parallels what is presented by the film's white director, Eric Lipmann, and more recent popular music discourse that echoes his perspective. Moreover, the longitude of Lusitano's experience as a historical figure offers a unique vantage from which we can observe recursive rhetorical devices – denial, fantasy, and erasure – over time and in varied cultural contexts. Because these tropes support contemporary American anti-Black viewpoints as well as similarly flawed and destructive argumentation from historically distant European societies, we can see the continuity of denial, fantasy, and erasure in five hundred years of discourse as a sign that these musical cultures favor domination.

Keywords: American music discourse; anti-Blackness; historical scholarship; public scholarship; whiteness

At one point in the 1984 documentary *I Love Quincy*, the late music producer Quincy Jones visits pianist Herbie Hancock's electronic music studio. Surrounded by the era's leading technology, the two musicians collaboratively program a multilayered beat using a Fairlight Computer Musical Instrument. They laugh and dance as they tediously assemble an intricate web of percussive sounds. Eventually, Jones presses “play” on the looping track, and Hancock takes to a synthesizer to improvise against the electronic accompaniment and show off his musicianship.

After the performance, director Eric Lipmann, who is white, interrupts Jones and Hancock, who are both Black, from off-camera:

Herbie, there was one thing I was thinking. Seeing you and Quincy here, with all these instruments and this sophistication of electronics and everything, but still the African blood is streaming through.¹

¹ Lipmann 1984.

Lipmann's remark is brief and off-the-cuff, but its implications are broad. Whether out of wonder or suspicion, Lipmann asserts that, for some reason, the duo's musical skills should not be compatible with cutting-edge technology, and this makes the performance more astounding. I interpret the term, "African Blood," as a reductive pejorative that invokes additional ahistorical fantasy in order to circumscribe Black musical creativity within the body and a simplistic, mythological realm defined by naturalism and instinct. It seems this characterization is meant to form a juxtaposition against the synthesizers and computers that fill the room, encoding that hardware as white, or at least non-Black, and foreign to Hancock and Jones.

Lipmann's perspective denies both the obvious abilities the two musicians have just displayed and their highly accomplished and varied careers. Jones began his musical life playing and arranging jazz with high-profile collaborators like Count Basie and Cannonball Adderley before studying classical composition techniques with the famed French instructor Nadia Boulanger. These dual experiences laid the groundwork for a polystylistic career that had already reached the highest heights of commercial success in 1984. Two years before *I Love Quincy* was released, Jones produced Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, which became the highest-selling album of all time.² In 1983, Hancock released the crossover hit "Rockit,"³ a Grammy-winning electronic instrumental bedecked with synthesizer riffs and extensive turntable solos. Although Hancock began his career in a more traditional jazz context – Miles Davis recruited him to join his band in 1963⁴ – he was, by the 1980s, known as, "a master of electronics," in the American music press.⁵ "Rockit" stands out not only for its gains in the marketplace of American popular music but also for its winning fusion of dance, funk, and hip-hop esthetics.

Accordingly, this exchange between Lipmann, Jones, and Hancock serves to introduce the rhetorical tropes of denial, fantasy, and erasure in music discourse that are the focus of this essay. Lipmann chooses to question, rather than accept, Jones' and Hancock's music making. And, the evocative fantasy of "African blood" animates Lipmann's interpretation by obscuring the reality of the performance with myths that presuppose the primitivism of Black American culture. The result is erasure: Lipmann's remark ignores Jones' and Hancock's clear competence with electronic music tools, the accomplished careers each brought into that day's filming, as well as the well-documented, decades-long history of twentieth-century afrodiasporic musicians embracing a wide range of emergent music technologies.⁶

This moment in *I Love Quincy* is casual and, ultimately, collegial – Jones even jokes, "the blood will prevail," in his immediate response to Lipmann's comments.⁷ It would be easy to ignore this conversation except for the way Lipmann's chosen language resonates with centuries of European and American music discourse that mistreats musicians of African descent. I argue we can trace these sympathetic vibrations at least as far back as the sixteenth century, to the experiences of Vicente Lusitano (c. 1522 – fl. 1561), a mixed-race Portuguese composer, music theorist, and priest.⁸ Lusitano's representation in writing, scholarship, and other

² Shah 1990.

³ DeVault 1984.

⁴ Bennett 2008.

⁵ Feather 1983.

⁶ For a comprehensive overview of this history in experimental and popular contexts, see Lewis 2000, Silpayamanant 2023, and the chapter "Machine Time" in Charnas and Peretz 2022.

⁷ Lipmann 1984.

⁸ For a comprehensive overview of Vicente Lusitano's biography, see Barbosa 1978, Stevenson 1982, Blackburn 2001, and Blackburn, Schumann, and McHardy 2022.

discussions during and after his life is defined by acts of denial and fantasy reminiscent of Lipmann's exchange with Hancock and Jones. While the following focuses on afrodiasporic music, I believe that the connections between these two stylistically, geographically, and chronologically disparate instances illustrate tendencies toward dominating rhetoric in European and American music discourse that also impact other vulnerable groups over a long period.

My earnest study of Vicente Lusitano's life and music began in 2020, and this exploration introduced me to the diffusion of denial, fantasy, and erasure in American and European music scholarship. I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual man, and it took me years following my education to reconcile the practices of exclusion that shaped my understanding of music and its history. I was lucky to come to my Lusitano research with some understanding of the risks posed by my social position, mostly thanks to my engagement with the work of twentieth-century African-American music scholars and practitioners like Dominique-Rene de Lerma, Undine Smith Moore, Samuel A. Floyd Jr., and Olly Wilson.⁹ This generation's calls to action remained urgent across the varied specialties of the American musical academy in the late 2010s. As George E. Lewis and Joy H. Calico describe in the editorial introduction to the *Journal of the American Musicological Society's* special issue on Music, Race, and Ethnicity, "[s]harpening musicology's engagement with race and ethnicity can also produce new understandings of the relations among formations of canon, race, and genre."¹⁰ This was published in 2019, the same year music theorist Philip Ewell debuted his notable research conceptualizing the "white racial frame" and its historical influence on his academic discipline.¹¹

As prepared as I felt to study Lusitano, my choice to conduct this research in collaboration with Joseph McHardy, a Scottish-Congolese conductor and early music expert, proved to be the most important step in negotiating my social position. We connected in the summer of 2020 through our mutual interest in Lusitano and began working together almost immediately. Our primary focus has involved coalescing and reconciling extant sources dating from the sixteenth century to the present. After spending years studying Lusitano's historiography, I feel strongly that many of its issues result from the empowerment of individual white scholars' misguided perspectives. (I recognize it is ironic to make this point in a single-author essay.) I am glad Joe's and my co-authored work addresses this problem. Joe's influence also led us to enthusiastically engage with disciplines outside of music – linguistics, Black Studies, Diaspora Studies, etc. – so that our understanding of Lusitano's biography, namely his racialized identity, would greatly improve upon the status quo. To date, the most important outcome of our work can be found in our revisions to musicologist Bonnie Blackburn's 2001 entry on Lusitano in *Grove Music*, which we published in 2022.

There are two critical acts of denial that define both Lusitano's career and his legacy in scholarship. The most well-known of these stems from a notorious academic dispute in the summer of 1551 that pitted Lusitano against an Italian contemporary, Nicola Vicentino. Although a panel of senior Vatican musicians declared Lusitano victorious, Vicentino dedicated part of his 1555 treatise *L'Antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica* to discrediting his Portuguese opponent and challenging the dispute's result. Vicentino draws on fictive

⁹ The meaningful scholarship I encountered from these authors includes de Lerma 1970; the chapter "Black Music in the Undergraduate Curriculum", which features Moore, in Lee, Maultsby, Moore, and Taylor 1973; Floyd Jr. 1998; Wilson 1983.

¹⁰ Lewis and Calico 2019, 209.

¹¹ See Ewell 2020.

evidence – a fabricated reproduction of Lusitano’s written testimony from 1551 and intentional misrepresentations of Lusitano’s 1553 music theory publication *Introduittione facilissima* – to portray his rival as conservative and untrustworthy.¹²

For multiple reasons, Vicentino’s version of the facts met little resistance at the time and came to dominate early scholarship related to Lusitano,¹³ which caused harm to the Portuguese composer’s reception by scholars and practitioners of sixteenth-century European music. It took until the nineteenth century for any source to locate Lusitano’s scores.¹⁴ And, Joaquim de Vasconcellos’ 1870 volume *Os Musicos Portuguezas* offers the first detailed disproof of Vicentino’s misinformation after the sixteenth century.¹⁵ The first partial analysis of Lusitano’s music was published in 1962,¹⁶ the first critical edition of *Introduittione Facilissima* was published in 1989,¹⁷ and, as of January 2025, there remains no critical edition of Lusitano’s most substantial surviving composition, *Liber Primus Epigramatum* (1551). The first commercial recording featuring multiple selections from this motet collection was released in 2022.¹⁸

The second act of denial in Lusitano’s historiography involves his racialized identity, and it features a set of events that unfolds over hundreds of years, beginning with the fifteenth-century arrival of enslaved Africans in Portugal.¹⁹ In 1518, Pope Leo X’s Papal Bull *Exponi nobis* restricted African-descended priests’ access to employment in and patrimony from the Catholic Church.²⁰ Lusitano was an ordained priest, had a close relationship with Portuguese nobility, collaborated with multiple prominent Italian publishers, and participated in the Vatican’s elite musical community during his time in Rome. However, he was never employed in the Church while he lived in Portugal or Italy. Pope Leo X’s restrictions provide a plausible explanation for this incongruity.²¹ It is also likely that this professional disenfranchisement influenced the most striking developments in Lusitano’s life after the dispute with Vicentino, such as his marriage and conversion to Protestantism. Lusitano and his wife left Italy altogether in the late 1550s or early 1560s, and his presence is last recorded in southern Germany in 1561.²²

This circumstantial evidence is the only indication of Lusitano’s racialized identity from his lifetime. A direct textual reference appears in a seventeenth-century manuscript by Portuguese bibliographer João Franco Barreto, who describes Lusitano as *homem pardo*, an unambiguous term used at the time in Portugal to label certain mixed-race people of African descent.²³ However, when eighteenth-century historian Diogo Barbosa Machado used Barreto’s manuscript as a source for a 1752 encyclopedia, he omitted *homem pardo* from

¹² Blackburn et al. 2022.

¹³ Baini 1828, 343–46; Fétis 1839, 208–09.

¹⁴ Gerber 1814, 443.

¹⁵ Vasconcellos 1870, 203–18; Ghiselin Danckerts, one of the judges in the 1551 dispute, wrote a manuscript entitled *Sopra differentia musicale sententiata* (1556), which challenged Vicentino’s reproduction and interpretation of Lusitano’s testimony.

¹⁶ Stevenson 1962.

¹⁷ Lusitano and Gialdroni 1989.

¹⁸ The Marian Consort 2022.

¹⁹ Magalhães 1997, 144–45.

²⁰ de C. M. Saunders 1982, 157.

²¹ Blackburn et al. 2022.

²² Stevenson 1982, 98.

²³ Blackburn et al. 2022.

his entry on Lusitano.²⁴ Like Vicentino's distorted account of the 1551 dispute, Machado's incomplete biography became the foundation of subsequent scholarship.

In the 1970s, musicologist Maria Augusta Alves Barbosa became the first scholar to publicize Barreto's racializing description of Lusitano. Over the four decades that follow, we see early music practitioners and scholars who specialize in the history of composers of African descent accept this new information without hesitation,²⁵ while more traditionally oriented academics continue to deny the evidence of Lusitano's identity.²⁶ In 2013, art historian Kate Lowe aptly described this situation in music studies, "what is particularly interesting about Vicente's case is that he has become disassociated from his blackness; all musicologists know of him, but until recently, virtually none knew he was black [*sic*]."²⁷

The contemporary resistance to Lusitano's biography among white scholars shares in the same basic, anti-Black skepticism evident in Eric Lipmann's response to Herbie Hancock and Quincy Jones. Both situations recall Rinaldo Walcott's assertion, "The limit of the idea of freedom as actually occurring for Black people is most clearly seen when movement happens."²⁸ Hancock, Jones, and Lusitano face arguments based on denial, fantasy, and erasure because they are seen as trespassers in the creative and historical spaces in which they are observed. Lipmann's argument relates to the idea of Black movement in a metaphorical way, as the fantasy of "African Blood" works to frame Hancock and Jones as primitive intruders in the "advanced" world of electronic music. Lusitano's situation evokes movement more literally as his trans-European career also featured his traversal of confessional boundaries via his conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism. Even Lusitano's dispute with Vicentino dealt with a kind of movement, as its abstruse subject involved the analysis of a certain kind of melodic motion in the commonly composed and performed music of the day.²⁹ Of course, while Lusitano's parents are unknown, it is very likely he was the child of, or otherwise descended from, someone who was enslaved and forcibly relocated from Africa to Portugal. Doubts about the reliability of the evidence of Lusitano's racialized identity often appear predicated on the notion that African and African-descended people were not present in Europe during his lifetime, but this denies the documented history of enslavement.

From Lipmann's haphazard argument in 1984 to Vicentino's fabrications in *L'Antica musica*, and in contemporary rejections of Lusitano's identity, we see the tropes of denial, fantasy, and erasure consistently lead people toward positions that do not hold up to scrutiny. For example, Bonnie Blackburn's 2001 entry in *Grove Music* incorrectly claims Barreto labeled Lusitano as *mestizo* in his seventeenth-century manuscript. That Spanish term neither appears in this source nor holds an equivalent meaning to *homem pardo*.³⁰ As academic and public discourses involving Lusitano have more or less converged over the last four years, the quality of argumentation has declined more egregiously. In a December 2020 appearance on *The Marian Consort Podcast*, Blackburn speculated about the Portuguese composer's appearance ("What kind of complexion did he have? Was it obvious?") in an exchange with the host, conductor Rory McCleery, that questioned the integrity of extant

²⁴ Nery 1984, 156–57; Barbosa 1977, 2.

²⁵ Schumann 2023; Flandreau 1998, 26.

²⁶ Blackburn 2001; Hill 2023.

²⁷ Lowe 2013, 51.

²⁸ Walcott 2021, 14.

²⁹ Blackburn et al. 2022.

³⁰ Earle 2016, 443.

evidence.³¹ Blackburn's concern about Lusitano's body echoes, though almost certainly by accident, the arguments Wikipedia editors used two months earlier to justify their refusal to acknowledge Lusitano's racialized identity:

remove the "African descent" part of the article as it is unproven and its legitimacy is based all on the words of someone who did not work in genetics or worked in the study of phenotypes.³²

In general terms, this discourse continues to trade in fantasy and denial as it seeks to obscure and impugn both the assembled understanding of Lusitano's life as well as academic consensus regarding Europe's demographic history. We also see a turn toward arcane, biologically oriented frameworks for interpreting Lusitano's identity. These relate to the historical race-based discrimination that is evident in Lusitano's life, as well as the moment Barreto racializes him as *homem pardo*. However, these factors recede from the foreground of Lusitano scholarship in the eighteenth century and onward as the evidence of his identity is ignored or hidden. For hundreds of years, Lusitano's potential Blackness was not remarked upon and music scholars presumed his identity fit the default (whiteness). Ironically, these misunderstandings likely benefit Lusitano, as at least one of the nineteenth-century scholars who analyzed his work – François-Joseph Fétis – held explicitly white supremacist views.³³

The methodology Blackburn and the Wikipedia editors used independently in 2020 demonstrates what Charles Mills dubs, "racial realism," an idea that twentieth-century scholars persuasively dismissed in favor of a social ontology of race.³⁴ It matters that Blackburn continues to hold expert status as a scholar of Vicente Lusitano's life and music despite the issues with her analysis of his racialized identity in peer-reviewed and public-facing contexts. There is also no indication these particular Wikipedia editors faced any recourse for their more blatant scientific racism, and Lusitano's page on the site continues to equivocate about his racialized identity. The fact that glaringly inaccurate and flawed arguments draw little to no accountability suggests that dominance is more important to this discursive system than evidence. Denial, fantasy, and erasure recur, both deliberately and passively, across centuries of academic and public music discourse because they fit into this set of values. As bell hooks explains:

Certainly from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the "primitive" or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo*.³⁵

If the disparate examples of Vicente Lusitano and *I Love Quincy* demonstrate such a status quo, it is one in which research, media, and discussion involving music reinforce existing disparities in social and political power. Various phenomena, from denial, fantasy, and erasure, to the empowerment of flawed arguments, and more specific ideologies, like modern American anti-Blackness, all facilitate the destructive rhetoric required to achieve this discourse's ultimate goal: domination. My conclusion may not be exceptional in the larger scheme of current humanities scholarship, but contemporary disagreements about diversity in music

³¹ McCleery 2020.

³² Talk:Vicente Lusitano 2020.

³³ Christensen 2020.

³⁴ Mills 1998, 44–47.

³⁵ Hooks 2015, 22.

scholarship and practice – including the ongoing resistance to Lusitano’s evidenced identity – show that key European and American institutions still refuse to reconcile this idea.³⁶

It is important to recognize that, unlike their white peers, Black American writers have recognized the primacy of dominance in white interpretations of Black music since at least the first half of the nineteenth century. Frederick Douglass criticized white Americans for their, “great mistake,” of misinterpreting the musical practices of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the United States as evidence of happiness.³⁷ And, in the preface to his 1878 chronicle of Black American classical musicians, *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, James Monroe Trotter notes:

[T]he haze of complexional prejudice has so much obscured the vision of many persons, that they cannot see (at least, there are many who affect not to see) that musical faculties, and power for their artistic development, are not in the exclusive possession of the fairer-skinned race, but are alike the beneficent gifts of the Creator to all his children.³⁸

It is not difficult to see how Douglass’s critique, as well as many of the anecdotes of anti-Black prejudice Trotter includes in his exhaustive history,³⁹ connects to the manifestations of denial, fantasy, and erasure I have identified in discourses from other times and places.

In America, the twentieth century continues the paradigms Douglass and Trotter detect. Here, the achievements of countless men and women vivify an esthetic, geographic, and economic expansion of Black American musicality that is met by recursive rejections from white audiences, media, and institutions.⁴⁰ As composer William Grant Still summarized in a 1950 essay, “The more one advances, the higher the hurdle grows.”⁴¹ To borrow Still’s metaphor, it seems clear Eric Lipmann raised his hurdle for Herbie Hancock and Quincy Jones upon observing the duo’s virtuosic collaboration in *I Love Quincy*. And, whether we consider more recent claims that hip hop is not music, or that hip hop’s influence has made all popular music less sophisticated, or that Black artists, like Beyoncé, cannot participate in certain genres, Still’s concerns – and prejudices that Black music is primitive and that Black musical expression must be contained within acceptable esthetic spaces – appear to live on in the 2020s.⁴²

Fitting Vicente Lusitano into this Black American musical and intellectual tradition is more complicated due to historical and cultural distance. While contemporary skepticism about his identity evinces the same sort of contrived rationale that Still identifies, we must remember that the social structures within which Lusitano lived were not identical to those in the nineteenth-, twentieth-, or twenty-first-century United States.⁴³ There is much more to uncover and study about Lusitano, particularly with respect to the clear evidence that he

³⁶ For relevant examples of this recent discourse in classical music, see MacDonald 2021a, 2021b, Lebrecht 2021, Powell 2021, McWhorter 2023, and Kisiedu and Lewis 2023.

³⁷ Douglass 1857, 99; Douglass introduces this critique in his first autobiography (1847).

³⁸ Trotter 1878, 4.

³⁹ Of many exemplary episodes from Trotter’s history, the story of when members of an all-Black orchestra led by the composer Francis Johnson (1792–1844) were questioned by white concertgoers as to whether they could actually read the sheet music in front of them is particularly relevant to the subject of this essay (307).

⁴⁰ See DuBois 1903, 256; Cuney-Hare 1936, 10–74; Freeman n.d., 100–03; Trotter 1878, 22–50; de Lerma 1970; Lee et al. 1973; Wilson 1971; Green 1975.

⁴¹ Still 1950.

⁴² For relevant examples of this recent discourse in American popular music, see Riva 2022, Voznick-Levinson 2023, Grisar 2024, and Crumpton 2024.

⁴³ Hoerder 2013, 239.

was part of a global, European-dominated musical culture that included many people of African descent in different roles.⁴⁴ In this way, Lusitano's biography seems to hold meaningful implications in terms of the variegated reality of European musical life as well as the African Diaspora, but this future research is imperiled by twenty-first-century disagreements. In addition to this unrealized potential, the enormous demands for reparative scholarship generated by Lusitano's fraught experience as a historical figure aligns with the arguments of many Black American musicians and writers who underscore the intellectual and cultural costs of destructive music discourse.

As a white scholar, I am principally inclined to explore denial, fantasy, and erasure out of solidarity with those who are, have been, and will be targeted by these tropes. I am also fascinated and disturbed by the modes of whiteness reflected in the disregard for documented evidence, embrace of unreality, and imposition of unsupported interpretations that I have written about this essay. What can be done to confront this historically persistent rhetoric? What precedents of resistance and restoration exist that we should honor and follow? Interestingly, Herbie Hancock's reply to Eric Lipmann in *I Love Quincy* offers a compelling starting point for addressing these questions:

These instruments were designed for people to use...ya know, it's just a tool, another tool, the way, the way, an axe is a tool. An axe can be a tool to cut wood to build a house, or it can be a tool to slaughter your neighbor...it all depends on the person who's using them. People blame machines very often, "it's the machine's fault," how can it be the machine's fault? We have to plug it in.⁴⁵

Music discourse is a tool. People have the choice as to how they use it. When domination is the norm, participants in music discourse, particularly those from the most empowered groups, have the responsibility not to reify a status quo defined by inequality and oppression. Among other practices, this resistance must involve eschewing arguments based on denial, fantasy, and erasure and finding new ways of doing that center, repair, and expand the meaningfulness of documented evidence from the past and present.

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⁴⁴ See Stevenson 1968, which describes an ensemble of enslaved African percussionists accompanying Antonio de Mendoza, the first viceroy of New Spain, upon his arrival in Lima, Peru in 1551; also, the painting *The Engagement of St. Ursula and Prince Etherius*, which was commissioned in 1522, depicts an ensemble of African-descended instrumentalists performing in the Portuguese court.

⁴⁵ Lipmann 1984.

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