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**Blackness and the Writing of Sound in Modernity**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

History of Consciousness

by

**Jeremy DeCristo**

June 2015

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**Dissertation Abstract:**

*Blackness and the Writing of Sound in Modernity*

**Jeremy DeCristo**

*Blackness and the Writing of Sound in Modernity* is a critique of the tenants of the Western sonic avant-garde through black music. I engage African diasporic music as a critical site where the modernist distinction between human and technology is endlessly challenged and shattered. Early black recordings by George W. Johnson, Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Huddie Williams Ledbetter entered an epistemological nexus between the human and its mechanical double. The phonographic reproduction of black sounds: the prison blues, “coon songs,” simulated black lynching and early jazz recordings, was often enlisted to secure sentimental ideas of black inhumanity while affirming the prowess of sonic technologies. Yet, I argue that precisely through this impasse of the nonhuman, fugitive forms of black sonic experimentation were realized. I track how the emergence of experimental African diasporic musics in the 1960’s actually owes a dialogical debt to the recording conditions of earlier black artists. By mapping this experimental genealogy of black music I explore how black sounds bring to crisis the Eurocentric ideals of the human, the avant-garde and sonic technology. I examine the musical investigations of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in the 1960’s, the sonic experiments of Jamaican dub producers/engineers in the early 1970’s, and the contemporary sound art of African diasporic and post-colonial Arab artists, all of whom have reconfigured the racialized and colonial legacies of sonic technologies.

Committee Members: David Marriott, Chair; Gina Dent; Eric Porter

*For Charlene, my Mom (Marielena), Petey, Ollie and OG  
all your love, support and warmth*

## Blackness and the Writing of Sound in Modernity

Then, there are all kinds of freedom, and even all kinds of spirits. We can use the past as shrines of our suffering, as poeticizing beyond what we think the present (the “actual”) has to offer. But that is true in the sense that any clear present must include as much of the past as it needs to clearly illuminate it.

—Amiri Baraka, “The Changing Same”

It was the constellation of Mrs. Livingston’s voice from the other side; her hands knocking angrily against her son’s bedroom door, and the insistent hand of that 13 year old boy, Grand Wizard Theodore, pulling the record “Jam on the Groove”<sup>1</sup> back and forth, back and forth that created the sound: the scratch.<sup>2</sup> The “baby scratch” or just the scratch as it would have been known in 1976, involves pulling the record back against the record stylus, still in the groove, and then sliding it forward along the same groove at varying speeds and cadences to produce newly pitched or percussive sounds. Sounds that were in a way always there on the record, but were never heard.<sup>3</sup> There are a set of forces, of energies; a set of relations of things in this story of Grand Wizard Theodore’s discovery of the “baby scratch” that are crucial to how we might

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<sup>1</sup> Listen to Ralph MacDonald’s “Jam on the Groove” from his first album *Sound of a Drum*, originally released as one album in 1976—when Grand Wizard Theodore is scratching it—and re-released in 1978 as a double album *Sound of a Drum/Counterpoint*.

<sup>2</sup> While there are numerous retellings of Theodore Livingston aka Grand Wizard Theodore’s original moment of the creation of the scratching technique—by now a hip-hop legend of sorts—I take my rendering here from the version as obtained in Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton’s *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey*. New York: Grove Press, 1999, 224-225. Also see most notably Jeff Chang’s *Cant’s Stop, Won’t Stop*. New York: Picador, 2005 and Hebdige’s *Cut n’ Mix*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1987, for much more truncated though similarly iconic renderings of the invention of the scratch.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am reminded of DJ Jazzy Jay’s comments in an interview about sampling and cutting: “Maybe those records were ahead of their time. Maybe they were made specifically for the rap era; these people didn’t even know what they were making at that time.” Cited in David Toop’s *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York hip-hop*. Boston: South End Press, 1984, 54.



understand blackness, and by extension, how we might understand sound in modernity.

As Grand Wizard Theodore narrates it, the birth of the scratch begins as much with the “modernist fantasy”<sup>4</sup> of the individual black (child) genius—with “Miles” or “Michael”—as it does with the symbolic and sonic force of his mother, Mrs. Livingston and her voice.

I used to come home from school and try to practice and try to get new ideas... This particular day I was playing music a little bit too loud. And my moms came and like [banging on the door] boom, boom, boom, boom. ‘If you don’t cut that music down...’ So she had the door open and she was talking to me and I was still holding the record, and my earphones were still on. And while she was cursing me out in the doorway, I was still holding the record—‘Jam on the Groove’ by Ralph McDonald—and my hand was still going like this [back and forth] with the record. And when she left I was like, ‘What is this?’ So I studied it and studied it for a couple months until I actually figured out what I wanted to do with it. Then that’s when it became a scratch.<sup>5</sup>

Grand Wizard Theodore also provides an appendix to this interviewer’s question: “So your mom invented scratching?” “Yeah, God bless my mama.” Grand Wizard Theodore’s narrative might initially be misunderstood as the kind of Newtonian fantasy of self-affirming scientific discovery that dominates the individualist and corporatist narratives of sonic innovation in the West and the Western avant-garde; the Kantian individual genius whose innovation precedes judgment and understanding

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<sup>4</sup> Here I have stolen the words of Hassan Khan, Cairean sound/text/visual artist. I will continue to steal his words, until he steals them back, and I know he will. I will discuss his work more explicitly in Chapter 4..

<sup>5</sup> Originally interviewed in Brewster and Broughton, 224-225. Additionally, it is worth noting that Theodore repeats this narrative almost verbatim in the documentary film *Scratch*, replete with the “boom, boom, boom,” the onomatopoeias of his mother. *Scratch*. DVD. Directed by Doug Pray. 2002; New York, NY: Palm Pictures, 2002.

because they are simply part of the nature to which they return.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Grand Wizard Theodore's appendicle attribution of the scratch to his mother and his, perhaps more subtle, revelation of the sonic interchange, that is the ensemblic rendering of their sound—here onomatopoeicized in the “boom, boom, boom” and signified in his mother's cursing—recognizes a profound materiality, a social materiality, through and against which black sounds are constituted. The audible dissemblance yet social resonance between Mrs. Livingston's knocking and the sound of the scratch disrupts the anti-pedagogical, anti-social notion of nature from which individual genius is thought to emerge and to which it is thought to return. Grand Wizard Theodore and his mother cultivate a black sonic materiality that initiates the abolition of sonic innovation in the West as the singularity of genius. Through the normative materiality of Grand Wizard Theodore's bedroom door and the indexical grooves of Ralph McDonald's record a new materiality is produced; sound blurs the phonic and ideal borders of the bodies in the room and a new sound, a new materiality emerges. This black sonic materiality troubles the normative conditions under which the Western sonic avant-garde and its complementary regime of Western technological progress have been produced and theorized in terms of reproduced sound and composition.

The contrapuntal nature of Grand Wizard Theodore's narrative and its sonic force, which harmonizes and resonates with a whole host of sounds, words, gestures and operations by prior black musicians and artists: George W. Johnson, Bessie

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<sup>6</sup> §46 “Beautiful Art is the Art of Genius.” *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. J.H. Bernard. New York, NY: Hafner Press, 1914, pp. 150-151, 150. Kant writes, “Since talent, as the innate productive faculty of the artist, belongs itself to nature, we may express the matter thus: Genius is the innate mental disposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule of art.”

Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Ralph McDonald, Roscoe Mitchell and many others, also strikes a discordant critical note with the conventional theorization of sonic modernity. If the phonograph and by extension technologies for the reproduction of sound are simply instruments and means put to certain human ends in composition, then how are Grand Wizard Theodore able to realize a latent language of things, beyond their means? This project seeks to ruminate on this question, which revolves around black music’s radical critique of the normative tenants of the Western avant-garde: of both its normative human subject of composition and that subject’s means to producing sound, that is its technological Other.

Here I have in mind the more contemporary materialist histories of sound reproduction, particularly Mark Katz’s *Capturing Sound*, David L. Morton’s *Sound Recording: the Life Story of a Technology* Andre Millard’s *America on Record* and going back even further, Roland Gelatt’s 1965 book *the Fabulous Phonograph*—the first book-length treatment of the phonograph and sound technology in the Anglophone tradition. These texts set out to establish how shifts in sound technology effect or relate to shifts in music; in Katz’s work in particular, this is the stated goal.<sup>7</sup> However, these works propose to achieve their ends at the expense of effacing the role of blackness in sound reproduction. As an absence blackness is implicitly rendered as excessive to the teleology that these authors hope to realize. To clarify, these texts do not simply overlook black music—however they may define it. On the

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<sup>7</sup> Katz states rather simply “My claim was that technology of sound recording, writ large, has profoundly transformed modern musical life. At its broadest, that is the thesis of *Capturing Sound*.” Mark Katz. *Capturing Sound: How Technology Changed Music*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004, 1.

contrary, each of the aforementioned works cites at least a few black artists such as George W. Johnson, the first black recording artist, and Bessie Smith the incomparable blues singer. In fact, Katz's *Capturing Sound* actually dedicates two chapters to the discussion of hip-hop DJing and digital sampling. The problem with these texts is not, traditionally speaking a representative one; what is at stake here is not simply whether these texts faithfully acknowledge or represent how black music has played a significant role in the history of reproduced sound, or specifically the development of the phonograph. What remains troubling with these texts is the way in which they cast black music, and a putative conception of blackness, as minor contingencies in a longer linear materialist history of the phonograph and reproduced sound. Such a disavowal of blackness haunts the theorization and realization of modernity at every turn of the record. As I will attempt to lay out in this introduction the failure I see in these texts is an inability to confront blackness, which is an inability to hear sounds and sonic relations which were always there, in the phonograph, in the record, but which were never quite heard.

A shared problematic persists in histories of sonic technology as well as the conventional histories of the sonic avant-garde.<sup>8</sup> The aforementioned texts of Katz, Morgan, Millard, and Gelatt begin with too simple and reductive a conception of what constitutes sound reproduction technology and what constitutes the phonograph

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<sup>8</sup> Here I am referring to the canonical studies of the sonic avant-garde—which at best footnote black musical innovation—such as Thom Holmes' *Electronic and Experimental Music*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002, Peter Manning's *Electronic and Computer Music*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004, and Joanna Demers' *Listening through the Noise: the Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, amongst other Eurocentric studies of experimental and electronic music.

specifically. By making such grave functionalist-materialist assumptions about sonic and phonographic technology conventional histories of sound in modernity implicitly hold simplistic and reductive conceptions of blackness and black music, of music. The traditional scholarship on sound reproduction centers on or begins with the phonograph, because the origins of mechanical music, ingrained in the phonograph and other sonic technologies, are often framed as a crucial part of the foundation for the realization of the sonic avant-garde.<sup>9</sup> In more technically descriptive histories of sound reproductive technology, like Roland Gelatt's *Fabulous Phonograph* or Millard's *America on Record*, the phonograph and its inventor Thomas Edison are established historically as the absolute origin of all sound reproduction, if not all sound in sonic modernity. In his work *Capturing Sound*, Mark Katz takes a more socially critical though conceptually similar route to his predecessors. Katz describes the phonograph in particular as a social "hub" around which listeners, experience "phonographic effects" which "meet their ends in human actions." Katz's clarifies his paradigm, adding "Put another way, it is not simply the technology but the relationship between the technology and its users that determines the impact of recording."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, while Katz acknowledges and so avoids the strict "technological determinism" of many previous writers on the phonograph, he also rigidly insists on the binary opposition between "technology" and "human activity." This opposition

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<sup>9</sup> Most famous among these proclamations of the sonic avant-garde's birth in sonic technology, are Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's Marinetti, F.T. "the Futurist Manifesto" (1909 in Apollonio, Umbro, ed. *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*. Trans. Brain, Robert, R.W. Flint, J.C. Higgitt, and Caroline Tisdall. New York: Viking Press, 1973 and Luigi Rosolo's "the Art of Noises" (1913). Trans. Robert Filliou. New York, NY: Something Else Press, 1967.

<sup>10</sup>Katz, 3-4.

enables or emerges from a teleological history of the human subject in which the phonograph becomes merely a technological means to “the ends of human actions.” Thus the opposition fails to understand the way in which objects relate, sound and emerge as “technological” and or as “human” in and through the phonograph.<sup>11</sup> Through an engagement with the scratch we might realize that the fantastical opposition between machines and human music are deeply troubled by the scratch’s mode of writing. Another one of the central animating questions of this dissertation is: what would it mean to embark upon an understanding of the phonograph through the scratch: *through a sound that was always there, but was never heard?*

On the surface, the opposition between the human and technology, which anchors both the study of sonic technology and the ideal of the sonic avant-garde, can be attributed to what Georgina Born identifies as the shared “modernist scientism” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century from which both movements and phenomena emerged.<sup>12</sup> Born describes the rationalization of sound and technology as the founding opposition by which the Western sonic avant-garde came to constitute itself. This self of the musical avant-garde was enlisted to dialectically resolve the opposition between the human and technology; whether in the aspirations of self-expression sought in the early experiments of atonalism or the supposed negation of the self through the rule-

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Sterne’s work *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, makes some very important points in a “post-humanist” vein about the way in which the idea of humanity, the human body and indeed the human more broadly were informed and produced via the knowledge around sound reproduction technology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hence Sterne’s work offers a sharp historicist criticism of “histories of sound.” I will discuss Sterne’s work more directly in the first chapter of this work.

<sup>12</sup> Georgina Born. *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995, 41.

governed practices of total serialism and the work of John Cage. Theodor Adorno's criticism of this dialectic of the self in "the new music"—a trepidation central to his writings on music and his work with George Simpson in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—is that it emerged from the Western avant-garde's programmatic collusion with the "instrumental rationality" that had actively subjugated forms of human difference through legalistic and scientific categories of identification. As Georgina Born's project suggests the disciplinary apparatuses of the Institute de Recherché et la Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM) embody some of Adorno's gravest fears as to the rationalization of art and music. Yet, Adorno's concerns for the desecration of art were not rooted in the symbolic presence of technology, but in the capitalist systems of knowing that celebrated technological novelty as the means of human recognition. Adorno's critique of Schoenberg's serialism reveals the epistemological stakes of centering the Western bourgeois self in the work of the avant-garde music and sound. "The closed artwork [of later serial composition] was not an act of knowledge; rather, it made knowledge disappear into itself," Adorno adds,

The closed artwork adopts the perspective of the identity of subject and object... Only by measuring the contradiction [between subject and object] against the possibility of its resolution is the contradiction not merely registered but known. In the act of knowing that art carries out, its form criticizes the contradiction by indicating the possibility of its reconciliation and thus of what is contingent, surmountable, and dependent in the contradiction.<sup>13</sup>

The more sonic works simply fill themselves up with contents of rationalist thought, much like the way Schoenberg's 12-tone technique and (later) total serialism treated

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor Adorno. *Philosophy of New Music*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis, MN: the University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 96-97.

the 12-tone chromatic scale as a kind of authorizing rational authority for composition, the more the work's knowing capacity is subordinated to and systematized within the dominant order's ways of knowing. The work mimics and sublimates itself to the prescribed orders of knowing, and hence becomes an object of that knowing, rather than doing its own kind of thinking, its own kind of knowing beyond the object. The almost automatic tendency in the contemporary Western avant-garde to embrace corporate technological innovations, in a manner, which mirrors those corporations' hegemonic rendition of subjectivity, owes its drives to the problematic Adorno outlines here. What is, at least partially a pining for the dialectical composer in Adorno's writing, also more profoundly holds implications for the cloistering of sonic work within the disciplinary annals of IRCAM and similarly conceived art institutions. The institutionalization of the avant-garde under this kind of modernist scientism, formalized, and so reconciled, the image of the human and its attendant modes of subjectivity and self, with the means of technological reproduction that had made such an ideal possible and necessary.

In the case of the phonograph, which most exemplifies sonic modernity's modes of differentiation and recognition, a false opposition between human and technology emerges. Martin Heidegger perhaps most famously theorized this danger as the dissolution of *techne*, of artistic knowledge, into a means-end relation of knowing; a relation that only opposes human to technology in the interest of putting



their beings to similar ends.<sup>14</sup> Though Adorno's oeuvre is dedicated largely to the reclamation of the subject at the hands of this opposition, I suspect something like the critique he imagines, but cannot realize, that is the critique which would surmount the opposition between human and technology that manifests in modernist music, actually lies in the "resistance of the object" that has been objectified in the very formation of the human and the technology.<sup>15</sup> The aesthetic knowing that is blackness, sounds the disavowal that makes this opposition possible, and it is in the resistance to this disavowal's structuring that black music lives. Blackness' opposition to the human precisely writes the limitations of Western modernity and imagines a somewhere/someone/something else.<sup>16</sup> While the contours of this somewhere/someone/something else of black music have not been programmatically mapped—and it is important that they have not—the capacity to think these different dimensions and realities has perhaps been most recently theorized in the black musical scholarship of Fred Moten and Alexander Weheliye, which have provided a guiding light and a sounding voice to speak to, to follow and to improvise with. It is

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Heidegger. "The Question Concerning Technology." *The Question Concerning Technology and other essays*. Trans. William Lovitt. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1977.

<sup>15</sup> Fred Moten. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 1. Here I am referring to and driven by the some of the most influential lines I have ever read, that "The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges ever line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity."

<sup>16</sup> See Fred Moten's entire black musical oeuvre: Fred Moten. "Blackness and Nothingness: (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112: 4, Fall 2013, pp. 738-780; "The Case of Blackness." *Criticism*. Vol. 50, No. 2, Spring, 2008, pp. 177-218; *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003; Notes on Passage (the New International Sovereign Feelings)." *Palimpsest: A journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*. Vol. 3, No. 1, 2014, pp. 51-74; "The Phonographic *mis-en-scene*." *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3, "Performance Studies and Opera," Nov. 2004, pp. 269-281; "Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia." *Hambone* 19, (Fall 2009), pp.110-133. Also see Alexander Weheliye. "After Man." *American Literary History* 20 2008 pp. 321-336.

within the critical legacy and spirits that drives their respective work that I frame this dissertation then as not only a kind critical engagement and experimentation with black music, as black music, but also always as a theorization of the (too often) unnamed background against which black music is measured and recognized; the unnamed background that it performs out of and beyond. Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers work has most profoundly and extensively named that unnamed background as, amongst other objects, the human norm; this is the very norm or standard from which the Western avant-garde presumes to theorize itself and it is this standard of the human against which blackness and black music is always subordinated and disavowed—a disavowal which makes that human (and technology) recognizable as such.

As Sylvia Wynter’s massive body of work tracks, the “technological rationality” that defined sonic modernity—and by extension the Western avant-garde—owes its roots to the sublimation of race to the order of the natural, to the world through which “Natural Man” and “human nature” can be defined.<sup>17</sup> The ratification of the human subject, that is the tautology in which it was known and by which it could know, by which it could judge, was putatively sutured (symbolically, phrenologically, phonologically, and phonographically) by the “aesthetic criteria” of blackness. Not only is this “aesthetic criteria” the designation of blackness “as the

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<sup>17</sup> Sylvia Wynter. “The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism.” *boundary 2* vol. 12, no. 13, vol. 13 no. 1 On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism. Spring - Autumn, 1984), pp. 19-70. Also see Sylvia Wynter. “Sambos and Minstrels.” *Social Text* No. 1, Winter, 1979, pp. 149-156 and “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation, an Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review*. Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2003, pp. 257-337.

symbolic object of this lack which is designated as the lack of the human” and not only is this “aesthetic criteria” the objectification of blackness into the lack of light, the lack of Reason upon which Reason is founded.<sup>18</sup> But even further this “aesthetic criteria,” that is the Kantian aesthetic ideal to which Adorno earlier refers, is the disavowal of things under the objectification of blackness, simultaneously the production of the (human) subject and the conversion of things into objects.

Blackness embodies, moves into and away from the isomorphism of Reason, of the human subject that converts things into classifiable objects. Yet this embodiment and movement, this sound is disavowed under the sign of Reason and most recognizably under the sign of the human—disavowed even when it is assimilated to that structure as its chief means of identification. The Western sonic avant-garde has, as I will argue in the chapters that follow, embraced the recognition of this human subject precisely through the disavowal of blackness, and particularly the blackness of the phonograph. Recognition of the subject and for the subject in sonic modernity has been yoked to the phonographic forms of writing wherein the symbolization of the voice, the object of sonic reproduction, affirms the knowing capacity of a certain articulation of the phonograph that understands the technology exclusively in terms of the human intellection that regulates it by recognizing the voice on the other end. The phonographic mode of reproduction by which things become objects through the affirmation of their functioning, the functioning of the phonograph, and therefore the affirmation of the functioning of the human (ideal), is

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<sup>18</sup> Wynter, “Sambos and Minstrels,” 152.

the condition of possibility of the Western sonic avant-garde. Black music operates in and emerges from this space of conversion, of things to objects, something, which Kant cannot quite reconcile with in his writing on aesthetics, but which he tries to capture in the “purposiveness of a thing.”<sup>19</sup> The aesthetic ideal grounded in the conversion of things into objects via the representation and identification of their “purposiveness” as teleologically inscribed in nature seeks, above all, to regulate the movements of a thing and reduce those movements to the recognition of their prescribed functioning as objects in perception, cognition, sense, and pleasure. The aesthetic judgment of the Kantian subject, which is to say the regulative subject, the subject that is regulated, is overwhelmed by things that must be converted into objects, things that must be converted into purposes, intentions, behaviors, pathologies. The life of things, the language of things that Grand Wizard Theodore and his mother traffic in, what they know, how they know beyond the pale of Reason must be regulated and disavowed under the object.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Judgment*. “VII. Of the Aesthetical Representation of the Purposiveness of Nature.” Trans. J.H. Bernard. New York, NY: Hafner Press, 1951, 25-29.

<sup>20</sup> In particular I am thinking of a moment in Immanuel Kant. §16 “The Judgment of Taste, by which an Object is declared to be Beautiful under the Condition of a Definite Concept, is not Pure.” *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. J.H. Bernard. New York, NY: Hafner Press, 1914, pp. 81-84. Kant tries to define the aesthetic judgment (and implicitly the transcendental basis of the teleological judgment) precisely through rendering the Human as an aesthetic ideal, which he at least temporarily consecrates to figure. The Human is cast as the Platonic ideal form, but a form which of course humans must implicitly occupy even while they remain and aspire to the rationalism of the teleological judgment. The human as both an aesthetic object and a subject of Reason complicates the purity of the judgments that Kant wants to establish. It is primarily and perhaps only that this purity is brought to crisis through Kant’s analysis of the Maori’s skin *ta-no*. Kant writes, “We could adorn a figure with all kinds of spirals and light, but regular lines, as the New Zealanders do with their tattooing, if only it were not the figure of a human being. And again this [ornamentation] could have much finer features and a more pleasing and gentle cast of countenance provided it were not intended to represent a man, much less a warrior,” 82. What is clearly going on in Kant’s thinking is the recognition that the human being is not an immanently natural occurrence, but is an aesthetic ideal, perhaps a product of its own aesthetic judgment. The lines on the New Zealander’s skin as they reflect Kant’s reasoning bare this out. The

Blackness—the phonograph, is such an object that, by virtue of how it programmatically reports its functioning to the subject in perception, sense, pleasure, cognition and (increasingly) pathology, establishes the preconditions of sonic modernity. The pleasure of the Romantic subject, as I will argue, that Adorno sought to recover from the dirge of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century musical avant-garde's programmatic rationalism, is no less implicated in the thingliness of blackness. Adorno gives some sign of his absolute incomprehension of blackness, even as it enables and refuses the fullness of his aesthetic experience, in the first line of his second significant essay on the phonograph, "the Form of the Phonograph Record." Adorno laments: "One does not want to accord it any form other than the one it itself exhibits; a black pane made of a composite mass which these days no longer has its honest name anymore than automobile fuel is called benzine [sic.]..."<sup>21</sup> Adorno mourns the loss of aesthetic experience in the blackness of the phonographic record

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Maori skin engravings carry for Kant the capacity to be beautiful, but only so long as they remain ornamental and do not attain to the concept of the human, this is the *aesthetical judgment*. The application of the human concept as a negative, meaning that the New Zealander does not quite arise to the concept of the human, because the engravings lack purposes that adhere to the human's perfection, this is the *teleological judgment*. We might associate this with what is famously called the "autonomy of art" or what sometime later gets called "art for art's sake," both highly influential ways of understanding art for European Romantics. Though Kant wishes to leave art and aesthetics as separate, the latter being a tool for relating rationally to the former, this separation becomes complicated in the face of certain difference. The obscurity or even the impossibility of purposiveness within the Maori's markings actually render them rationally (analytically) as instruments through which the human can be Understood, even though they are understood as its lack. Thus the human is revealed to be a distinctly *teleological* entity; other beings, who are rendered as aesthetic objects, become a means to the ends, instruments, for the human's realization. There are then certain formal characteristics, postures and aesthetic ideals one must conform to in order be recognized in the ideal of the human, precisely because these forms, these poses make the human teleologically possible through their aesthetic rendering. People that occupy these positions thus become the nature, beautiful or painful from which the human can be rationally theorized. Here I am thinking of Josiah Wedgwood's, "Am I not a man and a Brother," abolitionist image/slogan/drawing/commodity from 1787 as well.

<sup>21</sup> Theodore Adorno. "The Form of the Phonograph Record." Trans. Thomas Y. Levin. *October* Vol. 55, Winter 1990, pp. 56-61, 56.

precisely through his aesthetic experience, which is to say his aesthetic judgment of the phonographic record; an aesthetic experience, which is always already teleological. What Adorno characterizes as the moment of encounter is haunted by the inscrutable nature of blackness; this immediate enigma leads him to grant the record a kind of selfhood, but only in its objecthood, the form that “it itself exhibits.” The Kantian aesthetic imperative to convert the thing into an object via the (forced) recognition of its purposiveness emerges for Adorno through the radical difference of the blackness of the record. The “it itself exhibits” grants Adorno aesthetic and epistemological access to the record even and especially as he imagines and negates its being,<sup>22</sup> it is as if Adorno is staring into the blackness of the record’s shellac and can only see his own reflection as the desire of the object to reflect him looking. Yet even Adorno’s looking (and by extension his listening) is disturbed—it regresses doubly so, because of the phonograph’s commodification, which like “automobile fuel” replaces concept with name; a substitution, which Adorno suggests exemplifies the subordination of the artistic pleasure of the subject (and true aesthetic experience) to the teleological ends of mass production and advertising. Adorno goes on in more extended terms to describe the apparent opposition between aesthetic experience and sound’s mass production:

It is covered with curves, a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing, which here and there forms more plastic figures for reasons that remain obscure to the layman upon listening; structured like a spiral, it ends somewhere in the vicinity of the title label, to which it is

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<sup>22</sup> The grammatical construction of “it itself exhibits” persists in the two most common English translations from the German: both Thomas Y. Levin’s (cited above) and Susan Gillespie’s version found in, *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

sometimes connected by a lead-out groove so that the needle can comfortably finish its trajectory. In terms of its “form,” this is all that it will reveal. As perhaps the first of the technological artistic inventions, it already stems from an era that cynically acknowledges the dominance of things over people through the emancipation of technology from human requirements and human needs and through the presentation of achievements whose significance is not primarily human; instead, the need is initially produced by advertisement once the thing already exists and is spinning in its own orbit.<sup>23</sup>

Adorno’s reflection on the blackness of the record reveals the functionality of blackness as a mirror for the constitution of the human subject through the disavowal of its thingliness in its translated objecthood. As I will discuss in the beginning of Chapter 1, the glyphic consecration and automation of sound and especially voice in the phonograph and the phonautograph, actually shows how the “Natural Causality” of Human Reason, as founded in the “empirical reality” of the human voice, was brought to crisis at its most vaunted point of technological expression.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, for Adorno the inscrutable nature of blackness is not allayed through the isomorphic tendencies of Reason that, through a closer examination of the markings of the record, would either produce a more empirically-rationally good conception of its being or at least a more aesthetically pleasurable experience of its nature. The blackness of the record casts it back and beyond this understanding and into a thingliness that Adorno can’t quite grapple with at the level of the object. The indexical character of the phonographic inscription bears the mark of human intervention on the surface, but this surface is also an interruption of the subject’s

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<sup>23</sup> Adorno, “The Form of the Phonograph Record,” 56.

<sup>24</sup> Wynter, “The Ceremony Must Be Found,” 33.

reflective aspirations that are voided by the record's blackness. That is the blackness of the record even though it is encoded with the assumption of (subordinated) human parity—Adorno wants to see and hear the human intervention, the human on the other end—it also endlessly frustrates and refuses that forced equivalence that constitutes human subjection. The blackness of the record refuses human subjection even when it is enlisted to fulfill such ends.

Even when Adorno comes at least partially to this recognition, that is the recognition of the limits of the indexical, pathological, narrative and empirical functions and recognitions of the phonographic grooves, he still cannot help but reduce the “form” of the record to its prescribed mode of functioning, which for Adorno is its mode of aesthetic dysfunction. Adorno combats the difference of the blackness of the record with pathology. The means-end relation Adorno identifies in the “lead-out groove so that the needle can comfortably finish its trajectory” writes the glyphic opacity of the record's spirals by reducing all that is or can be contained within the blackness of the record to the temporality of its laboring capacity, which Adorno understands simply as its playing time. The blackness of the record is reduced to the symbolic temporality of its laboring capacity and hence that presumed laboring capacity comes retrospectively to define its materiality. The blackness of the record and the aesthetic reflection of the record's mirroring surface—Adorno's face that he sees in the blackness of the record, becomes a harbinger for the dissolution of the human (“human requirements,” “human needs”) precisely because it reveals the



human (and by extension its capacity for knowing) as a teleological image entirely contingent upon the reflective surface of blackness.

Adorno's earlier conception of a dynamic artwork returns to him precisely when he cannot recognize it: in the blackness of the record, "In the act of knowing that art carries out, its form criticizes the contradiction by indicating the possibility of its reconciliation and thus of what is contingent, surmountable, and dependent in the contradiction"<sup>25</sup> What the blackness of the record reveals is that the opposition between technology and the human itself relies upon the contingency and violent constitution of the non-human wherein blackness is merely an object and an axiom of reflection for that initial opposition.<sup>26</sup> Adorno is not ready to reckon with this realization and instead consigns the record and its movements to a philosophical impasse: "once the thing already exists and is spinning in its own orbit." What dwells in this spinning space of disavowal, the "circular migrations" of the blackness of the record, is precisely the moments, spaces, and realities by which the record ceases to be a technology for the reflection of the human subject and its aesthetic experience; when the complex thingliness of the record is lived. Theodor Adorno simply cannot conceive of this moment within the terms of conventional Western philosophical thought even though he imposes its entire weight upon the record's surface. Yet,

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<sup>25</sup> Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 96-97.

<sup>26</sup> In the preceding sentences my thinking owes a debt to the writing of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, a work that Fanon hopes will function as a mirror for the black colonial subject who encounters it. Similarly I am driven by David Marriot's rich theorization of black visibility. I am referring specifically to the essay "I'm gonna borrow me a Kodak: Photography and Lynching" in *On Black Men*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 1-22 and "Black Narcissus: Isaac Julien" in *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006, pp. 106-132.

Theodore Livingston—Grand Wizard Theodore, and his mother, live, create and work within the spaces of blackness’ phonographic mis/recognition and disavowal.

If Adorno’s earlier assertion holds true: that the sounds of phonographic inscription had been driven to inscrutability through their commodification in the naming and branding practices of their corporate masters,<sup>27</sup> then surely by the time Grand Wizard Theodore got his hands on some vinyl in the 1970’s this process of branding and obscuration would have been entirely sedimented and normalized. Indeed within the tradition of a dialectical Marxism, the moment of the phonograph’s emergence, in order to bring about the kind of immanent critique Adorno is searching for, would have had to reveal its contradiction well before 1976; well before the record’s electrification and standardization became massively reified as I will discuss in Chapter 2. Adorno’s ambivalent mourning of the opera form’s demise as sounded by its inscription to the newly invented long-playing record format in the 1950’s and 1960’s further illustrates his understanding of the record’s normative temporality and namely how he could not even conceive of this temporality being unsettled. Adorno’s final plea for the temporality of the opera form seeks to safeguard opera from the radical and profound threat of black music in and through the blackness of the record: “Another sensitive point is making cuts within an [operatic] act, the unity of which ought to be respected at all costs.”<sup>28</sup> Adorno’s earlier zeal for the record to be turned

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<sup>27</sup> A prime example of this being Nipper the dog’s present/absent master being the RCA company record label.

<sup>28</sup> Adorno characterizes the commitment of the opera form to the newly invented long-playing record as a further moment of the reification of the subject through the repeatability and over-familiarity with the opera form. See Theodor W. Adorno. “Opera and the Long-playing Record.” Trans. Thomas Y. Levin. October, Vol. 55, Winter, 1990, pp. 62-66, 66.

into an object or instrument of composition that he expressed in earlier essays, has now been curbed; we now find Adorno acquiescing to the phonograph's and the surface of the record's pure functioning; in so doing Adorno consents to the very musical and epistemological conservatism that he earlier criticizes. In 1969 Adorno closes the closed work in the blackness of the record and it is in 1976 that Grand Wizard Theodore and his mother will realize the blackness of the record's radical openness as a site of experimentation before and beyond what Adorno could hope to recognize.

As Grand Wizard Theodore's narrative of the scratch indicates, Livingston's familiarity with records undoubtedly suggests the kind of "lonely and perceptive listener, hibernating for purposes unknown."<sup>29</sup> As Grand Wizard Theodore lays it out (to cut back to Grand Wizard Theodore's cut):

I used to come home from school and try to practice and try to get new ideas... This particular day I was playing music a little bit too loud. And my moms came and like [banging on the door] boom, boom, boom, boom. 'If you don't cut that music down...' So she had the door open and she was talking to me and I was still holding the record, and my earphones were still on. And while she was cursing me out in the doorway, I was still holding the record—'Jam on the Groove' by Ralph McDonald—and my hand was still going like this [back and forth] with the record. And when she left I was like, 'What is this?' So I studied it and studied it for a couple months until I actually figured out what I wanted to do with it. Then that's when it became a scratch.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> Originally interviewed in Brewster and Broughton, 224-225. Additionally, it is worth noting that Theodore repeats this narrative almost verbatim in the documentary film *Scratch*, replete with the "boom, boom, boom"; the onomatopoeias of his mother.

Grand Wizard Theodore immerses himself in the private and quotidian experience of listening to records, specifically Ralph McDonald's "Jam on the Groove" within the privacy of his room and the even more infinitely private space of his headphones. Yet, Grand Wizard Theodore, before he discovers the scratch proper, discovers something both immanent and excessive to the commodity form as he presumably raises the volume of McDonald's percussive medleys to a level which is both immanent and excessive to that concept of spatial privacy Adorno assigns the record. This level, this volume, is none other than the level of black sociality that is both written into and realized beyond the commodity form of the record. It is this black sociality, which Grand Wizard Theodore's narrative imagines precisely as the conditions under which the scene and the time of the record can be cut. James Snead is entrained to hear such complexity in the cut:

While repetition in black music is almost proverbial, what has not often been recognized in black music is the prominence of the "cut." The "cut" overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music, by abruptly skipping it back to another beginning, which we have already heard. Moreover, the greater the insistence on the pure beauty and value of repetition, the greater the awareness must also be that repetition takes place not on a level of musical development or progression, but on the purest tonal and timbric [sic.] level.<sup>31</sup>

Snead's work attempts to point out the centrality of the structure of repetition to the formal and indeed sonic practices of black music. The cut is theorized as a temporality of repetition and perpetual return that is antagonistic to Western culture's musical, historical and indeed social emphasis on "linear progression" and "material

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<sup>31</sup> James Snead. "On repetition in Black Culture." *Black American Literature Forum*. Vol.15, No. 4. Black Textual Strategies, Vol. 1: Theory, Winter 1981, pp.146-154, 150.

progress.” The “cut” endlessly challenges the linear materialist progress that Adorno perpetually laments over the course of the phonograph’s supposed development. Immanent critique in the phonograph becomes so inconceivable for Adorno, because he overlooks what temporality and what materiality are immanent to its surface. Yet Grand Wizard Theodore and the black sociality in which he operates with his mother is so profoundly aware of a temporal and material immanence, a point of critique and revision, which Western thought simply struggles to apprehend. Perhaps the life of black music on the record, perhaps black musical life as the record, has been unwriting the inscriptions of its surface all along.<sup>32</sup> The inherently antagonistic difference of black musical temporality, articulated in the “cut,” undergirds the normative Western model of “linear” temporality even as it unwrites such a model; all the while “spinning in its own orbit.”

Snead intends the “cut” to stand as a metaphor for temporal cultural difference articulated formally in black music. The recognition of the cut both within and antithetical to the Western philosophical tradition is made possible by Grand Wizard Theodore’s scratching. Though Snead’s definition of the cut also undergoes some modifications through the scratch. The time of the cut, when Ms. Livingston’s knocking and voice and Grand Wizard Theodore’s hand momentarily suspend and revise normative phonographic time, facilitates not just a return to “what we have already heard,” but also through the scratch, and this space of back and forth

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<sup>32</sup> Ralph Ellison’s wonderfully crafted moment in *Invisible Man*, in which the narrator’s prismatic identification with the record, with Louis Armstrong’s voice, and with the voice of Armstrong’s trumpet, suggests that the blackness of the record was always already encoded with the blueness/blueseness of blackness. Also see Fred Moten’s, “The Phonographic *mis-en-scene*.” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3, “Performance Studies and Opera,” Nov. 2004, pp. 269-281.

phonographic departure and return, we are also given an unhearing of “what we already heard.” The complex modifications of tone (specifically pitch) and timbre that Grand Wizard Theodore realizes in the scratch become a deeper revision of that “which we have already heard,” the putatively commodified familiarity of the record form. Grand Wizard Theodore’s aesthetic experience of the record and his formal realization of its aesthetic potential actually strain closer toward hearing and engaging the thingliness of the record as the basis for thinking its materiality and sound, its radical modes and potentialities of black embodiment.

### **Embodiments of the Archive:**

It is difficult for Adorno to see the materiality of the phonograph and the bodies of the phonograph beyond their industrial-aesthetic and epistemological-telic objecthood. This difficulty emerges largely because the similitude between the object of recording and the object of reproduction are structured through the invisibilized labor of the phonograph’s working the (vinyl) record’s glyph. While Adorno is rightly critical of the subjective reconciliation that occurs through and with the reproduced voice in the phonograph, he also falls pray to reconciliation when he presumes the *a priority* of the body before its phonographic reproduction.

The “private character” that Adorno found so pervasive in the phonograph, and which supposedly secures its function as a lifeless possession of bourgeois life, is

troubled through the thingliness of black sociality.<sup>33</sup> Grand Wizard Theodore theorizes what it means to be possessed by the phonograph and what it means to find form and life in the thingliness of the supposedly lifeless possession. This is neither simply to conform to the ideology or discourse or pathology of the record that attends its objectification—a field of objectification which I will discuss in greater detail in the following chapters. Rather the turn toward black sociality is the turn that turns the record into a form of practice, a mode of life, of living and sociality irreducible to its dominant encoding in the means of technological production. Adorno struggled to see how the privation of the phonograph could ever lead to such an artistic revelation that would realize its life beyond “the pregnant stillness of individuals.”<sup>34</sup> The melancholia in Adorno’s treatment of the phonograph arises from his critique of the Kantian individual as they are formed by the social relations that emerge under the capitalist means of production, and Adorno’s investment in the resuscitation of that individual within those very means of production. Where Adorno’s contradiction of the subjection of the individual emerges most sharply is through his treatment of gender and the phonograph:

Male voices can be reproduced better than female voices. The female voice easily sounds shrill—but not because the gramophone is incapable of conveying higher tones, as is demonstrated by its adequate reproduction of the flute. Rather, to be unfettered, the female voice requires the physical appearance of the body that carries it. But it is just this body that the gramophone eliminates, thereby giving every female voice a sound that is needy and incomplete. Only there where the body itself resonates, where the self to which the gramophone

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<sup>33</sup> Theodor W. Adorno. “The Curves of the Needle” (1928). Trans. Thomas Y. Levin. *October* Vol. 55, Winter 1990, pp. 48-55, 50.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

refers is identical with its sound, only there does the gramophone have its legitimate realm of validity...<sup>35</sup>

The basis of Adorno's assumption in his phonographic rendering of the female voice is that the body simply exists prior to its phonographic reproduction. But then isn't this exactly what he would want to criticize in the phonograph: the fantasy of the phonographic voice's imminence? It seems for Adorno then that there is something inherently phonographic about gender. As I will argue in Chapters 1 and 2 primarily, gender understood as an *a priori* inscription on the body and as a prescription for the body, does not fully hold up through sound, through the voice, if it holds up at all.

Hortense Spillers' writing has so brilliantly argued and guided my thinking here as to the embeddedness of blackness and sound. Spillers writes, in a way which both responds to and moves away from the kind of embodiment of gender that Adorno wants to work out in the phonograph:

But I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemony stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities, in concert with the African "middle-man," we regard this social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and African males [amongst other genders] registered the wounding. If we think of the "flesh" as primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ships hold, fallen, or "escaped" overboard.<sup>36</sup>

In Chapters 1 and 2, I will return to a deeper engagement with Spillers' thinking as it

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<sup>35</sup> Adorno, *Curves*, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Hortense Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2. *Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection*, Summer 1987 pp. 65-81, 67.



bears on sound in modernity, but for now it remains critical to understand how the inscription of blackness and its attendant modes of sociality trouble the kind of *a priori* inscriptions of gender that Adorno would like to assign to the phonograph and before the phonograph. The kind of normative gender complementarity of the female body and the male body, the female voice and the male voice, was simply never fully available to the inscription of blackness, even when blackness as inscription was enlisted to reify such a complementarity—we see Adorno tries to coerce the blackness of the record into just such a mode of subjection. As Spillers' theorization and the complex emergence of the scratch suggest the personage of black musical reflection has never exclusively, if at all, attained its realization through the kind of prescribed index of recognition that Adorno romanticizes as both the before and the after phonographic reproduction. Spillers' writing above, and Grand Wizard Theodore and his mother's aesthetic experience, point to blackness' compounded sonic legacy of fugitivity that in many ways exists within plain sound and sight of the record all the while resisting the *ethnos* and *gene* which is thought to undergird both the functioning of the human and the functioning of the phonograph.

What I am after here arises as something like the thingliness of diaspora; specifically, the kind of movement that blackness in and as sound, in and as the phonograph, makes possible. Blackness may at times operate through its grammatical modes of prosthesis, as Brent Hayes Edwards has so eloquently discussed, but it does so in a way that troubles the authority of the *ethnos* and *genos*, the racial, gendered

human against and beyond which black life is continually lived and measured.<sup>37</sup> The “circular migrations” of black life and black sociality emerge through and converge in the circulation of things in a way which recognizes the “radical displacement” and the perpetual movement of what Adorno simply thinks of as the “pregnant stillness” of the commodity form. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, the movable sound systems of King Tubby, Afrika Bambata and Kool Herc testify most audibly to the sonic poetics of perpetual mobility. The “statelessness” of black music is born of, yet irreducible to, the statelessness of blackness as commodity form; black music is the mobilization against the mobilization of the commodity form’s supplementary forms of life.<sup>38</sup> Though it is not only the technological prosthesis that conditions the materiality and the embodiment of the phonograph through black music: Grand Wizard Theodore’s hand still holding the record or the sound system operator toeing her equipment on to the next... This prosthesis realizes a new materiality through sound; it is the refusal of and the refuge from the normative human body through and against which the commodity form of the phonograph, and the commodity form of the object are recognized. The sheer travels of the blackness of the record and the immense and immeasurable aesthetic realizations of black music that have emerged from and further instigated this movement suggest the different modes of archival embodiment that have been found in the record. As Ralph Ellison hears it, to live with music is to realize a different world and a different materiality beyond the given world that is

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<sup>37</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Here I am moved primarily by Fred Moten’s writing in, “Notes on Passage (the New International Sovereign Feelings).” *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*. Vol. 3, No. 1, 2014, pp. 51-74.

simply inscribed on the record: “Between the hi-fi record and the ear, I learned there was a new electronic world.”<sup>39</sup> It is my loftiest hope that this project will, for the reader, open up something like the “electronic world” that Ellison discovered; a living sounding archive to be read and hear.

The centrality of the archive as a site of embodiment has been so extensively theorized in the work of Toni Morrison and the scholarship that emerged in its massive ancestral shadow, including the above-mentioned writing of Hortense Spillers. While there is no unitary origin for the dynamic currents in black studies that Morrison and Spillers have inspired. There does emerge something like the powerful theorization of black objecthood and its excess in the words of Baby Suggs (Morrison’s ancestral figure in *Beloved*): “In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.”<sup>40</sup> As suggested by the oft-cited injunction of Baby Suggs to love your flesh, blackness emerges precisely from the kind of inscrutability that is only supposed to be perceived, regulated and reduced, by the perspective of dominance, to the inscription of the commodity form, to the knowable inscriptions on the record. In her somewhat less studied novel *Jazz* Morrison finds another way to further set loose Suggs’ flesh and to realize the thingliness of diaspora. *Jazz*’s entire narrative realization of black sociality takes place from the perspective of jazz, of the phonograph, of the record.<sup>41</sup> All the lives of

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<sup>39</sup> Ralph Ellison. “Living with Music.” *Shadow and Act*. New York, NY: Vintage Press, 1964, 194.

<sup>40</sup> Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. New York, NY: Vintage, 2004, 88.

<sup>41</sup> Toni Morrison. *Jazz*. New York, NY: Vintage, 2004, 220. Here I am thinking of the terminal revelation in Morrison’s novel that reads: “So I missed it all together. I was sure one would kill the

the black characters in the novel that are lived beyond the conditions that supposedly produced them and which they produced is realized from the sounding perspective of the phonographic record of black music. The resonance between Morrison's explicitly phonographic narrative gesture and the phonographic gesture of Grand Wizard Theodore's narrative points to the realization of a somewhere/something/someone else in and beyond the sonic inscriptions of modernity. This text seeks to work with and travel in that kind of invention; I do not dare to call it an ancestor, but that a measure of improvisation from the reader may give these awkward lines flight and set them free into the sounding world of a perpetually moving record.

### **Track Listing and Liner Notes**

#### **Track 1:**

The opening chapter ties together the epistemological and scientific development of early phonographic technology to the representational crisis it engendered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. I immediately frame the inextricability of the two imaginative and symbolic spheres of early phonography, the phonic and the graphic, as embodying a crisis and confrontation with blackness. I begin with George W. Johnson's phonography and the figure and structure of the black voice that it embodies. George W. Johnson was a former slave and the first black recording

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other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle. I was so sure, and they danced and walked over me. Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable—human...”

artist—one of the first recording artists of the phonograph. Through Johnson I suggest that sound technologies are always infected by the embodied logic of a black Other. Hence I move into the development of Leon Scott's phonautograph and its mimetic supplement of the human ear, after which this apparatus was modeled. However, I suggest that the human ear itself was supplemented by a conception of the black voice as the carrier of phonic and corporeal difference and hence constituted a normative white conception of human hearing and humanity more broadly. I consider how the primary anxiety around the phonautograph's inability to create a phonologically indexical and therefore phenomenally ideal representation of the human voice was wrapped up in the legacy of corporeal difference persisting through chattel slavery. The phonautograph could only offer an opaque and glyphic graphical representation of the human voice and hence troubled the recognition of a concept of sonic humanity, if you will, as fully self-constituting. The phonautograph only provided a liminal representation around which no recognition could occur. Rather the very glyphic terms of recognition, the condition of possibility for human identification through race, gender, age etc., were embodied in the phonautographic trace and brought to crisis through sonic technology.

## **Track 2:**

Chapter 2 begins with and is framed by Ma Rainey's 1925 stage performances of "Moonshine Blues," in which she emerges from a Victrola phonograph to reveal that she had been making the mechanism sound all along. This chapter considers the

complex questions about black objecthood and its excess engendered through phonographic reproduction and, particularly, how such an object-status is raised and challenged by Bessie Smith's oeuvre and the work of black female blues singers such as Rainey. I focus specifically on the difference engendered from the shift from acoustical phonographic reproduction to electrical transmission in the early 1920's. I then think through Bessie Smith's first acoustic recordings in 1923 and her first electric recordings in May of 1925 to understand how her work and her voice carries and is carried by the legacy of the black voice. Much of the writings on Bessie Smith's recordings have assumed and reified her idealization as "the black voice." Specifically, I critique two distinct positions about Bessie Smith's work that of sound historian Andre Millard, who attributes much of her success to the developments in phonographic *technology* and Edward Brooks, whose close-listening study of Smith champions her *technique*. I synthesize the articulations of technology and technique by Millard and Brooks respectively through Theodor Adorno's writings "On Popular Music" and "The Curves of the Needle." I extend an Adornian analysis of popular music against black female blues phonography and Smith's work in particular. Yet rather than simply affirm the analysis of the latter, I point out how black female blues phonography and Bessie Smith's work, even in the rigidified symbol of the black voice, troubles Adorno's dialectical opposition between technology and technique as derived from an opposition between the commercial and the artisanal production of technology. To this end, I contend that the electrification of recording technology, namely the advances in orthophonics and early telephony, owes a profound and

troubling debt to Bessie Smith, to blackness and to the black voice. I continue my genealogical understanding of the phonograph through and against Smith's innovative work. I trace a knowledge base that invests in the excessive embodiment of the black voice and which renders it symbolically as the fantastical basis for the production of technological knowledge and innovation. I ground this fantasy primarily in the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnologist and speech pathologist James Hunt whose initial work in orthophonics, phrenology, anatomy and phonology contributed to the knowledge base of electrical recording. This section consists primarily of juxtapositions between two sets of 'primary' sources: the scientific writings of Bell Laboratories engineers who developed the Orthophonic Victrola and the anatomical-physiological (orthophonic) writings of 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists. I contend that these knowledge bases contributed significantly to the development of the electrification of sound and produced scientific knowledge about sound through this idea of the black voice. I return to Bessie's recordings and some of the recording work of early black female blues artists Clara Smith and Ma Rainey and ask the question of how these works can be considered in light of this legacy. Finally, I propose an understanding of Smith's 1925 electrical recordings as opening up a site of *techne* and *poiesis* (Heidegger's terms) from which the phonograph can be (re)imagined as an instrument. Bessie Smith then creates black music as the recording process; that is the object that recorded itself in a manner that precisely troubles the opposition between the phonic and symbolics of sound and the technological place of reproduction.

I end this chapter with a reconsideration of Bessie Smith's first electrical recording session in May of 1925. I focus on the narrative of the sessions' failure because of the desire for true fidelity by the Columbia records' sound engineers. I then move into a consideration of the recordings themselves from that May 1925 session and consider how they were not released until 15 years later in 1940, three years after Smith's death. I trace the process of reproduction and remastering of these discs in the 1950's, in the 1970's and finally in the 1990's to the implicit zeal and fetishization of fidelity they engender.

Finally, I suggest that we consider the remastering process of Bessie Smith's voice; the cuts and splices that always already constitute our hearing of her voice as troubling and making possible our phenomenal and symbolic rendering of Smith. Finally, I suggest that we situate Smith's recordings as part of her larger musical oeuvre, and even more I propose that we consider the way in which they consistently troubled the ideality of fidelity as part of a black musical and aesthetic tradition at the level of time and form.

### **Track 3:**

Chapter 3 continues a thread that has been subtly referred to throughout the dissertation project. Firstly, I depart from the allusions I make in the previous chapter about the black voice's structuring of the phonograph; specifically Bessie Smith's and Ma Rainey's structuring of the Orthophonic Victrola. Moving away from Bessie Smith, I delve into the early origins of explicitly and self-consciously improvised



black musics that emerged in the 1960's. I focus on the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet's 1966 album *Sound*. *Sound* is the 1966 collaboration of Roscoe Mitchell ("alto saxophone, clarinet, recorder etc."), Lester Bowie (trumpet, flugelhorn, and harmonica), Lester Lashley (cello and trombone), Maurice McIntyre (tenor saxophone), Malachi Favors (standing bass), and Alvin Fielder (percussion).<sup>42</sup> The album stands emblematically among the first recorded efforts of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (and later the Art Ensemble of Chicago); along with the releases by fellow AACM founding artists: Lester Bowie's *Numbers 1 & 2*, Joseph Jarman's *Song For* and Muhal Richard Abrams' *Levels and Degrees of Light*.<sup>43</sup> Not unlike the almost familiar textures that populate its sonic landscapes, *Sound* continually butts up against regimes and structures of reference and resemblance: genre, race, and even form are inhabited only to be undone. Simultaneously, *Sound* bears a strong likeness to post-war 1950's and 1960's New Music experimentalism in which musicians and sound artists began to draw heavily upon theories of performance from dance and theater. In addition to creating a sonically distinct experience, *Sound* involves extended improvised, theatrical and choreographic performances by the musicians, which in some, at least symbolic, resemblance to John Cage's experimentation with theater in that period and later on.

I think through the ways in which these forms specific articulation in the record form became a transferential marker for the anxieties over black

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<sup>42</sup> *Sound*. Roscoe Mitchell Sextet. Art Ensemble of Chicago Series Volume 1. Delmark Records, 1966.

<sup>43</sup> Listen, also, to Joseph Jarman's *Song For*. Delmark Records, 1966 and Muhal Richard Abrams' *Levels and Degrees of Light*. Delmark Records, 1967.

unknowability that had been supposedly resolved through the mass production of black music on records and the simultaneous rigidification of genre, namely jazz. The blackness of the record becomes both the subject of greater scientific scrutiny and development in the quest for perfect fidelity, yet it also becomes the surface through which more dynamic forms of black artistic expression are born. I will discuss how improvisatory instrumental jazz and experimental musical practices were both anxious and enthralled by the opaque and rigidified materiality of the record. This discussion will take place largely through a consideration of the Roscoe Mitchell's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians' (AACM) 1965 recording session of *Sound*. The recording sessions for *Sound* illustrate the simultaneous way in which recording rigidified certain black musical forms (consolidated over decades of recording that standardized jazz), while also allowing the bounds for improvisation through and beyond the recorded value of sound.

#### **Track 4:**

Finally in Chapter 4 the genealogical approach that I have maintained through the first three chapters is put under further pressure in chapter four as consider the complex way in which the legacy of Jamaican Dub music is configured and reimagined in the multi-media art work of Egyptian sound/text/visual artist Hassan Khan. I spend chapter four thinking through the way in which the Dub musics of Osbourne Ruddock aka King Tubby, Augustus Pablo, Horace Andy and Duke Reid among others. Dub music has been perhaps the most influential sonic force of the late

20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, though its cultural influence, like its native island context has often been rendered in “small” and all too marginal terms. Particularly unthinkable has been the proposition laid out by Michael E. Veal in his brilliant monograph on dub music, that dub practices (which is to say dub) have engendered an immense and immeasurable global black diasporic experimental legacy that has yet to be fully recognized as such. Many of the early forbearers of dub music did not concern themselves as to whether their music was regarded as “experimental” or avant-garde—terms, which I have and will continue to complicate in this writing. Until the gradual “internationalization” of Jamaican music in the 1970’s many of dub’s early innovators developed their music with an exclusive focus on how it would be received in the context of the Jamaican sound system. The sound system context—which I’ll touch upon briefly—was no more provincial or “little” than it was universal. Julian Henriques describes the sound system, which consists of a massive wall of speakers representing and then exceeding the frequency spectrum of human audibility with sheer loudness, as a “corporeal practice,” an embodied “thinking through sound” and form.<sup>44</sup> As Veal shows, artists like Clive Chin, Augustus Pablo, Errol Thompson, King Tubby, Duke Reid and Lee “Scratch” Perry have ascribed universalist cosmologies to their music that suggest an experimental tendency in their work that has garnered global sonic attention, especially at the formal level.

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<sup>44</sup> Julian Henriques. *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing*. New York, NY: Continuum Books, 2011.

often been rendered in “small” and all too marginal terms. Particularly unthinkable has been the proposition laid out by Michael E. Veal in his brilliant monograph on dub music, that dub practices (which is to say dub) have engendered an immense and immeasurable global black diasporic experimental legacy that has yet to be fully recognized as such. It would be reductive to subsume Khan’s approach purely under the banner of dub, equally so to describe it simply as “art music.” Yet, what I find so interesting here is how Khan’s engagement with dub theorizes the very sonic-visual structures by which blackness becomes an oscillation between “recognition and abjection,” but also a sonic-visual force of subjection.<sup>45</sup> The elegance through which Khan’s work achieves such a complex entanglement arises not from a symbolic treatment of dub, nor a symbolic rendering of blackness, but through a nuanced engagement with the form; dub, dubbing, becomes the antagonist to race’s many symbolic modes of documentation and capture.

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<sup>45</sup> Fred Moten. *In the Break: the Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, 71. Moten’s words here are derived primarily from his reading of Ralph Ellison’s classic phonographic scene in *Invisible Man*. Also see Darieck Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African-American Literary Imagination*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010.

## Chapter 1: George W. Johnson and Phonautographic Differance: Blackness And the (Dis)figuring of the Human Voice

Differance is therefore the formation of form. But it is *on the other hand* the being-imprinted of the imprint. It is well-known that Saussure distinguishes between the “sound image” and the objective sound. . . The sound image is the structure of the appearing of the sound [l’apparaître du son] which is anything but the sound appearing [le son apparaissant].

—Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

The black voice began with(in) a breath of chattel slavery. Born onto a Virginia slave plantation c.1846, George W. Johnson would become the first black artist of the phonograph—and one of the first recording artists. At an early age Johnson became interested in music through his close proximity to his slave “family,” to his master(s). In an attempt to characterize George W. Johnson’s early life, historian Tim Brooks quotes a “local [Virginia] historian” who speculates: “I have a feeling that [slaves] were more servants than slaves in that area of small owners they were more nearly members of the family, as suggested in the case of Sam Moore [the son of Johnson’s master] and George [W.] Johnson.”<sup>46</sup> In his somewhat apologetic though admittedly expansive account of Johnson’s life Brooks further develops the familial and especially fraternal overtones of Johnson’s life under slavery; noting that it was in fact from his master’s son Samuel Moore—to whom Johnson was a “bodyservant”—that Johnson became interested in music:

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<sup>46</sup> Tim Brooks. *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry 1890-1919*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004, 18

George Johnson gained more than a long-lasting friendship from this early entrée into the white world. Master Samuel was given instruction on the flute at an early age. As Samuel developed into “an expert flute player” it was later reported, “the slave learned to imitate the notes. Johnson could soon whistle any tune that he had ever heard.” The seeds of Johnson’s later musical career were planted.<sup>47</sup>

Apparently Johnson’s imitative capacity, which was the result of and key to his access to the “white world,” as much endeared him to his adoptive “family” as it alienated him from his symbolic kin in the fields: “[Johnson] was fortunate to be living with a white family who treated him so well. He was envied and no doubt taunted by the field hands whose lives were so much rougher.”<sup>48</sup> Johnson’s whistling, the means of his sentimental “friendly” endearment and above all recognition in “the white world,” was also the means by which his implicitly fractured family lineage under the institution of slavery could be effaced. Johnson’s whistling secured his honorary adoptive human status in a familial and social order predicated precisely on the disavowal of the more brutal and violently inscribed social structure upon which it depended. Brooks’ apologia here then perhaps interestingly performs, at least by a degree, the way in which bonds of affection and even (familial) empathy function as more subtle though still violent modes of possession within the chattel slave system and its aftermath, of which the “white family” was and is a constitutive part.<sup>49</sup> To

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>49</sup> Again for more on this see Saidiya Hartman’s path-breaking work in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Also see Hortense Spiller’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2. *Culture and Countermemory: The “American” Connection*, Summer 1987 pp. 65-81. Also see Tera W. Hunter’s important work, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988 and Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. *Fatal Self-Deception:*

perhaps append his earlier comments Brooks adds, “Nevertheless the “Peculiar Institution” was a fact of life, one that demeaned and sometimes brutalized its victims. The scars on George’s father may bear mute testimony to this.”<sup>50</sup> Brooks’ speculative and indeed imaginative leap here is intriguing. After an exhaustive and meticulous historiographical project Brooks can still really only speculate about the graphical nature of Johnson’s slave genealogy. For Johnson’s slave ancestry has been all but effaced due to the hegemonic archive, which privileges (however minutely this can even be said) the positivism of Johnson’s family and fraternity in slavery rather than the symbolic order from which he was perpetually ripped and much later imaginatively and symbolically yoked. With his imaginative leap into Johnson’s father’s scars, Brooks leaves the racial pillars of chattel slavery and the white family intact, because he can only think to locate Johnson’s genealogy within the symbolic order of patrimony.<sup>51</sup> Drawing on any kind of unitary origin for George W. Johnson would appear to require a fractured social order however; an order perhaps as

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*Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011. I am indebted to the treatment of both of these sources in a class I took with Professor Angela Davis as well as several graduate students at UC Santa Cruz, entitled “Theories of Slavery.” I will return to Spillers’ text in a later chapter on the surface of the record.

<sup>50</sup> Brooks, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Nahum Dimitri Chandler sharply expounds such a situation as it pertains to the production of black folk, and particularly African-Americans, when they are produced as subjects of discourse. “Typically, the procedure is something like this: the system in which the subordination occurs, because it exists, is analytically presupposed, and then the subjects are inserted into this preestablished matrix to engage in their functional articulation of the permutations prescribed therein. The general, and salutary, concern has been to formulate, in the most balanced and sustainable manner, an account of the simultaneous production of the position of the subordinated subject as nonoriginary and displaced, *and* as resistant to subordination and creative practice. Yet in producing such an account, the constitution of the general system or structure in which, and by which, that (African American) subject is gathered or constructed has remained analytically presupposed or unthought, if not simply assumed. Which is to say that the system is not thought, that the system itself is approached within the circuit of analysis as preconstituted, that the system itself is assumed and presupposed. Nahum Dimitri Chandler. *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014, 140-141.

fractured as the supposed purity of the white family and the “white world” whose very name and constitution were continually cut and made possible by Johnson’s imaginary and symbolic presence.

In thinking of Johnson’s phonography we can, along the lines of the musical genealogy of the phonograph and blackness I have proposed earlier, think about “what binds Johnson to his relatives whether they have claimed him or not”; whether those ancestors are rendered as quintessentially human or not.<sup>52</sup> Johnson’s phonography is crucial to a black musical genealogy imagined and created through the phonograph, because his work at once allows us to understand the way black musical traditions are and can be “invented” rather than romantically “discovered,” which necessarily entails troubling the opposition between black culture and mass culture; particularly the supposed mass culture of technological modernity that has often been figured as the neutral and unremitting captor of black sounds and black lives.<sup>53</sup> From Johnson’s narrative we can begin to understand the fabricated nature of technological modernity as one homogenous totality, to which black music and blackness are seen as a mere appendage; an always already romantic vernacular opponent or, equally scurrilously, an unthought and presupposed addition.<sup>54</sup> In this regard Johnson’s original/nonoriginal narrative provides a provocative conceptual

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<sup>52</sup> Bryan Wagner, *Disturbing the Peace: Black Popular Culture and Police Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, 193.

<sup>53</sup> The preceding insights and the previous quote are taken from Wagner, 195. Also see Wagner’s point that “Maintaining that the phonograph was antithetical to black expression, collectors disowned the means that had enabled them to imagine a source for the tradition,” 193.

<sup>54</sup> Chandler, 140-141.



framework through which to understand the phonograph in terms of blackness and the black voice.

From his early life, as Brooks' (re)telling of it implies, Johnson's musical expression was reduced to an economy of deficient mimesis, uncanny even; Johnson's voice was a reproduction, but one recognizable as such through its differing medium: whistling. Johnson's voice, his whistling—the very means by which he later would attain fame through the phonograph—is deemed a formally different, yet effectively recognizable reproduction of “his master's voice.” In whistling Johnson captured and reproduced the sounds of his master's flute; at once acknowledging the kinship, the proximity, and even more the fraternity of their relationship as well as the radical formal dissimilarity of his reproduction. Hence whistling also represents the impossibility for that very fraternity that supposedly produced it. The acknowledgement of Johnson's gesture as only recognizable as imitative of “his master's voice” forecloses the possibility of Johnson's equality within that fraternity that supposedly constitutes humanity. Johnson was denied a “human voice,” or even more insidiously, he was offered one only as a recognizably affective gesture of imitation. Johnson's narrative however goes beyond the important though rather obvious point that as a slave he was sentimentally offered and denied his humanity.<sup>55</sup> More crucially, Johnson's musical training points to the way in which

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<sup>55</sup> Saidiya Hartman thoroughly discusses the dangers of the illusion of equality or we might say “likeness” in the construction of legal and extralegal emancipation discourses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hartman, in her central idea of “self-making,” address the way in which forms of legal equality or ontological similitude, particularly during Reconstruction, attempted to efface the injurious and debilitating effects of slavery, even as they at base presumed their legal existence. See Hartman's

the human voice and a concept of humanity were never always already constituted objects within this relation. On the contrary, as the narrative flow of Johnson's training tells us, the human voice always had to be reproduced, before it could be present, before it could forge its own recognition. The human voice would always require its imitative, instrumental and technological other; not as its ontological opposite, but rather as its very constitutive possibility. In his important work *Blues People* Amiri Baraka highlighted such a condition when he stated: "There was no communication between master and slave on any strictly human level, but only the relation one might have to a piece of property—if you twist the knob on your radio you expect it to play."<sup>56</sup> Johnson was, even in his early years, forced to stand in the place of a kind of imitative or reproductive sonic technology, perhaps foreshadowing the waning years of his recording career in which he would be replaced by "slot machines."<sup>57</sup> Johnson's imitative capacity, his technique, which was both the affirmation and disaffirmation of his fraternity within the white world, within his "family," belied the membranous inscription of his father's scars, which made his reproduction possible and necessary. Johnson's imitative whistling then signifies a double dislocation in which his genealogical lines are displaced from the symbolic order of slavery and relocated in the novel imitative economy of "the white world."

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chapter "Instinct and Injury: Bodily Integrity, Natural Affinities, and the Constitution of Equality" in *Scenes of Subjection*.

<sup>56</sup> Baraka, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and The Music That Developed From it*. New York, NY: Morrow Quill Books, 1963, 3. Barak's point that there was no human communication is sharply contradicted by Saidiya Hartman's work on sentimentality, humanity and slavery in *Scenes of Subjection*, cited above.

<sup>57</sup> Following the infamous trial that would define Johnson's later life in which he was accused of murdering his common law wife Roskin Stewart, newspapers stated that Johnson's "accomplishments are now being whistled and sung by slot machines from one end of the country to another." Brooks, 58.

More to the point, Johnson's whistling signified the displacement of phonic material—the black voice, from the commodified (legacy of) *graphical* inscription of chattel slavery, the very order that made his whistling possible and necessary.

Johnson's narrative and more importantly his music in the early days of the phonograph must be understood as central to the genealogy of the phonograph and indeed all sonic technology. Particularly, because Johnson's work illuminates how the split between the phonic and the graphic—what I understand here as blackness—was tied to the recognition of the black voice. In this phonographic economy, the human voice was a perpetually offered and a perpetually deferred ideal through the possibility and failure of mechanical reproduction. This deferment, this mechanical failure of the reproduction of the human voice was supplemented by the ideality and phenomenal presence of the black voice. The black voice was *the* idealized object in a system of commodification in which the pornographic scars of slavery and the inscription of sound, its very possibility, were at once reduced to what Marx famously called a “social hieroglyphic.”<sup>58</sup> The black voice became a force and an object whose capacity to speak, whose animation via its commodification in capitalist exchange, and whose perceived qualitative and quantitative similitude, made possible the human voice through sonic reproduction. The black voice engenders the repetition that writes phonographic modernity, precisely at the moment when the black voice as a structure of repetition is denied.

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<sup>58</sup> Marx, 74.

We cannot presume that Johnson's work was merely imitative or redundant of some prior and now corrupted referent or origin. To take such a position effaces the very way in which his music and his voice engendered the very recognition of such a repetition in the first place.<sup>59</sup> Meaning, we cannot believe that "his master's voice," Samuel Johnson, was ever whole or ever there before Johnson's whistling. Even more, we cannot, as Frantz Fanon has shown us, assume Johnson's master's body was even there, before Johnson's whistling opened and seemingly closed that bodily schema. The presence of the Negro, as Fanon notes, haunts the white man: "At the extreme, I should say that the Negro, because of his body, impedes the closing of the postural schema of the white man—at the point, naturally, at which the black man makes his entry into the phenomenal world of the white man." Here I would modify Fanon's point and implicitly expand it by way of George W. Johnson's music. Through Johnson's music I would add that the blackness of the body—that split between its relation to the phonic and the graphic—makes possible the very illusion of the opening of that "postural schema."<sup>60</sup> Johnson's whistling did not only create his master's voice in its apparent mimesis, it created his masters *ear* with which Johnson's mimesis and by extension "his master's voice" can be heard and acknowledged. Here we must locate Johnson's music as a central force in the

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<sup>59</sup> Fred Moten's radical argument against a traditional conception of the avant-garde drives my thinking here. In his chapter "the Sentimental Avant-Garde" in *In the Break*, discusses the way in which sentimentality is always already cut by a racial and sexual difference; blackness cuts the avant-garde even as it props it up. Moten's point is provocatively temporal, which resonates with some of my own temporal claims here. It is particularly relevant in light of the way Moten understands the deconstructive relationship between part and whole in relation to black art and aesthetics. See Fred Moten. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

<sup>60</sup> Fanon *Black Skin*, 160.

founding of early phonographic technology. We can chart the way in which the black voice contributed intimately to the forms of imaginative and symbolic embodiment that made possible phonographic technology.

Undoubtedly, one of the most pervasive ideals of embodiment that contributed to establishing phonographic technology was the idea of “the human.”<sup>61</sup> The structure of the black voice allows us to understand as Alexander Weheliye has pointed out that “Blackness, however, cannot be defined as primarily empirical nor understood as the non/property of particular subjects, but should be understood as an integral structuring assemblage of the modern human.”<sup>62</sup> It is in this sense that we might get at understanding Johnson’s master’s ear, the supplemented, yet absented means by which Johnson’s seemingly mimetic musical practices can be identified and recognized. Even more, we might understand how the supposedly white normative body of phonography is continually cut through and through by the disavowed supplement of the black voice. It is with this in mind that we turn to the blackness of the *phonograph*.

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<sup>61</sup> I would like to make an important distinction here in my work; why I align it more with scholars like Alexander Weheliye, Fred Moten, and Sylvia Wynter. In fact, rather than invoking the discourses on the “post-human”, I think Sylvia Wynter’s important critique is relevant. Sylvia Wynter’s criticism of “post-humanism” that it does not significantly tremble or disfigure the “overrepresentation” of Man as human, which is part of the epistemological authority, nor ethically can a “post-humanist” stance account for the violence of such a overrepresentation. Nor does it, I might suggest, adequately trouble or address the symbolic capital of such a humanity, which was built on the capital or fungibility of blackness. I hope to confront this through the phonograph in this essay. See Sylvia Wynter’s “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation, an Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review*. Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2003, pp. 257-337.

<sup>62</sup> Alexander Weheliye. “After Man.” *American Literary History* 20 2008 pp. 321-336, 324. Also see Weheliye’s book *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*. Though I would suggest the former article as Weheliye’s book too quickly elides the very questions mentioned in “After Man,” which makes his work so important. In other words neither phonography nor the hearing or sounding that constitutes modernity are really explored in Weheliye’s book.

In his “speculative history” of sound, the *Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne posits the centrality of shifting ideals of the human body in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as informing key developments in sound technology. Specifically, Sterne connects the changing conceptions of “the human ear” and the development of Leon Scott’s phonautograph and Alexander Graham Bell’s “ear phonautograph.”<sup>63</sup> The phonautograph, invented in 1855 by French scientist Edouard-Leon Scott de Martinville, was a device that captured acoustical sounds through a “barrel-shaped horn” and recorded them as visualizations in script; as representations of the vibrations of sound onto a piece of smoke-blackened glass or paper:

In this instrument the sound to be examined is concentrated upon a small drum of India-rubber or goldbeater's-skin, to the centre of which is connected a long and light strip of wood having a point at the end. The air-waves [of speech] beat upon the drum and cause it to vibrate in exactly the same manner as the particles of air themselves; the vibrations of the drum are communicated to the strip of wood, causing the pointed end of it to perform the same motions on a larger scale.<sup>64</sup>

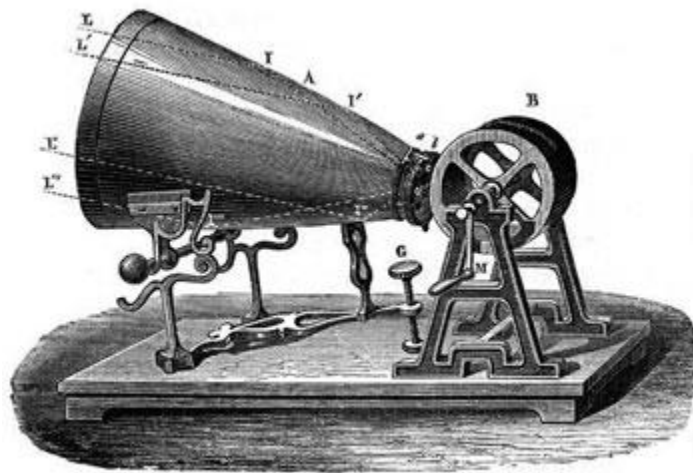
The acoustical etchings of the vibrations of the air were then committed to a piece of smoke-blackened paper effectively *inscribing* the paper with a record of the

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<sup>63</sup> Sterne, in focusing primarily on Bell’s “ear phonautograph” seeks to differentiate it from Scott’s (original) phonautograph in terms of each inventor’s intentions. Whereas Bell’s phonautograph, which sought more intentionally to imitate the tympanic aspects of the ear, was tied to an assimilationist politic, which sought to “cure” deafness (and hence eradicate deaf culture). Scott’s phonautograph fully invested in the majesty of *writing* sound, which he believed—not unlike Theodor W. Adorno almost a century later—would exalt music and restore it to its rightful place alongside writing. I will confront some of these aspects of Scott’s phonautograph, as well as Sterne’s characterization of it shortly.

<sup>64</sup> Shelford Bidwell. “The Recent Inventions for Reproducing the Sounds of the Human Voice.” *Proceedings of the [Royal] Musical Association* 5<sup>th</sup> sess. 1878-1879, pp.1-14, 3.

acoustical source: the human voice.<sup>65</sup> The phonautograph provided a kind of analogy then between the phenomenal and phonological presence of sound and the graphical representation of sound in writing. The acoustical representation of sound ultimately looked something like the results of a polygraph or a seismograph in that it was often a scribble of lines analogous only to the vibration that caused it.



Sterne identifies how the apparatus of the phonautograph relied on “tympanic” knowledge about the form and function of ‘the human ear’ as its epistemological frame:

Knowledge of the ear was intimately connected with the physical and analytic abstraction of the human ear from the body in this period. The use of human ears in experiments was, thus, intimately tied to a mechanical understanding of the ear and hearing. The ear could get attached to machines in part because ears were already being treated as mechanisms.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> See *the New York Times*’ March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008 article “Researched Play Tune Recorded Before Edison” by Jody Rosen for a more detailed explanation of the mechanical workings and historical significance of the phonautograph: [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/27/arts/27soun.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/27/arts/27soun.html?_r=2)

<sup>66</sup> Sterne, 59.

Sterne contextualizes the mechanization of the human ear within the broader scientific shifts in otology, physiology, anatomy and psychology in which the ear “became measurable.” The conceptual and mimetic significance of the apparatus of the phonograph’s ear-like shape, the [ear] “drum” that receives sounds, “is an artifact of a shift from models of sound reproduction based on imitations of the mouth to models based on imitations of the ear.”<sup>67</sup> The move from mouth to ear as the conceptual basis for sound reproduction is embodied in the very apparatus of the phonograph, yet the psychic and ideological dimensions of this shift are rather complicated. Johannes Müller, along with other 19<sup>th</sup> century physiologists and anatomists, contributed to a radical rethinking of the senses in which the “interiority” of the sense-organs, in this case the ear, determined or interpreted the “exterior” sense-data or phenomena. Prior to Müller’s assertions, the commonly held empiricist belief—perhaps best exemplified in the works of David Hume—maintained that the sense organs could only respond to particular phenomena. The phenomena were then the cause that awakened particular discrete sensory experiences and not the other way around. Through Müller’s work however, sound became “the *effect* of a set of nerves with determinate instrumental functions. Not only [then] are the senses separate and mechanical, but they are also almost purely indexical. That is to say, *any* stimulus of the nerves of sensation can register as a sense datum.”<sup>68</sup> The phonograph then, in

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 61. Italics in original. Sterne wages a far-reaching and expansive treatment about the way in which this orientation toward the ear signified a dramatic inversion if not a total rethinking of prior romantic conceptions of the sense. Earlier treatments of the sense ascribed particular and discrete



Sterne's estimation, relied on a kind of mimesis of the knowledge of the human body at the level of form and function. The phonautograph's receiving horn or "drum" mimicked the tympanic function of the ear in receiving sound, and the inscriptive surface and writing mechanism of the stylus were imagined to work something like the opaque capacity of human intellection, memory and eventually the unconscious.<sup>69</sup> Sterne's broad approach is helpful here in elucidating the larger historical and philosophical context in which sound reproduction was developed. However, Sterne's treatment of the phonautograph overlooks the profound way in which the ideal of the human was not simply reinscribed through its mediation in scientific knowledge, but in fact encountered hindrance in the smoke-blackened paper. The ideal of the human was continually cut through even as it was being reinscribed on the surface of its blackened other.

The surface onto which the phonautograph wrote engendered a great deal of anxiety, for its very writtenness, or what Jacques Derrida again, might simply call its writing. Not unlike the differentiating force Derrida identifies as inherent to quotation, the mechanical writing of the phonograph brought into partial recognition the possibility of death in its very offer of what Edison later called "immortality."<sup>70</sup> In other words, Sterne's text presumes too uniform and total a similitude in the

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phenomena to particular organs. Meaning that prior conceptions of the sense maintained certain phenomena could awaken or enliven particular sense, like a rose awakening the sense of smell, and not the other way around as was implied in Müller's formulation.

<sup>69</sup> The cognitive philosophies of the 1970's that analogized the workings of the human brain to computer cybernetics owe an extensive debt to Müller's modeling.

<sup>70</sup> While Derrida's focus in *the Politics of Friendship*, is a notion of friendly love, his insights that such a notion of love is predicated upon an ideal (albeit fabricated) of "symmetry" is helpful here. Specifically, Derrida establishes the way in which concepts of political selfhood, among which we could call the human, are dependent upon a kind of similitude to structure their field of recognition. Derrida *the Politics*, 297-299.

construction of early sound technology. To suggest that reciprocally or even dialectically phonographic technology informs conceptions of humanity, and in turn conceptions of phonographic technology affect humanity, overlooks the very force that founds this rather binary equation. Hence we cannot overlook Fanon's insights about blackness as operating as a reflective surface through which identification is achieved.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore in regard to George W. Johnson's phonography, and indeed the construction of the phonautograph, we must consider how through and beyond Fanon, blackness also dissembled the very identification it was enlisted to (re)produce. Especially, when we consider how George W. Johnson's performances and music were continually framed as a kind of deficient mimesis, which always obscured the more violent and troubling glyph of chattel slavery and its afterlife. The dissimilitude of blackness within the phonograph made possible the kind of "human" phonographic recognition of which Sterne speaks, even as it threatened and unraveled such a construction at every turn of the record, the cylinder, the paper.

The operation of the phonautograph brings us closer to understanding, just how the ideality of the human body/phonograph, the human ear and the human voice, were constructed in relation to blackness as a certain glyphic mode of difference. The inscriptive capacity displayed by the phonautograph, required and emerged from the writing of blackness. Indeed, the phonautograph provided an analogy between the object of recording and the graphic inscription on the paper or glass. The ideal object

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<sup>71</sup> Again, here I am referring to the above-cited quote of Fanon in *Black Skin*, 160, as well as David Marriot's treatment of Fanon's thinking within the visual context of turn of the century lynching. See Marriot, David. *On Black Men*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000.

that drove this technological process was the human voice. However, the insufficiency of the analogical relation created by the phonograph at one level lay in the graphical representation being anti-alphabetical, anti-indexical to the human voice to the point of being glyphic and obscure even; it was writing without a system (of signification). The graphical inscription, the glyph, was significant of, but not referential to the human voice in any finer indexical sense. Hence, the phonic material of the human voice was then effectively unintelligible without full knowledge of the object of recording—without some kind of supplemental and retrospective recognition. In the phonograph there was not a cohesive logical relation that could tie the phonic (acoustical) vibration to the graphical representation that could be drawn into the letter. Thus the coerced alphabetic nature of speech, which had become dominant in the *phoneme* through phonology, was antagonized by the phonographic glyph. At the 1879 conference of the Royal Musical Association Shelford Bidwell discusses in fair detail Scott's phonograph, pointing out the aforementioned lack of alphabetic referentiality in sound. While Bidwell initially delights in the phonograph's inscription of the "oo" phoneme that it records, he admits that it is essentially impossible to identify the sound either immanently or retrospectively without really knowing the source. Thus, the phonographic rendering fails to be indexical to the phoneme and the voice cuts the signifying function that it facilitates in language. During this conference Bidwell refers to the representations of the phonograph as "the hieroglyph that was traced by the pure

musical tone.”<sup>72</sup> The phonautograph then had provided a crucial sonic innovation in that unlike notational musical scoring systems in the West, the phonautograph did not create a system of signification between sounds or units of sounds (especially a system based around whole tones). Rather it more directly or “purely” represented an attempt to *record* or *capture* the movement of sounds and render them graphically. Moreover, unlike notational systems primarily in music, which required the human voice to more or less directly correspond to standardized (and somewhat arbitrary) graphical concepts, which referred to abstract musical-structural referents such as notes (proper whole tones), the phonautograph could represent the human voice graphically in all of its overtones and messiness. Yet this graphical representation was also glyphic and without any thorough system of signification, as Bidwell notes. Hence, the phonautograph in effect more truly represented the impossibility of the indexicality of the human voice within signification as only the presence of this obscure glyph, which could, for the most part, only be appreciated for its gesture of representation or imitation and not its capacity to speak *for itself*. In other words, the phonautograph may as well have been whistling “Dixie.”

In the language of Derrida’s grammatology the phonautographic representation was perhaps most troubling in that it gave only a “trace” of the human voice, which “is not only the disappearance of origin,” but that also shows that “the origin was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin.” This trace “thus

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

becomes the origin of the origin.”<sup>73</sup> The phonautographic representation, this hieroglyphic of the human voice, then, threateningly suggests that there has always been something else; something other that constitutes the human voice’s presence and modes of (self) recognition. Grappling with this disappearance of the human’s “nonorigin” is troubling as Bidwell points out: “No sound, with perhaps the single exception of that of a tuning fork when excited in a particular manner, is a *simple* one. What we are accustomed to regard as simple elementary sounds are in fact more or less complicated chords.”<sup>74</sup> Bidwell goes on to note that if all of the “overtones, “the high notes of varying pitch and intensity” of the human voice were to be eliminated then it would be impossible to distinguish between musical instruments or for that matter between musical instruments and human beings; it would be impossible to hear human beings as such. Even more importantly “All voices would be exactly alike, and no distinction between the various vowel sounds would be cognisable.”<sup>75</sup> The tonic messiness of the human voice represented phonautographically could then conceivably be misrecognized as the sounds of an instrument, of an object utterly other than a human being. This glyph carried the potential to efface racial and sexual difference, gender and national accent, speech ability and disability. The problem with the *grapheme* or graph of the phonautograph then was that it did not speak phonologically in that reproduce human voice as a phenomenal experience, but only as the opacity of a glyph. Difference, then, as recorded through the phonautograph,

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<sup>73</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. trans. Gayatri Charkrovorty Spivak. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, 61 (italics in original).

<sup>74</sup> Bidwell, 5.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

might have an axis other than the normative phenomenal difference “experienced” as the human voice. Derrida’s thinking on the trace again is instructive; the originary trace for Derrida is that which operates:

Without a retention in the minimal unit of experience, without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear. It is not the question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the content, of the *pure* movement which produces difference. The (*pure*) trace is *differance*. It does not depend on any sensible plentitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is on the contrary, the condition of such a plentitude. . . . This differance is therefore not more sensible than intelligible and it permits the articulation of signs among themselves within the same abstract order—a phonic or graphic text for example—or between two orders of expression.<sup>76</sup>

If we follow Derrida’s thinking on the trace and *differance* then the phonautographic differance of the human voice would necessarily imply a new order of expression; an order not grounded in the phenomenal experience of the human voice that would be the basis of later phonological and phonographic systems. Phonautographic differance would dispute that very phenomenal, experiential difference Bidwell claims resides in an inherent corporeal difference determined phonologically by the “sounding body.”<sup>77</sup> Phonautographic differance would instead involve its own immanent *graphic* regime of difference. That is a regime of difference not reducible to the apriori difference of the (human) body that would, in sonic reproductive technology, retrospectively be designated as the phonological and later phonographic origin; what would later be considered simply the object of recording. To consider how the object of recording

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<sup>76</sup> Derrida, 62-63.

<sup>77</sup> Bidwell, 2.

thinks, how it cuts its very occasions for and conditions of recording, is to place blackness at the center of a radical rethinking of the sonic avant-garde, which I am attempting here.

The phonautograph was an affront to what Derrida terms “phonologocentrism” to the extent that it displaced the value of the appearance or logical relation of the graphic to the phonic—a relation the phonograph would later further amend and complicate—that was and would become the kernel of the experience or later *presence* of the human voice. As Derrida puts it further in his consideration of the trace: “The graphic image is not seen [does not appear]; and the acoustic image is not heard. The difference between the full unities of the voice remains unheard. And, the difference in the body of the inscription is also invisible.”<sup>78</sup> To this degree the phonautograph displaced a particular ideality of the body grounded in a particular (logical) “experience” and (scientific) “observation” of the body as inherently racialized, sexualized and gendered. The problem of the correspondence between the body and the human voice; or more the trouble of the origin of the latter in the former was called into question by this phonautographic differance precisely when, as Bidwell implies, it is a technology’s job to do just the opposite. The possibility of this phonautographic differance was to a degree realized when in 2009 researchers ran the phonautographs through a laser-based computational system in order to reproduce phonically the sounds written within the

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<sup>78</sup> Derrida, 65.

paper. The scientists and sound historians were surprised not only to hear a human voice singing “Au Clair de la Lune,” a French folk song, but even more they were shocked later to realize that the voice they had extracted from the phonautograph had been played or *reproduced* at the incorrect speed. The singing voice they had determined the previous year to be recognizably female was actually the voice of Leon Scott himself singing the French folk song.<sup>79</sup> The human voice in the phonautograph had been written with a glyphic materiality rather than a properly *phonological* presence hence its translation into or *reproduction* in the phonologism (or phonologocentric paradigms) of contemporary voice technology made real a troubling notion of difference; one in which the gendered-imaginary of the human voice was recognized as a mere difference of speed.<sup>80</sup>

As if anticipating such phonic and symbolic gender confusion Bidwell in 1879 reproached the inability of the phonautograph to carry though the immediacy of the body in the human voice. “The result was that, though the tones of the voice were to a certain extent imitated, articulation was entirely absent.”<sup>81</sup> The origin of the human voice then for Bidwell cannot be represented in its originary trace, as is the case of the phonautograph, rather there must be a true and direct relation of its origin in what Bidwell refers to as “the cavity of the mouth.” Bidwell adds, “The great defect in a

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<sup>79</sup> See “Earliest known sound recording revealed: Researches unveil imprints made 20 years before Edison invented phonograph.” By Ron Cowen in *Science News* June 1, 2009:

<http://www.usnews.com/science/articles/2009/06/01/earliest-known-sound-recordings-revealed.html>

<sup>80</sup> The notion of phonocentrism, phonologism and phonologocentrism were coined by Jacques Derrida in his attempt to the ideality and materiality of writing as distinct from logics of phonemes or simply of speech. Again see *Of Grammatology*, particularly the chapter entitled *Linguistics of Grammatology*.

<sup>81</sup> Bidwell, 6. This is the lack that Bidwell attributes to the phonautograph, but even more so to early phonographic and microphonic technology—an issue that I will return to in my discussion of Bessie Smith.



this instrument, as in all others constructed on a similar principle, is its inability to reproduce the qualities of the sounds which it is intended to transmit.”<sup>82</sup> The failure of the phonautograph lay in its incapacity to transmit or reproduce the human voice. Phonologically speaking, the phonautograph failed to properly reify the prescribed logical relation between “the cavity of the mouth” and its phonic “articulation” as recognized in the human ear. Emphasizing this point Bidwell compared the phonautograph to early telephonic technology in which imitation of the human voice was possible, but transmission or reproduction had never fully been reached, because phonological *articulation* could not be attained with great enough precision. Therefore it was not strictly formal mimesis, which was sought in phonographic technology, but functional mimesis as well, and even more formal and functional reproduction and transmission of the human voice. However, this relationship between the idealization of the human voice and the anxiety of its transmission or reproduction—both of which are equally present in Bidwell’s comments above—relies on and is cut by a repetitious force that it refuses to acknowledge, but always necessarily requires. As Derrida’s thinking on the trace suggests this anxiety undoubtedly turns around the phonautograph’s temporalization and spatialization. The time of the phonautograph, like the (later) time of the record, is not the time of the human voice nor even strictly speaking the time of its mechanical reproduction both of which hinge around an idealization and fantasy of their (representative) similitude. As the artistry of black music and its turntablist incarnations has

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

discovered, the differentiating force of the hands on the record/cylinder/paper realizes the time of the phonograph.

The reproductive capacity that would soon be conceived of through the phonograph differed importantly from the capacities of its relative contemporaries in telephonic and microphonic technologies, which offered *transmission* of the human voice. The Edisonian phonograph—the first phonograph, recorded sound vibrations into tin and later wax (not unlike the phonautograph did with paper) and then with a metal stylus, *reproduced* and amplified those vibrations acoustically by retracing the original impressions. Thus, while this reproductive capacity of the phonograph would resemble the graphic function of the phonautograph it would eschew its glyphic representation for an ethos of *reproduction*. The emphasis on the relation between the human body, the human voice and phonographic technology would give way to what was perhaps the most important facet of recording technology: the fantasy of the object *reproduced*. This concept of reproduction is essential to an understanding of the relationship between the human voice and the black voice and finally their relation to blackness. We must then return to George W. Johnson's phonography in order to understand the full force of the black voice in writing phonographic technology.

My point here is to draw out the spectral implications of slavery that persist and make possible phonographic technology and which the phonograph cannot be thought or heard without. I attempt to understand this relation that I have outlined in George W. Johnson's life, but even more so in his music at the turn of the twentieth

century, in order to outline a notion of blackness, which cannot be merely understood as an *effect* of the phonograph, but as its condition of possibility. In so doing I hope to sketch a notion of blackness that is moored imaginatively, symbolically, and even more epistemologically to the phonograph. I will attempt to establish the crucial relationship between the phonic and the graphic that cannot be fully grasped without a notion of phonic difference inscribed in and through the human voice. The relationship between the graphic and the phonic should be thought in relation to the possibility of a phenomenal presence of the human voice that was promised by the reproductive capacity of the phonograph. The possibility of the phonograph to reproduce the human voice with great fidelity was as much a perpetual promise as it was a disappointment—a deferred expectation. Johnson’s original narrative (or the original narrative(s) of Johnson) is important here because it points to the way in which the black voice became idealized as the imitative supplement to phonographic difference inherent within the earlier promise and expectation of the human voice. Phonographic difference then can be understood through Johnson’s phonography and particularly the supplementary sounds that made possible his symbolization and phenomenal presence in the phonograph. I am speaking here of the excessively embodied sounds of phonographic inscription, the “ugly hisses” and errant sibilants that make possible and undo Johnson’s phonography. Such *exscriptive* sounds get at the crucial dynamic between graphic inscription and phonic reproduction. Furthermore, as we will see shortly these sounds and indeed this relation between the graphic and phonic were ceaselessly tied to the phonograph’s commodification at the

turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The ethos of what would be called reproduction; and the reproducibility of the human voice, must then be understood hand in hand with the latent phonographic record of slavery.

### **Edisonian Reproduction and the Anxiety of the Human Voice**

Above all histories of the phonograph cannot begin with the object that the phonograph was enlisted to reproduce and which produced it: the black voice. Surely, histories of the phonograph must begin with the life of its inventor and his laboratory. These traditional narratives of the phonograph pursue and reify the romantic aspirations of rugged individualism and mechanical advancement that anchor larger nationalist-masculinist narratives of American progress. In kind, mythical comparisons are made, between the small “bright, blue eyed” boy who strained those eyes in his hand built laboratory and that same “bright, blue eyed” “Wizard” who conducted his innovative research in a converted farmhouse in West Orange, New Jersey, in a lab simply known as “the plant.”<sup>83</sup> The arcs of these stories, like the

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<sup>83</sup> See “Edison and the Kinetograph (1895). *Montreal Daily Star* 20 April, 1895. Reprinted in *Film History* No. 11 Vol. 4 Special Domitor Issue: Global Experiments in Early Synchronous Sounds 1999, pp. 404-407. In this article the author expounds the blueness of Edison’s eyes to such an extent as to reduce them to a synecdoche for his whole body. Also for a small, but equally mythic treatment of Edison’s estate see Hester M. Poole’s write up “The Residence of Thomas A. Edison Orange, New Jersey” for *The Decorator and Furnisher* Vol. 19, No. 3 Dec., 1891, pp. 93-96 in which Edison’s estate becomes metonymically substituted for Edison as an idea, figure or indeed person. Also see the first page of the first chapter of Roland Gelatt’s *the Fabulous Phonograph: From Edison to Stereo*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1965. For a critique of this thinking established at the turn of the century see Bryan Wagner’s *Disturbing the Peace: Black Popular Culture and the Police Power After Slavery*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. See especially his chapter on George W. Johnson, which even though it portends to be about Johnson does actually ending being much more invested in treating the myth of Edison, which Johnson makes possible. While this is an implicit and

trajectory of the Edisonian “straight line” of thought, move toward a successive and successful future. These narratives are the fantastical substitute for the object itself. They efface the materiality of the phonograph; the cyclical (or cylindrical) movements of the record or wax cylinder, the repeated skips, the hisses, the pops, and the mechanical shrieks that brought it into being. The phonograph’s failures, its object-choices, and the messy and convoluted trajectories of its desires are all but effaced in the conventional attempts at historical dressage. The technology of the phonograph may have indeed been birthed partially in the mind and hands of its inventor Thomas A. Edison. However, the object that the phonograph sought to apprehend is the phonograph’s condition of possibility, the condition of its materiality. Undoubtedly, the object of recording inaugurated the phonograph’s rather immediate mechanical means as much as, if not more than its eminent architect. What the phonograph sought to capture and how it sought such a form of capture are inextricable from what it would come to be. The ethos of sound capture and above all *reproduction* espoused with the phonograph requires us to eschew more novel ideas of pure individual ingenuity that, in varying degrees of naivety, drive narratives of the phonograph’s invention. Along these lines, we must recognize that, the drive toward sound *capture* and ultimately sound *reproduction* inherent within the phonograph and early telegraphic technology were intensified in Edison’s work on the phonograph. Hence, in focusing on the object of phonographic reproduction and its

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explicit critique of the kind of centering of Edison in discourses of technological modernity, it may also to a degree simply ending reinscribing the centrality of Edison in a manner that still sees him as a center, if only a mythologized one.

inherent mode of difference and differentiation also requires a move away from a history of the phonograph or a history of sound reproduction, or perhaps History, as a linearly conceived series of movements. Instead, a genealogical approach is more illuminative in that it provides a more dynamic account of the object of recording rather than subsuming that object under the larger sign of the history of sound reproduction. It is in questioning how the object of recording throws light on its (re)producer's deepest anxieties—anxieties which found and inhere to the phonograph's functioning—that we shall gain some purchase on the force of blackness and the black voice. For the tension between the graphic and the phonic, the tension between that which can be most ideally and fully symbolized and that which must be obscured for that symbolization to stand, intensifies with the introduction of phonographic reproduction.

A pregnant concept like reproduction should force us to understand Edison's phonograph as addressing or responding in some way to the desire for the presence of the human body that went unfulfilled in the phonautograph. The phonograph sought to compensate for the irreconcilability (of the *logos*) of the body in relation to the production of sound in early phonographic technology. To this end one can certainly identify the phonograph as wrapped up in the economy of the phonologic; of the phonology that defined the late (post-Saussurian) 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which, departed from earlier investments in phonetics. The messiness of the human voice—implied by Bidwell's comments earlier on its inherent overtones—in the phonautograph and earlier telegraphic technology could merely be anecdotally observed rather than

scientifically prescribed. Put another way, the human voice could only be alchemistically imitated rather than logically *captured* and reproduced. Here it is worth mentioning that deriving the *phoneme* of the human voice had represented an epistemological impasse in the minds of linguists for centuries. The phonemics of the voice would finally allow for a categorization of the human voice, and not simply a consecration of the human voice to a hieroglyph as in the phonautograph. The phoneme would be modern structural linguistics epistemological unit supreme for at once making sense out of the voice—making the voice mean in a more than analogical sense, but rather in a prescriptive scientific sense—something the phonautograph had refused to do. Derrida draws some attention to this contradiction of structural linguistics to claim the human voice as at once the origin of human speech (and writing a mere oblique system), while also designating the voice a mere remainder in the larger scheme of linguistic calculus. Mladen Dolar provides further prescient insight into the work of phonology stating: “The inaugural gesture of phonology was thus the total reduction of the voice as the substance of language. Phonology...was after killing the voice. Phonology stabs the voice with the signifying dagger; it does away with its living presence, with its flesh and blood.”<sup>84</sup> This “living presence” mentioned by Mladen Dolar and the human body (represented by the “flesh and blood” here borrowed from Roman Jakobson) are at once the condition of possibility for the “life” of human speech; of language (phonologically) as well as the condition of possibility for its “killing.” Meaning, the phonological rendering of the

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<sup>84</sup>Mladen Dolar. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, 19.

human voice calculated it as a living object only so it could be extinguished or rendered irrelevant (killed) by the majesty of phonological analysis. Through phonology the human voice became a calculable and known scientific quantity logically related to the human body, which made its indecipherability in the hieroglyph of the phonautograph so limited and perhaps even loathsome. Edison's work in inventing the phonograph was not purely serendipitous then, but was to a much greater extent attached to other epistemological anxieties of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that were concerned with the logic between the body and speech/sound.

This anxiety was undeniably tied to the racial and sexual differentiation of bodies—indicating perhaps the most important valence of phonographic *reproduction*. Through the axis of reproduction the phonograph would achieve its most complex entanglements. As is implied in the concept of reproduction, the phonograph had to compensate for the anxiety over the absence of a body, of the projection of the human body. The presence of reproduction then in early phonography would persistently, even melancholically stand in for the partial absence of the human body enshrined in (the impossibility of) the human voice. Reproduction possessed a distinctly phonemic quality in that it was to provide—just as the phoneme had done for linguistics—a measurable and essential means through which recognition or what would later be called *fidelity* could be imagined through the phonograph. Reproduction then promised to make present the body (of the dead); it promised what Edison earlier referred to as the “immortality of words” at the very moment that it rendered words the mere affect, or even more, absence of presence.



Present within Edison's description of his process of discovering the phonograph is the same lamentary concern, raised by Bidwell, over the inevitable recognizable absence of the human body by way of the human voice in earlier phonographic technology. Writing ten years after the invention of the phonograph (a period marked by the phonograph's initial decline) Edison narrated his discovery as follows:

In manipulating this machine [the first rudimentary phonograph] I found that the cylinder carrying the indented paper turned with great swiftness it gave off a humming noise from the indentations—a musical, rhythmic sound resembling that of human talk heard indistinctly...[it was] just as if *the machine itself were speaking*. I saw at once the problem of registering human speech, so that it could be repeated by mechanical means as often as possible had been solved.<sup>85</sup>

Edison, had it seemed, found mechanical means to imitate the function or the logical effect of the human body as human speech. To be sure this resemblance “to human talk” was not strictly a metaphor, but an affect that would become the phonograph's hallmark: “the talking machine.” The human voice or “human talk” that the machine had come to imitate or resemble became an affect, which phonologically referred to the human voice and hence the human body—or what Bidwell earlier referred to as the “cavity of the mouth.” Yet, ontologically this affect of the human voice also referred to an inherent dissemblance in the very nature of its condition of possibility: reproduction. One could not mean, or even exist without the other. In the phonograph reproduction could not be such without the human voice as its end—the phonograph

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<sup>85</sup> “The Perfected Phonograph.” *North American Review*. June 1888, Vol. 146 No. CCCLXXIX p. 641-651. The italics here are mine.

required the human voice as its terms of and hence limits of recognition. Nor could the human voice have existed (phonographically) without reproduction. Edison acknowledges this supplementarity between the human voice and reproduction when in the very description of his process for inventing the phonograph he notes that the resemblance of the human voice was equally predicated upon its dissemblance in reproduction both in terms of the excess of the inscriptive grooves: the “humming noise” and even more famously the human voice’s repeatability. Perhaps the most fascinating and important aspect of Edison’s discovery is his contention that it was as if “the machine itself were speaking.” For human talk does not quite become simply affect here, but it is always already infected by an absence in its presence.<sup>86</sup> In other words, the dramatic realization for Edison that it is automation and repetition that condition speech troubles the very ideality of the human voice that the phonograph was enlisted to technologically capture and reify.

Here, we can perhaps begin to sense then how and why George W. Johnson’s work would be so central to creating the phonograph. That the phonograph would rely on rather than simply produce repetition, and that such a situation would depend on rather than simply (re)produce another temporality implies the structure of the black voice as its organizing force and energy. Edison’s realization suggests the very disavowal of what it includes (and negates); specifically, that the presence of the human voice or “talk” always involves a retrojection to constitute its presence or the

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<sup>86</sup> I thank David Marriott, from a conversation we had, for pointing out this crucial dimension to Edison’s thought.

fantasy of its presence.<sup>87</sup> This realization, also a negation, then does not simply lead to the ‘true’ recognition of the loss of an original, yet nor does it casually suggest that there are no originals, only copies of copies. Rather it suggests that both these positions depend upon the disavowal of a structure of repetition in their very invocation of “copy” and “original.” While this structure of repetition undoubtedly facilitated the presence of affect within or even as the phonograph, it cannot be reduced to affect. The human voice suggested a presence born of its own dissemblance in repetition; the very structure of repetition without which it could not be heard. Here we can begin to gain some purchase on how the phonographic scars of slavery and the black voice wrote the conditions of sonic modernity.

In an unashamedly celebratory article in *Scientific American* published the year of the phonograph’s invention, entitled “the Talking Phonograph,” Edison raised a related function of the phonograph in which he likened it to a sonic version of the photographic camera, invented almost a half-century earlier. Edison stated that the phonograph’s chief novelty would lie in its ability to *reproduce the human voice* to such an extent as “...to counterfeit their [people’s] voices, and it would carry the illusion of real presence much further.”<sup>88</sup> The phonic absence of the human voice, which was bluntly present within the phonograph, could be quelled in the phonograph with the assurance that “the machine was talking.” The human voice was

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<sup>87</sup> Here I glean a definition of “retrojection” from Eric Downing’s intriguing work on Freud in *After Images: Photography, Archeology, and Psychoanalysis and the Tradition of Bildung*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2006. Downing, through Freud, speaks of retrojection as a “mechanism...that works to produce a rather complex set of reversals and replacements of originals and copies, a mechanism of retrojection that is also at times one of introjection,” Downing, 124.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas A. Edison. “The Talking Phonograph.” *Scientific American*. Vol. XXXVII, No. 25, Dec, 22<sup>nd</sup> 1877, pp.384-385, 385.

not just being transcribed, but was being properly captured and reproduced. The feat of sound reproduction however, as Edison's earlier comments around the human voice's dissemblance/resemblance imply, amounted to a kind of mimesis. Sound reproduction then in the phonograph was tied to an ontology of mimesis. Hence the phonograph was characterized by a kind of illusory mimesis between the body of the human voice and the body of sonic reproduction; between the human voice and the human voice of reproduction which were endlessly cut through and through by one another. This illusory mimesis elided or even disavowed the condition of possibility of the act of mimesis itself, which was phonographic inscription. Still, this promise of the phonograph for true mimesis was as much its condition of possibility as it was its greatest anxiety. One of Edison's critics in *Scientific American* pointed to the concern for absolute mimesis between the human body and the phonograph, stating: "The problem to be solved in the phonograph is to find a mechanical *substitute* for auditory nerves, brain and muscles, or in other words, to connect some device with the body thrown into vibration by sound, which shall register the movements of that body."<sup>89</sup> The phonograph was criticized very early on for the "fidelity" of its imitation, its process as well as its product. Emily Thompson takes this trope of "fidelity" to understand the "trueness" of imitation of the phonograph. Thompson sheds light on the way in which the phonograph's phonological emphasis on the imitation of the sounds (as well as the logic of the sounds) of the human voice was predicated on a

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<sup>89</sup> "Machines that Hear and Write." *Scientific American*. Dec, 15, 1877' Vol. XXXVII., No. 24 p. 376-377. My emphasis.

notion of “real presence.”<sup>90</sup> The claim of the phonograph to “real presence” of a human voice rather than a representation of a human voice (as in the case of the phonautograph), or as reproducing the biologic of the body as Edison’s critic insisted, brought into being a regime in which the writing or graphic inscription of the phonograph was actively forgotten or effaced by the phonic “real presence” of the reproduction it promised. In an attempt to bolster this active forgetting Edison leveled a statement of grand historical eloquence in which he identified the true marvel of phonographic reproduction:

It is curious to reflect that the Assyrians and Babylonians, 2,500 years ago, chose baked clay cylinders inscribed with cuneiform characters as their medium for perpetuating records; while this recent result of modern science, the phonograph, uses cylinders of wax for a similar purpose, but with the great and progressive difference, *that our wax cylinders speak for themselves*, and will not have to wait dumbly for centuries to be deciphered, like the famous Kileh-Shergat cylinder, by a Rawlinson or Layard.<sup>91</sup>

Reproducibility for Edison, and the fidelity of that reproduction, signified the end of the silence and toil of hieroglyphic decipherment that supposedly burdened earlier cultures. Fidelity in this sense is what replaces the tedium and silence of deciphering an inscription with the proper phonic reproduction. Fidelity then expresses a relation in which the phonic supplement of reproduction displaces, masks over or at least amends the necessary dissemblance and highly glyphic nature of graphical inscription. This ideology of fidelity revolved around the axis (and axiology) of the

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<sup>90</sup> Emily Thompson. “Machines, Music and the Quest for Fidelity: Marketing the Edison Phonograph in America 1877-1925.” *The Musical Quarterly*. Vol. 79, No.1, Spring 1995, pp. 131-171, 140.

<sup>91</sup> Edison, *Perfected*, 646, italics added.

human voice as an ontological (mimetic) referent. Yet even more profoundly—and perhaps ironically given Edison’s grand eloquent claims, fidelity relied on the phonograph’s intimate imbrication within the “social hieroglyph” of the black voice and the complex entanglements of blackness. Fidelity relied upon a knowability that denied the very process of its mediation in that regard fidelity always partially unraveled itself, because it relied on structure of recognition and mediation in this social hieroglyph that it had to, at least partially, deny. The recognition of George W. Johnson’s whistling as his master’s flute could only emerge as a kind of faithful fraternity through the denial of the very violent forms of inscription the social hieroglyphic nature of blackness that necessitated this sound; to acknowledge such a violence in this imitative sonic gesture would have, at least partially, collapsed the coerced and invented nature of the master’s recognition.

While ultimately championing the ethos of reproducibility and with it fidelity, Edison also very partially acknowledged the impossibility of such a reality under such a constitutive presence. Referring to the fragile nature of the writing of the phonograph—the fragility of the hieroglyph contained within the cylinder and later disc—Edison speculated: “Difference of rotation within moderate limits would by no means render the machine’s talking indistinguishable, but it would have the curious effect of possibly converting the high voice of a child into the deep bass of a man, or *visa versa*.”<sup>92</sup> Edison’s comments here acknowledge a form of what I have referred to as phonautographic differance—akin to what contemporary researches discovered

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

when they reproduced Scott's phonautographs—as implicit within the phonograph. The *grapheme* of the phonograph seemed to harbor the threat for some kind of bodily dissemblance/resemblance, which, because it created the gender (and in this case age) of the human voice, it carried the power to endlessly manipulate that very gender. Even more it carried the potential to expose the dominant presumptions of that gender as nothing more than a set of reproducible affects. Edison's thoughts on difference in the phonograph presume a normative similitude between the (anatomical) phonic source and the phonic reproduction, which is always at least partially upset by the necessity and indecipherability of the graphical inscription. This slight acknowledgement on the part of Edison as to the fragility of the *grapheme* or graphical representation of the phonograph undoubtedly ran against all the other grand proclamations of “perfection” and “fidelity” that Edison maintained distinguished the phonograph from prior phonographic technology and from prior hieroglyphic regimes. In fact, Edison's own claims about his invention with regards to the human voice contradict the provocative idea suggested by Thompson in her work on the social history of the phonograph that “there was no single role or purpose for the invention [the phonograph] to fulfill. The phonograph appeared before the need for its function had been identified.”<sup>93</sup> On numerous occasions Edison claimed, and not without some justification that the “Juggernaut—the needs of man” would be met by this “perfected phonograph.”<sup>94</sup> Thompson's point earlier that the phonograph simply preceded is prescribed historical need is an odd one in that she states outright

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<sup>93</sup> Thompson, 137.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, *Phonograph*, 536.

that: “The modernity of the acoustical phonograph lies not in the realm of aesthetic production but in consumption.”<sup>95</sup> Thompson’s point here is intended to dispute the totalizing claims of Miles Orvell who foregrounds a notion of “aesthetic production” as a modern effort to go beyond the prior nineteenth-century fascination with imitation. Thus, Orvell argues that aesthetic production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century sought “reality itself.” Edison’s comments regarding the at once illusory yet also always “real presence” of the human voice embodied within the phonograph contradict or at least complicate Orvell’s totalizing claim, because Edison explicitly acknowledges the affective constitution of that “real presence.” Yet this tension does not require us to disregard one for the other: either aesthetic production or consumption, as Orvell and Thompson would have us do. Rather this tension requires that we think them in relation to one another as well as thinking through the human voice and the phonograph’s undeniable relationship to commodification, production, consumption, need and value. All of which undoubtedly affect this concept of the human voice. The phonograph as commodity entered into a capitalist economy that, as Marx rightly pointed out, through the abstract production of value creates the parameters and conditions of human “need.” A need which we have seen in Johnson’s earlier narrative, and which we will see throughout Johnson’s life and career, was rooted in and routed through the racial capitalism of slavery and its afterlife.

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<sup>95</sup> Thompson, 133.



There is a brief narrative of Edison's presentation in his laboratory of his new and improved phonograph to the J & W Seligman investment house in the spring of 1888 as explicated in Roland Gelatt's *The Fabulous Phonograph*, which is worth citing in its entirety:

When the bankers arrived on the appointed day, Edison sat down before the instrument, set it in motion, and dictated a short letter into the mouthpiece. He then lowered the reproducing stylus into place and prepared to let the phonograph *sell itself* to his assembled guests [the investors]. But instead of parroting the words he had just spoken, the phonograph emitted nothing more than an ugly hiss. Was it showing its contempt for the leaders of finance? Edison made some small adjustments, inserted a fresh cylinder, and dictated another letter—with the same humiliated result. After some further abortive tries, the Seligman entourage took their leave, promising to return when Edison had the instrument in working order. The defect was quickly repaired, but the Seligman people never paid a second visit.<sup>96</sup>

This story forces us to engage the culture of commodification into which the phonograph was inserted and without which it might never have been conceived. Gelatt's language in narrating this event is telling of the culture of commodification around the phonograph and more specifically the way in which its phenomenal speech, its reproduced sound, is commodified to such a degree as to be the basis upon which it could "sell itself." This promise of reproduction, or the possibility of reproduction through the human voice, as the human voice, leads to more than just a financial or capital investment in the phonograph; it leads to an investment of expectations and desires as well. Therefore this passage pushes us to understand the

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<sup>96</sup> Gelatt, 38. It is also worth noting that this demonstration took place just a couple of months before Edison writes his article "the Perfected Phonograph" again like the offer of the human voice makes a grand promise; ensuring that relation between promise—expectation, and failure. The italics are mine.

drive of mechanical reproduction of the phonograph, what Edison describes as the drive to create “real presence,” as wrapped up in a perpetual tension between promise and failure, desire, expectation and disappointment all at work through the human voice and as we will see through George W. Johnson’s phonography, the human voice’s supplementary relation to the black voice.

As the first black recording artist, Johnson emerged at the precise moment of the phonograph’s commodification and early commercialization in the 1890’s; the precise moment, as the earlier narrative of Edison’s implies, when the tension between *graphic* and *phonic* capabilities was at its most precarious as a “social hieroglyph.” It was Johnson’s repetitious performances and re-performances of two works for recording: “the Whistling Coon” and the “Laughing Coon Song” that allowed the phonograph to function. The “coon songs” sung by Johnson as well as a few other artists: Bert Williams, George Walker, and Arthur Collins, to mention only the most famous, helped to produce an object that would both perpetuate the need for, yet also obscure the absence of, the human voice of the phonograph. By providing a racist symbolic supplement to technological failure these recordings crucially facilitated the political economy of the phonograph.<sup>97</sup> Johnson’s narrative suggests further that a truly human voice or more a humanity from which such an ideal could emanate is based in an economy of mimesis. Yet implicit within Johnson’s narrative and even more present in his music there is always an excess, a failure, a surplus of

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<sup>97</sup> See James H. Dormon’s essay “Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction Blacks: The “Coon Song” Phenomena of the Gilded Age.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4, December, 1988, pp. 450-471, 453.

graphical inscription, which belies the black voice's phonic presence as constituted by this very inscriptive cut of the record, the scratch, blackness.

### **George W. Johnson's Phonography and the Cutting Hands of the Black Voice**

Recording the black voice began with the threat and requirement of perfection. Victor H. Emerson "discovered" George W. Johnson whistling at the Hudson River ferryboat terminal, which Emerson passed through on his way to work at the North American Phonograph Company in New Jersey. Emerson commissioned Johnson with an even-then fairly meager salary, because Emerson realized, like many who recorded on the phonograph, that he needed a musical or sonic source that was "cheap and loud."<sup>98</sup> Cheap, because the major companies producing the phonograph: the Edison Phonograph Company, the Columbia Phonograph Company and the North American Phonograph company had all embarked on a scale of overproduction that saw them perpetually on the brink of bankruptcy. Phonographs were placed on public display on street corners and in town squares where they were mass marketed chiefly as instruments of entertainment, as "coin-in the slot" machines.<sup>99</sup> Patrons paid a modest sum to consume the sound that emanated from the rubber tube earpieces. While repeated listenings were the primary means of phonographic profit, the practice did not quite work with the material limitations of the wax cylinder format. Edison's

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<sup>98</sup> Brooks *Lost*, 27.

<sup>99</sup> Turning the phonograph into a source of commercial entertainment, of course, as it is famously told, graded against Edison's desire for the phonograph to remain a kind of office tool for secretaries to dictate the words of their boss. This shift further complicated the phonograph was gendered as I will discuss.

cylinders could only withstand a limited amount of reproductions—that is both recordings and plays, before the paraffin wax (of which they were composed) would degrade to such a level as to render the recording unintelligible and or inaudible. Large-scale reproduction was then requisite to turn any profit. Repetition was simultaneously the basis for the recognition and reproduction of these phonographic hieroglyphs—how they could mean—and also their point of sonic unintelligibility as they befell material degradation, which was the partial recognition of their repetition. The Edisonian wonder of the ad infinitum repetition of the human voice through reproduction had become both a necessary possibility and impossibility. Related to this desire for cheapness, loudness was an even more fantastical and perhaps powerful evocation of the ideal object of the phonograph. Prior to the 1920's phonographic recording was entirely acoustical as opposed to electric. All objects of recording were sonically captured through a large acoustical recording horn. The possibility of graphical inscription in the record or cylinder required an acoustic force intense enough to be transmitted through the large recording horn and cause the recording stylus to make distinct enough impressions or grooves on the record. The receptive limitations of the early phonograph are, by now a somewhat famous issue, because certain instruments and certain sounds could not be faithfully inscribed on the cylinder and faithfully reproduced without more troubling dissemblance. High strung instruments and pianos were fairly difficult, highly percussive instruments namely drums were difficult as well violins.<sup>100</sup> Symphonies and orchestras and some

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<sup>100</sup> Gelatt, 40.

operatic musics were afterthoughts due largely to the difficulty in recording the variety of instruments and frequency ranges. More amenable to inscription were brass instruments: tubas, trombones and trumpets in particular allowed for more dynamic harmonic control and hence control of the cutting stylus' movements during the recording process. Moreover, brass horn instruments could be more sharply focused into the direction of the recording horn, which allowed for a more faithful reproduction of their sound.

While there is some discrete musical truth to the harmonic, tonal and phonological distinctions implicit within phonographic recording, ultimately, what or who could or could not be recorded was as much a phenomenal distinction as it was a political or an ideological one and perhaps most consistently a psychic one.

According to some theorists of the time “women’s voices” were impossible to record and reproduce.<sup>101</sup> The cut of sexual difference here not only sexually cuts the materiality of the aforementioned instruments, but it also reveals the instrumentalization of the body; the instrumentalization of the human through difference that had been underway in acoustic spaces like the field and the plantation long before it had been mechanically recorded.<sup>102</sup>

Johnson’s voice had never been captured before by phonographic technology—only had the ear of the white passerby on the street achieved anything

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<sup>101</sup> Roland Gelatt’s *the Fabulous Phonograph* mentions just such a commonplace conception. This common assumption shows how the phonograph relied on and reinforced such rigid phenomenal and symbolic conceptions of sexual difference.

<sup>102</sup> Again see Hortense Spiller’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2. *Culture and Countermemory: The “American” Connection*, Summer 1987 pp. 65-81

like capturing Johnson's voice. In their first recording session Emerson instructed Johnson, "Sing loudly and clearly and don't make any mistakes. If you do we have to stop, shave down all the cylinders, and start all over again."<sup>103</sup> Emerson's demands evince the anxiety over the entanglement of technological failure and commodification (reproduction and production) in the phonograph around which the black voice was the fulcrum, and in which it became *the* commodity. The black voice was idealized as that which could quell technological failure by enabling the phonograph to provide a true and faithful reproduction of its object. A commenter in *Phonogram*, a turn of the century phonographic trade publication, reveals the fantastical desires imagined in the black voice: "Negroes take [to recording] better than white singers, because their voices have a certain sharpness or harshness about them that a white man's has not. A barking dog, squalling cat, neighing horse, and, in fact almost any beast's or bird's voice is excellent for the good repetition on the phonograph."<sup>104</sup> Indeed, these comments represent the obverse of phonographic anxiety around the representative limitations of the phonograph with regard to human speech. As sound historian Andre Millard has pointed out about the early phonograph: "The disembodied sounds and squeaks emerging from the tinfoil could be discerned by the listener, but it took practice to recognize [human] speech."<sup>105</sup> The black voice was the ideal object of phonographic reproduction, because its entirely knowable phonic difference, categorized above as its animalism, was based in a

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<sup>103</sup> Brooks *Lost*, 27.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>105</sup> Andre Millard. *American on record: a history of Recorded Sound*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 27.

phonological essentialism: “sharpness and harshness”, embodied, excessively so, in “the black body.” That perceived knowability of the black voice deemed it at once faithfully inscribable in the phonograph, while also making it symbolically full enough (with fantastical knowledge and wishes) so as to supplement its very process of mechanical reproduction; the black voice thus became phonographically reproducible.

Concurrent with Johnson’s recording career and the rise of the phonograph were the anthropological work of ethnologists like J. Deniker and G.D. Gibb which emphasized the anatomical, physiological and phrenological characteristics of Negroes, which differentiated their speech amongst “the races of man” as a biological fact of the distinctness of the “Negro larynx” and hence made their voices and their sounds ideal for recording.<sup>106</sup> This anatomization was tied to a phonic and phonological fetishization of the black body as the ultimate source of the black voice, and even more as the ultimate source for all phonographic knowledge.<sup>107</sup> The black voice was then embodied as it was instrumentalized in a manner reminiscent of Sheldford Bidwell’s earlier emphasis on the phonic and phonemic quality of the human voice as attributable to the logics of the “cavity of the mouth.” Hence, the black voice was, in and against the human voice, assigned to a body with an excessive

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<sup>106</sup> Joseph Deniker. *The Race of Man: an Outline of Anthropology and Ethnography*. New York, NY : The Walter Scott Publishing Company, 1900. Also see the article by John Burdick entitled “The Singing Voice and the Racial Politics on the Brazilian Evangelical Scene.” Burdick’s research while specifically located in Brazil actually points to the way in which this inherent anatomical and physiological difference of the black body gives it a unique and special black voice.

<sup>107</sup> The relationship between the black voice, the black body and the ordering of phonographic knowledge will be explored in the following chapter on Bessie Smith and Orthophonic phonography.

knowability and symbolization, a body presumed by ethnology, phrenology, phonology and anthropology to be entirely known and knowable.

The kind of knowability attributed to the logos of the human voice and “cavity of the mouth” was imagined to be even greater in the logos between the black voice and the black body; indeed this kind of knowledge became necessary in and against blackness. The ideality of the black voice’s inherently inscribable capacity and its reproducibility were predicated upon the presumed instrumentality of black bodies or more “the black body” as a sight/site and sound of scientific knowledge and hence the ideal means for technological reproduction.<sup>108</sup> In an indispensable article on black phonographic lynching Gustavus Stadler remarks on the centrality of the black voice to early phonographic technology. In particular, Stadler discusses how early lynching cylinders, which simulated the sounds of the lynching of black men for “coin-in the slot” phonographs, contributed to this anatomization of the black body that qualified the ideality of the black voice for phonographic reproduction: “The recordings surely also drew upon an established and growing white fascination with the sound of black voices and, in particular, with imagining black voices as in some senses excessively embodied and insufficiently linguistic—that is, as less or other than human.”<sup>109</sup>

Stadler’s insights shed light on the way in which the black voice was inextricably tied, affectively even, to the possibility of humanity and the possibility of a human

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<sup>108</sup> See Alice Maurice’s “Cinema at its Source:” Synchronizing Race and Sound in the Early Talkies.” *Camera Obscura* 49. Vol. 17, No.1, 2002 pp.1-71. In this path-breaking article Maurice discusses a similar dynamic of the black voice in early cinema sound synchronization of the 1920’s and 1930’s. Undoubtedly this story of the black voice’s idealized essential reproducibility is wrapped up in and perhaps to a degree attributable to its phonographic legacy.

<sup>109</sup> Gustavus Stadler. “Never Heard Such a Thing:” Lynching and Phonographic Modernity.” *Social Text* 102. Vol. 28, No. 1 Spring 2010, pp. 87-105, 98.



voice via a kind of animalism or inhumanity envisioned in the black body. The human was a perpetually promised and hence perpetually undelivered future, precisely through the objecthood of blackness. The black voice supplemented and was substituted for this perpetually undelivered promise. The black voice supplemented the constant technological failure, the ends of which were to ensure the possibility of the human voice, of true human speech. Hence the black voice was an affect not only in the sense of its gestural presence as that which would supplement mechanical failure and hence mechanical reproduction, but the black voice also exemplified an affectivity that was prelinguistic and paralinguistic. By this I mean prelinguistic in a teleological sense that it would provide the “primitive” ground for the possibility of true human speech and language through the phonography. Yet, the black voice was also paralinguistic in that through its fantastical instrumentalization it was instilled with a complex and elusive set of characteristics and operations that undid and went beyond its commodification. The affectivity of the black voice initiated the possibility of both phonographic inscription and reproduction and made possible the promise and deferment of the faithfully reproduced human voice. The black voice established a complex set of imbrications between blackness and technology that we must delve further into George W. Johnson’s music in order to understand.

George W. Johnson’s 1891 recording of “the Whistling Coon” begins with his announcement of himself: “Mr. George W. Johnson will now sing “the Whistling Coon” at the Edison Phonograph Works.” The form of the introduction is

characteristic of most early phonographic recordings, which begin with an unidentified voice announcing the recording artist and piece of music that is to follow. Johnson however, somewhat uncharacteristically, announced himself on his own recordings. George W. Johnson's announcement of himself would not have been unusual in and of itself had it not been musically contrasted and conceptually contradicted by what was to follow. The stilted tone Johnson adopts for his introduction was in some sense a highly common affected voice in which announcers had to shout in a strident enunciative fashion to make sure the object of the recording was effectively named. Victor Emerson's command for Johnson to speak loudly then was as much a demand for proper fidelity as it was a kind of violent aesthetic call for Johnson to conform to the phonic and symbolic conventions of early phonography. Typically, performers shouted loudly into the acoustic recording horn, which gave a kind of sprayed or "tiny" quality to their voices that designated them as affectively phonographic.<sup>110</sup> This announcer voice Johnson invoked was—especially in the case of "coon songs"—usually a voice that was recognized as highly exaggerated and for that reason referential in a certain sense only to the phonograph. This aspect of phonography can at one level be attributed to the recording process itself in which recording artists—as Emerson's earlier demand for perfection implies—performed and re-performed each song continuously all the way through. Due to the limited mechanics of recording as well as the temporal limitations of the wax cylinder, which

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<sup>110</sup> This "tiny" quality, a common feature of early phonographic recording before the invention of electrical recording, was largely the result of the acoustic process via the recording horn, in which the amplitudes of both low and high tones, if they were recorded at all, were attenuated. "Tiny" in fact became the sonic metonym for the phonograph, perhaps most famously harped on in John Philip Sousa's 1906 essay "The Menace of Mechanical Music." *Appleton's Magazine*. Vol. 8, 1906.

could only record about three minutes, it might be said that there was no time or space to cultivate any more dynamic and less standardized form of introduction.<sup>111</sup> Of course, these mechanical limitations do not actually account for the complexity of the presence of the introduction itself, which I would suggest, can be accounted for more by the announcement's performativity. The announcement that began early phonographs at once tried to create the presence of the live stage; the vaudeville state, the minstrel stage, especially in "coon songs." Yet in so attempting, the phonographic introduction also, often unintentionally, through such a stilted and repetitive form, ended up acknowledging the impossibility of the minstrel stage's true presence in phonographic reproduction. It was the form of announcement itself that called attention to the fact that it and what followed was a phonographic reproduction. One can detect a similar dynamic in the later "coon songs" of Arthur Collins, a white man, whose singing voice as much as it tried to affect a signature of minstrelized blackness sounded comically identical to his own announcing voice.<sup>112</sup> Bert Williams' brand of "black-on-black minstrelsy" in his recordings of "coon songs" with George Walker—in particular "My Little Zulu Baby" and "Pretty Desdemone (sic)"—produced a similar kind of sublimity when Williams adopted an enunciative affect in introducing his songs, which trickled perceptibly into his minstrelized "coon" singing.<sup>113</sup> At one

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<sup>111</sup> See Brooks, 28 and Gelatt, 49.

<sup>112</sup> Listen to Arthur Collins' earlier "coon songs", particularly his rendition of "Bill Bailey Won't You Please Come Home" c.1902. The similarity of Collins "minstrelized" voice and his announcing voice pervades nearly all of his songs in fact even songs that were not strictly "coon songs" bear this trait, perhaps further pointing to the contagious effects of the black voice in phonography.

<sup>113</sup> For a greater discussion of Bert Williams' minstrelsy career and its role in the making of racialized stardom and notions of diaspora at the turn of the century see Louis Chude-Sokei's path-breaking book *the Last Darcy: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy and the African Diaspora*.

level the cause of this unintended parody could have been a relic of the minstrel stage and the “coon song” genre, in which an intentional ironic and highly symbolic “black” double was produced, riffing on and reifying stereotypes and pathologies of “black life,” for the very purpose of obscuring white involvement and ensuring primarily white spectatorial pleasure.<sup>114</sup> However, if this was the case for the black voice of phonography then the phonographic announcement seemed to double back against itself in a more-than-ironic gesture, which threatened to expose the symbol of the minstrel mask/voice as the technology of phonographic reproduction and hence collapse the ironic distance. Moreover, in terms of the human voice, the announcement aesthetic of early phonography sought to deliver or even more stage a presence it could promise only as much as it could not deliver. Like the repetitive form of the phonographic announcement, which promised the human voice, the black voice always teetered on the brink of mere affect. Hence it was the affective quality of the black voice in early phonography—its emblematic yoking to minstrelsy—which ensured the fidelity of its symbolic value and phenomenal presence in the absence of the actual minstrel stage. Indeed the symbolic and phonic mask of minstrelsy pervades Johnson’s early recordings, yet that same structure is also further complicated by Johnson’s work.

The choice of song “the Whistling Coon” was again made by Johnson’s white patron Victor Emerson. “The Whistling Coon” was a classic from the minstrel stage written by the white vaudevillian Sam Devere. Brooks in his writing on Johnson notes

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<sup>114</sup> See James H. Dormon’s on the “Coon Song craze” cited earlier.

that on the minstrel stage the song always inspired “a shower of nickels from the white folks.”<sup>115</sup>

*The Whistling Coon*

Oh, I’ve seen in my time some very funny folks,  
But the funniest of all I know,  
Is a colored individual as sure as you’re alive,  
He’s black as any black cow...  
You may talk until you’re tired, but you’ll never get a word  
From this very funny queer old coon...  
He’s a knock-kneed, double-jointed, hunky-plunky moke  
But he’s happy when he whistles this tune...  
(Whistles refrain)

He’s got a pair of lips, like a pound of liver split,  
And a nose like an injun rubber shoe,  
He’s a limpy, happy, chuckle headed huckleberry nig,  
And he whistles like a happy killy loo...  
He’s an independent, free and easy, fat and greasy ham,  
With a cranium like a big baboon...  
Say! I never heard him talk to anybody in my life,  
But he’s happy when he whistles this tune...  
(Whistles refrain)

He’d whistle in the morning, thro’ the day and thro’ the night,  
And he’d whistle like the devil going to bed...  
Why he’d whistle like a locomotive engine in his sleep,  
And he whistled when his wife was dead...  
One day a fellow hit him with a brick upon the mouth,  
And his jaw swelled up like a balloon...  
Now he goes along shaking like a monkey in a fit,  
And this is how he whistles that tune...  
(Whistles unsteadily)<sup>116</sup>

The lucrative nature of the song is likely one reason why Emerson chose a song in which “a black man made fun of himself,”<sup>117</sup> but the even greater motivation to

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<sup>115</sup> Brook *Lost*, 28.

<sup>116</sup> This rendition of the lyrics is cited in Brooks *Black Sounds*, 28.

choose such a work might have been to appropriate the very displacing symbolics and narrative irony of the minstrel stage and sonically paint them onto the phonograph—effectively black facing the phonograph.<sup>117</sup> With this visually figurative language I do not mean to suggest that the phonograph then simply became a version of or strict continuance of the minstrel stage. Though such a position would be tempting, especially given the obvious referentiality of the “coon song” genre to the symbolics of the minstrel stage. However, this perspective would miss the very fact of phonographic reproduction, which I have set out to analyze throughout this entire work. On the contrary, the choice of “the Whistling Coon” seems more a desperate attempt to make present the minstrel stage as such. Meaning the significance of the song perhaps more sinisterly lies in its ability to perform the phonic and narratively racialized presence of the minstrel stage (which of course carries minstrelsy’s displacing symbolics as well) as the very means to suppress their actual absence engendered in the phonograph. In fact, rather than neatly reduce the recording to a simple continuance of minstrelsy; the choice of song actually makes the recording more complicated, because it attempts to mask over the recording as a reproduction, as a recording. This dynamic becomes even more complicated once Johnson begins singing.

The song begins with a ragtime piano introduction played at a slightly brisk pace—probably truncated to fit the recording limitations of the wax cylinder. Johnson

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Martin Kevorkian makes a more contemporary and more visually grounded point in his work *Color Monitors: the Black Face of Technology in America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006.

comes in with an unusually bouncy style, which actually distinguished him from both the minstrel stage as well as the later predominately “white” style of vaudevillian crooning that would characterize many genres of early phonography including “coon songs.” Brooks points out some of the significance of Johnson’s voice, noting: “Johnson’s performance *sounded* authentic, just like the black panhandler on the street. This was far more unusual than it might seem, for in the early days of recording most artists sang in distinct, stilted, almost shouted tones, striving above all else to make the words very clear and understandable.”<sup>119</sup> Phonographic difference then while to a degree referential to the *presence* or even possibly the *experience* of the minstrel stage engendered a different kind of racialized performance. Through the phonograph, the black voice was not exclusively located within the economy of racial contagion that defined the perverse symbolic masquerade of the minstrel stage. As Eric Lott reminds us about the necessity of the threat of intermixture that characterized the minstrel stage: “Minstrelsy’s focus on disruptions and infractions of the flesh, its theatrical dream work condensed and displaced those [racialized psychic] fears, imaged in the “black” body, that could be neither forgotten nor fully acknowledged.”<sup>120</sup> Lott’s point about racialized and sexualized transgression in the minstrel stage is revealing. Johnson’s “authenticity” as a black male street singer undoubtedly held the potential to fulfill the white private fantasy of black public

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<sup>119</sup> Brooks *Lost*, 31.

<sup>120</sup> Eric Lott. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993, 147. For a further and more extensive critique of Lott’s rather one sided telling of Minstrelsy particularly in its almost exclusive focus on male and male –on-male minstrelsy see Jayna Brown’s excellent work *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*. Durham, NY: Duke University Press, 2008.

threat, and in fact may have, as a recording, functioned as some kind of inherent mediated policing of blackness analogous to the function of the minstrel stage.<sup>121</sup>

After all Johnson is singing a song that narrates the violent destruction of a black man at the hands of a white mob. Johnson is seemingly recouping the violent symbolics of the minstrel stage in which black performers were made to introject the content and form of their own destruction and desecration. Then again there is something highly ecstatic about singing, about whistling, that even and perhaps especially in the context of the minstrel stage (and its apparent phonographic tribute) which must take the form of excising those very attempts of forced racial introjection; creatively spitting out what the white world thinks it has made Johnson swallow—especially when that swill contains one’s own violent demise as life.<sup>122</sup> Thus I would challenge the reduction of George W. Johnson’s work to a mere continuation of minstrelsy as it ignores the actually rather complicated fact that it is a recording; Johnson’s voice and perhaps his body were also a record/cylinder. It is in this sense that Lott’s analysis might misstep its own point around this term “flesh,” which must be thought more complexly as a

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<sup>121</sup> Again Bryan Wagner’s important work *Disturbing the Peace* reaches a similar conclusion as to Johnson’s work, yet I think there is a much more complicated possibility for Johnson’s work when we take into account the longer history of the anxiety over the phonograph and early phonography and even more when we consider how this “historical” narrative is endlessly complicated by the work of hip-hop turntablists and deejays, who have effectively made possible a radical reinterpretation of early black phonography.

<sup>122</sup> Here I am channeling not only the broader ethos of Fred Moten’s *In the Break*, cited earlier, but specifically a talk and poetry reading he gave at California College for the Arts in December 2014, in which he sharply criticized the reduced place of black music in Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave*. Moten’s insight that in the film black music through the camera’s perspective is only figured in scenes of utter abjection—most notably McQueen’s Northrup singing “Roll Jordan,” in and as a sign of defeat. That blackness is reduced, through song, to a site/sight of putative abjection uncritically accepts the hegemony of the human against which abjection is configured. Moten’s broader oeuvre brilliantly expounds on this problematic. I am also encouraged in this re-reading of Johnson by Darieck Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010.



materially rich and dynamic symbolic imperative. When Lott speaks of the minstrel stage as facilitating racial transgression and affirmation through the flesh, he seems really more to mean body than flesh; or even more he seems to be referring to the minstrel mask itself, which in minstrelsy is not only symbolically applied to but often imaginatively substituted for the body. The phonograph, as I have suggested, was a kind of black-faced minstrel mask that delighted and displeased the racial logics of the white imaginary. However, this technological masking itself belies a racialized reality of the phonograph, which must be thought more critically in relation to not just the symbolics of race, but also the inscriptive process of racialization itself, which both initiates and exceeds the realm of the symbolic.

From George W. Johnson's song it would be impossible to deny that the phonograph, to a degree, occupied a continual legacy of minstrelsy. In discussing George W. Johnson's recordings, Gustavus Stadler further identifies a connection between the contemporary phenomena of simulated phonographic lynching recordings, which were fictionalized through studio theater tricks, and the theatrical fantasies and social simulations of the minstrel stage:

“The Whistling Coon” and “The Laughing Song.” These numbers—which were built around refrains in which Johnson whistled and laughed, of course—drew on the same fascination with the black voice as corporeal, inarticulate, prelinguistic, and pushed to the extremes of embodiment as was reflected in the lynching cylinders, and they reaffirmed the sense that these sounds were somehow closest to embodying the process of sound reproduction itself.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Stadler, 12.

The black voice was undoubtedly tied to this corporeal and corporealizing logic through the phonograph. The black voice played a crucial role in displacing the process of inscription itself from the phonograph—the graphic nature of its writing and the basis of its reproduction—and projecting it instead onto the symbolic scripting of the black body.<sup>124</sup> The black body had been both the mask of 19<sup>th</sup> century minstrelsy and the monstrously idealized ornament of early 20<sup>th</sup> century lynching. And it is under these signs and iterations of the black bodies became the symbolic referent of the black voice. Through these ideological strictures of the black body the black voice acquired a symbolic authority, which would bolster its phonic affectivity. Stadler’s point is crucial in marking out the affectivity of the black voice in and as phonographic reproduction, which was carried out simultaneously under the figure of the minstrel mask, the minstrel stage and the scene of lynching. Staking out Johnson’s relationship to minstrelsy, the formal context for which “the Whistling Coon” was composed, and the scene of lynching, the violent act, which “the Whistling Coon” disturbingly normalizes, is important, because it allow us a kind of cursory listening; one idealized by and through the phonograph.

While the dynamic between the choice of minstrel coon song: “the Whistling Coon” and Johnson’s “authentic” black street singing voice makes possible the black facing of the phonograph, it even more importantly allows us to understand the particular web of commodification in which the black voice and the phonograph were

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<sup>124</sup> For a sharp discussion of the relationship between inscription in more discursive terms particularly in other forms of contemporary media, see Roland L. Jackson’s important work *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*. Albany: NY: State University of New York, 2006.

entrenched. The choice of “the Whistling Coon” renders Johnson’s announcement of himself silent. Johnson effectively occupied that impossible yet necessary position of “the commodity that speaks.”<sup>125</sup> In his reading of Marx’s famous paradox of valuation, Fred Moten identifies the inextricable link between blackness, sound (speech) and commodification. Moten sharply points out how simultaneously the possible and impossible commodity that speaks instantiates an ontology or even a performativity in which what it speaks; its semanticity is often irrelevant in light of the fact that it speaks. More to it, that magical (as Marx’s tone and language imply) sign of animation that is the commodity’s speaking, which ensures its embeddedness exclusively in a “sociality of exchange,” also obscures its ventriloquization by its means of (re)production.<sup>126</sup> While it was the enunciative voice that Johnson performs that affectively draws attention to the recording as a phonographic reproduction, it is the song’s objective to defer such a revelation by throwing his voice into a symbolic web of over-representation (and overdetermination) in the tradition of minstrelsy. However, the moment Johnson’s voice begins singing in his bouncy gate he produces an (imaginative) phonic reality, of “*sounded*” Negro authenticity, in which the very possibility that he is announcing himself—that that enunciative voice could be his voice—is rendered an impossibility. Johnson speaks and indeed sings from that impossible—and for Marx paradoxical—place of the commodity. Through the singing of an “authentic coon” that follows Johnson’s announcing of himself,

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<sup>125</sup> Marx, 83.

<sup>126</sup> Here I am relying on though surely differing from Moten’s reading of Marx’s classic writing on the commodity fetish. Of course I am also invoking my own understanding of this figure in Marx as well. See both Moten’s *In the Break*, “Resistance of the Object: Hester’s Scream,” and Marx’s essay on “Exchange” Chapter II of *Capital*, Vol. 1.

Johnson's earlier speech is rendered as mute qua subject, but as another kind of object he speaks. It is Johnson's announcement that sings and his singing that renders him silent, but through this ontological silence Johnson speaks and sings. Not unlike the minstrel mask, Johnson's style of singing sought to obscure the connectivity between the symbolics of race, as well as their attendant reservoir of imaginative potential from the inscriptive surface of racialization: the record. The overrepresentative economy, which Johnson's voice initiated and was initiated in, was constructed as the remedy to the frustratingly unintelligible glyphic economy of the "ugly hiss," which stymied Edison's eventual aspirations of phonographic commodification. Bryan Wagner makes a related point in his book *Disturbing the Peace*, stating:

At a time when most singers were bellowing or overenunciating into the horn, straining to the point of stiling their words in an attempt to register unambiguously on the needle, Johnson was dropping his closing consonants and slurring between words, sometimes with discernible vibrato, all the while remaining entirely comprehensible to listeners... When people listened to Johnson's records, they testified that they were hearing a voice that was "exactly like" what they *expected* to hear<sup>127</sup>

In considering Johnson's song, "the Laughing Coon," which Johnson wrote himself—unlike "the Whistling Coon"—Bryan Wagner considers the racial-symbolic legacies of the minstrel stage that contribute to the capacity and incapacity of Johnson to sing, or as he puts it "to speak." Wagner points out how the overdetermining and overdetermined symbolics of the minstrel stage do not end at the phonic and symbolic level of the song, but in fact bleed into the syntactical and narrative dimensions of the

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<sup>127</sup> See Bryan Wagner *the Peace Black Culture and the Police Power After Slavery*, 186.

“Laughing Coon.” The song tells a story in which the singer/narrator encounters a vigilante mob, possibly a lynch mob, that immediately racially objectifies the narrator for the purpose of doing violence to him. This racial “objectification” occurs through the imaginative production and phonic utterance of “the racial epithet,” after which the song is named: coon.<sup>128</sup>

*The Laughing Coon/The Laughing Song*

As I was coming ‘round the corner, I heard some people say,  
Here comes the dandy darkey, here he comes this way...  
His heel is like a snow plow, his mouth is like a trap,  
And when he opens it gently you will see a fearful gap...  
And then I laughed...  
(Laughs heartily in time with the music)

They said his mother was a princess, his father was a prince,  
And he’d been the apple of their eye if he had not been a quince...  
But he’ll be the king of Africa in the sweet bye and bye,  
And when I heard them say it, why I’d laugh until I’d cry ...And Then I  
laughed...

(Laughs to music)

So now kind friends just listen, to what I’m going to say,  
I’ve tried my best to please you with my simple little lay...  
Now whether you think it funny or a quiet bit of chaff,  
Why all I’m going to do is just to end it with a laugh...  
And then I laughed...  
(Laughs to music)<sup>129</sup>

Wagner discusses the racial epithets: “darky”, “coon”, “nigger,” that continually inaugurate the terms of address between the narrator and his would be lynchers. Within this context and the broader context of Reconstruction America, Wagner defines the racial epithet then as that which “claims to say everything that needs to be

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<sup>128</sup> See Appendix for the words to “the Laughing Coon”.

<sup>129</sup> Again the lyrics to this song are cited in Brooks *Black Sounds*, 31.

said about somebody. It does not modify or describe its object; rather, it structures the field in which the object is perceived... [Hence] the object appears within the world, but it does not speak.”<sup>130</sup> Not surprisingly it is at this moment that Wagner nominally invokes Frantz Fanon, from whom a great deal of thought has sprung about the racial logics of the “stereotype,” an economy in which the black voice undoubtedly, at least partially, operates.<sup>131</sup> Moreover, it is in Fanon’s name that a great deal of thinking has also been done about the phenomenology of violence. Against these two backdrops Wagner turns to the historical and ontological referents of police power, to which he sees early black phonography (and all of black popular culture throughout his larger work) as indexically and historically referring. In this regard, Johnson’s laughing then, for Wagner, becomes a point of fetishization for its very unintelligibility, its semantic opacity, which supposedly sheds the referentiality of the black body and of any prescribed terms of recognition; that is the same terms, or even the same body, by which one might be interpolated or called into the racial epithet. Why Wagner sees the extra-linguistic capacity in Johnson’s laughter, but not in his whistling remains unclear. Moreover, how he can argue that any part of the symbolic economy of Johnson’s singing, of which the affective laughter seems the most integral part, is strictly immune to the prescribed forms of subjection and terms of recognition of racial objectification is highly suspect.<sup>132</sup> At one level such a move can be attributed

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> See Homi Bhabha’s well-known chapter on “the stereotype”: “The other question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism” in *The Location of Culture*.

<sup>132</sup> For a brilliant and I would argue anticipatory argument against some of Wagner’s distinction between the speakable and the unspeakable and more particularly how blackness is the position from which no speech can occur, see Saidiya Hartman’s foundation work *Scenes of Subjection*, which I have

to a misapprehension of Fanon's thought, in which Fanon goes at pains to describe the excessive indexicality of the black voice to the black body; a point, which Wagner clearly avoids at his own peril. Rather than argue that Johnson's laugh evaded or possibly subverted any semantic field through which a phonological or semantic referent, namely the black body, could be conjured, it seems the opposite would be more the case. Meaning that Johnson's laughing in its phonic intensity and sheer affectivity was meant to summon the black body itself as ever phenomenally present, even sensually so, at the disavowal of the condition of possibility for that body in phonographic inscription. For Wagner then, it was not that Johnson's laughing did not speak; on the contrary it spoke too much, so much so as to silence the less intelligible narrative (of violence) of the song which Wagner appreciates so. In reinscribing the semanticity of Johnson's laugh, Wagner's claim considers what his laughing means much more so than how his laughing means:

What encrypted the black voice was not primarily the fact of the groove, not in the sense that record grooves can be "read" or decrypted by a phonograph needle. Rather, blackness was encrypted by the fact that it could only be decrypted by the technology that made the voice appear as if it were already thrown. From this point of reproduction, the black voice's primary effects became indistinguishable from their technological condition of possibility... Alienating the voice from the body, in this instance, creates rather than disrupts speech's capacity to stand for subjectivity, producing a new opportunity for face-to-face immediacy between collector and informant. The aura is made, not destroyed, by the phonograph.<sup>133</sup>

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referred to throughout this work. Particularly the first chapter: "Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance." Additionally, for a critique of the subversive effects of laughter see Chapter 4 of Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*, entitled "The Thing and Its Doubles."

<sup>133</sup> Wagner, 194.

While Wagner's concern for the construction of phonographic authenticity is certainly prescient in light of the long history of ethnographic capture of the black voice in the creation of a romantically "found" black folk tradition. Authenticity is a less viable and certainly less vital diagnosis for offering a glimpse at the workings of blackness, because it eschews the complexity of inscription, of writing itself for the value of narrative content. For Fanon a counter-narration offered an opposition to what was being said, but only when it fundamentally changed the terms of recognition. If the racial epithet—at play in the famous trembling words spoke by that French boy to Fanon—is the production of blackness as the black voice, as the "symbol of negation," from which its graphicality is obscured, then blackness cannot be simply re-signified or re-narrativized within the same phonic terms of recognition, with the same voice; even if that voice is shouting or laughing. This is a problematic conclusion for both Fanon and Wagner in completely different ways, and so they respond from completely different bodily and epistemological schemas.

For Wagner the conundrum of the black body, as it is produced unconditionally as a purely phonic and symbolic object through the phonograph—the form and content of the racial epithet—achieves a kind of resolution when that prescribed form of embodiment is simply refilled with a counter-narrative. Wagner injects George W. Johnson's laughter then with an oppositional non-semanticity as semanticity, a non-meaning as meaning, and in so doing he attempts to inject new narrative life into the phenomenality of the black body or as he puts it, he attempts to recover or identify the Ellisonian "lower frequencies" where black speaking is



continually being invented in response to its awkward occasion.”<sup>134</sup> Not unlike the phenomenality of invisibility then, Wagner sees black phonography as producing a body whose presence is perpetually felt, but whose narrativity and hence its (full) subjectivity, as that which can speak, are continually misapprehended or misrecognized “in the world.” The better question after Wagner’s extensive hermeneutic work toward understanding Johnson’s “laughter” though seems to be: are we really talking about the same “world” here? Or at the very least then what are the limits to this “world” to which he is referring? Even more, as a response to Wagner’s insistence that blackness be prescribed within and inscribed by the bounds of the law, are we talking about the same (kind of) body? What remains interesting and most important about the occasion of Johnson’s announcement, his singing, his whistling and his laughing is the kind of body they create and the black phonographic world we might imagine beyond the inscriptive racial logics of the law (of genre, of the avant-garde, of form even).

More than simply understanding blackness as the invisible obverse in the world of speaking subjects, in which it does not speak, we might do better to understand *how* blackness points to the limitations of that regime of symbolic recognition as such; where it is continually thought to reside and to whose means and ends it is continually subjected. We do not simply have to go away from the black voice or the black body to which it continually points. Wagner’s analysis does not go far enough then in confronting the black body’s entangledness within phonographic

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

technology and the form rather than the content of its inscription. Hence, the notion of what constitutes the phonograph or a technology more broadly, for Wagner remains flatly untroubled. Therefore, again, I would propose that blackness and the black voice be considered constitutive of the form of the phonograph, and that the phonograph then be understood as inextricably bound to the form of the body and the black voice it required.<sup>135</sup> After all, the invisible hands of Ellison's narrator, thrown from an invisible world, could still black-eye the unsuspecting passersby. What I am after here then is the black voice's writing of phonographic technology from that place and force of the lower frequencies.

To this end, I would propose that we understand more than the fact that the phonograph—through the ideality of the black voice—simply perpetuated the already arrived-ness of the minstrel mask and “the racial-epithet.” Like I have suggested by way of Fanon earlier, I contend that the affective symbolic nature of the black voice also left a space of “waiting” in which a kind of writing, both its initiation and excess, could be imagined and realized. Confronting only the symbolics of racialization does not in a deeper sense allow us to understand the racialized and sexualized underpinnings of the phonograph.<sup>136</sup> Nor does a strictly symbolic reading of the

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<sup>135</sup> Wagner instead of thinking the phonograph and the black body defers the black body's inscription to the law; firstly in that he sees blackness qua object as inscribed by the symbolic authority of natural law—and likely eventually blackness inscribed as subject (later) in civil law. This need to substitute the (proprietary of) “the cultural” for (the proprietary of) “the legal” on the part of Wagner seems to literally *reinscribe* a similar level of phenomenal and symbolic violence to blackness in the very way that Wagner is attempting to criticize.

<sup>136</sup> In listening to Johnson's recording work more generously and understanding the form and not just the content of its mediation I intend to push through the minstrel paradigmatic that, while undoubtedly central to representational work done on black music, has tended to—perhaps ironically with the same totality it often seeks to critique—reduced all black cultural and aesthetic production to merely a re-presentation, a re-performance of the dramaturgy of the minstrels stage. Some of the more salient

phonograph show us the importance of this idea of “flesh,” which is equally central to blackness as the phonograph, and which perhaps identifies the surface from which a kind of “waiting” takes place. Understanding the extent to which the black voice functioned phonographically as a symbol of negation, gets us part way to understanding blackness. Undoubtedly, it is through the black voice, through Johnson’s voice as it was reduced to the symbolic economy of minstrelsy, that we must trespass in order to understand another kind of sound, the sound of blackness, the sound of the phonograph, which was always there, but was never heard. In the interest of attuning ourselves to this sound, to this kind of hearing, I would suggest a turn to a notion of “flesh” and its implicit relation to commodification in phonography. Therefore, we must further consider Johnson’s recording; we must understand the cutting of the stylus into the wax of the record and the tracing of the stylus along the grooves that affirm its reproduction.

In and against the continual embodiment engendered by George W. Johnson’s voice and intensified most in his whistling and later his laughing, there ebbs and flows the phonographic supplement of another body, which perhaps belies the phonic symbolic body of the black voice: the phonographic hiss.

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writing in this tradition has been Paul Gilroy’s continued work on the minstrel legacy’s performative and gestural presence within Jimi Hendrix. Persistent in Gilroy’s thought, and I would suggest much of the writing that sets black performance strictly within the minstrel tradition, there is a lack of attention paid to the reproductive technology and commodity status of the phonograph as black music and *visa versa*.

## Both Are Johnson



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Unlike in the context of John Lomax’s famous recordings of Lead Belly, Blind Lemon and other black artists in prisons in the 1930’s, phonographic hiss did not always reify the authenticity of its source, of the black voice, in the early days of phonography when Johnson was recording. Rather this irregular and intense sound—which was an impediment in Edison’s eyes to fidelity and hence the phonograph’s commodification and commercialization—would have went largely unheard or more it was something which the burgeoning phonograph audience would be entrained to unhear. The phonographic hiss engendered another form of hearing as unhearing, just as it required another form of speaking as not speaking. The phonographic hiss to which I am referring is actually the sound of an arm—likely Victor Emerson’s—winding the crank attached to the recording stylus against the cylinder to cut

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<sup>137</sup> This invented and reconstructed comparison riffs on the rather famous 1905 Victor advertisement featuring an image of Enrico Caruso and an image of one of his gramophone records and claims simply “Both are Caruso.” Implying the fidelity of the record is indistinguishable from the actual presence of Caruso. Here I am invoking another way of hearing, of understanding, and of seeing this provocative comparison. See Gelatt, 141-142.

Johnson's voice into the record.<sup>138</sup> At the *hinge* [la brisure] between Emerson's fast and unevenly winding hands—the threat of perfection they constantly wielded towards Johnson, the way they formed him, formed his voice—and that recording stylus that inscribed the phonic vibrations of Johnson's voice lays the force and energy of blackness. Johnson's voice is the supplement to the surface of the cylinder (record) and indeed the process that bears and is made possible by his voice. Emerson's arm, embodied in the phonographic hiss, is the trace, the “opaque energy” against which Johnson's voice is defined and which Johnson's voice is supposed to transcend. However an impasse arises at the surface of the cylinder (record) where both the movements of Johnson's voice and the movement of Emerson's arm are inscribed. Whether the high tones of Johnson's whistling refrains throughout the song or his (literal) whistling of “Dixie” at the end of song, or his bellyful chuckles in “the Laughing Coon,” Johnson's voice and its (white) mechanical supplement convene irreducibly at the surface of the record. No chain of signification, nor “sequences of differences,” arises within the terms of recognition, because it is the inoperative convergence of the surface, which Johnson's voice is supposed to obscure. Johnson's voice, and both following it and preceding it, his body, become the terms of recognition, they become presence and constitute the basis for phonographic

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<sup>138</sup> Here I would clarify that I am to a small degree speculating that Johnson's early 1890's recordings were recorded by the “older” hand-crank motor. While Edison had technically developed a phonograph with a small electrical motor in the 1880's such a mechanism was not available until the early 1900's. For commercial recordings companies primarily used hand-crank motor that ran on mechanical energy. One can of course, as I have suggested, hear the presence of the hand-cranked motor on Johnson's earliest recordings, in which there is an irregular hiss, which is not exclusively the product of cylinder degradation, but also Emerson's cranking hands. For more on the development of the various phonographic motors see Millard's *America on Record*.

*experience* or more they become our listening. In other words, the already-always-arrived-ness of Johnson's body and voice within the symbolic economy of minstrelsy and the "racial epithet" preclude or obscure the "always-already-there-ness" of phonographic inscription and hence partially block another kind of listening, another kind of time and another world perhaps moored to another body.<sup>139</sup>

Confronting the symbolics of racialization does at least give us a glimpse into this inscriptive mechanical, technological and commodified surface of the record.<sup>140</sup> Focusing on the symbolics of the phonograph—while it cannot get us all the way there—at least shows us the importance of the surface of the record: a radical site from which we can glean blackness. To again invoke Fanon, understanding the extent to which the black voice functioned phonographically as a symbol of negation, gets us part way, but only part way, towards understanding the writing of blackness as phonographic modernity. Therefore, I do not, strictly speaking, seek to reject the phenomenal rendering of black music for some more "pure" form of listening. Such a position would only reify the very idea of that "purely" phenomenal conception of music that I am attempting to complicate. Rather I would like to listen through this

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<sup>139</sup> Derrida *Of Grammatology*, 65.

<sup>140</sup> In listening to Johnson's recording work more generously and understanding the form and not just the content of its mediation I intend to push through the minstrel paradigmatic that, while undoubtedly central to representational work done on black music, has tended to—perhaps ironically with the same totality it often seeks to critique—reduced all black cultural and aesthetic production to merely a representation, a re-performance of the dramaturgy of the minstrel stage. Some of the more salient writing in this tradition has been Paul Gilroy's continued work on the minstrel legacy's performative and gestural presence within Jimi Hendrix. Persistent in Gilroy's thought, and I would suggest much of the writing that sets black performance strictly within the minstrel tradition, there is a lack of attention paid to the reproductive technology and commodity status of the phonograph as black music and *visa versa*.

phenomenal and symbolic rending of the black voice in order to trouble the foundations for its traditional distinction in the phonograph.

In the interest of attuning ourselves to phonographic blackness, to this kind of hearing, I would suggest a turn to a notion of “flesh” and its relation to commodification involved in phonography we must further recognize Johnson’s recording; we must engage the cutting of the stylus into the wax of the record and the tracing of the stylus along the grooves that affirms its reproduction. I am trying to outline a kind of hearing that strains towards the, at least partial, graphical and glyphic absence engendered by phonographic reproduction through the idealization of the black voice, a kind of hearing of black music; a hearing that strains toward a black body that is always there, but never present, never heard and in so being marks the condition of possibility for all hearing in modernity.<sup>141</sup> In Johnson’s work it is the dissonant and discordant hiss of his voice’s mechanical inscription embodied in Victor Emerson’s threatening and reeling arm. From Johnson’s work two important points arise, both of which I have only hinted at here, and which need to be further explored, because they clarify the genealogical underpinnings of blackness in and as the phonograph. The first point is the way in which blackness is not only symbolically linked to the phonograph through the black voice, but more the way blackness through the black voice became epistemologically and imaginatively built

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<sup>141</sup>See Derrida’s thinking on *la brisure* in *Of Grammatology* as it relates to a kind of thinking through the trace. Particularly as “the trace” represents that which has been suppressed for the fascination and indeed desire of a *logos*. Hence the trace is continually consigned to the realm of absence, for that which is present, namely the absence of writing for the presence of speech. Derrida alludes to a long philosophical legacy of the traces sublimation from Plato to Heidegger, or from Classical dialectic, classical *logos* to modern metaphysics. This is significant for how it helps us think through and beyond Johnson’s body as it was subjected to and hence rearticulated as phonographic inscription.

into the phonograph apparatus itself. The second point is the alienating processes by which blackness has been graphically inscribed in the surface or more the *flesh* of the record in the *spacing* and the opaque written-ness of the grooves.<sup>142</sup> Each of these predicaments show how the phonograph would have been absolutely unthinkable if not for the phenomenal and symbolic presence engendered in the black voice through which the profoundly glyphic nature of blackness has been imagined and produced.

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<sup>142</sup>See Fred Moten's provocative point: "The doubleness (blackness) of blackness is given as the aftermath of a determined durative, fleshy, sexual encounter: the symbolics is cast in reference to the materiality of the miscegenative natal occasion." Moten *In the Break*, 70.



If the marks on George W. Johnson's father's back and the lines Johnson's voice inscribed on the surface of the record can teach us a truth; that would be to never underestimate the complex lives of the *black object*.<sup>143</sup>

## **Chapter 2: Bessie Smith and the Orthophonic Telepoesis of Electric Speech:**

### **Loop A:**

“An old Victrola of long ago” is wheeled onto the stage, it is fitted for an over-sized record by an unnamed stagehand, and just as the stylus is lowered, the Georgia Jazz Band strikes up a rendition of Ma Rainey's “Moonshine Blues.”<sup>144</sup> In usual accordance with the band's 8-bar introduction, Ma Rainey's “gravelly” voice emanates from the phonograph singing as if it were there, as if it were present. Rainey's voice continues to fill the crowded venue, yet she remains “unseen” to the expectant audience. Finally—likely at the peak of the audience's confusion or anticipation—the “huge cabinet doors swing open,” and Rainey steps forth from the Victrola in a shimmering and ebullient dress, to reveal that she had always been there, inside the machine, making it sound all along.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Here I am further encouraged by Ronaldo Wilson's poetic interventions in *Poems of the Black Object*. New York, NY: Futurepoems Books, 2009.

<sup>144</sup> Listen to Ma Rainey's Double LP entitled simply *Ma Rainey*. Milestone Records, 1971, ASIN: B000Z7TCJI. Vinyl.

<sup>145</sup> The retelling of this performance is modified and duplicated from at least three different perspectives in Chris Albertson's expansive biography, *Bessie*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003, 113-115. My description here is a composite of Ruby's (Bessie's cousin) portrayal, Thomas A. Dorsey's and Bob Hayes' 1925 newspaper article in the *Chicago Defender*, February 13, 1925. All are cited and quoted in Albertson's book.

It might be both strange and fitting to begin a chapter largely—though not exclusively—about Bessie Smith, with a description of a 1925 concert performance by the artist who was dubiously claimed to be Smith’s musical mentor, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey. However, Rainey’s performance provides an apt preface for understanding black female blues singers, and most especially Smith’s, relationship to the technology of the phonograph. Even more, this scene pushes us to understand the way in which the black voice was always already built into the phonograph, and in fact made to stand in for the machine so much so as to efface the mechanism’s very presence and functioning. This tension has always been tied to the inscription of the black voice on and in the black body, which has obscured its inscription in the phonograph. Ma Rainey’s brilliant performance both illustrates and challenges this dynamic. At first this relation may seem only characteristic of early mechanical and acoustical phonography in the work of George W. Johnson for example. And indeed it will be the claim of many that the phonograph’s electrification and further commercialization required the black voice only obliquely rather than centrally as its animating force of exchange. However, as black female blues phonography demonstrates, the legacy of racial and sexual *inscription* through the phonograph, and even built into the phonograph, continued with the scientific anatomization that contributed to the phonograph’s electrification. As phonographic technology became electrified and fitted with even more rigorous technical and scientific knowledge, particularly the knowledge of orthophonics, this collapse of voice into body was further symbolically cemented, even as it was being technologically and

epistemologically undone. The conflation of the black voice with the black body, not only rode against Ma Rainey's performative suggestions, but it also belied the epistemological reality with which the black voice and blackness had written phonographic technology. It is this dynamic tension between the black voice's supplementary presence for the phonograph and its excessive and fantastical embodiment within (an idea of) the black body, which allows us to give a different hearing, or even unhearing to Bessie Smith's work.

Much like the sonic convergence of Emerson and Johnson's body—the way they cut one another and hence cut the record—black female blues phonography imagined another kind of body or corporeality through the phonograph. My attempt here then is to connect the imaginative performance of Ma Rainey, and the (embodied) vocal work of Bessie Smith, with the more contemporary artistic traditions of black electronic experimentation, deejaying, putting fingers to the surfaces of records; cutting, mixing, juggling and scratching. Scholars and critics such as James Snead, Amiri Baraka, Tricia Rose, Albert Murray, Houston Baker and Nelson George, to name only a few, have drawn parallels between the form and content of blues and hip-hop suggestive of a longer and at times more variegated genealogy of black music.<sup>146</sup> Hip-hop scholar Imani Perry even goes as far as to provide a broader sense of what these scholars are getting at when she suggests that

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<sup>146</sup> See Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University, University Press of New England: 1994. Also see Nelson George's *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1988 and *Hip Hop America*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998.

hip-hop music is “representationally black.”<sup>147</sup> Perry’s insights about hip-hop actually hold wider implications for all of what we might call black music, particularly if we are speaking about the always already racialized and gendered lines of genre. Indeed, much of the music that we today call the blues or even jazz was simply called “race music” for much of the early twentieth century.<sup>148</sup>

My point here then, in discussing black female blues phonography, is not simply to reify the discursive and representational categories of genre, to which many iterations of “form” often refer. Yet, and this is why I continually employ the moniker “black female blues phonography,” we cannot strictly ignore or sidestep these longer historical and aesthetic projects that have been cultivated in the name of form or genre, even if those categories are only loose retrospective designations. Rather, I will attempt in this essay to change the very ways that we might traditionally understand form and its relationship to race, technology and embodiment. Strictly formal arguments often take technology for granted and tend to reduce it to a kind of pure instrumentality through which musicians and artists simply put to their desired ends.<sup>149</sup> However, as Alexander Weheliye’s writing and George W. Johnson’s

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<sup>147</sup>I am referring to Imani Perry’s important comment that the “The representative consciousness of hip hop is black American in its relationship of alterity to American power and race politics.” See Imani Perry *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, 18. I think this idea while sharp and to a degree true it is too totalizing and doesn’t quite stake out as distinct a critique as I hope to make in this essay.

<sup>148</sup> See Karl Hagstrom Miller’s recent work, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Also see Guthrie P. Ramsey’s *Race Music: black cultures form Bebop to Hip-hop*. Also see my discussion of Max Roach and Amiri Baraka’s implicit and explicit critiques of the racializing force of genre in Chapter 3.

<sup>149</sup> This approach is famously practiced in musical scholarship and earlier visual scholarship on photography. In music this is perhaps the way in which we call all or most objects that produce and organize sound, instruments. Yet, much recent technology in music and particularly the work of turntablists and DJs have troubled this concept of what constitutes a musical instrument. Perhaps more

phonography have shown us, conceptions of music and technology, and hence the opposition between the two, can never really be made this simply. Discussing the blues proves particularly difficult for the very reasons Weheliye mentions:

When these questions about the recording and distribution of black popular music are relegated to the present and future, previous forms of black popular music remain auratically suspended in an authentic pre-technological bubble. And this bubble appears only as such in contradistinction to the technological—much in the same way as the source of the phonographic framing.<sup>150</sup>

Blues music has been almost exclusively thought within the realm of “the vernacular” or “the folk,” which has rendered it a distinctly romantic (even when anti-romantic), rural and anti-technological music and culture.<sup>151</sup> This general characterization of the blues has pervaded scholarship on black music from Amiri Baraka to Paul Gilroy. In Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, and in his more recent work *Darker than Blue*, technology figures as a kind of prohibitive obstacle to obtaining a fully romantic and nostalgic experience of black music. I am thinking not only of Gilroy’s recent dismissal (and misapprehension) of computer based musical production in *Darker than Blue*.<sup>152</sup> But

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expansively, in photography, critics, scholars and practitioners of photography have fairly recently begun to critique the “instrumental” conception of the photographic camera and of photography more generally. See Susan Bright’s “Introduction.” *Art Photography Now*. New York, NY: Aperture Foundation, 2005. Also see David Company’s “Preface: Art and Photography” *Art and Photography*. London, England: Phaidon Press, 2003.

<sup>150</sup> Weheliye, 21.

<sup>151</sup> Again see Wagner’s work *Disturbing the Peace* and Miller’s *Segregating Sound* for a more historical treatment and critique of this approach.

<sup>152</sup> See Paul Gilroy’s *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture*. Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press, Harvard University, 2010, 128. Specifically the final chapter entitled “Troubadours, Warriors, and Diplomats.” Specifically, Gilroy decries the use of Ableton Live, an innovative and indispensable loop-based musical software, claiming: The second strategy employs effectively deskilled, dehumanized technologies which, along with indifference, laziness and disregard, have reduced a shocking modernist tradition to a tame lexicon of preconstituted fragments.” There is

also his earlier disidentification with hip-hop music in the *Black Atlantic*, in which he condescendingly and nostalgically refers to hip hop, opining: “Twenty years later, with the sound tracks of my adolescence recirculating in the exhilaratingly damaged form of hip hop...”<sup>153</sup> Actually, Gilroy, much like Baraka, renders the “changing same” as a strictly romantic trope—albeit freed of much of its explicit essentialism, now “anti-anti-essentialism” from Gilroy—which implies that black music was never technological, never repeated, or “damaged” until a certain historical point; the “empirical” application or use of technology. Such a reductive conclusion in Gilroy’s narrative of black music and the changing same ironically takes place when Gilroy is looking for a “record shop stocked with black music.”<sup>154</sup> Here Gilroy misses the Fanonian point I have cited throughout, that blackness always blocks fantasies of identification (at the level of the body) even as it makes them (partially) possible. What might be more difficult and necessary to reckon with are how all record shops, all records and record players/phonographs/turntables bare a trace of the black voice. I would like to consider Bessie Smith’s work through the lens of the black voice, which is the form of presence her music both engenders and troubles.

My goal then is to (re)think, to (re)sample Bessie Smith, to think through her massive and incomparably superb catalogue in relation to the phonograph. Because of

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perhaps no paragraph in which Paul Gilroy sounds more like your grandfather nor is there a paragraph in which he sounds like the kind of avowed and uncritical modernist that he should precisely be critiquing.

<sup>153</sup> Gilroy *Black Atlantic*, 109. Just as a note one could trace the use of this romantic descriptor in Gilroy’s work “damaged, which he also uses in *Darker than Blue*, 132 to describe Jimi Hendrix’s electric guitar innovation. “Damaged” here seems unquestionably a romantic signifier in that it relegates musical innovation, specifically “technological” innovation, to a kind of ineffability where both more thorough research and critical insights are needed.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

Bessie Smith's expansive recording career—she produced the most records among her generation of blues singers—and her undeniable aesthetic ability, Smith has often been cast as the romantic fantasy of a great deal of listeners.<sup>155</sup> What is often fantasized and appreciated as the pure formalism or naked “technique” of Bessie Smith's music also colludes in a particular kind of fantasy of her, often through the disavowal of the phonograph. That is the kind of fantasies that Smith's dynamic oeuvre conjures are always constituted by a repetition that they must, at least partially, deny. My aim here is not suggest simply that we do away with such fantasies—or that this chapter itself does not produce or rely on these fantasies of Bessie Smith. Rather, I would like to linger with some of these fantastical operations, get caught up in their loop, as they allows us to understand another set of relations between black female blues singers and phonographic technology, which is irreducibly complex. What I am after here, is how black female blues phonography forces a confrontation between “thingliness” and blackness that can emerge not just as another kind of music, but as another way of hearing.<sup>156</sup> Heidegger, in focusing on the way in which technology “presences”—the way it makes present supposedly remote objects—states:

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<sup>155</sup> Here I am referring to the scholarly arguments, which I will mention and cite briefly, as well as the poetical and literary fantasies of Bessie Smith, which are myriad. Among them are Langston Hughes' famous poem “Harlem Night Club,” which is said to be inspired (at least partially) by Bessie Smith as well as Fred Moten's recent poem “Bessie Smith.” Also Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman* offers a brief but significance reference to Smith via the poem's main character Clay—who bears some polemical resemblance to a young Baraka.

<sup>156</sup>This fantastical relation has been most intriguingly approached in Fred Moten's work. See his important essay: “The Case of Blackness.” *Criticism*. Vol. 50, No. 2, Spring, 2008, pp. 177-218.

The terrifying is unsettling; it places everything outside its own nature. What is it that unsettles and thus terrifies? It shows itself and hides itself in the *way* in which everything presences, namely, in the fact that despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent...Nearness, it seems cannot be encountered directly...Near to us are what we usually call things.”<sup>157</sup>

Concretizing his formulations, Heidegger turns his attention to a jug, which he suggests is not realized in its mere presence but rather by the way it is supplemented by the way it is filled, that it is filled with a liquid. Things, those putative objects that lie near us, like the phonograph/turntable in the family room, are always filled with something that remains absent. It will be my contention that a certain conception of blackness always already writes this absence. We can get at this conception of blackness, its force of writing, through black female blues phonography. Indeed, those moments before Ma Rainey emerged from the phonograph her body forms the absented object of that phonograph’s presencing; its trace in her body and voice. Ma Rainey’s performance, and Bessie Smith’s phonography, which the phonograph made possible and by which the phonograph was made possible, point us in the direction of the supplementarity of phonographic listening. Bessie Smith’s phonography along with Rainey’s performance continually suggests the absented body of phonography in the structure of the black voice. The confrontation with the phonograph in general involves understanding the different ways in which black music, specifically the phonography of black female blues singers relate and write different forms of embodiment. As I will show in my discussion of acoustics, physiology and

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<sup>157</sup> Martin Heidegger. “the Thing.” *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York, NY: Perennial, 1975.



orthophonics, black female blues phonography embodied a form of life in death through the structure of the black voice. My point then is not to narrowly stake out some particular (formal) listening of Bessie Smith's music, but to understand the profound way in which her work and the black female blues tradition (re)thinks the way we hear through and in the phonograph.

### **Bessie Smith and the Disputation of Technology and Technique:**

Bessie Smith is shouting herself hoarse in 1923, and in two years, after 1925, we won't be able to hear her shout. Instead, her shout will be forever heard as our unhearing of the phonograph.<sup>158</sup> Undoubtedly, the Columbia Records technicians that recorded Bessie Smith's pre-electrical catalogue must have, like George W. Johnson's white patron Victor Emerson, commanded her to shout, commanded her to a certain kind of loudness. But by 1925, Columbia Record's newly electrified recording studio and methods of reproduction would capture her voice just fine—then there was no need for Bessie Smith to shout anymore. The traditional claim to technological progress would suggest we can no longer hear this operation, this shift that Bessie Smith made and was forced to make in that studio, because such a shift has been subsumed under the fidelity of phonographic technology. Is it Bessie

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<sup>158</sup> Here again I have stolen the words of Hassan Khan, whose insights into Shaa'bi music and art have immensely shaped this project. See Hassan Khan's pithy essay on Egyptian Shaa'bi music "Loud, Insistent and Dumb" in *Bidoun*. Failure Issue, No. 11, 2006. Also see "In Defense of the Corrupt Intellectual" *e-flux Journal*. No. 18, Sept. 2010.

Smith's voice, her shouting, that effaces the phonograph, or is it the phonograph that effaces her voice, or do the two endlessly cut one another again and again? Where does one begin and the other end? More suggestively how do we understand this shift, which we can both hear, and not hear; is it the *technique* of the Empress of the Blues, or the *technology* of the new orthophonic phonograph and electric recording process? Perhaps we are caught in a kind of repetitious loop that continually offers us the illusion and even the fantasy of difference. Sound historian Andre Millard's explanation is simple: electrification of the recording process, driven by engineering advances in telephony and radio, had simply rendered obsolete certain styles and techniques of singing. Millard adds that as a result of electrification, "Stars from the acoustical era, such as Al Jolson and Bessie Smith, found their declamatory singing outdated."<sup>159</sup> For Millard, Smith's singing is technical only in how it has responded to and hence been reproduced through technology. Even more, the filtering effects of recording technology, not technique, position her voice within the same racial economy of the minstrelized singing of Al Jolson. Through the phonograph Bessie Smith's voice is symbolically and phonically rendered as the black voice. While Millard's position ascribes a firm and quasi-deterministic power to electrical recording technology and the phonograph, one of Smith's most dedicated listeners, Edward Brooks, offers an implicit challenge to this position.

In his detailed work *the Bessie Smith Companion*, Brooks, attempts a close-listening analysis of Bessie Smith's entire oeuvre of 159-recordings from February of

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<sup>159</sup> Millard, 177.

1923 to November of 1933.<sup>160</sup> From the outset Brooks states emphatically that it is with Smith's *technique* that he is most concerned:

Her aesthetic taste, which seldom faltered, was built upon incomparable technique; the former depends upon subjective opinion but technique is something which can be quantified more precisely. This book sets out to describe details of her technique and at the same time assess its appropriateness to the material she found herself with.<sup>161</sup>

Seemingly in opposition to Millard's work, Edward Brooks sets out to privilege *technique*—and, following from it, aesthetics—over the developments in phonographic technology. As Brooks comments suggest, his attention to Bessie Smith's recordings, is focused resolutely on Smith's musical phrasing, “her innate sense of swing” and metrical and pitch variation—bluesing notes to the highest tonic rather than singing them straight. In her early releases, Brooks marvels at “the velvet quality of [her] voice”, the “subtle microtonal shading” of her voice and, further, her development of characteristic glissando and acciaccaturas; the powerful ornamentation indicative of both Bessie Smith's establishment of musical ideas and

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<sup>160</sup> Bessie Smith's total number of recordings is a somewhat ambiguous notion. By the publication date of Brooks' book in 1982, Columbia records, which is supposed to hold the total catalogue of Smith's *released* recordings, had released a five volume series of double LP's (10 records in total) in the early 1970's that states “Bessie Smith” recorded 180 songs for Columbia records” from the ten years she recorded for Columbia (from 1923-1933), presumed to be her first and last recordings. The final five-volume Columbia output contains 160 “sides” (recorded singles), excluding the remaining 20 “unusable” sides. Brooks never strictly specifies whether he is using the original 78-rpm's issued by Columbia—Brooks notes that his discography cites these original 78's, but he never states whether they are the source of his listening analysis. Brooks explicit attention to Bessie Smith's alternate takes further suggests that he is listening to the original 78's. A decade after the publication of Brooks' book Columbia released another five volume box set on Vinyl, CD and Cassette titled: “Bessie Smith: the Complete Recordings,” which contained 172 recordings including several alternate takes.

<sup>161</sup> *The Bessie Smith Companion: A Critical Detailed Appreciation of the Recordings*. New York, NY: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1982, xiv.

her affecting of and beyond those ideals. Smith's ability to rhythmically inflect and melodically decorate often mediocre musical ideals and consistently subpar, if not stilted, instrumental accompaniment by pianist Clarence Williams, distinguish Smith's vocal range and control. Moreover, such a talent creates the affective sensation of "emotional power" and "visceral pleasure" that Brooks identifies as a hallmark of her music. What distinguishes Bessie Smith's *technique* then is not only the referentiality of her lyrics; the "common place words" of her songs that refer to a discursive reservoir of the common black experience—what many second wave blues scholars have identified as distinct to the performativity of blues' lyrics.<sup>162</sup> Nor is it the musical structure of the 12-bar blues form or 32-bar popular song formats in which Smith exclusively worked. More significant, for Brooks, is Smith's ability to accent, highlight and affect such lyrical content through her unparalleled "articulation."

In fact, it is precisely around Bessie Smith's *articulation*, which Brooks partially acknowledges the mediated effects of the changes in sound reproduction

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<sup>162</sup> One of the first if not the first, to put forth this argument in a more academic context is Albert Murray in his seminal work *Stompin' the Blues*. Here Murray compares blues to the dramatic craft of acting, suggesting that blues is constituted as much if not more by aesthetic artifice and performative technique than it is by some romantic "direct emotional expression in the raw." The following line is taken from an excerpt of Murray's text in Robert Walser's *Keeping Time*, cited above, entitled "The Musician's Heroic Craft." A, perhaps related, though more radical point can be seen in Angela Davis' treatment of Bessie and other black female blues singers in her work *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* and even more foundationally is Hazel Carby's "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." *Radical America* 20, No. 4, Jun-July, 1986 pp. 9-24. Great examples of Bessie's songs that refer to common experiences that might have characterized early 20<sup>th</sup> century working class life, especially for black women, are "Washer Women's Blues," "I've been Mistreated and I Don't Like it," "I Ain't Goin' to Play No Second Fiddle" and "Tain't Nobody's Bizness if I do" to name only a select few. Of course, as Albert Murray points out, much of the blues refers to painful or depressing experiences, yet the music attempts to transform the listener's relationship to those experiences through the music itself, which often inspires dance and frivolity.

technology; namely the shift from “pre-electric” acoustical recording to electrical recording. However, Brooks grants much less affective power to the electrification of sound technology than Millard, even insisting, “this still relatively primitive system does have some problems with Bessie Smith’s voice.”<sup>163</sup> Giving only one more thought to the effect of electrical recording on Smith’s voice and most notably her articulation, Brooks adds, “For obvious reasons her microphonic technique must have been minimal at this time and she may well have been too close to the instrument; whatever the cause though there is often a considerable over-spill, resulting in distortion.”<sup>164</sup> The only significant, though related, difference Brooks hears between pre-electrical and electrical recordings are the “the amorphous nature of the sound,” which at its strongest only minutely effects Smith’s articulation. Though Brooks listens extremely closely to Smith’s voice, he never grants primacy to the shifts in sound technology that engendered Smith’s voice, and which I will argue, her voice generated. Brooks is only interested in Smith’s technique, which he identifies as the prominent phenomenal and musical structural characteristics of her voice, her articulation, all of which signify the power of her breath. It is this relation to Bessie Smith’s breath, her body and her voice that can be objectively determined and “quantified” as technique. Technique for Brooks then lies in the mastery of control of the set of effects generated through and with breath. Technique then is a rigorously embodied ideal to which the body remains a largely abstracted and hence only partial referent. Both technology and technique take on a kind of oppositional functionalism

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<sup>163</sup> Brooks *Bessie*, 77.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

through the abstraction of the body, the one relying on and then transcending the other into what Brooks and Millard identify respectively as music.<sup>165</sup> The question remains as to what writes the distinction between sound reproduction technology and the formal genealogy of technique? While technology and technique then for Brooks and Millard do rely on each other, they only do so at the expense of the others negation and ultimately at the disavowal of a kind of embodiment. Is there more to hear, or perhaps more to unhear in or as Bessie Smith's voice? In this negation of technology/technique what is disavowed through this identification which Brooks and Millard call music?

These are the questions raised by the difference and differentiation of Bessie Smith's 1923 and 1925 phonographic recordings for Columbia. These recordings hold implications for blackness and indeed all hearing in modernity. More than perhaps any recording artist Bessie Smith's recording career cuts right through the middle of the electrification of sound in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, instead of embracing the modernist narrative of technological progress implicit and explicit in Brooks' and Millard's respective treatments of her voice. I want to trouble the underlying assumptions of both Millard's and Brooks' listenings of Bessie Smith, which presume she is merely the phenomenal object of recording. I will challenge the implicit notion within their thought that Smith's voice, her breath, and her body are

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<sup>165</sup> Albert Murray might in a different sense include what Brooks describes as Bessie's technique within his notion of a "technology of style." Murray's term, more than Brooks', is meant to challenge the treatment of blues performance as simply "raw" personal expression and place it more within the realm of aesthetics, Murray, 311.

simply shaped by technology or technique, which are mutually opposed to one another and which lie outside of her.

To this end I enlist a line of philosophical thinking, and media theorization, in the work of Martin Heidegger and Theodor Adorno, which facilitates a move away from either a technological or technical-aesthetic determinism of Bessie Smith. Each of these thinkers, in differing ways, is enamored with and troubled by the *logos* at the center of technology; and particularly the way this *logos* disrupts and differentiates technology from technique; a move that I will contend is as much sexual as it is scientific, as much racial as it is rational. For Adorno the phonographic technology of mass culture reduces musical technique to the mechanical repetition and numbing *standardization* characteristic of advanced capitalist production.<sup>166</sup> In his (in)famous essay “On Popular Music,” Adorno states:

The frame of mind to which popular music originally appealed, on which it feeds, and which it perpetually reinforces, is simultaneously one of distraction and inattention...Distraction is bound to the present mode of production, to the rationalized and mechanized process of labor to which, directly or indirectly, masses are subject.<sup>167</sup>

The standardization of musical form in “cliché” and “rote repetition” were for Adorno symptomatic of musical technology’s place in advanced capitalist production as the instrumentalized means of maintaining mass obedience through entertainment as

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<sup>166</sup> Adorno’s arguments about popular music are among his most extended treatments of technology, save for Adorno’s somewhat later treatment of an “avant-garde” or experimental implementation of technology in the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen in a work translated in English as *Sound Figures*. “Music and Technique.” Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999.

<sup>167</sup> See Adorno’s “On Popular Music (1941).” In *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002, 458.

distraction.<sup>168</sup> Sound technology and most especially the phonograph then functioned largely as an instrument, not unlike a photographic camera that served to merely delight people at the idea or illusion that they were capturing or indeed recognizing themselves.<sup>169</sup>

For Heidegger, in a related though distinct sense from Adorno, technology represents an ontological and epistemological danger, because technology reduces all forms of “revealing” all forms of a thing’s “being” to what Heidegger calls “standing in reserve.” Technology, specifically “modern technology,” establishes and reifies an order in which all objects are made present simply for the means-ends relations they ensure.<sup>170</sup> Heidegger’s sense of technology is, not unlike Adorno’s articulation, tied to production. However, Heidegger’s thinking suggests that the “precensing” capacity of technology is not exclusively located within a history of advanced capitalism—though capitalism does signify a major juncture in the ordering of being as “precensing.” Heidegger locates the reduction of all being in his idea of technological “enframing”; a symptom of a much longer and perhaps more pervasive metaphysical treatment of the “world.” Heidegger posits:

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<sup>168</sup> For sharp analysis of Adorno’s position of Adorno’s writings on popular music see both Richard Leppert’s introductions in the above cited *Essays in Music* by Adorno. Also see Robert Hullot-Kentor’s essay “Popular Music and “the Again of the New Music.” *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodore W. Adorno*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006.

<sup>169</sup> While Thomas Edison made this explicit comparison in his exuberance for the invention of the phonograph in “The Perfected Phonograph.” *North American Review*. June 1888, Vol. 146 No. CCCLXXIX p. 641-651. Adorno also draws this conclusion more critically and undoubtedly more cynically in a 1927 essay. See Theodore Adorno. “The Curves of the Needle.” *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

<sup>170</sup> See “The Question Concerning Technology.” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. William Lovitt. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1977, 22. For a brilliant and inventive approach to Heidegger’s work see Avital Ronell’s. *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.



In Enframing, that unconcealment comes to pass in conforming with which the work of modern technology reveals the real as standing reserve. This work is therefore neither only human activity nor a mere means within such activity. The merely instrumental, merely anthropological definition of technology is therefore in principle untenable.<sup>171</sup>

Heidegger's thought is important here, because it inherently troubles the binary between "technology" and "human activity" that pervades much of the writing about black music and technology. Even more, Heidegger's thought will bring us closer to understanding the way in which the reliance on an "instrumental" conception of technology not only undergirds this opposition between "technology" and "human activity" or technology, but even more how such an opposition is written and troubled by the structure of the black voice. It is at this point in their respective thinking that Bessie Smith might become both an ideal illustration and an immense problem.

Very little treatment is given to the way in which this phenomenal object, this voice, Smith, thinks in and beyond the way she is known, precisely through technology and, to a differing extent technique. Bessie Smith's occupation as a phenomenal object of sound reproduction, of sound, also troubles and threatens the phenomenality and implicit ideality of that object status of sound and voice. Smith opens up spaces, worlds, of phonographic poiesis in which blackness inheres not only to the object of recording, but also always to the phonographic technology that recorded and reproduced it. At the very moment when Smith in and as the black voice becomes the idealized symbolic supplement for phonographic technology, its

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<sup>171</sup> Heidegger *TQCT*, 21.

“standing reserve,” she creates a dynamic and imaginative place and time: a “spacing” of the phonograph, which initiates and exceeds her symbolic racialization and sexual differentiation through the phonograph.<sup>172</sup> Evocative of Ma Rainey’s performance, Bessie Smith’s phonography instantiates an aesthetic order which structures and restructures the phonograph itself. To understand this more fully we will have to turn to the beginnings of electrical and orthophonic recording and the way in which they perpetuate and are broken up by certain ways of knowing and hearing the black voice.

### **Bessie Smith and the Poetics of Thingliness:**

Implicit within both Millard and Brooks’ respective treatments of Smith’s voice is its status as a commercial object of recording; and equally an object which reifies a culture of commodification through the phonograph and sound reproduction. Millard’s comments in particular seem to frame Bessie Smith’s 1923 recordings within the ethos of exchangeability characteristic of commercial and technological sound reproduction. Millard notes that by the early twentieth century expectations for the object of sound recording had shifted: “As the listening public got over the novelty of recorded sound, their expectations increased. In other words, they expected to recognize the voice or piece of music on record. It was no longer good enough just

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<sup>172</sup> Here Derrida’s discussion of “*Spacing* (notice that this word speaks the articulation of space and time, the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space) is always the unperceived, the nonpresent, and the nonconscious...Arche-writing as spacing cannot occur *as such* within the phenomenological experience of a *presence*. It marks the *dead time* within the presence of the living present, within the general form of all presence. The dead time is at work.” Derrida *Of Grammatology*, 68.

to be able to hear a sound.”<sup>173</sup> This recognition that the phonograph listener required for the object of recording eerily supplements the previously cited words of a commenter in *Phonogram*: “Negroes take [to recording] better than white singers, because their voices have a certain sharpness or harshness about them that a white man’s has not. A barking dog, squalling cat, neighing horse, and, in fact almost any beast’s or bird’s voice is excellent for the good repetition on the phonograph.”

Fantasies of black sonic carnality occasioned phonographic listening and recognition, and through this putative cultural cache of exchangeability, black voices drove phonographic functioning. Black voices’ fantastical and material capital was further exemplified by the glib words of a 1922 commentator in the musical publication *Metronome*, who exclaims: “every phonograph company has a colored girl recording the blues.”<sup>174</sup> It was the black voice, which sonically and financially propped up the recording industry in its nascence at the turn of the century. Bessie Smith in particular is often, though some claim hyperbolically, cited with having “saved Columbia Records from bankruptcy.”<sup>175</sup> Millard’s implied conception of Smith’s voice as a commercial object of recording if not a commodity is explicit in his earlier cited conflation of her voice with Al Jolson’s. By rendering the phenomenal presence of Smith’s voice into the graphical image of Jolson and visa versa, Millard’s comments again exemplify the black voice’s tortured legacy in the symbolics of minstrelsy. Specifically, this fantastical substitution may refer to Smith’s presence in a 1924

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<sup>173</sup> Millard, 126.

<sup>174</sup> See Robert M.W. Dixon and John Godrich’s *Recording the Blues*. New York, NY: Stein and Day Publishers, 1970, 10.

<sup>175</sup> Albertson, 56.

Columbia advertisement in which she is named alongside Jolson.<sup>176</sup> More powerfully and more subtly, this substitution alludes to the absolute dependence of phonographic listening and functioning upon the symbolics and materiality of the black voice. From Millard's treatment of Bessie Smith we can infer the racist logic of this symbolization and even more how this placed the black voice within a culture of musical exchangeability in and as the phonograph.

Millard's substitution of Jolson for Smith evokes an Adornian line of thinking "On Popular Music" wherein a certain putative view of technology deposits Smith's music within "structure of standardization."<sup>177</sup> Standardization in popular music, Adorno argues relies upon and in turn produces an advanced capitalist logic of production, based on the "interchangeability" and "exchangeability" of the constituent parts of the musical whole. Adorno uses the term "standardization" to describe the means of musical production—including the entire process through which a record would be made: from studio to store—and he also radically suggests that this mechanized "standardization" infects and shapes the formal dimensions of popular music itself. The formal "standardization" is reified through popular musical forms' cultural circulation and valuation in terms of "distraction." Adorno argues that, "On the other hand, distraction is not only a presupposition but also a product of popular music."<sup>178</sup> Meaning, the exchangeable nature of musical form collapses the aesthetic elements of the song into the mere social-functional ends of what Adorno

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>177</sup> See Adorno's "On Popular Music (1941)." In *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002, 442.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, 459.

will later famously call “the Culture Industry.” Like the interchangeable mechanical components of the phonographic apparatus: the stylus/needle, the arm, the acoustic horn, the orthophonic diaphragm (which I will discuss in greater detail), Adorno would contend, the structural parts of popular musical works can be infinitely substituted for one another in the interest of satisfying commercial rather than artisanal ends.

Certainly, the remnant tin-pan alley 32-bar popular song structure in which Bessie Smith occasionally sang is something like what Adorno had in mind when he discussed standardization. Moreover, it is this style or structure that Adorno primarily designated as “popular music” in his writings.<sup>179</sup> There is some formal truth to Adorno’s contentions as the 32-bar popular song, and arguably the 12-bar blues song, became even more rigidly standardized in a musical-structural sense as they were modified to fit the 78-rpm ten-inch phonograph disc. For example, Bessie Smith’s 1923 “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll like Mine,”<sup>180</sup> a tune replete with phallic and ejaculative imagery, truncates the third and the last chorus of the 30-bar popular song structure in order to fit the song within the mechanically and materially prescribed limitation of the three minute record. Ostensibly an ideal example, “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll like Mine”, would appear to affirm Adorno’s suspicion that the modes of production meet their ideological rationalization via the technological means of sound (re)production; the structure of

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<sup>179</sup> For a clear and lucid treatment of Adorno’s essay “On Popular Music,” see Bernard Gendron’s “Theodore Adorno Meets the Cadillacs.” *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*. Ed. Tania Modleski. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986.

<sup>180</sup> Listen to “Nobody in Town Can Make a Sweet Jelly Roll like Mine.” On *Bessie Smith: The World’s Greatest Blues Singer*. Columbia Records, ASIN: B000M0A602, 1970. Vinyl Double LP

the song yields to and hence reifies this relation. Yet a strange turn comes about at the attempted standardization of the work. As if to deny the coitus Smith's lyrics boastfully promise, both choruses of the song end on the dominant rather than the tonic, as one would expect.<sup>181</sup> In fact, it may be this very assurance and eventual refusal of sexual release, the final way in which the lyrics contradict the formal song-structure, which grades against a totalizing logic of standardization at the very moment it suggests such a possibility.

Standardization, as a musical-structural problematic for Adorno, was also bolstered by the "predigested" familiarity it prescribed for the listener, in which musical parts were indeed interchangeable, because they all fulfilled a dominant standardized structure of sentiment through "familiarity," "pseudo individuality" and repetition. Adorno, likely would have searched for these symptoms in the black female vocal blues characteristic musical "borrowing" and attributed such a dynamic to the dominant technological ethos of phonographic reproduction. Amongst black female vocal blues singers, verses, musical phrases, lyrics and indeed whole songs were covered, exchanged, and or "borrowed," implying, perhaps a logic of interchangeability of the artist and the work and perhaps ensuring a collapse of the content into the form. Bessie Smith's early recordings carry this hallmark. In her 1924 recording of "Sorrowful Blues" Smith not only "borrows" or riffs on "birdlike" "twee twee twahs" from Gertrude Saunders, but she more or less repeats verses from

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<sup>181</sup> See Brooks, *Bessie*, 23 for greater detail about this particular phenomenon.

an earlier recording of Ida Cox's "Chicago Monkey Man Blues."<sup>182</sup> An even more dramatic example of Smith's "borrowing" can of course be found in her first-ever recording for Columbia (perhaps her first recording ever), "Down Hearted Blues" in 1923. This very song had been previously written and recorded by Alberta Hunter and recorded by Clara Smith earlier that year. On some level inherent to the blues tradition, "borrowing" or its close relative "versioning," were made possible by the relatively standard structure of the twelve-bar blues form—the "vernacular" tradition from which it sprang, which was actually, to a significant degree, further standardized by the phonograph. Bessie Smith's contributions to the blues form were facilitated by and through phonographic technology and phonograph records. This standardization however went hand in hand with a contradictory formal, if not technological and certainly social, ethos of homoeroticism and homosexuality in black women's vocal blues; exemplified by the interchangeability or interpenetration of black female parts (ful)filling black female (w)holes.<sup>183</sup> The apparent standardization of the means of production and particularly the commodification of black female blues singers seemed to also engender a queer black musicality, which strictly opposed the dominant social norm it had been enlisted to reify. Here I am referring to what Angela Davis' and Hazel Carby's works respectively have designated as not only a radical social instantiation of black female sexuality, but also indeed a political praxis of black feminism. This social-sexual dimension can also be understood here as a kind

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<sup>182</sup> This observation belongs to Chris Albertson in his extensive biography of Bessie cited above, Albertson, 70.

<sup>183</sup> I owe the development of this insight to the treatment of blues sexuality in Angela Davis' *Blues Legacies* and Hazel Carby's "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." *Radical America* 20, No. 4, Jun-July, 1986 pp. 9-24.

of musical and technological promiscuity, which relied upon, but graded against musical standardization. Meaning, the phonic ideal of “black woman” as the symbolized totality of the black voice and early phonography—which had been enlisted to satisfy white male corporate ends—was being undone even as it was being created. This racial-sexual dynamic was even more subtly, but equally importantly, at work all the while in the phonograph. Yet, rather than understand this racial-sexual dynamic as strictly an effect of reproduction and commercialization, I would suggest that it inheres to the technological development of the phonograph and its subsequent electrification. The materiality of the phonograph and particularly its electrification were produced through the materiality of (the category of) black woman as an object of scientific and sonic knowledge and recognition.

From Adorno’s somewhat strict material sense of a technology the availability of the phonographic mode of (re)production ensured the kind of spurned “familiarity” and “reproducibility” of not only blues records, but blues technique. Through the logic of standardization then black female blues “borrowing” merely reified the dominant structure that supposedly produced it. Moreover, for Adorno “standardization” gave way to “pseudo-individualization” by which listeners come not only to accept music as a commodity, but in so doing, they accept their listening as being wholly commodified and hence revert from listeners to consumers. Adorno explains, “The customers of musical entertainment are themselves objects or, indeed, products of the same mechanisms which determine the production of popular music. Their spare time [of listening] serves only to reproduce their working capacity. It is a



means instead of an end.”<sup>184</sup> Standardization and the infinite exchangeability of parts of popular music then render Smith’s voice as “means” or a kind of pure functioning Adorno might ascribe to a technology rather than to “serious” musical technique. For it is not strictly the commodification of form that Adorno attributes to technological means, but also the abstraction of technique from the human subject that grapples with technology. In “Music and Technique,” Adorno defines technique in a manner more explicitly operational in Brooks’ treatment of Bessie Smith and Millard’s conception of technology.

The sum of all musical means is musical technique; it is both the organization of the content and its translation into an outward manifestation. The word “technique” points to the human agency in that creation of meaning; it reminds us of the human subject, however that may be constituted. It reminds us, too, of the element of know-how, success, function, at which the organization of a musical structure is directed. It is ultimately sublimated into a state of objectivity, a law-governed reality that moves beyond the realm of subjective effort and endows it with the aspect of a being that exists in itself.<sup>185</sup>

This transmutation of voice to technology, not only signifies for Adorno the collapse of the fragile tension between technology and technique characteristic of a distinctly human formation of subjectivity, but also further it marks “the transition from artisanal to industrial production [which] transforms not only the technology of distribution but also that which is distributed.”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Adorno, 458.

<sup>185</sup> Theodore Adorno. *Sound Figures*. “Music and Technique.” Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999, 197.

<sup>186</sup> Theodore Adorno. “The Curves of the Needle.” *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002, 271. It is important to note as

In a 1927 article dedicated entirely to the phonograph, Adorno attempts to treat this shift in a more strictly Marxist sense in terms of a shift in the means of musical production through the phonograph moving from “artisanal to industrial.” Hence, Adorno designates the phonograph and all sonic reproductive technology as the means of musical production, which function at the ideological behest of the more expansive mode of capitalist production of the commercial record industry. In so doing these means of production carry the potential to efface the human subject from which musical technique and aesthetics are derived. The psychic effects of this historical shift are the absolute dissolution of the human subject, which music, for Adorno contrarily had the potential to posit as its most difficult and necessary possibility. For Adorno this was—especially with the later emergence of radio in the 1930’s—the central antagonism of popular music; an antagonism, which might seem equally central to Bessie Smith’s phonographic work and to her voice.

Yet, through blackness, Adorno’s late romanticism of form and particularly the form of human agency is troubled. Blackness dwells somewhere in between the objecthood, mechanicity and indeed technology against which a romantically constructed human subject is often opposed.<sup>187</sup> Thus the putative tension between technology and technique, which Adorno draws upon, must be under significant revision in light of Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Alberta Hunter and numerous other black female blues singers’ formal and phonographic promiscuity.

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the editor Richard Leppert does, that while this article was originally written in 1927—when Adorno was just 24—it was revised just a few years before his death in 1965.

<sup>187</sup> Moten *In the Break*, 1.

Blues sexuality wove a subtle lyrical fabric that may have gone largely unnoticed or only partially acknowledged by its contemporary listeners. Regardless of whether they were “heard” or not the subversive drive of new and vibrant sexualities through blues, particularly black queerness and lesbian relations, were an incredibly important dimension of the music. Angela Davis notes that: “By contrast, the popular song formulas of the period demanded saccharine and idealized nonsexual depictions of heterosexual love relationships.” Despite the formulaic nature of popular music, Davis adds: “One of the most obvious way in which blues lyrics deviated from that era’s established popular musical culture was their provocative and pervasive sexual—including homosexual imagery.”<sup>188</sup> Smith’s music slips the yoke of prescriptive black womanhood even as it occupies and draws upon such a “gender-specific” amalgam.<sup>189</sup> What emerges in Smith’s music is precisely the fleshy interior space that Ma Rainey creates within the body of her phonograph. Here I am thinking along the lines of what Fred Moten has identified as the “sexual cut” of black music. In citing Nate Mackey, Moten points out the sexuality of black music as “an insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion.”<sup>190</sup> Moten and Mackey’s engagements point to the way in which black music always grades against an absolute origin or “natal occasion” even as it might offer such an illusion. Black female blues phonography creates a vocal and lyrical surplus—how Smith’s later music writes Rainey’s previous phonographic performance—that Adorno would probably have

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<sup>188</sup> Davis *Blues*, 3.

<sup>189</sup> See Spillers, 206.

<sup>190</sup> Moten *In the Break*, 28.

misunderstood as an excessive affirmation of black music's "pre-digested" format; reducible to the "exchangeable" "rote repetition" of the culture industry. But Smith's singing, its promiscuous formalization through borrowing and versioning—what might be misperceived as simple repetition, and its unique temporal and sexual trajectories, do not invest in the heteronormative rituals of (re)production—the natal occasion—to which the culture industry supposedly gives birth.

The limitations of Adorno's thought for tracing the sexuality of black female blues phonography might lay not so much in a kind of conservatism of which Adorno has been tepidly accused. Rather Adorno's inability to engage blackness as a fundamentally phonographic conundrum may lie more in a prescribed ideological conception of the body and embodiment, which was central to his writing on music.<sup>191</sup> There is a (perhaps unacknowledged) similarity between the instrumentality of the phonograph and the instrumentality of interpellated subjects at the hands of ideology. I am speaking of Adorno's insistence on an interpellative conception of the body as caught up in a web of "distraction."<sup>192</sup> The sexuality of black female blues phonography, even as it operates through the traditional channels of distraction, still persists on the Ellisonian "lower frequencies;" those very frequencies which were

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<sup>191</sup> In addition to the discussion of popular music in distraction, which I have cited in Adorno's essay "On Popular Music," I am also thinking here of the essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1969.

<sup>192</sup> Here I am thinking of John Mowitt's powerful rethinking and treatment of Adorno's conception of "attention and distraction" with regard to sound and music as well as Althusser's notion of the ideological "interpellation" of the subject by the political or by discourse. See John Mowitt's *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, especially the second chapter entitled "Knocking the Subject." Also see Mowitt's short article "Tune Stuck in the Head." *Parallax*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2006 pp. 12-25.

inscribed into yet unheard in the record. Bessie Smith's persistent and powerful shouting that was always there, but was never heard speaks to this.

Bessie Smith's voice and her work would be subsumed within this dialectic of historical progress driven by the technological means of production; the drive towards sonic fidelity. However, it is precisely at this point that Adorno's dialectical approach too immediately, albeit critically, reduces technology to the subservient motor of a teleologically driven history. Adorno's inauguration of the phonograph as emblematic of the shift in the musical and commercial means of production, too easily assigns the phonograph an ideological instrumentality, which reifies a larger historical narrative of capitalist production and implicitly a strictly ideological conception of embodiment; specifically, the ends to which the body is put and the means by which the body comes to be, its natality and mortality.

Adorno designates both the phonograph's electrification and its attendant drive for "fidelity" as the sign of technological modernity's unwavering ascendance. The more explicit quest for phonographic fidelity had intensified just a decade prior to Adorno's essay on the phonograph. Hence, it is for these ends, which Adorno sees all phonographic (re)production as being instrumentalized: "The positive tendency of consolidated technology to present objects themselves in as unadorned a fashion as possible, is however, traversed by the ideological need of the ruling society, which demands subjective reconciliation with these objects—with the reproduced voice as such, for example."<sup>193</sup> Here Adorno's point is astute with regards to the phonograph's

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

instrumentality and implicitly the subsequent instrumentality of the black voice as a means of the listening subject's recognition. Such a reconciliatory dynamic permeates George W. Johnson's earlier acoustical recordings and seems to have intensified with the commercialization of black female blues artists. Therefore the black voice for Adorno would be primarily the object of recording through which the listening subject achieves self-affirming reconciliation via the negation and implicit misrecognition of reproduction (of the black voice). Put another way the black voice, for Adorno, would then only be the image, projected through the phonograph, by which the listening/gazing subject achieves her necessary recognition, but only as the kind of illusory recognition prescribed by the dominant society. The phonograph in this equation is too simply understood as an instrument through which the social (economic), psychic and above all symbolic production of the black voice takes place. However, Bessie Smith's voice and Ma Rainey's performance suggest more: that the black voice was not merely the object (image) produced by the phonograph, but that it produced the phonograph itself. To approach this claim we will need to rethink the technological or even techno-ontological genealogy of the phonograph, in a way that acknowledges its instrumentality within its commodification and or commercialization. Nevertheless, we would also have to question the very ontological assumptions that establish the phonograph, commercially, technologically or artistically, as only an instrument, only as a means of production and not as a body (itself). For there is a more complicated legacy of the phonograph beyond its mere instrumentality, and which requires an imaginative move through and beyond

Millard's and even Adorno's claims as to what constitutes a technology; an imaginative leap into and through Bessie Smith's voice.

The body is indeed a problematic site for Adorno's thought in light of phonography. As Barbara Engh notes the body's problematic arises precisely at the emergence of its gendering, which is to say the body's emergence as such.<sup>194</sup> Adorno rather famously, conjectured:

Male voices can be reproduced better than female voices. The female voice easily sounds shrill—but not because the gramophone is incapable of conveying higher tones, as is demonstrated by its adequate reproduction of the flute. Rather, to be unfettered, the female voice requires the physical appearance of the body that carries it. But it is just this body that the gramophone eliminates, thereby giving every female voice a sound that is needy and incomplete. Only there where the body itself resonates, where the self to which the gramophone refers is identical with its sound, only there does the gramophone have its legitimate realm of validity...<sup>195</sup>

Black female blues phonography brings to crisis Adorno's more absolute phenomenological rendering of the body, precisely through his attempt to consolidate gender at the very moment of its perpetual rupture in the phonograph. Gertrude "Ma" Rainey's dissemblance of the phonograph through the (with)holding of her body and the animation of blues records through their circulation and versioning clearly trouble Adorno's romantic rendering of the body's normative supremacy within phonography. Blackness, as Hortense Spillers would guide us to thinking, precisely throws into crisis the normative "completeness" of the "pre-phonographic" body, precisely at the site of gender and its symbolic constitution. Smith and Rainey's

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<sup>194</sup> See Barbara Engh. "Adorno and the Sirens: tele-phono-graphic bodies." *Embodied Voice: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 120-135.

<sup>195</sup> Adorno, *Curves*, 54.

aesthetic brilliance emerges from and operates within a complex legacy of the black body's gendering for sound, as sound. Blackness was simultaneously barred from symbolic corporeality of "women"—and its attendant legal, scientific and discursive nominations—precisely as it was being scientifically and anatomically dissected in order to constitute such a fantastical totality in sound.

### **Orthophonics and the Electric Anatomization of the Black Voice:**

In his formidable history of sound recording, *America on Record*, Andre Millard places the development of electrical recording within the private spaces of Western Electric laboratories—"the research arm of AT&T," which followed up on a legacy of white male genius from the research of Bell, Edison and Berliner. This research was driven by commercial demands, which were underpinned by the crucial desire to make reproduced sound louder, less impeded (reduced surface noise of the record) and longer playing in terms of the record's recording and playback capacity (more than the three minute standard). Concerns for the technology or technological prowess of sound reproduction went hand in hand with the ideal object of recording, particularly in terms of ensuring a faithful reproduction or transmission of the object of recording as in what Adorno earlier refers to as "subjective reconciliation." It is this pursuit for "fidelity" that Adorno laments as the phonograph's characteristic failure; indicative of its production as an instrumental means of production. These desires for fidelity, or what would later become "high fidelity", were directed through the advances in telegraphy and telephony and *orthophonics*; these knowledges relied



upon a deeper logic of racialization of bodies that would ensure the phonograph's functioning. The scientific knowledge and developments in phonography, telephony, orthophonics and electrification, which were conscripted for the phonograph's commercial ends, actually preceded its commercialization. Adorno's opposition between technique and technology and primarily his opposition between "the commercial and the artisanal" are thrown into crisis precisely through these knowledges reliance upon the racialization of the body and of bodies. The unacknowledged reliance on these knowledges persists in the more contemporary "anthropological" treatments of the phonograph.<sup>196</sup> The racial legacies of the phonograph's material construction can be discerned from a 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific fascination with voice, breath, "respiration" and "the organs of speech" and hearing. These conceptual imperatives contributed centrally to the development of the electrification of sound reproduction in a manner, which is too easily overlooked. Roland Gelatt, for example credits the phonograph's electrification, almost exclusively to the experimentations of Henry C. Harrison, the "idea man" for Bell laboratories and his team of scientists. Gelatt identifies Harrison and his team with having achieved a synthesis of these scientific knowledges in forming the first electrical phonograph: "the Orthophonic Victrola." Harrison wrote in the pages of *the Scientific Monthly*, the key discovery lay in the revelation that "Energy obeys the same laws whether it be the electrical or mechanical form...By using a list of

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<sup>196</sup> This conceptualization can be attributed to Martin Heidegger's work on technology in *On the Question Concerning Technology*. Trans. William Lovitt. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1977 pp. 3-35.

corresponding constants a known electrical equation may be readily converted to an analogous mechanical equation.”<sup>197</sup> The promise of electrification had long resided in the developments in transduction and electromagnetic induction from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that would abet phonographic reproduction.<sup>198</sup> Much like the analogy between the human voice and the (mechanical) vibration of the writing stylus that distinguished Scott’s phonautograph; the new electrical phonograph was predicated upon an analogical reduction of the human voice from air and breathe to electrical energy. However, this analogical conversion of mechanical energy to electrical energy was allayed by the phenomenal and symbolic presence of the black voice as one of its major epistemological constituents. Even more, what facilitated electrical and primarily orthophonic sound reproduction was the instrumentalized, technological, legacy of blackness in and as scientific knowledge.

Before being employed in Harrison’s algebraic calculation and circuit diagrams, and even before being built into the phonograph, *orthophonics* were a remote field of physiological and anatomical knowledge consigned primarily to the bookshelves of anthropologists. In fact, the term: orthophonic first emerges in the 1865 publication *Stammering and Stuttering, Their Nature and Treatment*, by British

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<sup>197</sup> For the original Henry C. Harrison’s “A New Mechanical Phonograph.” *Scientific American*. Vol. 23, No. 3, March 1926, pp. 264-261, 267. For the portion I have cited see Gelatt, *Fabulous Phonograph*.

<sup>198</sup> Jonathan Sterne argues that transduction, and not reproduction, is the most continuous and helpful thread to follow in understanding sound technology from early phonographic technology’s conversion of mechanical to electrical energy to digital technology’s conversion of electrical and mechanical energy into binary code. See Sterne, 31-35.

ethnologist and speech pathologist James Hunt.<sup>199</sup> The term as Hunt deploys it focused, “physically upon all the respiratory muscles; upon the lungs, the larynx and especially upon the glottis, the tongue and the lips.”<sup>200</sup> Orthophonics were set to “relieve the spasmodic constriction of the vocal chords by opening the glottis, while at the same time the chest is expanded by a large quantity of air, which escapes slowly by an exasperation which should be gradual, and only sufficient to produce the sound.”<sup>201</sup> For Hunt, it was this orthophonic *technique*, which would ensure the production of more nearly perfect speech in the stuttering subject. Well before the phonograph’s commercialization, a deep and forceful reconciliation with the subject, at the level of speech and sound was at play in the orthophonic knowledge that would build the electric phonograph. Subtly, but powerfully, Hunt’s work reveals a 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific interest in the racialization of voice and body through their rationalized co-constitution. In fact it is from Hunt’s *Philosophy of Voice and Speech* and ethnological conference paper “On the Negro’s Place in Nature”, that we might more accurately understand as the distillation of technique, which Brooks appreciates as the objectification of Smith’s voice. Reminiscent of Brooks’ fetishization of

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<sup>199</sup> The origins of the term orthophonics or at least its first usage are not entirely settled. Orthophony, as a term and general subject dates as far back as the 1845 publication by the same name of Dr. W. Russell in which he defines it thusly: “The term Orthophony is used to designate the art of cultivating the voice. The systematic cultivation of the vocal organ is a branch of education for which our own language furnishes no appropriate designation.” *Orthophony* Oxford English Dictionary. However when it comes to the term “*Orthophonics*” the OED, incorrectly in my mind, dates the first publication or use of this term—the scientific application of Orthophony—to 1877, twelve years after Hunt’s book. The genealogy of the term can be found under the Wikipedia entry “Victor Orthophonic Victrola”: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor\\_Orthophonic\\_Victrola](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Orthophonic_Victrola). Moreover, it is this use with which we are concerned here.

<sup>200</sup> James Hunt, *Stuttering and Stammering, Their Nature and Treatment*. London, England: Logmans , Green and Co., Paternoster Row. 1865 (Seventh Edition), 147.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

Smith's technique and voice at the level of breath and articulation, James Hunt's work exemplifies a long-standing scientific pathology of the black voice and black body that crucially informed the construction of the electric phonograph.

Jonathan Sterne's work on the phonautograph also illuminates the contributions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century fascinations with anatomy, physiology, otology, and the practice of medical dissection in generating knowledge about acoustics and sound reproduction. Sterne states: "The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were very fertile period for the sciences, and alongside acoustics developed a whole set of sciences of hearing."<sup>202</sup> Appended to this we can add the fascination with breathing, breath, lungs and "the organs of speech" all of which became the central axis for the establishment and reification of racial and sexual difference. As Sterne further suggests anatomical and physiological dissection contributed greatly to the 19<sup>th</sup> century understanding of sound, hearing and indeed sound technology. Specifically, anatomical dissection was an indispensable practice that solidified the anthropological ideality of "the human," as a discursive and material object constituted through the observable differences that European societies read into the bodies of the "more primitive" colonized peoples they dissected. Dissection also contributed to the growing reservoir of knowledge derived from "the body's" scientific abstraction in ways which yielded positivist advances in the science and engineering of sound technology. The immediate medical demands of the latter were satisfied largely through the dissection of "the bodies of the poor," executed

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<sup>202</sup> Sterne, 51.

criminals, and the already entombed—grave robberies.” The supplementary and equally expansive desires of anatomists and scientists to know and create their anthropological Other were met through the colonial missions of political, military, economic and intellectual expansion.<sup>203</sup> Indeed, the archive of sonic knowledge and its attendant practice of dissection relied on and reaffirmed the connection between sound reproduction and death. Sterne notes: “As beliefs surrounding death, the preservation of the dead body, transcendence, and temporality shaped or explained sound reproduction, sound reproduction itself became a distinctive way of relating to, understanding, and experiencing death, history, and culture.”<sup>204</sup> The simultaneous creation and preservation of death; death of cultures, death of bodies, is certainly at work in the (in)famous Lomax and Works Progress Administration’s recordings of imprisoned black male blues singers.<sup>205</sup> Racial pathologies explicitly emerged from anxieties about European colonization and chattel slavery. Yet these conceptions of racial difference congealed and took flight from a scientific fascination between race, sound (the voice) and death, namely dead black bodies. While the previous chapter has tracked the more spectacular modes of black embodiment through sound in the pervasive legacies of phonographic lynching and minstrelsy, an equally significance, yet subtler legacy lies in this scientific legacy of the phonograph’s electrification.

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<sup>203</sup> *Ibid* 68-69.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid*, 26. Sterne also fascinatingly connects this drive to simultaneously create and preserve the dead, to anthropologists’ use of phonographic technology in “capturing and storing” the “dying” or “dead” cultures of Native Americans in the 1890’s.

<sup>205</sup> See Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997. Also for a direct and engaging treatment of Lomax’s project see Bryan Wagner’s *Disturbing the Peace: Black Popular Culture and the Police Power After Slavery*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009, and my discussion of his work in Chapter 1.

In his 1859 work *the Philosophy of Voice and Speech* James Hunt set out to establish a line of thought, which would once and for all unite the disparate writings on the *form* and *function* of the human voice and speech. Hunt's work develops and expands upon an epistemological position in the human sciences, which at the general level sought to rescue the form and function of the human body from the grips of "metaphysical speculation."<sup>206</sup> Rather than attributing the differences of "the races of man" to the ontological assumptions of a priori racial difference—something, which phrenology had been assiduously accused of—Hunt's philosophy and anthropology intended to inductively derive racial difference from the observable anatomical and physiological facts of the "production of the human voice." The aim then of this anatomical and physiological—what would eventually become synthesized in orthophonics—treatment of the human voice, was to abstract the human voice into a set of logical and positive human effects intelligible to the scientific faculties of human reason. Racial difference then was an observable fact of scientific induction, which served to affirm that very process of induction as a legitimate and powerful way of ordering and knowing that would sculpt sound technology. Specifically, Hunt wanted to derive the mechanics of the production of the voice as a universal. Covering a span of anatomical literature dating back to Greek Antiquity and the European Renaissance, Hunt locates the basis of the human voice in the *articulation* of air in *breath* stating, "The production of the voice in general, as has been shown in

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<sup>206</sup> See James Hunt's conference paper presented at the *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*. "On Physio-Anthropology, Its Aim and Method." *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*. Vol. 5, pp. ccix-cclxxi, 1867.

a preceding chapter, is the result of certain actions in the larynx, by which the air is made to vibrate, and in its turn puts the vocal ligaments into a state of vibration.”<sup>207</sup>

Production then was predicated upon a Cartesian abstraction of the voice into the container of the human body, the body itself being an abstraction of scientific knowledge and categorical understanding. Here it becomes rather clear where Adorno’s romantic anxiety over the phonographic female body emerges, because Adorno expects, even latently that the female body carry out this vessel-like capacity as the bearer of gender and identity through the voice.<sup>208</sup> Gertrude “Ma” Rainey radically disputes these regulative Cartesian claims of embodiment, the female body—a body to which Rainey has no symbolic or ancestral access and therefore perhaps no interest in nominally reaffirming or disaffirming—by positing (and withholding) the body as neither container nor contained, the phonograph as neither container nor contained.

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<sup>207</sup> James Hunt. *A Manual of the Philosophy of Voice and Speech: Especially in Relation to the English Language and the Art of Public Speaking*. Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, Paternoster Row. London, England, 1859, 148.

<sup>208</sup> See Henri Bergson. *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N.M Paul and W.S. Palmer. New York, NY: Zone Books, 1991, 182. In particular see Bergson’s synthesis of matter and memory via embodiment, which complicates Adorno’s conclusions: “Memory is, then, in no degree an emanation of matter; on the contrary, matter, as grasped in concrete perception which always occupies a certain duration, is in great part the work of memory... Now, if every concrete perception, however short we suppose it, is already a synthesis, made by memory, of an infinity of “pure perceptions” which succeed each other, must we not think that the heterogeneity of sensible qualities is due to their being contracted in our memory and the relative homogeneity of objective change to the slackness of their natural tension? And might not the interval between quantity and quality be lessened by considerations of *tension*, as the distance between the extended and the unextended is lessened by considerations of extension?” Bergson goes on to offer a critique of consciousness as the mind’s capture of an object—again that relationship of container to contained that Husserl deals with in his phenomenology—and moves into his notion of “pure perception”, which given its critique of “immediate” consciousness or what we might call transcendent consciousness, that is the awareness of transcendence, awareness as transcendence, his “pure perception” resonates with Michel Henry’s fixation on imminence. Imminence, grapples with the ontology of Husserl’s Cartesian preceptors, which seem to perpetually if not infinitely assume an ontology of container to contained for the *cogitatio*.

The speculative propositions of black female blues phonography endlessly trouble the scientific presumptions of orthophonics even as these blues theories are subjected to the machinations of this rationalist racial legacy. For Hunt voice is entirely physiologically and anatomically derived from “mankind’s” ability to convert air to breath, and breath to voice. The flicker of the “agency” or “will” of the human subject, which Adorno centers in his definition of technique, was still present in Hunt’s equation albeit sublimated to the mechanics of rational scientific knowledge. In this sense, aesthetics and technique were reducible to and hence observable in terms of the rationalization of human form and function. Black parts: “the larynx,” “the palate” and “the organs of speech,” were particularized (only) for the purpose of filling a white universal (w)hole; ensuring tautologically the terms of knowing and recognition by which that rational whole had come to identify itself.

Figure 1:

	CALCULATED	OBSERVED	
For the coach-horn {	Closed.....	177	181
	Open.....	254	202
For the trombone {	Closed.....	286	305
	Open.....	418	432
For the phonograph {	Closed.....	311	304
	Open.....	329	415



Figure 2:

**Table II.**  
**Thoracic Index in Female Negro.**

Age Period	Average Age	Number of Obs.	Lowest Index	Highest Index	Average Index
0—11 mo.	5.5 mo.	10	80.00	94.11	85.83
1— 5 yrs.	3.3 yrs.	39	68.00	88.88	76.84
6—10 "	7.5 "	33	57.77	80.00	72.98
11—15 "	13.3 "	19	63.04	78.26	68.75
16—20 "	18.0 "	16	65.21	79.16	70.35
21—25 "	23.2 "	32	65.30	81.63	71.57
26—30 "	28.2 "	26	63.20	82.00	71.60
31—40 "	35.6 "	38	65.70	82.90	72.48
41—50 "	45.8 "	39	64.80	80.04	74.46
51—60 "	55.9 "	25	64.00	85.70	74.93
61—70 "	65.3 "	9	59.40	85.93	75.27
over 70 "	78.2 "	8	70.83	88.46	76.68

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Black parts affirmed the knowing capabilities (limits too) of a white male scientific whole, whose means of knowing rested on that very reflected notion of racial difference. To this extent, Hunt's approach was no less dependent upon a racialized prescription of difference than the phrenology it had sought to dethrone. As implied both in Hunt's philosophy and his ethnology, the human voice had no form, no function and no sound without its epistemological supplement of the structure of the black voice. Hunt's ethnological work allowed him to understand something known as the black body, or the body of the Negro as the philosophical reification of "form and function." The contributions of prescribed racial difference in understanding the voice were exemplified in a seminal 1864 conference organized by

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<sup>209</sup> Figure 1 is taken from Arthur Gordon Webster's article "Acoustical Impedance, and the Theory of Horns and of the Phonograph." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*. Vol. 5, No. 7, June 15<sup>th</sup> 1919, pp.275-282, 281. Figure 2 is taken from Charles Bradford Rhodes Jr's "The Thoracic Index in the Negro." *Zeitschrift für Morphologie und Anthropologie*. Bd. 19, H. 1, 1905, pp.103-117, 109. Here I am making a speculative comparison hinging around the abstraction and measurability of racial corporeal difference in the negro through sound and the abstraction and measurability of the body of the phonograph through sound. I make this to again suggest speculatively that the two were twins of the same episteme.

Hunt for the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland; an organization which Hunt chaired for much of his later career. The conference and subsequent publication entitled “On the Negro’s Place in Nature,” affirmed and in an epistemological sense preceded Hunt’s work on orthophonics and the philosophy of voice.<sup>210</sup> The conference was designed to discuss the “physical, mental and moral characteristics of the Negro [which] had never been brought before a scientific audience in London” unlike in the Americas, France and Germany “where these subjects had been fully discussed.”<sup>211</sup> Throughout the conference Hunt and his interlocutors establish a set of paradigms and an epistemological basis for the Negro’s valuation. The inductive method by which the Negro, and most especially her anatomy come to be known, is based in and hence further affirms the anatomical and physiological order by which Hunt studies the human voice. Primarily, the rationalization of difference, vocal difference in and as corporeal difference, facilitates the voice’s objectification in what Hunt terms “articulation”; the very basis for Hunt’s orthophonics. Here the use of the term “articulation” uncannily echoes Brooks’ desire to treat Bessie Smith’s voice through the objective lens of technique and his attention to her “articulation.” Again such an appreciation of Bessie Smith undoubtedly turns around the absented force of the black voice in the phonograph; but that very voice, its structure of knowability and reverie, made the phonograph possible. Despite the claims of engineers, advertisers and audiophiles, fidelity does

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<sup>210</sup> James Hunt “On the Negro’s Place in Nature.” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*. Vol. 2, pp. xv-lvi, 1864, xvi.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

not hinge around objectively producing objects that are heard or sonically reproduced “better” or simply with a lower signal to noise ratio. As both John Mowitt and Jonathan Sterne have respectively suggested the fetishization of “fidelity” in sound technology is about continually establishing and restoring one’s faith in their own perceptive capacity—their projective capacities; faith in their own body and identification.<sup>212</sup> Adorno’s lamentation of the pre/phonographic female body is circumscribed by the very logic of fidelity and faith—faith in the normative female body (and by extension his own body)—that he seeks to criticize. Similarly, Hunt’s valuation of articulation as the highest level of the voice’s presentation seems to prefigure both Brooks’ appreciation and Millard’s rationalization of Smith, and indeed the fantasy of fidelity that marks all sonic technology. If we return to Hunt’s earlier works on voice and orthophonics, he seems to anticipate the desire for faith and reconciliation with Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey and their ambivalent manifestation within bodies they occupied and complicated through the phonograph.

### **When Talking Machines Make Their Masters Speak:**

In *the Philosophy of Voice* Hunt dedicates a brief chapter to the discussion of “Ventriloquism and Speaking Machines.” In this section Hunt focuses on a rather established trend in the 18<sup>th</sup> century of developing a “speaking machine” and

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<sup>212</sup> Sterne, 277. Also see John Mowitt’s article “The Sound of Music in the Era of Its Electronic Reproducibility.” In *Music and Society: the Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*. Ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

speaking “automata.” One invention, in particular, called a “speaking machine” consisted of a wooden box with a puppet’s or doll’s head placed on top; the box was fitted “deceptively” with “a pair of bellows, a sound board, cylinder, and pipes” all of which imitated “the organs of speech.” Inside the hollowed out box sat either a “child or a woman” who would speak into a pipe, giving the audience the impression that the machine itself was speaking.<sup>213</sup> This novel “speaking machine” gave way to more scientifically rigorous though no less uncanny inventions which used perforated reed pipes and anatomical replicas of human speech organs to imitate the vowel and consonant sounds of human speech. The most famous of these machines and most technically complex was Wolfgang von Kempelen’s 1782 “Speaking Machine.”<sup>214</sup> In his own cataloging of the increased precision with which these mechanisms imitated the faculties of the human voice, Hunt still laments the way in which their artisanal quality always stands in as a mimetic substitute for the real of the human voice; that is the formal and functional, even technical, means of the human voice. In Hunt’s unmet desire we can locate the uncanny relation and supplementarity revealed by Ma Rainey’s evocative performance and Bessie Smith’s singing. Not only do the parallels and continuances between Hunt’s thought and the thinking about Bessie Smith reveal an entwined performative legacy of sound technology and blackness.

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<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, 142. The function of automata here clearly prefigures and echoes Edison’s encounter with blackness in and as the phonograph; when it was as if “the machine [itself] was speaking.”

<sup>214</sup> Mladen Dolar mentions a similar example, if not the same example in his work *A Voice and Nothing More*. Dolar’s example is derived from Wolfgang von Kempelen’s 1780 invention the “Speaking Machine”, which Kempelen wrote about a decade later in a work *Machanismus der Menschlichen Sprache nebst Beschreibung einer spechenden Mascine*. I am actually referring to an earlier device, which is similar in its promise of human speech, but which differs in its functionality. I rely primarily on Hunt’s treatment of it by way of another German scientist John Beckmann and his work *History of Inventions*. Hunt’s also mentions Kempelen’s work.

Even more, these parallels expose a long-standing connection between the epistemology of the voice in technological modernity that reaches its height with the electrification of recording technology through Smith's 1925 electrical recordings.

It was the developments by Hunt, anthropologists, speech pathologists' and physiologists' in the technique of orthophonics that contributed to the mechanical frame, what Martin Heidegger might call the *gestell* or skeleton, of the Victrola phonograph. Heidegger posits that it is in *gestell* (sometimes written as *Ge-stell*) or *enframing* that modern technology reveals its essence: "The essence of modern technology starts man upon the way of that revealing through which the real everywhere, more or less distinctly, becomes standing-reserve."<sup>215</sup> Heidegger goes on to a point, which is worth reciting:

In Enframing, that unconcealment comes to pass in conforming with which the work of modern technology reveals the real as standing reserve. This work is therefore neither only human activity nor a mere means within such activity. The merely instrumental, merely anthropological definition of technology is therefore in principle untenable.<sup>216</sup>

Avital Ronell posits *Ge-stell* can be understood as the building of a frame, as the organizing of an epistemological order by which objects come to presence, and in coming to presence cease to be objects as such.<sup>217</sup> Ronell's astute extension of *Ge-stell* to Mary Shelley's anatomically driven construction of *Frankenstein* is helpful and telling in that it allows us to understand how modern technology and specifically

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<sup>215</sup> Heidegger *TQCT*, 24.

<sup>216</sup> Heidegger *TQCT*, 21.

<sup>217</sup> Ronell *Telephone*, 414. Ronell's playful examination of Heidegger has been extremely helpful in shaping my own understanding of Heidegger's work in relation to sonic technology.

sound technology plundered and produced a racial graveyard of black bodies—of blackness, in order to invent electrified sound and with it sonic “fidelity.” The scientific rationalization of racial difference that made possible technological advances in sound sought to establish and restore faith (fidelity) in the fantasy of human and technological identification through blackness. The electrification of sound technology, more than any prior advances, sought to reify the opposition between technology and “human activity” even as it relied on the complex supplementarity of the two. This impasse between the simultaneous dependence on and disavowal of the body of phonography marks the early framing of the Orthophonic Victrola. One advertisement touted: “To me the reproduction sounds *uncanny* in its faithfulness. It was as though the artist in person was in the room, giving life to the voice coming from the instrument.”<sup>218</sup> This advertised commentary echoes Heidegger’s claims as to the “nearness” promised by modern technology. Even more, these comments hint at the way in which a reproduced presence of the (romantic) black voice could be brought to the phonographic listener at the very disavowal of the complex mechanical nature of that body and that voice’s construction. Not unlike Dr. Frankenstein’s creation the machine is thought to be “giving life to the voice” when it is the voice giving life to the machine and its inventor; and it is this life, the life of the black voice that simultaneously writes phonographic modernity while also evading its regulative instrumental forms of functioning.

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<sup>218</sup> Sterne, 275.

Beyond the realm of mere causality, the black voice then is not only the phonic supplement to the phonograph's functioning. Rather the black voice stands as the *episteme*, the frame [*gestell*], which besets the phonograph's ordering, all its "revealing." The black voice occupies this position, not least of which for its affirmation and confirmation as a kind of "standing reserve," as Heidegger terms it. That is, the black voice is the epistemological apparatus through and against which the phonograph achieves its relation to sounding, knowing and meaning. It is from the black voice which all "nature" and particularly the "nature" of sound can be theorized in electrical phonography.

A sublimely mimetic *logos* of human anatomy and physiology were invoked in the pursuit of the "perfect reproduction of speech and music." In order to reproduce a "natural" frequency range 100 Hz to 5000 Hz, the "diaphragm" of the Victrola phonograph was built with the orthophonic knowledge of resonance, reverberation and physiology from Hunt's work and thinking. In general, the electrification was designed to reveal not just a sound, but also a way of hearing. Electrical recording, in "reproducing the natural frequency range" of the human subject (as it was believed to be then), (re)created a world of naturalized perception through its scientific rationalization of "human perception." However, as Harrison's colleague and collaborator in Bell Labs, Joseph P. Maxfield's comments imply, electrical recording did not simply allow for the recording of any object in some totalistic sense, and hence lead to the uniform standardization of the object of phonographic reproduction, as Theodor Adorno would much later suggest. Maxfield sees the achievement of

electrification as an opportunity to move beyond the acoustical phonograph whose process of recording and reproduction attenuated higher frequencies into a metallic and “tinny” sound that characterized the earlier “talking machine.” To these ends, Maxfield states that the importance of electrical recording in reproducing these lower frequencies will be to reproduce the “naturalness or what is called “the body” of the music.”<sup>219</sup> The simultaneous possibility and impossibility of recording—of reproducing, of disclosing increasingly wider frequency ranges, and hence increasingly varying objects and sound sources—implied and engendered a (new) anxiety over the representation and consumption of difference.

Reproduction required a supremely “natural” object both as its epistemological frame and as the affirmation or evidence of its knowing. Such an object would establish the limits of reproduction as “natural” speech. Yet also, for these ends to be reached and these limits to be recognized, that same object would have to obscure the process by which it had come to be and hence efface the phonographic technology that had disclosed it. The black voice emerged not just as a commercial asset or effect of phonographic reproduction, but its epistemological and technological condition of possibility. The black voice buttressed the Natural and naturalness of the electrical phonograph; it constituted and facilitated speech as such and ultimately a notion of presence in the phonograph, as I have discussed earlier. Even more however, the black voice did so precisely at the enfacement of the

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<sup>219</sup> John P. Maxfield. “Electrical Phonograph Recording.” *The Scientific Monthly*. Vol. 22, No. 1, January 1926, pp. 71-79, 79.



technology in terms of its condition of possibility; the black voice sounded precisely so the phonograph did not have to.

To achieve the ends of a “naturalness” of human speech phonographic technology called upon a long-standing body of anthropological knowledge of form and function that had rendered rational the Natural in terms of how the black voice and body were known and knowable by (re)creating the nature of the black body from the supposed obscurity of the (rational) technology. Harrison boasted of the new Victrola that, “Its reproduction of the low frequencies gives naturalness to speech and music, makes it comfortable and carries over the full power of the rhythm.”<sup>220</sup> The black voice then was not just “the natural” or even more “Nature” in electrical phonography, but also what ordered, made possible, and revealed, “the natural.” The (black) voice was “the natural” supplement to phonographic electrification. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was the idealized and instrumentalized image of the black voice and the black body that had been crammed into the compartment of “the speaking machine.” It would take the genius and poiesis of black female blues singers in 1925 to break it out by confronting the inscriptive force of the phonograph and bring about its *exscription*, its scratch.

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<sup>220</sup> Harrison, 269.

Sectional View of the Body  
Of the Orthophonic Victrola's  
Diaphragm c. 1926.

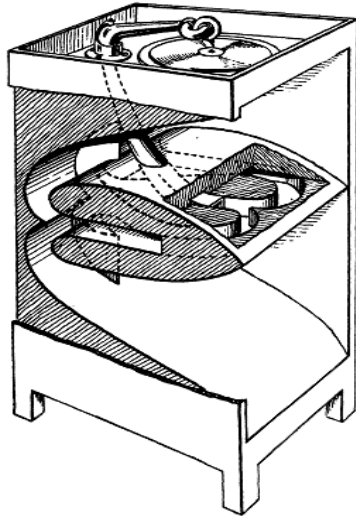


FIG. 6. SECTIONAL VIEW OF THE FOLDED HORN  
SHOWING THE AIR PASSAGE.

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1917 photo of Ma Rainey



When Bessie Smith stepped into Columbia's newly electrified recording studio in May of 1925, her voice had, in many ways, already preceded her; her body it seems had even preceded her. This did not occur strictly at the level of reputation. Rather it was the recording and phonographic technology—the microphone amplifier and the orthophonic Victrola—which had come about, from the very object that Bessie Smith had, for the phonograph, always seemingly been: the black voice. By what I have outlined above then, I would like to (re)consider Smith's 1925 recordings with the indispensable caveat that the black voice and the black body were epistemologically and imaginatively written into electrical recording. Whether the

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<sup>221</sup> *Ibid*, 270.

electrical condenser microphones used to record Bessie Smith's voice or the electric Victrola used to reproduce it, these technologies owed their fabrication to this certain way of knowing and prescribing blackness.<sup>222</sup> Thus blackness carries the capacity to trouble the superficial instrumentality, with which Millard, and to a differing degree Adorno, understand technology. Privileging blackness in understanding the phonograph also complicates Brooks' notion that Smith's work was attributable exclusively to some kind of putative notion of technique. Both positions presume the stable objecthood of Bessie Smith's voice for the purposes of reifying their own positivist and objectivist assumptions about technology and technique. Understanding the phonograph through Bessie Smith and black female blues singers allows us to see on the one hand blackness' inscription under the "law of genre," form and technique and on the other hand, how blackness has worked precisely to dismantle those very laws; laws which contemporary black experimental music and sound artist continues to tear down. The phonographic work of black female blues singers then forces us to rethink how sonic reproductive technology and even hearing in technological modernity is always tied to the inscription of blackness through our identifications with sound. The anxiety to suppress this relation, this lineage, overwhelms the scholarship on Bessie Smith and endlessly frames our way of hearing (her). Because

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<sup>222</sup> Though I did not discuss it in great detail, microphonic and telephonic technology depended on similarly anatomical and physiological bodies of knowledge, and similar epistemological relationships to the body, in order to constitute their parameters for "natural" sound and the "natural" subject/object of that sound. Condenser microphones, which revolutionized electrical recording, especially vocal recording, relied upon the kinds of studies of the organs of speech that Hunt's work delineated. See "Program of the Seventh Meeting of the Acoustical Society of America, May 2-3, 1932." *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*. Vol. IV, No. 1, Part 1, July 1932. For a more exhaustive contemporary treatment of electrical microphonic and telephonic development see Lillian Hoddeson's essay. "The Emergence of Basic Research in the Bell Telephone System, 1875-1915." *Technology and Culture*. Vol. 22, No. 3, July 1981, pp. 512-544.

of the symbolic and phenomenal way in which Smith's voice engenders and is generated by phonographic *enframing*, it might seem impossible to think of Smith's work as breaking out of the symbolic structure of the black voice even as it operates through the phonograph and operates the phonograph.<sup>223</sup>

Yet, lying within the dangers, if you will, of Bessie Smith's endless enframing through the phonograph, there also grows a kind of saving power beyond these strictly phenomenal modes of recognition. Hence, Smith's 1925 electrical recording sessions, more powerfully open up a space and a time in which Ma Rainey writes and performs in her 1925 concert. The inside of the Orthophonic Victrola, the diaphragmatic space that was built upon the naturalization of rationalized racial difference and the rationalization of black life as exhumed anatomical black death through ethnographic and phrenological knowledge—all of which distinguished the Victrola's electrical capacity—was intentionally emptied of signification so that the black voice and the black body could be overloaded with speech, sentiment and above all faithful presence. Inherent to the phonograph's electrification was the further obscuration of the space of (phonographic) writing.<sup>224</sup> In 1925, once Bessie Smith records her first electric breath, she both colludes in the obscuration of the space of writing, and more interestingly transforms and (dis)figures this space, making it an

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<sup>223</sup> The notion of *enframing* here to which I am referring comes from Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology" and his essay translated as "The Turning", both contained in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, cited above. For an excellent discussion of *gestell*, see Hans Ruin's "Ge-stell as The Essence of Technology" in *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*. Ed. Bret W. Davis. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010.

<sup>224</sup> Heidegger says of the dangers of Enframing as the supreme way of technological ordering and indeed all knowing: "Thus the challenging Enframing not only conceals a former way of revealing way of revealing, bringing-forth but it conceals revealing itself and with it That wherein unconcealment, i.e., truth, comes to pass." Heidegger *TQCT*, 27.

inhabitable space of poiesis and performance for Ma Rainey. Smith's recordings therefore disturb the "equipmentality" of the phonograph, and by extension the instrumentality of the black voice, which Adorno's incisive analysis falls under the spell of. What I am trying to draw out here is the "worlding" of black female blues phonography—to borrow another term from Heidegger, which complicates a certain reductive phenomenal calculation of the black voice as either being unmediated and romantically natural or as technologically overdetermined from without and hence merely thrown by the phonograph. The implicit disputation of the merely instrumental conception of the phonograph, even beyond its technical development as a commercial technology, signifies a movement in phonographic sound and hearing, because it facilitates a drive towards thinking of blackness as more than merely instrumental to black life. The poetic nature of this move, made possible through black female blue phonography, realizes a moment when blackness is no longer simply cast as the ideological fodder for the phonograph's technological functioning, even at the level of the body. In Smith's and Rainey's works we can locate the radical (non)origin(s) of blackness as the site of phonographic *techne*; the very *techne* from which the phonograph could be (re)imagined as another kind of instrument, another kind of music, another kind of life.<sup>225</sup> This force, this energy opens up an artistic space, which was always there, but, under the symbolic structuring of the black voice, was never (quite) heard.

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<sup>225</sup> Heidegger in his attempt to both argue out of an instrumental definition of technology as well as show "what instrumentality as such in truth might be", states "*Techne* belongs to bringing-forth to poiesis; it is something poetic [sic.]...It is a revealing, and not as manufacturing, that *techne* is a bringing-forth" Heidegger, *Question 12*.

## **Loop B:**

Bessie Smith was making some dub music in 1925 whether she knew it or not. In her first electric recording Smith was making a kind of dubbed or doubled, uncanny version of herself that would live beyond her death and that would continually trouble the writing of her death as the perpetuation of sonic fidelity and racial pathology. A funny thing happened in that first May 25<sup>th</sup> 1925 recording session in Columbia's newly electrified recording studio; an incident, which is part of Bessie Smith's oeuvre; what we can and cannot hear of her. An hour before Smith stepped into the studio, Maggie Jones (also known as Fae Barnes) had just finished up a recording session making her the first of Columbia's "race" artists to test the new electrical system.<sup>226</sup> However, in many senses the studio had been made for Bessie Smith, indeed we might say made of her. For the long-standing complaints of acoustical recording to capture the lower frequencies and much higher frequencies had long pinched Smith's complex vocal dynamics to a compressed mid-range. Although Smith was to record with the same stellar backup band that Jones had just worked with: Fletcher Henderson on piano, Buster Bailey on clarinet, Joe Smith on trumpet and Coleman Hawkins on tenor saxophone. Special precautions were taken to ensure the electrical recording would properly capture and reproduce Smith's voice for the Orthophonic Victrola. Christopher Albertson notes that: "To solve the problem and obtain a more intimate sound, one of Western's engineers suggested shrinking the

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<sup>226</sup>Albertson, 97.

studio with the help of a monk's cloth tent. Hastily designed and sewn together, a conical tent of monk's cloth was suspended from the ceiling by a wire and spread to the corners of the studio."<sup>227</sup> The recording session started off with several wild formal departures for Smith including her classic rendition of Alberta Hunter's "Cake Walkin' Babies from Home" and "Jazzbo Brown from Memphis Town" and rounded out with an interrupted performance of "Yellow Dog Blues." Interrupted, because the monk cloth that had been suspended above the studio came crashing down, covering all of the musicians, including Smith, and the sound technicians; effectively bringing the recording session to an abrupt halt. Albertson again notes, "The session was cut short, and the monk's cloth was folded up for good, but the theory proved to be correct, so a more permanent solution was designed and installed." Despite the studio's collapse this session had been recorded, but the discs were to remain on Columbia's shelves untouched for another 15 years. No explanation has ever been fully given, but for decades none of these recorded sides were released. The likely drive behind the shelving of these recordings seems to be the anxiety over their fidelity. Bessie Smith's takes could not be forced within the linear progressive narrative of technological progress that the "fidelity" of her 1925 recording session had been enlisted to reify. Rather the fantasy of fidelity was rendered, if only momentarily as a confrontation with loss; even as the sheet was restored in an attempt

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<sup>227</sup> *Ibid*, 98.

to suture over that loss.<sup>228</sup> Yet, the cloth of fidelity is always already supplemented and cut through and through with slits of Bessie Smith's voice.

Not until 1940, after Smith's death in 1937, would any of these recordings meet the ear of their eager listener/collector.<sup>229</sup> Yet, supposedly discerning blues record collectors found fault with the quality of these recordings. Disappointment likely arose from the increased surface noise that had worsened as the time in storage wore the shellac from the records. About a decade later in 1951 a portion of Bessie Smith's catalogue was remastered and cut to hi-fidelity stereo tape by Columbia sound engineers. Perceptible tape echo was added, because "In those early days of hi-fi it was a common belief that echo enhanced old recordings." In the early 1970's Columbia made one final and last revision in remastering Smith's entire catalogue to vinyl records in a five volume series. In this process "Every effort has been made to preserve the vocal quality captured by the original recording equipment." Chris Albertson explains this process in the record sleeve of the first volume of Bessie Smith's rereleased and remastered recordings entitled *the World's Greatest Blues Singer*:

In some cases up to four different copies of a side were needed in order to come up with one good version and, altogether, close to 400

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<sup>228</sup> Here I am thinking of Fred Moten's treatment of Glen Gould's renowned penchant for performing for the recording. Moten uses Gould's music, his recording and performing, to connect the apparent smooth totality of fantasy to the apparent sliced mode of montage. Moten theorizes: "*quasi una fantasia*"—like a fantasy, where fantasy refers to a mode of polyphonic composition that is at once improvisatory, transportive (of composer, performer and listener) and montagic (not only in its sequencing of musical sections that are not thematically connected but in its yoking together of seemingly disparate emotional contents)." See Fred Moten's article "Sonata Qua Una Fantasia." In *Hambone 19*, Fall 2009, pp.110-133, 111.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*



sides were transferred before a satisfactory version of each of the 160 sides was obtained... The result of all this enables us to hear the recordings of Bessie Smith with unprecedented clarity and presence.<sup>230</sup>

The fantasy of Bessie Smith's voice as phonographic presence relies on what Fred Moten has called the montagic cut; the recording, the writing of the sound/scene that produces the illusion of seriality and continuity through a series of fragmentary cuts.<sup>231</sup> Indeed the absence of Bessie Smith's voice writes and infects its phonographic presence; the cuts and splices of her work grade against the ideality of an absolute origin even as they are continually enlisted to constitute it. Just as Ma Rainey had created the uncanny double of herself that phonography had always relied on even as it had disavowed its complex set of performative iterations, Bessie Smith's catalogue reveals a similar tension or dynamic. Bessie Smith's oeuvre presents us with a continuous infinitely differentiated loop, a series of montagic cuts, splices and dissections, which are continually enlisted to fulfill the fantasy and ideality of her voice even as they literally cut it through and through. What does it mean that the (w)hole of sonic modernity rests on the negation of fidelity and perpetual sonic progression at the disavowal of this loop; of the disavowal of these cut and cutting black parts? Perhaps we simply live in the "circular migration" of the record, grating

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<sup>230</sup> See Albertson's comments in *Bessie Smith: The World's Greatest Blues Singer*. Columbia Records, ASIN: B000M0A602, 1970. Vinyl Double LP. For all 400 sides, which Columbia more recently released on CD see *Bessie Smith: the Complete Recordings Vol. 1-5*. New York, NY: Columbia Records, 1991-1996.

<sup>231</sup> Moten *Qua*, 111.

against its grooves even as we remain locked in the differentiating potential of its surface: scratch.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> See Fred Moten's characterization of the circular migration of improvisation; the way in which the always preparedness of improvisation always returns to a kind of appropriation that, in quoting Derrida, "marks you without belonging to you." Moten *In the Break*, 75.

### Chapter 3: To Capture, *Sound*: Black Affective Soundscapes and The Legacy of the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet's *Sound*

What might it take to think of the formal dimensions of electronic sampling through the avant-garde jazz experiments of Roscoe Mitchell's 1966 album *Sound*? We would have to do away with, even as we engage, the common categorization of *Sound* as strictly free jazz. Additionally, we would have to rethink a concept of the experimental electronic avant-garde or electronic experimentalism—something which in the 1950's and 1960's is centered primarily on the development of musique concrète, the legacy of Edgar Varèse and the experiments of John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Steve Reich, Morton Subotnick, Ramon Sender, Robert Moog, Wendy Carlos and others—that does not simply rely on the empirical presence of electronic instruments as the precondition for electronic experimentation. The resemblance of *Sound* to putative forms of experimental (electronic) music and free jazz belies the profound extent to which *Sound* actually disturbs the materiality of these forms. This essay revels in the necessary impossibility of considering *Sound* as a musical and sonic blueprint for future experimentations in black electronic music.<sup>233</sup> Writers Kodwo Eshun and Greg Tate have argued that the brilliant electronic jazz/funk/rock fusion experiments of the late 1960's and early 1970's, works such as George Russell's *Electronic Sonata For Souls Loved by Nature*, Miles Davis' *On the Corner*, and Herby Hancock's *Headhunters*, laid the foundation for the black musical

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<sup>233</sup> Fred Moten's work in *In the Break: the Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, has been the most helpful and inspiring text in this endeavor. Additionally, George Lewis' *A Power Stronger than itself: The Association for the AACM and American Experimental Music* has been helpful in the specific task of confronting music of the AACM and Roscoe Mitchell's work in particular.

experimentation that would eventually develop into black electronic musical forms such as dub, hip-hop, house and techno.<sup>234</sup> While I do not dispute these positions or their historical relevance, I would like to complicate the dimensionality that we invoke when we theorize black music and electronic experimentation. In the previous chapter on Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and black female blues phonography, I discussed the way in which Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and other black female blues singers’ music, performance and recordings troubled the materiality and ideality of sonic technologies. Smith and Rainey’s voices and performances, respectively, produced a phonic materiality that realized the production of electrical (analogue) sonic technologies to an even greater extent than those technologies anticipated and enframed their voices. Hence, I have attempted in this larger work to consider black music’s formal dimensions as inherently troubling the materialities and idealities that have enframed black music and by extension the normative materialities and idealities, from which modernity has often been theorized. In this regard I would like to consider the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet’s 1966 work *Sound*—an album that unlike the aforementioned works by Lewis, Davis, and Hancock, does not self-consciously employ electronic instruments—as a critical predecessor to the black electronic experiments that were and are to come.

*Sound* is the 1966 collaboration of Roscoe Mitchell (“alto saxophone, clarinet, recorder etc.”), Lester Bowie (trumpet, flugelhorn, and harmonica), Lester Lashley

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<sup>234</sup> For Eshun’s argument see his seminal work *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London, England: Quarter Books Limited, 1998. See Greg Tate’s essay on Miles Davis in *Fly Boy in the Buttermilk: Essay on Contemporary America*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992.

(cello and trombone), Maurice McIntyre (tenor saxophone), Malachi Favors (standing bass), and Alvin Fielder (percussion).<sup>235</sup> The album stands emblematically among the first recorded efforts of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (and later the Art Ensemble of Chicago); along with the releases by fellow AACM founding artists: Lester Bowie's *Numbers 1 & 2*, Joseph Jarman's *Song For* and Muhal Richard Abrams' *Levels and Degrees of Light*.<sup>236</sup> Not unlike the almost familiar textures that populate its sonic landscapes, *Sound* continually butts up against regimes and structures of reference and resemblance: genre, race, and even form are inhabited only to be undone. Simultaneously, *Sound* bears a strong likeness to post-war 1950's and 1960's New Music experimentalism in which musicians and sound artists began to draw heavily upon theories of performance from dance and theater. In addition to creating a sonically distinct experience, *Sound* involves extended improvised, theatrical and choreographic performances by the musicians; evoking an aesthetic in some, at least symbolic, resemblance to John Cage's experimentation with theater in that period and later on.<sup>237</sup> George Lewis and Anthony Braxton have both discussed the AACM's engagement with Cage's work, pointing out that Cage's text *Silence* and Cage's open relationship to sound were partial influences; however

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<sup>235</sup> *Sound*. Roscoe Mitchel Sextet. Art Ensemble of Chicago Series Volume 1. Delmark Records, 1966.

<sup>236</sup> Listen, also, to Joseph Jarman's *Song For*. Delmark Records, 1966 and Muhal Richard Abrams' *Levels and Degrees of Light*. Delmark Records, 1967.

<sup>237</sup> Here I am thinking primarily of the effect or texture of John Cage works as wide ranging in time and scope as "Living Room," (1940), "Cartridge Music" (1960) and "Music For \_\_\_" (1984). What the majority of these Cage pieces share with Mitchell's *Sound* is perhaps only a similar affect, a similar abstract sound. Save for "Music For \_\_\_" which bears a nominally similar performative ethos (remember this is composed much later than *Sound*)—I will discuss the performative organization of sound in a moment. But what is most immediately interesting is the fact that unlike much of Cage's work, *Sound* is a record, an album, a recording. This critical difference means we must think of *Sound* as a theorization of recorded sound, of sound. We will see that in the longer genealogy of black music it conjures, *Sound* troubles this opposition between live and recorded.

this open relationship to sound was heavily processed through the AACM's focus on improvisation.<sup>238</sup> Describing the creative context in 1950's Chicago Mitchell notes, "There were a lot of different collaborations between different people in the arts: with poets, dancers, painters. You might go now to a dance performance and it might be our [the AACM or Muhal Richard Abram's Experimental band's] recorded music, and that's one end of the spectrum, where people are able to take a certain recording and choreograph to that recording and the other end of the spectrum is where people are actually doing this live."<sup>239</sup> The fluidity of Chicago's experimental arts and music scene in the 1960's, signaled by Mitchell here and echoed in the writings of George Lewis, provided a dynamic context for AACM musicians. In this milieu we can on the one hand imagine a free engagement by AACM musicians with the writings and practices of John Cage, yet also, as Mitchell explicitly states we can see the production of a world of black art in which reciprocity and exchange are central. Cage's music and his pontifications were certainly parcel in this exchange for AACM musicians like Mitchell who began a profound critique and rethinking of sound that reached beyond the idealism that even Cage had come to embrace.

The centrality of improvisation, the distinct contrapuntal phrasing, and its reliance on the jazz tradition and longer trajectories of black music distinguishes *Sound's* output from the putative Western avant-garde. Moments of *Sound* are reminiscent of the harmonic or harmolodic saxophone-heavy grooves of early 1960's

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<sup>238</sup> See of course George Lewis' *A Power Stronger than itself: The Association for the AACM and American Experimental Music*. Chicago, IL: the University of Chicago Press, 2009 and Anthony Braxton's ruminations on the "Post-Cagean continuum" in *Tri-Axium Writings, Volume 1*. Synthesis Music, 1985.

<sup>239</sup> Interview conducted with author, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012 at Mills College Oakland, CA.

free jazz in the styling of Ornette Coleman.<sup>240</sup> Certainly *Sound* belongs within the artistic catalogue and the improvisatory ethos of the AACM's artistic output, as George Lewis has importantly argued.<sup>241</sup> Much of the AACM's music at the time is often slotted within the broader movement of free jazz of the 1950's and 1960's.<sup>242</sup> Yet the categorization of *Sound* as free jazz has always fell short of grasping that “something else” in the music that evades the common harmonic frameworks, rhythmic and metrical structures and performative practices characteristic of free jazz. That “something else” (and that somewhere else) in *Sound* has a great deal to do with the impact of the AACM's work on the development of black experimental and electronic forms of music that would arise in its wake, namely electronic sampling.

Sampling, whether it be the recording and reproducing capacity of magnetic tape (tape recorders) as early as the 1930's—most famously aestheticized in the collage techniques of *musique concrète* in the 1950's—or the digital sampling of microprocessors in the 1980's, has often been framed as an audio practice whose realization was and is determined by the technological means to capture and

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<sup>240</sup> For an engagement with Coleman's “harmolodic” see Ronald M. Radano's discussion of Ornette Coleman's modernism, *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton's Cultural Critique*. Chicago, IL: the University of Chicago Press, 1994, 109-110. But do not buy Radano's dismissal of Cecil Taylor's own theorization and presentation of his work as having roots in the epistemology of black arts and poetry. The most obvious and perhaps important reference for *Sound* from a Jazz perspective is Ornette Coleman's work. The late 1950's and early 1960's saw Coleman release two of the most innovative and powerful jazz records ever created in *the Shape of Jazz to Come* in 1959 and *Free Jazz* in 1960. *Sound* makes explicit Coleman's influence with the first A side track entitled “Ornette” and of course Roscoe Mitchel's alto sax phrasing throughout the album bears a noticeable similarity to Coleman's on the aforementioned albums.

<sup>241</sup> See George Lewis. *A Power Stronger than itself: The Association for the AACM and American Experimental Music*. Chicago, IL: the University of Chicago Press, 2009

<sup>242</sup> Works like Joseph Jarman's *Song For*, Muhal Richard Abram's *Levels and Degrees of Light* and to a lesser extent Anthony Braxton's *Three Compositions of New Jazz* all mentioned above. See Ekkehard Jost. *Free Jazz*. New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1975.

reproduce, or in musique concrète, capture, decontextualize and recontextualize, sounds.<sup>243</sup> The aesthetic realization of these technological means, tape recorders and digital samplers, through sound art and music is presumed to follow the invention and commercial availability of sampling technology. Along with the use of signal processing and electronic synthesis, the reliance on sampling is often invoked to cordon off electronic music from something else, which might infect the supposed purity of the machine. Though the distinctions between “experimental” music, “the avant-garde” and even “experimental electronic music” have been actively blurred by artists and historians, the attempt to at least partially establish sonic technology as a pure narrative origin abounds. F.T. Marinetti and Luigi Rossolo’s exaltation of the mechanized sounds of modernity as sources for music and art in “the Futurist Manifesto” and “the Art of Noises” respectively, imbue the commercial products of capitalist industrialization with an abstract power of artistic innovation.<sup>244</sup> The gendered way in which the invention of the Moog synthesizer is discussed as the facilitator for the realization of Wendy Carlos’ *Switched on Bach* (1968)—wherein Carlos is figured as merely an instrument in the Moog’s inherent technical unfolding, marks a different, but related example of how the fetishization of electronic

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<sup>243</sup> For the more traditional technical definitions of sampling or for a closer treatment of musique concrète, which I will only mention in this chapter, see Thom Holmes’ *Electronic and Experimental Music*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002 and Peter Manning’s *Electronic and Computer Music*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>244</sup> See F.T. Marinetti’s “the Futurist Manifesto” (1909). Cited in Apollonio, Umbro, ed. *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*. Trans. Brain, Robert, R.W. Flint, J.C. Higgitt, and Caroline Tisdall. New York: Viking Press, 1973, 19-24. And see Luigi Rossolo’s “the Art of Noises” (1913). Trans. Robert Filliou. New York, NY: Something Else Press, 1967. Rossolo’s insights in particular about the almost infinite division of sounds is especially prescient in light of the advances in digital sampling that would come roughly seventy years after his essays publication. Also Peter Manning in *Electronic and Computer Music*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004, discusses Rossolo’s essay as one of the foundational movements in electronic and experimental music.



instruments serves to override, and in this case, novelize, artistic innovation.<sup>245</sup>

Despite his rather open, and at times idiosyncratic, relationship to sonic technology John Cage embraced the presence of sonic technologies as providing innovative artistic capacities: “With tape and music-synthesizers, action with the overtone structure of sounds can be less a matter of taste and more thoroughly an action in a field of possibilities.”<sup>246</sup> The conditional nature of Cage’s statement subtly hints at how the valuation of electronic instruments as the basis for electronic experimentation has been, at least partially, both a projective and retrospective dimension of the music. What music “can” be made—the “field of possibilities”—has always seemed a necessary dialectical constituent to the modernization of sound through sonic technologies.<sup>247</sup> However, the acceptance of the putative materiality of sonic technologies always comes at the expense of the dematerialization of sound as an irreality; a chaos which is tamed by the logical structures of the technology or corralled through the rational structures of composition and technique. Both the impassioned celebrations and fiery critiques of sonic technology that have predominated in the Western avant-garde are burdened by this assumption. As I have argued in previous chapters, black music is precisely a site where modernity’s founding distinction between the human and the technology breaks down.

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<sup>245</sup> Thom Holmes discuss the intricacies of Carlos’ earlier work in *Switched on Bach*, but notes how the mere presence and implementation of the synthesizer—something which the album cover drives home ten-fold—served to novelize and, to an extent diminish the piece and Carlos’ larger work, see Chapter 8 “Robert Moog, Wendy Carlos and the Birth of the Commercial Synthesizer.” The film *Moog* (2004) also testifies to this problematic.

<sup>246</sup> See John Cage. . “Composition as Process: 1. Changes (1958).” *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973, 31.

<sup>247</sup> Paul Theberge’s *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology*. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997, approaches this realm of “possibility” from the perspective of consumer technology.

It is within this interruptive framework that I move toward and rethink the AACM's oft repeated and oft-critiqued notion of "Great Black Music, Ancient to the Future," as a kind of realization of a sampling aesthetic, which is not reducible to the normative materiality from which the sample is thought to emerge. The term "Great Black Music," vacillated between a compositional edict and a political slogan referring to the AACM's deep and committed engagement with prior and contemporary forms of black music; namely the Blues, the black church gospels, and jazz. Not unlike Amiri Baraka's ruminations in the "Changing Same," for many AACM members "Great Black Music" conjured an ideality bordering on the spiritual. AACM trumpeter Ameen Muhammad once stated: "Great black music is one of the blessings that came with us standing up to a white world and saying, we're going to do what we want to do, despite what you try to do to us. Great Black Music is a result of us having the courage to use our Great Blackness, and realizing that this is our only power."<sup>248</sup> While acknowledging the political and spiritual efficacy of "Great Black Music," scholars like Ronald M. Radano have argued that such a notion is ultimately historically naïve because it proffers an ethnocentrism that precisely denies the historical materiality of the respective forms of mediation and realization that brought black music into being.<sup>249</sup> The ambivalence over an idea of black music, often quickly turns to competing narratives of origins. Perhaps ironically, Radano's discursive turn to the origins of black music is distinctly unmusical, because it is

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<sup>248</sup> Ameen Muhammad cited in Lewis, 505.

<sup>249</sup> Ronald Radano's *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003

implicitly rooted in the kind of technological (a crude marriage of *techne* to *logos*) thinking in which the science of (material) history teaches the “science” of music where it comes from. While AACM musicians have certainly acknowledged the limited notion of materialism with which Radano is operating, the term Great Black Music and its myriad manifestations also seems to imagine a kind of materiality, that historical materialism does not seem particularly attune to. Musing about the corporatization of music, which relies on a kind of commodified materialism, Roscoe Mitchell quips, “In the end music is the one that speaks the words in the end, and we’ll discover that when we look at the history of what really happened, [but then again] You know music is a science [on some level] and people have figured out a way [to manipulate that formula].”<sup>250</sup> Mitchell’s varied ruminations and the compositions on *Sound* make us wonder: what sound can teach history; what kind of thinking is sound that it can theorize the materiality from which a (new) history can be imagined? If the normative histories of electronic and experimental music have presumed technological and material apriority, then *Sound* offers us a new prism through which to think the electronic and experimental materiality of sound beyond such a reductively causative framework.

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<sup>250</sup> Interview conducted with author, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012 at Mills College Oakland, CA. My sense here is that Mitchell in our conversation is suggesting that even while music may contain a kind of epistemological bearing, like that, which is often reserved for science, even that epistemology is limited by virtue of its very scientific capacity. In this regard Mitchell critiques a kind of Kantian position toward music—not unlike Adorno—that would “raise it up” as a science as a means of embracing its properly transcendental and historical qualities. As Mitchell notes music as a concept only attains to the teleological and capitalist drives of a science in modernity. But it is precisely in sound and in *Sound* that a kind of movement: “what really happened,” which is refused under the scientism of music and the scientism of history, that another kind of materiality and material history can emerge.

In electronic and experimental music, indeed in music more generally, a split continually arises between *materiality* and *ideality*; an opposition which is further fueled by music's historicization, its narration and its eventual submission to the materiality of its mode of production. This mode of production, this historicization—and idealization, might best be aligned with what Paul Ricoeur calls the “configurational act” that “emplots” or situates music within the narrative exigencies of historical time.<sup>251</sup> I suggest that Roscoe Mitchell's *Sound* not only troubles previous narratives and histories of jazz and experimental electronic music, but *Sound* troubles this very discursive “configurational act”—the very discursive act that marks and marked the phonographic bodies of George W. Johnson, Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey. What *Sound* questions, or rather what *Sound* thinks then is a materiality of sound beyond the prescribed materiality of (the science of) history. In Mitchell's *Sound* the technological-historical dogma of electronic music that presumes these empirically “real” material products (of the means of production): samplers, tape recorders, are the precondition to their supposedly ideal aesthetic product: *sound*.

Sarah Kofman in her now classic work *Camera Obscura* identifies the way in which the literal, the realist, the material and the non-metaphorical are continually infected and defined by metaphoricity. Kofman suggests that the real, the material (historical, economical, phenomenal) are always already projected, dialectically, as an ideal opposite to sound's ideality. A contemporary example looms in the opposition

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<sup>251</sup> See Paul Ricoeur. *Time and Narrative Volume 1*. Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, 82.

amongst audiophile communities’, and some electronic musicians, between the materiality of analogue sound technology and the ideality or (merely) virtual reality or virtual materiality of digital sonic technologies.<sup>252</sup> This opposition revolves around a naturalized notion of presence of electronic sound technology or equipment as material; precisely the grounds upon which analog electronic instruments were criticized. This notion of presence (and materiality) is an always retrospectively invented (*après-coup*) nostalgia of the real in the face of semblance, in the face of sound.<sup>253</sup> Marx anticipates this paradox of electronic and experimental music when he wrote in 1867:

No boots can be made without leather. He [man] requires also the means of subsistence. Nobody—not even “a musician of the future”—can live upon future products or upon use-values in an unfinished state; and man always has been, and must still be a consumer, both before and while he is producing.<sup>254</sup>

Marx inserts music, in his “musician of the future,” into the nexus of valuations that are facilitated by the commodity form. On the one hand then, his proclamations confirm the traditional historical narrative of electronic music in which the production and presence of electronic instruments: synthesizers, turntables, programming environments, always precede and facilitate musical and sonic innovation. The

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<sup>252</sup> In a pithy manner that connects the history of romanticism to the history of capitalism and audiophilia see Rey Chow and Jason A. Steintrager. “In Pursuit of the Object of Sound” *Differences*, Vol. 22, No 2 and 3, (Summer-Fall 2011), 5.

<sup>253</sup> See Sarah Kofman. *Camera Obscura: Of Ideology*. Trans. Will Straw. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998, 19.

<sup>254</sup> Karl Marx. *Capital Volume 1: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*. Ed. Friedrich Engels. Trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. New York, NY: International Publishing Co., 1967, Chapter 6 p. 169.

retrospection that facilitates this narration of sound goes hand in hand with the retrospective designation of the commodity-form that Marx is grappling with in the above passage. Marx's doubting of the music, and the musician's futurity, are tied to that music's supposed immateriality and by extension its irreality in thought and material as purely imaginary. Whatever and whomever makes this future music, and more importantly whatever this future music makes—both shrouded in misrecognition by Marx—are inconceivable through the optic of value, which retrospectively determines the conditions of subsistence. The analogy of an unnamed musical substance that makes music, to the leather used for making boots, suggests that Marx doubts music's futurity, precisely because he doubts its materiality outside the parameters of value, namely use-value. Jacques Derrida's critique of the presumption of use-value as a retrospective condition of the commodity-form and not an antecedent of exchange value is illuminative:

But whence comes the certainty concerning the previous phase, that of this supposed use-value, precisely, a use-value purified of everything that makes for exchange-value and the commodity-form? What secures this distinction for us? It is not a matter here of negating a use-value or the necessity of referring to it. But of doubting its strict purity. If this purity is not guaranteed, then one would have to say that the phantasmagoria began before the said exchange-value, at the threshold of the value of value in general, or that the commodity-form began before the commodity-form, itself before itself.<sup>255</sup>

For Marx, the commodity form as “the social hieroglyph,” inscribed with its fetish-status, is perhaps no more illusory than music, no more illusory than music's social

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<sup>255</sup> Jacques Derrida. “What is Ideology?” *Specters of Marx: the State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1994, 9.

valuation and realization. In fact, the materiality of music and the materiality of the commodity fetish converge at the phantasmal inscription of labor and value as realized in exchangeability. Yet Marx, and certainly later Theodor W. Adorno, would contend that this exchangeability, this forced equivalency: music as commodity-fetish is a product of the larger illusory enterprise of capitalist production. Hence, the phantasmagoria of capitalism, which props up (the discourse of) its fetishistic tenants, assures Marx of the immateriality, and irreality, of music, because it retrospectively creates a putative use-value or value for music. Jacques Derrida succinctly brings attention to this dimension of *Capital* when he states: “if a work of art can become a commodity, and if this process seems fated to occur, it is also because the commodity began by putting to work, in one way or another, the principle of an art.”<sup>256</sup>

Hence for *Sound*, value’s materiality is no less real than materiality’s value. This realization does not bring about some naïve or romantic loosing of music from the commodity-fetish form—something Marx is nostalgically considering in this cynical conceived “future”—but actually brings us to question the presumed materiality which is derived from this retrospective designation of value namely use-value, if not life all together. The importance of this move is that it will allow us to consider the materiality of experimental electronic and sample-based musics, outside the putative materialist guidelines that traditionally designate those fields. In this regard the complex timbres, the dynamic tone coloring and the larger formal innovations of Roscoe Mitchell’s *Sound* can be understood as conversing in and

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<sup>256</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

making a kind of experimental electronic music from which it is conventionally barred. If we attempt to hear a materiality that is produced by music, by sound, we might indeed open ourselves up to a kind of thinking through this materiality and hence a reimagination of that sound.<sup>257</sup> What I am after then in my pursuit of *Sound* is both the rethinking of sampling and the rethinking of thought through and as black music.

What *Sound* and the AACM's larger output at the time have in common with sampling and sample-based musical traditions, or perhaps what they pass on, or musically recognize in relation to them, is a certain kind of musical thought—a black musical thought. The contours of this black musical thought pitch their borders at the irreality of philosophical thought and by extension that thought's grasping of materiality. Hence this black musical thinking necessarily grades against the ideological, the empiricist and the pragmatist account of that materiality from which it is often imaginarily or ideologically thought to emerge. The early scholarship on hip-hop is perhaps most illustrative of this dynamic in which writers like David Toop and Tricia Rose claimed that the material lack of “traditional” instruments in primarily black communities led to early hip-hop producers engagement with the materially available (and theoretically less commercially expensive) technology of digital samplers and turntables.<sup>258</sup> Joseph G. Schloss, in his ethnography of sample-

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<sup>257</sup> See Simon Jarvis' essay “Musical Thinking: Hegel and the Phenomenology of Prosody.” *Paragraph*, Volume 28, Page 57-71, July 2005.

<sup>258</sup> See Tricia Rose's discussion of digital sampling in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994 and David Toop's *Rap Attack 2*. New York, NY: Serpent's Tail Press, 1984. While Rose's work does not rely on the kind of reductive socially determinist arguments seen in works like Ben Sidran's *Black Talk*, New York, NY:



based hip-hop, sharply refutes the sentimental pathologies about black culture that these positions implicitly rely upon. Schloss points out that not only were (and are) most digital samplers such as the Akai MPC 2000, the Roland TR-808 and the E-MU 4000, or a pair of Technics 1200 turntables more expensive than most traditional acoustic instruments (guitars, saxophones, clarinets, violins etc.), but that a significant number of hip-hop's forbearers, at one time or another, learned traditional instruments but still chose to work with electronic samplers and turntables.<sup>259</sup> Perhaps the most aesthetically troubling dimension to the strict materialist and empiricist renderings of black culture are the fact that they do not even imagine that black music can produce its own means of materiality and thought—something which Schloss' text actually attempts to imagine and engage. Even more unthinkable than the contingent irreality of Marx's future musician, black experimental and electronic musics are consigned to what Ralph Ellison famously called the place of the “un-visible.” To vary and improvise from Ellison: the realities of black musical thought often dwell in plain sight, well within ear shot, of their dominant symbolic modes of misrecognition.

The misrecognition of black musical thought and its attendant real has to do with the object of thought. Simon Jarvis suggests that the object of thought as it is consecrated to the symbolic order of language in Western thought, gives one the

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Da Capo Press, 1983. However, in her zeal to bring attention to the social and material conditions of deindustrialized black urban centers, Rose makes some reductive formal and practical assumptions about the hip-hop music that is being created in and from those very centers.

<sup>259</sup> See Joseph G. Schloss' *Making Beats: the Art of Sample-based Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004. See in particular Chapter 2: “It's about Playing Records,” pp. 25-61.

impression (and fantasy) that that object is being thought *about*.<sup>260</sup> Music, despite the pretensions of its supposedly absolute form,<sup>261</sup> never circles around its object with an equivalent mode of referentiality. Jarvis raises this predicament as it occurs to Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, when Hegel states, that if music were a kind of thinking then it “is no more than the chaotic jingling of bells, or a mist of warm incense, a musical thinking that does not get as far as the Notion, which would be the sole, immanent objective mode of thought.”<sup>262</sup> The inconceivability of musical thought for Hegel enshrined in “chaos” seems to allude to music’s inherent perversity towards teleology; specifically music’s avoidance (except retrospectively) of notions, postulates and other structures of thought that are vested with a kind of logical means end relationship—or what Marx designated earlier as a futurity. That music swerves away from or simply lays suspended in relation to teleology’s narrative arch makes it so ungraspable, unusable and unthinkable in time, as time. In Hegel’s “chaotic jingling of bells” and Marx’s “musician of the future,” both narrativity and teleology arise as necessary preconditions for thought to apprehend and be evaded by a kind of music it cannot hear or recognize. Rather than dispute this sound-image: “the chaotic jingling of bells,” I would actually like to further delve into the complex contours of its thought which seem to trouble or dissatisfy Hegel (and others) so deeply.

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<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*, 59-60.

<sup>261</sup> Musicologist Carl Dahlhaus was perhaps the most famous 20<sup>th</sup> century proponent of the legacy of romanticism and absolute music as exemplified in his work *the Idea of Absolute Music*. Trans. Roger Lustig. Chicago, IL: the University of Chicago Press, 1991. For a partial critique of Dahlhaus’ positions on absolute music and a helpful elucidation of some of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideals of music I am implicitly and explicitly critiquing. See Daniel Chua’s *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>262</sup> Jarvis, 58.

To many this figure “the chaotic jingling of bells,” would symbolize (and by extension) realize their experience of listening to a work like *Sound*, as well as experimental sample-based musics. *Sound*’s emphasis on dynamic tone coloring, dynamic texture and timbral richness affectively evoke some of Hegel’s chaotic jingling. Certainly “the chaotic jingling of bells,” could be then dismissed as a merely affective and reactionary classification of the music or any music. As a classificatory idea “the chaotic jingling of bells” would be in need of serious emendation by finer and more precise “good” concepts to clarify its rational structuring. However, as I have discussed earlier such a position deludes itself into thinking it has evaded the imaginary, the illusory and the imprecise, when it has merely substituted the irreality of one name for another. As Theodore Adorno’s musicology and aesthetics have adamantly maintained: music and art more broadly will never completely escape semblance, perhaps because in the economy of language music is always made recognizable through a kind of semblance, namely the semblance of thought. There have been several attempts to classify Roscoe Mitchell’s *Sound* and much of the musical and sonic experiments of the AACM in the 1960’s. Most of its proponents have argued, with varying success, that this music arose out of the formal developments of free jazz in the 1950’s, 1960’s and 1970’s, but such accounts have always struggled to capture that something else which distinguishes *Sound* and the AACM’s music from the cannon of jazz—including free jazz.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Again Ekkehard Jost in *Free Jazz* makes this point or tentatively engages it when he discuss the AACM, he suggest that indeed their work is certainly related to the trend of free jazz, but in a much more fractured way.

## “Sound Surfaces” and Surfaces of Difference

In an attempt to at least partially grasp the evasive dynamics and tonal and sonic coloration of the AACM’s music Ekkehard Jost has described their work, and Roscoe Mitchell’s work in particular, as centered on the production of “sound surfaces,” which subtend to, but are not reducible to larger formal structures—most commonly structures of theme and variation. While providing some formal language of description and classification for the AACM’s work, Jost cannot locate these “sound surfaces” comfortably within either the annals of “New York or European free jazz” nor in the atonal experiments of the European or American avant-garde at the time.<sup>264</sup> Nor can Jost reduce “sound surfaces” to the output of a particular program of technical devices; several orders of harmonic structuring are active in Mitchell’s “sound surfaces,” such that a forced equivalency between sound and structure (harmonic or otherwise) is not uniformly privileged. Sound is not being played, but rather time is being played through sound. In this regard, Jost’s attention to “sound surfaces” acts as a kind of affective response to the AACM’s music, which uniquely avoids the traditional analytical distinction of European musicology at that time between the “surface” and the “deep structure” of the music.<sup>265</sup> Jost’s identification of these “sound surfaces” seems to anticipate scholar and musician George Lewis’ more expansive and provocative position that the AACM’s sonic explorations at this time

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<sup>264</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>265</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European characterization of musical depth or “deep structure” as the relative harmonic and metrical workings of the music compared to its larger melodic and sonic “surface.” Holly Watkins offers an interesting rereading of this trend in European musicology in her text. *Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought: from E.T.A. Hoffman to Arnold Schoenberg*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

arose as an organic and original response to prior black, European and non-Western musics.<sup>266</sup> Lewis credits the centrality of improvisation, as a formal and cultural practice, with the development of this new sound. What is so intriguing about the development of these “sound surfaces” through such rigorous and complex improvisation is that we can, in listening to *Sound*, only guess at some of the motivic, acoustical, thematic and causal (or absolute) dimensions of the sounds we hear. As the term “sound *surfaces*” implies the recognition of sound within this music rests on a kind of collision of projections between the listener, musicians (and sound engineers) and the record. We can never fully take in (introject) all of *Sound*’s “offerings,” but rather we are called into a kind of perpetually projective activity; an elusive and allusive attempt to image and symbolize these sounds. This imagistic or even meta-imagistic quality of the music is something, which I will suggest is closely tied to the development of an experimental black music that responds to the history of (the recording of) black music.<sup>267</sup> Neither Jost, nor Lewis, suggest that the AACM’s music at this time bears any formal or structural relationship to sampling, looping or forms of electronic music. On the contrary, both analyses argue in differing ways that the centrality of a music based on improvisation, live performance, and a rich tradition of theatricality are only loosely connected to forms of recording,

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<sup>266</sup> See Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*, 157.

<sup>267</sup> Many will all no doubt assume that I am, in the vein of Peter Burger’s positions in *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trying to place *Sound* and the AACM’s broader work within an abstractionist, and therefore modernist, and therefore avant-garde lineage. Meaning, many might assume I am making a kind of analogical argument that would like to think of *Sound* in terms of avant-garde movements such as surrealism, Dadaism and abstract expressionism. This is not the case however. The more helpful text and point of departure for this essay will be Fred Moten’s *In the Break* in which Moten critiques and goes beyond, amongst other things, the avant-garde’s disavowal of art’s materiality.

reproduction and repetition, and (to a greater extent) looping. Jost admittedly drives this point home more sharply than Lewis—whose position is more nuanced, as we will see—when he states:

The combination of stage action, spoken words, and music is therefore not on the periphery of the AACM’s artistic “self-identification” but squarely in the centre. ...recordings by the Chicagoans [the AACM] (which must be considered in a sense as acoustical extracts of their shows)...<sup>268</sup>

Jost’s contention that “recordings by the Chicagoans ...must be considered in a sense as acoustical extracts of their shows,” is certainly an overstatement when considered in light of the specific recording practices that created *Sound*. Yet his presumption for what *Sound* sounds like and by extension how it must have been recorded actually highlights the imaginative potency and complexity of the AACM’s recordings and these sound surfaces. The affective capacity of these “sound surfaces” to bolster an idea of “live” authenticity (performativity, acoustics, theatricality, and apparent spontaneity) actually arises out of a specific set of dynamics, tone coloring, soloistic turn taking and improvisation, that are, to a great extent, realized through the recording process in the recording session regardless of their prior composition. One dimension to the unnamed brilliance of Mitchell’s work in *Sound*, and much of the AACM’s output, is precisely the way in which it conjures an apparent referentiality, a narrativity and an affectivity that it inherently grades against.

### **Repetition:**

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<sup>268</sup> Jost, 172.

Whether or not we can detect the centrality of sampling or looping in the form or the image of these “sound surfaces” of the AACM depends on how, at the level of time and form, we think about sampling and looping and for that matter repetition—looping’s signature of recognition. Yet in order to think about looping we must consider it in light of its opposition to narrative structure and time in music. Somewhat famously for Theodor Adorno, the character or quality of repetition depended upon the actualization of memory through the musical material, through form.<sup>269</sup> Memory in and through form “volatilized time,” because it recognized the latent dialectical process through which form had come to be;<sup>270</sup> how the straightness of a steel pole suddenly imbued with a subtle twist became something else.<sup>271</sup> The ambiguity behind this temporal dimension of music, and by extension repetition, becomes productive and necessary, especially when we consider the multiple processes and layers of temporality that constitute a recording’s realization and production. For Adorno the recording process, as an extension of the mass means of production of music, would have irrevocably muddied this recognition of the dialectical nature of form; the gestures and ornaments of the recording engineers would have overridden any immanent realizations of the musicians. To a large extent Adorno’s attitude toward recording is, by now, taken to be a conventional, albeit reductive understanding of the recording process as prosthetic and temporally static.

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<sup>269</sup> See Adorno’s essay “Music and Memory” in *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. New York, NY: Verso, 1992.

<sup>270</sup> See Robert Hullot-Kentor’s essay “Popular Music and “the Aging of the New Music” in *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodore W. Adorno*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006.

<sup>271</sup> See Hassan Khan’s installation/sculpture “the Twist” (2012).

However, like the unthinkability of Marx's "musician of the future" Adorno's position here presumes a normative temporality, a linear narrativity for the process of musical production—namely the Fordist model of production.<sup>272</sup> The serialism of Adorno's thought is at least partially ironic in the face of his extended critique of serialism. But more importantly the limitations to Adorno's thought identify the limits of thought in pursuing music through an overdetermined putative ascription of time.

For Theodor Adorno the "volatilization of time" inhered to music's ability to exceed "linear sequence," in which its constitutive parts were "shaped and burdened by an essential sameness."<sup>273</sup> The tendency of music toward a serial or (eventually) narrative structural logic, as Fred Moten's reading of *Quasi Una Fantasia* suggests, is haunted by a racial logic in which the anxiety of difference is sublimated to an order of sameness—not unlike the structure of race and the visual to which Ralph Ellison's "unvisibility" alludes. Adorno argued that when the "totality" of a musical work, and time itself, was subject to a kind of "deadening rigor" of similitude, then identification rested with the "narration of emotions" and not an actual grappling with expression or the means of expression through form. The logic of serial and narration in music then would require an object and more a character whose capacity as a point of continuous sentimental (narrative) identification, would work, at every second, to disavow the very repetitive structure that had enlisted her expression, because that character or that figure could be "invisible" or seem as repetitively similar as the

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<sup>272</sup> See Bernard Gendron's essay, "Theodore Adorno Meets the Cadillacs." *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*. Ed. Tania Modleski. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986.

<sup>273</sup> Here I am drawing on Fred Moten's work in his sharply written article "Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia." *Hambone* 19, (Fall 2009), pp.110-133.



units of objective time itself. Music would have to follow a narrative-filmic logic in which the characters in the work are merely an expression and reification of the minutes of the work (the film, the song, the recording); in this regard the time of the work would be merely its run time rather than something more powerful and imminent in the musical material, which trouble such a normative enframing.<sup>274</sup>

Though it departs canonically from serialism, John Cage's famous 4'33'' (of silence) might be, at least symbolic of serialism's narrative drive. In Cage's three-movement piece the composer does not play the instrument, but listens to the ambient sounds for a specific set of durations totaling 4 minutes and 33 seconds. 4'33,'' in its provocative automatic posture, sharply balks at the romantic "expression" of the work that Adorno lauds in Beethoven. However, the abstraction of the musical material of a work into the structural units of minutes and seconds does not get rid of self-expression or expression more broadly, but in fact seems to relocate them within the sentiment or intention of the composition/composer in a manner which inheres to and reifies a filmic and legalistic logic of identity in and as narrative.

The stakes of musical similitude align with something which Paul Ricoeur locates in the structural logic of narrative and emplotment, in which the structural elements: characters, figures, symbols persist as "an imitation of action," but not necessarily action.<sup>275</sup> Sounds occupy a rigorous intervallic relationship to one another, in which they tick away with the indifference and predeterminacy of the sounds of a

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<sup>274</sup> Obviously John Cage's "4'33''" piece which gains its name from being a piece of music designed to last exactly 4 minutes and 33 seconds; the numbers themselves were chosen, quite characteristically from Cage's "chance" process, which I will discuss in brief toward the end of this essay.

<sup>275</sup> Ricoeur, 54.

clock. Frantz Fanon's contemporaneous intervention about the collusion between narrative arrest and racism is illuminative of what this sound intones. Fanon precisely diagnosis the way in which the imitation of action central to narrative emplotment, functions as a "magic substitution" for blacks' actions, so much so as to prohibit the possibility of black action (movement, temporalization, spatialization, time). "I am overdetermined from without," Fanon writes, "And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, *waiting for me*."<sup>276</sup> What is so troubling for Fanon and in a related sense for Adorno is the way in which certain musical forms and certain structures of sound (namely film and radio) substitute the same (repeated) imitative structures of action, while foreclosing the possibility of action's realization outside and beyond these structures in time. Adorno criticized serialism's, and especially "total serialism's," tendency to rely on strict "atomistic" units of expression organized in a series rather than thinking in terms of the totality of the work.<sup>277</sup> Time and subjectivity in serialism thus took on a "legalistic quality" in which the theme overrode and assimilated any orders of difference to it that might diverge from their organizing structure.<sup>278</sup> Adorno pointed out that the submission of musical expression to prescribed orders of time met its dialectical end in music's assimilation to the formal logic of film. Frantz Fanon's weariness about the sublimation of the realities and actions of black life to the symbolics and

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<sup>276</sup> Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York, NY: Grove Press, 1967, 116, 134.

<sup>277</sup> Here Adorno's critique of serialism's commitment of music to (almost) scientifically manageable and quantifiable units, which served to affirm that very rationalization can also be thought of as an ominous critique of sound's digital reproducibility in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which music becomes exchangeable and repeatable through its rendering in numeric series of 1's and 0's.

<sup>278</sup> Hullot-Kentor, 172.

imaginaries of film share a related anxiety with Adorno's criticisms of serialism and film. Of cinema's racialized drives Fanon laments, "The Negro is aiming for the universal, but on the screen his Negro essence his Negro "nature," is kept intact."<sup>279</sup> Part of understanding the brilliance of *Sound* requires that we engage the legacy of racial colonial logics that sought to establish narrative (logics) in and as black music. Therefore, I will argue through *Sound* that certain forms of the blues and jazz—which *Sound* draws upon—were enlisted to be recorded precisely to create a narratively "continuous black subjectivity," which could testify (credibly) to the authority of the temporal and specifically narrative structures that prompted and captured it.<sup>280</sup>

The shattering of the narrative image of black music or the shattering of black music as narrative image is an important aesthetic moment that can be located in the experiments of the AACM and Roscoe Mitchell's *Sound*. Darieck Scott notion of "extravagant abjection" abstractly textures this point, noting that certain black art works "pose a problem for narrative machinery, because the marvelous fictions of I, self, linear temporality, or coherent perspective on which narrative usually depends are in the state of abjection awash in those fictions' opposites, their negations and

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<sup>279</sup> Fanon, 186.

<sup>280</sup> See Zakia Pathak and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. "Shahbano." *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992. Here I am citing Pathak and Rajan's citing of Gayatri Spivak's notion of "subject-affect" as a mode of operation which seeks to make legible the subject through a certain series of recognizable gestures. Pathak and Rajan cite this notion in the context of the Law (Indian Law's) attempt to make legible "Shahbano's" actions and decisions. I will think about the way in which a blues' subjectivity or more properly a blues subject-affect. In this regard there is a connection between the subject and the structuring of narrative, but even more, as Paul Ricoeur has suggest that (the structure of) narrative has structured our lives and not just the other way around, Ricoeur, 74.

what is in excess of them.”<sup>281</sup> While Scott’s examples are more discretely literary his broader point is relevant: that black subjects and their attendant representations are continually hemmed in by, yet also defiant of narrative structures. I will show that the demand for narrative from black music was undoubtedly connected to the racial dimensions of what Frantz Fanon called “misrecognition.”

So while Adorno’s critique of structural similitude in music is targeted towards the dogmatic scientism of postwar musical forms, specifically Schoenberg’s 12-tone serialism, the mechanistic drives of serialism’s rationalism must be thought along with the pernicious form of musical subjection in the fetishization of narrative in black musical recordings that renders them as cultural “documents” of black life. In the history of recording black musics we see the application of documentary narrative as a means of double capture, and by extension, dismissal of black sound and music as capable of thought. The most reductive and perhaps the most impactful narrative captures of black sounds emerged in John and Alan Lomaxes’ field recordings of incarcerated black blues musicians in the 1930’s and 1940’s. By way of a formal detour, that the living slogan of the AAACM: “Great Black Music, Ancient to the Future” inspires, I would like to examine how the Lomaxes’ symbolization of blackness through narrative and emplotment infected the sentimental and formal dimensions of black musical production by endlessly framing its mode and occasion for recording. Hence, this fixation with black music as inherently lyrical and folksy, stems from a racial desire to cast black music in a place of imitative action or

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<sup>281</sup> Darieck Scott. *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010, 13.

“waiting” as Fanon describes it. Furthermore, I will identify how this fantasy of black music becomes rigidified in the recording of black music and therefore inextricably linked to its formal development and realization. To this end, I rely on Theodor Adorno’s dialectical contention that music operates simultaneously as the sedimentation of history and the imminent realization of time in its very moment of creation (recording and reproduction). The volatilization of time, I suggest, is inextricably bound to the realization of race as a narratological prescription in form. Roscoe Mitchell’s *Sound* and the broader experiments of the AACM in the 1960’s relate to and transfigure the sedimented dimensions of blackness and black music. Hence it is within this vein that I understand *Sound* as attempting an impossible yet necessary formal gesture of identifying and transcending the images and narratological procedures for recording black music through an abstract mode of sound and music making. Through “the chaotic jingling of bells,” the “sound surfaces,” *Sound* realizes the radical possibility of action and time in black music by formally shattering the prior images and narrative modes of recognition which have persistently marked black music’s occasion for recording. In terms of Frantz Fanon’s famously Lacanian framework, *Sound* steps out from behind the mirror—it refuses to stand as idol or image—and hence creates the very possibility for the action, the act of looking, of sampling, of sound.

## “Ornette” and the Formal Gesture of the Proper Name

*Sound* announces itself with the lexical allure of the proper name in its first track: “Ornette.” The familiarity of the name (and its associations) not only release the semantic desire to essentialize its associational meanings (“le pouvoir d’essentialisation”), but it deposits the track and by extension the totality of *Sound* within a narrative of jazz’s formal development.<sup>282</sup> The phrasing of the theme of “Ornette” affirms this associative logic when the sextet, led by Mitchell’s saxophone, establishes a set of chord progressions that lead into the familiar melodic lines of Ornette Coleman’s “Congeniality” from his seminal album *the Shape of Jazz to Come*. At the level of form, it would be tempting to identify with the apparent historical plot of “Ornette” and, presumably by extension, *Sound*.<sup>283</sup> Like so many jazz works before it—most explicitly Coleman’s *the Shape of Jazz to Come* and *Free Jazz*—*Sound* seems dedicated to a logic of rehearsal and even homage, as if it has a plot; inserting itself in and drawing on a historical tradition, an emplotment, in which these specific actors hope to make their individual mark on an already written and received narrative. After all, the characters and certainly the harmonic figures seem familiar at the first few moments of “Ornette.” The identity of the piece in terms of

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<sup>282</sup> Here I am drawing on Clive Scott’s discussion of “the proper name” and the “proper noun” in “Reading Verse” in *The Poetics of French Verse: Studies in Reading*. London, England: Oxford University Press, 1998. I am also drawing on Barthes discussion of the “proper nouns” implicitly narrative potential.

<sup>283</sup> Ekkehard Jost also notes that the thematic content as the basis for the expressive content of improvisation is something characteristic to Ornette Coleman’s oeuvre, especially on tracks like “Lorraine,” “Rejoicing,” and “Una May Bonita.” See Ekkehard Jost. *Free Jazz*. New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1975, 56.

instrumentation relies on a cast of some familiar characters: alto saxophone (Coleman's signature instrument), clarinet, trumpet, trombone, standing bass and drums. The original 1966 and more recent 2010 vinyl re-release of the album include traditional rhythmic backing by drums.<sup>284</sup> Many historians of jazz contend that by the 1960's jazz had to a great extent standardized its repertoire of performance and recording; even after the tumult of Bebop's rapid rhythm changes and the expanding palette of tonality introduced by Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane. Even the radical free jazz experiments by Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor, by virtue of their reliance on more conventional modes of audition and performance, for example soloistic turn-taking, had, at least to a degree, become standardized and ensnared by the very moniker of jazz from which they had sought freedom.<sup>285</sup> *Sound* arises, on some level, as a kind of imaginative resistance to the freedom, which free jazz is, just at this moment, being denied through standardization. George Lewis notes that *Sound*'s very moment of recording represents a nexus between the ideological strictures of recording jazz music—steeped in recently established cultures of audiophilia and jazz's standardization—and the musicians own attempts and desires to do something new. Jazz had almost always relied on the establishment of a theme as a harmonic framework that the musicians' improvisation would depart from and eventually return to. The works of Charles Mingus in the 1950's were

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<sup>284</sup> While the "original" release of *Sound* contains the version of "Ornette" with drum backing (both vinyl releases), the 1996 Compact Disc release contains an alternate take—a first take that was recorded with Lester Lashley's providing rhythmic backing with his cello. I will address this difference shortly.

<sup>285</sup> See John Szwed's *Jazz 101: A complete Guide to Learning and Loving Jazz*. New York, NY: Hyperion Press, 2000.

perhaps the most innovative in establishing this “theme-improvisation-theme” structure that “Ornette” undertakes.<sup>286</sup>

In a 1999 article published in the creative music recording publication *Tape Op*, recording historian and *Tape Op* editor Steve Silverstein revisited the 1966 recording session of *Sound*. Silverstein, in his preface to the article, alludes to the centrality of ideality and idealization in recording jazz that provoked his inquiry, when he muses about the “excitement” behind the “less ideal circumstances” of *Sound*’s recording. Silverstein interviews Charles Nessa (the recording supervisor), Stu Black (the recording engineer) and Robert G. Koester (the producer), about their experiences recoding the album for Delmark Records. The anxiety contained within their descriptions reveals the sedimentation of the ideality of audiophilic recording practices into the form and structure of jazz in the 1960’s. Furthermore, the predicament of recording *Sound* reveals the persistent tension between the repetitive structuring of jazz through narrative figures of sound and the AACM’s broader attempt to loose sound, and by extension blackness, from its imagistic quality in recording and phonographic inscription.

Chuck Nessa notes that for Stu Black, an experienced recording engineer, “by far this was the strangest stuff he’d ever encountered.”<sup>287</sup> Silverstein adds: “Nessa was concerned about the music’s ability to communicate with new listeners and felt that achieving this goal was one of his tasks as producer.” Yet seemingly in contrast

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<sup>286</sup> To be clear this schematization is not Mingus work, but Ekkehard Jost’s analysis of Mingus’ work in *Free Jazz*.

<sup>287</sup> Steve Silverstein. “Recording History: The AACM and the Chicago Avant-Garde Jazz Scene of the Mid-Sixties.” *Tape Op*. Vol. 1, No. 11 Winter 1998/1999, pp. 55-58.



to his concern for the communicative capacity for the music, Nessa “was not concerned about recording the variety of instruments used on the album,” adding “you can fake it in the mix later.” Nessa mentions to Black, the recording engineer that “the music was going to get loud, so leave plenty of headroom.” As we might imagine, Nessa’s legislative involvement in the recording process does not end there. The drive towards standardization abounds as Nessa raises the concern that “We’d recorded “Sound” and we’d recorded “Ornette” and there was no place that you heard Roscoe Mitchell playing with drums behind him.” Eventually, Nessa convinces Mitchell to record a second take of “Ornette” with drums behind him in place of the backing cello that was first recorded. The series of compromises, concerns, anxieties and desires involved in the recording of *Sound* highlights the extent to which the recording process attempted to manage the “strangeness” of the music by rendering it within the larger sonic narratology of “jazz.” Commenting on this George Lewis wisely asserts that:

While the article understandably frames the problems largely in terms of recording techniques, the techniques themselves had become mediated by the dominant culture’s vernacular notion of “jazz.” Given the standardized culture of “jamming-as-performance,” the engineers generally knew what to expect in producing a standard jazz recording of that era—a relatively compact dynamic range, turn-taking in a clearly defined and often preselected order of solos, fairly constant backing of piano, bass, and drums, and the odd unaccompanied bass or drum solo. Even much of the so-called free jazz of that period, including the work of Coleman, Shepp, Coltrane, Taylor and Ayler, often closely followed this model.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Lewis, *A Power*, 141-142.

Lewis not only identifies the historical confluence of jazz's standardization or "vernacularizing" through recordings, but he also importantly positions *Sound* and the broader output of the AACM at that time as a departure from that standardized notion of jazz. Many jazz musicians, who as early as the 1950s, began criticizing the procedures for jazz's standardization through recording, further supporting Lewis' claim. Archie Shepp continually voiced his criticism of black music's commercialization; likening its economic structure to plantation slavery, Shepp stated "you own the music, we make it. By definition, then you own the people who make the music. You own us whole chunks of flesh."<sup>289</sup> One of the most incisive criticisms in this vein is jazz drummer and activist Max Roach's 1971 piece "What Jazz Means to Me." In this pithy essay Roach suggests we "decolonize our minds" by doing away with the term "Jazz," which he points out was an instrument of the "recording and managing industries' systematic "oppression of black musicians."<sup>290</sup> Roach's perspective suggests an interpellative force of identification entombed in "jazz." Indeed, Roscoe Mitchell's eventual concession to replay "Ornette" with drums behind him, reifies Nessa's interpellative "hail" of jazz standardization.<sup>291</sup> If we consider John Mowitt's point about the sonic force of ideology in which, "music is involved in producing the very bearer of an identity—that is, as subject," then we have to

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<sup>289</sup> Cited in Lewis, 43.

<sup>290</sup> See Max Roach. "What Jazz Means to Me." *The Black Scholar*. Summer 1972, pp.3-6. The version I am working with has been reprinted in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*. Ed. Robert Walser. Under the title "Beyond Categories" pp. 305-310. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>291</sup> Here I am referring to John Mowitt's illuminative treatment of Althusserian interpellation and the ideological constitution of the subject. See John Mowitt. *Percussion: Drumming, Beating Striking*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002, 57. In this chapter I will make reference to Chapter 2 in particularly entitled "Knocking the Subject."

understand “Ornette” as more than a simple compromise of the recording process, but a form of (musical) subjection. Mowitt elaborates, “Interpellation must address more than you in order to constitute you without, thereby, immediately touching on the unconscious.”<sup>292</sup> Perhaps then what is so menacing about the standardization of music is that it produces an object that does not need, and does not request access to, the unconscious annals of subjective memory, but merely operates as imagistic homage to the idea of memory, of time, through the logic of a symbolic familiarity. Here we are threatened with that form of subjectivity Adorno feared in which the interpellative capacity of (commercial) music would produce a fetishized commodified image of subjectivity—the subject made available through advertisement’s standardized form of address. Hence, the performative dimensions of “Ornette” are, at moments, coerced and bent towards the ends of standardization; a drive, that would have the melodic lines of “Ornette” conform to its reference with the putative mechanical precision of the grooves on the record’s surface. The attempt to center the horn playing of Mitchell, Bowie and McIntyre against Alvin Fielder’s backing percussion then is an attempt to distill jazz at the level of the image—the sound image, as if memory could not be consecrated in form, but merely committed to the recognition of the image of form.

Extracting and adding melodic phrasing and clearer rhythmical meter are central to the “sonic objectification” of the recording process. Rey Chow and James A. Steintrager describe “Sonic objectification” as “almost by default organized

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<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

through a *Romantic paradigm whereby sonic capture is understood implicitly as the capture of that which is lost*. More succinctly put, *sound is always capture, and capture is always loss*.<sup>293</sup> This “sonic objectification” manifests in the contention that Nessa “was not concerned about recording the variety of instruments used on the album,” adding “you can fake it in the mix later.” On the one hand Nessa’s comments admit to the recognition of loss, but only in relation to the potential for sonic plenitude, lost but only in order to be found. The very moment of this prosthetic substitution reveals the hinge where the recognition of the sonic object, sound, coheres strictly through the production of sonic loss as capture. Even more subtly, this sonic objectification operates through a narrative logic, in which the instruments merely become characters enlisted to fulfill a scripted plot; “an imitation of action,” a narrative of “lost and found.” The instrumentation of “Ornette” reflects what Paul Ricoeur refers to as “the violence of interpretation,” in which the referentiality of the plot becomes sublimated to, and realized in, the referentiality of the hearer; what the hearer finds in the sonic object both produces and amends that loss as recognition.<sup>294</sup> Ricoeur identifies this temporalizing gesture as a kind of “nostalgia,” which seems central to the “romantic paradigm” that drives listening and recording as sonic capture. Indeed, the recording and production team explicitly attempt to make “Ornette” into Ornette Coleman, both the icon, the idol, and the image of his sound; his sonic image. George Lewis’ earlier point that the radicality of *Sound* strained

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<sup>293</sup> See Rey Chow and Jason A. Steintrager. “In Pursuit of the Object of Sound” *Differences*, Vol. 22, No 2 and 3, (Summer-Fall 2011), 4. Italics in original.

<sup>294</sup> Ricoeur, 72.

against even the innovation of Coleman's work on *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, *Ornette!*, *The Art of Improvisers* and *Free Jazz* (to name only a few) is further compounded when we consider how the engineers' attempt and *desire* to produce "Ornette" as the imitative double of Ornette Coleman's sound—regardless of the profound intricacy of Coleman's work—was standardized. The recording of "Ornette" gives us some insight into how Ornette Coleman's sound became characterized, how it became image, type, typified, by both its form and its image. Coleman's complexity of rhythmic changes, the use of counterpoint (particularly with horns) and the extension of harmonic and harmolodic variations were met with a standardized racial and formal desire in sonic capture, that sought to subject the sound to what it thought was the already standardized imprint of the record, of what they thought was "Ornette."

Nessa's earlier contention that Mitchell and his sextet's instruments could be faked later in the mix evolved from a presupposition of the instrumental sparseness and more clear sonic hierarchy, if you will, of Coleman's recorded output, which, similar to Coltrane's recordings, always centered the saxophone in the mix—except of course during solos of other instruments—and played against backing percussion and walking bass lines which constituted the lower registers. The dynamic frequency range and spectrum of Coleman's recordings generally stay within these parameters. It is then telling that "Ornette," symbolizes and formalizes this nostalgic sameness and its inherent violence that Max Roach identified in jazz, because the indexical nature of the title and the ordering of the instrumentation play out the story of

recording jazz; both at the level of the symbolic (the icon, Ornette) and the (stereo) image of the mix.<sup>295</sup>

This image of Coleman: the contrapuntal Coleman-like horn phrases, the harmonic progressions, that begin Ornette, are in fact the musical theme. With the coerced introduction of the backing percussion even the improvisatory, dramatic rhythm changes that constitute the variation from this theme are brought back to reify their musical and symbolic sameness to it. In this regard there does seem to be some inherent grappling with this image on “Ornette.” Though passages of improvisation on “Ornette” seem organically group-centered and not as hierarchical or soloistic as Coleman’s arrangements, all of the musicians, and most especially Mitchell’s saxophone, seem to be wrestling with the rhythmic and tonal legacies of bebop as they permeated and were dramatically revised through Coleman’s early innovations. Even in the sparse almost pointillist breakdowns by Favors’ cello there is a kind of restricted attempt to get out from under the formal motivations of the theme and the symbolic and imaginary weight of “Ornette” and hence the occasion for black music’s recording and recognition.

But black music is not reducible strictly to this image, this symbolization, or this larger racial-musical imaginary that is this standardization. As *Sound* and Amiri Baraka’s contemporaneous writings on black music suggest, the relation between

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<sup>295</sup> While the iconicity of jazz is something that has been rightly associated with jazz’s more recent canonization and rigidification within the live performances of Marsalis’ Lincoln Center production, some of this conservative tendency is undoubtedly due to the jazz’s recording, at long ago as the 1960’s. See Tracy McMullen’s “Identity for Sale: Glenn Miller, Wynton Marsalis, and Cultural Replay in Music” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*. Ed. Nichole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008 pp. 129-156.

black music and repetition, even and especially in its phonographic repetition, cannot be reduced to pure conventional semblance or semblance as convention, any more than they can be reduced to pure individual expression. What *Sound* accomplishes is the removal of black music from the Romantic paradigm in which it is conceived of in either of these two terms: that is either pure image or pure (individual) expression. While the first few bars, and perhaps we could even argue the totality, of “Ornette” allows us to grasp the collapse of technique into semblance, it only scratches the surface of how this semblance may have come to be and specifically how *Sound* confronts and transcends this imagistic rendering of black music. Though they remain endlessly haunted by the romantic image of black music, Amiri Baraka’s writings on black music will help us gain some traction on how repetition, imitation, and image surface in the dialectical revolutions of *Sound*.

### **Lyricism, Narrative and the Recording of the “Blues” (People):**

We are offered a consideration of the tension between image and imitation in black music from the memorable first lines of Amiri Baraka’s 1966 essay “the Changing Same: (R&B and New Black Music)”: “The blues impulse transferred...containing a race, and its expression. *Primal* (mixtures...transfers and imitations). Through its many changes, it remained the exact replication of the Black Man in the West.”<sup>296</sup> Baraka’s first lines are riddled with an ambivalence that belies that trademark racial essentialism attributed to his Black Nationalist Period. But what

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<sup>296</sup> Amiri Baraka. “The Changing Same: (R&B and New Black Music).”

is particularly conspicuous here is the language of fluidity and mimicry: “transferred...mixtures...transfers and imitations,” “replication,” that Baraka ascribes to black music; that he identifies as immanent to the blues “impulse.” Baraka desperately wants to locate an origin for this “impulse” in the “Primal” as that which contains this “race, and its expression.” Yet, the desire for primacy, for the “*Primal*” (as the origin of this impulse), is antagonized by the necessity of transfers, shifts, and repetitions that make it possible and above all recognizable. Primacy and “the Primal” are threatened, if not obliterated, by the structure of the “Changing Same.” The romance of the “*Primal*” as a loss, or an irretrievable origin, only persists in the very fullness of the ellipses that make possible transfer, imitation and replication. The ellipsis in Baraka’s “Changing Same” performs a narratological theorization of blackness by affecting the “imitation of action.” This imitative action has been central to the subjection and recognition of blackness through recording. Yet, as the entirety of “the Changing Same” suggests, both in and through these ellipses, the nexus between race and culture, the nexus of blackness has an undeniably phonographic quality.<sup>297</sup> What Baraka seems to run up against in the “Changing Same” is the idiomatic nature of blackness in light of (refracted through) recorded sound. By idiomatic, I am thinking somewhat in Jacques Derrida’s sense of the term as:

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<sup>297</sup> There is an obvious resonance here between Baraka’s formulation of black music and Ellison’s famous formulation of black music in *Invisible Man* in which the protagonist identifies with yet complicates his phonographic encounter with Louie Armstrong. Even more I would submit that Baraka’s phonographic reckonings with black music reverberate with Herby Hancock’s and Wynton Marsalis’ realizations about the power of improvisation, an epiphany and above all a practice, they describe in a now somewhat famous dialogue together. See Rafi Zabor and Vic Garbarini. “Wynton Vs. Herbie: The Purist and the Crossbreeder [sic.] Duke It Out.” *Musician* 77, March 1985, pp. 52-64.



A property you cannot appropriate; it somehow marks you without belonging to you. It appears only to others, never to you—except in flashes of madness which draw together life and death, which render you at once alive and dead. It's fatal to dream of inventing a language or a song which would be yours—not the attributes of an “ego,” but rather, the accentuated flourish, that is the musical flourish of your own most unreadable history. I'm not speaking about style, but of an intersection of singularities, of manners of living, voices, writing, of what you carry with you, what you can never leave behind.<sup>298</sup>

Derrida's notion of return seems inextricably bound to the fantasy of (re)listening to recorded music; that (perhaps unconscious) impulse to reset the stylus, rewind the tape and hit play, shuffle back to the song, sound, music, in search of something strange in the familiar and something familiar in the strange. Fred Moten sharply connects this non-appropriative, otherness—the seeming primacy, vitality, fatality, and exteriority of the idiomatic with improvisation and by extension blackness or its potentiation. Moten in this sense complicates and extends upon Derrida's formulation that bemoans the necessity and impossibility of a return to an origin. Moten draws on the way in which improvisation, the act, the movement, makes possible a kind of recognition—an abjection, abjection in recognition as blackness—of that origin, of the “Primal” precisely through the repetitive structure of the idiomatic.

Redoubled blackness is determined in the encountering time of a caesura, in a dialectic of recognition and abjection, enlightenment and unconcealment; but its condition of possibility lies before this. Accessing this before is, at least in part, accomplished in the

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<sup>298</sup> Jacques Derrida. “An Interview with Derrida,” trans. David Allison et al., in *Derrida and Difference*, eds. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988, 73-74.

improvisation through in/visibility, the interanimation of light and music, vision and sound.<sup>299</sup>

Blackness actually rides, lives on, and moves through the “fatal” “dream of inventing a language or song which would be yours...the musical flourish of your own most unreadable history” that Derrida imagines as a necessary impossibility. Max Roach’s attempt to “do away with jazz” resonates here with both Derrida and Baraka’s respective words. Moten then thinks Baraka’s ellipses more explicitly; blackness as a dimension of black singularities is imagined in those straining “irruptive” ellipses that link Baraka’s words. The “Primal” only arises as an origin for blackness through the enactment of the ellipses as conditions for return. Like the theme of “Ornette” from which its variation emerges, but also that variation that takes place before that theme could be consolidated and recognized. These ellipses perform the oscillation between the recognition of an origin through abjection, through the imitative double of that origin, through “Ornette,” through a loop, a rhythm; the poetic rhythm of “the Changing Same.”

Baraka’s “Changing Same” is not then simply a manifesto of racial absolutism, in which black interiority and black expressivity are reducible to the symbolic order of race as “style,” blackness as style.<sup>300</sup> The major responses to

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<sup>299</sup> Fred Moten. *In the Break: the Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, 71. Moten’s words here are derived primarily from his reading of Ralph Ellison’s classic phonographic scene in *Invisible Man*. I am here suggesting that there are other phonographic implications raised both by Moten’s reading (and implicitly Ellison’s formulation in *Invisible Man*) for Baraka’s poetic formulations.

<sup>300</sup> Moten’s formulation of the idiomatic, via Derrida, resonates closely with Brent Hayes Edwards’ notion of a “grammar of blackness”; a term which Edwards employs to suggest that blackness is always a work of translation, always a about a movement, a return, a perpetually loop or cycle back to a perceived and imagined original that is constituted by that very act of return. Brent Hayes Edwards.

Baraka, either in celebration or contestation of his work, have tended to too easily assume this syllogism between race and style.<sup>301</sup> The “Changing Same,” in light of its preoccupation with blackness as looping, oscillating return, suggests black music and blackness as a relation to form wherein the sound of form is always already being thought before and beyond the form of sound, “the chaotic jingling of bells,” or what simply gets understood as blackness in recognition.

The poetics of the “Changing Same” attempt to theorize the complexity of opening up a *space* of black expressivity, black singularities, “redoubled blackness” in light of and through what Moten identifies as a “circular migration.”<sup>302</sup> The images and figures of imitation, transfer and replication that animate the “Changing Same” identify this “circular migration;” they form a loop around expressivity and “voices, writing, of what you carry with you, what you can never leave behind.” Baraka’s “Changing Same” marks the mimetic, the duplicable, the repeatable—the record and the recording, as the condition of possibility for both blackness and more importantly black expressivity and “expression.” The phonographic record and recording then are as much sites of black music’s imitation as they are sites for its return. However this would be as politically perilous a conclusion for Baraka to reach in his 1966 essay as

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*The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 7.

<sup>301</sup> Here I am referring mostly to the lineage of work, if one can trace one, from Ben Sidran’s *Black Talk* to Ronald Radano’s *Lying up a Nation*. This syllogistic thinking even creeps into Paul Gilroy’s leading assumption in the *Black Atlantic*; Gilroy theorizes a kind of antinomy of racial logics around black music through Baraka as either “It’s a Black thing you wouldn’t understand” or “Different strokes for different folks.” While Gilroy merely founds his “anti-anti-essentialism” on this opposition, the momentum of this symbolization of black music as style pervades his reductive position on hip-hop as nostalgic sentiment—something that pervades his later work. See Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1993, 100. We shall further discuss this shortly.

<sup>302</sup> Moten *In the Break*, 75.

it would be for Roscoe Mitchell and his sextet when they entered the studio that very same year. The question haunting Baraka and the question haunting *Sound* is: what does it mean when “what you carry with you, what you can never leave behind” lies in a seemingly rigidified object of exchange value; a dark material surface symbolizing repeatability, exchangeability and consumption? The record form had become the embodiment of black value: the vinyl an exchangeable body and its stored sound a phonic idealization of black interiority. What can be done to get out from under the weight of “Ornette”?

### **Blackness Ain’t Just “Blues:” The Little Suite’s Color Theory**

This literalization may be too tempting to be true, but the persistent creaking of tiny instruments in “the Little Suite,” seems to be foreshadowing a crack in the formal façade and spectral image of black music’s recording. “The Little Suite” is the second track of *Sound*; a suite centered on physically small yet timbrally rich instruments such as the recorder (Mitchell), the harmonica (Bowie) and a collection of bells, noisemakers and percussive tools that are simply categorized as “etc.” in the album notes. Though the compositional logic is distinct, the emphasis on tone coloring from the horns and Malachi Favors pointillist pizzicato bass, resound Cecil Taylor’s work on *Unit Structures*. The focus on variegated instrumentation from “little instruments” to noise objects anticipates the experiments of trumpeter Don Cherry in the early 1970’s. And that departure from more vernacular and popular

harmonic and harmolodic structures toward improvisatory variation again recalls Ornette Coleman's contemporaneous approach: "the Little Suite" is thematically centered around an F major blues chord progression played on the harmonica and a 4/4 marching horn crescendo from which the piece departs and to which it returns, though only at the end. We are again besieged by the narratological strictures that emplot and hence occasion *Sound's* recording and listening. Yet, *Sound* thinks through these narratological structures/strictures of resemblance in aesthetic that is rooted in the common structure of theme and variation. The structuring of "the Little Suite" around theme and variation allows moments for the narratological and indeed historical figures of black music to manifest, but it also facilitates a musical way of thinking beyond those figures and their inherent limitations as musical racial image.

In "the Little Suite" the last drop of the quasi-transcendental referentiality of theme and variation is let. Jazz's appropriation of popular music has often produced a formally nuanced yet figuratively parodic double. Coltrane's sharply arpeggiated masterpiece "My Favorite Things" is perhaps the most illustrative work of this parodic relationship. By the 1960's free jazz musicians like Ornette Coleman, and to a lesser extent John Coltrane, were mining the chord structures of the 12-bar blues for harmonic flexibility.<sup>303</sup> In this regard Coleman's activity was incredibly influential to

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<sup>303</sup> For an excellent example of this see Ornette Coleman's "Tears Inside" from *Tomorrow is the Question*. OJC, 1959. Ekkehard Jost makes a related point in his analysis of Coleman's "Tears Inside"—Jost, 47—that the piece differed markedly from traditional bebop and post-bop treatments of the blues form in that it presented a relatively simple harmonic structure. Coleman's harmonic structuring of "Tears Inside" and many of his blues-derived works in the late 1950's and 1960's seem to more explicitly engage and even converse within the formal organization of the blues. "The Little Suite" bears this debt in a similar yet different manner.

Roscoe Mitchell.<sup>304</sup> However, “Little Suite’s” referentiality is neither so precise nor so contrived as to call upon the content or form of a specific object to parody, to satirize or even to pay homage to; rather the blues form is referenced musically, immanently even, in terms of the gesture of its recording. By this I mean the blues form is thought in terms of, not only the discrete inherited image of the blues—and all its entanglements, but also the infinite and immanent sonic phenomena of the blues, which exists as something else beyond its narrative, symbolic and imagistic trajectory.

Many contemporary scholars such as Nathaniel Mackey, Fred Moten and Aldon Lynn Nielson have pointed out, and as the title of Amiri Baraka’s influential study of black music *Blues People* attests, that the blues tradition was an especially vital reservoir of cultural influence for the Black Arts Movement.<sup>305</sup> The larger revival of the blues in the context of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960’s at least partially explains Mitchell’s application of this blues chord progression.<sup>306</sup> Though the historical employment of the theme of “the Little Suite” would only takes us

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<sup>304</sup> Though it hardly needs verbal corroboration, Roscoe Mitchell mentioned to me in an interview I conducted with him, that Coleman’s work in the early 1960’s, “once he figured out what he was doing,” was incredibly influential to his own music. Roscoe Mitchell. Interviewed by Jeramy DeCristo. Mills College Music Bldg., November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

<sup>305</sup> See Nathaniel Mackey’s *Bedouin Hornbook*. New York, NY: Sun and Moon Press, 2000 and *Splay Anthem*. New York, NY: New Directions, 2006. Mackey’s critical writing not only makes explicit reference to this phenomenon, but his poetry evokes a similarly dynamic influence with the free jazz and black experimental music of the 1960’s and 1970’s.

<sup>306</sup> Though the black arts movement, and for that matter free jazz are traditionally thought of as almost exclusively centered in New York City: the literary innovations and happenings of Sonya Sanchez, Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones), Jayne Cortez, Elouise Loftin, Lorenzo Thomas, Audre Lorde and others as well as the consolidation of the Jazz Composers Guild and the New York Jazz Scene around the famous Five Spot. However, Margo Natalie Crawford (and others) has argued that the Black Arts Movement also had regional iterations, especially in Chicago. See Margo Natalie Crawford’s essay “Black Light on the Wall of Respect: the Chicago Black Arts Movement.” *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*. Ed. Lisa Gail Collins, Margo Natalie Crawford, and Alondra Nelson. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006, pp. 23-43.

partially, remotely, toward that something else and that somewhere else in the music. Both Nielson and Moten respectively, have powerfully argued for the realization of a black high modernist and post-modern aesthetic in the works of the 1960's black avant-garde, which actually prefigures, or at least does not merely subsequently duplicate, the putative European and American postwar avant-garde. Moreover, both Nielson and Moten have argued that the lived realities and psychic specters of race, class and gender were explicitly and implicitly broached in the work of these artists.<sup>307</sup> The recording or capturing of *Sound*, I have tried to show was always already a management of time; an attempt to submit one (or several) immanent structurings of time, music, and thought to a dominant temporal logic of recording and mode of sonic objectification and rationalization, largely through post-production, micing and mixing. Though his position is perhaps too hermetically sealed, Ekkehard Jost raises an important point to this effect when he speaks of recording free jazz (and improvisatory music more broadly): "No matter with what technical brilliance records are produced, they always constitute a reduction of what was originally an audio-visual event to a purely acoustical one." Jost raises a more helpful dimension to this point when he places it in the context of recording free jazz and improvisatory music as making static something that in terms of its realization is very much "a work in progress."<sup>308</sup> Jost's comments are illuminating in that the record and the (occasion for) recording are often enlisted to overlay and, in the

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<sup>307</sup> See *In the Break: the Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003 and Aldon Lynn Nielson's *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 255 and *Integral Music: Languages of African-American Innovation*. Tuscaloosa, AL: the University of Alabama Press, 2004.

<sup>308</sup> Jost, 14.

process, obliterate other latent temporalities with a dominant set of formal, classificatory and narratological effects: genre, lyric, phrase, even sample; chasing ghosts, these are the substituted gestures for musical thinking and action. If we think more generously and more critically about the unfinished “work in progress” that “the Little Suite” is actually working to (further) unfinish then we might become tuned into that something else *Sound* is doing and that somewhere else it is going. What I am after here is that blues chord progression from which and in which springs something else that was always already latent in the form, but which had become an unquestioned part of this larger musical nature.

When Alan Lomax brought his disk and tape recorder to the incarcerated black blues musicians in the American South in the 1930’s and the Mississippi Delta throughout the 1930’s and 1940’s, he held the position that in order for the American South to be realized in a narrative of liberal democratic progress the truth-content of blues’ lyrics needed to be absorbed and recognized as documentary objects that illustrative “bare” facts about black life. Lomax stated in a 1957 article: “I do not believe that the pattern of Southern life can be fundamentally reshaped until what lies behind these roaring, ironic choruses is understood.”<sup>309</sup> Lomax’s framing of the blues’ lyric, chorus and attendant chord structures renders what is an overtly lyrical form in terms of a larger narrative of national-racial turmoil and catharsis. What is

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<sup>309</sup>From a 1957 article that graces the liner notes of *Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from Parchman Farm 1947-48 Volume 1: Murderous Home* and *Volume 2: Don’t cha Hear Poor Mother Calling?* Cambridge, MA: Rounder Records, 1997.



most subtle, but formally significant about this gesture is that the time and activity of the lyric is submitted to the time and “action” of a normative progressive history, specifically a white liberal democratic narrative of racial progress, which the American North had supposedly already achieved.<sup>310</sup> The lyric form is denuded poetically and is reconfigured narratively; the blues lyric becomes a historical character (and eventually an artifact) in and for the racially idealized narrative of the South’s (eventual) progression which is tied to the rational technological capture (or narrative of functioning) of Lomax’s tape recorder. Paul Ricoeur distinguishes narrative time from poetic time, in that the former hinges around the “configurational act” which creates a temporal consonance in the flow of events through the retrospective configuration of characters as fulfilling the ends of narrative time.<sup>311</sup> Lomax’s insertion of the blues lyric, chorus and chord progression into the temporality and referentiality of narrative makes the blues and all its potential poetical realizations subservient to its recording; the blues is reduced to the retrospective motivation and occasion for its recording. The dynamic originality of the blues may have originally, in some way we can only guess at, confronted Lomax with some form of generally incriminating and self-effacing difference, something

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<sup>310</sup> As Benjamin Filene notes, Lomax was in this regard neither the most radical or incisive critic of Jim Crow segregation nor was Lomax a particularly insightful critic of the emerging albatross of mass racial incarceration that was fomenting in the American South and which would eventually define racial subjection in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century. See Benjamin Filene. “Our Singing Country”: John and Allen Lomax, Leadbelly, and the Construction of an American Past.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 4, December, 1991, pp. 602-624.

<sup>311</sup> Paul Ricoeur points out the important and necessary tension and distinction between narrative time and referentiality and poetical or lyrical temporality and referentiality. It would not be too extreme to say that much of Paul Ricoeur’s larger project of discussing narrative, time and history is predicated on narrative time’s inherent difference with poetical time. The referentiality of the two, while dependent upon what Ricoeur calls the “configurational act” differs entirely in their relationship to a presumed (empirical) reality or more their mimicry of that presumed (empirical) time, Ricoeur, 82.

unrecognizable that he could hear, but not fully understand. However, through the act of recording, of collecting and archiving this difference this undetectable trace is submitted to the order of sameness, of desire, of familiarity of character and perhaps eventually caricature that suits its eventual narration.

Lomax's tape recorder and his ethnographic method sought to establish the narratological terms for blues music's recognition by placing sentimental weight on the lyrical character of the blues and subjecting its temporal unfolding to a mechanical "writing of history" in the phonograph and tape recorder. Following in the footsteps of Carl Engel and Robert Winslow Gordon, Alan Lomax and his father John set out on a project that, through the sentimental capture of the blues form, fused the ideals of a late European romanticism with the impulses of a documentary realist drive.<sup>312</sup> Black bodies, like the surfaces of records were hungrily pursued as the waiting sources for sentimental sounds. Lomax described these "field trips" as his "attempts to penetrate this zone of silence" wherein "I managed, finally, to record the way black laborers [and prisoners] of the Delta [and the prisons] saw their situation." To accomplish this task, the Lomax's employed a "portable recording machine," which "put neglected cultures and silenced people in the communication chain... [and it] gave a voice to the voiceless."<sup>313</sup> It should not surprise us that Lomax and his

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<sup>312</sup> In the CD booklet for *A Treasury of Library of Congress Field Recordings*. Cambridge, MA: Rounder Records, 1997, Steven Wade notes that the broader impulse to produce field recordings of folk songs "emerged in the context of a European Romantic Movement," in which folk material would be the formal fodder for more "refined" forms of American concert music—in a manner that mimicked European "classical" music's folk roots. Also see Mark Katz's discussion of the phonograph's role in the search for "America's Classic Music" in *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.

<sup>313</sup> Alan Lomax. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1993, xi.

predecessors saw the Mississippi Delta, the Prison and the Native American Reservation as simultaneous structures facilitating cultural annihilation as well as sentimental cultural consecration to disk or tape reel. The romantic racial terror that lead to the blues' dismissal emerged from the same sentimental racial anxiety that occasioned its capture and embrace.<sup>314</sup> If there is any confusion as to how the erotic nature of this romantic and condescendingly beneficent gesture of voice finding coheres, Alan Lomax adds the confessional point that: "There is an impulsive and romantic streak in my nature that I find difficult to control when I go song hunting."<sup>315</sup> Alan Lomax's confessional gets at part of the point, but mislocates the unconscious romantic drive to document somewhere exclusively in himself when these fantastic contents, the need to document, actually spill out over into the very form, time and nature of the recording, of recording itself. Fred Moten identifies the "seriality of [a] documentary drive," that is constituted by a relentless pursuit for a realist narrative: linking both the content of the blues as a formal legacy (the lyric, the (often) ironic chorus, the 12-bar structure, the common chord progressions) and the meta-narrative of giving "neglected cultures and silenced people" a "voice" or giving a "voice to the voiceless." Moten asks about this unconscious need to capture: "Is the documentary drive, not only against but also in its seriality, necessarily

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<sup>314</sup> For an intriguing treatment of the sexual slippage between lust and anger inherent to Lomax's project see Bryan Wagner's discussion of Lomax's interview with Jelly Roll Morton in *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Politics of Slavery after Slavery*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. Morton's refusal of Lomax's demand that he play particular unrecorded pieces drives Lomax to an uncomfortable silence. Equally, Morton's occasional offer to play a piece that has not been recorded that Lomax has not requested titillates Lomax.

<sup>315</sup> Lomax, xi.

fantastical?”<sup>316</sup> Moten’s question highlights the imbedded structures of desire in blues recordings in a way that gets at both Lomax’s “impulsive and romantic streak” but also gets at Baraka’s romantic narration of the *Blues People*. Both positions invoke the words of Paul Ricoeur that, “The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative.”<sup>317</sup> It would be difficult to argue from this realization that the romantic narration and documentation of the blues does not creep, at least partially, into the form or what amounts to the form’s recognition in the record. The encounter with the blues, for many, then may be nothing more than the encounter with a record; genre, the proper name, micing, mixing, are merely the fantastical means by which we attempt to grasp at and annihilate this encounter and its effects. It is especially difficult, and perhaps impossible, as Baraka’s treatment of the blues indicates, to do away with the violent empathetic impulse that inheres to the blues lyric and the F major chord progression (or at least its expected resolution) in the “the Little Suite.”

As if to call us from the waking dream of this romantic image Favours plucks a low bass note.

The subtle creaking of tiny sounds trickle in; sounds that not unlike the harmonic blues theme urge us into recalling an image that can never quite appear, it’s not a door, it is not going somewhere, but it is a character. The “tiny sounds” attract that Barthesian “adjective,” they possess a distinct dynamic and timbral quality; they may even take on a sonic “personage” that does not establish any diegetic function for

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<sup>316</sup> Moten *Qua*, 10.

<sup>317</sup> Ricoeur, 75.

the work.<sup>318</sup> In this regard, the manifestation of these poetical musical figures, these sonic characters, instantiates a significant movement away from the compositional and representational terms of “Ornette” as well as the documentary drives that pursued the black Blues tradition, which the work referentially invokes. The sharp turn we see within the first few movements of “the Little Suite” is the movement away from the capture of narrative and its temporal legacy—its diegetic unfolding—into the temporality and dynamism of character. That character is a non-mimetic rendering of black music, wherein the referent is the structure and process of the imaging and the recording of black music, not simply the sound-image. *Sound* fundamentally rethinks the terms by which black music and blackness are constituted. At one level *Sound* engages the terms by which black music and blackness are recognized and regulated, recorded, captured and imaged. Yet, because *Sound* recognizes the absolute partiality of that image, the caesura in which that capture is composed and undone, it produces a time and a place before and beyond that caesura, a break before and beyond the break, the blues before the blues, where the irreducibly non-mimetic non-diegetic dimensions of blackness are lived and realized. The less the track is jazz the more it becomes jazz. Eric Porter’s formulation of Muhal Richard Abrams’ work is illuminative here: “Muhal Richard Abrams argued that by moving away from chord progression, AACM members were able to return to the roots of what later became known as jazz, when artists were playing “original” music rather

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<sup>318</sup> Here I am invoking Aristotle’s classical definition of character in relation to poetry and Epic and Drama: “Character is that in virtue of which we say that the personages are of such and such a quality.” Cited in Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Vol. I*, 47. Also see Aristotle’s definition of diegesis and in particular Ricoeur’s treatment of it, 36-37.

than interpretations of popular songs.”<sup>319</sup> Certainly, jazz, as Porter’s tone suggests, is still a deeply flawed characterization of what is going on (and not a characterization or naming that Abrams fully embraces), but the gesture of centering character (tonal, timbral, rhythmic) over structural narrative and tonal seriality—the abolition of narrative and seriality by character even—troubles the formal logic of race and the racial logic of form as they manifest in the recording and the record of the blues.<sup>320</sup> The development of melodic line without the emphasis on “vertical harmony” allows, in a structural sense for the exploration of instruments’ and objects’ tonal colorings free from harmonic chord pairings. As Abrams’ comments about chord progression suggest, from the perspective of something we might call jazz, the movement into thinking in terms of the tonal coloring and dynamics of obscure objects and instruments, or what Ekkehard Jost simply called “sound surfaces,” initiates the rupture and return to jazz’s consecration in a formal, material and racial mythos. *Sound* returns to and slows down jazz’s formal convergence; and so we are brought to the ideological construction or our own listening: “Ornette,” “the blues,” “jazz.”

Somewhere just before the seventh minute of “the Little Suite” one of the sextet’s members lets out a shout amidst sparse percussion and a rising recorder line played by Mitchell. The shout, which reoccurs three times within the next minute and a half of the track, always arises as an instrument amongst other instruments. Like the other “little” or “tiny” instruments, the shout suggests a kind of personage, a quality,

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<sup>319</sup>See Eric Porter’s influential work, *What is this Thing Called Jazz: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics and Activists*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press Berkeley, 2002, 212.

<sup>320</sup>For a similarly dynamic gesture see Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep*. Dir. Charles Burnett. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Film and Television Archive, 1977.

as an expressive force, not a narratological function. Unlike Lomax's capture of the blues this shout falls silent to the deaf ears of a history or historicism that would deposit it within a narrative temporality. Rather it seems to inhere to an organic language developed in the very moment of "the Little Suite's" composition/performance/recording. The dead object of the disk recorder is rejected with this shout as a prescribed language; whether that is "the words of the dying"<sup>321</sup> Edison envisioned for the phonograph or the lively and spirited sounds of the "neglected," "silenced" cultures Lomax sought with his disk and tape recorders. In this sense "the Little Suite," through the formal dimensions of the music, acknowledges and admonishes a larger racial logic instilled not just in the racial coding of the form, but the very material means by which that form has been captured. The very emphasis on "coloring" of sounds calls attention to a racial formal logic in which the materiality of sound and sound technology are closely implicated. Fred Moten identifies a convergence between racial-social pathology and the aesthetics of sound when he points out that: "blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay, even when that decay is invoked in the name of a certain (fetishization) of vitality."<sup>322</sup> That death of blackness that corresponds to the silence Lomax violently projects into incarcerated black folks in the South is precisely the condition that produces the vitality, the liveliness and the liveness of the recording (technology).

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<sup>321</sup> Edison, Thomas A. "The Phonograph and its Future." *North American Review*. Vol. 126, No. 262, May-June 1878 pp. 527-536, 533.

<sup>322</sup> See Fred Moten. "The Case of Blackness." *Criticism*, Vol. 50, No.2, Spring 2008, pp. 177-218, 177.

*Sound*, in “the Little Suite,” moves through and against the glyphic imaging of black music inscribed in the record by moving away from narrative fixity of black sound-images enshrined in a structure like the black voice, the record, jazz; *Sound* creates a language through these forms that is not reducible to their prior structuring and hence *Sound* actually rematerializes the record before and beyond its putative materiality—a materiality that Marx could not quite hear beyond. Through tone coloring “the Little Suite” produces a set of tonally and timbrally dynamic images.<sup>323</sup> What is distinct about these images is that they eschew the excessive form of symbolic referentiality that occasioned and conditioned their recording and indeed the capture of black music and blackness. The sonic and symbolic narrativity and seriality into which black forms of music and black forms of life are so often deposited is formally and temporally shattered. In “the Little Suite” we can hear the reconfiguring of this black sound-image in a new temporality and dimensionality. The ideality of the black sound-image, indeed the commodity form that it is, still weaves through fibers that form “the Little Suite,” but it is not simply mimetically reified—like we hear inklings of in “Ornette.” By inventing and returning to the moment of the black sound-image’s commodification, its rigidification, *Sound* undoes and recreates the parameters through which we can imagine blackness as the reimagination of the ideal and the material. The symbolic nature of blackness may go somewhat wanting as *Sound* goes on then, but perhaps the most consistent engagement with blackness in

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<sup>323</sup> JB Figi on the back of the 1966 and 2010 vinyl release of *Sound* mentions Mitchell’s intention to explore coloring and coloration in “The Little Suite Stating”: “a “suite of colors,” in which the instruments represent different and modulating colors. Colors, in this case, synonymous with moods. The listener may hear more definite human imageries.”



*Sound* is as a gestural aesthetic. *Sound* engages that very return to an invented origin not unlike what Amiri Baraka imagined in the “Changing Same”; blackness as an aesthetic gesture that troubles the opposition between ideality and materiality, even as it is endlessly haunted by that very legacy.

### **“Sound:” Improvisation and the Coalescence of Black Sonic Materiality**

The improvisatory ethos of “Sound” might the final track on *Sound*, at first, seem to render the record and the recording irrelevant. The only shreds of jazz familiarity float in the diluted theme and variation structure that stretches across the 21 and a half-minute piece. Yet, in a track, which cuts through the entire side of a record, we can hardly ignore “Sound’s” materialization of the record. Ekkehard Jost’s earlier contention overlooks this; the record is not merely a diminished copy of a live performance. We cannot naively presume the absoluteness of one materiality over another, nor the materiality of one structure of thought over another as Hegel misjudges. The record is not merely ancillary in the intensely formal, improvisatory, theatrical, and gestural sonic experiment of “Sound;” that cyclical, repetitive and looping nature of the record is central to the formal realization and imaginary of *Sound*. Again, *Sound* is both haunted by and realized through the structures of the generic: the proper name, the commodity form of the record, something called “jazz,” it never deludes itself with notions of a total escape from these structures. Yet, it never simply recognizes and reifies the authority of these structures through a kind of ironic or parodic referentiality. The apparent simplicity of the theme and variation

structure—a well-worn and by all accounts conventional jazz structure—opens up a juxtapositional aesthetic between form and improvisation. The realization of form: the recognition of melodic line (the basis for the recognition of theme) and the texture, tone-coloring and dynamics of these “little instruments” through improvisation bumps up against something the ideality and materiality of the record, which is perhaps something like sampling.

Somewhere at the nexus of race and form, the (romantic) “modernist fantasy”<sup>324</sup> of the individual artist exploring their unconscious through a “spontaneous” act, gained currency through both jazz music’s systematic abeyance as avant-garde introspection, and “new” (experimental) music’s social reclusion and canonical formalization. Whether the romantic nationalism attributed to John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman’s playing,<sup>325</sup> or the Universalist bourgeois retreat sounded by John Cage’s “chance” method of composition, race, and its relationship to form, was never quite thought outside its inherent contradictions. The racialized hyper-visibility of black musicians’ inherent musicality seemed, as it still seems, suspended against the invisible background of a normative white universality.<sup>326</sup> The

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<sup>324</sup>Here I have again stolen the words of Hassan Khan, Cairean sound/text/visual artist. I will continue to steal his words, until he steals them back, and I know he will. I will discuss his work explicitly much later in this essay.

<sup>325</sup> Again I am thinking of Amiri Baraka’s treatment of Coltrane and Coleman’s playing in “the Changing Same,” but equally we might turn to, as Eric Porter has, Frank Kofsky’s famous attempts to force such conclusions from John Coltrane in their interview sessions. See Porter, *What is this Thing Called Jazz*, Chapter 5.

<sup>326</sup> Prolific multi-instrumentalist and cultural theorist Anthony Braxton points out the ethnocentrism of the Cageian project when he states “there was no need for Europe to view the Cage movement as a threat, but rather as an expanded arm of western continuance...in fact in America the post-Cageian movement has done everything it could to be viewed as European—or ‘of Europe’—or ‘of white people and Europe exclusively.” Quoted from Anthony Braxton’s *Tri-Axium Writings Volume I*. Synthesis Music, 1985, 325. I take this quote from George Lewis’ “Afterword to ‘Improvised Music

record has perhaps been one of the most consistent reificatory culprits of race's symbolic regime, because, it has been formally and materially pitched as either the emblematic and narrative confirmation of inherent black musicality or, equally, the conceptual dead end to "limitless" musical experimentation. John Cage's comments on the record explicitly illustrate the latter point, while implicitly running up against the former:

I have noticed listening to a record that my attention moves to a moving object or a play of light, and at a rehearsal of the *Williams Mix* last May when all eight machines were in operation the attention of those present was engaged by a sixty-year-old piano tuner who was busy tuning the instrument for the evening's concert. It becomes evident that music itself is an ideal situation, not a real one.<sup>327</sup>

Cage's framing of the record freezes it in its commodity form as either an instrument of attention or distraction.<sup>328</sup> In so doing, Cage ascribes a kind of fantastical state of waiting and expectation to listening that removes it from the actual moment of listening and by extension rehearsal. The projective activity of listening—something to which Cage assigns a pure ideality—is distinguished from the reality that it supposedly negates. These lines about the record reveal an inherent ambivalence within Cage's larger oeuvre, which is an assertion of the will disguised as its

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After 1950' The Changing Same." *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation and Communities in Dialogue*. Eds. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.

<sup>327</sup> John Cage. "Composition as Process: 1. Changes (1958)." *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973, 31-32.

<sup>328</sup> This, perhaps ironically, recalls Adorno's treatment of popular music within the terms of distraction or attention: The frame of mind to which popular music originally appealed, on which it feeds, and which it perpetually reinforces, is simultaneously one of distraction and inattention...Distraction is bound to the present mode of production, to the rationalized and mechanized process of labor to which, directly or indirectly, masses are subject." "On Popular Music (1941)." In *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002, 458.

abnegation. These comments allude to Cage's division between composition and performance—a division, which fuels his love of indeterminacy and his incredulity toward improvisation—by narrating a contingent moment between the two: rehearsal. The narration and negation of rehearsal or practice, is carried out via the substitution of the reality of that time, with the (perpetually) projected time of a future musical event. In this formulation Cage conventionally seals both musical temporality and musical materiality within a normative temporal order. Much like Marx, Cage seems unable to imagine a future musician who creates a materiality through music and not just the other way around. The unthinkability of this musical materiality arises through Cage's rejection of the overbearing otherness, the prescriptive subjection, and the temporal fixity entombed in form, instrument, practice and training. The absolute assertion of the will in Cage's own prescriptive methodology is nothing less than an insurmountable fear of race, of being racialized. If we remember Fanon's stirring declarations that racialization and racism's most pernicious dimensions lie in the absolute negation of the individual will, depersonalization, even in the very moment of subjection. "I am overdetermined from without," Fanon writes, "And so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, *waiting for me*."<sup>329</sup> As I've discussed *Sound* actively grapples with this tension, it grapples with the social in a uniquely and intricately formal way that Cage's work seems terrified of. In particular *Sound*'s creation of sonic character and personage, through improvisation, wrestles with this tension and anxiety of

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<sup>329</sup> Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York, NY: Grove Press, 1967, 116, 134.

racialization. Hence in Cage's romantic disavowal of improvisation we can glean some more insight into the racial dimensions of form and the formal dimensions of race:

It is at the point of spontaneity that the performance is most apt to have recourse to his [the performer's] memory. He is not apt to make a discovery spontaneously. I want to find ways of discovering something you don't know at the time that you improvise—that is to say, the same time you're doing something that's not written down, or decided upon *ahead of time*. The first way is to play an instrument over which you have no control, or less control than usual.<sup>330</sup>

Again, we see in Cage's thought an assertion of the will everywhere, and especially at the idealized point of its negation. Cage certainly gets closer to thinking a kind of musical materiality through music, but not unlike his encounter with the record, he gets caught up in a normative reinscription of materiality and time. The attempt to avoid determination, toward being determined "ahead of time," forecloses in Cage's romantic formulation of "improvisation," the possibility for a more radical temporal gesture—getting "ahead of time." The reification of a normative capitalist temporality and materiality remain untroubled in this cloaked journey for self through self-prescribed rules. The attempt to discover and hence prescribe, in an equally legalistic manner to objective time, an "unconscious" through the calculated musical superstructure of "chance" testifies to this problematic. Theodore Adorno's critique of the "new" music resonates: "No rule is more repressive than one that is self-promulgated."<sup>331</sup> Formally, musically, philosophically, more of an unconscious might

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<sup>330</sup> Quoted in Roger Kostelanetz. *Conversing with Cage*. New York, NY: Limelight Editions, 1988, 222. Cite in Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*, 363. The italics are mine.

<sup>331</sup> See Theodor W. Adorno. *Philosophy of New Music*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis, MN: the University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 55. Adorno also adds germane to the earlier point: "It is

be exposed in the very striving for an anti-improvisatory “non-intentional” method than is achieved in its implementation or actualization.

Cage’s romantic abstraction of intention places instruments (including the record/record player) in a putative position with respect to temporality and their musical realization. George Lewis sharply criticizes Cage’s fantasies through the music of the AACM. Lewis points out that in Cage’s formulation of spontaneity: “discovering something you don’t know at the time that you improvise,” practice looms as a present absence.<sup>332</sup> The elision of practice, or the negation of rehearsal in the face of the record, reifies the opposition between inherent black musicality and abstract white universality enshrined in Cage’s prescription of a universal unconscious. “Sound” and by extension the larger work *Sound*, poses a more nuanced and complicated relation to the record, time, improvisation and to materiality through the implantation of these “little instruments.”

Theme and variation feels like a tentative outline on *Sound*; the shell-container for black expressivity. Each of the three tracks realizes this structure with very different results and widely varying durations. By the time we get to “Sound” it is clear that theme and variation are not simply structuring the track, but they are structuring memory—it becomes the structure of memory. But Mitchell’s wandering saxophone lines, and their subtle decoration with almost regulative chimes, merely

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precisely its origin in subjectivity that becomes the contingency of arbitrary pronouncement as soon as the rule stands in the way of the subject, positively, as a regulative system.”

<sup>332</sup> Lewis, *A Power*, 384. Also relevant in this regard is James Baldwin’s response to inherent black musicality in his short story “Sonny’s Blues” and Amiri Baraka’s writings in “Jazz and the White Critic” cited above.

tempt us with the intuitive or expectant capacity that fuels what Cage termed an “ideal situation.” The melodic and indeed the greater symbolic resolutions we might have expected—those that “Ornette” tempts us with—are sacrificed for something more meditative. Adorno speaks to this knowing capacity for music:

In the act of knowing that art carries out, its form criticizes the contradiction by indicating the possibility of its reconciliation and thus of what is contingent, surmountable and dependent in the contradiction.<sup>333</sup>

While the propensity of theme toward variation is something we might remember or associate with the form, the slow descent into silence disrupts this seemingly inherent tendency in the material. The subtle searching rise of rolled and shaking percussive chimes and bells, these “little instruments,” yields an exploratory, experimental and improvisatory process that inherently disrupts the apparent nature of theme. The realization and disruption of the theme and variation provides an almost empathic meeting point between the listener and the musicians through improvisation.<sup>334</sup> As soloistic turn taking unfolds, the will, and indeed the subjectivity of the individual players is not bombastically celebrated, as is often the case with excessive displays of virtuosity, yet neither is the will romantically reified with its superficial sublimation to a self-prescribed method or order. George Lewis again adds some important clarification here, “the use of little instruments was not necessarily intended as an

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<sup>333</sup> Adorno *Philosophy of New Music*, 97.

<sup>334</sup> George Lewis has remarked about a kind of empathic necessity when listening to improvised music stating, “the listener also improvises.” Lewis *Improvised*, 148.

escape from the challenge of virtuosity”<sup>335</sup> indeed the musicians still practiced, studied and learned these instruments as a means of getting “ahead of time” in a way which Cage overlooks. The constraints placed on the composer by the historical and indeed memorial nature of theme and variation lead to a denaturalization of that order through improvisation with these instruments, with these sounds. The free relationship placed on the tone coloring, texture and dynamics of the sounds of these “little instruments” makes at least partially recognizable the shared process of improvisation, while leaving somewhat opaque the subtle confluence of form we are witnessing. The inscrutable nature of this form’s confluence, the opacity that is form’s coming together, actually discovers the kind of automation (perhaps an unconscious of the record) that Cage’s work claims to explore. What repeats, what continually returns or loops back in the record, is our projected expectations of a formal return; a return to the ideality of music, to the familiarity of listening that the record ensures. Yet *Sound* has no interest in providing us with familiarity as content, because it is too busy theorizing the conditions of our hearing by which that familiarity, that referentiality and that materiality are produced. The record is rematerialized, at every turn, the blackness of the record surface, the sound surfaces are thought anew.

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<sup>335</sup> Lewis A *Power Stronger*, 363.



## Chapter 4: Dub Aesthetics and the Work of Hassan Khan

A vacant underground walking tunnel in Cairo is abruptly filled with unintelligibly loud, looped chanting. A few stanzas and the central refrain of *البردة* (*El Borda*, a praise poem for the Prophet Mohammed recited on his birthday to signify the passing of his mantle) blare as a sweeping bass drone, high tweets and a processed crashing drum cut in, distorted. The sampled voice of the reciter teeters on the brink of distortion. The sheer volume of his call clipping and blaring as if it were piping through the tinny ubiquitous loudspeakers that populate the streets of Cairo—the instruments that often bare this voice.<sup>336</sup> That clipping distorted voice blares not unlike the rattling façade of the Jamaican sound system speakers to which this work, *Tabla Dubb no. 9* (2002), nominally makes reference. In the project description that accompanies the work, the artist, Hassan Khan attributes the noisy aesthetic of this single-channel video to his theorization of the “meeting point,” between the Arabic *tabla* (طبلّة) drum and “noise electronica.” *Tabla Dubb no. 9* is not a novel fusion of “different cultures,” but a partial disclosure of a local reality, which “employ[s] the structural qualities of video itself as the basis for a formal language.” Khan’s piece and indeed some of his larger oeuvre are a continuation, expansion and complication of dub music’s dynamic legacy.

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<sup>336</sup> For an extensive discussion of tape sermons and the sonic presence of public Koran recitation in Cairo see Charles Hirschkind’s *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

More figures arrive: a woman trudging towards the camera, shadowed by a table of blurred street vendors; a young boy rides his bicycle through the frame veering off to the side and into the background to reveal what appears to be a man sitting cross-legged studying a text. These characters, these images, pass in and out of the tunnel as spectral superimpositions; different layers that arrive in partial obscurity and leave only their shadows as visual echoes of their presence and absence; postcards from a partially negated public sphere. They all pass through and flutter against a constant background—a backbeat—a physical space; the walking tunnel that is often charged with their resonances and residues of voices, sounds, bodies, and echoes. The space and time, the form of *Tabla Dubb no. 9* works through these materials and is invested with the layered echoic aesthetics of dub music. The video, the visual is dubbed, it is subjected to dubbing and hence dub is realized formally as a mode or force of subjection. In the project description Hassan Khan adds, “A simple choice in how to shoot and arrange the visual material, in this case people walking through a pedestrian tunnel, is also an attempt at articulating a language through which to produce cultural forms that are always one step beyond the artist’s intentions yet also a direct and immediate translation of its sources.”<sup>337</sup> It would be reductive to subsume Khan’s approach purely under the banner of dub, equally so to describe it simply as “art music.” Yet, what I find so interesting here is how Khan’s engagement with dub theorizes the very sonic-visual structures by which blackness becomes an oscillation between “recognition and abjection,” but also a sonic-visual force of

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<sup>337</sup> Hassan Khan. *Tabla Dubb No. 9*. Color video transferred to DVD, sound / Vidéo couleur transférée sur DVD, son 3 min 40. Artist Gallery Description, 2002.

subjection.<sup>338</sup> The elegance through which Khan’s work achieves such a complex entanglement arises not from a symbolic treatment of dub, nor a symbolic rendering of blackness, but through a nuanced engagement with the form; dub, dubbing, becomes the antagonist to race’s many symbolic modes of documentation and capture.

Dub music has been perhaps the most influential sonic force of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, though its cultural influence, like its native island context has often been rendered in “small” and all too marginal terms. Particularly unthinkable has been the proposition laid out by Michael E. Veal in his brilliant monograph on dub music, that dub practices (which is to say dub) have engendered an immense and immeasurable global black diasporic experimental legacy that has yet to be fully recognized as such. Many of the early forbearers of dub music did not concern themselves as to whether their music was regarded as “experimental” or avant-garde—terms, which I have and will continue to complicate.

Until the gradual “internationalization” of Jamaican music in the 1970’s many of dub’s early innovators developed their music with an exclusive focus on how it would be received in the context of the Jamaican sound system. The sound system context—which I’ll touch upon briefly—was no more provincial or “little” than it was universal. Julian Henriques describes the sound system, which consists of a

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<sup>338</sup> Fred Moten. *In the Break: the Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, 71. Moten’s words here are derived primarily from his reading of Ralph Ellison’s classic phonographic scene in *Invisible Man*. Also see Darieck Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African-American Literary Imagination*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010.

massive wall of speakers representing and then exceeding the frequency spectrum of human audibility with sheer loudness, as a “corporeal practice,” an embodied “thinking through sound” and form.<sup>339</sup> As Veal shows, artists like Clive Chin, Augustus Pablo, Errol Thompson, King Tubby, Duke Reid and Lee “Scratch” Perry have ascribed universalist cosmologies to their music that suggest an experimental tendency in their work that has garnered global sonic attention, especially at the formal level. Veal quotes contemporary Jamaican reggae producer Computer Paul who states of the early founders and practitioners of dub: “What I know that is genius about dub music is it defied all the principles of recording...it is artistic music.”<sup>340</sup> Paul’s comments allude to dub’s operation within a perceived normative studio “recording” context and moreover, the profound way in which dub artists made strategic creative attempts to go beyond and disfigure this context. As a contemporary musician commenting about the development of dub, Paul reminds us of how the profound artistic dimensions of dub are continually being realized anew, again and again, by successive generations in different times and in different contexts. Hence it would be impossible, as Hassan Khan’s work suggests, for us to disavow the global realization of *dub aesthetics*.

Though trying to account for the totality of dub’s global influence—or presuming that the normative terms of a totality are indeed what we are dealing with when we deal with dub—would be a critical misstep, the importance of dub’s

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<sup>339</sup> Julian Henriques. *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing*. New York, NY: Continuum Books, 2011.

<sup>340</sup> Michael E. Veal. *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007, 93.

material legacy of blackness are of paramount importance to this writing. As I will discuss, dub's profound refashioning of the ontological precepts of the instruments and technologies of the sound studio is one of the most radical sonic gestures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, the radicality of this operation is, perhaps ironically, overlooked precisely because of dub's global influence. For example, King Tubby's experiments with echo and reverb through circuit-bending and reprogramming his commercial studio equipment were eventually appropriated into the designs by companies who had built the very commercial sound equipment Tubby had deconstructed.<sup>341</sup> Even more blatant is the way in which the formal procedures of overdubbing with tape that many dub producers realized through complicated mechanical means has been digitally streamlined and whittled down to, as in the case of current Digital Audio Workstations, a simple resampling procedure, or dragging and dropping a "dub" digital signal processing effect on a track. Indeed the deconstructed instrumentality of dub has been instrumentalized within the very tools it had worked to dismantle. But it would be reductive to mistake the symbolic absence of dub's specific forms of instrumentation as the material absence of dub's radical aesthetic legacy of blackness.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Greg Milner. *Perfecting Sound Forever: The Story of Recorded Music*. London, England: Granta Publishing, 2009. Louis Chude-Sokei also outlines the appropriation of dub, briefly in, Lois Chude-Sokei. "Dr. Satan's Echo Chamber": Reggae, Technology, and the Diaspora Process." *Emergences*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1999.

<sup>342</sup> Paul Gilroy's nostalgic consecration of Curtis Mayfield as a kind of romantic root that is antagonized and stomped out by the contemporary creation of black musics via Ableton Live and other audio software, is a prime example of the diminution of black music and blackness to the symbolics of a presence the kind of metaphysical understanding of technology and being that is precisely under critique and review of dub. See Paul Gilroy. *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

The emergence of black forms of music from this appropriated commercial legacy bears the haunted power of dub: techno, house, jungle (drum n' bass), trip-hop are only the most sonically immediate and perhaps obvious offspring of dub's ancestral swell. What is far more subtle and yet more profound, and what I will attempt to think through here, is dub's profound aesthetic materialization of blackness, which is not reducible to the symbolic presence of specific instruments, instrumentations or bodies, and so nor, is it reducible to the putative symbolics of blackness that are taken to be presence. After all, if as Louis Chude-Sokei suggests, dub is rooted in a "material process of re-translation" then a great deal of the music's experimentation lies not within the symbolic recognition of technology, but somewhere beyond technology's normative purview. How we attempt to think through (at least part of) dub's experimental legacy then is crucial, and moreover this thinking and writing must take the experimental imperatives of the music into account.

The unthinkability of dub's expansive experimental artistic legacy has persisted largely under the Eurocentricity of the designation "experimental" or "avant-garde" that I have alluded to in earlier chapters; a designation that Amiri Baraka, George Lewis and Fred Moten criticize in many of their writings on black music, and a designation Veal criticizes when he writes: "the terms *electronic* and *experimental* are by no means synonymous...my use of the term "electronic music" in this text is also a conscious attempt to raise and problematize the concept of an experimental avant-garde in relation to the music cultures of Africa and the African

Diaspora.”<sup>343</sup> Veal identifies how dub’s blackness, its diasporic origins in and (perpetual) returns to African musics, have led to its grammatical disavowal as “experimental” from that normative Eurocentric gaze/ear. Even the Africanist musicological scholarship—conducted mostly by European and American ethnomusicologists—that has attempted to argue against the Eurocentric conception of music,<sup>344</sup> has struggled to imagine a reciprocal musicality like dub outside of an “invented” monolithic African (primal) musical origin.<sup>345</sup> Kofi Agawu points out how ethnomusicological studies of African musics have explicitly and implicitly depended upon representational paradigms of comparison. Attempts to discursively render African musics, translate them, and subject them to Western analysis, have often regressed to, if not sprung from, the very colonial terms that worked toward African musics’ romantic invention in the first place.<sup>346</sup> Furthermore, the anthropological impulse to render African music within a rigid temporal frame as a monolithic tributary of culture to New World black musics, often elides the formal and temporal complexity of black musics,<sup>347</sup> a complexity that Brent Hayes Edwards suggests

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<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>344</sup> Here I am thinking primarily of two substantial works: John Miller Chernoff’s *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981 and Christopher Small’s *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in Afro-American Music*. New York, NY: Riverrun Press, 1987.

<sup>345</sup> For a critique of the Eurocentric ideal of Africa see VY Mudimbe’s groundbreaking works: *the Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Indianapolis, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1988 and *the Idea of Africa*. Indianapolis, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1994. For a critique which focuses primarily on African music see Kofi Agawu’s *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*. New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2003.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> We would also be wise to heed Giulia Loli’s (aka DJ Mutamassik’s) warnings about overlooking the complex distillation of “Africa” and the black world as we define it as a given. Loli/Mutamassik marks this complexity with designating her music and production of culture as “Afro-Asiatic Mokkaasar.” See Giulia Loli. “Egypt: A Brief thought on North African colonialism or “de-Nile”

works through a dynamic of *decalage* that underwrites a “grammar of blackness;” that is a reciprocal, syncretic and disjointed set of entanglements “that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water.”<sup>348</sup> Edwards’ (and Edouard Glissant’s) attention to more relational aesthetic lineages echoes Veal’s earlier comments about dub as an experimental electronic music. Reconsidering and rethinking dub music in terms of a broader set of experimental electronic practices and aesthetics will perhaps take us one step closer to the challenge thrown down by black experimental musician Morgan Craft to realize a black experimental avant-garde “beyond all the current categories,” which includes the reductive categories against which black music has often been defined: race, nation, gender and genre.<sup>349</sup> Craft’s collaboration with his partner Egyptian-Italian-American artist DJ Mutamassik under the group moniker Rough Americana also interweaves dub aesthetics through different compositional landscapes. In the interest of resituating dub music within a larger legacy of dub aesthetics I wish to take on Veal’s, Craft’s and Khan’s respective drives to understand dub as a set of practices that produce a “formal language” that disfigures and refigures the inherited and (at times) prescribed mediums of the recording studio space, the popular song structure and the visual and sonic foundations of documentation and capture in modernity. My hope is that the reframing of dub in this experimental light will provide an even greater aesthetic reservoir for contemporary

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of/to Vulcanize or Afro-Asiatic Makkassar.” *Ambassador.net*. July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009: <http://ambassadors.net/archives/issue26/opinions3.htm>.

<sup>348</sup> See Brent Hayes Edwards’ *the Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, 14.

<sup>349</sup> Morgan Craft. “The Black Equation Forum 2.” *The Wire*. 2009



black experimental artists to ponder the double-edged legacy outlined in these chapters.

The central formal, and indeed symbolic, identity of dub music has centered on the creation of dub (or similarly altered) *versions* of popular Jamaican songs. Earlier scholarship on dub music (and to a significant extent reggae) emphasized versioning as a singular sign of dub's articulation of a postmodern aesthetic that refashions, and in so doing, displaces the absoluteness of the "original's" signification.<sup>350</sup> Though as I have discussed in previous chapters through George W. Johnson, Bessie Smith, and Roscoe Mitchell, versioning, and in a more general sense (perceived) musical mimicry and repetition, have been central parts to the development of black music in the New World—no doubt attributable in part to a legacy that extends back to early black recordings, most notably the phonography of black female blues singers. That being said I do not wish to dismiss the uniquely central place of versioning in dub music, rather I wish to resituate the practice of versioning within the formal matrices of dub's echoic, shadow like aesthetics of reverberation, delay, and rhythmization. What I am trying to engage in the continued legacy of dub aesthetics, is what Louis Chude-Sokei has put a finger on in his theorization of dub's diasporic resonances as an "echo chamber":

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<sup>350</sup> See Dick Hebdige's *Cut n' Mix: Culture, Identity, and Caribbean Music*. New York: Routledge, 1987. Also see Paul Gilroy's early work *Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1987. The emphasis on the remix and versioning was a particular point of attention for scholars of the black diaspora such as Gilroy and Hebdige when treating reggae and dub, Brent Edwards' work on black diasporic music and culture has responded to the aforementioned writers in manner which troubles the implicit romantic nationalism within their anti-national treatments of black music.

Ghosts in the mix, *duppies* in the machine. King Tubby and others like Errol Thompson, Overton “Scientist” Brown and Lloyd “Jammy” James—and so many other producer/engineers whose names still need to be rescued from the purgatory of history—played the mixing board like an instrument upon which one could improvise. They effectively turned popular music into an abstract concept where the ear has to listen far beyond the melody, far below the bass, and where the mind has to constantly adjust to a vision (a sounding) of the world where meaning seems to reside everywhere and, yet, nowhere.<sup>351</sup>

Chude-Sokei identifies dub’s brilliance in its unique interweaving of the quasi-spiritual (cosmological, ghostly) and the technical into a sonic-visual form. I would like to extend upon and dig further into Chude-Sokei’s distillation of dub’s brilliance and suggest that one node of dub’s formal, aesthetic and political genius lies in its disfigurement and rematerialization of the black voice qua voice-image. By voice-image, here I am thinking in those close terms of the black voice outlined in previous chapters: as the projective sonic milieu by which the individual achieves a kind of interpolative phonographic recognition and identification as a subject. As I discussed in Chapters 1, Mladen Dolar has argued for the centrality of the voice to a phonology (and by extension a phonography). Dolar further extends his analysis to ponder the politics of the voice as that which, through affect and language (speech), anchors the political and by extensions the ideological constitution of the subject.<sup>352</sup> Appended to the ideological strictures of the voice are its place within the realm of the symbolic and the ritual; a realm which undoubtedly includes the voice’s position within popular music—much like the popular American music which was piped over Jamaican

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<sup>351</sup> Chude-Sokei, 56.

<sup>352</sup> Mladen Dolar. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, 108.

airwaves and smuggled into Jamaican record shops after World War II. The disfigurement of this subject of popular music, this phonographic mode of recognition and identification entombed in the black voice, perhaps somewhat subtly or even latently, lies encoded within the forms of postwar Jamaican music as both a point of limitation and perpetual formal realization. What happens to that political constitution of the subject when the aesthetics and sonic-visual materiality of that voice are explored, doubled, repeated, echoed and dubbed? I would like to think of dub as a kind of formal experimental theorization of new aesthetics and politics that dwells in this production of echoic presence and materiality.

In addition to African and native Jamaican musical influences, many forms of Jamaican music prior to dub: rocksteady, ska, and reggae were all influenced significantly by the sounds of imported American rhythm and blues and doo-wop music; hence these Jamaican musics centered the lyric and the melodies and harmonies of the singers' voices within the confines of the popular song structure. Dub producers and engineers however, began treating these voices, and indeed the larger harmonic framework of the popular song structure, as the "raw material," to borrow a term from Hassan Khan, for sonic and artistic experimentation. Thus the perceived referentiality, *resemblance* and recognition, the sheer symbolic novelty, that prop up the aesthetics of versioning is by no means the whole story of dub. Using King Tubby's LP *King Tubbys Meets the Rockers Uptown*, and specifically Tubby's dub version of Paul Blackman's "Say So," Michael Veal discusses the "erasure and fragmentation" of the song lyric in dub as "the simultaneous dissolution and

distillation of meaning [that is] achieved through this subtractive [or “additive”] textual strategy.”<sup>353</sup> While it is difficult to choose just one example or even a handful of dub tracks to illustrate this formal dimension of dub, because the dubbing of lyrics and vocals has been so central to the form, Veal’s instincts are astute when he focuses on King Tubby’s catalogue.

King Tubby’s (born Osbourne Ruddock) work, especially his early work with Augustus Pablo, perhaps best illustrates the disfigurement and rematerialization of form through his experimental manipulation of popular Jamaican lyrics and vocals. Though a rather subtle example, I would posit King Tubby and the Aggrovators’ “A Noisy Place/Dub Place,” the B Side to Horace Andy’s reggae single “A Quiet Place” (an adaptation) produced by Bunny Lee, as an interesting rematerialization of the black voice (of popular music). Andy’s track, the A Side of the record, is itself a “version,” or an “Adaptation” as it is referred to on the record surface, of the Paragon’s 1960’s rocksteady hit of the same name. The Paragons were a Jamaican rocksteady group led by John Holt that, like much rocksteady of the time, sounded like a unique confluence of traditional Jamaican rhythms laid under black American rhythm and blues vocalization. Tubby’s version realizes the inherent standardization of the black voice in form through a disruption of the voice’s narrative and indeed lyrical function in the track. Tubby’s dub version plays with the very—almost wry— injunctions of fear and anxiety in Andy’s “original.”

There’s a man that live next-door

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<sup>353</sup> Veal, 65.

In my neighborhood  
In my neighborhood  
He gets me down

He gets me so late at night  
Always a fuss n' fight  
Always a fuss n' fight  
All through the night

I've got to get away from here  
This is not a place for me to stay  
I've got to take my family  
And find a quiet place

Hear the pots and pans they fall  
Bang against the wall  
Bang against the wall  
No rest at all

I've got to get away from here  
This is not a place for me to stay  
I've got to take my family  
And find a quiet place

Hear the pots and pans they fall  
Bang against the wall  
Bang against the wall  
No rest at all

I've got to get away now  
I've got to get away now  
I've got to get away now  
I've got to get away now

Andy's "original," with the lyrics cited above, bears a somewhat surprisingly close resemblance to the Paragon's "original;" maintaining the same rhythm and blues chord progression and only very slightly slowing down the rhythm of the track.

Andy's falsetto textures the track with beautifully subtle tonal differences and adds delicate patois inflections that seem intentionally absent from the Paragons' version,

which more self-consciously enunciates its black American influences. The difference of inflection is actually a rather crucial point. For if that version of blackness encased within the standard of the black voice as appropriated by the Paragons, bears such an overwhelming rigidity so as to only be capable of speaking for others, then Andy invokes patios as a means of experimenting with the perceived standardization of that standard.<sup>354</sup> Andy's invocation of patios might form something like a homological relationship to Tubby's radical tinkering with the perceived standard of studio equipment. Yet, Andy's patios inflection does not suggest an ironic parody or condescending aversion to the Paragon's standard, but rather a genuine questioning, at the level of the materiality of sound and language, of the conditions of possibility for that standard.

Both the Paragons' version and Horace Andy's version maintain a now classically Jamaican rhythm or "riddim"—central to rocksteady, ska and reggae of the time—through the time keeping function of the bass guitar and the snare and the bass drums in what is generically referred to as "drum and bass" style. Though Tubby's mix enacts a subtle decentering of the "drum and bass" aesthetic: the track begins with what sounds like a snare processed through Tubby dropping his spring reverb unit on the floor (a technique for which he was famous) and running that sound through a delay unit while he manipulates the feedback of that delay unit, what would

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<sup>354</sup> See Fred Moten's "Blackness and Nothingness: (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112: 4, Fall 2013, pp. 738-780, and particularly his discussion of "pidgin" as it troubles and underwrites Fanon's conclusions as to the Negro in Language.

come to be Tubby's signature "slap-back echo." As these echoes decay Tubby brings the "original" riddim/rhythm in the mix and Andy's lyrics arise in a new world:

There's a man that live next-door

In my neighborhood  
In my neighborhood

At the completion of "neighborhood" Tubby unloads an atmospheric burst of reverb and delay through the slap back echo—akin to what began the track—momentarily drowns out the riddim/rhythm; amongst this delayed reverberating material is Andy's voice which leaves only trails of its lyrical identity. Andy's voice fades into or mixes with the chorus, both sets of voice(s) are heavily filtered in the mix—mixed down, and subjected to expansive reverb so much so that their rhythmical, and by extension, semantic and harmonic structures are broken down into sustained ambience. Tubby mixes down the entirety of the next verse, and Andy's voice only chimes in again, this time to be even more abruptly: "Hear the pots and pans they fall/Bang..." Tubby almost literalizes and so rematerializes Andy's "bang" into an extended syncopated cacophony—while the track's tempo maintains the original 85 beats per minute, the delay unit is set closer to 178bpm. The sentiment of the track is almost entirely broken down: the literal narrative of extreme privation; the veneer for the narrator's anxiety over the perceived criminality of the ghetto—the noise of the "neighborhood," and his desire to move "away from here" eventually becomes a more profound sonic exploration of the ghetto as a crucible of musical activity; perhaps ominously gesturing towards Tubby's (final) home studio in the Waterhouse

district of Kingston. Tubby, materializes this noise through decentering the vocals and rendering them primarily as the ambient harmonic background material of the track. The modification of pitch initiated by the reverb and delay adds a dark ghostly quality to the track when set against the muffled and filtered vocals. This kind of lush abstract quality to the mix wherein the drums dominate and drive the track forward, only to be continually caught up in a subtly shifting nebulous harmonic swell, differentiated Tubby's style from other contemporaries Tubby's work was distinct from his contemporaries such as Duke Reid's mixes, which on the whole, tended to maintain the structure of the ("original") popular song much more faithfully, or Sylvan Morris, whose mixes were known for the way in which they cleanly differentiated the instruments within different frequency ranges, or Lee "Scratch" Perry, whose additive mixing techniques often tended toward the kind of sample-based sound that would eventually characterize hip-hop production. Earlier work like "A Noisy Place/Dub Place" and of course Tubby and Lee "Scratch" Perry's seminal album with the Upsetters, *Blackboard Jungle Dub* 1973, foreshadow Tubby's later work in which he eventually does away with the voice's symbolic power as a sight/site/cite of recognition and identification. Again, Veal unearths a resonant point here when he states, "dub revealed the inner architecture of pop song constructions often understood as complete and self-contained."<sup>355</sup> We see the work of Tubby's most prominent contemporaries explore this power of dub in differing ways. Whether that be Lee "Scratch" Perry's cultivations of the British (post) Dub trip-hop scene

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<sup>355</sup> Veal, 77.



with the likes of Mad Professor or Tubby's further exploration of "drum and bass" into the genre or subgenre that bears that name and which took Europe by force in the 1990's.

This rethinking of the symbolics and the materiality of the voice through and against the popular song structure must also be thought in relation to the increasing "perfection" of sound in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the studio space. The quest for auditory perfection (fidelity, clarity, representability) that was built into the recording studio in the 20<sup>th</sup> century became the content, the form, and the instrument that drove dub's experimentation.<sup>356</sup> Contemporary treatments of dub have rightly marveled at how dub producers turned the mixing board and the (presumably) standardized equipment of the recording studio into an instrument. The creation of the studio/mixing board as an instrument through dub is directly rooted in a larger and more pervasive ideality of popular music qua mass culture, which is rooted in the very means-end functionality of the modern recording studio and its technologies.<sup>357</sup> In the previous chapters I have discussed the way in which black music and the ideality enshrined in the black voice were at the forefront of the commodification of sound in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I have attempted to think through the way the Fordist capitalist logic of recording and reproducing sound required and engendered a complex relationship between materiality and ideality that was propped up by, yet also antagonized by, what I have called the black voice. In King Tubby's "A Noisy

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<sup>356</sup> Greg Milner's broaches this topic briefly in *Perfecting Sound Forever: The Story of Recorded Music*. London, England: Granta Publishing, 2009 in the chapter "Tubby's Ghost."

<sup>357</sup> Martin Heidegger. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. William Lovitt. New York, NY: Harper Books, 1977, 5.

Place/Dub Place” we can see that these logics pervaded, in particular, the radio broadcasts of black music which funneled into Jamaica and which influenced part of the foundation of post-war Jamaican music. Dub music disturbed, interrupted and completely shattered this hegemonic ideality that inhered to the invention of the modern recording studio and the popular mass music it produced and the mass cultural subject it both purported to manufacture and document. The presumed universalism of the audio discourses that founded the recording studio, and by extension its perfection of sound, were deconstructed as mere provincial materials; fodder for dub producers to make sound system patrons move.<sup>358</sup> The funneling of black American music into postwar Jamaica inhered to both the standardized repertoires of black American music and the standardized means of production via radio broadcast and studio recording. The convergence of these two modes of standardization, or the consolidation of these forms into a standard, forms something like what I have earlier referred to as the black voice, an object that dub music profoundly realized and transformed. This rematerialization of the black voice was at least partially traversed by the specific concerns of Jamaica recording studios, which at the time graded against the modalities of the supposedly standardized musical forms and instruments that Jamaican studios and listeners received. Dub producers improvised; not unlike the way in which George W. Johnson, Bessie Smith and the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet had to improvise beyond the rendering of blackness as an

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<sup>358</sup> Again see Julian Henriques. *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing*. New York, NY: Continuum Books, 2011.

ontological technological standard. Dub producers reimagined the materiality of blackness in and beyond the studio space.

### **In the Studio:**

The recording studio in Jamaica, throughout dub's reign, was inhabited by the projection of the ideal listener as a sound system participant. Michael Veal and Greg Milner have suggested that before dub producer's experimentations, the recording studio, not unlike Lomax's anthropological notion of "the field" (discussed in chapter three), were invested largely with a documentary capacity; what Fred Moten has more expansively identified as a "documentary drive."<sup>359</sup> Dub music arose in a context where the interpolative "hail" of the sound system forcibly constituted a (political) subjectivity that was, at least partially, the remainder of the projected authority, the ideality, the technical mastery that built the material structures of the recording studio. From the perspective of the studio in Jamaica, recording reggae then amounted to not only "documenting" the formulas used to successfully produce prior popular musical forms, especially those emanating from the US, but recording also took on the function, and indeed the materiality, of the sound system audience whom it imaginatively and symbolically introjected and projected into every recording session. Veal emphasizes the influence of the sound system on Tubby's mixing, stating: "The sound system context in turn influenced King Tubby's studio work: after witnessing the crowd's response in the dancehall, he would then elaborate upon

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<sup>359</sup> See Fred Moten. "Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia." *Hambone*, Vol. 19 Fall, 2009, pp. 110-133.

these effects in the laboratory setting of his studio, and eventually use them to craft records.”<sup>360</sup>

Tubby eventually built his own home studio in the Waterhouse district in Kingston to accommodate his remixes and production, an event which Veal refers to as “*the pivotal moment in the development of dub music.*”<sup>361</sup> Tubby furnished his studio with high-end audio equipment that rivaled many facilities found in Jamaica, the US and Europe; most notable was his purchase of a Music Centers Inc. (MCI) four track recording console. The extent to which Tubby’s materials—both the popular song structures he remixed and the commercial equipment he used—were steeped in a legacy of the generic and the popular cannot be overstated. What was so distinct about Tubby’s artistry was the way in which his music, his art, continually reimagined and refashioned the structural qualities and terms of recognition that fashioned that generic or popular subject. The general, the familiar, the popular were indeed remixed. Nowhere does the remix more subtly occur than in the way Tubby reimagined the tools, the materials, of the recording studio. Tubby’s intentional dropping and banging of his spring reverb unit—a unit which is generally used to imbue sounds with the resonant spatial characteristics of different physical environments—is emblematic of his profound experimentation with studio materials. By actually physically knocking the chassis of the spring reverb unit, Tubby (further) dislodged the resonant spring unit within the device to produce a loud, reverberant, clangorous, and almost percussive effect that imbued his mixes with a dark timbral

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<sup>360</sup> Veal, 110.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid*, 116, italics in original.

quality. This clangorous sound inhered to the very mechanism. The vulnerability of this spring reverb unit, for traditional studio engineers, lay in the unit's oversensitivity to external vibrations from the studio, which caused the actual spring within the chassis to vibrate producing a flat metallic hum. No traditional studio engineers would want such an effect, because ideally the reverb unit's capacity to simulate varying spatial environments allows the listener to forget the invisible hand of the studio/engineer and the real studio context in which it is utilized. Tubby however, appropriated this power of the reverb unit and actually created what was a distinctly studio produced sound—quite literally bringing the transformed materiality of the studio into his work. Tubby's use of the test tone, which inaugurates so many of his dubs, invokes a similarly profound gesture. The test tone is a “pure tone” generated by mixing consoles (and now more commonly Digital Audio Workstation software) which allows mixers and engineers to calibrate their equipment in terms of a wide set of audible characteristic from general signal path flow, to stereo imaging accuracy, to the trueness of frequency range representations in studio monitors, to (in a digital context) sample bit rate and latency. All of these calibrations are of course vested with the goal of balancing the treatment of the studio and equipment and effectively perfecting the sound that can be produced. In other words, the test tone is a sound distinct to and perhaps only heard within the context of the studio by the engineer; its knell sounds and resounds the ideality of the studio and the perfection of sound therein. On works like “Murderous Dub” we can hear the test tone rolled and arpeggiated within the swell of the drum and bass. The rhythmization of the test

tone is a product of Tubby running the sound through a delay unit—along with the drums—which, Tubby has set to roughly double the tempo of the “original” backing percussion. Processing the drums and the test tone through a delay produces a rich and even textural polyrhythm that is layered against the more distinct percussive pattern. Though its methods would differ somewhat, the genre of music that would develop in the United Kingdom in the early 1990’s, “drum and bass,” is believed to have obtained its percussive foundation from Tubby’s layering and polyrhythmic effects.<sup>362</sup>

Given its immediate sonic complexity and its profound musical legacy, it is easy to overlook the subtle brilliance of Tubby’s, and other foundational dub producer’s, gestures of sound processing and mixing with regards to dismantling and reconfiguring the ideality and materiality of the studio space. Veal makes brief reference to this phenomenon when speaking of Lee “Scratch” Perry’s exploration of the atmospheric potentials of dub: “Clearly, he [Perry] was beginning to embrace the recording studio’s potential as a creative and not merely documentary tool.” I would add to Veal’s point here and suggest that this slippage between the documentary and the “creative,” or fantastical—which is more dynamic than a strict shift—is precisely how dub dismantled the ideality and materiality of the studio space. Moreover, the formalization of this dematerialization and rematerialization of the studio is one of dub’s most profound contributions to a sonic and, as we see in the work of Hassan Khan in particular, larger aesthetic of experimentalism. Popular music’s harmonic

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<sup>362</sup> Veal, 225.

structure and its formal assertion of the voice were not just a “natural” formal development of the music, but equally, a presumption of mass popular music’s potential to document and (re)produce the tastes, sensibilities, and indeed subjectivity of its listenership through the equipment of the studio space. Hassan Khan’s work brings this gestural legacy of dub to the fore and further realizes its political implications through sound, text and image.

The vested interests of many contemporary dub fans and communities outside of Jamaica seem to lie in the symbolic reconstitution of what is deemed to be dub’s essential “Jamaicaness”: the Rastafarian spirituality, the reggae clothing aesthetics, and the affected Jamaican accent. This propensity for moments of “cultural replay”<sup>363</sup> all but resound Chude-Sokei’s point that “dub is [long] dead in Jamaica.”<sup>364</sup> The consecration of dub to nostalgic ritual seems all but to ensure this death as if, amidst its appropriative swell, to foretell the “death-bound” nature of the black subjects that it feigns to recognize.<sup>365</sup> Dub never seemed caught up in appeals for its own symbolic recognition on such terms—never quite so interested in such pallid rehearsals of its life and death. The experimentalism of dub producers does not sound as if completely ruled by a nostalgia for the pop materials that they (at least partially) sampled, nor symbolically for the African “homeland” nor the black American hinterland that in

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<sup>363</sup> See Tracy McMullen’s “Identity for Sale: Glenn Miller, Wynton Marsalis, and Cultural Replay in Music” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*. Ed. Nichole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008 pp. 129-156.

<sup>364</sup> Chude-Sokei, 55.

<sup>365</sup> Abdul R. JanMohamed. *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

varying degrees influenced them—though of course these traces are present.<sup>366</sup> Rather dub’s aesthetic and political brilliance lie in its dynamic attempts to produce its own terrain, its own territories of sonic recognition, what Veal generically refers to as “soundscapes.” This is not to suggest that dub has naively strived towards an aesthetic *tabula rasa*; a modernist break akin to European art music’s narration of itself, but rather it is as late reggae legend Mikey Dread puts it: “They just keep reinventing the song. That’s what I feel dub does—it reinvents itself.”<sup>367</sup> Dub’s capacity to produce new aesthetic forms goes hand in hand with its potential to produce new social publics. As I have discussed earlier, dub producers were not strictly content to merely reproduce the familiar harmonic structures of the popular song and by extension reify its mode and means of production; dub was able to produce and realize a new mode, a new force, of subjection beyond the pale of novel familiarity—somewhere/when the version displaced the “original.” The volatilization of memory, that point where the echo returns as the force of subjection. “Echoes,” Chude-Sokei proclaims:

Messages distorted, yet vaguely familiar. Memory. Melody, that technique of artistic and cultural consistency—mathematically precise, necessarily predictable—becomes subject to the ‘ground bass’ and is never allowed fully to satisfy your remembering; for when the melody returns it is either transformed yet the same or painfully joyous like a homecoming. All of this primarily by way of echo and reverb.”<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>366</sup>Veal, 60, cites Colin A. Palmer’s study “Identity, Race, and Black Power in Independent Jamaica” to point out that attitudes towards Afrocentrism have always been ambivalent in Jamaica and in Jamaican music and much less unabashedly romantic than American Afrocentrisms. There are many reasons for this including Jamaica’s unique slave past, which Veal briefly discusses, as well as the African-American monopolies on Afrocentrism and of course Jamaica’s unique relationship to Africa. Yet it suffices to say that Afrocentric nostalgia has been less central to the aesthetic imaginary of dub in particular despite its close links to Rastafarianism.

<sup>367</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>368</sup>Chude-Sokei, 57.



What might it mean then to think of dub's sonic legacy as not strictly the reappearance of its sonic and symbolic form, but the continuance of its legacy of dynamic musical thought?

***Tabla Dubbs and the Sonic/Visual Echoic:***

Egyptian artist Hassan Khan's work realizes the artistic and political complexity of dub anew with a profound subtlety. Equally Khan understands the sophistication of Egyptian popular *Shaa'bil* شعبي cultural forms of music, which his work (re)produces with a similar complexity and dynamism. If, as Chude-Sokei points out, dub's echoic sound resonates and reverberates such that meaning lies "everywhere and, yet, nowhere" this might suggest that dub's (political) public, like its aesthetic form is perpetually realized anew as it actively produces new frontiers and contexts. Khan's work recognizes and refashions this spatial tenant of dub through his invocation of multiple post-colonial contexts and the subtle portrayals of fantastical local realities in complex non-reductive terms.

In the project description for *Tabla Dubb no. 9*, Khan emphasizes his attempt to create something "beyond the artist intentions," which gestures partially towards a Cagelan aesthetic (discussed in the previous chapter) concerned with engaging

structure and form beyond the artist's intentionality or will.<sup>369</sup> Though, as I have discussed in terms of dub and black experimental improvisatory music, the elision of intention is something that inheres to many black diasporic forms.<sup>370</sup> Khan's layering of these influences, these forces, does not simply reduce them to "pure" nominal reference. Khan clarifies this while comparing two other pieces, one of which I will discuss shortly, a programmed sonic environment *Dom Tak Tak Dom Tak* (2005), and a series of thematic cartoon images entitled *Stuffed Pig Follies* (2007):

So the figure [of the pig in *Stuffed Pig Follies*] is not lifted out of popular culture it's kind of discovered within my own horizon so it's used like anything else I might use, so I think that is a fine line. I think I would refer to another artist, I would refer to Sun Ra in this context although very different. For example Sun Ra, I imagine or I think that this is how he approached things. I don't imagine that he was ever consciously seeing himself as taking something and using it, rather than [seeing] that it was his to be used and I think there is a similarity [to my work] in that maybe.<sup>371</sup>

Khan then does not rely on abstract self-promulgation or rules from the "outside," but rather *Tabla Dubb* and much of Khan's work, is inherently limited through the centrality of the popular *Shaa'bi*/شعبي cultural forms and materials that it engages and which Khan, in varying ways, inherited.<sup>372</sup> The Arabic/Egyptian instrument, the *tabla*

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<sup>369</sup> Khan briefly lists Cage more generally as an artistic influence in an interview I conducted with him in Cairo in 2010. Hassan Khan. Personal Interview. August, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010 in Cairo, Egypt.

<sup>370</sup> Chude-Sokei raises a similar point when he discusses that in the black diaspora, "meaning accrue to a sound or a symbol or a person completely independent of the original intention." Chude-Sokei, 57.

<sup>371</sup> Khan, August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010. . Personal Interview.

<sup>372</sup> The term *Shaa'bi*/شعبي, as I have mentioned does not imply as it does often in English popular as in mass produced or part of mass culture—though sometimes it can partially include this. Rather the term *Shaa'bi*/شعبي relates more to a kind of urban "culture of the people", for example in Cairo there are *مناطق شعبية*/*Minaatiq Shaa'biya*, meaning neighborhoods of the people. *Shaa'bi* or *Shaa'biya* are more closely aligned with the English terms, as they're used for example in the US and the UK

drum, for instance, intrinsically refers to its respective culture, genres and idioms all the while driving the percussive framework of *Tabla Dubb* in nonconventional directions. Similarly, Khan's engagement with an actual genre, a form, and a culture in dub, grapples with the very terms of recognition and abjection that make dub sound. Khan's attention to "the direct and immediate translation of its sources," as he puts it, invokes a sampling dub aesthetic in which the conscious engagement with the familiar, the repeated, the routinized, the quotidian, actually functions as the gateway to the new. What might then only appear as the content of *Tabla Dubb no.9*, the recitation of *البردة* *El Borda* (a praise poem for the Prophet Mohammed recited on his birthday to signify the passing of his mantle), engages the public coherence of the forms of Arabic popular music and popular instantiations of Islam within Cairo.<sup>373</sup>

The first postcolonial generations of scholars on Arabic music in trying to extract a "pure" "Arabness" from the successive orders of Ottoman and European colonialism, might claim Khan's piece is trying to interpolate, or worse mimetically reproduce, the experience of "the Arab listener" or "the Egyptian listener."<sup>374</sup> For much of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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(however differently), "working class culture." To be clear this, like all translations, is an imperfect one, but hopefully it provides some context for the reader as this term becomes so central to Hassan's work.

<sup>373</sup> See Anna Madoeuf's essay "Feasts: Panoramas in Town—the Spaces and Times of the Moulids of Cairo," in *Urban Africa: Changing Contours of Survival in the City*. Eds. AbdouMaliq Simone and Abdelghani Abouhani. London, England: Zed Books, 2005, pp. 68-96. *Shaa'bi* music has an important though complicated relationship to popular instantiations of Islam. Madoeuf's article provides some very helpful background for understanding the context of *Shaa'bi* emergence.

<sup>374</sup> Here I am thinking of the important though at times reductively ethnocentrically work done on Arabic music and poetics such as Adonis' *Arabic Poetics*. Paris, France: College du France, May 1984. ١٩٨٤. الكوليج دور فرانس، باريس، فرنسا: أيار: الكوليج دور فرانس، ١٩٨٤. and perhaps most emblematic of this ethnocentrism is Habib Hassan Touma's *The Music of the Arabs*. Trans. Lauri Schwartz. Portland, OR : Amadeus Press, 1996. The position that posits a kind of essential "Arabness" pervades Yusuf Shawqi's *Ibn Al-Munajjim's Essay on Music and The Melodic Ciphers of Kitaab Al-Aghani رسالة ابن (المنجم في الموسيقى: كشف رموز كتاب الاغاني)*. Cairo, Egypt: Ministry of Culture Centre for Editing and Publishing Arabic Manuscripts, 1976.

century demands for “authentically Egyptian” art have been framed in terms of whether the artist’s adopts the symbolic dimensions of a designated “Egyptian culture,” namely images of the Pharaonic, the pastoral Upper Egypt (*Sa’idi*), Islamic or Coptic iconography, and the urban working class popular or *Shaa’bi* cultures.<sup>375</sup> These attempts to flatten out difference across the Arab and Muslim Worlds in general and Egypt in particular, were dominant in the critical writings of scholars such as غالي شكري/Ghali Shukri in Lebanon, or طه حسين/Taha Hussein and توفيق الحكيم/Tawfiq El-Hakim as far back as the 1920’s, however this attitude still pervades “official” state formations of art in Egypt as well.<sup>376</sup> As Omnia El-Shakry and Jessica Winegar point out in their respective works, Cairo’s contemporary neoliberal art landscape of private and state funded art often privilege works that represent a perceived authentic (عصيلي) Egyptian aesthetic or a global artistic modernist “contemporary” aesthetic (معصري) that presumably appeals to a Western global art world.<sup>377</sup> However, Khan does not attempt to recreate the “experience” of Cairo or its attendant subject within this binary, as El-Shakry points out. Perhaps this is because

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<sup>375</sup> Jessica Winegar provides a more extensive discussion of the components of Egyptian artistic authenticity in her book *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, see especially Chapter 2.

<sup>376</sup> See غالي شكري. *التراث والثورة*. بيروت, لبنان: دار الطليعت للطباعة و بيروت, 1973. Ghali Shukri. *The Turaath [Literary Tradition] and Revolution*. Beirut, Lebanon: the Printing and Publishing House of Lebanon, 1973 and 1923. طه حسين. *في الشعر الجاهلي*. القاهرة, مصر: بكلية الآداب بالجامعة المصرية, 1923 and finally توفيق الحكيم. *عودلة الوعي*. القاهرة, مصر: دار للطباعة, 1972. Tawfiq El-Hakim. *The Return of the Spirit* Cairo, Egypt: the Publishing House of Egypt, 1972.

<sup>377</sup> See Omnia El-Shakry’s article on Hassan Khan, “The Hidden Location: Art and Politics in the Work of Hassan Khan.” *Third Text Asia*. No. 2, Spring 2009. For a treatment of Egypt’s art scene see El-Shakry’s “Artistic Sovereignty in the Shadow of Post-Socialism: Egypt’s 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Youth Salon.” *e-flux journal*. No. 7, June-August 2009 and Jessica Winegar’s extensive ethnography of Cairo’s contemporary art scene, *Creative Reckonings: the Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.

Khan's work, while relying closely on the materials that he has inherited in varying ways as referents, ideas, images, sounds, is not consumed by a mimetic aesthetic either in the interest of parody, pastiche, irony, celebration, homage or attribution. Rather Khan is dedicated to the pursuit of a new language of form, as he frequently puts it. Khan elaborates in a problem-space wherein we might think of not only his own work, but also how we might conceive of a past, present and future in black music. "Maybe what I'm trying to do is not necessarily trying to create a more visual or formal language, but rather what I am trying to do is produce a relationship between myself and the material that is not determined by the history of any form, although the material itself is historical."<sup>378</sup>

Khan further explores the tension between the production of form and the exteriority of its historicization in the collection of 15 tracks collected under the album title *Tabla Dubb* (2007).<sup>379</sup> In this collection of tracks (which includes *Tabla Dubb no. 9*) Khan engages an echoic dimension of the visual and the sonic that Louis Chude-Sokei and Michael E. Veal have identified as central to the aesthetics of dub music. To be sure Khan's tracks are in no way simply imitative (taqlidi/تقليدي or naqli/نقلي)<sup>380</sup>—they do not ascribe to the mode of ritualistic rehearsal and replay that

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<sup>378</sup> Interview conducted with author September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Istanbul, Turkey.

<sup>379</sup> Hassan Khan. *Tabla Dubb*. 100 Copies Label, 2007.

<sup>380</sup> These are terms which in a certain art context in Cairo—one that Khan does and does not occupy—invokes to address the anxiety of influence of "foreign" sources, usually defined as "Western" forces on Egyptian art.

has characterized a significant portion of dub's impact throughout the world.<sup>381</sup> Jessica Winegar and dozens of artists in Egypt have argued against the presumed essentialism of art that is perceived as “merely imitative” of the West (or the rest). Of course, some Egyptian artists, some of whom I spoke with in Cairo, were also acknowledging of the reality that some artists do try to imitate Western sources in the interest of appearing and appealing intelligibly to a global Western art world that can further their careers. However, I submit that Khan's engagement with a distinctly black post-colonial musical form such as dub, adds a further complexity to not only the idea of the “the West” but also the formal recognition of “mimicry.” *Tabla Dubb* does not reify a “pure” ethnocentrism of a Euro-American Cagayan experimentalism, nor of the blackness or (specifically) Jamaicaness of dub, nor the Arabness or Arabo-Islamicness of *El Borda* (البردة). Despite the classification of these materials, sounds and cultures in my analysis, Khan does not allow these cultures to be rendered in purely symbolic or categorical terms which would reify their perceived purity through novelty. Importantly then, Khan's work does not rely on a regressive essentialism, one which often explicitly founds musical and art projects that often claim to go beyond such an essentialism under the banner of “fusion.” In an interview I conducted with Khan in 2010 in Cairo, Khan quipped, “I am not interested in synthesis or fusion—which is a dirtier word.” In discussing several of his works, including *الوحدة الكبيرة* (*The Big One* 2009) Khan elaborated:

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<sup>381</sup> Both Chude-Sokei and Veal make brief reference to dub's almost ritualistic reconstitution outside of Jamaica in other parts of the world, I have also mentioned this above.

Because I am not interested in the Shaa'bi/شعبي [or *El Borda*] reference as some kind of validation, or street cred or some kind of funkiness. That's fusion; I am not trying to just export some hip sounds or some exotic sounds that's not the interest. So I am using the pattern, but as the producer with my own impulses, interests and musical tendencies I am affecting that pattern and playing it. So my argument is maybe with *Dom Tak Tak* in a different manner and even *Tabla Dubb*. So in each work, in all three cases what I am actually doing is playing the musical culture itself rather than just the music.<sup>382</sup>

“Playing the musical culture itself rather than just the music,” engages both the formal and meta-formal dimensions of a musical culture as raw sonic and visual materials and hence allows for the realization of a new form that is encumbered with, but not strictly overdetermined by, the symbolic weight of these (prior) forms. Here Khan's engagement with the tension between the inheritance of the referent and the layering of aesthetic gesture subtly extends and reconfigures dub's artistic legacy.

Khan's project description from his website, written after *Tabla Dubb's* debut as a larger performance work at Strange Fruit in Beirut, Lebanon in 2002, provides even more insight here:

Using 2 CD players, an audio mixer, 2 VCRs, a video mixer, a live mike, a plethora of pedals and a live camera and projector, Khan mixes the music he has created out of the intersection between the tabla and electronica to the video loops shot and edited to accompany that music. Connecting the music to a library of video images that arise out of an imagistic engagement with the city and mixing this with directed, repeated statements transforms the performance into an invitation to ponder upon the relation the body politic holds to itself. This is an attempt at producing a cultural practice that is popular, exciting, challenging, liberating, questioning and dangerous.

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<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*

*Tabla Dubb* is an attempt at fashioning a public media that uses a foundational element in popular Egyptian musical culture (the tabla), within the context of a performance based on three media: music, video, and the direct statement, to create a new cultural practice where the politic of shared co-habitation in a city where power is contested on a daily basis is investigated in a concise and concentrated form. Refusing to engage in the reductionist discussions around the “traditional and contemporary” imposed by the Orientalizing discourses of the dominant institution, *Tabla Dubb* attempts to sidestep the insecurities of having to constantly define your identity that is continuously promoted by official culture.

*Tabla Dubb* has already been performed at “Strange Fruit” in Beirut, a cinema transformed into a club and is currently scheduled for several performances on the streets of Cairo as well as youth centers this summer and in various international festivals next year. *Tabla Dubb* should be performed in public spaces.<sup>383</sup>

Khan’s refusal to “engage in the reductionist discussions around the “traditional and contemporary” imposed by the Orientalizing discourses of the dominant institution,” resonates with the intellectual considerations of many contemporary Egyptian artists within Khan’s generation. Artists like Basam Magdy, (the late) Amal Kanawy, Sherif El-Azma, Maha Maamoun, and Iman Issa (to name only a few), who, through brilliant formal explorations, have dismantled the authenticity (*asala*/الاصالة) claims of previous generations that sought to found the aesthetic ideal of Egyptian art on the “Orientalized notion of the “real Egypt” in relation to a hermetic ideal of “the West.”<sup>384</sup> Khan’s work however does not merely respond to the anxiety brought on by

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<sup>383</sup> <http://www.hassankhan.com/tabla-dubb>

<sup>384</sup> Winegar, 118. It is perhaps worth noting that Winegar produces a kind of broad category or placeholder in which to slot, perhaps the entirety, of Egypt’s contemporary artists, in “Modern/Postmodern.” Winegar discusses this generation largely in terms of its institutionalized rejection of the “*asala*” generation of artists. Unlike the artists Winegar discusses and the artists I have mentioned above, Khan did not attend art school in Egypt nor elsewhere. Rather Khan’s artists and



the representative demands for symbolic authenticity, waged both by Egypt's official state art institutions and by the fetishistic and exoticist desires of Western gallerists in Egypt and abroad. Rather Khan subtly invokes this tension as the material fodder for the production of new forms; Khan's aesthetic gestures then rematerialize and hence destabilize that which appears to be discrete, absolute and familiar (in memory).

In his 2005 "programmed space" *Dom Tak Tak Dom Tak*, Khan places a collection of speakers in a custom built room; in the corner of the room lies a visible yet visually subdued set of electronics running a program which synchronizes the lights to the music; every musical track corresponds to a different light setting. Abruptly, the timer ticks audibly, ominously, for exactly 30 ticks, leading into 30 seconds of white light after which a sudden explosion of Egyptian *Shaa'bi*/شعبي music blears forth from the speakers. A text, which lines the wall of the SALT gallery in Istanbul in 2012, offers the viewer/listener insight into the music's composition within a recording studio context, using practicing Egyptian *Shaa'bi*/شعبي musicians, but this information does nothing to prepare the viewer/listener for the ecstatic experience of the piece. While the automated controls of *Dom Tak* appear to respond to our presence the anthropomorphic speakers spraying forth *Shaa'bi* music (produced by Khan) seem to be playing at us with a kind of indifference that forces us to develop an organic relationship with them; that is if we ever hope to be recognized by them. The bewildering process of identification that the viewer/listener

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conceptual training were gained through his own experimentation and his intense intellectualization in college and graduate school at the American University in Cairo, where he obtained a Masters in Comparative Literature in 1995s. Hence his relationship to the previous generation of Egyptian artists differs rather interestingly.

experiences in *Dom Tak* is perhaps a brilliant translation by Khan of the improvisatory and automated process through which the soundscape of *Dom Tak* came to be.

The music of *Dom Tak* was produced by Khan inviting practicing *Shaa'bi* musicians to a recording studio where they were asked to record in isolation from one another. Khan provided them with only a set of predetermined beats and a mode in which to play; however the musicians were sonically blindfolded from one another and asked to “play what immediately comes to mind—without listening to what the other musicians [in the final recorded ensemble] had played.” *Shaa'bi* music, while a form with at least partial folk roots in rural Egypt, has primarily been an urban studio-based musical form. Like the forms of Arabic art music and Classical Arabic music with which it shares some significant formal continuities, *Shaa'bi* music relies on the improvisation of *Maqaam*/مقامات or “scales” in order to derive harmonic progression. However, this improvisatory process, not unlike jazz improvisation, is created from the at least partial recognition between musicians as to what the other is playing.<sup>385</sup> In fact, the title of the piece, *Dom Tak Tak Dom Tak* refers to the percussive stroke pattern (the dom or *dum* indicating a strike in the center of the drum skin and the Tak

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<sup>385</sup> For a more elaborate description of the formal influences of *Shaa'bi* music, such as Islamic *Mawaal*/موال and *muwashshah*/موششاح or the legacy of instrumentation between these music's and *Shaa'bi*, see Habib Hassan Touma's *The Music of the Arabs*. Trans. Lauri Schwartz. Portland, OR : Amadeus Press, 1996 and Yusuf Shawqi's *Ibn Al-Munajjim's Essay on Music and The Melodic Ciphers of Kitaab Al-Aghani* (رسالة ابن المنجم في الموسيقى: كشف رموز كتاب الاغاني). Cairo, Egypt: Ministry of Culture Centre for Editing and Publishing Arabic Manuscripts, 1976.

or outer stroke indicating a stroke on the outer skin or rim of the drum) of the *wazn*/وزن or rhythmical structure *dawr Hindi*/دور هندي common to *Shaa'bi* music.<sup>386</sup>



“Dom Tak Tak Dom Tak” (Photo taken by the author and reproduced with permission of the artist, SALT Gallery Istanbul, Turkey September 2012).

Rather than reifying the authenticity of this process Khan interjects a new component by sonically blindfolding the musicians to their colleagues’ musical choices and creations. Perhaps even more profoundly this gesture disrupts the documentary ethos of the studio space itself as a tool for the unmediated capture of “authentic” Egyptian culture.<sup>387</sup> Yet, Khan does not invoke this gesture for pure novelty, but rather it is proposed as a genuine attempt to think in sophisticated ways about a highly sophisticated popular cultural form. Khan adds that in *Dom Tak* it is

<sup>386</sup>For more on the different *wazn*/وزان see Habib Hassan Touma’s *The Music of the Arabs*. Trans. Lauri Schwartz. Portland, OR : Amadeus Press, 1996.

<sup>387</sup> See Louise Meintjes. *Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

“as if Shaa’bi music has gone to a psychoanalytical session and I was witnessing all of its neurosis; a little nervous breakdown: what it wants, what it hates and what it loves and what it’s afraid of was kind of speaking to me.”<sup>388</sup> The (psycho)analysis of *Shaa’bi* music carried out through *Dom Tak* not only upsets the “loud, insistent and dumb” aesthetic which the music cultivates (to quote Khan) through its raucous form of public address, but implicitly *Dom Tak*’s analytical dimensions unsettle the fine art context of Western art galleries in which the piece is received.<sup>389</sup>

Presenting *Shaa’bi* music within the context of fine art galleries is not a reductive reification of some Egyptian authenticity nor a novel exoticism, but rather a gesture which serves to partially displace that museums’ and galleries’ documentary capacity to collect and display their dark Others. Khan muses:

The ways it’s presented in this space with the lights changing, it’s basically for me a list, it’s as if I am turning a list into a space, that is why these lights, which come at different moments that is why they have to be so precise, so absolutely synchronized and automatic. The moment you come in the room and the lights go on and [the music ends] then the lights go off. That’s actually also the moment when the audience feels the rupture in their experience of the piece as something they’re consuming and their experience of the piece outside that.<sup>390</sup>

The visual sparseness of *Dom Tak* is anchored by an affect and effect of technological mastery instilled in the automation of the speakers and the collection of electronic controls in the corner. Their minimalist presentation and their affect of indifference, gesture towards a more contemporary mode of sound instillation in fine

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<sup>388</sup> Interview conducted with author September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Istanbul, Turkey.

<sup>389</sup> Khan has written one of the more interesting pieces on Egyptian *Shaa’bi* music for *Bidoun*. See Hassan Khan. “Loud, Insistent and Dumb.” *Bidoun*, no. 11 “Failure” Winter 2007 pp. 82-83.

<sup>390</sup> Khan, 2012.

art gallery contexts; pieces like Tim Hawkinson's "My Favorite Things" or David Galbrath's "Ryoanji 2" (a reference to John Cage's "Ryoanji") for example. Khan adds, "I could have easily hidden the equipment, but I wanted to refer to both the labor and the dissemination, the presence of the speakers—the place is very clean and formal until you come to that table that has amps and stuff, which is what powers it. I am not putting that there just to be kind of messy, but to put the engine forth."<sup>391</sup>

Khan's attention to the aesthetic labor and its dissemination is brilliantly metaphorized in the calculated formation of the speakers. The tweeters, representing the higher frequency range (the brighter harmonics of the tabla and the *Kawala*/كوالا flute) are placed in a higher position. Below the tweeter is the woofer, which contains the middle frequency range and which, in this case, contains the most expansive representation of instruments. Finally, sitting on the floor the subwoofer representing the lower frequency ranges transmits the body of the tabla, the bass and the sub-bass. The placement of the speakers not only "mirrors the experience of being in a mastering studio where you're listening for the details," but it also establishes an uncanny relationship between the irreconcilably commodified musicians' labor as it is disseminated in the gallery space.<sup>392</sup> The speakers begin to resemble an anthropomorphized version of the musicians—their uncanny echoic, dubbed "cyborg" double, who haunts every refrain that sounds their present-absence.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>393</sup> See Donna Haraway's classic work "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1991 pp. 149-181. Also see Alexander Weheliye's essay "Feenin." Post-Human Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music." *Social Text*, 71 Vol. 20 No. 2 Summer 2002, 21-47.

The traces of dub's echoic legacy linger; not only in the strained symbolic resemblance of Jamaican sound systems to Khan's more minimalist gallery speaker arrangement, but even more subtly and profoundly in Khan's visual and sonic attempts to invert the function (and functionalism) of the gallery space to document and display exotic Otherness. The documentary drive of the museum/gallery is alienated and overcome by *Dom Tak*, what prevails and all that remains is an echo, a reverberation of that space's time and sound that can be heard in the new sound and the new temporality, which Khan has imposed on the space and on the viewer/listener through the piece.

The bedrock of Frantz Fanon's thought always grappled with the insurmountable paradox of blackness: what do you do when the sonic and visual force of blackness always happens *to* you, precisely because you have no access to the structures of that happening? What do you do when you are merely a reaction, a reification (a fulfillment) of an Other's already determined memorial wish: a riff, a melodic resolution, a pop tune? Responses become limited, because the form of response is so polluted as a rejection and hence an introjection of what it hopes to destroy. Movements into the recalcitrance of authenticity, while at times powerful, even "strategic," seem at least partially hollowed by the very way in which they hollow out form into formula. Khan's is deeply aware of this predicament, in fact Khan's performance piece "*READ FANON YOU FUCKING BASTARD*" (2003-ongoing on various mediums) explicitly engages the anti-colonial legacy of Frantz Fanon in order to call attention to and reject the art world's fetishistic engagement

with his work and its (still) colonial occupation with its collectable “cultural” Other. This statement, which Khan offers to exoticist interlocutors, is not strictly reaction, but like Dom Tak strives towards a form of automation that imagines and forcibly attempts to produce the contours of a new subject.

### ***Blind Ambition: Dubbing with the “Acoustic Mirror”***

Finally, Khan’s theorizes this new dub and dubbed subjectivity even more intricately within the context of his film *Blind Ambition* (2012). *Blind Ambition/ الطموح الاعمي* consists of roughly 10 artfully composed black and white vignettes that take place throughout downtown Cairo. The film, a long-short or short-feature (running about 46 minutes), was shot entirely on Khan’s Samsung Galaxy phone. Khan later recorded and dubbed the characters’ scripted dialogue into the soundtrack of the film effectively removing any of the presumed ambient audio that would otherwise be present. This calculated gesture by Khan dramatically centers the dialogue or “chatter” of the film’s characters within intimate yet intentionally generic vignettes. The rough camera movements, the extended tracking shots, the generic and even quotidian subject matter of the characters and their dialogue might tempt viewers—especially those in the Western gallery context in which the film has been shown—into receiving *Blind Ambition* as a kind of experimental documentary or at least an attempt to document. It is not. The documentary camera angles, and indeed the synthetically intimate position of the camera seek to produce a tension wherein the

visual fantasy of documentary is suspended against “an essential musicality of cinema.”<sup>394</sup> The soundtrack echoes the movement of the camera; the camera (its voice) is dubbed.

The wayward footsteps of scrambling pedestrians, the abrupt shrieking honks of taxis and the generic blare of Cairo’s city streets are all silenced. The emergence of these familiar, or at the very least, generic images, precisely through their visual generality, draws us into a mode of sentimental attachment from which we will eventually attempt to render these images of Cairo into symbols. Yet, something happens in the juxtaposition of this persistent silence against the rapid cutting of these images; the silence of the perceived sounds of these images breaks down our sentimental identification with them. Here Khan’s use of the cut is not only “montagic” as Fred Moten discusses it in Girard’s *Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould* and Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin*, as breaking up the “linear temporality that is often understood to be essential to documentation,” but more apropos, these cuts are, in a word dub.<sup>395</sup> Perhaps only for a particular viewer/listener the popular image of Cairo, and with it, the popular narratives of Cairo are shattered. Again the effect of montage arises, as Kaja Silverman describes it through Andre Bazin: “Montage transforms “something real into something imaginary;” it substitutes absence for presence.”<sup>396</sup> Yet, Khan is not attempting visually to reconstruct the common imaginary “cultural” narratives of Cairo—anthropological or

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<sup>394</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>395</sup> Moten *Qua*, 111.

<sup>396</sup> Kaja Silverman. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: the Indiana University Press, 1988, 3.



otherwise—to which one might append a politically and culturally totalizing sound/image. Through the soundtrack, *Blind Ambition* disrupts the sentimental attachment to these fantastical documentary images that have fueled the romantic cliché of the city, “Cairo, as a character”—living breathing, smelling, bright, noisy, loud, and hot. *Blind Ambition* is not questing for or trying to document the “real Cairo,” rather the film is theorizing the very audibility and subjectivity of the camera. In the service of disfiguring the very structure of the “documentary drive” Khan disfigure all the fantasies it seeks to fulfill by rendering the traditional documentary technology, the camera, as a character; a mere part of the narrative and sonic content of the film. What emerges is a new fantasy from the ashes of documentary’s fetishistic drives.

The camera’s drive to document, and even more to capture, realizes and is realized by the intricate set of cultural references that pervade the subtly constructed visual narratives Khan has laid out. In *Blind Ambition* seriality—that which usually inheres to the documentary drive of film—is not a provision, because every movement of the camera is a cut anticipating its sonic overdubbing. Khan’s decision to dub the character’s dialogue and place that against a backdrop of scripted gestures and actions, portrayed by the actors, antagonizes the viewer/listener’s attempts to glean programmatic cultural meanings from the camera and its movements. By dubbing and doubling the scripted gestures of the characters in and through the soundtrack, Khan troubles the inherited forms of social inscription which are so often reified through captured forms of social performance. Richard Iton’s concerns then

about the performative predicament of blackness are dubbed and doubled through Khan's tightly composed cellphone opus:

Considering as well the proliferation of handheld and surveillance video cameras, camera phones, and awareness of these new technologies, one can suggest that the visual surplus would likely also produce a heightened performative sensibility—in other words, the internalization of the expectation that one is always potentially being watched. A related urge would be the conscious effort to always give one's best performance and encourage others to do the same, and indeed to perform even when one is not sure of one's audience (or whether there in fact is an audience).

Iton's insights about the technological regimes of visibility and their institutionalization of difference are prescient. What emerges even more complexly is the formalization (aestheticization) of the surplus of this performance, this anxiety of the visual, and specifically the documentary. Khan not only thinks the formal and aesthetic nature of this visual performance and its surplus of anxiety, but he does so through sound. Specifically, *Blind Ambition* dubs the camera by engaging the visual effect of chatter.

The first sustained vignette of *Blind Ambition* centers on a business meeting in a café between four professionals. The class tensions that pervade the interactions between the three younger professionals: Mowafy, Niveen, Amr and their older, less-educated yet more senior colleague—the proprietor of the advertising agency where they all work—Said, are wrought with precise care. The content of the character's gestures and their dialogue convey these subtle local realities of class, caste, education, and generation. Yet even the recognition of these nuanced cultural

references is subjected to a musical formalization through the sound, the effect and the form of the characters' dialogue; their chatter. Niveen begins telling Amr, and to a lesser extent Mowafy, how they need to approach Mahmoud—an unseen underperforming colleague—in a more generous manner when asking him for work. As Niveen begins addressing Amr, he softly begins singing in whispered tones the chorus of Chris Isaak's song "I Wanna Fall in Love." The camera cuts and then tracks into an almost extreme close up of Amr's mouth as the soundtrack layers the whispered furtive singing of Amr with Niveen and Mowafy's dialogue. The drives of the camera are thwarted and so revealed as such, as desires, fantasies, sexual fantasies. If as John Mowitt (by way of Walter Benjamin) suggests the drive toward memorization and capture of the "tune stuck in the head," is often an expression of the consumptive drive of capitalist social relations, then its utterance aloud, in humming, singing, whistling might signal an attempt to master and quell one's own internalized consumptive drives—a sonic rejection of what one has consumed, memorized, curated and personally cultivated.<sup>397</sup> Even more, the camera's drive to capture a moment may be an attempt to introject such a rejection within the viewer/listener in the audience; to make that rejection itself consumable. The temporality, the seriality, between these gestures enables the reification of this consumptive drive that is no doubt latent within the documentary drive of the camera. Khan's soundtrack then samples this moment, it samples this structure of expectation and desire and dubs it; not unlike Tubby's, Thompson's, Perry's, Pablo's dubbing of

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<sup>397</sup> See John Mowitt. "Tune Stuck in the Head." *Parallax* vol. 12, no. 4, 2006, pp. 12-25.

the popular song structure—their dubbing of the structure of memory. In this moment we encounter what Fred Moten attributes to the visual work of montage; that is “the strange attraction and estranged relation between sound and image are exceeded as an essential musicality of cinema becomes clear. That musicality is no more evident than in the high fantastical additive ruptures of seriality that documentation can neither assimilate nor control to the extent that it is driven by them.”<sup>398</sup> But if montage cuts the seriality of film, how does chatter, dubbed chatter, chatter as dub, cut the musicality of montage? What kind of music arises when the montagic is cut and dubbed by chatter?

It is not so much a “pure” “unmediated” notion of chatter that cuts montage; in *Blind Ambition* chatter would not exist without montage, nor montage without chatter. Rather the production and imposition of chatter is a new kind of temporality over and against the temporality of montage. We are given further insight into the sonic and subjective force of the dubbing of chatter in a strangely dynamic scene in which five young men argue cyclically about money. The content of their argument, specifically about how Magdy (one of the young men) is owed money by Ahmed (another one of the young men), while generically intelligible, is tinged with a subtle revelation of the banal urgency that permeates class relations in contemporary Cairo. Yet Khan casts these young men in a light, which refuses to understand their gestures, actions, and words within a reductive pathology of culture whose authoritative referentiality is obtained through the camera’s lens. Khan inserts slight audio fades

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<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*

within the dubbed dialogue that mirror the camera's movements towards and away from the subjects. The seemingly automated fades in the dialogue reflect a studio dynamic, which does not try to recreate the fictionalized embeddedness of the camera that is romanticized in documentary, but indicates the camera's intimate involvement in manufacturing these moments. Through the masterful soundtrack of this film we come to realize the formal gesture of the camera as characterized not through abstract omniscience, but through silence and its tendentious relationship to sound. Through the soundtrack of chatter Khan is indeed playing the culture of documentary that enlists the camera's capture; he is dubbing the camera and dubbing the documentary drive.

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