Timing to Descant: The Colonial Ear and Afro-Caribbean Women Writers' Decolonial Soundscapes

By

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For my family, who make me brave: Laurina, Heneith, Nat, Steven.

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INTRODUCTION: What Noise Is Not

In 2001, the Environmental Management Agency in Trinidad and Tobago released a set of press advertisements decrying the deleterious effects of noise. The ad pictured warns of the risks of noise to number of parties—babies, the elderly, at-risk patients, women, animals—parties that are positioned here as especially vulnerable and deserving of the viewers' sympathy. Of particular interest, however, is the slogan that appears on all the press ads: "Remember, music is our culture, noise is NOT!" This slogan curiously works against itself, suggesting—in spite of the ad's attempts to categorize noise simply as an environmental toxin—that noise *is* indeed a matter of culture. By pronouncing that noise is acultural, or even anti-cultural, the ad reveals that the parties and institutions targeted by these noise abatement regulations have indeed made a case for the prohibited "noise" on the grounds of culture. The distinction here between music and noise, and how and why these separations become matters of public contention, is at the heart of this work.

Timing to Descant considers the ways that governing bodies take a special interest in regulating what we hear and how we hear it. These matters of audition, which can assume the character of merely objective physiological or environmental phenomena, are always profoundly ideological: what can be heard as pleasing, harmonious, and virtuosic, or can stand as proud cultural and national emblems? Which sounds appear amateur, invoke discomfort, terror, confusion, disgust, and are shamed and disavowed in the sphere of national culture? What presuppositions of identity—racial, political, economic, sexual—are attached to various forms of sounding? The associations between kinds and categories of sound and the bodies that are assumed to have produced them yield submerged fields of discourse wherein racist and colonial notions of citizenship, respectability, and the human can be reified or, indeed, contested.

Noise can have serious effects

on babies, the elderly,
at-risk patients and pets.
It can cause migraines, irritability,
hearing loss and sleep deprivation.

Remember, music is our culture, noise is NOT!

TO FIND OUT MORE CALL THE EMA AT 628-8042 OR VISIT EMA.CO.TT

Figure 1: Trinidad and Tobago Environmental Management Agency 2001 Press Ad

Sound can matter to the state because of the ways it can reflect, or even theorize, models of social relations within a polity, announce postures toward the state, and claim or disavow versions of history.

In particular, this study examines the role of sound in tactics of colonial governance and strategies of Afro-Caribbean anticolonial resistance in the twentieth-century Anglophone Caribbean. British colonial authorities in the Anglophone Caribbean showed a marked interest in managing not just persons, labor, and space, but also the senses. Legislation guarding against "noise" and "nuisance," and public discourses about the physical and psychological effects produced by exposure to noise became a vehicle for stigmatizing Afro-Caribbean social spaces, rituals, and uses of sound reproduction and amplification technologies (like the gramophone). However, after independence, many Anglophone Afro-Caribbean women writers, such as M. NourbeSe Philip, Erna Brodber, Michelle Cliff, and Paule Marshall, forwarded visions of a decolonized soundscape by valorizing unorthodox and occult forms of hearing and listening in their literatures. This project's aim is twofold: 1) to elaborate how British colonial administrations used noise abatement legislation to cultivate a "colonial ear"—a form of respectable sound perception that criminalized the Afro-Caribbean underclass, and 2) to demonstrate how Afro-Jamaican and Trinidadian women writers posed challenges to these attempts through literature with pronounced emphases on sound and hearing.

In the tumultuous period of the 1940s-60s in the Caribbean, what Harvey Neptune called the "high age of decolonization,"[1] the fault lines between desirable and undesirable sound—music and noise, discourse and babble—were matters of consequence for Caribbean nations in

[1] Harvey Neptune, "'The Twilight Years': Caribbean Social Movements, 1940-1960," accessed April 25, 2016, http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-caribbean-40.html.
[2] Ken Pryce, *Endless Pressure: A Study of West Indian Lifestyles in Bristol* (Bristol: Bristol

the twilight of colonial rule. Caribbean peoples, activists, artists, and intellectuals who were eager to redefine and reimagine culture and modes of sovereignty (or indeed non-sovereignty) along lines that rejected the anti-blackness of colonial forms were confronted by stubbornly conservative state regimes, eager to demonstrate to the political giants of the global North that the nascent nations were stable and amenable to Western capitalism. When the late sociologist Ken Pryce claimed that reggae was "no more than the distillation of visceral images of sex, violence and protest,"[2] Jamaican economist George Beckford countered that "it [was] the historical accumulation of pressure [in the longue duree of plantation capitalism] that created the sounds of reggae."[3] What was at stake in their debate was not just a question of reggae's suitability as a national cultural form, but what mores that form advocated, what persons were attached to those mores, and thus whether the creativity and ingenuity of those persons could properly qualify as culture. Discussions like these were thus never

The act of stigmatizing music as a route for suppressing and criminalizing Afro-Caribbean subjects, however, has its roots in colonial administration. The early twentieth century saw the British colonial administration's growing concern with noise, and calls to police and regulate it. British colonial authorities devised extensive programs of soundscape regulation in order to stigmatize social, political and religious gatherings of Afro-Caribbean subjects. Noise abatement and "breach of the peace" laws in Jamaica and Trinidad in the early twentieth century prohibited a wide swath of gatherings, including Revivalist meetings (whose traditions and rituals were rooted in slave resistance), night-time wakes for the dead, and protests against the colonial administration—all deemed criminal ostensibly because they were too loud, too noisy,

[2] Ken Pryce, *Endless Pressure: A Study of West Indian Lifestyles in Bristol* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1979): 151.
[3] George Beckford, "Sounds and Pressures of Black Survival," in *The George Beckford Papers*, ed. Kari Levitt (Kingston: Canoe Press, 2000), 377.

and thus disturbing and improper. Rather than explicitly targeting persons, colonial legislation and public discourse instead indicted the noise produced by musical instruments, conversation, and laughter. Overwhelmingly, these gatherings mobilized the black underclass, and thus held the potential to be chaos-inducing; they were recast within the frame of "noise," a frame that depended on the invention of a sensitive and vulnerable collective aural sensibility that had to be protected at all costs.

In the era of decolonization, Afro-Caribbean thinkers sought not only to decolonize the political apparatus, but cultural, economic, historical, and social apparatuses as well. Poetic voice and language were critical terrains for decolonization for many Caribbean writers, linguists, performers, and cultural critics. Innovative approaches to language and form—such as the inclusion of Caribbean English and creoles and the rejection of standard poetic meters (like pentameter), among other tactics—characterized Caribbean literature in this period. Scholarly discourse about the literary innovations of this period, however, overwhelmingly attributes them to a prominent canon of male writers, including Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, Édouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire, the créolistes (Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphael Confiant), Wilson Harris, and others. While Caribbean women writers in recent years have received greater scholarly attention and are read as important ledgers of Caribbean culture, history, and life, they are less often treated as vanguards of literary innovation whose works yield important theoretical approaches that can inform our study of the period and its cultural production. The women writers I examine in this project explore the ways that colonial rule shaped the senses, and sought to reimagine modes of sounding and hearing that rejected colonial sensibilities. Beyond poetic voice, their works grappled with the possibilities of sound for

identifying enduring, yet subtle, modes of colonial governance and imagining decolonized narrative and historical modes and expressive idioms.

Afro-Caribbean women writers reclaim the soundscape—through attention to acoustics, noise, sound reproduction technologies, and musical improvisation—as a useful tool for re-valorizing Afro-Caribbean social, spiritual, linguistic, and artistic forms. These literatures foreground characters that experience sound in unusual and extreme ways. Characters like Ella in Erna Brodber's *Louisiana* encounter tape recorders that capture noises produced decades prior to the recording and are killed by hearing the incessant mutterings of the dead. Texts like M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* produce extra-diegetic textual soundscapes through form—whether abrupt silences signaled by blank pages or extreme noise represented by multilayered superimpositions of text. By producing these aural experiences, these writers disrupt colonial figurations of hearing by reclaiming noise and cacophony as subversive grammars that evade colonial discipline and alternative routes for exploring the past. Where colonial law sought to constrict the soundscape by imposing rational and proper forms of listening, Afro-Caribbean women writers championed characters whose capacities for hearing are radically expanded. My study examines a wide range of texts that highlight both sound's role as a tool of colonial regulation and as a route through which Afro-Caribbean women writers produce disturbances to colonial paradigms of sensation, expression, and reality.

"Noise," Non-Sense, and the Colonial Ear

The category of "noise" is an important operative category in this manuscript: it is the language of choice in colonial legal documents, correspondences, and periodicals that target Afro-Caribbean social spaces. While contemporary noise abatement legislation adopts the

language of physiological harm or environmental pollution, these laws and public discourses sought instead to restrict on the grounds of nuisance. It is important here to elaborate the joint operations of noise as hyperaudibility, or as a marker of excessive volume, and noise as a violation of the sensibilities—a sound whose very nature or source elicits confusion, repugnance, or fear.

Colonial periodicals explicitly link the two. In an issue of the *Jamaica Gleaner* published on February 28, 1934, an editorial complained of the "hideous tumult" of trumpets, gramophones, orchestras, and raucous tunes issuing from any "vicinity[ies] favoured by 'ladies of the life'," and called on the police to be endowed with the authority to put an end to the noise "when the fleet of tourists are here especially".[4] The editorial, on one hand, complains that the music issuing from venues and districts where sex laborers work at night is too loud, and thus frustrates or inhibits sleep. However, it is difficult to distinguish the editorial's disgust with the volume of the noise from its posture toward sex labor, and its concern for the tourist economy and the island's global reputation. I argue that instances like these illustrate the ways that postures toward groups of people, social activities, and spaces are cultivated in combination with sensibilities about disturbance, via volume, sound quality, or other audible properties of sound. Concern for the economic and political stature of the colony here goes hand in hand with a concern for whose activities are clearly audible and when.

In this manuscript, I posit the "colonial ear" as a way of describing how the management of processes of audition are linked with the political and ideological agendas of a colonial

[4] Extract from Gleaner, February 28, 1934, Night Noises, CSO 1B/5/77/293.

governing body.[5] In this frame, modes of hearing and sounding, technologies of sound production and reproduction (from the human body to sonic instruments like gramophones, radios, and tape recorders), forms of music, language, and speech are contested sites where colonial authorities seek to purge black subjects and their expressive modes from the zone of culture. Instead, they are cast as disturbances or forces of depreciation that threaten the integrity and character of the nation. The colonial ear operates at the juncture of the physical experience of hearing and the ideological constructs that inform how we distinguish pleasurable sound from unsavory noise. As such, the colonial ear links sensory experience with notions of citizenship and respectability. It throws into relief the relationship between what one hears and how one is trained to hear it.

I adopt a critical posture toward legal and public discourses that decry "noise" or other forms of aural disturbance. In the Caribbean, regulations of Afro-Caribbean music, communicative modes, and social spaces have a long history, spanning back to eighteenth-century colonial bans of the drum. The historical scope of my dissertation commences, however, in the early twentieth century, only decades before independence across the Anglophone Caribbean. Two key primary sources that I consult—including a colonial secretary's office correspondence and *Gleaner* editorial circulated in 1934, both decrying the "night noise" disturbances—illustrate a growing concern with noise and increased efforts to manage it legislatively. These discourses have an afterlife in the postcolonial Caribbean—in the past decade, calls for government regulation of the noisiness of Caribbean soundscapes on islands

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[5] While my study focuses primarily on Caribbean literature and colonial policy, I view the term "colonial" as a designation that does not exclusively apply to external colonies; "internal" or "domestic" colonies, the moniker Robert Allen coined to describe African-Americans in the U.S., might also productively be considered within this frame. For more, see Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

like Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados (the home islands of the writers I examine) have appeared in major periodicals—exemplifying its ongoing salience as a matter of national, and indeed regional, contention.[6] The venues that are currently the overwhelming targets of these contemporary discourses—spaces of Afro-Caribbean social and religious gatherings such as dancehalls and churches—were the very same target zones of colonial legislation. My project explores the function of "noise" as a persistent analytic that acts as an enduring stronghold of colonial anti-black thought.

In composer and writer R. Murray Schafer's landmark text, *The Soundscape: Our Environment and the Tuning of the World*, he bemoans the advent of a global crisis of noise pollution, warning:

> These new sounds, which differ in quality and intensity from those of the past, have alerted many researchers to the dangers of an indiscriminate and imperialistic spread of more and larger sounds into every corner of man's life. Noise pollution is now a world problem. It would seem that the world soundscape has reached an apex of vulgarity in our time, and many experts have predicted

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[6] For example, see Mark Harris, "Clamp Down on Noise Nuisance," *Gleaner*, November 13, 2012, accessed April 25, 2016, http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20121113/cleisure/cleisure4.html. Also see, Melissa Doughty, "Stronger noise pollution laws needed—EMA head," *Guardian*, January 5, 2013, accessed April 25, 2016, http://www.guardian.co.tt/news/2013-01-05/stronger-noise-pollution-laws-needed%E2%80%94ema-head; and Shadia Simpson, "Deafening truth of noise pollution," *Nationnews*, January 11, 2013, accessed April 25, 2016, http://www.nationnews.com/nationnews/news/14468/deafening-truth-noise-pollution.

universal deafness as the ultimate consequence unless the problem be brought quickly under control.[7]

For Schafer, who is something of a soundscape purist, this crisis of noise is an immediate product of the industrial era—in his view, the noise of machines and the din of densely populated cities was masking the sounds of nature, which were slowly being rendered inaudible while the sensitivity of human ear was being dulled and corroded. He distinguishes the "hi-fi soundscape" of the pre-industrial French countryside, where "discrete sounds can be heard clearly" and "sounds overlap less frequently" from the "lo-fi soundscape" of the Industrial Revolution, which "suffers from an overpopulation of sounds" and "there is so much acoustic information that little of it can emerge with clarity."[8] Here, the soundscape of the countryside is favorable because it permits the ear to hear over long distances, to discern the source and meaning of each sound. The "overpopulated" city soundscape frustrates a listener's attempt to fully apprehend a soundscape, to identify noises with their sources, to create taxonomies of sound wherein one may sift meaningful sound from meaningless noise.

Schafer also views the spread of noise as "imperialistic"—he remarks, "[w]herever Noise is granted immunity from human intervention, there will be found a seat of power."[9] For him, noise is a tool of intimidation and subjugation, and the quiet sounds of nature are the targets of suppression. Schafer's interest in the soundscape of the Industrial Era is, of course, not simply pursuing an ideal of auditory experience, but is nostalgic for a pre-industrial, pastoral way of life. My study departs from Schafer's thinking in at least two ways: First, I delink noise from the

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[7] R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1994), 3.
[8] Ibid., 43, 71.
[9] Ibid., 76.

emergence of the machinic modes of production characteristic of the Industrial Revolution; colonial discourses about noise and aural disturbance far predate this historical moment, and I view their attachment to instruments and, later, to tools of sound reproduction, as rooted in colonial constructions of unruly black subjects. Next, while Schafer's notion of the "imperialistic" spread of noise does point to the emergence of global North neoliberal regimes of economic exploitation in the Caribbean and elsewhere, I catalog instead the ways that colonial regimes deploy noise as a category of contravention that licenses the regulatory efforts of the state to be directed disproportionately at black subjects.

Contrarily, economic and social theorist Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* views noise as a herald, or effect, of life. He writes, "life is full of noise and…death alone is silent: work noise, noise of man, and noise of beast. Noise bought, sold, or prohibited. Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise."[10] Further, he views noise as an important emblem of disorder that resides "at the heart of the progressive rationalization of aesthetics, and it is a refuge for residual irrationality," and is "the source of purpose and power, of the dream".[11] I align with Attali's understanding of noise as a disruptive force that disrupts Enlightenment rationalism—as I show, the writers at the center of this study deploy noise as a way of signaling the formation and practice of alternate forms of knowledge. However, my work also understands noise as a fungible category that is strategically deployed by governing bodies in order to structure and maintain relations of incongruency and antagonism between a polity and the black subjects and cultural productions that shape it. Noise, in my account, is not a pre-ideological or pre-capitalist form; it is the site of struggle that produces and is produced by the senses.

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[10] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 3.
[11] Ibid., 4.

Recent Africana studies and sound studies scholarship has examined how studying the interfaces between black subjects and sound technologies can reframe and invigorate new understandings of modernity, diasporic solidarity, and notions of the human.[12] While these studies approach the study of the soundscape primarily through attention to the circulation of black musical forms and sound reproduction technologies, my study calls attention instead to the routes through which these forms and technologies are targeted for reform and regulated. Much scholarship has considered sound to be a liberating, counter-scribal zone that inherently resists colonial systematization and codification. Connectedly, oral forms have similarly been studied as alternative archives of historical memory that survived the devastation of the Middle Passage, plantation slavery in the Americas, and colonial rule. My work, however, complicates such redemptive readings of sound by charting a range of attempts to manage the soundscape that persist to the contemporary moment. Sound, in my reading, becomes a zone of conflict.

My study is one of the first to examine the range of formal and informal strategies that colonial authorities used to restrict the soundscape, and unpacks the ways that regulations of "noise" ostensibly targeted at instruments or institutions thinly veiled an organized program of cultural repression. The evolution of noise abatement laws in post-independence Jamaica and Trinidad further demonstrates the state's continued attempts to uphold forms of colonial respectability that target Afro-Caribbean people, spaces, and productions. My project historicizes such instances by tracing how noise becomes a tool of cultural regulation in the colonial period

[12] See Tsitsi Jaji, *Africa in Stereo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); and Daphne Brooks' forthcoming monograph *Subterranean Blues: Black Women Sound Modernity* (Harvard University Press).

through depictions of noise as a kind of "pollution"—of the economy, environment, and culture—that must be cleared.

Legislation against noise consolidates its authority by presenting itself as a matter of health, economics, or law, rather than as a matter of culture. My project methodologically resists this attempt to mask the cultural imperialist project of noise legislation by placing in conversation disparate kinds of texts, such as novels, poetry, colonial correspondences, periodicals, legal acts, and press advertisements. These texts, while they discuss sound production and perception from various historical, literary, and legal standpoints, nevertheless reveal a common investment in sound as a realm where forms of empowerment and claims to authority become newly possible.

Finally, this study reframes sound studies' treatment of "noise" as a phenomenon that emerges as a consequence of a post-World War II moment of industrial and technological modernity.[13] In these studies, technologies like the radio, gramophone, and other hi-fi equipment are targeted as the sources of "noise" characteristic of growing urban centers, and become sources of complaint as they form the backdrop of the social and cultural activities of black colonial subjects. However, ordinances like the 1911 Night Noises Prevention Law in Jamaica, which sought to suppress the practice of Obeah demonstrate that "noise"—as a category used to regulate Afro-Caribbean social, political, and religious life—has a history that predates the emergence of new technologies of sound reproduction in the 1940s.[14] My project demonstrates

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[13] See for example, Attali's *Noise* and Bryce Peake, "Noise: A historical ethnography of listening, masculinity and media technology in British Gibraltar, 1940–2013," *Cultural Studies* 30:1 (2014): 1-28.

[14] Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 152.

how the “noisiness” of technological modernity was fundamentally informed by a belief in black subjects as inherently noisy, as producers of unwanted sound that required regulation. Rather than attempting to recuperate Afro-Caribbean cultural forms as music or art, these writers instead recuperate noise as a chaotic potential that is critical to the ongoing struggle toward decolonization in the Caribbean.

The aim of this project is not to introduce noise as a catch-all category for disenfranchised peoples, or to suggest a natural or inherent affinity between black diasporic peoples and amusicality. The reverse is also true: this work does not seek to recuperate black cultural production within an unproblematically valorized frame of music, or perhaps, as belonging subjects within a geopolitical nation-state, whether Jamaica or the United States. Noise functions here neither solely as a vehicle for stigmatization, nor as a tool of resistance. Instead, in all cases, it structures, informs, or symptomizes alternative ways of being in the world whose very alterity creates discomfort, confusion, and chaos for the persons and institutions that attempt to foreclose such possibilities. For M. NoubeSe Philip, noise is a way to tell an untellable story; for Brodber, noise is the medium through which the dead speak; for Cliff, noise signals a temporal conundrum, wherein supposedly past eras persist within the presents that disavow them; for Marshall, noise is the connective tissue that links domestic and state regimes and their management of black subjects. These women see hearing, and hearing widely, as an ethical approach to the lives they represent in their writing.

This project also avoids taking oversimplified or moralistic stances on whether or not noise is or is not acceptable, or should or should not be controlled. There is, of course, such a thing as sound that harms (both instantaneously and in a prolonged fashion over time), disturbs, soothes, or heals—the power of sound to act on our bodies and psyches has been adequately

outlined and continues yielding richer and deeper analyses. However, the recourse to the physiological and psychological effects of noise does not, as my work shows, deliver us from ideology into the realm of a scientific objectivity. There always remain the questions: whose harm by sound matters counts as harm? What conditions qualify a subject as someone who can indeed be disturbed?[15] Thus, when this project avoids taking a stance on the legitimacy of these measures, it is because it instead hopes to uncover how discourses of physiological harm can be strategically mobilized to anticipate and foreclose recognition of the social and political motivations and implications of noise laws. In my reading, I attend to the ways that aural disturbance and nuisance become historically attached to Afro-diasporic subjects in connection with global anti-black rhetoric that codifies black subjects as unbelonging and unsuited for inclusion within a body politic.

While I do deal with the ways that designations of noise or other forms of sonic transgression are mobilized against black subjects, I do not neglect to analyze the ways that these subjects communicate and theorize through what ostensibly registers as noise or nonsense. This manuscript spends the bulk of its time examining how the sound experiments of these writers challenge conventions of form, discipline, citizenship, and being. The women writers I examine both extend and exceed challenges to scribal modes of history and efforts to decolonize poetic voice and form. They take up forms of sounding and music that are seemingly unusual or occult

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[15] While my work does not take up The Colony, TX as a site of study, the municipal noise codes for this city are illustrative of the ideologically charged criteria that determine one's capacity to be disturbed by noise. The law stipulates: "Any noise of such character, intensity, and continued duration which substantially *interferes with the comfortable enjoyment of private homes by persons of ordinary sensibilities*, is hereby declared to be a nuisance and is hereby prohibited" (my emphasis). According to the language of this law, occupancy of a private home and "ordinary sensibilities" are prerequisites for experiencing legally-recognizable disturbance by noise. See "Sec 6-192. – Noise, Code of Ordinances, The Colony, TX," accessed April 25, 2016, https://www2.municode.com/library/tx/the_colony/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=PTIICOOR_CH6BUCOHESA_ARTIXPUNU_S6-192NO#!.

not only to point to the ways that silencing through violence, suppression, and exclusion nevertheless yield persistent expressive forms, but also to challenge a number of institutions that borrow from the logics of inclusion and exclusion practiced by the state.

Afro-Caribbean Women Writers, Disorder, and Global Black Solidarity

In Maryse Condé's "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer" she decries the restricted field of literary engagement for Caribbean writers as being governed by the "commands enumerated throughout the history of West Indian literature by the various generations of writers….all of them contributing to the edification of an order very few writers have dared to transgress to induce disorder."[16] In particular, Condé cites a range of well-known Afro-Caribbean men writers—such as Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Patrick Chamoiseau—as the forces of order, and a number of women writers—whose works are "little known," "forgotten, out of print, misunderstood"—as the agents of disorder.[17] Condé continues:

> Whenever women speak out, they displease, shock, or disturb. Their writings imply that before thinking of a political revolution, West Indian society needs a psychological one. What they hope for and desire conflicts with men's ambitions and dreams. Why, they ask, fight against racism in the world when it exists at home, among ourselves?[18]

For Condé, the "command" issued to West Indian writing is for it to offer a positive image of the island and its peoples and to valorize the "masses," where often, women's writing appears to

[16] Maryse Condé, "Order, disorder, freedom, and the West Indian writer," *Yale French Studies* 97 (2000): 151-2.

[17] Ibid., 160.
[18] Ibid., 161-2.

move against the grain of this directive, opting instead to produce narratives that highlight characters who are alienated and ostracized rather than representative emblems of the island, expose contradictions and hypocrisies, confront difficult or embarrassing realities about the Caribbean, and fail to follow a clear trajectory of gradual triumph or of heroic salvation or resistance.

The women writers I examine align in many ways with Condé's pronouncement. They expose uncomfortable racial, class, and national complexes: the parents of the protagonists of Brodber's *Louisiana*, Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Free Enterprise*, and Marshall's *The Fisher King* are all Afro-Caribbean characters that display deep attachments to a kind of black middle class respectability politics, where they push their children to succeed in predominantly white institutions and discourage any affinities with working class Afro-Caribbean or African-American communities. These women's writings also do not appear to take the valorization of their island homes as their primary object; they instead display attitudes of both affinity and estrangement from those spaces. Indeed, they display a more explicit interest in the possibilities of African diasporic solidarity, which accounts for the transnational scope of all the works in the project. Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King* relays between Barbados, Georgia, Brooklyn, and Paris as it unfolds the decades-long conflict that four generations of an African-diasporic family (with both Afro-Caribbean and African-American lineages) grapple with. Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Free Enterprise* depict Jamaica, the United States, and London as hostile, interconnected sites of anti-black racism that both gravely harm (and sometimes kill) her women protagonists and catalyze their revolutionary impulses.

A departure from the project of espousing a distinctly Caribbean regional identity, or an island-specific national identity, the characters in these works find acceptance and revolutionary

camaraderie only by building a broad black, transnational web of affiliation. Brodber comments explicitly on this gesture in her work, noting: "I find that there's a lot of confusion, then, in my mind about creole, creolization, and all the rest of it….from a political point of view, *creole* wants to forget where we're from and focus on what was made here in the Caribbean. And I think it's too early for that. I think, first of all, especially for the Afro-people, you have to look at where you're coming from first."[19] These women writers point to the dangers of visions of Caribbean nationalism and sovereignty that do not challenge the anti-black logics of colonial forms. By focusing on writers who champion global black solidarity, I emphasize my project's investment in understanding the issues raised in these women's texts as portable and interconnected strategies of anti-blackness with iterations in a wide range of national contexts.

Sound and Text

The works I examine theorize the relationship between sound and text. These writers' experiments with sound are textually-mediated—the text is our primary, and often sole, vehicle for experiencing the soundscape. This demands a different way of thinking of texts, typically understood as silent objects, as mediums that are not only informed by and mimetic of language and sound, but as sites where yet unheard sound can be imagined. There is a long and rich tradition in African diasporic studies of understanding the text as a sonic, or more properly vocal, object that confounds the boundaries between oral and scribal, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. described through the "Talking Book" trope or as the Créolistes outlined in *Éloge de la Créolité*, for instance. The work of these women writers both extends and moves beyond attempts to render the vernacular through text. While their texts are indeed suffused with representations of

[19] "Put Your Bucket Down: A Conversation with Erna Brodber," by Petal Samuel, *sx salon*, June 30, 2015, http://smallaxe.net/wordpress3/interviews/2015/06/30/put-your-bucket-down/.

vernacular speech, their experiments with sound often center around non-verbal expressive modes, forms of expression not easily captured within the signifying framework of language. The inclusion of vernacular speech in scribal forms pointed to the ways in which black subjects were simultaneously enjoined to prove their humanity through writing and excluded from the representative frameworks of the written word (with which black writers then improvised). In a similar fashion, these women writers' renderings of non-verbal sound indexes how sound—including, but not limited to language—is a contested field for sustaining or challenging notions of the rational and respectable.

Thus, when I use the term "soundscape" in this manuscript, I am always referring to the textual soundscape of the poem or novel (unless otherwise indicated). R. Murray Schafer, who is credited with coining the term "soundscape," declared that it described "events *heard* not objects *seen*."[20] He bemoaned the necessity of turning to visual and scribal forms to describe sound as a "misfortune," and stressed the importance of being an "earwitness" to the soundscapes one describes. He writes: "a writer is trustworthy only when writing about sounds directly experienced and intimately known."[21] The writers I study, however, ask us to imagine hearing things that are, at best, unusual, and at worst, unimaginable. They describe the sounds of the voices of the dead speaking into the sphere of the living and the soundscapes of alternate planes of being, as Sonny Rett, a jazz musician in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*, does when describing the soundscape of heaven. The field of evocation is not limited to the already heard, or the commonly heard, but is open to that which cannot be heard, and can only register in a kind of sonic imaginary. They also point to the limits of sensory perception by creating soundscapes that are only perceptible to the trained ear. Brodber's protagonist in *Louisiana* must train in order

[20] Schafer, *Soundscape*, 8.
[21] Ibid.

to better attune herself to the voices of the dead. By imagining alternative ways to hear, and suggesting that hearing is a matter of training, audition becomes as much an epistemological process as it is a biological one.

These women writers render the interface between sound and text in a variety of ways. In some cases, they call upon familiar forms (like jazz) whose logics structure unusual textual effects inflected by sound. For instance, Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King* deploys what the novel describes as a "counterpoint of memory," where private memory and public history are interwoven, distinguished by subtle shifts in the spacing of the margins. Other times, the writers call upon the power of other senses, creating new synaesthetic experiences. Where Schafer views the scribal and aural as mutually exclusive zones that can only ever emulate one another without intersecting, these women instead muddy the boundaries between senses: M. NourbeSe Philip depends on the visual reduction of white space in the poem to evoke aural cacophony; Brodber's protagonist Ella always hears the voices of the dead in combination with the sensation of her head swelling.[22] Further still, they sometimes turn to onomatopoeic language in place of description. In the final execution scene of Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, a set of Jamaica guerilla fighters are ambushed and gunned down, and the text bursts into a catalog of sounds like "piju," "cuk," "tuc-tuc-tuc," "eee-kah," and "krrr-re-ek".[23] Finally, they rely on the power of the written word and scribal forms to confront the inarticulable, to bend and morph in ways that point to what is not being, or cannot be, described. In NourbeSe's *Zong!*, long stretches of blank space punctuate the magnitude of what remains unsaid; her live performances of the poem sound these blank spaces as long stretches of silence. The written word, confronted by the

[22] See figure 2 on the following page for an example of visual cacophony in *Zong!*
[23] Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (New York: Dutton, 1987), 208.

soundscapes they identify and imagine, becomes indicative and suggestive, rather than descriptive.

Figure 2: Excerpt from M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*

These strategies reveal a great deal about the intended work of sound in the narrative. Improvisation and musical strategies invite audience participation in the act of history-making and re-making: NourbeSe holds public, collective readings of her text, where the audience is invited to read the poem aloud with her and NourbeSe introduces the names of recent victims of anti-black policing tactics into the ledger of victims aboard the *Zong*. The cooperation and solidarity of the senses in Brodber's *Louisiana* coincides with the formation of a psychic solidarity between the Jamaican-American protagonist and her African-American interlocutor. Following Tsitsi Jaji's reading of synaesthesia as a strategy of coalition-building amongst African diasporic communities, I read these instances as moments where the writers exhibit and enact a politics of global black solidarity. The appearance of onomatopoeia and negative space often mark a text's confrontation with both extreme anti-black violence and the epistemological violence of erasure: Cliff's guerilla fighters are executed at the scene of a film shoot about major Jamaican revolutionary figures (such as Nanny of the Maroons) led by an American director, who collaborates with the Jamaican government to lure and entrap the fighters at the scene of the shoot. Even as the government attempts to silence the guerilla fighters through death, the novel ends in a repetitive and persistent explosion of non-verbal noises.

The powerful and sustained impact of the dead on the living is a prominent feature of each of these works, and the presence of the dead is the primary phenomenon that the textual soundscape signals. The cast of dead actors across texts is diverse: from the slaves jettisoned from the *Zong* in 1781 to a black woman Louisiana elder and former Garveyite activist; from a group of Afro-Jamaican guerilla fighters in postcolonial Jamaica to a murdered jazz virtuoso who sustains generations of tension and unrest in a black diasporic family. The presence of the dead always, as Avery Gordon notes, "registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a

social violence done in the past or in the present. But haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done."[24] For the characters in these novels, one of the major stakes of learning to hear non-normatively, to hear something other than nonsense in the presence of noise or other unsavory sound, is establishing a rapport with the dead. As a result, time is often confounded either in the lives of the characters or in the chronology of the narrative itself. Characters are unable to distinguish past from present, and are at the mercy of past events that never stop repeating themselves. For instance, Paule Marshall's Ulene Payne continually hears the voices of roomers that no longer live in her apartment and repeatedly engages these ghostly presences in the same argument about the volume of their radios ad infinitum. These characters, and we as readers through engaging with these texts, all experience time not as linear and sequential, but as simultaneous and accruing—the past never ends even as the present and future iterate themselves newly into, and in excess of, the fields of occurrence the past has established. The iterative logics of sound lend itself to this structure of time, and the ghastly ephemerality of noises that cannot be sourced parallel the intrusiveness of the irrepressible dead. Some characters pursue a rapport with the dead; others are pursued by the dead: in either case, the dead have their say, and always on their terms.

The colonial ear is a way of knowing through hearing. Its functions rely on the aural construction of a black subject who is unsuited for modernity, who is a constant threat to the peace and stability of the state, and who cannot produce culture because is not a member of a cultured collective nor a fitting member of the human family. It conditions social and political attitudes through seemingly objective designations of volume, sound quality, and aesthetics. Many of these texts take many of these emblems and measures of objectivity and rationality (i.e.

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[24] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

– the legal decision in *Zong!*, the tape recorder in *Louisiana*, the novel form itself) and transform them, expose the fragility of their claims to the objective, and demonstrate how proximate they are to the seemingly occult. They reveal what we can learn beyond the fold of the respectable and objective. For these women, hearing and sounding are contested processes caught in the hold of colonial curation. What's at stake, ultimately, is not simply learning to value forms of black cultural production and accept black subjects as integral members of a body politic. Instead, what's at stake is invigorating an imaginary of revolutionary possibility in a moment of ruined time, or what David Scott describes as "the temporal disjunctures involved in living *on* in the wake of past political time, amid the ruins, specifically, of postsocialist and postcolonial futures past."[25]

Chapter Summaries

This manuscript is divided into two sections. Section One, "Revolutionary Imaginaries and the Anti-National," examines two Jamaican writers—Erna Brodber and Michelle Cliff—whose protagonists struggle to envision the new possibilities for Afro-diasporic alliances both in the wake of the imprisonment and deportation of Marcus Garvey and before his rise to prominence. Where Brodber's work is situated in the aftermath of the Garvey and centers on a former Garveyite activist, Cliff's work imagines a diasporic alliance of black women revolutionaries who coordinate John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and who must recover from the disappointment of its failure. The symbol of the persistence of revolutionary possibility for Cliff's protagonist is a Black Star Line calendar, named after the shipping line founded by Marcus Garvey intended to transport African-Americans across the Atlantic to return to the African continent. Both writers use sound to think through how to sustain, and indeed

[25] David Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 2.

reinvigorate, traditions of black diasporic collectivity and mobilization in the wake of the disappointments of former movements. I argue that for both writers, who witnessed Jamaica's transition to independence in 1962, meditating on Garvey is not simply a matter of nostalgia for a national icon, but a way of reconsidering national identification as the route to black self-determination in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Their women protagonists transform into subjects that are not easily legible as citizens, and who instead form alternative networks of belonging that supersede national belonging.

Chapter One, "'Hearing Other Frequencies': Erna Brodber's Louisiana, the Colonial Ear, and Low Fidelity Aesthetics," examines the writing of Jamaican activist and writer, Erna Brodber, whose work highlights the potential of chaotic forms of sound and hearing to structure alternative forms of belonging and life, and illustrate the consequent prohibitions, exclusions, and assaults of state, and state-like, structures. Further, Brodber's work confounds disciplinary categorization in ways that parallel her disruptions of sensory rationalism. In this chapter, I analyze two critical primary sources—a colonial secretary's office correspondence and a Jamaica *Gleaner* newspaper article—that throw into relief the ways that soundscape regulation furtively targeted working class Jamaicans through curious substitutions between persons and instruments, and outlined standards of respectable and decent hearing that I reference as the "colonial ear". Next, I demonstrate how Ella, the protagonist of Brodber's novel *Louisiana*, hears against the grain of the colonial ear in ways that rupture, rather than reify, her ties to the linked governance of the state and the university. Finally, I elaborate how the tool of Ella's trade, the tape recorder, unexpectedly becomes the site of production for what I call a "low fidelity aesthetic," an approach to sound and belonging that valorizes productions that seemingly fail to rise to

standards of high quality and proper form, and thus confound the boundaries between the respectable and the damnable, music and noise, citizen and outsider, fact and fiction.

Next, in Chapter Two, "Everything is Now: The Terrasonic in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Free Enterprise*, " I examine the ways that Michelle Cliff highlights the residues of colonial rule in the Americas through the intertwining of landscapes and soundscapes. In Cliff's works, the flora and fauna bear an enduring memory of the atrocities of slavery and colonialism and their sounds haunt the "present" moment of the novel. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the textual soundscape exhibits the ongoing contest between anti-black colonial forms and decolonial efforts, and marks both temporal rupture and continuity, denoting the tumultuous coexistence of colonial and decolonial forms, rather than showing the triumph of one over the other. Here, non-verbal sound and noise appear again as important vehicles of historical resistance.

The second section of this manuscript, "The Reverberant Violences of State," examines texts by writers who hone in on the long-term effects of state violence on black subjects. Both writers demonstrate a concern with the law and its power to implicitly sanction extreme violence and codify black subjects as unbelonging subjects or pollutants within the body politic. This section highlights how the organizing impulses of the state make themselves felt in other zones: through language and grammar, through notions of time, and through the regulation of the soundscape, for example. The writers I examine in this section turn to sound as a way of exposing the disavowed longue durée of state violence against black communities and forming diasporic networks of solidarity. Both works meditate on the state-sanctioned murders of black protagonists, and the struggles of their descendants to commemorate their lives and cope with the traumatic effects of their deaths.

Chapter Three, " Ex Tempore: The Zong Massacre, Sound, and a Critique of Progressive Time," explores the ways in which the 1781 Zong massacre has been repeatedly narrativized as a conflict that was resolved through the just passage of time, eliding the irresolvable gaps in the historical record of the event. This elision acts as a strategic disavowal of the longue durée of slavery in the contemporary moment. M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!,* however, rejects this notion of ameliorative time and instead aesthetically structures opacity and unintelligibility into her poem through the use of white space and superimposition. Further, she links the massacre to contemporary instances of anti-black police violence in the United States during her live performances of the poem. NourbeSe's poem not only borrows heavily from the improvisatory logics of jazz, she structures forms of non-verbal sound—such as shouts, hisses, cries, and nonsense words—into the poem, declaring it a "language of pure sound fragmented and broken by history."[26] Through textual representations of noise, NourbeSe finds a language that permits her to ethically represent the massacre and that enables her to subvert what she views as the "ordering of grammar, the ordering that is the impulse of empire."[27]

In my final chapter, "The Profane Ear: Regimes of Aural Discipline in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*," I highlight the sonic disciplinary regimes that form the backdrop of the novel. Marshall's final novel, published in 2001, chronicles the climax of a generations-long antagonism within a black diasporic family that coalesces around one character's, Sonny-Rett's, career as a jazz musician. Sonny-Rett's exceptional musical talent, however, renders him the target of overlapping regimes of domestic and state regulation and discipline. His alienation from his communities follows the condemnation of jazz in the interwar period as too obscene, flagrant, and undisciplined to have a place in national culture in both the United States and France. By

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[26] Nourbese, Zong!, 205.
[27] Ibid.

examining the inter- and intra-community fissures that form around the maintenance of a respectable soundscape—and thereby obedient and respectable black subjects—I argue that Marshall calls attention to the soundscape as a critical frontier in struggles to dismantle global anti-blackness. By casting black cultural production as improper and anti-national, black subjects are obliquely targeted for exclusion or extermination under the guise of seemingly neutral regulations that indict music and musical venues rather than subjects.

SECTION ONE:

Revolutionary Imaginaries and the Anti-National

CHAPTER ONE: "Hearing Other Frequencies": Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*, the Colonial Ear, and Low Fidelity Aesthetics

Eluding Discipline

There are a strange and contradictory set of attitudes that coalesce around Jamaican activist and intellectual, Erna Brodber. She is at once canonical and peripheral, oft-cited and understudied, iconic and an iconoclast. Born and raised in Woodside, St. Mary Parish, Jamaica, Brodber is commonly regarded in scholarly criticism as a major Caribbean, primarily *literary*, icon whose novels explore the social and psychological terrain of post-slavery Afro-Caribbean communities; her works have been stylistically described as "head-hurting," "notoriously complex," and "postmodern". However, Brodber, who is trained as an historian and sociologist with additional credentials in psychiatry, social work, and community activism, has expressed discomfort with the label of "novelist". As she remarked in a 2002 interview, "I am not a writer-writer. I am coming out of history and sociology and I go into writing because I find that it is one of the ways I can communicate what I want to say about historical and sociological phenomena relating to the Caribbean."[28] The mere task of describing what Brodber's work *is* is often a cumbersome project for literary scholars, who gravitate toward her novels, but struggle to reconcile what becomes of the novel in her hands.

Brodber's tenuous relationship to the novel form is pronounced within her literary work itself: her novels quite often claim to be something other than novels—for example, case studies, interview transcripts, and personal diaries.[29] She has further claimed in the past that her novels

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[28] "Erna Brodber, celebrated thinker, writer," *All Woman* in the *Jamaica Observer*, April 22, 2002, http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/magazines/allwoman/24430_Erna-Brodber--celebrated-thinker--writer.

[29] As June Roberts notes, Erna Brodber's first and most acclaimed novel, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, "was purportedly written as a case study for Jamaican social-work students

are part of a "sociological effort" that is "served" by fiction and that is "unlike mainstream sociology" because it has "activist intentions".[30] Brodber's evasion of the labels of "fiction writer" and "sociologist" is a product of her uneasiness with academic disciplinary taxonomies. Brodber describes herself as a "ghost" in the academy: "My postgraduate life was a ghostlike wandering through disciplines—sociology, social psychology, anthropology, psychiatry, social work from my native university to colleges in Canada and the United States in search of a methodology by which information about and action with or on behalf of black people could proceed at the same time."[31] In particular, Brodber problematized the charge of "objectivity" in the social sciences as one that alienated researcher from subject, "spurning affective interaction between researcher and researched,"[32] and demanding a turn to fiction. What emerges is a contest of the terms on which her work is understood; rather than taking up or rejecting disciplinary affiliation, Brodber shows a more pointed interest in describing her work through an affiliation with "the bottom," or as she later describes "people we don't find in the archives, who don't appear at all in the public records".[33]

Brodber's third novel *Louisiana* is an exceptional example of this disciplinary evasion. The novel is formally hybrid; while it advertises itself as a novel, its components all generically lay claims to non-fiction: it begins with an "editor's note" from the fictional Black World Press complete with a false address in Coral Gardens, and is followed by what it alleges to be a set of

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who had no indigenous case models of the dissociative personality." June Roberts, *Reading Erna Brodber: Uniting the Black Diaspora Through Folk Culture and Religion* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 21.

[30] Erna Brodber, "Fiction in the Scientific Procedure," in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. Selwyn Cudjoe (Wellesley: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 164.

[31] Ibid., 165.

[32] Ibid.

[33] "Put Your Bucket Down: A Conversation with Erna Brodber," by Petal Samuel, *sx salon*, June 30, 2015, http://smallaxe.net/wordpress3/interviews/2015/06/30/put-your-bucket-down/.

interview transcripts, a collection of journal entries, and a cover letter to the editors explaining the contents of the manuscript. The work itself tells the story of Ella, a Jamaican-American anthropologist employed by Columbia University. Ella is dispatched to Louisiana under the auspices of a federal program—FDR's Federal Writer's Project, an initiative that employed writers to compile local histories, conduct interviews and ethnographies, and design creative projects.[34] She must learn to adapt, however, after her interview subject, a black Louisiana elder named Mammy King, unexpectedly dies in the early stages of their interviews. Mammy's death, however, catalyzes Ella's newfound power to hear the voices of the dead; she becomes a medium and learns to channel the spirit of Mammy King, in order to continue gathering the information she needs to write Mammy's story. In the process, Ella coins new disciplinary categorizations for her work, including "celestial ethnography" and "anthropology of the dead". Ella's use of what is perceived as an illegitimate and occult mechanism of knowledge production compromises her already tenuous position within the academy and within her social networks. She finds acceptance within Mammy King's community, where she permanently relocates.

Ella's hearing—expanded to grant her the ability to "hear other frequencies"—becomes the route through which Brodber proposes a link between disciplinary approaches and colonial postures toward black cultural production. Further, Ella's primary tool of the trade, the tape recorder, behaves in especially erratic and mysterious ways. After Mammy King dies, her spirit

[34] One of the most renowned archives that result from this program was the WPA Slave Narrative archive, composed of accounts of life under slavery by former slaves. It is unclear whether or not Ella is employed to interview Mammy King to contribute to this archive, and it is later suggested (as I later address) that Mammy King was selected for this project because of her work as a Garveyite organizer, and not because she was born into slavery. If, indeed, Ella is dispatched to Louisiana to produce a contribution to the WPA Slave Narrative archive, she represents an unusual circumstance; according to the Library of Congress' history of the WPA narratives, "Louisiana was the only Southern state not to participate in the Writers' Project ex-slave study". See "An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives," note 18, accessed April 24, 2016, (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snnotes.html.

possesses the predatory tape recorder, and it becomes unable to perform its functions; instead of reproducing the content of Ella's interviews, it distorts and revises its recorded material, spontaneously generates new content, and catalyzes the psychic trances where Ella can hear Mammy King's voice beyond the threshold of death. The unusual behavior of the phantom tape recorder serves to extend Brodber's critique of the colonial-disciplinary nexus; she interferes with the technical and aesthetic logics of sound reproduction technologies in order to disrupt both the technology's associations with a kind of objectivity *and* the machinic production and reproduction of knowledge in the frame of the academic discipline.

This chapter unfolds in three sections: in the first section, I explore the ways in which the labor, leisure, and cultural production of working class Afro-Jamaicans was managed through the regulation of the soundscape in the colonial period and in the aftermath of independence. In the second section, I examine how the forms of aural "discernment" proposed in the first section fall through in Brodber's novel, where Ella's expanded capacity for hearing opens her to new soundscapes, which threatens to rupture her already tenuous ties to the university, her family, and the state. In the final section, I elaborate how the erratic tape recorder becomes the site of production for a "low fidelity aesthetic," an approach to sound and genre that valorizes productions that seemingly fail to rise to standards of high quality and proper form. I establish sound as a contested site of colonial management and elaborate how Brodber fashions alternatives to the colonial soundscape and its standards. By considering Brodber's experiments in sound, we can better historicize Brodber's own tenuous relationship to the academy and attempts to forge new spaces for her work.

The Colonial Sensorium & Respectable Hearing

In a letter from the Inspector General to the Colonial Secretary on March 23, 1934, he complained about the "night noises" in Kingston, curiously citing a litany of sound reproduction and transmission technologies as the culprits:

> These Brothels or Temperance Bars keep open till all hours of the night and accompanied throughout by music of all kinds, viz., Orchestras, Gramophones, Radio-gramophones etc, etc and naturally are a source of attraction for all classes to concentrate around, but, of course, chiefly the lower orders, and the noise is increased by conversation, laughter etc emanating from this source as well….To effectively stop the present and most obnoxious nuisance of noise at night by musical instruments in particular, this should be entirely forbidden after 12 o'clock midnight.[35]

The Inspector General's invocations of the terms "noise" and "nuisance" do more than convey an annoyance with these social practices; they represent an attempt to criminalize them. The "Night Noises Prevention Law" was established in colonial Jamaica in 1911 and furtively targeted a number of Afro-Jamaican cultural, social, and religious institutions and musical genres.[36] The policing of the soundscape through the designation of "noise" became an expansive and

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[35] Letter from Inspector General to the Colonial Secretary, March 23, 1934, Night Noises, CSO 1B/5/77/293.

[36] For more on how the Night Noises Prevention Law represented a stage in a longer history of suppression of the Jamaican Revivalist movement, see Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism, and Modernity in the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 152-3. For more on how this law criminalized Jamaican marches, processions, and masquerades, and provided the framework for the later legal battle against Jamaican dancehall (the genre) and dancehalls (the social spaces), see Krista A. Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

adaptable cover for an organized program of black criminalization. Thus, the Inspector General's turn to "noise" is a familiar, historical avenue of regulation.

While he opens with a seeming indictment of brothels, temperance bars, and "the lower orders," the grammatical structuring of his complaint obfuscates the "source" of the nuisance: he appears to assert that it is the "orchestras, gramophones, and radio-gramophones" that are a source of attraction for the "lower orders" and not the brothels or temperance bars, the "musical instruments in particular" that must be "entirely forbidden," and not the gatherings or spaces themselves.

This odd, evasive substitution appeared before only a month prior in an article in the February 28, 1934 issue of *The Gleaner*: "Anyone who is unfortunate enough to live in a vicinity favoured by 'ladies of the life' are aware of how loudly the trumpets blow or the gramophones sound after night."[37] Later, the author writes: "Everybody knows, too, that in certain streets gramophones scream forth their raucous tunes until two or three o'clock in the morning, and loud orchestras keep a whole neighborhood awake, and nothing is done about it."[38] While the article again invokes women's sex labor, it depicts instruments and sound technologies as autonomous agents that produce noise without human intervention. The article calls for the police to be "endowed with the authority necessary for them to put an end to the hideous tumult characteristic of certain neighborhoods, when the fleet of tourists are [sic] here especially," but later qualifies

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[37] Extract from Gleaner, February 28, 1934, Night Noises, CSO 1B/5/77/293.
[38] Ibid.

that "no one wants police tyranny in this country: we are not keen upon developing along German lines."[39]

The *Gleaner* article exhibits the same evasive strategies as the letter to the Colonial Secretary, and additionally imagines instruments, technologies, and the sounds they produce as being characteristically ugly and disorderly, using colorful descriptors like "raucous," "hideous," and "tumult". By avoiding persons and instead targeting instruments and sound technologies, both writers camouflage calls for racist, classist, and gendered forms of administration within the seemingly objective frame of sensory experience. The *Gleaner* article illustrates this with its frequent and strategic deployment of generalizations such as "anyone," "everyone," and "no one". The efforts of *The Gleaner* are also explicitly targeted at protecting the tourist economy, noting, "These will not wish that Kingston or any town of the island should acquire the reputation of being a sort of bawdy bedlam."[40] Through the criminalization of particular "noises," both items uphold and attempt to train a shared and universal sonic sensibility predicated upon a colonial politics of respectability and a kind of national sentiment: in the interest of the colony's well-being, one must develop respectable hearing, and understand these soundscapes as "noisy". Thus, the island can continue to attract the right kinds of people (those who help sustain flows of foreign capital into the island), deter the leisure and labor of the

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[39] Ibid. There are a number of Caribbean writers who have pointed out, however, that the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the colonial project were the original exercises in "Nazism". For example, Aimé Césaire writes of the white European bourgeoisie, "before they were its [Nazism's] victims, they were its accomplices; that they tolerated Nazism before it was inflicted upon them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had only been applied to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it, and that before engulfing the whole edifice of Western, Christian civilization in its reddened waters, it oozes, seeps, and trickles from every crack." See Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 36.
[40] Extract from Gleaner, February 28, 1934.

primarily black working classes, and regulate the sexual economy.[41] The corruption of the soundscape was the work of the "lower orders"; the regulation of such corruption was the mark of the elite.

Concerns about the regulation of the lower classes continued to play a major role in the political upheavals of the 1960s in post-independence Jamaica. At the height of the civil rights movement in the United States, the transnational reach of Black Power, Black Nationalism, Rastafarianism, and other forms of black radical, socialist and anti-capitalist thought in the Caribbean—movements which overwhelmingly targeted the working classes—Jamaica became a hotbed of radical intellectuals, activists, and artists. However, the state administration remained stubbornly conservative, eager to demonstrate to the political giants of the global North that the nascent nation was stable and amenable to Western capitalism. Independence, in its early years, appeared to produce few substantive departures from the colonial regime. As Rex Nettleford remarks about the period, "The flag, the anthem, the National Stadium were visible but brought no sense of fundamental change….The social order did not collapse. The political order merely moved from one phase to the next in the smooth transition that was the agenda set under British tutelage from 1944."[42]

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[41] These strategies of regulation extend into the postcolonial era in Jamaica, and survive in the form of noise abatement laws that overwhelmingly target the same demographics.

As recently as January 17, 2015, the regulation of the soundscape remains a hot button issue, with a *Gleaner* editorial citing the health hazards of noise exposure and sleep deprivation, completely submerging issues of gendered labor and leisure. See "Shredding the Noise Abatement Act," The Gleaner, January 17, 2015, accessed October 31, 2015, http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20150117/cleisure/cleisure1.html.

[42] Rex Nettleford, "Introduction: Fledgling Years," in *Jamaica in Independence: Essays on the Early Years*, ed. Rex Nettleford (Kingston: Heinemann, 1988), 3.

Erna Brodber, who was a student at the University of West Indies campus in Mona, Jamaica at the time, remembers the period as a moment when the state viewed the political mobilization of the working classes as a major threat and began taking measures to forestall such solidarities. She highlights one branch of the threat as stemming from Caribbean intellectuals—figures like Guyanese historian and activist Walter Rodney and Jamaican economist and activist, George Beckford, were traveling outside of the city to rural agricultural towns and speaking directly to the working classes.[43] Brodber remarks, "As far as the administration is concerned, academics must stay inside their ghetto up in the university and discuss amongst themselves. When they come out now they begin to threaten people."[44] However, another branch of the threat came from the "underclass" expressly through music. Brodber notes, "the underclass—singers and players are really in every underclass in Jamaica—they were writing some very, very powerful tunes, which were really antigovernment."[45] Thus, the soundscape emerged yet again as a politicized zone where forms of anticolonial resistance could also take center stage.

Similar forms of disapproval had begun to accrete around Afro-Jamaican musical forms in this period, which were commonly disregarded as excessively violent or lewd, and were held responsible for the social and political tensions of the period. However, writers like George Beckford demanded that these phenomena be contextualized within the longue durée of plantation capitalism. Writing against Ken Pryce's claim that reggae was "no more than the

[43]The Jamaican government attempted to contain the growing region-wide influence of Beckford and Rodney by restricting their movements. Brodber recalls that George Beckford's passport was taken away in this period because he was well known as a Castro supporter, preventing travel for many years. Further, Walter Rodney was banned from re-entering Jamaica in 1968, sparking what began as a student demonstration and evolved into what are now known as the "Rodney riots".
[44] "Put Your Bucket Down: A Conversation with Erna Brodber," Petal Samuel.
[45] Ibid.

distillation of visceral images of sex, violence and protest,"[46] Beckford emphasized instead, "A correct materialist view of history will reveal….*It is the historical accumulation of pressure that created the sounds of reggae*" (emphasis in original).[47] Thus, the denigration of Afro-Jamaican musical forms emerging from the "underclass" in this period was, in Beckford's view, intimately tied to a project of historical revisionism, diverting critical attention away from what he described as the unprecedented expansion of world capitalism after the close of the Second World War.[48]

Brodber's novel, *Louisiana*, which boasts an elaborate tapestry of sound through sound reproduction technologies, instruments, and voices that endure beyond the threshold of death, takes up sound with this history in mind. Set only two years after the letter to the Colonial Secretary and *Gleaner* article circulated (commencing in 1936 with Ella's trip to Louisiana to interview Mammy King), the soundscape of the novel is similarly charged with concerns about respectability, sexuality, and belonging. For Ella, the novel's protagonist, hearing is not objective or neutral—it is political, contentious, and transformative. Ella begins her career as a respectable, properly disciplined anthropologist employed by Columbia University, and she approaches her initial interviews with her subject, Mammy King, determined to record Mammy's life narrative for transcription. However, Ella's aspirations are frustrated when Mammy King dies in the middle of their interview process and Ella continues hearing her voice echoing post-mortem. Ella's capital offense is that she hears indecently and improperly: the voices of the dead pollute the soundscape and exile her from the frame of rational hearing.

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[46] Ken Pryce, *Endless Pressure: A Study of West Indian Lifestyles in Bristol* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1979): 151.
[47] George Beckford, "Sounds and Pressures of Black Survival," in *The George Beckford Papers*, ed. Kari Levitt (Kingston: Canoe Press, 2000), 377.
[48] Ibid., 369.

An Undiscerning Ear

The colonial ear prizes a kind of discernment—the ability to sift music from noise, to enjoy the soundscape at the proper time of day in the proper measures, to demonstrate refined (Eurocentric, respectable) tastes. It must not welcome any kind of sound; it must protect itself from music, voices, noises, and peoples whose interests are not synchronized with the colonial cultural, political, and tourist economies. However, it must do so under the cover of an Enlightenment humanism that presumes sensory experience as rational, universal, and pre-ideological. This way, the colonial ear can remain unnamed, buttressed by the "objective" and the "civilized", and deeming all else noise. Here, the colonial ear—signifying a kind of rational hearing—signals a kind of civil obedience and belonging in the polity.

Mammy's death and Ella's discovery of her powers as a psychic force Ella to learn to hear differently, and to develop new strategies of knowledge production. The radical widening of Ella's aural capacities marks her transition—she becomes so sensitive to hearing that she can hear beyond the threshold of death, through time and space into pasts that she has never experienced. Her prophetic hearing renders her unrecognizable to the university and to the law, both of whom deem her mad. In this section, I trace the development of Ella's magnified hearing to elucidate how Ella's radically expanded hearing stands as a kind of civil disobedience, and ultimately renders her nationally illegible. In *Louisiana*, the state and the senses are allied.

In the novel, Ella's allegiances to the state are cemented through her employment through the Federal Writers Project. However, she arguably boasts more powerful affiliations with another state-like entity: the university. Ella, who is a first-generation American of Jamaican descent, cites her affiliation with Columbia University as the job that permits her Jamaican

parents to "hold up their heads a little bit."[49] Ella's parents, who face racism in the United States from whites who regard them as "King George's negroes"[50]—aspirational, "[un]natural" "black whites"[51]—tie their fortunes to Ella and pressure her to succeed in a conventionally lucrative and respectable profession as a doctor. However, Ella quits medical school after one year choosing to pursue her passion for writing instead, to her parents' embarrassment. Ella's affiliation with Columbia, a prestigious university originally established by British royal charter as one of nine colonial colleges[52], reaffirms for Ella's parents their class and national status as legitimate, respectable, near-white British citizens.[53] Ella's journey to Louisiana and her unexpected transition to the life of a medium, however, jeopardizes her credibility within the university, and by extension, her parents' statuses as proper citizens.

Even as Ella accepts that she must develop a new, hybrid set of disciplinary strategies, such as "celestial ethnography" and "anthropology of the dead," in order to record Mammy's narrative, she cannot escape the sense that she is a "criminal" because she has acted out of accordance with her disciplinary training.[54] Brodber's own quarrels with the academic discipline undergird Ella's disciplinary uneasiness and Ella's parents' racial disaffiliation with blackness and Jamaicanness. Just as Ella must leave the university and develop new disciplinary methods to conduct her work, Brodber left UWI Mona to conduct her fieldwork and interdisciplinary

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[49] Erna Brodber, *Louisiana* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 40.
[50] Ibid., 58.
[51] Ibid., 39.
[52] "Colonial colleges" were colleges that were founded by royal charter prior to the American Revolution, and that therefore predate the United States as such.
[53] There is also undoubtedly a color politics attached to their class aspirations. Ella's husband Reuben, is a mixed-race German student of psychoanalysis, and Ella remarks that her parents' "heads on their shoulders got distinctly steadier when I started bringing Reuben around. That golden boy absolved me. Gave me something to give my luckless parents about whose happiness I did care tremendously." See Brodber, *Louisiana*, 40.
[54] Ibid., 108.

writing in her home community of Woodside, St. Mary, Jamaica. Just as Ella must face her own family's complex relationship to blackness engendered by then ongoing colonial rule in Jamaica, Brodber struggled to cope with intra-racial tensions in Jamaica and turned to writing as a therapeuatic process. Ella similarly keeps a journal to help her process her transition to becoming a medium, and this "journal" constitutes the bulk of the novel's content. Brodber writes of Jamaicans: "my particular pain was settling into my own country after living in areas defined as racist [such as the United States] and having here to deal with what I now know to be a prejudice against blacks in a country of blacks. The enemy was a ghost that talked through black faces. It was maddening, and to keep my sanity I talked on paper….I was now keeping my nonacademic writing for therapeutic purposes."[55]

Thus, the "haunting" in *Louisiana* occurs in at least two registers. In one register, it insists upon power of the dead (Mammy King) to "haunt" the living (Ella); by advocating an openness to such hauntings, it valorizes spiritual possession (and other delegitimized Afro-diasporic spiritual practices) as a legitimate, alter-rational route of learning and knowledge production. Haunting, however, also represents a renewed relationship between researchers and their objects of knowledge. Where the academy has traditionally upheld "critical distance" as the mark of legitimate scholarship, Brodber calls for something more like a "critical proximity"—a mode of knowledge production that proceeds from an intimate connection to one's subject of study and from openness to self-reflexive criticism.

While the former register of haunting is the most oft-recognized form, the second register of haunting is equally important and more pernicious: "haunting" as a strategy of state governance. When Brodber describes the "ghost" that talks through black faces, she references

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[55] Brodber, "Fiction in the Scientific Procedure," 165.

the logics of colonial rule that survive in Jamaica's contemporary institutions in the post-independence moment. Ella accordingly imagines her relationship to Columbia through a kind of haunting—she constantly fears retribution from the university for failing to return the tape recorder and turn in the commissioned manuscript of Mammy King's life. Even while Ella embraces her new life as a medium and must relinquish her hopes to compose a traditional manuscript of Mammy King's life, she never resigns from the task of producing a written manuscript, however unconventional. Further, while she imagines new disciplinary forms, she never fully renounces the discipline itself as an epistemological framework. Where she no longer trains as an anthropologist, she assumes a new form of training as a medium. While she extricates herself from the academy itself, she never fully abandons its exercises.

Thus, haunting appears as a kind of panopticonic—or more properly panaural—force that elicits obedience through sometimes nebulous, sometimes concrete threats of punishment and promises of reward. Avery Gordon explains in *Ghostly Matters* that haunting is not a confrontation with "the invisible or some ineffable excess," but rather is as an essential strategy through which governing institutions enact "modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, [and] repression".[56] She continues, "[H]aunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security)."[57] The specter of British colonialism and its attendant requisites of obedience, deference, and respectability haunts Ella and her family. Her parents, whose names

[56] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xv.
[57] Ibid., xvi.

are never revealed in the novel, are known to us only as “King George’s Negroes,”[58] a label which discomforts Ella. She remarks, “I didn’t even know in any sensible way who King George was and what he had to do with me.”[59]

Ella attributes her incomplete allegiances to King George as a failure in the realm of the “sensible,” dually understood as that which is rationally known and that which can be perceived or felt. In effect, Ella’s inability to identify with the Crown in the way her parents have illustrates her incomplete initiation into the colonial sensorium. The governance of the senses in the colonial context is about cultivating both proper senses and appropriate sensibilities. Thus, by the time Ella’s hearing begins to seemingly misfire, to expand into the realm of the improper and occult, we have already been positioned to regard Ella as a disobedient subject, one who has not fully accepted the senses and sensibilities of colonial respectability.

The first symptoms of Ella’s expanded aural capabilities appear immediately after Mammy King’s death. When Ella first begins to hear voices, she initially interprets the experience as an issue of sound localization. Thinking she has heard a voice while standing before her dead body, Ella reasons instead that “she’s spoken aloud, for [Mammy’s] lips aren’t moving.”[60] The next time Ella hears the voice, the narrator presents Ella’s failures of comprehension as an epistemological problem: “The child knows they are not her words for they are nowhere in her head but she is quite sure that she has heard them and that your lips haven’t moved. With so many years of formal schooling, she cannot think ‘ghost’. Ventriloquist, she thinks.”[61] Again, Ella attributes her abnormal experiences of hearing to a sound effect, a trick of

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[58] This is likely a reference to King George V, King of the United Kingdom from 1910-1936.
[59] Brodber, *Louisiana*, 58.
[60] Ibid., 27.
[61] Ibid., 28.

acoustics. The narrator notes that Ella cannot grasp what's happening to her because she has been excessively trained. Her "years of formal schooling" have closed down as many avenues of knowledge as they have opened up. Finally, when Ella accepts that she is hearing the voices of the dead, the narrator notes triumphantly, "The ears are hearing other frequencies."[62]

This turn to the audio-temporal ratio of "frequency" gives insight into the purchase of sound for writers like Brodber. Frequency is unit of measurement that both determines pitch and delimits the range audible sound for the human ear. Invoking the physical property of a sound wave that vibrates and displaces air (leaving a trace) permits us to understand the voices of the dead and the marginalized as having traceable, though sometimes erratic and ephemeral, presences in spite of their inaudibility. It disrupts fictions of the human senses as unlimited and all-inclusive.

As the novel unfolds, we see that Ella's psychic connection with Mammy King is notably unidirectional. Ella does not or cannot ask questions as she did when Mammy was still alive. Instead, she must wait and listen intently for whatever Mammy is willing to share whenever she is willing. The psychic rapport stands in for the researcher-subject rapport, and renders the ethnographic mainstay of the prepared questionnaire ineffective. Ella appears to be a passive receptacle of information, who engages in practices of illicit or irrational listening. Illicit listening, however, is also explicitly framed in the novel as a highly politicized, resistive process with roots in plantation slavery.

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[62] Ibid.

As Ella learns through their psychic rapport, Mammy's grandfather—"Grandpappy Moses"—was enslaved on a plantation in the years preceding the U.S. civil war.[63] On the plantation, a collective political awakening takes hold amongst the slaves when news about the civil war and the Emancipation Proclamation spreads to the chagrin of the plantation master. Their awakening is notably described in terms of hearing: Mammy recounts that a "great listening" had begun, and that news about the civil war and the Emancipation Declaration had settled "within their inner ear".[64]

The plantation master eventually kills Grandpappy Moses, who aids the spread of the news amongst the slaves and attempts to flee the plantation repeatedly. Listening in this context is not a passive or neutral activity. Illicit listening—listening beyond the sanctioned parameters of the dominant structure—signals political awakening, a coming-into-consciousness. Ella's lifelong journey of listening to Mammy King throughout the novel engenders a similar form of political awakening—she learns to embrace her racial identity and turn away from the call to respectability that has thus far kept her from a sense of community belonging.

Ella's descriptions of the physiological experience of listening depict the process as putting pressure on the boundaries of her body. Her first psychic experience of Mammy's voice appears to induce a phase shift in Ella's body; as she describes, "my head grew large suffused by

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[63] Grandpappy Moses bears a clear metaphorical resemblance to Marcus Garvey. Both men are notably charismatic speakers who have the power to garner a broad following; both men are passionate about spreading messages of black pride and mobilizing black communities around questions of racial injustice. Marcus Garvey was even famously referred to by some as "the Negro Moses"—both Garvey and Grandpappy Moses seek to shepherd their people to freedom from white supremacist rule. Before Mammy King reveals later in the story that she was a Garveyite organizer, she reveals, through the narrative of her grandfather's life and death, that she sees herself as having been born into the Garveyite tradition and into a life of political activism on behalf of black communities. Marcus Garvey was eventually successfully imprisoned on charges of mail fraud in 1923 and deported to Jamaica upon release in 1927.

[64] Brodber, *Louisiana*, 83.

my liquefied body" and she becomes "all ears".[65] The imagery in this scene, which depicts Ella as entering a state of hyperacusis, magnifies the sense that Ella does not have a discerning ear, but rather an indiscriminate one that can perceive all registers of the soundscape. Indeed, her capacity for hearing has been so radically expanded that it becomes her dominant sense. Further, the imagery of the swelling of her head signals an expanded intellectual capacity. The liquefaction and suffusion of the organs of sense perception (the body) throughout the cognitive center (the brain) rejects notions of mind-body dualism that undergird notions of objectivity, that permit the intellectual to isolate the cognitive process from embodiment and sustain the fantasy of a thinking subject untouched by ideology.

As a consequence of the expansion of Ella's aural capacities, she undergoes a number of aesthetic and lifestyle changes: she becomes a vegetarian, allows her hair to grow natural, and begins sewing her own clothes rather than buying them. These changes are historically specific and correspond with Brodber's own lifestyle changes in her own coming to political consciousness. For example, Brodber recalls the 1960s and 70s and the impact of Black Power and the feminist movement on her decision to wear her hair in an Afro. Her decision garnered great ridicule and disdain in Jamaica[66]; she recounts being called a "madwoman" and a "communist" and notes that "the mystique was conceptualized in terms of Left things."[67] Similarly, when Ella attempts to return the tape recorder to Columbia after many years and meets with her parents' attorney to claim money they've left for her after their retirement to Jamaica, Ella is similarly perceived as a madwoman. For both women, their appearances signaled an

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[65] Ibid., 50-1.
[66] "Erna Brodber, celebrated thinker, writer," *All Woman* in the *Jamaica Observer*, April 22, 2002, http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/magazines/allwoman/24430_Erna-Brodber--celebrated-thinker--writer.
[67] "Put Your Bucket Down: A Conversation with Erna Brodber," Petal Samuel.

affiliation with ideologies of racial pride, anticolonialism, and anti-capitalism, ideologies that posed serious threats to colonial and neocolonial orders and thus were relegated to the realm of "madness," resembling the function of the sonic category of noise.

By the end of the novel, Ella's parents refuse to accept her lifestyle or correspond with her, and Columbia alleges that it has no record of her affiliation with the university. Ella's rejection of the terms of her scholarly charge to contribute to the WPA archives permit her to pursue a meaningful connection to a black community through which she can repair the experience of racial alienation she experienced through her affiliations with familial and state institutions that disparage black communities and cultural production. By learning to "hear other frequencies," Ella escapes the cycle of colonial haunting that imposes self-estrangement.

Low Fidelity Aesthetics

While the Colonial Secretary Office documents aim on one hand to expand the province of noise and nuisance to maintain hierarchies of class and color, their regulating exercises also specifically extended to instruments and technologies of sound. Attributing blame to musical instruments as a way to furtively make explicitly racialized, classed, and gendered indictments demonstrated the capacity of a version of technological modernity to act as a seemingly anti-ideological buffer for the ongoing colonial project. While there were ways that the emergence and availability of new technologies blurred class and national boundaries[68]—the letter to the Colonial Secretary highlights that the lively soundscapes of brothels and temperance bars were

[68] As Lara Putnum notes, "Caribbean popular culture of the interwar years confounds all attempts to draw bright lines between high and low, foreign and local, autochtonous and commercial. New technologies were speeding the circulation of sounds around the region. The image of an islander returning from labor abroad with 'a Victrola wind-up gramophone' for the folks at home had become iconic." Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 169.

an attraction for *all classes*—sound technologies were still folded into older discourses of Afro-Caribbean primitivism and European cultural supremacy.

American travel writer and author A. Hyatt Verrill in his survey of Jamaican musical traditions explained that "West Indian negroes are extremely poetical and musical"[69] (although he qualifies that they are "not artistic") and offers a litany of acoustic instruments used in Jamaica as examples, noting that "as a rule, the natives employ the conventional form."[70] However, accounting for the emergence of sound technologies on the market, he qualifies, "I am speaking of the orchestras as found in the remote villages and among the country folk, for in the larger town all the noise and music-making instruments of civilization are in use; and even in distant settlements and huts the ubiquitous gramophone is all too common."[71] There is a tension in Verrill's description between a colonial vision of black subjects as anti-technological, pre-modern, and uncivilized and as technologically-fluent participants in "civilization". He is unable to uphold the distinction between the pre-modern village and the modern town—as he notes, gramophones were becoming an important part of the soundscape, "even in distant settlements and huts". The idea of the natural musicality (as distinct from "artistry") of black Jamaicans is troubled by the idea of technological engagement. The designation "noise" appears here again as both constitutive of modern civilization and as somehow impure; he imagines sound technologies as producing something other than music, a soundscape less clean and idyllic.

Brodber's novel puts pressure on the racial, national, and class politics of technological modernity by staging the central plot elements through engagements with what would have been (in the novel's opening historical setting of the 1930s) cutting edge sonic technologies. *Louisiana*

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[69] A. Hyatt Verrill, *Jamaica of Today* (New York, Dodd, Mead, 1931), 143.
[70] Ibid., 145.
[71] Ibid., 145-6.

both boasts a wide and diverse tapestry of sound, music, and sonic technologies and mobilizes as metaphor the idioms produced for engagements with these technologies. In Brodber's acknowledgments for the novel, she dedicates the novel to a number of family members and intellectual influences, and closes with the line, "We read you loud and clear." Using the language of radio broadcasting, Brodber makes a threefold gesture: she sets up the novel as engaging with technological modernity; appropriates the discourse of radio broadcast as a way of describing interpersonal connection, inheritance, and solidarity[72]; and establishes the novel's central negotiation between sound and text—between conventional "reading" and the clear transmission of a broadcast.

A number of sound reproduction technologies form the backdrop of Brodber's characters' lives. During Ella's psychic communications with Mammy King, Mammy repeatedly invokes the presence of a Victrola (a popular brand of gramophone) as a sole marker of place in her memory.[73] Decades later in the novel, Ella and her husband Reuben inherit money from their families and begin exploring innovations in audio recording by recording music on disc.[74] Even while the central action of the novel revolves around Ella's conversion from a classically trained anthropologist into a spiritual medium, the novel does not sustain colonial distinctions between a pre-modern Afro-Caribbean spirituality and a Western secular modernity. Instead, Ella's transition into a medium is only made possible through her engagements with a single sound reproduction technology, one that takes center stage in the novel as a main character: the tape recorder.

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[72] For more on how the circulation of sound has engendered forms of African diasporic solidarity, see Tsitsi Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[73] Brodber, *Louisiana*, 61.
[74] Ibid., 136.

When Ella is dispatched to Louisiana to interview Mammy King, the university loans her an early prototype of the tape recorder to record their dialogue. Ella describes the tape recorder as a precious, fragile instrument whose proper use and care are tantamount: "I did not want the people's recording machine to hurt its head. That would be embarrassment plus. I from nowhere was one of the first to be given this instrument, this precious instrument, first of its kind, donated to the programme by the manufacturers."[75] The tape recorder acts as a symbol of the university to which Ella is beholden—in her view, being entrusted with the tape recorder, especially as a woman "from nowhere," is an undeserved honor and privilege, a marker of status. Ella's feeling that she is an unusual and unworthy recipient of this technology is historical: being "from nowhere"—whether referencing the originary displacement of the Middle Passage crossing or the contemporary displacements of diasporic movement—is a reflection on denigrations of Afro-Caribbean subjects as historyless or outside of history.[76] Further, the "embarrassment plus" Ella references hearkens again to her concerns with protecting her own and her parents' reputations as competent and productive. Thus, the stigma of black intellectual incompetency and unbelonging in the academy is linked again to historical concerns around national belonging. For Ella, completing this project well means the difference between confirming and disproving her belonging in the academy and in the United States altogether.

The tape recorder is alternately personified as a fragile, helpless child and as a predator, one that sustains its integrity by feeding on Mammy King's mind and restraining and eroding her body. The function of the tape recorder as a technology of archive and sound reproduction

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[75] Ibid., 32.

[76] This has been heavily debated in Caribbean criticism. Perhaps one of the most infamous revivals of this colonial sentiment in the Caribbean was V.S. Naipul's declaration in his 1962 work *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Colonial Societies*, "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies."

technology that can only sustain itself by neutralizing its subject is, again, illustrative of Brodber's concern with the alienation of researcher from subject. However, after Mammy dies, her spirit possesses the tape recorder and it begins to behave in unusual ways. It becomes a technological extension of Ella's hyperacusustic hearing—in order to catalyze her psychic rapport with Mammy, Ella must replay the content of the tape recorder. Further, where it should mark a critical distance between research and subject, it instead helps to engender a radical and proliferating intimacy between Ella, Mammy King, and a number of other characters. Here, the curious alterfunction (rather than malfunction) of the technology poses an alternate paradigm of aural values within which the tape recorder—and by extension, the black voices they record—can be valued.

Ella's tape recorder both exceeds and reneges on its duties as an extension of Ella's ears and memory; it records beyond what even Ella herself can hear, understand, and transcribe. The machine captures those items which Ella cannot yet transpose in writing: "those sighs and those laughs and other non-verbal expressions of emotion", "the dog's bark" and "the wind whispering,"[77] even recording in Ella's absence. It later reveals content that Ella herself cannot remember hearing or speaking, and ultimately, begins generating content that was not present on the reel before. As such, Ella's tape recorder is torn between its charge as a reliable and "objective" anthropological and historical tool and its function as an unpredictable and esoteric vehicle for psychic communication.

The tape recorder's refusal to faithfully reproduce what it records is exemplary of its function as the site of production for what I call a "low fidelity aesthetic". Riffing on the audio quality classification of "high fidelity" recording—which marks high quality sound through the

[77] Brodber, *Louisiana,* 14, 43.

absence of noise and distortion—a "low fidelity" aesthetic values, embraces, and indeed amplifies noise and distortion. Rather than aiming to evoke a sense of aural realism (the feeling of being transported, without mediation, to the scene of a sonic event), low fidelity aesthetics highlight mediation and remove, and emphasize the generative capacity of mediating objects and processes. Where a high fidelity aesthetic aims to mask the process of mediation by indulging an audiophilic fantasy of unobstructed access to a version of the "real," a low fidelity aesthetic highlights the real as an illusory, ephemeral, and loosely defined production. While the former seeks to mirror and to offer unlimited and faithful reproductions of the same, the latter becomes a site of proliferation, spontaneity, and excess.

The idea of "low fidelity aesthetics" resists false socio-sonic hierarchies between music and noise, and between what Verrill describes as "musicality" and "artistry". In this context, what appear to be failures of design, quality, or function, are purposefully staged in order to disrupt attempts to invoke seeming objective systems of aural value in order to render black cultural production illegible or criminal. This strategy appears in the novel in at least two registers: first, through the alterfunctioning of the tape recorder and of Ella's hearing; and next, on the level of genre, in the very form of the novel. Brodber's novel is composed of a number of fictional items: an "editor's note" from the fictional "Black World Press," an interview transcript, a collection of journal entries, and cover letter from Ella's husband accompanying the preceding materials. Not only does the novel claim to be a collection of non-fictional materials, it fails to accord to the formal conventions of each of these genres. For example, the interview transcript contains clear indications of a speaker that corresponds with each line of text. However, in the context of the novel where several subjects inhabit and articulate themselves through Ella (where an Enlightenment individualism cannot stand), refusing to name a single

designated speaker makes sense and requires alternate formal conventions. Gestures like these call attention to the ways in which seemingly neutral categories of form or designations of quality (such as sound quality) presume cultural and political perspectives that furtively govern social relations.

Another key qualifier of "high fidelity" sound is an accurate "frequency response"—that is, the direct correspondence of an auditory device's inputs and outputs, or its ability to faithfully reproduce (output) the range of musical tones it has recorded (input), at the exact volume and within the precise interval of time in which those tones were produced (accuracy). Ella's tape recorder spectacularly fails this test of precision: it not only regularly produces content that does not match what was recorded on the device, Ella is called to train herself to hear "other frequencies". Where an ideal frequency response requires a device to reproduce the range of human hearing, the tape recorder (at the behest of Mammy King) must exceed this range, entering the realm of infra-/ultrasound, or the range of what Steve Goodman refers to as "unsound". In the realm of "unsound," which includes the "nexus of not-yet-audible frequencies," not only can sound be inaudible, it can "become tactile" as well as "neuro-affective".[78] The imagery of the radical dissolution of her body is not only a sign of the presence of "sound as force"[79], but as significant of the tape recorder's simultaneous failure to meet the standards of high-fidelity sound, and profound exceeding of those standards, beyond human perception and tolerance, and beyond the category of the human altogether.

The term "fidelity" boasts broader associations with ideas of conformity and loyalty. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first listed definition of "fidelity" is "the quality of being

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[78] Steven Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), x.
[79] Ibid.

faithful; faithfulness, loyalty, unswerving allegiance to a person, party, bond, etc." (OED) Other listed definitions include, "conjugal faithfulness," "strict conformity to truth or fact," and "the degree to which a sound or picture reproduced or transmitted by any device resembles the original". The language used to make determinations of moral value—linked to behaviors such as monogamy, honesty, unconditional loyalty, and allegiance to a "person, party, or bond"—thus produces the discourse used to determine the quality and value of an audio recording. Our value judgments about audio quality are produced within the context of our understanding of what makes good, obedient citizens.

Another OED definition of the word describes it as the act of "tak[ing] an oath of fealty" (OED). Oaths of fealty—which hearken back to medieval European feudal relations between the state (via the monarch), lords, vassals, and serfs—signal "fidelity's" usage as a marker of allegiance to a political order through the maintenance of social and economic contracts. Determinations about audio quality, then, in part take their cue from the context of political obedience; a "high fidelity," or "hi-fi," recording describes a sonic object that sustains a sort of contract between itself and an original event or performance—namely, that it will guard, sustain, and immortalize the integrity and authority of the original through an endless series of repetitions. In *Louisiana*, the tape recorder's failure to repeat what it records aligns with Ella's refusal to repeat the conventions of her academic discipline, and with her break with her parents' sustenance of the mores of colonial respectability.

Upon the tape recorder's initial introduction into the text, it appears not as a neutral mediating technology, but as an adversary—the language that characterizes the tape recorder's (and Ella's) relationship to Mammy's life narrative is violent, intrusive, and foreboding. Ella's first words to Mammy King in their introductory interview reference a prior agreement to record

using the tape recorder: "I'm putting this tube round your neck…remember we talked about that?...so I can get into my black box here all that you have in that head you're so determined to dry out in the sun."[80] Ella's reminder amplifies the physical and psychological invasiveness of the recording process; her gesture of wrapping the tube around Mammy's neck bears an eerie resemblance to strangulation. Her hesitance here betrays that she perhaps already recognizes her methods as problematic—that she has somehow drawn Mammy King into a bad deal—but she calls upon the terms of their agreement to foreclose further possible challenges to the tape recorder's presence in the interview. The tape recorder demonstrates a simultaneous and contradictory set of desires here: to record and to suffocate Mammy's speech. This image hearkens to what De Certeau's references as a process of "rendering inorganic" that is often implicit to the creation of archives, noting that the creation of "documents" entail procedures that "exile them from practice in order to confer upon them the status of 'abstract' objects of knowledge….The material is created through concerted actions which delimit it by carving it out from the sphere of use, actions which seek also to know it beyond the limits of use, and which aim at giving it a coherent new use."[81] Mammy King, a living archive, must figuratively be rendered inorganic and static, converted into an archival object.

Next, the tape recorder does not behave as a neutral receptacle for the information in Mammy King's head, but as an eager predator with an insatiable appetite. Ella represents the tape recorder as a "hungry" object that will only be satiated by Mammy's "brains". She remarks: "So shall we now pick through those brains and put what's in them in my hungry black box?"[82] Likening the recording process to a kind of lobotomy, Ella's language again raises questions

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[80] Brodber, *Louisiana*, 12.
[81] Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 73.
[82] Brodber, *Louisiana*, 18.

about the benevolence of her project of archiving. In this model of ethnography, Mammy King is a subject whose use value is expended upon having her narrative recorded.

It is no surprise then that Mammy King reveals herself to be an uncooperative interview subject. Ella's first command to recall her earliest memories and "take me with you. Tell me what you see, tell me what you hear and what you feel." Mammy responds evasively with a laugh, one that Ella describes as a "runaway laugh".[83] Mammy's explicitly evades the desires of the tape recorder. Later, Mammy responds to Ella's insistent questioning with a "sigh that leaked from our history".[84] Mammy's first expressive resort is to non-verbal sound—sound which is not easily codified as testimony in a recording or transcript, but which piques Ella's attention as significant: "the girl made a note to be sure to find some way of transposing those sighs and those laughs and other non-verbal expressions of emotions into the transcript she would submit to her masters."[85]

Several interviews later, when Ella continues to barrage Mammy with questions about her origins, Mammy appropriates Ella's line of questioning about origins and directs them toward Ella. She demands to know who Ella is—what she's studying, what line of work she hopes to enter, and where she and her parents are from. Mammy's barrage of questions is rapid and authoritative; Ella remarks that Mammy "is totally in charge" of the interview.[86] Mammy King's questions reveal a great insecurity for Ella—she knows little about her Jamaican heritage because her parents have never shared with her any stories about their culture and origins. Ella's discomfort in this moment attunes her to the complex and sensitive process of sharing

[83] Ibid.,13.
[84] Ibid., 14.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., 19.

information about one's origins, especially if—as in Ella's case and the case of members of the African diaspora more broadly—one's connection to one's origins is tenuous, fragmentary, heavily mediated, withheld, painful, or even dangerous to recount.

Mammy, however, stubbornly continues to question Ella about her Jamaican origins and recounting her own knowledge of the island until, finally, she outlasts the spool of the tape recorder: "The recording machine goes 'ping' and the girl is Hamlet again; whether 'tis nobler to turn the tape over and to go on or just throw the towel in".[87] Frustrated by her failure to record any testimony from Mammy that will be meaningful to her employers at Columbia, Ella packs up the tape recorder and prepares to leave for the day. Mammy, in her final act before her death, instructs the disheartened Ella to leave the tape recorder with her overnight, noting, "Machine's mighty heavy. And so is your bag. Leave it with me and stop puckering your brow".[88] Here, the transference of ownership of the tape recorder from Ella to Mammy signals Mammy's final appropriation of the novel's key sonic technology.

In Mammy's hands, the tape recorder becomes an extraordinarily different technology, behaving in unexpected and erratic ways. Mammy has not only appropriated the tape recorder and shifted its internal logics, she also attempts to relieve Ella of the pressure to accord with and assimilate within academic institutions of knowledge production that are limiting and limited. By taking the heavy bag from Ella, Mammy literally and figuratively takes the weight off her shoulders, and frees her of the demands of the institutions she feels compelled to answer to and make herself legible and acceptable within.

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[87] Ibid., 21.
[88] Ibid., 22.

First, the tape recorder magnifies the axes of Ella's hearing, permitting her to hear through time, into the past. Shortly after Mammy's death, Ella begins listening to the recordings she made in the few interviews she conducted with Mammy King before her death and soon discovers that what were long stretches of silence in their interview are filled with content she has never heard before. While considering this curious new content, she realizes quickly that a voice that she hears on the spool is not a voice she recognizes as Mammy's. She discovers eventually that it is the voice of Lowly, Mammy King's long-deceased friend who had the powers of a medium. Ella asks what seems like an impossible question: "When and how did Lowly's speech get on the recording machine if she had spoken in the past when it was not there? Mammy must have recalled her….Mammy on her way to the other world recalled that event and so powerfully that it was recorded on the machine".[89]

The use of the term "recall" here is significant—Ella realizes that Mammy has remembered Lowly so powerfully that her spirit returns to the site of Mammy's death. Ella concludes that in the days preceding Mammy's death, the spirit of her friend Lowly "had come to accompany her [Mammy] home"[90], to the realm of the dead. The power of memory here is quite literally the raising of the dead, and the tape recorder demonstrates a strange ability to record the registers in which the dead speak, echoing Ella's abilities to communicate with the dead. The boundaries of human hearing no longer apply—just as Ella can "hear other frequencies," the tape recorder can record them.

After working with the tape recorder for some time, Ella begins to realize that there is not only content on the recorder that she *couldn't hear* before, but rather, there is content that indeed

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[89] Ibid., 60.
[90] Ibid.

was not present on the recorder before. Ella, who at this point is intimately familiar with the contents of the reel, writes, "All I know is that I heard Mammy's voice on the reel saying something she hadn't said before."[91] The new information Mammy shares is intimately tied with the reel itself; her voice is notably "on the reel," rather than in Ella's mind. Thus, the tape recorder is imagined as a crucial site of productivity and not simply incidental to the productivity of Ella's psychic rapport with Mammy King.

Furthermore, Ella parallels the tape recorder with the "magic pot" from Anancy folktales. In the popular folktale, Anancy's family is starving because of a drought in the land; however, Anancy remains comfortable and well fed because he possesses a magic pot that spontaneously produces a bounty of food on command. When Anancy is away, however, his wife washes the pot and it consequently loses its magic. Considering this folktale, Ella reflects, "What magic thing did we know? The recording machine of course….Let me accept this recording machine as the magic pot."[92] Just like Anancy's cooking pot, the tape recorder spontaneously generates material; it proliferates unexpectedly. One difference, Ella notes, is that "it does appear that magic pot cannot be cleaned".[93] Not only does the tape recorder produce excess, it cannot be stopped. Where the tape recorder is prized as a technology that can protect the objective integrity of a soundscape through capture and repetition, Ella's tape recorder acts as a medium that negotiates multiple synchronized and parallel soundscapes.

Thus, the tape recorder transforms from a guardian of a carefully curated version of the soundscape into the proponent of a radically expanded soundscape. The tape recorder can only expand Ella's capacity to hear through time and past the threshold of death through what read as

[91] Ibid., 80.
[92] Ibid., 79-80.
[93] Ibid., 80.

distortions—deviations from what Ella perceived to be the original sonic event of her interview with Mammy. The moments on the recorder where Mammy seemingly refused to speak—that appeared to simply record valueless ambient noise on the reel—generated valuable content upon a replay on the transformed technology. Rather than stand as the inverse of the construct of a pre-modern Afro-Caribbean spirituality, the tape recorder becomes an integral within its schema.

Brodber's experiments with sound and hearing in the novel trouble colonial attempts to stymie black cultural production and political resistance through the regulation of the soundscape. Where Ella was dispatched to Louisiana to record a version of Mammy King's life that would narrate her family's ties to slavery, Mammy ends up yielding a narrative of Black Nationalism instead through her work as a Garveyite organizer. However, Mammy must yield this narrative through unconventional avenues: through a psychic rapport and by speaking on "other frequencies". Through Ella's expanded hearing and the tape recorder's transformation, Brodber demands that we reclaim sensory experience as a part of the ongoing struggle toward decolonization in the postcolonial moment.

The letter from the colonial secretary's office and the *Gleaner* article both attempt to forge decisive and authoritative lines between music and noise. They reveal the soundscape to be a site of lively contention about what should or should not constitute culture, and what forms of business, recreation, and sociality are respectable or shameful. The soundscape of the brothel is disturbing not only because of the volume of the gramophones, but because of the attendant and overlapping ambient noises of "conversation and laughter"; it is about persons who make themselves heard, who announce their presences and pleasures via mediums, and at times of day, that conduct, rather than submerge, their sounds. Ella similarly opens herself to the announced presences of the dead, even as it places her outside of the frame of respectable academic

production. The novel's forwarding of a "low fidelity aesthetic" is both a characteristic of the work's sound technologies *and* a methodological approach that embraces and takes seriously those forms of work and knowledge that appear to fall short of institutional standards and regulations. To turn to noise is to insist upon the renewal of the imagination, mobilized toward still yet unheard possibilities for freedom, collectivity, knowing, and being.

CHAPTER TWO: "Everything is Now": The Terrasonic in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Free Enterprise*

Terrasonic Fields

Where Brodber's experiments with hearing highlight the dead as an important, alternative set of historical sources, Cliff broadens this capability to the landscape, animals, and even inanimate objects. Here, we move beyond the notion of the witnessing and testimonial powers of the dead to also consider the terrain, flora, and fauna as impressionable media that absorb, retain, and echo the past. The fault lines between colonial and postcolonial moments are marked by landscapes whose alternating wild verdancy and controlled sparseness produce distinct acoustic fields. Open and clear landscapes and soundscapes invite colonial panauralism by making its subjects clearly audible, and mark obedient and respectable subjects; crowded and overgrown landscapes and soundscapes evade and resist colonial regulation and mask the sounds of their inhabitants. One may speak here of *terrasonic fields*—marking acoustic fields produced by the historical interfacing of plant and animal life in discrete periods of time: if the dead don't tell the tale of colonial extermination, the landscape, its inhabitants, and objects do.

Cliff's and Brodber's works intersect in curious ways: both writers situate works between Jamaica and early twentieth-century Louisiana, both boast Afro-Caribbean women protagonists who choose to abandon the standards of respectability set by their families; and both women establish transformative intimacies with African-American women in joint struggles against global anti-blackness. Both women also struggle with feelings of alienation from their families and their shared home island of Jamaica, a sense of placelessness that is only ameliorated through black diasporic coalition-building. This sense of being alienated from one's family, but embraced by a wider diasporic collective serves as a way of emphasizing the importance of

global black solidarity in light of the lures, failures, and coercions of structures of national identity and belonging.

First, I turn first to Cliff's earlier work, *No Telephone to Heaven*, as a theoretical framework for reading one of her least-studied later works, *Free Enterprise*. Across Cliff's oeuvre, the fissures and continuities between the colonial period and independence in the Caribbean are rendered through the intertwining of nature (i.e. – flora, water) and sound. From generation to generation, the land and the acoustics of the land shift noticeably. Perhaps the most apt illustration of this acoustics of fissure appears in the opening scenes of Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, when the protagonist, Clare Savage, describes a group of guerilla fighters/farmers who must clear a plot of land that has gone to bush, or become overgrown and fallen into "ruination," due to neglect. The land, which belonged to Clare's maternal grandmother who lived under the colonial regime in Jamaica, once was the idyllic site of an orderly flower garden and a nearby rushing river. However, since the death of Clare's grandmother, the land has been supplanted by a dense forest and a variety of wildlife.

Where Clare's grandmother once cultivated an orderly garden (dedicated to God), the land has now given way to disorder: "these flowers, chosen for color and texture and how each would set off the next, revealing splendor and glory, her order, her choices, reflecting the order, the choices, of His universe, had been haphazardly supplanted by wilder and brighter ones, exploding disorder into her scheme."[94] More notably, however, the acoustics of the land have shifted radically:

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[94] Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (New York: Dutton, 1987), 8.

> Now, the place had a different pattern of sounds altogether. The only sound that remained from the grandmother's time was the rush of the riverwater, but that, which had once sounded clearly through the open grove of citrus, was muffled by the new thick growth and fainter, more distant than before. It competed with the creak and rustle of the coconut fronds, the noises of the animals moving through the undergrowth, the population of wild birds, and the steady gnawing of the rats making nests.[95]

Cliff renders the transition from the colonial period to independence—the distinction between the periods in which Clare's grandmother and Clare lived on this land—in aural terms. The soundscape of the pre-independence period is marked by the idyllic sound of riverwater, and characterized by open, clear, and ordered land that creates ideal acoustics for the sounding of the river. The post independence period, however, is depicted as a chaotic soundscape that blends the "wild" noises of the flora and fauna that thrive in the overgrown forest and suppresses the "rush of the riverwater". The soundscape of the independence period, like the overgrown forest, is crowded, unpredictable, and "competing" where the colonial soundscape is "open" and ordered. In the colonial soundscape, a clear hierarchy of sound exists: "wild" noise has been sufficiently regulated and suppressed (through the clearing and maintenance of the land) to create an openness that will allow the riverwater—the only sonic relic of Clare's grandmother's time—to flourish.

There is also a clear distinction in the character of the sounds that populate each soundscape. The colonial soundscape is marked by the "rush" of the riverwater, evoking a kind of idyllic natural harmony. The post-colonial soundscape is populated with "noises":

[95] Ibid., 9.

"creak[ing]," "rustl[ing]," "gnawing". Aural distance coincides with temporal distance—just as the post-colonial period marks a kind of temporal distance from the colonial period, the rushing riverwater now sounds "fainter" and "more distant than before". However, this is not a narrative of progress—of the forward march of time, and of events that dissolve in the face of newer events. The rush of the riverwater is distant, but not gone; it is instead subsumed within the now-chaotic soundscape. Time, here, does not march forward, but rather, it accretes, and yields a palimpsest of periods and events.

Clare and her colleagues grow a variety of produce for subsistence and trade, and use the profits to purchase arms that can fund their guerilla resistance. The overgrown forest, which muffles the sound of the river, also protects them from detection. Clearly evocative of the Maroon resistance tactics of their forebears, Clare and her colleagues' activities bookend *No Telephone to Heaven* and are outlined in acoustic chaos. In the closing of the novel, Clare's guerilla group is ambushed and killed as they prepare to ambush an American film company directing a film about Nanny of the Maroons. This scene is immediately preceded by another, where the white director of the film derides the island, proclaiming, "These people are used to selling themselves. I don't think they know from revolution."[96] Thus, we are faced here with the irony of a production that ostensibly appears to celebrate the nation's revolutionary figures and history in the same instance as it ridicules and denies its contemporary revolutionary potential. As the director claims: "'about revolution…the class system wouldn't permit. I mean, they're more English than the English in that regard. At least, the ones on top are. The ones who call the shots.'"[97]

[96] Ibid., 202.
[97] Ibid., 203.

The shoot commences with the director's command to Christopher, an Afro-Jamaican man on set dressed as Sasabonsam—the Fante "monster" of folklore—to "howl," "bellow as loud as you can. Try to wake the dead."[98] We quickly learn that the scene of loud howling is orchestrated as a distraction to the guerilla fighters to "mask other noises," "[o]f the actors and technicians, retreating the scene and locking themselves in trailers, as they had been warned," and confusing the fighters who were "waiting for the soft signal of the abeng".[99] In this scene, the soundscape becomes, yet again, a contested site. Where the crowded acoustics of Clare's grandmother's land marked the tumultuous continuities and fissures between the colonial and postcolonial periods, the acoustic chaos of this scene marks the unpredictable irruption and suppression of revolutionary potential in independent Jamaica.

As Christopher howls, the set lights are abruptly cut and the cast and crew run for cover—as previously instructed—as a helicopter descends above the set and opens fire on Clare and the guerilla fighters. As Clare is shot, the text bursts into a series of phrases, sounds, and noises, including: "O je t'adore," "poor-me-one," "tres-tontos-son," "kitty-woo," "whip," "back-raw," "cutacoo," "cu coo," "piju," "cuk," "tuc-tuc-tuc," "eee-kah," "krrr-re-ek," "cawak," "hoo hoo," "be be," "kut ktu," and "cwaah".[100] Amidst the noise, and at the moment of her death, Clare's lifelong search for language (both literally as the language of her birthplace and language abstracted as the marker of belonging) is resolved: "She remembered language. Then it was

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[98] Ibid., 207.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid., 208. As Belinda Edmundson argues powerfully about this scene, the noises here "signify the unharnessed possibilities of discourse: the power to name, signify, create. These remain embedded in the landscape, future potential to reclaim representation." Belinda Edmondson, "Race, Privilege, and the Politics of (Re)Writing History: An Analysis of the Novels of Michelle Cliff," *Callaloo* 16:1 (Winter 1993): 190.

gone."[101] I have reproduced here in some measure the blank space the text includes between "then" and "it was gone" to mark what I read as an important moment of textual opacity. I suggest that we resist reading the grammar of this sentence as simply "then, it was gone," with "then" serving as an adverbial modifier for "it was gone". Rather, including the blank space into the grammar of the phrase, we might read the blank (similarly to how we might read it in NourbeSe's *Zong!*) as the moment that marks or contains the apex of Clare's linguistic fluency, as a moment when Clare articulates herself in a way that cannot be represented within the signifying framework of the text. Instead, the text synaesthetically evokes silence, the visual of the blank highlighting silence as a force which parses words apart and disrupts grammar.

This scene interweaves what appears to be meaningless noise amidst language: the noises evoked here appear to evoke a range of things: the noise of an incessant whip against the back of a slave ("whip-whip-whip" and "back-raw, back-raw")[102], the crow of a rooster ("cutacoo," "cu, coo," "cuk, cuk"), the hooting of an owl ("hoo hoo"), the grating of a crow ("cwaah cwaah"), and the noises of gunfire, both of machine guns ("tuc-tuc-tuc," "krrr-re-ek") and pistols ("piju, piju," "cawak, cawak"). On one hand, this array of noises demonstrates the crippling exacting of the full and historical force of colonial and state authorities in the subjugation of working class Afro-Caribbean peoples, whether through the whip against the "raw" backs of slaves or the heavy, rapid fire of industrial machine guns opposed only by the feeble return fire of the guerilla fighters. On the other hand, however, the predominance of the noises of birds tells another story of defiance and persistence in the face of overwhelming force.

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[101] Ibid.

[102] There is also a deliberate sonic similarity to the term "backra," which Cliff defines in the novel's glossary as "white; white identified. Probably from the West African *mbakara*, he who surrounds or governs. Some Jamaicans believe the word derives from back-raw, the condition of a slave's back after whipping".

Herman Melville offers a way of reading the rooster's crow in this scene. In his short story, "Cock-a-Doodle-Doo! Or the Crowing of the Noble Cock Beneventano"—a story bursting with sexual innuendo—he describes the crowing of the rooster as signifying an act of defiance even in the face of death, in full view of impending devastation:

> Nor did it sound like the foolish, vain-glorious crow of some young sophomorean cock, who knew not the world, and was beginning life in audacious gay spirits, because in wretched ignorance of what might be to come. It was the crow of a cock who crowed not without advice; the crow of a cock who knew a thing or two; the crow of a cock who had fought the world and got the better of it and was resolved to crow, though the earth should heave and the heavens should fall. It was a wise crow; an invincible crow; a philosophic crow; a crow of all crows. I returned home once more full of reinvigorated spirits, with a dauntless sort of feeling. I thought over my debts and other troubles, and over the unlucky risings of the poor oppressed peoples abroad, and over the railroad and steamboat accidents, and over even the loss of my dear friend, with a calm and good-natured rapture of defiance, which astounded myself. I felt as though I could meet Death, and invite him to dinner, and toast the Catacombs with him, in pure overflow of self-reliance and sense of universal security.

It is also noteworthy perhaps that the protagonist of Melville's tale cannot determine from whence the sound of the rooster issues, except that it issues from the east—signifying that defiance in death is not the mark of an ending, but of a beginning; it is catalytic rather than catastrophic: "I listened attentively now, striving to mark from what direction the crow came. But it so charged and replenished, and made bountiful and overflowing all the air, that it was

impossible to say from what precise point the exultation came. All that I could decide upon was this: the crow came from out of the east, and not from out of the west." Finally, Melville's landscape is also marked by crowded acoustics that make sound localization impossible: "Besides, the undulations of the land, the abuttings of the mountains into the rolling hill and valley below, produced strange echoes, and reverberations, and multiplications, and accumulations of resonance, very remarkable to hear, and very puzzling to think of." Just as the guerilla fighters in Cliff's novel utilize the crowded acoustics of the land to mask themselves from authorities, Melville's rooster's crow achieves a kind of sonic omnipotence precisely by interweaving itself with the landscape's acoustics, a space we might understand as a "low fidelity" landscape (in accordance with my usage of this designation in the preceding chapter): a crowdedness that makes possible a kind of revolutionary opacity, similar to what the text evokes through the blank space.

Melville's formation of "accumulations of resonance" is a useful point of departure for reading the sonic-temporal palimpsest of the rushing river and the noises of the overgrown forest in the opening of the novel alongside the violent and noisy conclusion. Whereas Melville's "accumulation" denotes the layering of noises through time, the simultaneity of the whip and the gunfire in the final scene suggest that these events have not occurred in sequence, but rather, are occurring all at once. Returning briefly to the opening scene, the narrator describes the guerilla fighters clearing the overgrown land as evoking their forebears as they cut cane: "At first they used machetes, fixing themselves in a line against the green, the incredibly alive green, swinging their blades in unison, sometimes singing songs they remembered from the grandmothers and grandfathers who had swung their own blades once in the canefields."[103] Here, again, the

[103] Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*, 10.

clearing of the land seems to occur in a parallel or simultaneous temporal zone to the cutting of cane, brought into relation through the connective tissue of song. Thus, "cumulation"—the formation of a gathered or heaped mass at a single site—becomes a more precise framework for viewing the novel's rendering of events.

The term "resonance" signifies usefully in both its colloquial iterations, as that which echoes or reverberates, and its use in physics, denoting "the reinforcement or prolongation of sound by reflection or by the synchronous vibration of a surrounding space or neighboring object".[104] In both scenes, we encounter the sonic paradox of echo, or a single event that is recurring, but whose recurrences are unique events in themselves with distinct conditions of production. Further, drawing on the term's latter iteration, these scenes illustrate similar and simultaneous occurrences that amplify one another on contact. The clearing of the land and the shooting of the guerilla fighters in the novel becomes far more than those events in themselves—they necessarily immerse us both in the brutality of plantation slavery and in the open horizons of possibility that have been forged by black revolutionaries through time.

No Telephone to Heaven elaborates an important set of relations between sound and time—a way of thinking time through sound—that elucidates a somewhat more cryptic set of sonic imagery that appears in Cliff's later 1993 novel, *Free Enterprise*. The former novel lays out a number of propositions that resonate (in the dual sense described above) in *Free Enterprise*: 1) sound is a material site of contest between anti-black colonial forms and decolonial efforts; 2) sound marks both temporal rupture and continuity, denoting the tumultuous coexistence of colonial and decolonial forms, rather than showing the triumph of one over the

[104] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "resonance."

other (cumulation, rather than progress or even accumulation); 3) non-verbal sound and noise—that which is evocative rather than denotative—is an important vehicle of historical resistance.

An Anti-Teleology

Michelle Cliff's 1993 novel *Free Enterprise* recounts the narratives of two women—Mary Ellen Pleasant (an historical figure) and Annie Christmas (a fictional character)—who collaborate with abolitionist John Brown to plan and execute the 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry, intended to instigate an armed slave revolt to overthrow slavery in the United States. The novel, however, de-centers John Brown as the primary mastermind behind the raid and instead situates him as a "splendid ally; no more, no less" amidst a broad network of collaborators, with black women playing central roles in the raid's planning.[105] The novel consists of a series of vignettes centering on various women characters, their personal histories, lives, and snippets of their preparations for the raid, or escape from it after its ultimate failure.

The novel exists in a curious rapport with the raid itself—even as it takes the raid as its subject, it never describes the events of the raid itself. Cliff never allows us to be in the moment or at the site of the event—we are always askance, just shy, never quite there. Instead, we are always getting there—whether through the narration of the events leading up to the raid, or through retrospectives that ebb ever closer to helping us to understand "what happened". The novel proceeds from a central thought-experiment: What if the Harper's Ferry raid occurred at the wrong time, on the wrong day? In the novel, John Brown—whom we only encounter secondhand through Mary Ellen's retrospectives—inexplicably deviates from plan and commences the raid a day early. As a result, a great majority of Brown's collaborators—many of

[105] Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2004), 141.

whom are black men and women who are carrying arms and supplies for the raid—do not arrive in time and are instead informed in code through their furtive network on the road to Harpers Ferry that the raid has failed and they must flee.

The premises that the raid had a broad, furtive network of support and held a perplexing error of timing at its core challenges the view that acts of black resistance to slavery were either nonexistent or small-scale, rogue events with a madmen at their centers. However, even while Cliff reclaims the raid as an act of organized resistance, she does not seem to eliminate the teleology of failure from her account: in spite of the varying actors and conditions of the raid, the outcome is unchanged. However, the organization of the novel's events, its partial and meandering treatment of the raid, and its inclusion of vignettes that bear uncertain relationships to the raid, tell a different story about the work Cliff is doing with teleology.

The novel sporadically jumps back and forth through time, extending as far back as the pre-colonial period in the Caribbean and as far forward as the civil rights era of the mid-1960s.[106] The 1859 raid, then, while advertised as the novel's central historical object and understood as the occasion for the collaboration and intimacy between Mary Ellen and Annie, does not stand as a central, stable temporal anchor in the novel and exists in an ambiguous causal relationship with many of the novel's other events. The effect is that we cannot effectively situate the raid within a longer teleological account of triumph or failure, progress or regress; the raid is suspended indeterminately in time. Put otherwise, the raid appears as only one of the novel's many historical coordinates in a longer history of white supremacy and colonization in the Americas; however, that collection of coordinates cannot be easily assembled to suggest an historical

[106] While Annie Christmas, who lives in 1920s Louisiana, appears to be our anchor to the present, I mark the "hologrammatical man"—the future specter of Malcolm X who haunts Mary Ellen Pleasant—as the upper bound of the novel's timespace.

sequence that can easily indicate tendency (i.e. – temporal progress, regress, or stasis). Instead, as the novel remarks, “Everything is here, and now.”[107] For Cliff, time and space are not organized laterally, but are collapsed and condensed, and cumulate at the site of the novel.

Time instead takes on the character of what St. Augustine called in his *Confessions* a threefold present—including a “present of things past, memory,” a “present of things present, sight” and a “present time of things future, expectation”.[108] A tripartite present permits Cliff to explore the active legacies of slavery and colonialism that haunt her and her characters, and continue to shape global politics. The “present” of the novel is a constantly shifting terrain: we are forever in Mary Ellen’s past, and forever in the aftermath of Annie’s traumatic survival; we are ever in the years and moments before the raid or the year and moments after.

In this chapter, I broadly contend that *Free Enterprise* rejects the notion of time as an independent variable that ties events together according to the spatial logics that make possible postulations about historical or temporal tendency. Instead, loosely correlated events—that otherwise read as historical triumphs or failures—are pulled into relation in a way that confounds their treatment as events that lead toward or away from other events. A more complex web of interconnectivity becomes possible. Further, sound again reappears as the vehicle through which notions of teleology are disrupted. Where certain textual soundscapes become resonant, the vignettes that surround them highlight ambiguity and uncertainty, the sporadic shift between political optimism and melancholia.

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[107] Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 154.
[108] “The Confessions of St. Augustine,” Project Gutenberg, accessed April 23, 2016, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm.

While *Free Enterprise* takes up a different set of historical actors and national terrain than her prior novels, Cliff's uncertainty about the possibilities of revolution are consistently staged across what she treats as the linked geographies of the Americas and Europe: Kitty Savage of *No Telephone to Heaven* refuses to sustain the fictional persona of Mrs. White at the New York city laundry service where she works, and instead writes notes as "Mrs. Black" indicting the racism of the business' white patrons; Clare Savage, following her mother's footsteps, leaves her graduate program in London, where she is surrounded by racist colleagues, to become a guerilla fighter in independent Jamaica; Cliff herself narrates her journey to the University of Virginia to participate in a panel on women and multiculturalism, and decries the "shorthand which passes for cultural commentary, political awareness in these times."[109] Cliff, who herself lived and traveled between these sites in the aftermaths of World War II and independence in Jamaica, treats these sites as overlapping rather than distinct. Thus, when we are introduced to one of the protagonists of Free Enterprise, Annie Christmas, a Jamaican-American woman who has become involved in the abolition struggle in the United States, we are meant to read her narrative and actions as having implications across geographies.

Turtle Song

In the novel's accounting for the ways that geographies across the Americas are linked by slavery and colonialism, Cliff raises a curious set of characters to announce this historical bridging: turtles. Turtles appear throughout the novel at critical sites of both the official history of the Americas and at sites of counter-historical production. Their curious and unexpected presences, and reference to their "cry" or "song," become both alternative registers in which the dead can express themselves and alternative historical ledgers that survive the devastation of

[109] Michelle Cliff, "History as Fiction, Fiction as History," *Ploughshares* 20:2/3 (1994), 196.

slavery and the colonial project in the Americas. Again, with turtles, the novel turns to forms of sound production that are non-verbal and unintelligible, within the realm of the semiotic. Also, famous for their long lifespans, turtles become live witnesses of sorts for marginalized peoples who are effaced from official histories, and a route for considering the prehistory of the Americas prior to colonial intervention.

In one section of the novel, sandwiched between the history of Mary Ellen Pleasant's father and mother, the novel lapses into a meditation on the original soundscape of the Caribbean. While imagining the original Carib and Arawak inhabitants of the Caribbean, the narrator reflects,

> Cinnamon men carved flutes from the bones of their enemies. They were the musicians. They were the navigators. The men had a secret dialect with which to plan war. Cinnamon men cried into battle at midnight, blowing their war conches, smeared with white powder made from the claws of wildcats, swinging their war clubs over their heads in wide arcs. The island sang with their noise.[110]

For the narrator, the sounds of war compose the early soundscape of the Caribbean; death is the event that evokes and enables sound. Through the image of flutes carved from the bones of enemies, we may only regard sound at that which emerges at the juncture of death and life. The bones are not buried, but refined and reincorporated into the live social sphere as instruments that enable an alternative mode of expression.

Yet the scene presented here is one of beauty and nobility rather than terror. It is notable that the vignette preceding this one—which takes place in the future during the colonial period in

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[110] Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 123.

the Caribbean—contains a pivotal scene where a Carib man is killed without reason by a colonial official. By this scene, the narrative tone assumes a kind of reverence and nostalgia. The narrator continues: "Can you imagine all these sounds? Cinnamon men smeared white crying into battle in the middle of a tropical night. Flute songs. The carving of stone. Turtle song. Language."[111] "Turtle song" here becomes associated with an originary pre-colonial moment in Caribbean history. It also becomes synonymous with exterminated peoples, a register that bears a long memory of the past, where the dead may reside.

The invocation of turtles as native beings, or as original forms of life that bear witness to the autochthonous peoples and sounds of the Caribbean resonates with the cultural iconography surrounding the turtle as a symbol of strength and longevity, and as a being that bridges the spheres of the human and the divine. For example, in some Native American mythologies, the "World Turtle" references the idea that the Earth is not a spherical body orbiting in space, but is rather a body supported atop the back of a giant turtle.[112]

Further, a detour to Melville again offers a useful framework for understanding the symbolic value of the turtle. In "The Encantadas," Melville describes the tortoise as a creature of "dateless, indefinite endurance" that "possesses such a citadel wherein to resist the assaults of Time".[113] Turtles appear here again not only as timeless, but as symbols of endurance. Melville

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[111] Ibid.
[112] This mythology has been challenged by a variety of thinkers who have reasoned that the World Turtle must stand atop something else, to which a famous rejoinder has been that the turtle stands atop another turtle, which stands atop another and so on, so that it's "turtles all the way down". Turtles are thus imagined as beings that simultaneously meet and exceed the demands of causality. There is no way to get to the bottom of the turtle chain, and indeed, taken to its extreme, turtles eventually exceed all matter in a manner that renders the original question absurd.
[113] Herman Melville, "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles," in *The Piazza Tales* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 131.

continues, imagining them as "the victims of a penal, or malignant, or perhaps downright diabolical, enchanter…in that strange infatuation of hopeless toil which so often possesses them….Their crowning curse is their dredging impulse to straightforwardness in a belittered world."[114] Drawing on the image of tortoises pushing determinedly against stone century after century, tortoises (as the rooster prior) appear as symbols of stubborn, tireless endurance in the face of overwhelming opposition. Turtles in Cliff's work serve a similar function, acting as ageless witnesses that can testify to the omissions of official histories and marking a dogged commitment to revolutionary struggle.

Turtles as symbols of long memory, as witnesses of the crime of colonial extermination, appear again shortly afterward. The narrator recounts, "the giant turtles, great female beasts so old they might remember pre-contact days, might miss the prior landscape, might know what had been, where the canefields, and indigo plants, and coffee pieces, and herds of Brahman cattle now were. They might remember what had been transplanted when Captain Bligh put in his breadfruit trees."[115] Recounting what was effectively a rewriting of the natural history of the Caribbean upon the arrival of colonial forces (transplanting several forms of plant life that come to be viewed as indigenous to the region), and linking the transformation of the terrain with the extermination of native peoples, the text calls upon turtles as the only surviving witness, capable of testimony through song.

At another moment in the narrative, the sound of the turtle is mistaken for the cries of the dead. During a scene that occurs in the aftermath of the Civil War, two women visit the historic battleground of the Battle of Antietam, the site of the first major battle of the U.S. Civil War, and

[114] Ibid., 132.
[115] Ibid., 125.

the narrator remarks, “On the battle field they heard a turtle crying. Probably the sound made by the dead, they thought, unfamiliar with the cries of turtles.”[116] Again, turtles appear as the survivors of war and catastrophe, as the only creatures capable of bearing witness to history. The slippage between the human voice post-mortem and the noises of the turtle also imagines yet another zone where the dead and the living come into contact. Here, the novel imagines other forms of life as the sites where the overlapping of spheres of life and death can occur. Where the trees serve this function for Annie, turtles serve this function for other characters in the novel.

Annie herself encounters the turtle song once in the novel as well. During the scene where Rachel visits Annie, immediately preceding the moment where she asks her to recount her story of the raid on Harper’s Ferry, the song of the turtle appears again. In this scene, Annie is rummaging through a box of old belongings, bemoaning that she can no longer remember what the significance of her belongings are. She remarks, “ ‘I find it harder and harder to keep track of events, of how things fit into time. Even with this box of things. Especially with this box of things. What happened? When? Who do these faces belong to? Did I love them? What was the occasion?’ ”[117] Here, at the end of the novel, Annie laments the insufficiency of objects to serve as receptacles for memory. Specifically, however, her problem is temporal—she struggles to remember how things fit into time, in what order, within what causal chain, and to what effect.

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[116] Ibid., 96. It is notable that one of the women in this scene, Alice Hooper (also an historical figure), bears a similar relationship to bats as historical ledgers. Alice, who fears speaking her mind in public, will satisfy her need to speak her mind only by sharing her thoughts with a bat she keeps in her attic, named Atthis. This is exemplary of the strange way that animals become alternative record keepers and interlocutors for silenced and marginalized persons in this novel.
[117] Ibid., 190.

Immediately following this reflection, the turtle song appears again: "From the mists over the river came the cry of a turtle."[118] Here, the emblem of long memory, the one stable witness that has appeared in each major era of the novel, appears again when Annie is experiencing a failure of memory. Thus, the turtle song appears with constancy in the pre-colonial period, the post-Civil War period, and the early twentieth century, appearing to accumulate memory where those who might give testimony can no longer do so. The turtle is both an emblem of a spectacular and long memory and marks a failure of memory elsewhere. The turtle, which appears to exist outside of time, bears witness at seemingly disparate moments of the production of very different kinds of history and memory—unofficial histories (the Caribs), official histories (the Battle of Antietam), and personal recollections (Annie's box of mnemonic objects). Yet, the only sufficient register for the contents of its memory is imagined to be song, rather than language. The field of the semiotic appears again, marking a disruption of linear and teleological narratives.

The Bottle Trees

Annie Christmas is introduced to us as a woman who lives "on the very edge," both literally and figuratively in 1920s Louisiana. Her home, a "rundown," "secluded," house that "almost slid off the land to the south of Carville, hanging on to a spit for dear life," is at constant risk of slipping into fatal disrepair, and altogether slipping from the face of the land.[119] She is similarly regarded by others as being on the edge of sanity—she is regarded as "crazy" and as a "witch" not only because she lives secluded in a hazardous house, but because the only

[118] Ibid.
[119] Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 3.

companions she keeps are quarantined in a nearby colony for leprosy patients, into which she regularly sneaks to socialize with those who are condemned to never leave.[120]

Annie is a character shrouded in mystery, ever-evasive, and constantly fleeing or in hiding.[121] Over the course of the novel, we learn about her past through brief narrative vignettes recounting her life as a member of an elite Jamaican creole family whose "carefully inbred" racial ambiguity earns them the title of "gens inconnu" ("unknown people").[122] Disturbed by what she views as a limited horizon of political possibility in Jamaica, "believing the island to be without hope," she flees to the United States intent on joining the struggle against slavery and anti-blackness elsewhere.[123] When we are introduced to her in the opening of the novel, however, it is long after the failure of the raid on Harper's Ferry, and she lives secluded and disconnected from the abolition movement (now over in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War) and race rights movements. Her house is notably obscured by the landscape and atmosphere; it is "enshrouded by river fog, masked by moss and trees."[124] Annie is literally and figuratively a character who is difficult to discern, and who relies on this indiscernibility for survival.

Perhaps the most curious features of the landscape are the trees that surround Annie's home. These "bottle trees" are odd assemblages of the natural and the inorganic. The narrator describes:

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[120] The colony referenced in the novel is the Carville Leprosarium, one of two leprosy colonies in the United States. This historic site, a former sugar plantation, was transformed into a leper colony and hospital in the 1890s and remained in operation until 1999.
[121] Annie is given the birth name "Regina" by her family, but later flees Jamaica for the United States and takes on the name "Annie Christmas" after the African-American woman folklore legend known for her superhuman strength. Her house is alleged to be the legend's "original bailiwick".
[122] Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 9.
[123] Ibid., 10.
[124] Ibid., 30.

> In front, forming a crescent, were live oak and mimosa and cypress trees, each branch bearing bottles she had fixed there herself. Live oak and mimosa and cypress decked with colored glass, clear glass, between her and the river….Trees adorned with Moxie. Dr. Pepper. Royal Crown. Milk of Magnesia. Frank's Louisiana Hot Sauce. Coca-Cola. Jamaica Ginger Beer. Electric Bitters. Lea & Perrin. Hood's Nerve Tonic. Major Grey. Sal Hepatica. Aunt Sally's Witch Hazel. Bogle's Bay Rum. Mr. Bones's Liquid Blackener. Khus-Khus Original African Scent. A chaos of residue haloed the trees, scenting the river's mist. Curative and purgatives and thirst quenchers and condiments and perfumes.[125]

This odd conglomeration of items, blending historical and fictional products, serves as a material catalogue of Annie's life—including items that hearken to her Jamaican heritage and political affiliations (Bogle's Bay Rum, alluding to Paul Bogle, the orchestrator of the famous Morant Bay Rebellion), embrace of her African-descent (Khus Khus Original African Scent), and her nomadic movement throughout the United States. The bottles cannot be stripped of their scents; as a result, Annie lives in miasma of memory, activated by scents that intermingle and send her into sudden bouts of nostalgia and confound her sense of time and space. The concept of simultaneous time is again illustrated by the cohabitation and intermingling of mnemonic devices belonging to different times and spaces.

The bottles are repeatedly suggested to be more than things; they take on the characteristics of persons or spirits capable of song and speech. The narrator often describes the bottles themselves as vocal, and turns to metaphors of language to describe their effects on the environment. For example, though Annie attempts to purge the bottles of their distinctive scents

[125] Ibid., 5.

by washing them in the Mississippi River, the narrator nevertheless notes that "a babel of scents" lingers in front of her house.[126] The allusion to the biblical Tower of Babel—mythologized as the site where a single human language was divided into the many—highlights the incoherence of the memory work prompted by the trees. Just as the laborers on the biblical towers could not assemble a structure that could enter the sphere of the divine, Annie's bottle trees represent fragments of memory that cannot assemble into a coherent whole, a complete (divine) account of history. The language of the bottle trees is a garbled and incoherent one; they signify in the zone of the Semiotic, which "precedes the establishment of the sign"—a zone where a kind of meaning may be registered, but cannot achieve a stable incorporation into the realm of the Symbolic.[127] The bottle trees indeed resist the symbolic order of language altogether—their utterances are noises, songs, rhythms, echoes, monosyllabic responses, and glossolalic proclamations.

Most often, the bottle trees are often described as being in song. The narrator remarks that under the right natural conditions, "The trees would sing. The glass would a-men," and the trees would sound in unison as a "chorus".[128] Visitors to Annie's home are "announced by the clink and hum" of the bottles, and the bottles "catch" words and respond to them with "echoes and amens".[129] Indeed, the bottle trees borrow engage in a kind of call and response with nature and with persons. They are described as being in "communion" with the breeze; when the wind blows or when a person speaks, the bottle trees "amen," a sign of affirmation, solidarity, or

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[126] Ibid.
[127] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 27.
[128] Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 13, 185.
[129] Ibid., 185.

agreement. [130] This call and response format not only recalls the centrality of this ritual in the black church, but also invokes a range of black musical traditions, such as jazz, that have taken it up as a key marker of the tradition.[131] Thus, the bottles appear to act in moments as a congregation or collective—one that is racially and culturally coded via its forms of expression—that listens, repeats, responds, and affirms.

The bottles also evoke the shape of the human body. Annie remarks on viewing some bottles to be gendered as women, specifically citing the design of the Coca-Cola bottle: "The lines of the Coca-Cola bottle were meant to represent the corseted form of a woman, compelled by whalebone almost beyond hope of breath, her bosom straining forward."[132] In this imagery, the link between the bottles and persons is most directly established. There is an odd juxtaposition here between what we know to be the extraordinarily vocal bottles and the restricted, confined feminine figure struggling for breath.

However, if we are to confront the slippage between objects and persons that occur via the bottles, we must also confront the unsettling fact that they are person-objects suspended from the branches of trees—a visual that bears a haunting parallel to lynching. The novel is replete throughout with images of lynchings and hangings: Leo Frank's lynching[133], the beheading and

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[130] Ibid.
[131] Jazz plays an important role in the way Cliff conceptualizes this novel. Most notably, she opens the novel with an epigraph by Miles Davis, "I always listen for what I can leave out."
[132] Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 11. It is notable that Annie immediately follows the image of a corseted woman with a retrospective about Frances Ellen Watkins Harper "tilted over a lectern in 1858, speaking on 'The Education and the Elevation of the Colored Race,' advocating a talented tenth."
[133] Ibid., 188.

public exhibition of a Maroon's head[134], the nailing and suspension of an enslaved woman by the ear from a tree[135], and John Brown's hanging, among others.

Thus, while the tree undoubtedly represents a kind of material history of Annie's exile and dual cultural heritage, one way of interpreting its primary function is as a dwelling place for the unsettled dead, particularly those killed in acts of racialized state and extralegal violence.[136] Importantly, it exists in a semiotic zone where language fails, where the dead upset and trouble the symbolic order while maintaining a radical opacity. Where the bottle trees sound, they underwrite Annie's memories with a current of ambivalence or inertia; the presence of the unsettled and unappeasable dead creates for Annie a sense of political uncertainty, or a mystification of the viable routes of action that might expiate or make reparation for the lives lost.

The publically-displayed, suspended body has historically served a symbolic function, as a kind of assurance that the person, along with the political ideals and future possibilities they may have represented, engendered, or projected, have been, as George Orwell once aptly described, "lifted clean out of the stream of history".[137] One reading of Annie's bottle trees is that they do not simply commemorate the lives lost in the anti-slavery struggle, but they rather

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[134] Ibid., 65.
[135] Ibid., 117.
[136] The bottle trees evokes a African diasporic spiritual tradition where bottles, representing dead ancestors, are hung on trees outside of the home. They represent the persistence of the dead and reject the finitude of death. As Robert Farris Thompson explains, "there is a persistent Kongo-derived tradition of *bottle trees*—trees garlanded with bottles, vessels, and other objects for protecting the household through invocation of the dead." He continues, "Lifting up their plates or bottles on trees or saplings means 'not the end,' 'death will not end our fight,' the renaissance of the talents of the dead that have been stopped by gleaming glass and elevation, from absorption into the void." For more see Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 142-145.
[137] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Plume, 2003), 262.

symbolize Annie's uncertain relation to the dead, in a liminal space between mourning and melancholia.[138] She invites the dead into her space of dwelling without a clear objective of grief or resolution; instead, they haunt and disrupt any attempts to establish a teleological account of her memories that advance toward either certain victory or absolute failure. Annie's bottle trees are anti-commemorative in the sense that they refuse to lay the dead to rest, but rather seek to raise or, more properly, conduct them. In this way, they may stand as symbolic of an ethical mode of being-with-the-dead that Carla Freccero describes as "queer spectrality". Freccero writes:

> the specter is the form a certain unfinished mourning takes. Thus part of what it might mean to learn to live with ghosts would be to understand oneself as "ghosted," and to understand "learning to live" as something that takes place "between life and death" as the "non-contemporaneity with itself as the living present." This would then be an approach to history—and to justice—that would neither "forget the dead" nor "successfully" mourn them.[139]

This mode of being requires that Annie lives not separately from the dead (including her key collaborator, Mary Ellen Pleasant, who has died by the time we encounter Annie's narrative), but in a dialogic rapport with their hopes, needs, desires, and legacies. The novel itself structurally

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[138] Here, I invoke "melancholia" in the Freudian sense of a loss that cannot be fully comprehended and is thus unconsciously processed, as distinguished from "mourning" where the loss is attached to a specific object or person and can thus be consciously grieved. Because of the necessity for defensive stealth both before and after the Harper's Ferry raid, Annie could not know how many comrades were certainly killed in the failed attempt or in the events that followed. As such, she can only partially comprehend the scale of the loss. For more on Freud's notions of melancholia and mourning, see Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and melancholia," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 56.5 (1922): 543-545.

[139] Carla Frecerro, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 78.

does not honor the finality of death; instead, the lives of characters who have lived and died in different times are interwoven, and we are encouraged to view them all in current relation with one another. Being-with-the-dead then demands that we not view the struggles that once confronted the dead in life as struggles that died with them. Instead, Annie views herself as a participant in a long lineage of ongoing struggle, and the dead as resources and interlocutors in struggle.

There are a number of allusions to Annie's life on the border between life and death, not the least of which is her dwelling's literal suspension on the edge of the land, constantly threating to fall into oblivion. Her only companions at the Carville Leprosarium are those condemned to the sphere of social death, a strange corollary to the exile and isolation Annie experiences. Annie also describes groups of armed white men (suggested to be Klan members) passing by her house, appearing both terrified (of her) and violent, and shouting jeers at her, including "Old Spook".[140] The term "spook" both recalls the 1950s racial slur and denotes a ghost or specter. The language here suggests that Annie is not quite alive and not quite dead, but something in between. For the white men, this of course hearkens to racist notions of unkillable black persons (who cannot be murdered because they were never alive as such); for Annie, however, I contend that toeing this border constitutes an embrace of queer spectrality; in the haunted and collapsed timespace of her land, she lives in a kind of "non-contemporaneity with the living present".

If the dead reside on Annie's land, they become voiced only through the bottle trees. The trees, which produce a certain strange melody, are sites where, in a sense, the dead continue to sound, where the violence of their deaths are confronted and meaningfully witnessed by what the

[140] Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 30.

narrator calls the "capable listener". The narrator describes: "Once in a blue moon, if the breeze from the river came up in a certain way, and filled the spaces between bottles and branches, there might be a tune….Lamentation or bamboula, or something in between, depending on the heaviness of the air, the mood of the glass, the density of the tree, the capability of the listener."[141]

The two forms of musical and poetic expression cited here—lamentation and bamboula—are worth unpacking. On one hand, the former recalls both an expression of grief through song and the biblical Book of Lamentations, wherein the prophet Jeremiah bemoans the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. Lamentations, where Jeremiah grieves having been forsaken by God and the seemingly meaningless suffering and destruction around him, offers an apt corollary to Annie's lifelong lament over the failure of the Harper's Ferry raid, her own suffering in captivity, and the deaths and disappearances of her colleagues and of the movement itself. Just as Jerusalem "sobs through the night" because "[she], once so full of people, is now deserted," Annie mourns the scattering of her network of black women revolutionaries in the aftermath of the raid.[142]

On the other hand, the latter (bamboula) recalls a kind of drum and an accompanying form of music and dance that was introduced to the Americas as a cultural practice of African slaves. Fascinatingly, the bamboula has a long history of formal administrative bans in both the Caribbean and Louisiana.[143] Thus, the bottle trees become sites where that which is illicit, banned, or silenced may be voiced or sounded; the strictures of colonial regulation are resisted

[141] Ibid., 13.
[142] Lam 1:1 (NLT).
[143] For more on the history of bamboula, see Dale Francis, *The Quelbe Commentary 1672-2012: Anthropology in Virgin Islands Music* (Bloomington: iuniverse LLC, 2014).

and broken; prohibited sound finds free expression. Annie appears to us dually as a character who has excused herself from any subsequent struggles for freedom because of the trauma of the rebellion's failure; however, the sounding of the bamboula is a sign that resistance is structured into the very logic of the grounds of her home. Part of Annie's resistance occurs through the reclamation of the soundscape.

Thus, another reading of the bottle trees might demand that we not view the bottles as significant of a number of individual sacrifices, but that we understand them primarily in their function as emptied containers that can, as a result of their emptiness, produce sound. Just as Annie deals with an archive that has been emptied of black women's revolutionary activities (crippling their use-value for future generations of revolutionaries), the bottles themselves have been emptied of their use value. Cliff references this specifically in "History as Fiction," noting: "The history of armed and organized African-American resistance has been made unimaginable by the official histories of this country. One or two incidents are allowed in these sanctioned pages, but these more often than not end with the hanging of the hero. The extraordinary extent of ordinary people involved in a centuries' long struggle goes unacknowledged."[144] However, it is indeed *because of* the emptiness of the bottles that the song of the bottle trees becomes possible. Thus, sound appears here as an alternative signifying register that appears at the site of an emptied archive. Sound is a way of recuperating the use-value of these emptied archives, or more properly, of imagining their use anew. The bottle trees fall somewhere between these two poles of signification: Annie is both engaging in the radical memory work of living with the dead (and confronting the physical and psychological trauma of failure) and also imagining new ways of grappling with the empty archive.

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[144] Michelle Cliff, "History as Fiction, Fiction as History," 199.

Viewed in this way, the sounding of the bottle trees takes on new significance as alternative vocalizations of the dead or the suppressed. When, and why, these phantom soundings are activated—and when they are silent—is of critical importance. Because of the condensed time-space of Annie's land, oversimplified interpretations of silence as the marker of historical absence and injustice and sound (as an abstraction of voice) as the marker of historical presence and redress fall apart. Instead, the sounding of the bottle trees occur ever in the moment of violence, loss, and uncertainty (always in the grip of the noose), and sometimes alternate between descriptions of pleasant "serenade" and threatening speech. The bottle trees resist teleological accounts of Annie's experiences altogether, and demand that she confront instead what Stuart Hall refers to as history's "open horizon towards the future".[145]

The first description of the "tune" of the bottle trees appears sandwiched between three memories: 1) a ball at Annie's childhood home celebrating her family's designation as "gens inconnu," 2) Annie's first introduction to Mary Ellen Pleasant, and 3) a description of a calendar printed by Marcus Garvey's Black Star Shipping Line. The prior two anecdotes signify competing moments of hope and possibility, where history appears to tend toward an actualization of characters' political and social hopes. In the first memory—replete with visuals of white via "deadwhite gowns," "the deadwhiteness of a full moon," and a "Carrara marble" table "piled high with hundreds of eggs"—Annie's family celebrates the hope that they may purge the family of its blackness and secure a place of social security and privilege. In the second memory, which occurs years after the first, Annie begins to seek another form of community, security, and purpose in the antislavery struggle, and anticipates the possibility that her alliance

[145] Petal K. Samuel and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, "For Stuart Hall," *The Black Scholar*, accessed April 24, 2016, http://www.theblackscholar.org/for-stuart-hall-by-petal-k-samuel-and-ifeoma-kiddoe-nwankwo/.

with Mary Ellen will result in a national revolution. Both scenes exhibit moments of hope and anticipation, celebrations of a horizon of possibility that has been newly opened.

The final scene, however, illustrates the failure of Annie's hopes in connection with an implied failure of Garvey's black nationalist aspirations. Noting that the year is 1920, the narrator describes: "So says the calendar on the wall inside her house, which came to her courtesy of the Black Star Shipping Line. Above the numerals, days of the week, phases of the moon, is an artist's rendering of the S.S. *Phillis Wheatley*—imagine it. With each month, the progress of the ship is imagined….Africa achieved, finally, by a ship that never came to be."[146] Here, the narrator vividly pictures the Black Star Line's successful trip from Harlem to Accra, but only in the context of an unfulfilled political hope or potential. Just as Garvey's aspirations to see his efforts culminate in a mass exodus back to Africa were foreclosed, Annie's hopes to transform society through the Harper's Ferry raid were also foreclosed. The first serenade of the bottle trees, between "lamentation and bamboula" that immediately precedes this scene mirrors the same dual presence of celebration and foreclosed possibility. Sound, here, does not mark an historical redress, but rather, signals a kind of dual political mourning/melancholy.[147]

The serenade of the bottle trees appears yet again shortly afterward in a scene where Annie describes the landscape of her home as one that is "surrounded by silence" with the

[146] Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 14.

[147] Melancholy here bears some relation to what I described before as Annie's dual mourning and melancholy; here, instead, I hope to invoke the sense of a political goal whose foreclosure generates, perhaps infinitely, imaginative possibilities for what could have been (had the revolution succeeded). These possibilities may be both concrete, premeditated outcomes (we might have forcibly abolished slavery, achieved a state revolution, etc.) and intangible and unforeseeable (the broader, infinite range of effects). Thus, this also falls somewhere between mourning and melancholy in the sense that one can both crystallize an object of loss without fully comprehending the infinite scale of loss.

exception of a number of competing noises.[148] The narrator remarks that “the occasional serenade from the bottle trees” and “the interruption of white boys, armed with fishing poles or shotguns, yelling ’Old Spook’ toward her dwelling” are two key forms of sound that interrupt the otherwise silent landscape.[149] The narrator points out that these encounters between Annie and the white men occur in two moments—casually and noisily in passing, yelling insults at her, and again, eerily and quietly in passing, when they are dressed in the distinctive white costumes of the Ku Klux Klan en route to provoke terror elsewhere. Again, the fickle serenade of the bottle trees appears juxtaposed with Annie’s alternatingly noisy and silent encounters with the Klan, whom she does not fear, but is nevertheless powerless to stop. The song of the bottle trees signals Annie’s dual sense of fearless defiance and powerlessness.

One final instance of the bottle tree’s serenade appears at the end of the novel when Annie is visited by her friend Rachel, a resident of the Carville Leprosarium. Rachel’s visit to Annie is a key moment of exposition in the novel where she finally discloses, in part, what happened to her after the failure of the Harpers Ferry raid. An enthusiastic serenade by the bottle trees marks her arrival: “[Rachel’s] words [were] caught by the bottles so that the visitor was accompanied by a chorus of echoes and a-mens.”[150] During her visit, Rachel cryptically prompts Annie to “tell [her] what did not happen.” Annie responds, “Everything did not happen.” Again, the theme of foreclosed possibility, of that which never saw fruition appears alongside the bottle serenade.

[148] Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 30.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid., 185.

Annie reveals in this scene that, years ago, en route to the rendez-vous point for the raid, she is forced to kill two white women, "unarmed women, except they weren't".[151] Disguised as a man and transporting hidden arms in a horse-drawn wagon, Annie ventures into the woods in search of water for her horse, and stumbles upon two white women bathing naked in a pond. Mistaking her for a black man, they begin screaming. Annie attempts to calm them, but when her attempts fail, she shoots both women. Annie recalls, "I kept waiting to be horrified; I was not."[152] Annie further discloses that upon receiving word that the raid had failed, she flees to a Maroon camp which is soon raided by Confederate soldiers. Still disguised as a man, Annie is forced to be part of a chain gang, but relates to Rachel that "eventually her sex became known." She ceases her recounting at this point, abruptly shifting gears away from her own story and instead explaining what happened to Mary Ellen Pleasant and John Brown.

Only later, in a letter to Mary Ellen Pleasant (one we're not sure Annie sends, or Mary Ellen receives), she reveals that upon realizing her sex, the soldiers force all the slaves of the chain gang to rape her. Union soldiers eventually stumble upon the chain gang, kill the Confederate soldiers, and free Annie and the enslaved men. Annie states simply in her letter to Mary Ellen, "There is a point of no return, I assure you. I detached my nether parts from the rest of me. But I could not disown my mouth, the burning in my throat….This is the story I do not tell."[153] After this traumatic experience, Annie secludes herself in Louisiana where we meet her in the opening of the novel.

There is "no return" for Annie on a number of levels: she will never reunite with her colleagues, nor join another resistance movement. She will also never be able to return "home"

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[151] Ibid., 195.
[152] Ibid., 196.
[153] Ibid., 207-8.

to Jamaica, noting that “[i]t was a fantasy, and she knew it, that there was a solution to the placelessness which had always been hers, even as a girl behind her mother’s skirts.”[154] The visual of Annie being obscured behind her mother’s skirt also signifies her irreversible rejection of her family’s racial, class, and gender-normative values. While Annie “disguises” herself as a man for the purposes of the raid, it is the second time she appears dressed as such. Upon her first meeting with Mary Ellen Pleasant, the narrator notes, “She looked as close as cold be to a man, not a dandy, more like a mule driver.”[155] The novel makes clear that Annie’s garb is not simply a disguise—her garb demonstrates not only an affiliation with the black working class, but also a rejection of the feminine ideals iconized by the Coca-Cola bottle and the feathered gowns she recalls from her mother’s ball. Further, her assumption of the name “Annie Christmas,” a legend known for her hyper-masculine build and strength, suggests that Annie’s gender expression might be thought of as what Halberstam might describe as “female masculinity.”[156] As Halberstam remarks, “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing.”[157] Annie’s gang rape, for the soldiers, is a punishment for her perceived trespass on the hallowed grounds of masculinity, and more importantly, for having exposed gender as not essential, but performative. Judith Butler famously describes the performativity of gender and describes it as “a constituted social temporality,” writing, “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of

[154] Ibid., 19.
[155] Ibid., 24.
[156] See Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
[157] Ibid., 2.

agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts."[158]

Thus, the "point of no return" Annie describes signifies in at least two registers: There is no redress for the institutional violence of slavery, for the lives lost in the abolition struggle, or for the gendered violence she is subjected to and commits (i.e. – her murder of the two women in the pond, the forced act of fellatio suggested by the "burning in [her] throat). Additionally, however, there is no returning to her life of white supremacist complicity as a member of the "gens inconnu". For Annie, the failure of the raid signals the foreclosure of an important horizon of political possibility and the exhaustion of a strategy of resistance; however, she remains vigilant about the emergence of later movements, as signaled by her Black Star Shipping Line calendar. She is determined to satisfy the "burning in her throat," yet she remains largely secluded, engaging in a regular storytelling ritual with her Carville companions, but never disclosing her personal narrative until repeatedly prompted by Rachel at the end of the novel. Silence and sound, action and inaction, hopelessness and unrelenting struggle exist in tension with one another.

The bottle trees, then, which always form the backdrop of Annie's reflections on the past and the possibilities for transformative action, signal paradox or a kind of political ambivalence. However, the bottle trees are not merely passive background objects, but rather appear in moments as threatening to Annie. Describing how Annie's solitude became at times overwhelming for her, the narrator remarks: "But even for Annie the solitude could get to be too

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[158] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

much, and when it did, and the bottle trees threatened to speak in tongues, to get the spirit, or to wear hoods, to garland themselves with lengths of rope, when she felt herself surrounded, she walked to her captive company, and partook of storytelling."[159]

Here, the bottle trees appear alternatively as unintelligible, possessed, and violent. Where the trees once signified a congregation that remained safely in agreement (through its "a-men") with Annie and with the land and atmosphere of her home, they appear here as unruly. The phenomenon of "speaking in tongues" is regarded in several charismatic Christian traditions as a spiritual gift that occurs when one encounters the Holy Spirit. While speaking in tongues can be regarded by linguists as a nonsensical vocalization, it can also be regarded in Christian traditions as the manifestation of a divine language. Speaking in tongues is largely regarded a symptom of "getting the spirit," alongside other signs such as the loss of control of one's body through, for instance, fainting or convulsions. However, several Christian traditions allow for both possession by benevolent divine spirits and by malevolent ones—speaking in tongues can signify the presence of either. As such, this scene describes the bottle trees becoming infused with spirits, ambiguously benevolent or malevolent. The causal chain is broken—they no longer sound in accordance with the principles of wind friction that produce their serenades, but now begin to issue forth noises with no apparent catalyst or meaning—none, at least, that Annie can decipher. Here, the principles of phantom acoustics come into play most directly—in the presence of the dead the source of sound is confounded, sound localization becomes impossible.

Further, for Annie, the bottle trees come to resemble Klan agents (through "wearing hoods") and the nooses used in lynchings. They fluctuate between appearing as symbols of divine proximity—of the presence of the Holy Spirit—and between acting as symbols of white

[159] Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 181.

terror. Here, we observe yet another overt link between the hanging of bottles and the hanging of persons, demonstrating that the bottle trees stand simultaneously as the products of a kind of radical being-with-the-dead, where Annie creates an acoustic platform for the dead to sound and as a morbid reminder of the structures of state terror that surround her, just at the trees surround her home.

The bottle trees, which normally "serenade" Annie, show themselves to be suddenly susceptible to a range of phantoms that shift their behavior beyond the kind of memory work that Annie designs the bottle trees to do. However, the unruly, chaotic transmogrification of the bottle trees into divine congregations and lynch mobs is described as being triggered, as the narrator remarks, by Annie's excessive solitude. When Annie's solitude becomes "too much," the landscape around Annie's home, otherwise serene and quiet, becomes noisy and chaotic. The trees are then figured as a kind of barometer for Annie of her social and psychological well-being—the bottle trees quite literally drive her out of her home when she becomes too mired in solitude. That storytelling is the remedy for Annie's malaise is significant: when Annie drifts away from the project of counter-historical storytelling, the spirits that are otherwise brought to life in the controlled context of her stories instead leak onto the landscape, find voice through other mediums.

The bottle trees represent for Annie an attempt to live in a kind of equilibrium with the dead—to live with them without becoming them, to allow them room while governing the sanctity of her physical and psychological spaces, to mourn them without burying them. The bottle trees in moments appear to conduct the power of collectivity (where Annie has always had trouble finding belonging) while registering her doubts about whether collective mobilization

can be successfully transformative. The serenade of the bottle trees points to the contingency of political mobilization.

Sound appears at crucial junctures of the novel to problematize the notion of teleological accounts of time and history. While the novel centers on ostensible failures, where resistance was quelled or neutralized, it catalogues them as moments of trauma that neither find resolution or redress, but simultaneously never stop generating possible futures. The melancholic experience of time that Annie lives with is one where loss can neither be easily situated within a linear account of time nor fully comprehended or catalogued.

SECTION TWO: The Reverberant Violences of State

CHAPTER THREE: "Ex Tempore": The *Zong* Massacre, Sound, and a Critique of Progressive Time

A Story You Have Heard Before

While Brodber and Cliff have demonstrated the ways that new forms of hearing can act as ways to uncover submerged routes of historical possibility and revolutionary potential, the two writers that follow reflect on the long afterlives of assaults of state on Afro-diasporic peoples and the ways that logics of sound can both expose the persistence of this longue durée and become a site for collective mobilization. Both of these women, M. NourbeSe Philip and Paule Marshall, publish their works at the opening of the twenty-first century and confront new state technologies of anti-blackness in a moment when discourses of post-race and post-racism resurface with new force, and strategies for targeting black subjects appear under the sign of national belonging. When Bill Clinton recently defended the mass incarceration crisis that resulted from his 1994 crime bill, he all but declared that the bill, which disproportionately targeted black communities, merely saved blacks from themselves.[160] This line of argumentation exposes a reiteration of a centuries-old conundrum of black citizenship—black subjects must simultaneously see themselves as a threat to the body politic and prove their belonging in that very body politic by tacitly sanctioning their own extermination. My turn to contemporary public discourses of "progress" and NourbeSe's rejection of such teleologies elaborates how issues of national belonging become exacerbated in a "post-racial" moment.

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[160] Clinton remarked that "the gang leaders who got 13-year-old kids hopped up on crack and sent them out onto the street to murder other African-American children" were the true targets of the bill—the suggestion being that they were "gang leaders" who were only incidentally African-American. See "Bill Clinton Gets Into Heated Exchange with Black Lives Matter Protester," accessed April 23, 2016, http://www.npr.org/2016/04/07/473428472/bill-clinton-gets-into-heated-exchange-with-black-lives-matter-protester.

NourbeSe recalls in her 2001 article “Black W/Holes: A History of Brief Time” the experience of nearly colliding with a white man on a Toronto street, to which he angrily responds, “You fucking people are all over the place!”[161] She points out the hypocrisy of the implicit suggestion that African-diasporic peoples “ought not to be” all over the place while “capital, which is in fact our capital, wielded by multi-nationals, runs rampant and rough-shod all over the world.”[162] NourbeSe’s account is an important story of the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of black communities in Canada, where as Peter Hudson and Aaron Kamugisha point out, African diasporic peoples live “as a racialized population under a regime of neoliberal multiculturalism that affirms culture while it denies race and that fêtes diversity while it despises Blackness.”[163] Where Canada is imagined as a geography untouched by the social, political, and ideological terrain that produced and was produced by plantation slavery, the United States is imagined as a site that was deeply affected by slavery, but has successfully eradicated the institution and its outgrowths. Indeed, the open acknowledgment of the nation’s participation in slavery and the slave trade has become a popular public discourse and marketable commodity (in the form of films, for instance). The Zong massacre, a 1781 slave ship massacre, has been one example of an event that has in the past decade attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, public acknowledgement, and artistic treatment. It would appear—certainly to the disciples of post-raciality—that this is a step in the right direction. However, as I point out in this chapter, open discourse can nevertheless produce forms of silencing and foreclosure that inoculate contemporary forms of anti-blackness from criticism.

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[161] M. NourbeSe Philip, “Black W/Holes: A History of Brief Time” in *For the Geography of a Soul: Emerging Perspectives on Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Timothy J. Reiss (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001), 253.
[162] Ibid., 253-4.
[163] Peter Hudson and Aaron Kamugisha, “On Black Canadian Thought,” *The CLR James Journal* 20:1/2 (2014): 3.

In her article, “Accounts Unpaid, Accounts Untold,” about Tobagan-Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip’s’ poem *Zong!*, Erin Fehskens opens with the following lines: “You have heard this story before….You will hear this story again and again”.[164] It is, indeed, likely Fehskens’ audience has heard the story of the 1781 Zong massacre before—the account of the enslaved persons thrown overboard the slave ship *Zong* in order to enable the ship owners to claim insurance money for their value. Fehskens’ remarks are equal parts critical observation and prophecy; they reflect her acute sense not only of the growing familiarity of the tale, but also of the gathering speed and force of its cyclical torque: we will not only hear it again and again, we will hear it more and more often. It is unclear, however, why this tale has been revisited and repeated with such renewed vigor and scholarly interest in the past decade. It is, furthermore, unclear, what precisely it means to “hear” this story that is famous for how little we can know about what happened on board, due, in part, to an enduring scarcity of documentary evidence. What versions of this story might we have “heard” before, then, and what is the relationship in this case between “hearing” the story and knowing what happened?

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which legal, historical, and artistic discussions of the *Zong* massacre, from the 1783 *Gregson v. Gilbert* legal decision to the present day, have maintained a consistent sense that the massacre, as an instantiation of the state-sanctioned extermination of African-descended peoples, is a crisis that has always already been resolved. Even as the massacre becomes more well-known, there remains a persistent discourse of finitude that demarcates the event as belonging to a time that is not our present time. Narratives of the massacre disproportionately induct the event into a timeline of progress, wherein the enduring

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[164] Erin M. Fehskens, "Accounts Unpaid, Accounts Untold: M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong! and the Catalogue," *Callaloo* 35.2 (2012): 407-8.

legacy of slavery in the contemporary moment is denied through claims of resolution. Caribbean narratives of the massacre, including and especially M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, however, offer a competing timeline of the massacre as a crisis that is unresolved and that continues to resonate in the present.

In particular, this chapter will focus on how logics of sound in NourbeSe's *Zong!*—as structures of musical notation, as improvisatory practice, and as noise—inform her challenge to the techniques of narration and strategies of commemoration that render the massacre a story already "heard". I invoke "hearing" here as both the literal perception of sound as vibration, and as cognition (to be made aware or to be informed). In the case of the Zong massacre, both forms of "hearing" are vexed: very little material has survived to constitute an archive of the event. However, what little material there is was brought to life in the forms of reenactments of the court proceedings and of abolitionist condemnations of the massacre[165] in 2007, the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade in England.[166] By describing the *Zong* massacre as "already heard," I point to an overdetermination of the massacre's significance, or a sense that we are no longer being newly informed, that we already understand why this is a story worth telling or

[165] Here, I refer specifically to videos of re-enacted readings from abolitionist Granville Sharp's diaries, which were released by the Gloucestershire Archives as a part of their "Inhuman Traffic" series. These videos, in their words, "mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade." Here, the definitions of both "abolition" and "involvement" are, I would argue, purposefully obfuscated. I align myself with those critics who would argue that this timeline of "involvement" is incorrect and misleading. As we know, the British continued to profit from slavery in their colonies and traders participated illegally in the slave trade for decades after the Slave Trade Act of 1807. For the Gloucester Archives "Inhuman Traffic Series," see "Inhuman Traffic," accessed April 22, 2016, http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/archives/article/107420/Inhuman-traffic. For more on the extended involvement of the British in the slave trade past 1807, see Marika Sherwood, *After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade Since 1807* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

[166] James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law, and the End of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 206-7.

knowing, why the massacre should be condemned, and what the massacre revealed about the structures that made it possible. However, NourbeSe's *Zong!* presents a critique of this discourse of progress through her use of sound, and points to the resiliency of what has now become an "always already" of racial justice—the sense that the legacies of slavery have been overcome solely through a public acknowledgment of the institution's horrors. The danger, in the case of the Zong massacre, as in the contemporary moment, is that public denouncements or discourses of remorse stand in for institutional and structural transformation. Critiques of slavery are imagined as only being possible in a stream of time that is distinct and irreconcilable with the centuries during which the slave trade was legalized—the contemporary moment is imagined as both severed from the past ("that could never happen now"), and imagined as the natural resolution of the past through a logic of progressive time ("we have moved beyond that now").

In what ways might the organization of sound in time (i.e. – rhythm, meter) echo, sustain, or even produce, a distinct and useful approach to time in our commemorations of the ZOng massacre and of slavery altogether? NourbeSe's infusion of the sonic into the text of *Zong!,* which structures an alternative spatiotemporal historical paradigm, is a vital part of her effort to disrupt the commonsense of what David Scott calls "modern historical time."[167] According to Scott, modern historical time, or "the collective time of nations and classes and subjects and populations," is "organized around a notion of discrete but continuous, modular change" wherein "change is imagined not only as successive and progressive, but also as revolutionary."[168] Change, which Scott describes specifically as "secular Enlightenment change," is a critical part

[167] I refer to M. NourbeSe Philip as "NourbeSe" rather than "Philip" in accordance with her expressed preference, which she notes in some of her live performances.
[168] David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 5-6.

of many contemporary institutional[169] public commemorative projects around slavery. These narratives of slavery are typically emplotted as a kind of romance, a form of emplotment that Hayden White notes is characterized by "the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall".[170] We are to see ourselves and our time as the long-awaited antidote to the moral ills of a past time. NourbeSe's poem, however, rejects this notion, and uses sound as a vehicle for presenting a version of historical time wherein we might see ourselves as inhabiting the *longue durée* of slavery.[171]

NourbeSe, like many Caribbean women writers of her generation, has a unique educational and professional background, and her creative writing must be contextualized as only one dimension of a diverse, lifelong commitment to social activism. Born Marlene Philip in Moriah, Tobago in 1947, she completed her B.Sc in Economics at the University of the West Indies in 1968 and relocated to Canada in the same year. Shortly afterward, she achieved her master's in political science in 1970 and her J.D. in 1973 from the University of Western Ontario. After practicing law in Toronto for seven years (1975 – 1982), she stopped and became a full time poet, essayist, and fiction writer, and adopted the name "NourbeSe". While NourbeSe is widely recognized as amongst the most influential and well-known Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Canadian writers and her work has received a number of prizes (such as the Casa de Las

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[169] Here, I include Hollywood's art industrial complex within the frame of the "institutional" in order to discuss films like Amma Asante's *Belle* later in the article.
[170] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), 9.

[171] Here, I see myself in conversation with the Annales School of historical writing, which prioritizes the long-term dynamics of historical phenomena over short-term, "eventual history". For more see: Fernand Braudel, *On History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Americas prize), much of her oeuvre has remained curiously understudied, and has, in some cases, gone out of print.[172] The publication of her latest poetic work, *Zong!,* in 2008 marked an apex in her career—scholarly interest in *Zong!* has been enthusiastic, and NourbeSe has given numerous public and invited university performances of the poem.

NourbeSe's work is known for its experimental form and its powerful critiques of colonialism and white supremacy in the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada. In particular, her work is characterized by "a profound distrust of language"; she highlights the complicity of European languages—especially English—in colonial projects throughout the Americas.[173] As she explains, "[t]his language…was never intended or developed with me or my kind in mind. It spoke of my non-being. It encapsulated my chattel status. And irony of all ironies it is the only language in which I can now function."[174] As a result, NourbeSe's poetry often features words and phrases with internal fractures, and wide intervening white spaces between word fragments. She notes, "when I fracture, fragment then put language back together again—[I am] trying to decontaminate it, perhaps. Refashioning it so that it can carry what you want it to say; managing the brutal history that casts a long and deep shadow around the language."[175] She explicitly links her experiments with language to the jazz tradition, and often resists viewing her form as postmodernist; instead, she links it to what she describes as a kind of Caribbean or New World ontology: "To understand the Caribbean one needs to understand it and the entire New World as

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[172] Perhaps her most famous collection of poetry after *Zong!* is a collection entitled *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. This collection, which won the Casa de Las Americas prize in 1988, has been out of print for several years. For more, see Marlene N. Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1989.

[173] M. NourbeSe Philip, "Interview with an Empire" in *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally*, ed. Romana Huk (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 196.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid., 198.

a site of massive interruptions….The Caribbean is synonymous with rupture and break and hiatus and held breath. And death. And rebirth."[176] As a result of her experimental form, NourbeSe's work—also much like the work of several Afro-Caribbean women writers of her generation—is often viewed as dense, opaque, and inaccessible. Riffing on a number of forms—including jazz, dub poetry, legal decisions, interviews, and even Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*—NourbeSe's work is not only formally experimental, it is formally *hybrid* and teeming with intertextual references.[177]

NourbeSe's work has also consistently drawn links between ostensibly distant historical periods, emphasizing the resilience of anti-black institutions and practices through time. She has, for example, linked the Zong massacre to recent instances of police brutality in the United States. On November 24, 2014, the evening of the Missouri Grand Jury decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson in the killing of black youth Michael Brown, NourbeSe posted a tweet linking the incidents in Ferguson to the events of the 1781 Zong massacre: "Zong! Ferguson, Ferguson Zong!, Zong! Ferguson, Ferguzong, Ferguson, Fergusing, sing a song of Zong, a song of Ferguzong". Under the portmanteau "Ferguzong," NourbeSe links these seemingly distinct and temporally distant events by using the connective fabric of song. The slant rhyme between "song," "Zong," and the "-son" of "Ferguson" becomes the poetic and sonic basis for affiliation, an aesthetic vehicle for elaborating the historical parallels between the systematic extermination of African-descended peoples during the transatlantic slave trade and contemporary instances of state-sanctioned police violence against black communities in the United States. The Zong massacre, for NourbeSe, has never ended.

[176] Ibid., 200.
[177] See M. NourbeSe Philip, "Black W/Holes: A History of Brief Time".

In a similar instance in 2007, the year of the bicentary celebrations of the abolition of the slave trade throughout the British empire, Dr. Verene Shepherd, chair of the Jamaica National Bicentenary Committee, stated in reference to the 1781 Zong massacre that her "only response to such atrocities is Buju Banton's lyrics, 'Murderer, blood is on your shoulder…'" (Williams). Banton's celebrated anthem decrying gun violence following the murders of three fellow musicians is both a powerful indictment of gun violence and an experiment in eliciting empathy through sound.[178] In an important lyric in the song, Banton sings "You ever think about your skull getting bored?" "Bore" is used here in its iteration as a verb, "to pierce, perforate, make a hole in or through." Following the invitation to imagine what it would be like to shot in the skull, the song enacts the gunshots being fired at the listener, with a voice (perhaps Banton's) yelling out "Bup, bup!" before the chorus launches again into "Murderer! Blood is on your shoulder…" In this moment of onomatopoeia, where language conforms to and approximates sound, the song momentarily lapses into silence and turns to noise effects to do what the song by itself cannot: approximate the startling sonic experience of being shot. Shepherd's use of the present tense "is" of Banton's lyrics depicts the Zong massacre as an unredressed crime whose consequences continually extend into the present moment. Here, sound—through both song and noise—helps to undergird an ethical re-thinking of the massacre's timeline. Furthermore, the call to view the massacre as an ongoing crisis is part of a broader set of political stances that emphasize the decolonial process in the Caribbean as a set of long-term structural and ideological transformations, rather than viewing exceptional historical moments, such as independence, as clean breaks from the colonial period. NourbeSe, in league with Shepherd, commands specific forms of sound as tools of anticolonial critique.

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[178] The murders referenced here are the murders of Jamaican dancehall DJs Pan Head, Dirtsman, and Garnett Silk in 1993 and 1994.

This chapter unfolds in two broad sections. I will begin the first section by outlining the "story" of the Zong massacre (amplifying the story's gaps and absences) and by discussing the ways in which the massacre has been discursively exempted from present time (as a past crisis already resolved, or a future crisis yet to be resolved), and in some cases, from time altogether. I will then demonstrate how NourbeSe anticipates, reflects, and challenges this temporal conundrum in both the structure and content of her poem, *Zong!*

In the second section, I will delve into close readings of the sonic terrain of the poem, thinking about the operation of both sound as text (and governing structural metaphor) and sound as transformative force.[179] I examine the ways that musical techniques, such as solfeggio, link it to an improvisatory jazz aesthetic. I also trace the importance of sound and noise within Caribbean anticolonial writing in order to contextualize NourbeSe's strategic use of sound, and highlight the link between the poem's emphasis on extemporization (as a form of improvisation), and extemporization in its root etymological sense of being "out of time". NourbeSe's use of sound to challenge, repurpose, and navigate the notion of the massacre as an event already resolved offers an alternative idiom of remembrance that throws into relief how the massacre (and its commemorations) participate in a longer, ongoing legacy of slavery.

In conclusion, I will consider the contemporary urgency of the narrative's re-telling through a discussion of the resiliency of public discourses of progress. In accordance with NoubeSe's linkage of the poem with recent state violence against black communities in the U.S.

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[179] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010), 10. This is a distinction I echo from Goodman's work. He defines "sonic warfare" through a consideration of sound as *force*: "*Sonic warfare* then, is the use of force, *both seductive and violent, abstract and physical,* via a range of acoustic machines (biotechnical, social, cultural, artistic, conceptual), to modulate the physical, affective, and libidinal dynamics of populations, of bodies, of crowds."

(through leading a collective reading of the poem at a public wake for Trayvon Martin), I will discuss the similarities between the discourse of a kind of temporal exceptionality (being "out of time" or not of our time) that has suffused both institutional commemorations of the *Zong* massacre and president Barack Obama's commentary on the Ferguson Grand Jury's recent decision not to indict Darren Wilson for the killing of unarmed black youth Mike Brown. As such, this chapter as a whole nuances Giorgio Agamben's astute contention that "[e]very conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated" by considering how attention to the sonic might reveal the dynamic relationship between history and time and constitute an alternate strategy of historical representation in Caribbean anticolonial writing.

Mysterium Iniquitatis/The Mystery of Evil

Let us begin this story by weaving together historical record, rumor, and speculation—because perhaps nothing can characterize the tale of the *Zong* more powerfully than an acknowledgement of the questions it has left unanswered. The *Zong* was originally a Dutch slave ship (initially named the *Zorgue* by its Dutch owners) that was impounded by the British and brought to Cape Coast in 1781 with two hundred and forty-four slaves already on board. It was then purchased on behalf of a syndicate of Liverpool slave trading merchants, the Gregson syndicate, and renamed. It is not clear why it was renamed in the way it was—from *Zorgue*, a title reminiscent of the Dutch word "zorg" for "care" or "worry," to *Zong*, a title that resonates both in English and Dutch with the word "song." Indeed, *zong* is the singular past tense conjugation of the Dutch infinitive *zingen*, "to sing." Thus, the ship and its legend have long borne a mysterious and perhaps coincidental relationship to sound, temporality, voice, and the

past: its name connotes not only a rhythmic of arrangement of sound in time, but a projection of the voice that has always already occurred, that is, by definition, not of our present time.

The sailing of this vessel was characterized on multiple fronts by excess. We know that the amount of slaves packed beneath the decks of this relatively small ship far exceeded the typical holding capacity for such ships. Some of the enslaved aboard the ship had been kept in the holds for almost a year before the ship finally embarked on its transatlantic voyage. Before setting sail for Jamaica, the ship sailed southward along the Western coast of Africa from Cape Coast to Anomabu to São Tomé, and a representative for the ship owners purchased enslaved Africans at the former two stops. While, as James Walvin notes in his history of the *Zong*, "[a] typical British slave ship of that size would only have carried around 193 Africans,"[180] the *Zong* set sail with over 440 African slaves on board, or well over 200% of its holding capacity. The voyage also far exceeded the average length of Middle Passage crossings to Jamaica. Where such trips typically took eight to nine weeks, the *Zong* took over fourteen weeks to arrive in Jamaica, or almost double the average travel time.[181] The unusual length of the voyage would later be cited as a primary justification for the "necessary" mass murder of slaves that took place during the voyage.

Navigational errors delayed the ship's arrival, but due to accounts of the replacement of the captain because of severe illness during the latter half of the voyage, it is unclear who was responsible for those errors. It is said that provisions, especially water, on board the ship were running dangerously low; however, it is unclear who confirmed the ship's inventory before its departure and who was checking the inventory over the course of the voyage (if anyone at all).

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[180] Walvin, *The Zong*, 27.
[181] Ibid., 89.

Records state that when the vessel reached its port in Black River, Jamaica, only 208 enslaved Africans arrived. A staggering 52.7% of the slaves aboard the ship died during the voyage across the Atlantic[182]; well over one hundred of those slaves were deliberately drowned, thrown overboard by the crew. Upon completion of the ship's voyage the Gregson syndicate filed an insurance claim with the ship's insurers, demanding compensation for the "loss of goods" (valued at 30 pounds per murdered slave).[183] The basis of this claim was that "the perils of the sea" (navigational errors, low provisions) made "a throwing overboard of goods, and of part to save the residue" necessary.[184]

There has been some dissent and uncertainty around how to account for the death toll on board. Many scholars say 132,[185] other writers say 150.[186] Some institutions claim 122, parsing out the number drowned from the 10 who are said to have thrown themselves overboard.[187] (They are, presumably, counted as suicide and not murder.) The *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*, however, cites the death toll as 232—the rest, presumably, died of "natural causes".[188]

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[182] "The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database," accessed October 1, 2014, http://www.slavevoyages.org/.
[183] James C. Oldham, "Insurance Litigation Involving the Zong and other British Slave Ships, 1780 – 1807," *Journal of Legal History* 28:3 (2007): 299-318.

[184] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 211.
[185] This is the figure that appears most frequently in scholarly literature about the massacre, including Walvin's *Zong*, Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic*, and Vincent Brown's *Reaper's Garden*.
[186] NourbeSe cites 150 slaves murdered in the "Notanda" of *Zong!*
[187] Walvin, *The Zong*, 98. This is the figure that the courts officially accepted when proceeding with the insurance case.
[188] Philip, *Zong!*, 190. Only very rarely do fictional or scholarly accounts of the massacre account for the slaves that died of disease or hunger. NourbeSe includes a reflection, as a parenthetical aside in her "Notanda," on "whether the death of someone who is a slave can ever be 'natural.'" This is a critical point when considering how scholars and other writers interested in the massacre have chosen to represent what constituted an act of murder as the slaves thrown overboard (and sometimes the slaves who threw themselves overboard), but not the deaths by disease, which by many accounts, likely spread as a result of how tightly slaves were packed in

The confusion about the figure itself is less interesting to me than the choices various scholars and institutions make when relating the story, and why. The BBC Broadcast on "The British Slave Trade and Its Abolition 1770 – 1807" adopted the lowest possible figure of 122[189], M. NourbeSe Philip adopts the highest figure of 150 in her poem *Zong!*, and the bulk of scholarly literature adopts 132, a compromise between the lowest and highest possibilities (accepting the suicides in the count for murder). There is, of course, no precise answer to this question, nor does this question, in and of itself, demand a consensus. However, it is important to ask how and why some estimates have become more popular than others, and what the work of estimation is at all.

In the case of the *Zong,* estimation seems to be one of several responses to the irresolvable indeterminacy of "what happened" over the course of the ship's voyage. The ship's log, which would have detailed the daily goings on of the ship as well as precise figures of slaves and provisions on board, was mysteriously lost after the ship docked in Jamaica and therefore, could play no role in the legal proceedings that followed. It is, strictly speaking, impossible to describe the massacre in precise numerical terms. In fact, much of what is known about the *Zong* massacre (including figures of slaves murdered) is hearsay, derived from the unreliable testimonies of two crewmembers that likely played key roles in the massacre itself.[190] Furthermore, one of the only, and certainly the most famous, surviving documents of the massacre is a transcript of a legal decision, *Gregson v. Gilbert*. This document describes an

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the holds. Is the normalcy of slaves' deaths during the Middle Passage and slavery reinforced by the choice not to include in the widely used death toll deaths by malnourishment and disease?

[189] "Life on board slave ships and the Zong massacre," accessed November 15, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/clips/zgb2n39. It is also noteworthy that the BBC, like the Gloucestershire Archives, adopts 1807 as the end of the slave trade in the British empire.

[190] In their testimonies, they claim because the lack of provisions was so severe, it was necessary to throw the slaves overboard for the survival of the crew and the remaining slaves on board, For more on the questionable character of Robert Stubbs, the only passenger aboard the ship who is also rumored to have captained the ship during the time of Captain Collingwood's illness, see Walvin, *The Zong*, 76 - 87.

appeal to the original ruling in this case, which mandated that the ship's insurers compensate the Gregson syndicate for the "loss of goods". The ship's insurers appealed this decision, on the suspicion that the slaves were murdered purposefully in order to claim insurance money for slaves who may not have sold well or at all on the market in Jamaica. However, there is no surviving record of the re-trial, so we have no sense of how, or if, the case resolved.

Hence, the tale of the *Zong* massacre registers an internal resistance to linear temporality and order: it rests on unreliable testimony, it has few documentary sources that can confirm any numerical or temporal details of the event, and those records that have survived are full of gaps, contradictions, and silences. It is a tale with no clear beginning or end; it is neither clear how the ship's alleged navigational and supplies crises were catalyzed, nor how the Court of King's Bench finally ruled on the dispute between the ship's owners and insurers and why. However, unresolved questions about the massacre have not solely (or even primarily) accreted around the narrative details of the event, but also around questions that are seemingly a part of a broad humanitarian commonsense: Were the parties involved aware (both immediately and epistemologically—capable of being aware) of the ethical implications of the legal designation of slaves as property? Did these parties acknowledge the moral conundrum that the purposeful murder of over one hundred slaves was being considered instead as a case of insurance fraud?[191] This case is haunted both by its indiscernible timeline and by its implicit sanctioning of black dehumanization.

For some of the aforementioned reasons, the *Zong* massacre has remained a mystery in many ways. However, what I find perhaps more fascinating than the unanswered questions

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[191] Prominent abolitionist Granville Sharp, through the encouragement of Olaudah Equiano, indeed attempted unsuccessfully to have the Gregson syndicate charged with murder. He eventually dropped his pursuit of the charges, though it is unclear why.

themselves, has been the narrative arc of resolution that has nevertheless been attached to it in the institutional memory of the massacre. The great majority of public discourse around the massacre is couched within narratives of social and historical progress. The representation of the Zong massacre in a number of the commemorative displays during the 2007 abolition bicentennial in the UK appeared as a reticent admission of the British Empire's participation in the slave trade within a broader celebration of the empire's successful abolition of slavery. The admission operates only as a reminder of what the nation no longer actively reckons with. These commemorations of the *Zong* massacre adopt the temporality of Pierre Nora's *lieux de memoire*. As Nora notes, "*Lieux de mémoire* exist because there are no longer any *milieux de mémoire*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience."[192] Even as it is openly discussed, the transatlantic slave trade in this context is not broadly or explicitly acknowledged as having a meaningful and ongoing afterlife in contemporary social, economic, and political spheres.

Furthermore, many, if not most, institutional narratives of the massacre end with an explicitly redemptive message enabled by a progressive historical telos. The short blurb describing what the Gloucestershire Archives call "The 'Zong' Incident" ends with the following statement: "This notorious case helped turn public opinion against the slave trade."[193] Ghanaian-British director Amma Asante's film, *Belle* (which focuses in large part on the legal proceedings around the *Zong* case), ends with the following caption: "The Zong case became a seminal step

[192] Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.

[193] "The 'Zong' Incident," accessed November 15, 2014, http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/archives/article/106380/The-Zong-incident.

towards the abolition of slavery."[194] In the film *Belle*, other mysteries of the case are also explicitly resolved: most notably, the ship's log is found and becomes a critical piece of evidence in the legal proceedings, and the presiding judge, Lord Mansfield, rules against the Gregson syndicate and declares slavery to be an institution that is "so odious" that "nothing may support it".[195] There is a way in which a recognition of the *Zong* case as a massacre and human rights violation, rather than as a case of insurance fraud, becomes a corrective to the slave trade's mysterious gaps, silences, a-linearity, and pernicious afterlives. The narrative's resolution in this way makes it a willing participant in a progressive historical timeline, wherein the *Zong* massacre can be mourned as a singular and spectacular injustice, but one that is always already over and done with, resolved by the implicitly just march of time.

M. NourbeSe Philip's poem *Zong!*, however, offers a different conception of the relationship between time and justice, and I argue, anticipates and reflects notions of progressive or corrective time that render the massacre "already resolved". The poem, which is almost two hundred pages long, might be described as an exhaustive meditation on the sonic, temporal, spatial, and etymological logics of language. Composed of sections that scatter words and

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[194] *Belle*, dir. Amma Asante (Beverly Hills: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2014), Blu-ray video. In fact, Asante even takes the liberty to allow characters to discover purportedly lost documents, such as the ship's log, and creates a scene where Mansfield delivers a ruling in favor of the ship's insurers, and an affected speech about the reprehensible character of slavery. In reality, we have no evidence that a retrial ever took place, nor definitive information about whether the final ruling was in favor of the ship's owners or the ship's insurers.

[195] Amma Asante, *Belle*, directed by Amma Asante (Beverly Hills: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2014.), DVD. Also, see Jeremy Krikler's "The *Zong* and the Lord Chief Justice" for a contextualization of the Zong case within Lord Mansfield's legal career. While I contest Krikler's thesis that the implicit denial of the slaves' humanity was simply a casualty of Lord Mansfield's lifelong project of English legal reform rather than a matter of prejudice, we agree that a declaration of slavery's "odiousness" by Mansfield would have been far-fetched at best. Jeremy Krikler, "The Zong and the Lord Chief Justice," *History Workshop Journal* 64:1 (2007): 29-47.

fragments of words chaotically across the page and feature the extensive use of white space, NourbeSe's poem not only contains a consistent temporal motif, it offers a structural meditation on time through its re-imagination of poetic tempo.

The poem is broken up into six sections, many of which sport Latin titles: "Os," "Sal," "Ventus," "Ratio," "Ferrum," and "Ẹbọra". Further, the back matter of the poem includes a glossary of words in fourteen languages that appear in the poem; a "manifest" detailing an odd conglomeration of persons, animals, languages, and objects; a "Notanda" where NourbeSe offers some background on her process of writing the poem often in the format of journal entries; and finally, the insurance dispute claim (and the only surviving public record of the case), *Gregson v. Gilbert*. Each section of the poem opens with epigraphs by a number of renowned writers and texts, including American modernist poet Wallace Stevens, Christian theologian St. Augustine, English lawyer and philosopher Thomas More, German poet Paul Celan, and the book of Ezekiel. Perhaps the epigraphs that most overtly illustrate NourbeSe's interest in rethinking the relationship between the past and the present are from St. Augustine: "non enim erat tunc" ("there was no then") and "praesens de praereritis" ("the past is ever present").

In the "Notanda," an essay at the end of the poem in which NourbeSe summarizes the *Zong* massacre and discusses, among other things, the formal and stylistic characteristics of the poem, NourbeSe explains her choice of poetic form, rather than the novel form, as a medium for representing the poem's "mystery": "'A novel requires too much telling…and this story must be told by not telling—there is a mystery here—the mystery of evil (mysterium iniquitatis to quote Ivan Illich).'"[196] Here, NourbeSe approaches the question of justice through Christian theodicy (from the Greek *theos* for "God" and *dikē* for "trial," "judgement," or "justice"). The invocation

[196] Philip, *Zong!*, 190.

of theodicy here—the attempt to explain how and why evil exists under the purview of a benevolent God, or the "mystery of evil"—opens up a way of thinking about the question of justice in the *Zong* case as an open or irresolvable paradox. In progressive time, the massacre is resolved through the temporal progression into the just and humane present. In the time of this poem—a cumulative vision of time that NourbeSe structures the poem to accommodate—the massacre is still yet unresolved because the tension between "evil" (or injustice) and "justice" is not safely mediated through time, but is compounded and aggravated.

The *Zong*—a space whose Dutch etymology already displaces it in time by sealing it in the past tense—is re-imagined in NourbeSe's poem as *Zong!,* a space with an exclamatory urgency and immediacy that arrests time, that forces a pause through a burst of sound. Throughout the poem, Philip's meditations on time not only highlight and anticipate the ways in which the *Zong* massacre—expressly because of the way it resonates with persistent, still operative technologies of black dehumanization—has been repeatedly cast out of the stream of present time. NourbeSe takes up the way the massacre has been cast as *ex tempore* (Latin for "out of time," also an expression for improvisation) in both the form and content of the poem. What kinds of afterlives do our gaps in knowledge about the massacre, which are largely obscured in institutional narratives, have in NourbeSe's work? In what way might an understanding of the way the massacre has been cast as "out of time" undergird the poem's organizational and thematic currents? How might attention to the temporal schema of the poem help us to contextualize the historical and political function of what I view as an institutional fealty to the present, or a mode of disowning the afterlives of slavery by uncoupling the present from the past, by insisting that we have indeed "moved forward"?

The "Not Now" of the Zong Massacre

The insurance dispute claim, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, animates NourbeSe's poem *Zong!*, and, in many ways, catalyzes questions of time in the poem. In the text, both legal representatives for the ship's owners and ship insurers present their cases for why the case should or should not be reconsidered. The first section of NourbeSe's poem, "Os," consists of poems that are composed entirely from the language, or what NourbeSe calls "the particular and peculiar discursive landscape," of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, which has largely been considered to be the "only publically extant document directly bearing on these events."[197] The actual text of the legal decision is reproduced at the very end of *Zong!*, bookending the poem with an account of the massacre that is full of "silences" that NourbeSe mines over the course of "Os." Because both this legal decision and the "Notanda" (which explains NourbeSe's formal and stylistic decisions) are the last items printed in the poem, one must begin with the end matter in order to understand the poem itself. In its layout alone, the poem frustrates chronological reading practices (which necessarily have both a temporal dimension—events organized from earliest to latest—and a spatial dimension—left to right). Instead, readers are encouraged to move back and forth between the end of the poem and the beginning section; the legal language at the end of the poem is precisely what constructs what we understand to be the poem's "beginning." Indeed, in this very legal language, we find a kernel of temporal obfuscation that energizes NourbeSe's consistent *ex tempore* motif: the designation of slaves as property as a phenomenon that cannot be discussed in the present moment.

In the section of *Gregson v. Gilbert* where the legal representatives for the Gregson syndicate (John Lee and his assistant, Mr. Chambres) present their case for receiving

[197] Philip, *Zong!*, 199.

compensation from the ship's insurers, they open with a curious line: "It has been decided, whether wisely or unwisely is *not now the question*, that a portion of our fellow-creatures may become the subject of property. This, therefore, was a throwing overboard of goods, and of part to save the residue" (my emphasis).[198] As Lee cites the conversion of persons into property, he proposes a strange hyphenated category of being: fellow-creatures. The hyphen does the important work of obfuscating the meaning of the word "fellow," a confusing marker of status. The word "fellow" is uniquely capable of signifying as both a person and as a thing: as either "a person in the same position" or "a thing of the same kind as or otherwise associated with another."[199] The word "creature," of course does similar work, denoting both kinds of persons and forms of life that are not human. These words complicate the signification of the possessive pronoun "our": it is unclear whether or not the term denotes association (as in "our kind") or ownership (as in "our property"). Even while Lee goes on to reframe the massacre as a "throwing overboard of goods," he prefaces his statement with language that demonstrates the taxonomical, legal, and political conundrums posed by the enslaved: they fell into the interstices between legal taxonomical categories. As Colin Dayan writes: "Not simply things and not really

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[198] Ibid., 211.

[199] *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "fellow." This implicit understanding of the enslaved as something other than human is pervasive throughout the text of the decision. The legal representatives (Davenport, Pigott, and Heywood) for the ship's insurers do not contest Lee's claims on the basis of the humanity of the enslaved, but rather, on the basis that there was "no sufficient necessity to justify the captain and crew in throwing the negroes overboard." As such, the central question of the proceedings is a question of "necessity"—namely whether the circumstances of the voyage necessitated the jettisoning of the slaves or whether the murders were committed because the crew worried that "they should have a bad market for their slaves." The idea that the ship's owners might be tried for murder—a charge that renowned British abolitionist Granville Sharp unsuccessfully attempted to have raised against the Gregson syndicate—was never formally up for discussion in the courts.

human, slaves occupied a curiously nuanced category."[200] Lee's words become a critical example of what Dayan calls "the double character of person and property," or as Lee might put it, of "creatures" and cargo.[201]

Furthermore, throughout the document, the terms "negroes" and "slaves"—and in one case "negro slaves"—are used to describe those who were murdered during the *Zong*'s voyage. The murder itself is referred to alternately as a "throwing overboard" and as the "loss." In all cases but one, the "throwing overboard is referenced in the passive voice ("the negroes *were thrown* overboard" [my emphasis]); in the single instance that a subject is attributed to the action, it is phrased passively as a matter of obligation: "the masters and mariners…were obliged to throw overboard 150 other negroes".[202] Not once in the document is an actively and intentional subject explicitly referenced. The legal decision does not explicitly deny the personhood of slaves outright; rather, it leaves the terms "negro" and "slave" elastic, able to accommodate what Dayan calls the "shifting and tentative" character of the "meaning of persons" in law.[203] The language of the law here simply leaves the denial of humanity inherent in the declaration of slaves as property as a matter that, in Lee's words, "is not now the question." It is a concern suspended in time, it is exempt from the legal "now" of the case.

As such, the humanity of the enslaved is a question that is tabled in the document, and exiled to a negative temporal category: it is a question that does not belong definitively to the past, present, or future, but to a time that is non-present. Lee's refusal to discuss the "wisdom" of the law's designation of slaves as "subjects of property" is couched in an overdetermined legal

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[200] Colin Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 139.
[201] Ibid., 140.
[202] Philip, *Zong!*, 210.
[203] Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog*, xii.

present: in Lee's words, "it has been decided" already (presumably by the law, characterized here as a higher authority that exceeds the sum of its subjects and practitioners).[204] While Lee's seemingly preemptive words betray the fact that objections to the morality of designating slaves as property were indeed circulating around the case (outside the courts, if not formally in them), Lee staves off such questions with an expression of obligation and allegiance to the legal present. By doing so, he eschews the court's ethical imperative to reckon with the accusation of mass murder through an expressed fealty to his present time.

The poem "Zong! # 4" in the "Os" section of the poem speaks against this eschewal of ethical responsibility using the present, past, and conditional conjugations of the verb "to be," which are all found in the original language of the legal decision. First, the title of the section itself—"Os," which is Latin for both "bone" and "mouth"—connotes the idea of the verbal dead, or more specifically here, a verbal past that continually articulates itself into the present. The poem "Zong! # 4" reads: "this is/ not was/ or/ should be/ this be/ not/ should be/ this/ should/ not/ be/ is" (see figure 2).[205] Here, NourbeSe rejects the notion that the massacre is a part of a past that is sealed off, and asserts, rather, that it is a participant in an ongoing present ("this is/ not was"). Furthermore, the introduction of the deontic modality ("this/ should/ not/ be"), a grammatical mood that permits the expression of an ethical position within a verbal tense, signals the recognition of the tragic contemporaneity of the massacre as an important ethical position. Here, the separation of time into streams of extant (present) and conditional (or specifically, deontic) time refuses the supposed pastness of the massacre, and instead repositions

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[204] Robert M. Covers describes this strategy as the "judicial can't," wherein a judge evades moral responsibility by citing that he is "bound to apply the law, immoral as it may be." For more, see Robert M. Cover, *Justice Accused: Antislavery and the Judicial Process* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975): 119 – 125.
[205] Philip, *Zong!*, 7.

it in an extended present (or an enduring past) with an ethical imperative for redress ("this should not be"). By concluding finally with the word "is," she finalizes its place in the present; by omitting punctuation (such as a period), she leaves room for the temporal complexity of the massacre: it is neither sealed exclusively in the past nor in the present, but rather implicates both.

The notion of the massacre being cast out of time is repeatedly referenced throughout the poem. In the "Ratio" section of the poem, a section title that is "short for *ratio decidendi*, the central reason for a legal decision," the following line appears: "the deal was/ to begin/ & end in/ time and we are out/ of time lost like the/ ship."[206] Here, an obfuscated speaker (who is likely a crewmember) equates being out of time with being lost at sea. The ship, which was severely delayed in its voyage to Jamaica, is imaged as drifting in and out of the stream of time. What specifically might it mean, however, to be out of time? Here, "out of time" might resonate in at least two ways: first, with the colloquial expression of being "out of time," the elapsing and conclusion of a fixed stretch of time. Through this image, the alleged scarcity of provisions on board the *Zong*, which was used as justification for the jettisoning of slaves, is invoked. The stretch of the voyage that could be supported by provisions had reached a critical tapering point, and according to the testimony of the crew, it was this scarcity that ultimately necessitated the massacre. In a crude sense, the stretch of time allotted for the maintenance of the enslaved on board had elapsed—once "out of time," in a moment of crisis, it becomes, indeed, reasonable (in the eyes of the law) to jettison the enslaved in order to spare the lives of the crew. In fact, the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision revolves precisely around this question of the "necessity," of the massacre.

[206] Ibid., 183, 120.

"Out of time," however, might also be read in another way as a kind of literal rhythmic dissonance, wherein the tempo of one musical element does not accord with the tempo of another. In this case, a rhythmic unison is broken, a sonic aberration becomes apparent because of the way it interrupts an otherwise synchronized rhythm. If we understand being "in time" as a sonic metaphor for order and normalcy, we can read the language here as casting the massacre as an event that is not simply not of our time, but also *unruly, disordered, and abnormal*. Interestingly enough, however, the conditions that catalyzed the *Zong* massacre were not particularly unusual: ships were frequently overcrowded, slaves were, for various reasons, thrown overboard (hence reports that sharks often followed slave ships), and disease often spread on board, among other things. However, the *Zong* has become a singular representative of this phenomenon, in part, because of the way it manifested extremes of these otherwise normative phenomena. Thus, the massacre shifts between being in and out of time, straddling norm and extreme. The status of the massacre as an aberration is linked to the way it disrupts, and thereby exposes, the horrific normativity of its time. Cast as a kind of departure from the normative stream of time, the *Zong* is made to absorb our critical energies. As an aberration that is "out of time," its link to the normativity of black demhumanization (that extends into the present) is severed. It does not threaten of integrity of progressive time.

The *Zong* massacre's casting out of time has, thus, occurred on two related, but distinct, fronts: through denial and resolution. On one hand, its occurrence *as a massacre* (rather than as a case of insurance fraud) is cast in the *Gregson v. Gilbert* insurance dispute as a question that belongs a time that is not the legal "now" of the case. On the other hand, its occurrence as a massacre is highlighted, but only after it is incorporated into a timeline of historical progress that renders the massacre an injustice that has already been redressed. In both cases, the massacre is

disallowed a presence in contemporary debates about the legacy of slavery. It remains, instead, a curiosity, or “a very uncommon case” (in the words of Lord Mansfield), that cannot be easily incorporated into a progressive timeline, and is thus, cast out entirely. NourbeSe’s poem, however, uses sound to revise the notion of the massacre as a singular, resolved event, and rather, advances a notion of the massacre as a resonant, repeating phenomenon.

The Sonic Terrain of *Zong!*

In the “Notanda,” Philip writes, “I feel that I *do* have a language—this language of grunt and groan, of moan and stutter—this language of pure sound fragmented by history.” Throughout the poem, she explicitly invokes various registers of sound: from non-verbal sounds such as “grunt[s] and groan[s]” to musical sound. NourbeSe’s turn to sound prompts us to consider how the critical discourse around gaps and omissions in archives are rendered through sonic metaphors. The “silence” in “archival silence” hearkens to a longstanding practice of linking agency and voice, an association that has been long problematized by feminist scholars. As Sheena Maholtra and Aimee Rowe write in *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*, “The articulation between silence and powerlessness is almost common sense within Western culture, an assumption that is reified across literary, progressive academic, and activist contexts”.[207] Perhaps one of the most widely recognized paragons of this practice is Gayatri Spivak’s 1988 article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” which investigates and critiques the grounds on which Western radical criticism (represented, for example, by figures like Deleuze and Guattari, and Foucault) attempt to “give voice” back to, re-empower, or prioritize the needs

[207] Sheena Maholtra and Aimee Carillo Rowe, “Still the Silence: Feminist Reflections at the Edges of Sound,” in *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound* ed. Sheena Maholtra and Aimee Carillo Row (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

and perspectives of marginalized peoples.[208] For Spivak, even such well-meaning political projects emerge from an epistemological framework that normalizes Western rational paradigms. The sonic metaphor with which Spivak's question is framed demonstrates that speech—or more properly in this context, being "hearable" or able to elicit attention and consideration—moves beyond sound as a vehicle for communication and toward sound as an effective, persuasive force.

Indeed, Phillip, as shown in the preceding epigraph, advances a similar conjoining of speech and sound through a description of her search for the right "language" with which to explore the archival silences within the Zong case. NourbeSe's contentious relationship with the English language, the imposed colonial language in her home island of Tobago, echoes, in ways, Spivak's concerns about the epistemological framework in which resistance is staged. NourbeSe writes in the "Notanda" section of the poem: "I deeply distrust this tool I work with—language….I distrust its order, which hides disorder; its logic hiding the illogic and its rationality, which is simultaneously irrational….humans push against the boundary of language by engaging in language that often is neither rational, logical, predictable or ordered. It is sometimes even noncomprehensible".[209] The violent imposition of European languages and modes of expression on colonial subjects becomes an integral tactic of colonial management, wherein "proper" Caribbean subjects produce sound in politically and culturally sanctioned ways.

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[208] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 296.

[209] Philip, *Zong!*, 197.

This anti-colonial critique of language is the principal political impetus undergirding much of the scholarship on Caribbean creoles, patois, and speech patterns. Barbadian writer Kamau Brathwaite, in his *History of the Voice,* famously critiques British colonial literary education in the Caribbean, which inundates students with European cultural and literary constructs and references that do not account for Caribbean realities. In a specific critique of the normalization of pentameter as the "natural" rhythm of the English language, Brathwaite remarks that "it [pentameter] carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameters."[210] Brathwaite points out that the colonial imposition of language is not simply a matter of vocabulary; rather, there is an inexorable sonic dimension in his critique: rhythm. Furthermore, Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant also elaborates how non-verbal sound became an important alternative to speech in the context of slavery. He notes, "Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise."[211] As Glissant demonstrates, not only is non-verbal sound a critical realm of resistive speech, it is its "apparent meaninglessness" that makes it a powerful alternative to colonial language. Further, there is something valuable about noise—that which appears to be nonsensical and primitive is reclaimed as containing an alternative grammar of expression. Thus, NourbeSe's use of her own unique "language" throughout the poem invariably references the ways in which intelligible linguistic and sonic forms became

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[210] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: the Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), 10.

[211] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 123-4.

grounds for colonial imposition, and the potential of unintelligible sound, or noise, for anticolonial resistance.

However, NourbeSe also openly rejects the discourse of "giving voice back" to the slaves drowned during the *Zong*'s voyage and, instead, consistently declares a desire to "not tell the story that must be told".[212] In an interview with Paul Watkins in the *Toronto Review of Books*, NourbeSe discusses the importance for writers and artists of searching for narratives outside of those factual accounts that surround events. She remarks:

> [A]s artists, poets, shamans and *awos*—keeps of secrets—we cannot reside, indeed we cannot afford to reside in the gospel according to whatever the governing fact situation is….How then do we begin to read the silences around slavery, and an event like the Zong? The first imperative is to become aware that we require a new language and following hard on that, the learning of a new language. Even if it's the language of silence.[213]

NourbeSe uncouples language and speech from the idea of returning voice/agency or filling historical gaps. For her, the gaps and omissions are a fundamental aspect of the collective memory of slavery that should, in fact, shape our unique idiom for discussing events like the Zong massacre. This, again, demonstrates how profoundly epistemological the question of slavery remembrance is. NourbeSe does not simply deploy superficial metaphors of sound as agency, and silence as oppression. Instead, silence "was its own language that one could read,

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[212] Philip, *Zong*!,189.
[213] "We Can Never Tell the Entire Story of Slavery: In Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip," by Paul Watkins, *The Toronto Review of Books*, April 30, 2014, http://www.torontoreviewofbooks.com/2014/04/in-conversation-with-m-nourbese-philip/.

interpret, and even speak."[214] Here, silence is not simply a form of absence or withholding, it is a coded field that can be interpreted and engaged. NourbeSe shifts the sonic terrain on which we consider "archival silence" and demands that we recognize a more dialogical relationship between silence and sound. More specifically, we are no longer encouraged to see silence and speech as diametrically opposed, but are encouraged to see them as related strategies within a sonic idiom of memory. How, then, might we read *Zong!* with attention to the sonic? In what ways then does the poem draw our attention to the realm of the sonic, and how do these invocations of sound attempt to shift the critical discourse around the massacre?

Critically, however, NourbeSe's *Zong!* has both a textual life and a life in performance. Live renditions of the poem animate the sonic registers that the poem encodes through visual play with blank space and superimposition. Blank spaces become long pauses, and familiar words in the text are divided into syllabic, and sometimes sub-syllabic, units and pronounced in ways that defamiliarize them.[215] NourbeSe relates during one of her performances that she hasn't always known how to read the superimposed words in the final section of her poem, "Ebora," remarking: "I hadn't understood how to read this until I suddenly realized that it was gibberish, some of it, and that when you don't understand a language, what you hear is gibberish." When she does indeed attempt to read it, however, she performs the sounds of what may only be described as the noises of a skipping record, or the sound of stumbling over words, throughout

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[214] Philip, *Zong*!, 195.

[215] For an example of NourbeSe's readings of blank spaces as long pauses, see her readings of "*Zong!* #7," "*Zong!* #11," "*Zong!* #12," and "*Zong!* #13" in "NourbeSe Philip – 720p.mov," YouTube Video, 22:17, Posted by "rmajzels," August 3, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zjz8UFGCJeI, 4:27-11:03. For an example of the fragmenting and defamiliarizing of words, see 12:29 – 12:38 in the same video, where she reads a line from page 70 of the poem that visually reads as "bilge water for tea," but in her reading sounds more like "bilge what (pause) erfortea." Visually, the line appears as "bilge wat / er for tea"; so her reading of the poem frustrates readers' attempts to make sense of the phrase as it appears on the page.

her reading.[216] Finally, her readings sometimes emulate the noises of drowning. In a live reading of "*Zong!* #1," the opening poem of *Zong!*, NourbeSe deploys the sounds of stuttering and gurgling throughout the reading.[217] As a result, listening to the poem quite often alternately sounds like listening to a ritual chant, a foreign language, a scratched record, and sometimes, a person in the final throes of life. Listening to the poem, then, introduces a field of signification that cannot to accessed through the visuals and language of the poem alone.

Further, NourbeSe's live performances also create opportunities for audience participation and collaboration. For example, NourbeSe hosted a live, collective reading of the poem as a wake for Trayvon Martin.[218] For a part of the reading, NourbeSe and the audience read in solidarity and Trayvon's name was included in the list of names of victims aboard the *Zong*; for another part, the audience was encouraged to read the poem at their own pace, and to sit or stand, to sing or speak as they felt moved. As such, NourbeSe's live readings also render the poem flexible and amenable to a variety of readings and performative options. The evocative and unifying power of NourbeSe's poem, then, is most apparent most when the textual soundscape is performed.

Sound, Solfeggio, and the Repeating Zong

Sonic imagery and metaphors transform the *Zong* massacre from a singularity—an event clearly demarcated in time—into "chant! Shout! And ululation! *Zong* is moan! Mutter! Howl!

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[216] See "The Holloway Series in Poetry – M. NourbeSe Philip," YouTube Video, 1:17:47, Posted by "UC Berkeley Events," March 1, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-k70prBjD4, 1:15:43 – 1:17:25.
[217] See "Zong 1," accessed November 25, 2014, https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Philip/04-23-08/Philip-M-Nourbese_02_Zong-1_Friends-Meeting-House_Toronto_04-23-08.mp3.
[218] "NourbeSe at Naropa – Wake for Trayvon Martin" Vimeo Video, 18:33, Posted by "Alystyre Julian," October 9, 2013, https://vimeo.com/76496681.

And shriek! *Zong!* is 'pure utterance.'"[219] The poem becomes a rhythmic, repeated sequence that can be projected into space and can resonate aurally. The title of the poem alone transforms the massacre into a cry, shout, or command. The exclamation point transitions us into the realm of the phonological—it transforms the title into an interjection where sounds are allowed to stand alone as grammatical anomalies, as interruptions and irregularities in the fluency of speech. Here, the poem highlights sound as a field that is imbricated with speech in many ways, but far exceeds, and at times, contradicts speech.

Discussing her fragmentation of words in the poem, NourbeSe writes, "Words break into sound, return to their initial and originary phonic sound—grunts, plosives, labials—is this perhaps how language might have sounded at the beginning of time?"[220] NourbeSe is using sound as a vehicle to move through time and to parse the historical accretions of meaning in language in order to return to an idea of "pure sound." NourbeSe cites sound as vehicle for discussing the massacre in connection with an alternate originary timeline of sorts, where language can be cleansed of its colonial history. However, I see sound operating in the poem less as a *tabula rasa* of sorts, and rather, as a kind of chaotic potential that can challenge and disrupt proper signification and enable improvisation. The exclamation point in the title of the poem converts a proper noun into an interjection—through its enunciative force, it converts the ship into a discursive space where other unlikely conversions become possible.

In the fourth section of *Zong!*, "Ratio," the poem resumes a similarly ordered visual schema to what appears in the second section, "Sal." In contrast to the section that precedes it, "Ventus"—where the words scatter in gently curving diagonal lines across the page, mimicking

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[219] Philip, *Zong!*, 207.
[220] Ibid., 205.

the “wind” its title invokes—the “Ratio” section returns to horizontally aligned lines of text. In the “Notanda” at the end of the poem, “ratio” is discussed in the following way:

> The basic tool in the study of law is case analysis. This process requires a careful sifting of the reported case to find the kernel of the legal principle at the heart of the decision—the *ratio decidendi* or simply the *ratio*. Having isolated that, all other opinion becomes *obiter dicta*, informally referred to as *dicta*. Which is what the Africans on board the *Zong* become—*dicta*, footnotes, related to, but not, the *ratio*.[221]

Again, NourbeSe clearly indicts Western post-Enlightenment rational paradigms, specifically legal rationale. NourbeSe calls our attention to the moral conundrum at the heart of the *ratio* of Gregson v. Gilbert—that a case of mass murder might be considered instead as an insurance dispute with the full support of the law.

It is in this section of the poem that the first instances of solfeggio appear. NourbeSe bridges “reason” and “song” through her fracturing of the word reason. In the following phrase, for instance, she isolates the syllable “son” from “reason”: “a sea against the / hard / reef of rea / son”[222]. Throughout the poem, NourbeSe repeats the word “son” as a reference to what she translates in her glossary from Spanish to English as “the song”. Fascinatingly, NourbeSe’s translation is an unconventional one: more typically one might see “song” translated into Spanish as “canción”—however, “son” has a dual reference: both as a *sound* (including both musical sound and rhythmic sound) and as the Cuban musical tradition that combines Spanish instrumental and Bantu rhythmic elements. In both cases, “son” allows us to think both musically

[221] Ibid.,199.
[222] Ibid.,105.

and rhythmically as we read the poem. Why, however, is NourbeSe priming us to experience the poem sonically, and what does solfeggio lend to her explorations of the silences within the *Zong* case?

Solfeggio (or solfège, in its French translation) is defined in the Encyclopedia Brittanica as "vocal exercises sung to the solmization syllables (do, re, mi, etc.) and, by extension, vocalizes, or exercises sung to a single vowel….sometimes refers to an intensive course in the knowledge of musical intervals and their notation." In other words, solfeggio is a traditional musical instruction technique that is used to teach musicians how to "sight read," or sing the melody from the sheet music of a given composition without needing to hear it played or sung first. It enables an instantaneous translation of written musical notation into musical sound, and is a strategy that marks the most virtuosic musical performances. The basic principle of this technique is that a syllable (in this case, do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, or ti) is assigned to a given note (i.e. – C, D, E, F, G, A, or B respectively) and the intervals between the syllables are memorized. It is a way of memorizing the language of music by understanding the relations between notes, rather than by memorizing notes themselves. This way, when approaching a work of sheet music, one may determine the opening note (according to its corresponding solfeggio syllable) and intuit the following notes accordingly.[223]

It is fitting, then, that in the section eponymously dedicated to the "kernel of the legal principle" at work in the Zong case, that NourbeSe would evoke a foundational technique of Western European musical forms. The work of the text so far has been to explore the archival

[223] A quite famous popular reference to solfeggio occurs in the film *The Sound of Music*, during the song "Do-Re-Mi," during which Mary sings all the solfeggio syllables in C major.

silences throughout the Zong case by disrupting the foundational kernels with which the case is constructed—namely, words.

The first instance of solfeggio in the poem reads as such: “the/ song so la/fa so/ la far isola”.[224] In this moment, and many subsequent moments in the poem, it appears as though NourbeSe is offering the reader sight-reading instructions for how to sing the poem. Solfeggio operates through a memorization of intervals—in order to sight-read, one must be provided with a “key” as a tonal basis and must have a sophisticated understanding of the conditions of relation between notes. If we were to assume C major as the “key” of the poem, the “so la/fa so/la” portion of the poem, translated into notes, might read as the following: G-A-F-G-A. However, it is significant that NourbeSe provides us with intervals, but not with a tonal basis. When abstracted, a musical “key” might be understood as that which sets up normative parameters within which notes may relate to one another. Solfeggio syllables take on completely different notes depending on the established key. Because, however, it is normativity that, on many levels, NourbeSe is attempting to interrupt, she shies away from offering us any musical notation that might too clearly correspond with a single note. Therefore, she opens up room for us, as an audience, to improvise.

In this way, jazz aesthetics and performative conventions are integral to the poem’s function. Jazz musicians very typically open their performances using a “lead sheet” which offers only the most fundamental elements of a given composition, and musicians are expected to populate the composition via improvisation. Improvisation, or extemporaneously *inventing* a composition while performing it, ensures that no two jazz performances are the same. Each performance accommodates the relational idiom of the performers on stage. In jazz, no

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[224] Philip, *Zong!*, 107.

progression is disallowed; the lead sheet's function is not to fix the performers within a given schema, but to offer a common point of departure and return that can offer disparate musicians a route for relation. In Fred Moten's *In the Break*, he discusses improvisation in the following way: "The questions demand that we turn obliquely, up ahead, to the recording, to what seems and doesn't seem to be there, to what it is (to seem) to be. This is what it is to activate the foresight that is not prophecy but description. This is what it is to improvise."[225] Here, Moten's reference to the cognitive process of determining what "seems and doesn't seem to be there" offers us another route for thinking about the epistemological problem of the Zong case.

Within an improvisatory practice, one can rethink questions of ontology, or the nature of being, in radical ways—thus, the appeal of jazz to many African diasporic writers, artists, and scholars. The definition of "improvise" in the New Oxford American dictionary here proves useful: "produce or make (something) from whatever is available." This process of generating new materials from a fixed set of materials with previous users and uses is critical to how NourbeSe uses the *Gregson v. Gilbert* case. Rearranging the words in the legal case in various unpredictable orders, NourbeSe improvises and creates new meaning with the "available" materials in the scant archive of the Zong massacre. The poem itself invites us, as readers, to engage in similar creative projects. The importance of improvisation is further highlighted in NourbeSe's live performances of her poem, many of which include live musicians who improvise throughout the performances, which are often many hours long.

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[225] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 124.

NourbeSe's turn to solfeggio marks a call to improvisation. The solfeggio syllables act as our lead sheet of sorts, and we are invited into a creative process that counters the implied erasure of the history signified by the absence of formal records. Thus, even with the imposition of a colonial language, there is an irruption of other sonic codes and idioms unique to particular experiences of history, culture, environment, and time. Sound and music become the spaces where the fixed meanings of words can be disrupted.

The ethics and politics of the poem—one that seeks to denounce the erasures of the *Zong* victims from historical accounts and the structurally-entrenched afterlives of slavery in the present moment—are apparent, imaginative, and admirable. However, the poem's techniques of remembrance raise a number of important questions around the politics of remembrance and resistance. NourbeSe's approach to language in particular raises unique ethical quandaries: What does it mean that NourbeSe seeks a language "of grunt and groan" that escapes the history of colonial impositions of language?

NourbeSe considers the moments of textually rendering the non-verbal noises of grunt and groan to be moment when she discovers the poetic voice that was forestalled by slavery and colonial rule. She writes: "I feel as if I am writing a code and, oddly enough, for the very first time since writing chose me, I feel that I *do* have a language….this language of pure sound fragmented and broken by history."[226] For her, the realm of non-verbal sound is purified from the baggage of the atrocities committed through language. She ruminates that in her poem "[w]ords break into sound, return to their initial and originary phonic sound—grunts, plosives, labials—is this, perhaps, how language might have sounded at the beginning of time?"[227] The turn to non-

[226] NourbeSe, *Zong!*, 205.
[227] Ibid.

verbal sound, then, is part of a quest for an originary moment, a pre-ideological state of language. On one hand, the quest for a moment that precedes anti-blackness is a way of reaffirming that it is human and not divine, that it is a symptom of our fall from grace. On the other hand, this search for beginnings seems out of sync with the poem's confounding of linear time. The question of whether or not it is possible to conduct the work of dismantling colonial thought (the proverbial "house" that Audre Lorde cites) with the tool of colonially-imposed language (the "master's tools") is a problem NourbeSe creatively grapples with across her oeuvre through experiments with language. However, the significations made possible through her experiments suggest that it is in the struggle against colonial language that new possibilities for expression appear, in forms sometimes familiar and other times yet unheard.

Conclusion

Let us return, finally to the notion of the story of the *Zong* as one we have both already "heard" and will "hear again and again". The story of the Zong massacre has, indeed, become one of the most, if not *the* most, well-known events tied to the transatlantic slave trade of the 18th century. Curiously, the massacre's popularity in academic discourse coincides with a popular resurgence in public discourse around the massacre. There have been two major, fairly recent waves of scholarly production on the Zong massacre. The first might be said to have occurred in the mid-to-late 1990s, marked by texts like Guyanese-British writers David Dabydeen's 1994 long poem "Turner" and Fred D'Aguiar's 1997 novel *Feeding the Ghosts*. The second wave might be marked by a wave of scholarship in the mid-to-late 2000s and early 2010s, marked by texts like Ian Baucom's 2005 *Specters of the Atlantic*, Victor Brown's 2008 *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*, and James Walvin's 2011 *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law, and the End of Slavery*.

In public discourse, the *Zong* case has also experienced a recent growth in visibility, from the sailing of a replica of the *Zong* into the Port of London as part of the 2007 abolition bicentennial celebrations in the UK to the erection of a stone memorial at Black River in Jamaica in 2007, to the international release in 2013 of the film *Belle* which recounts the narrative of Lord Mansfield's mixed-race niece, Dido Elizabeth Belle, and her involvement in Mansfield's ruling on the *Zong* case.[228] NourbeSe's poem *Zong!*, published in 2008, is also growing in renown, with more and more scholars publishing books and articles featuring the poem[229] and teaching it in classes.[230] Furthermore, NourbeSe herself has now held several public performances of poem, adding further layers of improvisation with the addition of live musicians, including a cellist and drummer. The evolution of the poem into performance has taken on an undoubtedly sonic dimension, with NourbeSe notably remarking, "I am very keen to introduce the sounds of techno, scratching and turntabling into the text."[231] How might we account for this resurgence of interest in the *Zong* case?

Questions of "what happened" aboard the *Zong* and "why" have become loaded with accretions of meaning through time—legal, political, social, ideological, and temporal—even as

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[228] These listings are not intended to suggest that the *Zong* massacre has only become an object of interest in recent memory; one of the earliest artistic representations of the massacre appeared in British painter J.M.W. Turner's 1840 painting *The Slave Ship*. The massacre has maintained a stubbornly resilient presence in public memory since its occurrence.
[229] For a brief sampling of recent published works that have featured the poem, please see: Christina Sharpe, "Black Studies: In the Wake," *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014): 59-69;

Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in two acts," *Small Axe* 12.2 (2008): 1-14;

Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); and Fehskens, "Accounts Unpaid, Accounts Untold."
[230] Fred Moten has discussed on multiple occasions his experiences teaching the poem. For example, see "3/6 Social Text 30th Anniversary Panel: Panelist Fred Moten," YouTube Video, 9:36, Posted by "SocialTextJournal," July 26, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLrTYbD-sKw.
[231] "We Can Never Tell the Entire Story of Slavery: In Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip."

it deceptively appears that we have finally arrived at a cogent narrative of the massacre. Part of the denial of the longue durée of slavery occurs precisely through the crystallization of the narrative of the *Zong* into a story we know all too well, a story we have heard before. We are bombarded with relics of the past, replicas, videos, films that offer to transport us to the time of the massacre's and the trial's occurrence and suggest that the terrors of state-sanctioned exterminations of black subjects have been overcome, and have been resolved in the present.

The repetition of the story of the massacre as a romance that has resolved in our present moment makes it less and less possible to see the massacre as a chapter in an ongoing social, economic, political, and ideological order that thrives and profits off the degradation and dehumanization of black subjects. The mystery of the *Zong* is not only in the archival silences that shape its narrative, or in the extraordinary disregard for human life—rather, it is in the massacre's commonness and reasonableness by shared standards of the late 18th and early 21st centuries, which, NourbeSe's poem suggests, both exist within the timeline of the longue durée of slavery. The mystery of the massacre is in, as Christina Sharpe writes, "the ways that black death is built into the various systems that demand those deaths to produce something mistaken for and called freedom for others."[232]

There remains, however, a resilient fealty both to the (particularly legal) structures that sanction black dehumanization and to the corrective power of the present. Here, an acknowledgement of the longue durée of slavery, manifesting itself through the consistent extermination of black life in the present moment, is qualified or outright denied. On the evening of November 24, 2014, President Barack Obama gave a speech in response to the Grand Jury decision in Ferguson, MO not to indict officer Darren Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown,

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[232] Sharpe, "Black Studies: In the Wake," 66.

an unarmed black youth. Obama opened with an expression of fealty to the law: "First and foremost, we are a nation built on the rule of law." What follows shortly after is a pronouncement of belief not only in a pure and just "spirit of law," but to a present, progressive time[233]:

> We have made enormous progress in race relations over the course of the past several decades. I've witnessed that in my own life. And to deny that progress is to deny America's capacity for change…there are issues in which the law too often *feels as if* it is being applied in a discriminatory fashion. I don't think that's the norm. I don't think that's true for the majority of communities or the vast majority of law enforcement officials. But these are real issues…What we need to do is understand them and figure out how do we make *more progress*. And that can be done. (my emphasis)

Obama's language is replete with a powerful urge to exceptionalize Ferguson, to condemn it as a "real issue" but only after it has been cast out of the stream of progressive time. He does this under the veil of being measured (an implicit rejection of the longue durée of slavery by inducting the nation into a framework of progressive time) and by appealing to the commonsense of a present time that is much better than the time that came before it.

This is, of course, the idea that NourbeSe highlights and troubles when she writes that the *Zong* is "outside of time" or that it is dysfunctional in the memory-space of the *Zong*. It is that to cast the massacre within the systemic norm, rather than as an aberration, would corrupt the spirit of law. It can only be remembered within a history of events, not in the frame of the longue

[233] I borrow this expression from Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog*, xiii.

durée. The longue durée disrupts any sense that the events aboard the *Zong* were exceptional, and any sense that they can be quickly or easily overcome. Institutional narratives of the past, like Obama's, which often adopt romantic arcs of progress, cultivate an allegiance to the progressive power of the present and to the integrity and goodwill of our institutions (particularly of law). These allegiances make critiques of the present rooted in the historical continuity of oppressive institutions appear extreme or irrational. NourbeSe's poem, *Zong!*'s dependence on visual, verbal, temporal, and sonic irregularity constitutes, then, offers an alternative route for demanding accountability from our state and legal institutions.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Profane Ear: Regimes of Aural Discipline in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*

In the preceding chapters, I have articulated the relationship between sound and history in a variety of ways: improvisatory musical logics as tools for challenging teleologies of progressive time that claim to resolve and redress; "over-hearing," or indiscriminate hearing, as a rejection of colonial soundscape management techniques which sought to suppress, criminalize, and expel black cultural production from the sphere of "culture"; and resonant flora and fauna serving as alternative historical ledgers that have survived the destruction of colonial rule, where the stories of those who are supposedly extinguished endure. In all three of these chapters, sound acts as a medium of resistance, and may seem to function in this way unproblematically—sound seems to organically offer a way out of the conundrum of historical silencing. My final chapter, however, complicates this notion. Sound, here, becomes a contested field; rather than being the vehicle for restoring African diasporic histories, it is the site of struggle and fissure for multiple generations of African diasporic peoples.

In Barbadian-American novelist Paule Marshall's fifth and most recent novel, *The Fisher King*, Marshall relates the story of a generations-long antagonism within a black diasporic family in 1980s Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn who must come together to commemorate the life of the family member at the heart of the family's enmity: a jazz musician named Sonny-Rett Payne. Sonny-Rett achieves widespread musical renown in 1950s Brooklyn and 1960s Paris, but his decision to pursue the path of a jazz musician becomes the source of great contention between the family's two matriarchs—Ulene Payne and Florence Varina McCullum-Jones, respectively Sonny-Rett's mother and mother-in-law—and within their respective families. The novel follows the perspective of Sonny, a nine-year-old boy of the family's youngest generation who is named

after his grandfather, the aforementioned Sonny-Rett.[234] While Sonny-Rett's training as a jazz musician is the catalyzing action that creates irresolvable fissures in the family, his grandson Sonny's travels from Paris to the Brooklyn in the 1980s to attend a memorial concert for Sonny-Rett and meet his family for the first time becomes the occasion to confront these longstanding tensions.

In the novel, music is a simultaneous site of repression and liberation, submission and resistance. Jazz is emblematic of black cultural production writ large, and through Sonny-Rett, we follow its rise and decline in popularity across two continents.[235] Bach—a synecdoche for European classical musical traditions—Broadway, and Hollywood loom large in the novel as traditions and institutions toward which some characters aspire, and others reject or corrupt, to the chagrin of their families. However, the juxtaposition between jazz, classical music, and Broadway is not rendered as a clean opposition between mutually exclusive forms; it cannot easily be reduced to a conflict between assimilation to European conventions and embracing blackness through jazz. Sonny-Rett has mastered all of these musical traditions, and it is through techniques of jazz improvisation that he transforms them into new songs, unrecognizable in their former generic categories.

The black matriarchs of the two families—Barbadian-American immigrant Ulene Payne and Bed-Stuy native Florence Varina McCullum-Jones—make great sacrifices to rigorously train

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[234] "Everett Payne" is Sonny-Rett Payne's birth name; however, he is donned "Sonny-Rett" after his first formal musical performance, and he adopts that name from that moment forward. To distinguish him from his grandson, I will always refer to the jazz musician as "Sonny-Rett" and his grandson as "Sonny".

[235] There are many other novelists who have taken up jazz in their works as a distinctly black resistive idiom or therapeutic tool, such as Gayl Jones in *Corregidora*. The impact of jazz on Caribbean writing has been significant. For example, see Kamau Brathwaite, "Jazz and the West Indian Novel I, II, and III," in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, ed. Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh (London: Routledge, 1996).

their respective son (Sonny-Rett Payne) and daughter (Cherisse) in European classical music and American musical theater in the hopes that they will subvert the very traditions that have long been cited as symbols of white cultural supremacy. In other words, while Ulene and Florence appear to uncritically embrace a kind of respectability politics, Marshall complicates this notion by contextualizing their aspirations for their children within their own past and present struggles against American white supremacy. Ulene dreams after reflecting on her own demeaning experiences as a housemaid that one day Sonny-Rett will appear "in the white people big Carnegie Hall playing their music better than them" and Florence endures humiliation by her white employer in the hopes that her daughter Cherisse will become "[a]nother Lena Horne….or Dorothy Dandridge."[236]

Jazz, on the other hand, is regarded by the family matriarchs as the musical tradition that foils their hopes for their children. Sonny-Rett abandons his regimented classical training under his mother, Ulene, to pursue a career as a jazz musician; Cherisse similarly abandons her training in music and dance under her mother, Florence, when she marries Sonny-Rett and flees to Paris with him as he pursues his jazz career abroad. Ulene and Florence associate jazz with impropriety, profanity, and ignobility: Ulene refers to jazz only as "Sodom and Gomorrah music" and Florence refers to Sonny-Rett as a "so-and-so" who ruins Cherisse's chances to fulfill her potential to become a cultural and musical icon. Jazz simultaneously acts as the vehicle for characters' liberation from the burden of their parents' expectations for race leadership and the pursuit that marks them for unrelenting discipline and regulation.

In this chapter, I excavate the sonic disciplinary regimes that permeate Marshall's *The Fisher King* and structure relations between characters and communities. In Marshall's work,

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[236] Paule Marshall, *The Fisher King* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 36, 173.

sound becomes both the site where claims of belonging are asserted, contested, and rejected, and the vehicle by which characters are alternatively repressed and liberated. Several writers have instructively examined the role of jazz in *The Fisher King* as a central character and critical structural motif.[237] My chapter, however, reframes this discussion by calling attention to the interconnected sonic disciplinary regimes that designate jazz as a threat or pollutant, and examining the motivations of these structures and the mechanisms by which they seek to control, suppress, or exterminate forms of black music and the musicians who play them. I focus primarily on Sonny-Rett, who is the target of the strictest and deadliest mechanisms of discipline and regulation in the novel. I view Sonny-Rett's "threat" as one that is both sonic and aural—he is labeled as problematic by a variety of persons and institutions not only because of the music he plays, but because of the music he *listens* to and the ways in which he *sounds* his audience through the music he plays.[238] By attending to these regimes of soundscape regulation, I point to the diasporic dimensions of soundscape regulation, and elucidate the function of such regulation in excluding black subjects as belonging members of a body politic.

[237] See Caroline Rosenthal, "Jazz as a Narrative Principle in *The Fisher King,*" in *New York and Toronto Novels After Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban* (Rochester: Camden House, 2011): 152-154 and John Lowney, "'A New Kind of Music': Jazz Improvisation and the Diasporic Dissonance of Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*," MELUS 40:1 (2015): 99-123.
[238] Here, I use "sounding" to invoke not simply the physical act of producing sound (i.e. – speaking, playing music, etc.), but also as a form of self-expression and self-representation that has implications for the community or communities that have stakes in a subject's public performances. Sonny-Rett is positioned as a kind of "race man" whose choice of career and public performances have the potential to uplift the race by dignifying the sacrifices and hardships that his mother (and other families like his) have had to endure. Thus, what kind of music Sonny-Rett masters is a matter of concern and contention for his mother expressly because she views his self-representation as not only his, but also hers. I draw on Tsitsi Jaji's use of the term "sounding" when she writes that South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile's poetry "blur[s] the distinctions between sounding and giving ear to music, between performer and listener," and that "performances are not just determined by the sound [a performer] makes, but in fact sound out [one's] audience." See Tsitsi Jaji, "Sound Effects: Synaesthesia as Purposeful Distortion in Keorapetse Kgositsile's Poetry," Comparative Literature Studies 46:2 (2009): 303.

The Profane Ear

In *The Fisher King*, the character at the center of the novel's drama—Sonny-Rett Payne—is present only through the recollections of others. By the opening of the novel, Sonny-Rett and his wife Cherisse have passed away, survived by their respective parents, Ulene Payne and Florence Varina McCullum-Jones; sibling, Edgar Payne, (Sonny-Rett's brother); their absent daughter Jojo, who flees Paris after her parents' deaths, destroying all photographs of herself before she departs; their mutual lover, Hattie Carmichael; and their grandson, Sonny Carmichael Payne, who Jojo abandons into Hattie's care as a baby, leaving him with Hattie as his "fathermothersisterbrother and all the 'kin' he'd ever known."[239] Even though Sonny-Rett is physically absent, his presence permeates the novel through the memories and anecdotes, audio tapes and vinyl records, photographs, the memorial concert, and his grandson and namesake, Sonny. His legacy continues to both inspire a new generation of jazz musicians and sustain a seemingly irresolvable rift amongst the members of his and Cherisse's families. Hattie's and Sonny's return to Brooklyn after years in Paris for Sonny to meet his family members for the first time and to attend the memorial concert in honor of his late grandfather, Sonny-Rett, becomes the occasion for a number of characters to revisit their memories of Sonny-Rett and confront longstanding tensions.

Sonny-Rett is distinguished throughout the novel as a musical prodigy with exceptional aural acuity. He learns to play piano by chasing the movement of keys on an old player piano before ever receiving formal training; he is regarded as a master of improvisation, who bridges jazz, blues, European classical, and American popular musical traditions; and he achieves both

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[239] Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 16.

local and international renown as a musician in the United States and France.[240] Despite his acclaim, however, he becomes the target of overwhelming regulation and repression in both domestic and state arenas. He is described not only as having supernatural hearing, but also as experiencing the world overwhelmingly through his ears, neglecting other senses. It is his musical expertise and hearing that makes him dangerous; by hearing and sounding beyond the accepted bounds of the various soundscapes he occupies, he threatens to corrupt or derail a number of projects of identity consolidation and realization. In this section, I demonstrate how Sonny-Rett appears in the novel as a distinctive, and indeed supernatural, aural subject, and consider the ways that his powers of hearing and sounding blend high and low traditions, and merge the sacred with the profane. I consider these ideas in order to explore a number of questions: Why is Sonny-Rett regarded as a threat to the institutions he exists within? What precisely does he threaten? How precisely does he disrupt through music?

Sonny-Rett is distinctive, in large part, because of the ways he embodies his unusual gift for music in his posture and countenance. One of the first descriptions of Sonny-Rett appears in Hattie's recollections of his first, and most iconic, performance at the venue that will later serve as the site of his memorial concert: the Putnam Royal. As he is invited to sit in as a guest performer in a jazz ensemble, Hattie describes his movements as slow, "with what almost seemed a deliberate pause between each step." She continues:

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[240] As Caroline Rosenthal points out, Sonny learns to draw in a similar way to how his grandfather, Sonny-Rett learns to play: "Sonny starts drawing the castles by using tracing paper and after a while finds he can make up his own castles, a technique reminiscent of how Sonny-Rett Payne learned to play the piano on his mother's automatic piano. Marshall draws a parallel between grandson and grandfather in how they discover and develop their artistic talent, which more and more deviates from copying into creating a style of their own." See Rosenthal, "Jazz as a Narrative Principle," 149.

> That was his way, Hattie knew. His body moving absentmindedly through space, his head, his thoughts on something other than his surroundings, and his eyes (she had studied them well!) like a curtain he occasionally drew aside a fraction of an inch to peer out at the world. A world far less interesting than the music inside his head.[241]

Sonny-Rett's slow and absentminded movements are understood here to be a function of his overindulgence in the imaginative work of hearing creatively; the world disinterests him because it represents that which already exists and "surround[s]" him. Instead, he is compelled by what has yet to be created; he is suspended in a realm of creative potential.

Most notably, however, is the description of his eyes, which appear to perpetually have a "curtain" drawn over them. Sonny-Rett appears here to reject the visual in favor of the aural—his vision is utilitarian; it is, for him, the realm of the unimaginative, of that which is "far less interesting". The image of a curtain at once invokes the stage—a site of performance—and the use of the fabric as a screen or barrier that shields or hides the interior of a building from outside viewers. This dual signification foreshadows Sonny-Rett's lifelong conundrum of being a public figure and musical celebrity who must nonetheless remain guarded and hidden in order to practice his craft. He must perform to make a living, but those performances often mark him for discipline. The curtain also perhaps invokes an end or conclusion—as in the drawing of curtains at the end of a performance—as we later learn, Sonny Rett's life and career are doomed to end violently.

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[241] Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 134.

The narrator also spends a great deal of time describing the trademark posture Sonny-Rett adopts when he is improvising. At his first public performance, Sonny-Rett initially scandalizes his audience—who is expecting a jazz performance—by faithfully playing, "paying his respects to the tune as written,"[242] a Tin Pan Alley classic, "Sonny Boy," a hit pop song of the late 1920s.[243] However, once he is finished playing the original song, he assumes a distinctive posture and, to the shock and awe of the audience, transforms the song through improvisation into "Sonny Boy Blue," a jazz rendition of the classic. As Hattie recalls:

> he hunched closer to the piano, angled his head sharply to the left, completely closed the curtain of his gaze, and with his hands commanding the length and breadth of the keyboard he unleashed a dazzling pyrotechnic of chords (you could almost see their colors), polyrhythms, seemingly unrelated harmonies, and ideas—fresh, brash, outrageous ideas.[244]

As Sonny-Rett assumes his stance—with his left ear angled toward the piano and his right ear angled toward the sky—he "completely close[s] the curtain of his gaze"; again, vision is figured as a sense that must be barred in order for him to engage in his creative process. This is perhaps not so much an indictment or dismissal of vision; it is perhaps rather an invocation of the idea that other senses amplify to compensate for a sense that is blocked or can no longer function. By closing his eyes in performance, and by limiting his vision on a quotidian basis, Sonny is signaled as having amplified hearing.

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[242] Ibid., 137.

[243] "Tin Pan Alley" was a group of iconic lyricists, songwriters, and music publishers who were responsible for producing a great deal of popular music in the late 19th and early 20th century United States. The song "Sonny Boy" was written for singer and actor Al Jolson for the 1928 film *The Singing Fool*.

[244] Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 137.

Fascinatingly, however, when Sonny-Rett closes his eyes, he produces an experience of synaesthesia for his audience—they can both hear and *see* the notes he's playing. Synaesthesia, here, operates similarly to the way Tsitsi Jaji describes the evocation of the same experience in South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile's poetry. As Jaji describes:

> Synaesthesia refers to Kgositsile's blurring of the modes of sense perception, particularly vision and hearing, to perform a solidarity among the senses which can be read as an aesthetic parallel of the search for solidarity between Black Americans and South Africans in exile….In numerous examples of sound experienced through multiple sensory modalities, intimacy between the senses figures a Relation of solidarity between diasporic music and (pan-)African visionary or embodied experience.[245]

Jaji's description of "metaphorical or literary synaesthesia" helps us to read the audience's experience in this scene as an important marker of solidarity. By demonstrating his mastery and respect for an African-American musical tradition, Sonny-Rett—the child of an Afro-Barbadian mother—makes a sensory gesture toward building solidarity between Afro-Caribbean and African-American communities, communities that have had a number of historical tensions. Indeed, we see this tension illustrated by the tension between Ulene (who is Barbadian) and Florence (who hails from Georgia), explicitly through Florence, who refers pejoratively to Caribbean-Americans as "W.I.'s".[246] Ulene's embrace of European classical music and rejection of jazz suggests that she is disinterested in seeing Sonny-Rett express solidarity with the African-American community, and instead aspires for him to be embraced by white audiences. By

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[245] Jaji, "Sound Effects," 293.
[246] Marshall, *The Fisher King,* 36.

employing jazz improvisation to transform an American pop classic, revealing it to be a "little simpleminded tune" when viewed alongside the creative potency of jazz, he affirms the beauty and value of African-American cultural production and rejects notions of its inferiority.

Sonny-Rett not only bridges diasporic communities, but also earthly and divine realms. Sonny-Rett's right and left ears respectively are described as attuned to these zones. His right ear is "directed skyward, hearing up there, in the Upper Room among the stars Mahalia sang about, a new kind of music: splintered, atonal, profane, and possessing a wonderful dissonance that spoke to him, to his soul-case. For him, this was the true music of the spheres, of the maelstrom up there."[247] As Sonny-Rett experiences it, the divine soundscape does not obey the laws of order, harmony, consonance, and key that governs European classical traditions. Instead, it is disunited and, in a literal sense, out of key—"atonalism," or the absence of a unifying key, suggests a decentered musical work, or one that has multiple, ever-shifting centers. Further, it is described as "profane," or sacrilegious. The heavenly soundscape appears to be governed not by order, but by chaos and contradiction. This is, of course, not simply a comment on musical paradigms, but a reflection on the framing of black subjects as threats to white order and unity—a framing which often appeals to the divine as a justification for its exercises. By experiencing the heavens as a site of aural "dissonance" and highlighting the coexistence of dissimilar elements as the mark of the divine, Sonny-Rett destabilizes a major spiritual and ideological foundation of white supremacy. This act of hearing illustrates one link between aurality and racial ideology: postures toward difference as unsavory and discordant, in need of resolution, appear in a structurally

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[247] Ibid., 137. Here, the text refers to gospel singer Mahalia Jackson's song "In the Upper Room," where the "upper room" is a reference to heaven. Jackson's career spanned the 1930s to the 1970s.

similar fashion in musically discourses. As such, it is possible to both hear and sound disruptively and resistively.

Sonny-Rett's left ear, on the other hand, is described as "earthbound," rather than attuned to the divine as his right ear is:

> His other ear? It remained earthbound, trained on the bedrock that for him was Bach and the blues. All those years dutifully practicing Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, et al. on the old t'row-off player piano; and later, all those afternoons sneaking into Birdell's to listen to Muddy, Basie, Tatum, et al., never mind the beatings that followed. You heard them, both Bach and the hard, pure lyricism of the blues in that powerful, driving, disciplined left hand of his.[248]

Sonny-Rett's left ear and left hand are the sites where his classical and blues training coalesce; it is the site of "discipline". Where his right ear permits him to transcend convention, his left ear keeps him rooted in tradition. It is noteworthy that the meeting of tradition and innovation, discipline and disorderliness, are rendered in terms of "right" and "left". In ways, Sonny-Rett's posture defies connotations of the left and right in politics: where the "right" typically denotes tradition, order, and conservatism, the "left" denotes change, upheaval, and liberalism or radicalism. Sonny's ears and hands appear to reverse these poles.[249] This reversal challenges us, in part, to view Sonny-Rett as an agent who simply opposes the institutions that attempt to discipline him; rather, he renders political and musical institutions unrecognizable to themselves; he brings them into contact with traditions and peoples that they are normally opposed to.

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[248] Marshall, *The Fisher King,* 137.
[249] It is also perhaps significant that the switch that turns on Ulene's player piano, a key instrument of Sonny-Rett's classical training, is "to the left of the keyboard." Ibid., 20.

Through Sonny-Rett (and through jazz as a genre) classical tradition meets the blues; African-American and Afro-Caribbean communities are brought into solidarity. The "beatings" the narrator alludes to are the consequences for his corruption of categories.

The challenges Sonny-Rett poses to institutions such as the state (as I discuss later), however, make one part of his biography particularly difficult to read: Sonny-Rett owes a great deal of his performance experience and hybrid musical style to his time in the army. Sonny-Rett is prohibited from, and often caught by Ulene, listening to blues and jazz in the neighborhood's local record store, Birdell's, where Hattie works. However, after leaving home to join the army, likely fleeing his mother's discipline and repression, he is exposed to a range of musical styles and performance opportunities. As the narrator recounts,

> He was lucky to not have been sent overseas, and luckier still that he got to play a lot of piano, and all kinds of music at that: the oompah-pah, military stuff in the band, light classics and pop tunes in the officers' club, jazz in the combo they had on the base. And the blues. The base was near Kansas City so that he got to hear and occasionally even to play some pure down-home Kansas City blues. That had helped his own playing a lot. The army? It had given him a chance to do some serious woodshedding.[250]

Sonny-Rett's time in the army is unusual. First, his departure from the restrictive regime of his mother's home leads him to another sphere of discipline: the army. As I discuss later, Sonny-Rett appears to volley constantly between regimes of domestic and state discipline that have shared stakes in policing his hearing and suppressing his music. However, it is especially curious then,

[250] Marshall, *The Fisher King,* 135.

that the army becomes the space where he trains in the craft that later becomes the subject of the regulatory legislation in his adopted home in Paris. When Hattie asks him about his time in the army, he recounts very little about his responsibilities as a soldier—he has been training while in the army, but it is the wrong, or an unintended, form of training.

Sonny-Rett's training in the army, however, is one example of his penchant for gravitating toward alternative and improvisatory modes of musical study and expression. While Ulene makes great sacrifices to pay for classical training for Sonny-Rett, Edgar recounts to Sonny that "by the time he [Sonny-Rett] started taking lessons he already knew how to play."[251] Sonny-Rett learns to play classical music on a player piano, an instrument that was never intended to act as a pedagogical tool. Ulene intends to train Sonny-Rett to faithfully play classical music, but he exceeds her hopes—he masters classical music, but incorporates it into his performances in ways that transform it. It might be said that it was the experience of learning piano through an unusual vehicle that acts as his first experience of the power of improvisation.

Further, Sonny-Rett hears music emanating from unusual places. After having sex with Hattie while in tour in Paris, Sonny-Rett describes Hattie's body in terms of the music it emanates. The narrator remarks that Hattie "prov[ed] to him [Sonny-Rett], as she did each time they were together, that even an ordinary, unremarkable body such as hers possessed a kind of music, its own rhythms, harmonies, tonalities, crescendos."[252] For Sonny-Rett, music is not just an art form, it is a framework for viewing the world, and provides a useful language for doing so. When Sonny-Rett asks Hattie, who kept her feelings for Sonny-Rett a secret for years, why she never confessed her feelings, Hattie criticizes Sonny-Rett for not being able to discern her

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[251] Ibid., 47.
[252] Ibid., 193.

signals above "all the notes and chords flying around in [his] head."[253] If Sonny-Rett is hypersensitive to music, he is often insensitive to the desires and demands of those around him—a dangerous trait that lead to his climactic death.

Sonny-Rett's hearing is advanced, sensitive, and profane, and his playing places disparate forms and communities in unusual relations and solidarities. The way he moves his body through space, listens, learns music, and performs, however, commands the energies of a number of disciplinary agents. In aprticular, Ulene, Sonny-Rett's mother, is one of the most prominent agents of discipline in the novel. While Ulene governs Sonny-Rett strictly at home, she bars him from returning once he leaves: when Sonny-Rett returns home from the army, his mother bars him from entering after learning that he still plays jazz. His flight, and expulsion, from home is the initial form of exile that leads him to his time as an expatriate in Paris. As such, domestic spaces seem to inaugurate the forms of discipline that Sonny-Rett later experiences from the state, and which ultimately kill him. In the next section, I will examine the disciplinary structure of domestic spaces in *The Fisher King*, most notably Ulene's home. How are domestic spaces distinctive as spaces of discipline, and what is their relationship to state discipline? In what kind of relation does the anti-blackness of the state and the anti-jazz of the household stand?

Disciplinary Dwellings

The novel's web of sonic discipline is inaugurated in the home. Both family matriarchs, Ulene and Florence, create regimented routines of musical training for their respective children, Sonny-Rett and Cherisse, and in the former case, mechanisms of punishment for listening to or playing the wrong kind of music. Ulene and Florence are characterized in many ways as opposite

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[253] Ibid., 192.

personalities—the terse and strict Ulene who lives in squalor versus the loquacious and decorous Florence who lives in gaudy splendor—and tellingly live on opposite ends of the same street in Bed Stuy, Macon street. They are also bitter enemies; while their public conflict is traced to their children's decision to get married and move to Paris, their antagonism extends further to their experiences as black women and new residents of 1910s and 1920s Brooklyn. Their tension is classed—Ulene views Florence, an upper middle class migrant from the South, as an uppity and snobby "old-miss-young," and Florence views Ulene, a working class immigrant from Barbados, as old, sick, and unkempt, with "[n]o flair. No style. No class. Pitiful."[254]

In spite of their mutual disdain and polarized characterizations, these two women share in common regimes of musical training and discipline that are ensconced in their households. Ulene's household, however, employs exceptional strategies of soundscape regulation and restriction. Where Florence's home is meticulously curated, preserved, and opened for public consumption, Ulene's home is closed off, filthy, and in ruins—the essential peculiarity in her home is a player piano, the only item that is cleaned, polished, and well-preserved. She has stringent rules about which kinds and durations of sound are permissible in her home, and is described as having a "tone" that intimidates the subjects of her discipline into compliance. Ulene's also appears to have exceptional and unorthodox aural capacities—her hearing collapses distinctions between discreet periods of time and often exacts mechanisms of discipline and restriction onto noises of the past, ones that characters in the present of the novel can no longer hear. Ulene acts as an agent of aural discipline for all those who enter her home, most notably her son, Sonny-Rett, and her great-grandson, Sonny.

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[254] Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 112, 118.

In this section, I examine the curious ways that domestic spaces are framed as reminiscent of, or even extensions of, the state. The home is the primary site of musical training and discipline, employing repressive tactics not unlike those associated with state discipline. Further, defiance of the wills of the heads of household are explicitly regarded and described as criminal acts. Here, the anti-black social environment of the early-mid twentieth century United States appears only subtly, as the backdrop to (and indeed justification for) the disciplinary tactics employed within the domestic space. In the novel, characters—particularly Sonny-Rett—are caught between domestic discipline and state discipline; the two spheres are represented as having a shared investment in commanding the obedience of the novel's absent central character, Sonny-Rett.

The iconic Bed Stuy brownstones on Macon Street, the opening site of the novel, are depicted as highly militarized and ardently policed. The novel opens as Sonny meets Ulene, his great-grandmother, for the first time and observes the architectural features of the brownstones. Afterward, Sonny remarks, "Because of the raised, high-stepping stoops, the brown uniform houses made him think of an army goosestepping toward an enemy that was a mirror image of itself across the street."[255] In this image, the spheres of the domestic and the state are blurred—houses become "armies," militarized dwellings that are emblematic of the might of the state. The description of the houses as "uniform" signifies both in its adjectival and noun forms, both signaling homogeneity and an article of clothing that marks affiliation with a broader organization, where the distinction between subject-as-subject and subject-as-organization becomes ambiguous. If the houses are emblematic of the state, however, one might ask: *which* state? Though the setting of the novel seems to automatically suggest that the houses are

[255] Ibid., 14.

metonymic of the United States, the description of the houses as "goosestepping"—a military march "in which the legs are alternately advanced without bending the knees"—complicates this notion.[256] The goose-step, which in the aftermath of World War II became associated with totalitarianism and state violence—appears to hearken instead to regimes like Nazi Germany, fascist Italy under Mussolini, or Vichy France.[257] What, then, do we make of the appearance of the goose-step in 1980s Bed Stuy?

One reading of this imagery is that it points to the forms of extermination and genocide in the United States that link it to the aforementioned regimes. Sonny's grandfather Sonny-Rett flees Bed Stuy in the 1950s to escape the pre-civil right era environment of racism and segregation, illustrated by a scene when he is refused entry into a restaurant after playing a gig at a nearby venue. The social and political afterlives of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade writ large feature prominently in the novel—thus, the crimes associated with totalitarian regimes, such as genocide and repression, are indeed the crimes of United States.

Another reading of this imagery, however, might highlight instead how the domestic space becomes the site of emergence of a demand for a kind of complete subservience. Rather than representing a specific state, these goose-stepping brownstones might instead suggest that a

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[256] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "goose-step."
[257] George Orwell famously made this association in his 1941 essay "The Lion and the Unicorn," writing, "One rapid but fairly sure guide to the social atmosphere of a country is the parade-step of its army. A military parade is really a kind of ritual dance, something like a ballet, expressing a certain philosophy of life. The goose-step, for instance, is one of the most horrible sights in the world, far more terrifying than a dive-bomber. It is simply an affirmation of naked power; contained in it, quite consciously and intentionally, is the vision of a boot crashing down on a face. Its ugliness is part of its essence, for what it is saying is 'Yes, I *am* ugly, and you daren't laugh at me', like the bully who makes faces at his victim….The Italians adopted the goose-step at about the time when Italy passed definitely under German control….The Vichy government, if it survives, is bound to introduce a stiffer parade-ground discipline into what is left of the French army." See "The Lion and the Unicorn," George Orwell, accessed April 24, 2016, http://www.k-1.com/Orwell/site/work/essays/lionunicorn.html.

form of governance associated with autocratic regimes is at work in the domestic spaces where Ulene, Sonny-Rett, Florence, and Cherisse reside. In a sense then, these brownstones demonstrate how techniques of repression typically associated with the state can become absorbed into the fabric of local settings and structure social relations in intimate spaces even as, or precisely *because*, the state publicly opposes such techniques. This idea is important for understanding Ulene and Florence who are demeaned, insulted, and excluded by structural racism in Brooklyn, but combat these experiences by, as it happens, forcing their children to adopt pursuits and accept opportunities that are otherwise denied to black communities. The push to excel in arenas where blacks are excluded—rather than embrace arenas where they are welcome—becomes a form of oppression in itself. Thus, even while the domestic space and the state appear to have different goals, they produce—and deliberately so—remarkably similar social environments that alienate both Sonny-Rett and Cherisse.

Sonny continues his description noting the likeness between the brownstones and medieval architecture: "Then there was the heavy wrought-iron basement gate under the side of each stoop, identical to the one rearing up just inches from his face. A dungeon gate with arrowhead bars like spears. He liked it. Liked also the marching houses. Castles. Something about them reminded him of the castles and fortresses he was good at drawing."[258] Sonny, who is an avid sketcher of medieval castles, likens the basement gate of Ulene's home to a "dungeon," an underground prison cell. Sonny, here, marks the home as a site of both imprisonment and of comfort: though the basement gate recalls medieval dungeons, he nevertheless "like[s] it"—it resembles the architectures that he sketches, and drawing is not only a strength for Sonny but also a therapeutic act that provides a distinctively aural comfort.

[258] Marshall, *The Fisher King,* 14.

Sonny describes his longing for his "drawing *bloc*" as a response to being overwhelmed (or indeed underwhelmed) by the chatter of the adults around him. He remarks: "Whenever he was around Big People talking talking talking and he couldn't fathom what they were talking about or he understood but wasn't interested or they were saying things that upset him…or there was no *télé* around he could watch, he would take out his drawing *bloc* and pencil case and get to work on a castle or a fortress. Once he got started, he no longer heard the talk around him."[259] Just as castles are architectures that are fortified against outside threats, Sonny's castles fortify him against unwanted sound—they serve as psychological and aural architectures within which he can assume control over the soundscape. Thus, Sonny's counterintuitive response to the dungeon gate is a function of his associations between fortified architectures and ideas of refuge, safety, and control. As we later learn of the novel, Sonny and Sonny-Rett have sometimes diverging, sometimes intersecting aural tendencies—where Sonny struggles to keep unwanted or troubling sounds out, his grandfather Sonny-Rett struggles precisely because he listens too widely, too mutinously, beyond generic borders, and indeed beyond the domain of the human.

At the door of her home, Ulene authorizes Sonny to enter, but not his caretaker, Hattie. For the duration of the novel, the doors to the dungeon gate only ever open for Sonny—even when it means she must turn away her own son, Edgar, who grew up in the house with his brother, Sonny-Rett. Upon entering, however, Sonny is confronted by a house in squalor: it has a "dank, musty, stale-kitchen smell" and "little light," and where there is light, it "reveal[s] a shameful state of neglect and dirt everywhere. Cracked and peeling walls. Large turds of dust like tumbleweed. Overhead, the rusted pipes of a defunct sprinkler system lined what had once between a beautiful coffered ceiling. Underfoot, the filthy hall runner was worn clear through to

[259] Ibid., 38-9.

the floorboards down its center."[260] Ulene's militarized house is in ruins in its interior. It is like a dungeon in more ways than one, such as the "dank, musty" air and the lack of light.

The state of Ulene's home is curious when viewing the brownstones as heavily policed spaces, and Ulene herself as a policing agent. On one hand, it appears that the exclusivity of the privilege of entering Ulene's home demonstrates that her home is a coveted space, that the militarized brownstone is protecting something precious in its interior. Because the squalor of her house is an open secret—Florence and her son Edgar view it as a sign that Ulene is not self-sufficient—guarding the doors of her home acts as a way of safeguarding her independence. On the other hand, Ulene's strictness of demeanor seems inconsistent with a messy home—squalor seems to suggest laxity and neglect. With the exception of barring visitors from entering her home, Ulene's strictness overwhelmingly emerges around questions of sound: what noises she hears echoing throughout her home, what music her son Sonny-Rett and great-grandson Sonny should play and listen to, and when that music should be played and ceased. As we learn, the only well-kept item in her home is an old player piano: "Out of everything in the room the piano alone stood dusted and polished….To his [Sonny's] astonishment, there inside the piano, in its innards, stood a long roll of white paper, paper whiter and cleaner than anything he had seen so far in the house."[261] For Ulene, her policing energies are reserved exclusively for the management of the soundscape. When considered alongside the "dungeon" gate, it appears more likely that Ulene is not just interested in keeping interlopers out, but also with keeping people, like her son Sonny-Rett, *in*.

[260] Ibid., 17.
[261] Ibid., 18, 20.

During Sonny's visits to Ulene, she demands that he attempt to "play" the player piano by mimicking the automatic depressions of the keys. Upon encountering the piano player for the first time, Ulene demands that Sonny stand on the piano bench and come face to face with a large photograph sitting atop the piano of his grandfather, Sonny-Rett, as a young boy. In the photo, Sonny-Rett is depicted as "[a] primly posed, unsmiling boy a lesser shade of brownish-black than himself and all dressed up in an old-timey suit and high-topped shoes, his hair neatly parted on one side, his hands neatly clasped in his lap" and is "seated at the same piano, his back to it, and on the stand behind lay a [Bach] music book."[262] In the photo, Sonny-Rett's appearance is respectably curated for the photo; however, his face is "unsmiling" and his back is turned to the piano, foreshadowing his departure from classical tradition and his home.

After showing Sonny the photo of his grandfather, she exclaims, "Had the brass-face to come round me playing the Sodom and Gomorrah music!"[263] This statement, which also serves as an "epigraph" for the chapter, articulates the core tension of the novel: Ulene cannot accept Sonny-Rett's decision to become a jazz musician because it is, in her eyes, an ignoble musical form. Over the course of the novel, she never refers to it as jazz, but rather, as "Sodom and Gomorrah music". By refusing to name the musical form, and instead associating it with Sodom and Gomorrah, she discredits it as a form and instead represents it as sacrilegious, associated with sin, vice, and sexual deviancy.[264] Just as the biblical "cry" of the cities of Sodom and

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[262] Ibid., 19.
[263] Ibid., 20.
[264] Notably, Sonny-Rett does spend his adult life in an unconventional three-partner relationship with both Cherisse and Hattie, Sonny's caretaker. Cherisse and Hattie are suggested to be lovers, and the text explicitly shows they they are both intimate with Sonny-Rett, with each others' full knowledge and consent. As Rosamond King remarks: "This triangle is not a physical ménage à trois; there are no indications that all three ever have sex together. Rather it is an unconventional relationship involving two women and one man, but instead of the women feuding over the man or the man hiding his relationship with one woman from the other, the triangle is united, with all

Gomorrah reached the ears of God and elicited their destruction, the sound of Sonny Rett playing jazz induces Ulene's harsh and righteous discipline.[265]

Edgar, Sonny-Rett's brother, recalls with pain the "sound of the strap" that Ulene once used to beat Sonny Rett whenever she catches him playing jazz at home or listening to jazz at the local record store. He remarks: "I can still hear to this day the sound of the strap the times Ulene caught him playing what he wasn't supposed to be playing or spotted him hanging out in that record store where you worked listening to what he wasn't supposed to be listening to."[266] Edgar's language here—describing what Sonny-Rett is "caught" doing what he "wasn't supposed to be" doing—illustrates that there is an explicit set of prohibitions around music in Ulene's household, and that to defy them is, in effect, to commit a crime. The traumatic sonic experience of hearing Sonny-Rett get beaten is one that haunts Edgar and echoes into his aural present—he "still hear[s] it to this day".[267]

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three partners knowing that each person loves the other." King further highlights that in *The Fisher King*, "[f]or the first time in Marshall's oeuvre we find characters who are comfortable with loves and desires that do not fit a monogamous heterosexual model." For more, see Rosamond King, "The Flesh and Blood Triangle in Paule Marshall's *The Fisher King*," *Callaloo* 26:2 (2003): 543-545.

[265] Here, I refer to the biblical legend of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities renowned for being hotbeds of sin and unholy deviation—in particular, of same-sex relations. God responds by completely destroying both cities, sparing only Lot (Abraham's nephew) and his family. In Genesis 18:20-21 (KJV), God declares to Abraham, "Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me". In Genesis 19:13 (KJV), the angels of the Lord that are sent to destroy the cities declare, "we will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxen great before the face of the Lord; and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it." In both instances, the cities are described as incubating sin so great it cries out in the ears of the Lord; it becomes audible.

[266] Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 87.

[267] This is not the last time that the language of criminality will appear around Sonny-Rett. Describing Florence's anger with Hattie over knowing about, and doing nothing to stop, Sonny-Rett's plans to move to Paris with Cherisse, the narrator notes: "Florence Varina would accuse her—Hattie—of aiding and abetting in what she—Florence Varina—considered to be a criminal

He remarks additionally on the inescapability of the noise, noting, "I used to run and cover my ears, but there was no escaping the sound of that strap. And that was all you heard because my brother never uttered word, never cried, never begged her to stop."[268] The juxtaposition of the loud, echoing tool of discipline with Sonny Rett's silence pronounces Sonny-Rett's defiance in the face of discipline. Edgar reflects that Sonny-Rett's silence was a sign that "he already understood…that the strap in one form or another was the price he might always have to pay for playing what he wanted to. And he accepted it."[269] Sonny-Rett's silent acceptance, then, is a sign that Ulene's discipline is failing. The punishment for his transgressions does not deter him from transgressing again; it is instead an inescapable consequence of his commitment to listen to and produce forms of music that are transgressive and profane in his mother's eyes and ears. The invocation of Sodom and Gomorrah, however, foreshadows Sonny-Rett's eventual destruction at the hands of the French state.

Just as Sonny-Rett once did, Sonny is forced to undergo the same ritual of musical training—perhaps as a corrective to Sonny-Rett's rebellion against his training. Sonny's experiences, however, mirror his grandfather's in many ways—he experiences the player piano with excitement, awe, and enthusiasm. Just as his grandfather "used to sit for hours chasing after those keys, pretending he was the one playing, with [Ulene] an adoring audience of one," Sonny also enjoys the fantasy that "he was actually playing" even as he misses most of the keys.[270] It is perhaps *because* Sonny is *not* actually playing that the fantasy is an attractive and viable one. It seems, however, that the awe and pleasure Sonny experiences when listening to the music that

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act." See Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 70. Of course, Sonny-Rett is also explicitly treated as a criminal in Paris, a period of his life I will examine in detail later in the chapter.
[268] Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 87.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid., 47, 22.

issues from the piano is conditioned by his already standing fascination with state structures and their qualities. When Ulene turns on the player piano, Sonny describes the music that issues forth from it as "tall and *stately* and ecclesiastic" (my emphasis)—the music itself appears to contain sonic affiliations with the state, or at least evokes the stature, dignity, and authority of the state.[271] In another sense, however, Sonny appears to misrecognize the disciplinary intent of the piano playing. When commanded by Ulene to "play till [she] say[s] stop," Sonny experiences the exercise as a "game".[272]

We also glimpse through Sonny the forms of musical discipline Ulene provided for Sonny-Rett, even while it appears that Sonny relishes in the regimented routines and disciplinary exercises that his grandfather once chafed under. Ulene does not simply govern the kind of music that sounds in her home, but its duration; she commands Sonny sharply and precisely when to start and stop playing, regardless of Sonny's expressed desire to keep playing. Ulene's governance with Sonny is not about cultivating or encouraging pleasure or even skill, but *compliance*. This is notable, particularly considering the novel's divulgence that Sonny-Rett played "for hours" with Ulene as an "adoring" audience—with Sonny, Ulene offers no such latitude. Even as Sonny complies with her demands, the unexpected pleasure that he experiences during her disciplinary exercises is excessive, and thus unruly. In a sense, then, Sonny exhibits here perhaps a first and striking similarity with his grandfather: a tendency to exceed, unsettle, and defy disciplinary structures by experiencing them as routes to creativity and imagination. Through Sonny's experience of the player piano, we are offered some insight into his grandfather Sonny-Rett's true crime: it was not that he rejected Ulene's training; it was that he embraced it too fully, understood it too well, and experienced it as an occasion for improvisation

[271] Ibid., 22.
[272] Ibid., 21-22.

and creativity: his playing style does not abandon classical training, but blends it with other traditions. Later in the novel, Sonny manifests this tendency toward defiance—speaking back to Ulene and appearing unmoved by her strictness and harshness of tone—and attempts to reconcile her with Florence and convince her to attend Sonny-Rett's memorial concert. While Ulene honors neither of these requests, it is nevertheless significant that her attempts to discipline Sonny-Rett fail both when enacted directly upon her son and indirectly through her great-grandson.

Finally, while Ulene presents herself as a disciplinary agent with the power to both command and silence sound at will, she is simultaneously haunted by noises that can never be adequately silenced. Ulene hears, and is tortured by, noises in her home that Sonny cannot hear. Both times Sonny visits her, she abruptly yells at "roomers" that Sonny is not sure are actually there: "'Turn off the lights and the blasted radios up there!' The woman suddenly shouting like a drill sergeant up the dark and silent stairs."[273] The characterization of Ulene herself as a military authority appears explicitly here for the first time, as she attempts to prevent unwanted sound from coming across the radio. The juxtaposition of the disruptive radio with the protected and beloved player piano is both historically and ideologically significant. The player piano is an automatic piano that contains a perforated scroll on which pre-programmed music is inscribed—in effect, it is a piano that plays itself. The player piano, which saw the height of its popularity in the first three decades of the twentieth century rapidly declined in popularity with the advent of the radio and other sound reproduction technologies, like the gramophone, which permitted listeners to hear exact replications of pre-recorded music via cheaper technologies. In a sense, then, the radio is partially "responsible" for the player piano's obsolescence. Additionally, where

[273] Ibid., 18.

the player piano represents a kind of disciplined predictability—it always plays the same song in the same way, according to the instructions on the scroll—the radio represents unpredictability: anything can come over the airwaves at any time. Ulene's aversion to the radio, then, appears again rooted in a desire to meticulously govern what can sound throughout her home.

Ulene's reprimand to her roomers is also temporally curious. While we learn later in the novel that Ulene did, in fact, once host roomers in her house many years ago, it is suggested that they are no longer present in the house. Indeed, the juxtaposition of Ulene's demand for the lights and radios to be turned off with the description of the stairs as "dark and silent" suggests that the noise Ulene is disturbed by is only in her mind—a potential mark of insanity. Another reading of Ulene's reaction, however, is to understand the noise as being of another time—Ulene is caught in a kind of time loop where she experiences an unwanted sounding and reprimands her roomers of the past accordingly. The disturbances her roomers created with the radio and lights echoes into perpetuity. For Ulene, the past is not stably located in the past, but registers in her sensory present—her work as an authority figure who presides over the soundscape is never over expressly because perceived transgressions to sonic order are infinitely repeated across past, present, and future time. Sound demonstrates an uncanny power to transcend time for the members of the family—whether through the voices of roomers that Ulene incessantly hears or the sound of the strap that Edgar continues to hear through time.

Fascinatingly, while Sonny's descriptions of Florence's home starkly contrasts with those of Ulene's home, they produce similar reactions in both Sonny and his late grandmother, Cherisse. Florence's home is notably more ornate and better kept than Ulene's; while it is nearly uniform to the other brownstones on the exterior, "[i]t would turn out to be the best house on the

block."[274] Inside, Sonny likens a room in her home to "a room in the *palais royal* back home".[275] Florence's home is not simply well-kept, it resembles a royal dwelling place. Additionally, Sonny links Ulene's and Florence's homes in his account of the latter, remarking that there is "elegant, old-timey furniture arranged over the gleaming floor as if poised, breath held, waiting to begin a stately dance to the music he'd just been playing."[276] For Sonny, Florence's home—which resembles a state residence—offers the appropriate accompanying visual setting for the "stately" music he was "playing" in Ulene's dilapidated home. What respectability Florence achieves through the visual décor of her home, Ulene achieves through sound.[277]

Even while Sonny is impressed by Florence's home, he nevertheless does not feel at home in the gaudy performativity of the space. The narrator remarks of the room Sonny previously described, "It was the kind of room where someone like himself, a kid, was to go and sit hands clasped in his lap and dare not touch anything."[278] Sonny eventually feels less and less comfortable in her home and yearns to escape the sound of her voice when she begins to deride his grandfather, Sonny-Rett, as an "[o]ld monkey chaser from the islands" and a "so-and-so" who "ran off with [her] only child and ruined her chances."[279] We later learn that Florence was

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[274] Ibid., 30.
[275] Ibid., 33.
[276] Ibid.
[277] While the novel does not describe Florence as similarly preoccupied with policing sound, it does represent her as a figure who talks excessively and frivolously, and thereby alienates the people around her. During his visit to her home, Sonny describes a yearning for his drawing *bloc* to escape the noise of her complaints about Sonny-Rett. Hattie also recalls walking past Florence's home as a young girl and recounts "Florence Varina McCullum-Jones, dressed each evening as if for a dinner party, and talking, hers the only lips seen moving most of the time; the father, Mr. Jones, a silent, uncomfortable-looking brownskin man who behaved like a stranger at his own table; and only child, Cherisse." See Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 68.
[278] Ibid., 33.
[279] Ibid., 36. Florence does—whether earnestly or performatively—instruct Sonny to cover his ears while she makes these remarks, and claims that she can't help deriding Sonny-Rett because she's "[b]een holding in too much too long".

responsible for a similarly regimented program of music, dance, and performance training that Cherisse finds oppressive—such that she describes her marriage to Sonny-Rett as the event that "rescue[s]" her "from that woman at Two fifty-eight Macon."[280] While Ulene is restrictive and Florence is inviting, their homes produce similar effects of repression and repulsion—both homes repel Sonny and others. Ulene's home repels because it is restricted and filthy; Florence's home repels because it is somehow too staged and pristine to be inviting. Both are equally uninhabitable, one due to neglect, and the other due to hyper-diligence.

Domestic spaces thus appear to function as the inaugural sites of alienation and discipline for many characters in the novel. While Sonny-Rett's alienation is perhaps the most pronounced in the novel, nearly all characters in the novel experience profound estrangement in their homes. While Sonny has mixed feelings of endearment and repulsion to Ulene's and Florence's homes, his home in Paris with Hattie is equally isolating. Sonny is estranged from his remaining biological family members (his mother Jojo, Ulene, Florence, Edgar, his cousins/Edgar's grandchildren)—Hattie, who he calls his "fathermothersisterbrother," serves as the embodiment of all forms for family for him. Sonny's mother, Jojo, flees home when she is fourteen after discovering that her mother, Cherisse, and Hattie are romantically involved. As Hattie recalls painfully, she fled "leaving every picture ever taken of her shredded beyond recognition on the floor in her room".[281]

This is a peculiar rendition of damnatio memoriae; by destroying photos of herself, she both severs her ties with her family and assumes the status of a kind of pariah or enemy of the

[280] Ibid., 202.
[281] Ibid., 206.

state.[282] Because this practice was reserved for those who were declared to be "dead public enem[ies]," Jojo appears to self-impose the techniques of a state disciplinary paradigm as a kind of punishment for the standing heads of household.[283] Further, she declares for herself a kind of death, both physically and mnemonically. While Jojo's rejection of Hattie and Cherisse appear to occur in defense of a version of family that is more commonly embraced by the state, she nonetheless views the domestic space as a site of alienation where she experiences a form of discipline, even as it is self-imposed. Finally, Jojo's act of destruction and flight imposes an irresolvable lacuna of memory on Sonny and pronounces his estrangement from family; he bemoans at numerous points in the novel his inability to envision what his mother looked like.

Hattie also experiences forms of alienation, discipline, and abuse in connection to domestic spaces space. Hattie, who spent her childhood in foster care, recalls occurrences of discipline by a foster parent who is "quick with her hand or the strap," malnourishment, hard labor, sexual violence, and abandonment at the hands of her foster parents when she is a child.[284] Further, she is explicitly banned from entering Ulene and Florence's homes. Hattie recalls to

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[282] As Charles Hedrick explains, "[t]he ancient *damnatio memoriae* was a set of more or less formal and traditional strategies for attacking the memory of a dead public enemy. These were in use throughout the period of the republic and empire, from the fifth century B.C. through the sixth century A.D. In broadest outline techniques of the *damnatio memoriae* included the eradication of visual representations of the person, a ban of the name, and a prohibition of the observance of the funeral and mourning. Roman authors of all periods describe the *damnatio memoriae* as an attempt to eradicate memory. Despit such pretensions…the procedure was not invoked with that intent and could not have had that effect. Certainly it may be possible (as some contemporary totalitarian regimes have come close to proving) to obliterate tradition itself, by destroying all trace of the existence of a person or thing. The procedures of the damnatio memoriae, however, worked to produce traces of their own operation—ostentatious erasures and noticeable omissions—which confound their apparent purpose….The Roman *damnatio memoriae* worked…to *dishonor* memory, not to destroy it." For more, see Charles W. Hedrick Jr., *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000): xii.
[283] Ibid.
[284] Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 66.

Edgar that when she was a child, Ulene would "come storming out and chase us away like she owned the sidewalk!"[285] Ulene repeats this behavior decades later when Hattie brings Sonny to her house to meet her, again barring Hattie from entry. Hattie was also barred from Florence's home in spite of her close friendship with Cherisse. When Hattie later brings Sonny to Florence's home, she remarks to Sonny, "Do you know that this is the first time I've ever been inside that house?....Here your grandmother and I were best friends from junior high school, yet Florence Varina McCullum-Jones would never so much as let me enter the front yard of Two fifty-eight."[286]

I have thus far considered the architectures and disciplinary structures of domestic spaces in terms of the ways they draw on the techniques or language of the state to authenticate and enact their authority. However, we must ask: what precisely is the relationship between the disciplinary programs of the home and those of the state? The two primary national settings of the novel are twentieth-century Brooklyn and Paris, where characters experience various forms of social, economic, and legal anti-blackness. What, then, might be said to be the rapport between the anti-blackness of the state and the anti-jazz of the household? One thesis might be that jazz music and jazz venues provide occasions for belonging, community, and self-expression that the household and the state mutually deny. A major stipulation for belonging and acceptance in Sonny-Rett's home is an affiliation with and exclusive commitment to classical music, an acknowledgment of a form of white European cultural production as the privileged terrain for artistic expression. Ulene's home becomes the site of indoctrination for the state's beliefs in white cultural supremacy.

[285] Ibid., 46.
[286] Ibid., 41.

This notion is complicated by Ulene's and Florence's personal histories of flight and estrangement from their homes—Ulene relocates to the United States from Barbados in search of a better life and Florence flees her home in Varina, Georgia after her family and property are threatened by white supremacists. Their homes in Brooklyn are symbols of resilience, survival, and pride under white supremacy for them. How, then, do their homes come to produce the same structures of discipline? Homes in the novel challenge readers to consider the ways that anti-blackness can furtively inhabit spaces and relationships that are ostensibly motivated by the struggle against anti-blackness. Ulene and Florence both toil and struggle in the hopes that their children will be able to achieve the respect and influence that they were denied—however, by viewing the terrain of struggle solely through access to renowned white cultural institutions (such as Carnegie Hall), they neglect the work of affirming and embracing other avenues of black cultural expression and resistance.

The home in *The Fisher King* is not a site of comfort, nostalgia, or reassurance, but a site of trauma, repression, discipline, and estrangement that necessitates—especially for Sonny-Rett—similar tactics of evasion and resistance as life under the state soundscape restriction he experiences in Paris. When Sonny-Rett, Cherisse, and Hattie eventually leave Bed Stuy and flee to Paris together, the setup of Sonny-Rett's apartment seems to echo, even if faintly, Ulene's home. Hattie describes, "Apart from the requisite number of beds and a colossal new concert grand in the living room, there was not much else by way of furniture."[287] Just as Ulene neglects all other furnishings in her home in favor of caring only for the player piano, Sonny-Rett's apartment is economically furnished and the grand piano stands as the centerpiece of the household. Though Sonny Rett does not reproduce the same structures of sonic discipline that he

[287] Ibid., 188.

was raised with, this echo of the logic of Ulene's home foreshadows that Sonny-Rett has not escaped the interlinked forms of racial and sonic prejudice, exclusion, and repression that he flees the United States to avoid. Instead, he finds himself confronted by an even more damaging and deadly form of soundscape regulation administered by the state. In the next section, I will examine how forms of racial and sonic prejudice and exclusion appear on a larger scale in Sonny Rett's time in Paris. The novel's linkage of these phenomena throws into relief how soundscape regulation becomes a furtive tactic of anti-black racism—one which is integral to colonial management—that bars black subjects from inclusion in notions of national belonging.

Aural Others

The final chapter of Sonny-Rett's life—his time in Paris—is distinctive not only because he enters a different national context, but because the arm of the law intervenes to suppress his musical career. Further, Sonny-Rett is in Paris in a moment when the passage of French cabaret laws coincides with a moment of national vitriol against black immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa in France. When Sonny-Rett first arrives in Paris, however, he is embraced and sought-after as a skilled jazz musician. In fact, he becomes so iconic that an image of his face hangs outside of a nightclub in Paris, the "Belle Epoque," as a draw for patrons. It is in the latter half of his time in Paris that Sonny-Rett is targeted by the state for fatal discipline. By acknowledging both of these experiences of France, Marshall pushes us to consider the linked geographies of New York and Paris both as important sites of black artistry and performance *and* as employing shared techniques of anti-black marginalization, disavowal, and brutalization.

In this section, my goal is twofold: 1) I will illustrate how legislation regulating black musical forms and the venues where they are played forms a critical backdrop of *The Fisher*

King; and 2) I will demonstrate that the novel's depiction of the fatal effects of a transnational program of soundscape regulation is exemplary of the pivotal role of sound in the sustenance of anti-black colonial regimes. In the novel, Sonny-Rett confronts cabaret laws in Paris that destroy his musical career and employment prospects; however, though they are not explicitly referenced in the novel, there were a set of cabaret laws in New York in the same period that served a similar function. Similarly, in both metropolitan locales, environments of racial intolerance and xenophobia prevailed and produced subtle forms of regulation (such as the cabaret laws) that policed and targeted black subjects under the guise of policing sound, the environment, morality, or national culture. Colonial regimes (both domestic colonialism as we see in the United States and external colonies as we see with European colonies) sought to consolidate national identity through sound by designating black subjects as aural others.

During the central event of *The Fisher King*—the memorial concert held in Sonny-Rett's honor—Hattie is invited to present fragments of Sonny-Rett's life story in the interims between musical number. Hattie presents for the audience a number of details about Sonny-Rett's public life and success, and in the same instant, silently recalls other memories that are not to be recounted publicly; she is described as "pursuing a counterpoint of other memories that were not for the public's ear as she spoke."[288] As she details for the audience at the Putnam Royal a kind of public history of Sonny-Rett's rise to fame after an iconic performance at the venue in 1947, she mentally reminisces on the development of the intimate "triangle" between her, Sonny-Rett, and Cherisse. The text marks the distinction between Hattie's public speech and her private recollections visually: her speech is formatted normally, within standard margins, whereas her recollections are condensed within visibly larger margins on the left and right, appearing as a

[288] Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 183.

narrow column of text. Her turn to "counterpoint," a musical strategy where a single piece is composed of two independent musical lines that are nevertheless conversant, reminds us that a comprehensive account of Sonny-Rett's life does not emerge from her public narrative, her private recollections, or the musical tribute individually, but from the interface of these three registers of memory.

When narrating for the audience the story of the decline of Sonny-Rett's career in Paris, Hattie opens by offering an account of the cabaret laws that devastate Sonny-Rett's prospects of success. The narrator reports:

> [S]he began speaking this time in a surprisingly flat, factual voice about the jazz scene in Europe, how it started to change around the mid-sixties, especially in France. There were suddenly all these new cabaret laws and rules on the books, she told them. She even cited some of them: There were to be no more all-black bands, for one. French musicians, nationals, had to be included; in fact, they were to be given preference when a club was hiring. The playing of non-French music on the radio was to be strictly limited. Another law. Non-French music meaning jazz, not Beethoven or Bach, she pointed out. For years the state radio in Paris had regularly played live jazz, commissioning prominent musicians like Sonny-Rett—who were considered almost French by then—to compose and arrange the music for the various studio bands. That too soon came to an end.[289]

The program of regulation Hattie describes extends from cabarets themselves into the realm of radio broadcast; they not only target black musicians playing jazz, but also the commissioned

[289] Ibid., 199-200.

compositions and arrangements of jazz musicians and black musicians altogether, regardless of whether they play jazz or not. Hattie places particular emphasis on national identity—only "[f]rench musicians, national" are to be hired and only "French" music is to played over the radio. It becomes quickly apparent, however, that the "nation" is invoked as a synecdoche for Europe, not as a specific reference to France—blackness and foreignness implicitly become equivalent in her description of the laws. What masquerades, then, as an effort to preserve and champion "national" identity works to reframe black subjects and cultural production as not just foreign, but indeed anti-national, and in need of strict regulation.

The cabaret laws Hattie describes likely reference the "10 percent law," a Parisian municipal law passed in 1922 in reaction to the influx and popularity of black American jazz musicians and jazz music in the city. In the interwar period, black American jazz musicians were highly favored above French jazz musicians, creating a booming demand for the former and a sparse one for the latter. The economic strain of the Depression in the 30s heightened tensions—black American jazz musicians were viewed as nomadic, opportunistic foreigners who were taking jobs away from French musicians, who viewed themselves as true citizens who should be privileged for jobs. As a result, Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré passed the "10 percent law," which "limited the number of foreign musicians employed by an establishment to 10 percent of the total number of French musicians employed there."[290] The discourse of foreignness here would coincide with mounting xenophobia directed at black immigrants from the colonies—black and brown immigrants were viewed as polluting elements. Prime Minister Jacques Chirac's infamous complaint in 1991 about "le bruit et l'odeur" [the noise and the smell] of immigrants perhaps best illustrates how, through time, the preservation of a "pure" soundscape

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[290] William A. Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre: a Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 77.

(devoid of "noise") and the sustenance of an anti-black vision of national identity have appeared as strategically aligned projects.[291]

A corollary to the cabaret laws Hattie describes appear in New York throughout the twentieth century. Paul Chevigny explains, "For more than sixty years, from 1926 until 1990, live music played in bars and restaurants in New York City was restricted by local regulations called collectively 'the cabaret laws.'"[292] Indeed, in New York, the term "cabaret" was borrowed from its French context and extrapolated to encompass a wide swath of venues (including those without a stage for performances, which traditional cabarets typically had). These laws, justified through a concern for the moral character of the city, prevented the unmitigated function of nightclubs and speakeasies where jazz musicians found work by requiring that these venues acquire a cabaret license and that performers acquire cabaret identification cards.[293] In order to be considered for a license, performers had to, among other things, be fingerprinted by the police and judged to be "of good character".[294] As Chevigny argues, "The racist impulse to control the supposedly degrading abandon of black music was thus absorbed into a vaguer purpose, more acceptable to contemporary tastes, of shielding patrons from 'undesirable' influences."[295]

[291] For Jacques Chirac's statement, see "CHIRAC, LE BRUIT ET L'ODEUR," YouTube Video, 0:58, Posted by "MANOSOLO2," October 14, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eERFYd1DuDE. Dominic Thomas discusses this statement in the context of understanding how xenophobia informs French national identity. See Dominic Thomas, "Sarkozy's Law: National Identity and the Institutionalization of Xenophobia" in *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration, and Racism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013): 59 – 88.
[292] Paul Chevigny, *Gigs: Jazz and the Cabaret Laws in New York City* (London: Routledge, 2005): 1.
[293] Chevigny, 56-7.
[294] Ibid., 58.
[295] Ibid., 59.

Proponents of the law further argued that jazz was tarnishing the city's reputation; visitors were coming to New York City to "run wild" and these "'wild' strangers are not at all interested in our great museums of art and history, in our magnificent churches and public libraries, our splendid parks and public monuments. They are interested in speakeasies and dance halls and return to their native heaths to slander New York."[296] By citing seemingly more respectable and *representative* cultural institutions such as museums, churches, and libraries as American culture par excellence, jazz is exempted from the realm of American culture and black musicians are cast as foreigners. By indicting jazz and the venues where jazz music is performed, the law obliquely targets black subjects and cultural production for discipline and exclusion, and frames the sounds they produce as pollutants that compromise the moral character of the city, and indeed, of the nation.

Sonny-Rett's career dramatically declines after the passage of the cabaret laws, and in spite of his former renown, he is no longer able to find work. Hattie explains to the audience: "Less and less of the kind of work he was used to came his way: the regular bookings at the big, well-known clubs, the record dates, the concerts, the yearly festivals. Less of all that, including event he standard engagement at the Belle Epoque where his image hung out front."[297]Sonny-Rett's inability to find work at the venue where his visage is displayed is a powerful comment on the terms on which Sonny-Rett can be accepted in France: as a symbol that draws capital into the economy, he is welcome; as an embodied subject who earns capital and shapes the music market, he is unwelcome. He is welcome as an object of fetish, not as an actor.

[296] Proceedings of the Board of Alderman, City of New York, Dec. 7, 1926, p. 572, as cited in Chevigny, 56.
[297] Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 200.

Sonny-Rett's music sonically captures the decline of his career, producing two songs—"Continental Free-fall" and "Sodom and Gomorrah Days and Nights"—where, as Hattie describes, "[y]ou can hear the long free-fall in both those tunes. Listen."[298] While we are left to imagine the sounds of these songs of Sonny-Rett's late career, their titles suggest a recurrence on a larger scale of the conflict he has many years prior with his mother, Ulene—she is ashamed of the way he has fallen away from the continental classical tradition, and pejoratively refers to jazz as "Sodom and Gomorrah music". His experiences of repression in his home were the precursor to his experiences of repression with the state.

While relating the story of the decline of Sonny-Rett's career, she again silently reminisces about his death. Sonny-Rett, who has been reduced to serving as a substitute pianist at a local bar, is stopped by the police on his way home from the gig. The police, as Hattie remembers, are "cracking down on the undocumented, the illegals, stopped him that Friday night in the Châtelet station."[299] Again, the text shows here that sound regulation legislation and anti-black racism coalesce upon a shared target of regulation. When asked for his residency card, however, Sonny-Rett—who has his card in his wallet—refuses to present it. Instead, "he told them they could find it hanging above the entrance to a certain nightclub on rue Monge."[300] After attempting to walk away from the police, a chase ensues, and Sonny-Rett is claimed to have died after he "had either fallen or jumped down the long flight of concrete stairs, repeatedly striking his head on the way down."[301] Hattie emphasizes here that this account is what is *alleged* to have

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[298] Ibid., 201.
[299] Ibid., 201.
[300] Ibid.
[301] Ibid., 202.

happened in the police report; she remarks suggestively: "Only *les flics* [the cops] had been there."[302]

It is notable that Sonny-Rett is targeted because he is assumed to be a foreigner (despite having lived in Paris for over a decade), and is killed only after making an alternative bid for citizenship. One reading of Sonny-Rett's gesture is to understand him as making a claim to national belonging on the basis of the reception of his music. Another reading, however, is to regard Sonny-Rett as declaring that institutions of identification and belonging, such as the state and the home, are unwilling and inadequate for the work of shaping his identity. Music, however, proves uniquely useful in this process. However, Sonny-Rett's attempt to identify beyond these institutions acts as an apex of his threat to the nation, and he is immediately killed. It is no mistake that Sonny-Rett dies in a subway station—just as he spends his life in transit between governing institutions, he ends his life in the same way: wandering, never quite finding a space where he is accepted, embraced, and permitted to live freely.

This final arm of Sonny-Rett's life illustrates a program of global anti-blackness across continents with shared mechanisms of sonic and aural discipline. While music in *The Fisher King* is an important site of identification and belonging for characters like Sonny-Rett, Cherisse, Hattie, and Sonny who experience various forms of alienation, it is important that Marshall not present these as uncontested claims. By illustrating the forms of regulation that intervene in Sonny-Rett's life, *The Fisher King* points out that music and sound were critical zones of regulation and important sites of struggle for Afro-diasporic subjects.

Conclusion: The Castle

[302] Ibid.

Sonny-Rett's grandson, Sonny, has a peculiar and specific passion: he loves to sketch intricate images of medieval castles on his drawing bloc. He also occasionally sees the various architectures he navigates throughout the novel as castles—most notably in the dungeon gate to Ulene's home and the Putnam Royal, the renovated theater where Sonny-Rett's memorial concert is held. As Sonny reveals, sketching castles—architectures that are fortified against attack—that brings him comfort in moments of distress, confusion, loneliness, or boredom. One reading of these castles is that they are symbolic fortifications of Sonny's young psyche; it is a way for him to remain removed from the hostility of his family's interactions with one another, a tension he does not yet understand. However, Sonny's unique signature on his drawings—a miniature image of himself as an armored knight—suggests that the primary function of Sonny's castles is not to protect himself, but rather something, or as we learn *someone*, else.

As the narrator describes, "He [Sonny] always drew a miniature version of himself in full armor, his visor down, in the bottom right-hand corner of every drawing. Himself armed with a lance, a wicked-looking halberd, or a Sir Lancelot broadsword."[303] Sonny is secretive about the meaning of the castles he draws and his unusual signature, however, he divulges information about both only to his grand-uncle, Edgar, and his cousins (Edgar's grandchildren) during his trip to New York. Edgar, who becomes a paternal figure for Sonny over the course of the novel, takes a special interest in Sonny's drawings and notices his "signature"; while Sonny confirms that the knighted figure is him, he "left it at that" and says no more, though it is implied that there is more to the drawings.[304]

Later, when his cousins ask him about his drawings, Sonny divulges:

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[303] Marshall, *The Fisher King*, 75.
[304] Ibid.

> he suddenly found himself telling his cousins that his namesake grandfather lived inside the castles and fortresses, placed there by him for safekeeping. And not only was he safe, he was healed as well, all the bloody head wounds he had suffered in the Métro completely healed, his head, his face restored to that of his billboard image above the entrance to the Club Belle Epoque. "My grandfather's inside and I'm on guard" was all he actually said. "I move him to each new one I draw."[305]

Sonny's castles act as havens, where his grandfather, Sonny-Rett, can be protected and healed. The image of his grandfather's wounds healing is a reference to the Arthurian legend of the Fisher King, a wounded king who remains in his castle awaiting the person who will be able to heal his wounds and restore his kingdom. Sonny views his castles as healing architectures that restore his grandfather to a position of distinction and honor, that rewrite the narrative of Sonny-Rett's life as a redress to the indignity of his death. Further, Sonny occasionally yearns for his drawing bloc in moments when his grandfather's memory is being slandered. When he visits Florence for the first time, she refers to Sonny-Rett with a string of insults ("so-and-so," "monkey chaser") and in response, the frustrated Sonny expresses a powerful longing to draw. Sonny's castles serve as sites where both the man and the memory of Sonny-Rett can be protected.

Ostensibly, this appears to be an act of love. Sonny, after all, only hopes to shield his grandfather from the physical, emotional, and legal harm he incurred during his life. However, what do we make of the character of the refuge Sonny has forged for his grandfather, a structure that has a dual function as a domestic space and as a kind of state emblem? In Sonny's castles,

[305] Ibid., 154-5.

Sonny-Rett is alive and well, but he is also heavily policed—the armored knight bars entry and also, presumably, exit. The weapons with which Sonny endows his signature—lances, halberds, and broadswords—are medieval military weapons of war. The manifestation of Sonny's love for his grandfather, of his powerful identification with him, is imprisonment, a promise of protection if Sonny-Rett obeys, and the specter of death if he disobeys.

Sonny-Rett, then, is confined and policed even post-mortem. This is not to conclude that Sonny himself is an agent of the state—but rather to point out that, on the grounds of love, Sonny behaves just as other characters do: Ulene and Florence impose oppressive regimes of musical training on their children because they want to see them succeed in ways they were not able to; Hattie keeps Sonny in Paris, isolated from his family, in the name of her love for Sonny-Rett; Edgar threatens to wrest custody of Sonny from Hattie and keep him instead at his home in New York in honor of Sonny-Rett; Parisian audiences love black American jazz musicians, and so access to them and their music must be restricted. Love and devotion in *The Fisher King* quickly becomes the occasion for confinement, restriction, discipline, and even death.

CONCLUSION: The Things They Say We Are

On September 27, 2012, Jamaican-British historian and BBC radio producer Colin Grant published a BBC News article entitled, "Jamaica: The Loudest Island on the Planet?" claiming to historicize the nation's alleged "reputation for being the loudest island on the planet."[306] The article appears to suggest that this designation was assigned by tourists, explaining that the Jamaican government had been persuaded to take measures to curb the public airing of music at night after "sleep-deprived tourists complained about the noise…especially in and around resorts."[307] Grant acknowledges that these perceptions of sound are historical, linking contemporary noise abatement legislation to colonial bans on the drum, instituted to address concerns that "slaves could use it to send coded messages calling for insurrection."[308] He offers up instead a narrative of the importance of music—specifically reggae—as a treasured form of cultural expression and force of peace, complete with an image of reggae legend Bob Marley joining the hands of political rivals Michael Manley and Edward Seaga at his 1978 One Love concert in Kingston. The article is rife with problems—not the least of which are its fetishizing vignettes of Jamaican laborers at the resort where he stays and the wholesale dismissal of dancehall as the lewd, violence-inducing antithesis of reggae. It does, however, attempt to answer the resituate the loudness of the music within the recuperative narrative frame of cultural production and norms.

This article appears to take the opposite approach of the press ad that opened this manuscript; where the press ads determinedly declared powerful fault lines between music and noise, this article seems instead to attempt to recuperate what tourists hear as noise as a Jamaican

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[306] Colin Grant, "Jamaica: The Loudest Island on the Planet?," published 27 September 2012, accessed April 10, 2016; http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19636160.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Ibid.

cultural inheritance. Both of these items, however, appear to me to be engaged in the same project: designating black subjects and social spaces as inherently noisy. While Grant discusses loudness as a cultural inheritance, he does nothing to problematize the tourists' complaints or the government's response to those complaints. The article hopes to gently suggest that tourists might come to appreciate the loudness of the island; it hopes not to recognize the fissures between the subjects targeted for regulation and those demanding regulation. But, we must ask: why are vacationing tourists disturbed by loud music, the ambient noise of the city, or whatever other sounds fall under the umbrella of noise? What do we make of the presumption of temporary travelers that the national soundscape, a soundscape produced by residents of the island—must be shaped around their tastes?

The popularity of the Caribbean in the tourist imagination relies on a set of fantasies and promises, not the least of which is the promise of a "getaway": to be away from familiar people and places, to be marooned on a beautiful beach, to be inaccessible via phone or email, and drowned in sunlight.[309] The residents of the island must appear only as laborers at the traveler's behest or as elements of the landscape to be beheld with curiosity. The moment the sounds of life, expression, and sociality appear—and not as performances for tourist consumption—they become disturbances. Tourists come to the Caribbean to be alone, to travel backward in time to a moment when the modern features of urban life and of industrial innovation are absent; the sounds of booming speakers (as they appear in the article) disrupt this fantasy of a backwater island paradise. They remind tourists that the entire island is not at their service. I also read the subtext of colonial fears of black insurrection and unruliness in the tourists' complaints; the

[309] Jamaica Kincaid specifically describes the global Northern tourist's need for a "getaway" in the context of the alienation of urban life. Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988), 15-16.

discourse of aural disturbance is available to them to buttress their entitlement to the labor and cultural production of the island's peoples.

Thus, when Grant reflects nostalgically on the way that, upon request, his waiter "beat[s] out a syncopated rhythm on his chest" and the porter "improvise[s] a song at breakfast," confirming for him that "everyone you meet in Jamaica seems capable of carrying a tune," it is important to read the fetish alongside what might be intended as homage. They are serving him, their sounds are elicited, and so they are sanctioned. The unspoken venues responsible for the disturbance of tourists—dancehalls—remain unaddressed. The notion of black noise as more damnable than other forms of sound, as in need of state regulation and collective denouncement, remains untroubled here.

My interest in this problem—of the perceived capacity of black subjects to produce noise that disrupts, disgusts, and elicits regulation—is, of course, also personal; it crosses, and curiously links, geographies. I've spent the better part of my life self-conscious about the volume of my voice. I was told early on that black people—especially black women—should not be loud. I was told that black people already had enough to deal with, already had to live with the weight of innumerable negatve stereotypes about our unsuitability for civilization: about being lazy and incompetent, unrefined and uncouth, loud and violent, about never being able to "have anything nice." My lifelong struggle, as I'd heard it packaged for me by people who both did and did not look like me, would be to get in front of those stereotypes by being the opposite of all those things: quiet, "ladylike," polite. It simply wouldn't do to be loud—the moment I was heard, and heard as a disturbance, I was warned, I would become all the things they say I am.

However, I grew up in a household, in a neighborhood, full of what some might call noise. My home was equipped with all manner of sound reproduction equipment: record players, CD players, (later, MP3 players and aux cords), turn tabling equipment, loudspeakers, portable boom boxes, Walkmans, portable CD players, radios in every room, for every occasion. My father would sometimes retreat to the basement by himself and blast music from the loudspeakers just to stand immersed in the sound. Talk radio and radio news programs formed the constant soundtrack of the kitchen, where my mother often read and worked. My father blasted music from the car speakers on long road trips, and we had to shout over the music to be heard. I woke up on Saturday mornings to the sounds of soca and reggae blasting from our neighbor's backyard, a welcome herald of the weekend. My friends and I kept up with the latest soca, dancehall, r&b, and hip-hop; we learned to dance like the adults and jumped at any opportunity to do so under the cover of dark, deafeningly loud basement parties. I learned to listen to my music at top volume to the dismay of concerned adults who warned me that I would go deaf. I loved the constant hum and ambient noise of the city I grew up in—they were signs of life. I developed a loud, booming laugh, "from the gut," my family and friends would say. I learned to be wary of noise, to be ashamed of issuing my full voice into the atmosphere, but I'd been reared in noise. I am suspicious of the quiet.

This project is ultimately concerned with the ways black subjects are dissuaded from making themselves heard for fear of causing a disturbance, for fear of becoming the things they say we are. Being "loud" was never about volume alone, but what it would mean to feel freed to make your presence known, to stake a claim in acoustic space. It is about what it would mean to demand that space and defend it. The colonial ear seeks to protect the integrity of global white supremacy by enforcing respectable silence, by dangling the promise of citizenship and inclusion

before those who accept its terms. *Timing to Descant*, and the writers it catalogues, rejects that call, and responds: bring the noise.

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