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Abstract

“The Right to Tell: Listening Practices, Race and Recordings, 1959-1978,” is a multidisciplinary examination of LP recordings and their role in the formation of racial and national listening practices. In order to do so, I look at the protocols and structures of perception and declaration in the late 1960s in order to make two primary and linked claims. First, the cultural and political upheaval of the period were often taken as evidence of a new order of cross-racial encounter. This new order was seen not only to draw white and black communities and individuals into different—if no less precarious—contact. It also forced individuals and communities on both sides of the color line to recalibrate the protocols of perception or what I call telling. To be sure, these recalibrations were multiple and often personal, so in excess of the carefully guarded divisions associated with and established by the color line. Second, because the record was one of the primary mediums through which cross-racial encounter was believed to occur, recordings were opportunities to stage new modes of telling. For artists like James Brown, whose late 1960s and early 1970s releases are explored, recordings became a ground upon which to revise the protocols of telling. For other artists, recordings were an opportunity through which to generate new performative modes of listening and playing. By embracing the record’s temporal multiplicity and disembodied nature, these songs—and the literature they inspired—foregrounded the performative and, in doing so, demoted the descriptive nature of telling.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction:
The Right to Tell

Burden I:
Whiteness Out of Phase

Chapter 1:
But Think of the Parents: Kate Smith, the Racial Body and Whiteness Out of Phase

Chapter 2:
“Say It Loud:” Retelling, Race Men and the Striving for Possessive Personhood in the Work of James Brown

Burden II:
Hereness

Chapter 3:
A Pocket of Exchange: The Inadequacy of Language and Music Writing as an Act of Listening

Chapter 4:
Talking Loud and Saying (Almost) Nothing: The Political Possibilities of Regard in Audience’s Responses to “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud.”

Chapter 5:
Roberta Flack’s Humming Time as an Alternative Mode of Communion and Regard

Epilogue
Mix as Method: An Alternative Approach to Listening with Regard

Coda:
Who Stays; Who Goes; Who Knows

Bibliography

Discography
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I still remember the record player in daddy’s cupboard—him lifting me upwards and me singing on our kitchen table, then the southern breeze would come in my window. Outside Black hands sweating in the cornfields. Lemonade on the sidewalk. Segregation: Black and white. Policeman always white.

-Betty Davis

If I could, I would copy this passage over and over then over again. I would leave a blank page between each again. I would call these pages room. They would be for those who have already sung. And if could, I would listen in the blank. For the quiet of what Davis leaves untold. For the private each of us reserves for ourselves. And if it were, and if I had, and if the subjunctive weren’t a tense given to lies, each page would be a paltry ground, too small to contain our tally, too persistent to forget the celebration that exceeds one’s telling. All would be hush, a ceremony of smallness, an opening onto abundance, which—infinitiesimal—gives in and to and alongside the small swell we call Black music. Instead, I place it here as my beginning. . . as my borrowing . . . first and then also last . . . which like a record at its unending end, serves to spur a listening to listening over and over then over again . . .

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Introduction: The Right to Tell

To tell or not tell / . . . tell you? ha! Who / can tell another how / to manage the swimming? / he was right: people // don’t change. They only stand more / revealed. I, / likewise.
- Charles Olson.

In between rehearsals for their December 30, 1970 Jacksonville concert, the Jackson 5 sat down with Scott Osbourne of ABC news for an interview. Part of a larger “Special Report” that followed the band on their first national tour, Osbourne speaks to the brothers while they are on a break from on-the-road-classes. If the majority of the special offers a carefully constructed image of the brothers as preternaturally hardworking while occasionally prone to adolescent distractions, the interview is different. Tense to the point of discomfort, both the questions and responses evacuate the unbothered and naturally easy demeanor for which the brothers had come to be known. In its place was something less assured and, perhaps, even resistant. The brothers, however, can hardly be blamed. Osbourne’s questions offer little substance and, instead, cycle through variations on a single, unasked but looming theme: racial standpoint and the reach and scope of contemporary Black sound.

When asked, “what kind of audience do you play to? Who do you think is listening when you perform your music and what do you try to tell them or do you try to tell them anything,” Michael leans forward and answers with a question of his own. “You mean when I’m singing?” He then turns to face the out-of-frame interviewer and asks, “While I’m singing? What do you tell them?” The interviewer replies, “Who do you think is listening to your music. Describe your

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4 Osbourne, “A Special Report.”
5 Osbourne, “A Special Report.”
audience.” To this question, Michael offers a non-answer. “Maybe some guys from television or something. I don’t know.” The interviewer then shifts to Jackie, the eldest of the brothers, and says, “Millions of people have bought your records, so who do you think your audience is?” Jackie is more forthcoming than Michael. “Well, the majority of them are Black.” But when the interviewer asks Jackie to “describe them for me,” he asks the interviewer to clarify. “Describe them?” he repeats, to which the interviewer responds, “I mean would you call it . . . how would you describe your music. Would you just say it’s popular music or is it, you know, real soul.” Jackie is quick to say, “Call it bubblegum soul,” but he almost immediately qualifies the answer by saying, “That’s what they call it. It’s like funky music, soul.”

For all the seeming confusion between the Jacksons and their interviewer, the scene is neither new nor without precedent. It almost immediately recalls the opening to W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, wherein Du Bois describes how an “unasked question” looms over every encounter he has with white people. “They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town. . . To the real question,” Du Bois asserts, “I answer seldom a word.” Like Du Bois’ white interlocutors, the Jackson’s interviewer offers questions that “flutter around” the “problem” of Blackness without explicitly

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6 Osbourne, “A Special Report.”
7 Osbourne, “A Special Report.”
8 Osbourne, “A Special Report.”
9 Osbourne, “A Special Report.”
10 Osbourne, “A Special Report.”
11 Osbourne, “A Special Report.”
12 Osbourne, “A Special Report.”
invoking it.\textsuperscript{14} And, in doing so, he ensures that Blackness remains unspeakable. But what does it mean to speak of Blackness? And, more pressingly, does the unasked nature of the question precede or proceed from the understanding of Blackness as a problem?

If Michael follows Du Bois’s example, offering seldom a word, Jackie’s declaration that the Jackson 5’s audience was Black operates from a decidedly different mode. Unlike Du Bois and Michael, Jackie invokes Blackness at the very moment it goes unspoken and, in doing so, draws the question of race into the open. The casting of race into the realm of the spoken, however, only enables the interviewer to demand further elaboration without, in fact, asking anything at all. This demand, which neither precedes nor proceeds from a question but, instead, exists at every stage of encounter, forms the locus of what might be called the Du Boisian dilemma of representation both in 1903 and 1970. No matter how Jackie proceeds, his answer is always under threat of being treated as the representative answer to a still unasked question. Worse, neither silence nor description can escape the threat of becoming an answer. As Nahum Dimitri Chandler writes, the “response-ability” of individuals is short-circuited by the question itself.\textsuperscript{15} The fact of address becomes a kind of tautological confirmation, where to litigate one’s humanity is to accept a life lived as a problem.

Jackie chooses neither silence nor elaboration but, instead, repeats the question back to the interviewer, rendering the interrogative demand into a performative that inaugurates what might be called affective confusion. Neither denying the trap of a question that, in fact, asks for an answer embedded within the marrow of its silence, nor falling quiet, Jackie’s performance of confusion doubly evades the Du Boisian dilemma—even if only temporarily. For one, confusion

\textsuperscript{14} Du Bois, \textit{Souls}, 7.
requires the interviewer to either abandon his inquiry—as he does—or speak to the question of Blackness as a problem. Additionally, confusion disrupts the ways that Black people have been historically treated as a representative (or, alternatively, exceptional) answer to the unasked question. Because Jackie’s repetition offers no answer but, instead, finds a voice from within the repurposing of the interviewer’s question, his confusion produces the requisite dissemblance needed to dissatisfy any sense of answer. Indeed, to be confused is to lack assurance and answer; to be confused is to exist within what Saidiya Hartman has called, in other moments, ambivalence.16

The generation of ambivalence is only further complicated by the constitutive relationship between what Fred Moten has called the “critical analysis of anti-blackness” and the “celebratory analysis of blackness.”17 If the predication of the latter must “subordinate” the former “by a measure so small that it constitutes measure’s eclipse,” celebration always promises to place the requisite analysis of anti-blackness into the realm of the unspeakable. Yet, as Moten reminds us, “Subordination is not detachment,” and “disappearance is not absence.”18 Or, as Haki R. Madhubiti argues just three years after the airing of the Jackson’s special, “We attack the anti rather than be the pro.”19 To declare that one’s audience is Black, as Jackie does, ostensibly generates a hierarchy of focus on, for and with Black people and, in doing so, might be said to celebrate the Black community. Nevertheless, the celebration neither evicts nor, as we have seen above, seizes control over the historical nature of framing Blackness as an unspoken problem. If

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Jackie’s declaration serves to foreground both Black people and the traditions generated by and for them, celebrating what Frank B. Wilderson has called the politics of culture, the interviewer’s question returns both the band and the audience to the culture of politics, which is to say the “structural positionality” of the band and interviewer vis-à-vis race. What is at stake in Jackie’s affective confusion, then, is not just a matter of disrupting the representative impulse; it also draws out how the Du Boisian dilemma is an historically particular manifestation of a larger complex of racial telling, with telling signaling the complicated relationship between the state, standpoint and the variety of perceptual, sensual and expressive modes differently available to communities in any given historical moment. Who has the right to tell—and how that telling is often treated as a representative totality—underlies the strange and strained nature of the interview.

Still, this strain is neither easily challenged nor excised. For even as the Du Boisian question goes “unasked,” and, thereby, generates an aporia through which Blackness is seen to be a problem, the narrative impulse—indeed, the impulse to narrate song and sound—requires telling. As Ronald Radano argues, the “familiar saying: ‘Let the music speak for itself’ is an insufficient method by which to contend with meaning and song.”

It would seem that music cannot speak for itself. “For all that we hear in black music, or indeed in any kind of music, is inevitably invested in words: in the stories we tell, in the histories we recite, in the associations we make.” Music, Radano concludes, comes into meaning through discernable—which is to say established and often thoughtlessly accepted—referents made available by the network of

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22 Ronald Radano, Lying Up a Nation, xi.
somantic, historical and social stories communities tell. To ask that we leave telling by the way so to allow music to speak, thus, is to naively believe that rhetorical, formal or analytical silence is evidence of telling’s absence. It is, then, to engender a new protocol through which Blackness becomes an unspoken—but “twice told”—problem.23

Yet, to speak of music invites problems as well, especially as one’s speech—or telling—pertains to Black communities’ making of and listening to music. Much of the issue turns back to questions of the many ways that speech both structures and is structured by racialized “grammars” that render Blackness into what Hortense Spillers calls “signifying property plus,” those “layers of attenuated meanings” that make one’s ability to “speak a truer word” more difficult.24 Indeed, when Spillers opens her canonical text “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” with the line “Let’s face it,” she does not offer an idiomatic entry into narrative.25 Rather, the sentence contends with the already present tropes that obtain in racist conceptions of Blackness. To face these tropes halts the teleological force by which Black women’s “mythical prepossession” by racist, reductive ideas are treated as axiological givens, those categories by which Blackness is understood to be a structural position.26 These categories were not, then, synonymous with identity but, following Calvin L. Warren, “an anchor for human identity [wherein] the anchor is an inclusive exclusion [that] subtends human identity but is not incorporated into it.”27

23 Du Bois, Souls, 3.
Blackness, following both Spillers and Warren, becomes that which simultaneously makes a Western concept of the human possible even as its participation within such a project also requires it to be seen as a quality that excludes Black people from the human category. Leading from these observations, there can be no idiom given by Spillers; or, to take a small liberty, this is not a tale that can accord “once upon a time,” that most powerful announcement of narrative entry. No such risk can be taken, for the prepossessing myth—or tale told—is not of (human) time but, in fact, that which marks time’s bounds. If music can’t speak for itself, it is equally true that word’s obtain—and so invite—racialized meanings that emerge from within the trace of stories that precede their utterance. This, too, is a sort of telling, though not one through which freedom can be imagined. And it would seem, then, that if music cannot speak for itself; history and the present ensures that Black speech—and, for Spillers, Black women’s speech in particular—has been put to uses that make our speaking of Black music all the more difficult to tell.

Moving between the impulse to tell and the difficulties therein, this project turns to the protocols and structures of telling in the late 1960s in order to make two primary and linked claims. First, the cultural and political upheavals of the period were often taken as evidence of a new order of cross-racial encounter. This new order was seen not only to draw white and Black communities into different—if no less precarious—contact. It also forced individuals on both sides of the colorline to recalibrate the protocols of telling. To be sure, these recalibrations were multiple and often personal, so in excess of the carefully guarded divisions associated with and established by the colorline. However, this excess, I argue, was less a matter of a sudden leap into heretofore unrealized complexity and, instead, a coming into public recognition of an
always-already denied richness of difference within the historically and geographically contingent Black communities across the United States.

Second, because the record was one of the primary mediums through which cross-racial encounter was believed to occur, recordings could be used either to stage new modes of Black telling or, alternatively, to undermine the modality altogether. For Black performers and listeners alike, recordings could and did push against monolithic conceptions of Blackness, even as many white accounts of Black music deployed telling for just those purposes. For artists like James Brown, whose late 1960s and early 1970s releases are explored below, recordings became a ground upon which to revise the protocols of telling. For other artists, of whom Roberta Flack is exemplary, recordings offered an opportunity through which to generate new performative modes in excess of telling. By embracing the record’s temporal multiplicity and disembodied nature, many Black artists and listeners foregrounded the performative nature of reception and, in doing so, demoted the descriptive nature of telling. While often small in shift, these demotions were not small in feat. Declaration had—and has—historically been misunderstood as the means through which Black people litigated their humanity, even as the very fact of treating declaration as testimony, per the court, re-instantiates the need for further declaration. By shifting to the performative, which is to say those utterances, tones, gestures and repertoires that do not describe but, in fact, constitute meaning, these songs offered new ways of reception that were—in the moment—not as easily evaluated along ethnographic lines, a practice that Lucy

\[28\] I use the past tense here purposefully and in acknowledgement of the ways in which the radical potential of any mode is absorbed and so attenuated over time. As such, my use of the past-tense is to draw attention to the period as much as the songs discussed.
Lippard once called the “second route” of racist appraisal.\textsuperscript{29} To be sure the dynamics of Black
telling being legible through music is neither new to this period nor unique. It is, however, useful
for thinking through a period where the tendency to overdetermine music’s political possibility
calls for a careful parsing of telling, Black practices and the demands for self-determination.

Leading from this, it might be said that the right to tell names a relation of racialized
power that is often subsumed or atomized under interrogations of its individual modes of
operation. Whether speaking of sight or touch, testimony or judgment, exegesis or reason, these
operational modalities encourage communities to contend with them in an isolated or focused
manner. Individuals are expected to attend to—or challenge—each of these modalities
singularly. The consequence of singular attention is that isolation removes one’s ability to
grapple with the modular evasions of racialized power, which escapes regard or challenge by
way of transfer. As such, the invocation of “right” and “telling” interrogates the historical
complex through which telling might more fully uncover the operations of racism in a period
when the mythic discourses of integration, colorblindism and both Cold War and neoliberal
policies required the disavowal of racial regimes, even as race continued to shape the criteria of
citizenship. Indeed, the right to tell demands an interrogation of the citizen, subject and
liberalism by way of “rights.” But it also demands an attention to how telling might name an
historical matrix that links practices of discretion, skepticism, decipherment, declaration and
exposure across legal, academic and social spheres. That is, to tell operates as a multiply
denotative verb and noun that names multiple acts. To tell is to communicate, divulge, discern,
inform and command. But it is also the name given to unconscious actions that betray one’s

motivations. As such, the right to tell is also always the right to withhold—but who and whom, and how and what are being withheld operate multiply—even if not always victoriously.

The right to tell, thus, operates alongside Jacques Derrida’s “right of inspection,” which he argues is never the simple matter of sight but also that which sets the protocols of use.30 For Derrida, the issue is always, in part, archival. The right to inspection is a right “to show, edit, store, interpret, and exploit images.”31 And, yet, for all its analytical force—or maybe because of it—inspection threatens to obscure the intimate, small and often unintended procedures of telling race. What’s at stake here is sensuality—both as popularly defined and, more widely, as individuals’ ability to know themselves through encounters with both the world and other selves. And, more pointedly, telling more aptly engages how individuals coming to terms with sensuous bodies have always been a racialized and gendered project of either exnomination or “isolate, overdetermined” nomination.32 To put a more direct point on the above, my focus on telling is concerned with how our current procedures of telling race are not in singular service to the degradation of Blackness; they are also the procedure through which the integrity of whiteness and its most basic need, centrality of narrative, are maintained. Indeed, it might be said that

31 Derrida, Right of Inspection, 34. See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “as soon as philosophy declares itself to be reflection or coincidence it prejudges what it will find, then once again must recommence everything . . . Seeing, speaking, even thinking.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and Invisible. (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1968).
32 On exnomination, see, Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1972), 141-149; on “isolate and over determined” nomination, see, Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 203. Beyond the immediate utility of Barthes’ notion of exnomination, I also cite it because its appearance in 1957 as an extension of both Saussure’s semiological approach to reading texts and a way of thinking about the ways power can and does operate by fact of its un-naming seems to portend the mood to which telling in the sixties begins to contend in broader ways. For related—if obverse methodology—see, Raymond Williams’ “structure of feeling,” in Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-135.
centrality, as both a historical fact and socially mitigated desire, is one of the central conditions that recordings amplify.

What, it might be asked, does it mean to listen to recordings as an act of telling and, alternatively, what does it mean to listen to recordings in service of regard and, in particular, Black regard? In asking such a question so early—perhaps even prematurely—I hope to signal that my focus on telling—and its ultimate limits—is leading to something that might be called the repertoires of Black regard, those modes of relation and community making that have too often been foreclosed, dismissed, or ignored within or because of telling.33 That Black communities have located and then nurtured specific repertoires of regard, making them real in the face of precarity, is—in no uncertain terms—the central concern of the essays that follow.

Leading from such a claim, Black regard might be said to be a coming into company with others, without recourse to assurance or possession. It is also a way of thinking through the necessity of—and desire for—individual difference, which is so often made through acts of telling. But where telling—as I define it—seeks to procure distinction from within possessive modes, placing both the burden and benefit of distinction within frameworks of individual and universally applied rights, regard generates distinction by way of mutual obligation, a demand to come into new or “otherwise” relation with others so to mutually grapple with the world.34 In such grappling, regard makes clear that the opposite of possession is not, in fact, dispossession but, rather, a surrender to the idea that our individual distinction, which is to say partiality, obliges a

33 On repertoire, see, Diana Taylor, The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas (Durham: Duke University, 2003). For Taylor, repertoire names the series of embodied movements, gestures, rituals and practices that geographically specific communities use to transfer knowledge and meaning in excess of written and archival materials.

constant attention to both the historical and present conditions of relation and the violence it both generates and enables. As such, regard’s exclusivity to Black communities—should exclusivity be present, and in the pages that follow I hope to show how it both is and is not—occurs because of whiteness’ constitutive adherence to individuation and possessive selves. These adherences—made manifest through repertoires of telling—effectively foreclose the realization of any kind of regard that takes company and surrender as its primary objectives.

Indeed, the tensions between the right to tell and Black regard are, perhaps, most saliently (and humorously) given in Henry Dumas’ late sixties short story “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” In it, Dumas offers a parable that suggests whiteness as a relation with and in and of the world is not only incompatible with Black life but, perhaps, irredeemable, as well. The story takes place at the Sound Barrier Club, during a period when a Black horn player named Probe has returned from “exile” to “reveal the new sound,” which Dumas describes as “ring of sound from . . . six wailing pieces [that] tightened, creating a spiraling circle.” The effect, the narrator asserts, was profound. “The black audience, unaware at first of its collectiveness had begun to move in a soundless rhythm as if it were the tiny twitchings of an embryo.” Outside the club, three white people try to enter. One of the three, named Jan, is horn player and jazz critic, who does “not believe that there was anything new to this philosophy the musicians were talking about.” His intention is to speak to Probe “personally,” so to confirm that Black musicians’ work was “no

37 Dumas, 105.
38 Dumas, 105.
different from any other artist’s struggles to be himself, including his own.”\textsuperscript{39} Three Black men stop Jan’s group from entering, and when Jan insists that he be allowed enter, one of the men blocking the entry says, “We cannot allow non-Brothers because of the danger involved with extension.”\textsuperscript{40} In response, Jan and his friends find a police officer, who then approaches the three men at the door and insists that Jan’s group be allowed to enter. The men at the door relent, and the one who initially warned Jan of the dangers for “non-Brothers,” says, “Listen officer, if these people go in, the responsibility is yours.”\textsuperscript{41} Jan and his friends ignore the warning and enter the club, encountering the spiral of sound, which “\textit{inside the center of the gyration is an atom stripped of time, black}.”\textsuperscript{42} The story concludes with Jan and his friends found dead at the back of the club.

Dumas’ story, on the one hand, is fantastic, a literalization of Amiri Baraka’s injunction that Charlie Parker “would've played not a note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw.”\textsuperscript{43} In this way, it might be said that Dumas presents notes the way Baraka wants poetry to present; it must “kill.”\textsuperscript{44} However, I want to suggest that there is more to Dumas’ work; it is not singularly in service to killing (nor, for that matter, is Baraka’s “Black Art.”). To the contrary, it might be read as the fantastical literalization of white telling. Dumas makes Black music do what it, quite simply, cannot do: generate the totality of Black life, making it tellable and so wholly knowable to white audiences.

\textsuperscript{39} Dumas, 105.
\textsuperscript{40} Dumas, 107
\textsuperscript{41} Dumas, 108.
\textsuperscript{42} Dumas, 109
Dumas, however, does not stop with the literalization of white telling. Rather, he uses the literalization to proffer a critique concerning whiteness as a relation with and of and in the world. In witnessing the totality of Black life, Jan and his friends, quite literally, cannot sustain their relational position, which depends on Blackness as non-being, a fungible material to be used.\footnote{On fungibility, see, Saidiya Hartman, \textit{Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route} (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 31. See, also, C. Riley Snorton, \textit{Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 62; Tiffany Lethabo King, \textit{The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 21. See, also, Spillers’ concept of flesh in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 206.}

To see Black life—its exorbitance—is, in parable form, to evacuate the possibility of possessive forms of whiteness, showing how “possessive investments in whiteness” are both irredeemable and unsustainable.\footnote{On possessive investments in whiteness, see, George Lipsitz, \textit{The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).}

Records, I want to suggest, both complicate and realize the tensions drawn in Dumas’ parable. Indeed, recorded music matters in issues of both telling and Black regard in two ways. First, listening and subsequent re-listening offers opportunities through which the repetition of a recording amplifies the ir-repli-capability of experience. And in such amplification, it puts pressure on any endeavor that would seek to know an experience in its totality. More directly put, recordings make clear the futility of seeking to fold—or read—music into regimes of history or knowing even as they also model what a surrender to joy might look, sound, and feel like. They are, to borrow from Richard Iton, tools of the “fantastic,” objects that can and do intervene within political modes even as the intervention effectively evades direct and so tellable
declarations. In this way, recordings are unable to accord any single reading even as they serve as a hub around which listeners and dancers and even talkers might gather again and again. And in their invitation to gather, they demonstrate how joy—so profoundly practiced in Black communities—requires one to ask a question of what is in front of us anew or circumstantially, with each moment given not to authoritatively knowing—which is to say telling—but, rather, to regard.

In this way, it might be said that the record is an instrument of waiting, a site of future encounters—not quite but still somehow that which makes return, affectually speaking, appear possible. In listening to recordings, we are given a tool through which a moment—or its surrogate—becomes returnable. In fact, with the advent of multitracking, splicing and any number of other recording techniques, we might even say that our return marks the condensation of multiple moments, a memory without a single event that marks its initial occurrence or origin. In listening, we witness what we have not, in fact, witnessed, experience a sounding that happened prior to but also has only occurred now. The record, then, is like a rumor gone awry—gone before we were aware of its presence. The listener is invited into an event—the event of recording—that may or may not have happened as it plays, which is to say as one hears it. In this way, to play a recording is to experience an event that oscillates between past facts and our present telling, and this oscillation, the way it says something of the past even as that past may not have existed is its resonance, if you will. Nevertheless, further explication must wait. Before we can even broach the import of oscillation—which is to say the various affectual and social

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qualities of recordings—we must contend with the time and places that condition oscillation, or our perception of said state. More directly, before considering the role of recordings we must turn to the late 1960s and think about the right to tell.

There’s Something Happening Here. What It is Ain’t Exactly Clear

Telling serves as one way to contend with the growing belief that the perceptual and communicative repertoires available were no longer enough for understanding and managing the world. To be sure, this is not to treat the late 1960s as a moment of aberrational change and paradigmatic rupture that edged the nation closer to Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Great Society.” Indeed, I take for granted that all historical moments are in a stage of dialectical struggle between that which is and that which is emergent or still to be realized. The late sixties is no exception, and hindsight lends the requisite distance for a more complicated assessment of the period as neither linear nor severed but, rather, contingent and additive. However, such hindsight also enables one to see just how many white writers, artists, critics and communities believed in the possibility—and, in some cases, the realization—of paradigmatic rupture. As Edward Quinn and Paul J. Dolan write in their 1968 introduction to *The Sense of the 60’s*, “Quite suddenly, or so it seemed, the silence [of the fifties] was broken,” and in its place was a generation who “said ‘No’—and the reverberations of that no are still being heard.” These refusals by younger citizens might be said to mark what academic and gay activist Charles Reich would call the “breaches of consciousness,” which is to say the growing sense that there were “discrepancies

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between the realities of our society and our beliefs about them.”  

Paul Goodman would seem to agree, suggesting that the period was marked by a dilemma similar to Christian’s notions of faith and works, while Keith Melville would write that “[f]or the hippie, all works, all attempts to act effectively, are corrupt. Only right consciousness can avail.”  

It is, perhaps, activist and writer Michael Harrington’s 1966 *New Republic* article that most captures the period when he writes in 1966 that “the shock generated by the society’s duplicity in this or that single issue then opened their eyes to larger, and even more systemic, injustices.”  

Rupture and the shock of an ever more fractious nation had become something that called for new modes of consciousness.  

This growing sense of rupture was not limited to those who identified as leftists and radicals. Moderates and conservatives had also begun to express a loss of confidence in the perceptual and communicative modes available. For conservative sociologist Robert Nisbet, who had served as a Vice Chancellor of the University of California system and would, in 1978, join the American Enterprise Institute, the gradual erosion of authority generated a “scene filled with eruptions of the occult, the superstitious, and the antirational, of faith in blind fortune and

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54 Reich, 10. To be sure, numerous accounts of the period identify internal divisions between members of the white counterculture and those who identified as revolutionaries. To borrow Todd Gitlin’s concept, “strategy and expression, far from being pure alternatives are coordinates like latitude and longitude; any action partakes of both,” and, in the examples above, I want to stress a shared idea concerning breaches. For quote, see, Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Revised Edition (New York: Bantam, 1993), 135. For a then contemporary account that attests to these divides, see, Stuart Hall and University of Birmingham. Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The hippies: an American 'moment'* (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, 1968).
chance, and of generalized retreat into the subjective recesses of consciousness.” Put more directly, the tools by which a national polity came into political and social consciousness had been, according to Nisbet, lost to exercises of ego and “the upthrust of ethnicity.” This turn to individualism over national consciousness left the often duplicitous state incapable of offering salient ideologies or shaping popular sentiment, leaving the U.S. in a state of decline. For others, the period marked a moment when one’s capacity for rigorous or objective assessments and analysis had been thrown into crisis. Indeed, historian Jon Wiener has even argued that radical historians entry into the U.S. academy in the late sixties occurred at a moment when key proponents of consensus history suffered a “loss of confidence” in their ability to ask “the important question[s] and provid[e] adequate answers . . .” For Weiner, consensus historian’s privileging of shared values over conflict was disrupted—if never fully evacuated—by the surge of conflicts and state enacted violence. If, as John Higham has argued, Wiener’s assessment underestimates the degree to which Universities’ welcome of radical scholars was as much about their desire to absorb and instrumentalize radical methods and pedagogy as it was a crisis of faith, his attention to the growing sense that a loss of faith had occurred captures the mood of the period.

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56 Nisbet, *Twilight*, 7
Importantly, this loss of faith was not the exclusive domain of intellectuals and academics. Jean Fritz, a 51-year-old registered Republican, who served on the Chicago 8 trial in 1969, would register a growing disorientation with how state power foreclosed rather than opened up conceptions of liberty. Writing of Judge Julius Jennings Hoffman’s order to bound and gag Black Panther Bobby Seal, Fritz expresses shock and disgust:

It was absolutely sickening . . . You just felt that the world was coming to an end—that you were actually seeing this in the United States of America. Somebody tied up like he was. That’s when I learned not to like my government, not to trust them, and that’s hard to say.59

If, in reflection, she cites the court’s abuse of Seale as the moment of breach, her notebooks indicate surges of suspicion even after Seale had been severed from the trial.

When one listens to someone like him one wonders what is happening in this country. Will be afraid to express my opinion on things. I know we need police and am all for them. But I don’t like people like this and have sure learned not to trust a lot of things and people . . . my mind is in such a where trying to know who or what to believe. Am, getting more afraid for our freedom every day that I sit here. Yet, I really don’t know what these 7 defendants believe in either. Wish I knew what they are. Have so many questions for and against both sides. Every day, I see and feel more and more my lack of education. Can people really be fooled if they keep their eyes and ears really open!!!60

Much like those on the left, Fritz’s growing awareness of the state’s abuses manifested in a growing disillusionment of her perceptual abilities. Former modes of telling were, quite simply, methods of deception, that which “fooled” one into thinking the state was, ultimately, just.

60 Fritz, 44-48.
Even reactionaries contended with perceptual and ideological breaches. In his infamous 1964 anti-communist screed, John A. Stormer moves against the use of the then emerging form of investigative journalism. “The interpretive reporter, rather than faithfully recording in an orderly way a speaker’s words, instead explains the ‘meaning’ and overall importance’ of what is said.” The danger, he argues, is that reporters often fail to “understand the meaning of what the speaker says.” Just as Reich argues that a failure to properly understand the conditions of daily life had generated an “unreality,” Stormer sees journalistic attempts to explain phenomena and events as an active construction of unreality. Stormer goes on to cite Richard Pourade, an editor of the *San Diego Union*, who criticized the Associated Press’s use of “so-called interpretive columns” in the 1960 Presidential Election. According to Pourade, the organization “questioned the motives of the candidates, disparaged their remarks, and brought the doubt of the Associated Press on their integrity and character.” For both men, the ability to tell was threatened by the press’s desire to interpret. This intervention, Stormer argues, resulted in the production of “distortion” that was no less than a threat to “free, representative government” predicated on the assumption that “people, having facts, will make the right decisions when they go to the polls.” As such, “[b]reaking through the ‘paper curtain’ which screens most Americans from the truth is a primary challenge.” More than a warning against bias, Stormer’s criticism embeds the idea that citizenship—even civic participation—was predicated upon an individual’s ability to make sense of facts and to perceive from these facts a kind of standpoint from which a politically bounded self emerged.

61 John A. Stormer, *None Dare Call It Treason* (Flourissant: Liberty Bell Press, 1964), 144-45.
62 As cited in Stormer, 144.
63 Stormer, 154.
64 Stormer, 154.
Nowhere Man: Paranoia, Sense and Repossession of White Personhood

Richard Hosfstadter, a leading historian of the Consensus School, would famously use Stormer’s screed as an example of what he called the paranoid style of politics. For Hosfstadter, paranoid analysis foreclosed the possibility of rational debate by focusing on “the way ideas are believed and advocated rather than with the truth or falsity of their content.” Amplified by the rise of mass media, paranoid politics privileged “the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” over more rigorous forms analysis. Its popularity—or, at the very least, its rhetorical power—occurred in how paranoid analysis offered an assured understanding of world, wherein “conspiratorial views articulated the mental heat behind pseudo-conservativism more fully than [conservative politicians] more equivocal utterances.” It would seem, then, that paranoia was both a condition and a method, that which generated Reich’s “unreality” so to effectuate an unequivocal and assured position. As Hofstader writes,

One of the impressive things about paranoid literature is the contrast between its fantasied conclusions and the almost touching concern with factuality it invariably shows. . . But respectable paranoid literature not only starts from certain moral commitments that can indeed be justified but also carefully and all but obsessively accumulates “evidence.”

The accumulation of evidence Hofstader cites as a hallmark of paranoid politics is its method, a mode by which one tells (in both senses of the word) of impending catastrophe by piling on fact

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after fact, without, for Hofstader, the rigor requisite of either historical method or, as the case
may be, contemporary diagnosis. As such, the paranoid style of politics, it might be said, is the
generation of a kind of senseless sense or unreasonable reason, a method by which minimal
relations between events or people are not invented but, rather, aggregated so to effectuate a
sense of panic.  

Hofstader was not singular in his attention to paranoia. As the narrator of Thomas
Pynchon’s 1973 novel, Gravity’s Rainbow, asserts, “[i]f there is something comforting—
religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is
connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long.” What separates paranoia
and anti-paranoia, the narrator argues, is a sense of connection to “anything,” which is to say an
unequivocal position and place within the social and political world. “Either They have put him
here for a reason or he’s just here.” To sense a “reason” for the world, no matter how

70 In literature, questions of interpretation and paranoia abound. Much of these debates surround
practices of symptomatic reading, which approaches texts as the carriers of hidden or latent
meaning that can only be deduced through an investigation of recurring “symptoms.” Works
from Louis Althusser, Fredric Jameson and Paul Ricouer each took up Marxist and
psychoanalytic modes in order to diagnose the symptomatic nature of texts.
In a troubling assessment on scholars’ use of interpretation (in the era of deconstruction),
Umberto Eco writes, “From a certain point of view everything bears relationships of analogy,
contiguity, and similarity to everything else. One may push this to its limits . . . But the
difference between sane interpretation paranoiac interpretation lies in recognizing that this
relationship is minimal, and not, on the contrary, deducing from this minimal relationship the
maximum possible.” More recently, Rita Felski has offered a less antagonistic assessment,
writing that “whatever definition of ideology is being deployed . . . a text is being diagnosed
rather than heard, relegated to the status of a symptom of social structures or political causes.”
See, Ellen Rooney, “Symptomatic Reading is a Problem.” Critique and Post Critique, ed.
Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 127-152; Umberto
Eco, “Overinterpreting Texts,” Interpretation and Overinterpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1992), 48; Rita Felski, Uses of Literature (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008),
6–7.
72 Pynchon, 434.
unreasonable, was to establish—or, at the very least, declare—a definitive relation with and within the world. Where paranoid politics’ desire to establish an unequivocal position cannot help but encourage reactionary proponents, its desire to recognize connections also pushes against the nihilistic idea that one’s life is singular.

And it is this desire to establish connections, which is to say both come to know and generate the conditions of one’s relations with the world, that links a great deal of otherwise oppositional ideas of breach and rupture. Indeed, one might ask to whom does the “sense” invoked by Hofstader belong: the paranoiac or the historian? If Hofstader’s explicit referent is lost to the moment of its writing, a broader answer is available. Namely, both the paranoiac and the historian move by and through sense-making, which is to say that each generates methods and gestures that locate and then demonstrate connections between events and communities. And this desire to generate new methods that one might use to more accurately analyze—or tell of—the conditions that structure our connections is a central component of both paranoiac and historical methods. Sense—and one’s ability to sense, as Hofstader does—matters, then, not simply because it effectuates an order but in that order a self is both realized and (re)possessed. Indeed, it is the loss of a self that paranoia-as-method seeks to reclaim through reactionary telling.

To tell, it would seem, matters precisely because it was so crucial to the formation of self-possession. As Reich asserts, “[o]f all the forms of impoverishment that can be seen or felt in America, loss of self, of death in life, is surely the most devastating.”73 This loss of self, Reich argues, begins when “an individual is systematically stripped of his imagination, his creativity, his heritage, his dreams, and his personal uniqueness, in order to style him into a productive unit

73 Reich, 7.
for a mass, technological society.”74 The consequence of such striping is the repression of “[i]nstinct, feeling, and spontaneity . . . by overwhelming forces.”75 One, it would seem, could no longer discern their place in the world, and, as Reich goes on to write, “the American crisis, then, seems clearly to be related to an inability to act.”76 Just as Pynchon’s narrator shows how the paranoiac recognizes that “[e]ither They have put him here for a reason or he’s just here,” Reich understands the ability to act as something that begins with a repossession of one’s senses.77 To tell of the world and one’s place in it, then, was not simply a matter of narration or determination, paranoid or otherwise. It was also a function of power. “Unreality is the true source of powerlessness,” he writes.78 “What we do not understand, we cannot control. And when we cannot comprehend the major forces, structures, and values that pervade our existence, they must inevitably come to dominate us.”79

Reich’s call for a repossession of sense and comprehension bears a great deal in common with Michel Foucault’s concept of epistemes, those discursive structures of knowledge that set the bounds of a given society’s lived experiences. As Foucault will ask, “How is it that at certain moments and in certain orders of knowledge, there are these sudden take-offs, these hastenings of evolution, these transformations which fail to correspond to the calm, continuous image that is normally accredited?”80 If the philosopher’s focus on science and the eighteenth century’s turn to disciplinary powers renders an image of these hastenings as a contested but nevertheless more

74 Reich, 7.
75 Reich, 8.
76 Reich, 9.
77 Pynchon, 434.
78 Reich, 13.
79 Reich, 13.
efficient means of both generating and managing a polity, it might seem as if Foucault’s period marks a decidedly different moment than the sixties breaches Reich identifies. However, the broader spirit of the question bears on Reich’s concerns precisely because his focus on comprehension turns on an unchallenged question concerning whether sense—as he conceives it—can outpace the “discursive régime” to which 1960s political and social personhood answered.\textsuperscript{81} Indeed, Reich’s call for a repossession of “instinct, feeling and spontaneity” ensnares within a specific mode of knowing by which telling comes to form the ground upon which personhood—or selfhood—is both constituted and maintained.\textsuperscript{82} To be self-possessed routes through telling and, more pointedly, the claim to one’s right of discretion, the latter of which had come to be a crucial concept within the U.S. legal system and its abuse of power, particularly as it was applied to Black and other marginalized communities.

As the American Friends Service committee would argue in a 1971 white paper, discretionary power is a core component of both the carceral state and inequity.\textsuperscript{83} Much of discretion’s problem, I want to suggest, lies how discretion effectively grants legal actors the power to privilege telling and tells, and, in their telling, determine who is and is not a danger to society at large.\textsuperscript{84} As such, individuals do not face the same sentences, opportunities and chances. To the contrary, state actors proceed—are ‘freed’ from—the burden of regulated

\textsuperscript{81} Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 113.
\textsuperscript{82} Reich, 9. In a way that both exceeds the scope of this essay and which emerges ancillary to the immediate concerns given the following quote, Reich’s assertion seems to bear out Jared Sexton’s claim that “all researches, insofar as they are genuinely critical inquiries, aspire to black studies.” See, Jared Sexton, “Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts,” \textit{Lateral} 1 (Spring 2012): n.p. https://csalateral.org/original/issue1/content/sexton.html
\textsuperscript{84} Friends Service Committee, 125.
“techniques for distinguishing” individuals charged with crimes.\textsuperscript{85} Under such a process, individual prejudice is both legitimized and made virtually unavailable for challenge. As the paper argues, the justice system sets the perceptual and legal terms by which conceptions of danger are aimed “almost exclusively toward certain types of offender, such as thieves, rapists, and murderers” even as these terms “ignor[e] almost completely larger numbers of persons who are much more dangerous, such as those who make and profit from war, unsafe automobiles, and contaminating pesticides.”\textsuperscript{86} As a great deal of recent work has demonstrated, race unduly influenced discretionary modes as well, with a disproportionate amount of police and state power wielding their right to surveille, arrest, charge and sentence Black communities.\textsuperscript{87} What goes largely unexamined, however, is how discretion—as a form of telling—runs up against its extra-legal uses. That is, telling as a form of self-possession and, thus, subject-making cannot effectively evacuate discretionary policies because to do so would be to disrupt the primary means by which white-conceived and adjudicated personhood—per Reich’s model—was maintained.

Of maintenance and its role within telling, personhood and property, Lindon Barrett turns to questions of value. For Barrett, the struggle over value, which operates as a struggle to tell or determine the bounds of importance, enacts a chauvinistic violence precisely because expulsion and exclusion are not simply expedient methods of generating value but inherent and requisite to

\textsuperscript{85} Friends Service Committee, 125.
\textsuperscript{86} Friends Service Committee, 125-6.
value itself. “Value,” he writes, “always signifies the form-ality of one or more precincts. To recognize value fully one must, at least, see double.”88 This is why value “is violence.”89 Yet, if value—and the sensibility it constitutes—were merely the chauvinistic generation of precincts—of white as value and Black as outside of value—its violence would be far more apparent.

“Vexingly,” Barrett writes, “value can invest itself everywhere and in everything so that even inside itself . . . [it] is ceaselessly in operation.” Under such ceaseless operation, “value as force becomes a displaced Other, at the same time that it effects a displaced other.”90 That is, value as force and value as form operate dialectically, even as form comes to obscure the ceaseless force requisite in the maintenance of value’s form. Within questions of race, whiteness as a formal value obscures the violent and exclusionary force requisite for its generation and maintenance.

Possessive investment in telling and personhood, thus, is also always a question of value and force.91

Returning, then, to the epigraph that opens this introduction, Charles Olson’s “To tell or not to tell” is not a convenient play on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (“To be or not to be”).92 It is an

89 Barrett, 30.
90 Barrett, 32.
explicit link between telling—as a perceptual and declarative mode—and being, marking less a shift from ontology to phenomenology and more the unveiling of the ontological procedures of self-possession in a moment when “political struggles are defined by, and located most meaningfully within, the realm of subjectivity, that includes or projects local, particular allegiances and goals.”93 As the well-worn idiom goes, the personal, in this moment, became political. Yet, the personal—as made possible by telling and the struggle to secure it and so a self—was often limited rather than opened up by the local. Moreover, one did not take up telling so to come into an awareness of the limits of their experience. To the contrary, telling required one to come into a consciousness of the self by way of knowing its proverbial other. If George Lukacs’ conception of standpoint—which is the name he gives to the many ways that one’s understanding of the world is conditioned by the society in which an individual lives—had been implicitly crucial for a great many white organizers and activists in the sixties, it seems to have stalled in matters of race, gender and sexual orientation, resting, as it were, within the precincts of labor, order or an amorphous call to “drop out.”94

**White Tales and Telling**

Such reframing—reinforced by telling as central to the securing of self-consciousness and self-possession—could not help but shape the many ways white people came to tell (of) Blackness and Black people in this period. The consequence, I want to suggest, was one in which calls for Black determination and Black power became—which is to say were perceived as—

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Black rage or Black hatred. The opening to Paul Jacob’s *Prelude to a Riot: A View of Urban America from the Bottom* is exemplary in this regard.

The spittle sprayed across my face. I spun around, astounded, and saw no one except a tall Negro . . . It was he who spat at me, I realized, and instantly I was flooded with anger, fright, an insane worry that his spittle was diseased, and then shame at the thought of such a disgusting fear.\(^95\)

Jacobs, who would go on to co-found *Mother Jones*, then describes his confrontation of the man.

We stared at each other—he working himself into a frenzy, I scared and wondering how I could reason with him and thinking, too, that if he’d been a white man, wouldn’t I have hit him instinctively, even though he was so much bigger?\(^96\)

As Jacobs’ fear and anger dissipates, he realizes that

Because [this man] was a Negro, I wanted him to see me as his friend, and so I was willing to submit to behavior from him that I wouldn’t have accepted from a while man. Then I realized that noting, absolutely nothing I could say to him would make any impression: he was beyond conversation, beyond rational explanation, beyond anything but hate for me solely because I was Whitey, and I couldn’t get through to him. \(^97\)

There is, of course, no reason to doubt the act, even if only because there is no way to disprove it. However, the ways that the story is told—that it bears an uncanny resemblance to Ralph Ellison’s magisterial depiction of white fear of an imagined Black boogeyman in 1952’s *Invisible Man*; that it seems to confirm the growing sentiment of Black hatred; that it ends with the one-side appraisal of racial incommensurability—is confrontable.\(^98\) For all of Jacob’s claims

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\(^96\) Jacobs, 4.

\(^97\) Jacobs, 4.

to being “a full time radical”—indeed, for what we might say is the properly intentioned nature of the rest of the study—this opening passage acts as the affective clef that sets the pitch for all that will follow. Jacobs, not Black communities, is the one who faces adversity.

Jacobs was not singular in his assessment. For many white Americans, Black militancy moved in direct opposition to telling and its role within the making of possessive personhood. Black militancy was not just a description made; it was a judgment given, the establishment of ethical bounds, of what one could and could not do in the struggle for self-determination. In short, Black militancy named a mode of being that threatened U.S. personhood. As Philip Ardery would write about Charles Sims and the Deacons for Defense for The Harvard Crimson,

If you’re white, and you’re a civil rights worker, it’s a good bet that meeting Charles Sims would be unpleasant. His grizzled face and scruffy clothes look engaging only from a distance; once you come close to the man, he stares you down, and you want to disappear. There is something hostile, even belligerent [sic] in his eyes. Without opening his mouth, he seems to be saying, "I don't like you."

Ardery goes on to make similar assertions about other members. “They are just as mysterious, just as hostile, and even less accessible.” There is, perhaps, no way to determine the truth of these depictions. However, Ardery’s focus on hostility—that this is the primary affect he perceives—matters. So, too, does the fact that both hostility and inaccessibility are seen as threats portending if not the physical then certainly the social disappearance of white Civil Rights workers. The telling, thus, is telling in how it reduces Black self-defense and the right to determine who would and would not be offered solidarity, warmth and intimacy to simple

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101 Ardery, n.p.
aggression.\textsuperscript{102}

However, in a dizzying way, white telling also made use of—and profited from—expressions of Black assertion. Writing in 1969, three years after Jacobs’ *Prelude to a Riot*, the Jamaican novelist, academic and activist Michael Thelwell notes the growing interest in radical essays by Black organizers and theorists.

But improvement though it is, this new vogue, allowing one to be more ‘militant in print’ than before, is merely permissive rather than evidence of a genuine intellectual liberalism; it seems to represent no real deepening of the social and cultural sensibilities of publishers, and it embodies problems which are no less dangerous and frustrating than the cultural freeze which preceded it.\textsuperscript{103}

And if Thelwell’s point can be taken at face-value, it does not need to be. It might as well have been a response to Dan Sullivan’s 1968 review for the revival of Langston Hughes’ 1964 gospel-musical, *Jericho-Jim Crow*. In it, Sullivan writes, “A Rap Brown or LeRoi Jones would find Mr. Hughes text disgracefully obsequious toward the values of middle-class America. Even a white middle-class American might wish for more righteous anger and less bland talk about ‘brotherhood,’ desirable as brotherhood may be. In the context of 1968, the show lacks backbone a little.”\textsuperscript{104}

A month later, while covering the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., the long-time *Esquire* staff writer and early proponent of New Journalism, Gary Wills would echo Sullivan’s call for “more righteous anger,” when he claimed that “Tennessee negroes are not unlikely, they

\textsuperscript{102} Histories of popular music and what one writer would call “Black “assertiveness” were still being published as late as 1989. See, for example, David Pichaske, *A Generation in Motion: Popular Music and the Culture of the Sixties* (Granite Falls, Mn: Ellis Press, 1989), 146.

\textsuperscript{103} Michael Thelwell, “Publishing the Black Experience,” *Ramparts Magazine* (October 1969), 60.

are impossible.” Written in reference to the Memphis “memorial march” the day after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, Wills’ assertion registers his displeasure with the ways that Black Memphian’s had decided to participate in the march. They were, by his estimation, “the world’s least likely revolutionaries. . . They are anachronisms. Their leaders had objected for some time to J.P. Alley’s ‘Hambone’ cartoon in the local paper; they say, rightly, that it offers an outdated depiction of the Negro. Nonetheless, these men are hambones. History has passed them by.”

If Wills’s dismissal marks an extreme—and extremely offensive—demand that Black people behave according to his expectations, his use of degrading tropes highlights a secondary demand of Black readers with respect to telling. Namely, the reader is supposed to discern that Wills’ use of these tropes takes up irony—or, as the editors of the collection in which the essay is published claim, “casualness”—in order to highlight his commitment to Black radical ideologies. Black readers, in this way, are supposed to tell that Wills is committed to justice,

106 Wills, 358-9.
107 For quoted material, see, Wills, 356. If beyond the scope of this essay, Wills’ use of irony in this manner might also be read into questions concerning white people’s use of racial slurs and the erroneous idea that irony or endearment upends any offense. It seems to me that the offense of the slur lies at the conjunction of the descriptive and performative, which is to say that it is not that the term describes an individual but how the utterance quite literally repeats—so instantiates—the power of bestowal. This is true whether the slur is said as a term of endearment or degradation. As such, the question of whether a person can “say it” has always struck me as strange. It seems better to ask why a person would want to use the term. If the utterance is performative, bestowing a title, and in bestowment it generates a kind of encounter of and with power, one’s ability to “say it” seems—if not inconsequential—than certainly foregone. What the saying instantiates, however, will differ according to an innumerable number of contingencies—and, most importantly, one’s race. To say it offers a title and in such titling maps the bounds of power’s reach. For white people, then, the desire to say it instantiates either the remapping of one’s right to degrade and its historically implied violence, or the taking up of degradation’s defeat, which is to follow the logic offered in Black people’s right to repurpose the term. However, an insurmountable irony emerges in white people’s attempt to repurpose the slur precisely because repurposing is made inside the performative or embodied utterance. Indeed, defeat—however precarious—is not prior to but instantiated in the utterance. As such, there is no
with the trap being that those who take offense bear out a tell of their own, a perceived lack of discernment and discretion.

This desire for Black people to discern white people’s commitments and intentions was nothing new. In a response to John Oliver Killen’s June 7, 1964 article for the *New York Times Magazine*, “Explanation of the ‘Black Psyche,” Bernard Mistretta writes, “I have read [John] Killen’s book, ‘And The We Heard the Thunder”; I have read several books by James Baldwin; I have seen Langston Hughes’s ‘Jericho-Jim Crow,’ and I have come to the conclusion that there is a definite planning by Negro intellectuals to propagate hatred of whites.”\(^\text{108}\) Turning then to *Jericho-Jim Crow*, he adds, “Not once in Langston’s Hughes’s folk musical did he say that somewhere in history there was one good white person.”\(^\text{109}\) Another reader would express his anger more plainly, writing, “I refuse! I refuse to be called a bigot because I am white. I refuse to accept responsibility for what other have done or think.”\(^\text{110}\) If the search for “righteous anger” and “one good white person” appear, at first pass, to present opposite opinions, Killen’s response to Mistretta clarifies their links. “Many white Americans,” the novelist and co-founder of the Harlem writers workshop writes, “seem to be obsessed with the question of whether the black man hates or loves them. Why do you need me to love you or hate you? Why don’t you settle for defeat in white efforts, just a displacement of power, wherein the right to degrade becomes the right to participate, which is to say center whiteness (in all its entitled strictures) within a method meant to resist such centering.


\(^\text{109}\) Mistretta, SM2.

And it was this indifference that, perhaps, lead Nat Hentoff to observe, “From hysterically rigid segregationists to the increasingly anxious liberals who feel they are misunderstood and undervalued by Negroes, whites in America are experiencing a double dislocation.” The doubled dislocation, Hentoff argues, occurred first in the realization that white communities knew little of Black life and people and second in the fact that “more and more whites are coming to feel that Negroes do not know them.” A striking refutation—if only implicitly—of Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, white telling’s need for Black confirmation might be said to operate less as a space of encounter, engagement and regard and more as an understanding of Blackness and Black people as a material by which the sanctity of white personhood might be shored. Or, as then Harper’s Magazine editor-in-chief, Willie Morris, would write of his childhood in Yazoo, Mississippi, “The broader reality was that the Negroes in the town were there: they were ours, to do with as we wished. I grew up with this consciousness of tangible possession . . .”

If Morris’ recollection serves as a correction to such an idea, the need for Black people’s participation within white telling seems to have merely shifted the end goal, not the structure itself. Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) member and Boston Civil Rights organizer Byron

113 Hentoff, 26.
115 In 1967, Morris would travel to Yazoo city for national library week alongside William Styron, Larry L. King and Norman Podhoretz, and in front of a majority Black audience, he spoke of the racism and violence he both witnessed and participated in when younger, culminating in the story of attacking a Black toddler. Both the stories and the speech in full served as a call for reconciliation between Black and white southerners. For Morris, reconciliation began with ceasing the appositional mode of decorum that had, by his estimate,
Rushing offers a strikingly similar understanding of white telling requiring Black people’s participation. Writing of the Civil Rights Movement in 1968, he argues that “I knew that there were two movements. One was the movement to free white folks’ consciences, to make white folks human.” In order to do so, he observes, Black people “invent demonstration-dramas to confront them,” while white people “organize fair housing groups or Equality Projects and get homes for thirty-five Negro families in the suburbs or stop their church from buying from a firm that discriminates, and, by their standards, they have put their bodies on the line, they have suffered courageously. Yet, their acts do not affect the other movement one bit.” Violence, Rushing makes clear, continues to befall Black people. “Like most black people,” he writes, “I have spent my life being both an obedient child and responsible parent to white people.”

The (Im)Possibility of Black Telling

generated the affective and social bounds between Black and white communities. “I can only say, in closing, that we white Southerners and Negro Southerners do indeed have more in common than we have often been given the chance to understand, and that perhaps we should keep this quality in mind in the changing, tumultuous period we are entering. In the meantime, please believe me, for what little it is worth, that this white Yazoo boy’s heart is with you.” Indeed, his friend Harriet DeCell speculated that the speech was put in service of “exorcising a deep, complex, soul-searching guilt sense.” However, she wondered, “can a speech at a Negro high school really atone for anything?” Countering Historian Jennifer Jensen Wallach has offered a more generous reading, arguing that while atonement may have figured into Morris’ thinking, the motivation was a sincere desire to bridge the racial divide. See, Jennifer Jensen Wallach, “Introduction.” Yazoo: Integration in a Deep-southern Town, New Edition (Rayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2012), xxxix.


Rushing, 232.

Rushing, 232.

Rushing, 233.
Telling’s role within questions of sensation, exnomination and the integrity of whiteness introduces complications with respect to Black usage. Most notably, it is not—as I hope to show in the essays that follow—generative of Black relationality.\textsuperscript{120} To the contrary, it names the repertoires and gestures, in body, in word, in note, through which one’s relation to the state comes into view and, in its best moments, can be seized so to make claims upon a political personhood.\textsuperscript{121} As such, these debates over telling were not only in service to a redistribution of representative and, thus, descriptive power. They were also performative gestures. To name an individual or community—indeed, to invoke a name—is not only a matter of apolitical description or address. It has historically operated as a disciplining power, a means through which the reductive telling moves unchallenged. Concomitantly, the late sixties debates concerning what and how Black people would express themselves cannot be singularly understood as a debate concerning declaration. Rather, these debates seized upon the


\textsuperscript{121} This is not to suggest that Black organizers and community members were not registering the need for new perceptive modes. Indeed, a great deal of practices and methods within white counterculture drew from Black praxis. As the Black feminist theorists the damned write in 1973, “During the late fifties and through the early sixties, all of us as separate black people felt that we knew something was wrong . . . we had hazy feeling of being cheated, feelings of emptiness and loneliness and confusion and a kind of cynicism. (Fuck it!) Most of all, we felt our problems were personal and individual. All of us were looking for a connection and a reflection that would bring us together with others—for what we didn’t know.” See, the damned, \textit{Lessons from the Damned: Class Struggle in the Black Community} (Washington, NJ: Times Change Press, 1973), 10. With respect to white radicals and counterculture drawing from Black organizers and practices, numerous examples can be found. Of particular note, see, Bill Ayers & Jim Mellon’s “Hot Town: Summer in the City or I Ain’t Gonna Work on Maggie’s Farm No More,” \textit{Weatherman}, ed. Harold Jacobs (San Francisco: Ramparts Press, 1970), 33.
performative gesture in two ways. By staging these debates, which by the late sixties had become if not perennial than certainly familiar, critics, letter writers, and various community members diffused the performative instillation of telling-power, showcasing a goal that was never interested in resolution as much as disruptive process. Debate—involved, informed, and often contentious—became a stage upon which a different kind of solidarity was—or, to be more careful, could be—generated. This performative stage, however, had a second effect. It effectively seized telling power from white pundits, whose distance from and lack of engagement with these debates became a different kind of ‘tell.’ If the performative nature of debates foregrounded a solidarity built on engagement and process, those who endeavored mere declaration as an end unto itself, effectively told on themselves.

Records and Telling

The growing tension and the fight over telling-power across race is, perhaps, one reason why, in 1965, Bob Dylan would assert that “[t]he only thing where it’s happening is on the radio and records. That’s where people hang out. Music is the one thing that’s in tune with what’s happening.”\(^\text{122}\) Dylan was, of course, not the only one to make such a claim. Both Chuck Berry and Carl Perkins believed that they “might be doing as much with our music as our leaders are in Washington to bring down the barriers,” while Ben Sidran, writing in 1971, argued that “[c]ertainly more than one white household was ‘integrated’ through recordings of black music during” the 1920s.\(^\text{123}\) The splitting of sound from a seeable source, and, more importantly, from


the embodied source, had—in the era to which I look—come to be seen as one avenue by which breaches were both realized and, following Dylan, perhaps even mended.

This was not, however, always the case. At its inception, the record had been associated with both testimony and death.\textsuperscript{124} Writing for \textit{The North American Review} in 1878, Thomas Edison predicts the phonograph will be a machine used for “the purpose of preserving the sayings, the voices, and \textit{the last words} of the dying member of the family.”\textsuperscript{125} And the 1878 promotional brochure \textit{All about the Telephone and Phonograph} promised “Lovers” that the machine would preserve “the last utterances of a dearly-loved parent, child or friend,” even when “continents and oceans intervene.”\textsuperscript{126} Death and distance—and the living’s ability to defy both—were at the fore of concerns for the early phonograph industry.

By the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century, claims about the record’s ability to call across death were not as common, but broadcast and recording technology were still said to bridge otherwise insurmountable distances. In a 1925 ad for headsets, Canadian radio manufacturer Brandes attempted to lure the listening public away from the increasingly popular loudspeaker. The company argued that only headsets enabled listeners to capture distant broadcasts; to “shut out the noise in the room;” and to “get the truest and clearest reception . . .”\textsuperscript{127} These claims not only emphasized a kind of listening experience unique to headsets; the benefits also point to an

\textsuperscript{124} There has been a great deal of work with respect to sound recording’s association with death. Of these, Jonathan Sterne posits the 19th century recording as an object that “preserved the bodies of the dead so that they could continue to perform a social function after life.” See, Jonathan Sterne, \textit{The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 292.


\textsuperscript{126} \textit{All about the Telephone and Phonograph: How to Make and Use Them} (London: Ward, Lock & Co., 1878), 99.

\textsuperscript{127} As cited in Sterne, \textit{The Audible Past}, 37.
emerging way of listening that reconstituted intimacy, community and their relationship to space. Where prior listening experiences, whether at concerts or, more commonly, home gatherings, brought the listener into physical contact with others, recording technologies allowed for listening to occur in isolation. The ad, however, goes even further. For Brandes, physical proximity was not merely different from the kind of technological intimacy headsets provided; it actively impeded its instantiation. To get the most from a distant broadcast, listeners had to eliminate—or dampen—the noise of their immediate surroundings.

The dependence upon dampening outside sounds is no less true for recordings. And as composer Pierre Schaeffer argues, all recordings “giv[e] back to the ear alone the entire responsibility of a perception that ordinarily rests on other sensible witness,” which is say that the listener hears a voice but cannot see the person from which it issues.128 It should be added that this is true for all four of the remaining senses.129 One can neither see nor touch nor smell nor taste that which the performer experiences. Under such conditions, fidelity is not merely a function of getting the most out of a recording; it is the condition through which contact occurs. Where in a concert or home performance, an interruption of any one sense still leaves four others; in recordings, to interrupt the voice is to eliminate the performer. If the recording allowed listeners to apprehend the recorded voice or performer, it did so precariously and from within a potentially isolated space.

129 While it is most likely that Schaeffer would agree, his focus on sight looms from the very start of the article. For example, the decision to use acousmatic as his primary analytic draws from Pythagoras’s pedagogical method in which he taught behind a curtain, forcing his students to listen without sight.
At a purely practical level, the record’s expansion into discs that required varying speeds or rotation (78, 45 and 33 1/3 revolutions per minute) only further presented opportunities for distortion. In a 1951 article for *The Saturday Review*, Harvey Taylor, a music editor for *The Detroit Times*, describes the experience of playing Darius Milhaud’s Symphony No. 1 at 78 rpm instead of the intended 33 1/3 rpm. Unexpectedly, Taylor does not experience aversion; rather, he assigns the “churning pace” to “something revolutionary”—a “thrilling new music,” replete with the “eerie” and “breathless.” And it is only upon reading Virgil Thompson’s altogether different review of the same recording that Taylor realizes his mistake. Taylor does not write from embarrassment, however. To the contrary, he describes the pleasure generated by listening to records at unintended speeds.

Again when alone in the house I sneak in and play [the recording] at 78 rpm, meanwhile thinking strange and exciting thoughts. So far I’ve held this weird new vice under strict control and haven’t yielded to the temptation of playing, say, Wagner’s ‘Magic Fire Music’ in a 33-rpm version at 45 or 78. I suppose it’s silly to think that some enterprising composer will eventually write a work to be played optionally at 33, 45, or 78 rpm, but it’s nice to speculate on the annotator who would have to write three separate interpretations thereof.  

Taylor’s glee occurs in how his mistake might become a practice, a mode of listening through which speculation and interpretation open the possibility for further sensual configurations and, thus, telling.

If there is little evidence that other listeners shared Taylor’s enthusiasm for the possibility of felicitous mistakes, the desire for listener control was another matter. Two months after

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132 An important exception to this would be party DJs. Beginning in the late sixties and coming into force by the early seventies, club and mobile party DJs would begin to manipulate records in any number of ways, treating them as tools by which to keep a party going. Of the many
Taylor’s article, *The Saturday Review* published Edward Tatnall Canby’s “Aspects of Variable Pitch.” In it, Taylor advocates for manual pitch adjustment over the then popular set pitch players, the latter of which disallowed users to make small adjustments in rotation speeds. If Taylor’s experience with felicitous mistakes was rapturous, Canby’s reaction to the influence of set pitch on fidelity is troubled. “[T]here are more ramifications here than any sane reader can digest,” Canby writes. “The sound you hear is, as usual, a composite of all these masters and if any pitch question has been perturbing you, peace of mind will be unlikely until they’re sorted out.” He goes on to describe all the potential disturbances introduced by pitch. “Even with correct records we may have trouble,” he writes. “[A] large swing in house current voltage . . . may disturb the exactness of the usual motor,” while those listeners who play pianos “along with records . . . will suffer out-of-tune agony with an untunable standard phono and a piano that doesn’t quite match.” Canby concludes that while set pitch players are clearly marked, “I privately distrust their exactitude and would feel constrained myself to double check each time just to be sure.” It would seem, then, that the pleasures found in both infidelity and fidelity occurred in the listener’s ability to sense or tell what was occurring. In an attention to listening

techniques developed in this period, playing recordings at unintended speeds was one. Two well-known examples of this practice were the playing of E.S.G.’s “U.F.O” at 33 rpm instead of the intended 45 rpm and Isaac Hayes’s “Breakthrough” at 45 rpm instead the intended 33 rpm, so to please dancers and, in time, MCs/rappers.

134 Canby, 54.
135 Canby, 55.
136 Canby, 55.
“improperly,” in the case of Taylor, or, alternatively, properly, as we see with Canby, the listener came to know and interact with the recording in a way that exceeded passive reception.\(^{137}\)

These preoccupations with both infidelity and fidelity as a mode of interaction might be read as a counter practice to composer Igor Stravinsky’s injunction that the advent and turn to recordings marked an era in which the ease of listening—a “lack of necessity for any effort” on the part of the listener—encouraged “[p]assive receptivity” in “a branch of art” where “understanding is given only to those who make an active effort.”\(^{138}\) For Stravinsky, ease threatened to generate a community of listeners whose “active faculties” would become “atrophied from lack of use.”\(^{139}\) The audiophile’s interaction with recordings countered the worry. If one did not retain the precise “faculties” Stravinsky mourned, new modes of listening—and so telling—could and did signal an unequivocally ‘trained ear’ that indicated both effort and expertise. And—if publications are any indication—the desire to tinker and so come into a kind of possessive mode of listening was popular, with specialists and celebrities releasing books on record collecting and sound engineering aimed at the general public. In 1948, composer turned radio disc jockey Paul Whiteman and then RCA-Victor head and former music critic, Charles O’Connell, published books on how one might start a record collection, and, four years

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\(^{137}\) These preoccupations were neither unique nor early. The Cecilian Phonograph Company instructed users to adjust the volume according to “the size of the room or character of music.” While listeners could “play each record exactly as [they] wish,” the company warned that “the real function of a phonograph is to faithfully reproduce the work of the artist who made the record.” Manipulation, as proposed by Taylor 30 years later, was strictly discouraged. And as the manual states, “a phonograph should have no distinctive tone of its own.” Indeed, the company offers a series of instructions for ensuring fidelity. From cleaning records, to changing needles after a certain number of listen, to inserting a piece of paper under the record and counting revolutions so to ensure proper speed, purity of a certain kind was paramount. See, Montgomery Ward. *Instruction Book for Ward’s Cecilian Phonograph* (Chicago: Montgomery Ward, Co.), 5.


\(^{139}\) Stravinsky, 153.
later, in 1952, Harry F. Olson, director of RCA Laboratories and President of the Acoustical Society of America, would publish generalist text on sound and sound engineering.\textsuperscript{140}

Moreover, the audiophile’s attention to fidelity could not help but foreground loss. This is no small thing. To listen in mind of fidelity and, thus, loss, is to generate a practice of repossession, to come into a possessive investment wherein the loss of embodied performances makes telling-power possible and, by the nature of isolation, generates an affective condition almost wholly free of interruption or challenge. There was, then, a kind of technological intimacy generated between listener and recording that enabled the self to tell of and about sounds and in so telling come into a particular kind of consciousness and selfhood. Returning one last time to Charles Reich, then, the nature of records seemed to halt—for the duration of their listening—some of the “overwhelming forces” that inhibited one’s “imagination . . . creativity . . . heritage . . . dreams . . . and personal uniqueness.” And, in doing so, they returned the listener to “[i]nstinct, feeling, and spontaneity . . .”\textsuperscript{141}

This is, perhaps, why Theodor Adorno would argue that recordings operate differently between first and second listens. The first experience with a recording is immersion. There is no distinction of one’s distance from the object, which is to say the performance heard, and, thus, there is, at best, a postponement of thoughts concerning the recording, for Adorno, as both commodity and its social and cultural artifact. Subsequent listens, however, spur reflection. The listener hears what has been heard before. “What is mediated is art,” Adorno writes, “that


\textsuperscript{141} Reich, 8.
through which the artwork becomes something other than its mere factuality, must be mediated a
second time by reflection.”¹⁴² As Murray Dineen points out, it is the repetition—the listening
again to a recording—that “produces a conscious detachment from the music, a detached
awareness, a moment of critical reflection in the wake of immediate experience.”¹⁴³ The
recording’s availing of subsequent listening not only spurs the need to make sense—which is to
say tell—of what one hears but, in the making of sense, engenders an affectual idea of the
listener’s detachment or distance from the source of sound/song. This detachment, in turn,
introduces the idea of listening as a mode of subjectivity. In listening as a function of telling,
then, one generates the requisite affectual condition through which sense and making sense
confirm one’s self-possession through its ability to judge—or tell of—sounds’ difference.¹⁴⁴ To
hear, it might be said, opens one up to the fact of interiority, while listening, which emerges
when one listens again, produces a subject by way of making sense of recordings as “lively and
differentiated individuals.”¹⁴⁵

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¹⁴² As cited in Murray Dineen, Friendly Remainders: Essays in Music Criticism After Adorno
Adorno, Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik: Fragmente und Texte.
¹⁴³ Dineen, 59.
¹⁴⁴ This is, perhaps, why Jacques Attali will argue that music can generate (or herald) paradigm
shifts. In the generation of a “music of the mean,” music—as opposed to noise—emerges as one
formal mode that effectively enables one to “monitor unexpected forms,” which is to say register
distance, eliminating “noise” through what he calls “repetition.” If Attali’s point is well-taken, I
tend to lean toward Robin James’ work, which takes up some of the regulatory analysis Attali
provides even as she refuses to overdetermine the causal and temporal links between music and
political economy. That is to say that music, for James, offers a “parallel” relationship to political
economy, and it is music’s parallel nature that enables us to talk about regulatory systems. See,
Jacques Attali, Noise: The Political Economy of Music, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 106; Robin James, “Neoliberal Noise: Attali, Foucault &
¹⁴⁵ Tara Rodgers, “What, for Me, Constitutes Life in a Sound?: Electronic Sounds as Lively
and Differentiated Individuals,” American Quarterly 63, no. 3 (2011): 510.
Tara Rodgers’ identification of sound technologies as productive of individuals—and especially as racialized individuals—follows a broader idea of sound having a signature that can be both detected and differentiated in excess of notation. Timbre—or, alternatively, tone color—comes to name the embodied experience of hearing sound in ways that exceed the abstracting regime of musical notation. As Emily Dolan demonstrates, contemporary notions of timbre draw from Johan Gottfried Herder’s declaration that tone-color (or timbre) names that which exists in excess of—or “beyond”—pitch and volume. As such, it is timbre that allows listeners to distinguish between electric and acoustic instruments playing the same note; it is also what allows listeners to identify singers. The “signature” of a voice emerges in timbre, and so timbre is also often understood as the identifiable—and so tellable—trace that indexes an era’s “aesthetic” and turns listeners attention to “music’s immediate sensations and its mediating technologies, its instruments.” This was true of both the eighteen century, when Herder first proposed tone color as that which resists notation’s abstraction, and, as Michael Denning shows, it remained true at the advent of mass-recordings, with timbre coming to distinguish genres.

Yet, as Nina Sun Eidshem argues, timbre’s signature turns less on the particularities of a material and so knowable trace that links an individual to eras and racial groups than it does on the regimes of listening. Timbre, she argues, “is institutionalized and internalized as a meaningful measurement of traits believed by a given society to be essential to people,” but, in

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147 Dolan, 89.
fact, the correlation runs inversely, with the voice tracking back to ideas.¹⁴⁹ Thus, Eidshem argues that what the listener hears as distinct and signatory is, in fact, a distinction made in the act of listening. Drawing from and constellating Rodgers’ and Eidshem’s points, it might be said that one listens for race even as sound’s links to “lively and differentiated individuals” enables one to perceive the listening for a racial community as a function of listening with a sounded individual.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, I would suggest that timbre is not even a reliable marker for identifying individuals. To give one example from my own experiences, I have met numerous people that mistake the vocals on both William DeVaughn’s “Be Thankful for What You’ve Got” and Spirit’s “The Other Song” as belonging to Curtis Mayfield. In the case of Devaughn’s recording, the mistake can, perhaps, be explained by an early mislabeled digital file that still circulates on the internet.¹⁵¹ The association between Mayfield and Spirit—a white, Los Angeles rock band formed in 1967—is not as easily explained. Though, the song’s stripped-down blues brings the drums and guitar into the front of the mix, allowing for the combination of a not-quite falsetto vocal and funky guitar and drum play to index Mayfield. Whatever the reasons, however, it

¹⁵⁰ For a similar if different analytic, see, Lindon Barrett’s distinction between signing and singing voice. Barrett, Blackness and Value, 57-58; Kamau Brathwaite, “History of the Voice,” Roots (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993), 264. If Brathwaite’s attention to the development of language in the Caribbean expands the above to an unmanageable degree, it might also be said to offer a way of thinking about the mutually constitutive role language in the making of the body and the body in the making of language. To wit, “what is even more important, as we develop this business of emergent language in the Caribbean, is the actual rhythm and the syllables, the very body work, in a way, of the language. See, also, epigraph to Toni Morrison’s Jazz: “I am the name of the sound / and the sound of the name. / I am the sign of the letter / and the designation of division,” originally from The Nag Hammadi, as cited in Toni Morrison, Jazz (New York: Plume Book 1992), n.p.
¹⁵¹ At the time of this writing, YouTube has archived videos of the song under both “Be Thankful” and “Diamond in the Back.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVANQheoRUw; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ND7XheSW2ZA
becomes clear that vocal signatures—timbre or not—are often generated by the listener rather than the voice. What we hear, then, demands or calls to our listening, which does not act from sound’s inherent and so tellable meaning but from the ideas we already possess.

Individualization and the generation of sound as a surrogate for the individual heard matters, then, precisely because it was believed to be requisite for the creation of the self by way of relative difference. But, I want to suggest, such difference requires what might be called a recognizable—or tellable—difference as well. Put more simply, telling as a basic method for self-possession and the possessive self requires that one be able to tell of its other, to know the other by way of perception and so phenomenological bounds. In matters of recordings, both fidelity and Tara Rodger’s conception of sound as a “lively and differentiated individual” matters precisely because they condition and so confirm the success of one’s listening as an act of telling the self by way of telling of sound’s difference. At the very moment that a recording takes in not just associations with individuals, but also voicings that trouble racial and gendered expectations—the question of (and, perhaps, even demand for) fidelity emerges. One, quite simply, must make sense of what they hear along racial and gendered lines. Or, as Jennifer Lynn Stoever writes, “listening [becomes] a racialized body discipline . . . informed by emergent

152 Michael Denning’s work on recordings made by cultural workers in the global south during the 1920s offers a compelling rejoinder to such a demand. For Denning, the recorded music of this period became a central site of both populist and nationalist contestation precisely because they enabled the “global circulation of local musics.” Deploying—if ultimately parting from—Attali’s conception of “noise,” Denning argues that the circulation of the local troubled the dominant narratives of nations, effectively offering listeners a tool through which to “decolonize the ear.” If recordings can and have been used to such ends, I want to suggest that the compulsion to make sense of sound so to generate a (white) self has historically meant that recordings were used to obscure the colonizing impulse. See, Michael Denning, Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution (New York: Verso, 2015), 5. On “noise,” see, Jacques Attali, Noise: The Political Economy of Music (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). On empire, see, Ronald Radano & Tejumola Olaniya, eds, Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique (Durham: Duke University, 2016).
sound technologies.” This sense of discipline—and the need for recognizable difference—is what “drives [the] search for an imaginary link binding all black music.” What I would add to Stoever and Radano’s points is that what allows the realization—or recognition—of such drives to remain even in a moment when white listeners claimed to have abandoned racist ideas is the idea that listening to recordings is always a function and matter of recognition or even witness. To hear a recognizably Black voice is to bear witness to Rodger’s “lively and differentiated individual,” no matter how limited or hinged to the historical strains of what Matthew Morrison has usefully named “blacksound” that hearing may be.

Listening as a practice that renders recordings into individuals, thus, troubles Dylan’s assertion that recordings were places that one might “hang out.” If they availed listeners new modes of reception and telling-power, their capacity to provide the sounds of tellable Blackness in excess of proximity could not help but reinforce the exclusionary bounds of the time. As Susan J. Douglass argues, while radio was celebrated for its ability to generate a community of listeners beyond towns and cities, it was often seen—and used—as a medium that could

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154 Radano, 7.

155 Morrison offers the term “Blacksound” to begin thinking about the racialization of popular music and intellectual property relations that both begin in blackface minstrelsy and soon exceed it. By thinking through the concept of Blacksound, Morrison offers a way to contend with how strains of racial authenticity given in the 19th century have both endured and changed, even as popular music’s political economy continues to generate a troubling site of exclusion and exploitation. See, Matthew D. Morrison, “Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, No. 3 (2019): 781–823.

“insulate its listeners from heterogeneous crowds of unknown, different, and potentially unrestrained individuals.”¹⁵⁷ And Ben Sidran, who noticed the interracial listening that recordings opened up, is also careful to point out that records also “brought black music to the whites who were hesitant to frequent the living environments of black music.”¹⁵⁸ The listener could turn on the radio or put on a record and be transported into a variety of aural worlds without having to mix into communities that were, by fact of both de jure and de facto segregation along racial and class lines, understood to be both off-limits and incommensurable—even as the idea of witness and encounter of a sounded “individual” obscured the material, social and legal regimes at play. Technological intimacy, thus, extended one’s ear, but why an individual would celebrate elongation often betrayed a desire for constriction and quarantine, generating what Josh Kun has usefully called “audiotopias,” sites of imagined listening that free individuals to further the course of empire.¹⁵⁹

The stakes of listening to recordings vis-à-vis Black music and white listeners matter greatly, for as Jon Cruz writes, Black music “was then grasped as a distinct, observable, and knowable element of black culture. Indeed, white moral and cultural entrepreneurs found it to be their preferred cultural expression by blacks.”¹⁶⁰ And in the period leading up to the sixties—and with the rise of recordings—listening habits across the racial line “broke from the earlier frameworks in which black song making was heard as alien noise, and it created a critical

¹⁵⁸ Sidran, 65.
humanistic interest in the music of African Americans.”

It would seem, then, if associations with death had been mostly evacuated by the 20th century, the record’s links to perceived testimony remained—even as what became tellable often occurred and circuit through an all-white ‘jury,’ who, to hear A.B. Spellman tell it, continued to offer “gross indifference [to] aspects of Afro-American culture that are not ‘entertaining.’”

This is, perhaps, why Nina Sun Eidshem is careful to reminds us that “listening is never neutral,” but, rather, “actively produces meaning.” And it is this production of meaning that makes listening “a political act.” Through sense, we make sense. The idiom, however, misleads. Our ability to make is limited, bounded by—or, at the very least, strongly guided by—the configurations of what is already understood to be sensible, which is to say both prudent and appreciable. Listeners hear actively and plot historically all at once. The receptive event, which bundles hearing and plotting, is what Ronald Radano has called “a second hearing,” with hearing taking up both the sensorial and adjudicating act.

It is, then, of little wonder why, in 1965, Revolutionary Action Movement member and Soulbook editor, Ernest Allen would write, “i was

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161 Cruz, 3.
162 A.B. Spellman, Black Music: Four Lives (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), viii. In his appraisal of Charles Edward Ives’ Four Ragtime Dances, Charles Hiroshi Garrett writes, “the point, it seems, is not that varied musical practices are meeting on common ground, sharing space equally, and learning to get along perfectly, but that they are crossing over and colliding, bumping up against one another, struggling to be heard above the commotion, even as they participate in the process of trying to work things out.” The consequence of such struggles, Garrett argues, is that even if these stylistic forays were treated as an important “step toward racial understanding,” they also were used in the perpetuation of unequal race relations.” Charles Hiroshi Garrett, Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 43-45.
165 Radano, 105-165
once a model prisoner / drowning in a wretched record groove / etched to stale vibration / unable to hear for the rankle of chains about my ears.”

Regarding Recordings (without) Telling Blackness

This is not to suggest that either recordings by Black musicians or practices by Black listeners were unable to outpace or exceed telling. To the contrary, Black musicians and listeners developed any number of practices and modes that exceeded and contended with forces of telling. In his magisterial examination of the role of Black popular culture within both Black and U.S. politics, Richard Iton has shown how Black bands of the period came to represent analogues for “the kinds of deliberative potentials . . . one finds in certain junctures in black politics.” On the one hand, the junctures given in and by Black Bands were seen as an analogue to certain corners of Black politics at the time, taking part in and so becoming a kind of model for the “convention movement, protest activities and transnational engagement.” On the other hand, the band’s celebration of a wide—but never full—spectrum of expressivity helped to demonstrate the requisite condition through which expressions of Black interiority were made possible. Indeed, Black bands—and musicians—of the late sixties and seventies could and did move through any number of expressive possibilities, from ecstatic to romantic, from the loud to the quiet, and from the representational to the abstract. Whether in the recording studio, on stage or participating in the many workshops of the period, Black bands offered Black listeners a way

166 Ernie Allen, “notes from great society prison: dedicated to the Watts War on Poverty,” Soulbook 1, no. 3 (Fall 1965): 191.
167 Iton,117.
168 Iton,117.
169 Iton,117.
through which to come into regard of each other, and, I would add, because a great deal of 
listening moved through recordings, Black listeners were able to do so across otherwise 
insurmountable distances.

This ability to generate modes of distant regard is, perhaps, why Amiri Baraka argues that 
the record’s entry into the market space “really began to put forth extra-local models and styles 
of blues-singing.”170 This sense of the extra-local, however, speaks to a very particular kind of 
reception. If, as Baraka argues, recordings enabled blues techniques to spread beyond the local 
and geographically bound circuits of influence, the precise technique that a more distant listener 
or community noticed was often determined according to any number of variables. That is to say 
that how one listens—the conditions of listening—is necessarily local. Reflecting on the passing 
of Aretha Franklin, Darryl Pinckney gets at this sense.

I never went to an Aretha Franklin concert, but her voice has gone 
with me everywhere. The 33⅓ vinyl records long ago turned into 
cassettes that were then replaced by CDs, which are packed away 
somewhere, now that everything is on YouTube or Spotify. I never 
knew much about her. Her vibe was unequivocal: I am not your 
business. She was our witness and maybe she didn’t need for us to 
be hers. She had earned her privacy more than we deserved to 
know her business.171 

What Pinckney makes clear is that his admiration for Franklin’s singing—and its ability to serve 
as Black listener’s “witness”—did not need Franklin to tell of her life. Not only was she within 
hers rights to withhold information; the regard she makes possible lay—and by fact of recordings 
lies—in excess of the kinds of inspection telling so often took up. What a joint consideration of

170 Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York: 
171 Darryl Pinckney, “Miss Aretha Franklin,” NYR Daily, New York Review of Books (August 
Iton, Baraka and Pickney make clear is the how Black listeners and musicians have been able to use recordings as tools for mutual regard.

Much like telling, regard provides a complex of related meanings. At base, it names the attention given those individuals, ideas and things we encounter. But regard also names the action by which an individual looks after either oneself or another. And, still, it names a kind of mindfulness, wherein an individual recognizes their esteem for someone or something. Finally, regard has also—at one point—meant to deliberate or think carefully. Regard— as I use it in these essays—takes up each of these possible meanings so to generate a mode of relationality in excess of telling. Where telling turns on individuation and the possession of a sensible self, regard names an approach to engagement predicated on what Caribbean poet and theorist Édouard Glissant calls relation. For Glissant, relation offers a framework for thinking about the world as irreducible to its constituent parts. These parts, he argues, are constituted by the relation itself, existing not just in but only because of the relation at hand. Regard not only takes Glissant’s notion of relationality as its fundamental frame; it also takes seriously the role of relationality in questions of solidarity, coalition and community. In doing so, it offers a name to those efforts that attend to the contingencies and difficulties presented by questions of recognition, care and need. It also takes up where representation—and so telling—leaves off, even as it does not deny the import of representational and incorporative efforts and works. Leading from this admittedly diffuse fray of meanings, it might be said that if acts of Black

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173 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 172.
telling take up the sort of “watching” described in Ebony Rhythm Funk Campaign’s “Watching You, Watching Me” (“I’ve been watching you watching me watching you watching me”), regard takes up Charles Wright’s assertion that “It’s not what you look like when you're doing what you're doing, it's what you're doing when you're doing what you look like you're doing.” And both deploy grammars (and so a poetics) that signify on the circuitous nature of living in and somehow beyond an antiblack and heterosexist state.

Given regard’s link to community making, it might also be said to move into conversation with questions of kinship and belonging. In particular, regard moves alongside what Ruha Benjamin has called kinfulness, a mode relation that “exceeds biological relatedness” in order to construct “alternative family formations in the midst of crisis.” Regard extends Benjamin’s formations in order to think through forms of mutuality and obligation that emerge in excess of direct contact and interpersonal care. Its central question, then, is how a community might understand itself when kinship is either not possible, not wanted or harmful. And, by attending to the obligation of community and care that exceeds interpersonal and kinship practices, regard generates intercommunal modes of relation that attend to structural harm even as individuals are given the room to choose whether or not they participate in specific activities, gestures and relationships. To be sure, my invocation of regard does not seek to intervene into

174 Ebony Rhythm Funk Campaign, “Watchin’ You, Watchin’ Me” Watchin’ You, Watchin’ Me, Chi Sounds Records, 1976; Charles Wright and the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band, “Express Yourself,” Express Yourself, Warner Brothers Records, 1970. While well beyond the period to which these essays contend, Beyoncé’s “Pray You Catch Me” bears an affectual similarity to Ebony Rhythm Campaign. I note as much less to draw some purposeful link between the two and more to stress that Black telling—interpersonally and nationally speaking—continues to be used. See, Beyoncé, “Pray You Catch Me,” Lemonade, Parkwood/Columbia, 2016.


176 If a great deal of work has complicated, if not dismissed, Carol Stack’s concept of “fictive kinship” across the last thirty years, it is, perhaps, worth pointing out that she writes of the
discussions on kinship so much as to participate in the inquiries it has so beautifully opened up. Regard offers, then, an additional way to contend with questions of relationality, care and otherwise modes of living that have been part of Black life- and community-making before, during and after the period to which the essays that follow contend.

In her exploration of the many ways that Black women have used their lived experiences to “generate philosophical practices” and methods that constitute nothing less than a “tradition,” Devonya Havis offers a key example of how regard does not move from declaration but, rather, relation.177 Writing of Mamma Ola, the Black Native American woman that raised her father, Havis tells a story about how the elder woman taught her father to approach the world from the position of relation. The entire passage bears repeating:

“Now, how you sound,” Mamma Ola would ask whenever my father was out of line. Her inquiry was not a simple question about motives or the specificity of my father's particular actions. She did not ask, “What are you doing,” or "why did you do that?” Rather, her inquiry was a broader question designed to make my father think beyond the particular action and to consider the larger ethical implications of his position. "Now, how you sound" functioned as a call to consider not only the final result of one's thinking but also the framework and context from which the actions or choices issued. It was also a question about the hidden assumptions and blind spots that had not received consideration. At base, Mamma Ola's simple question was a complex inquiry into the landscape of my father's existential and ethical positioning. It served as a reminder of how his positions and actions were not only personal

concept after having spent time in a Black Midwestern community in 1968. That is to say that a question of the place of regard as it moves alongside kinship would also enter conversations contemporary with the period to which this project looks. See, Carol Stack, “Black Kindreds: Parenthood and Personal Kindreds Among Urban Blacks,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 3, no. 2 (1972): 194-206; Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

but also relational, anchoring him within a community. The inquiry reiterated the deep connection she saw between one's theories and action.\textsuperscript{178}

As Havis argues, Mamma Ola’s deployment of an interrogative forgoes her right to tell Havis’s father how he must be in and of the world. Instead, she encourages him to take up a practice of regard, both of himself and those around him. The question, in this way, “allows one to negotiate changing terrain.”\textsuperscript{179} For Havis’ the import of including Mamma Ola’s question in her work is not simply a function of recovery or recognition of the question. While it certainly does that, Havis’ ultimate end is to begin thinking about how Mamma Ola’s interrogative might be used as she and other philosophers negotiate the Western philosophical tradition. By continually asking themselves “‘how we sound’ when doing academic philosophy,” philosophers might begin to uncover how Western methods “overtly and covertly exclude philosophies derived from Black women’s experiences,” and, in this “new found” regard, generate “new interpretive strategies and new symbolic relationships.”\textsuperscript{180}

Within music studies and, in particular, the conjunction of Black studies and music studies, Yahya Jongintaba’s (Jon Michael Spencer) development of theomusicology most closely accords to what I am calling Black regard. As Jongintaba writes, the spur to develop theomusicology was a desire to move beyond both musicology’s focus on form and technique and ethnomusicology’s focus on culture in order to think about music within “the realm of ethics, religion, and mythology.”\textsuperscript{181} As he explains, a theomusicological methodology is especially

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\textsuperscript{178} Havis, “Now, How You Sound,” 240.  \\
\textsuperscript{179} Havis, “Now, How You Sound,” 240.  \\
\textsuperscript{180} Havis, “Now, How You Sound,” 240.  In addition to Havis’ notion of sounding, my sense of Black regard is deeply informed by discussions with Ramon Alvarez and Danny Gardner.  \\
\textsuperscript{181} Yahya Jongintaba (Jon Michael Spencer), \textit{Theological Music: Introduction to Theomusicology} (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 1991).
\end{flushright}
concerned with how communities involve music in their efforts to transform societies for the better. By focusing on music as an interpretive method—indeed, interpretation itself—theomusicological approaches think through the ways that music can and does enable individuals and communities to come into new—if always fragile—relation (and so regard) with each other. Like Havis, Jongintaba takes Black people’s many ways of interacting and thinking with and alongside each other seriously, treating Black literature, myth, stories, and even rumors as not only a worthwhile but a privileged site of contextualization for thinking about how music and listening both enriches and constitutes Black engagement, community and, I would add, regard.¹⁸²

Moreover, just as Havis’ project exceeds but does not exclude representation and recovery within broader circuits of philosophy, so, too, does theomusicology exceed without excluding questions of Black representation and recovery within music practices. Following a great deal of Black thinkers, organizers and academics who place care as central to any theoretical or historical practice, Jongintaba argues that transformation lies at the center of a theomusicologist’s concerns, turning research into a “re-search” for the many modes of living available and modeled in Black people’s practices of making and listening to music.¹⁸³ In this way, the method returns to questions of consciousness that open this introduction. But where modes of telling do so under the auspice of repossession and the formation of a possessive self, theomusicology’s focus on the mysteries given in and by life seem more concerned with notions

of relationality, of transforming the relations between Black musicians and listeners that have historically been thought from within antiblack frameworks. In this way, Jongintaba’s project takes up the task set by musician Cecil Taylor, who writes that art is nothing less than “the symbolizing of the life within the community, because it is the continuance of all of the acts, all of the intrapersonal acts, that go on within that community. . . . The art does not exist without recognition of the group and the particular ideation which propels the life of that group. What art is, is the abstraction, if you will, of what people exchange.” Leading from this, it might be said that theomusicology’s initial—and largely ignored—forays in the early eighties anticipate a great deal of work on music within Black, Diasporic and Caribbean studies, wherein scholars have begun to contend with sound as an embodied and material phenomenon that generates “a way of thinking, a process of knowledge, and a gnosis.”

More recently, scholars within Black studies have begun to look at how Black communities across the Diaspora have always contended with and used technology in order to generate both practices and modes of regard. Louis Chude-Sokei offers the concept of “technopoetics” to name the ways that Black peoples across the African diaspora have both engaged and understood technology despite a history within the Western world that often saw technology and Blackness as oppositions. Similarly, Alexander Weheliye offers the concept of

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185 Julian Henriques, Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing (New York: Continuum, 2011), xvii. Michael Veal’s monograph on dub makes a similar observation, arguing that “although dub is certainly a genre of music, it might be most accurate to think of it as a process . . .” See, Michael E. Veal, Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 21.
“phonographies” to begin assessing the many ways that Blackness “operate[s] paradoxically as both central to and outside of Western modernity.” By looking at how Black cultural production has used sound technologies since their advent in the late 19th century, Weheliye demonstrates how sound has always been “a zone” through which Afro-diasporic formations can and have been theorized. And both Chude-Sokei and Weheliye take up the latter’s assertion that “one significant way to dismantle the coloniality of being in Western modernity is to continually insist on just how fundamental blackness, black people, and black cultures are to this territory, albeit without falling prey to a politics of recognition, which merely adds window dressing to the systemic colonial territoriality of the modern West.” Far from a rehearsal of telling, Weheliye’s point is that many of the innovations, practices and modes of relation emerge—unacknowledged or not—within and by Black communities across the diaspora. In the chapters that follow, I attempt to follow these ideas, taking the record as a site through which both telling and regard are not only made possible but brought into a tense relief.

In order to do so, the essays that follow are split into two sections. The first contends with modes of telling by both white and Black figures. The second section turns to the different ways that Black communities have used recordings so to generate practices of regard in the late sixties and early seventies. Each of these sections is then prefaced by what I am calling burdens, which—as a musical figure—names the primary theme (or head) to which a song must

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187 Weheliye, Phonographies, 5.
188 Weheliye, Phonographies, 5.
constantly contend. Much like musical burdens, I argue that the burdens that open these sections come to form a secondary—or complimentary—concern to telling or regard, respectively. For the first section, I argue the figure of out of phase whiteness—a concept by which whiteness continually announces its distance from itself—lurks underneath forms of telling in this period. For the second section, I argue that hereness—the desire for an intellectual, social and sonic space free from white or state concerns—constantly surges in matters of regard.

Leading from this, the first section of the essays that follow consist of two chapters. Chapter one turns to the post-war period, arguing that contrary to a great deal of work that claims the sixties marked a break in its conceptual and perceptual modes, a great deal can be learned by looking at how listening emerges from turn of the century performances on both the vaudeville stage and radio. Taking Kate Smith as a case study, I argue that her career trajectory from a fat woman with limited—and often humiliating roles—on the vaudeville stage to a radio and television star not only profits from racial regimes but, in fact, becomes a kind of metric from which whiteness moves out of phase. Chapter two then turns to James Brown, arguing that Brown understood the market not just as the arbiter of art’s political possibility but also as a metric for national equity and, more pressingly, the justification for doing as he wanted. Neither wholly divorced nor fully in kind with the forms of telling developed in the previous chapter, much of James Brown’s political work—in recording and as a public figure—urged Black listeners to re-tell Blackness, resulting in both good and bad ends.

In chapter three, the first chapter on Black regard, I forgo a case study, choosing instead to focus on the ways that Black musicians, writers and intellectuals had long engaged in uneven,

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190 Thank you to Jonathan Karp for pointing me to the term when I mentioned that I had planned to use “head” as a figure through which to think of these complementary concerns. Burden is, I think, infinitely better.
difficult and differently constituted exchanges that often refused to translate music into language. Rather than treat this lack of translation as evidence of failure, both writers and musicians marshalled word’s inadequacy, treating its lack as a spur for engagement. In doing so, both groups rendered language’s inadequacy into a formal possibility of exchange between different and often antagonistic modes of expression. I then turn back to James Brown for chapter four. But rather than think about the declarative modes of re-telling he engaged in, I look at the many different ways that listeners responded to “Say It Loud—I’m Black and Proud,” arguing that “Say It Loud” says almost nothing—politically speaking—but, in doing so, it generates a listening space that if not free of white telling operates in excess of its modes. Finally, chapter five looks at Roberta Flack’s “Sunday and Sister Jones” as an example of Black regard without recourse to telling. More specifically, I argue that Flack’s use of the hum in the song is exemplary of a growing number of Black women vocalists who refused to accord the limited models of telling and, in their refusal, helped to reshape the horizon of political, social and relational possibility.
Telling
Burden I: Whiteness Out of Phase

Sound is patterned disturbance, a vibration that disrupts its surroundings. It is also an act of journey, moving out from a source only to be carried on the medium—gas, liquid, solid—it disturbs. It is, then, bothered or burdened exchange, what we might call energy’s contagion. Roused from equilibrium, particles move in a wave. From rise to crest and then descent, their displacement happens twice—first positively then negatively. And only when sound’s disruptive energy is given over to the next particle can the previous one return to equilibrium. In this way, sound is a series of crests and troughs, oscillating through time and space.

Importantly, sound need not be singularly manifest. In fact, it always competes with itself. Different sources issue different vibrations, each generating a particular wave shape, and when two or more collide, the result is interference. How we register these collisions depends on the waves’ respective amplitudes, which is to say the amount of particle displacement generated by each as they move through a medium. The greater the amplitude, the more likely we are to register it. This is why a shout is heard over a whisper; its vibrational force causes a greater displacement of particles as it moves through and—for our case—pressurizes air. It would seem, then, that sound can be used both to cover its other and as a cover that masks and reshapes sound’s journey in and across time and space. To listen, we must forgo—or even surrender—our right to force. To tell, which is to take note of forces that issue around us, we must suspend our giving of note, our right to tell.

However, generating greater amplitude is not the only way that sound covers itself. When two sources issue cycles whose shapes (frequency, amplitude and tone quality) are identical, their timing determines how and what we hear. If the cycles issue from their respective sources at the same moment, they are said to be in phase, and their overlap increases the size of the wave.
We register this increase as a gain in loudness or volume. But when two identical cycles are issued exactly one-half cycle apart, they are said to be out of phase, which is to say that the crest of one occurs at the exact moment when the other reaches its trough. The effect is one of mutual cancelation or what physicists call destructive interference. To be out of phase is to sound without apparent registration. Any response, should one be given, becomes—or seems to be—an origin without referent, an aggressor without cause. This is because out of phase cycles hold particles in place, acting without sensory trace and so enabling energy to order, which is to say structure, what appears to be an unbothered environment. For those in sound engineering and production, understanding phases is crucial for any number of recording and concert technologies. In matters of racial telling, the figure of two phases operating a half cycle apart serves as an apt metaphor for historical strains of whiteness whose internal contestations over belonging, sociality and telling collude, acting if not without trace then certainly in a state of constant maintenance.

Of course, the concept of a phase has broader applications within both racial telling and U.S. history. It is often the term used to describe a distinct period in which development occurs across time. Individuals, communities and the state move through phases. And within the rhetoric of a liberal state, the concept enables a polity to understand itself as always capable of change and correction. This is because a phase is necessarily temporary, something to be overcome or moved through. In this sense, a phase is also necessarily ideological, gathering events under the auspice that they operate as a series or pattern, politically, socially and relationally speaking. Thus, the concept of a temporal phase makes the concept of lag
possible. But where scholars have often seen lag uniquely applied to minoritized and colonized peoples, I want to suggest that lag also enables a white liberal polity to understand itself as operating in a continuous state of improvement, change and development. In this way, lag names a temporal relationship akin one wave moving out of phase from its other and, in its seeming leap ahead, creating another other—a perceived difference—whose relation to and with the world remains white in its framing itself as a phase.

As Richard W. Lid, a professor of English at San Fernando Valley State College, would write in the introduction to *Grooving the Symbol*, an edited volume of contemporary U.S. writing “for college students,”

The editor of *Grooving the Symbol* is, like everyone else, the representative of a generation, locked in time by background, education, profession. He believes, like many other concerned instructors, that he must break out of the past and move into the present—now, today, not alone but with his students, so that he too

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191 To be sure, my notion of phases is immensely informed by Attali’s notion of noise/repetition. This is particularly true with respect to his claim that repetition rids a sonic and political signal of noise by recycling it. As he writes, “Deviations from the original usage of the code constitute a profound danger to the existing powers, so much so that they sometimes transform their morphologies in order to benefit from the new network themselves.” However, I want to suggest that my focus on two phases moving half a cycle from each other effectively undermines the kind of absorption he usefully notes precisely because “music of the mean” is seemingly evaded or transcended by the perception of lag and the leap ahead. See, Attali, *Noise*, 35.

192 I am specifically referencing both Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha, and subaltern studies more broadly, but the racialized notion of lag has a much longer history within both scientific and popular discourses. If—like Fanon—such an appraisal might be assigned to Hegel’s assertion that Africans’ are without history, H.G. Well’s 1895 novel, *The Time Machine*, is a more apt example of lag. In it, the narrator offers readers the figure of an African visiting London for the first time to capture the disorientation he experiences upon arriving in the future. Here, then, are the linked figures of both leap and lag—and the racialized nature of both. “Conceive the tale of London which a negro, fresh from Central Africa, would take back to his tribe! What would he know of railway companies, of social movements, of telephones and telegraph wires . . . and the like? . . . Then, think how narrow the gap between a negro and a white man of our own times, and how wide the interval between myself and these of the Golden Age!” See, H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Random House, 1991), 65; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 263-266.
can ‘groove’ the symbols of the America of the Seventies and come responsibly to terms with it.\textsuperscript{193}

Lid will go on to propose a myth and symbol method, wherein the myths—which is to say the discursive constructs or ways of knowing and measuring ideas—given in symbols come to organize and so shape both sense and experience.\textsuperscript{194} As Lid writes, “American-ness surely lies [in one’s] attempts to define and give meaning to the seemingly indeterminate fate of American lives.”\textsuperscript{195} To be American, then, was to endeavor a diagnostic and often antagonistic approach to one’s “ancestors,” who he defines as “a dead relative we have forgotten about—or one we wish we could forget about.”\textsuperscript{196} For Lid, the purpose of both the collection and, more broadly, the myth and symbol method is to better grapple with our ancestors. As he writes, “[t]o discover one’s ancestors is to discover that we are descendants, whether we like it or not . . . Merely to flee our ancestors is to flee something of our personal and collective selves. It is,” he finally surmises, “better to confront them.”\textsuperscript{197}

In some ways, lag as confrontation follows older philosophical questions concerning skepticism (and, as later essays hope to show, anxiety). In this respect, skepticism might be understood as the enduring sense that there is some fundamental fact about existence we cannot prove but, nevertheless, feels true. And it is this lack of proof that leads Kant to call skepticism

\textsuperscript{195} Lid, 4.
\textsuperscript{196} Lid, 3.
\textsuperscript{197} Lid, 133.
“a scandal of philosophy.”¹⁹⁸ The skeptic, so to speak, does not proffer proof but, rather, marshals doubt, trusting it over previous assumptions concerning our fundamental nature. But as Stanley Cavell usefully points out, Kant’s scandal lies next to the Heidegger’s assertion that “the scandal of philosophy is not that this proof has yet to be given but that such proofs are expected and attempted again and again.”¹⁹⁹ These two approaches to skepticism are, if not immediately apparent, quite different. Where Kant sees skepticism as a method capable of responding to “dogmatism” without the requisite demand for proof, the Heideggerian call continually assumes arguments for particular proofs exist and that these arguments should be given over and over again. Telling’s attention to perceptive and disruptive modes, thus, might be thought to consolidate the simultaneity of the Kantian and Heideggerian calls precisely because perception can but does not demand declaration. One can perceive and one can declare all at once or at separate times.

However, consolidation of this sort produces a paradox. As Cavell argues, philosophers have shown that “skepticism defeats itself [by] denying a framework of assumption that it must itself assume.”²⁰⁰ In order to register the perceptive (which is to say un-proofed) mode, one must reveal skepticism through utterances or acts of language. In short, the simultaneity of telling as both perceptive and declarative still falls to communicative and so declarative modes. This is why, for Cavell, much of the issue lies in language itself. As he argues, “it is (ordinary) language that defeats itself, so that if I am ‘confined’ to the ordinary in language, it is I who suffer defeat,

²⁰⁰ Cavell, 133-134.
tied to a stumbling block.” For Cavell, what must be answered is neither the Kantian nor Heideggerian call, “though of course [they must] be accounted for.” Rather, one must answer “how it is that philosophy has chronically required itself a flight from the ordinary . . .” and, leading from that, how and why it is that “the ordinary from which one flees is the creation of skepticism (language and the world seen as from the leaving of them).” What Cavell’s focus on the ordinary makes clear is that questions of departure, flight and even intervention foreground modes of thinking and apprehension—and so scholarship, policy and law—whose generation of change or difference forecloses our ability to question the ethics of or within such change. “What this regime of a vulnerable ordinary means to me is that we are judges of what calls for, or tolerates, change in our ways of thinking and wording the world; whereas skepticism demands, in effect, that we forgo this judgment.” Telling, in this sense, cannot be seen so much as a departure from previous modes as it is the paradox itself. As such, one does well to recall Cavell’s warning that to tell of unethical or violent regimes also requires us to think about and through the ethics of our telling, too. And it is within white phases, I want to suggest, that any possibility of contending with telling’s unspoken ethics becomes obscured.

Lag, in this sense, is not lag at all. To the contrary, it is a temporally made staging of two white phases in confrontation, moving out of ‘ordinary’ time. Such staging—I want to suggest—cannot help but reconsolidate whiteness as a violent relation with the world precisely because in its confrontation, the jostling in and out of phase, it effectively generates the very conditions—white centrality—it claims to evacuate. Indeed, if the myth and symbol school rightfully

201 Cavell, 134.
202 Cavell, 134.
203 Cavell, 134.
204 Cavell, 134.
proffered critiques of American exceptionalism, refusing to accept the hegemonic, which is to say mythical and somehow also ordinary, notion of a single U.S. history, its promotion of pluralism, of which Lid supports, seemed to do so by way of conscription. This, I want to suggest, is the “hidden violence” Édouard Glissant identifies as occurring in myth. Equal representative presence—in texts like *Grooving the Symbol*—acts as an insufficient surrogate for calls for a more equitable distribution of power. And confrontation of the sort Lid calls for distracts precisely because its fails to contend with how even as a myth and symbol approach uproots exceptionalism, it continues to leave more insidious modes of white filiation unchallenged. More direct to these essays—and not without an awareness of the irony of my saying it—Black texts rather than Black people become the primary ways that pluralism was realized, leaving the basic components of white phases unchallenged.

These acts of confrontation and conscription participate within what Roderick Ferguson has called the “distributions of whiteness.” For Ferguson, white introspection—or the grappling with questions of racism by way of texts—fails to “demand the one thing required of self-criticism—redistribution.” Jennifer Pierce offers a similar argument. Looking at the 1980s and 1990s, she shows how white liberal assertions of appreciation for cultural diversity only ended up re-centering whiteness in political, social and cultural venues. Jody Melamed extends such confrontations to the post-war period, arguing that the “contradictions and tensions” between

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205 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 50.
white supremacist and antiracist projects “give rise to a new worldwide racial project, a formally antiracist, liberal capitalist modernity that revises, partners with, and exceeds the capacities of white supremacy without replacing or ending it.”

Worse, the focus on violence as the central shaping element of U.S. history combines with the representative approach to pluralism and, in combination, further generates conceptions of racialized lag, which is to give a temporary name to the idea that Black communities were understood to be socially behind. As work from both Wendy Brown and Alexander Weheliye demonstrate, Black communities were often transformed into ‘politicized identities’ whose entry costs became the very means through which full humanity was (and is) denied. As Weheliye points out, the focus on suffering by minority subjects does not evidence the pathological desire to hold onto pain, but, rather, is the result of how suffering has become “the only price of entry to proper personhood.” This leads him to argue that,

if demanding recognition and inclusion remains at the center of minority politics, it will lead only to a delimited notion of personhood as property that zeroes in comparatively on only one form of subjugation at the expense of others, thus allowing for the continued existence of hierarchical differences between full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans.

And, indeed, he is correct, as is Brown.

Much of this focus echoes critiques concerning identity and decipherment by Sylvia Wynter. Tracking the emergence of human as a category of classification across 500 years of

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European expansion and domination, Wynter identifies the 1960s as the moment in which many of what might be called today’s prescriptive categories or genres of humanness—person of color, feminist, queer—were generated so to challenge the over determined nature of Western Man. At the moment of initiation, these categories were effective challenges. However, Wynter argues that their more recent use has not been able to continue their de-centering project; rather, they have become mired in colonial, imperial and racist appropriation and are often put in service of the replication of racialized violence and disavowal. In short, these once radical categories have become a new tool through which imperial power generates the hierarchicalized categories of human that Weheliye—following Wynter—offers above.212 And, in the literature field, questions concerning decipherment, of which myth and symbol is only one example, emerge as a method through which whiteness—and, for Wynter, Man—moves out of phase with itself. As she writes, practices of decipherment enable “an emergent global and popular Imaginary” that serves to “secur[e] . . . the well-being of the concrete individual human subject” over and against “our counter hegemonic Imaginary, for which the securing of the well-being of the middle class mode of the subject is the telos.”213

Reframing how whiteness proceeds through phasing also demonstrates that our current metaphors are, perhaps, insufficient for thinking about its operations. Indeed, the fact of whiteness as a violent relation with the world is not—as so often presented—singly invisible


or a function of silence. Much like the myth and symbol school, white critics and citizens readily recognized the fact of racialized and imperial violence. Writing in 1968, Staughton Lynd would suggest that

Any critic of the American present must have profoundly mixed feelings about our country’s past. On the one hand, he will feel shame and distrust toward Founding Fathers who tolerated slavery, exterminated Indians, and blandly assumed that a good society must be based on private property. On the other hand, he is likely to find himself articulating his own demands in Revolutionary language of inalienable rights, a natural higher law, and the right to revolution.

Likewise, Sheldon Wolin writes that “Although cultural conservatives might count the sixties as a disaster, it was, instead, the loss of liberal innocence.” The “distinctive flavor” of the sixties New Left, Michael Harrington writes, operated from “a sense of outrage, of having been betrayed by all the father figures, which derives from an original innocence.” And it was this sense of betrayal that “left them in a contradiction between mysticism and militancy.”

What is, perhaps, telling of this period was the idea that normativity marked a racialized ideological and political standpoint that followed you—and, in its following, might be outpaced. As Leslie Fielder would argue, every white person enters the world “theoretically white,” and

214 On silence see, Grace Elizabeth Hale’s concise declaration of what is, at this time, axiomatic: “Central to the meaning of whiteness is a broad, collective American silence.” Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation, 1890-1940 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), xi.
only after “playing Indian” and ‘Black’ did they ‘buy into whiteness.’” Implicit within Fielder’s assessment is the idea that one might chose not to opt into whiteness, to—as it were—generate a phase that refuses ‘purchase’ into a necessarily visible (and violent) concept of whiteness. Under such a suggestion, whiteness’ violence might be effectively left in the past. Indeed, even Lynd’s evidence relies on the idea that racialized and dispossessive violence were the domain of the “founding fathers.”

If early in his assessment, Fielder was not singular in such ideas. As one commentator would put it in 1972, “the soothing message of the generation-gap explanation is that the problem is one of communication between the young and old. It suggests that differences are ‘merely generational,’ that a person’s age determines his way of looking at things. With condescending smugness the conclusion is that young people will ‘know better when they grow up.’” Age, in this sense, became a marker of time and so lag. But where the older ‘generation’ saw this divide as a function of maturation, a phase younger people must move through, the younger generation understood their leap as an advance or departure, not only permanent in nature but, in no small way, generative of a more just relation with a suddenly “pluralistic” world. Few, however, confronted the fact that pluralism might be a phase of whiteness, itself, which, in its perceived leap ahead, obscured how exclusion and possession, metaphorically and material speaking, were constitutive qualities of whiteness. And, in its argumentative

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218 As cited in Roedigger. Additionally, David Roedigger usefully demonstrates that Blackness is consistently marketed to younger, white consumers. See, David Roediger, Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), 226-227.
difference but structural maintenance of whiteness, out of phase whiteness might be said to operate in obverse relation to Fred Moten’s notion of the break as a conspicuous cut into and so temporary departure from an ensemble’s playing. Denying the structural repetition that enables those in the break to inaugurate and so contend with structures, out of phase approaches understand themselves as leaps ahead, or an opting out through dialectical means.\(^{222}\)

Leading from this, it might be said that whiteness is also always in a fight with itself, whereby cycles and phases obscure the maintenance at hand.\(^{223}\) Such an observation is not new. Edward Said’s critique of Foucault’s attention to textuality makes a similar appraisal, when he notices the Foucauldian approach to discourses could not attend to the numerous histories, meanings and lived experiences within any society.\(^{224}\) If Foucault “was not quite the dolt Said makes him out to be,” to follow Cedric Robinson, “there is still an impulse in Foucault’s thought to elect the dialectic as a privileged site of contestation . . . It is as if,” Robinson will suggest, “systems of power never encounter the stranger, or that strangers can be seamlessly abducted into a system of oppression.”\(^{225}\) This is perhaps why Richard Iton notes that “a certain emerging caution with regard to the trajectory of black politics and the scope of black claims” that accepts and even proffers the suggestion that “mainstream politics should be the yardstick against which

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\(^{222}\) On the break as cut, see, Moten, \textit{In the Break}.


\(^{225}\) Cedric Robinson, \textit{Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and The Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007), xii.
the wisdom of black strategies should be assessed.” My concern here, however, is not to assess the efficacy of mainstream politics; rather, it is to begin thinking through the ways that phases of whiteness, the generation of lag and the dialectical fights that ensue between different phases generate the conditions through which whiteness contends with questions of both race and power absent of or inattentive to communities of color and Black communities, in particular, and, in doing so, not only maintains racial regimes but, in fact, produces the conditions through which progress is thought to occur.

Within the then emerging field of sound studies, R. Murray Schafer’s conception of the “soundscape” also enters discussions concerning the relational nature of white phases. For Schafer, the import of approaching sound from an ecological approach, of which the soundscape attempts to map, occurs because our sonic environment had become increasingly “polluted” by any number of sounds. In answer to such pollution, Schafer urges musicians, composers and scholars to begin to contend with and so come into an understanding of the relational nature of sound and space. But, one might ask, how does such contention—and, for Schafer, transformation—proceed and what and whom is considered within such appraisals. As he writes, “what the soundscape analyst must do is first to discover the significant features of the soundscape, those sounds which are important either because of their individuality, the numerousness or their domination.” Discovery, I want to suggest, portends telling, even as it appears to generate an appraisal of relationality. What, for example, is one to make of an attention to individuality and dominance when myriad examples can be given of the constitutive
force (or sounding) of non-dominant but assimilated sounds? And what of those that we register as disruptive of the kind of fidelity discussed above? Indeed, both assimilative and disruptive sound not only take part in listening, they also are what enable it. If—rhetorically speaking—Schafer includes Black and marginalized communities, his relational approach falters under the analysis of sound as a collection of constituent parts that might be understood contingently—which is too often understood to be unidirectional—rather than relationally. 229

To state the obvious, and contrary to Lid’s assertion that we must not “flee,” it would seem that whiteness is constantly on the run from itself, not because it seeks to dismantle an antiblack state but, rather, because the generation of lag—and so out of phase whiteness—ensures its own equilibrium. “Like we can’t say, Yankee go home,” Abbie Hoffman would explain to a high school journalist. “We can’t say, ‘Get Whitey.’ We’re white. So we have to evolve a whole different strategy from who we are.” 230 Mel Lyman would go even further, arguing that the “Hip Movement is guilt ridden, it represents everything it condemns,” with “more truth in President Lyndon Johnson than in all the [Timothy] Learys and [Allen] Ginsbergs and all the rest of the professional lovers in the world and,” he challenges readers, “I hope you hate me for telling you the truth because there is much hate IN you and you might as well use it up on me because at least I can fight back.” 231 In generating fights internal to itself, the phases of whiteness remain—even as these fights seem, in no uncertain terms, as its gradual eradication. The right to tell—as both an act of issue and registration—produces a relation with the world that mistakes our rhetorical and ideological shape as the site of contestation and eradication and, in

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229 See, Glissant, *Poetics of Relation.*
doing so, effectively maintains its right to tell, which is to say issue, engage, consider and register itself over and over again. To move out of phase is to seize the right to tell and, in such seizure, assume a kind of possessive impulse.
Chapter 1: But Think of the Parents: Kate Smith, the Racial Body and Whiteness Out of Phase

To hear many tell it, Kate Smith had a body that mattered. This woman of “God Bless America” fame, of stage, radio and television fame, who once sold the largest amount of war bonds in a single day, and who spoke and advised and worried in the name of a nation she claimed as her own, had a body that mattered. Or, perhaps, it is better to say that Kate Smith’s body was useful, or, still better, that this body—as much imagined as observed—was taken up and discussed because of its capacity to matter in so many ways. Kate Smith, the contralto singer, whose career began in the 1920s and spanned nearly four decades, had a body almost as well-known as—and sometimes even better than—her voice. As one reviewer would write in 1935, the winner of an amateur contest was a “Kate Smith type (so it was announced) both as to size and style.” 232 If “style” might refer to any number of qualities associated with her voice, size signified one thing: fatness, a quality so constantly associated with her as to become elemental, the fundamental condition of her particular mattering. Indeed, forty-five years after the above review, and well-after she had retired from public life, a casting call would abandon all pretense of vocal associations when it announced a search for a “heavy set (Kate Smith type).” 233 Her weight, it would seem, mattered—and sometimes even more than her voice.

Kate Smith’s body matters, then, because writers and managers and casting agents continued to mobilize it across her career, to use it not only as a shorthand but, in fact, as an indexical figure through which race, gender and national belonging might be given unsaid. 234

233 "Stage Casting," Back Stage 21, no. 34, September 12, 1980, 58.
234 To perhaps state the obvious, the link between women’s bodies and the nation is not limited to Smith. Women have historically been linked to the nation due to their relative visibility as ‘bodies’ and their ability to bear children. See, Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race,
Indeed, fatness becomes if not an analogue then a convenient and identifiable quality that signified the matron, that grand administrator of the home, which, in Kate Smith’s case, would come to be the nation itself.\textsuperscript{235} And in the figure of the matron lay further associations of patriotism and whiteness, the latter of which sits at an infinitesimal but also insurmountable and so infinitely safe remove from the racist and violent tropes assigned to Black women. In her type, one could damn national judgments of the fat woman’s body even as they ignored the primary targets of such judgments.\textsuperscript{236} Perhaps this is why Franklin Roosevelt would declare “Kate Smith is America”—long suffering but ever stewarding a (white) nation.\textsuperscript{237} For Roosevelt and many critics, Smith was, above all else, an enduring figure, one who survived the perceived ravages of modernity, the New Woman, the Great Depression and, in time, a world war.


\textsuperscript{235} In many ways, the Kate Smith type operates in obverse relation to Gwendolyn Audrey Foster’s “bad-white-body.” To wit: “Bad-white-body films challenge the integrity of the body and the wholeness of identity as much as they challenge the integrity and wholeness of whiteness. They also are generated from a space that problematizes and fragments the binaries of good and bad, moral and immoral, as well as the notion of a unified performing self.” Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, \textit{Performing Whiteness} (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 69

\textsuperscript{236} A great deal of work on the stereotypes and pathologies assigned to Black women’s bodies on the basis of weight, size and notions of excess have come out. Of these, Janell Hobson and Jennifer Morgan are exemplary in their exploration of colonial and antebellum tropes and associations, while Andrea Shaw Nevins offers a survey of how Black women writers and performers have actively upended negative associations. More recently, Sabrina Strings had shown how the development of the transatlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism generated ideologies of fatness that were used to “degrade black women and discipline white women.” See, Janell Hobson, \textit{Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture} (London: Routledge, 2018); Jennifer Morgan, \textit{Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery} (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Andrea Shaw Nevins, \textit{The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies} (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006); Sabrina Strings, \textit{Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia} (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 6.

\textsuperscript{237} Frank J. Prial, “Kate Smith, All-American Singer, Dies at 79: Kate Smith, a Recording Star And Radio Idol, Is Dead at 79,” \textit{New York Times}, June 18, 1986, A1

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Importantly, Kate Smith’s body also matters because Smith clearly recognized the many ways these mobilizations limited and even conditioned her opportunities, and so made use of it, as well. To hear Smith tell the story of her life is to hear of a career trajectory moving from despair to elation, from humiliation to rescue and eventually a calling. It is an arc that moves from body to voice, from the vaudeville stages on which she beings her career as a “coon shouter” to the more ‘respectable’ radio and recording industries, where she is finally able to declare “I speak for myself.” And, in time, it would seem that she came to speak for others, too. She was, for one writer, a “national maternal beacon,” which is to say an orienting figure, if not out of time then moving steadily through it, unchanged and so reliable. It is no surprise, then, that one writer reflecting on Smith’s life in 1986 would declare that listening to her “felt [like] what Mom would sound like if only Mom could sing.” Such an assessment might even be read as a sly rejoinder to—or perhaps journalistic echo of—“Those Were the Days,” the famously off-key theme song for Norman Lear’s All in the Family, where Edith and Archie Bunker lament the loss of a time when “Hair was short and skirts were long [and] Kate Smith really sold a song [and] I don’t know just what went wrong.” What this combination of speech, remembrance and lyric illuminates is the reactionary nature of Kate Smith’s imagined body. What such attention occludes is how liberals and radicals used the Kate Smith type, as well. Next to her, they became—or could become—a living analogue to All in the Family’s Mike “Meathead” Stivic, the Chicago-born orphan, whose vague leftist politics and SDS sympathies turned him

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into Archie Bunker’s foil and the descendent of Huck Finn and Augie March. This living (and singing) woman had a body. It freighted our worst imaginative impulses and so served as a referent by which other modes of whiteness might move out of phase. But in order to see how, we must first return to the period just before her career, and there track the arc and meanings of fat white women’s bodies.

**Vaudeville Bodies**

The initial attention to Smith’s body would have been neither surprising nor uncommon. In the decades between 1890 and 1930, weight would become increasingly central to upper- and middle-class conceptions of both white womanhood and masculinity. But how weight mattered for women in this period depended on several often-contradictory factors. Victorian concepts of gender contended with the ideal of the New Woman, whose lithe and sensuous body seemed to promise a break from older modes of propriety, while U.S. eugenicists began to write

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of “racial obesity.”

Those of “Nordic/Aryan” stock, they would warn, had to actively protect themselves from the “degeneracy” of Southern and Eastern European peoples, who suffered from an “inherited tendency to fatness.” And these warnings and ideals were not limited to eugenicists. As Sabrina Strings writes, “[w]hile politicians crafted anti-immigrant legislation and scientists generated studies on (eugenic) racial inheritance, artists and journalists . . . embraced the country as a melting pot . . . [even as they presented] the emerging face and figure of American exceptionalism . . . [as] a trim Nordic woman.” It is little surprise, then, that both the medical and emerging fitness industries would also begin to correlate thinness with health and vigor.

If questions of racial heritability was attenuated—if not ever fully evacuated—by the fitness industry’s assertion that one might attain an ideal body, its claims proffered new reasons for judgement. For fitness professionals, bodies were treated as projects, something to be molded and shaped, and in that hard won state of being a being in progress, thinness marauded as something proximate to disciplined choice, an observable sign of virtue. Weight, then, was a moral issue for all women, even as class, ethnicity and race continued to assign discursive authority to upper- and middle-class white men and women.

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243 Strings, 158-159.

244 Strings, 159.

Alongside these discursive shifts were changes to the vaudeville circuits on which Smith begins her career. Once the domain of working-class white men—and, thus, their interests—the vaudeville circuit expanded its repertoires, courted white women and began to regulate any number of illicit or “low” activities associated with its nineteenth century roots, including but not limited to a prohibition on sex workers and an unregulated, free-for-all in the cheaper gallery seats.\footnote{M. Allison Kibler, \textit{Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 30. See, also, Lawrence W. Levine, \textit{Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 195-97; Robert W. Snyder, \textit{The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York} (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989).} By the first decade of the twentieth century, leaders of the circuit claimed that “[c]urrent vaudeville was clean, even educational, whereas past amusements were vulgar.”\footnote{Kibler, \textit{Rank Ladies}, 111. For an examination of the social milieu of theaters contemporary with vaudeville’s existence, see, Caroline Caffin, \textit{Vaudeville: The Book} (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914) B.F. Keith’s chain of theaters, for instance, published its own periodical, \textit{Keith News}. For a broad overview on vaudeville’s many circuits, see, Frank Cullen, \textit{Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America} Vol. 1 & 2 (London: Routledge, 2006).} The truth of management’s claims aside, the announcements—of which there were many—served their rhetorical purpose.\footnote{Kathy Peiss, \textit{Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 143-144. See, also, Susan Glenn, \textit{Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 14.} More and more, vaudeville gained new audience members, many of whom were white women and children from upper, middle- and working-class families. In fact, white working women in New York City would report that “theater-going was among the most popular of all amusements, rated the favorite by nearly one-quarter of the women interviewed,” while “[m]arried women, sometimes with their children, attended an occasional matinee or evening performance.”\footnote{\textit{\textit{}}Kathy Peiss, \textit{Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 143-144. See, also, Susan Glenn, \textit{Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 14.} If ticket price remained a factor—with most seats costing between twenty-five
and fifty cents, and allowing only higher income families to attend regularly—over half of working white class families who earned over nine hundred dollars a year attended shows more than once a year.\textsuperscript{250} And in 1910, “investigators” would classify the audience of one Lower East Side theater—perhaps too generously—as “middle class” or “mixed,” describing patrons as “fairly prosperous” and “respectable.”\textsuperscript{251}

The impact of these changes was felt even more strongly on stage, and by the first decade of the twentieth-century, vaudeville circuits provided opportunities for white women to develop acts in comedy, dance, acrobatics, singing and racial masquerade.\textsuperscript{252} And in each of these fields, these same women drew on older repertoires and forms—both from in- and outside of vaudeville—in order to amplify the contexts and conditions of their lives. As Susan Glenn argues, women’s performances “act[ed] out and stag[ed] the cultural, social and political assertions . . . associated with the era of the New Woman.”\textsuperscript{253} If more recent histories have challenged the degree to which these performances caused broader social change, the theater certainly offered white women a site on which they contended with many of the issues of the


\textsuperscript{251} John Springhall, \textit{The Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business Live in America, 1840 to 1940} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 139.

\textsuperscript{252} For a survey of different acts, see, Kibler, \textit{Rank Ladies}.

\textsuperscript{253} Susan Glenn, \textit{Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2-3; see, also, Kathleen B. Casey, \textit{The Prettiest Girl on Stage is a Man} (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2015)
day, not the least of which was the racial and gendered nature of the body and its signified and physical capacities.254

Nevertheless, the combination of price, reputation and a continued demand for “old timer” bills ensured that men remained vaudeville’s primary audience, if no longer its exclusive performer. And even after theater managers attempted to “silence their audience’s traditional combativeness” in a further effort to encourage middle-class women and children to attend.255 Indeed, playbills instructing spectators to “avoid whistling, stomping, talking loudly, or distracting others” worked only so well.256 And the continued presence of these instructions suggests that active prohibition rather than accepted or achieved custom was more usual than previous accounts have allowed. More practically, white women performers had to contend with male performers—particularly comics—who objected to women taking up forms of racial masquerade. They argued that women had not only left the home for the stage but, in fact, had taken the necessary and earned labor from men.257 And male performers were not singular in

254 A growing number of scholars have begun to temper the degree to which vaudeville’s performances are thought to cause change. See, Kathleen B. Casey, The Prettiest Girl on Stage is a Man (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2015); M. Allison Kibler, Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); S.D. Trav, No Applause—Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous (New York: Farber & Farber, 2005). However, it should be noted that while Casey seems to recognize the need to contend with the structural conditions that rendered the vaudeville stage a discursive site with respect to gender, she comes dangerously close to treating Sophie Tucker’s performances of racial masquerade as having a disruptive and so social effect. Likewise, Trav’s attention to managers, perhaps, over corrects, treating the fact of market influences as totalizing and disempowering.


256 For quoted material, see, Kibler, “Freedom,” 15.

257 This attention to labor would have fed into broader conversations about the gendered nature of labor at the time—especially as it pertained to the married women, who vaudeville managers sought to recruit into their audiences. Nancy Cott has shown how both feminism and the economy of the early 20th century forced conversations and objections to married women entering careers. In focusing on labor, then, male performers were able to strike doubly. See,
their objections. Audiences also objected to how women’s “crossing of racial lines . . . intertwined with [their] defiance of gender and domestic norms.”258 Less a full-scale eviction of previous audiences and attitudes than a site of “confusions and compromises” between the previously strict borders of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, vaudeville theaters became locations of an emerging heterogenous—but largely white—discursive community, whose concerns, repertoires and audiences both contended with and negotiated broader contestations of both whiteness and gender.259

To be sure, vaudeville was never the exclusive domain of white performers. Black vaudevillians such as Ernest Hogan, Bert Williams, George Walker, Dora Dean and Aida Overton Walker, to name only the biggest stars, developed acts that “blur[red] the lines between ‘coon acts’ and operatta, and between respectability and stereotype,” with many performers creating a doubled-register.260 On a single stage, in a single act, Black vaudevillians delivered “white-determined representations of blackness” for white audiences in the orchestra seats while innovating modes of expressivity and character that registered with Black audiences in the segregated gallery.261 As Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff write, “‘Natural expression’ in racial caricature became the cutting edge of black comedy. Still in blackface makeup, black comedians dared to bring forth modern, recognizable characters who spoke more directly to black

261 Sotiropoulos, 64.
audiences.” And these innovations were not limited to comedians. Dancers and singing acts generated “complex expressivities” that “exist[ed] in and of and for themselves.” And by the 1920s, the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA)—itself an outgrowth of both The Smart Set Company and the S. H. Dudley Theatrical Enterprises (or “Dudley Circuit”)—would establish itself as a vaudeville circuit exclusively for Black performers in the South.

Structurally speaking, however, Black women’s opportunities in white owned circuits could not match those given to white women precisely because management “typically limited black performers to just one spot per show.” And these limits were compounded by what M. Allison Kibler calls the “racial rules” of white-owned vaudeville circuits. Where “[v]audeville managers allowed white players to take on a range of racial disguises . . . they discouraged black performers from trying to look or act white.” This prohibition, Kibler argues, had explicit

262 Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 81. Abbott and Seroff’s work is primarily concerned with Black circuits in the South. However, their description identifies Ernest Hogan as central to these new modes, and Hogan performed on white-owned and managed theaters like the Keith Circuit.


265 Sotiropoulos, 44.

266 Kibler, Rank Ladies, 116. Karen Sotiropoulos points out that Black performers were infrequently allowed to portray Italian and Jewish characters and, somewhat more regularly, Chinese characters, but white characters were strictly prohibited. The decision to confine Black performers to Black characters should not be underestimated. If ethnic and racial masquerade was understood as both a site of disruption, contestation and even reformation along racial and gender lines, management’s insistence that Black performers limit their performances to the depiction of Black characters indicates an active refusal of these affective and performative modes across the color line. That is to say, disruption and subversion of racial boundaries was
consequences for both Black and white women’s respective opportunities. “In contrast to white women who had the privilege of playing with blackness and with less physically inhibited, more sexual selves, black women struggled to be taken seriously, in many cases trying to break into the ranks of leading ladies and highbrow artists.” As Jayna Brown makes clear, it was a period in which the “fetishization of racial expressivity . . . replaced black expressive bodies.”

The productive and destabilizing effect of racial masquerade was particularly true for fat white women, who were often relegated them to “coon shouting,” “mammy” acts and other forms of racial masquerade in a market that more and more sought thin, sporty and sensual chorus girls. Both a route to success and a cause of derision, “Racial masquerade and fat

267 Kibler, Rank Ladies, 116.
268 Jayna Brown, 174.
269 It is also worth noting the shrinking opportunities for what Susan Kattwinkel calls “eccentric bodies” acts, which she defines as a “a subset of the group of performers frequently known as “freaks,” were a chief component of dime museums and circuses throughout the nineteenth century.” If Kattwinkel explicitly avoids reading fatness into this category, the increasing homogenization of stage bodies and, as it were, middle- and upper-class ideas concerning the body’s role in determining both individual and national health, makes this shrinking “subset”
indeed combined to make white women ‘other’ in vaudeville, giving them space for rebellious and sexually aggressive performances but also making them the butt of jokes onstage.” And it was in these roles that white women not only found a great deal of success but were, in no small way, able to play with race in order to contest or disrupt the strictures of both Victorian and New women ideologies. For performers like May Irwin and Sophie Tucker, the latter of whom would become the primary type by which Kate Smith was compared, the combination of fatness and racial masquerade generated the opportunity for acts that combined an “uninhibited, masculine comic style” with “suggestions of a maternal mammy (a nexus of authority and subservience).”

The relegation of fat white women to these roles is not surprising. As discussed above, fatness often suggested links to ethnic and racial heritability. As such, it cannot help but intersect with discussions concerning the “interstitial” nature of racial masquerade’s other primary performers in this period, Jewish men and women. Theater historians have often read the interstitial nature of these performances as linked to broader ideologies that understood Eastern European immigrants—and especially Jewish immigrants—as occupying a “racially hybrid” positionality. They were in this way always in an act of becoming, but as Lori Harrison-

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270 Kibler, Rank Ladies, 130.
272 Strings, Fearing the Black Body.
273 On theater histories that read Jewish women’s use of racial masquerade as operating within broader discursive modes of hybridity, see, Kathleen B. Casey, The Prettiest Girl on Stage is a Man (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2015); Maria De Simone, “Sophie Tucker,
Kahan’s work on Jewish women’s blackface acts demonstrates, becoming cannot be read through the traditional “masculinist paradigms” that understand Jewish male performers use of blackface as either an overly optimistic expression of empathy and solidarity with Black people or a method through which demeaning performances of Blackness effectively made a claim on whiteness. To the contrary, Jewish women’s participation in blackface acts demonstrated “the possibility that whiteness can be both produced and destabilized through cross-racial performances and encounters”—and, I would add, sometimes all at once. For both fat white women and Jewish women, becoming did not portend an arrival into allegiance (with either Black or White Americans); rather, it named a process of constant shifting between racially and ethnically signified positionalities.

The roles also required these women to generate repertoires, appearances and tones that signaled the discursive and gestural fashions of the day. This was no easy feat, as the ability to generate racially and ethnically identifiable gestures and repertoires also had to compete with audience’s demands for novelty and surprise. In order to resonate with audience demands, then, fat white women had to reproduce already present ideas of race and gender while also generating


274 The two primary masculinist paradigms with which Harrison-Kahan contends are Irving Howe’s World of Our Fathers and Michael Rogin’s Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot.

novel, which is to say surprising or unexpected, moments during an act. If obvious and, perhaps, extending well beyond expectations of fat white women, the demand for both recognizable and novel acts is not inconsequential. These performers needed to be both behind and ahead of the audience, in possession and command of past racial signifiers and, somehow, offering a clarion or call into the novel present.

We can see such temporal balancing most notably in “coon shouting,” where questions of expertise, genealogy and authenticity mingled with innovation. The most concise and useful definition—though, they vary—of “coon shouting” is given in Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff’s history of Black travelling shows.

When ragtime burst onto the scene during the season of 1897–1898, a new generation of white, predominantly female “negro specialists” sprang up, who became popularly known as “coon shouters.” Like the earlier designations “jubilee shouter” and “camp meeting shouter,” “coon shouter” described an untrained vocalist of a certain “robust degree.276

If not explicitly the domain of fat white women, Abbott and Seroff’s assertion upends then contemporary arguments that “coon shouting” could be tracked back to authentic Black practices developed within the Southern plantation system and then refined—which is to say made new—on the stage or in recordings.277 If “coon shouters” took part in what Daphne A. Brooks calls “sonic blue(s)face performance,” the “vocal phenomenon pioneered by black and white women in the early twentieth century that had a ground-shifting impact on the histories of how we sound race and how racialize sound . . . ,” their presence on vaudeville stages not only benefited from


277 See, for example, John J. Niles, “Shout, Coon, Shout!” *The Musical Quarterly* 16, no. 4, (October 1, 1930): 516-530.
the “racial rules” of vaudeville, they also played those rules in ways that produced the kind of
temporal call described above.\textsuperscript{278} Their reputation as “specialists” enabled them to claim
expertise, grounding it within the past, while also opening up opportunities for novel
expressions. They were, then, in possession of a signified, embodied and affective past and, also,
the primary conduit or figure through which those pasts encountered the stage’s unfurling
present. And it is into these collisions and convergences that Kate Smith arrives late and useful
as ever.

Smith’s lateness to vaudeville is, perhaps, borne out by the fact that her professional entry
in the mid-twenties marks a period right before the form’s ultimate decline in the 1930s that
begins with the stock market crash of 1929 and continues through both the Great Depression and
the rise of radio. Still, Smith—who would soon be dubbed the “First Lady of Radio”—begins her
career when vaudeville was one of the primary forms of mass entertainment and, in a moment,
when the primary avenues for fat women would have been as a “coon shouter.”\textsuperscript{279} A particularly
thorough announcement for a 1926 “Specialty Night” held in a suburb of Washington, D.C.
billed Smith as a “D.C. Blues Singer,” writing that “Comedy numbers, jazz songs, and ‘blues’ of
the bluest sort are Miss Smith’s specialty . . .”\textsuperscript{280} If the combination of genres was not
enough to alert readers to Smith’s participation within “sonic blue(s)face,” the reviewer then asserts that the
emerging singer was “Washington’s own Sophie Tucker.”\textsuperscript{281} This would not have been entirely
surprising, as Tucker’s popularity and renown often served as a referent that even Black

\textsuperscript{278} Daphne A. Brooks, “‘This voice which is not one’: Amy Winehouse sings the ballad of sonic
blue(s)face culture,” \textit{Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory} 20, no. 1 (March
\textsuperscript{279} “Kate Smith Radio’s First Lady,” \textit{The Billboard}, May 2, 1942, 1.
\textsuperscript{280} “D.C. Blues Singer to Appear at Lake,” \textit{The Washington Post}, July 18, 1926, F2
\textsuperscript{281} “D.C. Blues Singer to Appear at Lake,” F2
performers could not escape. Sara Martin, the blues woman whose use of “swinging, danceable rhythms” placed her at the intersection of popular and blues styles, was billed as the “colored Sophie Tucker” in Black newspapers. Nevertheless, the comparison between Tucker and Smith matters in how it indicates just where reviewers saw Smith’s acts fitting within vaudeville and performance genealogies. Before Kate Smith was a type, she was a singer who fit the mold of Tucker, the renowned performer of racial masquerade and its many visual and sonic incarnations.

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282 Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 235; 234. The comparison might also have been a damning assessment of Martin’s perceived skills. Even as late as 1970, reviewers noted her inconsistent delivery. Derrick Stewart-Baxter writes, “The influence of the vaudeville stage comes through strongly at times, and some of her material is rather poor.” Stewart-Baxter’s assessment undercuts the importance of both vaudeville and other theater shows to the variety of blues styles developed by Black performers on and off the stage. It is, however, useful for thinking through the comparison made between Martin and Tucker. See, Derrick Stewart-Baxter, *Ma Rainey and the Classic Blues Singers* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), 80. For the role of both vaudeville and other traveling shows in the development of the blues, see, Lynn Abbott & Doug Seroff, *The Original Blues: The Emergence of the Blues in African American Vaudeville* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017); Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

283 Most accounts of Tucker note her ambivalence regarding racial masquerade. In her autobiography, for instance, she expresses relief at finally being able to stop using blackface in her performances. Her biographer, Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, agrees, arguing that “Tucker did not feel that she was in a position to move away from the caricatures” and insisted that she “could do more for her black counterparts once she achieved a higher degree of fame.” For Tucker, it was blues women like Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters who served as her primary inspirations, and she would famously pay Ethel Waters to sing for her privately, so that she might learn the singer’s “style of delivery.” Importantly, these kinds of offers did not end with Waters. She made a similar offer to Alberta Hunter, who refused to go to Tucker’s dressing room but remembers Tucker’s piano player attending Hunter’s rehearsals soon after. If, as Sklaroff argues, these encounters were “not entirely one-sided,” her identification with blues women could not help but obscure the uneven dynamics of market, political and social freedom she received. It also grossly undercuts her willingness to seize upon opportunities for intrusion even after musicians and singers like Hunter explicitly refused invitations to teach her techniques. See, Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Red Hot Mama: The Life of Sophie Tucker* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 63; 111-112.
The comparison also invited intimations concerning Smith’s lateness to vaudeville. To be compared to Sophie Tucker was to follow the singer who not two years later would perform what was to become her signature song, “I’m the Last of the Red Hot Mammas.” Both a boast and a lament for a world that was increasingly made irrelevant by “debs, flappers and baby vamps,” the song would become Tucker’s signature, announcing less the end of vaudeville than its completed turn toward more respectable fare. \(^{284}\) And by the 1920s, opportunities for what we might call interstitial acts had shrunk. As one manager would declare in 1918, “Blackface comedy is antiquated,” while some managers ordered performers to omit racial slurs from their acts. \(^{285}\) Furthermore, new acts emphasis on “machine like precision and patriarchal hierarchy” could not help but make racial masquerade and, thus, fat white women’s acts seemed antiquated, if not entirely unwanted. \(^{286}\) Smith’s arrival—which was heralded, to be sure—requires one to ask what did it mean to embark on career increasingly seen as anything but novel.

Offering an answer to such a question is made even more difficult by the fact that neither Tucker nor Smith faded away. Both, in fact, enjoyed careers that outlasted vaudeville, if in vastly different ways. Nevertheless, coverage of Smith marks a distinct shift from journalist’s treatment of Tucker. Where the older singer and performer was almost always seen to be singular, embodying a “distinctive style of specialty” and “originality,” reviews of Smith increasingly eliminated questions of singularity in favor of complimenting her surprising abilities for a fat woman. \(^{287}\) The distinction cannot be explained by aesthetic judgments alone, as Tucker would constantly be noted as singular in spite of her limited quality of tone and skills. As a 1922 review

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\(^{284}\) Sophie Tucker, “I’m The Last of the Red Hot Mammas,” His Master’s Voice, 1930.


\(^{286}\) Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 134.

of a London performance would note, “her artistry had triumphed over her lack of natural possessions. . . Almost plain, with nothing much of a voice and with a figure against her, she is a genius.”288 Indeed, when Variety reported on a controversy at the Palace Theater, wherein an audience member calling for songs was thought to be working for the publishers, Tucker wrote a letter to the editors that was more concerned with questions of her singularity than any dishonesty on her part. In it she demanded “an apology for editorially mentioning [that she had] imitated anyone.”289 In contrast, Tucker did not demand an apology when a review for The Gentlewoman and Modern Life noted that her performance at London’s Kiteat Club included a moment when “she eventually dragged triumphantly on to the stage the resisting Ella Retford who . . . was then compelled by force majeure (not to say the applause of the audience) to mimic Sophie singing her great song in front of Sophie herself. Quite an ordeal!”290 If Smith’s reviews continued to make jokes about her weight and note her as a “coon shouter” of impressive skill, they offered little if any notes about originality.

This is not to say that reviewers were bored by Smith. To the contrary, her body—if not yet a type—had found its first use. In review after review, weight served as a rhetorical device that allowed writers to participate in the raucous and disruptive register of the once loud vaudeville gallery. In their use of jokes, euphemisms and feigned surprise that a woman of her size could move with speed, reviewers offered a written compliment to those white, male audience members, whose loud expressions of pleasure and disgust had been an integral—if troubled—part of the vaudeville experience from its inception. To describe Smith’s body as “a

200 pound (or better) chassis,” as one 1929 reviewer does, is to generate a written equivalent to the kinds of crude participation audiences were increasingly asked to forego.\(^{291}\) And, thus, it might be said that by writing what one could no longer easily say during a performance, reviewers not only took up prior modes of audience participation, they found a medium in which its continuation was possible.

What becomes increasingly clear is that Kate Smith neither welcomed the mockery nor sought to participate in its continuation. If grossly inattentive to the role of race, Jennifer Fleeger’s assertion that Smith felt increasingly limited by the “buffoonish characters, rooted in stereotypes about fat women” echoes the singer’s recollection of the period.\(^{292}\) When Ted Collins, then an executive at Columbia Records, asked to be her manager, Smith describes being hesitant. “I’m not beautiful—I haven’t got ‘it’—what’s the use?” she recalls telling Collins, to which he would reply, “Now wait a minute . . . There’s no doubt in my mind that you have a glorious—rare—voice . . . I think if you offered your voice directly to the public through radio you would be a great hit.”\(^{293}\) As with most narratives that track a celebrity’s career arc, Smith’s despair soon turns to elation, but only after she has begun her career in radio. “I will never forget my first broadcast,” she writes, “because I had throughout those fifteen minutes a feeling of absolute confidence and happiness—at last I was in my element!”\(^{294}\) It would seem, then, that radio allowed her to develop a more complicated and rich persona not immediately tied to—though never wholly divorced from—appraisals of her body.

\(^{292}\) For quoted material, see, Jennifer Fleeger, \textit{Mismatched Women: The Siren's Song Through the Machine} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 141.
\(^{293}\) Kate Smith, “I Speak for Myself Part 2,” \textit{Radio Mirror} 2, no. 2, June 1934, 68.
Radio Bodies

If Smith’s 1934 article for *Radio Mirror* explains her transition to radio as a simple and almost immediate process, neither it nor the development of her as the nation’s maternal figure were simple or immediate. As one reviewer would write about the transitions that took place in the 1930s,

[a]mong ranking radio names, the duo of Rudy Vallee [sic] and Kate Smith can be set down as a pair with a real head full sense. Vallee [sic] realized long ago that tootling a saxophone or singing through the nose has natural limits, and thus branched out. Kate Smith—which is to say Kate Smith piloted by Ted Collins—has likewise got the idea that hugging a mike with ballads is not the beginning and end. Now she’s an m.c., a singer, and separately a newscaster. This evolution has taken years and it’s been foresighted.  

The development and expansion of her career, it would seem, proceeded through stages, the first of which occurred with her expansion into radio’s growing market.

Of course, radio had undergone changes of its own. Prior to the mid-twenties, clarity and amplification issues required users to use headphones, effectively rendering radio into a solitary act that tethered listeners to their sets. Such limits were then compounded by cumbersome designs that included a tangle of wires and batteries that could and did leak acid. Only the most committed hobbyist—often male—spent time scanning for signals, and because of the design, sets were placed at a remove from shared spaces. The invention of the Superheterodyne radio set in the mid-twenties ushered in a new era. These sets offered improved clarity and amplification, allowing listeners to forgo headsets in favor of speakers, while the elimination of

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batteries and unboxed wiring encouraged families to purchase newly handsome (or at least safe) sets for living rooms and kitchens.\textsuperscript{297} This was especially true of women, whose growing use opened up new markets and generated the need for announcers and singers that were “entertaining, natural, and friendly,” and who might speak to the family.\textsuperscript{298} And because the new sets allowed listeners to tune in while moving freely through a room—even when one sought to stay close to the speaker—listeners began to incorporate the radio into their daily lives, using it not just as a source of family entertainment but as an accompaniment to parties and smaller gatherings. It was, as Kate Lacey argues, a “secondary medium,” that which one turned on while doing other things.\textsuperscript{299}

Still, radio’s secondary or ancillary nature emerged alongside the fact that it “brought the disembodied voices of politicians, educators, celebrities, and announcers directly into people’s homes for the first time.”\textsuperscript{300} In removing the body of performers—and, crucially, other theater goers—from the experience, radio enabled audiences to generate new listening practices. Where in the theater, a response directed at the performer could illicit any number of responses, not the least of which might be reprobation from performer and fellow audience members alike, radio listeners were—theoretically—free to respond or even disrupt shows as they wished. One could turn radios on or off, up or down, and from broadcast to broadcast. Likewise, a listener might—at one moment—listen intensely and, at the next, distractedly, with the only consequence of distraction being a missed point, line, joke or note. Not altogether live but temporally ground

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{297} Susan Douglass, \textit{Listening In: Radio and The American Imagination} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
\bibitem{298} As cited in McCracken, 134.
\bibitem{299} Kate Lacey, \textit{Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age} (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 128.
\bibitem{300} Douglas, 102.
\end{thebibliography}
within the unfurling and so unreturnable nature of broadcast, radio’s disembodiment marked anything but the separation of the listener from a body; if the voices of announcer and performers were decoupled from their bodies and, thus, the visual field, listeners’ bodies became the central site and metric of determination and desire, with listening suddenly becoming anything but the passive act it was so often treated as. To the contrary, listeners’ embodied centrality was its pleasure. Radio may have been secondary to other activities—but it was second in a way that foregrounded the listener’s immediate and dynamic needs, moods and desires.

This is not to say that performers and programmers were at the singular mercy of listeners. The radio’s removal of the performer’s immediate body was especially useful for performers who sought to distance themselves from earlier acts and forms that used the body in racialized and gendered ways. As Jennifer Lynn Stoever details, radio—and, in particular, network radio—“enabled the emergence of color blindness, helping to make race invisible via exclusion, omission, and silencing while simultaneously expanding the sonic color lines repertoire of aural codes representing and hierarchicalizing racial difference.”

It is no surprise, then, that language would become a central source of controversy in 1920s broadcasts, with pronunciation debates becoming a new way by which race, class and ethnic differences were debated, disciplined and, in time, treated as inconsequential. Still, as Nina Sun Eidshem argues, all listening begins with a question of “who”—the need to mark a sound by and with a(n absent) body—precisely because of the “voice’s inability to be unique and yield precise answers” spurs listeners to confront “the continually developing understanding of meaning, the choices and power structures at its base, and the selective choices even the most conscientious

301 Stoever, 234.
302 Douglas, 102-103.
listeners must carry out in order to make sense of a voice.\textsuperscript{303} To be colorblind, then, even in the face of radio’s disembodiment, is to make a “selective choice” or, for Smith and others who made the jump to radio, to selectively forget the racialized sonic components of vaudeville (and other forms of mass entertainment), even as one remembers its affective and expressive possibilities and liberties.\textsuperscript{304} The selective omissions, evasions and choices performers and listeners made as each moved between vaudeville and radio comes down to a question of retention.

In its ability to retain and discard qualities across both time and medium, crooning is exemplary. It is also a crucial—if not immediately obvious—genre against which Kate Smith’s own retentions and whiteness would pivot. These soft-voiced, male singers of sentimental love songs, who challenged and disrupted the protocols of gender, used radio as a platform on which disembodiment—and a total lack of visual accompaniment—generated the conditions requisite for a gradual disassociation between the then contemporary soft-voiced love songs offered and the form’s nineteenth century roots in both blackface minstrelsy and “mammy songs.”\textsuperscript{305} Unlike other forms of racial masquerade, which either folded into new genres and acts or disappeared, crooning survived the folds and changes to become, as Allison McCracken notes, “deracinated.”\textsuperscript{306} This is, perhaps, not surprising given the growing demands for love songs that highlighted the kind of “emotional satisfaction” and “sensual connection” that ballads’

\textsuperscript{303} Eidshem, \textit{The Race of Sound}, 3; 21.
\textsuperscript{304} I use liberty and not freedom here instructively.
\textsuperscript{305} Allison McCracken notes that the terms croon and mammy derive from English, Scottish and Irish derivation, even as the trope of the mammy song is a postbellum invention of the U.S. minstrel stage. They were particularly popular in the last decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century because they were thought to be about mothering and understood to offer a wider range of expressivity. See, McCracken, 42-44.
\textsuperscript{306} McCracken, 55.
traditionally “chaste” and “moralizing” approach could not accommodate.\textsuperscript{307} In contrast to traditional ballads, crooning’s history immediately suggested a wider range of expressivity—even as the social history of range being rooted in racist stereotypes and understandings of white imagined Blackness was often understood to be of a past phase. Crooner Rudy Valée’s use of both microphone and radio technologies, for example, generated an unprecedented sense of quiet if distant intimacy, but the use of technology also placed him at the temporal fore of crooners. He was, if anything, a singer whose embrace of radio placed him within crooning’s contemporary phase, which had outpaced and even transcended crooning’s associations with mammy songs. Socially speaking, he was also, as McCracken points out, “a member of one of the most culturally influential groups of the 1920s: college students.”\textsuperscript{308} And many early fans would point to his youth (and voice) when explaining his appeal.\textsuperscript{309} In time, and as his embrace of radio technologies increased, he—this new guard of crooning’s “unraced” phase—garnered the admiration of both women \textit{and} men from any number of backgrounds, each of whom associated the singer’s radio performances and recordings with “their private lives and interior selves.”\textsuperscript{310}

If Valée was radio’s first idol, it is important to note that his wide appeal was not foregone. This guard of the new phase had to generate the sonic and social momentum requisite for transcendence. Indeed, his appeal across gender, racial and class lines would have come as a surprise to those who had been listening to crooning prior to his entry in radio, when most crooners were seen to offer “an unseemly degree of ardent emotion and vulnerability for white

\textsuperscript{307} McCracken, 60.
\textsuperscript{308} McCracken, 131.
\textsuperscript{309} McCracken, 131.
\textsuperscript{310} McCracken, 142.
men.” Part of Valée’s appeal can be explained by his refusal to use either slang or sexually explicit lyrics—echoing the debates concerning language and pronunciation that had surged in the 1920s. By forgoing both slang and suggestive lyrics, Valée both reassured parents and seemingly invited listeners across gender and generational lines to sing along to his simple and even conversational tones. And, still, race mattered and, in particular, Rudy Valée’s whiteness mattered. It is what made the strange toggle between turning inward and tuning in, possible. It is also what allowed a certain degree of erotic experience to proceed without confrontation. It would seem, then, that race—and its imagined and also somehow felt body—mattered in ways that tracked back to listeners, who had begun to endeavor multiple shifts between private and shared affects. It was not, then, that radio disappeared race; to the contrary, it is that whiteness, once most forcefully displayed in its use of racial masquerade, came to sound and gesture in new ways.

In contrast to whiteness’ selective choices, the sounds of Blackness, which is to say what we hear in and when Black performers sounded, were often brought back to the visual—if imagined—field by way of description. Eddie Danville’s 1932 “Poem to Cab Calloway” is exemplary in this respect.

He pinches the reed and rolls his eyes,
Kicks his toes and hi-de-hi’s
He’s a red-hot man!

...Snaps the baton like a man insane;
I tell you guys, ‘tis all very plain,
That boy’s a red-hot man!

...A little black and a shade of blue
...Hear their weird, plaintive sound.
I’ll tell you seein’s you don’t know.

311 McCracken, 3.
It’s Maestro Cab kickin’ the gong around.\textsuperscript{312}

The imperative that listeners “hear” all that Calloway offers even as Danville tells them what the performance might have looked like cannot help but begin to generate the demand for new modes of reception. The radio body—imagined or otherwise—mattered then precisely because radio placed it at a remove and opened up the opportunity for listener’s to imagine who and how a performer gestured. Nothing of this approach is inherently racialized, and the poem survives its initial broadcast due to its transcription in the Black run and owned \textit{New York Age}. However, listening’s selective choices are historically contingent, with the “what” of one’s attention often falling to a raced “who.”

Such a fall cannot help but take part in what Matthew D. Morrison has usefully called “blacksound,” an analytic that contends with the legacies, sounds, and movements of African American bodies—both real and imagined—on which blackface performance and popular entertainment were based. It also refers to the sonic and embodied performances of one’s own (nonblack) racial or ethnic identity as a vehicle for self-imagination and the construction of race within the nation’s racial caste system.\textsuperscript{313}

If Morrison’s primary focus is the nineteenth century and the many ways that blacksound was central to “the development of ideals of citizenship in the making of whiteness,” it might be extended to the 1930s by way of two questions.\textsuperscript{314} Would have the details offered to Calloway been given or noticed had the performer been white? And in a moment of waning interest in traditional uses of blackface—especially as it pertained to corking—does the description offered


\textsuperscript{313} Matthew D. Morrison, 796.

\textsuperscript{314} Matthew D. Morrison, 796.
select qualities that—intentionally or not—bear a striking resemblance to performances
developed within the minstrel tradition? To the first of these questions, there is no way to tell,
while the second question—which is, perhaps, infinitely easier to answer—presents even further
problems, not the least of which is the risk of over determining the links between contemporary
performances and minstrelsy. Indeed, contemporary appraisals of Danville’s decision to open
with Calloway’s eye rolling might be linked to traditions that begin on the minstrel stage, even as
those who have seen Calloway would know that his dynamic performances undermine the
“forgeries” of Blackness precisely through his attention to a dynamic range of expressivity.315
And making such appraisals even more difficult is the fact that the dynamic range of expression
was not limited to Calloway but, in fact, had a long tradition on minstrel and vaudeville stages,
where Black performers generated the kinds of double registers capable of outpacing reductive,
limited and racist tropes associated with the form. However, these difficulties—and the long
tradition of Black performers who generated innovative acts and repertoires—is partially solved
by questions of selection. It is not, then, that Calloway’s eye rolling signifies an exclusive link to
minstrelsy; to the contrary, it is that the selection of details limits what readers see. In the case of
eyerolling, the lack of other expressive qualities opens up the opportunity to wonder whether the
reader is being asked to imagine a performance predicated on—if not entirety within—the realm
of minstrelsy.316

315 Cedric Robinson, Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and The Regimes of Race in
American Theater
and Film Before World War II (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007).
316 If beyond the scope of this essay, I cannot help but notice how the above reading owes a great
deal to Laura Mulvey’s understanding of the gaze. But where her work focuses on the many
ways that the film camera conscripts male and female viewers into a male gaze, the above
reading sees Danville’s poem as an analogue to Mulvey’s camera. See, Laura Mulvey, “Visual
Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Screen 16, no. 3 (October 1 1975), 6-18.
Moreover, Danville’s poem also selects what readers hear as well. If his attention to eye rolling offers an ambivalent suggestion that we see Calloway’s performance within a history of minstrelsy, his use of “seein’s” suggests a more direct fall to the kind of white-written dialect used in then contemporary minstrel programs like *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. Indeed, in the same month that Danville’s poem aired, the Pepsodent Company would run an advertisement for *Amos ‘n’ Andy* that illuminates the “who” and “what” of radio’s racialized listening practices. “So many radio listeners have asked ‘Who are they, what do they look like, and where are they from that we have prepared a brief story.’” Even more interesting is Danville’s invocation of “red-hot-man.” If the description unquestionably links Calloway to fast-paced and so fiery jazz styles that blended ragtime, blues and brass bands, it cannot help but recall Sophie Tucker’s 1928 signature song “Last of the Red Hot Mommas.” Danville’s poem, written four years after ‘the last’ star of ‘hot’ styles, cannot help but to provide the opportunity for listeners to begin to ‘select’ Calloway’s delivery of “hotness” as a phase behind or even over, grammatically and sonically speaking. And when each of these individual details are placed into a whole, the poem—if never explicitly about minstrelsy—uses many of its visual and linguistic tropes so to place Calloway within a very particular temporal frame that exists if not behind then, certainly, out of (white) time.

None of this would have surprised Black writers and communities, who had long identified white audiences’ propensity for conflating Blackness with the singularly prurient and

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318 If well into the future, we can see the consequence of such temporal judgments in a CBS’s network production supervisor 1954 claim that “[s]ince radio is oral, Negroes chances should be greater. Radio is less limited in theory. I don’t feel the lack of Negroes in radio is due to discrimination . . . the lack of Negroes in radio is due to the lack of competent Negro actors.” As cited in, Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 234.
so out of time. In the June 1928 issue of *Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois published a review of Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*. Comparative in nature, Du Bois praised Larsen’s novel while pillorying McKay’s. For Du Bois, *Home to Harlem* was nothing less than “a damnable libel against the Negro,” and an irresponsible appeal to the “prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folks back from enjoying.”  

Worse than mere appeal, Du Bois argued that McKay’s considerable talent insured that his depictions would inhibit not only programs of racial uplift but his own potential to write the kind of book Du Bois believed him capable of writing. He was, in other words, sure to find success, but that success would be distracting. Nevertheless, Du Bois concluded on a positive—if tentative—note by declaring that it was his “sincer[e] hope that someday [McKay] will rise above it.” If the review survives within the contemporary discussions because of how it demonstrates some of the more conservative strains of uplift at the time, the attention to white people’s “prurient demand” might also be read as an implicit recognition of phases.

Indeed, other Black writers of the period would be more explicit in their attention to white phases. Two years after Du Bois’s review, Langston Hughes looked back on the twenties as “the period when the Negro was in vogue,” while James Weldon Johnson marked the decade as a period “when Harlem was made known as the scene of laughter, singing, dancing, and

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primitive passions, and as the center of New Negro literature and art.” In Johnson’s assessment “made” is the operative word. If—as Johnson is careful to point out—“Harlem was real,” it was its writers “who discovered [Harlem’s] values and, in giving literary expression to them, actually created the Harlem that caught the world’s imagination.” As Shane Vogel’s assessment of the cabaret period usefully points out, it “was between the ‘literary’ and the ‘real,’ between the discursive and nondiscursive practices, that the scene of Harlem cabaret becomes legible as a scene.” Made becomes legibility and in each of these terms lies questions of avowal. In each lies the central ground from which Kate Smith—body and all—will push off.

For Kate Smith, these shifts between the private and the shared converged with radio’s move to the parlors and kitchens of many homes, allowing her to cultivate a persona that, at once, retained the maternal associations of the fat body and, much like crooners, shed its immediate ties to race, racism and racial masquerade. But where crooners endeavored performances and techniques that used the full range of expressivity inherited from mammy songs, toying with both the comforting associations it had come to signify and also the erotic and stimulating qualities it soon generated, Smith endeavored a more limited pallet, if not vocally (at first) then certain within both the social and biographical details and gestures she began to offer to radio audiences. As she writes it in her 1934 Radio Mirror article, “[o]ne of the favorite yarns was that I used to sing in low-down night clubs. Well, the only experience I had as a night club singer were College Inn, Chicago, for two weeks during the engagement of ‘Flying High’ in that city . . .” and as if to bear out the lack with its exception, she adds, that she there were also

322 Johnson, 380.
323 Vogel, 75.
“appearances at the Central Park Casino in New York, during my second year broadcasting.”

Whether true or not, Smith’s explicit refusal of these “yarns” reinforce the discursive—and racist—associations between Blackness, nightlife and prurience that had become a major point of political and social convergence for the moral reform and progressive anti-vice movements in the first two decades of the twentieth century. More importantly, the refusal also implicitly distanced vaudeville’s own associations with prurience. Indeed, Smith may have danced on vaudeville’s stages at some point, the refusal implies, but she never fell to the more prurient elements and opportunities that these stages might have offered. If the “vulgar orgies” held in saloons, night clubs and cabarets allowed patrons to “get intoxicated, behave boisterously, and indulge in lascivious dancing” could never be fully rooted out, Smith’s declaration of having never performed in such places effectively removed both her and, to a lesser degree, later vaudeville from such associations.

Alongside such refusals, Smith and others begin to foreground her capacity for care, with a particular focus on the kinds of emotional and material needs in the midst of modernity’s ever more isolating spaces. Rhoda Hague would recall,

that Kate Smith repeated a song trice in a single week, because a girl had threatened to kill herself if it wasn’t sung. I remember too, that one young chap whose girl had thrown him down, who wanted to die. . . . He asked Kate Smith to sing [a song] on a certain date,

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324 Kate Smith, “I Speak for Myself Part 3,” 62.
325 Whether Smith played in cabarets or not, she certainly was seen to be taking jobs from those who worked in racial masquerade. As a New York Times review notes, Smith’s act “included, among other matters, a revival of the Charleston, a dance which, it may be necessary to explain, used to be popular in the American frontier places,” while Leo the Chalkologist would report to Billboard’s minstrel reporter that he “finds it difficult to get the ‘moon over the mountain’ since Kate Smith invaded his territory . . .” See, “Will Mahoney’s Fun Liked at the Palace,” New York Times, April 8, 1929, 32; Bob Emmet, “Minstrelsy,” The Billboard, June 25, 1932, 23.
326 As cited in Vogel, 113.
when he would ‘leave the world’ listening. Kate never sang the song, and is still afraid to sing it. \(^{327}\)

And Smith would write of radio’s ability to reach and so keep company with many of the city’s residents who had scant company or support.

Although the footlights had seemed a feverish life of make-believe, professional jealousies and continuous battle for phantom fame—radio seemed to me to be doing an important and worth-while job—bringing entertainment, not only to Manhattan fun-seekers, but to shut-ins in hospital beds, and folks way out in farmhouses far from Forty-Second Street. \(^{328}\)

And for *Radio Mirror*’s “Homemaking Department” column, Sylvia Covney would further draw the links between radio and its new roles as a companion for homemakers in an article that listed various radio star’s recipes. If male stars were included, Smith’s place within the hierarchy of domestic administration becomes clear when Covney, who notes that Smith’s chocolate cake had already been “claimed by all,” crowns Smith “the queen of cooks.” \(^{329}\) It would seem, then, that not only did Kate Smith care for her listeners, she had a unique ability to provide the literal and symbolic ingredients through which they might begin to care for themselves.

It makes sense, then, that the General Foods Corporation would begin sponsoring *The Kate Smith Hour* in 1937 and, two years later, collaborate with her on a recipe book that promoted the company’s Calumet Baking Powder. In order to promote both the Baking Powder and the recipe book, the company issued an advertisement in the form of a comic strip that would—in no uncertain terms—draw out the tensions between Smith’s fat body as a useful surrogate for Black women and her gradual distancing from the explicit links to racial

\(^{327}\) Rhoda Hague, “He Holds the Secrets of Countless Crimes,” *Radio Mirror* 2, no. 6, October 1934, 56.

\(^{328}\) Kate Smith, “I Speak for Myself Part 3,” 24.

\(^{329}\) Sylvia Covney, “Radio Mirror Homemaking Department,” *Radio Mirror* 2, no. 5, September 1934, 47.
masquerade. Titled “Kate Smith’s Mammy Doll,” the comic opens with a young, white and thin housewife returning to her childhood home to lament to her family’s cook, a Black woman dressed in an apron, polka dot shirt and a headkerchief. “Mammy,” the white woman says, “I’ve tried to make caramel cake by your recipe ever since I left here to get married—but no use!” The Black woman responds “You jes ain’t got a way wid an oven, honey chile!” The next day, the white woman returns to her new home and hears an advertisement for Kate Smith’s recipe book. Her husband is dubious that it will help, but the woman orders it, and a week later serves a caramel cake to glowing success. She then returns to her childhood home, offering her family’s cook a slice. The Black woman agrees that it is a success and asks the white woman if she thinks Smith would send a copy of the book to her. “Sure, she would!” the younger white woman replies, asking, “Mammy, how do you tie your turban anyway?” The comic concludes with a shift to Kate Smith’s living room, where a man—presumably Ted Collins—hands Smith a small mammy doll and a note written by the housewife, explaining to the singer that she “always wanted to be as good at baking as my old mammy—and now I am. . . . So won’t you keep this Mammy-doll in your dressing-room to remind you of your grateful listener.”

In her survey of how Black women cooks were treated as fetishes in advertising during this period, Alice A. Deck argues that the Smith comic differs from other companies use of Black women as fetishes of the period. In most ads, Black women and mammy figures served to “reassure potential buyers,” who because of the Depression could no longer afford to hire cooks and other domestic workers.331 For these ads, the image of a working class Black woman

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331 Deck, 82.
signaled to new or unsure cooks that they had the “support of [the Black woman depicted] in their cooking endeavors.”\textsuperscript{332} The Calumet Baking Powder ad, on the other hand, moved in sharp contrast. It upended the notion of fetishized support, replacing comfort with a narrative wherein “the doll, a shrunken version of the newlywed’s Mammy, is passed from an aspiring white woman cook to an accomplished, older white woman cook as though it were a trophy won at the end of their race against the black woman for control of the oven.”\textsuperscript{333} For Deck, it is nothing less than white “magic” that enables this sort of outpacing.\textsuperscript{334}

However, it is, perhaps, important to note that the need to “shrink” and, in no uncertain terms, possess the mammy figure emerges within a period when both economic and social realities had begun to wrest control of the image from upper- and middle-class white depictions. For at least a twenty-year period prior to the comic, artists and writers affiliated with the New Negro Movement had challenged and, in some cases, sought to redefine the meanings indexed by the mammy trope. As Kimberly Wallace-Sanders details, W.E.B. Du Bois, Elise Johnson McDougald, Winold Reiss, Sargent Johnson and others offered a range of work that “appropriated and subverted the mammy image for their own purposes.”\textsuperscript{335} In these depictions, writers and artists first seized upon and isolated the mammy’s association with “loyalty and tenderness” and then redirected them “toward [Black women’s] own children to refashion a new model of black maternity as ‘the modern Negro mother.’”\textsuperscript{336} Wallace-Sanders’ attention to appropriation and subversion—rather than protest and eviction—are crucial to understanding

\textsuperscript{332} Deck, 82.
\textsuperscript{333} Deck, 85.
\textsuperscript{334} Deck, 86.
\textsuperscript{335} Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, \textit{Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 117.
\textsuperscript{336} Wallace-Sanders, 117.
why the comic needed to shrink the figure, which was no longer the exclusive domain of white telling. The comic, in this sense, provides an image of repossession, which is to give a name to the many ways that white writers, artists and communities sought narrative control over not only racist tropes but, in fact, the ability to tell of Blackness and Black people.

However, the comic’s depiction of repossession operates from within a complicated series of white phases. There was, on the one hand, an attempt to reinvigorate the mammy as a symbol of white racial hierarchy, with “white southerners building a domestic training school in an attempt to reproduce the mammy in the next generation of African Americans.”\textsuperscript{337} And, on the other hand, there was a growing suspicion that repossession would not accord a return to the antebellum period, when the mammy served as a figure that both supported and justified enslavement and racial hierarchy. For this latter group, the surge in Black intellectuals, writers and artists’ appropriative and subversive efforts called for quarantine, not return. And if quarantine occurred through any number of methods, its most powerful mode was temporal in nature. The mammy, quite simply, became a figure of history, signaling either the loss of an unreturnable past or, alternatively, the symbolic and social residue of a time that, comparatively speaking, proved the U.S.’s continuing advance toward liberty.\textsuperscript{338} Quarantine also effectively displaced Black contributions to discussions concerning the mammy, and much like Danville’s

\textsuperscript{337} Wallace-Sanders, 117.

\textsuperscript{338} In what is the most notorious example of understanding the mammy figure as a lost figure, the United Daughters of the Confederacy commissioned Ulric Stonewall Jackson Dunbar to design a model for a statue titled “Mammy,” which they planned to erect as a Washington, D. C. monument. In 1923, the senate passed a bill allowing for the monument to proceed, and it only stalled in the House of Representatives due to the work of Black women like Mary Church Terrell and Hallie Quinn Brown and others from the National Association of Colored Women. Still, depictions of the trope endured, with Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel \textit{Gone with the Wind} and David O. Selznick’s 1939 film adaptation of the novel being other well know depictions contemporary to the comic.
“red hot man,” who emerges four years after Sophie Tucker began to sing the “last of the red hot mommas,” the mammy as a nostalgic figure could be used to signal a new phase of white domesticity and caregiving.

If the Calumet Baking Powder comic fits neatly into the latter of these efforts, Smith benefits from both. On the one hand, she comes out ahead of the mammy figure—not only outpacing the cook depicted in the comic but, quite literally, out-sizing her. The comic’s title frame depicts Smith four to five times the size of the narrative frames and gripping a doll whose body is roughly the size of her head. Size, in this case, becomes a central way to signify Smith’s capacity to overcome both the doll and the trope. At the same time, Smith is also a woman whose body of recipes effectively linked listeners and readers to what many white intellectuals of the period had begun to call a “usable” past. Indeed, the recipe given to Radio Mirror is for biscuits, not only helping to ensure that Smith promoted baking powder but also linking her to a southern staple. The “songbird of the south,” who by the mid-thirties lived in New York City and largely relied on personal cooks and other domestic workers, and who was famously unmarried, could, through radio and its related mediums, exist at the interstice of memory and its if not sanitized then certainly usable continuation. And in this role—as matron or matriarch—her struggle and eventual triumph over a racist trope could not help but realize “some poignant experience of the shortcomings, the needs, and the difficulties of our literary life as it is now

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conditioned.” In outpacing and outsizing the mammy figure, Smith effectively enters a new phase with a “poignant experience” she is within her “rights” to tell.

**Patriotic Bodies**

It makes a strange sense, then, that Kate Smith would almost immediately begin to eliminate any trace of Tin Pan Alley from Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America.” First asked to sing the song to mark the twentieth anniversary of the first World War, Smith’s 1938 performance on *The Kate Smith Hour* would prove wildly successful, with listeners constantly requesting that she perform the song both on the radio and for stage appearances. And with each new performance—and, in time, recordings—Smith, with the initial assistance of Berlin, began to turn a playful, rhythm driven song into the anthem it would become. Much of fervor for the song can be assigned to how even early arrangements “specifically positioned the song as a vehicle for group singing, infusing Berlin’s song with the musical conventions of both a hymn and an unofficial anthem.” If it would take Smith’s 1959 recording of the song to purge the last “remnants of Tin Pan Alley,” the process had begun twenty-one years prior and followed the broader trajectory of Smith efforts to distance herself from both racial masquerade and blacksound.

In her extended history of the song, Sheryl Kaskowitz argues that Smith’s arrangements were accompanied by ideological shifts as well. If the arrangements increasingly shifted the song toward anthem, Smith would also begin to treat it as a tool by which to suggest the necessity of

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342 On remnants, see, Kaskowitz, 43.
U.S. interventionist policies. Her usage, however, moved in sharp contrast to Berlin’s intentions. As he would state in a 1940 interview, “God Bless America” is “not a patriotic song, but rather an expression of gratitude for what this country has done for its citizens, of what home really means.”[^343] Home, it would seem, marked the crucial link between Smith, Berlin and the song, as both she and he claimed a kind of allegiance to the United States, even as their respective approaches diverged. But the song’s attention to both nation and home could not help but grant Smith an advantage. Because she was already well on her way to becoming the national matron or matriarch, administering the nation’s needs, a song about home and nation would seem to be her natural domain. The increasing changes she made, evident due to the recordings available for comparison, only further emboldened an idea of the song as something more and more distant from the “ethnic” sounds of Tin Pan Alley and, as it were, blacksound. Still, as Kaskowitz makes clear, the power of the song occurs in how it could accommodate both approaches and many more.[^344] If Berlin’s gratitude and earlier rhythmic accompaniments were increasingly tamped down in favor of Smith’s patriotism and anthemic touches, it could be said that mass demand—or even the demos—had spoken and still, theoretically speaking, left room for other viewpoints. It was, then, a song whose formal and ideological shifts seemed to spur and so accommodate just enough meanings so to proffer “a universal message that could be interpreted as the listener saw fit.”[^345] But did it accommodate universality or, rather, did it mark two or more modes of whiteness jostling in and out of phase?

The answer to such a question might come into better view by placing “God Bless America” alongside Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land,” a song explicitly written in

[^343]: Kaskowitz, 43.
[^344]: Kaskowitz, 43.
[^345]: Kaskowitz, 43.
response to “God Bless America’s” uncritical celebration and patriotism. In the initial draft, the
links to “God Bless America” are most evident. Each of the six verses ends with the refrain "God
blessed America for me,” and Guthrie would close the draft with "All you can write is what you see.”346 And, as the fourth and sixth verses of the initial draft make clear, Guthrie believed that
neither Berlin nor Smith could see the increasingly oppressive limits of U.S. capitalism and its
ties to property and power. As he writes in the fourth verse, “[w]as a big high wall that tried to
stop me, / A sign was painted said: Private Property, / But on the back side it didn’t say
nothing—God Blessed America for me.” In the sixth verse, he turns to need, writing “By the
relief office I saw my people—/ As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if / God Blessed
America for me.”347 In each verse, the kind of lavish praise given to the U.S is replaced by a
critique of who the “universal” leaves out.

For his part, Guthrie “did not show much interest in the song and did not perform it
often.”348 It would take an April 1944 recording session with Moses Asch to elevate the song to
its better-known status. In this version, Guthrie replaces the earlier, biting refrain with “This land
was made for you and me,” giving the song its first title. And it was this change that would, in
time, allow the song to rise “to the same status of such American songs as ‘The Star-Spangled
Banner,’ ‘America the Beautiful,’ ‘My Country ‘Tis of Thee . . . and,’ however ironically, ‘‘God
Bless America.”349 This is not altogether surprising, as both its formal and ideological qualities
bear a great deal of similarity to “God Bless America.” Just as arrangements of “God Bless

Company, 2004, 165
347 Mark Allan Jackson, “Is This Song Your Song Anymore?: Revisioning Woody Guthrie's
‘This Land Is Your Land’” *American Music* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 250.
348 Jackson, 250.
349 Jackson, 250.
America” invited group singing, the formal structure of “This Land is Your Land” limits the song to a single octave, allowing almost anybody to join in. More importantly, the change in lyrics, ironically, invite a politics not as far away from “God Bless America” as Guthrie’s initial objections might lead one to believe. If, as Mark Allan Jackson argues, Guthrie’s recorded version runs “the gamut from a laudatory to a discordant vision” in order to “offer a far more complete depiction of America,” it also continues to adhere to a logic predicated on colonial-settler logics, proffering a critique of capitalism that seemed either unaware or inattentive to the fact that race, borrowing from Stuart Hall, “is the modality through which class is lived.” Indeed, as Dave Marsh writes in a collection of the folksinger’s uncollected writing, the kind of racial consciousness Guthrie demonstrated in the 1940 anti-lynching song “Slipknot” ran alongside the fact that “only a few months before” he had “been known to tell racist jokes on the air in California.” If Marsh reads this as evidence of “how far [Guthrie had] come,” it seems more likely that the singer harbored a troubling and inconsistent understanding of both land-rights and Blackness. Within such contexts, both Smith and “God Bless America” became a convenient phase that he could—and did—outpace. And, in doing so, he was able to evade larger questions concerning the role of land and dispossession in the making and maintenance of whiteness.

Guthrie’s similarities do not end with the song; the recounting of his arrival in New York City is striking in both its convergence and divergence with Smith’s own story of her career arc. As he writes in his partially fictionalized autobiography, Bound for Glory, he arrived in New York

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350 Jackson, 256; Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke, and Brian Roberts, Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order (London: Macmillan, 1978), 394.
352 For quoted material, see, Guthrie, Pastures of Plenty, 35.
York in January of 1940 in order to audition for a singing residency at the Rainbow Room, located on the sixty-fifth floor of Rockefeller Center. The audition is cut short when the club’s management suggests that he dress up as Pierrot, the stock character of pantomime and any number of theater traditions from the late seventeenth century forward, including vaudeville.\textsuperscript{353} Importantly, Guthrie does not leave immediately, but, rather, looks out onto the city. And as if in an audition for the song to come, he writes, “I let my ears bend away from [one of the women running the audition], and I let my eyes drift out the window where the town of old New York was standing up living and breathing and cussing and laughing down yonder across [sic] that long island.”\textsuperscript{354} In rapture to all that seemed possible sixty-five floors below, he thinks about the many places he might sing and about the many people who he might meet in doing so, how he could sing without having to don the ‘mask’ of stock character whose primary quality is naiveté and whose single purpose was often to serve as the butt of a joke. Guthrie then doubles down on the links between mass entertainment, and its extractive, humiliating and easily ignored nature, writing that one of the women running the audition was “[s]till going like a Nineteen Hundred and Ten talking machine,” saying “a whole raft of stuff that I’d not a heard single word of.”\textsuperscript{355} And it would seem that much like Smith, Guthrie finds himself forced to decide between taking a humiliating act or leaving without a job. What follows the choice given to him, however, marks the divergence between Guthrie and Smith. No doubt aided by gender norms of the period, Guthrie walks out of the audition without a plan, and for the next two months, he sleeps on


\textsuperscript{354} Guthrie, 294.

\textsuperscript{355} Guthrie, 295.
friends’ couches, playing at various Bowery bars—no doubt of the kind of “low-down” variety that Kate Smith so adamantly denied attending. And when he finally settles at the Hanover Hotel, located two blocks off Times Square, on the corner of 43rd and 6th avenue, he will settle in to find his voice, pivoting from Smith’s own.\textsuperscript{356} In each of these narratives—Berlin, Smith and Guthrie—lies a robust site of debate, disagreement and narrative possession. In each, lies a near total domination of whiteness, which in its jostling, moves in and out of phase.

‘Smothering’ Bodies

By 1943, Smith, in collaboration with the Office of War Information (OWI) would spur another fight, by which her role would only further come to mark her as both patriotic and the figure from whom one might outpace. In a period when recordings were at an all-time low due to the recording ban issued by the musicians’ union, disc jockeys began to hold “Battle of the Songbirds” contests. Pitting popular singers of the period against each other, jockeys would ask their listeners to register their vote through either telephone or mail. A great deal of singers objected to the effort, arguing that the contests appeared as if “the singer is asking for the vote solicitation.”\textsuperscript{357} Smith’s concern was not a question of personal animosity. Rather, her objection was patriotic. By her estimate, the contest garnered at least 3,000 votes per week, the minimum number of votes a singer needed to stay in the contest.\textsuperscript{358} The sheer volume of postcards and calls further stressed an already overburdened post office and phone company. “At this point,” she would say on her noon broadcast,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{356} Jackson, 250.
\item \textsuperscript{357} “Kate Smith Blasts Disc Jockeys For 'Unpatriotic Singer Contests,” Variety, Dec 22, 1943, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{358} The number is not altogether unlikely. In his defense of the program Steve Ellis would report that WOR received twenty-thousand phone calls. Steve Ellis, “Steve Ellis Points to Survey Re Kate Smith Disc Airing,” Variety, January 5, 1944, 138.
\end{itemize}
let me make clear that I am not complaining about the use of the records on the air. That is not against the law. But speaking for myself, I am concerned over this matter of asking for votes by mail. In normal times it would be different . . . But we are at war. Our Postal authorities have their hands more than full getting mail through to those in camps in the United States . . . 359

The postcards sent into stations only added to their burden and so, too, did the phone calls some disc jockey’s requested. “And now,” she would conclude, “I find myself in the unfortunate position of being in the lead in a contest about which I wasn’t consulted, and in which I have no part.” 360

Smith’s objections, if not unfounded, certainly contradicted the reports from the stations and late-night DJs who held the contests. One of the primary targets of her critique, Steve Ellis, the host of WOR’s Moonlight-Saving-Time, would point out that the station’s Battle had been designed “to appeal to the so-called ‘graveyard shift’ [workers] in war plants nearby . . .” 361 In order to ensure that the battles would do just that, Ellis claimed that the station managers had spoken with personnel managers at both the city’s aeronautical plants and its shipyards and, together, they determined that the 2:30-3:30 AM hour was the best time to hold the contests, as workers were allotted a break at this time and would be free to vote if they choose to participate. Furthermore, because the calls were local, Ellis reported, the phone operators were not overloaded. 362 And, in his history of Disc Jockey’s, Arnold Passman would argue that the time slot was “not a time when people are inclined to want to listen to Kate Smith,” with the implication being that Smith’s reputation as the matron of the nation served a far more limited

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359 “Kate Smith Blasts Disc Jockeys For 'Unpatriotic Singer Contests,” 3.
360 “Kate Smith Blasts Disc Jockeys For 'Unpatriotic Singer Contests,” 3.
361 Ellis, 138.
362 “Ellis Drops Contest; Says Song Battle Not Unpatriotic.” The Billboard, January 22, 1944, 3.
segment of the U.S. If, as Passman writes, the “night people were being heard from,” Smith’s objection called for their silence. Smith, it would seem, knew best, refusing to consider night worker’s and listener’s ability to balance work and recreation. And Ellis would eventually drop the contests, claiming the station would “like to co-operate with Kate Smith, who has done such a swell patriotic job herself.”

Ellis’ reasoning was well-founded. At the time of their fight, Smith had secured her role as the nation’s primary patriotic matriarch. On September 21, 1943, she opened what would become an eighteen-hour marathon asking her radio audience to purchase War Bonds. Using personal anecdotes and appeals to home front patriotism, she urged listeners to call their local war bond number and “buy our boys back.” By the end of the broadcast, she had raised an unprecedented 39 million dollars. And this was not the first drive she had held. Roughly a year earlier, she had gone on the air, announcing that her broad goal was to raise one-billion dollars from the sale of war bonds. Twenty hours later, she had sold $1,964,900.00 worth of bonds and, the New York Times reported, “orders were still coming in.” Becoming, then, a central voice of what James Sparrow has called “fiscal citizenship,” Smith had secured her status as national matron. Seventeen months later, Mayor La Guardia presented her with the National Conference of Christians and Jews’ Tolerance Award. In their citation, they wrote the award had been given “because her radio programs throughout the year 1944 embodied the message of

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364 Passman, 109.
365 “Ellis Drops Contest; Says Song Battle Not Unpatriotic,” 3.
368 Sparrow, 263.
understanding and good-will among all Americans.”\textsuperscript{369} To refuse Smith, it would seem, was to refuse the full authority of the nation.

If Smith claimed the immediate victory over late-night jockeys, they would eventually claim a victory of their own: her decision to begin spinning records. Not everybody was happy with her decision. Writing for the \textit{Washington Post} in 1947, Sonia Stein declared that “America’s most wholesome personality” had succumb to the “heinous business” of disc jockey, while June Bundy reported that her show had become “slow-paced and weak on ingenuity, depending mainly on the old disk jockey gimmick of pretending a recorded star is actually in the studio instead of on wax. The gimmick . . . is at times embarrassingly transparent and the audience applause cut-ins have a particularly phony ring.”\textsuperscript{370} And alongside these reviews was a growing fight between disc-jockeys and the American Federation of Radio Artists union (AFRA), who in 1947, under the order of executive secretary, George Heller, announced that the union was weighing two options concerning the use of its members as guests on disc jockey shows. The first was a total ban on guest appearances, and the second was demanding that guests receive the “customary fee” for interviews and other appearances. Prior to this push, it was common practice for stars to come onto programs in exchange for the time to promote their newest film or record, while others—who had nothing to “plug”—would work for minimum

\textsuperscript{369} ”Tolerance Award to Kate Smith,” \textit{New York Times}, February 21, 1945, 13.
union scale. As Variety would report, “Not even Paul Whiteman’s bankrolled ABC platter stanza could stand such guest tabs.” Once again, it would seem, Smith was a woman in a fight.

Smith’s positionality, however, was markedly different from the one she once commanded. In both the review and the critiques made by AFRA, a question of authenticity looms; Kate Smith, once the model of wholesomeness, who outpaced the gendered limits of the fat body, racial masquerade and blacksound, so to offer white female listeners guidance in domestic affairs, had, in her role as a disc jockey, stalled. If she was not alone in her turn to DJing, with both Paul Whiteman and Tommy Dorsey also taking up the craft, she was often vilified in ways that could not help but take up a gendered dynamic. Still, it is hard to forget Smith’s continued willingness to traffic in questions of racialized authenticity and national authority, whether implicit or explicit in nature. And, moreover, the stall—perceived or actual—reflected less a diminishment of her ability to generate a role for herself in popular culture and more the shifting nature of her role within the phases of whiteness. She was, alternatively, an overbearing patriot or an inauthentic disc jockey, nearly universally believed to be incapable of anything but national maintenance, and so a steward of what many intellectuals of the period marked as an increasing affective numbness in a time of empty middlebrow consumption and unprecedented affluence.

373 While beyond the scope of this essay, Smith would become a television star as well.
In time, Smith would come to signify a particular mode of whiteness, which tucked neatly into the hideaway of domesticity and consumption, ushered in the doldrums of the 1950s: a period of abundance and complacency, tranquil and dull, so lending to or even the cause of a national numbness.\textsuperscript{375} Even anxiety, the tandem affect of the period and what Smith once seemed to bear for the nation, was now subsumed by her “nauseatingly cheery” outlook.\textsuperscript{376} As George Frazier would write in his 1951 assessment of the “eight best girl singers,” Smith was a “fabulous money-maker,” but she lacked the expressivity great singers possessed.\textsuperscript{377} Quite simply, she had become too white or maybe it is better to say restrictively white. Anthony Helibut would certainly indicate as much in what marks a troubling assessment in his otherwise canonical work on gospel.

Mahalia [Jackson], the musical daughter of Bessie Smith, was effectively modified into a black Kate Smith. The lady once known as the most volatile mover in Chicago churches . . . became the stately, classic, ‘flat-footed’ presence who enthralled white critics.


\textsuperscript{377} Frazier, 110.
with her instinctive maternity . . . while those who really knew her could sense the repressed itch to rock and shimmy with the beat.\textsuperscript{378}

For Frazier, Helibut and many other critics, Kate Smith signaled limit—a kind of embodied whiteness—outsized, ‘smothering,’ and ‘‘flat-footed’’—that must be outpaced, which, in fact, could and, in many ways, would be outpaced by the generation of white U.S. citizens born just after World War II. And in their fervor to reinvigorate the nation, in their desire for class, gender and racial equality, many white youths took leave, joining their near elders in what Allen Ginsberg would call “a leap of detachment from the Artificial preoccupations and preconceptions of what is acceptable and normal and given my yea to the specific type of madness . . .”\textsuperscript{379} In marches and gatherings, in new experiences and experiments, and in speeches and writing, they leapt and leapt—going so far as to stage a mock funeral for the failed category of Hippie—and, in these leaps, became a nation of Huck Finns.\textsuperscript{380} “All right then,” they said, “I’ll go to hell,”

tearing the doctrines and letters that had so unevenly and violently structured the United States. To tell and tell and tell, hell or high water, a sounded flood of unleashed passions, they—in no uncertain terms—sought to remake the world. But like Huck before them, many forgot to consult the marginalized communities to which they claimed their efforts were in service. And with each leap, Smith and others of her generation, so far behind, could not help but obscure this new generation’s own racial positionality.

Never trust anyone over thirty, the cliché went. How reassuring it must have been to have Smith present then. It was as if her figure might provide one last bit of mothering, becoming, now, a metric by which this new generation of white entertainers, intellectuals and activists could measure their distance from the repressive strictures of whiteness. And in the unthinking comfort of Smith’s relative distance, they generated new phases of whiteness that left its structural relationality with the world if not unchallenged then certainly out of phase and so difficulty told.


382 The idea that adults lied and that the young generation had to come into new consciousness is expressed repeatedly. For a text that fully explores this sentiment, see, Notes from the New Underground: An Anthology, ed. Jesse Kornbluth (New York: Viking Press, 1968); for a more contemporary text that contends with the sense that those in Smith’s generation has proffered and propagated a lie, see, Nick Bromell, Tomorrow Never Knows: Rock and Psychedelics in the 1960s (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 39-40. Bromell’s text is particularly telling in his deeply troubling and decontextualized use of W.E.B. Du Bois’ “second sight” as what Elvis tapped into when he took up Blues techniques. Lies were, of course, not singularly assigned to older generations. A great deal of white radicals would claim that the vast majority of their peers were operating in either bad faith or under false consciousness—even as they, too, moved out of phase. See, for example, Mel Lyman, “To All Who Would Know,” Avatar 1. No. 4 (July 21-August 4, 1967): 13.
Chapter 2: “Say It Loud:” Retelling, Race Men and the Striving for Possessive Personhood in the Work of James Brown

For his 1968 performance of “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud” on Hugh Heffner’s Playboy After Dark, James Brown is a man alone. The Fabulous Flames, whose roster once included four drummers, are nowhere to be found. Neither is Brown’s M.C., Danny Ray. To begin the song, his second of the night, Brown lifts his left arm and stretches to his toes. There poised, he counts in the rhythm. “One, two, three, four.” On the first beat, he drops his arm, and the opening grunt—so emphatic on the recording—is tentatively given. So, too, are his gestures. It is as if Brown had started to give himself to the grunt’s release and then stopped. Caught in mid-air, even his body slows, and when he finally lands—having never actually left the ground—his knees buckle before settling into an off-balanced crouch. The awkwardness of pose is then amplified when he straightens and turns his head toward the studio’s ceiling. For the remainder of the song, his head tilts up, and his eyes close, opening only a few times, as if to orient himself. And even this need for orientation is strange, for his movement is restricted to the torso, leaving Brown to appear if not disinterested then guarded. All combined, it is a discomforting deviation from the performances that first brought him fame. If Brown’s cape routine gave his audience everything of body and of soul, his performance on Playboy After Dark offers almost nothing.

The man—for that is what Brown insisted he be seen as first and foremost—steels his

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384 Usually performed during “Please, Please, Please,” Brown’s cape routine was one in which he’d collapse to the floor in exhaustion and wait for the revue’s MC, Danny Ray, to walk to the singer. Once Ray reached Brown, he would place a cape around the singer and slowly help him walk toward the stage’s wing. At some point, Brown would fling the cape off and plead to an even greater degree.
body, and in steeling, a pun emerges, unspoken, signified, historical, painful. Brown steels to take himself back. But in the taking, he takes from the song until what is given—and, thus, what can be given—becomes the stubborn remainder of a once fuller and still always possible sound. Here is a half-expressed surrogate for the louder expressions of Black pride and Black Power that had come to shape a great deal of the art and politics of the period. Here is a performance of not quite but very nearly and somehow not exactly or entirely nothing. It is, then, a performance of loss, felt precisely because of the something that remains, the something of unrealized release.

Still, almost nothing, on the one hand, quantifies what Brown gives to the audience. On the other, it qualifies a declaration always at risk. Brown gives almost nothing; the performance is always under threat of doing nothing. The conjuncture of these two meanings, however, exceeds the immediate stage. History hinges them, forcing us to remember that Black pride—its many incarnations across time—is made necessary by a looming precarity and the state’s continued failure to recognize or protect Black personhood. For Brown, composure, what in another interview he described as “not running away with yourself,” was requisite for the kind of self-possession that gave cause for pride. And Black pride—loud or otherwise—required one to take recognizable control over both body and expression. It was linked then to a longer history of respectability, wherein one’s outward comportment came to serve as evidence of one’s inward

385 If the entanglements between personhood, rights and both state violence and its privileged protections invite broader ontological questions concerning the category of human, Black pride’s immediate relationship to expressions of solidarity, standpoint and identity require one to be careful not to collapse the political question of personhood with the ontological project of human. As Sylvia Wynter demonstrates, even categories asserted in service of political leverage and analytical clarity concerning the intersecting vectors of power fail to attend to the larger project of constituting Western Man as the only human. See, for example, Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument,” New Centennial Review 3, no. 3 (2003).
386 Mike Douglass Show, Season 8 Episode 213 (July 2, 1969), Producer. David Susskind, Westinghouse Broadcast.
control. And for his *After Dark* performance, Brown’s observable control emerges in almost obverse relation to the kinds of ecstatic release associated with his live shows. That both composure and release demonstrate supreme control does not matter. On the *After Dark* stage, there is no need to call Danny Ray. There will be no collapse, no laboring or tarrying release—just the uncomfortable near nothing.

Given the loss inherent to the performance, it should come as no surprise that Brown retired the song soon after his appearance on *After Dark*. For him, “Say It Loud” had become the “dull knife” described in his 1972 song “Talkin’ Loud and Sayin’ Nothing.” If “Say It Loud” was made necessary by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., it was also “obsolete when I first cut it.”

To say it once, it would seem, was enough. Why, then, perform the song at all? One possible answer is that his audiences—both Black and white—demanded it. If Brown, as will be discussed below, understood the market not just as the arbiter of art’s political possibility but also as a metric for national equity and, more pressingly, the justification for doing as he wanted, his audience’s declarations were often given in contrary and competing ways. And it is these declarations—and the contexts that both hinder and engender them, including Brown’s history of conservatism and abuse—that this chapter takes up. Neither wholly divorced nor fully in kind with the forms of telling developed in the previous chapter, “Say It Loud” offers “almost nothing,” which is to say an open-ended conception of Black pride that urges Black listeners to re-tell Blackness.

**Race Men and Retelling Blackness**

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The *After Dark* performance was not the first time Brown found himself alone. By 1969, the core members of The Fabulous Flames had also left, and Brown, not one to stop the show, retired the name. He even went so far as to edit out Danny Ray’s introduction of the group on 1968’s *Live at the Apollo II*, the follow up to his groundbreaking—and record-making—1963 recording, *Live at the Apollo*. And when Flames’ saxophonist, Maceo Parker, moved to Louisville, Kentucky to record his first record as a leader for the newly-formed Maceo and the King’s Men, Brown is said to have used his influence and wealth to sabotage the group’s career. He paid radio DJs not to play the band’s 1970 recording, *Doing Their Own Thing*, and promotional posters were torn down in each of the cities the King’s Men was scheduled to appear. At one Augusta, Georgia show, Parker and the band went on stage and learned that “the only one there was James’ daddy, who really liked the King’s Men.”

Of course, few stayed gone for long. Parker came back, not two years later, and if Brown’s attempts to sabotage The King’s Men “angered some of the guys in the band,” Parker “never took it personally. James Brown could do whatever he wanted,” the saxophonist declared. “I was still going to be Maceo Parker and could play like nobody else. He couldn’t take that away from me no matter what he did.” Whether Brown could do “whatever he wanted,” as Parker asserts, is up for debate. That much of his life was put in service to attempting just that is not.

At once a dismissal and assessment, Parker’s response is not surprising. Both Brown’s

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music and public life generate a discomforting conjunction between the rich and often radical idioms from which he drew and the political, economic and social ends to which he lived. If “Say It Loud” offered Black listeners the opportunity to declare their pride in and for Blackness, Brown’s explicit commitment to Black capitalism and a more implicit belief in possessive individualism limited the song’s immediate political and social possibility and further obscured what Richard Iton identifies as the often-undistinguished line between “resistant” and “accommodationist” work in this period.\textsuperscript{390} To sing from within Brown’s particular political and economic standpoint was to actively pursue a kind of civic personhood predicated on property and its protections. It was, then, to sing alone—even as declarations of solidarity and pride abounded.

Nevertheless, parsing the song’s resistant possibility, of which this chapter hopes to think through below, from Brown’s explicitly accommodationist politics is difficult. In no small way, “Say It Loud” exists because of Brown’s economic position at the time of recording. By 1969, King Records left Brown to his own devices, which is to say that they, too, left him alone, while his ownership of multiple radio stations, still a crucial element for sales and promotion during the period, ensured that the potentially transgressive call for Black pride would receive airplay. When KGFJ in Los Angeles refused to play it, Brown was able to take out a full-page ad denouncing the decision and calling for listeners to demand its airing. And he succeeded.\textsuperscript{391}

As Joel Dreyfuss surmised in 1973, James Brown “comes on as a rather complex man who has synthesized a curious blend of patriotism and skepticism about America and a sense of

\textsuperscript{390} Iton, 258.
\textsuperscript{391} R.J. Smith, 210.
duty to blacks that jeeters on the brink of egotism.”

By describing the singer as complex, Dreyfuss both foregrounds and obscures the racial stakes that gird both Brown’s “duty” to Black empowerment and the Black community’s often conflicted reception of both his music and its political implications. The unasked but ever-present question was not whether Brown—or any Black person—was complex; rather, the question was how the inevitable and particular complexities of Black people were configured across artistic, political and social lines. In Brown’s case, both his performances and his political outlook—most notably but not limited to his commitment to Black capitalism and Black pride—placed him at the temporal and social crossroads of multiple ideological and structural standpoints within African American history and performance. He was, then, firmly within St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, Jr’s. concept of the “Race Man,” a category of community member whose pride for and work in the Black community was often thought to exists at the unfortunate intersection between uplift and self-interest. Guthrie Ramsey argues, Brown was the consummate “race man” not in spite of his Black capitalist ideology but, in fact, because of it.

Most widely developed in Black Metropolis, the race man is one of four “social types” that emerge within the “interplay between race consciousness, race pride, and race solidarity.” Of these types, the race man occupies a unique role in that he is seen to be both an “uncompromising fighter in attempts to subordinate Negroes” and, at the same time, often

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395 St. Clair Drake & Horace R. Clayton, 392
thought to pay mere “lip service to ‘race pride.’”

“Everybody says that they admire a Race Man but behind the scenes they may not regard him as being sincere.”

More recently, Ann Field Alexander defines the race man as “one of those public figures who promoted the interests of African Americans on every front” Dwight McBride agrees, going even further to claim that the race man has largely stood “at the precipice between a monolithic Blackness and the rest of the world broadcasting a prêt-à-porter version of Black life.”

The irony, as either implied or made explicit within these definitions, is that the race man exists as both exceptional to and exemplary of the Black communities and people with whom he claims allegiance.

This is perhaps why E. Patrick Johnson has framed the different—and often seemingly incommensurable—repertoires he undertakes as a southern-born Black queer academic through the notion performances at the border. These performances, Johnson argues, take place within

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397 St. Clair Drake & Horace R. Clayton, 395.


400 Johnson’s essay is included in a collection that looks at “performance at the border.” The collection in whole moves from—and finds a fraught but fruitful conjunction between—the work of anthropologist Victor Turner’s notion of liminality, which forms one grid upon which the field of performance studies would build itself into an ambivalent discipline, and Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga’s understanding of the border as material site, theoretical concept and embodied epistemology. I note as much because the collection grapples—implicitly if not explicitly—with questions of performance’s role within questions of political representation, personhood and transgression across public, professional and community spheres. As such, it demonstrates both the enduring nature of the precipice and the ways that it changes across time, geography and
a liminal space, demanding him “to simultaneously conform to and transgress the temporal
boundaries and borders that enclose them and the politics therein.”

If Johnson’s exploration of the “politics therein” moves well into the “beyond” of McBride’s work, not so much
transgressing the circumscribed nature of race men as actively existing outside of its categorical
consideration, his invocation of borders, boundaries and the repertoires signal the enduring—if
always shifting—nature of the racial precipice. In attending to the capaciousness of the precipice,
Johnson makes two things abundantly clear. First, he shows how the category of race man is far
more complicated than it might first appear, with any number of standpoints both recruited and
excluded all at once. And second, he makes clear that the precipice is the site upon which public-
 facing figures staged Black people’s place within the larger national pageant.


402 My invocation of “staging place” is meant to draw upon both humanist geography and
theater. In geography, space and place name two different kinds of locations. Where space names
locations that have no attachment to human experience, place name locations made by and
through human experience and the relationships that both emerge and dissolve by way of
experience. As Kathrine McKittrick argues, the making of place is always a “social process” that
“organizes where racial-sexual differentiation occurs.” For theater, staging names the method by
which a play or dramatic performance is presented. Leading from these definitions, what might it
mean to understand the staging of place as a method through which Black public figures generate
performances attentive to but exceeding repertoires that threaten to collapse back into McBride’s
notion of the black monolith so to generate the requisite conditions for an ambivalent
community? Relatedly, Melvin Dixon observes that “more than merely describing place, Afro-
American writers have vigorously analyzed what kind of behavior or performance occurs in
alternative spaces and leads to control over self and environment.” If Dixon’s use of “alternative
spaces” shifts attention to locations that operate in closer relation to what Katherine McKittrick
has called “the loophole of retreat,” it is worth noting that the writers with whom he contends all
took on public facing texts and, in doing so, complicated the precise nature of place and public. It
is also worth noting, perhaps, that the publication of Dixon’s monograph in 1987 means that it
came out—and, presumably, was being written—at the same time as both Toni Morrison’s
Beloved and Hortense Spiller’s “Mama’s Baby; Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.”
If their respective analytics of re-memory and flesh do not work directly toward the making of
Like other race men, a great deal of Brown efforts contended with questions about both the protocols of and the struggles over who and how one might tell. Yet, the right to tell mattered in different ways than it did for white critics and activists, respectively. For race men, telling, which is to say the struggle to determine or adjudicate one’s experience as both worthy and actual, often turned their work into a defense of Black personhood. To tell was not, then, an inquiry into Black life and its abundant and often conflicting modes of being. Rather, race men demanded a role in determining the rights and duties that constituted an individual’s recognition by the state.\textsuperscript{403} They, in effect, refused to be told on and accepted neither the state nor white place, their linked project of kinship and the matrilineal nature of African American tradition further enriches Dixon’s work on the role of staging place within slavery’s afterlives. For more on place as a social process, see Katherine McKittrick, \textit{Demonic Grounds: Black Women and The Cartographies of Struggle} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xii; For my immediate referent with respect to “staging place,” see, Una Chaudhuri, \textit{Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). Finally, for the different ways that performance has been used to generate “alternative spaces,” see, Melvin Dixon, \textit{Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 5.

\textsuperscript{403} In a published roundtable on Hortense Spiller’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Shelly Eversley brings up the cosmopolitan, a figure whose effort to deracinate the intellectual so to launch a critique of the many discourses surrounding race, maintains (and, as implied, emboldens) an intellectual “founded on the patriarchal family.” In response, Spillers extends Eversley’s claim, arguing that “it seems to me that the worldling, the cosmopolitan, is always figured in these conversations as male. It seems to me that the notion of the cosmopolitan is a way to reclaim positions that have been given up; that the framing of the conversation is a way to reassert race has hegemonic male whiteness. It's reclaiming certain features of a very old argument.” I bring this conversation up because it seems to me that two ancillary points pertain to the discussion in the body of this essay. First, the cosmopolitan figure does not dissolve questions of race or gender so much as reduce those questions to something less than they are. Indeed, if state recognition is requisite for the kind of physical and intellectual movement associated with cosmopolitanism, how does one reconcile recognition with the kinds of “politicized identities” that require suffering as the singular “price to proper personhood.” Second, if cosmopolitanism has undoubtedly moved past Kant’s 18\textsuperscript{th} century attempts to map the precise limits of what movement and individual liberty might look like, it has not fully escaped the links between the state, its modes of recognition, and what Kant calls hospitality. In fact, hospitality seems to be the trap through which the state justifies the registration of persons as citizens and visitors. Individuals who seeks the hospitality of nations can only do so if he is a citizen of one nation. More plainly, the requisite for cosmopolitan travel is citizenship status. As
social institutions claims on narrating and determining the limits of Black existence. Considering these differences, it might be better to say that race men did not take up practices of telling. To the contrary, they endeavored a corrective practice of re-telling, wherein individuals told on racist institutions while also telling of their experience as Black men in the United States. Under these efforts, the adjudication of Black personhood was, in part, reclaimed and recovered. As Brown would say to Watts residents on his 1968 campaign for Hubert Humphrey’s presidential bid, “I believe in telling it like it is. I don’t want no pretty words. I’m gonna tell you just how I feel.”

Yet, the staging of place by race men was not without its intracommunal problems. As Hazel Carby points out, the consequence of having to “actively and consistently” prove that Black people “were not the inferior beings that their second class declared them to be” was an “aggressive demonstration of their superiority in some field.” It might be asked, then, by what such, the state becomes the guarantor of an individual’s right to move, even as, in the case of minoritized subjects, that right is predicated on registering the lack of such right. If this discussion exceeds the above essay in both topic and time, I offer the gloss for two reasons. First, I do so to stress that the kind of patriarchal and heteronormative arrangement present in my discussion of race men moves through the right to tell and possessive individualism, wherein the latter not only reifies but is justified on the grounds that minoritized personhood names a form of personhood in which the self-as-property has been denied. Second, by extending the discussion to questions of cosmopolitanism, my hope is that it becomes clear that telling and retelling cannot help but return one to an adjudicative mode that even as it ostensibly testifies to state wrongdoing ends up reducing the richness of Black life to suffering.

R.J. Smith, 205. I have decided to leave the quote as it appears in Smith’s book for clarity purposes. However, it should be noted that Smith’s decision to transcribe ‘going to’ as “gonna” produces a great deal of ambivalence for me. While the spelling is an obvious attempt to capture the authentic sound of Brown’s speech, authenticity is often the term used to justify the long history of white audiences and creators conflating the dynamic grammars present in AAVE’s many local iterations for those accents inherited or passed down from stereotypes and racist depictions. It is these conflations that give pause. To be sure, this is not to rehearse or weigh in on the appropriateness of using dialect; rather, it’s to notice a difference between hearing a flattened and standardized black accent and Brown’s rich deployment of AAVE.

metric is superiority measured? In Brown’s case, which was both exceptional in its relative success and usual in its ideological positioning of superiority, that metric was property—materially and intellectually speaking—and its entanglements with both the market and power. As Brown would argue in March of 1968 on a segment for NBC’s Man to Man, “Everybody wants to feel important. I think this is the main thing.”\footnote{Man to Man, WNEW-TV New York - Live at The Apollo 1968. March 1968, Director Art Fisher. The film was recorded in March but released in June.} He goes on to list things that he wanted and wanted to be when he was a child. “A convertible,” he says, and “sometimes a movie actor . . . Then, all of a sudden, I wanted to be a tough guy. Then I wanted to be a cowboy. You want to be anything that’s important.”\footnote{Man to Man.} While the childhood desire for material comforts like “a convertible” is far from unique and, thus, cannot adequately bear out the complicated relationship between property and the kinds of importance Brown saw as requisite for living, his decision to stump for Hubert Humphrey’s presidential run in Watts is unequivocal in its connection between property and Black empowerment. “First, I’d like to say, the black man wants ownership. He wants to be able to own his own things and make up his own mind.”\footnote{R.J. Smith, 205.} Brown goes on to list housing, hospitals and banks as institutions that the Black community should have owning share of.\footnote{R.J. Smith, 205.} As his numerous investments in radio stations, restaurants and, in time, record labels attest, investments offered him an importance that ensured he possessed an even grander kind of property, one tied to the longer project of liberalism, that of the self-as-property.\footnote{C.B Macpherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); C.B. MacPherson, Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Cheryl. I Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” Harvard Law Review} To own things, Brown would surmise, generated the conditions—materially,
economically and socially, speaking—requisite for self-possession.

He was not wrong. When he and one of his road crew were unjustly harassed, assaulted and then arrested in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1973, Brown filed a million-dollar lawsuit, claiming that the city and police had deprived him of his civil rights. As Brown explains, he and two of his road crew were loading equipment onto a truck outside of the City Coliseum when two police officers told them to move. Not able to move until the truck was loaded, Brown told his crew to continue packing. The officers attacked the three men and arrested them for resisting arrest and assault. In many of the articles that followed, the attack was reported as alleged, while the injuries that the officers sustained were reported as fact. This rhetorical incongruity between the alleged attack and the evidence of bruising was then amplified by the city’s response to the suit. Mayor Kyle Testerman held a news conference to announce that the city would be dropping the charges but that he believed that Brown had “exhibited ungentlemanly conduct for the sake of publicity.”

Given the city’s decision to drop the charges and the mayor’s unique access to media, the statement should be read as an effort to seize the right to tell, to both adjudicate Brown’s arrest and his defense. In effect, Brown’s right to a hearing—in this case, before the court—had been taken from him, obscuring and even erasing the dispossessive efforts of the officers. Brown, however, was not to be deterred and gave a seven-minute statement on his radio


station, WJBE. “You’re dealing with racism in Knoxville,” he argued.\footnote{412} The statement, in effect, took back his right to tell of his treatment by the police, and he was able to do so because he owned the radio station.\footnote{413}

However, questions abound with respect to retelling’s consequences and its tendency to conflate Black personhood with Black living. What, it might be asked, is reclaimed in acts of adjudication at the precipice?\footnote{414} And, more pressing, what is seized and kept for the self when one endeavors to retell? Was Brown correct—that “importance” was requisite for self-possession—or does importance obscure the desire for and maintenance of power within all forms of telling? At the same time, Brown’s mode of retelling, however, does not perfectly fit within the doubled vision of Lindon Barrett’s value that generates the doubled modes of force and form.\footnote{415} If anything, Brown’s success troubles—if not ever fully displacing—the binary construction of race as a site of eternal or fixed value and its lack.\footnote{416}

\footnote{412} As cited in Don Rhodes, \textit{Say It Loud!: My Memories of James Brown, Soul Brother No. 1} (Lanham, Md: Lyons Press, 2008), 77.
\footnote{414} The racial precipice as the site of adjudication might be said to move into conversation with Denise Ferreira da Silva’s “scene of regulation,” wherein the political and ontological fuse in profoundly violent ways for minoritized subjects. “When self-consciousness is fashioned as a juridical subject, the ‘individual’ emerges as the basic ontological unit, the rational will that embraces exterior regulation to protect its life and self-determination.” This embrace of exterior regulation has dire consequences for minoritized subjects, whose standpoints are often transformed into politicized identities whose entry costs become the very means through which full humanity is denied. On the denial of full humanity, for more on this, see introduction. Denise Ferreira da Silva, \textit{Toward a Global Idea of Race} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007), 38; 48.
\footnote{415} For Barrett’s analysis of value, see introduction.
\footnote{416} Lindon Barrett’s reading of Billie Holiday’s autobiography and how it illuminates the “complication of value boundaries and privilege” has already brilliantly demonstrated how modes of “transgression” trouble and negotiate the bounds of value. See chapter 1 in Lindon
Moreover, it might be asked whether retelling—especially as it pertains to race men—reproduces the chauvinistic and exclusionary force of value within the Black communities. If telling names an historical complex of sensibility predicated on power, self-possession and, following Barrett, value, does retelling—as a counter-method—reiterate the kinds of force and social violence inherent to telling? As Hazel Carby makes clear, the aggression and superiority many race men displayed were not innocuous qualities; they were the sensible parts of a much wider “conceptual framework” that “not only [applied] to men, but encompass[ed] only those men who enact narrowly and rigidly determined codes of masculinity.”

Race men were not men by coincidence or categorical utility. Rather, they were men, as Brown would sing in 1966, because it was a “man’s, man’s, man’s world” structurally, politically and socially speaking. Institutions, organizations and histories treated the intellectual, theoretical and organizational efforts of Black women and—it must be added—gay and transgender individuals as affective cardinal points that race men, in turn, used to map the intellectual routes out of a national “wilderness” and “bitterness.”

Barrett, Blackness and Value: Seeing Double (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11-54.


418 James Brown, “It’s a Man’s, Man’s, Man’s World,” It’s A Man’s Man’s World: Soul Brother #1, King Records, 1966.

419 Brown, “It’s a Man’s, Man’s, Man’s World.” In their introduction, the editors of Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women notice a continued “neglect” with respect to scholarship that “map[s] the broad contours of [black women’s] political and social thought in any detail, [or] examine[s] their distinctive intellectual tradition as often self-educated thinkers with a sustained history of wrestling with both sexism and racism. This, they argue, continues “even as black
retelling evacuated the abundance of Black intellectual and social modes of being that theorized and enacted lives in excess of androcentric and heteronormative personhood.\textsuperscript{420}

Brown’s decision to open the \textit{After Dark} appearance with Leslie Bricusse and Cyril Ornadel’s “If I Ruled the World,” whether intentional or not, acts as a synecdoche for the contradictions both inherent to his political and economic worldview and, more generally, with respect to acts of re-telling. If the lyrics present a subjunctive call for global love, they also move through the metaphor of benevolent rule and, in doing so, generate a kind of political and social ambivalence—and perhaps even incoherence—with respect to questions of selfhood and its role in the remaking of the world. What good is love, it might be asked, when its bounds reflect the interests of a single leader? And, more pressingly, what kinds of relational and communal possibility can be had by decree? Like all race men, Brown’s vision of love mires in his desire to retell the limits of relationality, and, in his seizure of and entry into practices of retelling, he evacuates possibilities that exceed his vision in much the way that Carby argues race men often evacuated the abundance of Black intellectual and social modes of being and living along gender, class, and sexual orientation lines. More pointedly, Brown’s subjunctive retelling continues to establish the conditions by which a self is singular, by which he—at the apex of importance and power—finds himself alone. Or, as George Jackson would argue in his rebuke of liberal personhood, “I don’t recognize uniqueness, not as it’s applied to individualism, because

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\textsuperscript{420} This also bears upon the figure of genius and its role in the making of U.S. nationalism through a normative, white and male figure. See, Naomi Z. Sofer, \textit{Making The America of Art: Cultural Nationalism & Nineteenth-Century Women Writers} (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005).
it’s too tightly tied into decadent capitalist culture.”

Brown, for his part, refused as much of the category as he embraced. In his September 1968 column for the Los Angeles-based periodical Soul, he argued that “I’ve been acting as a spokesman to my people. “Keep in mind,” he would add, “I haven’t been acting as a spokesman FOR my people—I’m not qualified to do that, I don’t know who is.” And it is equally true, if not more so, that all but the most extreme race men refused to accord telling’s stringent limitations. In many cases, race men avowed their respect for both Black women and their work within the long freedom movement. Carby’s exploration of DuBois’ masculine politics, for instance, grants that he displayed a firm and genuine commitment to Black women. His commitment, however, could not outpace the structural and ideological underpinnings that ensured a gendered hierarchy within questions of leadership at the time. Indeed, Du Bois’ failure to outpace the structural nature of patriarchy often occurred through invitations—however well-intentioned and, perhaps, even necessary given the economic realities Black women faced in this period—to reinforce it. When Ethel Ray Nance told her parents that she had decided to move to New York to assist Charles S. Johnson with Opportunity, they were not happy but “knew that Dr. Du Bois was there and he felt that though [sic] his friendship with him, I would

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423 Carby, 11.
have a degree of guardianship.”

That a then twenty-five-year-old woman, who had worked for the Minnesota State Relief Commission and, just a year prior, broken the secretarial color barrier in the Minnesota State Legislature would need guardianship speaks to the complicated vectors of power, economy and opportunity available to Black women at the time.

A similar—if more difficult—argument about Brown has been made by historian E. T. Atkins. For Atkins, Brown’s recording of Black women served as a kind of counter argument to the self-possessive force of masculinity and the material and ideological violence within both his life and work. According to Atkins, Brown stages an “internal dialogue” between himself and women like Marva Whitney, Vicki Anderson, Lyn Collins, and Kay Robinson, whose songs took part in “the public reconciliation of black women and men as a community of mutual respect, sexual reciprocity, and collective racial empowerment.”

Atkin’s focus on the “frank—yet hardly humorless” exchange that occurred between Brown and the women on his label offers a compelling defense of retelling’s ability to expel the protocols and politics of respectability. In short, the women signed to Brown’s label not only gave it as good as they got it, they did so, to return to Brown’s column, while speaking to rather than for Black people.

Retelling, however, is related to but ultimately different from Atkin’s notion of exchange. Where Atkin’s contends that the women who recorded on Brown’s label effectively staged

dialogues internal to Black communities, retelling cannot help but expand the audience, precisely because it is an attempt to wrest narrative, social and perceptual control away from normative modes of telling. The difference, then, introduces a new set of questions concerning whether internal dialogues either evaded telling or, alternatively, operated alongside it. To such questions GerShun Avilez’s “discourse of suspicion” is useful. For Avilez, the “discourse of suspicion” names a method of both expression and critique that emerges in answer to Black nationalist calls for unity and kinship. Like Atkin’s exchange, it operates internal to Black communities, even as it also takes up a perceptual rhetoric that could be mistaken for retelling. Looking at the Black Arts movement, Avilez argues that much of the work “reflect[s] a consistent dialectical movement between investments in unity and anxieties about the demand of unity.” Where other scholars have seen this dialectical movement as one predicated on chauvinistic force—the writer or critic establishes their authenticity and membership by forcefully negating someone else’s—Avilez sees it as an mode of expression meant to convey the anxieties of community building and the need for unity and kinship in such endeavors. Suspicion, in this sense, becomes a method through which questions of trust are both worked out or shown to be fracture points in the development of kinship and nationalist bonds.

If Brown’s individual politics all but excluded him from Black Nationalist circles—and, therefore, make an explicit embrace unlikely—the utility of suspicion for staging interpersonal

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430 Avilez’s work on suspicion as a mode through which questions of trust and kinship emerge might be said to move alongside—without quite overlapping—emerging tactics of coalition within black feminist circles of the time.
and gendered dialogues brings the form back into play. Trust, unity and the question of bonds mattered in excess of nationalist ideas. Indeed, questions of Black pride, of which Brown consistently took part, also required one to grapple with who, how and in what ways kinship and bonds would be generated and maintained. In this sense, the women who sang for Brown did take part in such questions and suspicions. By the time Lyn Collins sings, “Before I give it up, I’ve got to think, think, think what the future holds for me,” she has already told both Brown’s all male band and listeners that she is speaking to those “fellas . . . who go out and stay out all night and half the next day.” And by the time she warns those who have demanded her participation that a regard for her “must be in [their] vision,” she has already insisted that “it takes two to make a thing go right.” Similarly, Marva Whitney displays a great deal of distrust when she sings “I got to be on alert. I’ll do anything . . . I choose. I just can’t be at the window stopped for you.” In each case, suspicion becomes a means to negotiate issues of trust and, perhaps more importantly, express the kinds of affective fractures that exceed empirical or evidentiary explanation. Just as Billie Holiday famously sang “hush now, don’t explain” when her lover returned from an affair, the discourses of suspicion taken up by Collins, Whitney and others pointed to otherwise unspeakable—or in-articulatable—points of fracture and distrust.

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431 If Brown’s politics exclude him from nationalist considerations, Atkin’s internal dialogues does bring discussions close to Jeremiah Wilson Moses’ assertion that Black nationalism sought to “unite” the entire black ‘family’ and assuming that the entire race has a collective destiny and a ‘message’ for humanity comparable to that of a nation.” See, Jeremiah Wilson Moses, The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 17.
433 Collins, “Think.”
Nevertheless, the staging of an internal dialogue obscures the gendered realities on which they occurred, passing off equality of dialogue for equity in intellectual and social solidarity. Just as Du Bois failed “to imagine black women as intellectuals and race leaders,” Brown failed to provide Whitney, Anderson, Collins and Robinson with the requisite freedom to sound outside the limited modes given by retelling. Indeed, if both “Think” and “It’s My Thing” effectively utilized suspicion so to signal their ability to tell of infidelity, specifically, and mistreatment and disregard, more generally, they failed to generate additional modes of expressivity. The consequence of such failures is the reduction of telling to an almost singular affect of mistreatment. To be sure, Collins and Whitney’s work was put in service to the demand for regard, but what, it might be asked, could regard offer when so narrowly operating from within a frame of mistreatment? Unfortunately, for Brown—and the women who recorded for him—the answer seems to be a kind of self-possession that left them alone, effectively foreclosing the possibility of imagining what La Donna L. Forsgren’s has described as “a more powerful vision of black liberation centered on the survival of black families.”

If Marva Whitney’s “It’s My Thing” produced an astounding and deeply satisfying response to the Isley Brothers’ “It’s Your Thing,” it did so through the production of a self that resembled Brown’s own. Whitney opens with the assertion that “I can do what I want do / You can't tell me / who to sock it to,” and, like much of Brown’s work of this period, her assertion presents—and performatively generates—a self-possession that handily seizes her individual right to do what she wanted to do. Yet, if Brown and Whitney’s respective thing shared a

436 Carby, 11.
438 Whitney, “It’s My Thing.”
method of enactment that always threatened to leave them alone, they also lived under very
different conditions. Access to social, political and economic power—telling or otherwise—saw
to that. For Black women, to be alone—to seize upon a self through retelling and possessive
personhood—at best located a mode of living within patriarchal constructions of Black and state
life. As Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith’s 1982 anthology of
writing on Black Women’s Studies put it, All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But
Some of Us Are Brave.439 In questions of U.S. personhood and its possessive investments in
property, access and protections, women contended with threats and exclusions that both the
state and men—across race—failed to perceive. This failure, Jennifer DeVere Brody argues,
generated the conditions through which “the coherence and specificity of black female subjects
is effaced by the logic that cannot produce her positionality except paradoxically.”440 Brown’s
staging of “internal dialogues” cannot circumvent or push through this paradox; to the contrary,
the dialogues between Brown and the women who recorded for him treat the gender binary
within Black communities as if it were two sides in equal struggle over the right to tell and retell.
In reality, the dialogues—in assuming retelling as its primary mode—become one more
instantiation of difference by and through multiple vectors of oppressive power.441

439 Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., All the women are white, all the
Blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women’s studies (Old Westbury, Ct.: Feminist
Press, 1982).
440 Jennifer DeVere Brody, “Effaced into Flesh: Black Women’s Subjectivity.” On Your Left:
The New Historical Materialism. ed. Ann Kibbey, Thomas Foster, et. al. (New York: NYU
441 If Kimberle Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality has, in the thirty years since she first
offered the term, come to signal the many ways that race and gender oppression form an
interlocking system through which they become mutually constitutive of each other, her
argument sought to address Black women’s amplified vulnerability to state oppression and
violence. As such, I avoid the term above. For a then contemporary theorizing of the many ways
that Black women were forced to contend with the often-conflicting vectors of gender, racial and
class oppression, see, Frances Beale, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” The Black
If, in the final tally, Brown assumes a kind of representational recovery, the realities at hand and within the world were far different. Indeed, it might be asked if the affective nature of retelling—that for Black men it was most often put in service of adjudication before an antiblack state—only further embolden the idea that these dialogues were operating on equal ground. That is, if retelling operated as a means by which one seized that which had been refused on the basis of race—and, thus, was seen as a tactic of recovering denied personhood—were the internal uses of retelling capable of signaling the particular standpoints within the Black community? Of course, the question cannot be—or at least should not be—answered, as it depends on the attentiveness of listeners. Nevertheless, it must be asked precisely because of retelling’s association with tactics of assertion and personhood. Returning to Hull, Bell-Scott and Smith’s work, to be brave and alone was to contend with and at the same time refuse a world that consistently demanded acquiescence to rights and protections in service to one’s destruction. To be brave, then, was to demand that we leave the telling and told world behind.442

442 Contemporary to the period in which this chapter contends, Kay Lindsey puts this sentiment most directly, writing, “What we truly are as women or as Black women or human beings or groups is an unknown quantity insofar as we have not determined our own destiny.” See, Kay
This is not to undercut both the pleasure and importance of “Think” or “It’s My Thing,” which in no uncertain terms show Collins and Whitney actively determining the shape of their sexual and political participation. Nor is it to diminish the ingenious ways that Black women challenged intellectual and political diminishment and mistreatment from within patriarchal structures. In fact, it is not even to dismiss retelling wholesale. Rather, it’s to raise three questions. First, do acts of retelling instantiate a mode of selfhood that forecloses the possibility of coalition and solidarity across Black men and Black women? Second, if listeners hear gender because Whitney, Anderson, Collins and Robinson sing; is it also true that most of the songs Brown produced bore his formal stamp, both lyrically and formally speaking? Third, can the staging of an internal dialogue on and through Brown’s unmistakable formal ground accurately contend with the inequities Black women of the period faced?

As June Jordan would write in 1985, “It occurs to me that much organizational grief could be avoided if people understood that partnership in misery does not necessarily provide for partnership for change: When we get the monsters off our backs all of us may want to run in very different directions.” The question of what participation might look inside freedom might be hinged to the question of participation and its limits within Brown’s formal and rhetorical repertoire. If nothing else, the disco work from Lola Love and Martha High—both of whom worked with Brown during this period—demonstrates the range of styles and sounds that might


have happened if he had surrendered to the idea that there were lyrical and formal possibilities in excess of his imagination.⁴⁴⁴

**Retelling as Political Surrogacy and Cultural Surrogation**

Ella Baker knew these dangers well, even as she also knew the necessity for material organizing and the need to contend with differences in excess of the uniqueness George Jackson dismisses. In a 1970 interview with Gerda Lerner, she argued that “the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means he has been touted through public media, which means that the media may do and undo him . . . such a person,” Baker makes clear, “gets to the point of believing he is the movement.”⁴⁴⁵ Elsewhere, she further draws out the consequences of charismatic leadership. “When the newspaper people come around, what do they look for? They don’t look for the solid organizational drive. . . . they look for a miracle performer.”⁴⁴⁶ Or, as Erica Edwards has written, charisma “names a phenomenon” that serves “to situate authority or the right to rule, in one exceptional figure perceived to be gifted with a privileged connection to the divine.”⁴⁴⁷ Many media and political figures believed they had found one such performer in Brown, who, according to Greensboro A&T student Reginald Defour, “could make an audience do anything he wants.”⁴⁴⁸

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⁴⁴⁸ If Defour’s observation figuratively refers to the charismatic power of Brown’s live performances, many in the press had begun to understand this power as moving beyond the
In Brown’s case, the press often framed him as a figure who might lead the Black community away from the radical politics of Black Power. This was his miracle. When *Look* asked on the cover of its February 18, 1969 issue whether he was “the most important black man in America,” they conveniently failed to qualify for whom. An answer, however, emerges in Thomas Barry’s coverage. “In 1969, when millions of hyper-aware young men and women wonder whether it’s still possible to be both black and American, James Brown is a new important leader.”

Barry goes on to quantify Brown’s reach, claiming that the performer’s “constituency dwarfs Stokely Carmichael’s and the late Dr. Martin Luther King’s.” He then makes a crucial turn that would occur in a great deal of coverage of Brown during this period. “Warily,” Barry writes, Brown “has begun to speak not for programs but dignity.” It is an astounding observation given Brown’s oft-spoken demand for institutional access. As he would tell Charlie Gillett in September of 1969, “When a person's tired of being treated as a puppet that's when he's labelled a militant. Give him his rights, and you'll have no trouble with him.”

Dignity, for Brown, required the acquisition of rights. That same year, he would pen the “Black Commandments” for his monthly column in *Soul*. Written as an acrostic that spells “BLACK,” the constitution opens with a declaration that bears some similarity to the lyrics of “Say It Loud,” and its invocation of the traditional spiritual “I’ve Been Buked and I’ve Been Scorned.”

B: The Black man, bullied and scorned for too long.

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concert realm and into the political and public sphere. The quote is cited in Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, And Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), 202.

450 Barry, 56.
451 Barry, 56.
L: Loneliness for the rights that we never had a chance to exercise.
A: Act NOW before it's too late.
C: Correction of constitutional rights, which we have never been able to exercise.
K: Knocking on the door has gotten boring and pathetic. We ARE coming in.\(^{453}\)

If Brown called for dignity so, too, did he demand policy, going so far to link loneliness—which is to say alienation—with personhood and the requisite rights that obtain in such a status. More pressingly, his strident assertions about dignity both in the poem and elsewhere shared one—and often only one—thing with other activists and celebrities of the period: calls for institutional change.

*Look* was not the only magazine to pit Brown against other figures of the period. Reflecting on the success of “Say It Loud,” biographer R.J. Smith notes that had “a Huey Newton or Angela Davis had expressed the idea, it would have been marginalized as an utterance from the black power fringe. But here was the most visible black man in America saying it. Here was the angry fringe and the smiling mainstream coming together.”\(^{454}\) Writing for *Variety*, Mark Pines described “Say It Loud” as “the Negro’s non-violent claim to dignity and equality”—and then immediately doubled down on the claim, stating, “black and white artists are discarding differences and indifferences for a musical expression of universal freedom.”\(^{455}\) And the conservative paper *Human Events* takes this approach to its logical conclusion. “James Brown is a name almost unknown to the white [conservative] community, but in the confused maze of

\(^{454}\) R.J. Smith, 212
values in America’s ghettos Brown holds the indisputable titled of ‘Soul Brother No. 1.”\textsuperscript{456} The article by itself is insulting and racist, but its intended goal emerges through an insert titled “But Stokely Helps Incite Violence.”\textsuperscript{457} In each case, the perception that Brown not only subscribed to a more moderate political outlook than other Black figures—activists and celebrities, alike—but also provided music and ideas that might serve as an interpersonal and interracial balm obscured the structural critiques made by him and, more importantly, others.

To be sure, not every article removed Brown’s call for structural change from his demand that he be treated with dignity. Yet, even when journalists retained Brown’s structural critique, they often treated him as exceptional to both the Black community and those theorizing what Black freedom might look like. Writing about a 1968 concert at Madison Square Garden, Robert Shelton argued that Brown “has changed a lot over the years, and so has his audience. Gone are Mr. Brown’s long hair and concern only with gut rhythm and blues. Now he is deeply immersed in his role as a spokesman as militant and peacemaker.”\textsuperscript{458} If Shelton hints at the structural critique Brown issued, the decision to frame him as both a militant and a peacekeeper follows a more the insidious idea that those who organized through direct action or advocacy were not interested in peace and either incorporative or structural justice but, returning to the arguments offered in the introduction, “Negro goons who go on racist rampages,” and whose “testimonial as a freedom fighter” offers “a cover; a chance to do pillaging and looting with little likelihood of punishment.”\textsuperscript{459}

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The perception that Black self-determination amounted to simple and unmediated aggression exceeded state and municipal figures. Many white public figures expressed similar ideas. When David Susskind appeared with James Brown on *The Mike Douglass Show* in July of 1969, he offered almost identical talking points to those given by Younger and Shelton. For Susskind, Black militancy portended “violence . . . Molotov cocktails” and “burning down of department stores.” But it also obscured paths to full personhood like “education,” “doing your job” and “making yourself count as an individual.” It all begs wonderment, of course. What, it might be asked, would Susskind make of efforts to establish Black Studies programs across the country? What would he say about the formation of the League of Revolutionary

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460 This would not be the first time that Susskind took it upon himself to frame Black activists in such a manner. In January of 1968, he and Muhammad Ali appeared on the *Eamonn Andrews Show* to speak about Ali’s decision to refuse the draft. For his allotted time, delivered by way of satellite, Susskind offers nothing less than a racist screed. “I find nothing amusing or interesting or tolerable about this man. He’s a disgrace to his country, his race, and what he laughingly describes as his profession. He is a convicted felon in the United States. He has been found guilty. He is out on bail. He will inevitably go to prison, as well he should. He is a simplistic fool and a pawn.” *The Eamonn Andrews Show*, Season 4, Episode 13, January 7, 1968, Producer, Gordon Reese.


462 If Black Studies as a multi-disciplinary approach to centering Black people, Black practices and Black methods existed prior to its acceptance within universities, efforts to establish programs and departments were contemporary to Susskind’s appearance on *The Mike Douglass Show*. In fact, the five-month strike at San Francisco State University (SFSU) in 1968 lead to the hiring of Nathan Hare as coordinator of a Black Studies department often thought of as the first of its kind. In addition to the SFSU strike, efforts were undertaken across the country. This included Susskind’s alma mater, Harvard, where the Black student organization Afro demanded that a program be established after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. In other cases, direct action for curriculum demands brought various people into contact with each other. As former Young Lord and Black Panther Party member Denise Oliver-Velez remembers, the demand for coursework in Black and Ethnic Studies and an increase in faculty of color at SUNY Old Westbury brought together a group of students who marked “the beginning of the Young Lords in New York. . .” In the Bay Area, the Afro-American Association (AAA) was founded in 1962 by U.C. Berkeley students but quickly expanded its membership to include the broader Bay Area Black community and soon after, Los Angeles as well. Across its tenure, the AAA would include future Oakland mayor Elihu Harris and activists and scholars like Ernie Allen, Maulana
Karenga (then Ronald Everett), Huey Newton, Bobby Seale and Cedric Robinson. Moreover, organizational efforts were not limited to predominately white universities or departmental issues. Students at Howard University also staged a series of protests in 1968. In their newsletter, members of UJAMAA, an unrecognized campus organization, would write, “At present, Howard is primarily Western civilization oriented. It is unrealistic to educate black students as if they were exclusively products of Western civilization and in fact totally integrated into that civilization. Our blackness is the principal realities of our lives—and what we want is a Howard University oriented to that reality.” If, as one study from the period claimed, many students did not agree with the organization’s demands, the slogan “Howard Should Be a Black University” became a common call at meetings and in statements given by various groups. Meanwhile, in October of 1969, three months after Brown and Susskind appeared on Douglass’ show, organizers would protest the “predominately-white” African Studies Association conference in Montreal, Canada. This protest would lead to the formation of the African Heritage Studies Association, who hosted its first national conference seven months later, in May 1970, at Howard University. Finally, if it is beyond contestation that Black methods for study existed prior to this period, it is, perhaps, important to also state that Black student organizations committed to radical and reconstructive ends were not new either. To give one example, in 1927, George Padmore, then a student at Fisk University, would write to Nnamdi “Ben” Azikiwe, then a student at Howard University, and suggest that they work to form a student group committed to ‘foster[ing] racial consciousness and a spirit of nationalism aiming at the protection of sovereignty of Liberia.’ On the formation of Black Studies departments, see, Ibram X. Kendi, The Black Campus Movement: The Radical Reconstruction of Higher Education, 1965-1972 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Noliwe M. Rooks. White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race and Higher Education (Beacon Press, 2006); Joy Williamson, Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965-75 (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Fabio Rojas, From Black Power to Black Studies (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2007). On the philosophical intentions of Black Studies, see, Delores P. Aldridge & Carlene Young, “Historical Development and Introduction to the Academy,” Out of the Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), 3-12; Nathan Hare, “A Torch to Burn Down a Decadent World.” The Black Scholar 2, no.1 (September 1970): 2-5; James B. Stewart, “The Field and Function of Black Studies: Toward an Accurate Assessment of the State of Black Studies in the 1970s and 1980s,” Out of the Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2000), 15-24; On the Young Lords and campus activism, see, Denise Oliver-Velez, “The Excitement Was in the Streets!” Through the Eyes of Rebel Women: The Young Lords: 1969-1975 (New York: Red Sugar Cane Press, 2016), 128. On the role of Afro-American Association, see, Scot Brown, Fighting for Us: Maulana Karenga The Us Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism (New York: New York University press, 2003), 25-28; Robin D.G. Kelley, “Foreword.” Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition, by Cedric J. Robinson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xv-xvi; Donna Murch, Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010), 97-116; On Howard University protests, see, Sophia F. Mcdowell, "Howard University's Student Protest Movement," Public Opinion Quarterly 34, no. 3 (1970): 383-388; On the formation of the African heritage Studies Association, see, “The African Heritage Studies Association,” Black World, July 1970, 20-24; on
Black Workers and their efforts to gain political power for Black workers in Detroit’s automotive and industrial sectors?\textsuperscript{463} And what would he make of the many musicians organizations that emerged in the decade, many of which were direct responses to the desegregation of local musicians unions that worsened—and, in some cases, created—racial disparities?\textsuperscript{464} Would these disruptive efforts “count”? And for or toward what? Turning to Brown, Susskind continued, “A lot of very angry and I think very misguided Black militants are saying you can’t make it in a white man’s society. . . What would you reply to those guys?”\textsuperscript{465} Brown, for his part, refuses any implication that he might live at a distance from the Black community. “I am still a Black man,”

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\textsuperscript{463} The League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) formed in 1969 in Detroit, Michigan as an answer to the often-dismissive treatment by white union leaders in the United Auto Workers. “You know, we wanted a pound of flesh, because the humiliation – I mean, we had worn a uniform, we had been good citizens, and the police brutality – they think is bad now, they should have been here in the sixties, in Detroit, it was really bad. And other places too. And it's fundamentally the catalyst for all of these rebellions and riots in the city. It was the overreach of the police, and this is gonna happen again, based on what's being done right now.” On LRBW see, Jack Taylor, "Revolution at the Point of Production: An Interview with Mike Hamlin of DRUM and The League of Revolutionary Black Workers,” Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men 2, no. 1 (2013): 99-112; for Hamlin quote, Mike Hamlin, “Interview by William Winkel,” December 22, 2015, video, The Detroit 1967 Project and the Oral and Written History Project. Detroit Historical Society. https://detroit1967.detroithistorical.org/items/show/238.

\textsuperscript{464} The number of organizations that emerge in this period—as either a direct answer to unions or with broader agendas of promoting and protecting Black musicians—is numerous. Of particular interest is African American Musicians Society (AAMS). Founded in 1961, AAMS expressed interest in hosting a convention that might serve as a “black musicians’s think tank.” They are, perhaps, best known for protesting the founding of Lincoln Center, which infamously used slum clearance laws to raze the San Juan Hill neighborhood. The AAMS protested the founding on the basis that Lincoln Center failed to incorporate Black culture in any of its buildings. In addition, they successfully negotiated with the Local 802, forcing the union to include an antidiscrimination clause in all contracts and redistribute their trust fund in more equitable ways. For more on the AAMS, see, Weston, 82-89. For a survey of local musician’s organizing against racist unions, see, Gerald Horne, Jazz & Justice: Racism and the Political Economy of Music (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019), 245-312.

\textsuperscript{465} Mike Douglass Show, July 2, 1969.
he says, only then to insist that Black experience was requisite for discussions concerning the modes and methods of self-determination.\textsuperscript{466} Brown’s insistence puts pressure on the incapacity of normative, white leadership to tell of Blackness. In seizing the right to retell, then, he takes a position of leadership even as he refuses the role that Susskind’s questions thrusts upon him. “I believe Black people can talk to Black people better than you can. . . We have got to have our own way of speaking and our own community. There’s nothing wrong with that.”\textsuperscript{467} Brown’s method of retelling effectively refuses to give the kind of tell—and telling on—Susskind demanded.

Nevertheless, imbedded within the question lie both the demand that Brown tell and, more importantly, the assumptions from which Susskind builds a judgment into a question. If Brown’s refusal to justify or discipline the Black community, as Susskind demanded, succeeds, his broader acts of retelling could not evacuate the growing tendency to treat him as a surrogate for the many different voices and ideas within these discussions. The unanswered—and, perhaps, unanswerable—question is for whom was he a surrogate—the militant or the peacekeeper, the Black community, or the liberal state?

The difficulty of answering such a question is, in part, a problem of definition. Surrogacy takes up very different—if still related—meanings in politics and cultural memory. Where in politics the surrogate extends the reach of the candidate in any number of ways, in cultural memory surrogation names the process by which an individual comes to fill social, political and community vacancies left by previous figures.\textsuperscript{468} This process, as Joseph Roach

\textsuperscript{466} Mike Douglass Show, July 2, 1969.
\textsuperscript{467} Mike Douglass Show, July 2, 1969.
\textsuperscript{468} For discussions on political surrogacy, see, Susan A. MacManus & Andrew F. Quecan, "Spouses as Campaign Surrogates: Strategic Appearances by Presidential and Vice Presidential Candidates Wives in the 2004 Election,” PS: Political Science Politics 41, no. 2 (2008): 337-48;
explains, does not guarantee a complete or total transfer of meanings, duties or institutional power. In fact, surrogation seldom produces a complete substitution; rather, surrogates either fail to fill the vacancies left behind, or they create a surplus of meaning. The result—especially when the vacancy opens because of death or violence—is the generation of an uncanny figure that disrupts cultural meanings and, in doing so, forces members of the community to take sides. The surrogate both is—in title and position—and is not—in ideology, duties and power—a match for the individual who had previously filled the roles into which the surrogate now stands. As such, debates about the surrogate’s fitness surge, and members of the community draw upon “myths of legitimacy and origin” in order to defend or deny the surrogate’s right to fill the vacancy.

These debates, however, do not draw upon a consensus of facts—of what is believed to be true or false across communities; rather, they are more accurately understood as “public enactments of forgetting [and remembering] either to blur the obvious discontinuities, misalliances and ruptures or, more desperately, to exaggerate them in order to mystify a previous golden age, now lapsed.” They are, then, auditions meant to fail, where failure is not only inevitable but the performative site of productivity. The failed surrogate becomes an


To this discussion, Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* adds an addition layer of consideration. She writes, “The slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and elusiveness.” See, Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 37.
opportunity for communities and people to reconfigure meaning and cultural memory. It is also a moment when a marginalized community’s access to power and telling atomizes even as it appears to remain stable and recognized.

In Brown’s case, questions of political surrogacy and cultural surrogation shift in any number of ways depending on the angle from which one approaches events. Indeed, at any given moment—and often at the same time—Brown engaged acts of surrogacy and surrogation, speaking to, for and with any number of individuals, communities and interests. By 1968, he had stood as a political surrogate for a number of politicians, including presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey, but there was only one figure with whom surrogation occurred, even if fleetingly. Brown’s commitment to self-determination through the acquisition of property, not violence, combined with his national popularity to make him a prime figure for media to place within the massive vacancy left by Martin Luther King, Jr.

This was not surprising given the near immediate efforts by journalists and politicians to reduce King’s radical call for equity and justice to calls for passivity. Writing a week after the assassination of King for the radical paper The Great Speckled Bird, Gene Guerrero Jr. argued that “King’s biggest problem was the attempt by America’s liberal leadership to make him one of their own—as ‘responsible’ leader. They tried to do this by emphasizing King’s non-violence approach . . . rather than his critique of the problems in America . . . While King was alive [sic] he was able to elude their grasp by speaking forthrightly about racism and other problems.” The truth of Guerrero’s point can be seen even in articles that called for citizens to pick up the tasks King and the SCLC had set forth. In an op-ed published on the same day as Guerrero’s

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article, Robert A. Feer, a history professor at Northeastern University, would sour his call for students and faculty to continue King’s project of Black enfranchisement by concluding with the assertion that “it is important to remember that Martin Luther King, who would have abhorred even a single person being smitten down, is [no] longer here to protect us.” Whether said in earnest or in an attempt at irony, it is a striking demonstration of how media outlets—small and large—wielded King’s “non-violent posture” so to invert the direction of oppressive force and racialized violence in the U.S.

The power of Feer’s assertion, however, hovers between rhetoric and logic. On the one hand, his decision not to name those figures who required King “to protect” white communities generates the need for readers to fill the vacancy left not just by King but, in fact, by Feer’s silence from within this vacancy. By remaining silent, he recruits readers into surrogation’s project, allowing their particular imaginations to fill the void. On the other hand, such recruitment was not boundless. To the contrary, the invocation of protection and impending harm limits who readers might imagine to those organizers and figures engaged in tactics and agendas readers understood as threatening. The reader’s chosen surrogate—whether a specific leader or an amalgam of racist tropes posing as a figure—does not stand a chance under such bounds. To the contrary, their implied threat always fails to fill King’s place precisely because harm would seem to go against King’s call for both unity and non-violence.

Reader’s failed surrogates do not operate alone. Rather, they combine with a broader white imaginary that follows Guerrero’s argument concerning white media’s tendency to strip King’s moral call of its social and political critiques of the U.S. state. And, in combination, they

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474 Guerrero, 2.
reduce Black efforts, organizations and people to a racial (or, perhaps, raced) monolith. By treating King as singular—which is to say irreplaceable—all Black organizers and activists working in the wake of King’s death obtain what might be called dis-incorporative and so violent power, which is to focus on and, ultimately, invert one of the central goals of King’s efforts: the political and economic incorporation of Black American citizens. Liberal organizers who sought to continue King’s moral call for incorporation become indistinguishable from Black Power and nationalist organizers who called for a complete dismantling of the U.S. imperial state. And both become threats to white communities rather than activists endeavoring a variety of tactics in service to Black freedom. Yet, as James Baldwin would remind Gustavo L. Scheuer, the onus of racial terror lied with white communities and the state that legally protected them, not with Black communities or organizers who, borrowing from Bayard Rustin, placed their bodies under the wheels of an antiblack state.475

However, the media’s use of surrogation was not always implied. In the decades that followed King’s assassination, questions of who might replace King began to emerge. As Jaquelyn Dowd Hall argues, “Journalists’ interest waxed and waned along with activists’ ability to generate charismatic personalities (who were usually men) and telegenic confrontations, preferably those in which white villains rained down terror on nonviolent demonstrators dressed in their Sunday best.”476 Yet, if efforts undertaken in the wake of King’s assassination lacked the kind of heroic narrative now associated with Civil Rights’ classical period, workers continued many of the projects associated with King. This is true of both the immediate period after King’s


Moreover, surrogation became a central tactic through which critiques of Black Power and Black nationalist efforts might be attenuated. Writing for the \textit{New York Times}, John Herber makes the bold assertion that “No national leader has been able to replace Dr. King.”\footnote{“A Fragmented Crusade,” \textit{New York Times}, April 5, 1969, 1.} The problem, Herber argues, occurred because,

in the last year, the movement has turned inward and has become Balkanized as negroes in increasing numbers have sought to establish their own separate identity and as a variety of leaders have worked for limited and sometimes contradictory goals.\footnote{“A Fragmented Crusade,” 1.}

At first pass, Herber’s argument might be read a recognition of the need for Black solidarity, echoing a long tradition of Black radicals who understood both national and global solidarity as the primary condition through which Black liberation could be won. Yet, such a reading must be resisted, as the assertion traffics in the same kind of liberal rhetoric that Guerrero identifies above. For Herber, King’s “high purpose” occurred in his commitment to “national unity,” not Black liberation or incorporation. Much like Feer’s rhetorical omission, then, Herber’s focus on the failure of replacement sets up the argumentative condition through which he can claim that the “mysticism and spiritual quality . . . seems to have gone out of the Negro revolution.”\footnote{“A Fragmented Crusade,” \textit{New York Times}, April 5, 1969, 1.} It is also what allows him to forget—or elide—the fact that Civil Rights, Black Power and Black Arts workers generated and enacted myriad cosmological and tactical efforts in the year following
King’s assassination.

As such, the media’s rush to fill the vacancy left by King with Brown cannot be understood as a matter of filling an otherwise unattended leadership void. To the contrary, it was one of many attempts to wield surrogation, which in Brown’s case served two related purposes. For one, Brown’s commitment to possessive individualism and a more moderate approach to Black liberation meant that he might advocate for policies in service of the state, effectively attenuating if not eliminating the kind of disruptive or ‘dis-incorporative’ claims made by Civil Rights organizers. However, Brown’s election served a second, related purpose, which might be read as filling a role through which the Black nationalist project might be attenuated. As Wahneema Lubiano argues, since the late eighteenth century, Black nationalists had conceived of their project as one “standing in for the state,” effectively “resist[ing] the U.S. state and its social and racialized ethnic domination—including what black social theorist Oliver Cox described as the tendency to proletarianize the entire black American group.”

If many of the nation’s most visible politicians had done just this, it was Brown’s Boston concert on April 5, 1968, the day after King’s assassination, where the combination of political surrogacy and cultural surrogation took its most forceful—if temporary—hold. Brown, we are told, took on Ella Baker’s mold of the media-made “miracle-maker” and single-handedly saved

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481 It should be noted that the media was not the only community that sought to fill the vacancy left by King. David L. Chapelle argues that efforts could also be seen during the National Black Political Conventions of 1972 and 1974. And, leading from my distinction between surrogate and surrogation, it could be argued that Chapelle’s argument that Jesse Jackson would come to embody the dilemmas, contradictions and lesser acknowledged victories of the post-King period marks a moment where both surrogate and surrogation merge in different but no less prominent ways. See, David L. Chapelle.

Yet, discrepancies abound in such telling. For one, Brown’s April 5 concert at Boston Gardens had been scheduled for months. Moreover, both Brown and mayor Kevin White were in favor of canceling it when they heard of King’s assassination. Brown, for his part, worried that he would lose money and demanded that the city pay him to perform, while White failed to see how Brown, who he initially mistook for the football star Jim Brown, could help calm a city on the brink of sustained violence. It took Councilor Thomas Atkins and NAACP member and Model City head Paul Parks to convince the mayor that cancelling might lead to further violence. And even then, White only agreed to pay for the concert after someone suggested that they televise the event. White believed it would keep Black residents in front of televisions—if he could not quell the impulse for rebellion, he could supersede it and, in the airing, he might also gain a powerful political surrogate in Brown.

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485 Such an understanding followed a growing and broader consensus that entertainment might quell Black frustrations. The same year that White considered the benefits of allowing Brown’s concert to proceed, Willis Conover, the founding host of *Voice of America Jazz Hour*, wrote Richard Nixon and suggested that the president support of jazz programs both at the White House and more broadly. The president’s support, Conover argued, could help soften the U.S.’s imperial and apartheid image both domestically and abroad. “Much of the liberal intellectual artists establishment will be surprised into applauding the president,” he wrote. Then in a blatantly racist assessment that “the sophisticates of jazz are outside of [the Black community’s]
Of course, Black Boston’s organizational efforts to mourn King both preceded and exceeded Brown’s concert. The *Bay State Banner* reports that community leaders had been working with city officials in order to ensure peace as soon as they learned of King’s assassination, while in Roxbury, the Freedom Security Patrol (FSP), first organized in 1965 to protect King, when he marched in Boston, re-formed and traveled throughout Roxbury and Dorchester “urging young people to ‘cool it.’” In the same moment that the FSP took to the streets, Boston’s Black United Front (BBUF), an “umbrella organization” designed to include “both organizations and individuals in the Black community of Boston,” were in the process of drafting a comprehensive “Statement of Demands” to be presented at an April 6 rally at White Stadium in Franklin Park. Even the violence that occurred in the Grove Hall neighborhood led to new modes of organizing. Then Northern Student Movement member Byron Rushing recalls that after King’s assassination the “black community organized in very different ways. They had a united front and there was a big attempt at unity in the black community.”

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None of this was new. As Boston organizer and arts educator Elma Lewis would pointedly tell the *Bay State Banner* when asked what should have been achieved in 1968, “Are you kidding me? . . . Justice for black people—that's my ambition every year.”[^489] Indeed, the long struggle to secure justice for Black people—and the risks that struggle entailed—were well known to Black Boston. Writing for an early 1970s issue of *People’s News Service*, the paper of the Roxbury Chapter of the Black Panthers, Gene Jones demonstrates just how familiar Black Boston was with these issues. Black people, Jones writes, “will keep their cool at all times or suffer the consequences. Any deviation from maintaining the status quo is a crime against the ‘silent majority’ and the power structure.”[^490] Both Jones’ later observation and the more immediate efforts undertaken by various organizations only enrich King’s assertion that a “riot is the language of the unheard.”[^491] In the case of the Boston concert, what the city “failed to hear”

[^489]: Danice Bordett, “What Didn't Happen' in 1968?” *Bay State Banner*, Jan 02, 1969, 1. While beyond the scope of this essay, Elma Lewis would open the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAA) and Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists (MNCAAA) in 1968 and 1969, respectively. As her longtime collaborator Edmund Barry Gaither explains, the purpose of these organizations was to provide the black Boston community with multifaceted institutions that were “a combination of New York’s Lincoln Center and the 92nd Street YMCA performing arts programs . . . bringing together in one complex the best in teaching and professional performance and . . . a populist commitment to making diverse arts accessible to all.” See, Daniel McClure, “Brokering Culture: Elma Lewis, Cultural Politics, and Community Building in Postwar Boston,” *Black Women, Gender & Families* 6, no. 2 (2012).


[^491]: Martin Luther King, Jr, “The Other America,” *The Radical King* (Boston: Beacon Broadside, 2015), 235-245; see, also, Bayard Rustin’s reflection on King’s assassination: “Dr. King’s assassination is only the latest example of our society’s determination to teach young Negroes that violence pays. We pay no attention to them until they take to the streets in riotous rebellion. Then we make minor concessions—not enough to solve their basic problems, but enough to persuade them that we know they exist.” As found in, Bayard Rustin, “Reflections on the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” *Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 225.
were the varying efforts of both mourning and organizing that Black Boston undertook both
before and after King’s murder. Indeed, it might be asked whether Boston or any city needed
saving, or if the invocation of safety effectively obscured the expansion of state and police power
under the false notion of protection and equity. As King would explain to Mike Wallace in 1966,
“the cry of black power is, at bottom, a reaction to the reluctance of white power to make the
kind of changes necessary to make justice a reality for the Negro.”

Nonviolence, on the other hand, was a tactic that leveraged the looming possibility of
armed rebellion in order to force change. As Malcolm X’s famous critique of King in 1963
demonstrates, at the very moment nonviolent tactics were undertaken,

It was the grass roots out there in the street. [It] scared the white
man to death, scared the white power structure in Washington, D.
C. to death; I was there. When they found out that this black
steamroller was going to come down on the capital, they called in
Wilkins; they called in Randolph; they called in these national
Negro leaders that you respect and told them, “Call it off.”

492 In October of 1968, NBC came to Boston to begin filming what would become Ordeal of the
Cities, a two-hour documentary that sought to document the struggle between city officials and
Black Boston. If Black organizers initially agreed to cooperate, opposition followed as soon as
they realized that the producers were not interested in highlighting organizational efforts but,
instead, would include “nonmembers of the black community who have proved themselves
hostile to the interests of the black community.” Of the nonmembers referenced, Louise Day
Hicks, School Committee Chairman Thomas Eisenstadt, and Daniel Moynihan were scheduled
to participate. In answer, twenty-four community leaders and organizers signed a statement of
opposition. Filming, however, continued, and NBC aired the documentary in January of 1969.
As expected, “the film was full of yesterday's tired slogans and cheap sensationalism. The series
of urban demonstrations and excessive footage on Roxbury's recent murder did not create an
impression of positive progress in the ghetto. NBC lost a golden opportunity to show a nation
agonizing over the urban crisis that there is cluse [sic] for hope, that the efforts of people to
achieve peace will make a difference. See, “Leaders Oppose NBC Documentary,” Bay State
Banner, October 24, 1968, 1; “A Million Dollar Misunderstanding,” Bay State Banner, October
493 September 27, 1966 interview with Dr. King for CBS Reports. While King’s definition of
riots is often attributed to his 1968 speech cited above, he had already begun to offer it in
interviews, of which this interview with Mike Wallace is one.
Kennedy said . . .

Here was the “fire next time” famously invoked by James Baldwin. Whether King seized upon white fears, as Brandon Terry has argued, or endeavored such leverage dishonestly, as X suggests, matters less than the fact that nonviolence and violence emerged as a kind of intercommunal tension that when wielded correctly could generated what Terry usefully calls “coercive power.”

The savior narrative intercedes—and so attenuates—these tensions. For those who advocated for Black Power—in either its revolutionary or cultural forms—or called for armed rebellion, the savior narrative, which treats Brown as one capable of lulling the city’s Black communities, forwarded a narrative that mistook placation for change, entertainment for consciousness. For those who sought to quell the impulse for rebellion, the savior narrative effectively erased the agency and efforts of Black Boston. This combination, in turn, weakened—even if only at the level of memory and reportage—the coercive power obtained in the tensions between those who called for seizure by any means and those who called for institutional enfranchisement. To follow the logic of the narrative to its end, peace occurred because of Brown’s ability to lull Black Boston, not because Black Boston actively chose to abstain from armed rebellion. And, indeed, as the myth began to solidify, the facts changed. In 1971, *New York Times* cultural critic Albert Goldman would reflect that the “situation was

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495 Brandon Terry, “MLK Now,” *Fifty Years Since MLK: Boston Review. Forum 5* (43.1), eds. Brandon Terry, Barbara Ransby, et. al. (2017), 21. The idea that King and X generated a tension capable of leverage is not unique to academic circles. In a 1981 interview, saxophonist Archie Shepp offers a similar assessment, describing the work done by King and X as “complimentary.” See, Ron Mann, dir., *Imagine the Sound* (Toronto: Sphinx Productions, 1981), DVD.
desperate. Already people were in the streets, looting and burning.”496 The lie of Goldman’s assertion—the myth it builds—is told in George Buggs’ 1975 poem “Boston.”

Downtown, citizens design destruction.
Black Bostonians bend,
Bear the burden of being far from home.
White Boston fears the future.
White Boston fears its own, fears love,
living, yet loves building fear
of black faces . . . 497

Whether fair to either Brown or White’s stated goals, the former’s surrogacy—politically and culturally speaking—further emboldened these narratives and, in so doing, erased, however partially, the determinative role Black Boston took in making their lives under constant threat.

The erasure of the city’s Black residents, however, occurs twice: first in fact and then in affect. “Twenty-four hours ago,” the mayor would say when introducing Brown, “Dr. King died for all of us, black and white— that we may live together in harmony without violence and in peace.”498 Whose harmony? Under what peace? To disrupt White’s narrative with an act of

497 George Buggs, “Boston,” The Iowa Review 6, no. 2, Black Writing (Spring 1975): 32-34. Bugg’s poem is published roughly a year after Federal District Court Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. found the Boston School Committee guilty of segregation. In the year that followed, white Bostonians formed any number of mobs that sought to keep Black students from entering white schools. The violence that followed the ruling, however, was not restricted to schools. Attacks also occurred in South Boston, which one report claims was “totally off-limits to blacks.” Others were attacked in the Fields Corner neighborhood, and when four Black salesmen, visiting from out of town, decided to stop at Carson Beach, they were chased off the beach and attacked by a white mob. See, Joette Chancy & Brenda Franklin, “Report from Boston,” The Black Scholar 7, no. 4 (December 1975): 19-27; coverage from major papers, however, would disagree. John Kifner’s April 1976 report covers then recent “racial incidents” in which both Black and white communities were seen to have an equal role in the violence that left the “city tense and jittery. See, John Kifner, “White Man Beaten by Boston Blacks,” New York Times, Apr 21, 1976, 9.
498 David Atwood, dir., James Brown: Live at the Boston Garden, 1968 (Boston: WGBH, 1968), DVD.
retelling—to dare admit that anger, distrust and dislike, if amplified, were always present—
would be to collapse the miracle, to step off the precipice. Brown, to be sure, does—or will do—
what he can, as he always has done, as he did with Susskind. He will sing; he will give through
multiply signified gestures and lines that were, perhaps, an also always untold performance just
below the threshold of white telling. But he will not do so before White goes further. “Now I’m
here tonight like all of you to listen to James, but I’m also here to ask for your help. I’m here to
ask you to stay with me as your mayor, and to make Dr. King’s dreams a reality in Boston. . . All
I ask you tonight is this . . . that we in Boston will honor Dr. King in peace.”499 The painful
realization is not that Brown failed to save Boston, a city that did not needed saving from itself,
but that for all his presence, he could not save its Black residents from this narrative, which
endures, and which in its erasure of facts covers up the right to feel complexly and angrily.

But what might it mean to acknowledge the rightful place of anger in this moment? What,
to invoke Audre Lorde, might it do to accept—and sit with—the idea that anger has its uses?500
So much is lost in this moment: a man—who was a husband and father, who was friend and
collaborator, an organizer, too. These are the immediate tributes we give. And how strange that
in a nation committed to self-possession and property—and on one’s ability to stand alone—we
turn, in death, to the capacity for connection. In tribute, we honor what personhood so often
dismisses, listen for what we failed to hear or did not care to listen for during life. And, in this
doing, we generate a telling that cannot help but damage the memory, that falls short of tribute.
“All of us are here tonight to listen to a great talent, James Brown,” White would say in his
introduction to the concert. “But we’re also here to pay tribute to one of the greatest Americans,

499 Atwood, dir., James Brown: Live at the Boston Garden.
Dr. Martin Luther King [sic].” The combination of celebration and mourning—that both must happen, that White and the audience know this—is less important than how White understands mourning as moving through tribute. It seems to me—and I want to signal my own positionality here, which shares a standpoint closer to Whites’ than either Brown or Black America’s—that tribute cannot help but shrink the possibility of Black expressivity and the multiple feelings. In this moment, anger, rage, hurt, love, affection occur as a simultaneity, not then as an adjective signaling their temporary or aberrational merging by way of a disastrous event, but as a noun that names an enduring relation through which U.S. Blackness becomes a frame of reference. As Fred Moten writes, “to celebrate is to solemnify, in practice.” To dance or listen to Brown, in light of Moten’s observation, might be thought to gesture a kind of movement in the wake of antiblackness, which Christina Sharpe demonstrates is not merely a condition but an ethical choice to take account of enduring and never entirely knowable loss so to determine how Black people might better care for each other.

Well toward the end of the concert, Brown sings “I Got You (I Feel Good),” and it strikes me that one might wonder how Brown dared sing such a song. How dare he slip so deeply into feeling—into dangerous, inappropriate, even undisciplined feeling. How dare he call good—and all that word might signify—into being. To ask this question would be to miss the

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501 Atwood, dir., *James Brown: Live at the Boston Garden.*


503 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke, 2016); See also, Christina Sharpe, “And To Survive,” *Small Axe* 22, no. 3, (November 2018): 171-180. In this later article, Sharpe explicitly invokes care as a mode of unfreedom, a means through which lives are made in excess of but attendant to precarity and antiblackness.

504 It has become proverbial to state the fact that Black musical praxis, which is to foreground the linked role between practice and theory, has always negotiated reclamations of pleasure, pain, and agency in the face of enslavement, dispossession and its many afterlives. If scholars like
performative and passionate nature of the declaration, how it brings into the space a simultaneity
and so gestures to and toward and from within an always present, if untold, Black relationality.
In this moment, Brown—political surrogate and stand-in—drops modes of retelling and enters a
gesture of feeling. Tribute—so public, so staged—has no place and, somehow, in the enactment
of celebration and solemnity it is already present in the realization, however limited, of King’s
larger project.

Perhaps this sort of speculation is unfair. Perhaps this focus on tribute is a semantic
distinction too small to assign either intention or blame. Still, it looms; to call for tribute was to
schedule the repast before there’d been time for funeral, before there’d been time to sit with the
anger, rage and even revulsion that surged. How did we get here, so ahead of ourselves, as if
arrival had come, as if repair were not immanent but made in and by surrogated memory? And
where do we go from here, when here is foregone, permanent, with neither arc nor bend? Is there
room to imagine otherwise locations of relationality? Is there opportunity to eschew the miracle,
its telling and retelling ways?

Alone

Stephen Best have begun to explore the danger of overdetermining these links, it bears saying
that to “feel good” was often haunted by questions of respectability, spectacle and white telling.
What happens, it might be asked, when we begin to frame Brown’s lyric as hovering somewhere
between declaration and performative utterance, with the former becoming possible (or even
ture) only because it occurs simultaneous to the latter. To say that one feels good, in this sense,
inagurates a ground upon which one might for a moment or always partially feel and find just
that—a sweetness—alongside any number of other feelings. For work on black musical praxis as
In fact, for his *After Dark* performance, Brown does not start out alone. When Heffner brings the show’s opening performers, Three Dog Night, to meet the soul star, they find Brown standing at a bar with comedian Clay Tyson, singer Marva Whitney, and a third, unnamed Black woman. Later in the show, Heffner asks the singer about his recent purchase of a jet, saying, “Come fly with me,” to which Brown corrects, “come fly with us.” He then turns to smile at the Black woman who has joined him for the interview and begins to list the many cities that he and his revue had visited. In the middle of the list, Three Dog Night’s Cory Wells interrupts Brown and says, “We’ve done a few of our things. Why don’t you come and do something for us?” In response to Well’s abrupt—if obviously scripted—request, the audience begins to clap. Brown looks around and says, “fellas, fellas, fellas,” raising his voice, “I need a little room.” In the context of the program, Brown’s call for room is literal. The excited audience surrounds him, leaving little space for a performance. However, the clamor and excitement of Heffner’s largely white audience to be near Brown cannot help but hint at a much longer history of space claiming across the color line. Indeed, the audience’s reaction forecloses the possibility of Brown performing with others, and when combined with Well’s demand that he stop his interview to perform, it is hard not to read the call for “room” as a rejoinder to the long history of white demand and desire and the isolating and even alienating consequences they introduce.

Indeed, it might be said that Brown’s discomfiting performance on the *After Dark* stage occurs precisely because he has finally found himself alone—which is to say without the Black community to which he so frequently claimed kinship. In its place, a predominately white and

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505 The third woman goes uncredited in the show.
506 *Playboy After Dark*. “Episode 1.17.”
507 *Playboy After Dark*. “Episode 1.17.”
508 *Playboy After Dark*. “Episode 1.17.”
young audience gather around the performer’s feet or sit at tables toward the back of the television studio. And in the refusal to give of himself, the performance cannot help but draw associations with those protests staged by Muhammad Ali in 1967, where the boxer refused his draft induction, and Tommy Smith and John Carlos’ Black power salute on the medal stand at the 1968 Olympics. As Harvey Young has argued, Ali’s decision to show up to his induction ceremony and remain still was an act of passive defiance that forced the draft board to conspicuously—and unjustly—name him a criminal.509 Likewise, Kevin Quashie’s reading of Smith and Carlos’ decision to accompany their salutes with closed eyes and bowed heads signaled a quiet—and prayerful—retention of interiority.510 While there is no way to tell whether Brown’s performance was influenced by these athletes, the links between physicality, publicness and their respective refusals is striking.511

Of course, the performance has a more immediate precedent. For the premier episode of *Shindig!* in September of 1964, Sam Cooke performed “Blowin in the Wind,” the Bob Dylan penned Civil Rights anthem. The choice was not surprising. Cooke had already recorded the song for his *Live at the Copa* album, and *Shindig!* was the replacement program for *Hootennany*, a series that specialized in folk revival music. Indeed, “Blowin in the Wind” should have effectively bridged the transition, giving the younger audience one of pop’s most beloved artists performing a song written by a man who had come to be associated with the new guard of folk

and who was still a year away from his ground- or heart-breaking decision to ‘go electric.’

Topically, the song captured the mood of the period as well. The March for Jobs and Freedom had occurred just over a year before, while the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had passed into law that July. And, perhaps, it did manage to bridge what was to come.

In retrospect, however, it bears little resemblance to the episodes that followed. Cooke, for his part, delivers a beautiful vocal. But the dancers—so essential to the show—struggle on the risers behind him. Arms move in imitation of a march, while feet lift and fall with all the grace of an untrue wheel. They are, perhaps, not to blame. “Blowin in the Wind” might have

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512 In March 1965, Dylan released his fifth album, *Bring It All Back Home*. The album splits between an electric—and more rock-oriented—first side and an acoustic—and folk-oriented—second side. On July 25th, four and a half months after the album’s release, he played at the Newport Folk Festival and decided to defy the organizer’s wishes that he only play acoustic material. The reaction was mixed. Half the audience loved it; the other half were appalled. The split reaction occurred at his concerts across 1965 and 1966.

513 Though lesser known, Herb Metoyer’s “Five Questions” has always struck me as a subtle response to “Blowin in the Wind.” Released in 1966 on Smithsonian’s Folkways, “Five Questions” takes up a good deal of allusions and phrasing used by Dylan. For example, Metoyer’s “well, ask yourself this” takes up an identical stress and syllabic count to Dylan’s “yes, n’ how many . . .” Both are used as refrains, introducing the questions given by the singers. Lyrically, Metoyer’s work both alludes to and, ultimately, undermines Dylan’s somewhat uncritical lament. To wit: “Some folk cry out/‘Oh Lord/ when will I be free/ some others shout/ just as loud/ oh lord/ when will those people let us be/ well, ask yourself this / and I’m sure that you will see/ when will the mountain take the shore down by the sea / when will the money start to grow from any tree / now you know when.” In the above, Metoyer inverts the relationship given in Dylan’s song (mountains take the shore rather than get washed out by it), while Dylan’s nature metaphors are conspicuously brought into proximity with the cliché that money does not grow on trees. When all combined, listeners are invited to consider that for all of “Blowin in the Wind’s” beauty, it remains a song that is politically empty with respect to inequality across the color line. If no singer is obliged to take up a materialist critique, Metoyer’s “Five Questions” shows why some attention to the very different material realities across race might be necessary for white activists who endeavored projects in service of universal liberty (perhaps white America’s most enduring and violent cliché). Indeed, this inattention cannot help but give reason to why “some people” wanted to know “when these people will let us be.” That Dylan’s song does none of this work might also explain why it could not, to return to the body of this essay, bridge what was to come. See, Herb Metoyer, “Five Questions,” *Something New*, Verve Folkways, 1965.
reached number two on the pop charts that year, but it did not do so because it lent to dance. Even Cooke offers uninspired gestures that too literally interpret the lyrics. And when he finally walks into the white audience—seated in chairs arranged into rows—they do not immediately rush him. There is, if anything, a reluctance to join. One woman eventually rises and then part of the first row follows her. They form a semi-circle, clapping limply. At one point, Cooke leans forward, and the semi-circle breaks ever slightly, never to refill. It is a far cry from the image of excited teenagers falling over themselves to meet the Beatles that same year.

The reason for these differences cannot be told. There is no document, no interview, no reflection about why the audience receives Cooke so quietly, as if it were trying to keep him close but not with them all at once. There is, in this sense, nothing told and so nothing to retell—just an audience unsure what to do, just a singer who must manage a performance that is somehow close and distant all at once. If Brown’s After Dark performance differs in tone and time, the resemblance between audiences—both close and distant all at once—is, again, striking. Here were two men—separated by five years—somehow all alone and yet still surrounded.

Regard
Burden II: Hereness

With this difference: white power's nervous, irritable wariness. Because white power figures remember what a lot of Blacks don't: the late Sixties, which showed . . . that Blacks working together—or even, in some circumstances, just being together—are themselves powerful. Secret acknowledgment of that reality is one of the reasons that the phrase "the Sixties" has been shadowed of late, ridiculed, sometimes spat on: there is a jumpy desire for oblivion of that awareness of Black strength and potential resourcefulness.

-Gwendolyn Brooks

And then I look at you and the world’s all right with me.

-Bill Withers

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In 1967, Phil Cohran drew up an ad for the Affro-Arts Theater that reads, “All Up in Heah, The Affro-Arts Theater Presents in Concert The Artist Heritage Ensemble, Philip Cohran—Director Performing Black Magic—Black History, Black Knowledge and Black Truth, A Community Cultural Center—Rededicated The Affro-Arts Theater.” Based in Chicago, Cohran envisioned the theater as a hub for both visiting and local Black arts and Black power figures. In the three years that the theater operated, it hosted luminaries such as Kwame Ture, Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Reverend Spenser Jackson and Darlene Blackburn and played a central role in the formation of The Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), the collective of Black writers, artists, academics and intellectuals founded by Hoyt Fuller, Conrad Kent Rivers and Abdul Alkalimat in 1967. It was, then, a space given to what AbdouMaliq Simone names “districting somewhere,” the “incessantly inventive practice of

operating in the discontinuities between having a location in which one is identified and from which one can identify and speak to others and the capacity to address others, call upon them, and implicate them beyond the specificity of any location.”

To district, Simone argues, is to work from within the framework of “available classifications and administrative categories” in order to generate a space that “exceeds all efforts to definitively pin it down.”

For Cohran, the theater served as a place of infinite address and subsequent revision, making its closure in 1970 a loss for the local Chicago communities that used it as a site of entertainment and congregation. To have been there was, in this instance, to face the precarity of here, which is to say the making of an open and enduring space for Black congregation and community, even as its closure could never be entirely complete or, to play on Simone’s work, un-districted.

Of course, the making of place in otherwise precarious conditions was nothing new to Black artists. This was true even for those artists whose efforts have been heralded as groundbreaking and innovative. In a letter written to Nat Hentoff, the bassist, composer and writer Charles Mingus pointedly asks, “How many jazz musicians would stay in the clubs if they could even make a living playing in parks and simple places without the big build-up that’s now an absolute necessity for survival?”

The question is both pointed and poignant. For one, the letter is written during Mingus’ stay at the Bellevue Hospital in the late fifties. As he writes in his

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519 Simone, 5.

520 Any number of examples for how the spirit of the theater was carried further could be given. Fuller’s work at *Black World* (Formerly *Negro Digest*) and the formation of AfriCOBRA name two examples local to Chicago, which also would come to network across the nation. For more examples, see below.

autobiography, he had been awake for days. Hoping to stop the pace of his thoughts, he begins to walk through Manhattan. “I was sped up, tired out, I couldn’t think who I was, I wanted to lay down and sleep . . . I walked by Birdland and thought I’d go in and talk to some of the cats but I cancelled out on that idea, they’d wouldn’t understand.”

Passing the club, then located at 52nd street and Broadway, Mingus turns east and walks thirty-four blocks to Bellevue Hospital, where he encounters a Black guard, who initially refuses to let him into the hospital. “This is no rest home,” the guard tells Mingus, “this place is for the mentally disturbed.” Mingus pleads with him, insisting that he is not well. “Take my word for it,” the guard tells him, “you don’t want to come in here.” Mingus, however, persists, and the guard reluctantly lets him in, at which point Mingus realizes that the guard had been correct. The hospital is not a place where he might find “a quiet room,” and the “here” of Bellevue was decidedly different from the place of respite that Mingus sought. As he details in his autobiography, “attendants were cold and standoffish,” and the guard, once “polite and proper,” turns cold. In short time, Mingus hears his intake doctor tell a colleague that “Negroes are paranoiac, unrealistic people who believe the whole world is against them.”

What becomes clear to Mingus—and what was, perhaps, clear to the Black guard all along—is that by fact of being a Black man he is seen as insensible or, perhaps, too sensitive, without the requisite perceptual calibration needed to know anything of value and so unfit to properly claim his right to tell. Inside the hospital, neither Cohran’s “Black Magic” nor Simone’s

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522 Mingus, 330.
523 Mingus, 330.
524 Mingus, 330.
525 Mingus, 332.
526 Mingus, 333; 332.
527 Mingus, 333.
districting are available. In their place is institutional discipline, which, Foucauldian in nature, generates a discursive real that forecloses experiential or material challenges Mingus might offer. Doctors expect Mingus to become a subject by being subjected to the institution’s rule or law, which culminates in the suggestion that the cure for Mingus’ racialized and so pathological paranoia was nothing less than a lobotomy—a procedure that caused patients to lose their ability to process emotions, to become, as it were, insensate and so less able to tell.

However, it is Mingus’ decision to include Birdland within this scene that is of primary interest. Almost a decade in operation and the site of some of jazz recordings’ most famous “live” sessions, Birdland had become a symbol of the kind of sonic and congregational innovation jazz made possible. It was, then, seen to be a “heah” like Cohran’s Affro-Arts Theater. Where recordings of luminaries at Birdland suggest the successful generation of a jazz district, and so Black congregation, Mingus’ ultimate refusal to seek refuge inside of the club cannot help but trouble such understandings. For Mingus, Birdland, in a moment of need, is not a site of congregation; it is a place of and for performances interrupted by money. Transaction, not mutual regard and the search for small “understanding,” conditioned the encounter between musicians and their audiences in most clubs. Where Bellevue serves as an example of state institution’s disciplining force, Birdland signifies the market’s shaping and even alienating power. And both demonstrate how these spaces usher him in—as a possible source of revenue—

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529 Nichols Hogan, “‘We’re All Mad Here’: Power and Identity in the Modern Era of Mental Illness,” Intersect 10, no. 1 (2016): 1-17. What Mingus’ recollection makes abundantly clear that both Hogan and Foucault leave out is the racialized nature of psychiatry’s assessments. If lobotomies were performed on white and Black patients, the medical assessments of a patient deciding to narrate or tell of both a racial order and its violence could not help but produce racialized discipline.
even as they fail to offer a district in which he might find a here that could accommodate Black relationality. And it is these concerns to which Mingus’ letter contends.

In her reading of the letter, Fumi Okiji suggest that Mingus’ desire for spaces unanswerable to either the state or market forces might be fruitfully understood as taking up something akin to Walter Benjamin’s conception of “the household of the inhuman”—those places “where the music could take root for a while, ingratiate itself to the listeners . . . where it could stay put and where it could lead you astray—take you away from home.” 530 Okiji’s link between Mingus and Benjamin forces readers to ask a series of questions about property, habitability and refuge for Black communities. How, as it were, does one make a claim to space, enabling one to “stay put,” without falling to the possessive (and so violent) impulses of settlerism and coloniality? 531 In order to contend with such questions, Okiji turns to Theodor Adorno’s work on dwelling. Arguing that even if Adorno’s dismissals of jazz (and Black people) present limits to theorists and practitioners hoping to apply dwelling to both jazz and, more broadly, Black relationality, his approach to the modern impossibility of dwelling present opportunities through which to think about the profound ambivalence Black people must negotiate with respect to space, property and concepts of home. For both Adorno and Okiji, dwelling includes spatial concerns even it exceeds them. Individuals dwell in structures like homes and apartments, neighborhoods and cities, but they also dwell in less obvious things like

530 Fumi Okiji, Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2018), 51.
writing and texts.\textsuperscript{532} One can, for Adorno, dwell within concepts of the past and acts of remembering—in ways that both adhere to and diverge from the failed Enlightenment project of the individual. Or, as Okiji puts it, dwelling names both “a place we reside or stay” and a word that refers “to when one spends time thinking through an issue. To stay there and linger. To delay moving on.”\textsuperscript{533}

Departing from Adorno, Okiji moves further into the dilemma Black communities face within the double-jointed impulse of dwelling. As she writes, “while black people have to refuse the world, the rejection (their everyday living) is always up against the pull of normativity. . . Resistance is inevitable but also fraught and fragile.”\textsuperscript{534} Mingus’ recollection might be said to add one more sense of dwelling with which neither Adorno nor Okiji explicitly contend. Namely, he makes clear that the necessity of refuge and so space to dwell on ideas and with communities also means that precarity dwells, and, in Mingus’ telling, takes on an embodied phenomenon that exhausts his capacity for other endeavors. For Mingus, resistance is fraught precisely because the need to clear space produces the very conditions that exhaust him. Resistance, in this sense, is recursive, constantly rehearsing necessity and, in its rehearsal, it produces another kind of dwelling that leaves little room for anything else.\textsuperscript{535}


\textsuperscript{533} Okiji, 58.

\textsuperscript{534} Okiji, 66.

\textsuperscript{535} Robert Nichols’ note on recursion is helpful. For Nichols, recursion differs from tautology because it “produces what it presupposes.” Where the latter forms a loop, in which the trajectory constantly circles within a closed circuit back on itself, a recursive structure generates “iterations” that “build[d] upon or augment[t] its original postulate” through “self-reference and positive feedback effects.” It is, for Nichols, “the helix, not the circle.” In his exploration of dispossession and property, he demonstrates that while we often understand that “property” must be normatively prior to “theft,” within colonial and settler logics “theft is the mechanism by
This is, perhaps, why Simone argues that resistance must begin with the recognition and embrace of inhabitability, a term he uses to name both “the obvious conditions of violence, oppression and toxicity” marginalized and dispossessed communities have contended with and “a method, not one necessarily chosen by residents, but rather something converted into a method from the shards of broken lives and broken infrastructures that make up a district’s heritage.” As a method, Simone argues, the uninhabitable enables “a kind of thinking that challenged or refused what it means to visibly inhabit a place” and offers readers an analytic by which we might come to “more fully understand the rhythms of endurance, the surges of life that carry bodies forward and back between destinations that are altered in each approach, each retreat?”

Like Okiji and Mingus before, Simone’s notion of inhabitability makes clear that Cohran’s “heah,” while tied to the material space in which the theater operated found its import and, perhaps, even glory in how it exceeded questions of ideological coherence, sovereignty and space.

Leading from such discussions, I want to suggest that Mingus’ letter—how it makes clear that it was also a space deeply imbricated within state and market forces that had historically served antiblack ends—takes up an alternative mode of dwelling and so generates a “here” on the page. Indeed, his attention to imbrication cannot be read as a polemic, singularly dismissive of clubs; to the contrary, both the letter—and the many other instances of critique he famously offers—serve as both a negotiation in service to districting and, as it were, the generation of

which property is generated.” In matters of dwelling and space-making, then, the recursive effect to which Mingus contends exhausts precisely because of its augmentative or reiterative effect. See, Robert Nichols, Theft is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 9.

Simone, 10.

Simone, 10.
hope. Indeed, as he heartbreakingly writes of his time at Bellevue, “Anger is an emotion that has some hope in it,” and he does not commit himself to the hospital because he was too angry, but, in fact, because he “felt hopeless,” without the requisite anger needed to endeavor projects of districting.\footnote{Mingus, 332.} There was, then, no here possible in the club in the moment he passes Birdland. He, quite simply, lacked the will to make a place within an otherwise antiblack space. There was only despair, the dwelling on what must be cleared and, yet, could not be said or “understood” by those inside the club. Indeed, despair—and the embodied nature of its dwelling—is the central affect of the hospital scene.

The letter to Hentoff, on the other hand, issues anger in order to conjure hope and, in doing so, takes part in the spell suggested by Cohran’s invocation of “Black Magic.”\footnote{Semmes, 447.} In the letter, then, anger is not tantamount to dismissal; it is a call to the “somewhere” of Simone’s districting, an otherwise location brought into the present, not ‘there’ but ‘here.’ In this way, Mingus’s letter to Hentoff offers us another mode of “dwelling,” one that asks readers to find “refuge” in text, to hold onto the hard questions concerning relationality and antiblackness. It is a letter that does not “arrive out of despair,” to quote Ralph Ellison, but acts as the “something that had to be done in order to clear the way so that [one] could go on to other things.”\footnote{Ellison’s assertions come from a letter written in response to a letter written by Chester Aaron, in which the latter had assumed that Invisible Man had been written from a place of despair. See, Ralph Ellison. “Ralph Ellison to Chester Aaron,” The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Random House, 2019), 303.} In this way, Mingus’ assessment of the club might be read as that which clears the way, even as history demonstrates the fact that Black musicians, performers and audiences always also found ways to make the club a site of congregation, community and encounter.
That the club could produce congregation even as it contended with antiblack policies and economic demands is made evident in a 1972 essay on Boston’s long-running jazz club Wally’s. Written two years after the closing of the Affro-Arts Theater, the article describes a club as owned by “a brother who encourages jam sessions every weekend” and populated by “spirits that love to congregate here.” Important, the sessions were not exclusive to the musicians; one man—“elegant and gaunt with a deep lion voice”—is said to have “danced a powerful penguin,” while “old danced with young” and “all spirits, all people, all emotions, and suspended time was now unified and spiraling crazily upward . . .” Much like Cohran’s ad, Wally’s jam sessions occurred between musicians and audiences and generated a sense of congregation and presence. They were, then, engaged in and productive of the “heah” given in Cohran’s ad.

Importantly, Affro-Arts was not the first venue to provide a space for Black congregation. In a 1959 essay on Minton’s Playhouse, the legendary location for New York’s bop jam sessions, Ralph Ellison would make a strikingly similar observation to Okiji’s call for spaces that enabled straying. Audiences “were hardly aware of where they were or what time it was . . . They thought of Minton’s as a sanctuary, where in an atmosphere blended of nostalgia and a music-and-drink lulled suspension of time they could retreat from the wartime tensions of the town.” Ellison goes on to argue that if music “usually gives resonance to memory,” that was not the case “here.” Minton’s players offered music that “was itself a texture of fragments,

542 Tuffy, 13.
repetitive, nervous, not fully formed.” The memory generated at Minton’s “took place off to the side” and “beyond the range of attention.” One, as the saying goes, had to be there in order to understand the happenings. Mere reportage could not accommodate or account for what Ellison usefully calls “the revolutionary rumpus.” Sadly, by the time of Ellison’s writing, Minton’s had largely stopped their jam sessions, opting to book big name acts and so foreclosing the possibility of the kind of “approach” Simone outlines. Indeed, Ellison’s “revolutionary rumpus” existed outside of present time, forcing a return to memory without, it would seem, resonance. To have been there was, in this instance, to face the lack of a here, which returns us to Mingus’ question concerning necessity and survival.

I offer these passages less to suggest stylistic similarities between them—indeed, Ellison would famously deride a great deal of the musicians who played at both Affro-Arts and Wally’s—and more to think about Cohran’s notion of “heah.” The term is, of course, a transliteration of here and, thus, immediately foregrounds the importance of presence that both Mingus and Ellison note. To experience the making of “Black Magic—Black History, Black Knowledge and Black Truth” one needed to visit the theater—to be, as it were, in congregation with those inside it. However, the transliteration does more than demand one visit. “Heah” is already in the act of delivering its readers into the theater’s sounded community. To read “heah” out loud is to discover an utterance given as an exhalation whose tonal and semantic quality depends on how speakers and readers shape their mouths. “Heah,” thus, serves as both invitation

544 Ellison, 55.
545 Ellison, 55.
546 Ellison, 55.
547 Ellison, 55.
548 Semmes, 447.
into space and, importantly, an instruction for how presence without space might also be given—or more precisely given over to hereness, a term I use so to begin thinking about the many ways that Black congregation and community has a long history of place-making that if not inattentive to space—for risk and state violence loomed—took up alternative modalities and practices that sought to generate connection, communion and congregation in otherwise antiblack world. Here, then, was a new mode of telling, not in service to instantiating possessive personhood but, in fact, seeking to use communicative and sounding modes in order to come into (and, as I hope to show below, performatively inaugurate) greater relation. As Clayton Riley would write in 1971, “we recognized just partially what our hip walks, our heavy talk could mean. That our music and our lives were one, interchanging constantly, an always kinda thing.”

When placed within the broader contexts of the examples offered above and, importantly, of the period in which the ad is written, Cohran’s “heah” might be said to offer an alternative poetics through which to approach Black listening and, thus, regard. As Aretha Franklin more succinctly puts it, “music is my way of communicating, that part of me that I can get out front and share. It is my here-I-am-where-are-you? It’s what I have to give; my way of saying let’s find one another. Music is me with my hand outstretched, hoping someone will take it.”

Hereness, then, names those efforts, practices and analytics of extension that Black intellectuals, artists and communities used to come into community with each other even when neither space nor proximity was available. Of the many different approaches and ideas given to this sort of congregation, three are of particular interest to both the period and communities to which the essays that follow attend: Cheryl Clarke’s concept of circles, Brandon Terry’s notion of the

549 On relation, see, Glissant, *Poetics of Relation.*
Black power problem-space, and Fred Moten’s concept of “styling.” What follows is an attempt to place them in discussion both with each other and, more importantly, the many notions of hereness that occur within the discussions they enable.

Circles

Cheryl Clarke offers the concept of Black culture as “a system of circles constantly being redrawn and reshaped along race, gender, sex, class and community lines.” Drawing from and ultimately inverting Frederick Douglass’ invocation of the circle in his assessment of the sorrow songs, Clarke argues that for Douglass’ position “without the circle’ generated by enslavement and the plantation system engenders the experiential and intellectual distance requisite for assessing the “deep meanings” of the sorrow songs. To be without the circle was to come into consciousness of “history—in Africa—prior to slavery,” which in no small way provided an early—if only implicit—counter to the Hegelian notion that Africa and those who populated the continent were without history. If the Black Arts cohort shared Douglass’ desire for both consciousness and history, they also sought, Clarke argues, to re-draw a circle from within which they might come into collective consciousness. Distance of the sort Douglass sought “produced anxiety and a crisis of identity” for many artists and activists of the period precisely.

553 Clarke, 48.
554 Clarke, 48.
555 Following the work of black musicians, critics and academics, Ingrid Monson argues that the “linguistic and musical practices [in and surrounding jazz] . . . retain their power to stereotype when they are not situated within the history of ethnic interaction and politics in the United States.” see, Monson, Say Something, 74.
because of white, Western and state hegemony and its hailing-power.\textsuperscript{556} By drawing a circle—which is to say a nation—exclusive to Black people, Black Arts and Black Nationalists believed they would be better able come into a consciousness in excess of these forces.\textsuperscript{557}

Clarke’s figure of the circle was neither exclusive to her work nor limited to the poetry world to which she addresses. Writing on the “non-musical forces” that have forced Black musicians to adapt, negotiate or refuse any number of demands placed on them by record executives, Donald Byrd extends the figure to the many institutions that make up the music industry. Black musicians, he argues, were forced to negotiate a series of circles that served the interests of the music business. If the “policy making figures like a product and feel that it will make money, then the product will be issued and vigorously promoted.”\textsuperscript{558} The perhaps obvious consequence, Byrd argues, is that executives—many of whom have little and sometimes no musical training or background—obtain undue influence along at least two tracts. First, their power to sign and promote musicians and recordings, respectively, ensures their dominating and


\textsuperscript{557} Two quick points must be added. First, the idea of a nationalist circle beyond the reach of hailing power might describe any number of efforts, but Russell Atkin’s concept of generating the conditions that effectuated community members as “nationalist phenomenologists” most directly grapples with the notion of hailing-power. Indeed and as developed in “Burden II,” Atkin’s concept precedes Althusser’s concept of hailing-power and the state apparatus. Second, if the concept of Black circles seems to slip into an obverse mode of telling, that is because it can and, in. many cases, does. The second of these points is discussed below. On “Nationalist Phenomenologists,” Atkins wrote a great deal of articles between 1963 and 1980. See, for example, Russell Atkins, “Some Thoughts Defining ‘Mainstream’ in Relation to ‘Education’ and Destructive Power,” \textit{Free Lance} 8, no. 1 (1964): 26-27; in addition, see, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, “Black Deconstruction: Russell Atkins and the Reconstruction of African-American Criticism,” \textit{Diacritics} 26, no. 3 (1996): 86-103; On hailing, see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation.”

profit-driven influence. Second—and more importantly—executives’ power to decide who is and is not given a recording contract cannot help but stifle creativity because musicians, over time, become aware that they must “create whatever will fit into the prevailing whims of official recording policy.”

The import of institutional circles to the discussion at hand emerges within Byrd’s next point. For him, a label’s constricting influence does not effectuate market-force in isolation. Rather, the label is one profit-interested “circle” amongst others. “As the music leaves these circles of influence,” he will write of the executive ring, “it must then run the gauntlet erected by the media.” Extrapolating from Byrd’s point, it might be said that the sheer fact of media’s distributive chain means that it conditions the possibility of a sense of hereness in excess of the local. Because media provides the circuits through which hereness can be made in excess of one’s immediate circle, print, radio and television companies have an enormous amount of influence with respect to distribution. This is true of both large corporations or independent operations. And such influence matters in discussions concerning the role of language and music precisely because it is within this circle that criticism, reflection and other modes of music writing circulate. If editors like Hoyt Fuller and Black run journals provided a forum through which Black critics, writers and musicians could gather into an imagined circle, Byrd’s assertion that white critics continued to hold an undue influence on music criticism and writing stands. Worse, “[a]ll too often these writings have been derived from invalid frameworks of reference, resulting in faulty conclusions and gross distortions.” These distortions, however, go unchecked, and because they “are published in reputable journals and in books by reputable

\[559\] Byrd, 3
\[560\] Byrd, 4.
\[561\] Byrd, 4.
publishing companies,” they “gradually become part of written history and ultimately, perpetual legitimacy.”

Byrd was not alone in such observations. Kofi Natambu’s “Words and Music in America” looks at one example of how Black communities have taken up both words and music—even as language and theorization were often seen to be the exclusive domain of white critics and poets. “Jazz poetry,” he writes, “was not discovered by” the Beats and other white intellectual circles. To the contrary,

It started if you really wanna know
(and you damn well should) in a white
Whorehouse in East St. Louis, Illinois
In August 1928 where a bunch of drunken
Unemployed Negro poets were sitting around
Trying to sound like Louis Armstrong as a
Rickety Victrola ground out 1900 choruses
of “Tight like That” in the early mourning
hours of Eddie Jefferson’s 12th birthday . . .

Natambu’s origin point is canny. Alongside Babs Gonzales and King Pleasure, Jefferson is one of the early innovators of vocalese, a form of singing in which a vocalist adds words to a previously composed instrumental track. By signaling one of the innovators of vocalese, the poem effectively demands that those seeking to locate the start of jazz poetry (“if you really wanna know”) need to widen their approach, taking into account a form that for those unfamiliar might be thought of as anything but one that adds language to already recorded songs.

However, this is not the only thing the poem corrects. Importantly, the narrator does not locate the beginnings of jazz poetry in vocalese, which would pre-date recordings by the Beats.

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562 Byrd, 4.
Rather, the start occurs on Jefferson’s twelfth birthday, when a group of Black poets, “trying to sound like Louis Armstrong,” were asked by “Eddie’s father” to donate their individual stanzas to little Eddie as a birthday gift as Jefferson, Sr. didn’t have no money as usual to buy his wide-eyed son that silver-grey saxophone he’d seen in the window of a weary looking pawnshop . . .

The details of this moment collect and, perhaps, condense the various market and social forces that generate the start and erasure of Black writers’ participation within jazz poetry. If vocalese, per the poem’s narration, comes to be because Jefferson could not afford a saxophone, the form might be said to emerge and then disappear due to exclusionary market forces, which, in their ability to ignore and so erase Black musicians and critics’ contributions, embolden the enduring and fallacious idea that Black musicians and listeners were not always in the act of theorizing music, engagement and sounding.

Interestingly, the formal use of “as” appears in four of the final five lines of the poem and, in so appearing, amplifies the force of market and social exclusion. If “as” appears, for the most part, in its prepositional and adverbial forms, its repetition cannot help but generate the hint or trace of conjunction. This trace generates a kind of breathless quality that, in turn, sounds the tone or even temper of a narrator trying to contend with the variety of forces that seek to silence any history that would place Black innovation at its center. The poem, thus, joins Byrd’s critique and demonstrates how industry circles and the social forces that emerge from them effectively amplified Black sounding and music making while diminishing and even ignoring these same communities and individuals’ theorizations of jazz, poetry and their combinatory possibility.

564 Natambu, 342.
More directly, the poem joins other scholars and musicians who either identify or take part in a long tradition of thinking about music, language and listening. Indeed, it is not that Jefferson marks the start of jazz poetry; to the contrary, the poem makes clear that vocalese emerges from and is engendered by a longer tradition of “negro poets” whose love of jazz spurs response. These responses, it might be said, have occurred in any number of modes and forms across jazz’s history, not the least of which are the long-form myths of its *precise* beginnings in the late 19th century neighborhoods of Black New Orleans. Indeed, Black listener’s responses—which is to say words—have always been given to jazz and Black music more broadly; what might be said to change is their location, which is to return to a question of where they go. In the case of both the poem and the discussions above, however, Moten’s question obtains a secondary chain of inquiry. Namely, any inquiry into where words go also requires us to ask where have all the words that have been given by Black listeners gone. Such a question, while perhaps answered by Byrd’s media circle, remains pertinent. This is especially true of jazz poetry and the tendency to treat contemporaries to the Beats like Bob Kaufman and Amiri Baraka (then: LeRoi Jones) as “silent seconds, thirds, or fourths to white males . . .”\(^565\)

Yet, even this is not enough, as history bears out that it was not just poets who loved jazz and language but, also, that many of jazz’s most prominent figures also had a gift for language and insight into the role that words might take in the making of congregation and hereness. In his interdisciplinary study of Black speech, Aldon Lynn Nielsen points out that Charles Mingus and Duke Ellington used poetry on their recordings long before the Beats, while interview after interview of jazz musicians document their assertion that players like Charlie Parker, Dizzy

Gillespie and Max Roach, to name only three players contemporary to the emergence of vocalese, were deeply invested in language, ideas and the play between sound and word.\textsuperscript{566} Likewise, the autobiographies and articles written by players like Mingus and Byrd demonstrate the richness of thought and respect for words of many jazz musicians. For these musician’s and writers, the question of Black expression emerges as a play from within Clark’s circle, which, in many cases, had to contend with the kinds of constriction generated by the market-driven circles Byrd describes. And, in their respective negotiations, the question of circles emerges as a constant tension between drawing lines that protected the integrity of Black exchange, expression and experience while still allowing for the possibility of addition and redrawing.

Yet, even those circles drawn by Black participants were not without their own sacrifices and exclusions. Indeed, Natambu’s assertion that jazz poetry’s origin can be located within a single event effectively draws a circle similar to those described by Clarke. The effect of such a circle, however, depends on the vantage from which approaches it. On the one hand, it generates a myth strong enough to reclaim jazz poetry from those who would assume Black expression ended at music’s untheorized and unsigned sounding. By offering readers an event prior to the advent of Beat recordings, Natambu forecloses the possibility of any claim that it took Beat writers to “discover” jazz poetry. On the other hand, and as numerous scholars have demonstrated, the demand for origins—which is to say \textit{sui generis} creation—has long been the domain of white supremacist modes of both entry and denial/dismissal. The poem, in this way, threatens to slip into troubling tropes which, ironically, do not operate from closure but, in fact, open up the possibility for white claims on Jazz poetry. More pointedly, the poem’s use of prior

dates might effectively cast Beat claims out of the circle, but, in doing so, these claims also invite what might be called the race to priorness, which is to say that bad faith interlocutors only need to find a date prior to the poem’s own in order to commandeer questions of possession.\textsuperscript{567}

However, it might be asked whether Natambu’s story is to be taken as a literal start, or if the story, in fact, signifies on the concept of origins themselves.\textsuperscript{568} If no definitive answer can be given, contexts both outside and within the poem suggest that readers need to be attentive to the signified meaning embedded within the poem. Broadly speaking, a good deal of Black Arts and Black Power-era writers and musicians understood the power and utility of myths. For a wide range of Black writers and thinkers like Ron Karenga, Sun Ra and Henry Dumas, the fact of an origin point was less important than the utility of its myth. Indeed, myths were modes through which to come into collective consciousness and a nationalist imaginary, taking part in what Tavia Nyong’o has called “afro-philo-sonic fictions.”\textsuperscript{569} Yet, even these contexts—and the

\textsuperscript{567} While well beyond the domain of this essay, Albert Murray’s notion of omni-American also bears—and, perhaps, in an even more consequential manner. For Murray, the mutual influence Black and white communities had on each other would not need a prior date so much as evidence that Black and white musicians and writers drew from each other’s respective techniques and practices. If Murray, ultimately, adheres to origins—if in a strikingly new way—his approach is useful when thinking through questions of origin and, as I have named it above, priorness. See, Albert Murray, \textit{The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture} (New York: Outerbirdge & Dienstfrey, 1970).

\textsuperscript{568} Oftentimes Black uses of signifying are poorly understood as synonymous with irony. Such understandings, however, strip the practice of its richer use. Where irony names expressions that mean the opposite of what they state, signifying operates within ambivalence. To signify is to always generate the space through which multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings are available or possible. Determination comes from mutual recognition and regard, which does not so much limit an expression to one meaning as it does the instantaneous work of mutual regard and, in such work, comes into awareness of possible meanings.

presence of any number of myths therein—is perhaps unnecessary when discussing the poem, as
the closing line suggests that, signified or not, origins only tell part of Black music’s story. “The
rest” Natambu writes, “is MYSTERY . . .”

By not only invoking mystery but also ending on
an ellipsis, which has come to suggest an ongoing and to be determined movement or even
inertia, Natambu’s ending points readers toward the continued practice of music and word
making within Clarke’s circle. In his ending, it would seem, room is made—with each period,
perhaps, invoking an anticipated stop, a new voice to be added to the space of Black exchange.

Still, Clarke’s circles do not endeavor to map a binary relationship between those inside
and outside of Black culture. Per her description, these circles help to designate any number of
standpoints within the broad circle we might understand to be Black culture (capital B or
otherwise). Indeed, these circles emerge, she writes, “along race, gender, sex, class and
community lines,” with “the boundary of that ‘innermost circle’” being heavily policed by the
‘new black nationalist patriarchy.”

It is, perhaps, the figure of policing that turns the kinds of
“mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic
that occurs within the production of blackness” and, in its continued occurrence, comes to
“constitute[e] black culture,” into what E. Patrick Johnson has usefully called the appropriation
of Blackness by Black communities and individuals.

If “authentic blackness” is a requisite

Gail Collins, et. al. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 137-153; for Nyong’o’s
conception of afro-philo-sonic fiction, see, Tavia Nyongo, “Afro-philo-sonic Fictions: Black

Natambu. 342

For more on the performative nature of punctuation in Black writing, see, Jennifer DeVere
Brody. Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 64. For the
role of “punctuation” in music, see the next chapter, Talking Loud and Saying (Almost) Nothing:
The Political Possibilities in Audience’s Responses to “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud.”

Clarke, 48-49.

E. Patrick Johnson, Appropriation of Blackness.
analytic through which Black communities draw and re-draw Clarke’s circles, the policing of its borders, which implies an uneven power dynamic, cannot help but short-circuit these debates in favor of something more permanent and, returning to Clarke, constricting along gender, class and sexual orientations, respectively. This constriction is the precise moment when useful, necessary and often enlivening debates about authenticity descend to appropriation, which is to say the unsanctioned seizure of Black practice for or as one’s own.574

This is the circle’s danger—its lure, even. The force needed to generate a condition through which Black arts workers generated a circle—cannot help but also bear the implication of what might be called muscul arity. Words, in no short order, must be wielded in ways the evacuated those who would—and did—take part in Byrd’s circle, and they must be given to hereness all at once. As Larry Neal would open his treatise for Addison Gayle’s Black Aesthetic, “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community.”575 And if this did not effectuate a hidden or secreted meaning, it certainly could provide any number of works that operated through a double register. This matters in questions of circles precisely because these registers often leaked into each other. What might have been written so to hold bad faith and racist ideas in abeyance could and did descend or even register as intercommunity chauvinism. As Fred Moten writes of Amiri Baraka, Black Arts work begins as a “resistant embrace” but soon becomes “a repressive transfer of motive,” a means by

which the circle’s need to outpace a Western epistemological demand to know everything turns into a closed system.”

It also, despite its failures endeavored,

The pursuit of a more complex accommodation between technique and epistemological concerns, between ways of telling and ways of knowing, especially where knowing is less the claim than a nervousness about it, is what tends to be thought of as innovation, experimentation, avant-garde.

Hereness, then, turns on what Mackey calls nervousness, and which we might call ambivalence.

The issue at hand, thus, is how to generate an interrogative mode in which the practices, gestures are given over to the risky endeavor of constant auditioning and opening. And as Margo Natalie Crawford’s work demonstrates, Black Arts workers nervousness was, in no small way, a function of their commitment to “partially abstract [and] deeply experimental art” put in service of the “world-opening force of the concrete tags such as ‘Black is Beautiful’ and ‘Black Power.’”

Problem-Spaces and the Dialectics of Consciousness

The kinds of nervous auditions to which I reference above might be said to partake in what Brandon Terry calls “the problem-space of Black power.” Moving from David Scott’s conception of the “problem-space,” Terry argues that Black power was “far less a unitary

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movement than an assemblage of resonant and overlapping activity in politics, cultural production, and creative expression under a sign that tracks particular questions, contentions, and concepts. If Black Power advocates often trafficked in contentious and sometimes fractious declarations, which could and did generate the kind of “zero-sum” Blackness Dudley Randall warned against, they also evidenced the search for and development of “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes. (conceptual as well as ideological-political states) hangs.”

Placed within the problem-space framework, distinctions between expressions of Black Power, Black consciousness and Black liberation engender what might be called declarations from within an interrogative mode.

Indeed, this turn to the interrogative echoes Civil Rights activist Debbie Louis, who in her 1970 memoir of SNCC proffers the idea that Black power activists had begun to take up conversations concerning what Blackness—and Black consciousness—might mean.

‘Black Power,’ as a phrase, represented an intention to resolve the dilemmas confronting militant black youth, but was no means a guiding philosophy. It has stood undefined because as yet no definition exists—it has been this search for definition that gives meaning to the phrase. And because it has no definition, it is as philosophically absurd to be “for” black power as it has been for the white community to be ‘against’ it. Yet black power must have been something very real to have inspired the commitment of thousands to its fulfilment, and that of thousands more to its complete annihilation.

580 Terry, “Requiem for a Dream,” 293.
582 Debbie Louis, We Are Not Saved: A History of the Movement as People (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), 296. Louis work should be viewed as an early text that understood the winning of the 1964 & 1965 Civil Rights Acts and the rise of Black Power as the decline or close of activist organizing. However, its attention to and interest in thinking through what new activism might look like anticipates what many have begun to call New Black Power studies. For studies on the Black Freedom Movement’s organizing after 1965, see, Doug McAdam, Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930–1970, 2nd Edition.
If Louis’ assessment threatens to descend into arguments that Civil Rights activists were not also intellectuals in the act of theorizing Blackness and freedom, her observation that Black Power did not mark a break so much as a reconfiguration of the long freedom movement moves toward Terry’s understanding of Black Power as a purposefully generated “problem-space.”

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583 It is, perhaps, worth rehearsing the obvious point that organizations like SNCC had, in no small way, generated their own ideological and tactical fractures in the early 1960s. Moreover, as Charles Payne has shown, SNCC’s focus on and initiation of a mass-based political program that actively eschewed centralized and singular leadership for a wider participatory program, emerged, in no small way, from the combined work of Ella Baker, Septima Clark and Myles Horton, each of whom had experienced various forms of resistance from organizations that maintained leadership models. This is important for at least two reasons. First—and most obviously—it contextualizes the kind of fracture that occurred in 1966 within a broader and continuing debate concerning Black freedom. Second, SNCC’s adoption of a participatory approach was, in and of itself, new and, by no means, complete or established even within the organization. As such, even those leaders within the Black Power movement that took up implicitly and explicitly antagonistic stands against participatory models do not mark a break from the Black Freedom Movement as much as the adoption of a leader-model that had never left. What changes—in no small way—is a matter of focus. Black Power and Black Arts workers foregrounded the question of what Blackness might mean, not just in relation to the state but, instead, to Black communities. For more on SNCC and a participatory model, see Charles M. Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Faith S. Holsaert. et. al, Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts By Women in SNCC (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2012). On Ella Baker’s influence on SNCC, the number of histories and books that either discuss Baker or include epigraphs from her are numerous. See, for example, Robert P. Moses & Charles E. Cobb, Jr., Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights (Boston: Beacon, 2001); Charlayne Hunter-Gault, To The Mountaintop: My Journey Through the Civil Rights Movement (New York: Roaring Brook Press, 2012), 25. For a broader look at Baker’s life and theorization of participatory democracy, see, Barbara Ransby, Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); On the
Louis was not the only one who understood Black Power as a call for the theorization of Blackness, power, liberation and the stakes of each. Former CORE member and founder of Soul City, Floyd McKissick would argue that “It is the task of black intellectuals to provide the cohesive philosophy which will propel the black-led revolution which must happen if justice is to be achieved in America.”584 Importantly, he adds, “But these black intellectuals cannot provide that philosophy if they continue to be diverted by the opinions and pressures of the surrounding white society.”585 Harold Cruse, in his deeply-engaged but polemical critique of Black Power, agreed—even, it should be added, as he explicitly disagreed with McKissick’s focus on Black economy. “The radical wing of the Negro movement in America,” Cruse argued, “sorely needs a social theory based on the living ingredients of Afro-American history.”586 This need emerged not only within the call for theorization, but also in how Black Power advocates had not gone far enough in their theorization of the stakes. For Cruse, much of the problem occurred because Black Power advocates had not made the conceptual leap to “nationalist separatism,” as claimed


584 McKissick’s position within these discussions is, perhaps, more complicated than even James Brown’s. When he replaced James L. Farmer, Jr. as the head of CORE in 1966, he took the organization in a more radical direction, explicitly supporting Black Power. Two years after taking this position, he would leave CORE in order to helm the construction of Soul City in Warren County, North Carolina. As one of thirteen model city projects under HUD’s Urban Growth and New Community Development Act, Soul City sought to build a city guided by and in support of Black interests that could also provide a space for African Americans in the South and, thus, stave what the Washington Post would call “the cancer of hectic [Northern] urbanization.” He would also, like Brown, support Nixon’s first campaign. For quote, see, Roger Biles, “The Rise and Fall of Soul City: Planning, Politics, and Race in Recent America,” Journal of Planning History 4, no. 1 (2005): 52-72.


by both cultural and revolutionary nationalist movements, “but to some intermediate position between separatism and racial integration.” Nevertheless—and bracketing Cruse’s critique for the moment—if Black Power offered “a more specific and provocative abstraction than Freedom,” it also continued to generate “just as many diverse and conflicting interpretations” that Terry names as taking part in the problem-space.

Importantly, the struggle to theorize the stakes of Black Power and what Cedric Robinson would call the Black radical tradition might have been exceedingly contentious but it was not always fractious. Collaboration—and, perhaps, even the generation of circles—did exist across organizational agendas. In fact, Black Arts communities, who were often thought of as the cultural wing of Black Power, regularly participated in cross-generational collaboration, receiving a good deal of support and encouragement from both older artists and activists. If the infamous ideological conflict that lead to the 1964 split and eventual disintegration of Umbra workshop marks the beginning of a bigger rift that would lead to the “collapse” of the Harlem-based Black Arts Repertory and School (BARTS), Black Arts writers, artists and musicians drew from and found inspiration and encouragement in both the work and institutions of the previous

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590 Robinson’s work on the Black Radical Tradition was spurred, in part, by Cruse, see, Jordan Camp and Christina Heatherton. “The World We Want: An Interview with Cedric and Elizabeth Robinson.” Futures of Black Radicalism, eds. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (London: Verso Press, 2017), 95-96.
generations. In Boston, Elma Lewis’s Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts (ELSFA) support of Black Arts made “Boston an essential stop on the Black Arts cultural circuit,” while Chicago’s Margaret and Charles Burroughs’s Ebony Museum (later renamed the DuSable Museum of African American History) engaged, showed and encouraged individuals within Black Arts even as they disagreed with some of the nationalist politics espoused. In fact, Margaret Burroughs encouraged Haki Madhubuti to begin Third World Press in 1967, which would, in turn, publish fellow Chicagovan Gwendolyn Brooks. More broadly, Hoyt Fuller, the editor of *Negro Digest*,

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591 James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 149. It should be noted that Smethurst’s assessment undercuts the role of state intrusion at both economic and legal levels. Baraka’s repudiation of nonviolence and the call for Harlem to declare territorial independence would lead to the end of government economic support, and, in less than a year, the police raid on the BARTS offices forced the organization to close. Reporting on the raid for the *New York Times*, Michael Stern writes that “One [unidentified] friend said the seed of black nationalist culture Mr. Jones planted in the shabby, four-story brownstone just grew wildly, until the respectable Negro artists and intellectuals who had been attracted by Mr. Jones’s reputation as a playwright were choked out and only the group of violent black racists were left.” In addition, BARTS received some pushback from local nationalist groups who felt that the organization had come up from downtown and imposed themselves upon already existing efforts. See, Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997), 306-27; Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation*, 66-68; Michael Stern, “Arms Cache Laid To Small Group,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1966, 27.

592 For Elma Lewis and Boston, see, Smethurst, 153-57; see also, “Elma Lewis” *Ten O’Clock News* collection, 1/24/1980, Karen Holmes interviews. http://bostonlocaltv.wgbhmla.org/catalog/V_ASYO4BH8ZOAQCM8 for Margaret and Charles Burroughs’s Ebony Museum and Chicago, see, Smethurst, 196-97. In her history of Black Arts in Chicago, Rebecca Zorach argues that a great deal of work built on top of the efforts and institutions established during the city’s Black Renaissance, while elders and artists such as Margaret Burroughs, Marion Perkins, Paul Robeson, Theodore Ward and Richard Wright provided guidance to the Black Arts community in Chicago. Zorach also observes that despite the often-contentious debates between cultural and revolutionary nationalists, Chicago proponents of each worked, if not in total collaboration, then certainly without the firm lines seen in California and elsewhere. On Black Renaissance, see, Rebecca Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965-1975* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2019), 10. On guidance, see Zorach, 95; on divides between cultural and revolutionary nationalism, see, Zorach, 94.

reprinted articles from a great deal of Black radical and nationalist periodicals, whose
distribution chain fell short of the Johnson Publishing Company’s *Digest*. Fuller also
published many writers associated with the organizations and ideas of both Black Arts and Black
Power movements. The joint effect transformed the *Digest* into a “bonified movement
magazine,” and, perhaps even more importantly, helped to ensure that radical, nationalist and
Black Arts and Black Power’s instantiations of often local counter publics would receive
broader, national attention and debate.

These cross-generational efforts occurred in music as well. In Saint Louis, the “holistic
(if that’s the right word) multi-arts commune” Black Artists’ Group (BAG) benefited from the
mentorship of numerous elders, including Katherine Dunham, whose Performing Arts Training
Center (PACT) was a “veritable fulcrum of art, radical curriculum development . . . pan-
Africanism, activism, and leadership training for the movement.” While in Los Angeles,

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of the first books to be published with Dudley’s press, and, in order to help extend Broadside’s
reach, she donated the royalties of the book back to Broadside. Two years later, in 1971, she
would publish *Family Pictures*, which included the poem “Young Heroes,” a triptych that
celebrated Black Arts poets Keorapetse Kgositsile, Don L. Lee and Walter Bradford. The
combination of the collection’s title and her celebration of these younger poets suggests an effort
to designate ties between generations. Finally, she also ran a writer’s workshop out of her
Southside home. All of which is to say that her move to Third World Press in 1974 should be
understood as one gesture in a consistent and substantive effort to support Black presses, Black
Poets and the Black Arts and Nationalist movements of the period. If this rehearses the obvious,
it also attempts to frame Brooks as an active and impactful participant within the cross-
generational exchange at the time. For more on Brooks decision to leave Harper & Row, see,
James D. Sullivan, "Killing John Cabot and Publishing Black: Gwendolyn Brooks's

595 Smethurst, 149.
596 Fenderson, 35:38.
teachers such as Samuel Browne and Lloyd Reese provided both tutelage and opportunities for students to both meet and learn from multiple generations of Black musicians playing in any number of styles and genres. W.C. Handy, Nat “King” Cole, Lionel Hampton and William Grant Still all passed through Browne’s classroom, while Reese’s home was where Horace Tapscott first met Duke Ellington. In Chicago, Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (A.A.C.M.) member, musician and composer Joseph Jarman remembers the “incredible guidance” of Captain Walter Dyett, the director of the DuSable High School’s music program. And mentorship did not end at graduation, members of both A.A.C.M. and Jarman’s group, The Art Ensemble of Chicago, met at Woodrow Willison Junior College (later named Kennedy-King College) under the instruction of Dr. Richard Wang, who was able to set up Friday afternoon jam sessions that allowed students to play with professional musicians like Andrew Hill, Charles Stepney, Eddie Harris and Steve McCall. At the same time, students like Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, Henry Threadgill and others formed a rehearsal band primarily dedicated to studying Art Blakey’s early 1960 sextet.

In his essay for Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal’s Black Arts anthology, Black Fire, James T. Stewart goes even further, arguing that revolutionary artists’ call to end the current order of the world continued to reimagine kinship lines across generations.

The sense in which ‘revolutionary’ is understood is that a revolutionary is against the established order, regime, or culture.

Looker will go on to outline the role of the school band leaders in the development and nurturing many of the musicians who would become members of B.A.G.

598 Daniel Widener, Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 121.
The bourgeoisie calls him a revolutionary because he threatens the established way of life—things as they are. They cannot accept change, though change is inevitable. The revolutionary understands change. Change is what it is all about. He is not a revolutionary to his people, to his compatriots, to his comrades. He is, instead, a brother. He is a son. She is a sister, a daughter.601

And as Amiri Baraka would remember in his introduction to Larry Neal’s *Visions of a Liberated Future*, “Men like Rob[ert F.] Williams were heroes to us.”602

Even within revolutionary nationalist circles, the utility of work given by intellectuals across the long Black liberation struggle was acknowledged. The Black Panthers regularly argued that political consciousness began with education and attempted to engender a dialectical approach to past work, theories and tactics from within the long Black radical tradition. Amongst other efforts, they republished excerpts from various individuals writing on Black liberation, explaining that

BECAUSE THERE IS A PITIFUL ABSENCE OF THE KINDS OF CONCEPTS, STRATEGIES, TACTICS, SUMMARIES AND EXPERIENCES THAT MOTIVATED THOSE OF USE WHO WERE ‘YOUNG’ . . . BACL ‘IN THE DAYS.” Just as Louis offered a generous assessment of what black power might provide, the pamphlet also demonstrates the cross-generational generosity. If the panthers believed that the time had come to abandon goals of political enfranchisement and integration, calling for nationalist politics, they also recognize the value of work. “. . . IF THE CONTENT HAS VALUE, USE IT!,” concluding that “WE MIGHT LEARN FROM THE CRADLE TO THE GRAVE!”603

Their call to learn from efforts, theories and ideas from the past might be said to take part in what

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George Lewis calls a “concatenative work,” that on-going production of links that come to form a series and which move us to questions of practice and inheritance. 604

Returning briefly to Harold Cruse’s critique, Black Power’s inability to move out from the intermediate space between separatism and integrationalism generated a “conceptual gap between shadow and substance.” 605 For Cruse, this conceptual gap foreclosed the possibility of a truly radical theorization of Blackness and Black thought. If Cruse is correct, the fights—dialectical or otherwise—that occur within the problem space are always at risk of moving out of phase and, in such movement, reproducing the heteronormative, masculinist and, for Cruse, reformist modes to which Clarke identifies above. Both dialectical and problem approaches, then, might be said to provide an orientation within Black political and social movements that understood more radical but still reformist discourse as something it was not: an entry into or participation within the Black radical tradition. In fact, Black Power advocates, according to Cruse, did not offer a turn toward Black thought, and any challenge their efforts generated occurred because “the Negro movement represent[ed],” for Cruse, “an indirect challenge to the capitalist status quo not because it is programmatically anti-capitalist, but because full integration of the Negro in all levels of American society is not possible within the present frame work of the American system.” 606 In short, Cruse believed that nothing short of a turn toward and theorizing of Black life outside the bounds or superficial hope of integration could lead toward the kind of liberation sought.

604 George Lewis, “foreword: when improvisers speak, where do their words go?” silent solos: improvisers speak (Koln: Buddy’s Knife, 2010), 11.
606 Harold Cruse, Rebellion or Revolution? (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 100.
If history bears some truth to Cruise’s warning with respect to both the Black nationalist and Black Arts projects, the Panther’s theorization of “revolutionary intercommunalism” complicates the point. To such a complication, Huey Newton’s 1971 visit to Yale is instructive. During the question and answer part of the evening, a student asked Newton about how he reconciled the call for unity with the need for contradictory spur. “If unity of identity is going to exist in revolutionary intercommunalism, then what will be the contradictions that produce further change?”

Newton agreed with the student, arguing that “you cannot avoid contradictions, you cannot avoid the struggle of opposite tendencies within the same wholes. But I can’t tell you what the new opposites will be because they are not in existence yet . . .”

Following Fanon, Newton argues that

The qualitative leap from reactionary intercommunalism to revolutionary intercommunalism will not . . . immediately bring into being either a universal identity or a culture that is essentially human. It will only provide the material base for the development of those tendencies.

He goes on to argue,

when people seize the means of production, when they seize the mass media and so forth, you will still have racism, you will still have ethnocentrism, you will still have contradictions. But the fact that the people will be in control of all the productive and institutional unites of society—not only factories but the media too—will enable them to start solving these contradictions. It will produce new values, new identities . . .

608 In Search of Common Ground, 41.
609 In Search of Common Ground, 41.
610 In Search of New Ground, 41. See also, Huey Newton. “Intercommualism,” The Huey Newton Reader, eds. David Hilliard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011), 181-99; Judson Jefferies. Huey P. Newton: The Radical Theorist (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 62-82. In their history of both the formation and politics of the Black Panthers, Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr. argue that the Panther’s practical political work had a greater impact. While this does bear out, intercommunalism serves as a useful—if not
Newton’s call for the Fanonian leap into a world not structurally predicated on Western, colonialist or capitalist modes complicates Cruse’s claim precisely because revolutionary intercommunalism did not understand the call for Black Power as an end but the first stage in a dialectical struggle toward a new world that endeavored what Fanon, in the closing line of *Wretched of the Earth*, would call “a new man.”

If cultural nationalists might better fit Cruse’s critique, it is worth noting that by 1970, Baraka had argued that Black liberation occurred in stages as well. If these stages differed complete—foil to Cruse’s assertion. See, Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 468.

611 Franz Fanon. *Wretched of the Earth*, 239. The failure to acknowledge the continuing dialectical nature of the problem-space was neither new nor unique to Cruse. In his 1968 review of books on Black Power, including Cruse’s *Crisis*, Christopher Lasch argues that Stokely Carmichael & Charles V. Hamilton’s *Black Power* is “disappointing, first of all because it makes so few concrete proposals for action, and these seem hardly revolutionary in nature: black control of black schools, black-owned businesses, and the like.” See, Christopher Lasch, “A Special Supplement: The Trouble with Black Power,” *New York Review of Books* 10, no. 4, February 29, 1968, 4.

612 In an earlier essay in *Crisis*, Cruse tracked what he thought of as the rise and falter of Black cultural production and Black intellectual’s failure to recognize the economic and political importance of both mass media and culture in the freedom movements. This failure, he would argue, occurred because “Like most Americans, Negroes are profoundly antitheoretical.” Even as a polemic, the assertion sounds a belligerent note that could not help but encourage the kind of conservative and racist embrace his work has often been accused of trafficking in. To my ear, it runs parallel to Robert Penn Warren’s infamous dismissal of the possibility that a Black metaphysics could or did exist. If Cruse’s *exegesis*, to borrow from Sterling Brown, certainly widened the dismissal offered by Warren’s “Pondy Woods,” it also demonstrates a profound failure to think through the kinds of theorization moving through and occurring as praxis. If his focus on what he calls the black intelligentsia ever-slightly corrects for such a reading, it is a striking argument to make in 1968, with the rise of Black Arts and the near-memory of both the Civil Rights era and what Lawrence P. Jackson has called the “indignant generation,” the latter of which names the often unnoticed cohort of writers and cultural workers whose work and political commitments place them between the Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights eras. For Cruse’s critique of Black cultural production, see, Harold Cruse, “Mass Media and Cultural Democracy,” *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, New York: NYRB, 2005, 92; for Warren’s “Pondy Woods,” see *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 39-40; for Sterling Brown, see Henry Louis Gates Jr.,
greatly with respect to revolutionary nationalists, Baraka’s assertion that a social transformation predicated on socialism could only come after national liberation marks a differently-directed but no less Fanonian leap that began with the seizure of Black power.\textsuperscript{613} Given these oversights, it is—perhaps—surprising that Christopher Lasch would, in his review of Cruse’s collection, claim that “(w)hen all the manifestoes and polemics of the Sixties are forgotten, this book will survive as a monument of historical analysis.”\textsuperscript{614} If \textit{Crisis} can and should be understood as taking part in the negotiations circulating within the problem-space of Black Power, it did not—and does not seem interested in—offering a history of that period. Indeed, the anti-Caribbeanist nature of the collection and his exhaustion with Pan-Africanist approaches to Black liberation and Black thought troubles the call endeavored.\textsuperscript{615} Cruse, I want to stress, called for radical thinkers to

\textsuperscript{613} Komozi Woodard, \textit{A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) & Black Power Politics} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999), 161. This understanding was not limited to revolutionary or cultural nationalists within the United States. Writing of Walter Rodney’s efforts in both Jamaica and Guyana, Omawale puts the point into clear relief, “With the elimination of direct white domination, the anti-imperialist nature of Black power philosophy emerges in full bloom. It is the only way we can understand the posturings of the black bourgeoisie establishment. Omawale, “New Introduction,” \textit{The Groundings with My Brothers}, Walter Rodney (London: L’Ouverture Publications, Inc., 1996), 3.


\textsuperscript{615} At the same time Lasch’s embrace of Cruse—and, in particular, Cruse’s dismissal of Black power intellectuals—deserves a great deal of critique. One example should suffice. Toward the end of the review, he writes that Cruse is Marxist, but “he opposes the obstinate effort to impose on the Negro problem a class analysis which sees Negroes as an oppressed proletariat. He thinks this obscures, among other things, the nature of the Negro middle class and the role it plays in American life.” While the gloss is, in part, true, it also obscures both the thrust of Cruse’s argument concerning Black Power as an intermediate step and, importantly, the emerging critiques from multiple writers that the proletariat no longer represented the contradiction to capitalist society requisite for revolution. To this point, Herbert Marcuse’s \textit{One Dimensional}
forego any hope of integration and, instead, turn to Black life as the abundant source through which Black radical thought not only emerged but, in fact, had always existed. However, his polemics seem to limit the shape and scope of what should be understood as emerging from within such a space, all of which he justified—if only implicitly—under the very rubric of nationalism and, in retrospect, a call for historical and geographical specificity. Indeed—if well beyond the scope of this essay—it might be said that the polemical nature of the essays take part in the problem-space of Black Power and, in doing so, fall into many of the critiques he launched at others. Or, borrowing from Cedric Robinson, if, “as a participant,” Cruse “had every right to recall” the Black radical tradition “in the terms he that he did,” did he also “succum[b] to the conceit . . . that radicalism is dependent upon an intelligentsia?”

Leading from such a point, we might ask whether Cruse’s polemic generates Blackness out of phase and, if so, what methods might better attend to hereness.

**Styling Out**

In a poem from his 2010 collection, *B Jenkins*, Fred Moten articulates both the burden and mode of hereness in his invocation of “style.” To wit, “my daddy . . . said nancy / wilson can’t sing but she can style—hold back the force of random operators / return to the line refuse to punctuate.”

What, it might be asked, does it mean to style and not sing, to return to the line, Man, published in 1964, is exemplary. Furthermore, it does not take into account the broader critiques Cruse had made concerning the Communist Party’s inability to accommodate or even recognize both the lived experience and conditions of Black workers. When all combined, Lasch’s near gleeful embrace anticipates—if not quite realizing—how conservatives would take up *Crisis* in the decades to come.


which is, in fact, two imperative clauses mashed together? Such a question spurs more. What
would happen if we were to read the mashed line as something other than an imperative? What if
we were to read it as a subjectless assertion? This, of course, is not quite right, for a subject is
requisite for assertion, or so both liberal and Enlightenment discourse tells us. Underlying these
questions lies a more pressing one—one particular to Moten’s work on fugitivity and Black
studies more generally. If the subject is requisite for assertion, how do we address expressions
that exceed—or exhaust—language’s capabilities but which, as Moten’s work explores, contain
content that “is not simply unrepresentable but instantiates, rather, an alternative to
representation”?618

The question of address is crucial, for as Samira Kawash has argued, the antebellum
fugitive is a categorical designation that troubles the distinctions between object and subject by
refusing the state an opportunity of address. “If the fugitive is neither property nor subject, then
the closed circuits of property and subject is momentarily interrupted or suspended . . . the
fugitive has no address, cannot be addressed.”619 What could this mean for Moten’s mashed lines
and, more importantly, practices of fugitivity in the 20th and 21st centuries? Is assuming a subject
even possible? And, if such an assumption is possible, are we to imagine a subject in kind with
the narrator inherited from the New Critics, who, cleaved from authorial biography, is embedded
within a particular set of political logics that have historically, following Saidiya Hartman, been
used to diffuse—which is to say insidiously infuse—antiblack terror into the mundane?620 It

618 Moten, Black and Blur, ix.
619 Samira Kawash, Dislocating the Color Line, Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity,
620 Saidiya Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-
Century America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4; 42.
would seem that the tentative answer is *yes and also and, then again, no, on the other hand.*

And it is this surrender to both the affirmative and negative—both the impossibility of a representational subject and the repetition of that impossibility’s fact—that goes to the core of styling. If to sing names a practice wherein notes declare—even sentence—a line into finality, to style is to take part in what Moten calls “the devotional practice that is given in recitation of the sentence ‘blackness is x.’” To style but not sing serves to celebrate the continuous audition of the line—unpunctuated but always troubled by the terror of antiblackness. It is also one way to approach hereness, of which Mary Lou William’s “Tell Him Not to Talk Too Long” is exemplary.

In many cases, both language and notes helped to open up the possibility of generating both personal and communal feeling and response. Indeed, jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams’ “Tell Him Not to Talk Too Long” offers an unlikely example of a song that plays on and so styles out the tension generated between the impulse to tell and the needs to generate hereness and congregation. First performed on Palm Sunday during a 1968 mass in Harlem and then recorded a year later for Vatican Radio, the song is both a eulogy for and instructions on how one might eulogize Martin Luther King, Jr. In order to do so, Williams builds her song around three lines from King’s 1968 sermon “The Drum Major Instinct.” “If you’re around when I meet my day, don’t want a long funeral. And if somebody delivers my eulogy, tell him not to talk too

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622 Moten, *Black and Blur,* ix.
long.” adding “Just say I tried to feed the hungry, tried to love somebody.” But Williams’ lyrics are as interesting for what they leave out as for what they put in. In the sermon, King does not just list the details from his life for which he would like to be remembered but, importantly, he gives a series of details he hopes will be left out. “Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize— that isn’t important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that’s not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.” Within the immediate context of the sermon, the list might be understood as the generation and deployment of apophasis, a series of denials that make claims even as King seems to demur. Yet, the refusal moves through a broader political context. Liberal leaders attempts to “make him one of their own—as ‘responsible’ leader” required King to negotiate not only those who would—and did—dismiss his efforts but also, and importantly, those whose embrace of his calls for nonviolence effectively ignored and so obscured the calls for a radical restructuring of the U.S. Indeed, we might think of awards as a mode through which address became and becomes possible. If King’s sermon required the refusal, Williams’ eulogy does not, allowing for her to leave them out, not only to honor King’s wishes but in order to realize and reflect upon a life beyond state and institutional address and recognition. This, returning to the previous chapter, is what shifts it lending to the kind of surrogation James Brown was forced to negotiate.

Structurally speaking, the song also provides a sly referendum on the role of words in music. Talk should not be eschewed so much as measured, offering the grieving enough information through which to move into the wider space of memory and feeling. “Put my casket

627 Guerrero Jr., “The Liberal (Im)posture,” 2.
on an old wagon drawn by two fine mules,” Williams will add to King’s lines, and “Bury me in my home town Atlanta” but remember to “tell him not to talk too long.” 628 This reminder, which comes to form the core of the song’s imperative, works to tease those priests who would forget both the role of shared exchange and, importantly, a congregation’s patience. It is, then, a moment of levity through which the weight of shared mourning coincides with a richer field of communal feeling just out of institutional reach. In the play of words that do no more than selectively quote King, and in their selection tease longwinded priests, congregants come to share more than an ever-present grief, and the disciplining or channeling of feeling by way of institutional ritual. Exasperation with a long-winded priest, who takes up too much space, becomes a point of common—and now expressed—feeling that enables listeners to move into the complexity of sense and what might be called grief’s affective admixture.

Indeed, the playfulness of the lyrics combine with the understated, reverent and solemn performance to produce their own admixture of techniques and referents that nod to but always exceed the Catholic liturgy. Most immediately, the combination recalls Pius X’s 1903 statement on the need to restore sacred singing to the Catholic liturgy. Singing, the pope would argue, enabled congregants to take a more active role in worship. Through song they would be “more easily moved to devotion and better disposed for the reception of the fruits of grace belonging to the celebration of the most holy mysteries.” 629 In William’s composition, language, sound and feeling do not operate as mere augments of each other, but, in fact, as invitations into the space of feeling—that most holy of mysteries that demands one sound themselves into the space and then, returning to Paul Edwards, get out of the way of others who might do the same.

628 Mary Lou Williams, “Tell Him Not to Talk Too Long.”
If the North American College in Rome Choir, who provide the vocal on the Vatican recording, offers a simple and mournful chant that would seem to bear very little of either homiletic or gospel techniques found within the Black church, Williams’ quotation of King’s sermon still returns sound to sermon, or, more accurately, both the choir and her sounding carry the spirit of King’s sermon beyond its initial moment. The chant, however, works by and through its difference from both King’s sermon and any number of traditions found within both the Black church and Black music. Indeed, the chant bears no resemblance to the homiletic techniques King’s Baptist training would have given to the performance. Nor does it make use of the gospel, blues, swing or bop techniques Williams used on her other religious recordings of the period. Nevertheless, the sounding itself invites a surrender to its hearing and, in its hearing, refuses the silent reception given by mere transcription.

Such refusal is no small thing. As Hortense Spillers reminds, an “exhortation not heard becomes something else entirely—maybe,” and it is only “between the lines of scripture that the narratives of insurgence are delivered.” In the case of the song, listeners hear levity lined to a solemn key. Insurgency emerges in the juxtaposition, the unexpected combination that opens onto a not-quite-laughter, not-quite-weeping between. In this space, Williams allows for the full

630 The one exception to such a point could be Williams’ organ playing. This is especially true of the flourishes that break into the chord. However, the shared use of organ music in both Catholic and African American Churches makes me want to hold off on making the call in either direction. On Williams use of multiple techniques: For the rerelease of Mary Lou’s Mass “Tell Him Not To Talk Too Long” is preceded by “Jesus is The Best,” a song whose piano vamp and use of tambourines cannot help but recall then popular iterations of recorded gospel. Other songs would combine blues (“Medi I and Medi II”), call and response (“Kyrie Eleison (Lord Have Mercy)”) and hard bop (“One”) with the religious themes of the lyrics.

631 Hortense J. Spillers, “Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon,” Black,
scope of feeling to move back into mourning. At the same time, from within the affectual surrender to full feeling, she undermines the importance of awards that threatened to reinforce the very hierarchies King sought to dismantle. In exasperation and its back note of amusement, shared mourning opens from within a space made and sounded between words and notes, between what is lost and what is found.

Williams admixture retains much of the techniques of juxtaposition described by Frederick Douglass in his assessment of what Du Bois will call the sorrow songs. There is, however, one crucial difference. Where Douglass describes sorrow songs as combining “the most pathetic sentiment” with and through “rapturous tone,” Williams’ inverts the relationship. In “Tell Him Not to Talk Too Long,” listeners hear a solemn chant whose levity emerges in the line, which itself works on and through an exasperation predicated less on any immediate realization of long-winded priests and, instead, on a pattern given in and by the past. The inversion, however, does not undermine or mark a departure from Douglass so much as the elasticity of juxtaposition. In both the sorrow songs and Williams’ elegy, contradiction emerges as central. The space opened by both generates a place in which sound and word hold open a place for the release and surrender to sense. “Every tone,” Douglass writes, acts as “a testimony against slavery.” For Williams, each word acts against those whose unmeasured telling would attempt to reduce King’s life to awards. In both, contradiction emerges in the refusal to allow feeling to circuit singularly through pain, opening an ambivalent location through which hereness emerges.

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632 Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1855), 99.
633 Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, 99.
Hearing Time Here in Time

The overlapping and even contentious discussions given in the figures of circles, problem-spaces and styling reminds me of a conversation between Moten and Saidiya Hartman at Duke University’s 2016 talk, *The Black Outdoors: Humanities Futures after Property and Possession*. At one point in the conversation, Hartman cites Frederick Douglass so to outline a central paradox within the Black radical tradition. For Douglass, “there is a potent kind of thought, a revolutionary song, made inside the circle of slavery.” Nevertheless, “one is only able to give an account of it from the outside.”\(^634\) This sense of the outside, Hartman argues, is not temporal; the outside does not come *after* the inside. Rather, it is something in excess of temporality. Because of slavery’s afterlives, the critical tradition has always attempted “to give an account of the outside while on the inside.”\(^635\) This, I want to argue, orients us toward what Moten means when he states that “the inside and outside are, then, not only positions but forces; and the not-in-between marks an insistence in the Black radical tradition that is embodied in ancient and unprecedented phrasing.”\(^636\) Form matters, then, not just because of clarity, but, rather, because of the demand a phrase can place upon the reader. To phrase is to generate the requisite tension and torsion needed to ‘cut and augment’ forces so often embedded within representation and narrative, the liberal modes par excellence.

Moten’s call for augmentation, however, is not the same as—though, not entirely different from—Douglass’s paradox. Augmentation names the attempt to “to imagine out from

\(^635\) *The Black Outdoors: Humanities Futures after Property and Possession.*
the outside or out, so to speak, from that inside outside opposition” precisely because “the constant renewal of the terms and conditions of the inside/outside opposition are debilitating.”

The most powerful example of formal augmentation comes from the preface of his 2018 collection, *Black and Blur*. In it, he writes, “It hurts so much that we have to celebrate. That we have to celebrate is what hurts so much.” Moten’s use of chiasmus cannot help but return us to Douglas again, and, in particular, to what is, perhaps, Douglass’ most famous line: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." If Douglass marshals the figure in order to document his crossing into freedom, Moten’s use of the device corrects liberal readings that would assume such crossing as merely temporally and geographically based. By seizing upon a formal trope associated not only with crossing but a crossing into freedom, Moten generates a *not-in-between* performance that celebrates Douglass and the Black radical tradition even as his structure seems to whip back or circle around the material fact of antiblackness, and abolition’s non-event. This, then, is not merely an act of revision, per Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s conception of signifying. Rather, Moten’s chiasmus improvises within and upon the historical and present structures bounded by concepts of inside/outside so to generate an irruptive, performative meaning that, in fact, cuts and augments meaning itself. To style, which is to say phrase, which is to say celebrate is to generate meaning in excess of representation. For Moten, celebration is Black art, which in its performance of celebration is also already study—so Black study—precisely because it “does not disappear the

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637 *The Black Outdoors: Humanities Futures after Property and Possession.*
638 Moten, *Black and Blur*, xiii.
639 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Mineola: Dover, 1995), 64.
problem; it is the problem.”640 Black art as performance as Black study, then, operates as an “exhaustive celebration,” which—in an entirely new chain located within the surplus of Western ontological production—serves to “solemnify.” This seeming eternal loop is the enactment of what he calls blur.

At the Duke talk, Moten also recalls the North Carolina trails he walked with his children when he was a professor at the university and how he’d wonder at the beauty of a river they came upon. “But,” he adds, “there was always a kind of . . . I could always just hear somebody running.” The recollection seems to get at some of the crucial stakes for Black and Blur. That is, both the Black radical tradition and fugitivity—in all their materially and historically contingent enactments—are not and can never be mistaken for entry into freedom. It is, instead, the practice and performance of flight. “The whole point about escape,” Moten argues, “is that it’s . . . an activity. It’s not an achievement. . . . What that means is . . . it’s always on you.”641 As he will argue, the essential question for the Black radical tradition is “how would one inhabit such eccentric, such impossible ground,” a ground that requires a “comportment toward a center that is, if not nothing, certainly not there.”642 What inhabitation without recourse to address gets at then, is the question of “what would a life be that isn’t interested in leaving a trace of human habitation,” a necessity borne by the fugitive’s condition of unremitting escape.643 Hereeness, then, are those practices that attempt to account for moments in which congregation is made possible under such conditions.

640 Moten, Black and Blur, xii.
641 The Black Outdoors: Humanities Futures after Property and Possession.
642 Moten, Black and Blur, 91.
643 The Black Outdoors: Humanities Futures after Property and Possession.
This is, perhaps, obvious to those who work in Black studies, but it also bears repeating in a moment when the “devotional practice” given by generations of Black people is subsumed under the abstracting logics of the academy, wherein Blackness becomes or threatens to become—or, perhaps, remains—the unchallenged and so fungible object through which the largeness of Black life is rent from those individuals with and from whom this largeness emerges. Moten’s attunement to feeling demonstrates an insurgent meaning in excess of representation. It is, then, a refusal given to the kinds of logics that would, to return to Mingus, suggest a lobotomy as the solution to Black telling. It is, then, a tell in the sense of card players but one performed rather than given unwittingly. It is the generation of the bluff’s obverse, a paradox that recalls Douglass’s own but remains contingently (re)made. In his performance of the tell—at once in awe of beauty, at once attendant to terror—Moten allows us to know what language cannot tell. To hear “the runaway” is to recall the fact that, for Moten, the diffusion of antiblack terror into the everyday does not constitute a “dilution;” rather, “it is a pouring forth, a holding or spreading out, or a running over that never runs out and is never over.” If celebration is central to his work, so too is the recognition that the need to “hold back the force of random operators” can and does wear and so is an always present violence. Black Art, which is to say Black study, which is to say the performance of their conjunction, becomes in Moten’s telling and across generations of Black community making, one means through which new forms of meaning emerge not in between but appositionally and from within the Black radical tradition, generating a “hereness” sent out into the ether and there awaiting its reception within the dwelling of others.

644 Moten, *Black and Blur*, xi.
645 Moten, “gayl jones,” 2.
Chapter 3: A Pocket of Exchange: The Inadequacy of Language and Music Writing as an Act of Listening

. . . I don’t rightly know that I can give you the last-word facts about it, but I can tell you what I think if you’d like to hear that.

-Alice Childress

In a 1968 essay on “soul language” for Esquire, Claude Brown offers a sly referendum on the partiality of information.

Soul language can be heard in practically all communities throughout the country, but for pure, undiluted spoken soul one must go to Soul Street. There are several. Soul is located at Seventh and ‘T’ in Washington, D.C., One Two Five Street in New York City; on Springfield Avenue in Newark; on South Street in Philadelphia; on Tremont Street in Boston; on Forty-seventh Street in Chicago, on Filmore in San Francisco, and dozens of similar locations in dozens of other cities.

While ostensibly offering a kind of map for intrepid readers, Brown’s coordinates are incomplete. Readers are given streets but not addresses and left to wander in search of “soul language.” Even Brown’s decision to offer a cross street in D.C. defies an exact location. If a corner is given, the quadrant (N.W., N.E., S.W. or S.E.) is not. Yet, the sly nature of the essay lies in how it only seems as if more information is necessary. In fact, anyone familiar with Black performance venues would have recognized that Seventh and T marks the location of Washington, D.C.’s Howard Theater, whose 1910 opening both preceded New York’s Apollo Theater, located on “One Two Five Street,” and Chicago’s Regal Theater, which called “Forty-seventh street” home.

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647 Claude Brown, “The Language of Soul,” Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore, ed. Alan Dundes (University of Mississippi Press, 1990), 236.
Moreover, seventh street in Northwest, D.C. would have been a well-known location both to Black D.C. and those familiar with African American literature. By 1968, a great deal had been written about the street. For Langston Hughes, the area around the theater served as a haven from the pressures of both white supremacy and the politics of respectability. “From all this pretentiousness,” Hughes writes,

Seventh Street was a sweet relief. . . On Seventh Street in 1924 they played the blues, ate watermelon, barbecue, and fish sandwiches, shot pool, told tall tales, looked at the dome of the Capitol and laughed out loud . . . Their songs—those of Seventh Street—had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going.\textsuperscript{648}

On Seventh, the sacred and profane shared space. Hughes “liked the barrel houses of Seventh Street, the shouting churches, and the songs. They were warm and kind and didn’t care whether you had an overcoat or not.”\textsuperscript{649} In a word, Seventh Street engendered a wider understanding of community belonging than had been explored elsewhere. Though, even this wideness was not without its struggles.

Indeed, Howard Theater and the surrounding neighborhood has a long history of struggle. It marks one of the primary sites of Black resistance in 1919 and 1968. During 1919’s Red Summer, when white veterans began attacking Black residents throughout the city, the Howard Theater became a central post for Black veterans. Armed with rifles, they took to the theater’s roof in order to surveille the surrounding U Street and Shaw neighborhoods and, there, pushed back white veterans who had begun to attack Black residents. If the journalist covering the violence for the \textit{Washington Post} framed Black veterans as the primary aggressors, writing that “the negroes began early in the evening to take vengeance for the assaults on their race in the

\textsuperscript{648} Langston Hughes, \textit{The Big Sea} (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993), 208.
\textsuperscript{649} Hughes, 208.
downtown district the night before,” time has changed the minds of even those writing for the paper.650 Looking back on the period, Washington Post reporter Peter Perl argues that “[u]nlike virtually all the disturbances that preceded it – in which white-on-black violence dominated – the Washington riot of 1919 was distinguished by strong, organized and armed black resistance, foreshadowing the civil rights struggles later in the century.”651

Neither Hughes nor journalists were the only ones to write about the area during this period. Three years after the 1919 attacks, Jean Toomer called Seventh Street

a bastard of Prohibition and the War . . . [where] a black reddish blood [sunk] into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington.


In Toomer’s passage, blood serves as both metonym and synecdoche. It was, on the one hand, that which came to course the arteries of Black D.C., signaling a flow or way, a genealogy of being in relation with “folks who draw no color line between mulattoes and deep, dark-browns.”653 It was, then, a referendum on those who saw fit to choose no intra-set or what Hughes, in his critiques of Black D.C.’s embrace of class and colorism, called “conventional-mindedness,” where “a number of the families in the best colored society made proud boast of being descended from the leading Southern white families.”654 Whether Toomer’s claim can be read as reliable or not, it suggests that on Seventh Street the enduring and troubling questions concerning Black solidarity across both class and color lines was at least endeavored. On

653 Toomer, 41.
654 Hughes, 208.
Seventh, residents whose class-status might suggest an adherence to colorism shared space with those who “work[ed] hard for a living with their hands.” This is blood’s metonymic effect. It becomes the attribute through which Black solidarity is named.

Yet, Toomer’s invocation of blood also serves as a synecdoche for the kinds of violence wrought by enslavement and its afterlives. This is true in at least three ways. First, blood’s almost immediate link back to the one-drop rule forces readers to consider whether blood too strictly adhered to a white supremacist myth about race as a biological given. Second, when read alongside Hughes’ claim that Seventh Street was populated by “folks with practically no family tree at all,” blood might be said to be that which remained after enslavement fundamentally severed familial bonds. Third, blood also generates questions concerning then contemporary configurations of family and kinship. Indeed, both Toomer’s and Hughes’s work contend with The Great Migration, a period when racial violence across the United States, whether structurally or physically manifest, forced Black families to accept either a momentary or permanent dissolution of life spent together. If, as Farah Jasmine Griffin suggests, money comes to generate and sever relationships in Toomer’s depiction of Seventh, blood as a figurative instantiation of familial and biological connection emerges as the obligation commerce—or capital—effectively severs in any number of ways. It is, then, both what remains and, somehow, takes leave all at once.

These problems were neither unique to Toomer’s invocations of blood nor the period to which they are written. Indeed, antiblack violence and structural racism continued well beyond

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655 Hughes, 208
the period to which Toomer and Hughes contend. Forty-nine years after the 1919 riot and in the very same month that Brown would publish his article for *Esquire*, the Howard Theater and the U Street corridor would serve as ground zero for the rebellion that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.\(^{658}\) That Brown’s article is published in April of 1968, the same month that King was assassinated is not so much a coincidence as it, too, marks the endurance of this doubled reality. As such, the invocation of blood maps—however imprecisely—the enduring conditions that interrupted and, in some cases, severed the word’s familial possibility. When combined, blood signals both the varied ways that Black communities imagined solidarity, belonging and kinship and a specific and enduring historical practice by which biological racism and antiblack violence were used to sever those very things.

Of course, explication of the sort offered above teeters its own scandal. Brown’s decision to withhold the quadrant to which Seventh and T belonged might be said to have kept Howard Theater just out of reach of those whose commitments posed a threat to the communities that called both the neighborhood and theater home. By offering only partial information, Brown generates the informational condition through which blood’s metonymic possibility emerges outside of the immediate synecdochical threat of further bloodshed. Such a reading is not out of the question. In title and content, Constance McLaughlin Green’s 1967 monograph on Black D.C., *The Secret City*, offers a similar assessment. And, as the renowned African American historian George R. Woolfolk notes, Green uses “terms which are designed to cover the absence of definitive information at pivotal points.”\(^{659}\) In Green’s monograph, the history of Black D.C.

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\(^{658}\) The 1968 rebellion would begin on 14\(^{th}\) and U Street.

emerges through “cliché, innuendo, speculation, inference, and the big guess. Perhaps this was all that was possible under the circumstances.”\textsuperscript{660} If the precise circumstances to which Woolfolk refers remain unavailable, it is clear that the deployment of partial information was not unique to Brown. In fact, it is quite likely marshalled by Woolfolk in the above passage—though, in a manner perhaps \textit{circumstantially} unavailable to Green.\textsuperscript{661}

Still, the partiality of Brown’s information does not hide Howard Theater so much as disclose a mood. Whether Green’s monograph failed to adequately capture Black D.C. or not, one thing remains clear: language is not—and has never been—enough to keep Black theaters hidden. Both the market and media ensure that they remain available to white and Black publics alike. As such, it seems more likely that Brown’s use of partial information generates the mood through which his partiality, which is to say commitments, becomes apparent. In this way, the essay echoes “the smiling poise” given by Langston Hughes in \textit{The Big Sea}, which Arnold Rampersad argues is “the poise of the blues, where laughter, art and the will to survive triumph at last over personal suffering,” and where, in genres “defined by confession,” the artist “appears to give nothing away of a personal nature.”\textsuperscript{662} Soul language, it would seem, moves through and alongside the blues but with difference. Put another way, soul language names a practice in

\textsuperscript{660} Woolfolk, 307.

\textsuperscript{661} It might be said that Woolfolk’s critique—which emerges between his lines—anticipates Cedric Robinson’s extended reading of race and historical method in George Shepperson’s work. If—to borrow from Robinson—Green’s monograph serves to “add a little dignity” to Black D.C., “the big guess” Woolfolk identifies in her work might also be said to lose “the bowels, the ticks, and slight irritants which are so much of the consciousness of real human beings” Robinson sees as lacking from what we might call history’s dignity facing revisionism. See, Cedric Robinson, “Notes Toward a ‘Native’ Theory of History,” \textit{Cedric J. Robinson: On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism and Cultures of Resistance} (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 24; 32.

historically specific time given imperfectly or partially. It is, then, the “set” through which
collectivity—blood or otherwise—might be imagined.663

   By and through language’s inadequacy to tell everything that needs to be told, which also
does not need to be told to those who care enough about these venues to have studied them, the
partiality of language reveals the partiality of its author. In this instance, Brown does not take
part in what anthropologist James C. Scott calls a hidden transcript.664 Rather, he writes through
what might be called the bluff’s obverse, a not-quite-tell that refuses to seize telling as his right
but which discloses information all the same. Brown tells readers without, in fact, telling them
much at all. And, in doing so, he amplifies how the inadequacy of words might be wielded
against possessive and declarative impulses. If “soul language can be heard” in any number of
places, the question we might ask is how does one effectively listen for its sound and, more
pressingly, what role do words have in such sounding?

   This essay takes up such a question and argues that Black writers and Black musicians
had long engaged in uneven, difficult and differently constituted exchanges that could not and
did not transfer sound to page or page to sound. Rather than treat this lack of transfer as evidence
of failure, both writers and musicians marshalled word’s inadequacy, treating its lack as a spur
for engagement. In doing so, both groups rendered language’s inadequacy into a formal
possibility of exchange between different and often antagonistic modes of expression. More
pressingly, however, the partiality of language—its inability to record the totality of a sounded

663 Toomer, 41.
664 James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven:
Yale University Press, 1990). If Brown’s essay does not offer a hidden transcript, it most
certainly takes part in the broader practice of signifying. My focus in this essay, however, is
interested in how Black music writers seized upon the partiality of language—its inadequacy—to
generate conversations in excess of positivist accounts. As such, I want to bracket questions of
signifying in favor of focusing on Brown’s use of partiality.
and sounding event—modeled, in printed/read time, a mode of listening that invited even further response. If Black music writers did not, in fact, translate sound to page, but, instead, recorded their response to the event of listening to recordings, readers were likewise invited to consider their own responses. To listen between song and writing, thus, emerged as a mode from within a pocket of exchange, a figure that names the affective reception and response between writing and listening.

**Where Do Words Go?: Incommensurability and the Problems of Language and Music**

The inadequacy of language might help explain why tenor saxophonist and flautist Charles Lloyd would reputedly say to an interviewer, “words don’t go there.”

Lloyd’s refusal to give words banks on two unspoken facts. First, the refusal centers the affective and imaginative labor jazz produces in excess of language. Because jazz generates any number of feelings, he does not need to fall to word. Language, in this instance, becomes nothing less than a translational act through which music’s affective possibility is reduced to positivist description. Second—and equally important—Lloyd knows what white critics often miss: Black musicians’ capacity for rich language is neither diminished nor expelled by their refusal to offer words. Indeed, Lloyd does not so much refuse words as he refuses to place them within the particular moment cited by his interviewer. Readers know this—even if only implicitly—because words are precisely the material through which the interview—however difficult and pithy it may be—is built.

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665 As cited in Moten, *In the Break*, 41.
Given this refusal, we might ask, as Fred Moten does, “where do words go” when speaking about jazz and, more broadly, Black music. But before such an inquiry can be endeavored, it is important to note that both Lloyd’s answer and Moten’s question treat the Black community’s capacity for multiple modes of communication, exchange and expression as foregone. Expressivity is, for both men, always present and, more importantly, multiply manifest. As such, Moten’s line signifies doubly. On the one hand, he asks a rhetorical question about where one might talk about music without reducing the expressive possibility of it. On the other hand, he foregrounds the ill-fit of words in our appreciation of music. As Charles Rowell will jest in an interview with Moten, words may never go where one puts them, and the search for how we might give language to music must remain something with which one grapples perpetually. For Rowell, words obtain a kind of disruptive force within music, where language’s pull toward assertion and explanation threatens to reduce music to mere description.

Given the potential for words to become a disruptive force, another question surges from within these discussions. Why do we continue to turn to language—especially, to ask where do words go—given its perceived tendency to limit listening experiences? The answer to such a question varies. Lloyd’s assertion and Moten’s question might be thought to contend with what Nahum Dimitri Chandler has usefully called the “exorbitance” of Black life. For Chandler, exorbitance names the many modes of being that exist in excess to both whiteness and an antiblack state. In questions of Black expression, then, language’s reductive possibility might be thought of as that which limits Black exorbitance to description. Limited to positivist

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666 Moten, In the Break, 42.
668 Chandler, 11.
description, language becomes incommensurable with any project that seeks to treat Black music as a site through which to grapple with exorbitance.

However, citing the failure of language to accommodate Black expressivity is not exclusive to Black radical traditions. It also has been a central tool within anti-Black ideologies. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries—and, perhaps, even into our current moment—incommensurability might be thought of as a tautology that assigns categorical bounds between a number of racial and colonial binaries and then uses those bounds as justification for the maintenance of racial hierarchies. And it is the logic of these binaries—tautological or otherwise—that, following Sylvia Wynter, enabled the Western bourgeois concept of Man to “overrepresen[t] itself as if it were the human itself.” Through the development and then logic of binaries, those who sought to identify as Man need only to draw on differences with others who were understood either as lesser than or entirely outside of the human category. As Thomas Jefferson would write in his defense of repatriation of free Black people, white prejudice, a perceived Black grievance and “the real distinctions which nature has made . . . will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.” Farcical in his argument that repatriation might encourage the necessary but gradual abolishment of slavery, Jefferson’s plan for and justification of repatriation would not have been unfamiliar. Rather, it echoes those given by European philosophers and jurists, whose calls to limit slavery to the colonies were, in part, predicated on the idea that

“freedom is an attribute—in fact a way of living and being—of Nordic peoples . . .”  

In fact, Wynter’s assessment can be seen in any number of fields and treatises of the period. When the late eighteenth century naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc argues that the “New World” lagged behind Europe, he offers a historicist logic wherein both the continent and its indigenous communities’ varied relationships both to land and kinship moved in stark contrast to the populousness of Europe, a then contemporary indication of both progress and development. Leclerc is not singular in his assessment. In his discussion concerning representative government, John Stuart Mill justifies colonial rule “as legitimate as any other, if it is the one which in the existing state of civilization of the subject people most facilitates their transition to a higher stage of improvement.” And fifty years after Leclerc’s posits a historicist lag, Georg W. F. Hegel will assert that Africa is without history, echoing Thomas Jefferson’s assertion that Black people’s “existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection.” If Leclerc, Mill, Hegel and Jefferson endeavor vastly different projects, what links them is their insistence that indigenous and Black peoples were without a theoretical

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671 Charles-Louis Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller & Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 278. In fact, the 1772 Somersett decision, which ruled that James Somersett, an enslaved man brought to England, could not be held in bondage in the metropole, would set up the premise for arguments concerning the deportation of free Black people to Sierra Leone.


understanding of their ontological or, more broadly, metaphysical fact. Placed within the context of Western metaphysics, then, incommensurability takes part in colonial and enslavement projects, justifying a great deal of its violence through the invention of the Western, bourgeoisie man, and Black people’s distance from the category.

It is, perhaps, important to state the obvious here. The arguments offered during the Early modern and colonial periods were neither singular in their contemporary moment nor without a legacy of application across the nineteenth and, as it were, twentieth centuries. As Cedric Robinson demonstrates, Marx and Engels’s Eurocentric approach to the emerging capitalist regime generated a diagnostic that obscured the role of race in world structures. If Engel’s 1890 letter to J. Bloch indicates that neither he nor Marx understood economics as the sole base upon which all other super structures were built, their desire to “emphasize the main principle vis-à-vis our adversaries” effectively proffered a diagnostical set of terms, analytics and methods incapable of attending to the role of race in “the production and reproduction of real life.” In short, Marxist critique—and its often assumed focus on economics—obscured the particular forms of domination and oppression Black peoples experience(d). Such oversights are particularly consequential for Marxist critiques. For if the first mandate of immanent (rather than transcendental) critique requires an individual to locate their place within structures of

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675 If my focus on these three concepts suggests a metaphysical focus, it is worth noting that a great deal of work has been done on epistemology and phenomenology’s role in generating racial regimes. My purpose above is not to exhaust the topic so much as to historicize incommensurability.

676 Such oversights were not unique to Marx. In what might be called an inversion that arrives at identical consequences, Alexander G. Weheliye notices that both Agamben and Foucault’s concepts of Bare Life and Biopolitics, respectively, either dismiss race or treat it as prior to rather than concurrent with their objects of inquiry. See, Weheliye, Habeus Viscus, 4.

domination, Black people’s absent histories and experiences within Marx’s Eurocentric model cannot help but obscure their role as agents of change. And as Robinson masterfully demonstrates, Black radicals were—if not incommensurable with the Marxist project—certainly obliged to develop alternative diagnostic and analytical tools before even endeavoring radical and socialist critiques.

Incommensurability’s legacy—and the racialized logics it installs—redirects Moten’s question concerning where words might go. If it remains a question one must ask, it also serves as a refusal of the idea that words and music are automatically incommensurable. For both Moten and Rowell, then, words matter even and maybe especially when they fail to adequately describe a song in total. And it is this refusal to accept words as either the object through which total meaning or translation occurs or incommensurable objects in questions of music that explains why George E. Lewis, in response to Moten, argues “that wherever words go, they travel at the speed of thought, and they actually move faster than music,” which “unfolds in recollective and expectational time.” It is not only that music requires our speech, it is that these thoughts often form within the racialized and colonial logics of binary difference that understand Black musicians and Black listeners as incapable of theorizing or conceiving the broader (and, yet, somehow more particular) meanings given in language’s expression. It should come as no surprise, then, that a great deal of work that contends with racialized orders resonates with Lewis’s conception of recollective and expectational time.


Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

George E. Lewis, “foreword: when improvisers speak, where do words do?” *silent solos: improvisers speak* (Köln: Buddy’s Knife, 2010), 11.
Still, questions of incommensurability haunt music critics. Writing in the early sixties, musicologist Charles Seeger called this tendency toward and ultimate failure to reconcile language and music the “linguocentric predicament.” Twenty years later, rock critic Simon Reynolds made a similar observation, arguing that “what excites” people in popular music is often lost in music writer’s explications. For both Seeger and Reynolds, language and music do not mark each other’s lack, nor are they eternally destined to remain incommensurable. To the contrary, both men call for their respective fields to endeavor the creation of methods capable of both retaining and celebrating the integrity of music. They are not wrong, but they are not entirely correct either. Indeed, Black musicians and writers had long engaged, experimented and found surprisingly rich moments of extension in the combinatory possibility generated by language and music. This combination takes up questions of extension rather than explanation.


683 In addition to ethnomusicology’s grappling with language’s predicament, those in the literature field have attended to the many ways that writers—critics, poets and fiction writers, alike—have written both about and alongside music. See, for example, Brent Hayes Edwards, Epistrophies: Jazz and The Literary Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); John Gennari, Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Thriving on a Riff: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Literature and Film, ed. Graham Lock and David Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Emily Lordi, Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013); David Yaffe, Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). Finally, Alexandra T. Vazquez’s concept of “listening in detail” provides an interdisciplinary method through which the entanglements and, even, spasms of “the colonial, racial and geographic past” might be attended; see, also, Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman’s Music and The Racial Imagination for examples of how ethnomusicologists and others deploy an interdisciplinary approach to thinking about the intersections of language, music and race. See, Music and The Racial Imagination, ed. Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)
or transfer, and in and through a focus on extension, the combination assumes—or attempts to assume—the retention of what Audre Lorde calls the “interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences.”

Music and language emerge not as antagonistic modes of identification and experience but, in fact, as simultaneous modes of expressivity, whose tension is self-imposed by the many individuals who come to form a collective. Tension, thus, emerges less in either the individual or collective’s need to hold its other in abeyance and more from the need to contain itself (collective and individual alike) so to insure continued exchange.

A focus on language’s inadequacy, thus, engenders a discussion about excess and limits of both music and language. It is not that words fall short of the notes described—that sound is language’s surplus or, worse, its fugitive and so liberative quality. Rather, questions of surplus and limit shift in any number of ways depending on the circumstance. An attention to language’s inadequacy begins to contend with the many ways that sound goes over language’s descriptive limit, even as language’s surplus threatens to obscure sound.

In this way, sound’s analytical and affective push appears only to tend toward language as a reductive void or monolithic hole, as if it can only be heard when we give word to it.

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685 Jonathan Sterne makes a similar observation about sound and visuality. For Sterne, the “audiovisual litany” names the tendency to oppose sound to the visual, wherein sound is reduced to “pure interiority” while “vision takes us out of the world. But it also bathes us in the clear light of reason” See, Jonathan Sterne, The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 15.

686 See also, Lindon Barrett, Blackness and Value: Seeing Double. Barrett moves against the deconstructionist assessment of a sign’s infinite signifying potential and posits the voice as capable of generating what might be called a local awareness to expressions that exceed language. If such an assessment teeters Sterne’s “audiovisual litany,” Barrett’s careful appraisal of how the voice is marshalled avoids tipping over into inverting the privileged relationship between hearing and vision. See, also, Hortense Spiller’s work on the homiletic tradition. Hortense Spillers, “Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon,”
In practice, however, such an appearance is somehow both true and misleading. It is true that individual readings of music reduce the already realized expressive force of a song to a single narrative. However, it is equally true that these single narratives, when brought together spur any number of narratives. Importantly, even the aggregate does not portend completion so much as begin to demonstrate the expressive possibility of both music and its listeners. Under such an arrangement, language wrestles sound into a series of explanatory auditions each of which offers something lesser than what the sound gives and, in the accrual of inadequate descriptions, offers something more than what sound alone offers. That is to say that a focus on language’s inadequacy does not endeavor a search for a single mode through which the totality of Black song and can be given. Rather, to ask where inadequate but necessary words might go is to generate what Moten calls the caesura of the Black radical tradition, an ongoing—or elliptical—production of appositional or experimentalized modes of being and encounter.687

Language’s Inadequacy as an Opening of the Pocket in Black Writing

Music critics were not singular in their recognition of language’s reductive tendencies. Indeed, a great deal of Black Arts poets contended with and modeled methods for generating inadequacy. In her 1972 poem titled “Words,” Dyeatra Carter, a little-known poet, contends with language’s telling-power, which is to say its momentum of thought, and its ability to bring individuals into a community of listeners. For her, words can and often do “hang you up,” and they have also been used to generate the tropes that fix and degrade Black communities (“us”).

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687 For the Black radical tradition as an appositional positionality through which being exceeds negative constitution, see, Moten. *Black and Blur.*
Nevertheless, when used to “express you,” they can “reach to people for you.” Words, it would seem, generate the possibility of reach, which is to say extension, and, in extension, bring individuals into company with each other. Importantly, however, words—and, as we might surmise from her poem’s formal qualities, speech practices—do not guarantee extension or company.

The lack of guarantee is, perhaps, an obvious point given the discussion above. However, Carter’s formal design demonstrates how language’s imprecision can and has been used to make categorical claims. In order to do so, she opens the poem with two columns. Each designates some ways that words might be used. At a purely denotative level, the lists given are innocent enough, and they might be read as a path toward generating the many ways words signify both individually and collectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words – their meaning</th>
<th>Words – determine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>its meaning</td>
<td>express</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>our meaning</td>
<td>feeling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Words are controlled, words can control, words can hang one up, Words can be used against us.

Who has the power of meaning, of expression—You
Words are knowledge and experience – Authority of Words res in The Individual.
Words must be your own
They must mean your experience
The must express you
They must reach to people for you
The People –You – Must Determine Words.

The use of possessive pronouns in the first category, for instance, seems to offer a list through which to begin thinking about the role of possession, which is to say that words seem to be

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689 Carter, 31.
things that must be seized precisely because “their meaning” emerges separate from “our meaning.” The distinctions made in the left column would seem to designate various meanings, with white (their) and Black (our) meaning operating on opposite and hierarchical sides of a more general meaning (its). In this reading, the second column might be said to name the possibility of expression in words, where hierarchy alone—that “their” is listed higher than “our”—effectuates the kinds of inequity Carter goes on to describe.

Yet, reading opening of the poem as two vertical columns ignores the horizontal reading that remains available. When read horizontally, the question of inequity does not fall singularly to hierarchy, but, rather, demonstrates a chain of violent turns. To wit, “their meaning determine[s] its meaning [which] express[es] our meaning [:] feeling.” If the vertical reading offers a clear and immediately apprehensible classification of meaning and its racialized hierarchy, the horizontal reading generates a more insidious order of operation through which Black communities constantly had to contend with white meaning’s designation of not only words but, as discussed above, the various ontological and phenomenological categories that understood Black feeling as both that which never rises to the occasion of theorization or history and, at the same time, subtends the category of human and, in doing so, generates Warren’s condition of “inclusive exclusion.” In this way, the poem anticipates the work of Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, who track the development of those discursive practices that took part in and, in many cases, served to justify both colonial and racial hierarchies. Just as Bauman and Briggs locate “linguistic ideologies” at the interstice between language, tradition and classificatory prescription, Carter’s horizontal reading combines with the vertical so to

690 Warren, Ontological Terror, 39.
demonstrate how words not only index any number of antiblack ideas but, in their ordering, provide the grammar or syntax through which such ideas maintain both colonial and racial orders with a veneer of objectivity and scientific distance.

Nevertheless, Carter does not end with an exploration of antiblack categories and the order of their operation. As soon as she establishes how linguistic ideologies emerge within a twofold operation, the columns that help determine these operations disappear. Her words literally go a new way—which is to say that they are placed in a new manner and, in their placement, generate the formal conditions through which new meanings emerge. In the place of her previous comments, a series of statements are given in undivided lineation. Importantly, she writes,

\[
\text{Black People listen, Black People Understand, Black People know} \\
\text{Your Words are Your Own, its meaning, its definition must be} \\
\text{You, Your People.}^{692}
\]

Delivered in a manner that teeters between the declarative and imperative modes, the most interesting element of the lines occurs in her decisions concerning capitalization. Every noun is capitalized, as are all the personal pronouns, while all but one of the verbs is written in lowercase. If the capitalized words also signal their own hierarchy of importance, it is interesting that the verbs, which is to say the actions given, are almost all kept in the lowercase. Only “Understand” is given priority. Carter’s prioritization might be understood as signaling the importance of speakers coming into self-realization, and, in that case, it would coincide with the many calls for Black people to come into consciousness. Yet, it is equally true that her decision to leave “its” in the lowercase might also signify a refusal to understand some general—or even

\[^{692}\text{Carter, 31.}\]
pre-political—meaning as anything but an ideal. That is, capitalization draws from its common usage with respect to proper nouns and, in doing so, signals possession. With this in mind, her decision to capitalize both “Understand” and “Your,” both of which are usually left in the lowercase, might be less a function of priority and hierarchy and more a cue through which to signal those actions and utterances that belong wholly to the individual, while those words that are kept lowercase signal either an ideal or shared exchange of meanings that exceed even the connotative play that all words index.\(^{693}\)

Carter’s play with form does not end there. Toward the end of the poem, she pleads with Black speakers to “Defend your words – Defend your meaning,” once again shifting what words take the capital and lower cases. She then demands that speakers

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Take No Word Lightly} \\
\text{There’s power unknowingly in the ability to know, express,} \\
\text{and experience Words.}\quad^{694}
\end{align*}
\]

As with the above passages, the unusual or even disruptive elements trouble both assured readings of the poem and, importantly, words themselves. In this case, the use of “unknowingly” would seem to contradict earlier lines that encourage Black speakers to seize their affinity for “Your Words.” Still, such a reading elides the categorical critique she offers through her use of columns. When read within the multiple contexts offered in the poem, “unknowingly” subtly chides Black users who would forget that a command of words always threatens to descend into the kinds of violence—or “power”—given in language’s ability to reduce expression to mere


\(^{694}\) Carter, 31.
description. One not only “know[s]” and “express[es]” but “experience[s] Words,” which in their ability to extend individuals also enables a mode of exchange in which speakers can both “Be Your People, Be By Your People.”

The combination of alliteration and the lack of a conjunction between “People” and “Be” collapses the often-understood binary between selfhood and standpoint. In Carter’s arrangement, one’s community and one’s self exist in a constant state of relationality and re-orientation. Finding where her words have gone—and how their respective going generates any number of meanings and critiques—emerges as a formal call for readers to recognize that both Lloyd’s declaration and Moten’s question take part in a broader practice through which individuals encounter, engage and come into relation with each other. Indeed, Carter’s addition of “By” in the second half of the line “Be Your People, Be By Your People” participates within the alliterative order of the line’s first half. This willingness to participate within said order is nothing less than an act of orientation that then adds or supplements what has come prior to it. In the line, then, Carter offers a formal arrangement that undoes the strict borders between self and community, the self and polity. One is one’s “People” only when they orient themselves in ways that effectuate a kind of relationality that refuses the binary construction that a conjunction (and) might suggest.

Carter was not the only poet to contend with the importance of seizing words and, once seized, attending to their inadequacy. As Quincy Troupe writes, “my poems have holes sewn into them . . . & holes are these words . . .” which are nothing less than

   spaces between worlds
   are worlds themselves
   words falling off into one another . . .

695 While beyond the scope of this chapter, it is incumbent to acknowledge that questions concerning the intersections of Blackness and gender, sexuality and class surge in Carter’s line.
until “only God knows where they go . . .” And, there, lost, they are—to play on the religious metaphor—found. Born again—not as wholes, which is to return to the question of language’s adequacy, but as holes in search of communion—words move in congress with the collaborative project of encountering felt time and its labor of temporally and geographically specific difference. By sewing holes into his words, Troupe offers readers a figure for thinking about the dangers of what Carter calls “power unknowingly” and what Audre Lorde, in her 1976 poem “Coal,” will identify as the “total black,” that figure which renders “the many kinds of open” into a gaping force that flattens time, self and Blackness under the press of totality. If, as Lorde writes, “some words are open,” and, thus, always threatening to fall into racist and colonial logics, Troupe’s figure of a stitch reads the need to labor in and for inadequacy. For Carter, Troupe and Lorde, then, inadequacy must be actively called upon, and only then put in service of encounter. As each of their poems illuminate, where words go matter not because sound—speech, song or otherwise—begs positivist or historical explanation, but, rather, because an attentiveness to one’s partiality of expression helps locate themselves outside the binary logics of racism.

Words’ placement in both poetry and music matters, then, because finding their rightful location within the structure of Black engagement and its on-going practice of saying “no” to antiblack protocols is what enables, in Lorde’s poem, the emergence of a different kind of opening. As she writes in the closing stanza, “Love is a word another kind of open—.”

698 Carter, 31.
699 Lorde, 163.
lack of a comma between “word” and “another” is striking in how it suggests that the word itself opens up a grammatical space—or pause—that can do without punctuation. Two questions emerge from the lack of punctuation. First, how does one—quite literally—sound the line. Without the comma’s cue, where does one pause and, more pressingly, is “another kind of open” to be read as a parenthetical that further defines “word”? Second, given the threat of openings descending into totality, what kind of space does Lorde’s “a word” open? No definitive answer can be given, of course. Though, as a 1985 diary entry makes clear, “There is an important difference between openness and naiveté.” Still, if this difference remained something Lorde would “remind” herself of, the refusal to offer readers an assured answer concerning what openness might offer is both the power of the line and where Lorde explicitly refuses the binary constructions given within racist and colonial grammars.

Indeed, Lorde’s “a word” obtains at least two meanings, neither of which subsumes its other. Most obviously, her use of the indefinite article demotes “Love,” seizing it from relationality’s zenith and placing it on par with any—and maybe even all other—words. This is no small thing. In her demotion, she does not dismiss love so much as demonstrate how words—when not actively understood to be inadequate to Carter’s project of extension—can descend into the kinds of totalizing understandings that flatten particularity. However, and much like Troupe’s religious play, Lorde’s “a word” also takes on a connotative and even colloquial or local character that signifies an individual’s common assent to a higher or spiritual order. The phrase that’s a word, which when said out loud stresses the indefinite article, reinvests individual expressions with the kind of reach Carter names above. Inadequacy—which is to say the willful

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generation of it—refuses any reading that would demand “love” emerge as either total or worthless. Indeed, love as an inadequate and so partial word given is “another kind of open” precisely because it requires that one surrender the impulse to either totality or binaries. In giving “a word,” one asks that another “Take my word for jewel in your open light.” And it is only in the encounter of jewel and light that love’s luminescence emerges.

Returning to Troupe, sewing holes into language ensures the generation of a figurative pocket, that temporal-social-spatial phenomenon in music given by a rhythm section who plays around rather than on top of the beat. In the pocket created by the tense play between sound and language’s constant audition of its doing in time, a space opens in which Black expressivity not only moves but encounters itself in others, with historically and geographically specific difference. This shifts how we might think of language’s place in listening. Within the pocket of exchange, place might be better thought of as the endeavoring of placement or, returning to Lewis, a concatenative exchange through which the play around meaning’s pulse opens a space for entry and departure. Words as holes are also wholes, which do not name or mark a return to a former panacea so much as surrender to the constant need to participate within a process of imagining how engagement might better line or map the irreparable tear or flattening described in Lorde’s notion of “total black.”

From Holes to Pockets

Words don’t go there, Lloyd declares. So where, Moten asks, do they go, to which Paul “Buggie” Edwards discussion of the musical pocket might be added. For Edwards, one must listen for the pulse and then “pick and choose when you want to . . . come in and out.” But,

701 Lorde, 163.
crucially, one must always “get in and get out of the way.” To get in already portends a kind of rhythmic accountability to the other players. Edwards suggests a relational idiom, here. Such that to get in does not portend moving out; rather, one moves in and then out of the way of other players. The played holes, in this sense, do not mark a void so much as plot or mark time in such a way that takes room so to make or mark the room available at the edge of a song’s rhythmic pulse. One gets in and plots a moment that when coupled with others also plotting their place at the edge of the song’s pulse forms a relationship that opens up and around a song without ever, in fact, stamping it out.

Writing from within and of a pocket, thus, evades Seeger’s “linguocentric predicament” precisely because it does not endeavor explication, what might figuratively be a form or method that seeks to land on top of the pulse. Rather, the pocket emerges precisely because all involved seek to play its rim. Declarations, in this mode, are not definitive but, rather, additive and, ironically, always in mind of opening the possibility for more. In Edward’s example, the conguero, drummer and bass player do not dodge each other so much as “get out of the way.” In other words, they make room for others to come in and out of the song’s temporal space and, in making room, welcome or, alternatively, refuse engagement. Both welcome and refusal are possible. This possibility of either welcome or refusal is no small thing and, in fact, a mode of interaction that might be extended to a broader practice within the U.S.’s social and public spheres. Something as simple as walking down the street can and has required an attention to the

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702 Devon Taylor, dir., A Lesson on The Go-Go Beat (DSR Films, 2018). If lesser known than the other artists-theorists that populate these essays, Paul Edwards’ contributions to Go-Go, the largely Washington, D.C.-based form of music that emerges in the late 1970s, are enormous. He is, amongst other things, the drummer for Backyard Band, whose work in the 1990s and 2000s have included “Do Dat,” “Shook One,” “Killas in Da Park,” “It's 1996! (Kill em All), and “Tear Da Club Up!”
racial dynamics at hand. Black walkers have often had to dodge or account for white walkers in any number of ways. Whether one stands their ground or moves aside will, of course, depend on any number of factors, but the need to account for these factors, however, remains. The pocket shifts this relationship. It generates a mode of exchange, encounter and engagement that recognizes the violence of entitlement. Player and listeners alike surrender their right to place themselves wherever they please in time and space; they do not force one to dodge but, instead, endeavor to generate a mode of community encounter that makes room by coming into relation with each other and, thus, avoids the tendency to wield language as that which fixes or closes meaning.

A Pocket Not Hidden but Not Representative Either

The trend toward closure illuminates why Ernest Borneman, in his influential 1959 essay on the roots of jazz, foregrounds the role of circumlocution in playing. For Borneman, Black music “aims at circumlocution rather than exact definition. The direct statement is considered crude and unimaginative.” Instead, “the musician challenges himself to find and hold his orientation while denying or withholding all signposts.” Signposts not only avail listeners of easy entry (an often overdetermined point I want to hold onto for later in this essay), they also reduce the rich and abundant possibility of expressivity to meaning alone, which in its obligation to convey both the features and limits of that which is expressed returns expression to questions of both representation and value. As Amiri Baraka would warn in 1966, the impulse to “have everything known” limits what can be expressed, which, in and of itself, portends the limiting of

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what we might call luminescent or extending feeling. Acts of circumlocution, thus, emerge from within an historical set of practices designed to reopen expression and sense from the individuating forces that treat meaning as its own kind of possession. To have everything known is also always a matter of individuals possessing the requisite explanatory power needed for telling.

Language slips into these discussions, then, precisely because of the programmatic fallacy and the impulse to assign meaning that is always lesser than the sum of a song’s sound. Words, it seems, have not only gone there; they continued to stay within a there bounded by the demand for meaning. Baraka, however, does not let such impulses go unchallenged; instead, he stages a comparison between expressivity and its potential for meaning. “Tell me,” he writes, “all the things in the world? Or better, tell me all the feelings that exist? What feelings do not exist?” The final question turns the explanatory complex against itself precisely because one cannot tell of something that does not exist. Or, more pointedly, to tell of non-existence is to inaugurate a presence by way of utterance. In his question—and the impossibility of feelings’ non-existence after speech—Baraka shows how a singular focus on meaning becomes a metric that diminishes the full possibility of expressivity and, in doing so, maintains telling-power.

The recognition of speech’s role in inaugurating the impossible existence of non-existent feeling might be said to re-bundle Gayatri Spivak’s careful distinction between the two meanings of representation. For Spivak, representation names either acts of depiction (darstellen), as seen in the arts, or the act of speaking for (vertreten), as seen when a political surrogate replaces or is

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705 On programmatic fallacy, see, Brent Edwards, Epistrophies, 182.
706 Baraka, 19.
given the authority to decide for a polity.\footnote{707} For Spivak, the conflation of these two different modes of representation enables the explanatory regime of telling to proceed unchallenged. Worse, the conflation also threatens to turn any speech act given by subaltern subjects into the reiteration of their respective subordination.\footnote{708} In the context of the imperative, however, Baraka does not endeavor declaration; rather, he demands that those who would deny feelings that exceed meaning name these feelings as non-existent. What emerges within the imperative, thus, is a choice: those invested in understanding meaning as the singular metric by which expressivity’s value is measured can choose to answer, and, in so answering, reveal what they have disavowed. Alternatively, they can remain silent and, in silence, relinquish their assumed authority to tell. In the imperative, then, Baraka does not locate what Tavia Nyong’o has called the “hairline fracture” between Spivak’s two senses of representation.\footnote{709} Rather, he troubles the authority upon which telling-power determines the value of expression by and through its ability to convey meaning.

If Baraka’s imperative forces interrogation, which, in turn, forces a choice, it is his next sentence that demonstrates the role of meaning within the explanatory complex of race.\footnote{710} “A

\footnote{707} Rather than rehearse much of what the previous chapter takes up, I will point to enduring resonance between speech acts, representation and surrogation.


\footnote{709} Tavia Nyong’o, “Unburdening Representation,” \textit{The Black Scholar} 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 72.

\footnote{710} In addition to the work cited in both this chapter and chapter two, a great deal of work has been done on the role language in generating the impossibility or unspeakability of Blackness. Of particular interest to the above passage, see Ronald Judy’s \textit{thanatology}, which in his exploration of slave narratives names “a writing of annihilation that applies that taxonomies of death in Reason (natural law) to enable the emergence of the self-reflexive consciousness of the Negro;” Edouard Glissant’s concept of opacity, which names “a positive value to be opposed by any pseudo humanist attempt to reduce us to the scale of some universal model;” and Lindon Barrett argues that a paradox exists within slave narratives. “The bodies of ex-slave narrators are required to reproduce \textit{through} language are the very marks of their remove \textit{from} language and
catalogue of life,” he writes, “is an endless sound which could be broken up into nothing. No-
things.” In the fragment that follows the sentence, which itself is a word both fragmented and
tethered by the dash, Baraka gives readers a sounded and resounding word that amplifies the
impasse between expression and meaning put in service of measurement. Meaning, of course,
obeys, cannot help but obtain. History sees to that; and, in fact, the long history of
understanding Blackness as the end-bound of being demands an assignment that denies—or
appears to deny—ontology’s historical denial of Blackness. This, in of itself, is not a problem, as
meaning does not deliver telling’s violence. Rather, only when meaning is understood to be the
metric by which expressivity proceeds does it generate violence. Luckily, the fragment, as given
by Baraka from within an essay about Black language, sounds the metric’s demotion as well. In
it, lies a sounded, if not perfect, analogue to the idiom it’s no thing, that unbothered and casual
assurance that any challenge put forth will be met. In the sounding of the idiom, which carries
enough suggestive weight to forgo a full sentence, and which cannot be bothered to fit itself into
the grammatical line, Baraka makes clear that it is no thing that meanings obtain, for meanings
always do. Through the issue of the idiom, circumlocution neither eschews nor abandons
meaning; rather, it takes the fact of Black expressivity at its word—or, perhaps better put, at its
sounding. And in such sounding, Baraka refuses to succumb to the trap of persuasion, which is to
say that he refuses to offer readers an argument for the fact of abundant Black life. Instead, he

the life of the mind.” I quote these texts at length so to ensure that both their common concern
and different approaches and critiques are retained. See, Ronald Judy, (Dis)Forming the
American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular (Minneapolis: University
of Minnesota, 1993), 89; Edouard Glissant, “An Exploded Discourse,” Caribbean Discourse:
Selected Essays, trans. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1999), 162; Lindon

offers a phrase that proffers, modestly and somehow also unabashedly, one possible plan of its doing. This is no small thing, as a surrender to expressivity, following Denise Ferreira da Silva, takes Blackness “not as category but as a referent of another mode of existing in the world.” In the “word sound-ed,” comes a “quicker leap from the mind . . . past the machine.”

The Revel of Mystery, Sense and Quiet Reflection

Black musicians had long offered a model of music-making that neither eschewed the semiotic utility of language—and lyrics—nor understood song’s explanatory potential as its singular purpose. In a 1968 recording session with Columbia Records producer Attilio Joseph "Teo" Macero, Thelonious Monk put it thusly, “See, I’m not trying to disguise nothing and stop people from hearing it [and] dig it, you know? I want it to be easy as possible so people can dig it. And then, and still be good, you know?” In refusing the idea that his compositions were in service to disguise, Monk effectively upends the idea that hidden or disguised transcripts are always present within Black expression. Indeed, it might be said that his refusal of such an understanding also refuses to comment on meaning. This deepens the contexts to which his “reluctance to verbalize” explanations occurs. Under the command of refusal lies an implicit question of his own: hidden from and to whom? Like Baraka, Monk refuses the idea that

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714 Christian Blackwood and Michael Blackwood, dirs., *Monk*, (New York: Michael Blackwood Productions, 1999), DVD.
obscenity and disclosure mark the height of artistry. And both, perhaps, take up what Sarah Jane Cervenak calls “wandering,” those philosophical modes “that have nothing to do with [their] availability to external meaning or their ability to articulate anything at all.”717 And both demonstrate how sometimes beauty is the momentary freedom given in and by the mystery of senses. It is, then, “easy”—even and maybe especially when the particular formal qualities of the song are anything but simple—just so long as one is willing to surrender their right to possess total meaning.

Neither Charles Lloyd nor Thelonious Monk were singular in their respective refusal. Even Gil Scott-Heron, whose work across novels, poetry and music demonstrates a desire to work with both language and music, “was never very fond of doing interviews.”718 His reticence has to do with how interviewers and transcribers continued to treat articles as opportunities through which to discover Scott-Heron, with discovery functioning as that which replaces an exchange of ideas. Like Monk, then, he objects to the many ways that interviewers’ relative lack of familiarity with his work generated a stiff exercise that not only demanded that he reveal himself without anything offered in return but, also, obscured the many ideas that were given and apparent. As he describes the experience, interviewers would bring in a series of questions and appear as if they “couldn’t pick me out of a lineup without a cheat photo they looked at before they looked through a one-way mirror.”719 Worse, transcribers misinterpreted his words so often that he began to feel like he needed to bring a tape recorder to interviews just to have a counter-record of what he said. In what falls between signifying and the literal, he argues that it “was not

719 Scott-Heron, 197.
enough for the transcribers to have ears like an eagle. They needed ears like a Heron, and a sense of humor like a Heron, too, because that’s where most of the distortion and missed portions took place.” 720 In their search for the heretofore undiscovered parts of Scott-Heron—as seen through a one-way mirror—most interviewers missed the sounded and signified elements he had provided. Words, in this case, do not go where interviewers and transcribers put them because words and their given intonation already exist if not as tools through which discovery could be had then as gestures of unhidden exchange or, returning to Deatrya Carter, “reach.” 721

The pocket, thus, emerges as a sounded space of encounter, while words, in their inadequacy to record or pinpoint action in full, become a mode through which one enters a chain of many different expressions, each marking one element in a broader moment of engagement and exchange. As Amiri Baraka would write in 1966, “each voice is a place, in America, in the totality of its image.” 722 It is not then that “a Negro poet, . . . [so] tied to the texts” has never sung as powerfully as James Brown’s scream,” as Larry Neal would argue in 1968; rather, if music is “far ahead of [Black] literature,” it is because the pocket’s risky constitution requires that language remain generatively inadequate, moving around a song rather than on top of it. 723 Words take up and part in what Brent Edward identifies as Baraka’s joint process of “layering: an unending proliferation of qualification, annotation, and digression; as well as immersion, a step farther down, or in.” 724 And, indeed, writers and critics often seized upon song titles and

720 Scott-Heron, 198.
721 Carter, 31.
724 Brent Edwards, Epistrophies, 25.
lyrics, using allusion to generate an affective “aperture.””

The question to ask is whether the kind of wandering given in these meditations on music and musician’s processes can be captured in words. Indeed, even the verbs (wander and capture) suggest that the answer may be no. Words, in no small way, always portend capture, which is to say the opposite of wandering. And, indeed, much of Cervenak’s text questions the violence of attempts to literalize wandering. Still, what would it mean to see the pocket of exchange as a method through which partiality—in every sense discussed above—draws us closer to wandering amongst each other, as an act of otherwise unavailable encounter? Indeed, it is the nature of wandering that seems to counter early rock critic and Crawdaddy founder Paul Williams’ assertion that the “sensitive critic must act as a guide, not paraphrasing songs but trying to show people how to appreciate them.” If William’s point is that explanation can never happen, his ultimate conclusion still generates a kind of direction that impinges on the nature of exchange, which is then further mired by his repeated desire to sap all sense of historical and social context from listening and perception—to make it unavowed.

**The Pocket of Exchange in Practice**

In his on-going collection of essays concerning the associative possibility of song, Al Young uses song titles as spurs toward self-reflection and even memoir. In each essay, which range from one page to three pages in length, he offers little in the way of explication or exegesis and, instead, presents readers with events from his life. These events are not so much alternative methods of translation but efforts to narrate personal associations between song and biography.

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To read Young is to enter a mode of listening wherein songs remind and even spur recollection and feeling. If his use of titles tests the bounds of associative writing and the possibility of capturing the affective qualities of music, it also makes language’s translational inadequacy even more apparent. The divide between music and language may not be a question of the subjective chasm that lies between the two forms—for, of course, both linguistic and notational systems and theories allow for common analysis. Nevertheless, Young’s work demonstrates that there are other ways to think about the links between listening, writing and reflection so long as one acknowledges the inadequacies generated in such an approach. The need to attend to inadequacy is, perhaps, why in an essay on Martha Reeves and the Vandellas’ “Heatwave” he will offer an apology. “Sorry, I know the song’s supposed to be about love and all like that, but this is the way I heard it when the temperature was making me fuzzy and dizzy.”

However, Young’s apology might be said to obscure the impulse to tell, even as it seems to endeavor something different. As George Lewis and Amina Claudine Myers observe, listeners’ often demonstrate a unwillingness to receive new sounds on their own. Instead, they will often endeavor an act of translation. To translate, however, pulls the rich mystery of sound toward narrative, which is to say linguistic meaning. As Lewis observes,

> It seems that one of the hardest things is to teach people how to listen to things, how to hear things in a different way. One of the things I’ve noticed in teaching classes is that when I ask people to describe new and unfamiliar music, they can’t . . . What they can do is make up an impromptu movie scenario instead, a music-video scene. . . More and more, in this culture, sound’s major purpose is to serve as accompaniment for moving pictures.

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Myers agrees, adding that listeners will often “also connect those sounds with things that have happened in the past. The sounds have to go along with something instead of being on their own.” Yet, what if we are to understand their observations as taking part of a broad pocket of exchange, that occurs—and continues to occur—between those who endeavor translation and sounding? From with the pocket, Lewis and Myers’s observations are not the laments given by two musicians who must endure the casual listener’s stubborn need to make sense of sound. To the contrary, they are in the act of both local and distant exchange, addressing each other, listeners, and, indirectly, Young’s work. And in their distant address, they provide a counter—but still partial—approach to listening.

In fact, Lewis and Myers’s were not singular in their observations. In a 1966 essay on Albert Ayler, Baraka focuses on Ayler’s assertion that he sought “to play past note, and get, then, purely into sound.” In discarding the pursuit of notes—which is to say the bounds given by and through the system of music—Ayler’s work entered “into the basic element, the clear emotional thing, freed absolutely from anti-emotional concept.” If the claim suggests any number of intentions on the part of Ayler, none of which can be addressed, the refusal to accord any expectation of meaning—hidden or otherwise—is evident in Baraka’s assessment of what it is like to listen to Ayler’s recordings. “The records,” he writes, “have been beautiful, at first

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729 Lewis & Myers.
731 Baraka, “Apple Cores #3,” 145.
732 In his autobiography, Baraka recalls Ayler coming to his house even before he had listened to much of Ayler’s work. The passage is interesting in how it seems to anticipate the sort of assignment given above, inverting the relationship. That is to say that if intentionality is assigned it is assigned in such a way that also, somehow, refuses individuation. In this way, it seems to honor the exchange Baraka recalls in his Autobiography. To wit: Ayler had come to challenge Baraka, asking eventually, “You think [the music] is about you?” Baraka, for his part, claims that he “did and didn’t know what he meant. In some ways,” he writes, “I did think it was about me.
frightening, because they tear so completely away [and] are not at all ‘reasonable,’ i.e., having
done away with the ‘explanation’ . . .”\textsuperscript{733} For Baraka, not only does Ayler’s approach to
sounding do away with both explanatory and reasoning logics, its beauty lies in how the tear
away, so frightening, engenders an experience that if not evacuating a semiotic link or chain
certainly opens listeners up to alternative modes of reception and experience. In short, Ayler’s
out approach offered little or no recourse to narrative, cinematic or personal. Instead, Ayler
breaks open a space through which one might better attune to expressivity in excess of
meaning—in which one might wander.

Yet, meaning still obtains and, as Lewis and Myers observe, those meanings while never
totally falling to narrative can and do generate both the cinematic or personal telling. As Aldon
Lynn Nielsen writes of Lorenzo Thomas, one person’s words can “cros[s] the horizon into
me.”\textsuperscript{734} Extending Nielsen’s celebration of Thomas to the conversation at hand, the ability of
words to cross into others names the action by which Dyeatra Carter’s “reach” is achieved. At
the same time, it might be asked what happens to words and, more broadly, sounds and notes as
they exceed the giver and are metabolized, which is to say inevitably changed, by the receiver.
Do they return us to the dilemma of transcription described by Scott-Heron? While there is no
overarching answer to offer, as each reception will depend on an innumerable about of
contingencies, Young’s phrase “the way I heard it” offers a mode of response that attempts to
acknowledge the partiality of both reception and response through an embrace of—or even

\textsuperscript{733} Baraka, “Apple Cores #3,” 145.
\textsuperscript{734} Aldon Lynn Nielsen, “Introduction.” \textit{Don’t Deny My Name: Words and Music and the Black
surrender to—word’s inadequacy.\textsuperscript{735} By foregrounding the partial and so always incomplete nature of his experience, he demotes the right of his words to seize readers in total or, to return to the central thrust of this essay, the phrase explicitly acknowledges the personal and so partial nature of his listening experience.

In doing so, he might be said to take part in Dyeatra Carter’s capital case. By signaling that the reflections given are “the way I heard it,” Young gestures to the idea that they are His experience, not as a function of possession but, in fact, as an acknowledgement that His meaning (rather than his) is mediated by innumerable and so partial standpoints and conditions. Put another way, the phrase makes sure that readers know that the essays emerge from Young’s ears—as opposed to Scott-Heron’s or any musician’s ears. Through his ears, he writes of the experiences and associations that follow from within a very partial expression of a song’s possibility. Put more plainly, Young’s willingness to allow his written thoughts to wander generates a parallel experience to that generated by Ayler’s music, while both demonstrate that the opposite of possession is not, in fact, dispossession but manufactured and maintained partiality.\textsuperscript{736}

This is not to dismiss the critiques given by Lewis and Myers. Rather, it is to suggest that Young’s phrase shifts their critiques—if only slightly. By signaling his approach to writing toward the affectual rather than musical effect of “Heatwave,” Young offers a particular mode of

\textsuperscript{735} Young, 56.
\textsuperscript{736} If this suggestion appears to return to questions of reflexivity explored in the nineties—especially as the concept pertains to anthropology and sociology’s participant-observer model—my stress of dispossession and possession attends to intracommunal discussions. In other words, the pocket of exchange is not about an outside observer coming in and tracking how their presence changes and even corrupts group dynamics. Rather, it is about a longer and broader mode of relationality and exchange within Black listening, wherein questions of borrowing, appropriation and interpretation emerge, if not foreign to then certainly ancillary of practices between Black listeners and Black musicians.
narration that does not endeavor explication or, moving back to the larger arguments of these essays, telling. Rather, he demotes the impulse to tell everything and, instead, gives readers a glimpse into his listening experience. This is no small thing. In the demotion of his right to tell, Young makes something abundantly clear: neither he nor Lewis nor Myer nor Scott-Heron nor Monk nor Carter nor Lloyd are wrong. Rather, their approaches are partial in both senses of the word. And in combination, we come to see how the pocket of exchange challenges any endeavor that understands words as the material and even ground upon which one arrives at consensus. In the pocket, there is no assumption of right or wrong precisely because the nature of exchange within refuses the *a priori* assumption that the purpose of encounter, engagement and exchange is to determine the rightness of any process. This refusal is true even and maybe especially as questions of harm and care seem to endeavor a similar project. What each of the discussions above demonstrate, then, is how the pocket of exchange provides a mode through which a participant’s accountability to the music and the individuals who make up their community are made through a constant desire to generate room for response and encounter. One’s partiality, so to speak, refines from within the bounds of encounters always aware of expression’s inadequacy.

Young’s work also generates something that moves near but ultimately outside of what Eve Sedgwick calls paranoid reading. Just as Sedgwick’s essay does for texts and reading, Young’s essays demonstrate how music offers any number of listening experiences that are not immediately given over but, in fact, require work on the part of the listener. Meaning, feeling and referent exist within song’s possibility, not as conveyor or carrier of some gesture or information embedded into texts on the part of the writer but as an expression—collective or singular, as ensemble or as solo—that by fact of recordings allows listener-as-critic to join. However, the many experiences that might be given by listeners are not automatic. They are, in fact, often
difficult to draw out and, perhaps, even more difficult to sustain when given over to the pocket, which is always accountable to those within its field of exchange. These related difficulties of perception and time name the conjunction between the pocket and Sedgwick’s concept. Like paranoid reading, listening for and in and in service to a pocket frustrates immediate apprehension. But where paranoid reading produces an affect of distrust, a constant search for immanent rupture or corruption that can only be obtained when one enters and then rehearses a text’s logic, the pocket seeks to demonstrate its faith in the fact of song’s richness—which is to say in song’s multiplicity of experience that offers both the possibility of critique and something else. Unlike paranoid reading, where knowledge is generated “in the form of exposure,” the pocket gives words in the spirit of partial exchange, as an act of faith in the exorbitance of Black expressivity, as both notes and words, as both song and essay.737

This giving over is, in no uncertain terms, experience’s delight. Even when Young’s vignettes describe sad or discomforting events in his life, they provide the possibility of a complicated delight and show readers how songs engender the speaking to or toward an event that lies well outside the listening moment. In speaking—which is to say writing—an opportunity for meditation and reflection comes into being for both Young and readers. It is, then, the echo of the listening experience. Much like the song’s delight, writing from within the pocket operates as a mode of exchange that amplifies both the individual’s unique experience and their communal element, or, what Kofi Natambu calls the “MYSTERY” of how Black practices and Black study emerge as practices in service to otherwise modes of both reception and offering. In a surrender to mystery, one refuses the strict, iterative and, thus, categorical

binary between individual and community.\textsuperscript{738}

Returning to the beginning of this essay, Charles Lloyd’s refusal of words must be coupled with his embrace of wonderment. As he tells an interviewer in 1968,

\begin{quote}
One has to be concerned [about the political and social possibility of the world] . . . I think music transcends. I guess maybe that political is a byproduct or something . . . You know the sheer thing of the music as wonderment, or as life, or evolving and loving, growing, sadness, all the feelings that man has.\textsuperscript{739}
\end{quote}

Much like Natambu’s invocation of mystery, Lloyd’s surrender to wonderment refuses the impulse to know something completely, taking part, instead, in the sublimity of music’s potential for encounter. And both mystery and wonderment might be said to be the conditions under which “soul language” emerges precisely because its partiality cannot help but reach out to others in an act of “Be[ing] Your People, Be[ing] By Your People.”\textsuperscript{740}


\textsuperscript{740} Carter, 31.
Chapter 4: Talking Loud and Saying (Almost) Nothing: The Political Possibilities in Audiences’ Responses to “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud.”

No one alive / remembers / the unrecordable / warmth of my / breath
-Sandeep Parmar⁷⁴¹

Turn off the stereo / this country gave you / it is out of order / your breath / is your promiseland
-Pedro Pietri⁷⁴²

You vex me so / Impatient sigh, / Land whose liberation waits / In my own breath
-Lorenzo Thomas⁷⁴³

By the end of 1968, James Brown’s popularity was undeniable. His Memphis’ Coliseum concert broke previous attendance records, with at least a 1,000 people turned away.⁷⁴⁴ As Jet reported, “Brown was saying it loud at New York’s Madison Square Garden, where he scored a musical knock out before a wildly cheering 17,000 fans.”⁷⁴⁵ And his success was not limited to these venues. In the twelve months between June 1967 and 1968, he had performed before more than 1.5 million people and was set to release his first television broadcast of an Apollo concert on NBC.⁷⁴⁶ The popularity of “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” was, if anything, even more impressive. By December of 1968, the song had sold two million copies, with Jet giving it the honorific of “Soul Brothers Top 20 Honor Roll . . . because of the unusually heavy and sustained week-by-week balloting.” And alongside the honorific, Brown’s “Goodbye My Love”

⁷⁴³ Lorenzo Thomas, “Please Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood,” Dancing on Main Street (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004), 14.
charted at fifteen, while *Live at the Apollo Vol. II*, also released in August 1968, was named album of the week in November. Going by attendance and sales records, Brown had earned the accolades given by many in the mainstream press. His importance to popular culture, music and, as discussed in the previous chapter, politics was foregone.

However, if Brown’s importance was foregone, praise for “Say It Loud” was not.

Scholars and critics—then and now—have been more critical of the song. In a 1970 article condemning Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael), Eldridge Cleaver uses the song’s title as an epithet. For Cleaver, “the ‘I’m Black and I’m Proud’ set” constituted an incoherent community of activists more concerned with image than liberation.”747 Forty-five years later, Adolph Reed would make a similar argument about scholars’ tendency to overemphasize questions of Black agency in an article named “The James Brown Theory of Liberation.”748 In his work on music’s role in making the Black public sphere, Mark Anthony Neal argues that the song’s uncritical celebration of Black pride all but evicted “the articulation of real political strategies to address the black condition,” while Shana L. Redmond echoes Neal’s assertion and argues that the song’s history further removes it from anything broaching a substantial politics.749 This is particularly true, she argues, given the song’s timing. Released after a deservedly dismal response to “America is my Home,” “Say It Loud” marks, for Redmond, a moment in which “Brown was the one organized” by Black listeners.750

Redmond was not the first to come to such a conclusion. In June of 1968, poet Mae Jackson penned “There Was a Time (For James Brown),” writing “i know of an entertainer / that went into / a black community / talking and singing / about / americanism / and how some people / got him organized / (kicked his ass) / now his whole rap / is / very / revolutionary.” Five months later, an article in Jet speculated that “[m]aybe it’s because [“Say It Loud’s”] message appeals to the head and heart and it’s beat moves the fingers and feet or maybe it’s because SBT 20 readers are just proud of being black and Soul Brother No. 1 is doing their thing.” And these critiques continued beyond 1968. For their Spring 1969 cover, the editors of Black Dialogue repurposed the song’s imperative, so that a dialogue bubble read: “SAY IT LOUD: I’M GOING WITH THE CROWD!”

Interestingly, Brown did not disagree. If anything, going with the crowd served as a kind of ethos for his music. In a 1974 interview, a reporter asked about his then new single “Stoned to the Bone.” Brown argued that its success was due to how the song appealed to younger listeners. “It’s their kinda thing [sic] I get right down with them, talk their talk and walk their walk and that’s what it’s really all about.” The same, it might be said, was true of “Say It Loud.” In fact, it was not only teens who responded to the song. James Cone, one of the architects of Black Liberation Theology, remembers that the “spirit of blackness was driving me crazy in a good way, making me laugh and cry and walk and run, and even sing and dance as I listened to the sound and moved to the rhythm of Aretha’s “Respect” and James Brown’s “Say It Loud—I’m

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Black and Proud.” And in an essay reflecting on the Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal pointed out that James Brown was both a “big hero” and “a magnificent poet,” while Amiri Baraka agreed with Neal’s assertion, calling Brown Black America’s “number one poet.”

Whether listeners successfully organized Brown is, perhaps, unanswerable, but the many ways that listeners took up and celebrated or dismissed “Say It Loud” remains of interest. In fact, it might be said that because the song proffers an open-ended and politically unsubstantial conception of Black pride, its power—and enduring popularity—emerges because of its ability to evict then popular modes of telling even as its formal qualities cannot help but draw—and signal—audiences from any number of races, ethnicities, genders and classes. That is to say that “Say It Loud” says almost nothing—politically speaking—but, in doing so, it also generates a listening space that if not free of white telling operates in excess of its modes. In this case, because telling is based on a certain amount of expectations, its efficiency, which is to say how much it assumes a totality of meaning, obscures the possibility of excess. And it is this excess—performative in nature—that invites any number of then contemporary discussions concerning Black life and pride to emerge within its played space.

The Grunt

Before the imperative, there is the lure. Before James Brown demands that his audience “Say it Loud,” there is the grunt. Neither prior to language, nor of it and somehow caught between exhalation and exhilaration, Brown’s grunt gestures release in order to draw listeners into shifted time: the work of enflowering pride. This is the grunt’s lure—that unfamiliar and yet

somehow always possible placement, which marks the occasion, the first beat of each bar, upon which most of Brown’s work in this period would rest. And there placed, it sounds a body—unseen—marking time. Or so we trust, have come to trust.⁷⁵⁷ And in that trust—aural in nature, social in affect—we are moved and so move, too. The grunt’s movement moves us and, in doing so, becomes an act of capture and, if you’ll allow the indulgence, active capture. Of what, it might be asked. The answer is multiple.

At its most narrow, the grunt weights the first beat of the song and, in doing so, shifts the usual arrangement of accented notes from the second and fourth beats of each bar to the first and, as will soon be heard, third beat. This, however, does not say enough. The grunt also issues a vocal performance in service to—in imitation of—feeling and reaction. Coming out of nowhere, it operates on a separate phrase scheme from both the one-bar pattern of the bass and drum, and the five-bar pattern of the horns and guitars. These separate schemes, which by themselves would be incomplete and which when thought of together portend chaos, must find a way to interlock. And so they do through their individual consistency or seriality. Repetition, thus, becomes a means through which rhythmic complexity is managed, even as the management generates a constancy that feels loose and capable of improvisation.⁷⁵⁸ This is the grunt announcing the rhythmic vamp, that repeating musical figure, so simple in its play, so crucial in how it stretches the temporal bounds of a song so to ensure that we fall into its sway, and which,

⁷⁵⁷ According to Brown, he retired the song shortly after its release. After that, in order to hear “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud,” one would have to listen to the recording.
⁷⁵⁸ A great deal of work has been done on the role of repetition in Black and African based music. In the above, I am less concerned with linking Brown’s use of repetition to Diasporic formal modes and more interested in how it works to generate a very specific mode in “Say it Loud.” To be sure, this is neither to dismiss nor ignore the role of rhythm and repetition in Black music. Rather, it is to bracket both so to think about how repetition works in this specific song. For more on repetition, see, James A. Snead. “On Repetition in Black Culture,” African American Review 50, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 648-656.
for so long, had been used exclusively at concerts.\textsuperscript{759} This, then, is the capture of liveness or its surrogate.

What the combination of vamp and accented one offers, then, is repetition as a slowing agent. Even as the pulse of the song proceeds at a rapid pace, the vamp gives listeners time to adjust.\textsuperscript{760} They need not worry about the variety of dynamic, agogic and tonic accents Brown clusters around the one beat of each bar. The vamp eases them into any number of new sounds and interlocking rhythmic structures.\textsuperscript{761} Thus, the vamp is not merely an attempt to deliver liveness; it is the marshalling of live techniques so to offer two senses of time—the agile pulse of the bar and the patient plod of the vamp. And in its plod, listeners are given the structure through which they can feel themselves into the pulse of time and community.

Indeed, Brown’s rending of recorded time into what might be called nested times (pulse/vamp) offers a structure through which improvisation is both of the body and embodied. The perhaps opaque distinction I make between these two locations of body might be thought to rehearse the stages of improvisational reception—gestures that can but do not guarantee praxis.

\textsuperscript{759} The vamp had long been used by musicians during live recordings to both extend and open up the groove for players and dancers alike. However, Brown’s decision to record a song based on the vamp effectively brought the concert to recordings. His recording of “Cold Sweat” is often cited as the breakthrough record. However, a good deal of his work prior to “Cold Sweat” had begun to organize around the vamp. 1963’s “Signed, Sealed and Delivered” marks an earlier recording in which a song is built from the vamp, but even earlier recordings demonstrate a growing interest in both the vamp and accented downbeats. Brown’s 1958 recording “Baby Cries Over the Ocean,” for instance, follows the then common 12-bar blues pattern, but Bernard Odum’s bassline hedges the downbeat, giving the song a hint of what was to come.

\textsuperscript{760} The recorded version of “Say It Loud” runs at about 116 beats per minute, placing it if not at the upper register of musical tempos then certainly within the realm of uptempo songs.

\textsuperscript{761} For a discussion on both the structures Brown develops and the traditions from which both he and his arrangers drew, see, Alexander Stewart, “Funky Drummer: New Orleans, James Brown and the Rhythmic Transformation of American Popular Music,” \textit{Popular Music} 19, no. 3 (2000): 293-318. Stewart’s primary goal is to demonstrate the influence of New Orleans music and musicians on Brown’s work, but he also provides nine common techniques that Brown used beginning in the mid-sixties.
To be of the body tentatively names a felt disorientation that spurs a turn toward the accented note and, in so turning, comes into consciousness of the tension between what Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman name “the social construction of bodies and theories of prereflexive experience, contradictory as it may seem.”762 But because the vamp returns listeners again and again to this accent, they can soon follow along, rendering the initial bodied turn into an embodied expression of the stressed beat. And as such improvised and responsive or participatory embodiment occurs, it is the lure, that funky undeniable pulse first signaled in a grunt, that holds.

But what does the grunt hold? Does it fall into the category of Afro-modern “beginnings” that Alexander Weheliye argues “launch new worlds, holding out pleasures to come while also tendering futurity as such in their grooves”?763 Or does it falter under the weight of a telling already told, the grunt as New World laboring, that in utterance echoes the conditions of enslavement’s many afterlives. What, it might be asked, does it mean to be the hardest working man in a world that structures Black labor through dispossession, Black life as endurance?

Of dispossession and endurance, theologian Howard Thurman adds desolation and agony. “They held their breath against the agony,” he wrote upon first seeing the west coast of Africa. The entire passage bears reading.

From my cabin window I look out on the full moon, and the ghosts of my forefathers rise and fall with the undulating waves. Across these same waters how many years ago they came! What were the inchoate mutters locked tight within the circle of their hearts? In the deep, heavy darkness of the foul-smelling hold of the ship, where they could not see the sky, nor hear the night noises, nor feel the warm compassion of the tribe, they held their breath against the

763 Weheliye, Phonographies, 1.
How, he asks, “does the human spirit accommodate itself to desolation?” The question is—or must be—rhetorical, asked to signal the insufficiency of any answer in any time. And nested within it are more questions, equally unanswerable—about the methods of accommodation survival mandated across three centuries. How, he asks, does one accommodate themselves from within the various holds of ship, of plantation, of state.

These comparisons are not without risks. When wielded poorly, comparison collapses time and mistakes enslavement’s afterlives for an unchanging world. Power, of course, depends on the refinement of oppression’s mechanisms. Surrogation, to return to the previous chapter, evidences one way an antiblack world can and does learn how to absorb revolutionary efforts and modes of being.

Indeed, it might be said that liberal teleology and the myth of an ever-refining and accommodative state depend on the state’s ability to absorb that which opposes it, to stage spectacles of inclusivity and generate locations of diversity even as power holds. How, Thurman asks, does the human spirit accommodate itself to and in the midst of desolation, and the answer is that that it depends, not only with respect to the period faced but, crucially, on the local communities to whom the question extends. If Thurman rightfully asks about accommodation, we might ask about the many modes of unfreedom Black communities have made, which is to ask about the complex lives generated under the conditions of precarity. Both

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764 Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1979), 193. Thurman’s mediation comes from his 1963 trip to Nigeria at the invitation of Dr. Kenneth O. Dike, vice-chancellor of the University of Ibadan. Thurman and Dike met when the latter had come to Boston University in order to receive an honorary degree. Upon meeting Dike, Thurman said that he would like to visit Nigeria that coming fall. In response, Dike arranged for Thurman to come to Ibadan as a visiting lecturer in the department of philosophy and religion.

765 Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 193.

766 See, introduction on Sylvia Wynter and identity.
Rinaldo Walcott and Christina Sharpe point to “the multiple forms of different unfreedoms in the face of an elusive freedom.” The need to signal the presence of many forms occurs because unfreedom tempts us to treat Black people and the geographically and historically specific lives they make as out of time. Under the command of such a reading, there is no need for any breath but that which endures agony.

However, the grunt’s return of breath to time should not be mistaken for recovery. Rather, it labors to make breath audible in time, working in tandem with Thurman’s held breath, which also acts in time but without external sound. Together, Brown’s Grunt and Thurman’s breath mark exchange—its work, its pleasure, its pain, their affective simultaneity. And in their combination—breath in and breath out—they emerge as a mutual tarrying by, for and with Black communities in and across time. Brown’s grunt may trouble the notion that desolation should be accommodated, but it can do so only because it operates in company with Thurman’s hold—historically if not literally speaking. Together—and only together—they take part in the sounding of Black social life. I am reminded, here, of Ashon Crawley’s assertion that “an abolitionist politic [is] the ongoing ‘no,’” a black disbelief in the conditions under which [black

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767 Rinaldo Walcott, “Freedom Now Suite: Black Feminist Turns of Voice,” Small Axe 22, no. 3 (November 2018): 151–59. Sharpe cites Walcott in an article from the same issue. See, Christine Sharpe. “And To Survive,” Small Axe 22, no. 3 (November 2018): 171-180. In his Du Bois lecture on the “moral economies of Black Atlantic culture,” Paul Gilroy argues that “Apart from the battles for human recognition and political rights, black vernacular culture sought and found new freedoms in arenas of social life that were not readily amenable to the tempo of lawful and respectable commerce.” It might be said that unfreedom names the process by which the new freedoms found were also always attentive to the continued violence of an anti-black state. Additionally, Gilroy’s focus on vernacular culture helps foreground the historically and geographically specific nature of life-making, which is to say that the very nature of vernacular culture helps dismantle any conflation between the continued violence black communities faced from the idea that they were out of time. See, Paul Gilroy, Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 6.
people] are told [they] must endure.”768 If Thurman painfully contemplates the capacity of captured Africans to hold onto life in unfreedom; the grunt takes part in what Crawley has called “intentional patterned breathing exercises” that make a gesture “their own by giving it away.”769 And in these exercises, possession—breath as property—becomes impossible. One can neither hold nor release eternally. There is only exchange. Where whiteness seizes the right to tell by way of possessive ownership—seizing breath in the form of labor and dispossession—the grunt releases and, in doing so, models a mode of relation not held to the desolate criteria of possessive personhood.

The grunt, of course, follows from a broader method of collective exchange within Brown’s music. His revue, for instance, included multiple drummers, each of whom would have their kits set up on stage and in the studio. If this arrangement was, in part, a function of generating competition between drummers—wherein each drummer was always under threat of being replaced by another—it also opened the opportunity through which a kind of collaborative method could occur. As Clyde Stubblefield remembers, “One drummer would be playing the song and the other drummer would hit the accents to modify the sound.”770 John “Jabo” Starks remembers a similar mode of collaboration. “I would do little things that would complement

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769 Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 65.

what Clyde was doing. When I played, Clyde would do the same thing and sometimes he would play things against what I was doing.”\footnote{Payne, 53.} As Starks points out, Brown often waited to come into the studio and if “he heard a drummer play a certain little beat he hadn’t heard before, he’d say, ‘Hey man, that’s the baddest cat in the world,’ and demand that he play until the pattern had tired.”\footnote{Payne, 54.} If Stubblefield, who played on the recording of “Say It Loud,” could ably play the kind of 16th note accents and walking style that, for others, required assistance, the collaborative nature of Brown’s multiple drummers shaped even those efforts where only one drummer was playing. Exchange obtained even within a singular performance.

To be sure, moments of exchange are not unique to Brown or, for that matter, Black music. To the contrary, they obtain everywhere in music. Melody, for instance, describes the sequential relationship between notes moving within a given harmonic structure.\footnote{In popular discussions, harmony is often thought of as the joining of two or more voices. My usage above takes up its definition within music theory, wherein harmony names a relationship between notes. In this way, it is both like and unlike melody. Like melody, it describes a relationship between notes. But where melody describes a horizontal relationship, the sequence or order of notes expressed across time, harmony describes a vertical relationship, the unique dynamics generated by two or more notes irrespective of when or in what order they are played.\footnote{While beyond the scope of this essay, Ingrid Monson has shown that despite the tendency to take the rhythm section for granted in discussions of jazz improvisation, they are integral to the soloist’s improvised melodies. An imaginative rhythm section, Monson argues, provides the “rhythmic feel” requisite for a soloist to move out into a song’s ground and there “project his or her most vibrant voice.” See, Ingrid Monson, \textit{Say Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction} (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), 1.}} But mere sequence is not all that melody offers. Much of its pleasure occurs when the particular sequence generates conflict or tension—by and through the exchange of notes given out in time and alongside others.\footnote{Payne, 54.} Often this kind of tension occurs through a sequence of notes that move away from the harmonic center of a song and, in doing so, generate the demand for return.
Musician and listener are left to wonder at and about the innumerable combinations that might be given in service to return. But for as many possible combinations available for such a return, success is not inevitable. The relationship between notes—both melodically and harmonically speaking—present any number of obstacles to successful return. The question of how to return is both the source and site of innovation, tension and, when successfully managed, affective and literal exchange by way of resolution and return.

However, Brown’s grunt neither resolves nor spurs the search for resolution in the way that melodic movement does. Rather, it works in tension with melody’s movement across and through musical and listening time. This tension is, in part, structural. Because it does not move away from a center, it offers no opportunity for return. To the contrary, its release disrupts movement at a physical level by exhausting the lungs of air, halting further expression, and so postponing any attempt to specify. In fact, Brown goes silent for two beats of the song after issuing a grunt. When he finally re-enters on the fourth beat of the measure, chanting “with your bad self,” he arrives slightly behind the beat and without the usual volume given to his uptempo songs. And it is only when he delivers the word “bad” on the first beat of the next measure that a full recovery of breath and voice can be heard. If the reason for this late and quiet entry can be assigned to the formal demands of a one-three accent pattern—and the desire to stress the operative and signified “bad” on the next measure—it also amplifies the halting effect of the grunt. Because it lands so heavily, the listener becomes uniquely aware of the labor it takes to make and then recover both ear and body from its initial hit—here used as both the name given to Brown’s technique and the affective consequence of that technique. The grunt is not just stressed but weighted, and, in this way, it generates a center from which the vamp will move

775 James Brown, “Say It Loud.”
from within a space of shared air and its literal and figurative exchange.

Following Jean-Luc Nancy, “sharing is always incomplete, or it is beyond completion and incompletion. For a complete sharing implies the disappearance of what is shared.”

However, Brown’s seems to portend something other than exchange. Listeners hear the threat of total exhaustion, and it is not until Brown returns on the last beat of the measure to issue a barely said “with” that his disappearance sounds as a momentary respite in which he staves the possibility of breath’s completion. The grunt sounds into the structure of the song until he can sound no more, as if he has tipped over the edge of a shared space. It is as if he has given too much, and in that too much foreclosed the possibility of further sharing. Yet, in the last moment, just prior to the bar line—its arbitrary press—Brown finds the almost nothing, which is nothing less than the lung’s call for air. This give and gone, this issue of breath until the lungs demand air’s return, generates the conditions of funk, not simply as a formal genre, but as a mode of feeling that LaMonda Horton-Stallings argues “interrupt(s) and dismantl(es) sensory regimes left over from the Enlightenment and modernist periods in Black America that would fetishize written text and then orality.”

LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 15. It should be noted that Horton-Stallings exploration of funk and, in particular, what she calls “funky erotixx” both exceeds and encompasses the musical genre of funk. In a perhaps too reductive gloss, her concern is twofold: first, funk enables a modality and analytic through which black sexual cultures, specifically, and black ideas concerning eroticism might be better articulated; second, funk names a practice through which sensation (and desire) might be more fully explored and, ultimately, appreciated as an alternative means by which black life and being are conceived. If my invocation above


the body off [of] time and so in the off-time.

The grunt’s interruption of time operates doubly: first, as a differently-accented entry into rhythm, and, second, as the requisite force through which one must wait to share anything further. In Brown’s case, the delivery of the line “with your bad self” arrives late. It must; he needs a chance to recover. The grunt, in this sense, forces its counter, which is to say inhalation, and in forcing one to breathe, halts his ability to issue any declaration. This halt, in no small way, postpones the song’s lyrical thrust. In Brown’s vocal disappearance, however fleeting, both he and listeners are given a moment to fall into unstressed sense. Where in a 2-4 accent pattern, one would be forced into the upbeat, in “Say It Loud,” the ear hovers within a lighter play of senses. And in such play, in this recovery of breath as a moment taken for focus and repose, listeners evade the mandate to react. They can, instead, feel themselves into off-time. The grunt labors so the ear can rest within the pocket of time.

This is not to say that rest or release are perpetual. Indeed, the grunt’s postponement of time spurs further exchange or, returning to Nancy, the practice of sharing as endeavoring to leave breath’s exhaustion perpetually incomplete. The late line that follows the grunt, thus, is the call for listeners to participate within the song’s breath. Indeed, before Brown gives the stressed “bad,” he offers his listeners “with your . . .” Barely there, it’s the preposition and pronoun that matter. Together, they modify and so take a bit of the weight off “bad.” This, too, is a moment of exchange, a moment of shared working, wherein the listener’s “bad self” must take up some of the work of the song and, in no small way, holds out the possibility by which the

returns her work to music, it is not to reduce it to a matter of genre but, rather, to demonstrate the erotic or sensorial richness therein.

778 James Brown, “Say It Loud.”
779 James Brown, “Say It Loud.”
work of exchange opens up the space of release and community. By jumping in and saying it loud, listeners are also invited into the pocket, which is to say the grunt’s time. And in this structure, the line stresses “bad,” as if to indicate and play on the multiply signified meanings given by both the state and Black communities, where language moves in obverse relation with bad meaning good and good the word given to efficiently rendered oppression and force. Indeed, it might be said that “bad” is stressed by the multiply implicative meanings it must bear.

But What is this Black in Black Time

Leading from the formal elements Brown uses to open “Say It Loud,” I want to read the song’s expressivity as yet another mode of regard, which surrenders the right to tell so to generate a mode of perceptual and so phenomenological exchange, here given in the grunt. Indeed, inasmuch as the grunt marks time by way of release, by way of giving away and in so giving makes the gesture its temporary own, it is also an event—physically and affectively speaking—that does almost nothing or, more precisely, takes postponement as its doing. And in its doing, it generates what Nahum Dimitri Chandler has called “an originary scene of possibility,” as distinct from an originary scene of being. This near nothing emerges because it makes no effort to tell, takes no pains to establish the traditional markers by which political and ontological concepts articulate, are articulatable and so telling and told in either the public or national spheres. Brown grunts, and in its giving of air is the inauguration of possibility. The

780 James Brown, “Say It Loud.”
781 James Brown, “Say It Loud.”
782 Chandler, 17.
783 Chandler offers the useful analytic of paraontology which names a mode of being that eschews the Western ontological demand of essence or position but instead gets on with the
passive construction of the sentence, however, is necessary. Inauguration is not foregone; it is always almost nothing, politically and, as it were, ontologically speaking. This precarity—that we know what lies within, that it always is at risk of becoming nothing spurs the possessive impulse, the desire to trace the grunt’s existence back to that which spurred it. The desire to tell—to be tellable—tempts an articulation of that ‘that,’ a determiner which signals nothing less than the Black of Black time. But what, to repurpose Stuart Hall’s famous injunction, is this Black in Black time in Black music—and how could the grunt signify its moment as an event in presence with and for community? Does it even endeavor this project?

To this we might ask, how can we possibly know that the grunt sounds in Black time? The answer, located inside the tense pocket generated between sound and word, is because Brown’s imperative, still to come (but also, perhaps, already indexed in the grunt), tells us as much by telling its listeners to say as much. It would seem, then, that the declaration counters Chandler’s “originary scene of possibility,” returning listeners to the ontological imperative of purity and origin. Upon further inspection, however, the imperative is a call into the performative. Blackness is given in the saying, as a declaration that somehow evades, for the business of resisting the logic of political ontology. In this way, paraontology—which, I want to make clear, endeavors a much broader conceptualization than the grunt can accord—takes part in Crawley’s no but in very specific ways. It is a kind of appositional positioning that is less in obverse relation to Western concepts than in appositional relation to categories or concepts that require the negation of blackness. To put a casual note to it, paraontology’s disruptive force—should there be one—occurs less because of an antagonistic conception of being and more because it has, turning to Fred Moten, “refused what has been refused” by way of saying, “I’m Good. Thanks”—and in its due casualness, it demonstrates a turn to the richness and abundance of otherwise ways of living.

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785 Chandler, 17.
duration of the song, telling and, in such evasions, discards the impulse to labor over questions of purity. Brown was neither singular nor the first to take up such a mode. As Martin Luther King, Jr. would say in April 1967, “Somebody told a lie one day. They couched it in language. They made everything black ugly and evil . . . Well I want to get the language right tonight. I want to get the language so right that everybody here will cry out: “Yes, I am black and I’m proud of it. I’m black and beautiful!”

What had changed with the release of “Say It Loud; I’m Black and I’m Proud” was less a matter of liberal and radical listeners coming together and more the fact of recording—as a historically specific object—allowing multiple approaches to the song. If Brown had been organized by his Black audiences, the structural nature of “Say It Loud” provided what Walton Muyumba, writing of Jayne Cortez’s work, usefully identifies as an “immanent tense,” a cyclical run of riffs, lines and, in Brown’s case, grunts that describe a future space brought into thought. Thus, Brown’s music gets taken up by a variety of Black nationalists, without any of them attempting to claim him as nationalists. Moreover, the ways they take up his music was often marked by their strikingly different in their approaches to nationalism. Nevertheless, there is something made or given in the taking up.

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787 Randy Weston’s recollection of the making of 1960’s Uhuru Afrika echoes a great deal said about Brown’s invocation of Black pride. Most notably, the musicians gathered in the room were moved by the reading of Langston Hughes poem that serves as an invocation on the album. “Oh, man” they were reported to have said, “because that was during the period when Africa was either a place to be ashamed of or a place that people had tremendous fear of; you were not supposed to identify with Africa. See, Weston, 96.


As Cortez, who like Brown “found the words and rhythm in wrong places,” writes in 1969, would write,

our children will know
will know & be proud
Proud to say I’m from Parker City – Coltrane City – Ornette City
Pharoah City living on Holiday street next to
James Brown park in the State of Malcolm

Brown’s grunt and the pride it generated was not, then, a city built within and for the nationalist project of Black Power. Rather, it was a place of contemplation and play within a longer and relational project of Blackness as evolving praxis. This is, perhaps, why Larry Neal, in his memoir of the Black Arts era, recalls that he and other Black Arts writers, many of whom revered Brown, would speculate, “[s]uppose James Brown had consciousness. We use to have arguments like that. It was like saying, ‘Suppose James Brown read Fanon.’” For Cortez, Brown’s work, even within the longer project of Black radical thought, moved from within the almost nothing. In her poem, however, the almost nothing of the park signals a momentary respite, or, turning to earlier in this essay, a place where postponement might occur. In fact, it might be said that if the “State of Malcolm” functions as a metonym for a reimagined Black nation, “James Brown park” becomes a synecdoche from within the metonymic invocation of “state.” That is, James Brown park is one part of a larger nationalist imaginary. By reading

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792 Cortez, 42.
Brown into the nationalist project without framing him as a nationalist, Cortez imagines the kind of listening space that Elaine Brown’s 1969 “The End of Silence” hoped for, one in which “your voice could be heard in the noon-day sun,” and in which the long wait to sound an “unheard song” could no longer “stri[p] away your very soul.”

So Becoming, So Beautiful, But, Wait, What’s This What: The Stylization of Blackness Becoming

That Brown would have refused absorption within a Black nationalist project is, perhaps, beyond contestation. In a 1973 interview, he would even go so far as to distinguish Black pride from Black Power. “When people spoke of black power, I spoke of black pride.” This was a striking claim considering his previous support of Black Power. In March of 1968, five months before the release of “Say It Loud,” he would tell one reporter that “Black power is what you can do for your people. . . I’ve always thought the way I think. Black pride means a man is proud of himself and identifies with his own people.” Nevertheless and as striking as Brown’s distinction between Black Pride and Black Power might be, it would not have been surprising to his fans. He had already lent support to Richard Nixon’s 1972 Black capitalism campaign, which many in the Black community rightfully saw as a betrayal of the values espoused in “Say It Loud.” As William Marable would argue in a letter to the New York Amsterdam News, “It’s the poor Blacks who made James Brown what he is today. The welfare recipients undernourished and poverty stricken [sic] families make him and his records No. One, simply because like

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794 Joel Dreyfuss, “Soul Brother no. 1: A Hidden Flip Side,” The Washington Post, Aug 12, 1973, m4. It is worth noting that Brown’s earlier assessment of Black power could easily fold into the African American idiom that one does well by doing good and does good by doing well.
myself, we all thought of him as a leader representing Black Pride. And it’s these same people who will continue to suffer if the present administration gets another term in office.”

Marable was not alone. In Baltimore, many ticketholders picketed his Civic Center Concert. One sign read “SOLD brother,” while others turned Brown’s lyrics against him: “Give Up Nixon and we’ll turn you loose,” and “we’re on the good foot.”

Nevertheless, the bifurcation between Black pride and Black Power and between James Brown and his Black audiences fold into—and take part in—the troubling but enduring notion that Black Power represented a fractious event through which younger activists severed all contact with Civil Rights activists. In all cases, however, the differences and debates that emerge are better framed as a dialectical struggle to determine the direction of Black liberation efforts. Indeed, it might be said that “Say It Loud”—and Black activists subsequent condemnation of Brown’s political commitments—take part in these debates not in spite of Brown’s differences but because the combination of the song and Brown’s mercurial political commitments offered a complicated but shared reference around which debates, dismissals and embraces could be—and were—generated.

These debates and the repurposing of Brown’s lyrics might be said to partake in acts of reception that lay somewhere between Brandon Terry’s “problem-space of Black power” and Fred Moten’s notion of “styling.” Placed between these two frameworks, both Brown’s

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798 Terry, “Requiem for a Dream;” Moten, “gayl jones.”
distinctions between Black Power and Black Pride, and his fans decisions to boycott his concerts even as they continued to repurpose his songs engender what might be called declarations from within an interrogative mode. Both Brown and his politically antagonistic listeners desire to learn from efforts, theories and ideas from the past might be said to take part in what George Lewis calls a “concatenative work,” that on-going production of links that come to form a series and which move us to questions of practice and inheritance. And, indeed, Brown’s extended use of idioms, slogans and lines from the long Black Freedom movement in the lyrics of “Say It Loud” might be said to take part in and provide the opportunity for the kind of concatenative work at hand. If the conservative law professor Randall Kennedy argues in an article celebrating the song, “[o]ther than the refrain — ‘I’m black and I’m proud’ — the lyrics of “Say It Loud” are wholly forgettable,” he merely demonstrates the metabolic nature of dialectical and concatenative utterances. This is also perhaps why John Miller Chernoff remembers that Ghanaian musician Stephen Evans understood Brown’s work as generating “thick proverbs.” In each case, use-value and one’s very particular problem-space determine the direction one might take the lines.

With respect to the question of why so many within radical circles continued to embrace Brown’s work even after he demonstrated a commitment to conservative politics, the more simple answer is that such returns made one feel a certain way that both tied back to a sense of Black communion and, in their particular styling out of pride’s meaning, generated the

conditions requisite of individual expression. Or, more pointedly, in Brown’s own expression of feeling he effectively returned listeners to the complicated and rich nature of feeling complexly and along the very tracts discussed in the previous essay. The more complicated—if always partial—answer, however, lies in how the imperative and its potential for generating Chandler’s “originary scene of possibility” clears space or makes room for other more fruitful conversations precisely because “Say It Loud,” in no small measure, short-circuits the demand through which the long history of Black communal practice had to be adjudicated on the basis of either political fitness or ideological and sonic purity.802 In other words, and to repeat what I stated above, how does one know “Say It Loud” is a Black song? The answer is because Brown tells us as much in his demand, and, in such telling, he opens a space in which listeners can grapple with the Black expressivity inside the problem-space of Black power.

In this sense, Brown’s sounded ‘park’ does not endeavor representation, which in and of itself invites the possessive impulse back into the song. Rather, it “opened an extraordinary space of recalling that there had been a black radical intellectual past.”803 It was, then, a place of contemplation, which is to say a place of postponement through which study and care are made possible. Care of the sort signaled by Cortez’s park moves alongside what Rinaldo Walcott calls “the whatever of blackness.”

The uncertainties and commonalities of blackness might be formulated in the face of some room for surprise, disappointment, and pleasure without recourse to disciplinary and punishing measures . . . a whatever that can tolerate the whatever of blackness without knowing meaning—black meaning, that is—in advance of its various utterances.804

802 Chandler, 11.
803 Chernoff, 95.
Walcott’s sly use of a determiner (“whatever”) that, in fact, escapes determination might seem to move in direct opposition to care, which too often marks a concerted effort by which care becomes the giver’s projection of their needs onto and over the needs of the cared for. Yet, to say whatever, in no small way is to attenuate the impulse of projection. When coupled with “whatever,” care signals a mode of relationality through the surrender of expertise, of knowing how to care for another, is requisite, and in its surrender it, too, becomes a kind of leap into the endless possibility that emerges when we enter a space in which we must learn how to care— which is to say that one must study how to care for others, just as others must do so in return. In other words, care occurs when communities work to construct a space for unpredictable and messy abundance. Under such an idea, to be careful and to care move within similar recognitions and realities but from and toward very different ends. To be careful becomes a personal act of protection against the state and both structural and individual acts of racism. To care is to take up the work through which space is made for Black living, if not answering Cruse’s call in a politically substantial way then still amplifying the need for care in study and, more poignantly, that we must study in order to care.\textsuperscript{805}

Yet, the near nothing of Brown’s imperative is also a kind of lie, which is to say that the imperative takes up and seemingly accepts the ontological conceit. That is to say that the imperative takes Blackness as an \textit{a priori} somehow both given and ungiven, operating at the end bound of Western concepts of being. It is, then, the first’s fugitive foil or the breath’s faith or faith in the fact of breath, its trace, which, in trace, tracts movement in what is thought to be non-

\textsuperscript{805} While beyond the scope of this essay, my notion of care and study is drawn most directly from the work of Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe, but it, in no small way, names one of the central givens of Black Studies, which is to say that what Black Study offers the world is a method through which to care about Black life and Black people.
being, and in being non-being that somehow still states its pride, it scandalizes the ontological aporia embedded within modernity. To say it loud is to sound the call to performance inside a performance. Brown sings to spur his Black audience’s response. And in his song, he generates the conditions requisite of a new mode of performative, one that outpaces both the burden of Hegelian recognition and, strikingly, J.L. Austin’s notion that speech acts inaugurate events. In the song, one hears not the inauguration of Blackness but, instead, the performance of ontological authority within the precarity of acts that are always under threat of being reduced to (almost) nothing.

Or to misread 17th century poet John Wilmot, “Nothing, thou elder brother even to shade. . . then all proceeded from the great united What.” To turn toward the assumed nothing of Blackness—as gesture—is the beginning, what gives birth to a certain kind of shade. In demanding his audience “say” Blackness as an act of pride, Brown opens up an opportunity through which the utterance itself foregoes the impulse to retell. Western constructs that deny Blackness its ontological sanctity are simply not worth one’s time or energy, which, by fact of breath, is better spent in an act of interested exchange. As the queer ball room legend Dorian Corey explains, “Shade is [when] I don’t tell you you’re ugly, but I don’t have to tell you you’re ugly,” while Tavia Nyong’o adds, shade is a “resource in [the] countermimetic choreography”

806 While beyond the scope of this essay, the outpacing to which I refer might be fruitfully constellated with Stanley Cavell’s notion of passionate utterances, those speech acts that invite interlocutors into the disruptive space of desire. See, Stanley Cavell, Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); see also, Imani Perry, Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). See, also, Judith Butler, Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative (New York: Routledge, 1997). Of particular utility is Butler’s opening series of questions concerning the inescapability of language’s constitutive force—even and maybe especially when language is turned against itself—bears consideration in the above inquiry (1-2).

because it offers a “vernacular method of active and aggressive interpretation of an unfair and unequal social order . . .”808 To put it more bluntly, the performative turn to almost nothing is nothing of the sort; rather, it is an act of faith in Black life and Black sociality and Black meaning that lies in excess of Western personhood, as neither transcendent being, as phenomenology would have it, nor as liberalism’s renovated political subject. To turn to almost nothing is to seize Wilmot’s “what” and ask from within this what, what? Under such practice, “Say It Loud” becomes an interrogative and what we might call an unfinished or elliptical performance of doing and undoing Blackness.

**Concatenative Inheritance and the Expressive Possibility of Elliptical Breath**

To these discussions, we might return to Brown’s grunts, which is to say all those that appear in his song(s) and say that they provide the stress or accent through which the expressive logic of inheritance and refusal is given.809 Importantly, its structural provision takes part in the kind of short, punctuating phrases used in many of his songs, which Brown and his band would come to call hits, signaling the requisite force of structures. As Pee Wee Ellis, who served as Brown’s arranger during this period, explains,

> This was the punctuation that allowed the music to make sense. This is as important in music as it is in writing a paragraph. You

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But where the grammatical period signals the end of a line, halting movement, the grunt, in its announcement of the stressed downbeat, sounds the “point of arrival or departure” in the song’s cyclical procession through the vamp. In this way, it marks time through the announcement of a sounded pivot into and out of the downbeat, giving the listener an accent by which they might orient themselves to the song in time.

The grunt is not, then, a grammatical period that sentences—or disciplines—the song before it begins; rather, it spurs the listener’s anticipation of what is to come by imperfectly or partially indexing what has already come in both Brown’s work and within the long history of Black religious and popular music. It does not sound “political intonations” emerging out from under “constraint” but, rather, drew forth a gesture that had long been used within a variety of Black communities. In it, lay memories of previously given grunts. There are those from Brown’s previous work, so many of which sound the call into an ecstatic space and immanent exchange, of which much had been written just prior to the release of “Say It Loud.” Where many white critics and, according to Brown, audiences heard these techniques as mere “noise” and “hollering,” Black audiences understood them as the popular adaptation of techniques from

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the sanctified church. They were, in this sense, conduits, a call through which listeners’ might enter into what Guthrie Ramsey has called “blackness as practice.” Alongside these techniques were also specific grunts given by other singers within R&B. There was Ray Charles’ 1959 song “What’d I Say,” banned by many radio stations because the Wurlitzer piano riffs seemed to invite listeners into the church only to fall into moans and grunts that suggested the erotic pleasures of R&B. However, Brown’s grunt did not singularly index hard work, pleasure and their combination. In it lie those given by Sam Cooke on his 1960 single, “Chain Gang.” If Charles had merged the spiritual with the secular, Cooke’s grunts enunciated the role of alienated Black labor and carcerality in the making and maintenance of the U.S., even as it inserted them in between both a rhythm and lyric that was, by Atlantic Records vice president Jerry Wexler’s estimation, “happy-sounding.” And, in Brown’s index, his grunt acts as the last punctual mark in a series, sounding what we might call a fractured ellipsis, disjunctive and somehow still (and maybe because of its disjunction) enunciative all at once.

816 Of course, Charles, Cooke and Brown are not singular in their foregrounding of grunts. Dyke and The Blazer’s 1968 single “Uhh” goes as far as naming a song after the grunts that punctuate it, while Syl Johnson’s “Different Strokes,” also released in 1968, opens with an interplay between Johnson grunting and a woman laughing over a heavy and heavily syncopated drum. Lasting for 3 bars, Johnson then moves into the lyric, opening with “Baby you're laughing / But I'll be around for a while yeah, yeah / Can't you dig it, honey / While watching my style now, alright.” Both playful and somehow still boastful, the song adds humor to the grunt’s growing index. In each, the centrality of pleasure—both signified and indexed—is undeniable. In fact, the opening of Johnson’s song would become a favorite of both early hip hop DJs, who doubled the first two bars, and then later with hip hop producers, who would loop the drum.
However, the possibility of drawing from the long history of grunts within Black music cannot be taken as a definitive constellation of meaning. Rather, these past grunts demonstrate the practice itself, how it draws from the past in order to locate the present and future. Jazz musicians offer us an idiom for such practices: you build the house up in order to tear it down. In hearing the past—in taking up its tools and methods—listeners engage in a constant act of revision and return, with return functioning not as a concretized set of meanings but, rather, the process of refusing concretization itself. The grunt both has a long history and, in the act of its sounding, an even longer future, known only by the unspecified impulse to continue through unexhausted exchange. It is, then, not a period at all. It is an ellipsis.

Leading from this, the grunt-as-ellipsis marks an on-going attention to that which exists over the limit of language, not as an augment to it but as an equally constitutive mode through which the power of feeling and encounter might be expressed. Listeners hear too much in the grunt. It is excessive breath given at an improper time. But it is also an invitation into a modality of (un)knowing that defies the denotative and positivist modes associated with both language and telling. If Ray Charles asked in 1959, “What’d I Say,” as if in anticipation of the scandal to come, the question plays on the fact that it was not singularly what he said but the multiple modes through which he sounded what would be an otherwise empty—and profoundly sexist—

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While not an exhaustive list, the drum can be found on records from almost every stage of recorded rap’s first thirty years: from Whodini and Schoolly D’s early to mid-80s recordings, to the late-80s work from Eric B. & Rakim, B.D.P., and De La Soul, onto the early 90s work from Wu-Tang Clan, and, finally, all the way to Kanye West and Jay-Z’s 2010 collaboration “The Joy.” See, Dyke and the Blazers, “Uhh,” Original Sound Records, 1970; Syl Johnson, “Different Strokes,” Twilight Records, 1967.

Importantly, ellipsis comes from the Greek word meaning to fall short, which invites Nancy’s understanding of exchange as necessarily incomplete.
lyric. Drawing from and melding gospel, homiletic, and blues techniques with the erotically-charged sound of jukes, Charles generates an aural complexity requisite for sensation in its doubly signified form. That is to say that “What’d I Say” contains “(black) sensations” and, in its scandalizing of those within the Black community who believed the church and the secular should be kept separate, became a sensation in multiple ways. The juke—as affectively conjured by way of song—was neither the place nor the time to take up spiritual methods. The same might be said of Cooke’s “Chain Gang.” Like Charles’ song, it endeavors a complex rehearsal of Black sensation, using vocal and musical techniques to merge narrative terror with aural joy. Where Charles’ song operates through scandal, Cooke’s song generates affectual incongruity, while both give performances that generate sensation from within improper time. Brown’s grunt on “Say It Loud”—displaced, indexical, previous and also ongoing—inherits the sensations generated by Charles, Cooke and blues and religious traditions. This is its elliptical quality. As an utterance given to release, as index of historical modes of Black sensation and as a call into (improper) time, it spurs listeners to surrender to sensation that tempt analysis but, in fact, lie just over the limits of language.

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818 It should be noted that Charles and the Raylettes’ moans and grunts are the only element of the song that might suggest that Charles’ lyrics are given in playful and erotic jest rather than an earnest demand that the woman addressed give into the singer’s advances or be “ship[ped] back to Arkansas.” See, Ray Charles, “What’d I Say,” What’d I Say, Atlantic Records, 1959.

819 In the case of “What’d I Say,” Charles does not repurpose and rewrite lyrics from popular gospel songs as he does on other songs like “I Got a Woman” and “Hallelujah, I Love Her.” In fact, the song’s riffs are built upon a 12-bar blues pattern. Nevertheless, the grunts and moans issued by both him and the Raylettes recall the call and response tradition used by preachers and their congregation. Moreover, Charles—who would, in time, come to be called “The Bishop”—was known for the merging of the spiritual with the secular and, thus, even songs that did not actively take from gospel lyrics or deploy techniques that could be seen to operate in both realms were often still understood to have merged the two.

In this way, Ellis’ invocation of punctuation recalls Jennifer DeVeré Brody’s discussion about punctuation’s performative possibility. For Brody, Ralph Ellison’s use of ellipses in the prologue of *Invisible Man* “signify doubly what is there as the not-there.”\textsuperscript{821} As such, they act as both an immediate analog to the narrator and, importantly, generate “(black) sensations and sensations of blackness” that tempt—but refuse to accord—the declarative nature of language.\textsuperscript{822} Perhaps surprisingly, Ellison’s usage was not singular. In 1969, the Johnson Products Company—then best known as the makers of Ultra Sheen and Afro Sheen and soon to be known as the primary sponsor of *Soul Train*—sponsored . . . and Beautiful, an “hour-long musical special” set to air in Washington, Philadelphia and Baltimore.\textsuperscript{823} Capitalizing on the then popular phrase, Black is Beautiful, the show’s title tempts the viewer to fill in what is not-there but, somehow, also abundantly clear. In doing so, . . . and Beautiful generates a similar refusal to the kind Brody identifies in Ellison’s novel.

None of this is easily parsed. Even when decoupled from racial designation, sensation remains a complicated word, signifying, on the one hand, the capacity to detect an explicit and

\textsuperscript{821} Jennifer DeVeré Brody, *Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 64. See also, Theodor W. Adorno, “Punctuation Marks,” *The Antioch Review* 48, no. 3, Poetry Today (Summer, 1990), 300-305. If Adorno’s best-known assertion from this essay is that history leaves its “residue” within punctuation, it is also worth noting that he understands these marks as the element within language that most “resemble[s] music.” Adorno’s reason for pointing out their resemblance is—following his larger diagnostic project—meant to demonstrate how the “disintegration” of tonality in music generates further tension between the two already incommensurable forms. As he writes, “if music is forced to preserve the image of its resemblance to language in punctuation marks, then language may give in to its resemblance to music by distrusting them.” Leading from this focus on tonality and especially in light of Adorno’s ‘distrust’ of popular music, Ellis’ analogy moves obverse to Adorno’s own. Despite this potentially obverse relationship, their pairing demonstrates the continued and wide understanding of the links between language and music, and punctuation’s disruptive role between the two.

\textsuperscript{822} Brody, Punctuation, 65.

\textsuperscript{823} For information on the show, see “New Company Plans Innovation in TV Show,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, August 30, 1969, 10
identifiable stimulus existing outside of the body, and, on the other hand, a general feeling that cannot be attributable to any given stimulus but which is, nevertheless, felt. And, yet, still, sensation names a broader sense of shared excitement between individuals by way of event, gossip or rumor. In questions of what Brody calls “(black) sensations and sensations of blackness,” the tripartite definition becomes dialectical in nature. The surrender to—or even acknowledgment of—Black sensation as a mode of encountering the world over the limit of (positivist) language quite literally becomes a sensation. What remains to be answered, in these moments, is not the fact of these links, but, rather, whether the sensation—as a social phenomenon of excitement between individuals—is understood to be scandal, collective movement or both depending on who is asked.

As Ellison’s narrator will reflect on the experience of listening to a recording of Louis Armstrong’s “What Does it Mean to Be so Black and Blue,” “At first I was afraid; this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act.”824 Like Charles and Cooke, Ellison’s narrator dares to generate the conditions by which he listens improperly in time, “never quite on the beat”—but, rather, sometimes ahead and sometimes behind.825 He has, in short, named a kind of listening phenomenon situated within the song’s pocket, which lies in “the breaks” built into “Louis’ music.”826 Indeed, “under the spell of reefer,” the narrator discovers “a new analytical way of listening to music.”827 One must endeavor to hear “not only in time but in space as well,”

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and, therein, “descend . . . into its depths.” But, crucially, it also suggests that Black sensations are not merely what the listener discovers within already constructed pockets. To the contrary, the pocket is made in and kept by a collective surrender to Black sensation. In surrender, the pocket emerges as a complicated interplay between the rhythm section, listener, and, as the narrator’s desire to listen to five copies of Armstrong simultaneously implies, technology itself. In this way, sensations of Blackness do not proceed from the surrender to Black sensation, as the order of Brody’s line might suggest; rather, they occur as a simultaneity, a collective laboring taken up in the spirit of what Nathaniel Mackey has, in other contexts, called discrepant engagement, a mode that “dislodges or seeks to dislodge homogenous models of identity, assumptions of monolithic form, purist expectation, redefining ‘the features of original expression.’”

Where the possessive impulse to track the Black in Black time leads to pure difference, the elliptical nature of sensation demonstrates how its most basic question—how does a song make you feel?—both precedes and, somehow, exceeds Ellison’s narrator and, more broadly, all those who participate within the generation of song’s sensation. Surrender, in this sense, is not just an act of discovery but a phenomenological gesture, a position in and against possessive impulse, through which Black sensation and sensations of Blackness occur in appositional time. Like Ellison’s narrator, Brown’s grunt sounds one side of this figurative and literal pocket. Or, to quote Hortense Spiller’s stunning reflection on *Invisible Man*, in the release given in the grunt, “the game of blackness was no longer captive to the auspices of dominance, somewhere ‘out there’ beyond the veil, but came home, as it were, right between the ears, as the glittering

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weapon of an ‘invisible’ field of choice.” In the almost nothing “what” of Brown’s grunt, a call into community and regard emerges.

**To Be Moved**

There is an equally important dimension at play in questions of surrender and sensation, which heretofore unspoken, must now be asked. What does it mean to be touched by a song that so forcefully situates itself within Black sensation? What does it mean to call for surrender so publicly, when matters of touch—of being touched—blur the figurative and literal instantiation of touch? To proffer a more forceful answer: what is at stake is the right of intimacy. Yet, Brown’s grunt models a mode of surrender that cannot help but generate sensations of Blackness that exceed Black listeners. The very nature of the market and its distributive force ensures this excess and its availability to white audiences. Ostensibly, one need only purchase the single—or LP—to gain access. Or, returning to Cortez’s poem, the “club owners and disc jockeys made a deal . . . about black music and you really don’t give a shit as long as you take.” She was not wrong. In November of 1968, less than three months after the release of “Say It Loud,” the *New York Times* reported that WOL, a Black-oriented radio station in DC “has a fairly white audience.” Two years later, Columbia Records would solicit a report from the Harvard Business School concerning soul music and how the label might increase their share in the market, and three years after that, in an article on WRVR-FM’s Felipe Luciano and the success of his weekly radio show, Latin Roots, John J. O’Connor reports that much to Luciano’s

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surprise, his audience is only about a third Latin, with one-third black and the rest white.”

Who, to ask the question again, should surrender and, more pressingly, to what end?

The discursive possibility of “Say It Loud” is made clear in Elizabeth Alexander’s reading of Michael Harper’s “Nightmare Begins Responsibility.” As she writes, “what this Black Power-era poet wants a reader to ‘say it loud’ is about Blackness and about pride, certainly, but from an angle of profoundest intimacy, as though nothing is worth saying loudly unless it is felt from a place as deep as” that generated by the death of an infant. In Harper’s poem, in which Alexander hears allusions to Du Bois’ “Of the Passing of the First Born,” the need to “say it loud” emerges out of “panebreaking heartmadness.” And in these compound words, which in their formal quality signal compounding loss predicated on structures, surrender is complicated. For Harper’s narrator, these structures do not name race. Nevertheless, race looms. The narrator is kept behind a hospital window as he watches “white uniforms whisk over” his child “in the tube-kept prison,” “fear[ing] what they will do in experiment.” If the poem makes no indication that race factors into the narrator’s distrust, the long history of medical experiment, mistreatment and poor care of Black patients cannot help but surge in memory. What, in this light, does it mean to sing loudly of intimacy?

836 Harper, 76.
837 On exploitation, experiment and abuse in the U.S. medical industry, see Susan Lynn Smith, Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women's Health Activism in America, 1890-1950 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Harriet A. Washington, Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial times to the Present. (New York: Doubleday, 2006); Todd Lee Savitt, Race and Medicine in Nineteenth- and Early-twentieth-century America (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2007);
Harper’s allusion literalizes the stakes of saying it loud, showing them to be far less straightforward than they might first appear. In the poem, the medical industry sets the protocols of touch. Though outside the poem’s frame, the narrator must give consent, but his consent effectively casts him outside the room in which his infant lies. Unable to touch but also touched by any number of emotions, the narrator gives consent only to lose the right to touch his son. As such, the loss of his right to touch runs up against the rights to property, which also routes considerations of consent within the broader and uneven history of U.S. law. More broadly, the threat of catastrophe looms even in moments of (institutional) care. And, yet, precarity, which is nothing less than “nightmare,” does not absolve the will to love and live. These are Harper’s central “responsibilities”—the urge to and toward breath becomes his imperative. This is a kinship built by feeling and amid its recurrent denial. In Harper’s poem, to say it loud is to speak toward the former by way and through the latter. Volume affirms the idea that any mode of being that would deny the complexity of feeling in this moment must always be refused. To say it loud—in Harper’s poem—returns sense to self, its full and messy spectrum of feeling.


838 Of the relationship between touching and feeling, Eve Sedgwick writes, “If texture and affect, touching and feeling seem to belong together, then, it is not because they share a particular delicacy of scale, such as would necessarily call for “close reading” or “thick description.” What they have in common is that at whatever scale they are attended to, both are irreducibly phenomenological. To describe them primarily in terms of structure is always a qualitative misrepresentation.” See, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 16.

unpossessed by state personhood and in an active state of refusal to deny the many surges of feeling that this moment draws from within a history of institutional violence.

Again, this complicates the nature of participation with respect to race. In no uncertain terms, surrender of this kind is an historically founded mode of resistance predicated on “the yearning to emancipate sense, to open sense out into a plurality of alternative possibilities of sense for Black people across the world.”840 A surrender to sensation must be exclusive to the Black community. This is true even—and maybe especially—when the song is available to white listeners. The exclusivity of surrender, however, should not be understood as acting in obverse relation to possessive individualism. Surrender suggests a mode not tethered to property, demarcation or rights. Rather, the affectual process of surrender takes part in the “refusal of what has been refused” or what Tina Campt has called “a striving to create possibility in the face of negation.”841 And, indeed, such refusals were, as Chambers-Letson’s notion of plurality implies, multiple. On the one hand, simple notions of personhood were refused. And, on the other, the surrender to Black sensation refused to accept any mode in which the “corporeal enactment of blackness [was wholly reduced to] a pained one.”842

If the refusal of personhood might be differently claimed by white and Black communities, questions concerning the surrender to Black sensation were not as clearly

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841 On refusal, see, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013), 96; on striving, see, Tina Campt, “The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal,” *Social Text* 37, no. 3 (September 2019), 25.
842 Saidiya Hartman. *Scenes of Subjection*, 27. See also C.L.R. James, *Black Jacobins*; and for a gloss on how sense was seen as both the domain of what constituted humanity and the tool through which enslaved people were terrorized and seen to be senseless, see Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).
demarcated and, in fact, might return us to questions of telling.843 And it is this return—or its threat—that leads author and filmmaker Danny Gardner to argue that “Black people just want to be left alone.”844 For Gardner, the impulse to be alone does not reside within possessive investments; rather, “alone” signals an affective and often physical space that enables one to feel fully, complexly and without the impending precarity of state intrusion. To be left alone, thus, returns us to Cortez’s park, that space in which care and study are made possible precisely because one can finally stop being careful.

Interestingly, Brown’s invitation to “Say It Loud,” and its generation of the shared and elliptical modes, produces an uncommon phenomenon with respect to surrender’s political possibility. In “Say It Loud,” participation—or its absence—cannot help but call attention to itself. To sing declaration, and loudly so, is to generate a tell concerning the possessive force of entry. This, perhaps, gives one explanation for why the largely white audience at Brown’s After Dark performance did not sing along. They quite simply could not. To sing would be to try on Blackness. More interestingly, the decision not to sing effectively amplified—even if only symbolically speaking—how disavowed whiteness enabled the many other intrusions that occur. That Brown is crowded and must demand room, that Well’s interrupts Brown’s discussion with Heffner to demand a song emerge as the ‘rules’ proven by silence’s exception. Indeed, it might be said that Brown’s imperative does not evict the possibility of white participation but, rather,

843 See also, the previous chapter on questions of appropriation.
amplifies how the structural nature of participation had and continued to move differently across the color line.

This is not to say that white listening was foreclosed by Brown’s imperative. The realities of the market are such that one can never guarantee exclusion. If Brown reported that he lost white fans after the release of “Say It Loud,” he could not offer why. But one reason might be that the song spurred questions about the nature of white audiences listening to Black artists. What, for instance, might it mean to sit inside the song quietly and consider how the social fact of whiteness changes how Derridean inheritance operates? The implied call for white quiet signals—and even models—the possibility of quiet more widely. In doing so, “Say It Loud” cannot help but demonstrate how white listeners, seeking to take up the critical possibilities given by Black listening praxis, are elected into inheritance differently by fact of the political and historical world. Even as the lure to possess looms, even as this loom leads us to mistake a passion for culture as caring participation within it, the possibility for exchange hinges on a modality of care that surrenders those gestures that would center—and, indeed, project—a loud response, the trying on of Black declaration.

Even still, it seems that “Say It Loud” is a song not for us but still always, if carefully attended, one that offers the possibility of experiencing it with others and as an act of uneven or redirected volume at the limit of breath. Toni Morrison argues that, “. . . the function of freedom is to free somebody else.” But, crucially, she begins by calling for the audience to “pay as much attention to our nurturing sensibilities as to our ambition.” The dichotomy made between ambition and acts of nurture attenuates the possessive impulse, which in the case of freeing

always threatens to descend into paternalism. Who, in this instance, is freed? Who, in this instance, is nurtured? The answer depends, of course, but U.S. history demonstrates a tendency to nurture whiteness itself, to demand that its ontological modes determine the protocols of care and freedom. What might it mean for white listeners to approach Brown’s song as one that constellates Morrison’s imperative with Gardner’s own, not, then, as an act of listening which muscularly bestows freedom upon marginalized communities but which takes up the more difficult—and painful—reality that bestowal—the right to confer or place—betrays the location of ideological and structural power as violently white?

What might it mean—for white listeners—to consider that Black study, which is to say care in and through the practice of freedom, saves us, too? 846 If rarely said, the claim is neither new nor novel. Yet, even this sort of consideration feels loud in how it reiterates the protocols through which an ever-evasive centering emerges. Christina Sharpe’s understanding of care as “shared risk between and among” Black people helps to clarify the insufficiency of acknowledging the role of care without attending to the role of race within it. 847 How, it might be asked, can one take part in care without sharing that risk? If Black studies can—and does—teach freedom and care across race, the constant need to clear the intellectual and physical space of whiteness as a first step in generating the conditions by which care and study are engendered is exhausting.


847 Sharpe, “And to Survive,” 180.
Indeed, it might be necessary to say that Brown’s grunt indexes one last thing: exhaustion, which in no small way occurs from the constant need to clear the field, frame or bar line of the obvious.\footnote{848} As Stevie Wonder would sing six years later, in 1974,

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{l}
But we are sick and tired of hearing your song \\
Telling how you were going to change right from wrong \\
’Cause if you really want to hear our views, \\
You haven’t done nothing.  \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Issued alongside a two-bar horn phrase that recalls—and innovates—from within a funk mode that Brown and his arrangers had helped to formalize, Wonder’s song is a masterclass of allusion, tracking not only the formal innovations of funk but also, in its lyrics, a long history of the toll Black liberation efforts take.\footnote{850} In it lies Fanny Lou Hammer’s 1964 speech.\footnote{851} So, too, is Charles White’s 1965 General Moses, a stunning portrait of Harriet Tubman sitting, finally at rest even as the struggle for freedom continues. And returning finally to the start of this essay, in it lies Thurman’s observations upon reaching the west coast of Africa.


\footnote{850} Wonder’s horn phrase begins on the downbeat, but on the second bar of the phrase the peak note slides onto the backbeat. The band holds the peak for two 16\textsuperscript{th} notes, after which it falls back down a step. This variation, if common on a lot of Wonder’s work, cannot help but recall some of the simple but effective phrasing in Brown’s arrangements.

These allusions, of which many more could be added, are neither assuredly intended nor particularly insightful. In fact, their presence within the song indicates the continued need to rehearse the obvious even as the obvious exhausts. Brown’s grunt gives, in this last instance, a gesture that demonstrates how the obvious is exhausting, is meant to exhaust, is, in its institutional mandate, that which exhausts the possibility of further discussion and intimate study. This is how the obvious becomes the engine of institutions. This is how it exhausts those who seek recourse to claims, institutionally and otherwise. What is lost in the mandate for the obvious, then, is not nuance, that always lurking dismissal. Rather, what is lost—depleted even—is the energy requisite for further study and inquiry. The obvious, as the engine of empire, moves forward, and what remains becomes—is understood to be—waste, mere exhaust. Brown’s grunt and the imperative that follows clear the way so that Black listeners can linger within this exhaust, that always almost nothing, and begin to consider the contentious, dialectical and concatenative work from within its historically and geographically particular problem-space, which is to say as listeners here in time.852

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Chapter 5: Roberta Flack’s Humming Time as an Alternative Mode of Communion and Regard

I began to thank God in my heart for all things, for when I heard some speak in tongues, I knew it was right though I did not understand it. Nevertheless, it was sweet to me.

- Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, 1879

The aesthetic of Black (re)telling as a retheorization that treats telling as a site of relation comes into a new register in a great deal of work from Black women of the period. Of particular interest is the work of Roberta Flack, whose refusal to assign direct political intention to much of her work seems, at first glance, to evacuate her music of a coherent ideological direction and, thus, telling-power. Upon closer inspection, however, Flack’s work is exemplary of a growing number of Black women vocalists who refused to accord the limited models of telling and, in their refusal, helped to reshape the horizon of political, social and relational possibility. Where leadership is often foregrounded in telling, Flack’s work shifts our attention to congregation, regard and, ultimately, communion by refusing the impulse to defend music because of its ability to be folded into ‘broader’ national discourses. In order show how, I briefly look at “Let them Talk,” arguing that her version sonically challenges the idea of the recording event as singular and, thus, opens up a place in which listeners might begin to frame their role as one tasked with improvisatory reconfiguration and community. I then more fully turn to “Sunday and Sister Jones” in order to show how Flack draws from a variety of traditions and practices so to present an alternative mode through which the communal might be achieved. More pointedly, I argue that “Sunday and Sister Jones” draws from the contemporary moment, the liturgical tradition, spirituals and, as I hope to show, Black women’s use of the hum to generate an alternative to the

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loud and proud methods of re-telling James Brown used two years earlier. As with “Let Them Talk,” “Sunday and Sister Jones” does not deny the utility of re-telling so much as offer another modality of communion that might produce an effective means through which the intersectional demands of cross- and intra-gender communion are realized.

Let Them Talk: Telling, Isolation and Constructing New Modes of Relationality

By the time Roberta Flack recorded Sonny Thompson’s “Let Them Talk” in 1971, James Brown had recorded the song two years prior for Say It Loud – I’m Black and Proud. Brown was not the first to record the song. That honor belonged to Thompson’s long-time collaborator, Lula Reed, in 1959. Nor was he Flack’s immediate predecessor. Kim Tolliver, Lonnie Mack, Baby Washington, Arthur Prysock and the Manhattans had released versions in 1970.854 With at least nineteen recordings made by R&B and soul artists between 1959 and 1971, “Let Them Talk” was as close to a standard as seen in R&B, and the vast majority of the recordings took up the popular ballad form. This was not surprising. At base, the song is an address to a lover urged to ignore the gossip and talk of those who would discourage and even deny the love the singer and addressee share. And for many recordings, the music matches the narrative. Plaintive and with a backbeat that encouraged listeners to find a partner with whom to dance both close and slow, “Let Them Talk” operates as a private plead and a publicly defiant dance. The world may look upon us and this gesture of intimacy and desire with disdain, the song declares, but these private words are for you alone. As for the “talk” offered from the world, Bobby Patterson’s talking-

854 “Let Them Talk” was first recorded for Thompson’s long-time singer Lula Reed (billed as Lulu) in 1959 under the title “Idle Gossip.” Since then, it has used the title “Let The Talk.” In the twelve years that separate Reed’s release and Flack’s recording of the song, it was covered by numerous artists, including Little Willie John, Dakota Staton, Mitty Collier, Norman West, Bunny Sigler, Pearlean, James Brown, Baby Washington and Kim Tolliver.
introduction from his 1967 recording of the song offers the most succinct appraisal. “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.”

Flack’s recording changes the song. The most obvious changes were in her arrangement. Where previous drummers deployed a slow but heavy backbeat that encouraged listeners to dance, drummer Grady Tate offers a much lighter and even slower touch that if not actively discouraging dancing then certainly not encouraging it in the ways that previous recordings had. Saxophonist Joe Farrell also diverges from previous recordings to play a morose, sentimental melody that spreads out into the sonic-scape by way of studio reverb. When Flack is singing Farrell tucks into the back of the mix, and when she’s not he surges toward the front, drawing as much attention to the studio—and the mix—as he does to the melody itself. The joint-effect of reverb and surge is one of isolation. If, as has been argued by numerous scholars, reverb widens the perceptual space of the studio, the use of surge sonically sheers the musicians from each other. Under the mix’s command, each plays from inside a lonely—if still figurative—corner, and, there, cannot enact the kind of harmonic improvisation thought to be at the core of ensemble groups, jazz and Black sounding. And it is, in part, this sense of studio quarantine that lends to the affective isolation that comes to characterize Flack’s vocal performance. Under her command, “Let Them Talk” becomes a song sung alone even as its lush accompaniment surrounds the vocal performance.

Given this strange sense of isolation and company, it is hard not to hear the song as a configuration built from and because of failed communion. Here, with all its technical and quiet playing, is a failed meeting that we come to know through the ways in which it has been cobbled from fragments of isolated performance. It is a song sung into emptiness, an intimacy that must be realized across recorded and listened times. There is no lover we can imagine in the cold sonic-scape of the studio; there are only individual musicians and listeners, whose temporal and proximal distance does not disdain the loud and proud re-telling generated by James Brown and others so much as render these practices of re-telling ineffective under present circumstance. It is the listener who hears the configured whole. We can imagine these musicians—figuratively isolated in a studio both—listening to the performances after the fact and, in doing so, we come to share a positionality within a listening mode. In our mutual listening-back, we imagine an impossible wholeness, where the directionality of time (the “back” of listening) is not a return to the non-event of improvisatory recording. Rather, each listen is a moment amongst other moments, a series of experiences in listened-time that amplify the role of listeners in improvisation.

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858 While beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth mentioning that my invocation of “moments amongst other moments” and studio isolation thinks both alongside and divergently from Greil
“Sit, do nothing: this is improvisation,” critic and musician David Toop writes in *Into the Maelstrom: Music, Improvisation and the Dream of Freedom.* If Flack’s recording of “Let Them Talk” discourages partner-dance and asks us to do “nothing,” it does so as an according-act, which is to say that it acts by foregrounding the truth of recording’s non-event or, perhaps, more accurately the role of listeners in improvising along and against “the impossible location of the chain of origins.” Listening to Flack forces us to hear the always-present-but-often-lost “movement in the not-in-between of conditions and foundations, some improvisation through that opposition, taking into account both retention and disruption, originality and response, in the tradition.” It is the pressed—so pressing—song rather than the moment of recording that marks “a privileged site of such improvisation.” “Sit, do nothing,” Toop contends, but he crucially adds, “Allow stray thought, inner tremors, sensory impressions to pass through the body. To listen is to improvise: shifting, filtering, prioritizing, placing, resisting comparing,

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Marcus’ canonical *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music.* For Marcus, recordings from The Band, Sly Stone and Randy Newman document a growing sense of isolation in the aftermath of fractious U.S. violence. Their 1970s releases are laments sent from lonely and perhaps even paranoid studios. Their purpose—or at least effect—was to act as testaments to the broken dream of democracy. By contrast, Roberta Flack’s work eschews paranoia. If Marcus’s subjects sing back to a nation—and what it was or could be—Flack sings toward a still to be realized intimacy between listeners. In doing so, she enables listeners to re-think what community, collaboration and communion might mean when the task at hand is the generation of otherwise methods through which the present might cohere into a contingent community of two or more. Her music, thus, lends to a project that is both smaller in scope than the kind engendered by lament and, at the same time, wider in its consideration of what fracture and wholeness might mean within geographically and temporally specific communities. See, Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music* (New York: Plume, 1975).

evaluating, rejecting and taking pleasure in sounds and absences of sounds. . .”863 This, then, is a form of improvisation that demotes loudness and mastery; that does not believe volume and force are enough to generate the blur and noise of mutual presence. This pursuit of something other than loudness and pride, this need to configure an intimacy across temporal fracture and structural violence, this reminder that intimacy is always an act rather than something given upends Bobby Patterson’s cliché. Under Flack’s command, it’s clear that words can hurt and can be filled with hurt, while talk, to marshal a parallel cliché, was neither cheap nor without consequence. We must listen to improvise a meaning accountable to truths outside of teleological time—we listen, then, to improvise a tempo or bop that enables the syncopated community, built by and alongside individuals nested by cobbled time but just outside the tick and toll of telling-power.

This reorientation of improvisatory modes is no small feat, as it bears upon the individual’s ability to both call to and be called into communion with others. For Flack, musicians of color, and especially women of color in the recording industry, the studio was not just the stage through which to render performance into a commercial and archival object, it was often—and even more often thought to be—the place through which performance was sheered of its communal potential precisely because of communion’s overdetermined relationship to improvisation in the moment of recording. If “Let Them Talk,” bears out this loss through its figurative isolation, it does so in a way that might be said to generate the opportunity for a wider understanding of the communal. By highlighting techniques of studio configuration, the song calls to and for practices through which individuals can gesture toward commonality, vulnerability and intimacy in difference. These calls were not, then, singularly about return.

863 Toop, Into the Maelstrom, 1.
Flack, after all, chooses a song whose narrative thrust can only look back at “talk.” Nor were they a demand for reconfiguration. Indeed, reconfiguration was impossible, as the act assumes the presence of a previous whole where only individual performances exist. Instead, “Let Them Talk” amplifies the ways that the present is always experienced as parts made and remade into a temporary, contingent and disintegrating series. Both the song and recording in general gather these parts into an event, and, in doing so, do not refuse the fact of events so much as help us understand that communion and community are always made manifest by conscious gathering. Because this is true of both studio improvisation and other forms, the question that “Let Them Talk” amplifies is this: what might be gained and lost when improvisatory “talk” is structurally withheld—whether by choice or oppressive forces. How can the power of improvisation and community be marshalled through alternative means?

Sunday & Sister Jones: A First Take

Roberta Flack's 1971's "Sunday and Sister Jones” documents the last day in the life of Sister Jones, who in sensing her husband's inevitable death, demands that God allow her to join him in heaven. While seemingly straightforward, it is a song whose historical and cultural referents are, to quote Daphne A. Brooks, "buried like a secret city.” Written by Eugene McDaniels, the song reworks the spiritual “'Twas On One Sunday Morning,” and, in referencing this earlier work, combines the secular and the spiritual so to produce a multivalent sonics capable of constructing two distinct regions: the overtly spiritual and the allegorical. This combination is, of course, not new. As Frederick Douglass made clear 116 years prior to the

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release of "Sunday and Sister Jones," Canaan was not merely the promise of an afterlife, but the coded exclamation of liberation.865 And James H. Cone, in his landmark study of the relationship between the blues and spirituals, takes Douglas' assertion to its logical end, claiming that spirituals make clear that the future is not simply a reality to come. It is a reality that has already happened in Jesus' resurrection and is present in the midst of the Black struggle for liberation. To accept the future of God as disclosed in the present means that we cannot be content with the present political order.866

Taking this history into account, McDaniel's lyrics take up what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has called signifyin(g), the intertextual practice through which African American writers drew from previous texts written by African Americans so to set them in conversation. As Gates writes in his introduction, "The black tradition is double-voiced. The trope of the Talking Book, of double-voiced texts that talk to other texts, is the unifying metaphor within this book. Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced, epitomized by Esu's [divine trickster figure in black culture] depictions in sculpture as possessing two mouths."867 For McDaniels, "Twas On One Sunday Morning" acts as the site upon which he erects—or improvises—an accountable to the present. His shift to the secular does not mark a move away from religion, but,

865 Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 203.
866 James H. Cone, The Blues and The Spiritual (London: Orbis, 2010), 84.

Some readers may wonder why I have not cited Samuel A. Floyd Jr.'s musical adaptation of Gates’ theory. To this question, I am interested in the ways that McDaniel’s lyrics draw from the text. While not entirely outside the purview of Floyd’s repurposing, my fear was that his illuminating focus on musical form and the tropes therein distracts from the more textual moves McDaniels makes and to which Gates’ initial theory proves more useful.
rather, evidences the new registers, realities and frequencies in which the African American community spoke to each other.\textsuperscript{868}

However, the potential for tropes to offer a constancy of object through which historically and socially contingent revision can track retention, change and disagreement within a communicative circle is only one element of signifyin(g). Its presence, often identified through singular tropes, also serves to signpost a larger communicative modality within the present. That is, signifyin(g) always obliges listeners—and, in Gates’ case, readers—to consider the present conversations within which these revisions operate. Unlike Bahktinian heteroglossia, signifyin(g) is neither the heroic act of critical recovery, under which one ‘saves’ meanings obscured by the structures of power, nor is it a singular backtracking of tropes across time. While it may generate recovery or retention, it is also—and always—a call into Black sociality and its multiple temporalities. It is, then, not merely voices drawn across time but also across rooms, blocks, communities and, in the case of “Sunday and Sister Jones,” albums.\textsuperscript{869} For Flack, then,


\textsuperscript{869} Flack’s use of allusion, signifyin(g) and intertextuality were not exclusive to “Sunday and Sister Jones.” A year after the song’s release, Flack recorded The Chad Mitchell Trio’s “Business Goes on as Usual.” For it, Flack opens with the primary melody from Patrick Gilmore’s popular Civil War ballad, “When Johnny Comes Marchin’ Home Again.” She also shifts the phrasing of the opening lines in a way that recalls “Summertime,” the aria from George Gershwin’s 1935 opera, \textit{Porgy and Bess}. Widely covered by jazz artists, “Summertime” is not without its own troubling history, not the least of which occurs in how Gershwin’s attempt to capture the beauty and expressivity of African American spirituals reproduced troubling and reductive stereotypes and tropes. Indeed, the frequency with which the song was covered might be said to operate as evidence of African American artists and communities’ ability to render profoundly troubling depictions into masterworks of signified nuance. Flack’s phrasing was no different. Under her command, “the corn and the profits are high” comes to match Gershwin’s “Fish are jumpin’ and the cotton is high.” When considered alongside the song’s title, Flack’s
we might position her as not only a singer but also a reader and listener, discursively engaged, whose history of drawing from and calling to a long history of Black signifying practices might be understood as the site of her agency.

Indeed, to assume that Eugene McDaniel's revision of “Twas One Sunday Morning” singularly generates the critique is to ignore the fact that Flack previous album, 1969's *First Take*, included a reworking of Venezuelan poet and politician Andrés Eloy Blanco's 1940 "Pintame angelitos negros." Retitled “Angelitos Negros,” the song takes up Blanco’s confrontation of a painter’s decision not to include Black figures in his depictions of heaven. As Theresa Delgadillo points out, this absence serves two related but unique functions. Most immediately, both texts contest the ways in which European aesthetics and neo-colonial hierarchies have been privileged. "Siempre que pintas iglesias/Pintas angelitos bellos/Pero nunca te acordaste/De pintar un ángel negro" (Every time you paint churches/you paint beautiful angels/but you never remember to paint a Black angel [Translation Mine]). Additional, both present an allegory in which heaven can be seen to signify the democratic ideal from which Black people have been historically excluded. This absence is not merely a matter of aesthetic preference; it is also indicative of the structural realities that refuse see people of color as citizens. If we are to understand "Sunday and Sister Jones" as part of this larger project, Sister Jones' passing might—and can—be read as the final step to both Blanco and Flack's earlier work.

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Where “Angelitos Negros” confronts the absence of Black people in heaven, "Sunday and Sister Jones" produces a sonic counter through which Cannan is made available.872

**The Virgin Mary & The Queens of Soul**

There are, however, gendered risks when trying to think about Black women’s singing practices and recordings through the normative frame of telling. Given everything we know concerning the particular, intersectional vectors of power that have historically amplified violent conditions, both materially and discursively speaking, and which Black women have documented extensively, a question emerges: does telling help or hem discussions concerning the expressive practices of Black women’s use of humming? If the answer to such a question depends on any number of factors, Flack’s challenges with the press demonstrates one of the ways that telling and its focus on possessive personhood cannot help but short circuit moments of communion between and in the particular interests of Black women.

Of note are the many articles and interviews celebrating Flack’s rise, a recurrent theme was whether she would replace Aretha Franklin or, alternatively, Nina Simone as the preeminent woman in music. In a 1971 interview, John Abbey asked producer and Atlantic Records head Jerry Wexler if he believed Flack had or would take Franklin’s title. Wexler, for his part, denies the claim, adding his own pantheon of would be royalty that Franklin had deposed.

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872 While beyond the scope of this chapter, I would be remiss to ignore how Flack’s choice to rework Blanco’s poem also reconfigures the geographies of race—offering listeners, depending on their standpoint, either a hemispheric or transnational and diasporic approach to race. More broadly, 1969 also marks the publication of Walter Rodney’s *The Grounding with My Brothers*, which includes a similar critique of the preponderance of white angels and a call for Third World and Revolutionary solidarity. On Flack’s transnational approach to race, see, Theresa Delgadillo, 407-430; on Rodney’s critique, see, Walter Rodney, *The Groundings with My Brothers* (Kingston: Miguel Lorne Publishers, 1996), 33.
So far, Aretha is the undisputed Queen and I don't think she's the Queen just for today. I think she's the all time Queen and with no disrespect to Billie Holiday or Bessie Smith I think that Aretha is the greatest black woman singer that we've ever known. I also think she's the most significant musical artist of this generation; to me, she's also the best performing artist of the generation, too.\textsuperscript{873}

Where the figurative coronation of James Brown discussed in the previous chapter seemed to map his music, business and political affiliations into a network of telling-power, Flack, Simone and Franklin—and, for Wexler, Holiday and Smith—were pitted against each other singularly. To be the queen of soul, it would seem, was not to seize control; rather, it was to abdicate the potential for communion between each other. Flack, Franklin, Simone, Holiday and Smith—who I purposely and conspicuously name here—were singers within a marketspace that seemed to mirror the studio space: isolated and without the potential for conversations and connections. As one reviewer condescendingly asserts for in the \textit{Bay State Banner}, “‘Let Them Talk’ becomes a challenge from sassy lips,” while both Nina Simone and Flack—in their own way—are seen to be “boss chick[s].” However,

\begin{quote}
The comparison ends there. Nina is into her own whiskey-voiced protest, but sometimes, I'm afraid, not so lyrical thing. Miss Flack is lyrical all the way. She could probably make heavenly melodies on the kazoo. And she certainly gives a distinct character and personality to each of her songs. Nina is a priestess making human sacrifice; Roberta is a lover making love.\textsuperscript{874}\end{quote}

If a distinction is made by the reviewer, it is not to recognize Flack and Simone as dynamic individuals, whose interests, concerns and experiences operate both within and without a community. To the contrary, they are two women whose individual performances render them, in

\textsuperscript{874} Kay Gibbs, “In the Cut,” \textit{Bay State Banner}, February 17, 1972, 16.
part, incommensurable and so once severed by gender and then, again, by a single, recorded performance.

Flack, for her part, refuses the designation in a felicitous way. “‘In fact, I hate it,’ she says, talking slowly and deliberately. ‘If anybody was the Queen of Soul it was the Virgin Mary. I feel the term is too loose.’”875 We might bracket—for the moment—the obvious fact that Flack’s citation of Mary invites a return to the allegory of Sister Jones. Instead, we might consider the multivalent way that her designation of Mary as the Queen of Soul implicitly reconfigures the comparisons between Flack, Franklin, Simone, Smith and Holiday. This reconfiguration amplifies how these comparisons—largely determined by marketplace and gendered lines—dis-engendered singers from recognizing themselves as a community. Indeed, the topics taken up by blues women like Bessie Smith had been historically seen to be in opposition to the religious themes marshalled by Flack, and would have been more commonly associated with club women of the decades preceding its 1971 release.876 Thus, while it is true that by 1971, a clear distinction between the blues and sanctified music had been partially severed with the rise of soul, Flack’s decision to position Mary as the term’s true queen provides a canny way through which to use marketplace designations against themselves. Mary, whose story is one of miracle, which is to say a necessary impossibility realized through other means, is not a representation of women. Rather, she is a figure who births the requisite hub around which

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876 For more on this, see, Angela Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (New York: Vintage, 1999).
Black women performers separated by structures of class, marketplace and belief were able to convene in difference—should they choose to do so.

What is shown to be “loose,” then, are not the blues women who celebrated the body and desire. If anything, the blues women were recovered from these vile stereotypes precisely because Flack’s proclamation shows the loose, unproductive and often violent nature of these stereotypes. Comparisons in service to or determined by androcentric and racist narratives could never generate fruitful comparison across both commonality and difference. They could only produce alienation and isolation. By contrast, Flack’s embrace of Mary generates what might be called an analogical genealogy in which otherwise unavailable commensurability—if not quite communion—occurred. It was a space, then, in which the rich variety of experiences Black

877 While beyond the scope of this essay, Flack’s marshaling of the Virgin Mary was not singular. One of the more poignant efforts to do so is Barkley Hendrick’s 1969 portrait of Kathy Williams, his second cousin, twice removed. Titled Lawdy Mama and utilizing the style associated with Byzantine icons, Hendricks paints Williams sitting. Her arm crosses over her waist in a protective manner, and she wears her hair in an afro that effectively replaces the gold-laid circles associated with portraits of Byzantine saints. Additionally, Hendrick’s portrait amplifies the iconographic nature of Flack’s cover, which is a close up of the singer’s face, with her name and the album’s title framing her afro. However, this amplification is not without its own risks. In “Palette Scrapings,” a series of short reflections on some of his paintings, Hendricks declares that the portrait was of Williams, “not Angela Davis or Kathleen Cleaver.” The decision to include this correction in an otherwise brief statement seems to indicate a common misconception or, at the very least, a trend of reducing black women to singular icons. Given the nature of the painting as discussed above, Hendrick’s declaration might be read as another snare with respect to the politics of depiction, presence and collectivity within Black art across mediums. See Barkely Hendricks, “Palette Scrapings.” Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool (Durham: Duke, 2018), 105. See, also: Ebony’s March 1969 cover and article, “The Quest for a Black Christ,” the former of which depicted a Black Christ figure. And in April of 1971, the periodical offered a survey of the artists who had painted a Black Christ in “Artists Portrays a Black Christ,” Ebony, April 1971, 177-80. Two pages later, an ad for Ultra Nadinola, a skin care product, pictured a black woman wearing an afro with the declaration that “Black is beautiful.” Black and white and utilizing a close up of the woman’s face, the ad takes up many of the aesthetics used by Flack for her 1970 release, Chapter 2. This is not to put too hard of a point on the resemblance, which is only partial; rather, it’s to mark a trend at the time. Ebony. Ad. April 1971, 182. Finally see, Linda Jacobs, Roberta Flack: Sound of Velvet Melting (St. Paul: EMC Corporation, 1975), 6.
women across class, political and musical lines might be expressed in and though differences made intimate. That is to say that Flack takes up the idiom of Mary in order to refuse of telling’s comparative modes, which too often pitted Black women against each other.

Flack’s assignment of Mary as queen also re-invests the conception of soul with Black religious practices and, perhaps, reinforces the political commitment she first expressed on “Angelitos Negros.” Her decision to reassign the title to Mary, however, shifts the critique made on her 1969 release. Where “Angelitos Negros” called for painters to include Black people within their depictions of heaven, Flack’s abdication provides the requisite circumstance through which an intersectional critique might be launched. This is neither a small shift nor singularly about religious practices. By 1971, it had become clear that inclusion into Canaan, the market- and museum-space, and the state, to name the four primary locations in which these songs operate, was not enough to dismantle the patriarchal and antiblack structures inherent to all four. As Floyd-Thomas cogently reminds readers in his discussion of Black theology’s first mandate,

The understanding that biblical texts assume the presence of black bodies, black characters, and black communities is not particularly empowering if those characters and communities are imbued with negative attributes, curses, or infamy. The Bible must be seen also as a liberative text that does not convey an immutable inferiority imposed by divine whim or wisdom.

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878 For a rehearsal of the ways that the late 1960s & 1970s marked an increase in representation, visibility and rhetorical inclusion even as it failed to engender full enfranchisement of marginalized communities, see Chapter 2. More broadly, see, Richard Iton’s In Search of the Black Fantastic.

Alternatively but not unrelatedly, Michael Apple’s concept of “dominance through mentioning” provides a secular frame for these critiques.\textsuperscript{880} And it would seem that depiction and mentioning, the former’s methodological and textual equivalent, did not automatically engender Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights concepts of integration, enfranchisement and Black Power.

Returning to Flack and the question of musical coronation, her reclamation of a self-possessed orientation through her refusal of the title, thus, repositions presence as something in excess of mere mention. This excess, in turn, demonstrates how liberation rests less in the demand for depiction and more in how depictions must be in service of opening up new, unforeseen opportunities through which intimate encounters could occur. Indeed, if studio and structural mandates always threatened to produce isolation, they also opened up the possibility of intimacy both within and across gendered communities. If reviewers tended to miss or misrepresent Flack’s ability to generate new modes of intimacy, poet Nikki Giovanni did not. In her 1975 poem “The Way I Feel,” Giovanni’s narrator declares to her lover,

\begin{quote}
 i’ve noticed that i’m happier
 when i make love
 with you

[\ldots ]

most of the time when you’re around
i feel like a note
roberta flack is going to sing.\textsuperscript{881}
\end{quote}

Separated by two stanzas that further develop the joy felt when the narrator is making love, the first and second lines figuratively map the importance of physical and emotional closeness to

\textsuperscript{880} Michael Apple, \textit{Social Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age} (New York: Routledge, 2000), 61.
intimacy. If the opening line seems to signal the importance of the physical, it is the latter and its invocation of an inevitable but still yet to be sung note from Flack that figuratively nods to trust as requisite for intimacy.

We can hear this sort of opening up when Flack describes her reasons for performing Nina Simone’s and Weldon Irvine’s anthem, “Young, Gifted and Black.”882 “But when I sing ‘Young, Gifted And Black’ from the stage, I'm not singing it for the audience. I'm singing it for me because it's a fact. I am young, I am gifted, and I am black, and I want to share that thing with people. I'm just stating a matter of fact.”883 On the one hand, Flack’s explanation seems to partake in an act of re-telling. And, yet, her insistence that she sings the song for herself almost immediately complicates the performance’s relationship to telling because telling and re-telling operate outwardly. That is, to tell or re-tell requires the teller to seize control over the protocols of exchange. It is, then, an act of legitimization and de-legitimization, taking up the understanding of politics described by Iton. Flack, however, sings inwardly, only sharing her experience of coming into consciousness. She does not tell so much as share—or give sound to—her experience. Just like she does with her assignment of Mary, then, Flack seizes the right to tell by refusing the conditions through which telling was made available. She tells to un-tell a political orientation.

**Gestures of Untelling: Humming as One Mode of Communion**

882 My hope is that my use of anthem invokes Shana Redmond’s powerful study of diasporic anthems as figures and tools of solidarity. See, Shana Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora.*

And so we might begin again, this time listening for the particular sonic method used by Flack on “Sunday and Sister Jones.” Indeed, if it is McDaniel's use of the “‘Twas Early One Sunday,” Flack’s invocation of the Virgin Mary in interviews and her insistence of inward methods of untelling that make gendered inequality audible on “Sunday and Sister Jones,” it is the inclusion of the hum, both in McDaniel's lyrics and in Flack's performance, that presents Sister Jones and Flack as members of a symbolic and communicative circle. Flack describes Sister Jones as a woman “familiar with the signs.” And Flack's own familiarity “with the signs” is made clear by her ability to translate Sister Jones' “humming” into un-coded language. “Late one night I heard her humming while strolling through the Georgia pines/She said, Lord, if you take him away, I don't want to live.” The second verse then draws an even deeper connection between the two women by shifting to a painfully intimate and vulnerable moment “early Sunday morning.” Flack sings: "Just before the birth of day . . . Sister Jones knelt down to pray." Sister Jones addresses the "Lord" asking if “death [is] the master of us all?” Then, much like in the first verse, she pleads to follow her husband to heaven. At this point in the song, Flack breaks from straight narration and begins to hum, further signaling her membership in Sister Jones' communicative community. The third verse then shifts to “just before the midnight dawn,” where Flack takes up Sister Jones' practice of reading the signs by describing how Sister Jones' life is “cryin’ from her body like water from a dryin’ well.”

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884 Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”
885 Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”
886 Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”
887 Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”
888 Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”
The hum is not new to African American communities. To the contrary, Flack and McDaniel’s use of it operates from within a crowded field. In her 1935 ethnography, *The Sanctified Church*, Zora Neale Hurston acknowledges the seeming "indefinite" sound of hums but insists that "they also are formal and can be found unchanged all over the South." ⁸⁹⁰ Abbey Lincoln's performance on *We Insist!*, her landmark 1960 collaboration with soon to be husband Max Roach and lyricist Oscar Brown Jr. includes the line "the beat. . . began with a hum. . . and a drum." ⁸⁹¹ Twenty years later, scholar Michele Russell arrived at a strikingly similar conclusion, writing that the hum was an act “which kept alive African Rhythms in spite of the lock-step ankle-chains demanded.” ⁸⁹² While recent scholarship has, perhaps, effectively warned against the tracing too hard of a line between African and African American practices across time and space, it does prove, at a variety of moments and sites, to be a durable practice through which alternative modalities of expression serve to disrupt the linguistic and explanatory complex of declaration and description. This might explain why, then, the hum begins to show up in a variety of texts, oral histories and songs both by and about women in the 1960s through to the present day. ⁸⁹³

Mircea Eliade's defense of the symbolic in religious ritual and experience is instructive. He writes, “. . . the symbol not only makes the world 'open' but also helps religious man to attain

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⁸⁹² Michele Russell, “Slave Codes and Liner Notes,” *All the women are white, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women's studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull et al. (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1982), 120.
Symbols awaken individual experience and transmute it into metaphysical comprehension of the world. . . by understanding the symbol, [the individual] succeeds in living the universal.”894 Thus, the symbolic functions not merely as a way to explain the world, as is often proposed, but also as the portal through which the vertical plane (ascension) is apprehended. For Eliade, to properly read the symbolic is to discover God. Though his discussion focuses exclusively on the ways in which the symbolic articulates man to both God and heaven, his methodology provides a valuable lesson for any analysis that seeks to reveal spatial planes that are not immediately apparent. More directly, consciousness emerges through one's efforts to identify and then translate the symbolic; one comes to know herself through the reading of the symbolic. Concomitantly, symbols emerge as the common gravity by which a community and its subjects are organized.

The primary shift to the secular, however, complicates Eliade’s arrangement. Within the secular space translation can never arrive at a universal precisely because signs transferred across selves are always, to varying degrees, untranslatable. That is to say that all translation—every symbol—bears meanings that are unique to the speaker and the listener. These meanings, which each of us intend to transfer across the self and to others but constantly and inevitably fail in our efforts, result in a constant vacillation. As a result, any dialogue—even at its most agreeable—produces tensions. This is because any conversation assumes that its participants share a common but not identical lexicon in which the shared sign bears the unique, irretrievable stamps of the individual who speaks and the listener who receives the speech. This true of signs even as

and especially when they articulate the participants—allowing them to form a community through a particular hermeneutic circle.

Drawing upon the idea of vacillation as a strength rather than weakness in discussions concerning communities made in difference, the hum at both an aesthetic and somatic level bears a striking relationship with various descriptions of soul and its link to feeling and vibrations during this period. In a 1967 issue of Soulbook, a California-based BAM journal, an advertisement describes Black aesthetics as

the *vibratory shock*, the force which, through our sense, grips us at the root of our being. It is expressed through corporeal and sensual means; through lines, surfaces, colours, and volumes in architecture, sculpture, or painting; through accents in poetry and music, through movements in dance. But doing this, rhythm turns all these concrete things towards the light of the spirit.

Likewise, Barbara Simmons’ poem “Soul” provides a succinct example of this bridging. Published in the landmark Black Arts Movement anthology *Black Fire* and recorded on Jackie McLean's 1967 release *'Bout Soul*, Simmons’ poem frames reverberation as the means by which an alternative "sight" is found. Simmons writes, “Soul is Screamin/ Screechin / TINTINABULATION! That's soul!!!”

Toni Cade Bambara explicitly links humming and vibrations in her 1972 short story, “My Man Bovane.” For Hazel, the narrator of the story, the vibratory nature of the hum enables her to reclaim the erotic from those parallel publics that have named it “the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation.”

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The phrase's construction forces its users to engage both the tongue and the lips and, in doing so, draws attention to how these small additions—a tongue added, or a held "z"—generate reverberations and meanings that refuse the damaging and crippling tropes historically assigned to Black women. Where her son, Task, sees her “makin a spectacle of herself,” Mama both hears and feels her way toward the shared erotic. “And I press up close to dance with Bovane who blind and I'm hummin and he hummin, chest to chest like talking.” The line's active refusal of sight helps Mama to slip free of the controlling, patriarchal gaze that her children take up. Instead, she engages "vibrations" rather than "tits." These vibrations bridge what Audre Lorde identifies as "the dichotomy between the spiritual and the political." This is no small feat; in a story where her daughter, Elo, sees her as “apolitical” and where Task understands “laughing loud” to be a source of shame, the reclaiming of a particular sonic practice outside of the damaging, historical gaze begins to move Mama toward an erotic space that is capable of generating what, in Salt Eaters, Minnie Ransom calls her "hummingsong."

As we saw with James Brown’s grunt, there is an always lurking danger of overdetermining the associative and indexical links between an individual act and its past iterations. This is true of the hum and other vibratory gestures. As such it must be stated plainly that the hum is small by any comparative metric, unable to index past hums and only drawing weak associative links between like gestures. Yet, its resonance occurs in how its expressive possibility extends into—or, quite literally, blurs—the bounds between meaning, association and

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connection. In fact, the hum does not issue an active refusal of the demand that small gestures fold into larger discourses. To the contrary, it is given in the midst of largeness, unbothered by such demands. And in its unbothered nature, the hum disturbs more than singing; it also undermines the very category of largeness and the ways that such a term has been historically indexed to telling. This is not to say that humming operates free from rules; rather, it takes its rule from and through mutual regard, which is to say that the hum given at a particular time, between particular Black women demonstrates a shared regard for community in the midst of becoming, so in the midst of mutual revision or compliment. Regard not disclosure, then, is the hum’s end or, perhaps, its purpose, that which both guides its usage and, as it were, shapes its sound. To hum, in this sense, is to generate an experiential connection between individuals even as its specific affective meanings are never disclosed or, importantly, expected to be disclosed.

Leading from the above, it might be said that Flack's narration and humming take up a practice within Black women’s repertoire so to proliferate it. She becomes an instructor of sorts, and, in doing so, seizes a new mode of regard. Just as Sister Jones modeled the hum for Flack, effectively teaching the younger woman the technique, Flack's performance models the technique for the listener and provides her with the critical tools needed join in, should she want to do so. The “signs” that make Sister Jones' death predictable are the very ones Flack introduces to the listener in the first and second verse. Like Sister Jones and Flack, the attentive listener should be “familiar with the signs” by the time Flack begins to hum. Furthermore, if Sister Jones’ hum establishes an intimate relationship between her and Flack, Flack's hum and its availability to her listeners establishes a community formed through and by a particular constellation of signs. This constellation both recruits the listener into the narrative space and

902 Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”
shows how the ritual is passed on to others: from Sister Jones to Flack and then from Flack to the listener, and from Josephine to the others. And because an attentive and interested listener can translate the hum, the act must be understood as a learned technique and not as one that is innate or natural. The performance, thus, takes up Martiniquais’ poet, theorist and scholar Édouardo Glissant's challenge that any utterance which aspires to the level of communication must not be a matter of “initiation” but rather “apprenticeship.”

903 More importantly, it demonstrates Patricia Hill Collins' assertion that "African-American women used [the] prophetic tradition to create and maintain a sophisticated sisterhood.”

904 There is, of course, a further danger in assuming the presence of a disciplined ritual where only gesture and joy exists, which is linked to questions of association and regard but, ultimately, different. And, yet, Flack has been vocal about the fact of study and technique in her work. In a 1972 interview, she argued that "There's a whole lot of instinct about creativity but art is a science. . . The elements of creativity can be there — the instinctive feeling of recognizing colours, responding to people; but to actually be able to turn this into technique is study, practice and skill.”

905 The role of study with respect to humming is most succinctly expressed in Charlotte Watson Sherman’s 1991 short story “Cateye,” where Miss Mary, the owner of a rooming house who refuses to speak, forcing her boarders to learn the communicative

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905 I take my lead from Robin D.G. Kelley’s discussion of the dozens, and his admonishment of scholars whose methodological commitments obscured the experiences of those who participated in the dozens for no other reason than the act brought joy. See, Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 32.

tones of her hums. “If a roomer asked her a question, she hummed the answer to herself and the listener had to listen real careful to catch on to what she was saying.” In another of her stories, Sherman writes, “Josephine started to hum, an old sound each of the others in turned pushed into the circle until melted into one long hum rolling over the water.” In each, technique, however undervalued prior to these explanations, emerges as a crucial element within humming’s practice.

In fact, Flack’s decision to hum amplifies the need for study on “Sunday and Sister Jones.” It is important to note the strangeness of the record and how Flack’s humming breaks the lyrical narrative—the telling of Sister Jones’ story—and, in doing so, allows us to hear what had previously only been named and described. Flack’s use of the hum, thus, is not merely a model through which listeners learn of its utility; it is also a moment in which they come into consciousness of different kind of listening. Flack’s hum—as opposed to her description of Sister Jones’ hum—acts as a hinge between temporally and geographically distant listeners. At the moment Flack hums, listeners are no longer agents outside of the record’s strange surveillance of a private moment kept only partially private. Nor are they merely drawn into a space and made part of a listening chain. Rather, they—and we—are shown how to generate a space that does not so much render us equivalents as shows us to be part of a larger, cross-temporal and also impossible field of sounding, which is—should it be treated as such—the location through which a distinction between “a precious memory and a demanding memory” comes into view. 909 If Flack’s description lulls listeners into feeling through the precious memory of Sister Jones, her

humming jolts the listener through its demand that all acts of listening and sounding are performative, which is to say generating and reiterating meaning.\textsuperscript{910}

To be sure, “Sunday and Sister Jones” succeeds, in part, because of the way both the structure of the song and Flack's hum construct a liminal space capable of contesting what Cheryl Wall calls “the false universalism that long defined critical practice and rendered black women and their writing mute.”\textsuperscript{911} Most immediately, the song’s events are dislocated from linear time. “The death of day” precedes “the birth of day” and “Sunday evening” lies “just before [a] midnight [capable of] dawn.”\textsuperscript{912} Past and future are inverted; night and morning overlap; and each verse exists in state of “just before. . .”\textsuperscript{913} This dislocation does two things. First, it temporarily disables Cone's gospel train by delaying the sort of linear propulsion the metaphor requires. Second, it reveals “Sunday” to be a malleable sign that is neither fixed nor natural. Rather, it is revealed as a construct whose value is measured by its ability to bridge the chasm between the individual and tradition. It is, as Eugene S. Callender writes in “The Glory of The Temple,” not an object of worship—or permanence— but an aid to worship.”\textsuperscript{914} The

\textsuperscript{910} It might seem as if the jolting effect of Flack’s performance bears some similarity to either Brecht’s V-effekt or John Cage’s urging that practices of silence are, in fact, demands for a radical reorientation to and with sound and listening. The primary distinction between Flack and these men might be too neatly summed by making a distinction between the alienating effect privileged by Brecht and Cage and the communal effect I argue Flack engenders. If Flack’s produces a “demanding memory,” to return to Townes, she does so by calling listeners into company and communion, which is an affectually different mode to those offered by Brecht and Cage’s desire to shock their audiences into otherwise unacknowledged and critical frequencies.\textsuperscript{911} Cheryl Wall, “Introduction: Taking Positions and Changing Words,” Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women, ed. Cheryl Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1989), 2.\textsuperscript{912} Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”\textsuperscript{913} Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”\textsuperscript{914} Eugene S. Callender, “The Glory of The Temple,” Black Preaching: Select Sermons in the Presbyterian Tradition, ed. Robert T. Newbold, Jr. (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1977), 76.
dislocation, thus, opens up the opportunity for Sister Jones' death "just before the midnight dawn" to be understood not as a boarding of Cone's train, but, rather, a sublime space located within the moment just before her assimilation is demanded. More simply, the song imagines a permanent Sunday where Sister Jones need not "live another day" because the day never ends. As such, she can be understood as an allegorical figure that represents African American women's search for volume over what Houston Baker calls "the dominant blues syntagm. . . an instrumental imitation of train-wheels-over-track-junctures."  

Temporal dislocation, as I have called it above, would have been familiar to those who had grown up in any number of Black denominations. As Presbyterian clergyman, educator and Civil Rights activist William Lloyd Imes writes, “. . . Reformation is not an act completed forever; it is rather a process that goes on through the ages. . . It begins with the Past, but does not end there. It is part of the Streams of Life; it is the Past and Present and Future.” Imes’ attention to time as processual is echoed by Baptist singer Mahalia Jackson when she describes her consternation with how both recording time and studio time were always in service to an end product rather than the process by which one came into communion with both the congregation and God. “Time is important to me,” she says, “because I want to sing long enough to leave a message. I’m used to signing in churches where nobody would dare stop me until the Lord

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916 I want to pause here to note the risks involved with generating my own monolith vis-à-vis the collapse of various denominations. To be sure, my intent here is neither to compare nor contrast the various ways in which the understanding of time existed within any particular space. To the contrary, it is to open up the idea that African American congregants of various denominations would have been familiar with the temporal dislocation presented by the song.
arrives!“ Indeed, gospel singer Danniebelle Hall’s 1974 “Work the Works” takes up the figures of day and night to retell the story of Jesus’ ascension three years after the release of “Sunday and Sister Jones.” “I must work the works of Him who sent me while it’s day, for when the night is come the time for work will be done away. Would you be willing to work for Jesus any time and everyday? He'll reward you when He comes to take His bride away.” In each, then, there is a sense of what we might rename as temporal condensation.

This sense of temporal condensation might offer a second performative utility for Flack’s hum. Even as it seems to point toward a trope that precedes the formation of the temporally local, it generates the embodied conditions through which the hum might signal a global impossibility. Should we follow the leads offered by Abbey Lincoln and Michelle Russell above—perhaps at the very moment that we do—we run up against the impossibility of tracking a unity of practice across time and space. Africa, to return to Lincoln, cannot be thought of as the hum’s origin. This is not simply to rehearse what Fred Moten, in other contexts, calls “an ongoing event of antiorigin and an anteorigin, replay and reverb of an impossible natal occasion, the performance of birth and rebirth of a new science, a phylogenetic fantasy that (dis)establishes genesis, the reproduction of blackness as (the) reproduction of black performance(s).” While it is that, it is also to draw attention to the hum’s physical requirements (closed mouth, lips pursed) and think about how these requirements might construct a decibel limit that disrupts the impulse for approaches to global or mass telling. If anything, “Sunday and Sister Jones” demands that we are as attentive to space as we are time. As Barry Blesser and Linda Ruth Salter note,

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Reverberation has a complex temporal behavior, rapidly increasing in loudness in the onset region, holding steady in the sustain region, and slowly decreasing to inaudibility in the decay region. Spatial geometry determines the actual shape of these regions . . . Depending on the music, the locations of the listeners, and the aural architecture of the space, each region makes a different contribution to the listening experience.921

The hum, then, is a quiet mode that negotiates the space between interiority (what is held back) and utterances between intimates.922 As such, it generates a condition through which the distribution of the record—its entry into the marketplace—operates in excess of telling. We may—or may not—know Sister Jones’ immediate story, but we certainly are allowed only a small glimpse into Flack’s affective and lived experience.

This is no small thing. In halting the narrative thrust at a spatial and structural/formal level, Flack effectively takes up the protocols of the gospel form, which Horace C. Boyer argues is “characterized by perpetual motion, ‘filing-in’ of the rest portions, heavy accentuation of after-beats, uneven division of the beats and syncopation,” in order to fracture the ideological thrust, which failed to enter women in full. But we might frame this even more broadly.923 In Flack’s rendition, movement operates both along gender lines and also from within a larger moment in which ‘movement’—as a formal noun designating a linear and liberal notion of collectivity—is troubled. If the record distances the singer from her performance, enabling the often-problematic comparisons between Black women singers that open this chapter, it also enables an alternative reading.

922 This reading is informed by Kevin Quashie’s Sovereignty of Quiet.
Distance disallows the automatic turn toward the past that work on history and memory engender. If, as Werner Sollors has suggested, the distinction made between history and memory as distinct and antagonistic modes of past making is not inevitable, neither is a focus on the past as the primary location through which communion and care are made. This is not to discount the necessity of attending to the past and its afterlives, the ways in which the endurance of an ever-shifting oppressive force in Black life always bears the traces of past modes of subjection and oppression. Rather, it is to argue that an attention to the past lessens our ability to attend to the immediate and unfolding present. While not foregone, much of this has to do with how the past is often implicitly an account of loss rather than what Charles D. Carson has fruitfully called “the continued immediacy” of reference, allusion and, I would add, gesture. What might be gained if we surrender the need to recall and, in doing so, call the present into presence, one that is not un-bracketed from the past and future but, rather, conspicuously shown to be an equally generative modality through which to think about ways of being in a world structured through patriarchy and antiblackness. When taken under such gain, Flack’s hum operates as a site of present presence, as a mode of being and labor that moves parallel to the still important “sites of memory.”

924 See, for example, Werner Sollors, ed., The Invention of Ethnicity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
925 For more on afterlives, see Saidya Hartman, Lose Your Mother, 6.
927 While moving in a different direction, Michel Foucault’s concept of “the history of the present” also moves along a similar tract. See, Michel Foucault, Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Vintage, 1995), 31.
This is not to put too hard a point on the recorded hum’s potential for interdiction into discussions concerning memory and history. Rather, it is to argue that Flack’s hum generates a field of meaning that has no recourse to representation. Instead, it offers something similar to what theologian Howard Thurman, in his 1971 treatise, *The Common Ground*, called “the final privacy of the individual” requisite to living within an integrated space. “I have always wanted to be *me* without making it difficult to be *you*.“929 The hermeneutical search isn’t to undress or expose. Rather, it is an audition of sorts, a means by which interiority and exteriority become a function of atransactional encounter. Those in the act of humming are in the act of being—they are engulfed by the present moment, hinting at the wealth of feeling—indeed, sharing this wealth—without, in fact, presenting it as testimony. The hum, in this sense, both means and does not mean; it is both prior to and after words, and so shared only in the sense that Jones, Flack and listeners can take it up.

Thurman goes on to argue that “the need to care for and the need to be cared for is another expression of the same basic idea.”930 Thurman’s point is that care—its need—might be used as an act through which human bond comes into being without sheering the individual necessity of interiority. The point is not without its own danger. Namely, the need to care for and to be cared for always threatens to smuggle in the conditions through which palliative and oppressive structures are seen to be one in the same. Indeed, Thurman’s own masculinist—if not fully patriarchal—approach to care demonstrates how easily connection can be structured in oppressive ways. What, it might and should be asked, does it mean to frame care wholly through

the needs of men when the material conditions of the U.S. renders space manifestly different for women—and women of color in particular?

This is further complicated by Thurman’s frame through which he develops a modality of care as a consumptive act. “We literally feed on each other,” Thurman asserts. While figurative—and, perhaps, drawing an analogy to transubstantiation—the language suggests a kind of dynamic that depends upon depletion. Within the ideal or utopian mode this kind of relationship operates as exchange, but within the material and historical world, exchange often manifests from within a transactional modality mired within the structures and strictures of race, gender and class. Nevertheless, it might be said that Thurman’s call for a common ground offers an opportunity through which to think about how Flack’s recording provides an object upon which to stage an alternative mode of care. This mode might be said to operate at a distance from the initial performance so to generate the requisite performative space through which the listener’s distance from Flack and Sister Jones always already forecloses the listener’s access to them and, thus, becomes a kind of model through which to think about boundaries. Sonic proximity does not match the temporal distance; the listener is both close and not close, and what comes to be in this moment is a ground upon which the listener negotiates commonality without right or recourse to consumption.

Thurman understands the realization of potential, however, to be one of community, which, in turn, is only community in its light touch. The grip upon individuals must always be light—not so much declarative as communicative. It is a gesture given to what will be and is—an active being—in the moment it is uttered but taken up through what might be seen to be pre-arranged timing rather than time. This pre-arrangement, then, is an alternative conception of time.

931 For more on exchange as an incomplete act, see previous chapter on James Brown’s grunt.
that is responsive to the rhythms—both figuratively and literally—of the community. As such, changes—whether affective or musical in nature—manifest by way of collective pivot. Within various denominations, there is, indeed, a time to hum and for hums, and one must accord those times, but how and what could be declared in the moment—for there is always something that has the potential to be declared—\textit{is}, perhaps, less important than a hum given to communicate—and so realize—the potential for communion.

The hum’s dislocation from language bears a great deal in common with scatting and, in particular, Brent Hayes Edward’s work. For Edwards, the “scat falls where language rustles with alterity, where the foreign runs in jive and the inside jargon goes in the garb of the outsider. But, as the examples above demonstrate, the performance of difference in scat is by no means innocent; it is the very point at which the music polices the edges of its territory.”\textsuperscript{932} Leading from Edward’s insight, it might be said that the kind of alterity generated by scatting serves both to set and disrupt the parameters of representation and, following the ground breaking work from Lindon Barrett, value itself.\textsuperscript{933} Nevertheless, the dexterity requisite for disruption can and often does renew our attention to the musician. Indeed, if everybody can scat, not everybody can effectively “drop words.” By contrast, the hum operates if not more modestly—for Flack’s tone, and her ability to hold the melody is in evidence of skill—then certainly in a manner that does not require virtuosity. This is no small feat, for it redirects attention from the skill of the performer to the practice itself. That we all might join is what matters. Moreover, the hum


\textsuperscript{933} Barrett’s understanding of value as a twofold operation in which value is first a force (of violent exclusion) and only then manifest—or understood—as form is of particular interest here precisely because the scat’s ability to police music’s “territory.” It might also illuminate how form (in this case the linguistic sign) obscures or occludes its relative force. See, Lindon Barrett. \textit{Blackness and Value: Seeing Double}, 40-45.
embeds within it a modality of communion and care. It is how parents console a crying infant or child, and it is often the gesture given to signal engagement with a speaker—one can hum in assent or dissent, for instance. Indeed, if the scat, per Edwards, signals the “dropping of words,” the hum might be said to signal something closer to a surrender to what Kevin Quashie has called a “raucous” interiority, both signaling the recognition of individual expression and relinquishing the idea that the listener must be offered full access to the wealth of feelings and thought therein.

Indeed, if it is Sister Jones that symbolizes the search for quiet care, it is Flack's hum that illustrates how volume can be controlled by the sort of spatial geometry Blesser and Salter define as regions. Its physical requirements (closed mouth, lips pursed) constructs its own decibel limit, which simultaneously refuses an actor's ability to shout over another and obliges that one listen intently. Indeed, Flack's volume is not so much a matter of an increase in sound but the exploitation of space and voice. Just outside the boundaries of the verses, her hum does not aggressively construct a sonic territory. To the contrary, she generates a modality that exists between territories and in a perpetual state of “just before.” It is a location much like the one in which Toni Morrison's Beloved exists: "Just outside music it lay, with a cadence not like theirs." Like Beloved, Flack's hum is not beholden to temporal and spatial borders of the narrative; rather, it capitalizes on its ability to render sound diffuse enough so to inflate a previously invisible--or inaudible—space. Just as Sister Jones’ hum can fill the air between the

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934 Thank you to Robin Bernstein for pointing out the links between the hum and consoling.
936 Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”
"Georgia pines," Flack's hum is capable of filling the space between verses, which, in turn, holds steady the moment “just before the midnight dawn” and just before the departure of the gospel train.938

What, then, is one to make of events and utterances that resist certainty so to gain volume? Perhaps their example symbolizes the necessary condition through which the individual is obliged to engage what Mae Gwendolyn Henderson calls “the simultaneity of discourse.”939 That is, in dislocating time—and, thus, denaturalizing the forward, verse-driven thrust of both the gospel train and the spiritual—the song reveals the existence of a variety of other communicative modes. Henderson calls these modes the multiple “tongues” within any discursive space. And as she makes clear, it is not that these “tongues” have only recently been invented; it is that, until recently, “they have had no say.”940 Taking this into account, the song's success might be said to be found in Sister Jones' ascension, but it also succeeds because both its structure and Flack's performance demonstrate the possibility of a practice that is accountable to its collective voice even as it refuses to be limited by self-constructed and reductive borders.

And so we might begin again for the fourth but not final time, returning to the start of this essay and Flack’s cover of “Let Them Talk.” Given the work done on “Sunday and Sister Jones,” which felicitously precedes “Let Them Talk,” the palpable sense of isolation and emptiness generated by both songs might be said to suggest the importance of generating locations—temporally and geographically speaking—in which a discomfiting intimacy emerges between pre-recorded song, its present listeners and the narratives that act as surrogates for the musicians.

938 Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”
whose lived moment and intentions have been lost to recording. Where Flack’s hum takes up the
materiality of the record in order to put pressure on the demand for disclosure, “Let Them Talk”
forces us to ask what intimacy and communion might mean when we begin to understand
recordings as something other than commercial and archival objects through which one hears the
past. Just as the song builds a whole from a series of parts, so too does the record amplify the
ways that communion is enacted in a continuous process of auditioning configurations of
community, sound and meaning. If readers will indulge a felicitous dash, it might be said that
the record’s a-liveness reminds listeners of an always present aliveness that is tied to an
understanding of individual wholeness as both loss and gain. If, as Linda Jacobs imagines, Flack
“wished she could talk to each person [at an unidentified concert venue], rap about hopes and
fears and dreams. But [knew], of course, that was impossible . . .”941 If she knew that she
“couldn’t see from her lake of light into their darkness” and, finally, knew, too, that she couldn’t
“touch them or even hear their individual voices,” she could theorize—which is to say give name
to or highlight methods from within any number of the communities she shared with others—
alternative ways of “mak[ing] contact.”942 As poet and theorist Mari Evans writes,

\[
\text{And we be bringing, each of us / the music of our selves to wrap / the other in // Forgiving clarities / soft as a choir’s last / lingering note our / personal blend // I will bring you someone whole / and you will bring me someone whole / and we be twice as strong / and we be twice as sure / and we will have us twice as much / of love / and everything.}^{943}
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Just as Evans’ use of the “we be” imagines the couple’s communion as timeless and continuous
even as “we will have” urges readers—and lover—to think about the kinds of care and labor

941 Linda Jacobs, Roberta Flack: Sound of Velvet Melting, 7.
942 Linda Jacobs, Roberta Flack: Sound of Velvet Melting, 7.
requisite of communion’s maintenance, so too does Flack’s hum offer the potential for “someone whole” to encounter another “someone whole.” The implicit directive Flack teaches us, then, is that alternative modes of communion and intimacy must be made again and again precisely because so much talk and its demand for telling continued to foreclose Black intimacy, regard and communion.

Epilogue: Mix as Method: An Alternative Approach to Listening with Regard

We might return to the Jackson 5 now, to a moment prior to the 1970 interview that opens these essays. We might return, as only recordings allow, to a moment—perhaps the moment—when Michael’s preternatural ease emerges on record and, in doing so, becomes one of the “mightiest peaks—of what we call Black music.”945 We might return, then, to “I’ll Be There,” and Michael’s most famous line, “Just look over your shoulders, honey.”946 What is sounded in that moment exists at the precipice of words and voice, of biography and history. It is an act of performative assurance by way of temporal confusion. Michael breaks into the song and there fractures not only its time but the many figures of time itself. In finding the space in between verse-time and lived-time, he stages an encounter between boyhood and adulthood. The sweet alto-voice, the savvy-if-borrowed line, the ease in which he dips in and out of the verse, indicating an experience in excess of years, is immediately betrayed by his playfulness of delivery and the fact that he flubs the idiom, pluralizing “shoulder.”947 This is a peak that portends a prelapsarian tale and so a fall, but of whom we must wait to hear.

And what is heard?—certainly not a boy donning the rhetoric of adulthood. What sounds both in and through the line is a telling history that spans the 17th-, 18th-, 19th- and 20th Centuries. What re-sounds are the violent methods by which Black communities were disallowed categories of age. What sounds still are philosophical conceits that framed Blackness—for there was no

947 I owe thanks to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. for alerting me to the fact that Jackson pluralizes “shoulder.”
personhood to spare—as an eternal present both socially and historically speaking. In this heard moment, we contend with an antiblack state, one in which Black children were (are) deemed inherently corrupt while Black adults were (are) treated as something beneath the level of intellectual consideration. Here, too, is a “midnight dawn” or, perhaps, its obverse, the melancholic side of Flack’s communal hum. What resounds, then, in this small phrase, is temporal condensation. Time is neither past nor future. It is not even present. By way of Michael’s combination and the record’s strange relationship to time, it is both past and future and still a fleeting present, which by fact of its sonic passing and affective linger urges re-play.

And so it’s done. And in these re-encounters of the moment, which both accrues and loses meaning, only to regain and lose again and again with each listen, generating meanings as much through loss as retention, listeners are able to hear quieter complications and collapses. If Michael’s promise to “be there” might assure the potential for collectivity—even a “bubblegum” dream of cross-racial collectivity—it also warns against mistaking collectivity for the re-instantiation of racial monolith, essence or ahistorical possession. To bring oneself into relation with Michael and his brothers, one must, as the lyric demands, “call my name.” The “pact” that “will bring salvation back” is neither a simple nor sentimental “love.” Rather, it is one that “will not pamper you nor spare.” It is nothing less than regard. That Michael cannot ensure we will—that history suggests we won’t—renders this this small, sweet slide between verses into something fraught and playful all at once. Indeed, in the same moment that he locates a place for joy, he amplifies the exhausting caution that might explain why former Black Panther and community activist Claudia Chesson-Williams once described the late-sixties and seventies as a

948 Flack, “Sunday and Sister Jones.”
949 Jackson 5, “I’ll Be There.”
moment when “Things went so fast. Time seems to accelerate when you’re always looking over your shoulder.”

But we must be careful. For Michael’s line is not act of declarative telling. It does not endeavor to litigate Black humanity. It does not speak to the many questions asked—and unasked—by interviewers and critics alike. Nor does it attempt to recover all those who had been—and continued to be—disallowed the innocence and playfulness of Black childhood. To the contrary, its declaration acts jointly, as both promise and orienting sound, small only by way of metrics that would mistake totality and completion as the proper measure for meaning. But for those who would call Michael by name, who would accept the playfulness as productive, as that which kneads at time so to unmoor the rigid methods of telling, the line draws attention to an alternative modality of understanding and sociality. Under Michael’s issue, time becomes place, place a function of time re-played, just over our shoulders, which if in mind of listening provides a means—precarious and risky, worthwhile and necessary—that while not eschewing telling might just demote it. By encouraging a kind of sociality that engenders encounter rather than decision—incomplete and so constantly fraying—we come to hear a moment that encourages exchange without recourse to assurance, comfort or expertise. We come to hear the demand for Black regard.

Yet, given the nature of the essays that precede this one, another question surges: what might listening look like without recourse to completion, which is to ask what does it mean to write without conclusion but, in fact, in the hope of spurring further inquiry? Rather than attempt to summarize the many different methods and analytics with which the above essays grapple, I

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am interested in how writing might also be a site and practice through which songs, ideas and
writing are brought within proximity of each other, not in an act of drawing definitive
connections but, rather, as an audition of an otherwise unavailable community. By seizing upon
texts’ resonance—which is to say moments of seemingly shared perspectives, sounds or
experiences—in otherwise discrete and even disparate work, we arrive at a mode of writing that
attunes to moments of possible intersection so to continue to draw on the wealth of difference
within a discursive community brought into existence on the page. What follows might be
called the record’s method or the method made possible by recordings. In other words, this is an
attempt to think alongside those scholars who have begun to treat the DJ’s mix as a model for
new methods.

Check the Technique: The Cut and Scratch of Black Listening in Time

The “Sth” that opens Toni Morrison’s Jazz operates within three immediate modes of
interjection: it signals the sucking of teeth; it visually signals a musical staff; and, finally, it
might be thought of as the sound of a scratched record, a needle violently dragged across the
grooves and there stalled in time. But what do we make of these modes? Or, more particularly,
what is the particular groove ruptured by the violence of the needle? To answer this, we might
add a fourth reading. It is not merely the needle dragged across time, but the cut voice skipping.
In this case, “Sth” is the partial, which is to say incomplete spelling of Sethe from Beloved,

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952 See, Lordi, Black Resonance.
953 See, for example, Weheliye, Phonographies; Daphne Brooks, Kara Keeling, and Jacqueline
Stewart. “Combahee River Collective Mixtape: Black Feminist Sonic Dissent Then and Now,”
Discussion Panel, Barnard Center for Research on Women, 40th Anniversary of the Combahee
which missing its “e’s” then “loops” readers back to the opening of *Beloved* and the ways that 124 absents its count—which is to say its numeric progression—of the numbers 3 and 5, and, in doing so, is richly suggestive of the 3/5ths clause.955 When networked in this way, time cannot proceed precisely because antiblack violence operates both as absence and as violence. Thus, multiple temporalities must be accounted for simultaneously if we are to escape the cut groove. More pointedly, what is absent is always present, but how we map the contours of loss require us to “mix” texts and times with no recourse to repair, only redress.

**Song. Donny Hathaway**

Is it possible to generate melisma as compression, to string notes along a single syllable but somehow generate—which is to say make audible—the press and limit of being through sound? Is it possible to sit within the word’s building block and deliver a word—all while in an act of demonstration and play—so a demonstration of play? The voice is. At once travailing and clipped, at once released and contained, Hathaway’s melisma is where being emerges from within a dangling verb. In the held and searching vowel lie searches for "the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that [breaks] the back of words."956 Is this is possible? Or, to allude to the Clark Sisters, has all this living been in vain? And what if we were to say no—no to this this is—would its impossibility dissuade pursuit?957 Jose Munoz offers the figure of a utopia on the horizon, an out of place space that cannot be touched, but which one can, nevertheless, be

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956 Morrison, *Beloved*, 261
touched by. This, too, describes the compression that somehow also unfurls within Donny Hathaway’s melisma. On which song, one might ask. The answer is on all of them.

Inside a string of notes, the aurality of exertion—the movement of air toward everything and nothing at once—works to rest, then rests in its work. This, I want to suggest, names the place of Hathaway’s love, where there’s “no space or time,” which, of course, is the word un- given to a world in which the making of both space and time portend and realize violence, and so see to loneliness, personally and structurally speaking. There are, of course, names for this kind of compression. Blues singers worry a line. Church singers travail. Each is a search in play, an audition in search of further auditions, which might be said to work. And, indeed, sounding is hard work.

Given such conditions, it might be said that there is no separation between play and work for Hathaway. To listen to him is to be in the midst of a run in search of stillness. To listen is to hear a fugitive series, which might be called pocketed exuberance, if only exuberance could bear the hereness of it all. To be here—which is to say in an act of hearing—is not to enter a state so much as bear witness to the constant renewal of escape into and so inside a time that did not exist before its sounding. Here is a nested time, thicketed through and with the times of Hathaway’s rhythm section. It is the generation of what Fred Moten calls appositional sounding, not so much between, which indicates a gap, as the making of a sonic space cut to augmented modes. Hathaway’s string of notes re-members listener and band by way of keying or noting an undeclared space that is not so much prior to representation—as delivered by the word—as it is

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960 Moten, *In the Break*. 

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disinterested in any word put in service to sentence. Here, in the notes offered within the word, is a word, colloquially speaking, precisely because we hear a singer voicing apposition, or, to return to Spillers, a voice issued as body, not as a body torn or tethered by flesh but finding its release in time opened. We have been here before precisely because we have never been here before.

Song One/Two: “For All We Know”/ “A Song For You”

Claudia Rankine writes,

... one meaning of here is “in this world, in this life, on earth. In this place or position, indicating the presence of,” or in other words, I am here. It also means to hand something to somebody—Here you are. Here, he said to her. Here both recognizes and demands recognition. I see you, or here, he said to her. In order for something to be handed over a hand must extend and a hand must receive. We must both be here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of.

Here, then, operates not as declaration but gesture. We can see this in Hathaway’s “For All We Know.” When he holds out his hand and tells us “my heart will be in it” the words are not his. The words, that grand domain of property and copyright, are Hoagie Charmichael’s. And the voice—its recorded performance—is his only because he offers its sublime largess, all that it has accrued before and after him, to listeners. “I’ll hold out my hand,” he sings. And, here, in front of us, are hands unseen. This is not a surprise. History demonstrates—continues to show—how

961 For more on “re-member,” see, Saidya Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 76-77.
964 Donny Hathaway, “For All We Know,” Roberta Flack & Donny Hathaway, Atlantic Records, 1972.
965 Hathaway, “For All We Know.”
often the U.S. refuses to see Black men’s hands as anything but weapons. State-refusal takes part in what Tina Campt calls “an anterior tense of present and future capture,” wherein due process emerges as an empty ritual that follows rather than determines guilt. 966 Still, Hathaway sings, “I’ll hold out my hand”—even as he knows—and “we know”—there can be no expectation of recompense.967 There is no energy wasted—no illusion given—to the idea that he might undo the historical complex that fails to see Black men. There is even less energy spent on locating a topological here. “I’ll hold out my hand,” he sings, “and my heart will be in it.”968

We cannot see the hands. It is true. Our choice, of course, is whether we will see this act of surrender, which in the figure of the heart is also an act of being touched, which is to say in a place of love “where there is no place or time.”969 He gives us a here even as time and place present an encroaching risk to Hathaway, one so great that “for all we know, we may never meet again?”970 This is a hereness that gestures through a surrender or openness to being touched. But what does it mean to demand one name, with precision, that which touches, that by which we are touched? We are, strangely, arriving upon the question of consent—or, perhaps, more accurately refusal—the refusal to name with precision that which has touched you but to know, paraphrasing Justice Stewart, when you hear it.971 Know means know means the right to say no. Only in refusal can yes emerge.

**Check the Technique: The Drop**

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966 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*, 81.
967 Hathaway, “For All We Know.”
968 Hathaway, “For All We Know.”
969 Donny Hathaway, “A Song for You.”
970 Hathaway, “For All We Know.”
There are many ways to do a body—so many that one might forget how the doing is always collaborative. It is collaboration that turns movement and gesture into shared meaning. At one point, this might have been fashionably called the semiotics of bodily gestures. It is, certainly, still “a stylized repetition of acts” that inaugurate and then go on to enforce gender, race and any number of unnamed standpoints. But, I want to make clear, there has also always been a beauty in these kinds of doings. Much of it lies in how collaboration particularizes meaning. Touch and gesture mean different things to different collaborators; intimacy and privacy, thus, emerge within the particular meanings given to them. But these doings also always threaten to generate beauty’s opposite, which by fact of doing’s need for privacy cannot help but render collaborative doings into conspiracies. This is true of each of us, white, Black, brown and Asian. What differs is that which one conspires toward.

Song Three: “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)”

“Make you want to holler the way they do my life,” Marvin Gaye sings, and the trouble of gesture’s direction becomes clear. This trouble—which lodges at the interstice of race and racism—is how often the doing looks the same but endeavors different ends. The kind of doing to which Gaye refers—to which he refuses in the utterance—seeks to consolidate meaning, to fix it to flesh, to see all gestures—all doing—as read through flesh, while another, which is to say what Gaye’s does, seeks to particularize and also somehow come together all at once, free of the binaries through which individuals and communion operate across a slash. “Make me want to

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holler,” Gaye will sing again, in that sweet tenor that defies the imagination’s ability to conjure
the sort of pain and anger his words invoke. And then comes the moment of fracture—or better
yet—the splitting of a single doing into distinct conspiracies: “. . . and throw up both my hands.
Yeah, it makes me want to holler and throw up both my hands.”974 We have heard this before.
We have seen it done. In movies, there is the associative phrase: “Put your hands up” or “hands
up.” This is the state’s dare masquerading as its fear. Its doing is close to but, ultimately, not the
same as Gaye’s gesture. More pointedly, this is the state’s command, its refrain, which is meant
to obscure and, perhaps, even justify its violent and racist doings. What is so dizzying about this
split, however, is that both obtain a kind of surrender. Gaye surrenders to the idea that he must
let his pain and anger go through the testimony of it, while the state demands that one surrender
his or her agency. Which of these two forms of surrender we hear, each contained in a single
gesture, will depend on whether we’re interested in consolidation and flesh, or particularization
and community. This is the core question of a body’s doing, which must start with an
acknowledgement that collaboration demands we see these doings as ones given by an
individual, not flesh, not body, not monolith.

Song Four: “Third Sermon of the Warpland.”

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls it “signifyin(g)” and, in doing so, gives a name to the method
by which Black writers take up the tropes within African American literature and use them to
speak to each other.975 Gwendolyn Brooks just calls it

. . . what
is going on

974 Gaye, “Inner City Blues.”
975 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary
is going on.976

Both have a point, which is to say that each—in their own way—identifies their proximity to a circle of mutually engaged thinkers. Both negotiate the distinctions that mark an individual’s place of belonging within a community of talkers. It would seem, then, that books do talk. And sometimes they even speak to songs.977

I like to think that just after Marvin Gaye has thrown up his hands but right before he collapses, Gwendolyn Brooks steps in and reminds us that “what is going on is going on.” And, in this way, she takes up Gaye’s plead to “talk to me,” but, in no small way, helps him to see more clearly what is going on.978 Her poem, so deeply invested in thinking about the necessity of relief and its role in rebellions, offers readers a new kind of surrogate, one that relieves through its signifyin(g). It might be asked why, and this is what I know: that Gaye’s studio prowess allowed him to harmonize with himself; that on “What’s Going On” he layered vocal after vocal until the song sounded as if he were a man torn, unable to confirm or make sense of the world in which he lived; and that he sang—maybe by fact of the world’s senseless violence, or maybe by fact of the desperate need to generate harmony—in isolation. If Gaye’s song serves as a balm for listeners seeking mournful company, we could not and cannot return his tenderness.

We have, as I have written above, been here before. Gaye’s isolation has many analogues. Each is individual in their utterance and somehow also of a conversation. Amiri  

Baraka calls it “missed love,” while Sam Cooke names it “looking.” Each takes up particular experiences and offers readers and listeners a glimpse into the ways that engagement and encounter, which is to say intimacy, wearies under the press of individual resilience and might. Gaye sings, and I am reminded—perhaps improperly so—of Essex Hemphill’s poem in memory of Joseph Beam, “When My Brother Fell.”

There was no one lonelier than you, Joseph. Perhaps you wanted love So desperately and pleaded With god for the only mercy That could be spared. Perhaps God knew You couldn’t be given More than public love In this lifetime.  

One must be careful here. There is a risk of erasing the particular violence that Black gay and queer men face. I say so explicitly and gracelessly, for both racism and homophobia require explicit attention and no grace. Yet, the risk also seems necessary, for “missed love,” in no uncertain terms, occurs when we fail to see the possibility of community in our associations. The harmony generated by both Gaye and Beam, different as they were, offers us the possibility of thinking alongside them, imagining their particular experiences as worthy of engagement and dignity. Hemphill will write that when Beam “fell / I picked up his weapons” and wielded them against an antiblack world.

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982 Hemphill. 32.
Both like and unlike Hemphill, Brooks picks up Gaye’s line. This is what I hear: that Brook’s poem joins Gaye; that, in doing so, she relieves him of a bit of labor; that she keeps company with him; and that her line, in no small way, confirms that the senselessness that Gaye feels but cannot name—which is, in and of itself, nameless—is going on and so on going. Or, as she will write earlier in the poem,

If you could hear it  
You would make music too  
The blackblues.  

Her deployment of the conditional bears on the richness of her given relief. In fact, the conditional adds to, which is to say signifies on, Gaye’s titular line. For in her line, what is going on is not just antiblack violence but Black life, whose refusal of the antiblack world is put in service of belonging to “The earth [as] a beautiful place.” What, in Gaye, sounds melancholic, the holding on to loss, in Brooks, becomes a matter of attunement to voices other than one’s own. “[I]f you could hear,” she writes, and, in so saying, invokes any number of idioms used by Black communities. In this small invocation, she signifies on Gaye’s song in order to remind him—and us—that quiet as it’s kept, Black people have and will go on in ways that have nothing to do with resistance and everything to do with kinship and regard. She calls this going on “the blackblues,” which is no more clearly parsed than in Ntozake Shange’s question, “Don’t ya know we is all sad ladies because we got the blues, and joyful women because we got our songs?”

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985 Shange, Ntozake, Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982), 81.
Song Five:

Farrah Jasmine Griffith offers the word “ancestor” to describe one of the methods through which individuals “in the midst of self-creation” generate models and communities across both time and space.986 In the figure of the ancestor, Black women locate, remember and even contend with “what they created and what they lost along the way.”987 For Shange’s Sassafras, Billie Holiday is an ancestor and foremother. She is both real and somehow not at all Holiday. A conjured figure, both in excess of and somehow lesser than Holiday, her voice in the novel figures as a force through which Sassafras can and does imagine herself within the company of other women. And in their refusal to accord sexist and racist protocols in favor of otherwise modes of selfhood and relationality, these ancestors serve as Sassafras’ model and, in no uncertain terms, comfort. This is no small thing. As Audre Lorde writes of coming into a Black queer consciousness in the 1950s, “I remember how being young and Black and gay and lonely felt. . . There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders of the loneliest out-posts of the kingdom of Dahomey.”988 This is what, perhaps, makes Shange’s Holiday so poignant. Where Lorde would describe passing other Black women in New York’s West Village only to “acknowledge[e] our kinship in silence, looking the other way,” Sassafras listens for Holiday and, there, hears something of herself.

Song Five: “A Song For You (Live at The Troubadour)”

987 Griffin, Who Set You Flowin’, 197.
988 Lorde, Zami, 176.
“That’s the way you’re supposed to love,” a woman will yell in response to one of Hathaway’s most beautiful performances of “A Song for You,” and it is hard not to think about her testimony as one that actively undoes the demand for the kind given in courts and in media. As James Cone writes, testimony in the Black church “is the occasion in which a believer stands before a community of faith in order to give account of the hope that is in him or her (I Peter 3:15).” The testimony given by a fellow believer emboldens the faith of the individual testifying and the congregation listening. Testimony is, then, a form of regard.

“That’s the way you’re supposed to love,” this unseen and barely heard woman says, and, in her testimony, those committed to otherwise modes of living are reminded that they, too, must find a way to hold out their hands—even as the state treats the gesture as something tawdry and violent. The woman’s word, so to speak, takes up testimony so to refuse its state counterpart, which is to incompletely name a complex of protocols and listening modes both in service to and reiterative of “the accumulative logic of cis-heteropatriarchal racial capitalism.”

“That’s the way you’re supposed to love,” she says, unseen and barely heard, requiring the listener to strain the ear. Yet, in that strain to hear, listening amplifies the role of will in pleasures that exceed the state. She, in this moment, is not an authority but, also, somehow not, not one. In refusing state modes of testimony and the listener’s right to tell of its accuracy, in sinking into the erotic pleasures of Hathaway’s prior notes, in celebrating him by and through responding to his ability to carry us away—to be carried away—caring about the immediate moment given to the room

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991 Hathaway, *In Performance*.
993 Hathaway, *In Performance*. 355
and its participants, she eschews the vile tropes that loom both outside the room and, sadly, inside it as well. And in so doing—in risking a response—she generates a refuge and so, also, a party—political and ecstatic and angry and full of care even as it enables ways of encountering over the limit of carefulness—all at once. As Moten writes, “this party is, and takes place in, and takes place as a kind of refuge,” which cannot help but generate anger and love all at once because “refuge still indicates that those who take it are refugees and people tend not to want to live like that [even as] tremendous amounts of love are circulated in refuge . . .”994 Under such conditions, precision—of the positivist sort—becomes impossible. “Everything is everything,” Hathaway sings, but, we might add, only in dependence.995

**Song Six: “'Cause I Love You”**

This is why one cannot just leave. Because “your heart is there” even as “you can’t stay ‘cause you been somewhere else.”996 Hereness, then, is not the same as a state of freedom, it is a way of listening for what Gwendolyn Brooks heard in Paul Robeson.

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Warning, in music-words
devout and large,
that we are each other’s
harvest:
We are each other’s
business:
we are each other’s
Magnitude and bond.997
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This is where listening has always been. It was before and after, within that impossible irreparability. As Fred Moten writes, “black art does not expel the problem; it is the problem.” But, we might ask what he knows his readers already know: what do we mean by the problem? In their essay on the 808 drum machine and its links to emulation, Katherine McKittrick and Alexander Weheliye ask, “How do we, who watch this and narrate this and hear this and live this, come to terms with the irreparable? Coming to terms with the unrecoupable means, above all else, having to exist with it and necessarily going on living.”

Hereness, then, is not the same as a state of freedom. It is the generation of a party that recognizes how

Heartbreak is not, then, a signifier of racial oppression or love lost. It is not a noun. Heartbreak is an aesthetic-physiological practice. It untangles that violence, it does not describe violence for profit. Because in order even begin to do justice to this physio-aesthetic praxis, to Black life, it must exceed and unsettle the accumulative logic of cis-heteropatriarchal racial capitalism.

How, then, does one endeavor this praxis of heartbreak?

There is what A. Van Jordan calls “the conscious presence of your heart, your internal bass drum, that is both in rhythm with . . . a voice and [its] inflection.” This is a heart in which the physical thump must find its mix with its affectual thud, the heart as a sonic iamb, one accented, the other unaccented. Jordan hears their entanglement in Lenny Williams, whose howl does to the vocal what James Brown did to his entire band: the rendering of what was formerly seen to be an instrument of melody into a congregation of percussive force. William’s voice beats—“oh oh oh oh oh ohhhhhh”—because love—conceptually, legally and linguistically—is

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said to be impossible. \(^{1001}\) “So when a brother shakes his head to Lenny’s voice, it’s the equivalent to nodding ‘Yes,’” Jordan writes.

We have been here before in many guises. Houston Baker calls this kind of inversion of meaning as the “deformation of mastery.” \(^{1002}\) Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call it “the refusal of what has been refused.” \(^{1003}\) While Run DMC put it more simply: “Not bad meaning bad but bad meaning good.” And “There it is.” \(^{1004}\) But, it might be asked, what—or where—is here? For Jordan, it is the moment when Williams “breaks out of song—not breaks out in song—to speak to a friend about some problems he was having with his lover.” \(^{1005}\) Here, it’s not speech that is important; rather, it is the way that Williams wields postponement. He halts the forward thrust of a song’s progression—even as the record spirals toward its end—to speak to another person, to relay his particular need to sit with a friend. Jordan will go on to write, “the heart has to fill with experience before it can pump.” \(^{1006}\) This breaking out of song might also be understood as an event that folds into experience, which is to say that which we come to keep of the many events in our lives. Taking Jordan’s metaphor to its, perhaps, tortured end, we might ask whether different experiences constitute different stresses.

**Song Five: The Book of Delights**


\(^{1003}\) Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013), 96.


“Tap Tap.” These are the words Ross Gay gives to a similar experience, when a male flight attendant—“maybe about fifty, the beginning of gray in his fade, his American Airlines vest snug on his sturdily built torso”—taps his arm twice after placing a seltzer onto the tray in front of Gay. Tap, tap: the word, repeated twice, is not quite onomatopoeic. To treat it as such would be to obscure the “tenderness” given and the softness of both the attendant’s hand and Gay’s tricep. In the moment of the attendant’s touch, sound is absent and so words cannot imitate it. Or, more accurately, the sound given by Ross’ words do not lend to the soft—maybe even unheard—sound given by the attendant’s touch. Still, there is something to the way that the ear naturally stresses the second “Tap” and, in doing so, generates an iamb. In this stress—which is and is not there, which we must listen for willfully—lies sound’s suggestion: the echo of a heartbeat. Tap, Tap, Gay writes, tap tap, we hear, and the pump given by repetition is made possible by the experience of the attendant’s small touch. We do not hear the heart any more than, perhaps, we can see it in Hathaway’s outstretch hand, but a collective and erotic will—so acted—to hear another as and in and through tenderness, which also always means through vulnerability and risk, generates an event in place and a place in and for the enactment of the event. “Oh,” Gay writes in reflection—returning us to William’s own use of interjection, though differently—

let me never cease extolling the virtues, and my adoration of, the warranted familiarity—you see the family in that word, don’t you, family? —expressed by a look or tone or voice, or, today on this airplane . . . a tap. . . By which, it’s really a kind of miracle, was expressed a social and bodily intimacy—on this airplane, at this moment in history, our particular bodies, making the social contract of mostly not touching each other irrelevant, or, rather, writing a brief addendum that acknowledges the official American policy, which is a kind of de facto and terrible touching of some of

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us, or trying to, always figuring out ways to keep touching is—and 
this flight attendant, tap tap, reminding me, like that how else we 
might be touched, and are . . . 1008

How else, indeed.

Check the Technique: Low End Theories 1009

And what of this bass in Black popular music? 1010 What does it suggest? For McKittrick 
and Weyhilie, bass links to “pleasure laced with damage, loss, sorrow” 1011 How, then, does one 
“untangle[e] that violence,” which renders refuge requisite, from pleasure, to—as they 
stunningly write—“do justice to this physio-aesthetic praxis, to Black life. . .”? 1012 Or, as Toni 
Morrison writes, “Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all.” 1013 But, it might be asked, what 
does “thick love” sound like when we know bass—that most immediate signifier of aural 
thickness—comes laced with damage, loss, sorrow? To such questions, the record avails.

So does the DJ, who was always here in these pages, though this is the first time I have 
admitted as much. It is the DJ who offers a technique or practice through which the low end 
emerges as theory, as praxis. The “working of gains” names a technique whereby a DJ uses a 
mixer to amplify or quiet various elements within a song. Often when discussing gains, 
discussions seek to determine how often one should use them. While a worthy discussion, I am

1010 This line is indebted to Stuart Hall. See, Stuart Hall, “What Is This "Black" in Black Popular 
Culture?”
1013 Toni Morrison, Beloved, 164.
more concerned with the end to which the labor is put. This is because one’s use of gains is always a matter of alerting the club to loss. Indeed, they're not called gains for nothing.

To make this simpler, we might limit our discussion to lows. For those unfamiliar with the term, lows refer to the bottom end of sound and so you might think of them as the sound that can be felt throughout the body. When the DJ removes them, the air gets a little thinner, literally and affectually speaking. And so does the room. Clubgoers are caught in the middle of loss—for as long as the DJ keeps the low-end turned off. What's important, however, is how that loss does multiple things. For one, it forces us to recall the thickness of a song. It also attunes us to other possible ways to feel both the song and our movement. Suddenly, we can hear all those sounds that exist within the upper range of sound, which were always available but which we had failed to hear. But a lack of low-end also forces us—as listeners, as dancers—to have to bridge the loss. Our bodies need to become conduits between each other more fully and precisely because the low end—the bass—is no longer there to guide us. And, finally, as bridges between loss, we come to anticipate the return, the moment when we can stop doing the labor of the low-end.

This last point, I think, is maybe the most important precisely because it is where the whole of club social life exists. Our anticipation is really an index for sociality, trust and release. It is social because of our willingness to keep the felt beat going even when it's gone. It is trust because we believe the DJ won't leave us hanging. And it is release because when the DJ brings the bass back, we are released from the labor of holding steady the thickness of space and sound with our bodies. And this sense of release matters precisely because it allows those who live under the regimes of colonial and diasporic loss, the world from which club life springs, to imagine, for a moment, what it would be like to relax. Toni Morrison's character Pilate has that
gorgeous line, "If you surrender to air, you could ride it." Well, it seems to me that the use of gains in DJing create the circumstance through which we get a glimpse into the ways of riding air itself. Likewise, and as Weheliye demonstrates, our modes of listening enrich—and inevitably become—a mode through which we encounter texts and each other. 1014

Fade Out

The music is a miracle, and the miracle is how it continues to present a way of listening and engaging otherwise modes of being and sounding. Still—and in the spirit of refuge—we must be cognizant of the adverb. Otherwise signals disjunction, not as limit but as a constant need to imagine past the limit. That need to imagine past rather than move in an already-arrived beyond is exhausting. That Black art does this is miraculous, but we cannot mistake the miracle as anything broaching arrival or completion, for freedom will always sound rested and “easy.”1015 What we hear in Black sound is exorbitance, that which remains after it has outpaced antiblackness, not quite tired but not all rested or at peace either. And so the problem is not unspoken, as goes the recurring and transmogrifying Du Boisan question.1016 It is, rather, sung and played and replayed from within the subjunctive mood, not then ontological (what is it like to be a problem) but, drawing from the many scholars that populate these pages, ontology’s scandal. To stay being (to have been being) has been and continues to be an incongruent art taken up (there is, here, an unfortunate temptation to use the term “mastered”) by Black communities across the diaspora. But recording’s second mediation, which is to say our subsequent listening, begins with another question: what would Black sounding be in freedom?

1014 Weheliye, Phonographies.
This is the question of our current modes; its answer, however, remains just out of reach. That the imagined answers given by Black artists and listeners are so beautiful makes me wonder how much more beautiful it could be if we endeavored to wield our told and telling love for Black song, Blackness, and Black people as a weapon by which we end the antiblack world.
Coda: Who Stays; Who Goes; Who Knows

“Who stays?” an elder in D.C. used to ask when my friends and I slipped into performances of toughness. “Who stays?” Joe would ask again, adding, “That’s all that matters.” Back then I took the line to be question of loyalty. Would we stick around when another fell into trouble? Would we stand with them? It was, to little surprise, an understanding mired by ego—a plastic toughness or superficial might. To be great was to be capable of force, and we took pains to ensure that we could give pain back. As the years went on, my understanding shifted into what I—and others—believed was a revolutionary ethos. Through it, we took up Willie Johnson’s credo that deep into midnight, “You're gonna need somebody on your bond.” And that is just what we did—for better and often for worse.

Of course, Johnson’s credo was not about carcerality, at least not singularly. It was about death as a looming presence, as a structure in and of itself that must be contended with or surrendered to. One either faced violence or took part in it. Others would be needed “way in the midnight when death comes slippin’ in your room.” For Johnson—and, I think, for Joe, too—there were two kinds of bonds. There were structural ones by which the state oppressed Black, brown and poor communities. And there were social ones—those efforts of kinship, regard and community that sought connections neither in excess of nor singularly dedicated to filial obligation. To attend to one bond without acknowledging the other was to embolden violence.

In the intervening years, I have come to understand Joe’s question as one that also asks who is able to stay. The answer invites any number of questions concerning race, gender and class. And so it is also a question of how does one stay, how can one stay, and, more broadly, how do we enable all who remain to stay staying. The latter of these questions is, perhaps, a way of saying that our social bonds operate with both the living and the dead, with generations here
and those long passed. These bonds are modes of survival and surviving. Indeed, to survive loved ones is to accept the obligation of their stay(ing)—in memory, in practice, and, for generations of Black people, in the lessons of living otherwise. What remains and what will remain comes down to a collective effort to hold past and present all at once. What remains and what will remain becomes a question of how well we take up these inherited practices and make them accountable to those survived and surviving. The record—an object around which we might more fully study the infinite feelings and memories they index—is but one opportunity through which practices of staying emerge.

Yet, I often wonder whether Joe would have laughed at all of this. Was this one more attempt to cleave myself of the kinds of embodied complicity I carry as a white, straight, cis-gendered man? Was it an attempt to treat my proximity to Black communities as equivalent to staying? There is no graceful answer to these questions. But, perhaps, this lack of grace, this impossibility of escape or, worse, assumed transcendence, is a necessary part of taking up Black Studies as a white person. Perhaps to stay is to admit that white scholars working in Black Studies remain within—and even benefit from—the very structures that much of their work seeks to undo. Sanctity and redemption are impossible. Worse, their pursuit is a distraction from the ultimate goal, which is to say that it distracts us from practices of care and freedom-making.

What is our role; should we have a role; and are these questions only further distractions in how they always risk centering white concerns and desires?

I like to think—perhaps mistakenly—that Black Studies and the practices generated by Black communities are not only sturdy enough to withstand—indeed, to hold in abeyance—efforts to re-center whiteness, they are also central in teaching us how we might better care and be cared for—even as both history and the present continue to sever us from each other. As Toni
Cade Bambara might say, “wholeness is no trifling manner.”  

Or, as James Baldwin’s mother told him as a boy, this work, “[i]t’s more than a notion.”

What might staying mean in light of these concerns? For one, they remind us that staying power—one’s ability to remain—is always influenced by individual capacity. To be forced to hold white desire in abeyance is neither care nor an act freedom-making. It is, of course, a necessary condition for the kind of wholeness that does not trifle with opposition but, instead, endeavors to practice freedom. But it is, itself, something different. And so it must be remembered that the robustness of Black practices does not justify the continued need to enact those in service of clearing ground.

In this way, to stay is also to curb the impulse of white desire, to stay our excitement that so often turns into a kind of ferocity. To stay, then, is to sit with the hard questions as questions, which, unanswerable, must be asked so to ensure that excitement does not turn into a consuming force. Put another way, to stay within these unanswerable questions is to admit that any attempt to separate oneself from complicity within the structures of white supremacy is to participate more fully in it, to move, as it were, out of phase. This is not enough, of course. In fact, it seems to me that a perpetual interrogation of proximity, biography and complicity is requisite to such discussions, no matter how exhausting and uncomfortable they may be.

Who stays? Joe would ask, and I know and knew then that his question was also always whether we would take up for him, too. Would we, a group of boys who ranged from twelve to fifteen, stay with him, a 28-year old, Black man, should he need it? The answer—painful as it is to admit—is no. We did not stay, and we did not for any number of reasons—not the least of which was the idea that our elders were in possession of endless capacity. We needed them; they

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did not need us. And how foolish the thought—how regrettable our inaction. For if there is one lesson from Joe that I might bring to these pages, it is the fact that midnight does not come; it is always here. It took me a bit longer to learn this fact than it did my friends—for reasons of race, class and gender. And this, too, marks a kind of loss. Of opportunity for care. Of hereness, now. But mostly of my loved ones. And in marking loss it is also, I suspect, a cause. To treat the figure of midnight as an hour is to miss the need for care at all hours. It is, then, not to stay. It is to take leave.

Under such realities—both structurally and personally manifest—how does one stay? I am reminded of Juanita’s response to Parnell at the close of Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*. “Well, we can walk in the same direction, Parnell. Come. Don’t look like that. Let’s go on.” 1019

It might be said that the lie is believing white people can stay. That, instead, the goal is to audition the requisite steps needed to walk in the same direction, which is to say toward liberation, not as saviors but, instead, as the students of otherwise modes that, in fact, save us, too. In this sense, we must rid ourselves of the arrogance of staying and, instead, effectuate a mode of being and study that grapples with the fact that white complicity occurs whether we stay or not, and that sometimes to stay might even further reinforce the structures of antiblackness. Our mutual direction with Black people must attend to this fact, to the idea that passion, love and desire can become ferocious, turning liberatory aims into violent effects.

Even this does not go far enough. When the university becomes—or is—the institution within which direction is negotiated, direction cannot help but mix with market forces. In doing so, direction turns into something more aptly described as trajectory, which is to give an

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imperfect name to the kinds of opportunities and advances white scholars are disproportionately offered. Good faith work is not enough. More obviously, good work cannot be the metric by which we measure mutual direction. As Herman Beavers once put it to me, white men who produce good work are rewarded with endowed chairs, while Black scholars who produce good work are rewarded with service.1020 Who stays, indeed.

In the writing of the above, it seems that another pattern emerges or threatens to emerge or hangs, overly ripe. Namely, the struggle to locate a mutual direction is often presented in essays like this as if it were unique to white people, as if Black communities across time and place have not also had to contend with locating mutual direction. There is—of course—a long history of Black people negotiating the bristle of individual desire so to find mutual direction or hereness, to return to the earlier essay. We have words for this negotiation. Coalition. Solidarity. Community building. And there are many others that could be given, but both those presented above and those left off this essay loose something when marshalled—whether implicitly or explicitly—by white writers who fail to recognize this negotiation is not unique to them. And, in this failure, another word emerges: exception, which, at its ugliest, smuggles in the idea that white people engaged in efforts of coalition building are exceptionally alienated. This, too, becomes the over-ripe source of structural violence—even and maybe especially when white people endeavor practices of mutual direction.

The question to be asked is exceptional to what or whom? One possible answer might be the particular struggle antiblackness proffers generates a lived experience and insight into the particular tactics and practices of living in excess of these same structures. But such an answer cannot account for something embedded into the grain of U.S. history and the production of

1020 Personal Correspondence.
possessive personhood, of the self as property, of liberty as the right to purchase—in any number of ways—entry into places. This something comes down to questions of welcome, which is to say the holding open of a space through which mutual direction might occur. And, in this regard, we have been here before, which is to say that one’s right to space—our welcome—is one of the most enduring questions in any discussion concerning liberation.

So, too, is the question of home: what makes it, what maintains it, who has and should be able to claim place as such. In “Death of the Hired Man,” Robert Frost writes of a husband and wife who contemplate the criteria by which place becomes “home.”

> “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in.”
>
> “I should have called Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”

Questions and patterns surge from within the couple’s contemplation. And I am both moved and struck by the phrase “when you have to go there.” What might this mean—what lessons might the phrase gird considering the discussions above? Most pressingly, what does it do when accompanied by questions of deserving and, to return to my own inquiry, welcome?

As with all of the questions asked thus far, I do not have assured answers, but words like “welcome” and “deserve” might be thought of as multi-dimensional, which is to say that their meaning changes depending on the social and historical angle from which one contemplates them. To think of welcome and deserving from within the long history of racial exclusion and the state’s attendant and violent compulsions suggests that Frost’s couple is correct. Home is something that one “haven’t to deserve.” Under such an idea, the good citizen becomes one

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1022 Frost, 38.
1023 Frost, 38.
who recognizes their obligation to care for others, that our central duty is to work toward mutual
dignity and welcome. This, too, might be thought of as a project by which we begin to “walk in
the same direction.” Yet, such a project cannot address the problem of exception as it pertains
to white perception. Here, too, a question concerning welcome surges. Within a frame that
understands Parnell’s obligation to “walk in the same direction” as both unique and exceptional
to white people who would like to participate within liberation efforts, welcome becomes an
unjustifiable burden thrust upon Black (and historically marginalized) communities. As
history—and the present—bear out, Black people’s refusal of such a burden opens them up to
accusations of unwelcome, which is to say the lie of reverse alienation, reverse racism.

The irony, of course, is that welcome is and always has been multidirectional as well. Indeed, what constitutes welcome, which is to say how we perceive both welcome and its opposites, often comes down to race. To turn to biography, it is important for me to say that I have been lucky enough to have had peers and elders disabuse me of the notion that I was central to all things that interested me. And because of this, my perception of what welcome might and could look like shifted. This is not to congratulate myself. To the contrary, it is important to remember that I had to be disabused of the idea, and that it was by the grace and effort of others, who, in my case, were most often people of color, that I learned how to reassess what welcome and, in time, home might look like. But to recognize this, I had to first accept the idea that centrality and welcome were not only not synonymous but, in fact, antonymic, terms that reconfigured questions of power, place and dignity in ways that could not help but frame whiteness as an excluded and somehow centered class. To welcome required me to welcome,

too. I had to welcome engagement. I had to welcome critique. I had to welcome challenge. And I even had to welcome refusal. All of which is to say that welcome, in this way, names the messy and sometimes unpleasant bristle of a not-yet-but-always-possible community of individuals encountering each other. To be welcomed, then, was to enter a space with the intention of getting out of the way, not as the exception or excluded party to an otherwise centered class but, in fact, as a participant within a broader endeavoring of mutual, if always differently experienced and walked, direction.

And so here I am, and here I remain—within the impossibility of going back to correct the violence done. I can, however, sit within that discomfiting reality, and I can study the lessons such discomfort engenders, drawing them into the here. As I often say, we must take care to study because in our study we learn how to better care. I like to think that the chapters that precede this coda attempt to remain with these issues, not as an act of repair but, leading from Saidiya Hartman's work, one of redress.1026 This dissertation is dedicated to the Black communities whose practices of care across time have taught me how to sit with both of these questions. It is dedicated to Joe and others who have shown me how one must either find a way to “go on” or, in fact, just go on.1027

1026 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 76.
1027 Baldwin, Blues for Mister Charlie, 158.


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