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Echoes of the Future-Past: Slavery and Sonic Testimony in African American and Diasporic Literature 1845-Present

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ABSTRACT

ECHOES OF THE FUTURE-PAST: SLAVERY AND SONIC TESTIMONY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND DIASPORIC LITERATURE 1845-PRESENT

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This dissertation theorizes sound in the form of cries, echoes, screams, and music as a mode of traumatic testimony unique to black diasporic populations by interrogating the relationship between the sounds blacks produce, the expression of traumatic experience, the mediation of American civic identity, and the production of black liberation ideology. The dissertation’s construct of diasporic testimony reveals the use of these sounds within diasporic literature and culture as a means to express that which has been deemed ineffable about the historical experience of bondage, and as the theoretical ground of black liberation ideologies. The project’s critical attention to sound reveals diasporic testimony as a heretofore-undiscovered aspect of African diasporic textual practice that forces an expansion of literary trauma studies’ narrow understanding of testimony. Echoes marks how the West’s histories of enslavement come to bear upon its contemporary affective and institutional relations, which I argue are arbitrated through the production and reception of black sound(s).

Echoes accounts for over 150 years of black sonic testimonial practice, beginning with Frederick Douglass’ 1845 Narrative and culminating in an examination of contemporary instances of extrajudicial violence against blacks as well as liberation activism. Echoes moves through representations of sound in African American and diasporic literatures, recorded sounds, and historical events, calling attention to the echoes of the sounds of bondage in the Western subconscious. Organized into four
chapters, *Echoes* considers the ways in which these testimonial soundings exceed commonly understood frameworks of testimony, recognition, and redress. Chapter One theorizes “diasporic testimony” as a distinctly Black Atlantic sonic model of testimony. Chapter Two juxtaposes texts from the antebellum period to the 20th Century to reveal the role of black maternal soundings in the formulation of black nationalist ideologies, and the manner in which these sounds are sublimated in masculinist expressions of black nationalism. Chapter Three tracks the circulation of a Jamaican marketwomen’s song in diaspora to argue that the economic logics of enslavement are reproduced by divesting these women of their cultural productions. Chapter Four examines the ways in which the black male body is consumed by and through sound in the Western imagination—a politics of hearing that mediates whites’ civic identities. The Coda suggests new modes of black liberation praxis that are based in acoustic and affective relationships as opposed to recognition and redress-based frameworks.
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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**
INTRODUCTION: Hearing Diasporic Testimony

1. RACE MEMORY (Africa, Middle Passage)
Rhythm as an expression of race memory; rhythm as a basic creative principle; rhythm as an existence, creative force as vector of existence. Swinging

2. MIDDLE PASSAGE (Diaspora)
Race Memory: terror, landlessness, Claustrophobia: America is a prison…” Malcolm X.

Larry Neal, “Reflections on the Black Aesthetic”

Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight.
Claudia Rankine, Citizen: An American Lyric

The cry—a visceral, sonic reaction to injury, while among the most common human responses to corporeal trauma, it seems, provides insufficient evidence of wounding to prompt redress for the African diasporic subjects who sound their injuries across time and space. If the aural registration of the impact of injury cannot move the empowered to acts of redress and recompense, what, then, is the aim of sounding one’s pain? Echoes of the Future-Past: Slavery and Sonic Testimony in African American and Diasporic Literature 1845-Present studies the raced, gendered, geographical, social, and political sites where trauma is sounded in the African diaspora—unearthing the phenomenon of diasporic testimony as an underground sounding of black experiences, politics, and pain hidden in plain sight. The work argues that literatures of the African
diaspora, working both within and against a dominant visual-textual schema that interdicts the expression and the recognition of black wounding, deploy sonic irruptions to disrupt textual integrity in order to force an imaginative hearing for black experience. The soundings of diasporic testimony do not seek recognition or redress. Rather, they draw our attention to the affective residues that the institution of chattel slavery has left upon us both individually and institutionally in the West, forcing us to hear these echoes as quotidian, and to understand that these cries of injury and testimony cannot be disarticulated from the structures of our daily lives. In fact, the cries themselves provide the structure for Western life. *Echoes of the Future-Past* demands that we take seriously the fact that Western conceptions of freedom, free enterprise, democracy, and self-determination all germinated within the abominable womb of chattel slavery; the ideological and economic body that provided the sustenance for their growth. It also requires that we understand that black injury and its subsequent denial are at the core of Western experience, and that the sounds produced by blacks during the epoch of chattel slavery constitute a sociocultural record that continues to play itself out in our contemporary moment—echoing into our present the sounds of our troubled past.

This dissertation materializes in a sociopolitical climate that disavows the persistence of racial prejudices, even while the performances and the effects of these prejudices continue to permeate Western public spheres. In our contemporary “post-racial” United States, the practices, prejudices, and violences of New World slavery continue to flourish and transform themselves in our post-Jim Crow society. The dominant cultural memory relegates slavery to a fictive, impermeable past hermetically sealed off from our present moment in order to disavow the manner in which slavery’s
sociocultural, political, affective, acoustic histories prove constitutive of the problems that plague our increasingly global world. Accordingly, important historical paradigms that have profoundly shaped Western affective and social relations are consistently overlooked—among them: the limiting structures of traumatic testimonial narrative, its attendant mode of address, (the lack of) sociopolitical recognition, and the (denied) redress that govern racial interactions. By attending to these paradigms, we come to understand the role that racialized acoustics continue to play in mediating Western civic identities through a study of inherited social affects that predispose listeners to particular modes of hearing the sounds of blackness. Echoes thereby reveals that the acoustic-cultural memory of slavery comprises the ground of our ostensibly post-racial interactions.

*Echoes of the Future-Past*, then, theorizes sound, in the form of cries, echoes, screams, and music as a mode of traumatic testimony unique to black diasporic populations. The project interrogates the relationship between the sounds blacks produce, the expression of traumatic experience, and the production of liberation ideology. *Echoes* reveals how chattel slavery constructed our acoustic-cultural memory, and how this acoustic-cultural memory continues to mediate racial interactions well into our ostensibly post-racial sociopolitical moment. Positing that the very sounds of diasporic testimony shape black sonic practices even today, this dissertation reveals the ways in which these testimonial sounds function in black Atlantic literature and culture as signifiers for aspects of the historical experience of bondage previously deemed ineffable. These sounds, in fact, serve as the theoretical ground of black liberation ideologies. The project therefore shifts attention away from the ineffable and toward the aural in order to reframe
understandings of black testimonial practice shaped by the slave narrative tradition, and to recover the lost, unheard, and unexamined testimonies of black diasporic subjects by attuning our hearing to their sounds. In so doing, the project also attunes listeners to hear the echoes of these testimonial sounds even today.

*Echoes* traces representations of sound in African American and diasporic literary texts from the mid-19th through the 21st Century, in order to highlight their shared representational practices and to chart a sonic genealogy of African diasporic testimony that enables us to understand some of the reasons that recognition-based activism fails to produce redress for African diasporic populations, and to discern how African American and diasporic thinkers imagine black liberation outside of a framework of recognition and redress. This sonic genealogy also helps us to understand the problematically gendered aspects of black liberatory politics in its study of the use and suppression of black maternal sounds that proves endemic to the creation of liberation ideologies in diaspora. Moreover, this genealogy reveals Western inherited legacies of (mis)hearing and (mis)interpreting blacks’ sounds across time and space as a phenomenon that engenders acts of social, political, and physical violence against black bodies. Therefore, *Echoes* attunes listeners to the inherited social affects of slavery in order to dismantle them, as well as reorients attention to the primacy of black maternal figures and the historical echoes of their pain. It does so in order to clear an auditory and social space for reimagining testimony, liberation, and intersubjectivity in the African diaspora—calling for modes of connection previously thought untenable, now made possible through rhythmic interrelation and subjective permeability to the planetary resonances of diasporic testimony.
Understanding slavery as an inherited traumatic experience, the project accounts for over 150 years of sonic testimonial practice, beginning with the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* and culminating in an examination of contemporary instances of extrajudicial violence against blacks and liberation activism such as the #BlackLivesMatter Movement. It does so in order to mark the representational, testimonial, and political confluences expressed through particular sounding practices in the African diaspora. Uncovering these soundings makes their status as traumatic testimony in African American and diasporic literary and cultural production clear. Heard primarily as noises if ever heard at all, and previously relegated to the fringes of Western cultural discourse via an attribution of loudness and *natural* sonority to African-descended peoples, diasporic testimony sounds itself in this project in order to demand a hearing for the traumas that the dominant racial narratives of the West persistently excise.

**Contesting Dominant Post/Racial Narratives: Sounding Traumatic Testimony beyond the Frame**

Militating against the manner in which the very structure of (post/racial) narrative itself produces silences, *Echoes of the Future-Past* also calls attention to the ways in which Trauma Studies as a field problematically reproduces the silencing of African diasporic populations in its centering of narrative-as-testimony as the paradigmatic model for expressing traumatic experience. Trauma Studies’ understanding of the traumatic event as one to be addressed through psychoanalytic processes in part explains the privileging of narrative as the paradigmatic mode of testimony to traumatic events.
Psychoanalysis’s “talking cure” centers language as the primary vehicle for expression and healing, pathologizing more embodied reenactment or replay of the event, denying the efficacy of testimonies outside the realm of linguistic signification. Trauma Studies, as a field, remains haunted, nonetheless, by the insistent belief that traumatic experience simply cannot be expressed through narrative language, posing a quandary that remains without a solution. Cathy Caruth in her seminal works *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) forcefully posits, following Felman and Laub, and van der Kolk, that the experience of trauma exceeds linguistic expression due to the insistent literality of the event. It denies abstraction and absorption into the subject’s cognitive frames—it is an experience that shatters the psyche and defies metaphorization and thereby, incorporation into a cohesive life narrative. Trauma criticism relies heavily on temporal structures of belatedness as prescribed by Freud, whereby the failure of the event to mesh with prior cognitive schemas marks it as trauma, as opposed to the experience itself. Dissociation, then, comprises an unavoidable aspect of traumatic experience that proves its validity. This structure of belated realization marks the recall or memory of the event as the trauma as opposed to the event itself. In order to mitigate the effects of trauma and engender healing, testimony must be given in narrative form to an authorizing party who will confer recognition, and validate the truth of the experience. Paradoxically, the traumatic experience conceived of in terms of the “ineffable” or the “unspeakable” mandates narrative and/or textualization as the only processes of communicating and healing these wounds. This paradoxical relation privileges narrative over other modes of
communication to deny bodily performances or non-semantic sounds as valid testimonial acts.

Felman and Laub’s foundational study Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History (1992) attempts to address the “relation between literature and testimony” through a largely psychoanalytic paradigm of testimony as narrative (xii). In their formulation, the narration of trauma is how the sufferer or victim comes to knowledge of the event itself, as “testimony is…the process by which the narrator…reclaims his position as a witness…and thus the possibility of a witness or listener inside himself” (85). Testimony, then, through processes of narrativization, engenders psychic incorporation, and reconstitutes the fragmented self as a subject. This exclusive focus on language as writing and/or speech both minimizes the role of the body in acts of testimony and witnessing, and valorizes the ideal of the self-contained subject. Against this standardized model of subjectivity, attention to the sonic enables us to conceive of new modes of subjectivity through rhythmic interrelation, beyond the confines of the individual. Sound’s capacity for transmissibility through bodies and other material mediums provides a model for subjective interrelation through the exchange of information and affects corporeally, as Teresa Brennan suggests in The Transmission of Affect (2004).

Echoes also attends to the constrictions that the slave narrative genre places upon testimonies of enslavement by attending to the manner in which the genre deploys black women’s sounds and cries of pain as the acoustic marker of the ineffability of slave experience. This generic commonplace effectively silences these women and denies them the ability to stand as testis to their own experiences. This paradigm of sounding and
silencing black women’s pain in the construction of narrative testimonies to black oppression and enslavement echoes throughout the corpus of African American and diasporic literary production in the trope I name a “theft of the umbilical,” whereby these women’s songs and sounds are abrogated by black males seeking to position themselves as testis, and as representative of the black community. In this way, the black maternal body comes to be materially marked by the deeply gendered sounds of trauma in African American and diasporic letters, effectively circumscribing how she has been represented in the Black Atlantic. The sounding maternal body and her songs and cries of pain have been used as the ground of black liberation ideologies ranging from Negritude, to various forms of cultural and militant nationalisms before and into the 1960’s Era of Black Nationalism, and contemporary social justice movements including #BlackLivesMatter. However, the primacy of her subjectivity, her humanity, and her testimony have been consistently suppressed in the interests of formulating liberation ideologies that center black men as the active agents of black freedom. She cries—and yet, her testimony goes unheard.

The relationship between diasporic testimony and black liberation politics is also made clear through the project’s attention to the black maternal body and the sounds it produces. As this figure is the locus of black testimony, subjectivity, and liberatory politics in the African diaspora, the project persistently (re)turns to her in each of its chapters to clearly mark the manner in which the narrative collapse of the black mother, bondage, and the ineffable leads to her marginalization and silencing in the formulation of black liberation ideologies, most readily apprehended in masculinist forms of black nationalism (as Chapter Two elucidates in detail), but also evident in feminist-oriented
conceptions of liberation, most notably revealed in Chapter Three’s study of Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng*. *Echoes* exposes that from Aimé Césaire’s theorization of Negritude in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, to Frederick Douglass’ proto-nationalist liberationist ideology in the 1845 *Narrative*, to Ralph Ellison’s complex, (re)visionary black nationalism in *Invisible Man*, that the black maternal body and its sounds comprise the unacknowledged ground of these expressions of liberatory politics and ideologies. In this way, the project attunes itself to the ways in which masculinist formulations of liberation both utilize and deny black women’s sonic expressions to instate black males as testis, a problem that continues even today.

By attending to these pernicious silencings, *Echoes* reveals the manner in which the reproduction of this silencing marks these projects as doomed to failure, as black liberation activism comes to be ideologically predicated upon the exclusion of the black mother from the realm of freedom. I argue that this is because black activism continues to be invested in, and thereby operates within, frameworks that require authorization, recognition, and recompense from the oppressors themselves. These activist frameworks, then, mirror the narrative conventions that function to silence and exclude black mothers. Sounding these women’s muffled and silenced testimonies enables us to imagine new modes of interrelation that are based upon rhythmic attunements rather than exclusions, be they narrative, social, racial, economic, or political. *Echoes* engenders a new hearing for these experiences in the realm of “black noise,” making possible the rhythmic attunements that may foster new modes of social interrelation.
Listening to and for “Black Noise”: Hearing the Diaspora’s Trauma(s)

Methodologically, *Echoes* moves through representations of sound in African American and diasporic literatures, recorded sounds, and historical events in a recursive fashion, calling attention to the manner in which the quotidian sounds of bondage echo through the Western collective subconscious. The work’s critical attention to sound reveals diasporic testimony as a heretofore undiscovered aspect of African diasporic textual practice that forces an expansion of Trauma Studies’ narrow understanding of testimony as narrative. Importantly, *Echoes* engages the complex relations of the past to the present and future, marking how the West’s histories of enslavement come to bear upon its contemporary affective and institutional relations, which I argue are arbitrated through the production and reception of black sound(s). Addressing Americans’ investment in the idea that a post-racial society has come into being, Imani Perry offers a cogent reminder that racial prejudices persist and transform over time. Perry argues that even as “biologically deterministic ideas of race…[are] out of the mainstream of popular culture” there has been a marked shift toward “the widespread impugning, in the twenty-first century, of black character, not on a deterministic basis but through what appears to be race-neutral evaluations regarding behaviors, culture, and morality” (2011 17, 21). I would add that attacks on black character circle back to some of the earliest recorded arguments about black incapacity, arguments that preceded the popularization and cultural codification of scientific racism. Accordingly, within this post-racial milieu, we find several sets of ideas regarding racial inferiority that have persisted through time via processes of transformation and disavowal. These ideas continue to influence social and affective relations. *Echoes of the Future-Past*, therefore, oscillates in the interstices
between the past and present, lingering in the affective traces of the traumas of enslavement that continue to sound their presence in contemporary literary and cultural production and social life.

Accordingly, *Echoes of the Future-Past* elucidates the relationship between the sonic aspects of black textual and cultural production, traumatic testimony, gender, black liberation ideologies, and social affects rooted in the history of mass chattel enslavement. Moving in a non-chronological fashion across the sites, sounds, and times of diaspora, *Echoes of the Future-Past* enacts its own critical practice in its very structure. Moving from Toni Morrison’s imaginative rendering of 18th Century slavery in *A Mercy* in the first chapter; to 1960’s Black Nationalisms and James Brown’s screams in the second; to the historical acoustic relationship between murdered teenager Jordan Davis and ship’s-musician Pip in Melville’s *Moby Dick*; the project deploys a reverberatory aesthetic that encompasses return and reiteration as it limns out the contours of a sonic genealogy of black testimony in diaspora. Crucially, *Echoes* departs from the construction of a chronological account of either black diasporic testimony or acoustic histories in order to call attention to the limitations of linear, progressive accounts of black experience by recapturing precisely those sonic acts and their attendant histories that fall beyond or outside the confines of teleological narrative. In this way, the project’s echoing structure models the nature of diasporic testimony by (re)turning to its initial soundings in a manner that amplifies, clarifies, and restates its claims across different contexts in an expansive, rather than restrictive fashion. The formal recursivity and non-linearity of the project as it moves through the sites, sounds, and times of the diaspora also attunes listeners to the echoing after-effects of slavery, and their resonances in contemporary life.
The project therefore traverses nodal points in history. Two of the project’s most significant nodal points are the time of slavery, and the 1960’s. The 1960’s prove particularly salient to the project in part due to the heightened activism of the era, but more so because this moment crystallizes many of the dissertation’s concerns regarding sound, gender, and liberation for diasporic subjects. This era offers the opportunity to study a condensed microcosm of the relationship between sound, traumatic testimony, gender and liberation activism that enables more incisive theorization of this dynamic over time. Equally important, *Echoes*’ focus upon sound and its various representations in African American and diasporic letters both resonates with and expands prior work in African American and diasporic literary and cultural criticism by revisiting the *sounds of blackness* from within its distinct critical framework.

While it is well understood that much of African American and diasporic literature engages histories of slavery, the testimonial nature and sonic modalities of these bodies of writing, nonetheless, go largely under examined. Sonic testimonies are frequently coded as “noise” and dismissively relegated to the background of a visual, discursive, or oral text. Yet, perhaps even more importantly, this “noise” comes to function as seemingly coincident with larger social perceptions of black sound and black presence. Irruptive outbursts of auditory information such as laughter and screams come to be heard as affirmations of blacks’ lack of social decorum, and cries of injury are sublimated within an implicit understanding of the justness of black suffering as punishment for offence—the West’s socially constructed sounds of blackness. Similarly, the sustained critical attention that oral and musical culture have received in African American and diasporic literary studies has seemingly exhausted the possibilities for
sonic studies in these fields through an unwitting circumscription of what has been critically recognized and studied as the *sounds of blackness*. Seminal works such as Houston Baker’s *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) and *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), as well as Henry Louis Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro American Literary Criticism* (1988) foreground black orality, as well as revisionary practices tied to musical production in order to theorize these aspects of black textual production as the definitive tropes for the examination of black literatures. However, in these works, acts of writing or speaking the black self into being via narrative tether them to the very frameworks of recognition and redress they claim to exceed or contest. Sound in itself as a viable theoretical axis, therefore, has been subsumed by an imperative to construct the black as a cognizant, speaking subject—a maneuver certainly historically necessary to combat conceptions of black inferiority—that centers black voice as a vehicle for language that must be received and understood by an audience in order to confer recognition of black personhood. Therefore, *Echoes of the Future-Past* proceeds from the sphere of the *aural* in its approach to hearing black traumatic experience, enfolding onomatopoetic and non-semantic sounds (i.e., cries and echoes), as well as song and other forms of musical expression in its theorization of acts of testimony that exceed the scope of narrative articulation in order to reimagine witnessing, healing, and subjectivity. These sounds are recaptured in this dissertation as an aspect of “black noise,” what Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman poignantly characterize as the “political aspirations that are inaudible and illegible within the prevailing formulas of political rationality” (2005, 9).
Unearthing and understanding the sonic aspects of black literary and cultural production allows for a renewed and reinvigorated engagement with the history of slavery in diaspora. Tracking the sonic aspects of textual and cultural production both builds upon and diverges from grounding ideas in African American literary theory that privilege orality (in terms of its verbal and content aspects) and black music as an important locus of meaning within black textual production. *Echoes of the Future-Past* draws a marked distinction between song and sound, even while encompassing song and musical expression in the scope of its study. Calling attention at times to the ways in which black song and sound come to be critically collapsed, both in their public hearings and in theorizations of their functions, import, and social impact, *Echoes* reveals how the Western politics of hearing strictly codify the sounds of blacks, effectively circumscribing their potential meanings. Indeed, I argue that the Western ear remains attuned to the soundscape of slavery, a soundscape that produced three distinct categories for black sound: sounds of jollity, sounds of acquiescence, and in the absence of the two prior, sounds of black pain as correction. Accordingly, the various sounds made by blacks under the press of chattel slavery become sonically compressed in the Western ear such that any sound that fails to meet these categories become coded as aberrant—producing a fundamental dissonance that we come to understand as part and parcel of “black noise.”

“Black noise” also troubles the structures of testimony and witnessing that undergird Western understandings of these acts. Testimony in the West—primarily conceived in terms of a narrative addressed to an authenticating party in the realm of juridical or religious practice—is anchored within a framework of address, recognition, and redress. This framework also mediates the relationship between the state and its
subjects. Because the institution of slavery divested the black subject of the capacity to testify, and/or rendered blacks without an “addressable other” to “affirm and recognize” their “memories,” the paradigmatic model of traumatic testimony that requires a narrative that is addressed to an authenticating party proves insufficient to the task of both attesting to enslavement and its residual effects on black life (Laub 1992, 68). Significantly, the narrative structure of testimony itself constrains the possibilities for its meanings: Because narrativization requires schematic ordering of information, excision of content, and the linear presentation of events in a sequential fashion, meaning is produced by the very logic of its organization. Importantly, as Hayden White contends, narrative “is [not] possible without some notion of the legal subject” (1990, 13, my emphasis). Testimonial narrative relies upon the same schematic ordering and excision of content as historical narrative, and requires that the testis embody the legal subject. The slave (and by extension, her descendant), then—unrecognized as a citizen of the state—must find a means of testifying beyond a narrative framework. Most tellingly, the slave narrative embodies the very mechanisms of exclusion required by testimony-as-narrative, in addition to its logics of address, authorization, and (denied) redress that render it ineffectual for testifying to diasporic experiences. In the slave narrative tradition silences and ellipses mark aspects of slave experience as that which cannot be said, whereas the construct of diasporic testimony understands these aspects as those which break narrative frames and require innovative sonic practices to aid in their expression to create unauthorized and unrecognized testimonies to black experience.

Moreover, contemporary instances of racial violence expose the manner in which the West’s refusal to hear the resonances of slavery in this ostensibly post-racial
sociopolitical climate constitutes a continuance of the institution’s violent devaluation and silencing of black personhood. One only needs to click on a television or open an internet browser to see a multitude of blacks killed and maimed from acts of state-sanctioned or extrajudicial racialized violence. Eric Garner’s barely audible wheezes of “I...can’t...breathe” as he expired on a Staten Island sidewalk in the light of day; Trayvon Martin’s cries for “HELP” as he is gunned down by George Zimmerman just blocks from his Sanford, Florida home; Sandra Bland’s questioning of police authority—these sonic acts all sound dissonant notes to the purported harmonies of Western democratic capitalism. Notes of black dissidence pose a threat to the dominant acoustic social order of the West, typically leading to their violent silencing, indexing the disposability of blacks who dare to sound their personhood. The continued disposability of black life is obscured and silenced by dominant narratives of the post-racial in the West that occlude the very real relationships to and effects of slavery that persist in not only black life, but Western culture. These narrative constructions minimize and romanticize the history of slavery, placing it in a hermetically sealed past. Acknowledgement of this past in the present is deemed as a pathological inability to move beyond the historical moment of slavery, effectively silencing voices of dissent. Many core issues related to the traumas of enslavement, because they exceed our contemporary narrative frames in their immediacy, cannot be fully integrated into public consciousness. The excision of these key aspects falsifies the “moral meaning[s]” of traumatic historical and quotidian events, fomenting subterranean affective biases under race-blind discourses of equality and merit (White 1990, 21). This is why it is imperative that the social, affective, and political relations engendered at the level of acoustic production and reception are called to
account alongside other vectors of historical engagement—to reveal the echoes of slavery’s past in the present.

The pages that follow trace the roles diasporic soundings perform as testimonies to enslavement and oppression, and as sites of catheisis, or emergence into new spheres of being and of possibility. Organized in four chapters, *Echoes* considers the ways in which diasporic testimonial soundings exceed commonly understood frameworks of testimony, recognition, and redress. Tracking the persistence of particular sonic-social formations over time, this dissertation uncovers distinctly gendered manifestations of violence in response to black sounding practices. In particular, *Echoes* reveals the use and suppression of black women’s sounds as constitutive to the formulation of black liberation ideologies in the African diaspora, and makes explicit that the black male sounding body is marked for destruction in the American public sphere. Moreover, the project suggests a new praxis for black liberation politics based in sonic-affective relations divorced from a politics of recognition.

Chapter One, “Across Distances without Recognition: Diasporic Testimony in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* and Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*” argues that Literary Trauma studies’ accepted paradigm of testimonial narrative is rooted in the socio-legal constructs of recognition and redress, and thereby proves inadequate to express the traumas of enslavement. I theorize *diasporic testimony*, as a distinctly Black Atlantic model of testimony to slavery’s traumas that denies the necessity of narrating experience to an authenticating witness. Morrison’s and Césaire’s texts produce and problematize testimony-as-narrative in order to expose its limitations as the singular model for testifying to the experiences of blacks in the New World.
Importantly, *A Mercy* and *Notebook* portray black maternal figures as both sources and transmitters of “diasporic testimony.” Morrison’s text exposes what I term *maternal inability*, a construct that acknowledges and attests to the “impossible…broken maternity” engendered by chattel slavery, as well as its debilitating impact upon black families (Moten 2003, 224). I argue that these texts propose a hearing for sonic testimonies that echo through the earth itself, offering a planetary paradigm of subjective interconnection allied to Edouard Glissant’s concept of *Relation* (1997). Accordingly, each text depicts non-narrative sounds of testimony transmitted through the mediums of water, air, and land that are not directed to authenticating others, but to the planetary body itself in a manner that calls upon other attuned recipients to bear witness. Césaire’s text also models what I term *theft of the umbilical*, a displacement of black maternal figures that asserts masculine authority in the construction of black liberation ideology. Importantly, this diasporic paradigm is examined at length in the second chapter, which assesses the deeply gendered sonic history of black nationalist and liberation ideologies.

**Chapter Two, “WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER’S NAME?”: Maternal Disavowal in Black Nationalist Ideologies, and the Reverberating Aesthetic of Black Women’s Pain,** posits that within black nationalist texts, black men’s testimonies and subject formation are predicated upon their appropriations of maternal sound and inhabitations of approximated of womb-spaces. In a comparative analysis of Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative* and Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, I uncover maternal sounds (in the form of cries) and songs as the unacknowledged ground of black nationalist and liberation ideologies. I argue that Douglass’ text mandates maternal abandonment in its production of black male nationalist identity and by formulating freedom in a manner that
disallows black maternal presence, a trope that (re)sounds itself in diasporic literary production—most notably in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man.* By attending to *Song of Solomon’s* representation of a theft of the umbilical, this chapter also reveals that Toni Morrison’s text serves as a feminist unveiling of, and response to, the gendered acoustic history of maternal sacrifice in black nationalist ideologies spanning from the time of Reconstruction to late 1960’s Black Nationalisms.

Continuing in the vein of uncovering the black mother, **Chapter Three, Sonic (Im)Mobilities: Speaking Commodities, Sounding Diaspora in Multi-layered Markets,** examines echoes between the Caribbean and the United States through a study of the Jamaican song “Linstead Market.” I argue that the transformation of “folk” songs into popular Calypso music in the 1960’s both echoes and extends the affective and fiscal economies of slavery through an analysis of Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng.* The novel relates an instance of impoverished Jamaican market-women singing, and negatively portrays the transformation of their song into a marketable good by Harry Belafonte. However, I reveal that the “folk” song circulated within multiple markets of exchange both in written and recorded forms prior to Belafonte’s single performance of the song. “Linstead Market[‘s]” unacknowledged movement underscores the ways in which black women’s maternal and sonic labors come to be hidden within the logics of capitalist exchange in a manner that fixes these women within states of poverty. For this reason, I name the song a surplus good. More troubling, perhaps, is the manner in which Cliff’s text (im)mobilizes the song’s Afro-Jamaican bearers to construct a liberatory ideal of the creole woman’s freedom as movement within and beyond the island-space.
The fourth chapter, “Slavery’s Acoustics of Domination and the Making of American Identities: A Study of the Black Male Sounding Body,” examines the manner in which the black body remains wedded to the production of sound for public consumption. Complicating W.E.B. Du Bois’ designation of black song as “gift” in The Souls of Black Folk, I extend Chapter Three’s argument to posit that black sounds’ status as surplus goods testifies to the ongoing commodification of black life. Revealing black sound as the plane of mediation for white, civic identity, I expose that black audition remains ensnared within an interpretive matrix formulated during chattel slavery through comparative readings of Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, Richard Wright’s Native Son, and James Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man.” Arguing that these texts reveal a Western sonic paradigm for the hearing and interpretation of black males’ sounds that mandates sounds of black acquiescence and, in their absence, sounds of black pain, I hear Baldwin’s 1965 story as sadly prophetic for 21st Century racial interactions, evidenced through a comparative reading with the Jordan Davis murder case.

The Coda, Holla if You Hear Me: Sounding Black Pain into the Post-Racial Void considers the continued impact of slavery and its acoustic-affective resonances within contemporary Western sociopolitical relations. The Coda listens to how 21st Century black writers and activists manage the reverberations of slavery’s traumas in post-racial society, and how these figures imagine liberty. Importantly, this section listens for the echoes of diasporic testimony as they confront, contest, undermine, and even commingle with dominant post-racial narratives that circumscribe black being and fix it as timeless, natural, pathological essence even while demanding that blacks move beyond slavery’s past. Moreover, the Coda insists that black liberation praxis must shift away
from recognition and redress-based activist frameworks and toward practices grounded in an understanding of the sonic-affective relations the dissertation exposes. Engaging with the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a site of resistance, as well as one that reveals the continuation of markedly gendered injury in black liberation politics, the Coda suggests future possibilities for sounding black trauma in the pursuit of healing.
Chapter One: “Across Distances Without Recognition”: Diasporic Testimony in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* and Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*

At best, Césaire’s project can be said to be above all a scream of conscience…

Edouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention*

Trauma Theory’s investment in narrative obscures other valid acts of testimony.¹ The standard paradigm of traumatic testimony requires both a coherent narrative of the event and its authorization by proximate witness, placing it squarely within an economy of recognition and redress.² These constructs mediate the relationship between the state and its subjects, mandating specific modes of address to authority. Testimony, broadly understood, encompasses recognizable conventions that operate to bestow recognition. Narrative construction, direct address, and authorization comprise the fundamental facets of traumatic testimony. These elements contain perceived excess through the expurgation of content, refolding testimony into homogenized narratives of normative experience. The wounds of chattel enslavement, however, exceed this economy, mandating a different paradigm of testimony—one that sounds the horrors of slavery against the strictures of narrative coherence.³ These traumatic experiences prove immoderate—incommensurate with normative realms of experience. They find their expression in the realm of “black noise,” which “represents the kinds of political aspirations that are inaudible and illegible within the prevailing formulas of political rationality” (Best and Hartman 2005, 9). Accordingly, literature of the Black Diaspora
consistently de-forms testimonial narrative and deploys sonic structures to contest the limits of traumatic testimony. These sonic structures engender an expansive understanding of testimony and its subject, sounding the specificities of the traumas of enslavement. Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008) and Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939) model what I am naming *diasporic testimony*, a mode that manifests in sonic traces and visceral impact, centering the maternal body as the conduit that enables its existence.

*A Mercy* and *Notebook* expose the complexities of testifying for the enslaved and their descendants, ensnared in dehumanizing discourses and political constellations that refuse them recognition. Testimony’s paradigm of narrativization, authorization and integration presupposes an uninhabitable subject position for the black testifier and a present, empathetic audience. Morrison and Césaire expose the black subject’s lack of “addressable other,” proffering resonant expression that contests, supplements, and replaces narrative, mitigating the need for proximate audience. In *A Mercy*, Morrison simultaneously produces and problematizes testimony-as-narrative, exposing its limitations as the singular model for witnessing to the experiences of blacks in the New World. Similarly, Césaire’s opus critiques the limits of narrative testimony, rendering diasporic testimony a “cry” or “scream” that aurally registers the wounds of enslavement to a collective social *conscience*. Non-narrative sonic elements in these texts expose the constructedness of narrative and resituate the testimonial act within a planetary context, unmooring subject formation from the “pathologies of recognition” (Oliver 2001, 23). Advancing narrative’s formal linguistic properties as an index of black exclusion from the domain of Reason, Morrison and Césaire reveal conventional prohibitions upon the
expression of black experience. Tellingly, in cases of slave testimony, “narrative is [frequently] denied,” causing the audience to “witness, in effect, the performance of the inability to bear witness” (McBride 2001, 94, my emphasis). Narrative’s reliance on exclusion and hierarchical structuring mirrors accepted understandings of subjective formation. That which masquerades as “universal” grounds a normative framework of human experience, rendering the mass traumas of enslavement and oppression as the integral, yet unspeakable excesses of Western socio-political narratives. Kelly Oliver contends, “It is impossible to bear witness to becoming an object” because “becoming an object means becoming inarticulate” (Oliver, 99). Oliver’s conflation of the act of bearing witness with narration exposes the fundamental problematic against which diasporic testimony militates. In order to sound traumatic experience, the New World black must contest both exclusion from the domain of Reason and its formulation of narrative expression as constitutive of humanity.

Diasporic testimony, as an act of affective transmission, engenders alternate modes of subject formation and wider ranges of intersubjectivities through rhythmic interrelation. Mechanisms of natural dispersal produce diffuse and multidirectional testimonies, troubling structures of address necessitated by the aim of recognition. Evelyn Schreiber contends, “American culture has failed to integrate the slave experience so as to perform the witness function” (11). Audience and authorization remain denied to black testimonies of the continuous e/affects of the systemic brutalities of slavery. Morrison specifically stages the question—What is testimony in the absence of proximate audience?—and performs its answer within the pages of A Mercy. A Mercy’s sonic structure centers the echo, a figure I argue is a constitutive trope within diasporic
testimony, as able to both contest and supplement the scriptural elements of the story, offering context for, and corrective to narrative. Importantly, the novel refigures testimony and its mechanisms of transmission in order to force the consideration of more expansive notions of witness and audience, unfettered by the necessities of proximity and authority. These sonic-textual maneuvers are foundational in the creation and expression of diasporic testimony, a sounding that, as Morrison deftly demonstrates, can neither be fully heard nor understood outside of the concept of “wounded maternity” (Moten 2003, 224). Published almost seventy years earlier than Morrison’s novel, Aimé Césaire’s Notebook of a Return to the Native Land provides a literary genealogy for understanding diasporic testimony as much as it stands as an earlier echo of this very (gendered) sounding. The centrality of black maternity in Césaire’s text, delineated through the imbrication of the sonic within the maternal body, posits fragmented and diffuse maternal relations as the defining metaphor through which to understand diasporic experience and testimonies thereof. Diffusion contests the metaphorical relation of the maternal to the national body. Against the solidity of Western conceptions of motherland, black maternity exists in a state of eternal transition, liminality, and dissipation. Exposing the perpetuity of black unbelonging in the New World provides leverage for Césaire and Morrison to shuttle Western monoliths of authority offsite in their renderings of testimony, reorienting the act in relation to this inexorable in-between-ness. At the same time, this shuttling enacts a questioning through the literalization of the disconnection from both motherland and Western authority—Who cannot be recognized? What is possible in the absence of recognition? The answers echo between the texts, producing a testimony of vibratory resonances that have yet to fully dissipate.
Words that Ride the Air: Wounded Maternity and Unbound Testimony in *A Mercy*

In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison juxtaposes multiple forms of witnessing and testimony in a complex, nuanced depiction of the history of early American enslavement. As with much of the work in her oeuvre, Morrison relies on extra linguistic modes of testimony that expand or break the frames of the narratives into which they erupt. Morrison’s novel models and complicates the traditionally understood structure of traumatic witnessing, exposing its inefficacy for survivors of slavery. Her nimble depiction of the imbrication of mother’s and daughter’s acts of testimony within a larger complex of practices between these testimonies and the reconfiguration of black maternity by chattel slavery, echoes Césaire’s placement of the maternal body at the core of diasporic testimony. *A Mercy* centers on the occupants of the Vaark homestead in 17th Century Virginia. Morrison designates these characters “orphans” in the New World, citing maternal absence as one of the burgeoning nation’s constitutive features. A study of the formation of America through its practices of commodifying human life by various means, *A Mercy* examines the purchase of slaves, wives, and servants in tandem, revealing the initial imbrication of these categories in order to expose the concretization of difference through the manufacture of distinctions. The plot follows each of the major characters, narrating each person’s journey to, and role on, the homestead. As Lina, Rebekka, Sorrow and Florens learn to survive in the frequent absence of Jacob; they also imagine themselves the creators of a new familial relation. However, race, class, marital status, and the stricter codification of slaving practices in colonial America produce fissures in the familial community of the homestead.
Jacob Vaark, the head of the settler family, invests in West Indian sugar plantations on the promise of abundant profits despite his seeming abhorrence of slavery. Believing that physical distance renders him blameless for the abuses of the sugar plantations, Vaark fails to recognize his own household as a site of enslavement. Thinking himself “guardian” of the women in his homestead, Vaark purchases Lina, a Native American servant, and arranges for his wife Rebekka’s passage to America in exchange for her hand (and labors) in marriage. He accepts Florens, a young girl slave whose mother begs him to take her daughter, as partial payment of a debt owed by a Portuguese slaveholder, and takes Sorrow into the homestead on the condition that the sawyer looking to place her “forgive the cost of the lumber he was buying” (33). While all of the major characters are marginalized, traded, oppressed and abandoned in various ways, the slave girl Florens catalyzes the text’s events, which are primarily relayed in relation to her quest to find the free African blacksmith to cure Rebekka’s smallpox. This journey places Florens in contact with a group of indentured servants, Native American youth, and a sect of religious Separatists, all of whom give cause for reflection upon the space she occupies in a land seeking to define itself and its various occupants. The woman-child’s sense of maternal abandonment creates a gnawing hunger for love that motivates her actions. Therefore, her relationships with her absent mother, Lina, and the blacksmith, provide the fodder for pondering the complex nature of human bondage. Florens’ powerful testimony brings to the fore and interrogates her ever-shifting status as a slave, lover, and daughter.

Arguably the novel’s central character, Florens’ command of first-person narration and literacy place her in the privileged position of the slave narrative author—a
witness to the atrocities of enslavement able to communicate to an audience through written narrative. At the text’s opening, Florens characterizes her written words as something other than confession, but does not clearly name the function they perform: “Confession we tell not write as I am doing now” (6, my emphasis). While Florens does not designate her writing as testimonial, its inexact comparison to “confession” suggests the construction of testimonial narrative. Importantly, her assertion that confession is told gestures toward an oral/aural component of testimony, modeling the interplay between the auditory and the scriptural, or “phono” and “graph,” as constitutive component of black expression (Weheliye 2005, 38-9).

“Confession” derives from the Latin confiteri and confesio, a “disclosure of sin or sinfulness…a formal, usually written acknowledgement of guilt by a person accused of a crime, [or] a formal profession of belief and acceptance of doctrines…before being admitted to church membership.” Bound up in a religious discourse of fitness, culpability and responsibility, the act of confession places the confessor in the role of sinner or criminal, in contradistinction to testimony, which allows the testifier to occupy the position of injured party. Morrison deftly maneuvers these definitions of testimonial and confession in Florens’ act of speaking/writing in order to expose the effects of the entanglements of these terms upon blacks that would testify. Florens, as a slave, cannot legally be injured, nor testify against her aggressors. However, this does not bar the slave from the act of confession, as she can be deemed culpable for injuring another, or for the commission of sinful transgressions.

Florens’ recounting of her life initially mirrors conventional structures of traumatic testimony first formulated by Freud. Her retroactive accounting reflects the
structure of belatedness associated with traumatic testimony, which suggests that the “delayed revival of the memory” comprises the core of traumatic experience, eclipsing the occurrence of the event itself, as the triggered memory becomes traumatic retrospectively—when the subject gains “maturity” and a fuller understanding of “social norms” (Leys 2010, 20). Florens’ narration, “fragmented,” full of ellipses and “interruption,” reflects its status as traumatic narrative, which is bolstered by the haunting presence of her indecipherable (silenced) mother, or “minha mae” (Whitehead 2004, 84). However, the belief that trauma renders language impotent designates its events “unspeakable,” and causes an “ontological and epistemological crisis at the level of language” (Felman and Laub 1992, xiii; Leys 2010, 268). The perceived failure of language to articulate trauma, however, does not diminish the primacy of narrative in Western cultural and theoretical understandings of bearing witness to experience. This body of thought posits that in order to effect recognition, redress, reconciliation, or healing, the survivor of trauma must craft a narrative and direct it toward an addressee to validate that experience, which then allows the teller to incorporate the traumatic memory into existing cognitive schemas (Caruth 1995, 167). Theoretical shuttling between deeming traumatic experience ineffable and demanding its narrative articulation, exposes the dissonance inherent in designating prescriptives for the relation of trauma. Deeply indebted to the psychoanalytic framework of the “talking cure” which proposes the analyst/analysand relation as the appropriate paradigm for “working through” trauma, as well as juridical structures of testimony and judgment, traumatic witnessing-as-narrative inheres in structures that refuse recognition to and continuously marginalize subjects.
traditionally barred from access to and participation in public discourse because they do not possess equal social and civic rights.

Florens, woman and slave, represents such a figure. Characterized with the other women of the Vaark homestead as “female and illegal,” Florens stands as an “interloper” in public discourse, because she is Vaark’s property (Morrison 2008, 58). Her testimony is legally unauthorized and unrecognized. To this effect, she only exists as an object. Dori Laub asserts, “the absence of…an addressable other…who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (1992, 68, emphasis in original). The seeming necessity of the responsive, receptive addressee delegitimizes non-narrative testimonial practices, re-produces problematic power differentials, and bars the possibility of testimony in the absence of verifying witness.

Florens’ command of first-person narration situates her as the testifier of this tale. She inscribes her life story on the newly minted walls of her now-dead master’s monument to himself, an audacious estate home. In this inscription are embedded Florens’ sense of maternal abandonment, and the quotidian indignities, betrayals, and traumas of servitude. The inscription, formally structured as written narrative, should allow Florens to integrate the totality of her sixteen years of life experience into a cohesive, comprehensible story, imbuing wholeness and engendering healing. However, other characters’ stories persistently disrupt Florens, both creating temporal disjunctures and troubling her narrative authority. Traumatic rupture continuously actualizes itself through this wresting of narrative control. While stylistically reminiscent of Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Florens’ “quest” does not result in the
cathartic self-awareness granted Janie, symbolized by perspectival synthesis of the two narrative voices in *Eyes*. Florens’ thoughts and syntax remain distinct from the other narrative voices throughout, and, if the novel did not open with her words, would seem to rupture the larger narrative. Occupying 46 scattered pages of 167, Florens’ testimony both precedes and is complicated by the remainder of the text. Florens’ narration haunts the text “proper,” similarly to the sonic traces and the *minha mae*’s peripheral presence. Importantly, Florens remains marginal, or “vestibular to [the dominant] culture” in which she finds herself succeeding her testimony (Spillers 2003, 155). She achieves no “liberation through literacy” as contended in the slave narrative tradition, finds no “friend’s mouth” in which to place her tongue, only a testimony to an absent addressee (Tally 2011, 65; Hurston 1937, 5).

The constant disruption of Florens’ text (re)produces both trauma and possibilities for other modes of testimony. Moments of traumatic rupture strategically appear within the text in order to flesh out the meaning of enslavement. One of the most significant manifests itself through what I have come to name a *site of sound*—a textual feature that helps articulate the realities of enslavement. “Site of sound” designates a formal feature of a text wherein sound functions to supplement, contest, clarify or otherwise alter narrative meaning. Sites of sound generally consist of thick descriptions of sound or sonic devices—(the echo in this case), moments of musical annotation, clusters of onomatopoetic language or ekphrasis whereby meaning is re-contextualized, troubled or reconstituted in the face of these non-narrative devices. This site coheres around Lina’s tale of a mother eagle unable to protect her eggs from a man. A traveler sees the perfection of the eagle’s habitat and claims it, laughing and saying, “This is perfect. This
is mine”—the word “mine…swells, booming like thunder into valleys…creatures come out of caves wondering what it means. Mine. Mine. Mine” (Morrison 2008, 62). The eagle finds the thunder “strange, meaningless…and incomprehensible,” deeming the sound “unnatural.” The sonic imprint of the traveler’s claiming, staking, and owning creates discord and confusion, placing the eagle’s unhatched young in peril, signified by the cracking of one of the eggs in her nest. Determined to protect her young, the eagle attacks the traveler, attempting to “claw away his laugh and his unnatural sound” (62). She is stricken, and falls “screaming and screaming”, doomed to “falling forever,” her scream continuous while the “eggs hatch alone” (62).

The eternal scream simultaneously mourns a displaced, dismantled, and decimated culture, and represents a disempowered and disabled maternity unable to offer protection. Fred Moten characterizes the “event of the commodity’s speech [as] itself broken by the…broken and irreducible maternity—of the commodity’s scream” (2003, 12, my emphasis). The speech of the commodity/slave contains the echoes of an incessant scream that signifies the “impossible maternity” made manifest by the practices of conquest and chattel enslavement (Moten 2003, 212). Minha mae’s statement, “There was no protection. None” and her “song about the green bird fighting then dying when the monkey steals her eggs” reiterate the unavailability of maternal protection (Morrison 2008, 162, 166). This scene of maternal inability and abandonment iterates the “poignancy of irremediable separation between slave mother and child [that] infuses the narrative structure” (Wyatt 2012, 131). It must, however, be read in conjunction with Florens’ rejection by the blacksmith, with whom she has had a love affair, in order to fully grasp the scope of the traumas to which she has been subjected.
Seeing that Florens has hurt the child Malaik for whom he cares, the blacksmith commands her to leave his house. When she demands a reason for her banishment, he answers, “Because you are a slave” (Morrison 2008, 141). Florens’ response, “Sir makes me that,” prompts the African to accuse her of becoming a slave in her abandon to her bodily impulses, implying her complicity in her subjection (141). He says, “Your head is empty and your body wild…. You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind,” espousing the rhetoric of black inferiority that comes to justify the chattel enslavement of Africans in the Americas (141). Ironically, the free African blacksmith’s words echo burgeoning proto-WASP ideology. His belief in his self-sufficiency and self-making effectively blinds him to his complicity in the maintenance of Florens’ misery. Scripting her testimony, Florens confronts him with his dehumanizing accusation: “You shout the word—mind, mind, mind—over and over and then you laugh, saying as I live and breathe, a slave by choice” (141). The blacksmith’s accusation homophonically reiterates the echo of the travelling adventurer. “Mine. Mine. Mine,” in its thunderous booming, becomes "mind, mind, mind"—recalling Lina’s foresight in the moment of the tale’s narration as to the “disruption, the shattering a free black man would cause” (61).

The reverberations of the sonic imprints of “mine” and “mind” actuate and define the traumas inflicted on the person of the enslaved. The resounding refrain oscillating between modes of possession and dispossession, and the ascription of inferiority and inhumanity creates a dialectic of owners and the owned. When certain people are believed to not possess a rational mind, they become the “Mine”—property—of a person in possession of such a mind. To be (re)injured in this way by someone she loves overwhelms Florens and she begins “living the dying inside” first activated by her
mother’s abandonment, intensified by the Separatists’ dehumanizing inspection, “looking at [her] body across distances without recognition,” and completed by the African’s betrayal and rejection (142, 113). Jean Wyatt contends that in this moment, “the rage of the abandoned orphan child ‘unfolds’ and strikes out against the parent/lover who fails her” (2012, 139). The “claws of the feathered thing” that unfold and attack the blacksmith, however, are neither simply retributive violence, nor indicative of Florens’ “fight…for recognition” (Morrison 2008, 160: Schreiber 2010, 169). They also represent Florens’ “hatch[ing] alone” into the traumatic life bound by the ever-present echoes of “mine” and “mind” as one wholly unprotected (Morrison 2008, 61). It is imperative to read these seemingly personal and unrelated offenses and tribulations as the results of conquest, dispossession, and the escalating restriction and homogenization of black life due to the “codification of slavery …dependent on skin color” in the New World during the colonial period (Bryan 2012, 89).

The echoic structure of *A Mercy* reframes and resituates linear, biographical narrative between the sonic reverberations of the homophonic echoes of “mine” and “mind” that come to define Florens as property, hyperembodied and non-rational. Narrative structure in this instance represents the structures of authority toward which testimony is traditionally directed. These aural reverberations provide a necessary supplement to her traumatic narration—acting both disruptively and in a clarifying manner. Diasporic testimony such as Florens’ makes use of authoritative structures as the objects off which the sonic waves “scatter…reflect[ing] back towards their source” as echoes, or diffracting so that the sounds are “transmitted in many directions away from the object,” denying the necessity of authorization while radically refiguring the audience
of testimony to include all within reach of and permeable to the sound (Denny 1993, 201). As Shoshana Felman writes, “the function of the echo—in the very resonance of its amplification, is itself inquisitive, and not simply repetitive” (1992, 221). The “inquisitive” aspect of the echo is reflected in the “enact[ment of] a difference through the very verbal repetition” of the homophones mine and mind (222, emphasis in original). Morrison’s reverberatory aesthetic, in keeping with Césaire’s anaphoric structure in Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, encourages an understanding of the expansiveness and multivalence of meaning through re-iteration.\textsuperscript{11} The inexactness of the echo exemplifies the “repetition with a…difference” that characterizes black music while opening a space to question the interrelation of the two terms as respectively representative of possession and intellect (Gates 1988, 51). This dynamic of questioning implicates Florens’ narrative, as it forces reconsideration of the traumas to which she attests. Not only attestation to maternal and romantic abandonment, Florens’ narrative must be understood as a single component in a complex of testimonial acts that echo throughout the text in relation to one another, reflecting the nature of diasporic testimony. Resounding echoes that dissipate and re-amplify within the text initially resist transcription, evidenced by Lina’s transmission of the eagle tale as part of an oral tradition and the minha mae’s song of the mother bird’s stolen eggs. Florens’ recapitulation of Lina’s oration suggests the possibility of transcription, yet the hidden transcript, or text, which occupies the walls of Vaark’s unfinished home, is secondary to the importance of the resonant sonic trace of the mother eagle’s scream, temporally preceding and amplified through Florens’ textual testimonial-confessional narrative.\textsuperscript{12}
Eugenia P. Bryan reads Florens’ textual inscription on Vaark’s house as “an individual’s desire to express her pain and ‘heal…historical slavery and marginalization trauma,’” and a “reclamation of self, history and the blood that built [the house]”—acts affirming “self own[ing]” (2012, 105). While the statement “I am also Florens. In full” supports this reading; it skirts the issue of to whom or to where Florens’ testimony is directed (Morrison 2008, 161). Bryan’s argument assumes self-directed testimony, whereas the novel first intimates that Florens addresses the blacksmith whom she loves. Importantly, however, the text exposes the impossibility of addressing this figure via scriptural trace as he “read[s] the world but not the letters of talk” (160). “The letters of talk” represent verbal, content-based articulation based upon the implied universality of narrative and the privileging of its production as script as the preferred modality of testimony. Lina cannot read, and both time and distance separate Florens from her mother. Rebekka’s illness and subsequent religious conversion render her unsympathetic, and Jacob Vaark is consigned to eternity. This set of circumstances leaves Florens without a suitable target of address for her written narrative, tempting Wyatt to characterize Florens’ testimony (along with her mother’s) as a “failed message” (2012, 139). However, the assertion of a testimony of echoes through the sonic traces of “Mine” and “Mind” that continue to oscillate through the earth suggests the potential for the aural or visceral reception of Florens’ testimony, and testimony to enslavement more broadly, by those barred from access to literacy.

Morrison’s deployment of textuo-sonic devices reflects the complex relation between the aural and the scriptural for people of African descent in the West. While diasporic testimony proceeds by way of sound figures, characterized by echoes, rhythmic
oscillations, and reverberations, it cannot be fully disarticulated from the narrative structures it contests. Instead, the relationship between confession and testimony echoes the relationship between sound and script, or “phono” and “graph” (Weheliye 2005, 38). Resisting the idea that these two elements operate independently of one another, Morrison deploys textuo-sonic devices in order to expose the constructedness of narrative. The juxtaposition of writing with mobile sonic figures that constantly proliferate through earthly mediums disputes the status of narrative script as natural, troubling its universalized representative function and re-placing it within a broader sphere of testimonial acts. Imbricated within, yet opposing testimonial narrative and its attendant structures of address, diasporic testimony troubles both the construct of the self-contained subject as testis, and the necessity of external validation for black diasporic experience.

Jean Wyatt contends “a message gains its meaning only in the transmission, only as it moves from sender to receiver,” emphatically stating that Florens’ “message is going nowhere” (2012, 139). The message of Florens’ testimony seems doomed to “lack meaning” as it “cannot signify…remain[ing] merely material marks inscribed on a wall” without a reader to decipher them (140). While not wholly incorrect in assessing the importance of transmission to traumatic testimony, Wyatt’s understanding of transmission requires a proximate audience. She does not consider the modes of transmission the novel imagines as alternate forms of testimony. Claude Lanzmann privileges the act of transmission as the core component of traumatic testimonial, negating the primacy of narrative articulation through an inclusion of sonic or bodily acts as testimony. However, his assessment of the primacy of transmission is disabled by the
insistence that “the truth of the event” remains “directed toward another,” even as he acknowledges that the transmission need not constrain itself to narrative structures (qtd in Caruth 1995, 205). The imputation of “truth” to testimony via external validation recalls the juridical imperative to assess “responsibility” as opposed to “justice,” suggesting that verification leads to melioration or redress, belying the ways in which the history of slavery exposes “the impossibility of redress” (Agamben 1999, 17; Best and Hartman 2005, 3). Put simply, the unauthorized testimonies of the slave (and her descendants) expose the flawed logic of testifying to one’s oppressor in order to seek redress.13

Morrison troubles the complex and seemingly unassailable interconnection between address, recognition, testimonial validity, and redress through Florens’ and her mother’s testimonies. The women Wyatt designates “tellers without a listener, messengers without a recipient” imaginatively reconfigure testimony in a way that contests the necessity of proximate audience (Wyatt 2012, 140).

Although Florens’ initially constructs a narrative, scriptural testimony, her means of production do not comply with normative methods. Using a nail to carve her words into the walls of a dead man’s house in stealth, she “shelter[s] lamp flame with [her] body and bear[s] the wind’s cold teeth biting (Morrison 2008, 158-9). Careful to use all of the space available, Florens covers the floor, and demands in the construction of her text a mode of reading that requires engagement with words that “talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room” (161). These allegedly “static marks on an immovable wall” are set into oscillating motion by Florens’ declaration of their relation to one another: the text must read and speak, or echo itself— to itself (Wyatt 2012, 139). This suggests internalized witnessing predicated upon self-
recognition, implying that Florens’ testimony may have been self-directed, as Bryan posits. Prior to designating the words’ capacity to “talk to themselves,” Florens states to the blacksmith “If you never read this, no one will” (Morrison 2008, 161 my emphasis). The fact that she knows the blacksmith does not “read the letters of talk” negates the possibility that her written testimony was ever directed toward him, troubling his position as authenticating witness. Further, her physical placement of the words on the walls and floors that require them to speak to each other designates a self-contained system of communication that does not require transmission, which, according to Wyatt, denies the possibility of their meaning.

However, Florens immediately reverses her thoughts, and imagines a radically different method of transmission in the process:

“Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth” (161).

Florens envisions the air as an appropriate medium for the transmission of her testimony, the words themselves infinitesimally small bits of particulate matter dispersed over the landscape, constellating unevenly, infusing within the atmosphere, integrating into the land, to be regenerated perpetually through the natural cycles of the earth. Florens imagines fire as the transformative element for her testimony. She mentally enlists Lina’s help for her purposes: “Lina will help. She finds horror in this house and much as she needs to be Mistress’ need I know she loves fire more” (161). Fire indexes
decimation and destruction, as well as the ritual purification Florens’ words will undergo in their transformation into diasporic, as opposed to merely narrative testimony.

Florens implicates Lina in carrying out this task to include Lina’s unvoiced and unwritten testimony, as the fire she imagines resonates with Lina’s own traumatic experiences: “Memories of her village peopled by the dead turned slowly to ash and in their place a single image arose. Fire. How quick. How purposefully it ate what had been built, what had been life. Cleansing and somehow scandalous in beauty” (49).

While ash connotes on one level death and loss of memory, the fire itself stands as a rite of cleansing and purification—transformative in its destructive power. These ashes also signify collectivity and community, the ash of Lina’s people figuratively commingling with the ash of Florens’ words, converting an ostensibly singular and self-directed testimonial into a communal enterprise that accounts for multiple histories of dispossession and bondage. The ashes will travel over the same “eternal hemlocks” and “turquoise lake” and through the same “clouds cut by rainbow” that the eagle struggles to protect in Lina’s tale, to produce yet another narrative echo (62). The ashes will co-inhabit this landscape with the persistent reverberations of the eagle’s scream, both “falling forever,” each supplementing the testimony of the other, creating meaning in tandem across time and space without the need for confirmation or verification through recognition. Significantly, the words themselves “need” to experience dispersal—to undergo dissolution of form and to un-make narrative in order to testify to the radical unmaking of community and personhood to which the characters of the novel are subjected.
The reconceptualization of testimony as dispersal allows Florens’ mother space for her own testimony at the novel’s close. Configured primarily as a haunting presence, silenced in her daughter’s traumatic recollection, the minha mae cannot communicate prior to Florens’ transformative imaginings. Enabled by her daughter’s freeing of testimonial from formal restrictions, the mother releases into the atmosphere her testimony, heard for the first time at the end of the text. The minha mae’s testimony echoes in the short span of six pages a haunting anaphoric structuring refrain that captures for her the true character of slavery: “There was no protection” (162). The persistent echo of “no protection” reaches backward into the body of the text to the Separatist cult member Widow Ealing’s query as to whether or not Florens has protection, and the girl’s naïve misplacement of faith in the blacksmith’s capacity to offer her “protection….because [he is] a free man” never before enslaved (163, 69). The denial of familial and civil protections that defines slavery is for the mother worsened in infinite degrees for enslaved women. She testifies: “To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (163). This not only implies the transgenerational inheritance of wounds, “handed by the mother,” as suggested by Spillers in her seminal essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” ([1987] 2003), but also reverberates with the wounded and disabled maternity of the screaming mother eagle and the bird of her song (228).

Maternal inability, I contend, propels Morrison’s rendition of diasporic testimony in the Americas. If, as Moten asserts, Nathaniel Mackey’s idea of “wounded kinship” proceeds from an understanding of the “impossibility” of a “broken, wounded…maternity,” then we come to understand the purpose of Florens’ and minha
mae’s diasporic testimony as witnessing to and through this wounded kinship and its continuous reiterations within diaspora (Moten 2003, 224). The disabling of biological maternity by slavery productively enables maternity more broadly to redefine itself as something other than a natal relation, echoing Césaire’s construct in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* of the diffuse maternal body as the locus of black subjectivity which appears in the figure of the “woman who seems to float belly up...[who] is...a bundle of sonorous water” (4). This expansive re-iteration of maternal practices asserts itself through Lina’s relationship with Florens and the blacksmith’s care for the young boy, modeling possibility without guarantee of protection, a space from which to reconfigure community in the face of trauma. Nonconventional mothering resulting from the denial of conventional familial practices becomes its own form of tangible, lived testimony to oppression which contains the “phonic substance” or “material trace” of the unending maternal scream (Moten 2003, 225, 6). This material trace composed of echoes continues to transmit and propagate itself across time and space, bearing witness to the brutalities of enslavement, domination and oppression, as well as the survival of those who are harmed by such atrocities. Florens’ mother relies upon continual propagation and sonic reverberation as she releases her testimony into the atmosphere, praying for her words safe passage as they ride the air.

The “minha mae” takes a leap of faith in her sole chapter by assuming immediate address to Florens. As she speaks to her (bodily absent) daughter, she imagines the air as a compressible medium for the propagation of the vibratory resonance of her words. The carriage of her sonic articulations through the atmosphere to her imagined audience for reception constructs sound as a means of mitigating spatial distance as a bar to
communication. Assuming that the winds will grant safe travel for her admissions, she speaks plainly and directly: “Neither one will want your brother” (162). Although her testimony seems directed solely at Florens, her explanation of the rationale she utilized when she offered her daughter to “the tall man with yellow hair” denies this alleged specificity of address, as it details her capture, multiple sales, and transport into the Americas (163). She attests to the forced compression and condensation of the diversity of black experiences into a meaningless, empty signifier: “It was there [Barbados] I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin” (165). This declaration seems boundless in its field of addressees, as her testimony exposes this brutal denial of personhood and particularity as the authorized, recognized narrative of her existence. She states, “it was as a black that I was purchased by Senhor” (165). While her purchase and transfer brings her “a hope,” it also results in her sexual “break[ing]…in,” which ultimately results in Florens’ birth, reorienting the testimony toward her daughter (166).

Minha mae’s ever-shifting and unsettled address reveals the presumably private confession of a mother’s wrongs and unavoidable injuries to the child cannot be disentangled, as it is not a thing apart, from her testimony to the horrors of a system that sought to extinguish the humanity of those in its thrall. Her admittance of maternal abandonment simultaneously comprises her testimony to the traumatic character, nature and impact of enslavement. Morrison reveals the convergence of testimony and confession at the site of the black maternal body, revealing mutually constitutive echoes of trauma. The minha mae’s testimonial is diasporic in nature not simply because she
literally moves throughout the diaspora, but because her experiences and testimonial
to thereof exemplify dispersal and its continued reverberations in black life. While her
words have specific meaning for Florens, they also resonate with the experiences of those
similarly oppressed. Additionally, her release of the words into the air while she kneels
as if in prayer indicates the possibility that the message she transmits can and will be
intercepted by more than one receiver. The minha mae’s posture of supplication for
prayer echoes Florens’ act of “confession” as the permeable frame of A Mercy’s
narrative, while also placing more of her body in contact with the earth. Because “the
whole body…produces sound,” the minha mae amplifies the vibration of her testimony
from her body into the planetary body by increasing this contact. The act of prayer in this
moment also underscores the manner in which the black testis has no “addressable other”
to receive her acts of testimony, which requires the restructuring of testimony in a
manner that denies the necessity of proximate audience and relies upon attunement and
resonance to reach bodies—celestial, planetary, and human—permeable to the sounds of
diasporic experience. As the minha mae can control neither the force or direction of the
wind, nor the intensity of the vibrations as they propagate themselves through the various
mediums of air, water and earth, her testimony will disseminate itself as randomized sets
of flows and echoes, perpetually refracted through its mediums, increasing and
decreasing in intensity, potentially settling into a resonant hum that coalesces into loud
and emphatic enunciations of suffering, personhood and survival in randomized
constellations across time, as the echoes double back upon themselves, meeting again for
the first time in disparate spaces.
As she testifies to her daughter that the knees bent in supplication in the dust are also joined by her “heart,” the minha mae testifies to her own belief in the power of the echo, which becomes prayer, to reach her child:

In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing.

Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mae. (167 my emphasis)

Separated from her child by seemingly unbroachable distance and years of separation, she relies upon the vibratory resonance of the echo to reach Florens and articulate the essence of her testimony. The echo will undoubtedly lose narrative coherence as its wavelength attenuates in the medium of the air, but will not, in the mother’s conception, lose its ability to transmit the truth of the matter to her child, engendering Florens’ eventual understanding. The residual phonic substance of her diasporic testimony, as does the persistent rhythmic vibration of Césaire’s *Notebook*, testifies through and to the earth itself “across distances without recognition,” carrying echoes of truth, without hope of melioration or redress (133).

Morrison’s utilization of the earth’s natural elements as vehicles of continuous propagation for the echoes of testimonial soundings, far from being singular, proves endemic of the ways in which diasporic testimony functions. Indeed, Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* signals itself the paradigmatic text on diasporic testimony by designating sonic propagation and echoic resonance as the constitutive elements of testimonial to enslavement and oppression. Moreover, by imbricating the earthly
mediums of sonic propagation within the maternal body, Césaire illustrates that diasporic testimony at its core is predicated upon a maternal ethic for both its articulation and transmission, which *A Mercy* models in great detail. Césaire’s *Notebook* signals a paradigm-shift for black testimony. The *Notebook*’s oblique theorization of diasporic testimony echoes unnoticed through much of Black Atlantic textual production, reproducing its ingenuity and, at times, the work’s more problematic aspects. Hence, Césaire’s most widely acclaimed work warrants another (re)turn in order to hear its initial soundings.

“**Sonorous Water**: The Maternal Body as Sonic Epistemology of Black Testimony

Césaire drafted several versions of *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* beginning in 1936, and culminating in the final version published in *Presence Africaine* in 1956. With editions appearing in French, Spanish and English at multiple sites in the African Diaspora, the repeated iteration of this singular work enacts the echo at the theoretical core of the text itself, marking it an aural palimpsest of diasporic experience. Built upon internal echoes that propel themselves toward and scatter from different sites in the black diaspora, the *Notebook* models diasporic testimony, theorizing this construct alongside and in relation to Negritude. Césaire’s most acclaimed work poetically catalogues the experiences of black diasporic subjects through surrealist imaginings. Juxtaposing aspects of epic narration with surrealist poetics and blunt prose, the *Notebook* offers through its amalgamation of distinct formal traditions a new hearing for diasporic experiences. Césaire’s deft handling of multiple forms forces us to note their limitations. Calling attention to the inability of any narrative style to capture diasporic
experience, Césaire introduces sonic irruptions at these narrative interstices to sound diasporic testimony. Importantly, attending to Césaire’s sonic epistemology of diasporic testimony also forces our attention to the ways in which Negritude, as a form of black liberation ideology, sounds itself throughout the pages of the Notebook. Here, Negritude, as a nascent expression of black cultural nationalism, comes to be grounded in Césaire’s theorization of diasporic testimony, which must be understood as part and parcel of Césaire’s imagining of black liberation as a resonant enterprise that calls the very earth itself into service.

Both mirroring and diverging from the epic form, the Notebook “describes…a series of abortive returns” or a “deferred homecoming” (Davis, 22). The speaker, or “I” of the text, as well as the Antilles islands, occupies the liminal sphere of cultural intersection between the West and an imagined, yet unreachable, Africa. Cast recursively through anaphoric textual echoes, the Notebook consistently returns to the core idea of the making of black identity against and through Western imposition and restrictions. Forwarding a distinctly diasporic conception of the maternal, the text deploys textuo-sonic devices to contest hegemonic conceptions of black (non)personhood. In this way, the speaker’s exploration of European ideals in contradistinction to the material realities of life in the Caribbean can be interpreted as the “construction of a plurality of selves” who are “plastic and subject to successive remakings,” just as Negritude is formulated “as a plastic concept in the process of construction” (Davis 1997, 27). Far from touting Negritude as a pure return to essential Africanness, the Notebook exposes something far different. Through the delineation of diasporic testimony evidenced via sonic devices and diffuse maternity, Negritude manifests itself in and through its relations to an ever-
shifting subject position that accounts for the constantly changing land and soundscapes of diaspora. The poetic subject sounds the traumas of enslavement and its continued iterations in black life through the surrealist poetic voice that consistently delineates, then repudiates the European hegemonies of reason and order by exposing their most pernicious manifestations. Just as *A Mercy* lays bare constraints upon black personhood indexed by the words “mine” and “mind,” the *Notebook* persistently returns to the imposition of words upon the black subject. This subject indulges in primitivist, utopian fantasy in which Africa appears as pure, primal essence opposed to European civilization. Although mythicized Africa ostensibly marks the site to which Césaire’s Negritude posits the Antillean must spiritually return, a closer examination of the text’s sonic structuring devices and diasporic testimonial practices reveals a more nuanced enunciation of the poetics and politics of Negritude. While scripted in French, the *Notebook*’s disruptive textuo-sonic devices suggest a poetics in which the “content conditions form,” a reversal of the paradigm in which narrative form determines its content, in order to formulate a new epistemology of black testimony (Davis 1997, 19).

*Notebook* models and implicitly theorizes the capacity of non-linguistic modes of testimony to address the traumatic effects of chattel slavery in the absence of proximate witness. Testimony in this vein reconfigures address to negate the necessity of third-party authorization, sidestepping the “pathologies of recognition” which plague the oppressed (Oliver 2001, 23). This does not preclude individual reception or understanding of testimonial. Instead, it demands a more expansive understanding of testimony’s audience—one not grounded in uneven relations of power and authority. Diasporic testimony coincides with Glissant’s formulation of *echos-monde* “at work in the matter
of the world,” as its receipt occurs in the nexus of *Relation*, an ever-shifting site of affective, informational, linguistic and sonic interchange in which “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (Glissant 1997, 11, 93).

*Relation*, Glissant’s imagining of an “interactive totality,” depends upon the revelatory function of *echos-monde* to expose the “confluences” which act to stabilize the communities engendered by contacts between the cultures of earth’s inhabitants (1997, 93-4). Diasporic testimony affirms the revelatory function of *echos-monde* as the nonverbal articulation of black testimonial to enslavement and oppression. The echo enables and transmits testimonies of reverberations that unfold on a planetary scale to “prophesy or illuminate…the matter of the world,” enabling a new paradigm of subjective relations divorced from narratively dependent recognition (93). The echo functions both within and outside of linear time—preceding by prophesying, falling in tempo while illuminating, and operating belatedly through retrospection. Yet all of these operations occur simultaneously due to the echo’s capacity for continuous propagation, which allows these testimonies to double back upon themselves, increasing in intensity or dissipating to nearly indiscernible ripples according to the ebbs and flows of the natural world. *Notebook* presents a figure that marries aquatics, acoustics, and maternity in order to sound diasporic testimony’s planetary scope as well as its intersubjective and political resonances.

Césaire obliquely theorizes diasporic testimony through the juxtaposition of a maternal figure with the Antillean Islands:

At the end of daybreak, the famished morne and no one knows better than this bastard morne why the suicide choked with a little help from his
hypoglossal jamming his tongue backward to swallow it, why a woman seems to float belly up on the Capot River (her chiaroscuro body submissively organized at the command of her navel) but she is only a bundle of sonorous water (Césaire 2001, 4).

In this depiction, we hear a maternal ethic of testimonial that resists and contests narrative order, relying instead upon auditory resonances transmitted through earthly mediums. The “bundle of sonorous water” resembling the maternal body alludes to the captives drowned during transport through the treacherous middle passage. Equally important, the phrase “sonorous water” indexes water’s capacity to act as a medium for the propagation and transmission of sound (4; Henriques, xviii). Sonic waves emitted from the body are echoed by literal waves moving along the path of the Capot River as it flows downward from the Carbet Mountains into the ocean, while the sonorous maternal body experiences decay and dispersal, creating a vibratory testimony that propagates itself toward all Atlantic shores before returning as its own echo. This image holds no tangible politics of recognition: it structures testimony and address as embodied possibilities beyond direction at an authenticating party. Césaire, like Morrison “decentralize[s] and disperse[s] the knowing one,” to create a more expansive sense of testimony’s audience to include the planetary body itself as potential recipient (Spillers 2003, 427).

Importantly, preceding the “submissively organized” woman’s appearance are the words “famished…bastard morne,” which triangulate the maternal image, an impoverished Martinican, and “the suicide,” who refers to a captured African who committed suicide during the middle passage (Césaire 2010, 4). In addition to attesting
to the rampant poverty of the Antilles and cataloging an act of defiance committed by the enslaved, Césaire reveals the connections between these seemingly disparate images. The history of enslavement cannot be disentangled from contemporary oppression, he argues. The narrative voice's “bastard” status gestures toward the familial ruptures resulting from chattel enslavement. The “sonorous water” resembling the maternal body performs an ocular trick that simultaneously affirms the possibilities and renders problematic the actualities of black maternity masterfully encapsulated in *A Mercy*’s refrain “No protection.” Additionally, the aquatic figure exemplifies the mechanisms of sonic propagation and dispersal that enable black testimony. Like the minha mae’s words that ride the air, this moment enacts diasporic testimony, a mode that privileges dispersal and resonance over the singularity of reciprocal address. That this mode of testimony proceeds by way of sound figures such as echoes emphasizes its potentially transformative multiplicities, multidirectionality, recursivity and mutability. These aspects of diasporic testimony contest the imposition of normative frameworks of experience deeply imbricated within traditional testimonial practices. Narrative designates a number of formal strictures that demand excision of content, frequently pushing the core events of black trauma outside its frame. The silences and ellipses in the slave narrative tradition index the ineffable aspects of slave experience as *that which cannot be said*, whereas Césaire and Morrison depict these aspects as those which break narrative frames, requiring innovative sonic practices to aid in their expression. Shifting our attention from the ineffable to the audible allows us to hear that which linear narrative consistently excises. Sounding black diasporic experience against the silencing enacted by the language of ineffability, textuo-sonic devices, interruptive acoustic matter,
and sites of sound reorient us toward and attune us to hear black expressions of being, as well as traumatic experiences. Importantly, the slave narrative tradition marks black women’s sounds and screams of pain as the acoustic marker of ineffability, effectively silencing them. Diasporic testimony offers a potential corrective to this silencing by forcing attention back to these black maternal soundings in a manner that marks them as the locus of black subjectivity and testimony, soundings which continue to echo through the planetary body as well as the Western sociopolitical subconscious. Therefore, reverberation, echo, and multidirectional dispersal combat the limitations of linear narrative, and its restricted speaker, content, and audience. The oscillations of this testimony broadens the field of addressees, empowering the disempowered to stand both as testifier and as witness to the specificity of experience, even as it crosses with and joins other testimonial echoes through the earth.

The maternal figure “suspended in the oceanic” also throws into relief the liminality of the Antilles and its black subjects, echoing the islands’ physical position “betwixt and between” the two Western monoliths of Europe and the United States (Spillers 2003, 214). The suspension of the maternal figure gestures toward psychoanalytic understandings of the womb as an oceanic space of “undifferentiated identity...nowhere at all,” indexing the state of “culturally ‘unmade’” New World blacks as one of constant suspension, deferral, and unbelonging (Spillers 2003, 214-15). In reconfiguring address, Césaire absents the physical sites of Western authority, but not the effects of their economic and cultural impositions. He depicts diasporic testimony as that which reflects off these structures, producing echoes to be received by communities “detoured from [their] cry” (2010, 2). The scattering of the testimony’s echo from
monolithic structures of authority captures a larger potential audience, producing visceral, rhythmic attunements around which new intersubjective formations may cohere. These formations contain the potential to subvert, contest, or dismantle the narrative and political structures that deny authorization to black testimony and thereby experience, seeking instead to build rhizomatic networks through affective engagement. Césaire’s restructuring of testimony imagines a global audience of rhythmically interrelated subjects poised to receive the black subject’s testimony as it propagates through the earth, as evidenced in the closing movement of his epic, to which I will return. A closer examination of the text’s aural structures is necessary to limn the contours of Césaire’s formulation of diasporic testimony.

Brent Hayes Edwards points to Césaire’s use of anaphora as a means of imparting complexity and irreducibility: “the element of repetition…adds a qualification, an element of uncertainty, to a proposition that could otherwise be taken as a singular declaration” which “introduces transformation and even contradiction” (2005, 8). Like A Mercy’s haunting “no protection,” the Notebook’s repeated invocation “At the end of daybreak” exemplifies Edward’s assertion. Each echo of the phrase, in addition to building the sonic structure of the text through insistent, rhythmic presence, functions as a pivot-point, an interstice through which the multiple and mutable nature of diasporic testimony reveals itself. Instead of its capture, sanitization and redeployment in master narratives of black incapacity, testimony as dispersal and echo enables prolonged, comprehensive engagement with the traumas of enslavement by a geographically diverse population of attuned recipients poised to interpret their manifold complexities.
Notebook exemplifies the struggle for blacks to articulate a testimony to their own existence through a history of dispossession, displacement and marginalization. Frequently, the poetic subject of the text and its masses are described as estranged from their own voices, unable to speak their experiences into a world that has circumscribed the possibilities of black articulation. In anaphoric echoes, Césaire characterizes the “throng” as “detoured from its true cry,” a palpable, living force of sound able to accurately represent their “hunger…poverty… revolt…[and] hatred” (2010, 2-3). Instead of the true cry of the people raised as testimonial, we face a “throng…strangely chattering and mute,” producing sonic traces seemingly disconnected from the suffering of the people—unrecognized as testimony (2). This pointless banter, as it were, indexes the public silencing of the past wounds that produce and sustain current humiliations. Effectively outlawed, testimonial speech remains unutilized by the masses. Because the wounds of slavery and colonialism cannot be resigned to the permanence of a hermetically sealed “past,” the production of narrative fails to convey the continuous wounding and oppression imbricated within the quotidian rhythms of daily life.

Narrative provides no closure because the wound “cannot heal” (Morrison 2008, 163).

The production of narrative implies not only a desire to testify, but also a twinned desire for permanence. Processes of narrativization require schematic ordering of information, excision of content, and the linear presentation of events in a sequential fashion such that meaning is produced by the very logic of this mode of organization. The “story form” of narrative requires one to assume an ostensibly “objective” stance that allows for the “truth” of an experience to be articulated (White 1990, 2). Narrative also presupposes structures of authority and a subject position in relation to those structures.
Hayden White contends, “Neither [historicity nor narrativity] is possible without some notion of the legal subject” (1990, 13, my emphasis). Traumatic testimony-as-narrative adheres to the same schema, as the testifier must address structures of authority within juridical or cultural spheres. A slave, or her descendant, must alter testimony, because testimonial narrative assumes a self-contained subject of the law with the capacity to “militate…against…a legal system” to attain recognition and redress (13). Therefore, Morrison’s and Césaire’s texts reconfigure structures of address in order to sound unauthorized testimonies to diasporic experience. Testimony, then, sounds itself through echoic resonances within the text that implicate the sphere of the oceanic and its physical and sonic waves as the fundamentals of diasporic testimony.

Returning to the “bundle of sonorous water,” Césaire’s conceptualization of the maternal ethics of testimony for the formerly enslaved and their descendants centers the woman’s body in the oceanic, marking it the site of enunciation for black testimonial. Because the “enforced diaspora” of the enslaved is founded upon “voyages…through uprooting” upon the seas, to which Florens’ mother testifies in _A Mercy_, the sea itself necessarily becomes the medium for testimonial transmission (Hall 1990, 224; Césaire 2010, 32). Importantly, “water transmits sound much more effectively than does air,” though the “speed of transmission in salt water is slower than in fresh” (Denny 1993, 199). Therefore, the placement of the maternal body within a small tributary river flowing into the ocean not only symbolizes the specificity of the island space within the wider complex of diaspora, but also suggests the relative speed of transmission and dissemination. The umbilical imagery of the woman’s navel as the core of her “submissively organized” floating body signals a fluid and diffuse maternal connection
with all of the Black Atlantic world, her “belly up” positioning suggesting the bloating of the drowned as well as pregnancy (Césaire 2010, 4). Birthing the living death of the enslaved and their oppressed descendants within the diaspora, the woman’s body also represents the re-routed echoing testimony of the masses.¹⁵

The anaphoric juxtaposition of her body with “Islands [as] scars of the water/Islands evidence of wounds/Islands crumbs/Islands unformed,” designates black testimony a resonant, repeating, mutable enterprise (42). Reiterations of the islands’ status model the amplification, modulation and dispersal of the echo, which forces continuous engagement through the denial of definitive categorization. The islands begin as “scars on the water” refigured in the next iteration as “evidence,” implicitly modeling traumatic testimony requiring proof and external verification (42). However, these scars also index survival of these traumatic events, relating “high crimes against the flesh,” and exhibiting its “seared, divided, ripped-apartness” as corroborating evidence of communal resilience (Spillers 2003, 206). In addition to reclaiming evidence and redirecting it toward an audience divested of the power of authorization, Césaire’s tour de force testimonial to enslavement and colonialism calls to question the efficacy of traditional models of testimony by refiguring the islands as “evidence” into “crumbs” (Césaire 2010, 42). Crumbs characterize the islands as diffuse, scattering, and also clinging. Crumbs both adhere to and move away from the solidity of the initial mass toward an unknown becoming through random dissemination. This leads Césaire to claim the islands’ status as “unformed” (42). Here unformed should not be read as negative, but unbound and unrestricted, suggesting against the “solidity” of Western teleological conceptions of progress a mode of being in the world that recognizes the unfinished state of all things.
Additionally, Césaire (re)presents the Antilles as a wound that transmits its presence in and relation to the world through sonic propagation. The “inane tom-toms of resounding sores” are the sonic imprints of the wounding enslavement produces (33). The islands as “wounds” or “sores” eschew their evidentiary status grounded in visual perception in favor of a sonically based practice of testimonial. As the dominant narrative of the islands has been written and attested to by those with the power of authorization, the islands are ocular evidence of black inferiority and its attendant decay. Evidence of abuse and oppression finds itself preemptively co-opted into a philosophical system wedding visual cues to teleological narratives that disallow alternate scripting. Césaire writes, “And this land screamed for centuries that we are bestial brutes; that the human pulse stops at the gates of the barracoon,” staging the master’s narrative of black inferiority that forestalls the prospect of a recognizable black testimonial in its narrative, evidentiary, professional form (28).

The poetic text, however, countermands the ideal of combatting the master narrative with likewise articulation: “We would tell. Would sing. Would howl. /Full voice, ample voice, you would be our wealth, our spear pointed….Words? /Ah, yes, words! /Reason, I crown you evening wind. /Your name voice of order? /To me the whip’s corolla” (17). Césaire exposes the inclination to contest the dominant narrative with a narrative of black suffering—to testify in the appropriate, or recognized manner—as a futile exercise. The medium of “words” proves insufficient for black testimonial as a product of the relationship of narrative to the ideals of Enlightenment rationality and “Reason” from which the slave, and the African more generally, are excluded. Hence, the palliative potentialities of the voice are rendered null and “Reason” functions as the
“whip’s corolla,” further lacerating the black subject through perpetual exclusion. Moreover, the black voice, “detoured,” “misl[ed]…[and] grate[d]” by the “weight of the insult and a hundred years of whip lashes,” fails in its attempts to counter the dominant, oppressive narrative (21).

However, these islands and their inhabitants are able to arrest the linear, progressive narrative of European conquest, mastery, and supremacy via the sounds produced in and emitted from them, re-cycling West African rhythmic patterns into New World functionality and re-orienting testimony of dispossession and enslavement toward the earth itself in order to capture rhythmically attuned recipients. Exposing narrative as an artificial construct, Césaire uses sound and its repetitions to signal blacks’ connection with the natural world. Hence, Césaire’s sounding of “rooh oh” circumnavigates the exclusion of the black subject from the domain of reason through the textual representation of a sonic trace devoid of linguistic meaning as informational content, but that posits an epistemology of embodied spiritual and intellectual practice wedded to the sonorous qualities of its articulation (Césaire 2010, 20; Henriques 2011, xvi). “Rooh oh” evokes the sonic capacities of bodies, affirming testimonies of the wounded and the wound itself. Césaire extrapolates these testimonies into the discourse of the drum: “tom-toms of empty hands/inane tom-toms of resounding sores/burlesque tom-toms of tabetic treason” (Henriques 2011, xvi; Césaire 2010, 33). The function and definition of the tom-toms undergo transformation and amplification through reiteration, like the islands. The “resounding” tom-tom drums produce a cacophony of rhythmic overlay and interplay between and beyond the constellations of islands, outward into the oceanic sphere for
diffuse dissemination via ripples, swells, surges and breakers that inexorably return transformed to these ever-evolving sites of sonic testimonial production.

The issue of return proves fundamental in theorizing diasporic testimony. The production of testimonial through the sonic figure of the echo anticipates in its inception the probability of transformation and the inevitability of return. Allied with an investment in nonlinear time, diasporic testimony draws upon the formal recursivity of African diasporic cultural production, rejecting linear notions of time in favor of a rhythmic, cyclical, *history as repetition*. Unmoored from finite processes, it cannot be conceived of in terms of Glissant’s *retour*, which posits a final destination (1997, 212). Nor should its continuous iterations be mistaken for a Freudian pathological irruption of the repressed. This return admits to the impossibility of finality, avoiding the constraints testimonial politics of recognition aimed at resolution through redress. Diasporic testimony is a reaching; while the echo eventually attenuates and dissipates, there is no finality of resolution, as its “acoustic energy [can be] diverted into internal vibrations” on a molecular level (Denny 1993, 199). The mechanics of ocean waves provide a conceptual tool to imagine the workings of diasporic testimony. The waves of water appear to travel outward from island shores, continuously moving in large wave formation or small, constant ripples—there is no such thing as a still sea, only the appearance of one from a distance. These waves in their outward movement “break” during contact with masses of land and other solid objects, creating alternate or divergent paths, coalescing and meeting in riptides and crosscurrents, covering the surface of the earth in a consistent, yet ever-evolving pattern. They return to wash back over their ostensible points of origin, but the wave has no distinct and readily identifiable point of
inception, as it is part of a complex of continuous motion. We can understand the echo as functioning in a similar manner to the wave. Once released the echo’s source cannot be definitively located, only followed in its points of contact and continued propagation, intensifications and dilutions across spheres, revealing itself to those who would hear both its loud, emphatic assertions and its insistent, nearly imperceptible frequencies.

For this reason, Césaire insists on the hearing capabilities of Negritude: “My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day” (2010, 35). A deaf Negritude is a dead Negritude; its ability to hear critically and attend to the testimonial aspects of black sound renders it useful. The possession of poetic voice is for naught if one is unable to perceive the auditory traces of a testimony re-routed through indirection due to the systematic “astonishing[sic] detour[ing]” of the “squalling throng…from…its cry” (2). The poet’s negritude must hear the squalling as resistance to the silencing of black diasporic experience, and as an index to the creation of a rhythmic testimonial that consistently reforms and transfigures itself in its propagations through earthly mediums. The maternal figure enables expansive reiterations of black personhood and testimonial, through her alignment with the (forced) suspension of the diasporic subject in socio-political contexts and this subject’s rhythmic relation to the natural world.

Césaire describes the diasporic subject as one “ignorant of surfaces but captivated by the motion of all things,” an important index to the form and function of diasporic testimony (35). The “motion of all things” serves as the cosmological and ontological locus of black experience that grounds black testimonial practices in rhythm and movement, evidenced by the waves emanating from and returning to the maternal body.
Césaire’s use of rhythm has been largely characterized “as a palliative force, a cathartic and dynamic way of sounding history and lost memory” to (re)connect the black diasporic subject to African origins, suturing the gaping wounds that slavery produced (Munro 2010, 132). This reductive hearing conflates Césaire’s textual deployments of rhythm with Leopold Senghor’s, denying the nuances of Césaire’s poetics. Stuart Hall argues cogently in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” that “cultural identity…is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being,’” and that acknowledgement of the rupture, discontinuity, and the contingencies of cultural identity are what allow “the traumatic character of colonial experience” and black diaspora to be fully apprehended (1990, 225). While *Notebook* painstakingly models a constant state of becoming in the midst of rupture and discontinuity in order to sound the traumas of enslavement and colonial oppression, Hall wrongly interprets Césaire’s work as the imposition of false unity throughout diaspora. This opinion of Césaire’s work imagines the poet’s reliance on an imaginative construct of return to mythic, utopian Africa, figured through an essentialized rhythm that restores the fragmented black subject to wholeness.

However, the suspended maternal figure in conjunction with *Notebook*’s ending suggests that a confrontation with history and a reconceptualization of testimony, not a (re)connection with Africa, positions the black diasporic subject as *testis*. In the same vein of Florens’ radical deconstruction of language, *Notebook*’s “I” formulates testimony bound to, and commingled with, the planet writ large. He states: “embrace, my purity mingles only with yours/so then embrace…bind me without remorse/bind me with your vast arms of luminous clay/bind my black vibration to the very navel of the world” (Césaire 2010, 50-51). “Black vibration” echoes Florens’ ashes integrating into the
atmosphere in tandem with the eagle’s eternal scream as a reconfiguration of testimony, enabling enslaved and oppressed blacks to stand as testis through the breaking of narrative strictures. This breaking simultaneously “bind[s] black vibration to the…navel of the world,” recalling the “bundle of sonorous water” that testifies to the creation and maintenance of diaspora through displacement and oppression. The final movement’s phallic (re)appropriation of umbilical imagery displaces the birth motif inherent in breaking (waves of) water, usurping the power of the maternal that facilitates black testimonial practice. Countering the diffusion of “submissively organized” water, the latter umbilical imagery implies penetration by the entry of vibration to the permeable body of the earth. This figurative cosmic insemination occurs only through the understanding of testimony as clusters of oscillating vibrations that travel through the mediums of human and planetary bodies. This theft of the umbilical and its masculine appropriation allows for the continued misunderstanding of Negritude as a fundamentally masculinist construct, as it disguises and displaces maternal power in favor of male-oriented expression. However, it cannot be ignored that this masculinist expression is facilitated by the maternal figure, as she precedes any and all assertions of male testimony. Black Atlantic textual production persistently reproduces this problematic disavowal of the maternal, specifically in nationalist discourses and in regard to black male subject formation. Mechanistic utilization and displacement reduce the maternal figure to mere instrumentality, denying its centrality to both diasporic testimony and black subject formation, which I will expound upon in the following chapter.

Despite the attempt to decouple the rhythmic from the maternal after such a painstaking elaboration of their imbrication, Césaire’s reliance on rhythm as a trope in the
text nevertheless casts it as a source of agentive possibilities. Teresa Brennan theorizes in *The Transmission of Affect* (2002), that rhythm serves as a tool “in the expression of agency,” and also plays a “unifying, regulating role in affective exchanges” (60).

Rhythm, as modeled in Césaire’s poem, in conjunction with the echo, serves as a mechanism of transmission for affective states, particularly those bound to the legacies of transatlantic slavery, producing embodied testimonies that constantly reverberate through bodies of water, land and flesh. Subjects attuned to this rhythm understand their places in relation to the immensity of a totality not centered upon their existence, but a field of rhythmic interrelation on a planetary scale. These subjects remain “porous to all the breathing of the world/fraternal locus for all the breathing of the world/drainless channel for all the water of the world/spark of the sacred fire of the world/flesh of the world’s flesh pulsating with the very motion of the world” (Césaire 2010, 35-6). The ideal of attunement with the cosmic rhythm of the planetary body illuminates the body’s permeability to environmental and social effects and affects. Césaire’s placement of the black body in alignment with other matter within the world, and his focus upon its “interdependence” with planetary “patterns of movement,” conceptually reverberates with sonic waves moving over and through the permeable envelope of the flesh, masses of land, and bodies of water to construct a testimony of echoes that resounds throughout the earth (Glissant 1997, 92). Radically disseminated, dispersed, transformed and transmuted, inexorably the waves return toward the diffuse maternal figure—the sonic site of testimony.
**Final Soundings**

Stuart Hall characterizes diaspora as a frame for cultural identity that must account for the heterogeneity of African peoples dispersed throughout the Atlantic. Difference denies the possibility of pure, shared origins highlighting the “ruptures and discontinuities” embedded within the formation of diasporic identity (1990, 225). While attending to these disjunctures proves necessary, “shared practices” that shape diasporic experience must be held in equal accord (Edwards 2003, 21). Both Césaire and Morrison posit through their respective texts that sound transmits testimonials of diasporic experience, in line with Paul Gilroy’s (1993) theorization of diasporic culture and identity as transcendent, though not unified, across geographic borders, conjoined primarily by music, rhythm and sound. Sonic formations and shared musical practices comprise the mechanisms that form and maintain black culture over space and time. Importantly, Gilroy’s designation of black music as “jewels taken from bondage”—sounds which attest to the “ineffable” aspects of enslavement—anticipates sonic elements as the fundamentals of diasporic testimonial practice (Gilroy 1993, 73). Following Gilroy, I posit that black sonic formations conjoined to the maternal body in Morrison’s and Césaire’s works propose and model a method of testimonial that coheres around the echo as a defining construct of diaspora and, therefore, diasporic testimony. Encompassing more than musical practice, the echo includes the quotidian sounds of enslavement, for which the mechanical propagation has never fully dissipated. Further, the echo stands as a figure for conceptualizing the formation and maintenance of diaspora through dispersal (first from African homelands via slave ships, later through internal and external migrations); resonance characterized by the varied and uneven implementation of
practices rooted in shared communal ideals; and return, a reaching-toward that engenders
diasporic connection and interchange between regionally adapted practices.

*A Mercy* and *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* require vigorous
engagement with and alternate understandings of testimony, urging us toward critical
listening practices that reveal the echo of black maternity as the unifying element of black
testimonial practices. Script and narrative undergo radical transfiguration in *A Mercy* and
*Notebook*. In the absence of redress and recompense, connection and realization come to
the fore. In contradistinction to sanitized historical narratives that putatively *recognize*
blacks as historically oppressed, bestowing institutional identity without systemic
reformation, the sounds of diasporic testimony orient recipients toward the echoes of
trauma in the contemporary structures that govern black life. Importantly, both texts
suggest a more broadly coalitional politics of activism that does not deny or displace
black experience, but that offers its resonance as a means of engendering connection.
Tellingly, Florens’ testimony resonates with and enfolds Lina’s experiences into its
sounding, commingling in the ashes Native American’s dispossession with African
diasporic experiences of enslavement as attestation to their interrelatedness within the
American “matrix of domination” (Collins 1990). The planetary orientation of diasporic
testimony calls upon other rhythmically attuned bodies to bear witness to, and to act as
mediums through which these testimonies continue to be transmitted, ultimately
gesturing toward a politics of what Ana Louise Keating names “raw openness,” a mode
of activist interaction located on a heretofore “unmapped common ground” predicated
upon intersubjective permeability (2005, 249; Anzaldua 2002, 570).
As an enactment of testimony and witnessing that shatters Cartesian notions of duality and the self-contained subject, diasporic testimony renders audible the persistence of slavery’s past in the present. It does so by attuning permeable subjects to echoes of experience that exceed traditional testimonial frames, and that continue to be excluded from contemporary racial narratives. The reception of these echoes is psychically and politically empowering, enabling more incisive critiques of the structures of power which continue to restrict black life, and engendering the possibilities for a politics in addition to poetics of relation capable of manifesting both widespread and site-specific changes. Diasporic testimony, then, participates in an underground politics of “black noise,” seeking an elusive, “fugitive justice”—a hearing for the experiences of black diasporic subjects, beyond the exigencies of recognition (Best and Hartman 2005, 9).

Chapter Two explores the manner in which black liberation ideologies deploy the politics of black noise in their various imaginings of freedom. Specifically, the chapter provides a sustained engagement with the problematically gendered aspects of black liberation activism by listening to representations of black nationalist discourses and ideologies beginning with Douglass’ 1845 Narrative and culminating with Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon (1977). Extending this chapter’s analysis of thefts of the umbilical as revealed in Césaire’s Notebook, I expose the manner in which the sounds of dis-abled maternal figures are both utilized, and then come to be suppressed in masculinist imaginings of freedom and black nationalism. Acts of maternal disavowal and silencing are revealed as endemic to these forms of black liberation discourse, a troubling paradigm that ignores the labors and contributions of black women in favor of designating black men as testis, and as representative of the black community.
Accordingly, Chapter Two uncovers and forces attention to the muffled testimonies of black women in order to sound a call for a more inclusive political program for black liberation in diaspora.

Notes

1 See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*; Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory and Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* and Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma and Writing History*, *Writing Trauma*. These studies of Holocaust trauma forward a paradigm of traumatic testimony closely tied to the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition wherein the survivor must learn to narrativize traumatic experience for an authorizing audience (witness), thereby engendering psychic integration of the traumatic event and the restoration of psychic wholeness and individual subjectivity. The presence of the “addressable other,” whether analyst or figure of political and social authority, is required in order to bestow recognition upon the survivor, validating the narrative of experience.

2 Dori Laub and Dominick LaCapra posit that the survivor of trauma must give her testimony “in a dialogic context and with an authentic listener, which allows for a reconciliation with a broken promise, and which makes resumption of life, in spite of the failed promise, at all possible” (“An Event, 91”). What Laub and LaCapra fail to address is the denial of empathetic witness to marginalized groups, or that the enterprise of relating trauma for external validation reproduces power differentials that continue to oppress certain racial/social groups.

3 Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best in “Fugitive Justice” cite Cugoano’s understanding of the impossibility of redress for slavery as the core of black political discourse: “In his account, justice is beyond the scope of the law, and redress necessarily inadequate… the forms of legal and social compensation available are less a matter of wiping the slate clean than of embracing the limited scope of the possible in face of the irreparable, and calling attention to the incommensurability between pain and compensation” (1-2).

4 Oliver’s logic proves particularly tenuous when considering the slave narrative’s tradition of bearing witness to objectification. Notably, Frederick Douglass marks the former slaves’ capacity to attest to both experience of being formed into an object, and of coming into self as subject in the 1845 *Narrative* with his famous statement “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (63).

5 While Schreiber focuses solely on the US context, her assertion can and should be expanded to think of slave experience diasporically and the lack of empathetic witness for communities of dispossessed blacks who would testify to the horrors of slavery.

6 Moten draws upon Nathaniel Mackey’s concept of “wounded kinship” and Hortense Spillers’ theorization of the impossibility of black matrinity under slavery. Moten locates the sonic trace of the maternal scream as the impetus for black political and artistic expression. I contend that wounded maternity is at the core of diasporic testimony, which the “black avant garde” practices in the creation of artistic and political works.

7 Sethe’s scarred flesh is read as a kind of script in *Beloved*, allowing each “reader” she encounters to interpret the raised flesh on Sethe’s back. As Mae G. Henderson argues, the “scars function as signs of ownership inscribing [Sethe] as property” and “like the inscription [on the tombstone] of Beloved and the pictorial images of the past, the scars function as…a memory trace” that must be deciphered by multiple readers (“Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text,” 68). While there is an
emphasis on the body’s capacity to bear scriptural traces of traumatic history that must be crafted into structured narrative in *Beloved*, equally compelling are the moments in which Morrison makes clear that narrative is insufficient to black testimonial through sonic rupture—Sethe’s “sth,” emblematic of the “private sounds of women” provides an aural trace that must also be contended with as a product of the flesh that also encodes testimony and history. Likewise, the townswomen’s production of “the sound that broke the backs of words” nods toward testimonial practices beyond the limitations of narrative or script, a necessary caveat for those barred access to literacy.

8 Dictionary.com

9 Ruth Leys posits in *Trauma, A Genealogy* that contemporary understandings of trauma revolve around Freudian conceptualizations of hysteria specifically dealing with sexual abuse of women. In this formulation, Freud theorizes a period of latency or of “deferred action” through which “trauma [becomes] constituted by a dialectic between two events, neither of which was intrinsically traumatic, and a temporal delay or latency through which the past was available only by a deferred act of understanding and interpretation” (20). This is incredibly problematic for the theorization of communal or shared traumas, particularly that of enslavement, for while the traumas of the institution may indeed have been “quotidian” in nature, the idea that the trauma would remain psychically unregistered over a long period of time seems quite unlikely.

10 Maternal inability, a critical theoretical construct in this work, must also be understood as indexing more broadly the phenomenon of parental inability to protect as part and parcel of chattel slavery’s disempowerment of slaves through the displacement of kinship ties in favor of commercial interests.

11 The body of Morrison’s work reveals a repeated engagement with the word “mercy” and it’s shifting connotations in black life through her female characters. This trope of reiteration in Morrison’s work can be heard in the echo of “Solomon” in the words “Sugarman,” “Shalimar,” and “Shalleemone” in *Song of Solomon* as well as in *Beloved* through Sethe’s deployment of “rememory,” which suggests that each iteration of memory is constructed in relation to its purpose, highlighting both its mutability and its status as an echo of the founding event itself, as opposed to an unmediated representation.

12 See James Scott: *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. I use Scott’s term hidden transcript to index the manner in which Florens’ narrative is constructed with a particular “social site” or “public” in mind—an audience to affirm her experiences (14). However, the public (embodied by the blacksmith and also her mother) at which her narrative is directed, cannot witness to her written experiences due to restrictions upon black literacy and geographical distance created due to slavery. Importantly, Florens’ etching of the text upon the walls of Vaark’s home also underscores the manner in which “the frontier between the hidden and public transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate—not a solid wall” (14, my emphasis).

13 The status of truth is decided by the audience of testimony which, in cases involving reparations and redress for slavery, is the state. The state has a vested interest in denying recognition of or authorization for blacks’ testimonies to the continued effects of chattel slavery in their daily lives, as authorizing these claims makes the state responsible for enacting redressive measures as an approximation of justice for the victims of oppression. Instead, the state refuses recognition, relying upon a framework that purports to assess “responsibility” instead, absolving Western whites (and by extension the state) while also making blacks responsible for not bettering their own condition.

14 Here I use rhizomatic in Glissant’s sense of the term, which imagines the possibility of cultural contact and interchange minus “foundational crutches like self-contained subjectivity, sovereign agency” (Hantel, “Errant Note on Caribbean Rhizome,” 2012).

15 Vincent Brown asserts in *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (2008) that death became the locus for all experience in the Atlantic world during slavery and the medium through which a distinctly black politics began to assert itself. Extending Brown’s analysis to encompass testimonial practices, we can theorize that black testimonial sounds itself from the depths of the Atlantic graveyard, in which, as Glissant asserts, the bodies of drowned African captives serve as “signposts”—or here, *soundposts*—through which diasporic testimony transmits itself and reverberates through the earth.
See also Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and Black Subjectivity*. Drawing on the groundbreaking work of Hortense Spillers, Holland asserts that black subjectivity in the West must be understood through a relationship with death—if the black body is marked in the public consciousness by and must come through death in order to articulate a subjectivity, then it also enables the subjectivities of those who must pass through the liminality of the always-already abjected and debased black body.

16 Leopold Sedar Senghor’s theory of Negritude posits that “the organizing force which makes the black style is rhythm,” which, in large part, Césaire’s theory of Negritude echoes (qtd in Snead 1981, 150). However, Senghor’s understanding of African diasporic rhythm casts it as essential, timeless, and intrinsic to black being—a pure form unmediated by the experiences of rupture, enslavement, and colonialism; a physiological enactment of a return to African origins that renders the fragmented diasporic subject whole. I want to suggest here that while Césaire similarly constructs rhythm as an organizing aspect of African diasporic life, he does so in a manner that refuses to essentialize this rhythm as intrinsic and immutable, but rather calls attention to the potential of Afro-diasporic rhythm as a mobilizing force—one that can be deployed on a planetary level to engender connection.

17 Senghor, Damas and Césaire are characterized as attributing an essentialized Africanness to black subjects worldwide through the troping of rhythm as a marker of African identity. While these thinkers certainly utilized rhythm in the formulation of their theories of Negritude, it is a simplistic and reductive understanding of Césaire’s use of rhythm. This type of characterization ignores his use of rhythm as a mechanism for the propagation of sonic testimonies of enslavement and oppression. Rhythm doesn’t merely operate as a palliative, but is taken up as a tool and its relation to blackness refigured as a mechanistic force to be appropriated as opposed to simply a natural attribute. It also complicates the relation of black rhythm to both servitude and entertainment in ways that highlight black agency, intellect and resistance.
Chapter Two: “WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER’S NAME?”: Maternal Disavowal and the Reverberating Aesthetic of Black Women’s Pain in Black Nationalist Literature

Black women, timeless, are sun breaths/are crying mothers/are snatched rhythms/are blues rivers

Larry Neal, “For Our Women”

But now the music became a distinct wail of female pain.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Without the scream of a maternal figure, it seems, the male Black Nationalist subject remains uninitiated into self-knowledge and full awareness of his oppressed social status. Black women’s pain serves as the matrix of his becoming. Related through songs, cries, and metaphors of labor and birth, black maternal suffering proves both productive and shameful—the primordial ooze from which the black man arises, but must leave behind in order to claim a future for himself. In 1960’s-70’s Black Nationalist circles (Black Panthers, Nation of Islam, and the Black Power/Arts Movements), “the black man” was centered “as the true subject of black nationalist discourse,” and black women were pushed to its margins (Dubey 1994, 17). Appallingly, the Black Nationalisms of this era reproduced Daniel Moynihan’s (1965) problematic claim in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* that the “matriarchal” structure of black American families oppresses black men. While the impact of Moynihan’s report cannot be denied, Black Nationalist tendencies to marginalize and silence black mothers encompass a broad historical terrain into which that moment must be situated. Black
Nationalism broadly defined is the claiming of a collective identity by blacks in the New World—acknowledgement of a shared “racial heritage and destiny” forged in the crucible of transatlantic slavery that mandates communal “responsibility for the welfare of other black individuals” (Moses 1988, 20).

Within Black Nationalist discourses, there lies a fundamental problem of gender inequity. Black feminist scholars Angela Davis (1983), Michele Wallace (1978) and bell hooks (1981) offer incisive critiques of Black Nationalism’s gender problems. However, these analyses are misunderstood as merely responses to the Black Power Movement and its concomitant Black Nationalist discourses. Instead, these women extend a longstanding legacy of black women’s critical assessments of Black Nationalist ideologies. Kathy Glass (2006, 1) posits that black women writer-activists including “Sojourner Truth, …and Frances E.W. Harper…transcend[ed] the narrowness of nationalism [by] develop[ing] eclectic resistance strategies and unique forms of political alliance.” Seemingly barred by gender from actively producing Black Nationalism’s principles, these women critically examine its conflicting ideological aims in their writing, and center black women as maternal (re)producers of culture. This chapter builds upon these women’s critical assessments, naming the matrix of black women’s sounds and approximated womb-spaces as the unclaimed fundamentals of Black Nationalist ideologies.

The patriarchal desire to relegate black women to “subordinate roles” obscures gendered aspects of racial oppression to which Black Nationalism should respond. Moynihan’s *The Negro Family* exacerbates the gendered wounds of slavery by naming the black maternal body as the site of black familial “pathology.” Responding to
Moynihan’s report, Hortense Spillers ([1987] 2003, 227) locates its “originary narrative and judicial principle” in “the condition of the slave mother [which is] ‘forever entailed on all her remotest posterity.’” One, therefore, cannot respond to Moynihan’s report without responding to the historical principle to which it tethers itself—“the condition of the [black] mother” (Spillers 2003, 227). Spillers interrogates “the condition of the mother,” probing the extent of its reducibility to “enslavement,” while suggesting that it signifies the “culturally forbidden…‘mark’ and ‘knowledge’ of the mother upon the child” (227). Lingering within Spillers’ dynamic of questioning, this chapter postulates that the “knowledge” transmitted from mother to child is at once indicative of social status and of self as subject. Using Spiller’s critical sounding to examine texts promulgating Black Nationalism(s) across a broad temporal spectrum, I expose that maternal displacement and disavowal prove integral to their politics and poetics. Investigating the core of Black Nationalism, we find that the New World black mother’s soundings are necessary to formulate Black Nationalist ideologies, though her cries are muted in the masculinist imagination.

Forwarding the ideal of an autonomous male witness within black male-authored nationalist texts, maternal acts become abrogated in thefts of the umbilical performed by black men who enact their own metaphorical rebirthings through proxy wombs and sounds of black women’s pain. These men then lay claim to subjective autonomy and the authority to represent the black community, thereby erasing the presence and labors of black women in the same manner as Césaire’s poetic testis in Notebook of a Return to the Native Land. The lionized status of black masculinity in nationalist contexts obscures the ways in which black maternity surfaces in the form of sound to engender community,
black testimonies, and subjectivity. Rendering audible textual echoes of black female pain, I name the maternal body’s sounds as sites of testimony, and the locus of black individual and collective identities. I expose how sonic black maternity is first called up to preserve and disseminate communal history and then reconfigured, shuttled offsite, and disavowed in order to forward masculinist perspectives of Black Nationalism. This disavowal of the maternal ethics of black testimony and subjectivity reaches a critical juncture during the 1960’s through 1970’s, as black male authority was discursively amplified in radical black movements in America. The Black Nationalist rhetoric of this historical moment effectively silences black women publicly, while requiring their psychic, physical, and maternal labors offsite. However, this gendered sleight of hand is not unique to the Black Power moment. Instead, this moment reveals longstanding practices of maternal denial and abandonment that place black women within the discursive margins of Black Nationalist and liberation ideologies.

Accordingly, I follow muffled sonic traces of black female presence in order to reveal these women’s centrality to Black Nationalist ideology. As black womanhood is allied with songs and sounds of pain in nationalist texts, this chapter theorizes the ways in which black female sound is rendered serviceable in the making of nationalist subjectivities and ideologies through unearthing echoes of black women’s pain. Black male nationalist writers reconstruct wombs as built and/or metaphorical spaces in order to forward a paradigm of male self-making. However, conscripting black women’s songs and sounds in this way produces a reverberating aesthetic of black female pain that simultaneously haunts and structures Black Nationalist texts.
Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* ([1845] 1999), Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy; or Shadows Uplifted* ([1892] 1988), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* ([1952] 1995), and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* ([1977] 2004) all locate maternal song and sound at the center of their diverse black nationalistic ideologies. Black women’s songs transmit histories and bridge geographical and temporal divides, while their cries of pain inform community members of danger. Black maternity’s sonic dimensions are commonly figured through recurrent umbilical and birthing imagery, forwarding a procreative ethos within which black male identity is constituted. However, male-authored nationalist texts frequently absent the literal maternal bearers of song and sound. The effect is a “split between sound and source” that echoes blacks’ severance from a national body (Weheliye 2005, 7). The “split” also serves as a fecund *materiodiscursive space* from which to configure black male identity. 2

Often within these texts, male-constructed sites mimic the womb to perform political and subjective rebirth. Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative* provides the womb’s blueprint for his literary heirs, of whom Ellison proves the most precocious.

Thefts of the umbilical in masculinist textual representations deny women’s maternal authority and presence, engendering a dynamic in which “men beget men” (Wright 2004, 139). This chapter traces echoes of maternal pain throughout nationalistic texts. Because “the trope of the mother speaks to circularity, connecting…to future generations [and] to previous ones,” (139) a focus upon maternal soundings also necessitates a mode of textual engagement that traces resonances across time and space in order to uncover black mothers at the core of nationalist discourse. Harper’s placement of maternal figures at the center of a burgeoning Black Nationalist discourse provides a
template for future black feminist scholars to contest the gendered inequities that inhere within black activism. Hearing *Iola Leroy* as a response to Douglass’ call, this chapter places Harper’s novel in a dialectical exchange with the *Narrative* that reveals and contests its masculinist exceptionalism. While Douglass is not commonly understood as a black nationalist writer or sympathizer in the context of his 1845 *Narrative*, here I seek to recuperate him as a black nationalist figure, not simply because he is taken up symbolically in 1960’s Black Nationalist circles, but because his exceptionalist, representative black masculinity and his ethics of maternal disavowal prove endemic to future Black Nationalist ideologies. Indeed, Douglass’ black masculinist exceptionalism comprises an aspirational politics of black male attainment that stakes itself in a claim to represent black male capacity for citizenship. Reading “against the grain” of Douglass’ singular testimony, I look to the *Narrative’s* “dislocations,” the moments in which he “pragmatically,” or “to his own surprise—expressed himself in a rhetoric harmonious with that of black nationalism” in order to mark the influence of his black masculinist exceptionalism in subsequent imaginings of black nationalism (Levine 2009; Moses 2004, 40).

Taking Douglass’ *Narrative* as a text that implicitly traffics in black nationalist discourse, and *Iola Leroy* as a novel in which “nationalist ingredients inform its ideological orientation,” then we more clearly understand that “the constitutive rhetoric of black nationalism [is]…a working theory of ‘discourse in action’ that is ‘constantly responsive to the exigencies of the contingent situations in which it operates,’” (Glass 2006, 107; Stancliff 2011,10; Gordon 2003, 5-6 qtd in Stancliff). Therefore, I read *Iola Leroy* in order to reveal that Harper’s text, in centering black mothers and their songs,
contributes “an important ethical register to the cultural rhetoric of black nationalism” (Stancliff 2011, 7). Taking Douglass’ *Narrative* and *Iola Leroy* as texts that negotiate aspects of black nationalist thought in their respective time periods, and that influence how black nationalism comes to be expressed in the future, I reveal the centrality of black maternal figures and their sounds in Black Nationalist ideologies. I contend that Douglass’ *Narrative* presents black women’s sounds and bodies in a manner that becomes paradigmatic within masculinist literatures of black nationalism. Next, naming Ellison as Douglass’ literary heir, the Chapter examines *Invisible Man*’s use of black women’s sounds and proxy wombs as constitutive to the text’s black nationalist ethics. Lastly, I read Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* as a sustained critical engagement that exposes the perpetuity of maternal disavowal and the sacrifice of black women as constitutive aspects of black nationalist ideologies. *Song of Solomon* allows us to look backwards to Douglass’ *Narrative* in order to note its enduring influence upon masculinist black nationalist ideologies and literatures, which continue to represent sounding and singing black maternal bodies both as sites of unfreedom, and the thresholds of black male becoming.

**Mothers Lost and Mothers Denied**

*Iola Leroy*’s eponymous heroine struggles to reconnect her family torn asunder by slavery. A young lady of mixed parentage, Iola grows up unaware that her fair-skinned mother is a former slave married to her master. Upon Iola’s father’s death from yellow fever, his cousin Alfred Loraine contests the legality of Leroy’s marriage to Marie,
claims the estate, and remands Marie and her children into slavery. Torn from her Northern boarding school, Iola briefly reconnects with her mother prior to the sale meant to separate them permanently. Fortunately, Iola’s brother receives her warning missive, escapes sale, and joins a colored regiment in the Union Army. Lorraine sells Iola to a lascivious master who attempts to force himself upon her sexually. Iola maintains her chastity against incredible odds, until Tom, a slave covertly aiding the Union Army, arranges her rescue. She is put to work as a nurse tending to wounded soldiers, soothing them with the songs of her childhood.

One song in particular appeals to Iola’s uncle Robert, who identifies her song as his “mother’s hymn” (Harper 1988, 140). The sonic trace of the “mother’s hymn” traverses physical and temporal distances as an embodied, recitative practice “handed by the mother” to her children (Spillers 2003, 228). The song operates in this text, both during and immediately after slavery, as a familial palimpsest transmitted generationally to mark its bearers with knowledge of and from the mother. Harper designates song as an aural palimpsest that connects scattered kin across physical and temporal distances—a paradigm that echoes throughout diasporic literatures. It accounts for both the song’s mutability and its enduring sonic trace, figured in later texts as haunting, residual “phonic substance” (Moten 2003, 10). *Iola Leroy* idealizes maternal song through its ability to reinstate familial and communal wholeness after the brutal experiences of enslavement. Importantly, Harper’s text both names and disposes of the white father and the attendant promise of “patronymic” inheritance (Spillers 2003, 218). Leroy’s inability to make legal provisions to protect his family exposes the manner in which under slavery “‘kinship’…can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations”
The mother’s song intercedes to define the familial unit. This at once indexes the rule that “the child follows the condition of the mother” and instates a distinctly maternal inheritance for the descendants of slaves.

Read with and against *Narrative of the Life*, *Iola Leroy* reveals what Douglass’ *Narrative* excises. Harper’s novel promotes black utopianism predicated upon setting aright the black domestic sphere, its nationalist impulse taking shape in uplift philosophy that posits a conjoined destiny for blacks irrespective of class and color differences. While seemingly incompatible with Douglass’ recital of slavery’s dehumanizing aspects, *Iola Leroy* clearly delineates the maternal ethics that ground Douglass’ pursuit of freedom. Douglass’ *Narrative* masks these ethics behind the rhetoric of self-mastery, positing an assimilationist, representative masculinism that centers back male experience as fundamental to American nationalism. Rebecka Rutledge Fisher (2010, 22) asserts, Harper espoused methods of “demonstrat[ing]…care…for others through ethical action” at the core of her work, privileging community over individual subjectivity. In contrast, Douglass’ masculinist narrative represents slavery’s effects upon the black community as they coalesce in the body of a singular individual. Harper’s text studies these effects through a diffuse dynamic that involves multiple experiences of slavery. Dispersing maternal presence through key feminized figures—daughters, matronly black women, and caring black men—Harper grounds the maintenance of the black community in a maternal ethics of caring one for another.³ While privileging “natural” maternity by birth, Harper’s text also honors nontraditional maternal practices within black communities born of the experience of slavery, responding to Douglass’ charge that slavery destroyed black motherhood.
Douglass’ *Narrative* laments the “destructive loss of the natural mother” by enslaved children, intimating that slavery negates kinship bonds (Spillers 2003, 221). Douglass’s biological mother, therefore, is replaced by other maternal figures. Aunt Hester emerges as the most important maternal figure in the *Narrative* because her cries inaugurate Douglass into knowledge of his own enslavement. However, Douglass refuses to linger in the impact of Hester’s scream. Rather, he (re)presents his attainment of subjectivity as the result of his battle with Covey, which reflects an attempt to formulate a narrative of slavery’s traumas that centers only his experiences.

Hester’s voice, as the *only* black woman’s voice represented in the text, manifests its presence in a non-linguistic cry, while Douglass’s mother and grandmother remain silent, haunting presences. Other slave women also suffer in silence. Douglass narrates the brutalities they endure, but omits any sounds of response on their part to their maltreatment. Douglass, as witness, reports these atrocities, but in a manner that further abjoints black women by presenting them as mute objects. Douglass’s masculine ideal of freedom requires this silencing. Hester’s scream performs a very specific task in the text that, once completed, renders black women’s sounds unnecessary. Her cries “awakened” Douglass to the horrors of enslavement, (re)birthing him into the knowledge of his own bondage (Douglass 1999, 18). Her “heart-rending shrieks” stand in the text as dissipating echoes of Douglass’s formative experience as opposed to an opportunity for the reader to truly bear witness to Hester’s scream (18). Significantly, once Douglass comes into knowledge of his own enslavement, the cries are no longer reported.

While Douglass ceases to report Hester’s sounds, his pen cannot contain the impact of her cries of pain. Douglass’s presentation of the black female body in (sexual)
peril, and the attendant “shrieks” of fear and pain are not specific to his *Narrative*, but a generic convention in the slave narrative tradition. The brutalized female slave and her cries become shorthands for the abasements of bondage that capture the “true character” of slavery (24). These cries also serve as “inaugural moments in the formation of the [male] slave” (Hartman 1997, 3), from which he must subsequently distance himself in the pursuit of freedom.

The 1845 *Narrative*, among Douglass’s writings, most closely adheres to the slave narrative’s conventions. Douglass attempts to manage the impact of Hester’s scream and to place himself at the center of the *Narrative* through the textual silencing of other black women. Because the cries of injured black women have already been cast as representative of the larger black community’s status, Douglass must undertake the discursive management of Hester’s scream in order to posit himself as an autonomous black male subject empowered to represent the community. One of the manners in which he sublimes Hester’s cries becomes evident in his discussion of slave songs.

While songs and cries are distinct from one another, Douglass’s *Narrative* tellingly conflates songs and the sounds of black women, effectively flattening the functional differences between these sonic forms. As Douglass is among the first writers to theorize slaves’ music as an act of testimony to their experiences, it is imperative to examine the relationship he constructs between Hester’s scream and the slaves’ songs, as well as how his use of these distinct sonic forms as synonyms for one another persists in masculinist imaginings of black nationalism. Douglass muses that “every tone was a testimony against slavery” and that “these songs” provided his “first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery” (Douglass 1999, 24). These songs
supplement Douglass’s awakening through Hester’s cries, and affirm his membership within a community of slaves. Importantly, the songs are likened in form and in function to the scream—as testimonies to enslavement that are semantically non-sensical. As such, slaves’ songs and Hester’s scream operate as “opacities.”Douglass imbues the songs with an impenetrable sonic authority to represent experiences of enslavement that cannot be reduced to the logic of narrative. These “incoherent” songs are analogous to Hester’s scream, which contains the kernel of slave experience that blooms into Douglass’s *Narrative* (24). The songs and scream provide acoustic evidence of Douglass’s communal and kinship relationships. As such, both auditory forms mediate Douglass’s testimony, and come to be mediated within the *Narrative* in a manner that sublimates them within Douglass’s masculinist ideal of freedom.

Douglass insists that the estranging effects of slavery render him completely without family, yet the *Narrative* belies this fact. He resides with his grandmother as a child, is cared for by Hester, and lives with an Aunt and Sister (all of whom are silent save Hester’s cries). Douglass also suggests a sense of kinship with his fellow bondsmen through song that, like Hester’s scream, must be textually managed by creating psychic and physical distance. He writes, “Those songs…quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds” (24). Songs, then, engender community among the slaves by disseminating coded knowledge as opaque testimonies to the captives’ experiences. Similarly, Hester’s scream testifies to her personal injuries while also sounding a warning to young Douglass. The songs, in tandem with Hester’s scream, inaugurate Douglass into knowledge of self. Yet for Douglass, neither the songs nor Hester’s scream warrant further mention succeeding their revelatory moments. Because he conceives of freedom
as autonomy, Douglass “forsakes ‘familial or communal postures,’” by narratively distancing himself from the implied kinship of the songs and by silencing black women (Andrews 1986, 238). The singing of slaves, like Hester and other maternal figures, must be left behind in order for Douglass to attain freedom, exposing the similar functions of screams and songs in his text.

Douglass names Hester’s cry “the blood stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which [he must] pass” into knowledge of his bondage, thereby analogizing her scream to the cry of a laboring mother (Douglass 1999, 18). Douglass’s choice to represent Hester’s scream as a gate mandates her abandonment. Once inaugurated, and presumably in order to claim an active manhood, Douglass must leave her behind. Similarly, his mother’s death and his grandmother’s banishment to the fringes of the plantation and the text propose the necessity of male unfettering from female influence as prerequisite to the attainment of freedom. Hester’s scream operates in the same manner as the song, both of which prove endemic to the masculinist constructs of freedom upon which the black nationalist tradition comes to rest. Hester’s scream enables Douglass’s testimony by sounding a warning even while attesting to the brutalities that she personally endures. Importantly, in slave narratives black women’s cries of pain metonymically represent communal suffering, rendering the maternal body and its cries as the locus of black communal testimony. The continuity of this trope is evident throughout the body of African American literature, but less attention is given to the wrestling of representative power from black women in order to center black men as archetypes of black personhood, and thereby models for the attainment of freedom. Douglass silences black women in the text following his rebirth through Hester’s scream
to enact a narrative containment that forwards idealized black masculinity as the basis for freedom. However, Hester’s cries continue to echo throughout the *Narrative*, producing a *reverberating aesthetic of black women’s pain*, a literary resonance that both shapes and exceeds the parameters of the text proper.

In a problematic turn, the slave narrative trope of the screaming black maternal figure ceases to signal her personal injury and the shared fate of the community. Rather, she *herself* comes to epitomize all that black men must escape in pursuit of freedom. Fred Moten (2003, 16) highlights the “indistinctness of the conditions of ‘mother’ and ‘enslavement’ in the milieu from which Douglass emerges,” wherein her perceived capacity to tether the child to a life of bondage prompts maternal disavowal by men seeking subjective autonomy. Just as her cries and communal songs are problematically conflated in the black masculinist imagination, the mother and bondage become synonymous in a manner that marks black maternal figures as degraded, necessitating black men’s flights. Freedom, then, for black men, is conceived as an individualistic *freedom-from* the mother, as opposed to *freedom-with* the black family intact, as evidenced by Douglass’s acts of abandonment.

Written nearly 50 years after the *Narrative*, *Iola Leroy* sounds a response and offers a corrective to Douglass’s text. While *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881;1892) proffers significant revisions that name and claim maternal influences, perhaps in an attempt to “regain…the heritage of the mother,” the 1845 *Narrative* occupies a hallowed space within the black nationalist imagination as textual monument to black male autonomy (Spillers 2003, 228). The *Narrative*’s paradigm of black male *self-making* mandates black women’s abandonment by representing their cries as
intrinsic—not responses—to slavery’s debasements, thereby intimating that to remain in their proximity resigns one to bondage. Harper’s novel “runs counter to the patriarchal orientation of black nationalist projects committed to re-invigorating the masculinity of black men at the expense of black women” (Glass 2006, 114). *Iola Leroy* contests Douglass’s masculinist quasi-nationalistic impulses that necessitate black female abandonment by imagining possibilities for black men’s attainment of freedom other than deserting black mothers. Ben, a courageous slave, refuses his opportunity to escape to the Union Army, stating, “I can’t take [my mother] along with me, an’ I don’t want to be free and leave her behind in slavery” (Harper 1988, 31). His words illuminate that the black community’s ethical priority in freedom should be maintaining the family, with the mother at its center. By installing the mother as the family’s core, Harper countermands Douglass’s maternal abandonment. Allying the female body to songs that operate as the primary vehicle for communal bonding, the text imbues mothers and daughters with authority. Song re-connects the family fractured by slavery to mitigate the effects of estrangement. The songs, which bind the community together, are transmitted from mother to daughter, and recognizable to their immediate kin. Importantly, these feminine musical forms precede and enable former slaves’ testimonies to traumatic experience. Without the mother’s song, testimony is preempted.

*Iola Leroy* centers maternal song in its enactment of postbellum black nationalism. Tellingly, Robert discovers his mother at a church revival. Harper clearly names maternal song as the impetus for both testimony and reunion. Robert “raise[s] the hymn which Iola had sung for him”—his *mother’s hymn*—which provokes “a dear old mother [to] r[i]se from her seat” and testify to her estrangement from her children as a
result of her sale (179). Her testimony prompts Robert to give his own—one of endless searching for a lost mother. Like their testimonies, their reunion also signifies on a communal level: “Mothers whose children had been torn from them in the days of slavery knew how to rejoice in her joy. The young people...rejoiced with them” (182). The mother’s song, transmitted to and by the daughters of her line, is recognized by the male descendant and aired in the public sphere. Robert thereby prompts his mother’s testimony, which, in turn, enables him to testify. Significantly, the mother’s song precedes and enables testimony, and engenders familial and communal unity.

The Narrative does not explicitly name maternal sound as fundamental to Douglass’s testimonial practice, yet Hester’s cries signify the birthing pains through which Douglass gains knowledge of his enslavement. Her cries, like the slaves’ songs provide a sonic record for future replay and recall, shaping his testimony to enslavement. Douglass writes: “It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant” (1999, 18). This traumatic scene so deeply affects Douglass that he echoes the experience two paragraphs later, more clearly stating his own sense of endangerment. In the midst of this narrative echo Douglass enacts his (re)birth into bondage. He writes, “I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over” (19). Maurice Wallace states that the “architecture” of the closet “repeats the concealments of speech as the camouflage of Douglass’s own sexual terror,” citing Douglass’s statement “‘I expected it would be my turn next’” (2002, 118). I propose that his closeting serves another purpose. Through the closet, Douglass (re)constructs and (re)inhabits a womb-like space, thereby (re)mediating his relationship to the black maternal body. While Douglass’s doubled recall of Hester’s
scream amplifies her cry as a primary motif of the text, this amplification also signals Douglass’s personal vulnerability. The echoed scream reveals Douglass’s fear of the possibility of sharing Hester’s fate, a merely projective exercise rather than an act of bearing witness to Hester’s anguish. For this reason, he seeks recourse in the closet. The built environment displaces the *natural* womb, marking it as a site of safety insofar as it places a barrier both between Douglass and the lash, and between Douglass and Hester’s body, signaling his first step toward physical and psychic detachment from his maternal forebears. Here, Douglass (re)constructs womb space in a manner that comes to mark itself as a signal trope in black male authors’ nationalist imaginings, one perhaps most masterfully deployed in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

*Invisible Man*’s series of appropriative and constructive acts surrounding the anatomy of the womb belie anxieties about the possibility of autonomous black male subjectivity. The unnamed protagonist’s multiple attempts to claim an identity within a racist society present themselves as a series of “becomings.” Notably, these “becomings” are masculine, and do not consider the possibility of complementary, feminine subjectivities. However, the protagonist’s multiple attempts at becoming are framed, like Douglass’ awakening, through the textual metaphors of rebirth, shoring up maternal presence even as the text attempts to suppress its import and impact. Moreover, *Invisible Man* maintains the link between the black maternal body and song/sound as a part of its overall conceptual framing, provoking a reading of the text that takes this crucial aspect into account. Black women must be acknowledged for their role in framing the discourse of the text.
“Women Disappear”—or Do They?

*Invisible Man* follows an unnamed protagonist on his quest for identity. After jeopardizing his “scholarship to the state college for Negroes” by offending a white patron, the protagonist travels to New York, where he discovers his invisibility in American society (Ellison 1995, 32). He undertakes a journey toward self-discovery requiring the persistent reassessment of his identity. Catalyzed by contact with those who “refuse to see [him],” the protagonist struggles to formulate a usable Black Nationalism that names and affirms his rightful place within America (3). Both the novel’s nationalism and the character’s subjective remakings are actualized in the matrix of black women’s sounds and (re)constructed wombs. By triangulating Ellison’s staging of black women, their sounds and songs, and the proxy womb, we recognize black women’s profound role in *Invisible Man*, and their centrality to the novel’s black nationalism.

Spaces that mimic the womb are laboriously (re)constructed for the unnamed protagonist, conjoining the black maternal body to sounds that connote history and home, and initiate the protagonist into various spheres of knowledge. Oscillating between uncovering and re-covering black maternal figures at the core of black male subjectivity and Black Nationalist ideologies, *Invisible Man* reveals both an investment in and anxiety about black maternal sound.

Though represented by a series of peripheral figures, the black woman’s ideological import and burden within *Invisible Man* cannot be overstated. Both Ellison’s Black Nationalism “that expands, while calling attention to,…narrowly
defined...understandings of black nationalisms,” and his musings about the responsibilities of the oppressed individual to society and society’s responsibilities to the individual, require the black female body and its sounds as the unnamed, unclaimed fundamentals of the novel (Waligora-Davis 2004, 388). Nicole Waligora-Davis offers a cogent remark concerning the place of black women in the novel’s riot scene. She writes, “While she risks being overlooked amidst the action…the black female literally and figurally overwhelms this moment” (405). Although Waligora-Davis’ comment specifically indexes the Harlem riot blues singer, the point she makes can be productively extrapolated to characterize the text’s overall treatment of black women. Ellison performs the double-movement of presenting black female figures as peripheral, while locating their sounds, songs, and maternal labors at the crux of the protagonist’s struggles to create an identity. The sheer volume of text devoted to the protagonist’s quest for identity seemingly overwhelms the scant depictions of black women, rendering them peripheral. However, a careful listening into the “groove[s]” of the text makes audible the sounds and maternal aspects of black women (Ellison 1995, 443). Conjoining the maternal with the sonic allows for the physical disappearing of black women during critical junctures within the text, which belies their necessity in the making of black male identities.

Black female figures in Invisible Man symbolically perform maternal labors for the protagonist and the community at large. Each woman offers sounds and songs that signify black Americans’ place, which conflates black female presence with home. From the “old singer” and the “beautiful girl” with the “mother’s” voice in the Prologue, to the “thin brown girl” at the college, to Mary Rambo’s “contralto” voice, to his grandmother’s
song, to the blues singer in the riot scene, *Invisible Man*’s pages resonate with the songs and cries of black women, necessitating an engagement with black maternal sonority. The prologue marks maternal sound as the protagonist’s means of grappling with questions of freedom. Hearing Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to be So Black and Blue” engenders his descent into the “lower levels” of his consciousness and American history (8). Descent into the underground realm of the music juxtaposes multiple temporalities against one another, embedding the history of enslavement within the novel’s narrative present, exposing slavery as the unacknowledged base of American culture. During his descent, the protagonist encounters a “singer of the spirituals” who has given birth to her master’s sons, as well as “a beautiful girl…pleading in a voice like [his] mother’s” (9). The record’s breaks disseminate the maternal voice in order to transmit black communal histories, and establish the role of black women’s sounds as fundamental to black men’s imaginings of freedom.

Significantly, the mother’s voice echoes throughout the prologue in a manner that signals black women’s sexual abuse under chattel slavery. The “old singer” has birthed children for her master, while the “beautiful girl…[stands] before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body” (9). These sexually imperiled black women’s “pleading[s]” and “moans” recall Hester’s screams, and enable the protagonist to “discover unrecognized compulsions of…being,” or come into a different sphere of knowledge of self (13). The sounds of black women inaugurate him into a new realm of his subjectivity, even as he is “incapable” of acting in response to the demands of the “familiar music” imbedded with their cries (12). This incapacity to act is echoed in the protagonist’s disclaiming of responsibility: “To whom can I be responsible, and why
should I be, when you refuse to see me... Responsibility rests upon recognition” (15). Tellingly, his demands for social “recognition” to prompt his “responsibility” are directed not toward black women, but an amorphous “you”/America, that reproduces the slave narrative’s mode of address, as well as its paradigmatic use of black maternal sounds. Ellison’s deployment of slave narrative generic commonplaces ally the protagonist’s experiences with those of the enslaved black male seeking freedom and unwittingly reveals the manner in which black men’s desire for social recognition allows them to mitigate responsibilities to or for black women.

Other black women in Ellison’s text gestate and birth communal histories through their songs, performing maternal labors in the service of communal survival. For instance, the “thin brown girl” at the “Negro college becomes “transformed by the music” into a “pipe” channeling expressions of communal “anguish” (116-17). Her sounds provide a sonic record of communal life, evoking home, preserving memories, and disseminating knowledge to engender a future. Tellingly, her body is conflated with a pipe—a conduit through which communal heritage is birthed. Similarly, Mary Rambo’s “contralto” voice offers care through its alliance with familiar folkways that provoke “a feeling of old, almost forgotten relief” that “echo[es]” the protagonist’s experiences with his mother and grandmother (251, 253). Later, the blues singer at the Harlem riot offers song as a form of maternal care to the masses, birthing the potential for a different type of self-knowledge into the community, a point to which I will return.

In order to contemplate freedom or subjectivity, the text insists one grapple with the materiality of black maternal sonicity. Maternal sounds and songs operate in a regenerative manner throughout the text, (re)birthing the protagonist into different
spheres of consciousness. His experiences at the hospital after becoming injured at work in a paint factory provide the most salient example of this narrative construct. “Cramped” into fetal position within a machine approximating the womb, he relies upon auditory traces to make sense of his surroundings (235):

I listened intensely, aware of the form and movement of sentences and grasping the now subtle rhythmical differences between progressions of sound that questioned and those that made a statement. But still their meanings were lost in the vast whiteness in which I myself was lost” (238). He wonders, “Where did my body end….? No sounds beyond the sluggish inner roar of blood. I couldn’t open my eyes. I seemed to exist in some other dimension (238).

His state of helplessness while suspended within the box, and his inability to decipher or communicate in language index the fetal stage of development nearing birth. The doctor’s written queries call to the fore issues of familial legitimacy and legacy, national belonging, and racial identity. Because “the condition of the…mother ‘is forever entailed on all her remotest posterity,’” (Spillers 2003, 219) the simple questions “WHO ARE YOU,” and “WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER’S NAME” (Ellison 1995, 239-40) alternately provoke terror, excitement and resistance. The protagonist muses that perhaps he is “just this blackness and bewilderment and pain” (240). The machine in which he finds himself trapped provides acoustic accompaniment to the doctor’s questions. When asked about his mother, the protagonist cannot identify a person, but instead associates maternal presence with the sound of a scream.
Mother, who was my mother? Mother, the one who screams when you suffer—but who? This was stupid, you always knew your mother’s name? Who was it that screamed? Mother? But the scream came from the machine. A machine my mother? … Clearly, I was out of my head (240).

Like Douglass, the narrator represents black maternity through a scream. This scream (re)sounds chattel slavery’s capacity to annul kinship ties. The protagonist’s inability to name his mother signals the continuance of slavery’s severance of black family. The resonant scream locates lost maternity in black women’s sounds of pain. This moment recalls both Douglass’s Aunt Hester, identified through her “heart-rending shrieks” (Douglass 1999, 18), as well as the “singer” and “beautiful girl” from the novel’s prologue. Interestingly, Ellison’s protagonist realizes that the mother’s scream “came from the machine,” which leads him to question “A machine my mother?” (Ellison 1995, 240).

Though the protagonist quickly dismisses this possibility, stating “Clearly, I was out of my head,” his query is worth considering. Machine-as-mother is predicated upon the “thingification” (Césaire [1950] 2000, 42) of black life instantiated by the systematic denial of personhood under the regime of chattel slavery. Slavery institutionally reduced the black body to its instrumental capacities and codified black maternity as the manufacture of laboring bodies, and black women’s maternal milk and care as extractable commodities. This mother-machine dynamic is forcefully underscored by the protagonist’s experience of being reborn from within the bowels of the factory hospital: “I felt a tug at my belly and looked down to see one of the physicians pull the chord which was attached to the stomach node….I recoiled inwardly as though the chord were a
part of me” (Ellison 1995, 243-44). The removal of the stomach node signifies the manner in which slavery disabled black maternity, and thereby black knowledge of self, via the machine. The protagonist’s abortive rebirth occurs within the matrix of black maternal sound and a constructed womb, obliquely echoing Douglass’s experience of rebirth from the closet awash in the sounds of Hester’s cries. This scene also marks a theft of the umbilical in the protagonist’s conflation of maternal presence and sound with bondage, and in his desire to dis-connect from the formative soundings of his maternal forebears.

Importantly, preceding this experience, his grandmother’s song awakens him. After drifting into a fantastical dream, he remarks “I came back,” revealing childhood memories of his grandmother’s song, which marks the first time he “saw the hounds chasing black men in stripes and chains” (234). The grandmother and imprisoned black men appear simultaneously, wedding maternal presence both to song and to black male bondage in equal measure. Grandmother’s song memorializes the bound men, prior to the protagonist ordaining the mother as she “who screams when you suffer,” exposing these maternal soundings as transitory spaces for gestating black male identities (240). Here, the maternal scream, as in the slave narrative, represents collective suffering. However, in order to mitigate black women’s representative power, the protagonist must cross the scream’s threshold and leave her behind. (Re)constructed womb-spaces in the laboratory hospital and his underground dwelling displace actual maternal bodies, reducing black women generationally to resounding screams sublimated in the interests of black male self-making. “The music became a distinct wail of female pain” immediately prior to his encounter with the inquisitive doctor, echoing Douglass’s
encounter with Hester’s scream as that which births him into knowledge of his enslavement (235). Similarly, the “glass and metal float[ing] above the protagonist” recallDouglass’s *closeting* in a proxy womb (235). Deemed by his torturers “a new man,” the protagonist reflects slavery’s legacy in black life (245). He is the bearer of an incomplete heritage made so through purposeful erasure. His statement “when I discover who I am, I’ll be free” is undermined by the bestowal of his name by the last interviewer (243). This naming reveals itself as violent. Forcibly (re)instating maternal severance, the interviewer interdicts the protagonist’s ability to claim an identity for himself, (re)injuring him: “already he had called my name and…a pain stabbed through my head” (246).

In this scene black maternity is abstracted in a manner that physically absents the black woman while echoing her voice. The cold, white, machine in which he has been forcibly placed dislocates the protagonist’s maternal figures, relegating the process of rebirth to authoritative white male figures. This moment reflects the ways in which chattel slavery forcibly instated disabled maternity as the primary mode of familial engagement for blacks in the Americas. While Ellison’s protagonist is (re)connected to black communal history through the memory of his grandmother’s song and the mother’s scream, his rebirth is predicated upon black women’s material absence. The sound/source split engenders his next becoming. Each space reconfigured as womb in the text disallows actual female presence. Abstracting black women to phantasmal presences conceals black maternity at black testimony’s core and places the black male at the center of Black Nationalism. While the constructed womb signifies the ways in which whiteness estranges the black male from his mother-figures, black maternal screams and
songs usher the protagonist into different, if still stunted, phases of self-consciousness. Tellingly, the grandmother’s presence is allied with black men’s imprisonment, conflating proximity to maternal figures with bondage.

After his abortive experience at the factory hospital, the protagonist emerges from the subway on Lenox avenue, assessing his surroundings “with…infant’s eyes,” unable to stand on his own (251). After crumpling to the ground, he hears “the big dark woman[’s]…husky-voiced contralto” inquiring about his wellbeing (251). Mary Rambo insists that she will “take care of [him],” which in tandem with her contralto voice, marks her as one of the text’s substitute maternal figures. The protagonist finds “living with her pleasant except for her constant talk about…responsibility” to the black community (258, emphasis in original). Chafing at Mary’s words even as he accepts her generosity, he muses that she is “a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown,” rather than his “friend” (258). Mary’s voice and home act as protective structures against the wider world that allow him to incubate and develop his sense of personhood. While inhabiting the womb-like safety of Mary’s home, he makes a speech during an elderly couple’s eviction that engenders a significant shift. Having been observed during the speech by Jack, a leader of the “Brotherhood,” the protagonist receives a job offer that will change the course of his life. “The odor of Mary’s cabbage” makes him consider that he doesn’t “even know how much…[he] owe[s] her” (296). As Mary sings “a troubled song” in her “clear and untroubled” voice, he comes to a “calm sense of [his] indebtedness” that propels him to act upon Jack’s offer (297).
Ellison once again displays the ways in which whiteness intervenes to separate black men from maternal influence when the protagonist enters the Brotherhood. Jack mandates that he move from Mary’s house as a condition of his employment. The protagonist wonders, “why should it be…that the very job which might make it possible for me to do some of the things which [Mary] expected of me required that I leave her” (315). He notes the necessity of his estrangement from this maternal figure, as well as the Harlem community, as prerequisite for his appointed role as community leader. However, his reverie is undercut by his criticism of the “‘we’” that “people like Mary” impose upon him, which inhibits his ability to “think in terms of ‘me’” (316). Ironically, the protagonist is fully invested in the Brotherhood’s “different, bigger ‘we’” (316). His desire for autonomy belies his yearnings for social “recognition” from whites. After attempting to repay Mary’s kindnesses with a “hundred dollar bill,” he takes his leave without warning that he won’t return (325). Ellison writes, “Mary was singing something sad and serene… as I opened the door….then took the faintly perfumed paper from my wallet….and took a long, hard look at my new Brotherhood name” (327). Mary’s “sad and serene” song, like the “old singer’s…moan,” the screaming mother/machine, and the “grandmother’s song,” usher the protagonist into a different sphere of his subjectivity, and actualize the reverberating aesthetic of black women’s pain that structures and exceeds the text. Importantly, he believes both his autonomy and authority to represent the community ultimately require his detachment, which reflects his investment in a masculinist freedom-from black women. This moment also exposes that the individualist rhetoric of black masculinist exceptionalism belies that recognition from white men comprises the measure of black men’s freedom.
Significantly, this frenetic double-motion away from black women and toward white men is not unique to Ellison’s novel. Instead, *Invisible Man* reveals the ways in which masculinist forms of black nationalism use both white patriarchal principles, and various forms of dis-connection from the black community to bolster black males’ claims to authority. Tellingly, Ellison places the protagonist squarely within the lineage of Douglass during his tenure at the Brotherhood when he receives a portrait of the “great man” from Brother Tarp, who urges him to “take a look at him every once in a while,” as the model for black male leadership (378). The protagonist ponders Douglass’s meteoric rise to national acclaim stating, “he talked his way from slavery to a government ministry” (381). He thinks, “Perhaps…something of the kind is happening to me,” underscoring his identification with Douglass while also claiming “escape” as requisite to his ability to “bec[o]me himself [and] define…himself” (381). The young orator never questions whom Douglass left behind.

While Ellison’s text attempts to critique America’s systemic abuse of black women by uncovering figures like the “singer” and Mary Rambo, the novel does not liberate black women from slavery’s procreative matrix. *Invisible Man* actualizes rebirths in the absence of women, utilizing black women’s songs and haunting sounds of pain to engender the protagonist’s shifts into various spheres of consciousness. Accordingly, the text both reflects the historical continuity of this problematic gendered paradigm, and prefigures the manner in which 1960’s nationalisms reduce black women’s roles to the physical and psychic maintenance of men who actively define and engage in the struggle. The Harlem riot scene espouses a critique of America’s abuses of black women grounded
in its history of enslavement, yet misses the opportunity to identify maternal power and authority as central to the politics of Black Nationalism.

In the chaos of the riot, black women’s collective focus on survival leads them to steal food as they seek to sustain the community and to ensure the possibility of a future. When one of the rioting men, Dupre, prepares to burn the tenement in which he lives, a pregnant woman, her “belly heavy and high” nearing her delivery date, begs him not to follow through with his plan (547). Thinking only of the loss of his own child to tuberculosis in the “deathtrap” building, he states “I bet a man ain’t no more go’n be born in there” (547). Dupre’s willingness to sacrifice both the pregnant mother and the unborn child offers a critical assessment of black male leaders who ignore the needs of the community. It also critiques the belief that black maternal figures tether black men to a degraded past. While Dupre can only imagine a future that blots out the past, Lottie and the other women attempt to ensure the community’s capacity to fight another day.

However critical of the more militant forms’ of black nationalism misuse of black women this moment appears, Ellison’s portrayal of the text’s most visible black woman undercuts his critique. “Excessive to Ellison’s reconstitution of a poetics of suffering necessary to refigure the black body as the embodiment of an American national identity,” the blues singer on the milk wagon brings the novel’s underground black maternal figures emphatically to the fore (Waligora-Davis 2004, 401). If the Prologue slyly instates the “old singer” as she who birthed the nation, then the blues singer offering “free beer” exposes radical liberatory possibilities for the black community, and its own failure to recognize black women as the source of these possibilities—a missed opportunity. Ellison writes:
And I saw a crowd of men running up pulling a Borden’s milk wagon, on top of which…a huge woman wearing a gingham pinafore sat drinking beer from a barrel which sat before her….she…threw back her head and shouted passionately in a full-throated voice of blues singer’s timbre….Free Beer!!—sloshing the dipper of beer around.

We stepped aside, amazed, as she bowed graciously from side to side like a tipsy fat lady in a circus parade, the dipper like a gravy spoon in her enormous hand. Then she laughed and drank deeply while reaching over nonchalantly with her free hand to send quart after quart of milk crashing into the street. And all the time the men running with the wagon over the debris. Around me there were shouts of laughter and disapproval. (1995, 544-545)

The blues singer’s acts of waste discursively marginalize her. Shuttling this figure to the margins exposes Invisible Man’s obsessive processes of revealing black maternal figures only to leave them behind. Here, Ellison may attempt to “reposition the role of the black female within the space of the national imaginary” (Waligora-Davis 2004, 406), but presenting a strategically costumed grotesque who recalls the aesthetics of the plantation to provoke “disapproval” mitigates her song’s potential importance (Ellison 1995, 11). The blueswoman perversely echoes Mary Rambo’s gifts of home and sustenance to the struggling protagonist by offering “Free Beer” in tandem with her song. Tossing milk from the Borden’s wagon, the blueswoman literally feeds the streets, reflecting the manner in which slavery re-routed black maternal milk from the community, and used this milk to nourish America’s exploitative capitalist structure. Importantly, “kerosene”
carried by Dupre’s men “splashed into the spilt milk,” suggesting that communal acts of gendered silencing taint this milk as well (545).

Ellison offers a trenchant critique of some of the most pernicious aspects of black nationalism through making visible the manner in which women and children become sacrificed to men’s desires to wipe out the past. Sadly, the protagonist’s susceptibility to reproduce some of the most troubling aspects of black nationalist ideology stem from his desire to “speak for” the black community (581). Like Douglass, Ellison amplifies, then sublimates black maternal presence in a manner that undercuts his critique. He falls prey to the very tendencies he criticizes. Tellingly, the blues singer’s appearance suggests the radical possibilities attending the powerful “mammy” stereotype of black female fecundity and plenitude, only to deny them. The comic staging of the blues singer and the men who carry her “throne” problematically echoes America’s gross misrepresentations of black maternal care, and its impact upon the black community. While all of the women perform maternal acts, the blues singer provokes communal shame. However, whether characterized as righteous or grotesque, the novel’s maternal figures all suffer the same fate—abandonment.

What Ellison ultimately exposes in layering these black maternal figures one upon the other is that neither the black community’s, nor the nation’s, ethical obligations to black mothers will be met. Even as the text locates the origins of black/national identity in black maternal sound, it denies the full potential of its own claims. The protagonist’s inability to recall his mother’s name, his abandonment of Mary Rambo, Dupre’s burning of the tenement against Lottie’s protest, and the disapproval directed at the blues singer, make apparent the gendered inequities in black communal duty. There is no attempt to
redress the specific injuries inflicted upon black mothers. Ellison’s text, while using the black maternal body and its sounds to mark shifts in the protagonist’s perspective, reaches an aporia in its inability to articulate responsibilities to, or for, black women. Instead, the text consistently uses, and then marginalizes, black maternal figures to engender the protagonist’s endless becomings, reflecting a fundamental problem within black nationalist thought. The imperative to center black men as active agents of black liberatory politics requires the simultaneous use and denial of the maternal aspects of black womanhood. The black male nationalist subject utilizes gifts of sustenance and song, and moves into spheres purportedly beyond maternal influence. He walks, alone, into the future. *Invisible Man*, then, begs this question without fully addressing it: What is the black woman’s place in the “future” (of America or Black Nationalism) if black men are cast as its representatives? *Song of Solomon* solemnly answers: She will be sacrificed.

“I Am Not To Belong to the Future”

HEEEYYYSOOUUL/SISS-TERS/Your deepest concern for us, blackmen./You… the fairest of the/fair/You, symbol of/eternal love/Love us, for all eternity/and eternity/Your love…./is strength,/truth/in the deepest pit of my/heart/BLACKWOMENOFTHE /WORLD,IHERE DECLARE/MYIMMORTALLOVEFORYOUALL.

Reginald Lockett, “This Poem for Black Women”

I fucked your mother/on top of a house/when I got through/she thought she was/Mickey Mouse/I fucked your mother/under a tree/when it was over/she couldn’t even pee/I fucked your mother/and she hollered OOOOO/she thought I was/fu man chu/I fucked your mother/and she started to grin/then she found out/it wasn’t even in

Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, “T.T. Jackson sings”
The turbulent late 1960’s are recognized as the height of Black Nationalism in America and abroad. Concomitant decolonial movements in Africa, the West Indies, and in the Asian subcontinent produced “Third World” political affinities often most forcefully expressed in Black Nationalist/Black Power rhetoric. If this moment proves the apex of ideologies of black cultural and political unity, it is not untroubled by divisions, gender chief among them. The construct in Douglass’ Narrative that attaches enslavement to black maternal figures becomes reinvigorated, marking black women as signifiers of atavism and conformity to “oppressive structures” (Dubey 1994, 17). Famously, Eldridge Cleaver (1968, 162) pens, "Every time I embrace a black woman I'm embracing slavery.” This statement reinstates the seeming necessity of black female abandonment modeled by Douglass and Invisible Man’s unnamed protagonist. At the same time, “the black nationalists’ womb centered definition of black women” conscripts their biological and social labors in the service of “breeding revolutionaries” (Dubey 1994, 19).

The “new” ideology marks a continuance of the problematic relationship to maternal figures that historically plagues black nationalism, evinced in the interlocking assessments of black womanhood in this section’s epigraphs. Together these poems, published in 1968 and 1969, respectively, reduce black womanhood to its serviceability to black men. Lockett exalts the black woman’s “deepest concern for…blackmen,” which complements Baraka’s persistent echo “I fucked your mother” in its centering of black male desire and appraisal of black women relative to their capacity to fulfill this desire. Baraka’s poem makes explicit Lockett’s implicitly sexual desire for “love,”
locating black male sexual fulfillment in the debasement of the “mother.” The mother in “T.T. Jackson sings” “holler[s] OOOOO,” sounding black female pain that at once indexes the perpetuity of her (sexual) violation and marks her body as the site of black male (be)coming.

*Song of Solomon* serves as a feminist engagement with the historical trajectory of masculinist Black Nationalist ideologies that exposes the manner in which *freedom* came to be constructed as male autonomy through the abandonment of black women.

Importantly, these women’s maternal labors, songs, and sounds of pain comprise the discursive matrix of black male “becoming.” The novel uncovers a genealogy of black female sacrifice that reveals the historical continuity of the interlocking significance of black women, their songs and sounds, and black nationalist ideologies through the character Pilate. Pilate, as song-bearer, embodies the link between past and present that enables Milkman’s “ironic quest” to understand his family’s history (Wall 2005, 219). However, she has no access to the song’s meaning and, along with other women, is sacrificed to male imperatives.

Pilate’s consistent singing and adherence to seemingly outmoded ways of living mark her as a vestige from the past, or reservoir of cultural heritage. Pilate’s song as metonym for black culture posits an understanding of memory that runs counter to, yet enables the fleshing out of the *historical record.* Milkman’s desire for wealth impels his quest south toward the Dead family’s site of origin, but Pilate’s “song is the key….that transforms his search for gold into an acknowledgement of his heritage” (Wilentz 1992, 63). Pilate’s “powerful contralto” voice signifies home and safety for her male kin, echoing Mary Rambo’s voice both in form and in purpose, while also serving, like the
“mother’s hymn” in *Iola Leroy*, as a bridge connecting past and future generations (Morrison 2004, 6). Her song presents an enigmatic mystery to Milkman and signifies nothing at all to his friend Guitar. The two young men represent the competing ideologies of 1960’s cultural and revolutionary nationalisms—Milkman pulled into the past by his desire to uncover “origins” and Guitar seeking a future that obliterates the past. Pilate “symbolically…exists as a merger between Milkman’s cultural nationalist characteristics and Guitar’s revolutionary militancy” (Eaton 2008, 34). However, the symbolic merger proves untenable, not because the ideological gulf between the two overlapping nationalisms cannot be broached, but because her sacrifice is encoded in their foundation(s).

Pilate’s offering of song provides insufficient cultural nourishment for her family or the community at large because it is incomplete. In the midst of a crowd waiting for “Mr. Smith” to leap from the cupola at “No Mercy Hospital,” Pilate sings “O Sugarman done fly away,” prompting some people to reflect upon her meaning, while others “sniggered,” echoing the Harlem community’s “laughter” at the blueswoman (Morrison 2004, 4, 6). While the lyrics “cotton balls to choke me…Buckra’s arms to yoke me” evoke black suffering and connect the community to its past, Pilate does not have the full text of the song (303). She cannot identify her grandfather Solomon, whom the song memorializes, even as she sings her grandmother Ryna’s blues. Pilate’s “radically unfinished” song marks it as among “the products of slavery” in its incompleteness (Gilroy 1993, 105). Importantly, Morrison depicts Pilate’s song as an aural palimpsest that echoes throughout the text as a transmitter of black communal heritage.
Tellingly, the incompleteness of Pilate’s song also results from the command handed down by her father Macon Sr. in her dreams: “Sing” (208). Interpreted as a directive to lift her voice, the perceived command actually represents her father’s yearning for her long-dead mother. Similarly, Pilate interprets her father’s statement, “‘You just can’t fly on off and leave a body’” as a mandate to remember the dead (208). However, these are pleadings directed toward his dead wife and the father who abandoned him. He is the center of his haunting discourse, seeking paternal acceptance and womanly comfort. Papa’s hauntings expose the narcissistic aspects of masculinist black nationalisms, in the same way that building up his farm “Lincoln’s Heaven” reveals the roots of black male self-making in American patriarchal-capitalist ethos (51). Macon Dead Sr.’s bootstrapping is persistently undermined by the limits his blackness imposes. Macon Jr. muses, “Everything bad that ever happened to him happened because he couldn’t read,” including “his name [getting] messed up,” (53). A drunken Freedman’s Bureau officer placed the then teenage Jake’s words “in the wrong spaces,” naming him Macon Dead (53). The Union soldier’s mistake was taken as a means to “wipe out the past” of slavery and begin “new” (54).

Jake is rendered Dead in more than name as he attempts to implement the “father’s law” in his life as a freedman (Spillers 2003, 218). He acknowledges that Solomon is socially “dead,” his “African name…displaced,” which effectively “banished” him as father prior to his active abandonment of the family (232). In accepting the “captor father[s]” misnomer, Macon Sr. accepts also the misogynist and racist principles encoded within (228). His attempt to adopt patrilineal principles refutes inheritance of the “condition of the mother,” ostensibly affirming black male civic
acceptability. Morrison exposes through the story of Macon Sr. that assimilationist politics of mastery of (white male citizenship as) form construct acts of black male exemplarity as representative in nature, and thereby fundamentally tethered to the fate of the black community. This is evidenced by Macon Sr.’s mythic status in Danbury, an echo of Douglass’s lionized status as exemplary black male both within his own historical moment, and within the historical trajectory of black nationalist thought.

Macon Sr. disallows the mother’s name in a futile attempt to reverse slavery’s denial of black paternal authority. After his wife Sing dies in labor, Macon forbids speaking her name. This ban alludes to the long history of maternal disavowal in masculinist black nationalist discourses that seek to concretize the “rights of patriarchal privilege…extended…at someone else’s behest” (Spillers 2003, 233). Macon’s attempt to build a patrilineal inheritance for his children problematically imposes white, middle class values that require the black mother’s silencing and disappearance. For his efforts, he is “shot….Five feet into the air,” and his children nevertheless inherit the “condition” of Macon Sr.’s mother Ryna—they are left behind (Morrison 2004, 52).

Bereft of her mother’s name, Pilate must "Sing" a song for which she has no text. Her missing navel signifies the ways in which the “heritage of the mother” becomes suppressed in order to undergird black (masculinist) nationalist ideology (Spillers 2003, 228). Macon reminisces, “It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she…had never…been connected to a reliable source of human nourishment” (Morrison 2004, 27-8). Instead, “once the…lifeline was cut, the cord stump…left no trace of having ever existed,” a physical indicator of disallowing the mother’s name (28). Forbidding Sing’s name and memory, Macon Sr. abstracts his wife to a womb. Pilate’s “struggling
out the womb [postmortem] without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb waters” signals the brazen (im)possibility of black communal survival (27). Unaware that her mother is song itself, Pilate nevertheless positions Sing (song) as the necessary interstice between past and future. The song echoes throughout the text in a manner that reaches both forward and backward in time and space. Against this echoing circularity, Milkman’s desire to record the song imposes linearity, and countermands the diffuse linkages to his history embodied in Pilate and her singing daughters. In turn these women are sacrificed to Milkman’s desire for self-knowledge, ironically mediated through Pilate's song and Hagar's body.

The gendered labors through which the Dead’s (hi)story is fleshed out—Pilate as song-bearer and Milkman as interpreter—suggest that the synthesis of these forms may engender communal healing. However, the song reveals rather than sutures the ideological breach that divides the community by exposing Solomon’s annulment of familial responsibility in the face of his desire to fly “home.” Ryna’s screams, her perpetual “crying in a ditch,” echo throughout the land as evidence of Solomon’s abandonment (323). Key within this paradigm is the necessity of the sacrificed mother to render the black man free to “fly off” (208). Milkman negotiates his subjectivity through the song, rendering Pilate the vessel of his becoming. Despite acknowledgement of whom Solomon “[left] behind” and the irremediable pain it caused, Pilate’s sacrifice remains necessary for Milkman to take flight (328). Milkman takes Pilate to Virginia to bury her father’s bones, where she inters her father atop Solomon’s Leap, placing her mother’s snuffbox containing her own name in the grave, thereby reconnecting the fractured
family. However, Guitar’s distrust has led him to hunt Milkman, and he fires the single shot that takes Pilate’s life.

In her final moments, Pilate enjoins Milkman to “Sing…. for [her],” (336). Milkman, however, speaks “the words without the least bit of a tune,” which denotes his refusal of reciprocity (336). Tellingly, he speaks Pilate into the text of the song and occludes her given name, calling her “Sugargirl” instead (336). These actions seem to outwardly affirm Milkman’s “love” for her, as he muses that “she could fly…without ever leaving the ground” (336). However, his homage is undercut by the necessity of her grounding and his denial of her name. It is not incidental that Pilate’s life ends at the site of her maternal ancestor’s abandonment. In the midst of her reconciliatory act, she is sacrificed like Ryna and Sing before her. Pilate’s flying “without ever leaving the ground” constitutes her body as the ground from which Milkman can take flight. His leap from beside Pilate’s lifeless body renders him “as bright and fleet as a lodestar” (337). Pilate’s demise, for which he only obliquely accepts responsibility, culminates Milkman’s paternal inheritance in his ability to take flight. Through her death, Milkman is reborn. “Lodestar” signifies a directive or tenet that navigates a course of action. Morrison thereby reveals the sacrificed mother comprises the ground, the problematic historical guiding principle, of all black nationalist ideologies.

This, then, is the mystery Song of Solomon solves through its cyclical engagement with maternal song and sound. Morrison’s text exposes the historical continuity of the abandonment of black women as a constitutive feature of black nationalist ideologies through a narrative journey, which uncovers the lost and silenced mothers in Pilate’s song. While maternal ancestors and familial history are discovered through the song,
Song of Solomon ultimately refutes Iola Leroy’s utopianism. Pilate is cut down at the site of her grandmother’s abandonment, and her name—like those of her foremothers—is stricken from the historical record. Morrison thereby critiques the masculinist construct of freedom-from black mothers at the core of black nationalist ideologies that mandates these women’s sacrifice. Pilate’s death and Milkman’s impending embrace in “the killing arms of his brother” Guitar sound a grim warning that the masculinist desire for complete autonomy assures only destruction (337). Morrison suggests that the black nationalist ideal of black male freedom as the ability to “fly off” also dictates that black women are “not to belong to the future” (Walker 1976, 221). Song of Solomon’s disturbing ending both offers a jarring counterpoint, and forces a return, to its opening epigraph. Morrison writes, “The fathers may soar/And the children may know their names” (2004). “And” suggests that soaring need not equate with flying-off—that black men may exercise subjective autonomy “And” attain freedom-with the “children,” who “may know their” fathers’ and their own names, as well as the names of their mothers, whose songs and cries birth these possibilities into existence.

In a critical (re)turn to the Caribbean, the next chapter continues to examine the ways in which liberation dreams sound themselves in the African diaspora. If this chapter helps us to understand the manner in which freedom in the black masculinist nationalist tradition came to be conceived of as autonomy, or freedom-from black women, Chapter Three both extends this critique and reveals how freedom sounds itself as mobility for creolized figures in the Caribbean through a study of Michelle Cliff’s Abeng (1984). Cliff’s novel launches a gendered critique of black male profiteering from the sounds of black Jamaican women, but fails to recognize its own construction of the mobile creole as
participating in the same problematic mode of consumption of Afro-Jamaican women’s cultural products. This mode of hearing renders these women static, fixes them in states of poverty, and constructs their testimonies as resources to be mobilized by traveling creole figures who stake their claims to “represent” Jamaican culture in their (re)presentations of these women’s songs and sounds.

Notes

1 An article-length version of this chapter is forthcoming in the September 2016 issue of American Literature.

2 The term materiodiscursive draws upon Karen Barad’s construct in Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning (2007), of the “material-discursive”—a recognition that both material and discursive effects occur within these shifting sites of sound and spaces that mimic the womb in form and in function. As the essay argues, the (autonomous) black male subject is discursively constituted and the black maternal figure erased through these appropriative acts. Additionally, the materiality of black women’s sounds impacts the black male subject such that he is changed, both physically and psychically. Moreover, the material relations of race and gender are concretized within this sphere, which initially presents as a sphere of possibility without predetermined outcomes.

3 Michael Borgstrom writes in “Face Value: Ambivalent Citizenship in Iola Leroy” that “Harper presents several black male characters whose...unselfish loyalty to family is as important as freedom” (783).

4 Douglass presents the following women and the traumas they endured in the text, but does not give them voice: his sister, aunt, and Henny (53), Henny’s abuse (56), Caroline the “breeder” (61), Sandy’s free wife (66), and his wife Anna Murray who “shouldered one part of the baggage” (95).

5 Frances Foster (1983) argues that the male-authored slave narrative “refers to slave women en masse...and presents slave women primarily as examples of the extremes of the depravity [of] slaveholders...and...the degradation to which black men, through their inability to protect, were forced” (“In Respect to Females,” 66).

6 William Andrews’ (1986) asserts that “male slave narrators [gave] voice to [slave women’s] suffering,” but in a manner that portrayed the inevitability of their status as “sexual victim[s],” (241).

7 Glissant characterizes the opacity as an active strategy of resistance that simultaneously conceals and reveals meaning.
Chapter Three: Sonic (Im)Mobilities: Speaking Commodities, Sounding Diaspora in Multi-layered Markets

Different voices, but a shared humanity; this was my platform, my authenticity, my politics. My song.

Harry Belafonte

All de pickney dem a linga, linga
Fe wah dem mumma no bring…

_Linstead Market_

Jamaican-born author Michelle Cliff’s _Abeng_ (1984) opens with a definition of its titular object, at once marking the text’s own status as an encyclopedic refiguring of Jamaican history, and emphatically instating this history as an acoustic one. Cliff sounds the etymological root of the conch’s name in tandem with its multivalent functions within the island-space in order to call attention to the manner in which the object’s multi-layered instrumentalities reveal that Jamaica’s history is accessible only through an investigation of the island’s dissonances, the sonic and cultural ruptures that render the island’s multifarious populations audible. Cliff writes: “Abeng is an African word meaning conch shell. The blowing of the conch called the slaves to the canefields in the West Indies. The abeng had another use: it was the instrument used by the Maroon armies to pass their messages and reach one another” (emphasis in original).¹ Cliff names the word’s etymological lineage as “African,” an evocative rather than precise
geographical location that casts the island’s history as mythic. The text immediately “cut[s]” this mythicism with a tersely worded statement speaking to the historical function of the object: it “called the slaves to the canefields in the West Indies.” Doubling this initial “cut,” Cliff further complicates the meaning and the use value of the conch shell in the islands, writing “it was the instrument used by the Maroon armies to pass their messages and reach one another.” Evoking first a mythic, if hazy, African past, and then the history of enslavement in the West Indies, *Abeng* sounds the ruptures of diaspora vis-à-vis its exploration of the dissonant relations between the etymological and sonic functional histories of the conch shell.² This sounding also echoes the creation of the African diaspora by mapping its geographies of influence through the figure of the abeng. Francoise Lionnet writes,

> Because its main function is to facilitate communication, the *abeng* stands in an obvious parallel relationship to the novel we are reading: both are objects by means of which different messages can be passed on (sometimes simultaneously) to different receivers; both are “double-voiced,” duplicitous, and susceptible to ambiguous reception and interpretation (1992, 323).

Pointing to the abeng as a sonic means of communication that both serves and disrupts the plantation economy of Jamaica, Cliff presents a revisionist acoustic history of the island in keeping with the novel’s sweeping re-presentation of Jamaica. The invocation of the extended acoustic significance of the abeng outside its use-value in the plantation sphere both connects the object to an “African” past, and requires the audience to consider the shell, enslaved Africans,
and the island of Jamaica outside of a European-dominant framework that elides the existence of their prior histories. Cliff writes, “the island rose and sank. Twice. During periods which history was recorded by indentations on rock and shell. This is a book about the time which followed on that time. As the island became a place where people lived. Indians. Africans. Europeans” (3). Cliff thereby constructs Jamaica as diasporic space by sounding the island’s geographical history prior to human inhabitation, therefore prior to European “discovery.” The “Indians. Africans” and “Europeans” who come to occupy Jamaica, then, contribute to the island’s distinct sonic milieu, one that Cliff insists turns upon the duplicitous soundings of the abeng, an African object.

Cliff’s sounding of the island’s variegated acoustic sphere comprises an act of diasporic testimony by calling attention to the sonic resonances that shaped Jamaica’s history. Importantly, as this chapter will demonstrate, Abeng’s critical attention to Jamaican sound(s) also shapes the manner in which liberation and freedom are conceived in the text. Abeng extends critical feminist interrogations of black liberatory politics in diaspora through a study of the sounds of Afro-Jamaicans, most critically, the sounds of poor, Afro-Jamaican women. The text does so by counterpoising black marketwomen singing “Linstead Market” in the world of the text, to the song’s commercial (re)presentation by Jamaican-American singer Harry Belafonte, thereby creating a dichotomous relationship between “authentic folk” Jamaican culture and inauthentic adaptations of this culture for Western markets. Importantly, Cliff presents the marketwomen’s song’s appropriate market of circulation as closed, or permanently tethered to the island of Jamaica itself, in order to critique Belafonte’s circulation of this
song in an American commercial market for pecuniary gain. The text rightly insists that Belafonte’s performance of the song creates interpretive dissonance by occluding the women’s meaning—which should be understood as their testimonies to maternal inability, a social condition that *Echoes of the Future-Past* marks as an echoing after-effect of chattel slavery. Belafonte is empowered by gender, mobility, and capital to consume the women’s song, alter it to sublimate their testimonies, and claim it as his own unique (re)presentation of Jamaican culture for a global market.

However, *Abeng* itself participates in this problematic consumption of Afro-Jamaican women’s sonic culture, fixing them through the narrative use of the ethnographic gaze and ear. This mode of hearing renders these women static, fixes them in states of poverty, and constructs their testimonies as resources (or raw materials) to be mobilized by traveling creole figures who stake their claims to “represent” Jamaican culture in their (re)presentations of these women’s songs and sounds. Importantly, the mixed-race Jamaican woman’s mediation of identity and freedom require the unchanging sounds of black women’s poverty. Even while *Abeng* sounds a call to hear the complexities and nuances of Jamaican history, culture, and identity through an exploration of the island’s soundscapes, and by uncovering mythic women of African and Miskito lineage such as Nanny, Mma Ali, and Inez, the novel also mires contemporary black Jamaican women in the stasis of poverty and degradation.

Accordingly, within this chapter I delineate the manner in which Cliff foregrounds the complexity of Jamaica’s acoustic milieu as a means to critique normative modes of hearing the Caribbean, which are invariably rooted in the hearer’s personal, political, and capital investments. Next, I turn to Cliff’s dissonant presentation of the
mixed-race, mobile female diasporan against the stasis of black Jamaican women by listening to the echoes of slavery in these black women’s lives. I argue that Cliff’s desire to imbue Afro-Jamaican women with cultural authority manifests itself in her presentation of a closed, female-oriented market of circulation for the song “Linstead Market” that belies its actual circulation history. In so doing, the novel (re)produces the logic of enslavement by narratively divesting these women of control over their bodies and their songs. This chapter reveals that Abeng also (re)enacts the troubling sublimation of black maternal sound within the production of identity, testimony, and liberation ideologies in the African diaspora. Next, I examine the manner in which marking the black women’s bodily produce as (devalued) surplus for unremunerated consumption also echoes the postwar transformation of Caribbean economies as tourist economies. Importantly, these tourist-driven economies turned upon a promise to (re)produce the past of slavery as a commodity, which in turn implicitly commodifies black abjection and poverty, as well as the sonic expressions of Afro-Caribbean maternal pain. Lastly, the chapter considers the ways in which the ethnographic ear falsely constructs “folk” sound as beyond the purview of market economies, and reveals that this desire to hear cultural authenticity is bound up with and enables the pernicious mechanisms capitalism it claims to resist.

**Sounding Alternate Histories: Hearing Jamaica’s Discordant Melodies**

Cliff exposes the layers of radical dis-connections and mis-communications that engender contemporary island culture and history by way of acoustic fragmentation,
suggesting that a distinctly multiplicitous politics of hearing are necessary to interpret what may commonly be understood as “island sound.” *Why the abeng?* Angeletta Gourdine notes, “the abeng as an African agent of sound becomes in Jamaica a mark of fracture and resistance,” and that “the use of the abeng parallels Jamaican double-consciousness, and it embodies female rebellion through its womblike configuration” (2002, 48). However, by foregrounding the abeng’s sound, Cliff also attests to the silencing of traditional West African drumming practices in Jamaica, which produced some of the most restrictive laws against percussion instruments in the West Indies. As the object served the colonial governance in its function of calling slaves to the fields to produce goods for European consumption, the abeng comes to be acoustically authorized by the dominant culture. The state’s sanction of this instrument allowed for its frequent public use, and instated its sound as integral to the island’s soundscapes. As such, the abeng enabled and supported English dominance through its role in acoustically managing plantation discipline. Because of this authorization, the abeng became a quotidian aspect of the island’s plantation soundscapes, which rendered it ripe for uses that echoed its disciplinary function while sounding dissonant messages to the captives themselves. These messages were crafted by the captives in contest to the dominant mode of hearing, which assesses only the conch’s power to command on their behalf, as opposed to its more subversive soundings. Cliff depicts the subversive sounds of the abeng as the captives’ recuperation of the shell’s usage within African soundscapes, an exercise in maintaining and adapting tradition within a New World context.

Tellingly, the text persistently (re)turns to various representations of sound as a means of accessing the different communities of Jamaica and for understanding the
racialized and gendered intra-island politics of difference and of intersection, foregrounding its own, as well as the island’s “irreducible...stereographic pluralities” (Barthes 1996, 194). For instance, early in the text, the reader’s ear is called to attend to the discordant music produced by a “harpsichord, which had been shipped to Jamaica” but “had never adjusted to the climate” (6). Importantly, “tuning upon tuning never made the instrument sound quite right,” which was “easily drowned out by the passing traffic, the voices of the congregation, the pair of croaking lizards who lived behind the cross of Godwood, sounding a double-bass in the wrong tempo, as the school teacher tinkled out the prelude” (6). The instrument sounds notes radically out of place in the John Knox church, whose members “although they were not able to say so, felt that the harpsichord had been a mistake” (Baucom, 1999; Cliff 1984, 6). The harpsichord’s weak notes can withstand neither the Jamaican climate nor its soundscapes, yet even as it seems to be drowned out, the harpsichord, in its vestment with “Englishness,” and thereby social and cultural authority, silences the congregation’s members. Moreover, the intrusive presence of the harpsichord causes the congregation even to question the island’s mild climate, which they deem at fault for the harpsichord’s failures: England’s “damp and dreary” climate, then, clearly “surpassed the clear light and deep warmth of Jamaica. They had always thought their island climate a gift; the harpsichord told them different” (6). The harpsichord’s vestment with British sonic authority simultaneously silences the congregation and marks itself as the acoustic standard against which the island’s soundscape sounds its dissonances. In this way, Cliff exposes not only the acoustic devaluation of Jamaican sound, but also the manner in which the island’s natural produce as well as its climate, become devalued in order to place Englishness at the apex of the
colonial cultural hierarchy. In addition, the ill-harmonized and intrusive presence of the harpsichord renders the sonic, natural, and manufactured produce of the island as surplus vis-à-vis this devaluation, which belies Great Britain’s dependence upon the island’s products. The harpsichord’s improper sound registers to the island’s black inhabitants as a peculiar sense of lack, indexing in part their sense of dis-connection from a cultural lineage and heritage comparable to an ever-unattainable Englishness.

The harpsichord instates the island soundscape in and of itself as dissonance, a figuration which Cliff seemingly undercuts by sounding Jamaica’s acoustic hybridity, both in the form of epigraphic insertions of “traditional…slave laments,” mento songs, folk music, and digging songs within the text in a manner that echoes Du Bois’ fragmented textuo-sonic representations of the sorrow songs in The Souls of Black Folk. In this way, Cliff acoustically sets the terms for a discourse of the island-space as diaspora, which is then reinforced by the text’s second opening(s), an ode “to the memory of Jean Toomer” and a dedication to “Bessie Head” followed by a stanza of Basil McFarlane’s poetry, and a “slave lament--traditional.” Marking Abeng as a text of and from diaspora, Cliff constructs a resonant matrix of influence that traverses geographical boundaries to sound diasporic being through mobilizing three seminal figures known for their mobility and their desires to disrupt the logics of race, as well as the “sorrow song,” or slave lament that marks itself as the acoustic imprimatur of diasporic “tradition.” However, Cliff’s presentation of Jamaican sonic hybridity also reveals multiple levels of mis-hearing that attempt to restrict the hybrid oral/aural cultural production of the island space to discrete, pure, categories that assume an uninterrupted, unadulterated sonic-historical trajectory that denies the mobilizing energies of contact, which then produces
“confluences,” or syncretic forms of cultural production (Glissant 1997, 93). A telling moment occurs while young Clare Savage travels back home to Kingston with her family after visiting her grandmother’s home in the country. The family comes upon a funeral procession in the dark singing “Lead Kindly Light” (Cliff 1984, 50). The procession’s members “moved forward underneath a steady hum, which at first seems of the same key and pitch, but soon differentiated into harmony” (50). The harmony was “led by the high falsetto of a man, whose voice circled the hum and turned it into a mourning chant” containing “words [that are] strange [and] unrecognizable” (50). Importantly, the family’s distance from the site of sonic production leads them to hear it as an undifferentiated “hum,” echoing the manner in which the sounds of African descended peoples in the New World complex come to be heard as the acoustic signal of their cultural “unmaking” in the Middle Passage, a space in which their multifarious ethno-tribal identities became “undifferentiated” (Spillers 2003, 214). The “hum” signals a massified black presence, comparable to a horde, while also presenting a seemingly impenetrable sonic object that functions on a non-semantic level that seems to deny its communicative capacities. The “hum,” then stands as another instance of sonic opacity as a mode of diasporic testimony, one that foregrounds resonance and vibration as opposed to narrative articulation. Equally important, as the Savage family’s proximity to the singing increases, so does their capacity to differentiate the distinct harmonic elements that comprise the song, as well as the “high falsetto” of the male singer. Significantly, the “falsetto” turns the “hum…into a mourning chant,” wedding feminized sound to the act of mourning, an act that simultaneously comprises a testimony to the life of the deceased that resonates as testimony to diasporic experience.
Kitty and Boy Savage’s discordant hearings and explications of the song following their daughter’s query “What are they saying” offers a microcosmic example of the ways in which personal and political investments in particular cultural-historical narratives overdetermine hearing. Kitty first explains that “they are singing in an old language; it is an ancient song, which the slaves carried with them from Africa” (50). Kitty’s explication of the song poses a counter-narrative and epistemological framework to the dominant cultural framework of Englishness by investing the song with an African lineage that remains whole in the face of the violent fragmentation of culture and self common to the experiences of enslavement. Kitty’s narrative downplays the prominence of rupture in order to assert the presence of an unadulterated, uninterrupted African heritage that both precedes and supersedes English domination, while also imbuing Africanness with an intrinsic cultural purity to rival Englishness. Boy Savage, however characterizes the singing as “‘some sort of pocomania song’…smugly, as if to contradict the tone of his wife’s voice, which had a reverence, even a belief to it” (50). Boy’s derisive tone functions to devalue the song and its singer by associating them with a Jamaican folk religious practice he disdains. Pocomania combines various elements of ancestor worship and spirit possession with Protestant-Christian revivalist traditions. A syncretic form of worship born of the “confluences” engendered by forced contact, Pocomania enacts a distinctly public performance of worship that contributes its own distinct acoustic imprint to the island’s soundscape through “tramping and the cymbals…. [and] ‘warning’ or non-sense songs” accompanied by “the beat of…. kettle-drums or bass drums” that concurrently constitutes “ancestral echoes” of African heritage (Loris 2008). Boy’s derisive dismissal of the “pocomania” religious procession, as well
as his wife’s “reverence…[and] belief” exposes his devaluation of African cultural practices as well as his desire to place distance between the “white” Savages and the possibility of contamination from African savagery.

The Savage family is forced to hear the processional singing from another vantage point in order to underscore the multivalence of Jamaica’s sounds. Boy Savage “parked his car by the roadside, so they wouldn’t interfere with the procession, or the procession with them,” reflecting Boy’s belief that he and the “pocomania” people occupy separate spheres of the Jamaican cultural hierarchy (Cliff 1984, 50). Significantly, Boy “had no choice…[because] the people were moving very slowly, and were in the middle of the road, treating the asphalt as if it were a forest track” (50). The placement of the pocomania procession in the center of the road between Kingston and St. Elizabeth forces the Savage family off their path. Both Kitty’s and Boy’s competing essentialist conceptions of the African aspects of Jamaican cultural heritage come to be sidelined by the procession. From the margins, the family begins to discern the strains of “Lead Kindly Light, within the Encircling of Gloom…and the voices of the people of the procession moved from the complexity of an African chant into the simplicity of an English hymn” (50). While the text suggests a distinct movement from sonic form to another, it is worth considering how Cliff’s delineation of the Savage’s politics of hearing complicates or undercuts this possibility. As each of the Savages has overwritten the group’s sonic expression prior to giving them a full hearing—Kitty in her proclamation of its status as “ancient [and] African,” and Boy’s dismissal of their sounds as “pocomania” religious singing—we can surmise that perhaps the song/sound does not undergo change, but that rather as the Savage’s positionality changes, so does their
interpretations of the song. The fact that both Kitty and Boy mis-took the song for a markedly African piece of cultural-sonic production, alternately vesting it with cultural authority or dismissing it because of their improper categorization, reveals the manner in which a priori judgments about the status of cultural products are tied to ocular assessments of the producers’ phenotypical presentation. John Henry Newman’s 1833 “The Pillar of Cloud,” the poem from which the song “Lead Kindly Light” was created, resonates with diasporic experience in its expression of dis-location evinced in the words “the night is dark and I am far from home” (Cliff, 50). The original hymnal version of the song married Newman’s “ambiguity and expressions of doubt” to Lux Benigna, a tune whose “steady, reassuring rhythms” obscure the poetic work’s ambiguity (Bradley 2013, 73). The processional singing of the hymn disrupts both Boy’s and Kitty’s epistemological frameworks for adjudging and interpreting “black” sound in the island space, revealing Cliff’s larger project to disrupt essentialized understandings of blackness itself in diasporic spaces by sounding the disjunctures of island life. However, she does so in a manner that itself becomes entangled in its own problematics, as her attempts to limn out the complexities of Jamaican experience frequently mobilize mixed-race or hybrid women against the inertia of black women in the island-space. Cliff marks the marketwomen of rural St. Elizabeth, Jamaica, and the song “Linstead Market” as authentically representative of Jamaican folk culture, at once echoing Kitty Savage’s “reverence [and] belief” in the Africanized purity of the processional song and enacting an ethnographic mode of hearing that fixes both the song and its producers.
Maternal Inability as Immobility: Trafficking in Marketwomen’s Song

Significantly, Cliff’s dedication to the mixed-race South African writer-activist Bessie Head names the writer as a foremother figure, and hints toward the novella’s aim to sound the hidden histories of Jamaican women. Bessie Head, as a mobile woman—one who travels within and between the spaces of a continental African diaspora to combat Apartheid as well as gendered restrictions of a patriarchal imperialist society—sounds an opening note of dissonance against which we are to hear the text’s other women, which conversely harmonizes with the young protagonist Clare’s experiences. Head’s biracial background and her writing acumen designate her as Clare’s (Cliff’s) literary foremother, allowing her to tap into a distinctly hybrid “African” lineage that is at once mobile and mobilized within the text itself. Importantly, as I will demonstrate, this biracial feminine mobility is textually counterpoised to the manner in which black women in Jamaica, represented by the figure of the marketwoman, are “fixed”—locked both within the boundaries of the post/colonial nation-state and within states of poverty. However, these women’s sounds and cultural productions traverse the geopolitical boundaries of global capital as marketable commodities, re-sounding the economic logics of enslavement in the contemporary moment of the novel, reflecting the manner in which black women’s divestment from the products of their cultural, physical, and maternal labors comprises a fundamental aspect of the workings of global capital.

Tellingly, Cliff sounds this peculiar diasporic acoustic formation through a moment of revealing “maternal inability”—a social figuration I have marked within this work as a direct result of chattel enslavement, and as one that comes to be understood as the primary modality of black familial interactions in the West. The marketwomen’s
testimony to their own maternal inability in Cliff’s novel is made acoustically manifest in their communal singing of the song “Linstead Market.” The narrative voice of Abeng reflects upon how this song is conscripted and re-routed into a commercial market by an American-born singer of Jamaican lineage, Harry Belafonte. Belafonte’s performance of “Linstead Market” at once enacts a *theft of the umbilical* in its conscription of black women’s sounds, and bespeaks the dissonances inherent in commodifying what are understood as “folk” cultural forms. Cliff attempts to juxtapose the lived “realities” of these Jamaican women with the staged presentation of their cultural products by Belafonte to expose the complex gendered, raced, and geographical dynamics of cultural production and commodification through competing representations of the market-women’s singing as representative of authentic “folk” culture and Belafonte’s as representative of inauthentic commercialized performances of folk forms. Belafonte, as a figure of international acclaim, prominently known in the 1950’s and 1960’s as the “King of Calypso” in the United States and abroad, would seemingly function as a mobile, cultural hybrid that is able to testify to the complexities of diasporic experience. However, *Abeng* problematizes his capacity to testify to the realities of island life, as evidenced by his discordant presentation of these women’s song.

It is worth examining at length the lyrics to “Linstead Market,” a sounding that Cliff constructs as a “traditional song” of “lament” and as a communal folk form in contradistinction to Harry Belafonte’s commercialized performance:

Carry me ackee go a Linstead Market

Not a quatty-wuth sell

Carry me ackee go a Linstead Market
Not a quatty-wuth sell.

Lord, what a night, not a bite
What a Satiday night
Lord, what a night, not a bite
What a Satiday night.

Everybody come a feel up, feel up
Not a quatty-wuth sell
Everybody come a feel up, feel up
Not a quatty-wuth sell.

Lord, what a night, not a bite
What a Satiday night
Lord, what a night, not a bite
What a Satiday night.

All de pickney dem a linga, linga
Fe wah dem mumma no bring
All de pickney dem a linga, linga
Fe wah dem mumma no bring.

Lord, what a night, what a night
What a Satidy night (Cliff 1984, 82-83).

The women’s lament confesses to their own maternal inability, a sounding that constitutes the essence of their testimonies to the continued reverberations of chattel slavery in their daily existence, just like the “minha mae’s” testimony in Morrison’s *A Mercy*. The minha mae’s resounding refrain “No protection” attenuates, refracts, and oscillates into the acoustic milieu of St. Elizabeth through the song’s admission of *no provision* as an echoing after-affect of chattel slavery. The song’s lyrics “all de pickney dem a linga, linga/Fe wah dem mumma no bring” attests to the fact that these women are unable to provide the material goods their families need. Because “not a quatty wuth” of their “ackee” sells, the women’s children linger in various states of impoverishment and deprivation. Tellingly, the women sing “everybody come a feel up, feel up,” or handle the women’s good’s—testing them for ripeness and soundness—recalling the practices of the coffle and the auction-block of the slave markets, wherein young slave women’s bodies would be “felt up,” or tested for soundness and ripeness. The woman’s “lament,” or dirge, mourns the continued impact of chattel slavery in their daily lives, suggesting a repetitive acoustics of sorrow encompassing weeping and moaning as accompaniment to their immobility. The song, then, seemingly attests to the irreversibility of their condition.

Against the stasis of the women’s lamentations of suffering, Cliff suggests that “King of Calypso” Harry Belafonte (mis)represents “Linstead Market” on “American television and in American nightclubs” through the song’s staging as “all smiling children and ever bearing trees,” a paradisiacal representation of Jamaica and its inhabitants (82). Tellingly, Cliff situates Belafonte’s performance of “Linstead Market”
in relation to his popular hits “Island in the Sun” and “Jamaica Farewell,” a testament to the “‘pretty gal’ he left back in Kingston town,” calling attention to the repeated motif of abandoning both the island space and its female inhabitants. Belafonte, as Cliff describes, “himself a Jamaican” profits from his (re)presentation of Jamaican women and children in his song while using visual and acoustic cues that directly contradict the song’s communal functions and meanings (82). The arrangement of the women’s dirge into a “calypso tempo” that catered to American and British popular tastes creates an interpretive dissonance that occludes the message of the Jamaican mento tune, and suppresses the historical memory encapsulated within it, just as the “steady, reassuring rhythms” of the Lux Benigna obscure Henry’s poetic uncertainty (82).

Through her castigation of Belafonte, Cliff reveals the manner in which she considers the tune “Linstead Market” to be “an unmediated expression of private, bodily feeling,” that “becomes through the economic forces of commodification and property ownership a public form available to all” (Radano 2010, 365). Characterized as “a lament, a traditional song of marketwomen [that] sometimes, on the back of Mas Freddie’s truck in cool of a late Saturday night, passing by the roads which led into the territory of the Maroons, the marketwomen sang,” Linstead Market stands in the text as a pure cultural product (Cliff 1984, 82). The use of the term “arranged” to describe Belafonte’s performance underscores not only his musical revision of “Linstead Market” but also the ways in which he also “arrange[s]” the “smiling children and ever-bearing trees” to revise its meaning (82). Casting the women’s singing as authentic in contradistinction to Belafonte’s by presenting their singing as part and parcel of communal history and life, Cliff’s gendered critique unwittingly elides the impact of
chattel slavery on all public hearings of black sound. That is, in launching her critical assessment of Belafonte’s commodification of the marketwomen’s song, Cliff fails to consider the ways in which slavery concretized the “relationship between [black] sound and property,” marking “slave music [as]…an aspect of the slaves themselves and…therefore a part of the human property that slaveholders owned” (Radano 2010, 365). While the women are not, in 1959, chattel slaves, Cliff’s juxtaposition of their singing to Belafonte’s obscures the relation between their sonic testaments of maternal inability and the enduring resonances of chattel slavery within their aural production. Put another way, Cliff’s construction of the market women’s singing as “pure” obscures the manner in which black sonic production in the Americas since the era of chattel slavery has always been marked as “property,” which in turn renders black acoustics as commodities that circulate in multiple markets of exchange. The marketwomen’s positions as “speaking commodities,” then, comes to be obscured by Cliff’s presentation of them within a cloistered market deemed unavailable to outside influence. Belafonte’s alignment with American consumer capitalism and his gender also function to obscure the ways in which mixed race, or creole, female subjectivity comes to be constructed and mobilized through the same vampiristic mechanisms Cliff attributes to Belafonte.

Significantly, the Black River market women in Abeng circulate their wares within a closed, or internal market, which mimics Cliff’s imaginings of the appropriate circulation of their song within the community, free from external influences that may engender misinterpretations. Cliff writes, “Black River was a small market town; there were no tourists ambling about….No buckra people were here at all—just country people, country women mostly, not unlike the market women themselves, just looking to
buy one *sint’ing* for their families which they themselves did not raise” (Cliff 1984, 82, emphasis in original). Here, the closed market presents an almost utopian space of exchange for the island’s inhabitants free from the intrusion and imposition of foreigners on holiday looking to create souvenirs in the form of photographs for which they would pay “the marketwomen sixpence…more if they agreed to show their gap-toothed smiles” (82). Trading primarily with other women much like themselves, these marketwomen’s geographic isolation seemingly protects them from being physically commodified in the capturing of their images for foreign circulation as souvenirs. However, this protection also exacts its own price, as these women are denied the pecuniary considerations attendant upon tourist trade engendered by more advantageous geographic positioning. These women, then, live “a hard life—selling things to other people as poor as they were” (82). Often, “the women had only earned a few shillings to get them through to the next weekend,” though “their baskets might be half-empty…because they had given away some of their goods to women who had asked” (82). The closed marketplace is an arena of exchange for women in similar circumstances, wherein they are able to assist one another in their hardscrabble lives. However, as a closed system, this market can only support, rather than reverse the cyclical poverty that dominates these women’s lives. Tellingly, men are conspicuously absent from this circuit, silently attesting to the abandonment of black women as both a product of, and as contributing to, the economic stasis of the cloistered island.

Emptying their baskets “because it felt better to do this than to carry the almost-laden baskets back home” these women fall victim to the lack of economic opportunities predicated, in part, by their geographic isolation and lack of mobility (82). The Black
River market will not bear financial rewards, which renders these women’s goods surplus in the island economy, echoing the manner in which the black maternal body is problematically allied with both fecundity and waste in the Western subconscious. Tellingly, these women bear the products of their labors to an already over-saturated market, aligning their produce with the perceived excesses of the black female body and of the island-space. Their produce thereby becomes marked as surplus, in contradiction to the state of deprivation from which it is derived, echoing the cultural and economic logics of enslavement which construct black maternal and sonic labors as surplus, hence devalued and “given away” rather than recompensed. Here, the problematic structuring of black labors as “gift” in the same manner as Du Bois resurfaces to expose that the bulk of black women’s labor, in particular, goes unrecompensed, effectively dis-abling black mothers to provide for their children within a social structure that mandates they do so.

Belafonte’s mobility contrasts sharply with the women’s of St. Elizabeth’s fixity—he is empowered by his ability to consume and claim Jamaican culture as a “native son,” as it were, as well as his ability to move into alternate spheres unfettered by obligation to the island or its inhabitants while offering its cultural products as commodities. His staging of the “smiling children and ever-bearing trees” echoes the construction of the island-space, as well as marks its inhabitants as inordinately fertile, thereby rendering its produce as surplus that becomes inherently devalued. The “smiling children” suggest an invitation, a welcome to the would-be tourist who consumes Calypso music to come and partake of the island’s bounty represented by the “ever-bearing trees.” The seeming inexhaustibility of the island’s fertility renders it ripe for the tourist class to “come a feel up,” or sample the island’s plenitude. The devaluation of the
island’s produce renders it waste, in the same manner that Césaire reflects upon in his characterization of the Antilles, and as Cliff herself presents in *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) in her descriptions of both the “ruinate” of ancestral lands—a stifling effusion of forest overgrowth that overtakes human cultivation—as well as “the Dungle,” a fetid locale of Jamaican poverty that bears the mark of both waste and excess, over-satiation and deprivation (32). Hearing “Linstead Market” in tandem with the Dungle mothers’ experiences uncovers the manner in which the devaluation and unrecompensed consumption of black women’s perceived plenitude echoes the post-World War II transformation of Caribbean island economies into tourist economies. The commercial (re)creation of slavery through the display of black abjection and servitude in tandem with the availability of luxurious comestible excesses for the traveling Westerner commodifies black maternal bodies and marks all the products of their bodies, including their sounds, songs, and even their children alternately as surplus goods, or as waste.

“PARADISE PLANTATION”: Circulating Slavery’s Surplus in a Global Market

Cliff reveals the pernicious effects of Jamaica’s tourist economy upon its most vulnerable inhabitants by juxtaposing the excesses of the tourist classes with the unmet needs of children in a stunningly painful description of maternal inability:

The children played in the ground around the shacks, tunneled into mountainsides, watched after their mothers’ babies while the women walked the city looking for food or begging work. Hunting through the trash behind the big hotels. Diving into a heavy steel drum, they came up with all
manner of sining. A slice of fruit from someone’s planter’s punch. Pieces of a green banana or chocho, cut into scalloped or zigzagged edges, a garnish from a stranger’s lobster, caught at Lime Cay that very morning. Remains of food flown in for visitors...like the carcasses of roast turkey which appeared each afternoon dumped from the luncheon buffet at Myrtle Bank. The white meat sliced away, but nice bits on the back and thighs. Would be like de Chrismus wid dis....

As she searched, she fought the streetdogs, the scrawny, lonely presences in the city—diving deep, the mother would take whatever she grasped. These things went into a crocus sack which she rested on her hip, tightly protecting it against the dogs who followed her, even the ones whose teats hung slack and empty. Against other women who might have found nothing. Against the black-up men...telling her dey sweet ‘pon she....

More often than not the turkey bones remained a dream of hers. More often than not, she returned empty-handed, her head bent into her slack chest. More often than not she was too tired to begin her search, and her children scoured the hills of the Dungle (Cliff 1987, 33-34).

The Dungle mother’s tribulations, taken together with the lyrics of “Linstead Market” attest to a prolonged history of maternal inability rooted in chattel enslavement, extended by British colonialism, and further exacerbated by American imperialism via the reduction of Jamaica’s economy to a strictly tourist/service economy. Each of these maternal figures comes to be locked, or fixed in place by Jamaica’s overdependence on a tourist economy that makes its
gains by claiming to have the ability to reproduce or sustain “the past.” The
nostalgic inhabitation of the past both takes Jamaica out of modern time in the
tourist imagination, and it also naturalizes black poverty and stasis, while at the
same time disappearing this poverty beneath the imaginative (re)production of the
island’s fecundity as surplus, which becomes the bounty of the tourists’ table.
This construction of Jamaica’s slaveholding past as a commodity is also reflected
during young Clare’s visit to her father’s ancestral estate, which has been
refashioned as “PARADISE PLANTATION,” the “great house…left by the
developers as a ‘come on,’ to convince prospective clients they could buy into the
past. Capture history in their summer homes” (1984, 24). Any woman who is
employed in this economy will undoubtedly hold a service position, cleaning and
preparing food that she herself and her children may not eat, for very low wages
that cannot fully support a family.

Importantly, the island’s own natural produce in *No Telephone to Heaven*,
such as the “lobster, caught at Lime Cay” and “chocho” are placed into circulation
with imported goods such as the “roast turkey” that is “flown in for visitors,”
while also denied to Jamaica’s inhabitants, who must scavenge dumpsters for the
remains of the tourist’s wasteful excesses. The “slack and empty teats” of the
“streetdogs” reflect the Dungle mother’s inability to provide sustenance for her
children as result of the island’s economic structure. Contrastingly, the
marketwomen’s bodies come to be conflated with the ripe “ackee” in the song
“Linstead Market,” fruits which “Everybody come feel a up, feel up,” while “not
a quatty wuth sell,” causing the women to “give away” the fruits of their labors
that will not be recompensed. This dual paradigm is reminiscent of Ellison’s portrayal of the theft and waste of maternal milk in *Invisible Man*, a testament to black women’s divestment from the produce of their own bodies and their communities, which also echoes in Belafonte’s (re)presentation of Jamaica in his variation of “Linstead Market.”

Tellingly, Belafonte himself reflects upon the lack of responsibility he felt toward the island’s inhabitants even as he profited from their culture at the height of his international success, largely by copyrighting “Caribbean songs” after “taking liberties with”—or altering—them (2011, 155). Belafonte retrospectively muses, “we might have passed on a slice of our profits—somehow—to the islands whose culture had generated those songs. The truth was, we never did” (2011, 156). Taking songs such as “Linstead Market” as surplus products which had ostensibly been “given away” because their original creators did not or could not obtain copyrights and/or seek recompense for them, Belafonte and his collaborator Lord Burgess (as did the Lomaxes, Pete Seeger and others), argued that these songs had no intrinsic value. Rather, Belafonte argues through his lawyers in legal proceedings against him that his “interpretation of those songs…gave them value, and helped make calypso internationally known” (155-56). The market women, then, obtain no purchase on their own sonic labor—a cultural surplus rendered marketable commodity by Belafonte’s artistic interventions. Belafonte, a black American of Jamaican descent, achieved popularity by leveraging his personal, cultural, and social liminality into a claim to the social authority to represent all people in his songs.

While known as the “King of Calypso,” Belafonte’s repertoire covered folk music from around the globe including “American chain-gang songs…‘Oh No, John,’ an
English ballad…‘Merci Bon Dieu,’ a Haitian folk song…and even ‘Hava Nageela,’ the Hebrew anthem” (99). Belafonte’s capacious repertoire, as well as his particular representation of black manhood in America—as the son of immigrants—position him to take advantage of a shifting discourse on race in “an internationally expanding American state” (Stephens 2003, 224). Michele Stephens argues that “the 1950’s saw Belafonte’s black, ethnic, working-class consciousness, forged in both Caribbean and American radicalism, transformed to fit a quintessentially liberal story of American, interracial integration” (225). Tellingly, Belafonte’s capacity to speak for American and Caribbean blacks (and, arguably blacks globally) in the late 1950’s and 1960’s results from both his gender and his mobility. The ability to move from place to place nearly unfettered allows him to engage in the flows of capital—cultural and otherwise. Moreover, I argue, Belafonte becomes vested with a distinctly Americanized ethnic appeal that simultaneously encompassed and troubled his blackness vis-à-vis foreign, or Caribbean identity, thereby eliding the more pernicious stereotypes of black American manhood by distinguishing the Caribbean mixed-raced ethnic from the American black. Belafonte himself reproduces this problematic construction of his selfhood against black American manhood by emphasizing the heightened spirit and mobility of the black “West Indian” in contradistinction to the eternally victimized, downtrodden American black. Belafonte’s problematic presentation of folk culture in the 1950’s sublimates the presence of West Indian women by codifying the West Indian laborer as the “working man” who is then able to transform “his ethnic working-class story into the interracial romance of American integrationism” (226). Using both West Indian women and American blacks as foils against which to present his ethnic masculinity, Belafonte emerged as a popular
performer at a moment of geopolitical convergences “that would necessitate the incorporation of this particular kind of black, male, ethnic performer” (Stephens 229). The United States’ intrusive presence across the circum-Caribbean, most notably through militarized presence in Trinidad, coupled with increasing expressions of black isolation and alienation within American culture succeeding World War II and “the resistance of the Caribbean through the figure of the Trinidadian calypso singer” merged to create a perfect storm of possibility for a figure such as Belafonte to emerge (229). The sonic resistances of Caribbean calypso singers had to be acknowledged, integrated, and muted within the soundscapes of American Imperialism.

In the latter half of the 1940’s and throughout the 1950’s, Americans’ understanding of freedom becomes increasingly marked by the ability to travel. Freedom of movement as freedom is allied at this moment with a broader cultural understanding of “American capital’s confidence in its right to travel and exert its influence globally and hemispherically” (30). Black soldiers who served in World War II and black seaman who had been circumnavigating the globe increasingly found that during this moment, freedom of movement meant freedom to move as, and as agents of capital, not as pleasure-seekers—a reification of slavery’s and colonialism’s transportational logics. White Americans were vested with the freedom to travel both as a fundamental right, and as a mode of consumption that echoes the structural and economic relations of slavery, whereby the produce of black bodies were rendered public goods subject to white enjoyment and control. The rapidly decolonizing islands provided the necessary projective spaces for white enjoyment, as they presented microcosmic recreations of the plantation wherein whites could partake of bounty while simultaneously consuming black
abjection as a form of entertainment, as Cliff represents both in *Abeng* and in *No Telephone to Heaven*. Island sounds came to be commodified and consumed in tandem with other types of produce by the vacationing American. Calypso music comes to the forefront among the myriad variations of Caribbean musical production, in part due to its linkages within the tourist economy, and in part because the American occupation of Trinidad exposed more U.S. citizens to its sounds.

It is important to note, however, that even as the calypso is being marketed as an expression of authentic West Indian musical styles to consumers, the multiple economies in which the calypso circulates mark it differently in relation to those economies. The confrontational calypsos of singers such as Mighty Sparrow sounded a dissonant note to the consumer-driven forms that came to dominate the international marketplace. Importantly, the calypso is understood prior to Belafonte’s emergence as a distinctly Trinidadian musical form, one that is “imported…slick and self-conscious” in catering to tourists, against purportedly more authentic Jamaican “folk” music, including songs like “Linstead Market” (Leach 1956). Belafonte himself disclaims that he is a Calypso singer in 1957 in his repeated declarations that he sings “folk material” (*Chicago Defender* February 1957). In this way, Belafonte seeks to distance himself from the production of what he understands as inauthentic music in favor of the “West Indian folk ballad[s]…and work song[s]” that comprise his biggest hit recordings (*Chicago Defender* February 1957). Here, we see at work the careful crafting of commercial music as “authentic” vis-à-vis a Belafonte’s claiming of folk status for his music, as well as an exposure of inter-island animosities in the West Indies that diametrically opposes Trinidadian to Jamaican culture—an opposition that is largely manufactured by and
through ethnographic discourse. Leveraging Trinidadian inauthenticity against the purported purity of Jamaican folk music, Belafonte participates in an elevation of folk culture similar to Cliff’s re-presentation of “Linstead Market” as a pure and unmediated cultural form prior to Belafonte’s theft and redeployment of the song. Both of their (re)presentations of Jamaican folk culture can be understood in their deployment of the ethnographic ear, a mode of hearing that seeks to grant cultural authority through discourses of authenticity, but which ultimately divests autochthonous producers of cultural forms of ownership by enabling the circulation of their cultural products in multiple markets to which the producers have no access. Tellingly, in Abeng, Cliff suppresses “Linstead Market’s” history as a mobilized sonic object circulating simultaneously through several markets, rendering the song and its producers static in order to ground her critique of American capitalism.

(Im)Mobilizing Discourse: Ethnographic Authenticity as Stasis in Abeng

Compromising Cliff’s desire to present “Linstead Market” as representative of authentic Jamaican women’s folk culture in 1959, the song’s actual circulation history marks it as part and parcel of both ethnographic and commercial markets of exchange very early in the 20th Century. MacEdward Leach remains among the most prominent practitioners of cultural ethnography, due in large part to his early work in Jamaica and other sites in the West Indies in the 1940’s and 1950’s. Conducting hundreds of interviews, and recording thousands of hours of Caribbean music, stories, and games, Leach’s work provides a rich archive of Jamaican auditory culture that celebrates the “authenticity” of Jamaican cultural production while also problematically marking this
authenticity as cultural stasis. Leach’s explication of Jamaican cultural authenticity rests in his concurrent readings of planter’s manuals, European travelogues, William Earle’s *Obi*, and notably Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica*—all of which (re)present black folk culture as part and parcel of their (re)presentations of chattel slavery. For Leach, black cultural authenticity derives from the proximity of the cultural product to the practices of chattel slavery, as well as its restricted circulation. He himself marks “Linstead Market” as an authentic folk song of “native” Jamaican women although his archival papers contradict this assessment. Leach’s papers contain a 1943 song catalog with a transcription of “Linstead Market,” evidencing the song’s circulation beyond Jamaica prior to his research. Importantly, a transcript of the song also appears in Walter Jekyll’s (1907) *Jamaican Song and Story: Anancy Stories, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes*, a text published by the British Folk-Lore Society. Digging through the strata of cultural material in Leach’s archive, we begin to discern the multiplicitous layers of markets in which the marketwomen’s song circulates, and how these markets obfuscate their interrelation. The academic, or ethnographic market crystallizes the status of the folk cultural form, and as a communal object divested of commercial value—its cultural value implicitly rests within a non-commodity status. At tension with this is the manner in which the collection of the object for preservation immediately places it within an economy of circulation within academic-ethnographic markets, obliquely but firmly allied with capitalism’s capacity to extract cultural products from their producers in the absence of compensation. Volumes of books and song catalogs are then sold without granting any pecuniary consideration to the producers of these cultural products—because their expression has been naturalized as surplus, authorship belongs to the
spectator or compiler vesting non-producers with ownership in multiple markets of exchange to echo slavery’s foundational impact upon Western democratic capitalism. Importantly, the black producers of authenticity remain locked in place as their songs and other cultural forms circulate within a globalized marketplace.

Cliff unwittingly (re)produces this very mechanism of exploitation in Abeng while launching her trenchant critique of Western capitalist exploitation in her castigation of Harry Belafonte. Cliff obfuscates the messy, interconnected web of British colonialism and burgeoning American imperialism in the construction of matrices of domination that continue to oppress the Jamaican subject by compressing Belafonte’s global audience into “American television…and…nightclubs” (1984, 82). This compression also enacts an erasure of the only time Belafonte actually performed “Linstead Market,” which was during a 1958 BBC Christmas Special. Importantly, Cliff’s collapsing of Belafonte’s performance of “Linstead Market” into his repertoire akin to his performance of “Island in the Sun” marks her understanding that “the cultural work” of a “Calypso King” comprised “forgiv[ing] America’s increased presence in the Caribbean” (Stephens 2003, 233). However, in so doing, she elides the cultural significance of his BBC performance as enacting this same forgiveness in relation to England by covering over the violences of slavery and its echoing after-effects in Jamaica with “all smiling children and ever-bearing trees” (Cliff 1984, 82). The seed of chattel slavery, his performance seems to suggest, has borne the fruit of plenty, still available for the Western consumer. Tellingly, women are absented in Belafonte’s presentation. The black woman’s body as the site for the infliction of slavery’s most brutal violence must be absented from this reconciliatory narrative. As violence against the black maternal body produced the cries which gave
birth to diaspora, black masculine figures come to be mobilized to sublimate her cries within songs of reconciliation that expose a “willingness to seduce” the mother country, represented by “the white female” (Stephens 2003, 228). The “smiling children,” along with the conscription of the song, also reflect the manner in which black women come to be divested of the produce of their bodies, which circulate as goods in global markets—the children as eager laborers ripe for exploitation.

While Cliff rightly assesses the manner in which “the mobility of black cultural forms and performers…depended upon the imprimatur of the U.S. state” in the 1950’s in her critique of Belafonte, she also problematically disempowers black Jamaican women by silencing “Linstead Market[‘s]” circulation history beyond the parameters of he Black River Market and Belafonte’s performance (Stephens 2003, 223). Therefore, “Miss Lou[‘s]” (Louise Bennett’s) 1954 recording of the song on the album Jamaican Folk Songs falls out of the narrative’s purportedly counter-historical frame in a manner that reproduces the novel’s “repeated reminders of gaps in [Jamaican] popular knowledge [that] work…to deemphasize the power of the militant words of Afro-Jamaican women” (Walters 2205, 35).10 In her critique of Belafonte’s sonic and bodily mobility, Cliff masks the manner in which Abeng’s critical framework depends upon the stasis of “pure” Afro-Jamaican women’s bodies in the island space as a foil to the mobility of hybridized women like Clare and Kitty. Cliff “fixes” these black women into place even as she attempts to sound their experiences in the text, reproducing through Clare an ethnographic sentimentalism that positions her to bear witness to these women’s experiences as opposed to empowering the marketwomen to stand as testis to their own experiences. While Cliff is typically understood as a writer who avoids the “stereotyped
immobilism of an essential ‘authenticity’” in her work, “presenting absence as opposed to ‘essential authenticity,’” I assert that in attempting to establish the cultural authenticity of “Linstead Market” Cliff problematically immobilizes Afro-Jamaican women (Walters 2005, 36). Affirming the rightful place of the song as within the isolated marketplaces of the island-space in an attempt to invest the black female producers of this song with ownership, the novel refuses the song’s actual history of circulation. Silencing Miss Lou’s projection of “Linstead Market” outward into a global marketplace, Cliff participates in Leach’s disturbing ethnographic auditory politics, which construct authenticity via proximity to slavery’s degradations. While Abeng does not uncritically participate in ethnographic voyeurism, it does fall prey to some its most pernicious representational strategies in its depictions of Afro-Jamaican women.

Because Abeng, in part, seeks to “expand the representation of Caribbean ethnic identity” by uncovering and sounding the experiences of “invisible, laboring West Indian women,” the novel instates these women as the (re)producers of Jamaican culture (Stephens 2003, 236). Cliff seems to be able to imagine these women’s ownership of their song only if it remains locked in place with them within the crushing poverty of the Jamaican countryside. In contradistinction to Belafonte’s mobilizing of the song via the currents of American capitalism, the song for the women of the Black River Market becomes locked into an echoing refrain that attests to their own stasis. Tellingly, both Kitty’s and Clare’s mobility come to be leveraged against their darker sisters’ immobility, evidenced by Kitty’s traversals of the island from “St. Elizabeth to Kingston, bringing back to town things from the country, and bringing to the country things from town” (Cliff 1984, 49). Kitty, a “red” woman from a propertied family, moves within the
text between “two distinct places [that] created the background for the whole of [her and Clare’s] existence” (38, 49). Clare, “whitened” by her father’s lineage, inherits and expands Kitty’s mobility in an attempt to actualize freedom, most startlingly rendered in contrast to her playmate Zoe’s fixity in St. Elizabeth.

Clare, mobilized by class and color privilege to more prominently “fix” the family’s social ascension through the permanent attainment of whiteness, militates against the idea of any type offixity for her own identity. In contrast, Zoe affirms that slavery’s inheritance of “the condition of the mother” will affix her and her generations to come. A most revealing instance occurs when Clare determines to hunt and kill “Massa Cudjoe,” a wild hog in the Jamaican bush after being excluded from her male cousins’ ritual at a hog slaughter (114). Protesting her fixity within a stereotypically feminine role underscored by this exclusion, Clare seeks to prove her ability to traverse the imposed boundaries of gender difference by mobilizing her sense of entitlement and her access to a weapon in contest to her confinement. She enlists Zoe, her playmate at her grandmother’s behest, in the adventure. Zoe attempts to divert Clare from her plan by illuminating the stark differences between them, most notably Zoe’s fixity in St. Elizabeth: “Wunna a go back to Kingston soon now. Wunna no realize me have to stay here….me would have fe tek on all de contention….—fe me pickney would be traced if dem mama did do such a t’ing” (117-18). Here Zoe emphasizes her lack of mobility, and the manner in which her children will both inherit her social condition, as well as come to be marked by whatever acts of indiscretion she may be seen to commit.

A stunning revelation of the manner in which Afro-Jamaican women must contend with the permanent heritability of the condition of the mother, Zoe’s words fall
upon Clare’s nearly-deaf ears as a negation of her right to pursue (gendered) equality by “do[ing] something so dem will know we is smaddy” (118). Including Zoe in her drive to be “smaddy,” Clare suppresses their differences in service of her vision, a problematic which Cliff critically assesses. As Zoe reiterates her point, she continues to contrast Clare’s mobility to her own immobility: “Dis here is fe me territory….Me will be here so all me life—me will be a marketwoman like fe me mama. Me will have to beg land fe me and me pickney to live pon. Wunna will go a England, den maybe America, to university…later we will be different smaddy. But we is different smaddy now” (118). Clare “felt hurt. By territory, Zoe’s division of it, and…conclusion that without a doubt their lives would never be close once they reached into womanhood” (118). Wounded, Clare wonders “why did everything seem so fixed? So unchangeable” (118). Although Clare attempts to reason away and mitigate the differences Zoe has delineated, the novel intimates that she grapples with Zoe’s declaration by turning back toward her fractured self—“split into two parts—white and not white, town and country, scholarship and privilege, Boy and Kitty” (119).

While this exploration of the fragmented self of the island hybrid echoes Cliff’s delineation of the island’s multilayered acoustic sphere, it also inherently echoes a confoundingly dissonant deployment of Afro-Jamaican women’s sounds as a means of grappling with personal subjectivity—a vampiristic use of these sounds by which the ethnic hybrid is able to profit. Put another way, Zoe’s testimony functions in the same manner as the marketwomen’s song in the text—as a site of Afro-Jamaican women’s sonic articulation that comes to be consumed and (re)presented in a manner that produces gain, as well as serves as the site from which the mixed-race woman is able to launch a
broader gendered critique that at once highlights, and participates in the sublimation of black women’s authoritative testimonial soundings in order to serve that critique. Tellingly, Zoe’s alignment with the marketwomen via maternal inheritance and her testimonial vocalizations to Clare, force attention back to Cliff’s presentation of “Linstead Market” and her critical fictional engagement with Belafonte’s (re)presentation of this song as a means of attaining pecuniary gain. The power differentials attendant upon Belafonte’s gender, as well as his alignment with the U.S. state as both controller of and market for the circulation of Caribbean cultural forms obscure the manner in which the narrative voice also profits from the written circulation of the “folk” tune. While the narrative accuses Belafonte (rightfully so) of producing a culturally dissonant version of the tune in his act of commodification, it also participates in the ethically questionable practice of claiming a right to disseminate this ostensibly folk heritage in the interests of its own critical project. The novel, like Belafonte, stakes a claim in the power to (re)present Jamaican culture, excising key aspects of Afro-Jamaican experience in the construction of its “stereophonic” textuality as a testament to diaspora. Most disturbingly, Abeng (and, by extension Clare and Kitty Savage) profits from black women’s fixity in states of poverty and the post/colonial nation-state, both by mining this fixity to reveal the ore of a critical project to sound island history, and as the problematic conflation of this critical project with the hybrid woman’s mediation of her own mobile identit(ies). Cliff, then, like Belafonte mobilizes “Linstead Market” in a manner that requires its producers’ continued stasis, enabling each of them to traffic these women’s cries individually as “My song,” reproducing the social and economic logics of enslavement by marking these women’s sonic products as readily available surplus to be circulated
within markets to which they have historically and contemporaneously been denied access.

_Abeng_, then, lays bare the continued suppression of black maternal soundings in diasporic imaginings of liberation, recalling Césaire’s use and sublimation of the sonorous maternal body in his nascent theory of Negritude, as well as Douglass’ and Ellison’s textual silencing of black women. Cliff’s sonic-textual production of a distinctly gendered critique of American capitalist exploitation rooted in the New World’s history of slavery unwittingly mires its imaginings of women’s freedom within the same logics of dominance it seeks to contest. The black maternal body as the locus for diasporic testimony and identity, even in this woman-authored text, continues to signal proximity to the abasements of bondage that must be escaped in the pursuit of freedom. Thus marked, the black mother is reduced to the threshold that all diasporic identities must cross and leave behind, her own testimony comprising an undecipherable resonance which enables her lineage to testify. Tellingly, Cliff’s novel neither affirms the utopianism of _Iola Leroy_’s (re)claiming of the mother’s centrality to black liberation activism, nor completely dismantles masculinist imaginings of freedom as autonomy in her delineation of freedom in the Caribbean as something only accessible to racial hybrids through mobility. Sadly, then, _Abeng_ (re)affirms maternal abandonment as the route to diasporic freedom even as it (re)affirms black mothers as the routes and roots of diasporic culture. However, Cliff’s novel better attunes our hearing to assess the manner in which black sounds are always-already overwritten by dominant cultural scripts to produce colonial and colonized identities in its study of the Jamaican soundscape.

(Re)turning toward the American nation-state, Chapter Four assesses the distinct modes
of hearing black male sound that operate to produce American civic identities, and investigates further how the status of black sound as surplus comes to be managed to express theories of black liberation from the antebellum period to the Black Power moment.

Notes

1 Cliff’s definition of the abeng appears prior to the beginning of the text proper, and is not included in the official pagination of the text—a purposeful sounding of an unauthorized testimony as an enactment of the novel’s fundamental purpose.

2 Wendy W. Walters notes in At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing (2005) that Cliff’s “work consistently traces out the genealogies of slavery, the complicated connections between the multiple national identities at play in Jamaican politics, and the intersections in the lives of individuals occupying multiple class, race, and national social locations” (28).

3 Beginning in the 18th Century, planters in Jamaica prohibited the use of African-style drums due to their uses within African contexts of war, and because the planters began to suspect (rightly so) that drums were being used to facilitate coded information to the slave population. Certain drumming practices were also believed to be associated with witchcraft, or Obeah.

4 Jamaican mento music is itself characterized as either a folk/rural style typically accompanied by banjo, guitar, bamboo wind instruments and hand percussion instruments, or as an American jazz-influenced “dance band” style of music in its urban iterations. Largely considered a precursor to popular ska and reggae styled music, mento reached its height of recording prominence in the 1950’s, just prior to Trinidadian Calypso’s ascension in the global market. Importantly, mento music, folk tunes, calypso, and jazz cross-pollinated another another stylistically, such that one hears diaspora in the performance of all of these forms. Importantly, the lyrical content of mento songs typically reflected quotidian aspects of Jamaican experience. These songs took food, migration, and humor as their topical matter and were often adaptations of folk songs. The rural style of mento—which Cliff seems to be drawing upon—had a markedly nasal style of delivery, which was thought to significantly echo African musicals styles.

5 Vince Brown writes in The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery: “Among Africans and their descendants, in Jamaica, funeral rites shaped moral idioms that highlighted their common humanity and values, often transcending and challenging the dominant mores and imperatives of slavery. Evocations of kinship and ancestry yoked participants to their past, even in the accelerated world organized by slaveholders’ expectant outlook” (2008, 62). I want to suggest here that the hum functions as the sonic imprint of the slaves’ counter-organization to slavery that reverberates in the narrative present of the novel as a testament to the slave past, and also as a contemporary act of diasporic testimony.

6 Significantly, Cliff echoes Jean Toomer’s Cane, wherein Toomer writes of “a goat path in the middle of the Dixie pike,” once again forcing our attention to diasporic interconnections while also illuminating the tenuousness of this in relation to Africa, which frequently stands in the diasporic imagination as an un-real place—a mythic space. Additionally, I want to note here that Wendy Walters reads the “falsetto” voice in this scene as indicative of Cliff’s mobilization of the “fulcrum of homophobia” in a manner that “disturbs the portrayal of an indigenous tradition surrounding burial” (38). She comes to this reading, in part, by comparing the funeral scene to the community’s refusal to assist “Mad Hannah” in the funeral rites for
her son, marked by the community as a “battyman” (Abeng, 63). While Walter’s insights hold, my reading insists upon the falsetto’s significance as a feminized sound, one that echoes the maternal cry in diaspora in order to create the “mourning chant” as aural testimony to the history of enslavement.

Cliff’s writing echoes many of the thematic concerns that preoccupied Head’s body of work, including the problematic gender relationships created and sustained by systemic oppression. Head also sought to reveal and represent the hidden women of South Africa, forwarding feminist solidarity and collectivity as the paradigm for liberation. However, her status as a mixed-race and highly educated woman complicated her mission as well as her ability to imagine and represent black African women, a problem we also apprehend in Cliff’s work.


Miss Lou was among Jamaica’s pre-eminent cultural ambassadors, who held a career of more than five decades writing poetry in patois, recording Jamaican folk and mento tunes, and traveling throughout the African diaspora. For an extended discussion, see Ifeoma Nwanko, “Preface: (Ap)Praising Miss Lou,” Journal of West Indian Literature (2009).

Sound [is] racial memory.

Larry Neal, “Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic”

Nigger, your breed ain’t metaphysical

Robert Penn Warren, “Pondy Woods”

Cracker, your kind ain’t exegetical

Sterling Brown

Black Arts Movement writer Larry Neal suggested that in order to understand “the black experience,” one simply had to listen to “James Brown scream”—intimating that testimony to black oppression and resilience were encoded in the non-linguistic cries of this renowned singer (1968, 653). While Neal’s statement prioritizes the visceral, affective impact of the scream, figuring this cry (as does Césaire) as the potential agent of transformation for Western social consciousness, it also belies the fact that America’s acoustic history is filled with the screams and cries of its black inhabitants, none of which has fundamentally changed the nation’s conception of them. Therefore, while we laud the transformative potential of black music and sound—the audition of the oppressed—we must also bear in mind that its broader hearing is tied to a complex of social, legal, and affective relations prescribed during chattel slavery. Because slavery authorized owners to both command and interpret black songs and sounds, the various meanings of
black acoustics became compressed in such a manner that the sounds blacks produced were used to confirm the rightness of chattel slavery as an institution. Planters and pro-slavery writers publicly lauded slave song as evidence of slaves’ happiness and contentment with their lot. As Saidiya Hartman asserts, the “quotidian” degradations of enslavement were conjoined to both “spectacle…. [and] enjoyment,” casting the enslaved black as “contented” with his or her condition (1997, 4, 21). Further, I contend that the management of black sound in the literal and discursive realms of the plantation produced an acoustic milieu that categorized black soundings such: sounds of enjoyment, sounds of complacency and/or acquiescence, and sounds of correction.

The sounds produced by slaves, often at the master’s behest, were frequently transformed for the captives’ own purposes, subverting the totality of domination and crafting intracommunal meaning that contested the rightness of their abasement. However, as Hartman reminds us, these acts and soundings simultaneously confirmed through display and acoustic compliance the master’s domination (1997, 7-8). Following Hartman, this chapter seeks to limn out the ways in which the black body is consumed by and through sound in the Western public imagination—the complex and often contradictory processes by which the possibilities for testifying to slavery’s traumas are actualized, and that also facilitate the conscription of these testimonial sounds within an affective matrix of white enjoyment that claims exegetical command of their meanings. Moreover, understanding these sounds as both raced and gendered articulations of experience, this chapter interrogates their public functions in order to meditate upon the status of black sound and song as “gift,” as Du Bois proclaimed at the dawn of the 20th Century in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903 [2003], 253). I argue that
these sounds are slavery’s surplus goods, and echo within the Western sociopolitical consciousness as such, complicating the notions of subjective autonomy that subtends the claim to their status as “gift.”

The status of black sound and song as surplus goods becomes concretized during the era of chattel slavery when whites are vested with the ownership of black personhood, which exceeds the ownership of labor in its strictest sense. As Ray Radano asserts, slavery’s construction of the “relationship between [black] sound and property,” marked “slave music as…an aspect of the slaves themselves and…therefore a part of the human property that slaveholders owned” (2010, 365). Moreover, the affective economy of chattel slavery in which black sounds circulated also rendered these sounds public goods by vesting non-slaveholding whites with the social authority to command, control, and define black sound as a surplus benefit of whiteness. Black sound, then, can be understood as both a surplus commodity and the social surplus through which white civic identity is constituted. In The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois attempts to (re)claim black sound by characterizing it as a gift, something freely and purposely given—ostensibly by an autonomous subject. In this way, Du Bois (re)captures the songs and sounds of the laboring slave as agentive intellectual production while concurrently forwarding an implicit argument that black humanity was not, and could not be, owned. By (re)framing and (re)assessing Du Bois’ “gift of…song” in this way, I reveal the possibilities for testimony embedded within the grain of black soundings, as well as the limitations imposed by the unquestioning acceptance of black bodies as “sonic bodies” within black theorizations of subjectivity (Du Bois 2003, 265; Henriches 2011, 13). The too-easy framing of the black body through its sound-making capacities in these
frameworks of the black self may inadvertently reinscribe the facile and demeaning belief “that Africans’ natural propensity for song…reflect[s] a disposition for servitude” (Hartman, 44). Disentangling blacks from this naturalized relationship to sound brings to the fore the manner in which black sound is heard as “transhistorical [racial] essence,” casting blacks as the atavistic folk ground of American (read white) identity (Washington 2002, 237).

Interrogating the discursive construction of blacks in the Americas as a “song-lit race of slaves,” this chapter moves through a broad range of literature and music, attending to the “nodes” of black soundings throughout history that “allow [one] to slip into the breaks” and hear again for the first time the “cri[es] for sanctuary” that punctuated America’s soundscapes during chattel slavery, and their resonant echoes in today’s “postracial” acoustic milieu (Toomer [1929] 2011, 12; Ellison [1951] 1995, 6; Waligora-Davis 2011, 12). The rendering of the black body public property during chattel slavery concomitantly rendered the sounds emitted from these bodies as public goods, which in turn configured these sounds as the plane for sounding white subjectivity and citizenship. The sounds of black unfreedom provide the necessary acoustic supplement, as well as contestation, to the harmonious melodies of Western democratic capitalism, a sonic figuration Duke Ellington aptly claims as the centralized “dissonance” of “Negro life” (qtd in Kun 2005, 39). Accordingly, it holds that sounds of black pain are requisite in framing Western ideals of “justice”—the infliction of pain upon black bodies and the consequent cries signify correction as opposed to torture in the American collective unconscious. In turn, blacks discursively re-deploy these screams of “correction” in order to sound the ongoing traumas of the brutalities they endure. These
competing interpretations of black screams are not merely incidental: they at once index the “doubly invaginated,” that is, “cut or doubled” nature of black sound in the West, and also the West’s schizophrenic desire to hear black suffering while simultaneously abrogating responsibility for its creation (Moten 2003, 224). Discourses surrounding the natural, essential character of black sound function to divorce these sounds from their socio-political-economic contexts of production. Put another way, the desire to hear black sound within this tightly circumscribed field of meaning requires that black sound “ma[k]e music” of suffering that is then heard as evidence of “immunity to sorrow” while concurrently providing an aural plane of projection from which whites are able to sound their citizenship (Hartman 1997, 17, 23). Crucial to the current inquiry are the ways in which acoustics played a role in constructing “the relations of chattel slavery [which] served to enhance whiteness by racializing rights and entitlements, designating inferior and superior races, and granting whites’ dominion over blacks,” and the ways in which contemporary acoustics continue to recall, and thereby reinforce, the socio-affective relations of chattel slavery despite our present claims to a post-racial society (Hartman 1997, 24).

Accordingly, within the scope of this inquiry, I investigate the consumption of the black body through sound in Hermann Melville’s opus, *Moby Dick, or; The Whale* ([1851] 2002), citing the construction of the black ship’s musician Pip as the “sonic body” through which antebellum concerns surrounding American national identity, freedom, and democracy are mediated. Next, as these naturalized relations of domination historically “established the parameters of interracial association” that I contend continue to echo themselves in the contemporary moment, it is important to examine at length the
manner in which black (masculinist) notions of the subject are shaped by and within these relations as they pertain to the status of black sound (Hartman 1997, 25). I accomplish this by hearing W.E.B. Du Bois’ characterizations of the “Sorrow Songs” in dissonance and harmony with Frederick Douglass’ meditations of the singing of slaves. As mentioned above, Du Bois seeks to instate the sounds of the “Sorrow Songs” crafted by blacks during chattel slavery as gifts in tandem with folk stories and other labors performed by black bodies. Together, these men’s understandings of the role of black sound continue to shape discourses of black subjectivity and liberation. By attending to Douglass’ and Du Bois’ foundational musings, we hear their echoes throughout the body of diasporic literary and cultural production even today. Next, listening across Richard Wright’s *Native Son* ([1939] 2005) and James Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man” ([1965] 1993), I reveal how both of these writers manage the dynamic tensions surrounding the status of black sound as cultural, social, and economic capital. Both texts stage the question of to whom black sound *belongs*, and sound unauthorized testimonies to trauma that remain entangled within the nexus of slavery’s sociocultural mandates that must be negotiated in the narrative present. Lastly, I suggest that Baldwin’s Civil Rights Era story issues a sadly prophetic paradigm for understanding 21st Century instances of the infliction of state and extrajudicial violence upon black bodies. Baldwin’s unflinching portrayal intimates that black songs and sounds of pain constitute a repressed soundscape that acoustically enables the development of white male identity in America. Importantly, across the aforementioned texts, the destruction of the black male sounding body comprises a requisite aspect of the national consumption of black sound. Beginning with Melville’s *Moby Dick*, we begin to apprehend a distinctly
masculinized relationship to African American sonic production and consumption that obliterates the black male body in the interests of affirming white, male citizenship.

“It makes me jingle all over”: The Black Male Sonic Body as Instrument of White Citizenship

Mark Smith asserts that in antebellum America “regional soundscapes… impinged on and helped define social relations in general and class and sectional identities in particular” (2004, 137). Smith argues that aurality proved particularly important in the antebellum South, evidenced by the manner in which sounds were regimented on the plantation. Echoing Hartman, Smith contends that masters attempted to “establish plantation harmony, literally and metaphorically” through imposing controls on slaves’ ability to produce sound, which the slaves were able to manipulate by turning the “masters’ ideal of quietude against them” (144-145). For the slave, the production and control of sound were acts of defiance and resistance, even as they remained oppressed within the system of chattel slavery. As a result, sound plays a complex and ever-changing role in blacks’ articulation of personhood. As masters allowed and encouraged certain sounds and disallowed others, often due to the misinterpretation of the importance of these sounds to slaves, an entire aural economy was produced in antebellum America that signified in multiple, competing, and contradictory manners. To understand the continued function of slavery’s acoustics in the Western sociopolitical imagination, we must hear these sounds both within and out of their original historical context.
Melville’s *Moby Dick* provides an opportunity to hear black sounds within the historical-temporal context of slavery. The novel also attunes our ears to better hear the sociocultural slippages that persist within the broader social consumption of black sound in America. Black male sound is critical to the text’s mediation of freedom, which centers the young musician Pip’s body at the core of American discourses of democracy and equality. Blacks’ contradictory status as human chattel positions them to intervene in discourses of nationhood: Their bodies provided the site of contestation for national identity in a country moving ever closer to Civil War. However, in drawing upon common 19th century tropes of black sonic practices most frequently represented in the minstrel tradition, *Moby Dick* also flattens the distinctions between bondsmen and free men, Northern and Southern blacks, bespeaking the manner in which “the status of free blacks was shaped and compromised by the existence of slavery,” that effectively naturalizes black subjugation (Hartman 1997, 25). Andrew Pisano states that the popularity of minstrelsy in the north fed directly into the stereotypes of blacks as “thoughtless” and “merry,…cod[ing] the enslavement of African Americans as a form of entertainment” (2008, 10). As the Pequod’s musician, Pip provides the necessary diversions that enforce the crew’s sense of self-possession and bolster their claims to citizenship. Not by any means singular, “Black Little Pip[’s]” ability to “enliven…a frolic” is textually echoed by the presence of “three [nameless] Long Island negroes…presiding over the hilarious jig” onboard the Bachelor, which posits a flat equivalence between all American-born blacks in the space of the novel (Melville 2002, 107, 320, 374). Ishmael recalls that, “Lord and master over all this scene, the captain stood erect on the ships elevated quarter-deck, so that the whole rejoicing drama was full
before him, and seemed merely contrived for his own individual diversion” (Melville 2002, 375, my emphasis). The three Long Islanders, like Pip, are ship musicians whose status as bond or free remains undisclosed. They are compelled to create and sustain a scene of entertainment for the ship’s crew, but more importantly for the ship’s “master,” who stands above and views it, positioning himself as the sole spectator able to read the scene’s entertainment value. In this way, the captain’s gaze enacts the affective and social logics of enslavement aboard the ship, and serves as “a reminder that diversion could not be extricated from discipline or domination” (Hartman 1997, 46). Essential to the production of American culture, yet barred from social and political equality, Pip’s irreconcilable status as an essential (non)member of the Pequod’s crew echoes the simultaneity of blacks’ instrumentality to and dislocation within the production of American identity.

Melville most clearly delineates Pip’s instrumentality in the “Midnight, Forecastle” chapter. While all the members of the crew are instrumental in respect to the fact that they all have particular roles to fulfill, Pip’s instrumentality is subordinate to the will of all free men aboard the Pequod, reflecting Hartman’s assertion that black bodies are rendered public property in the context of slavery. As the watch changes, the sailors engage in a round-about of song and dance that Sterling Stuckey interprets as a “ring-shout,” a traditional African-American ritual dance (2009, 18). Pip is commanded to “Strike the bell, eight,” in order for the “2D Nantucket Sailor” to “call the watch” (Melville 2002, 146). While denied agentive, self-directed voice, Pip is the designated instrumentalist for the second sailor’s prerogative, and later for the crew’s jig. Ordered to play his tambourine by the French sailor, Pip initially refuses—exercising circumscribed
agency by withholding sound. Following Pip’s refusal, the French Sailor conflates the young musician’s body with the tambourine itself with the statement: “Beat thy belly, then, and wag thy ears” (147). Here, Melville exposes how sailors of different nationalities and ethnicities understand the abject and instrumental position of American-born blacks vis-à-vis their relationship with sound. Pip is heard as natural(ized) subordinate to all of the crewmembers—a musical object for their use and entertainment.

Pip’s body is called into service to provide the music for the sailors’ consumption in a manner that alludes to popular forms of black dance consumed by 19th Century white audiences, but that also conjures the disciplinary violence of enslavement. After the tambourine is retrieved, the “Azores Sailor” encourages Pip to play with such abandon as to “break the jinglers,” which Pip actualizes by “pound[ing] it so” (148). When he complains, the “China Sailor” commands Pip to “Rattle thy teeth, then, and pound away” in order to provide the music for the crew’s enjoyment (148). The sailors’ continued demands for Pip to “beat” upon his own body in place of the tambourine exposes not only the black body’s reduction to a state of instrumental usage, but also that the public consumption of black sound constitutes an act of social violence. In the face of the likelihood of what Toni Morrison calls in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” the “severe fragmentation of the self” that arises from this type of ill-usage; Pip is expected to display and provide acoustic accompaniment to his own destruction for the crew’s enjoyment (1989, 16). Importantly, this scene makes clear through the depiction of Pip’s instrumental usage upon the ship, the manner in which the black body is consumed by and through sound in the Western public imagination.
Pip’s body, both literally and figuratively, functions as sounding-board through which the men of the Pequod’s multi-ethnic, multi-national crew assert their claims to citizenship and exercise the limited powers granted through their association with whiteness. Their access to democratic citizenship is mediated through their capacity to control Pip’s sounding practices, so much so, that in order to display their authority and individual subjective autonomy, they demand his sonic self-mutilation and ultimately, his destruction. Their consumption of black sound, then, is an exercise of power, a social investment in the construction of the black body and its attendant sounds as public commodities in the service of constituting white, male citizenship. It is through and against this political, economic, and discursive construction of the sounding black body that Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois must articulate their own theorizations of black sonically centered intellectual and sociopolitical practices. Both accepting the normative cultural association of black bodies with the production of specific sounds in the Western acoustic landscape, and departing from the morphological construction of black sounds of sorrow as natural, these two pre-eminent theorists of black sonic culture lay the foundations for contemporary understandings of the function, power, and impact of black sounds in the West.

Sounding Black Humanity: Public Hearings for Black Testimony in Douglass and Du Bois

The Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas. It has been neglected, it has been despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.

W.E.B. Du Bois
Both Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois attribute bondsmen with creative and artistic capacities while stressing the role not only of humanity, but also intellect in the crafting of slave song. However, while Douglass attests to the power of these songs to convey the cruel barbarism of slavery and its effects upon blacks, he denies the possibility for any singular, authoritative, interpretation of the slaves’ songs, barring even the captives themselves from full exegetical authority. Of the songs, Douglass writes in the 1845 *Narrative*: “Every tone was a testimony against slavery” that he, while “within the circle…neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear” (1999, 27-28).

Here, Douglass intimates that the condition of bondage prevented him from understanding the “deep meaning” encoded within (28). In this way, he denies those in bondage the final say, as it were, to the meaning of these songs. However, Douglass simultaneously denies whites the power to adjudge the songs’ meaning: “I have often been astonished…to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake” (28). Douglass goes on to state that he has come to understand the meaning of the “rude, incoherent songs” after the attainment of his own freedom, characterizing the interpretation of slave soundings as a dialectical exercise traversing the time of the slave’s experiences both within and outside of the circle of bondage, oscillating between those temporal nodes to create and name meaning from the distance between experience and reflection (28). Importantly, Douglass suggests the possibility for the affective transmission of the slaves’ testimonies to permeable hearers, who must, “in silence, analyze the sounds that pass through the chambers of [the] soul” in order to be “impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery” (28). In naming the possibility of this
“analytical way of listening” that presages Ellison, he renders the white subject passive (Ellison 1995, 8). This person may only be “impressed” with the “effects” of slavery, which in no way grants authority to determine the sounds’ meanings, thereby denying whites the overdetermined position of the authorizing witness common to traditional understandings of the act of testimony. Stunningly, Douglass simultaneously demands recognition of slaves’ injury, contains this recognition within the sphere of affective affinity in a manner that disempowers whites in the assignation of meaning to black suffering, and interdicts their ability to consume and destroy the black body through pornographic sentimental projection. In this way, he enacts a textuo-sonic disciplining of white phantasy, the very phantasy that seeks to occupy the space of black degradation in order to reaffirm white supremacy and mastery through the sounds of black pain.

Douglass refuses whites the power to interpret black songs by narratively rendering them inert, or passive, such that they may only receive and be influenced by the affective content of slaves’ singing. In this way, he constrains whites to the role of bearing witness to blacks’ sonic testimonies in a manner that disallows whites to interpret its meaning, or to reframe the content of black singing within an overdetermined narrative that affirms white supremacy and black degradation. He also makes clear that slave song constitutes an opacity that affectively testifies to the experience of bondage outside the realm of semantic meaning.

Douglass, in his construction of the appropriate mode of reception for the songs and sounds of blacks produced in the context of bondage, obliquely (and perhaps unwittingly) theorizes diasporic testimony. In denying whites the power of interpretation, Douglass also denies them the power of authorization attendant to the slave narrative’s
testimonial address. Because the slaves’ sounds and songs are not addressed to the white listener, he or she may only be affected by these sonic testimonies. In order to be so affected, one must be permeable, or receptive, to the testimonial content of the sounds as they encounter and pass through one’s body and other mediums. In the absence of address, recognition, and redress, connection comes to the fore in a manner that Douglass believes should engender the understanding of those who have encountered the song. Whether Douglass believes this understanding will then lead to abolition and appropriate redressive measures, he does not say.

Interestingly enough, Du Bois’ offering of black song and sound as gift both proceeds and departs from Douglass’ meditations upon black sound and song in the 1845 *Narrative*. While it cannot be denied that the designation of “gift” departs from Douglass’ demand for whites’ passive reception of slave singing, significantly both men position whites to *receive* rather than command black song in the manner that the sailor’s and ship’s master demanded the auditory labors of young Pip in Melville’s text. Accordingly, both Douglass’ and Du Bois’ ruminations upon black song and its role in American society speak back to the parameters of racial interaction wherein whites retain exegetical and social authority concerning the place of black sound as well as its producers. Whereas Douglass suspends white authority and grants blacks (males) the power of exegesis over slave sound by locating this power within the dialectic of experience and reflection, containing recognition to an admission, Du Bois, in naming these sounds gifts, seeks a different type of social recognition which pointedly and ironically reinvests whites with exegetical authority.²
In *The Souls of Black Folk’s* dénouement, Du Bois writes “Hear my cry, O God the Reader….Let the ears of guilty people tingle with truth” in a tone that oscillates between mockery and scraping humility, echoing the practice of “puttin’ on ole massa” (1995, 68; Hartman 1997, 8). Du Bois words and tone indicate his understanding that his text and the songs of souls of black folks offered therein remain constrained by the parameters of racial interaction codified during chattel slavery. Within these social, affective, and legal parameters, whites retain the power to assign meaning to black sounds, which are circumscribed into the categories of enjoyment (for whites through projection), complacency (as naturalized suffering), and in the absence of the aforementioned sounds, correction (as sounds of pain and punishment). Du Bois, in the construction of the Sorrow Songs as gift, seeks recognition—not simply of black humanity through evidence of suffering, but that the Sorrow Songs which contain echoes of the “rhythmic cry of the slave” comprise the cultural work that produces the capital fundamental to the making of America (253). Du Bois writes: “Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire.; the third, a gift of the Spirit” (265). However, designating the Sorrow Songs as gifts obscures their status as surplus goods wrought from the body of the slave, even as *Souls* gestures toward this very relation by constructing the “sweat and brawn” necessary to “lay the foundations of [America’s] vast economic empire” as gifts as well (265). The context of production for the “Sorrow Songs” under the condition of forced labor draws attention to these songs’ producers’ greatly circumscribed autonomy. Within this context,
slaveowners were thought to possess the bondsman’s entire being, including the sounds emitted from his body (Radano 2010). These sounds, whether in the form of screams, or songs, or music, were not established as the autonomous creations of the captives themselves, but as surplus goods that exceeded or supplemented the normal conditions and products of their daily labors. The status of black sound as surplus also problematically became allied with notions of black hyperembodied excess, or the normative cultural assumption that blacks were mindlessly hyper-productive. As surplus, black sound was thought to lack any value other than the enhancement of the already-owned body as the slaveowner’s property by producing entertainment for broader public consumption. Against this construction of black sound and song, Du Bois implicitly attempts to re-value black song by marking not as always-already surplus, but as a “gift” consciously and purposefully given, both as a testimony to black experiences of bondage, and as the foundational anthem of the American nation—both of which allude to America’s unpaid debts.

Du Bois, then, attempts to force recognition of the value of black contributions to America’s economic and cultural well-being via the designation “gift.” This designation calls to the fore America’s obligations to “receive [and] reciprocate,” in line with the construction of what Carole Lynn Stewart names Du Bois’ “critical epistemology as…[an] endeavor to recover the value of gifts, humility, and dignity as necessary…for authentic human community” (2008, 310). However, I argue that this is a problematic rhetorical strategy because the “gift” itself remains ensnared within affective and economic logics of enslavement that predetermine the value and mode of exchange for black material and cultural capital. Interestingly, Du Bois himself cannot imagine black
song and sound outside of these logics, and even suggests that these logics function
globally to conscript the meaning and impact of black song in his novel *Dark Princess*
([1928] 1974). Matthew, the protagonist, finds himself among a multinational,
multiethnic league of colored people seeking worldwide liberation. These people do not
believe that Africans, particularly the “common” among them, and their descendants, are
capable of participating in a global liberation project, and feel that their incapacity to do
so is evidenced in an inability to produce “Art.” In response, Matthew offers the “Great
Song” inherited from his father’s line, “Go Down Moses,” to the gathering, singing “as
his people had…twenty years ago in Virginia” (26). Du Bois writes, “His great voice,
gathered in one deep breath, rolled the call of God” (26). Matthew abruptly ends his
song, feeling “ashamed” in the “breathless…silence” succeeding his singing (26). The
awed silence is broken by “the Chinese Woman,” who cries “It was an American slave
song! I know it. How—how wonderful” (26). Tellingly, the song is recognized as a
slave song, which would seemingly index its production in the particularity of its
historical moment. Instead, black song and sound are understood across time and place
of production as a transhistorical marker of black “essence,” a construct forged in the
crucible of transatlantic slavery that disallows historical specificity to black sonic
articulation (Washington 2002, 236). Tellingly, in Wright’s Native Son, the song is
understood by well-meaning whites as reflective of the perpetuity of black servitude,
suffering, and deferred longing as the essential aspects of black essence, evidenced by
Mary Dalton’s desire for Bigger to sing “In the Bye and Bye.” Essence, then, becomes
conflated with bondage, rendering black sound as always already surplus goods from the
bound body, and thereby prompting Matthew’s shame. Du Bois writes: “He stopped as
quickly as he had begun, ashamed, and beads of sweat gathered on his forehead” (Du Bois 1974, 26). Importantly, the crowd of multinational elites recognizes the artistic properties of the song, the humanity of its bearer, and the affective power the song wields. However, this does not change what they see as the song’s inability to effect sociopolitical and economic liberation. While the “Chinaman” and the Princess believe that the song denotes the black, folk capacity to “revolutionize the world,” other attendees insist that this will not occur “today….nor in this siècle….Nor…in saecula saeculorum” (27).

Blacks’ gifts, Du Bois must acknowledge, have not been, and possibly will never be reciprocated. This absence of reciprocity attending receipt of the “gift of…song” echoes the ways in which the “recognition of the humanity of the slave did not redress the abuses of the institution” (Hartman 1997, 6). In fact, naming black song as this type of offering in an attempt to seek redressive measures simultaneously functions to constitute the black body and its sounds as the echo chamber of white self-reflection, facilitating the construction of citizenship through resonant cries of black pain. It must be noted that while the characters in the gathering hail from different nations, these various nations have histories of colonization that function to center (at least an approximation) of whiteness as the normative cultural framework through which they assess themselves and others, just as the sailor’s interactions with Pip are grounded in the ideologies of whiteness. Du Bois fails to decenter white authority in either Dark Princess or The Souls of Black Folk because he continues to sound black experience in a framework of recognition and redress that compels him to address whites—or white supremacist ideologies. Accordingly, he offers sounds of black sorrow as evidence of black humanity
and cultural contribution that then cannot be understood as divorced from their status as surplus goods seeking recognition in the hopes of compelling redress for slavery’s abuses. This ascription of evidentiary status to black cries and songs proves at once productive in the imaginings of testimonial beyond the bounds of narrative/textual articulation, and restrictive both in its reification of white authorization through interpretive exegesis, and in its inability to demand social or economic recompense for these sonic labors.\(^3\) This understanding of black screams and songs echoes over and again in diasporic contexts, enjoining the powerful to hear what they will not see, and audibly recognize the depth of black humanity and suffering, evidenced in Larry Neal’s offering of James Brown’s scream to 1960’s white America.

**Feeling Good: Sounding Black Pain as Black Power**

(Re)Turning to James Brown’s scream, we must interrogate both what Neal explicitly states and what he does not. First, in naming James Brown, as opposed to Aretha Franklin or Nina Simone, or any of a host of black women whose musical screams could well articulate something important about “black experience…[and] poetry,” Neal appoints a black male figure as communal representative and enacts a theft of the umbilical. The sublimation of black women’s authoritative soundings and cries of pain reflect his ideological construction of a masculinist Black Nationalism. However, if we examine both Brown’s screams and his sartorial excesses, we see and hear how appropriations and approximations of black womanhood constellate within a matrix of gendered signs and sounds that Brown (re)presents as the implicitly queered black manhood most often identified in the personage of the *player, sweetback, or pimp*. From
his straightened hair, to his closely fitted clothing in lux fabrics, to his performative weeping, Brown crosses and re-crosses the binary line of gender construction in a manner that echoes “Mary’s weep[ing]” and “Martha’s moan[ing],” and the “shriek” in the woods emitted from the body of Frances Harper’s “Slave Mother” (1854). The sounds of black maternal pain reverberate within the drum-driven, masculinist, blues-funk that defines Brown’s oeuvre. All this to say that, likely unbeknownst to Neal, in appointing James Brown’s auditions as testimony to black life in America and beyond, and as reflective of a burgeoning third world affinity, he appoints a sonically queered figure who carries within the grain of his scream black women’s articulations of communal pain. Moreover, as he does not question the “naturalized” relation between the black body and sound as its most definitive mode of expression, Neal too risks confining Brown’s scream within slavery’s logics of domination.

True to form, Neal positions the wider public as appropriate hearers for the sound of black testimony, granting whites—for to whom else is his explanation of “Black Arts” and “the new breed” addressed—exegetical authority, thereby reproducing the structures of (literary and sociopolitical) recognition that he assumes Brown’s soundings exceed. In this way, Neal not only exposes the problematic centering of black masculinity as the simultaneous affirmation of white, paternalistic authority through the suppression of black women (which Chapter 2 explores at length) but he also effaces, through acts of first rhetorically opposing, and then conflating, black musical folk culture and “literature,” the ways in which sound has always been integral to black literary aesthetics in the West. Tellingly, Neal’s declamation of the lack of a true “black literature” rests both in Western Enlightenment conceptions of the literary predicated foremost upon
black exclusion from the realm of the literate and cultured, and within his own understanding that black textual production has not sufficiently integrated black musical aesthetics into its practices. Neal characterizes “contemporary black writing” (referring primarily to the pieces within the volume *Black Fire*) as “a literature somewhat more mature than that which preceded it” because “it is primarily directed at the consciences of black people” (1968, 647-648). This move toward communally self-directed address is predicated upon the fact that, according to Neal, “almost all [black] literature had failed” because “[i]t had succumbed to merely providing exotic entertainment for white America” (650). The new literature of the new breed purportedly addresses the black community in a manner that strives to “destroy the double-consciousness,” as well as “become an integral part of the community’s life style” in part by recognizing that “[t]he key is in the music…[which] has always been far ahead of the literature” (656, 653).

However, Neal’s own textual practice in the construction of his signature piece, “And Shine Swam On,” is decidedly double-voiced and dually addressed. Neal couches his address to the white American public within a text purportedly addressed to “US,” meaning the black community (638). However, his overt explanatory mechanisms for the “private mythology of black America” suggest that his audience does not fully count itself among “black America,” prompting a reading of his essay as addressed not only to the black community, but to the white American public as well (638). Moreover, in his offering of black sound, he echoes and extends Du Bois’ participation in the longstanding practice of b(e)aring the black body and its sonic products to the public as fungible commodities. Taking Neal’s suggestion to heart and lending an ear to James Brown’s
piercing aurality allows us also to hear echoes of Douglass, Du Bois, Césaire, and even “black Little Pip” in the singer’s evocative cries (Melville 2002, 107).

The sonic impact of Brown’s signature scream, perhaps most recognized from the song “I Got You (I Feel Good)” (1964) straddles the line between pain and declaration. Both a claim to self-possession and a plea for relief, the urgency of the scream’s call to action is abruptly interrupted by the lyrics “I feel good.” In the moment of these words’ irruption, the listener is still entangled within the residual “phonic substance” of the preceding cry (Moten 2003, 39). The words together with the scream mark a performative interdiction—purposeful sonic misdirection that Douglass cites as the slave’s power to interrupt the dominative logics of slavery in order to give testament to his own condition. Further, Brown’s slurred diction in the next line’s delivery manifests itself in competing transcriptions of “I knew that I would have” and “I knew that I wouldn’t of” (Metrolyrics; lyrics.com). This dynamic tension is further complicated by the song’s declaration, “I feel nice…Like sugar and spice” invoking the consumer products which drove slaving and colonial expeditions (Brown 1964). Holding the “you” of the song in his arms, while alternately promising “My love won’t do you no harm,” and claiming “my love can’t do me no harm” recalls the Notebook’s speaker’s desire to “embrace…our multicolored purities” and to be bound within the Other’s “vast luminous arms of clay” in order to “bind [his] black vibration to the very navel of the world” (Brown 1964; Césaire 2001, 50-51). Both Brown’s reiteration of the theft of the umbilical enacted when he sublimates black maternal cries and the desire to make “love” to the other via sonic vibration mark Brown’s song as testimony to enslavement, and as testimony to the interracial intimacies which construct both black and white identities.
Is Brown’s scream reflective of the nation’s extraordinary *gifi* in the form of the sounds of its black inhabitants? Can we understand this piercing aurality as the humble offering of blacks to the American nation-state as Du Bois suggests? The answer is both *yes*, and *no*. Because, as stated earlier, Du Bois and Neal suggest that black sound stands as the offering par excellence of black intellectual, creative, and political practice, we must interrogate these claims at their foundation as well as through their far-reaching implications. Neal’s and Du Bois’ (along with Wright’s and Baldwin’s) claims surrounding the primacy black oral/aural vernacular traditions are subtended by an admission of blacks lack of accomplishment in “high” literary and artistic exploits. These thinkers, then, mark a distinctly sonic aesthetic within black literary practices, but in a manner that problematically admits of “lack,” obliquely echoing longstanding arguments of black incapacity. Tethered to a teleological conception of historical progress marked by the attainment of “literate culture,” these seemingly strong declarations of black cultural authority unwittingly de-value the cultural capital of black sonic expressiveness through a sideways admission that sound is a lesser, or pre-literate, form. What does this then mean for theorizations of black soundings of subjectivity in America? How can a people express the “ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection” in and through a medium implicitly characterized as lesser (Moten 2003, 12)? And how, then, do blacks deploy this medium to craft a testimony to their own experiences?

Bearing in mind that the aforementioned thinkers produced theories within a restrictive set of social circumstances—always and ever writing back, to, through, and against discourses of black inferiority, we must understand that they are positioned
fundamentally to respond, miring their intellectual and theoretical call within a response from which it is nearly impossible to disarticulate. Trapped within this call-response dialectic is black sound, the “political noise” which serves as the mediating factor, oscillating between ascriptions of inferiority and brilliance, bestiality and humanity, sentiment and logic (Best and Hartman 2005, 9). Claudia Rankine offers us a succinct and resonant reminder regarding this very dynamic in her stunning poetic testimony, Citizen: An American Lyric (2014), wherein she writes: “the rebuttal assumes an original form” (128). This sound of response echoes, reflecting and refracting against, as well as permeating the seemingly solidity of Western authority, producing a resonant testimony to black presence that must be addressed. The nation’s reliance upon black sounds as constitutive elements—as both borders and mediating mechanisms—of white, national belonging demands the peculiar double-movement of recognizing black sonic intellectual and social capital while denying the possibility of its existence as such. The broader public understands black soundings alternately as incomprehensible noise, or as the acoustic background to white subjectivity that James Baldwin explores at length.

Moreover, as black sound came to be understood as the marker of black sentience, it also became increasingly associated with the perception of blacks’ heightened affective and emotional powers. The perceived emotional excesses of blacks marked both their greatest gift and their fatal flaw in the Western imagination—depth of feeling for blacks proved to be both fungible asset and detrimental marker of racial difference most commonly apprehended through the broader social consumption of black sound. In Native Son, Wright exposes the consumption of what came to be recognized as emotive
black soundings as the Western cultural demand for black affective labors that troubles their status as freely rendered “gifts” to the body politic.

**Song of the Native Son: White Consumer Demands for Black Sonic Affect as Surplus**

In both *Native Son* and “Blueprint for Negro Writing” ([1937] 1994), Wright cites the existence of “emotional attitudes” within black communal life and ritual “which are conducive to action” (99). While in 1937 “Blueprint” seems to affirm the potential uses for black song to engender the large-scale mobilization of blacks for Communist Party political action, in 1940’s *Native Son* Wright marks black song as the site of contestation for black cultural authority and autonomy. Echoing the sentiments voiced by Wright himself in “Blueprint,” in *Native Son* the wealthy, young daughter of Bigger’s new employer, Mary Dalton, remarks to her Communist lover Jan, “They have so much emotion! What a people! If we could ever get them going…” (Wright 2005, 77, emphasis in original). While Mary appears genuine in her desire to mobilize the black community in the spirit of equality, Jan’s subsequent statement “They’ll give the party something it needs” followed by Mary’s mention of “their songs—the spirituals” reveals the conflation of emotion and sentience with black song-making capacities in even the sympathetic, leftist, imagination (77). Importantly, this otherwise innocuous exchange echoes the historical availability of the black body and its sonic products for general public consumption. The song and its emotional content are represented as resources, or raw materials, to be extracted from the living black body and deployed in the pursuit of higher aims dictated by interested whites. In other words, the raw materials of black song
and emotional sentiment, consumed by the broader public will lead to the production of collective action for the proletariat. Wright exposes the position of the black sounding body as publicly available, labor(ing) commodity through this brief conversation. Moreover, Mary’s and Jan’s repeated requests for Bigger to “sing” and to “help [them] sing” make apparent the latent American sociocultural imperative to consume the black body and its attendant culture through sound and song. “‘I can’t sing,’ he said” in response to Mary’s query, “‘Say, Bigger, can you sing?’” (77). Bigger’s refusal to “help” Jan and Mary sing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” functions both as the exercise of circumscribed subjective autonomy in the vein of Pip’s initial refusal to play his tambourine, and as an affirmation of black cultural authority in his unspoken claim to intimate knowledge of song’s proper form: “Bigger smiled derisively. Hell, that ain’t the tune, he thought” (77).

Refuting Du Bois’ designation of black spirituals née “Sorrow Songs” as publicly available “gifts,” Wright reclaims these soundings as the aural plane of black cultural authority and limited subjective autonomy. By withholding that which will not be recompensed, Wright enacts a disciplining of white sentimental phantasy akin to Douglass’ in the 1845 Narrative, ultimately exposing whites’ inability to wield the power of exegesis upon black soundings, as they understand neither the literal form, nor the communal function of black song. In this way, Wright suggests that even well meaning whites are tune-deaf and tone-deaf to the sounds of “the souls of black folks” (Du Bois 1995, 14). To truly understand the importance of this exchange between Bigger, Mary, and Jan, we must move both forward and backward within the body of the text, oscillating between Wright’s descriptions of black sound-making’s intracommunal
meanings, and his attendant depictions of white demand for and consumption of these sounds.

The car ride with Mary and Jan reveals the problematic casual insistence of their right to Bigger’s affective and cultural labors in tandem with the physical labors of his body. Their desire for Bigger to socialize, eat, and sing with them exposes the ways in which the Western cultural expectation for blacks to render surplus services to white employers is ingrained not in a refusal to recognize black humanity, but rather from an investment in the idea of black humanity as resource or good available for consumption. Mary Dalton expresses her desire to “feel” through knowing black suffering, much like the 19th century sentimentalist abolitionist sympathizer. She says wistfully, “I just want to see. I want to know these people….they must live like we live. They’re human” (Wright 2005, 70, emphasis in original). The unconscious belief in the availability of the black body and all it produces as the right of the white employer and the white public reveals an attitude cemented during chattel slavery, which Bigger attempts to express to the Communist Party attorney Max later in the novel. Max asserts that Mary “was being kind to [Bigger]” the night he murdered her, using the fact that “[s]he accepted [him] as another human being” (350). Bigger, however has a different understanding of what occurred that night, emphatically stating “Kind, hell! She wasn’t kind to me….She and her kind own the earth….They don’t let you do nothing but what they want” (350, my emphasis). Bigger hereby exposes Mary’s “kindness” as an extension of, not hindrance to, her power to control his actions. He understands her entreaties to his humanity as not-fully veiled articulations of her demands—regardless of Mary’s tone or questioning manner of address, Bigger knew it was not within his purview to deny her anything she
proposed. Mary Dalton, therefore, wielded her control through recognizing Bigger as a fellow-human, demanding distinctly human intimate labors from him in addition to his compensated labor as driver.

The righteously unaware consumer couple (for how could Jan not understand that they were adding to Bigger’s labors) forces Bigger to share a meal with them, just as they attempt to force him to share his culture via the food and a song. Though he does not want to join Mary and Jan for a meal, he realizes that their insistence constitutes a very real threat to his livelihood, one that compromises his ability to refuse their social overtures: “He was puzzled as to why they were treating him this way. But, after all, this was his job and it was just as painful to sit here and let them stare at him as it was to go in” (71, my emphasis). Wounded by the white gaze which seeks knowledge through observation and exercises control through surveillance, Bigger capitulates to the couples’ demand. He feels that he must render them the service of his company, just as Mary required his complicity in misleading her parents regarding where he was to drive her, rendered in the form of his pledge to secrecy. Once in the café, he finds that “the organic functions of his body had altered, and when he realized why, when he understood the cause, he could not chew the food” (74). Because Mary Dalton’s innocent7 “want[s]” supersede Bigger’s right to self-determination or comfort, Bigger recognizes that her desire constitutes a demand for his physical, psychological, affective and cultural labors. He is unable to swallow what is being served in Ernie’s Chicken Shack because he recognizes his own culture consumed, assessed, and approved by a white authority figure, served back to him subtended by a demand for his affective labors as well as his gratitude, and this he cannot stomach.
The forced sociality in the Chicken Shack draws attention back to Bigger’s earlier musings about Mary Dalton’s intentions: “She responded to him as if he were human….Was this some kind of game? The guarded feeling of freedom he had while listening to her was tangled with the fact that she was white and rich, a part of the world of people who told him what he could and could not do” (65). Understanding that Mary apprehends his humanity, Bigger wonders what, if anything this recognition might mean. While Mary attempts to put him at ease by referencing the “song [his] people sing…’We’ll understand it better bye and bye,’” Bigger rightly understands that even her recognition of his humanity does nothing to alter the nature and boundaries of their interaction (65). Requiring Bigger’s “trust,” and ability to keep her secret, Mary forces an unwelcome intimacy upon him as part and parcel of his duties as her driver. Moreover, her recognition of and desire to “know” and “see” black humanity must be seen as an extension of, not hindrance to, her power to direct his actions. The unquestioned assumption that Bigger would render the desired affective components of his labor reifies Mary Dalton’s dominance. Staging the moment Mary asks for Bigger’s secrecy, Wright is careful to contain her dialogue to terse commands and teasing questions as to whether he fears her. Bigger’s responses are contained to acquiescent mumbles of “Yessum,” acoustically signaling his compliance, which Mary seems to expect. For this reason, Bigger later utilizes the little autonomy he possesses in his refusal to sing.

Taking this moment of refusal together with Wright’s other descriptions of sounding bodies and black song in the text, we begin to discern Wright’s careful delineation of various sounding practices. The text opens with the onomatopoeic
“Brrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinnmg” of an alarm clock, followed by the creaking of a bed spring and a “woman’s voice” that “sang out impatiently” (3). Drawn first into the text by sound, the reader is both familiar with and disoriented by the sudden noises in the “dark and silent room” (3). In the absence of visual cues, sound is offered as the means of apprehending human presence in the room, first through the woman’s voice, and then through the “naked feet” which “swished dryly across the floor” (3). This initial disorienting moment fades as the light is turned on, only to enter into chaos at the sound of “a light tapping in the thinly plastered walls of the room” (3). Bigger’s mother, brother, and sister discern the presence of a large black rat through sonic clues. The mirror-relationship between Bigger and the rat is a well-studied one—the rat’s existence in the margins of the domestic space, his black coloring, and the inevitable manner in which he is trapped and executed are deemed conventional, if not, pat readings of the rat’s presence and function within the text. However, in lingering a moment over the sounds the rat produces prior to his demise, and other representations of song and sound in the text, we can more thoroughly assess Wright’s critical meditation upon black singing and sounding bodies.

Locked in a battle for his survival, the “rat emit[s] a long thin song of defiance” his “belly puls[ing] with fear” as he “squeaks” and attempts to escape to his hole (6, 5). Barred entry into his domicile, the rat “bared [his] fangs, piping shrilly” before he is killed by Bigger, who then continues to pummel the rat’s deceased body with a shoe (6). Bigger and his brother Buddy converse about the imminent threat the rat posed to their home and its inhabitants. The exchange is worth quoting at length:

“Gee, but he’s a big bastard.”
“That sonafabitch could cut your throat.”

“He’s over a foot long.”

“How in hell do they get so big?”

“Eating garbage and anything else they can get.”

“Look, Bigger, there’s a three-inch rip in your pantleg.”

“Yeah; he was after me, all right” (6-7).

Here, Bigger and Buddy employ the logic of anti-black racism in the U.S. Succeeding Bigger’s brutalization of the deceased body, which historically and contemporaneously echoes the mutilation of the lynched, and echoes forward in time to contemporary tactical practices of police “overkill,” the two brothers seek to justify their right to kill the animal. Their remarks regarding the outrageous size of the beast and the tear in Bigger’s pants allow the young men to code the crying, fleeing, rat as a looming threat—his perceived capacity to “cut your throat” providing the justification for his death (6). Importantly, the rat’s presence is first perceived by the family through the sound of his “light tapping”—a sound deemed out of place. Bigger’s mother both looks at the creature with “fascinated horror” and seeks to protect her daughter from injury and contamination resulting from being bitten (4). When the brothers block his route to escape, the rat attempts to engage in battle, while the family shouts for Bigger to “Kill ‘im,” a phrase that later echoes with the mob’s demands at Bigger’s trial (5, 373). The mother’s shout also implicitly genders the rat male, undergirding the latent sexualization of the threat in his mere presence. Staging the rat’s death to mirror a lynching, Wright also carefully reproduces the psycho-acoustic dynamics surrounding the practice. The family’s attunement to any sounds other
than the ones they produce as aberrant, and potential sources of threat; the mother’s “screams” of fear mingled with fascination; the rat’s “thin song of defiance” and fearful screams; and the “tones of awed admiration” at the conclusion of the deed echo the sonic dimensions of lynching. In this scene, Bigger and his family occupy the privileged space of citizen-subjects, the apartment signifying the domain they must protect from the intrusive presence of “others.” Their humanity is defined against and through the rat’s animality, his “thin song of defiance” heard as justification of the violence perpetrated against him. Because the Thomas family assumes exegetical control of the rat’s cries, they hear his sonic declarations of his right to existence as menacing the sanctity of their own and likewise perceive his dying “shrill” as the sound of justice. In this way, Wright exposes the very real dangers associated with hearing and assigning meaning to the sounds and songs of marginalized blacks within this power differential, providing critical context in regard to not only Bigger’s refusal to sing, but also to his understanding of the function and significance of black song.

Taken together with Wright’s description of Bigger’s mother singing, a sound which “irks” Bigger, and Bigger’s later experiences with the sounds of black song-making during his exile in the abandoned flat, the incident with the rat suggests the complex relationship of blacks to song and sound in the West. The rat metonymically replaces black presence in order to expose the brutality of the larger culture. This is accomplished in part by allowing the rat to sound his presence and his pain, only to have these acoustic performances of selfhood assessed, interpreted, and adjudged by those who seek to destroy him. In other words, the rat’s soundings are heard within and assessed according to a sociopolitical narrative that requires his non-existence—the logics of
domination which at once require that the rat does not exist while presupposing his existence to justify violence as a means of eradicating “threat” echo the persistent logics that mandate black non/presence in American civil society. In this way, the manner in which blacks are heard and perceived within the larger social acoustic sphere makes itself evident, exposing the sociocultural necessity of the destruction of the black male sounding body. However, when Bigger is awakened in his hideaway by the *sounds of blackness* we hear different conception of black sound-making, one from “within the circle” (Douglass 1999, 27).

Bigger’s occupation of the abandoned flat echoes both Linda Brent’s occupation of the attic space in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Frederick Douglass’ *closeting* in the 1845 *Narrative*, as well as presages *Invisible Man’s* depiction of the unnamed protagonist’s suspension within the glass box. In each of these cases, the necessity of making sense of the world via sound becomes crucial to black survival.

Acoustic clues and cues awaken, warn, and guide these black subjects, allowing them to navigate danger, establishing black sound as not only a critical tool for black survival, but as a materiodiscursive site of safety and transformation. However, Bigger’s experiences of and ruminations upon black sound in the flat trouble what Wright sees as a too-easy association between these sounds and safety in the black community. Having fallen into a fitful sleep, Bigger’s body is assaulted by “a disturbing, rhythmic throbbing” which he “tried to fight off to keep from waking up” (Wright 2005, 253). Seeking to preserve his rest and negate the traumas he has experienced, Bigger’s mind attempts to place, or categorize, the sounds he hears. “His mind, protecting him, wove the throb into patterns of innocent images” (253). Bigger endeavors to integrate the sonic psychic disruption, or
wound, into his schemas of experience, first through placing the sound as an “automatic phonograph playing,” then as “his mother…singing and shaking the mattress,” and lastly as “hundreds of black men and women beating drums with their fingers” (253). All of these scenarios, however, prove insufficient to integrate the sound into his experiential schemas and the sound remains traumatizing.

Each attempt by Bigger to psychically integrate these sounds also serves as a concurrent attempt to characterize black sound. Bigger’s first subconscious attempt at integration renders the sounds in the form of a phonograph record, indexing the status of black sound as entertainment and as commodity for mass consumption, “but that was not satisfying” (253). Next, he hears the sounds as indicative of the tenuous security, if not comfort, of home-life and a simultaneous call to action—“his mind told him that he was at home in bed and his mother was singing and shaking the mattress, wanting him to get up” (253). Here Wright depicts the construction of maternal sound as representative of home, source of communal knowledge and awakening, and clarion call to action as problematic, recalling the manner in which his mother’s singing “irks” Bigger. This interpretation of the sound both “failed to quiet him” and could not compel him to action (253). The last attempt to categorize the sounds as masses of black men and women “beating the drums with their fingers” signals their status as African cultural retentions, the drums likely signifying the primitivist fascination with and reclamation of the “tom-tom” associated with the New Negro Renaissance in the vein of Langston Hughes, Aimé Césaire, and other black modernist thinkers. The valorization of the tom-tom as a distinctly Africanist trope of rhythm posited cultural continuity that sought to re-place blacks within a history that did not commence with black abasement, but instead
stretched back into a richer body of cultural experience that was fractured by rupture, transport, enslavement and colonial dominance. Moreover, the tom-tom signals in African diasporic letters a coded form of communication that barred whites from determining its meaning.

Wright suggests that each of these cognitive schemas fails to “answer the question” in Bigger’s mind, thereby reflecting a more complex relationship between the black body and sound than either the larger American community or the black community itself recognizes. Clearly, these black soundings do not fit within the parameters set for black acoustics within the plantation sphere: jollity, acquiescence, and correction. Neither do they directly align with affirmative black understandings of sound and song-making as source of communal comfort, care, and agency. Wright intimates that something far different is happening in this moment. While the sound awakens Bigger, compelling him to “spr[i]ng to his feet, his heart pounding, his ears filled with the sound of singing and shouting,” it fails either to comfort or inspire him (253). Instead, the “singing from the church vibrated through him, suffusing him with a mood of sensitive sorrow….[that] seeped into his feelings…coaxing him to lie down and sleep and let them come and get him…to believe that all life was a sorrow that had to be accepted” (253). Clearly designating these sounds “sorrow songs,” Wright posits they function in the same manner as the cinema for Bigger and liquor for Bessie—as pacification. Importantly, Wright implicitly designates the sorrow songs as feminine and maternal by naming them as the songs of Bigger’s mother. The novel intimates that while these soundings are endemic to the foundation of black communal identity, they likewise prove themselves insufficient in providing black males with a blueprint for “living in the world”
The songs imbued with the richness of communal history and endurance for Bigger posit false homogeneity and transhistoricity to black experience that remain at odds with his hunger for autonomy. The songs accomplish their “fullness…[and] richness” vis-à-vis their own articulations of “timeless black essence” as existing both within and detached from linear, progressive time, as well as the larger socius (254; Washington 2005, 237). To be at one with the community that produces the song, Wright suggests, requires the acceptance of one’s subordination and isolation as natural, inevitable, and unalterable. Bigger muses:

Its fullness contrasted so sharply with his hunger, its richness with his emptiness, that he recoiled from it while answering it. Would it not have been better for him had he lived in that world the music sang of? It would have been easy to have lived in it, for it was his mother’s world, humble, contrite, believing. It had a center, a core, an axis, a heart which he needed but could never have unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up hope of living in the world. And he would never do that. (Wright 2005, 254)

Here, Wright casts the song both as that which “awakens” Bigger, and as something potentially dangerous in its ability to render blacks inert in their acceptance of their oppression and subordination. Tellingly, the song’s maternal association signals an acceptance of one’s degraded condition, echoing the problematic conflation of black mothers and bondage in the slave narrative tradition. Like Frederick Douglass, *Invisible Man*’s protagonist and Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, Bigger crosses the threshold of maternal sound into the world of active manhood, birthing himself into spheres of
experience beyond what he sees as the limitations the song imposes. This is important both because Wright’s depiction of Bigger’s rebirth through maternal sound participates in the masculinist practice of maternal abandonment as a marker of black male agency as discussed in Chapter 2, and because it also speaks to what Wright names as the “nationalist implications” that inhere within the song through this enactment of maternal abandonment and disavowal (Wright 1994, 100). The song, for Wright, as an implicitly nationalistic form of Negro folk culture, must serve as fodder for an expression of black being that is capable of transcending its origins. This is why Bigger “needs” the “heart” of the song, but cannot live with its containment of black personhood within the boundaries of a cultural nationalism that will ultimately prove untenable as the means to sustain blacks within the American social sphere. In “Blueprint,” Wright argues that the “nationalist spirit in Negro writing means a nationalism….that knows its origins, its limitations; that is aware of the dangers of its position; that knows that its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America” (101). Because for Wright, the existence of a black “nation within a nation” is both predicated upon black subordination and oppression, and casts black liberation as an always-deferred future event, realizable only in the “bye and bye,” he assesses “Negro nationalism” and the songs produced within it as transitional materiodiscursive spaces necessary for the facilitation of a “new” black cultural identity (1994, 101). Tellingly, the communal formation that Wright insists upon transcending, in the same manner that Du Bois insists upon the transformation of the Sorrow Songs, is markedly maternal. The flat provides a womb-like space for the gestation of Bigger’s black, masculinized identity, akin to Mary Rambo’s home in Invisible Man, and the protective closet in the 1845 Narrative. These
spaces also function as the threshold for black male becoming, seeming to necessitate the black male subject’s acts of crossing over to attain active manhood. Therefore, Bigger abandons both his family home, and also his hideaway in order to meet his destruction—his punishment for “living” and placing a claim on his right to manhood when “His very existence is a crime against the state” (Wright 2005, 400, emphasis in original). Bigger’s eventual fate can also be understood in the context of Milkman’s embrace of death “in the killing arms of his brother” in Morrison’s Song of Solomon (2004, 337). Bigger’s conception of freedom as autonomy, thereby freedom-from his mother and other members of the black community, aids in his destruction.

During Bigger’s final encounter with his mother at the prison, he is “paralyzed with shame…[and] violated” by her “wail[s]” for the Daltons’ mercy upon her and her family, instating the maternal cry as the shameful foundation of black male identity that must be transcended (Wright 2005, 301). Wright suggests that Bigger’s mere association with this song that both prompts shame and enables the murderous assertion of his manhood marks his body for atomization and dismemberment—Bigger’s destruction is required in the making and maintenance of white American capitalist identities much like the rat’s silencing through death is required to preserve the fictive sanctity of the Thomas home. Wright exposes that blacks’ fraught relationship with song and sound—as elements which facilitate black survival, endurance, and the possibility of creating “another world,” and as that which mires black subjects in shame in the Western, or as Du Bois suggests, global, imagination, turns, it seems, upon the questions “Where does exegetical authority lie?” and “Who has the power to ascribe meaning to black sound?” James Baldwin’s painfully evocative short story “Going to Meet the Man” demands that
we examine these questions, and hear the racialized, affective-acoustic history of America as it sounds itself during the turbulent 1960’s—a resonant and repeating history that structures “post” racial interactions even today.

**Crises of (Mis)Hearing: Black Sound and the American Civic Subconscious**

Black boy, Black boy, turn that shit down
You know that America don’t wanna hear the sounds
Of the bass-drum, Jungle-music—go back to Africa
Nigger I’ll arrest you…

Masta Ace, “Born to Roll”

There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even this moment. The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy.

Ta’Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

“Going to Meet the Man” makes explicit the connection between black song and sound, violence, and white male subject formation. In this story, black song functions as a “technology of memory” for both the black and white community, a metonym for black presence in the United States (Sturken 1997, 9). Baldwin calls attention to ways in which metonymy is both productive for, and poses a danger to, the black community. While the young black protestors sing the spirituals handed down from their ancestors, they *worry the lines* of these songs in order to make them relevant to their contemporary concerns (Wall 2005). In this way, the youth lend historical and social specificity to black audition. However, their singing is heard and adjudged by members of the dominant society as “timeless,” denoting not the expressions of a community of “individuals who
have a shared experience of racialization in a society structured around both maintaining and protecting white privilege and white supremacy,” but the essential character of black people as natural subordinates (DeVega 2015).

The plot of the story revolves around an impotent deputy sheriff who participates in the violent disbandment of a civil rights protest/voter registration drive. Neither he, nor any of the other deputies, can make the black protestors stop singing. Ruminating upon the inability of white authority figures to control the young people’s sound-making, the main character, Jesse, suggests that their noncompliance stems from the fact that “the young [black] people had changed some of the words to the songs” (Baldwin 1993, 237). That “he scarcely listened to the words before and did not listen to them now” does nothing to change his deep conviction that the words to the song are, and must necessarily be, different because he perceives that the young black people’s attitudes toward whites have shifted. The youth are no longer respectful of whiteness, and refuse to stop singing when ordered to do so. Jesse’s perturbation at the young blacks’ lack of respect causes him to reflect upon his own sexual impotence, as he “felt himself violently stiffen, with no warning at all” while committing acts of brutality upon a young man in jail while other protesters (described only by referring to their “hatred” of him and the word “blacker”) continue to sing (235). As Jesse later attempts to communicate his frustrations to his wife, he characterizes black singing as the “sound with which he was most familiar—though it was the sound of which he had been least conscious—and it had always contained obscure comfort” (235). The songs that “comfort” Jessie are the old spirituals, songs he believes are addressed to God for salvation and “mercy,” not only for the black singers, but for him as well (235). These songs, which have provided the
background music to Jesse’s life, function in the text as a metonym for blackness which allows the displacement and abstraction of black bodies in the service of white subjective construction, and as a mnemonic device that allows Jesse access to a forgotten past which enables the recovery of his virility.

As Jesse ponders his present state, his reflections about blacks’ singing allows him to recall the formative memory of a community picnic (lynching). Jesse feels that he, along with the old social order, has been “subtly and hideously displaced” (234). His feelings of being displaced are echoed textually by the absence of black bodies (234). As he thinks of the silence of white men in this time of confusion, “out of the darkness…out of nowhere, the line came flying up at him, with the melody and the beat….

*I stepped in the river at Jordan*” (239). As Jesse remembers more of the song, he remembers the day of the lynching, and traveling in the car with his parents along a dusty road. Awestruck by the absence of black people as they travel—he sees blacks neither at work nor at leisure, Jesse hears the white picnic-goers “singing which echoed and echoed in this graveyard silence” (244). Benoit Depardieu posits that “the singing acts as a metonymy—the part for the whole—as it represents both black people and the very desire of Jesse’s unconscious text” (2003, 3). While Depardieu offers a psycho-sexual reading of “Going to Meet the Man,” positing that singing serves as the “signifying chain” which allows the exposure of Jesse’s desire for the black male body, his analysis ignores the significance of the song’s lyrics. I want to focus here upon the importance of the lyrics of this particular song in relation to Jesse’s sense of self, and the implications of this song’s metonymic displacement of blackness as a means of articulating dual traumas. Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) that the linguistic strategy of
“metonymic displacement” in American literature requires that “physical traits become metonyms that displace rather than signify the Africanist character” (68). While Morrison does not explicitly mention song in her text, it is useful to consider her formulation of metonymic displacement in relation to Baldwin’s text. The song as metonymy in “Going to Meet the Man” signifies black presence even as it exemplifies the displacement of black bodies in the white cultural imaginary. Moreover, Jessie’s perceived inability to control the song and sound-making practices of blacks constitutes an “ontological-epistemological crisis” that Baldwin exposes as the core of white male traumatic experience (Leys 2005, 168).

Jesse does not attempt to decipher the lyrics that the youth are singing; rather he seeks the “comfort” of the old spiritual about the river Jordan. According to LeRoi Jones, “‘Crossing the river Jordan’ meant not only death but also the entrance into…heaven and a release from an earthly bondage; it came to represent all the slave’s yearning to be freed from the inhuman yoke of slavery” (1963, 40). In the context of Baldwin’s short story, the song about Jordan signals white nostalgia and desire for a return to the past that obscures the contemporary realities of black life. Jessie’s refusal to engage with the new lyrics and his determination to silence the young singers denies a historically contextualized understanding of black song. In other words, he refuses to accept its mutability. If Jesse accepts the song’s capacity for change, he must also accept that “black…agency to imagine alternative futures…is produced through sound” (Wald 2011, 675). By casting the singing in terms of the past and recalling the spiritual tied to the lamentations of slaves, Jesse signals his desire to restore the “proper order” of things. Here, the lament or “dirge” as metonym for blackness casts the black populace as a
people of perpetual servitude and suffering—the yardstick against which to measure and define white freedom. The recalled song, and Jesse’s interpretation of it, allow him to “‘efface the anteriority of the past’” in order to make use of this past moment in the present (Derrida 1989, 61). Jesse remembers this song as the black community’s resignation to suffering and death at the hands of whites. It is for this reason that he is disturbed by the alteration of the lyrics—their mutability, and political impact function as an acoustic affront to the racial order. Importantly, both Jesse’s understanding of and relationship to the song are cast as inherited from “the past,” which “while refusing to be forgotten…stubbornly refuse[d] to be remembered,” marking an inherited social affect (Baldwin 1993, 238). In this way Baldwin delineates black song as an acoustic marker of both the “refusal to remember” and the indelible imprint of the past in Jesse’s contemporary actions. Indeed, America’s history of slavery established white exegetical and social authority concerning the meaning and the production of black song and sound, as stated above. The very literal policing of black sound during slavery—in the prohibition upon the drum, the command for jollity, and the power to elicit cries of pain from the black body—echo forward in the text both in its representation of the lynching and of Jessie’s violence toward the black singers. This policing function also echoes forward into our contemporary, ostensibly postracial affective relations, evidenced by Michael Dunn’s execution of Jordan Davis, to which I shall return.

To be clear, the connection between white exegetical control of black sound, physical dominance over the bodies which produce these sounds, and disciplinary violence forged in slavery continues to manifest its presence across variegated socio-historical acoustic spheres in the West. Hence, just as the violence inflicted upon Pip’s
body at the command of the sailors reveals that the consumption of black sound in the West requires the concomitant brutalization of the body which produces it, here also, the black sounding body’s brutalization is connected to the disciplinary violence of lynching in a manner that reveals the historical continuity of this paradigm, and helps us to make sense of postracial acts of brutality committed against black subjects. The concretization of the “rights of white citizenship” under the press of chattel slavery, in which, I argue sound played a prominent role, also created an acousto-affective milieu of racial interaction predicated upon whites’ rights to enact disciplinary violence upon black sounding bodies which is at once socially inherited, and “disremembered and unaccounted for” in Western sociopolitical discourse (Morrison 2007, 324). This feat is accomplished in part through a cultural refusal to grant historical specificity to black sonic production, homogenizing black sound and casting its producers as teeming, degraded mass of subordinates, evidenced by Jesse’s maneuvers to retain exegetical command of black sound.

Jesse’s appropriation of the song is flawed in that both the contemporary and the “traditional” blacks are absented in his remembrance. Jesse’s memory of the song does (and can) not include the singers: “The singing came from far away, across the dark fields” (Baldwin 1993, 239). If Jesse specifies the singers of his youth, he must also grant historical specificity to the protesters, and an engage the modified lyrics of the present. The singers are therefore relegated to a shadowy “they” which de-contextualizes and historically flattens black presence. The simultaneous signification and displacement of blackness in Jesse’s recollection of the song belies his actual fear—that he has never understood the songs: “Perhaps this [the movement] was what the singing had meant all
along. They had not been singing black folks into heaven, they had been singing white folks into hell” (236). Jessie’s confusion regarding the song is also inherited. As his father listens to the singing the night before the lynching he remarks, “Even when they’re sad, they sound like they just about to go tear off a piece” (239). While “tearing off a piece” is echoed textually in a literal sense by the dismemberment of the lynched body at the “picnic,” Jesse’s father’s remark also suggests that the tone of the singing is forceful. Tiffany Gilbert asserts that for Jesse’s father the “tearing off a piece” symbolizes “something lascivious” that is proven by his lovemaking with his wife immediately after hearing the song (2010, 2). The forcefulness is interpreted as sexual by Jesse’s father, foreshadowing the sexualized violence of the lynching wherein white masculinity displays its capacity to mitigate the threat black sexuality poses through the act of castration. This decisive split ownership of sexuality and violence belies the imbrications of the two necessary to privilege white manhood. What is nearly effaced in the traumatic enactment of the lynching is the role black sound plays in mediating white sexuality and subjectivity. Jesse’s father vows to his wife “that’s what we going to do….You see? When I begin to feel it, I gets kind of musical too” (Baldwin 1993, 240). The father’s belief in his ability to interpret the blacks’ singing allows him to locate his own violent sexuality within a matrix of black degradation and perceived hypersexual excess that provides him with the libidinal resources to “tear off a piece,” or enact his fantasies through projection. This is eight year-old Jesse’s inherited model of subject formation. Because the picnic is one Jesse “won’t ever forget,” violence and sex are forever entangled in his mind with black song and the black male body, which produces his impotence in the midst of 60’s era Civil Rights protest (243).
What cannot be imagined by Jesse’s father in the 1930’s and is only perhaps beginning to dawn on Jessie himself in the 1960’s, is that the tone of the singing in addition to the lyrics produces the meaning of the song. The forceful recitation of the song coupled with the particular lyrics allow for interpretations other than the resigned sadness and sexual furor Jesse’s father imputes to it. The song, then, bears examination at length:

_I stepped in the river at Jordan..._
_I stepped in the river at Jordan._
_The water came to my knees..._
_I stepped in the river at Jordan._
_The water came to my waist..._
_I stepped in the river at Jordan,_
_The water came over my head,_
_I looked way over to the other side,_
_He was making up my dying bed!_

_Oh, Lord! Come on and ease my troubling mind!_

Although Jones’ interpretation of the lyrics is commonly accepted, the idea of resignation to death is not intrinsic to these lyrics. The song is also credited with having been an encoded message used by members of the Underground Railroad to indicate when rivers had to be crossed to runaway slaves. However, the implied tone of the singing in this text allows for a more ambiguous reading that signals latent black protest and affirmation of black pride comparable to the “changed” songs of the mid-to-late 1960’s. First, “step[ping] in the river” is not passive, but active. It implies choice and determined
action, even if the parameters of choice are limited. Secondly, the song aligns black people with the “chosen people” as they face the rushing waters of Jordan and receive God’s deliverance and protection, which is made evident by the last line in the song. This situating of blacks in a historical continuum allied with other suffering people exemplifies how “memory” is used to “establish life’s continuity” by “giv[ing] meaning to the present, as each moment is constituted by the past” (Sturken 1997, 1). The historical memory produced and expressed by this song allows for precisely the interpretation Jesse gives—this connection to the Israelites produces an image of blacks as transhistorical sufferers that de-contextualizes the present-ness of this particular experience and posits that this is as it always was and always shall be. This memory embedded in the song enacts the “forgetting or suppression of anteriority”—the “movement which attempts…to deny time” that produces the alleged timelessness of black essence in the American cultural imaginary (Derrida 1989, 62).

In tension with this transhistoricity is the particularity of African diasporic experience and African-American experience, both historically and within the moment of Jesse’s retrieval of the song. The Jordan may symbolize the crossing of the middle passage into slavery, the crossing of the Ohio River into free territory, a transition into activism and political agitation or, as Jones asserts, the passage into death. The line “I looked way over to the other side/He was making up my dying bed” is an accusation, a “protest [of] exploitation” that infers but does not name the perpetrator of misdeeds (Wall 2005, 224). The river Jordan is also the site where Jesus was baptized, which connotes both identification with Christ and the renewal of baptism. Simultaneously, “The water came over my head” is textually echoed by Jesse’s figurative “drowning in niggers”
through their “smell in his nostrils, filling his lungs” day after day, suggesting a different type of baptism through his hyper-awareness of black presence (Baldwin 1993, 236). This hyper-awareness, when coupled with real, imagined, or remembered violence, produces sexual excitement in Jesse—his own desired renewal—first articulated through sound: “He thought of the boy in the cell; he thought of the man in the fire; he thought of the knife and grabbed himself and stroked himself and a terrible sound, something between a high laugh and a howl, came out of him and dragged his sleeping wife up on one elbow” (249). Jesse’s “howl” signifies a desire for and connection with the black people he says “still live like animals,” marking the traumatic interconnection between desire, violence, and sound created when he witnessed the lynching as a child (231). The howl, which precedes language, signifies the dual impact of the trauma of racialized, sexualized violence on both the “object” of this violence and the subject who constructs identity by consuming or participating in this violence. This use of the “other” presents the opportunity for vicarious identification, exemplified through Jesse’s “labor[ing]” as his wife “moaned” (249). “Labor[ing] and moan[ing]” are typically associated with slavery and the songs that were produced in the context of forced labor that expressed the suffering and oppression of black people. As Jesse “labored harder than he ever had before” at the end of the tale, we become aware that the metonymic displacement of black presence allows Jesse to usurp blacks’ subordinate position in order to share pain with and deflect pain onto the absent black body (249). That this shared trauma is accessed through the song as a technology of memory exemplifies the ways in which “cultural memory has been produced in…contexts of pain,” and Jessie’s howl further exposes “the body’s importance to memory” (Sturken 1997, 16). Jesse’s masochistic
desire to suffer is accomplished by proxy through seemingly de-historicized, de-contextualized consumption of black song, which belies its roots in chattel slavery.

Importantly, Baldwin’s revelation of these embodied, inherited social practices rooted in white America’s investment in the continuance of the plantation’s socio-acousto-affective dimensions provides us with the critical conceptual leverage necessary to force attention to the ways in which the atomization of the black body proceeds from this distinct mode of consuming black sound. As stated earlier, Jesse’s inability to control blacks’ singing registers as traumatic in his psyche. He tells his wife “They were singing and I was supposed to make them stop” (Baldwin 1993, 232). Unable to control the mass of people who would “not be moved,” Jesse commands the person believed to be the protest leader to “make them stop singing” (232). The young man refuses, and is beaten and abused with a cattle prod. After kicking the young man until he faints, Jesse “felt close to peculiar, particular joy [and] something deep in him and deep in his memory was stirred, but…eluded him” (233). The joy Jesse feels stems from his brutal acts—acts that trigger the inherited memory of “correcting” blacks for producing unauthorized sounds. In this moment, Jesse feels that he has put right that which has been “hideously displaced” in the social order, even as he cannot name it. His joy, however, is brief. The young man stirs, telling Jesse that “We going to keep on singing until every one of you miserable mothers go stark raving out of your minds,” declaring acoustic warfare against those who seek to silence the protestors. As Jesse stands in the young man’s cell, “the singing filled him as though it were a weird, uncontrollable, monstrous howling rumbling up from the depths of his own belly,” indexing his permeability to the sounds, even as he refuses to be “impressed” by them (235, Douglass 1999, 28). Instead, he feels “fear” at
the young man’s refusal to fully submit and “howl[s], ‘You lucky we pump some white blood into you every once in a while—your women,’” feeling “himself violently stiffen” (Baldwin 1993, 235). Jesse’s inability to control black sound-making prompts a fear that registers to him as trauma stemming from the loss of social control. As his manhood and citizenship are bound up within his capacity to control black bodies, he perceives the young man’s claims to autonomy as a threat. As the singing has already been established as “different” from the singing that he historically understands as within the power of his command, the man’s continued refusal to submit to Jesse’s authority sends him into crisis, which must then be resolved through his violent reinstatement of white control. Importantly, the sounds of the blacks singing enters Jesse, suggesting sexual violation which is immediately echoed in Jesse’s sexualized threat directed at both black men and women. This moment reveals both Jesse’s subjective permeability to the affective content of black singing, and also his unconscious investment in slavery’s inherited social affects which grant him both control and exegetical authority over black song-making.

Jesse asserts social control both by forcing his own interpretation upon black song and through acts of real and imagined violence. The song “Stepped in the River at Jordan” serves as the mnemonic device that connects him to the historical memory that concretizes his right to domination as a white male subject. After recalling the lyrics to the song, Jesse remembers the journey with his parents to witness the lynching. At the lynching site, the “sounds of laughing and cursing and wrath—and something else—rolled in waves from the front of the mob to the back” (245). Unable to see, Jesse is bathed in sonic “wave upon wave” of “delight…more acrid than the smoke,” experiencing the lynching first only through auditory and tactile information as “he could
not see” (245). Desiring a better view for his son, Jessie’s “father reached down suddenly and sat Jesse on his shoulders” (245). As the lynching victim comes into view, Jesse hears the crowd “roar,” but is “not sure” if he “heard the hanging man scream” (246). As the man is lowered over and again into a fire, Jesse “knew that he screamed” as he “wondered. What did the man do?” (247). In the absence of evidence of the commission of a crime, the man is publicly tortured, his body rent to pieces before the boy Jesse who “screamed” immediately prior to the man’s castration, issuing a call that prompted the crowd to scream in response before “tearing at the [lynched] body with their hands…rocks..[and] stones, howling and cursing” (248). This moment echoes Wright’s approximation of lynching vis-à-vis the Thomas’ encounter with the rat. Importantly, at the story’s close, Jesse “thought of the boy in the cell” and “the man in the fire” prior to emitting “a terrible sound, something between a high laugh and a howl” signaling he has regained his virility. Jesse reclaims his historical right to control the black male body through a reclamation of authority over black sound. Casting black singing as timelessly mournful vis-à-vis the lynching, Jesse also recuperates the long-held communal belief that blacks’ “very existence constituted a crime against the state” to be punished at will (Wright 2005, 400). The dismemberment of the black body post-lynching reaffirms its status as public goods, the severed body parts likely to be displayed in the lynchers’ homes. Jesse’s inherited sociocultural affects are triggered by the sounds made by blacks in public, a paradigm that sadly remains operative in the 21st Century, as evidenced by the Jordan Davis murder case.

November 23, 2012, Michael Dunn approached an SUV occupied by black teenagers at a Jacksonville, Florida gas station and demanded that they turn down the rap
music playing in their vehicle. When Jordan Davis refused to comply and became argumentative, Dunn returned to his vehicle, removed his handgun, and opened fire on the vehicle, killing Davis. One of a spate of recent “extrajudicial killings” of unarmed blacks in America, the Jordan Davis case proves instructive for understanding the raced and gendered role sound plays in mediating our contemporary social interactions. This case exposes the cultural memory of slavery as the unspoken ground of ostensibly “post-racial” sociopolitical interactions, revealing Dunn’s demand as an echo, or contemporary manifestation, of the affective and social logics of slavery that authorized white male citizens to police blacks’ public behaviors. Importantly Dunn’s rage, just as Jesse’s in Baldwin’s short story, is provoked by his inability to control the sounds of young black men. Davis’ life is one of many sacrificed to the West’s willful deafness to the resounding echoes of its troubled past.

Jordan Davis’ murder comprises a single riff within a historical sonic spectrum of racial interactions in America that hear black autonomy as threateningly dissonant to the public order. We must understand Dunn’s violent actions as grounded within sociocultural understandings of the black body as both a public good for white consumption and entertainment, and also beholden to white control. Michael Dunn’s violent silencing of Jordan Davis emblematizes the nation’s historical relationship to black sound, for which Baldwin’s Civil Rights Era short story proves sadly prophetic; Wright’s Native Son examines at length; and which reveals itself in Melville’s use of the ship’s musician Pip’s body to sound his critical meditation on chattel slavery at the eve of the Civil War. As the rights of the white citizenry were concretized around their investment of authority to police blacks, controlling and directing their actions in public
places, then it stands to reason also that black resistance to this control constitutes a threat
that is consciously or unconsciously coded as traumatic injury and denial of one’s rights to citizenship. In Baldwin’s story, while Jesse is traumatized first by witnessing the lynching, his actions intimate that he feels more deeply traumatized by the loss of his authority. Similarly, Jordan Davis’ refusal to silence his music or himself was perceived as a threat to the sanctity of Dunn’s personhood and triggered inherited social affects that, as with Jesse in Baldwin’s story, manifested in egregious acts of violence. These violent acts forcibly silenced the sounds that America refuses to hear. Both Jesse and Dunn claimed to have been threatened and disinvested of their citizenship by black males’ refusals of acoustic compliance. These men therefore committed brutal acts of violence to silence black resistance, and to restore the acoustic social order, wherein the history of chattel slavery has forever marked blacks’ cries of pain in the American sociopolitical unconscious as the eternal echoes of correction and justice.

Notes

1 Douglass suggests that the slave while “within the circle” may not possess the interpretive skills to fully assess their songs’ meanings, as they are producing these songs in response to their own suffering. We can more clearly understand this assertion if we consider the manner in which he analogizes slaves’ songs to Hester’s scream (discussed in great detail in Chapter Two), and imbues them with meaning in his written Narrative, after attaining some distance from his state of bondage.

2 Jacques Derrida considers the notion of the gift both in Given Time, and in The Gift of Death. Derrida complicates the notion of the gift to understand that the true gift lies outside of the demands of giving and taking, or self-interest. The true, or genuine, gift for Derrida cannot command recompense or acknowledgement, as these acts work to destroy the gift itself. Significantly, the gift’s appearance as gift, places it within a cycle of debt and repayment. We can surmise that Du Bois is striking exactly this note by designating the “Sorrow Songs” and black labor during chattel slavery as gifts.
American innocence in the face of more than a hundred years ago” ([1965] 2013, 6). Here, I mean to stress the impossibility of being born under conditions not very far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago.  

Now, my dear namesake, these innocent and well-meaning people, your countrymen, have caused you to be born under conditions not very far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago.” ([1965] 2013, 6) Here, I mean to stress the impossibility of American innocence in the face of its racial history.

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3 In Native Son, Bigger refuses to sing with/for Mary Dalton and Jan, illuminating Wright’s understanding of the request/demand for the song as an attempt to extract surplus affective labor/goods from Bigger’s laboring body, as was the demand that he sit at table and give the air of social conviviality to his actual recompensed labor. Though he could not refuse all level of this forced social interaction in which his labor was reconstructed as entertainment, he could and did withhold the song, which in Wright’s estimation, held the key to black political unity and cultural authority. He refused them this unrecompensed gift as a statement not of his subjective autonomy, but as a recognition of the song’s circumscribed meaning in their realm of exegesis, and this was a form of malingering or refusing to participate in his subjection when he had control of nothing else.

4 For Neal in 1968, black literature is not a fully formed art because in his assessment, it refuses the sounds of black culture. Taking a page from Wright in “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Neal claims that the majority of black writing is stymied due to its mode of address to, and aping of whites in its creation. Both Wright and Neal plea for an internally derived, internally addressed body of literature that suffuses the qualities of black vernacular or folk culture and song within its construction. Tellingly, these desires echo Hughes and Locke during the New Negro era, who insisted upon the use of the “folk” in black literary production. Du Bois himself models the integration of black folk cultural forms in his presentation of and engagement with the Sorrow Songs in Souls. However, each of these men, and Baldwin following them, lamented the lack of a coherent body of distinctly black literature that both expressed the sentiments of blacks and could be regarded as “Art.” In this way, each of these men constructed “real” black literature as a still-deferred object that the race had yet to truly create. While each of them held up black song and oral (aural) culture as the premier and predominate mode of black expression, they did so in a manner that rationalized the primacy of black sonic culture as a product of the lack of access to, or attainment of, literate culture.


6 A similar incident occurs in Ellison’s Invisible Man when the protagonist is asked to sing at a Brotherhood gathering. The leaders balk at the impropriety of the person who has asked, as they clearly understand (and he reveals) that his request is tied to his belief in the natural sonority of blacks and that their sounds are readily available as entertainment for his consumption. The protagonist then muses “Shouldn’t there be some way for us to be asked to sing?” His query gets at the heart of whether or not black sounds and songs can ever be understood outside of the dominative logics of enslavement which constructed the sounds of blacks as always available goods for public consumption.

7 James Baldwin writes to his nephew in “My Dungeon Shook” (The Fire Next Time): “[I]t is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime. Now, my dear namesake, these innocent and well-meaning people, your countrymen, have caused you to be born under conditions not very far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago.” ([1965] 2013, 6) Here, I mean to stress the impossibility of American innocence in the face of its racial history.
Coda: Holla if You Hear Me: Sounding Black Trauma into the Post-Racial Void

We petition in the first instance because we are compelled to speak by the unending slaughter of Negroes.

*We Charge Genocide: Petition to the United Nations for Relief From a Crime of The United States Government Against the Negro People*

To live through the day sometimes you moan like deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets.

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*

[D]estruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old to black people. No one is held responsible.

Ta’Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

American sound could be this magical communal site of resistance and activism….

Kiese Laymon, *How to Slowly Kill yourself and Others in America*

In the “Author’s Note” to Kiese Laymon’s 2013 *How to Kill Yourself and Others Slowly in America*, the writer laments that “most of American literature…did not create an echo” because “most of the American literary classics were not courageous, imaginative, or honest enough to imagine our people or our experiences as part of its audience” (12). Laymon’s statement critically assesses the manner in which blacks have been marginalized within, excluded from, and not recognized by dominant American
cultural narratives—most readily apprehended in the fact that the nation’s literary “classics” neither represent black experience, nor understand African Americans as “addressable others” able to “affirm” American experience (Laub 1992, 68). The echo, for Laymon, seems to describe the creation of affective, cultural, and social resonances that engender connection. Simultaneously, Laymon’s statement names the echo as a communicative modality that hails subjects into what might be deemed more authentic interrelation, and that also affirms their experiences. Laymon attests that “the literary echoes” of “brilliant, soulful, courageous African American literature saved [his] life” (2013, 12). In this way, Laymon affirms the echo as a mode of diasporic testimony that oscillates throughout the canon of African American literature to sound black experiences with which Laymon identifies. The echo’s life-saving powers can be attributed to its creation of resonances through multi-directional address and its continuous propagation. The echo both reaches outward, and continually returns toward its source and site of enunciation. The vibratory resonance of the echo hails all permeable bodies to witness to its existence, and affirms their interconnection with others while disseminating itself across various mediums. Laymon, then, obliquely testifies to the possibilities of, and reveals the mechanism for, diasporic testimony. The echo’s affirmative function also influences him to “shape [his] book in the form of…albums,” so that his text sounds the multiplicitous realms of black experience into the world, to build resonances across time and space that will be (re)played and remixed by future generations (2013, 13). All of the text’s echoes, however, are not echoes of joy.

Throughout How to Kill Yourself and Others, Laymon attests to America’s “insatiable appetite for virtuoso black performance and routine black suffering” (28). He
does so in part by sounding his personal experiences of racialized violence in tandem with incidences of violence suffered by other blacks—most of whom did not survive. He writes: “I’m seventeen, five years younger than Rekia Boyd will be when she is shot in the head by an off-duty police officer in Chicago in 2012” (35). In the space of 3 pages, after sounding his own experience of terror at the hands of the police, Laymon writes: “Sixteen months later, I’m eighteen, three years older than Edward Evans will be when he is shot in the head behind an abandoned home in Jackson in 2012” (38). Again he echoes: “I am still nineteen, four years older than Hadiya Pendleton will be when she is murdered in Chicago,” and again: “I know that by the time I left Mississippi, I was twenty years old, three years older than Trayvon Martin will be when he is murdered for wearing a hoodie and swinging back in the wrong American neighborhood” (2013, 40, 48). Laymon thereby bears witness to the deaths of these slaughtered young black people by echoing both their names and experiences in the pages of his text. He also testifies—by aggregating echoed experiences of violence, and by cataloging the once-living bodies now brutally silenced—to the quotidian nature of racialized violence in what has been deemed a post-racial America; an America that consistently admonishes its black inhabitants to “Move forward. Let it go….Move on” (Rankine 2014, 66). The American desire/command for blacks to “let…go” of the history of slavery and “move on” reflects a national desire to maintain the illusion of the country’s innocence, as well as deny the horrors of slavery and its ongoing effects.

Significantly, the narratives America tells itself about itself, by excising key aspects of black experience, construct “race” as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world” from which “racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and
then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows,” thereby rendering “racism...innocent” (Coates 2015). The narrative of American innocence, therefore, colludes with its narrative of white supremacy to create a canon that silences blacks by refusing to address or recognize them. Contemporary post-racial narratives exacerbate the traumas of the nation’s originary narratives in that they belie both the existence of, and the continued resonances of, these narratives of exclusion in shaping our daily interactions. Historical narratives that naturalize black subordination as “a phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men,” or as a phenomenon that has been overcome or surpassed in post-Civil Rights, post-race America, occlude that the making of America itself was predicated upon “the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts, meant first and foremost, to deny [blacks] the right to secure and govern [their] own bodies” (Coates 2015). This critical excision of content from America’s narrative of itself constitutes an act of linguistic violence that both echoes and obscures the visceral physicality of racial violence in the West. Ta’Nehisi Coates writes unflinchingly of these violent echoes to his young son in Between the World and Me: “But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, break teeth” (2015). Coates’ (re)turn to the body reveals what narrative and language occlude by clarifying that racial traumas are enacted on, deployed against, and inscribe themselves upon bodies that must bear the burdens of quotidian violence as an aspect of their raced corporeality.
Yet we pretend not to apprehend the significance of these scars, refusing to recognize these exposed wounds as evidence of the repeating horrors of chattel slavery. They are, instead, seen as evidence of black inferiority and, in their exposure to the wider public, cultural pathology marked by what is understood as blacks’ refusal to heal from the historical wounds of enslavement. Postraciality, then, demands that blacks transcend their collective corporeal-cultural history in order to be quietly enfolded into an American narrative in which they are neither addressees, nor protagonists.


*Move on.*

*Come on.*

Echoing against and through these dominant post-racial narratives, the resonance of Mamie Till-Mobley’s scream wracks the bodies of Sabrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin; Lucia McBath, mother of Jordan Davis; Leslie McSpadden, mother of Mike Brown; Angela Helton, mother of Rekia Boyd; Geneva Reed-Veal, mother of Sandra Bland; and Esaw Garner, wife of Eric Garner; and erupts from their mouths in different times and different places in order to attest to the same (hi)story of black disposability. Scattering and diffracting away from the slain bodies of these women’s loved ones as objects of violence, these sounds of mourning and testimony (re)converge to (re)play the sonic record of maternal inability, and to (re)sound the cry “no protection;” reaching backward into time and space to join with the echoes of Hester’s scream, which perhaps even then contained the essence of today’s oft-repeated protest mantra—“Black Lives Matter.” But to whom, and where, are these cries of testimony addressed?
Black liberation activist movements from abolitionism, to the long Civil Rights Movement, to the Black Power Movement, to the Black Lives Matter movement, have all implicitly or explicitly addressed testimonies of black trauma to the state in their appeals to the wider public conscious. The state’s continuous refusal to recognize the historical source of black injury, as well as institutional racism’s ability to reproduce and transform itself in the face of the purported death of Jim Crow and the dawn of post-racial America, enables a profound denial of the manner in which slavery’s legacies comprise our shared national inheritance. Blacks, however, as they carry the inscription of slavery’s affective and social residues upon their bodies, seek to sound the resonances of the experiences of bondage, and their continued reverberations in quotidian aspects of black life today. The continuance of state-sanctioned and state-supported violence against blacks in the 21st Century echoes and extends the West’s legacies of racialized violence in the form of lynching as part and parcel of Western identity—one that is persistently denied and covered over with narratives of black inferiority, black pathology, and blacks’ unwillingness to integrate themselves into the body politic as productive citizens. These narratives have been persistently met with blacks’ counter-narratives of black humanity and exceptionality, blacks’ thrift, virtue and work ethic. Indeed, Du Bois’ The Souls of Black Folk was not the first black counter-narrative which emphatically placed blacks within the “warp and woof” of Western nation-states—as the laborers who produced the cultural and economic capital that laid these nations’ foundations (265). However, these beautifully worded narrative testimonies as appeals for the recognition of black humanity, as well as demands for the recognition of blacks’ foundational roles in the imagining and creation of Western democratic capitalism, have only been marginally heeded. These
counter-narratives are readily enfolded into the dominant narratives of oppression by marking the testis as singular and exceptional, effectively divorcing this narrator from the concerns or the fate of the larger community.

Aimé Césaire reminds us of the inefficacy of counter-narrative testimonies for the black diasporic subject in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* by naming “words” and (Enlightenment) “Reason…[as] the whip’s corolla” (2001, 17). Corolla is a term derived from the Latin corona, or crown, and also refers to the inner whorl of flower petals that serve to protect the reproductive organs of the plant. Césaire suggests that the words that form testimonial narrative (re)produce the wounds of enslavement precisely because words themselves form both the *crown*, and the (re)generative center, of the multiple violences visited upon the black diasporic subject. It is for this reason that Césaire advocates for a vibratory testimony that utilizes the earth as mediums, and also relies upon rhythmic interrelation to engender the receipt of this resonant testimony across time and space. As the preceding chapter has shown, Frederick Douglass, too, advocated for a mode of sonic testimonial that relied upon recipients’ bodily permeability, or visceral receptiveness, to the non-semantic sounds of black traumatic experience. Witnessing, then, in these two men’s oblique formulations, constitutes a physical and psychic permeability to the sounds, echoes, and vibratory resonances that comprise the repeating testimonies of and to diaspora as testament to black experiences. Attunement to these resonances should then also attune recipients to the echoes of enslavement in the quotidian aspects of black life—not as pathology—but as the West’s shared acousto-affective history that must be reckoned with. However, even as these men theorize new modes of intersubjectivity, they unwittingly become trapped by the logics of
recognition, and, more problematically, excise a critical demographic from their intersubjective imaginings of freedom—black women.

As this work has shown, from the time of slavery, black liberation activism in the West (most prominently through various forms of black nationalism) has persistently hailed black women, and benefited from their sonic, maternal, and bodily labors, only to silence and sublimate these women in the interests of centering black men as representative of black liberation. This problematic cycle of suppressing black women finds its roots in the slave narrative tradition, wherein black maternal figures’ cries come to mark the ineffable aspects of slave experience. This narrative collapse of the enslaved maternal figure and her sounds of pain, the state of bondage, and the ineffable, lead to her marginalization and silencing within the construction of black liberation ideologies even as she serves as the locus of black subjectivity and diasporic testimony. She is the unacknowledged ground of black liberation politics. Through acts that I have named in this work as “thefts of the umbilical,” representative authority has been persistently wrested from the black maternal sounding body, effectively silencing her testimony while positioning black males as authoritative testis to diasporic experience. This vested interest in male representatives constitutes black men as both the subject in need of institutional recognition and redress, and as the emblem of black freedom, as freedom comes to be constructed as freedom-from black women. Black women are thereby reduced generationally to wailing mothers (and aunts, and sisters) “who scream[sic] when you suffer,” indexing not only the perpetuity of black maternal inability and loss, but also how her soundings are compressed into testimonies of black male injury, rather than her own (Ellison 1995, 240).
If this seems unbelievable, one need only note that #BlackLivesMatter, a racial and social justice movement founded by Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors, and Opal Tometi, three queer black women, boasts as its most recognizable representatives Shaun King and Deray McKesson, two black men. Coalescing first around the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of unarmed Florida teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012, the #BlackLivesMatter movement was designed to protest the continued disposability of black life, as well as to transcend what the leaders saw as “the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which…keep[sic] straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all…. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements” (Garza 2015). While centering those typically rendered peripheral in traditional black liberation movements was among the founding goals of #BlackLivesMatter; its leaders, as well as its aims, have been forced back to the very margins of the liberation discourse they sought to expand in a saddening echo of Douglass’ suppression of Hester’s cry, and the silencing of black women in 1960’s activist circles. This begs the question as to whose #BlackLivesMatter when black men such as Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray become canonized, and serve as the primary (arguably sole) focus of popular protest actions. Women like Rekia Boyd, Mia Hall, Alexia Christian, Shelly Frey, and young Ayana Stanley-Jones, all victims of state-sanctioned or extrajudicial violence comparable to the aforementioned men, slipped quickly from public consciousness. Just three years after the #BlackLivesMatter movement was launched, a new movement entitled #SayHerName
sought to re-place black (cisgender and transgender) women’s experiences within an anti-
police brutality, black liberation activist framework.

The necessity of the #SayHerName movement in and of itself comprises a
powerful testimony to the ways in which black women’s traumatic experiences continue
to go unheard, and how justice and freedom continue to be conceptualized in black
liberation ideologies as the sole provenance of black males. Toni Morrison reminds us in
*Song of Solomon* that any liberation project that does not include the entire black
community as a body, or that requires us to silence our mother’s and sister’s names,
simply perpetuates (gendered) intracommunal violence that ultimately aids in the black
community’s destruction. Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* very early points us toward a
critical recovery of the black mother in liberation activism, and urges us to heed her
songs and sounds as those that have sustained the community. These echoing aural
palimpsests that operate to forge connections across time, space, and place may also work
in the same manner to forge connections across class, gender, and sexual identities. As
palimpsests, these maternal sounds hold the latent potential to echo and (re)form
themselves in order to address the exigencies of their moments of articulation, traveling
“across distances” absent even the hope of recognition, to engender heightened
receptivity and permeability to the sounds of diasporic testimony. In so doing, black
mother’s songs and cries will sound the depths of Western history and experience to
provide the routes and roots of connectivity and intersubjectivity that resonate on social,
political, affective, and even ecological levels. These maternal soundings and their
continuous echoes produce a reverberating testimony that insists upon the urgency of
actualizing black freedom (for all) as our rightful cultural inheritance, “handed by the mother”—one that the West can no longer afford to deny.
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