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Sampada Aranke, Atheel Elmalik, Amarie Gipson, Hanna Girma, Yelena Keller,
Keii Safia Maksud, Rachell Morillo. Edited with an introduction by Sable Elyse Smith.

Intro/Outro by sable elyse smith

“In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound and they all know what the sound sounded like.”

— Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

through our streets our cement our stucco and wood and vinyl and plastic and dirt and detritus and water and spills and spillage and the slickness under our pinning toes down to toe touch. Cracked bones and rank contortions. It's in every single fucking thing. Wild sinuous whisper whipping through brown latched streets. Do you see it now. Whole breath conjured to push it out. Whole breath belly laughed forward, forward, forward.

“I wrote sentences about space so that I could stand up and walk down that hill. I wrote them, because the hill was too steep to descend gracefully with your body upright and steady. Spaces moaned when you crossed them; they didn't know how to hold you.”

— Renee Gladman, *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*

The sound folded itself, folded you up, handed you around in a common sound/note/cluck thrust out the mouth by the tongue. It threw you out sometimes and you ran back in. Dropped off by the wind sometimes it climbed up in your ear. And it was Marvin Gaye moaning or it was Alice Coltrane coltraning or it was N.W.A saying fuck everything single goddamn thing and on top of that fuck the police. Or it was the siren or it was the lovemaking coming through the wall or it was the creek of the door opening or your mama's keys in the lock heart stopping you dead in your tracks, scrambling to straighten up or pretend sleep or to sneak out whatever body was there in your room hot on the verge of entering and sweaty—

“I wrote sentences about space so that I could stand up and walk down that hill. I wrote them, because the hill was too steep to descend gracefully with your body upright and steady. Spaces moaned when you crossed them; they didn't know how to hold you.”

— Renee Gladman, *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*

The sound you can be in and on top of and wrapped up by and wrapped in and swaddled and thrust through. The sound can sit between us mean as all out doors. The sound can take your breath away, as in reach down and inside and snatch it out of you—some cored vessel you become. But the resonance still lingering in your toes, felt and no longer heard.

When I say music I don't always mean the radio. Or a melody, or a rhythm or a blues, or a sweet lyric riding the underside of a G chord. When I say music I mean a scaffolding with a thin metal mesh so that parts of the other side are visible and parts are not, parts obscured. And the other side can represent an x, y or z space positionality and then something curved and altogether divergent from that. Because the music can get inside. The pulse is a makeshift roof over our heads. It's tin, percussive as the rain collects. In a time-space where teeth sucked is telecommunication.

Do you remember the first time you heard the sound your own voice?

Sampada Aranke

Sampada Aranke (PhD, Performance Studies) is an Assistant Professor in the Art History, Theory, and Criticism Department at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago. Her research interests include performance theories of embodiment, visual culture, and black cultural and aesthetic theory. Her work has been published in *e-flux*, *Artforum*, *Art Journal*, *ASAP/J*, and *October*. She has written catalogue essays for Sadie Barnette, Betye Saar, Rashid Johnson, Faith Ringgold, Kambui Olujimi, Sable Elyse Smith, and Zachary Fabri. She is the recipient of the 2021 Art Journal Award for her article "Blackouts and Other Visual Escapes." Her book, *Death's Futurity: The Visual Life of Black Power*, will be published by Duke University Press in early 2023.

Atheel Elmalik

Atheel Elmalik is a writer and filmmaker committed to the work of rendering Black and African diasporic life onscreen with specificity. She is interested in exploring liberated relationships of people to land and one another through stories of movement and migration, queerness, intergenerational healing, and connection to the sentience of the more-than-human world. Atheel comes to this work from a background in anthropology, and a curatorial career at such art institutions as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. After spending the last two years managing artist Arthur Jafa's art studio in Los Angeles, she is currently developing her first narrative film through Jafa's newly formed film studio, SunHaus.

Amarie Gipson

Amarie Gipson is a writer, art worker, and DJ. She earned a BA in Liberal Studies (with concentrations in Art History & Philosophy) and Sociology from St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas (2018). Gipson has held curatorial positions at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Renaissance Society, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Contemporary Austin, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Independently, her work has been published in several journals and magazines, including *Artforum*, *ARTNews*, *ARTS.BLACK*, *Gulf Coast*, and *THE SEEN*. She is an alumnus of the Mellon Undergraduate Curatorial Fellowship, DAMLI Emerging Art Leader program, and the Momus Emerging Critics Residency. Gipson is dedicated to ensuring that scholarly discussions of Black cultural production are accessible and carefully historicized. Her research and writing interests range from Black feminist theory and experimental cinema to Southern hip-hop and culture. She is the former Editorial Director of *MUD Magazine* and currently works full time as the Arts & Culture editor of *Houstonia Magazine*. Gipson authors *The Art of Return*, a monthly newsletter on art, culture, and Black womanhood.

Hanna Girma

Hanna Girma is a London-based writer and curator. She is currently Senior Editor and Curator of Editorial Projects at Serpentine Galleries. Prior to this role, she held positions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Mistake Room in Los Angeles. Girma has a BA in World Arts and Cultures and Digital Humanities from UCLA.

Yelena Keller

Yelena Keller is a writer and curator currently working as the Curatorial Assistant of Exhibitions at Studio Museum in Harlem. Most recently, Yelena co-organized *(Never) As I Was: Studio Museum Artists in Residence 2020–21* with Studio Museum's Associate Curator of Exhibitions, Legacy Russell, featuring new work by artists Jacolby Satterwhite, Genesis Jerez, Widline Cadet, and Texas Isaiah. Other projects include: *Projects: Kahlil Robert Irving* (2021) and *Projects: Garrett Bradley* (2020) at MoMA, *This Longing Vessel* (2020) at MoMA PS1, *Thomas J Price: Witness* (2021), *Dozie Kanu: Function* (2019), and *Chloë Bass: Wayfinding* (2019).

Keli Safia Maksud

Keli Safia Maksud is an interdisciplinary artist and writer working in sound, sculpture, installation, text, and embroidery. Concerned with histories of colonial encounters and their effects on memory, Maksud's practice favors the space of in-between and its threshold and works toward destabilizing received histories in order to expose fictions of the state. Maksud earned her BFA in Painting from the Ontario College of Art and Design University, a Diploma in Art and Curatorial Studies from the New Centre for Research and Practice and an MFA in Visual Arts from Columbia University. Her work has been shown at the Bamako Biennial, National Museum of Contemporary Art - Seoul, Galería Nueva, and the Biennial of Contemporary Art Sesc_Vid-eobrasil.

Rachell Morillo

Rachell Morillo is a Black feminist writer, educator, and artist from the Dominican Republic. Her writing has been published in *Hyperallergic*, *THE SEEN*, *Intense Art Magazine*, and the *Art Momentum*, as well as the Studio Museum's *Black Refractions* and *Fictions* catalogues. Rachell's creative practice includes photography, ceramics, bookmaking, and poetry. Guiding both her writing and making processes are interests in Black queer theory, critical fabulation, and embodiment as knowledge production. Rachell earned a BA in Sociology & Anthropology from Swarthmore College and is currently Assistant Educator for Community & Access programs at the Museum of Modern Art, where she crafts conditions for individuals to practice self-determination and create new possibilities.

Sable Elyse Smith

Sable Elyse Smith (b. 1986, Los Angeles, California) points to the carceral, the personal, the political, and the quotidian to speak about a violence that is largely unseen, and potentially imperceptible. Sable Elyse Smith was included in *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* at MoMA PS1, New York, NY; *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America* at the New Museum, New York, NY; and *Climate Changing* at the Wexner Center of the Arts in Columbus, OH. Most recently, her work was on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, MA, as part of *Colored People Time*, which traveled from the ICA Philadelphia. Her work was included in *Great Force* at the ICA at Virginia Commonwealth University, and solo shows include the Queens Museum in New York, NY, and the Haggerty Museum in Milwaukee, WI. Smith was a 2018–19 artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which culminated in an exhibition at MoMA PS1. Her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including the High Line, New York, NY, for which she also curated an event at the Kitchen, New York, NY; the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, TX; SITE Santa Fe, NM; Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, NY; the New Museum, New York, NY; the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; Socrates Sculpture Park, New York, NY; and El Museo del Barrio, New York, NY.

LYDIA OURAHMANE'S REACTIVE SOUND INSTALLATION:

What are you? I wonder how you came to take your shape? Made of glass, I wonder who blew you into it? There is unevenness to your surface. Bumps and folds that make you look alive. As though you, perhaps, recently contorted into that position. And that you might soon move again. I wonder if you are intentionally escaping legibility—unrecognizable and uncategorizable. Strange yet attractive, with your almost phallic presence—interjecting in and receiving from the sonic landscape. But back to your folds, the unevenness of your surface—you are breathing, moving. Your sentience echoing through the sounds you make. The sounds you listen to. And how you shrink the distance between those—what comes in and what goes out are always creating one another. An inhale, an exhale, a whisper. In a world where we are so concerned with the edge of where one thing ends and another begins, thank you for troubling that. What's inside you and what's outside you are creating one another. A microphone, a listening device, a transmitter. You listen for footsteps nearby, conversations, breath, the sounds of artworks nearby: Cudelice Brazelton IV's *Counterpoint* gives you the sound of water flowing, coming from a river in Tbilisi, and the sounds of rubble, coming from a construction site in Paris. Sounds of the Earth giving us access to her most precious resource. And sounds of humans opening her body to build. Extraction. What does extraction sound like when laid over the sounds of humans walking close to you? Sondra Perry's *Title TK 5* offers you a computerized voice recounting a lawsuit filed by Perry's brother against EA Games for using his likeness in a video game without his consent. Reply—finding ways to justify extraction in another form. A familiar form. Corporations create entertainment extracting from black people. Consent does not exist in that dictionary. Exploitation is the name of the game and there are clauses and bullet points and references that will dizzy you to justify a social contract that was never signed. This is the atmospheric sound you pick up. This is the ambient sound of our world. And in the foreground, I imagine a breathing body, signs of life more immediately accessed, trying to make sense of it all . . . our inescapable entanglement with all of this extraction.

And you also speak. Exhale. Offer sound that announces your presence. You take it all in and spit it back out. Transmit it to not so far away satellites. Expanding into the building—a speaker placed on a radiator, one by an exit door, facing the street. No way in, one way out. A passerby on the street listens to a river flowing in Georgia, filtered through an object intimately connected to Algeria. An experience of sound that fundamentally dislocates. Entanglement.

You shriek as people call you. Startle those around you as transmissions from more distant people interrupt the sonic autonomy of the space. You are so many things, linking so many places. Shifting and changing as the people who surround you change. I understand why you are so indecipherable to the eye. Blurring the edges of our bodies, of easy comprehension, and easy legibility.

EDGE ENTANGLEMENT EXTRACTION

What happens where the edges blur? Connection. A disintegration of the made-up unit of a single individual, body, or being, and a coming into a more honest truth of our entanglement as both a biological and a social reality. And, in the case of sound, as a reality embedded in the physics of what sound is. Particles in the air (or water) vibrate and collide with one another to create sound. So it can be said that sound exists at a juncture of contact. It is, by its very nature, about blurring the edge. An edge that only exists conceptually—our concept of the lamp is that it is a separate physical object than the table it stands on. However, at the scale of particles and atoms, that separation does not exist. There is a romantic undertone to this invocation of connection—but, is connection always welcome? The slippage of the clearly contained unit of the individual (cell, particle, human being, race, gender, etc.) seems to cause a lot of distress in our society. Because any slippage in the individual unit or category questions the whole system of categorization itself, and thereby the contrived sense of order we've created. I find myself turning here to the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas. In her influential text *Purity and Danger*, Douglas writes one of the most frequently cited quotes in anthropology, that "dirt is matter out of place." I find that to be a useful framework to engage as we think about the notion of blur and slippage and the sense of both liberation and danger that seem to exist at our points of contact Douglas's argument is that "dirt" implies two important conditions, "a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that

order" (Douglas 1966: 44). Dirt is not absolute—hair is not inherently dirty, but it feels dirty if you find a piece of hair in your soup. Dirt points to something that doesn't belong—it is a label for "all events which blur, smudge, contradict or otherwise confuse accepted classifications" (Douglas 1966: 50). And again, the confusion of said classifications seems to bring us great distress at both a social and biological level. After living through almost two years of a global pandemic, we all know, in our bodies, how high the stakes of protecting the boundaries between us can feel. My body in here, your respiratory fluids out there, and I do not consent to those categories being blurred. I will take the steps needed to be diligent to protect that boundary, even through its inherent futility. The idea of purity and maintaining purity (which is an idea that becomes physical and embodied) is dependent on the fear of contamination—whether we are talking about the logic of whiteness or the logic of individual self-containment. The danger is made real through its physicalization. Its link to bodily fluids. We now hold our breath in an elevator when a stranger walks in unmasked. Our reactions to "matter out of place" are somatic—our stomach turns, our bodies coil in disgust, we want to get away. There is danger in the place where I end and you begin.

I can't think of another work that invites us to sit with that physical discomfort more than the work of artist Carolyn Lazard titled *Consensual Healing*. I am disturbed by this work. Consensual healing of a nonconsensual, or, at best, questionably consensual act. I am disturbed as in angered at the familiarity of the unwelcomed entrance into one's body. Not in the ways of a softer, perhaps more ambiguous collusion at the edge, but a more intentional, focused, penetrative approach to entering another being's body for the purpose of taking. Feeding a wound.

The work is a conversation between a facilitator and a client about a "botched pregnancy"—botched as in poorly carried out or unsuccessful. So something went wrong, though we don't totally know what. The video starts with the facilitator saying "Okay, I hear you" in a somewhat automated or robotic voice, after which she invites the client to tell the story again from the beginning. The client, whose voice sounds much more vulnerable and human, starts by saying that she is having trouble remembering. That she is confused. That she felt both loved and mistreated in equal measure. The details she starts to recount, despite her experience of her memory fading, are very precise, even if incomplete, snippets: the texture of the wall underneath the paint, a slither of light coming into the room from the hallway. Meaning it was dark in the room. Meaning she sat there and fixated her attention onto sensory details while some of her consciousness left her body—so she could endure an experience that she was having a slippery experience of understanding the extent of her agency within because this is what happens because this is what we do, this is how it's always been, wait, what's happening? An experience further confused by the feelings of care and love and transgression happening simultaneously. The facilitator invites the client to pick a keyword to refer to the experience while they undergo a bilateral stimulation to help her process—she chooses "extraction." She tells a story of insemination but the word that comes to mind denotes what was taken away from her rather than what was inserted in her. The facilitator invites her to tolerate as much emotion as she can. I can't help but feel the slipperiness of consent even in this consensual healing. We, the viewers, are brought further into the experience—when a small, digitally rendered yellow sphere comes onscreen, behaving like a pendulum to begin the process. Healing in the realm of the subconscious. There is an extended moment of silence between the two women. The sounds of an echoing dial tone vibrate while the ball swings from left to right. The viewer is left in anticipation, and perhaps internal reflection of this kind of unwelcomed transgression. We hear what sounds like a digitized echo of water droplets dripping out of a faucet, which then transitions into a concurrently industrial and extraterrestrial sound. The facilitator prompts the client by saying her keyword—EXTRACTION—followed by an extended moment of silence—after which she invites her to start remembering as best she can. She starts with the light again. It is here that we get some context into the world that this piece exists within—the client describes the conditions that brought her to this moment of coerced insemination—her father died and it was time to give up one of their young. She had always been groomed for it. It was a ritual that brought her mother shame. She only felt the shame before and after, but not during. They have to trade carrying the eggs of these creatures whose lands they were in, in exchange for asylum. That was the agreement. She was drugged. She felt relaxed. She knew she had to be. She felt held.

She felt safe. She could see and feel the movement of this being's body against her own. It felt like this she was floating—but with a lot of little legs. She felt trapped and safely held at the same time. She felt her ankles heavy on the chair. Part of her body felt like it was going through the floor. She wishes she had more control. The facilitator invites her to think about whether it's possible that she did have more control. It's possible.

How do you make sense of the coercion? A generationally accepted, ritualistically sanctioned coercion. This is interspecies entanglement at the most intimate level—reproduction. Carrying life. Carrying eggs. Larvae. Different bodily fluids from and in a different orifice. Is your stomach turning? Is it the noncoercion or the larvae? Sometimes our entanglements are dangerous—power, dependency, supremacy are all mapped onto what determines our edges and our desire to protect them. And yet, as much as we would like to imagine ourselves as distinct individuals, these entanglements of power in the context of our deep interdependence are the waters we are swimming within. These are the sounds that fill our landscape. I feel again, into Lydia Ourahmane's sculptures picking up sounds of visitors breathing. Sharing the air, even if through their masks. Our biological reality is also one of entanglement and interdependence. Our social and political reality has been one of extraction from one another's bodies and the body of the earth. And that dichotomy is not so clear—there's also been care at those sites of dependence. But I find myself standing in the center of all these paradoxes, praying for a new way. Ironically, but not ironically, my breath is guiding me there. And I am listening for the primal sounds that I make. So that I might know the evolving answer to Audre Lorde's consistent question: Are you doing your work? And so that I might know how the sounds I make impact the particles in the air around me. Who is nearby? Who is listening? What are the sounds they are making? What are the sounds you are making? Are you doing your work?

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IN THE BEGINNING THERE WERE NO WORDS

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison writes, "In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound and they all know what the sound sounded like."¹ Bending the words of John 1:1, "In the beginning was the word," Morrison emphasizes the sonic resonance of sound and proposes the genesis of language as not word but song, heartbeat, foot tap, stomp, and breath. Language as enunciation—radiating, reflecting, and refracting through frequency and embodied memory. When we speak of language it is often in relation to speech, dialect, or vernacular, but the communication of sound and its ability to permeate the senses causing us to shake, sway, cry, and exclaim is a corporeal and sonic presence that keeps score across generations.

In Abigail DeVille's new commission *The Eye of God (Names Spoken in the Night)*, the artist takes inspiration from Morrison's words, challenging us to consider the vast spatiotemporal presence of sound within the body and throughout history. Across her practice, DeVille's assemblage installations utilize archival materials to reexamine lost histories. At its core, DeVille's exploration of temporality is a contemplation of the cosmological as a site of expansive possibility. Building on the death of a star or black hole as metaphor for the erasure of Black histories and legacies across American sociocultural memory, *The Eye of God (Names Spoken in the Night)* (2022) is constructed as an abstraction of the Helix Nebula. Mirror shards and resin skeleton fractals are suspended in a steel armature of metal wire, metallic gold thread, and aircraft cable that hangs from the ceiling. Black bones, inspired by those used to make the first instruments, float within a wire mesh cloud. Neanderthal flutes crafted from animal detritus provided sound by which to communicate before there was articulated language. Using archives as raw material, DeVille prints images from the '60s and '70s of Black historical moments on mirror fragments alongside shards of plexiglass, which reflect the viewer back to themselves and blur the distinction between past and present and ancestor and spirit. This echo of light and image across the room forms a cyclical memory and re-memory of sound, artifact, object, and bodily presence that together mimics the centrifugal drifting and expansion of stardust nebulae from the core of a celestial body—a vessel through which a chorus of silenced voices can be sung.

Resuscitation, repetition, and revisitation have long been a critical part of Black pedagogy and an extension of an atemporal Blackness that exists in the past, present, and future all at once. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten expand on the prevalence of experiential modes of learning and the dissemination of information through everyday Black life in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. "A couple people seem to be reticent about the term 'study,' but is there a way to be in the undercommons that isn't intellectual? Is there a way of being intellectual that isn't social? . . . The notion of a rehearsal—being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory—there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities was already there."² The undercommons cracks open the locus of education and scholarship, refusing institutions that have systematically excluded Black people and instead proposing that study is an act of the everyday, of reclamation, and of futurity. At the core of Black radical tradition is the practice of study as community and collaboration across archive and history.

Multimedia artist E. Jane's work explores the archetype of the Black diva, celebrates and studies the underrecognized labor of Black femme icons, and challenges notions of what is considered art. E. Jane's study of Black femmehood and the lexicon of Black sonic and visual output is an act of care and tending that seeks to decolonize and liberate the subjugated Black femme experience. Taking on divadom itself, E. Jane's alter ego, MHYSA, an underground popstar for the cyber resistance, is an embodiment of these histories and the experience of the Black diva. In a close reading of Whitney Houston's appearance on the Rosie O'Donnell show in February of 1998, wherein O'Donnell displays CCTV footage of Houston's trailer as proof of her presence backstage after Houston was unable to attend a previously scheduled interview on the show due to illness, E. Jane posits that "this particular gesture of monitoring rubs the policing of the Black body up against the surveillance of the pop star."³ Split across four separate monitors, *Let's talk about Whitney Houston's February 1998 Appearance on The Rosie O'Donnell Show* (2022) provides a critical examination of the conditions of Houston's stardom as she is publicly exploited and infantilized by O'Donnell, the physical and psychological toll of her labor.

1. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 305.

2. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 110.

3. E. Jane, *Let's talk about Whitney Houston's February 1998 Appearance on The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, 2022.

Throughout the video E. Jane is superimposed against an archival clip of the interview. In-between moments of reflection and critique the artist is seen reacting to the conversation between Houston and O'Donnell as it unfolds. E. Jane's commentary unfurls the undercurrents of what is said and unsaid—the somatic and sonic language of resistance communicated by Houston not just through articulated language but through gesture as she strives to reclaim her own narrative. This concurrent collapsing of historical and contemporary footage speaks to the ways in which the archive informs the present, as E. Jane's analysis becomes a blueprint for the radical refusal enacted through their own practice as MHYSA and provides a protective enclosure through which to read and understand the mechanisms of erasure at play in Houston's lived experience.

By attending to the sonic and haptic frequencies of Black histories, we can unearth a language of futurity, one which often evades language altogether and is spoken instead in body, sound, and community. Across their practices E. Jane and DeVille piece together fractured histories and propose new ways of engaging with archives that bring spirit and ancestor to the fore as a kind of study, not only of the past, but also of the self. Throughout Black history, memory and citation have created a lyrical layering of the archive, one that dances and echoes within the collective praxis of critical thought and study—an ancestral keeping that galvanizes noncanonical modes of thinking and being in the transmission of language across histories. Repetition and diasporic memory create a reflexive knowing—a practice of citation that acts as reverberation. Remembrance becomes a doubling, splicing, and expanding that acknowledges what came before as integral to the visioning of a time beyond.

Keli Safia Maksud

NOTES ON REFUSAL

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1. *We look at these maps that they have offered us as people and as academics and we know that these maps are leading towards something called unfreedom, something like slavery, something like death. Then we have to say that if there are lines that move me in this direction, there must be lines that move me away. So, how do I invent another route, another pathway and how do I make life in the spaces of the terror. How does one still live, still laugh, still love?*

—Andrea Davis¹

The modern world is a modular world predicated on a colonial system that continues to structure our everyday life through hierarchy and division. Nation states, borders, the West, the Global South are just a few terms that fall within this logic enforcing an inside and outside distinction—a boundary between “us” and “them.”² Mabel O. Wilson reminds us that this cartographic logic manifests not only in maps but in the very places in which we dwell through other modalities of drawing, such as orthographic projection, that built a world that doesn’t just locate it but also constructs it.³ The spaces and structures we inhabit are all physical manifestations of the social systems that order our society. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon describes the colonial world as a compartmentalized world, stating that:

[t]he colonial world is a world divided into compartments. It is probably unnecessary to recall the existence of native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans; in the same way we need not recall apartheid in South Africa. Yet, if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies. . . . This approach to the colonial world, its ordering and its geographical layout will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be reorganized.⁴

Every day, individuals and groups alike refuse this order by renegotiating these imposed boundaries and borders, thus creating new networks and pathways to other worlds. “The path to the wild beyond,” Jack Halberstam notes, “is paved with refusal”⁵ and practicing refusal, according to Tina Camp, names the urgency of rethinking the time, space, and fundamental vocabulary of what constitutes politics, activism, and theory, as well as what it means to refuse the terms given to us to name these struggles.⁶ In this exhibition, *Beneath Tongues* refusal happens on multiple scales, stretching the lines and boundaries around language, architecture, labor, visibility, and invisibility. Through distinct yet interconnected strategies, the artists discussed in this text—Christine Sun Kim, Carrie Mae Weems, and Jessica Vaughn—deny these imposed systems the energy needed to maintain and preserve them by offering other ways of being, thus constructing spaces that aren’t trapped within that colonial regime.

2. Silent, adj. and n.

1. *Designating a group of people whose views remain unknown or unexpressed, esp. as contrasted with a more vocal or dominant group.*

—OED Online

In 2016 I attended a series of performances put together by the FADO Performance Art Centre in Toronto, Canada. The series, entitled *MONOMYTHS*, invited a diverse collection of artists, scholars, and activists to present performance art, lectures, workshops, and other offerings in an attempt to revise professor Joseph Campbell’s conception of the hero’s journey. At the time, many arts organizations were trying to address questions around accessibility and inclusion as a direct result of a new law,

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), which mandated that organizations follow standards to become more accessible to people with disabilities. Prior to this, it had become customary for land acknowledgments to be made before any presentation but with the introduction of the AODA act, arts organizations started including American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation during events and ensured that the spaces where they held events were wheelchair accessible. It was through FADO that I first encountered ASL interpretation during a performance.

With considerations of community, collectivity, and collaboration at the forefront, *MONOMYTHS* was a yearlong project which was broken down into a series of parts and stages that attempted to dispel the notion of the lone patriarchal figure on a conquest to vanquish his demons. As such, the series sought to break the barriers between audience and performer, and the hearing and deaf communities. However, during a performance entitled *Refusal of the Call*, the ASL interpreter generated involuntary sounds while signing. As the performer got louder so too did the interpreter, creating tension and dissonance in the room—a room that generally only ever accommodates the binary between audience and performer(s). This sound, the “extra-musical,”⁷ to borrow from Fred Moten, problematized the order that locates music on one end of the spectrum and noise on the other. After the show, many audience members, albeit in hushed voices, spoke of the disruptiveness of the interpreter and how the noises may have distracted the artist. For me, these reactions warranted several questions, namely:

- A. What assumptions were made about the inclusion of an ASL interpreter or deaf people and deafness in general?
- B. What hierarchies continued to be upheld within the space of performance despite attempts to dispel the idea of the lone figure?
- C. What if, as Moten asks, authoritative speech could be detached from the notion of a univocal speaker? What if authoritative speech is actually given in the multiplicity and the multivocality of the demand?⁸
- D. What does accessible and inclusive look like beyond representation?

Silence, v.

1. *To cause (a person, organization, etc.) to stop speaking or communicating; spec. to render (a person) speechless with emotion, shock, etc.; (also) to defeat (a person) completely in argument.*

—Andrea Davis

In her 2015 TED Talk, “The Enchanting Music of Sign Language,” Christine Sun Kim speaks to the idea of sound etiquette, explaining how she learned that she creates sounds by watching how [hearing] people react to her. For example, she has learned not to slam doors and not to burp. “Maybe I think about sound etiquette more than the average hearing person does,” Kim explains, “I’m hypervigilant around sound . . . always waiting in anticipation around sound and what’s to come next.”⁹ Kim’s practice, which includes drawing, performance, sound, and installation, critiques the implicit authority placed on spoken language over signed languages, troubling the notion that sound is inextricably tethered to hearing. Her drawings frequently use English loanwords¹⁰ and notational systems to explore the linguistic structure of ASL. But rather than impose a hierarchy on this system of communication, Kim’s practice points to the interconnectivity between modes of communication and urges viewers to recognize the fluidity of language. For example, her series of drawings entitled *English vs Deaf English*, which contrasts English and Deaf English, demonstrates untranslatable ASL concepts. Unlike most other languages, ASL does not have a written component, so some expressions rely on loanwords from spoken English. Thus, in *Sorry Not Sorry* (2018), Not Interested translates to Interest Zero, and Can’t See A Thing equates to See Zero. This work demonstrates the loose boundaries that lie between English, Deaf English, and ASL.

1. Andrea A. Davis, “Day 4: Closing Conversation. A Map to the Door of No Return at 20: A Gathering” YouTube, uploaded by A Map To the Door at 20, 6 Nov. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVaEzhHSow4&t=1s&ab_channel=AMapToTheDoorAt20.

2. Wendy Brown, *Waning Sovereignty, Walled Democracy* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 24–25.

3. Mabel O. Wilson, “Day 4: Closing Conversation. A Map to the Door of No Return at 20: A Gathering” YouTube, uploaded by A Map To the Door at 20, 6 Nov. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVaEzhHSow4&t=1s&ab_channel=AMapToTheDoorAt20.

4. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 38.

5. Jack Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons,” in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 8.

6. Tina Camp, “Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal: Tina Camp,” *Women & Performance*, 12 March 2019, <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/29-1/camp>.

7. Fred Moten speaks of the extra-musical as sounds that have been denigrated as noise rather than signal.

8. *Ibid.* 135.

9. Christine Sun Kim, “The enchanting music of sign language,” YouTube, uploaded by TED, 19 Nov 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Euof4PnjD-k&ab_channel=TED.

10. A loanword is a word adopted from a foreign language with little or no modification.

In the same talk, Kim describes the similarities between ASL and music. Using a piano as a metaphor, she notes that ASL is broken down into many different grammatical parameters, such as facial expression, body movement, and speed, which can each be assigned to each finger in the style of a piano player. Unlike the English language, which she describes as linear, that is, “one key is pressed at a time,” ASL is like “a chord—all ten fingers need to come down simultaneously to express a clear concept or idea. One shift in key would create a completely different meaning much like in music with regards to pitch, tone and volume.”¹¹ Here, Kim reminds us of the expansiveness of language, revealing it to be a “multi-sensory phenomenon, one whose properties are auditory, visual, and spatial, as well as socially determined.”¹² The practice of refusal recurs and shifts throughout Kim’s practice but is most astutely demonstrated in her refusal to remain silent.

3
To speak another language is to enter another consciousness. Africans in the New World were compelled to enter another consciousness, that of their masters, while simultaneously being excluded from their own.

—NourbeSe Philip¹³

In She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks, NourbeSe Philip speaks to the image as being fundamental of any art form. Drawing on the Rastafarian practice of privileging the “I,” Philip stresses the “I” of “image”—i-mage—arguing that at the heart of all creative language is the i-mage: the practice of writing and imagining the self and/or collective in the world.¹⁴ Speaking specifically to the effects of slavery in the Caribbean (although I would argue that this is the condition throughout the Black diaspora), Philip describes the violence of stripping the African slave of her language and speech, stating that, “in denying the voice power to make and, simultaneously, to express thei-mage—in denying the voice expression, in fact—the ability and power to use the voice was effectively stymied.”¹⁵ The African was forced to adapt a foreign language—“a language comprised of word symbols that even then had affirmed negative i-mages about her, and one which was but a reflection of the experience of the European ethnocentric world view.”¹⁶ Thus, in adopting this new language the African was partially able to voice her experience while at the same time was bound to silence.

Despite the ravages of the New World, new forms of speech emerged allowing Black people to not only voice their experiences but also control their own i-mages. “The English language,” Philip notes, “was subverted, turned upside down, inside out . . . [and] infused with [their] own remembered linguistic traditions.”¹⁷ Wordplay refers to the action of playing with words or a witty use of words, especially of verbal ambiguities. In African American culture wordplay is based on Black vernacular—the ordinary language of Black Americans, enriched by colloquial expressions, metaphors, similes, and proverbs as well as excerpts from songs and stories rooted in African and African American culture. Bad English, Black English, Ebonics, Patois, and Creole are just a few terms that are used to describe modes of communication among Black people in the diaspora. I read these emergent languages under the rubric of refusal, saying no to, as Christina Sharpe notes in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, “those languages and the material conditions . . . that continue to produce our fast and slow death.”¹⁸ Sharpe asks:

If we understand portraiture to be both the “art of creating portraits” (image and text) and “graphic and detailed descriptions,” how might we understand a variety of forms of contemporary Black public image making in and as refusals to accede to the optics, the disciplines, and the deadly demands of antiblack worlds in which we live, work, and struggle to make visible (to ourselves, if not to others) all kinds of Black pasts, presents and possible futures?

11. Kim, “The enchanting music of sign language.”

12. Allison Noelle Conner, “Your Turn, My Turn, Our Turn: How Christine Sun Kim Reimagines Sound,” *Contemporary Art Review LA*, 17 March 2021, <https://contemporaryartreview.la/your-turn-my-turn-our-turn-how-christine-sun-kim-reimagines-sound/#marker-12490-5>.

13. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 78.

14. *Ibid.* 80.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.* 82.

17. *Ibid.* 85.

18. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 116.

19. *Ibid.* 115.

It is through the tradition of a Black vernacular that I view and enter the works of Carrie Mae Weems. Part of the artist’s larger *Sea Islands Series, Untitled (Peanuts)* 1991–92 and *Untitled (Box Spring in Tree)* 1991–92 are a visual exploration of a group of islands on the Atlantic Ocean coast of the Southeastern United States to which thousands of enslaved Africans were shipped. Many descendants of slaves remained on these isolated islands where they developed a creole culture known as Gullah (also referred to as Geechee). The Gullah people speak an English-based creole language that contains many African loanwords and is influenced by African languages in grammar and sentence structure.

In *Untitled (Peanuts)*, which consists of two gelatin photographs that depict generic storefront businesses and two screenprinted text panels located on either side of the images, Weems engages with wordplay by illustrating possible etymological variants of Gullah and Geechee: GOLA, ANGOLA, GULLA, GULLAH, GEECHEE. Some scholars suggest that Gullah may be connected to the word “Angola,” where the ancestors of some of the Gullah people likely originated, while others have suggested that it may come from the name of the Gola, an ethnic group living in another area of enslaved ancestors of the Gullah people between present-day Sierra Leone and Liberia in West Africa. The name Geechee may derive from the name of the Kissi people, an ethnic group living in the border area between Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia. But it might also be derived from the name of the Ogeechee River near Savannah, Georgia.²⁰ Stated on the panel to the right of the photographs are the words MPINDA, NGUBA, GOOBER, PEANUTS—all words meaning “peanut” in various African languages and Gullah creoles.

The two photographs depict storefronts of businesses in Savannah, Georgia, that are no longer extant. The left-oriented image indicates a business named “Max’s” while the photograph on the right shows “Awesome Hair Performance” at 1911 MLK Blvd with a Muslim star and crescent icon hand painted near the front door on the exterior wall, and “Steven’s Peanuts.”²¹ Looking at this work as a whole, I read the text panels as brackets or parentheses around the images, thus amplifying or expanding on the photographs and demanding a closer analysis. But the text, particularly the panel on the left, could also function as annotation—a metadata such as a note, explanation, or comment attached to text or image. Christina Sharpe suggests that the work of annotation, or rather Black annotation, is “another effort to try to look, to try to really see . . . seeing and reading otherwise; reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame.”²² By integrating these different voices through the various modes of language—English, Creole English, Kikongo, Mpinda, photography, and text—and also playing with orthography, Weems uses polyvocality to speak to the depths and complexities of African American history and culture, composing alternative narratives of Black existence and demanding a reconsideration of predominant narratives throughout our history.

Untitled (Box Spring in Tree) depicts a haunting landscape with a box spring hanging from a tree evoking an African folkloric practice that’s used to ward off evil spirits. Here, Black life is rendered visible through folklore, which employs the tactic of signifying—a way of speech that relies on metaphor and simile, thus creating layered and nuanced meanings. But this photograph also expresses a sense of quiet that forces the viewer to slow down in order to draw out these subtle pronouncements of Blackness.

Engaging with the Black vernacular tradition, these works also speak to the mode of opacity that was theorized by Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation*. As an antonym of transparency, this notion questions the possibilities of intercultural communication. For Glissant, a “transparent” language is transparent by virtue of the fact that it is the vehicle of humanist colonial ideology, reproducing humanism’s universality in being read and spoken by an ideal human individual. Transparency implies the existence of a universal, correct, and “right” language, toward which the individual strives. In a multi-relational world, recognizing difference does not mean understanding otherness by making it transparent, but accepting the unintelligibility, impenetrability, and confusion that often characterize cross-cultural communication.²³

20. Wikipedia, s.v. “Gullah,” 26 December 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gullah>.

21. Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Peanuts)* [ital.], 1992, two gelatin silver prints and two screenprinted text panels, 51.4 × 213 cm overall (framed), Telfair Museum, Savannah, Georgia, <https://collections.telfair.org/objects/6549/untitled-peanuts>.

22. Sharpe, *In the Wake* [ital.], 117.

23. Posted by Keywords Contributor. “Opacité / Opacity (Édouard Glissant).” *Keywords in Transcultural English Studies*, <http://www.transcultural-english-studies.de/opacite-opacity-edouard-glissant/>.

4.

Quiet, adj. and adv.

1. *Characterized by an absence or near absence of agitation or activity.*
2. *Free from noise or uproar; making little if any sound.*
3. *Absence of disturbance or discord; peace in social or political life.*

—OED Online

Working with residual materials that are often cast off or discarded during processes of production or labor, Jessica Vaughn makes sculptures and installations that point to the mundane and quotidian structures that inform our understanding of work, race, and space. For her sculptural work, she collects scrap materials such as industrial upholstery or seats from different sites of labor and city infrastructure, including Chicago Transit Authority buses, and transforms them into artworks that invite a reconsideration of these materials as art objects in themselves. For example, *D-90 Blue No.116* (2016), which is named after its commercial color code, is a sculpture that was made from scrap fabric that was used to line seating in commercial vehicles. Here, the fabric is presented as a readymade though unfamiliar form that frames empty, negative space.

In art, negative space is defined as the space around and between the subject of an image. It may be most evident when the space around a subject forms an interesting or artistically relevant shape, and such space occasionally is used to artistic effect as the “real” subject of an image.²⁴ Focusing our attention on the negative spaces, Vaughn encourages a closer inspection of not just the shapes that uncannily hint at patterns to cover armrests or seats but also their edges, which are often delicate and frayed. In a presentation of her work at Creative Time, she noted how these materials are designed to easily separate and unravel. “This unravelling,” she explains, “serves as a reminder of the people who are making, producing and running those machines that create the cuts in the fabric. There is a relationship to the machine and the body and working through space where labor goes unnoticed or is treated as invisible that I want to make evident.”²⁵

Invisibility, much like visibility, is socially constructed. Fanon’s conception of a compartmentalized world, dividing, for example, native and European quarters, is a useful framework to understand these constructions. Spatial segregation is the schema through which the built environment has been constructed,²⁶ organizing bodies both discursively and spatially according to perceived differences. For Mabel O. Wilson, the emergence of architecture as a modern discipline is itself inseparable from the problem of race. “I’m,” Wilson notes, “referring to a very specific, Western humanist notion of the architect as someone who thinks, who designs, who draws but who does not build. He is an intellectual, in other words, who works very abstractly, through reason, and is distanced from the physical labor of construction.” But as William Gleason reminds us in *Sites Unseen: Architecture, Race, and American Literature*, “the built environment is always shaped in some way by race whether such shaping is explicitly acknowledged or understood.”²⁷ The emergence of the modern world and modern architecture, which was dependent on enslaved labor, became, in part, about the maintenance of racial hierarchy.²⁸ By focusing on the work that builds the structure for other types of work that are seen as respectable, Vaughn’s practice raises pressing questions about what is considered important work, particularly in this moment of pandemic, and the idea of essential work, thus conjuring a population of unseen workers.

I often return to a question raised by Saidiya Hartman: How does one represent Black life, convey its frequencies, its textures and sounds, its opacity, the deep and rich Black tonalities that define the lived experience and the aesthetic territory? If Blackness is seen to run synonymous with loudness and expressiveness, what could a concept of quiet mean to how we understand Black culture?²⁹ How might we view Blackness outside of modes of resistance, attending instead to the mundane and quotidian? How might this extended vocabulary enable a more robust dialogue around Blackness and being? In the introduction to her book *Listening to Images*, Tina Campt muses on the relationship between quiet

Each term references something assumed to go unspoken or unsaid, unremarked, unrecognized, or overlooked. They name practices that are pervasive and ever-present yet occluded by their seeming absence or erasure in repetition, routine, or internalization. Yet the quotidian is not equivalent to passive everyday acts, and quiet is not an absence of articulation or utterance. Quiet is a modality that surrounds and infuses sound with impact and affect, which creates the possibility for it to register as meaningful . . . for blacks in the diaspora, both quiet and the quotidian are mobilized as everyday practices of refusal.³⁰

In music, negative space is analogous to silence but only when it is juxtaposed with adjacent musical ideas. Put differently, negative space is the silence between notes. But these silences should be thought of as positively formed spatial mass, the length of which gives the presence of sound as a perceivable shape. As such, there is a difference between inert and active silences in music, where the latter is more closely analogous to negative space in art. I read Vaughn’s works through these modalities of quiet, silent, and quotidian—not as passive objects but works that highlight, through an interplay of what is seen and unseen, closed systems of representation and value. They function like blueprints erecting an ideological architecture running rampant throughout our cities. An architecture of affect and impact and, though not visible, not quiet either.

24. Wikipedia, s.v. “negative space,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negative_space.

25. Jessica Vaughn, “Jessica Vaughn Presents at the 2021 Creative Capital Artist Retreat,” YouTube, uploaded by Creative Capital, 8 September 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37wOnWhg5tI&ab_channel=CreativeCapital.

26. Mabel O. Wilson and Julian Rose, “Changing the subject: Race and public space,” *Artforum*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/print/201706/changing-the-subject-race-and-public-space-68687>.

27. William A. Gleason, *Sites Unseen: Architecture, Race, and American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 3.

28. Ibid.

29. I point to a similar question asked by Kevin Quashie in *The Sovereignty of Quiet* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

30. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

.in

My friend is dead. She was my best friend and I can barely remember her. I spend my days flagellating my memory, trying to figure out why we stopped speaking. I am paralyzed by guilt. Guilt for failing to remember the many years we spent together. Guilt for my neglect. And guilt whenever my mind wanders away from trying to remember her to a moment of peace or work or my ex or my own indulgent self-pity.

I am supposed to write this essay which is already late, another fact that reinforces my guilt. A musical duet is the prompt: two voices that hold their own but are speaking toward the same thing/two voices that balance each other out/create dissonance/contradictions. But I cannot think past the crescendo/chorus/call-and-response of my own thoughts.

My friend is dead
My friend is dead
My friend is dead and I have to write this essay.
I cannot talk to my friend so I will talk to myself.
I cannot talk to my friend so I will write this essay.

And now ladies and gentlemen for your pleasure and entertainment we proudly present the two-headed girl and her famous solo duet.

I write this through the fog of my own recurring depression which now rolls in, reified by the death of a friend. Attempting this daring task of organizing my own anxious thoughts that reverberate sonically. Internally.

This daze . . . maze Constructed by my mind I know all too well. But this one seems to have a brand-new flavor! So here's my ill-fated and ill thought out, likely futile escape act. Here. On the page. I appreciate your patience.

And now ladies and gentlemen

My friend is dead and I have to write this thing but my brain doesn't work anymore. It's on strike.
FAIR PAY AND RESPECT.

Management won't listen. Instead, I try to remember.

I try to remember the last time we spoke. I can't.

A drunken night? An obligatory holiday text to meet up? Maybe we fought? Plans repeatedly unfulfilled that lead to scorned abandonments? Neglect. Anger?

Why was it so long?

Ironic now as I cancel plans—"I'm working on my essay." The one that is overdue and I haven't started. Now in progress.

An unanswered text is how I think we left it.

In her final year I hear she asked for me. "Where is Hanna? Have you heard from her? I miss who I was when I was with her. I was fun."

Fun
The goodtime girl

My mom told me my friend died
I went to dinner and was the loudest in the room

"There's always a joker in the pack. There's always a lonely clown. The poor laughing fool falls on his back. And everyone laughs when he's down. There's always a funny man in the game. But he's only funny by mistake. But everyone laughs at him, just the same. They don't see his lonely heart break. They don't care as long as there is a jester, just a fool. As foolish as he can be. There's always a joker, that's a rule. But fate deals the hand and I see."

"The joker is me"¹

Who has forgotten me?

My friend is dead and it's my fault

Why didn't she call?

She didn't ask for help. I don't think she could. I try to ask for help. In my way. The sardonic cries of a goodtime girl. Maybe this essay is one? I wonder if she did the same and I didn't hear.

Why didn't you check?

My mom keeps tempo. Her past questions that irritated me now echo. "Have you heard from her? Reach out. I hear she is going through a tough time."

I think I texted
I had to have
Lazy

Too preoccupied with my own small deaths throughout time, public cracks, and private crevices² I would fall in and out of, I forgot to reach out and help her up from hers.
She let go.
I let go.
She let go.

My friend is dead.

It's narcissistic to think I alone could lift her. Silence her chorus when mine was/is so loud.

Fasten your seatbelt before helping others.

It's my fault.

My therapist says I'm too hard on myself.
All of my memories feel fake. Her breathy laugh, calling me bozo and slapping my shoulder, all a scene from a movie I watched but didn't pay attention to. A book I only read the sparknotes for. I cannot place our last conversation. Our last embrace.

How many others have I forgotten?

All I have are images of us as babies thinking we were grown . . . going to concerts and drinking in cars with boys. Kings cup and cheap vodka shots. No parents, house to the neck. Slow moving fast girls who rubbed our hickies with ice and didn't rush anything but love. Smiles³ so big you could see the gums. Hers shines brighter than any memory I have.

Stanky legs and stiff twerks in dingy barely furnished apartments.

1. Shirley Bassey, "The Joker." Also the intro to *Kath and Kim*, an Australian talk show about a dysfunctional white mother and daughter.

They take everything . . . but the show is funny.

2. Morrison, Toni. 1992. *Jazz*. New York: Knopf.

3. Morrison, Toni. 1992. *Jazz*. New York: Knopf. A book I stole from my ex but never finished.

God I sound like an emo early 2000s song
I got your picture
I'm coming with ya⁴

I watched her funeral on a laptop before bed. The same screen I watch *Seinfeld* and porn on. The same screen I now write this essay. From my bed. The one days prior I couldn't get out of.

I watched her funeral and felt nothing. A voyeur. In a church that wasn't the one but might as well have been the one I hated.

A former catholic school tramp.
I lift up my church skirt and get spanked through my white tights on Easter Sunday.
Stick my finger in the flame every midnight mass.

Not nothing but not what I expected after days of debilitating grief.
I didn't cry. I was mad.

I watch the row of shrouded habesha grandmothers file in to mourn my friend. They stick out in their white cotton dresses. Like ghosts walking down the aisle. They hold each other, they support their friend who has lost a granddaughter and before that a son.

I am reminded of the first funeral I attended. This was not virtual but rather violently irl I remember the screams of my shrouded aunts. I remember my dad's soft cries, the first time I saw him cry. His glasses fogging up. I remember forcing myself to cry. To partake in the ritual. The shame I felt that I wasn't and couldn't cry.

She was my caretaker, my protector, but I could not cry. After all, I didn't know her. I loved her as much as I could. But I didn't know her. We didn't speak the same language. I knew nothing of her life, her love. Even her illness was hidden from my young ears until she was gone.
She would watch wrestling and soap operas and call my dad when I wouldn't eat.

My grandma cries in her living room
የእኔ ቆንጆ
"I love you, I love you"
The only English she knows.
The final breakdown after days of failed communication

Why don't I know her . . . language?

I remember My mom shushing my dad to stop crying so as not to upset me and my sister. Her coldness to his otherness.

I remember these failed sonic moments. Violent translation.⁵ Failed speech. Silence. How horrific it all felt but I can't remember my friend.

Grief and this essay feel self-serving at this moment. If I cannot remember her, how can I claim this sadness? This space to mourn? What does this do for her memory?

Am I the bad art friend?⁶

"Be kind to yourself"

But I wouldn't grieve someone I didn't know. My therapist says I need to be kind to myself. She asks me why I think I can't remember.

I need a new therapist
An analyst?

My dad was grieving the loss of the woman who raised him, yes, but also his last tether to home. I ask my dad about his previous life, before he came here, and he responds tersely. Suspiciously. Can he remember? He sounds Ethiopian. He plays broken jazz tunes on my sister's piano. The rental piano I thought was ours until one day it was gone.

"I can't do this. I hate the piano."

I wonder if my dad mourned the piano that was returned, I'm sure without his consent, by the matriarch of our family.

I always blame my mom
She was a good mom
I should call her

He probably told her to return it. To save money. But still harbors resentment for its absence. He plays the harmonica and accordion now. The ones I begged him to get me from the candy shop. The ones I quickly grew tired of and re-gifted to him on father's day.

His displacement/liminality is audible in the broken and vaguely habesha melody.
He is not Black
No longer Ethiopian
And simultaneously both

A cop pulls my dad over
"Shit shit"
"He heard my accent and realized I was ok"

The sonic call that you should not be there. You do not belong there, you have been displaced.

"When occupying a space, which is articulated by objects and furnishings that belong to someone else, you begin to adapt to a preset of gestures that haunt the space, to which you reorient your habits . . . my own body became a stand-in for these gestures, processing them, repeating them, and reinstating them."⁷

Amorphous, translucent, dark. This home. This family. He/They built. Is also a trap. A daily reminder of what he left behind for better or for worse. He won't say. Time and the American Dream has hardened the man whose glasses once steamed up as I held his hand. I try to imagine the boy he was before he came here. The boy whose mother would breastfeed other children to make him cry with jealousy.

He didn't cry when his brother died . . . mom still yelled at him.

This is also not my mother's home. On a walk she tells me she wanted to move back to New York when her father died. She says that feeling lasted about 5 years, 1994 (the year I was born, the year he died), 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998. My dad told her he would never move. His family is here. His grandmother. The one whose funeral she would shhh him at.

She says it's fine, she hates the cold anyway.

I can't even last 6 months in this puss filled gray city.

4. All Time Low, "Dear Maria, Count Me In."

5. Betsy Wing's translator intro to, Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* says that "The stumbling blocks of translation frequently exist at its most productive points. Their usual first effect is frustration caused by obstinate resistance (on both sides), but, in their ever-renewed demand for conjecture, these apparent obstacles can allow us to escape the cramped, habitual postures of our own thought."

6. Kolker, Robert. "Who is the Bad Art Friend?" *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 5 Oct. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/05/magazine/dorland-v-larson.html>.

7. Lydia Ourahmane lived amongst the ghosts of the auntie who had passed away in her apartment in Algiers. No space is ever ours. interview <https://www.the-art-paper.com/lydia-ourahmane-at-kunsthalle-base/>

They both crossed an ocean to meet me here.

“Barzakh in Arabic is the limbo, the in-between state. There are many translations which relate it as a space where the spirit awaits; somewhere between life and death, or a physical space; a thin strip of land between two seas, a refuge. But it is also a place of judgment, where a spirit waits while its earthly deeds are counted.”⁸

This limbo he has lived in for most of his life tears him apart. He sends me poems in Amharic and yells at me for not understanding them.

በጣም አመሰግናለሁ የኔ እህት ፡ ሰራሽ ሁሉ የተባረከ ይሁን ፡ ቅንነት ደግነትና መልካም ሰራ የሰጧት መገለጫ ነውና። ኤልያስ ግርማ አሰፋጧ⁹

I took my dad back to Ethiopia after 46 years. I tried to have a moment of silence in a room where I could not understand anything that was being said. A room that was foreign to me. One he knows all too well. My friend told me to meditate on the sounds. I screamed at my dad instead for his unwillingness to translate.

“Silence makes the brain grow fonder. In the silence of your day, chase your cares away and let your mind tune in to the next of what to do. And may peace all be with you whatever you do. Moments of silence. Moments of silence. Moments of silence. Chase your cares away.”¹⁰

Because I cannot remember the past, I think of the future my friend will have. The legacy she leaves behind. Who absorbs her pain now that she is free? Her mother?

I forgave my mom a long time ago. After all, a part of her died the year I was born so it feels like I'm talking shit when my therapist asks me about it. Her existence in corporate America. Wholesale subaltern. The first. The best. Was her own hell.

“We are in hell when we fail to exist”¹¹

I find myself in a similar predicament
Mother's daughter. A hellhole of my own upward mobility¹²

Mother told me to marry someone who loved me more than I love them

My ex says his first love was sent from god.

Who sent me?

I was told I wouldn't have recognized the person she was. That it is a blessing I have the memories of her as she truly was.

Memories I don't have.

“Love saves us only if we want to be saved.”¹³

The first word I learned to write was love. I used to write it in cursive over and over and over. I hardly ever use that word now.

She took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows
to freeze or fly
including the parrot that said
“I love you”¹⁴

8. Lydia Ourahmane interview <https://www.the-art-paper.com/lydia-ourahmane-at-kunsthalle-basel/>

9. Personal note from my father.

10. Satterwhite, Patricia. “Moments of Silence.”

11. Satterwhite, Patricia. “We are in Hell When We Hurt Each Other.”

12. I went back to work after I was raped. I went back after my friend died.

13. hooks, bell. 2018. All About Love. [S.I.]: HarperCollins. I sent this to my sister after her breakup on the day bell hooks died. She didn't read it. I've never finished it.

14. Morrison, Toni. 1992. Jazz. New York: Knopf. Apparently *Jazz* is Toni Morrison's favorite book.

“We are in hell when we break others down. We are in hell when we hurt each other. When we see the truth it will all be free.

I hurt you. You hurt me. I hurt myself. You hurt me. You hurt you. You hurt yourself.”¹⁵

Hall and Oates said “it's easy to hurt others when you can't feel pain.”

My sister said “hurt people hurt people” when I told her about the ex who broke my heart

My therapist said the same in response to my own corporate dysphoria

To live within this world as a Black person. A Black woman. and not feel constantly enraged by the bipolarizing nature of double consciousness, schizophrenic. Maybe it is insensitive and myopic to conflate my own bouts of psychosis/moments of inability to distinguish my, ours, your thoughts and ideas from reality with schizophrenia. I fight with my mom over the past. My reality and hers are in conflict and simultaneously true. She looks at me through the eyes of another and sees the wounds they made. She made. How can I expect her to remember?

I can't even remember my friend and I expect her to remember every infraction?

I saw a TikTok that said excessive daydreaming and fantasy is a form of OCD. I tried to think of a day when I didn't spend the majority of it daydreaming past the confines of my own existence. To suspend the pervasive darkness.

Maybe I shouldn't self-diagnose off (from?) TikTok anymore.

Patricia's gospel is what she leaves behind. A dose of her soft acapella calls for peace and hope, Mahalia, and Sunday Sessions.

The only things that quiet my mind are these repetitive, infectious choruses that burrow in my head, silencing the information I can't prioritize. The sonic and visual distractions ravaging my senses.

“You're not alone. You're Not alone. We're in this thing called love. To make a change be not ashamed. You know that love will find a way”¹⁶

I was angry watching my friend's funeral.

I was angry at my dirty computer screen.

I was angry at the minister who kept talking about HIM and HIS plan.

I was angry at myself.

If my parents talk about god more than me at my funeral I will be pissed.

My only moments of peace were when the lone gospel singer removed her mask and sang “He Knows My Name” and “More Than Anything” through strained vocals, over the distorted computer audio. The same songs I burrowed in to self-soothe.

They say that Charles “Buddy” Bolden was schizophrenic. They say he couldn't properly read music and had impaired motor function. That the only way he could play his cornet was by improvising on ragtime and that this was at the root of his pioneering jazz accomplishments.

While it may be true that he was schizophrenic, it is also possible that this “freewheeling” radical Black production could only be understood in the white imagination as a disorder.

I'm not crazy I'm free¹⁷

15. Satterwhite, Patricia. “We are in Hell When We Hurt Each Other.”

16. Satterwhite, Patricia. “Love Will Find a Way Home.”

17. Kanye West, Twitter, 2016

"[I]n a 1968 article that appeared in the prestigious Archives of General Psychiatry, psychiatrists Walter Bromberg and Frank Simon described schizophrenia as a 'protest psychosis' whereby black men developed 'hostile and aggressive feelings' and 'delusional anti-whiteness' after listening to the words of Malcolm X, joining the Black Muslims, or aligning with groups that preached militant resistance to white society. According to the authors, the men required psychiatric treatment because their symptoms threatened not only their own sanity, but the social order of white America. Bromberg and Simon argued that black men who 'espoused African or Islamic' ideologies, adopted 'Islamic names' that were changed in such a way so as to deny 'the previous Anglicization of their names' in fact demonstrated a 'delusional anti-whiteness' that manifest as 'paranoid projections of the Negroes to the Caucasian group.'" 18

They would rather have me say "I am a nigga"
Than hear me say "I am a god" 19

White Supremacy strips the ego. Constantly perceiving and validating self through the eyes of another. A social death as a precursor to the physical.

Huey P. Newton was placed in solitary confinement on and off for 3 years until he was released in 1970:

"Tonight I ask you to assume that an external world exists. An external world that exists independently of us. The second assumption I would like for you to make is that things are in a constant state of change, transformation, or flux. With agreement on these two assumptions we can go on with our discussion." 20

Newton did not rejoin the Black Panther party and struggled with drug abuse after his release. Steffani Jemison's *Same Time* relays Newton's words through popular music tropes.

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18. Jonathan M. Metz, *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).
19. Kanye West, BBC interview with Zane Lowe, 2013.
20. Huey P. Newton, Speech at Boston College, November 18, 1970.

The rhetorical possibilities of repetition. Variation, repetition and improvisation. I try to find the creative possibilities in the repetitive/sporadic thoughts I currently struggle with on/ in this page. Sharp white.. Give them narrative and structure.

The duality and conversation between external forces that are and internal voices that could be. Fractured familial conversations. Jacolby speaks to Patricia, Kanye speaks to Donda. I speak to my friend who I once called sister.

2017 was the last time I saw my friend.

The same year I spoke to E. Jane about their thoughts on softness as a political act for Black femmes.

Throughout our conversation I probed them on this idea. It was one I could not wrap my head around as someone who was taught my need for touch was deficient. Not to cry. Scream before you cry. But never in public, never too loud. Never audibly.

"We are in hell when we fail to exist" 21

Because of what I was taught I was always too loud, too mean, too fast, too much. Too wild.

I used to be a quiet girl. Thoughtful.

"If mama knew now. How you turned out. You too wild." 22

My rage was my shield and my default. I think during this time I was in the most pain and caused the most pain to those around me.

"I hurt you.
You hurt me.
I hurt myself.
You hurt me.
You hurt you.
You hurt yourself." 23

Radical softness contradicted everything I was taught. That I had to be hard to be hard to kill. A language I could not speak. An octave I could not reach.

Takes a lot more courage to talk about your feelings than it does to sit around and be a bitch 24

Not sure why anyone stuck around. Maybe cuz i was still a good time.

*"I, I feel really great, because like, my friends like me
I'm like bitch! I'ma really . . . I really bitch"* 25

After our conversation they emailed back to my questions:

"I think a lot about Alice Walker, her thoughts, her essays, and the film *The Color Purple* in relation to Black women and softness. I think about how Celie was just expected to work and not have nice things and Shug Avery was judged as "fast"/loose for getting those things through professional entertainment and relationships with men." 26

Celie in the streets Shug in the sheets

21. Satterwhite, Patricia. "We are in Hell When We Hurt Each Other."
22. West, Kanye. "Wolves."
23. Satterwhite, Patricia. "We are in Hell When We Hurt Each Other."
24. Kourtney Kardashian
25. Girl pusher, "A Lot of Boys Like Me Though." Audio is from a 1967 interview with a 19-year-old runaway hippie, Marcy. The interview, called "A Child Again," was conducted by WNEW without Marcy knowing she was being recorded.
26. Rhizome interview with E. Jane

Celie in the office Shug in the club

"I think about how softness is generally used against Black people, especially by one another, because we're told we have to be hard to survive. I think that sometimes that hardness inadvertently kills/harms us because that kind of repression—like unreleased cortisol from not crying—has actual negative effects on the body . . ." 27

"I am so angry, I have so much rage, but it becomes physically unhealthy for me to express it sometimes . . ." 28

"Working tirelessly to prove one's humanity as a Black person is also known as John Henryism, which Claudia Rankine discusses in her innovative work, *Citizen*. In the book she describes it." Sitting there staring at the closed garage door you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists a medical term—John Henryism—for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the build up of erasure." 29

"It's not passive resistance, but rather just as evil has gotten banal, maybe Black rage has to get soft to compete. Like how Judith must've been in the bible story where she convinces Holofernes to let her in his tent before she cuts off his head." 30

The banality of evil.
The insidious force that causes one to unravel.
Capable and culpable.

"Honestly, I'm just trying something because I have to keep going." 31

While I still find beauty in black rage, see it as productive, I can also see how it is restricting. An oppressive and depressive space to work from. I see the softness in Toni, Octavia, Audre and Saidiya's wayward girls where previously I could only empathize with the madness.

Octavia's characters from "Bloodchild" to Parable of The Sower take on the world's pain. Carry multitudes within them.

I should have finished that book.

Facilitator: OK, I hear you. Let's start over again.

Client: I'm having trouble remembering to be honest. Every time I try, I just see nothing, no image, but I remember how it felt.

Facilitator: OK, well, can you tell me?

Client: Sure. I just remember feeling confused. I felt deeply loved and deeply mistreated at the same time.

Facilitator: OK. Why do think you felt that way?

Client: Something changed in me. I was trying to navigate two different ways of seeing the world. It was a moment of transition.

Facilitator: Even if you can't remember the whole story, tell me the details you remember. 32

I just started therapy and I cry in every session and it's lit. I love it.

When I was younger I asked my mom to go to therapy and she told me I was being dramatic.

Maybe I was.
I grew up with the glamor and melodrama of Goldie and Meryl. 33
It was my time.
I'm a white woman. Address me as such.

Last week my therapist told me I was depressed. She also told me I was beautiful. I don't know which affirmation I needed more. Tbh that was pretty unprofessional
Is it sick I get off on the white validation?
Maybe I should get a Black therapist?
No, I'm good

My therapist told me, a phrase I thought was reserved for my wealthy white friends who weaponized their years of psychoanalysis against me is now mine.

My therapist told me to try white noise to calm my thoughts. But I have been listening to white noise all day. It's time to tune in.

Empathizing with my oppressor (external and internal) is hard but not new to me.

I don't think you're a bad person . . .
I just think it's hard for you to be good to me It hurts to hurt other people. As black women we are constantly made to empathize with our captor body mind social

You slap me and I try to make you laugh.
A kiss with a fist is better than none. 34

You love me so you treat me like shit because you know you don't deserve my love.
I love you because I hate myself.

In your story I'm the villain.
My therapist told me to locate feelings in my body—"how does it feel?"

But I can't feel my body right now.
Maybe once I locate my body I will remember.

I asked what my friend was diagnosed with before her death. It was schizophrenia.

A definite oversimplification but I imagine one voice, the lowest voice, became louder than all the others.
Drowned them out. Drew her away from us.

Drew Drowned Drew Drowned Drew Drowned

So now I try to make peace with my duet. My chorus.

"Love will find a way home." 35

34. Florence + the Machine. "Kiss With a Fist"

35. Patricia Satterwhite, "Love Will Find a Way Home."

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. *Citizen* saved me in college and was the first book that saw the academic fuckery I endured. I wonder if Claudia Rankine would hate me and my blond braids?

30. Rhizome interview with E. Jane.

31. Ibid.

32. Carolyn Lazard, *Consensual Healing*, 2018, HD Video, 14 min 43 secs.

33. Death Becomes Her.

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YOU HEAR ME?

NOTES ON
LANGUAGE
THAT ESCAPES,
SPECTACULARLY

And if looping is seamless repetition—a connecting of the end back to the beginning—what can we learn about what it means to start where others have without restarting? What can we learn about returning without going back? How can we talk about nonlinear progress, where “starting” is also a continuance?

Here, a loop can be an echo splicing, flipping, and folding sound in on itself to reveal the b-side of language. Take, for example, the lyrical repetition in “Belly of the Wail”—a freedom song conceptualized for *Beneath Tongues* by composer Tariq Al-Sabir, artist and vocalist Freddie June, and Sable Elyse Smith, the exhibition’s curator. The three-part composition begins and ends with a sort of hymn and recitation performed by June—encircling us in a potentially infinite cycle with her voice and its ghosts.

“Here I go again,” sings June, “losing sight of beginning and end.” Her words call me in, make me wonder. She sings them once more (x4). Leaving so much unspoken (what does uttering even do?), deferred (and somehow more real?), June builds a tension that propels our listening so that we may linger, expecting a new revelation. We remain, listening again, so that the looping of the sound becomes an exhumation. I am compelled to listen hard for meaning in the depth of an exhale or the length of a silence as in discernable language. With each repetition, I am reminded that the human body is also an instrument, that words—at their core—are a type of sound it plays.

This steady drip of language is joined by a chorus of other voices in an improvised dance: mounting, peaking, and falling. By the time we as listeners are brought back to Freddie June’s singular voice in the third act, we find that the trajectory of the piece is neither a straight line nor a circle, but a spiral. “Where are my children,” she sings again, this time elongated, a bit louder, so we have to sit with the resonance. As words come in and out of focus, the lyrics—which at first seemed central to the piece—shake loose of any static meaning.

In this way, “Belly of the Wail” is also a tuning that breaks open our performance of listening. I reach for that which is beside what is being said, for the unspeakable but not unknowable. Within and beyond the accumulation of individual words reverberate feelings of hope, despair, confusion, ascension. It’s all there yet the sensation disappears if I try to pin it down. I am left with only the option to surrender to the motion of the song as I ride the blinds.¹

And how funny it is that language can disintegrate into noise and reemerge with new meaning. How slippery that truth feels.

II.

Steffani Jemison, too, luxuriates in the possibilities that exist between what is shared and not shared through language. The thickly painted marks suspended on transparent film in Jemison’s *Same Time* installation operate between glyphs from an unknown alphabet and automatic drawings. Draped languidly off the wall and over a plinth, the marks recall ancient cave paintings or a grandmother’s writing scrawled on the back of an envelope. With a slight change in perspective the curved lines become a wormhole or a portal that crosses time. They form a map with no key and no destination—meant to be contemplated, observed, explored but never flattened enough to be summarized or surmised.

Broad, opaque vestiges of her touch, the black spirals are a manifestation of her laborious study of cryptograms by historic figures whose writings elude being deciphered to this day. In reinscribing their graphemes, chasing the logic they created where others saw a lack, Jemison extracts an embodied knowledge from the practices of fugitives.

1. Here I am thinking about Eileen Myles quoting Fred Moten in relation to their writing. How riding the blinds is not necessarily about control vs surrender but “[d]oggedly following one’s interests without fixating on their outcome.”

Of the series of sculptural drawings, Jemison writes:

I am thinking about what happens when writing is decoupled from communication, or when it is deliberately encoded. I am thinking about automatic drawing and speaking in tongues and spirit writing. I am thinking about technologies of representation and transcription as symbolic systems from which we are periodically compelled to escape. ²

In Jemison's conception, drawing and writing are a reconfiguring of time through splicing and replaying language. Writing or drawing, whichever name we give it, is less about the evidence of meaning and instead about conjuring what is yet to be imagined. The process of abstracting and extrapolating is a way of seeing things through other things. Remaining fixated in her pursuit of these ciphers while not seeking to fully understand or dominate them allows for new possibilities, different worlds. It is a poetics of relation, an intimacy, where we can think collectively without speaking for others.

For Jemison, as with so many of us that live with the weather and swim in the wake,³ the unimagined leads away from oppressive structures to a wild beyond. And within that movement toward liberation, drawing and withdrawing are tools for subverting a capitalist urge for consumption and ownership.

And maybe it's about connection and maybe it's about protecting mines and maybe it's about understanding or maybe it's about hiding or shielding or refusing. Maybe it just is. Maybe it's just about looking hard and through and around until something clicks.

Here, a loop takes a line, opens it, holds it open long enough for one to go through, move on, go out. Here, whether we are knowing or unknowing makes no difference. Here, freedom is just on the other side of our desire to understand, to master.

III.

Made of a repurposed crowd-control barricade and concrete-soaked terry cloth, Nikita Gale's *WATCH MEEEEEE* displaces an authoritative structure into the gallery space so that we can reconsider who or what is captive as well as where captivity is evaded.

The rigidity and shape of the metal bars are ubiquitous symbols of authority. Used in concert spaces and rallies, school halls and entryways, these forms are meant to control movement and energy in instances where unruliness is anticipated. They are a preemptive response to threats (of uprising, of wildness, of overthrow). Instant dividers of bodies and space, they demarcate and define what is forbidden and what is sanctioned.

Yet here again there is a suggestion of escape. In displacing these objects from their intended spaces and shifting their purpose, Gale puts viewers in a position of having to reconstruct the sociocultural meaning of this institutional artifact. The ultimate power is with each individual viewer, and the artist herself, to reestablish their relationship to the material. Ensnared in sound-dampening fabric, the original purpose of the structures is refused.

This is not to say that the sculpture entirely strips the barricade of its dominance. *WATCH MEEEEEE* and *RUINER VIII* hold our gaze, tell us where to stand, how to look, or at least suggest that we think of where and how to do so. Beyond that, what the matrix of cloth visualizes is how deeply enmeshed authority is with subjection, structure with free form. Looking up through the folds and rungs of *RUINER VII*, we see the once-flexible fused with the aluminum of the original structure, becoming indistinguishable from but forever changing its shape. The soft but firm hold of the fabric suggests there are ways of incapacitating violent structures without entering into conflict with them (or producing more violence).

And how beautiful that we can imagine ourselves in and out of form. Even a form so ubiquitous as language. That even though I only have the oppressor's language to touch you through, here, we can make it do what we want it to do: bust it open, make it leak. ⁴

....

Let me start with what I know.

I know that language often fails and that in that failure it supersedes. That even now as I try to touch you through this language, it chews my tongue and shuns my mother. I reach for you still because the state will never serve us and so why not start with this one touch. I am reaching to say let's write ourselves everywhere, even if only for ourselves, even if only to acknowledge the swagger. I am writing hoping that you might feel me from there, from elsewhere.

Here I am.

Here I go.

Again.

2. There is so much in "STEFFANI JEMISON: ON THE STROKE, THE GLYPH, AND THE MARK." This can be a start.

3. If you don't know, now you know: ISBN 9780822362944.

4. Here I am thinking about bell hooks and our shared appreciation for Adrienne Rich's poem "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children."

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

USE THIS SOUND

July 2021. One and a half years into the COVID-19 pandemic and one year since America's racial reckoning. Black creators are on strike to protest the constant theft of their content by white users and corporations. Where is this happening? TikTok: a video-based social networking app. The sound in question? Rapper Megan Thee Stallion's single "Thot Shit," released prior to the strike. The results of which are summed up in the following tweet:

"Yt people have no idea what to do with this sound because a black person hasn't made a dance to it yet." - @jinniessa on Twitter

The global success of TikTok has made issues of cultural appropriation and exploitation more complex. The app relies heavily on both the creation and circulation of video content, as well as sound. At the bottom of every post is a music symbol that identifies the name and/or source of the sound that accompanies a video. Oftentimes it's the song title and artist name, other times it's the name of a TikTok user's account. When an app user clicks the sound that accompanies a post, it takes them to a page where the "Original Sound" appears among each and every post that has recycled that sound, with a prompt to "Use this Sound" at the bottom of the screen.

In some cases, the "Original Sound" has been removed from the user that first uploaded it to the app's database, making it impossible to trace it back to its source. Similar to the way memes and reaction images circulate on other social media apps, on TikTok, all sounds are fair game, free to be remixed in whatever ways app users see fit. Because of this, it's not uncommon for Black comedic content to be adopted and recirculated. Users sometimes leave comments under a post asking the sound's author to "Please make this a sound," which aids in the sound's dissemination and resulting virality. Let's call this "sonic democracy."

TikTok user @khaenotbae (a young Black woman) is a key example of what happens when certain sounds are removed from their original context and used by thousands of white and non-Black accounts. Her catchy one-liners like, "The girls that get it, get it . . ." and ". . . don't fight me cause I know how you girls like to tussle" have made it to almost every corner of the internet. She has directly addressed this phenomenon in a video post saying, "I make all my content for Black people. Period. Black. Not people of color. But if I would have got on here and said explicitly, 'don't use XYZ sound' they would have flooded that shit . . ." Here, Khae points directly to the primary consequence of TikTok's sonic democracy and acknowledges the risk in trying to regulate who can use what she creates. In some ways, she understands that due to the democratic nature of the internet, she doesn't actually have the agency to mitigate the use or circulation of her own content, even if someone else could be credited for its virality. When this removal does happen (and there have been numerous instances), the content's impact is attributed to whichever non-Black user has appropriated sound, and they are rewarded with likes and continued circulation. TikTok has now become a domain where trying on Blackness (via memes or mimicry) is built into the user experience.

In a world where views and likes are currency, the conundrum of white influencers being rewarded with millions of hits for co-opting Black content has taken cultural appropriation to a new level. Sound, in this case, is an extension of Black culture and calls to the fore very important questions about circulation. Whether it's the direct usage of AAVE or mannerisms for memes, non-Black people using Blackness for virality is an extension of colonial practice.

How can we come to understand sound (in this case voice/language/tone/cadence) as not only an expression of culture but an extension of one's self? What does it mean when a mega-social media app like TikTok is built to enable digital blackface? Despite its comedic intention, how can the co-option of these sounds not be seen as racist performance or minstrelsy? What does it mean for a sound, a voice, a specific articulation of a catchy or comical phrase, to move freely throughout this app? What are the methods or structures for the consent of usage?

More questions:

1. How might it feel if a widely played video game uses your twin brother's likeness without his permission? Is your anger just as visceral?
2. What are the legal consequences for digital colonization (blackface, sound appropriation, movement theft, etc.) in a nation whose constitution declared Black people three-fifths human? How would they exist?
3. How, if at all, is one able to quantify Blackness in a way that allows it to be supported by a structure that works to disrupt commodification and exploitation in the digital realm?

LOST IN TRANSLATION

April 2021. TikTok announces the rollout of auto-captions. The feature generates subtitles with the goal to enhance content access and context for users who are deaf or hard of hearing. Although TikTok relies on sound circulation, a burgeoning community of app users is working to normalize its absence. Folks like @itscharm, @sintwrlddd, @bree.k.jones, and many more have brought awareness to the beauty and nuance of American Sign Language.

ASL employs the hands, the face, and the body to be spoken. It's a distinct language that has been misconceived as a direct translation of American English, and like all languages, it is constantly evolving with dialects that exist within.

As a sound artist, Christine Sun Kim's work has provided considerable insight on issues of translation and interpretation. Incisive drawings like *Sorry Not Sorry*, *Sorry Zero*, (2018) illustrate the distinctions between English and Deaf English in a series of phrases. "You don't deserve my respect" in English is distilled as "Respect zero" in Deaf English and "Zero fucks given" becomes a straightforward "Discuss dry."

Kim is also on Tik Tok and has used the app to share her experiences with ASL and motherhood. In an exercise for *Pop-Up Magazine*, she discussed the problem with closed captions and sound. Unlike captioning dialogue, caption writers (usually hearing) miss the opportunity to make descriptions of sound accurate. Kim emphasizes the potential for clearer translation by focusing on the intimate nature of interpretation and the poetic potential of describing sound.

More and more questions:

1. Why is ASL, a 200-year-old language, not required as primary education?
2. What are the direct parallels between African American Vernacular English and Black American Sign Language (which traces its origins back to the 1800s)?
3. What does it mean that the first American school for the deaf waited 135 years before it admitted Black students? How has this silence and erasure fortified the education gap that continues to inhibit the potential of communication?
4. Does co-option of Black slang or movement also exist within a signed dialect? What about code-switching?

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Sampada Aranke

CASHMERE
SOUND,
VOLUMINOUS
LINES,

METALLIC
REVERBERATIONS

At first glance, Jennie C. Jones, Abigail DeVille, and Lauren Halsey appear to deploy divergent visual strategies. DeVille and Halsey are well versed in the language of a kind of maximalism, while Jones adopts and intervenes upon a minimalist aesthetic. Jones presents the spatial capacity of listening where she offers spaces of absorption, deceptively quiet modes of Black life. DeVille creates lifeworlds filled with dedications to noise, the possibility embedded within layers and layers of the stuff that composes everyday Black life. Halsey mobilizes a uniquely recombinant aesthetic, arranging and rearranging aspects of minimalism and maximalism to activate an ongoing palimpsest of self and collective. What I propose here, however, is that these artists offer up the compositional materialities of Black life as they play out in modes of embodied encounter. The viewer is made composer as these artists open up a space of interplay, a mode of improvisational collaboration that centers the quiet multitudes and aesthetic polyphonies that form Black creative practice.

Part of what informs this particular take on DeVille and Jones is an attention to yet another duet within the visual and sonic registers of modernism, that of Aaron Douglas and Duke Ellington. I am taken by Robert O’Meally’s essay “The Flat Plane, the Jagged Edge: Aaron Douglas’s Musical Art,” where he brilliantly argues that Douglas’s Harlem Renaissance paintings generate a decidedly avant-garde notion of a jazz painting, where the artist’s attention to shape, texture, form, color embarks upon a direct engagement with the sonic registers of sound that were also taking shape in 1930s jazz worlds. O’Meally goes on to note how “for art, literature, and music, the modern moment was, in a sense, a moment of radical flatness.”¹ Flatness, in this regard, is a sonic and visual strategy that motivates attention to the compositional plane. O’Meally goes on to connect Douglas’s compositions to those of famed composer Duke Ellington. Of Ellington, O’Meally combines the sonic and visual descriptions, giving us a haptic sense of how the texture of Ellington’s sound wraps around the listener such that we are given a sense of flatness not as a rigid, sterile sound but rather a “surface of a perfect gemstone, and as liquidly smooth as cashmere and silk.” Ellington’s compositions were “known not only for his magnificently smooth and flat walls of sound but also for his roughed-up surfaces, his jagged edges.”² “No early jazz orchestra experimented more with plungers and mutes than Ellington’s,” writes O’Meally, “as he sought these textures of sound that varied the sonic weave of his compositions—the jaggedly edged contrasting with the unerringly smooth.”³ This pairing of two seemingly conflicting terrains—the jagged and the smooth—are but two complementary innovations of flatness. That same silky sound is achieved even in the most unpredictable eruptions of sound; the jagged edge still feels like cashmere. The visuals in O’Meally’s descriptions are striking and they visualize Ellington’s sound, just as O’Meally transposes Douglas’s work from visual to sonic.⁴ Speaking about Aaron Douglas’s *Emperor Jones* series, O’Meally writes:

Note in particular the work’s flatness, as usual with Douglas, but also the way the wavy and jagged images grant the work a third dimension: an edge one imagines could swing out, sculpturally, from the flattened plane. Douglas used these sharply edged lines—often occurring in foliage but also in skylines and elsewhere—to turn the roughed surface to its side, to create a lateral jaggedness. In this way, without laying his flat images (as [Romare] Bearden would do), Douglas gave his work what Bearden called—in another fascinating cross-media term—a sense of volume.⁵

Douglas creates a surface tension by motivating his line to give dimension where there is seemingly no space for it. His lines do a lot of work, they give you depth in addition to differentiating between spaces and times. This depth, this volume as Bearden so eloquently names, is but an engagement with what appears at first as a flatness that simply rests on the surface. Instead, Douglas’s compositions give dimension through the appearance of jagged edges. His is the visual volume that Ellington denotes sonically through his seemingly flat walls of sound. Both Douglas and Ellington let their lines walk, even run, calling attention to the composition of the visual and sonic plane as an act of generosity.

The line works overtime in Jennie C. Jones’s compositions too. *Corner Phrase Soft Measure* (2020) is a two-part acrylic on canvas work. As the title suggests, this is a corner piece, installed so that a 12-by-36-inch canvas sits perpendicular to a larger 48-by-36-inch canvas, forming a 90-degree angle where the two canvases intersect.

1. Robert G. O’Meally, “The Flat Plane, the Jagged Edge: Aaron Douglas’s Musical Art,” *American Studies* [ital.] 49, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 30.
2. *Ibid.*, 31.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 30.
5. *Ibid.*, 32.

The work asks us to consider the architecture of sound, as both canvases lead us to consider how rooms are composed as sonic chambers, posing questions about what it means to both make and listen for sounds. This work features Jones’s signature mark, that Barnett Newman–esque zip line she so effortlessly combines with the quiet multiplicity of minimalism. If minimalism is to some large degree about questions of reproducibility, repetition, and the ubiquity of such multiplicities within capitalist modes of production, then Jones’s twist on minimalism offers up how such multiplicities are transformed into insurgent collectives who work in the quiet corners and backgrounds of everyday life. Jones interrupts those very formal art histories that exclude Black American innovative traditions across genres, including those contributions made to abstraction by figures like Douglas and Ellington. Jones’s line rips through the picture plane as a poetic rupture, a steady and leveled chromatic shout that is as smooth as Ellington’s cashmere and as dimensional as Douglas’s lateral turn. As in Douglas’s work, Jones’s line also takes shape as volume.

Jones’s contribution to the question of volume is a vibrant engagement with what it means to listen. *Corner Phrase/Soft Measure* is an example of what Nijah Cunningham has called Jones’s invitation “to lend an ear to the unheard that resonates in and beyond the white cube. Hers is an appeal to what many cannot or refuse to hear and that can only be gleaned from the sensation of standing in a hollow and climate-controlled room.”⁶ Cunningham poetically names what Jones is asking of the viewer a certain “attunement.”⁷ Attunement, an act of self-reflexivity in which the viewer transforms herself into listener, articulates the work done within Jones’s compositions. Their functions as absorptive technologies are counterintuitive, as these canvases work to invite the viewer in to a relational engagement—one that centers the relationship between seeing and listening, loudness and quietude, smooth lines and cashmere notes.

If Jones invites an attunement toward the nuances of the line as both a visual and sonic register, then Abigail DeVille’s work spins us into the vortex of dimensionality at a scale that surrounds, envelops, and consumes the viewer. Inspired by three-dimensional models of the Helix Nebula, DeVille invites the viewer to travel into a space of enclosure. The work is composed of steel armature, aircraft cable, chicken wire, zip ties, metallic gold thread, various metal wire, aluminum foil, reflective plexiglass, mirror shards, archival images of the 1960s–’70s, a disarticulated resin skeleton, black latex paint—a generous and abundant form, attracting the viewer’s eye to multiple places at once. This overwhelm produces not an anxiety but an embrace, as these forms, structures, and objects envelop the viewer into multiplicity. Mirror shards invite the viewer to catch glimpses of herself in fractured pieces, archival images transport us to a time of both turmoil and radical possibility, threads and wires form lines that gesture toward astrological folds. We are in the stars. We are in the spatial void as a site of potential emergence, a renewed form of making. This is a kind of a sound bath that is purely visual, where the imaginative silence of being in outer space is punctured by breath and air that hums.

When we stand in the awe of the cosmos that surrounds us, static and white noise compose our soundtrack, those comforting noises that surround us but do not overwhelm us. DeVille’s cashmere sound is the cosmological enclosure, another location entirely that reminds us of a home we have yet to know. The artist’s jagged line is transformed into (at least) three-dimensional folds, a drawing in space/time that gives us pause so that we can look and listen for what, or where, comes next. I want to end with Halsey’s works as the future of that Ellington sound, that Douglas line. If Ellington’s cashmere sound is at play in Jones and Douglas’s line transforms into surround sound in DeVille, then Halsey’s work is absolutely what artist and curator Sable Elyse Smith calls “when jazz jumps to funk.”⁸ Indeed, both of Halsey’s works are relief sculptures that compositionally cite glyphs. One work is a monochrome clay-cream panel, engraved to resemble a brick wall. Halsey intervenes on the wall’s surface in order to capture the dynamic interplay between the personal and the financial that often takes place on city walls, where various constituents are leaving their marks with the hopes to be seen, to be heard. The artist includes engraved posters that clutter the relief’s surface along with handwritten interventions of names, neighborhoods, and affections scratched into the wall’s surface. These details compose a familiar surface, where the viewer can all but hear cars and buses zoom by, imagine the storefront entry just to the right of the DRU HILL SILK TOTAL poster, and see neighborhood kids out front eating Cheetos Flamin’ Hot after school.⁹ This relief is accompanied by a decadently maximalist work, a silver metallic structure filled with bold neon text, luminous source images, and palm fronds.

6. Nijah Cunningham, “Fractured Crescendo, Rest,” black one shot 16.2, <https://asapjournal.com/16-2-fractured-crescendo-rest-nijah-cunningham/#easy-footnote-bottom-3-6873>.

7. *Ibid.*

8. I am so indebted to Sable’s brilliant notes on this essay, including two mind-blowing comments that have developed my readings of Lauren Halsey’s art. Sable Elyse Smith, correspondence with author, February 14, 2022.

9. Summer Kim Lee’s poetic reflection on Hot Cheetos, race, and Los Angeles is all I can think of when I see these Halsey works. Summer Kim Lee, “Cheetos Flamin’ Hot Made Me Who I Am,” *New York Times*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/08/magazine/cheetos-crunchy-flamin-hot.html>.

Vertically organized, painted letters read "HIGHLY FAVORED," as '90s supergroup Dru Hill makes another appearance, this time in a black and pink concert advertisement that one might see strewn along major roads in Los Angeles. Other source images include Egyptian pharaoh masks glued onto figures in jeans and sneakers, a young Black person in deep contemplative thought framed by plastic palm fronds, cars with clean rims, an illustrated cutout of a DJ, a UFO beaming light, a figure with a Nike swoosh in their fade, to name but a few. And here again we have those signature scratches onto the metallic surface of the wall: names, places, affections, affiliations, and beautifully incomprehensible line work. In Halsey's hands, Douglas's jagged lines belong to those who mark their presence in this way, by declaring that this wall is theirs too. Smith has suggested that maybe Halsey's "cashmere is a crush velvet maybe even a velour," and I believe her. In fact, I see it and hear it. Halsey's reliefs are absorbent and embracing like those Juicy Couture velour track sets in luscious reds and pinks that accompanied pop and hip-hop videos on MTV. These two works come together to offer up a sound made possible by jazz turned funk, where the rhythm takes precedence such that the listener can't help but move. Indeed, hip hop is here too as that very funk is sampled in loops and break beats that remind us of a past not so far from the present, just like those pharaohs that beam up into space like Sun Ra or Pharoah Sanders told us they did. We're moved by the relief these reliefs offer as a place where we can remember to be right where we are.

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