

**Blackness, radicalism, sound: Black Consciousness and  
Black Popular Music in the U.S.A (1955-1971)**

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**I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.**

**Signed.....**

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## **Abstract**

The concern in this thesis is with the relationship between black music and black radicalism. This relationship is addressed through three case studies which centre on the co-emergence of the Black Consciousness movement and new forms of Black popular music in the United States between 1955 and 1971. The contention is that the relationship between the movement and the new popular music during this period is indicative of a general exchange between black music and black radicalism and can be analysed by paying attention to phonic substance. The relationship between these practices and traditions is primarily sonic, and it is as phonic substance that the blackness of black music and black radicalism emerges.

The theorisation of blackness and phonic materiality is informed by a set of ongoing debates taking place within the field of Black studies. These debates address the structural and political meanings of blackness in the West and as such form the background to the research presented in the case studies on the Black Consciousness movement and Black popular music.

Each of the case studies is made up of archival material ranging in format. The focus is always on how this material contributes to an analysis of the sonic form and content of the movement and the music. In this respect the archive is not a stable resource from which information is extracted but is always under construction and informing the arguments being made about the phonic materiality of black music and black radicalism.

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## **Introduction**

*What is the relationship between black music and black radicalism?* This question is the means through which the research that follows is organised. In order to understand how it organises the research it is necessary to unpack and analyse it in detail.

Conceptually the question is built on the premise that there is already a relationship between black music and black radicalism. This thesis begins with that premise and asks what it is that places them in a relationship. The place to begin might be that which renders black music and black radicalism black. Is it the blackness of black music and black radicalism which is at stake in this thesis? If so, what defines the category of blackness? How has blackness been understood intellectually and how does this apply to black music and black radicalism? Alternatively one could turn to radicalism as the connection between these two practices. It could be that black music works in a way which echoes the characteristics of what is more formally recognised as the Black radical tradition. The question then becomes, what are the particular traits of black radicalism and how is the music able to produce them? Finally there is the option of reversing the previous scenario and arguing that it is black radicalism which works like black music. Are there instances where the radicalism has ever been comparable to the music? Has the Black radical tradition ever produced phonic substance which sounds like black music?

The question - *what is the relationship between black music and black radicalism?* - is the starting point of this thesis because it opens up the areas of enquiry outlined above. Therefore the question allows for an analysis of the relationship between black music and black radicalism in terms of its blackness, radicalism and sonic content. Furthermore it allows us to ask what becomes of such categories when placed in close proximity to each other. How can blackness be understood as a sonic manifestation of resistance? How can an act of radicalism be audible and be listened to as black? What is it about black music that makes it black? Is it the way it sounds? Does that sound also make it radical? The contention in this thesis is that black music and black radicalism interact in ways which not only complicate the differences between them as distinct practices, but also unsettles the differences between blackness, radicalism and phonic substance as categories. Blackness becomes a site of enactment for radicalism by way of its production of phonic substance, yet at the same time, whether this phonic substance emanates from within the music, the radicalism or some interstitial space between them,

it never settles down as determinedly black. Instead the production of blackness as sonic resistance also becomes the means of its own radical breakdown. Blackness is always in constant escape.

To address black music and black radicalism on these terms and in their entirety is far too large a task to attempt here. It is necessary to develop a historical, geographical and archival context out of which a general approach to the research question can be extrapolated. The question of the relationship between black music and black radicalism will be filtered through a period of mid Twentieth century history in the U.S.A. Between 1955 and 1971 the Black Consciousness movement emerged as a broad attempt to restructure the modality of everyday life in the U.S. The movement encapsulated a range of ideologies, organisations, figureheads and locations, but what held it together is the evidence of Black people in America becoming radicalised on a mass scale. The Black Consciousness movement has often been misinterpreted as reflective of a desire for inclusion in mainstream American life. The stakes for the black radicalisms which developed over this period moved beyond discourses of inclusion. When the insurgent nature of the demands from the Black Consciousness movement came to be heard they were dismissed as either excessively violent or exceptional but unattainable democratic ideals.

At the same time as the movement came the emergence of Black popular music as a prominent feature of American culture and commerce. This is not to say Black popular music had not been part of the popular imagination until this point. Black music in various forms of jazz and blues had been a cultural presence albeit a relatively marginalised one. Beginning in the mid-to-late 1950s and continuing for a further decade, new forms of Black popular music developed, initially under the heading of r'n'b, but then more definitively as soul and funk. These forms of Black popular music were unique for a number of reasons. Firstly they were musics which had a strong commercial appeal and moved beyond the previous relatively minor status attached to black music to dominate the U.S. pop charts. Secondly r'n'b, soul and funk, although new and commercially viable, were also determinedly black musics. They represented new forms of communally derived blackness, new ways of being black, whilst also having cross-racial appeal. Thirdly and in a related point, these new musics seemed to speak to the Black Consciousness movement. Whether in the lyrics or themes chosen by those making and performing it, or something that was believed to be more generally carried in its sonic content, the music became a broadcasting device for the Black

Consciousness movement.

The research into Black popular music and Black Consciousness in this thesis is organised around the idea that between 1955 and 1971 they were tuned into the same frequencies. Over this period the music and the movement were involved in an intense but equally elusive mutual articulation. There were signals being sent between Black popular music and the Black Consciousness movement which ranged from the direct to the nebulous. It is by paying close attention to such transference during this period of mid Twentieth century Black history that the wider research question on black music and black radicalism will be addressed. The movement and the music were connected by way of the forms of blackness each represented, radicalism each embodied, and their respective production of phonic substance. In short the concern in this thesis is with the interplay between the blackness, the radicalism and the phonic materiality of Black popular music and the Black Consciousness movement between 1955 and 1971.

It is important to stress that when discussing the relationship between the movement and the music a comprehensive coverage of this period is not the intended aim. Instead the bulk of the research will be divided into three case studies, each focusing on materials that were produced by particular inflections of Black Consciousness or Black popular music and associated with specific events within those histories. The aim is to build these studies around potential convergences between the chosen materials and events. Part one will begin with James Brown. From 1964 his music was considered a direct recording of a new militant blackness. “Say it Loud (I’m black and I’m proud)” was thought of as an exemplary record in this respect because its lyrical demands for unity and consciousness led to the song becoming an Black Consciousness anthem. It is strange that other James Brown records of the same period, such as “I got the feeling”, “Cold Sweat” and “Super Bad”, sound more like black radical music. They feature little of the overt lyrics of “Say it Loud”, yet these records seem to get closer to the political feeling of black militancy. Black Cultural Nationalists listening to James Brown records certainly seemed to think his music was attuned to something they wanted to generalise. Take Amiri Baraka: he wanted to use Brown's sound as the basis for his political and poetic practice of nation building. When listening to James Brown, Baraka argued it was possible to hear a place where Black people lived. What was going on in Brown's music for Baraka to hear such possibilities? How was this sound able to transfer into Baraka's political and poetic performances of black nationhood?

Part two centres on “A Change is Gonna Come”, a song which also sounded like a

generalisation of a black political project. In this case Sam Cooke's posthumous 1964 release spoke to the Civil Rights movement. To some extent the song gained this status because it contained the rhetoric popularised by the movement, but "A Change" was always about more than that. Cooke found a way of recording in the song the sonic complication of spiritual agency and political will which was central to the Civil Rights project. In this respect Cooke resembled Martin Luther King. The speeches King gave as the public figurehead of Civil Rights protest were built on that same complication. They were shaped by the performance of spirit which was central to worship in the Black church. Yet King's speeches were also always directed at socio-political goals. How did King and Cooke respectively acquire the ability to transmit authentic spiritual feelings to large audiences? How was the voice a central instrument in this process? In the context of Civil Rights, how did the performance of spiritually authentic sounds affect a politics organised around wilful black demands for agency?

The final part turns to Detroit, the city which was home to the Motown recording company. During the 1960s the Sound of Young America was at the cutting edge of new black musical possibilities. These new possibilities were marked not just in the form the music took, but in the entirety of the Motown product. Motown was making a new black musical product which was sleek, appealing and sold to the American mainstream. Underneath the surface sheen though there was evidence of excessive black labouring because work at Motown was driven by the automated production line model. The production line was central to another black group manufacturing sleek new products in Detroit, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Formed in the city's automobile factories, the League sought to expose the exploitation of black labour on the production lines. The new cars which rolled out of Detroit and powered the U.S. economy were built upon black sweat and blood. The League's central tactic was to self-organise and to make themselves heard above and as machinery. The incongruities which effected Motown and the League raise critical questions. What does black labour sound like? What does black labour resisting sound like? What is the sonic difference between the two?

These three studies make up the response to the question of the relationship between black music and black radicalism. On an immediate level they raise questions of pre-eminence. Were the political and social concerns of the Black Consciousness movement creating an environment in which new forms of Black popular music could be produced? Or did the music generate new sensibilities which became the foundation for

the movement? The deeper concerns though lie with the conditions of possibility for the relationship between black music and black radicalism. What made the music and the movement black? Were they black because of those who participated in their production, or was it because of the way they were made? The same applies to their radicalism, was it a result of the participants and the content they produced or the forms the movement and the music took? How did phonic substance play a part in this? How could the sound of a musical or political recording be considered black and radical?

Given the primacy of the Black radical tradition and black music, it is important to make it clear that this is a Black studies thesis. It is largely through this area of scholarship that categories of blackness and radicalism will be addressed. Black studies, as a field of thought with the question of blackness at its centre, is at work across all of the research presented in this thesis. It informs, at a structural level, the organisation of all three case studies outlined above. The details of the engagement with Black studies and the categories of blackness and radicalism will follow in the next chapter but to outline briefly, this thesis is speaking to a recent reinvigoration of Black studies within the U.S. academy. The new turn in this field has been instigated by debates over the meanings and values of blackness. To situate this thesis within what seems like a minor debate taking place within a relative sub-discipline of Cultural studies and Critical theory is a strategic move. Part of what motivates the research in this thesis is the contention that Black studies is anything but minor or subsidiary. The category of blackness, particularly as it informs the Black radical tradition, is involved in an immanent critique of Western civilisation. What is meant by this statement is that blackness informs what has come to be known as proper thought, the legitimate subject, the social, the aesthetic, the economic – all central features of modernity. But blackness exists in an unstable relation to all of these features because it also always disrupts them. It is this notion of immanent critique which informs the engagement with black radicalism and black music as practices producing but also destabilising notions of blackness, radicalism and music.

Black studies though is not the sole area of scholarship deployed in this thesis. Rather it acts as a structure for moves into other disciplines. The use of a range of theoretical frameworks is informed by the questions which emerge from the case studies. Although each of the case studies addresses blackness, radicalism and their phonic materiality, they do so in ways which introduce a series of other concerns. For example the work on James Brown and Amiri Baraka in part one draws on issues of autobiographical writing,

violence and embodiment, avant-garde literary practice, poetic performance, militant territorial formations and masculinity. The Martin Luther King and Sam Cooke study moves into areas such as political will and agency, religious testimony, spiritual possession, and embodiment. Finally militant publishing and film making, the physicality and alienation of labour, and natality inform the analysis of the League and Motown. Although Black studies constitute the central theoretical horizon, the range of topics arising out of the research necessitates the use of other areas of scholarship. Alongside Black studies and its related concerns the case studies also put Postcolonial studies, Subaltern studies, Deconstruction, Poststructuralism, Marxist and Gramscian thought, Literary theory, Performance studies, Feminist theory and Queer theory to use. This array of scholarship is necessary for a number of reasons. As an immanent critique of Western civilisation, Black studies operates in relation to all of the fields outlined above. It shares concerns with many of them, despite their divergent histories. Part of the work of this thesis involves making those shared concerns apparent by juxtaposing these areas of scholarship with the work of Black studies. In this respect the resonances between them will come to the fore by way of a diversionary tactic. What will occur often with the case studies is a step across – using the questions raised by the specific materials and their relationship to Black studies – into say Subaltern studies or Queer theory, in order to open up different modalities of thought about blackness, radicalism and sound.

What the resonances opened up by the seemingly unorthodox juxtapositions of different theoretical horizons also points to are the methodological aspects of this thesis. The stated aim is to study the phonic materiality of the Black Consciousness movement and Black popular music as necessary to their blackness and radicalism. The use of various theoretical fields forms part of a general process of assembling systems for listening to this phonic materiality. Placing phonic substance at the heart of this thesis leads to questions about what is being studied and how. This subject will be addressed more fully in the next chapter, but it is worthwhile outlining the approach now. The study of phonic substance as generative of the blackness and radicalism of Black Consciousness and Black popular music centres on the status of the archive. The archive in this thesis is made up of sound recordings ranging in format and material about or related to those recordings. The common practice would be to treat the sound recordings as the primary research objects, but the emphasis on phonic substance requires a different approach. Part of the methodological argument being made in this thesis is that

phonic substance is not restricted to the recorded material. Instead it is generated by both the recordings *and* the discourse about them. As a result the archive in this thesis is an unstable feature and one which is produced as it is written about.

This approach to the methodological status of the archive is inseparable from the research question. The relationship between black music and black radicalism as one organised by their phonic materiality requires a nuanced approach to the notion of a research object. This approach is necessary because it maintains an openness to the blackness and radicalism of these two practices. What will become apparent is that the complexity required to give an account of a set of sounds as black and radical is intimately connected to the theorisation of blackness as the reproduction of a break. This will be named later as the paraontological nature of blackness as phonic substance. The task I have set myself in this thesis, by way of a specific historical juncture, is to listen closely to the nature of the relationship between black music and black radicalism.

## **Frameworks: conceptual, contextual, methodological**

Having established the terms of the research question, it is important to place those terms in more detailed context before moving into the case studies. The notion of studying the relationship between black music and black radicalism is not unique to this thesis. The terms at work in the research question – blackness, radicalism and their phonic materiality – have informed black intellectual thought in the West to the extent that black music has often been used as an interlocutor during such discussions. One of the aims in this chapter is to situate the terms of this thesis more determinedly within the aforementioned debates taking place in Black studies. These debates address the political ontology of blackness in the West and at a crucial moment turn towards the phonic substance of black music. Another task in this chapter is to map out the historical setting of the case studies. This will involve outlining the historiographies of the Black Consciousness movement and Black popular music in mid Twentieth century America. Finally the methodological issues raised in the Introduction will also be addressed in this chapter. It is important to think at length about the status of the material to be studied in this thesis. In particular the questions raised by the attempt to theorise blackness and radicalism through the phonic materiality of an archive need to be accounted for.

### **Cedric Robinson and the Black radical tradition**

The social, psychic, economic and political meanings of blackness have formed the basis of black intellectual thought in the West. Debates about the value of blackness as a racial category have been shaped by a range of thinkers since emancipation who have tended to study the history of racial enslavement, and the reproduction of its effects upon the free Black populations in the U.S. and beyond. The persistent legacy of racial enslavement has been organised under the heading “black”. Under the conditions of modernity blackness has become a category which is deemed to be without value. The questions Black thinkers have been addressing since emancipation concern the development of a collective black political project. These thinkers have been asking whether it is possible to develop a collective project using blackness as a starting point. What they have tended to suggest is that if such a project were to come about, it would have a fundamental effect on the organisation of life within Western modernity. The

question of blackness, for post-emancipation Black thinkers, has always been about the development of a black radical project. They have proffered theories of blackness as a way of defining what might become a general black radical project. Examining the relationship between blackness and black radicalism in black intellectual thought will offer a way of thinking about black music as part of a radical program in this chapter.

The theorisation of blackness as a radical program arguably found its earliest synthesis in W.E.B Du Bois. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1994) Du Bois presents an ontological case for Black social life. It is in this text that he delivered his pronouncements on the colour line and the metaphor of the veil as primary factors in Black life. His *Black Reconstruction* (1935/1992) put forward a theory of history which argued labour under capitalism could not be understood unless slavery and black labour were considered integral to the system. What I am not aiming to do in this chapter is give an overview of black radical thought from Du Bois onwards. Instead *Souls* and *Reconstruction* point to the way Du Bois' thought has shaped black intellectual thought, especially in the U.S. These two works set the parameters for black thought by establishing two major lines of enquiry. One centred on blackness as ontological existence, whereas the second focused on blackness as a political and economic question. What I want to do in this chapter is to follow these debates within Black studies as it has operated in the U.S. academy since the 1960s. The project of Black studies in the American university has tended to take on questions of blackness from Du Bois. Much of this work has resulted in a variety of contesting theories about black radical politics.

The influence of *Black Reconstruction* upon Black studies has also seen an attempt to coherently think race and class (it is arguable that C.L.R James has an equal claim to influencing this line of black intellectual thought. See; James 1938/1963). Scholars such as Cornel West (2002) Charles Mills (2003) and Manning Marable (1999) have used varying combinations of pragmatism, Black theology and social contract theory to align the apparent discontinuities between blackness and Marxism. The other prominent intellectual strand within Black studies has been an ontological and psychic examination of blackness. This line of thought has grown out of *Souls* but also encompasses the work of Frantz Fanon and slave narratives popularised by Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs and others. Theorists taking up the question of blackness from this perspective tend to enter into engagement with enlightenment philosophy and its legacies (Gordon, 1997; Smith, 1998; Yancy, 1998).

Despite the range of approaches to blackness and black radicalism available within the field of Black studies, the focus in this chapter shall be on one thinker and text in particular. Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* was published in 1983. Putting forward a unique theory of black diasporic history and resistance, I would suggest that Robinson's text has been underappreciated for a number of years. More recently though there has been a turn towards *Black Marxism* and the questions it raises within Black studies. A new edition was published in 2000 with a major foreword by Robin D.G Kelley, and Brent Hayes Edwards edited a special issue of *Social Text* dedicated to Robinson's book (2001). The resurgence of interest in *Black Marxism* lays the groundwork for a set of debates currently taking place within the field of Black studies about the status of blackness and the possibilities of a common black radical project. (Other examples of a return to Robinson's work include: Meyerson, 2000; Thomas, 2005; Morse, 2009).

The title of Robinson's text is somewhat misleading because *Black Marxism* is a critique of Marxist thought from the perspective of what he calls the Black radical tradition in the West. Marxism and black radicalism are, according to Robinson, largely "incommensurable" (2000, 1). He acknowledges they are both projects which seek revolutionary change and that Marxism and black radicalism "represent a significant and immanent mode of social resolution" (Robinson, 2000, 1). Despite the similarities they are incommensurable because "each is a particular and critically different realization of a history" (Robinson, 2000, 1). Robinson does not stop at incommensurability, he argues that one project (black radicalism) has been subsumed in favour of another (Marxism), within the Western intellectual tradition. Black radicalism has been misinterpreted because it has tended to be understood through the lens of Marxist revolutionary thought.

Robinson identifies the problem as a strain of universalism which dominates Marxist thought. It is largely forgotten that "Marxism is a Western construction" and despite Marx's mode of critique, his ideas were built upon readings of enlightenment thinkers (Robinson, 2000, 2). Marx was also responding to a set of historical circumstances that were unique to Europe. Despite its European origins, Marxism has largely been interpreted as a project which offers universal revolutionary change and is considered to be "identical with world historical development" (Robinson, 2000, 2). Robinson is critical of this universalism as it fails to account for the presence of "racial capitalism" in Europe (2000, 308). "Racial capitalism" refers to the "immense expenditures of

psychic and intellectual energies in the West” used to create the negro (Robinson, 2000, 4). According to Robinson the creation of the negro set the conditions for the mass enslavement of Africans and in turn led to slaves being conceived as black labouring objects. Robinson argues slaves were never considered subjects, they could only function in the New World if thought of as objects. These processes required significant amounts of energy because it was necessary to mask the fact the Atlantic Slave trade had inserted Black captives into the heart of capitalism. The West was reliant upon black labour power and Robinson argues “racial capitalism” is something Marxist thought has failed to adequately theorise. There is an absence of discussion about how blackness operates at the heart of Western systems of exploitation. Thus, for Robinson there are insufficiencies in the Marxist view of social relations and theory of revolution. As Brent Hayes Edwards makes clear, Robinson is not dismissive of Marxist thought. His task is to illustrate how black radicalism is not “subordinate to or comprehensible through Marxism” (Edwards, 2001, 4). Marxism in many ways created the “necessary conditions for the emergence of black radicalism” in the West (Edwards, 2001, 4). The attendance in Marxist thought to structural exploitation, collective organisation and revolutionary change, goes some way to understanding black radicalism, yet “they are not alone sufficient to explain it” (Edwards, 2001, 4). Black radicalism develops from a set of conditions which allow it to move beyond the scope of Marxism even on those occasions when it emerges through it.

Robinson's notion of incommensurability arises from this impasse. He wants to examine black radicalism as the “theoretical articulation” of opposition from the Black diaspora in the West, but black opposition in the West also works against the logics of Marxism (Robinson, 2000, 5). Thus Robinson wants to offer a theory of black radicalism without referring to models of insurrection developed through Marxism. Black radicalism represents the “negation” of capitalist society, unlike Marxism though, it was not an outcome of it (Robinson, 2000, 73). Rather black radicalism was forged through the responses of those brought to the New World as possessions and who were able to develop practices of opposition to Western capital. What Robinson is implying here is that such black radical practices tend to slip through the critical lens of Marxism, despite enacting the very revolutionary project Marxist thought desires.

The case Robinson makes for black radicalism centres on questions of form: “the forms that Black resistance assumed were incomprehensible.....the Black opposition to domination has continued to acquire new forms” (2000, 309, 5). Robinson is telling us

that the incomprehensibility of black radicalism grows out of its incommensurability with Marxism. Black radicalism allowed for the development of forms of insurgency which bypassed Marxist analysis. At best these forms were believed to have “passed beyond the threshold of sanity” (Robinson, 2000, 309). To understand black resistance in the West, Robinson argues it should not be solely assessed on its outcomes. Instead for him, it is vital to grasp the terms on which black radicalism operates and the forms it takes up.

Robinson gives his account of the core features of black radicalism in a short chapter entitled “The Nature of the Black Radical Tradition”. It comes at a significant juncture in *Black Marxism* between Robinson's detailed history of black resistance in the New World, pre and post emancipation, and his critical biographies of three Black intellectuals who emerged at the turn of the Twentieth century (W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright and C.L.R. James). In this essay he steps away from his archive and theorises the “status of the black movement” which was created by the combination of “capitalist slavery and imperialism” (Robinson, 2000, 167). Robinson sets out his most definitive account of the Black radical tradition by posing questions of black resistance in the West. These questions are wide ranging, exhaustive and significant because Robinson uses them to detail the changing and incomprehensible forms black radicalism takes:

What events have been most consistently present in its phenomenology? Which social processes has it persistently reiterated? From which social processes is it demonstrably, that is historically, alienated? How does it relate to the political order? Which ideographic constructs and semantic codes has it most often exhibited? Where have its metaphysical boundaries been most certainly fixed? What are its epistemological systems? (Robinson, 2000, 167)

Robinson undertakes a detailed line of questioning. It is through these questions that he theorises the nature of the Black radical tradition. For Robinson the role of these questions is to locate the patterns which help identify black radicalism. These patterns cut across a range of criteria. Robinson begins with phenomenology and asks if black radicalism is a phenomena then how is it constituted as such? To comprehend it phenomenologically, Robinson suggests it is necessary to understand the forms of sociality at stake in acts of black radicalism. He implies these forms of sociality might not be recognisable as social or even political. They are not immediately recognisable because Black diasporans have operated in the shadows of the normatively social and

political. What is produced by black radicalism are forms of symbolic communication which are never fully recognised as culture, but shape black radicalism as a mode of being. The final question hints that it is through all of these practices that black radicalism is reproduced as knowledge. For Robinson it is clear that black radicalism does function phenomenologically, metaphysically and epistemologically. To grasp its nature though, it is necessary to understand how black radicalism works within and strains against these structures of thought. Robinson makes the case for black radicalism as an immanent critique of Western civilisation.

The questions act as a starting point for Robinson to theorise the nature of the tradition. An examination of the historical archives points to a general “absence of mass violence” amongst Black diasporans (Robinson, 2000, 168). He argues during encounters between Black populations and their oppressors, “Blacks have seldom employed the level of violence that they (the Westerners) understood the situation required” (Robinson, 2000, 168). Robinson does not deny the presence of violence in the Black radical tradition, instead he points to a very different concept of violence and its relationship to radical action. Violence is not used in the service of “material conquest, moral vengeance or political dominance” (Edwards, 2001, 4). For Robinson “it was most often turned inward: the active against the passive....the community against its material aspect” (2000, 168). Robinson is making a critical point about the role of violence in black resistance here. The inward turn suggests violence was not directed towards an external object of oppression, or at least not totally. Violence “was not understood as part of an attack on a system, or an engagement with an abstraction of oppressive structures or relations”, rather it involved “the renunciation of actual being for historical being; the preservation of the ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system that had never allowed for property in either the physical, philosophical, temporal, legal, social or psychic senses. For them defeat or victory was an internal affair” (Robinson, 2000, 168). It is Robinson's focus on the internalised aspects of black radicalism which demands close attention.

Robinson's language of inward turns and preservation is significant and the way he ties it into a notion of “ontological totality” even more so (2000, 168). He suggests black radicalism is a practice concerned as much with its interior status as external outcomes. The turn inward points to a relationship between black radicalism and this ontological totality. The “historical struggles for liberation” cannot be separated from “the continuing development of a collective consciousness....motivated by the shared

sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality” (Robinson, 2000, 171). When Robinson makes the claim that black radicalism was incommensurable with Marxism (and thus incomprehensible to it), it is because as a tradition black radicalism was as much concerned with its internal constitution as external outcomes. To assess black radicalism solely by the outcome of the events which constitute its history would be beside the point. What is required is a simultaneous concern with the preservation of internal philosophical, epistemological, and ideological meanings. Black radicalism appears to work in the service of something internal to it. The focus of the tradition is the preservation and development of the ontological totality Robinson speaks of. This ontological totality is blackness and the question of blackness was inseparable from the forms that black radicalism took. Black diasporic insurgency in the West was always also about preserving a collective interior life, a life which operated under the heading blackness. Black radicalism was also always about preserving the ability to continually ask the question of what that interior life meant, of what blackness meant and how it related to the external oppression affecting black life. As Robinson states, the focus in the Black radical tradition was on “the structures of the mind” as much as material progress (2000, 169).

*Black Marxism* is centred on the relationship between black radicalism (the political project) and blackness (the ontological totality). This relationship has been conducted within and against both Western capital and Marxism by the Black diaspora. Black radicalism has strained against the oppressive structures of everyday life under capital. It has also strained against the forms of resistance legitimised by Marxist thought. All this straining has been conducted in the service of something which strains against black radicalism, its blackness.

### **Afro-pessimism, blackness and black radicalism**

The terms Robinson set up in his 1983 book have come to animate a new discussion within the field of Black studies. Over the previous five years or so a debate has developed over the category of blackness and its relationship to a general black political project. The debate has encompassed a group of Black studies scholars who identify themselves as Afro-pessimists and a mode of thought which has been termed Black optimism. Whether consciously or not, the terms of this debate seem to respond to Robinson's phenomenological, epistemological, and metaphysical concern with

blackness and black radicalism. Both Afro-pessimism and Black optimism are attentive to the status of blackness. They each offer differing accounts of how the task of addressing what Robinson calls an ontological totality can be used as part of a radical program.

Afro-pessimism is a new articulation within Black studies and its leading proponents, Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton work against the notion of blackness as plenitude. This discourse of plenitude has, for them, become common place within Black studies. Not only is it common place but its normalisation has not achieved any substantial political change for African-Americans. Instead Wilderson and Sexton argue blackness operates as a site of structural antagonism. Their pessimism stems from taking seriously the concept of blackness as ontological death. Wilderson and Sexton have developed the concept of Afro-pessimism over a series of books, articles and interviews. For the purposes of this chapter I shall focus on Wilderson's *Red, White and Black* (2010) and Sexton's *Social Text* piece, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the After-Life of Slavery" (2010a). (Also see Wilderson, 2003 & 2008; Sexton, 2003a, 2003b, 2010b & forthcoming).

In *Red, White and Black* Wilderson begins with what he refers to as the unspeakable. The black relationship to modernity, according to Wilderson, is built upon a set of claims that are unspeakable and "impossible to imagine" because there is neither the language nor the desire to articulate these claims (2010, 3). Even when a collective of Black people attempt to speak, they are so dispossessed their claims are deemed unhinged. Wilderson refers to this situation as the political and ethical "(non)ontological" status of blackness (2010, 55). He sees blackness in the West as a mode of total and antagonistic dispossession.

The non-ontology of blackness is the outcome of "the structure of the Slave's domination" (Wilderson, 2010, 9). For Wilderson, it means Black populations in the U.S. exist in the realm of ethical and political impossibility. What Wilderson means by impossibility is "if a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject, as imagined by Marxism and Psychoanalysis, then his or her paradigmatic exile is not simply a function of repressive practices on the part of institutions" (2010, 9). In "People-of-Colour-Blindness" Sexton takes up a similar position with regards to blackness and impossibility. He also views slavery as a structure which created blackness and which now Black people cannot escape from. Slavery, Sexton argues, is an exceptional status whereby Black populations in the U.S suffer. Slavery has rendered blackness

exceptional because it involved the annulment of natal ties: “The nativity of the slave is not inscribed elsewhere in some other (even subordinated) jurisdiction, but rather nowhere at all. The nativity of the slave is foreclosed, undermining from within the potential for citizenship, but also opening the possibility of a truly nonoriginal origin” (Sexton, 2010a, 46). The non-ontology of blackness in Sexton's view destroys the possibility of thinking of slaves and their descendants as human. What this leads to is the impossibility of thinking anything blacks say or do collectively as having any coherency:

what qualifies the condition of the slave is a suffering which not only wrecks the coordinates of any humanism, but also, for the same reason, precludes the generation of a proper political demand directed at a definable object or objective. (Sexton, 2010a, 46-47)

It is clear from both theorists that blackness is not only an impossibility; it is an exceptional impossibility. They interpret blackness as an exception specific to Black people in the U.S and the West in general. Wilderson renders blackness exceptional by positioning it outside the human. Blackness even exists outside the political. He argues self-avowed progressive or radical projects are incapable of reordering this situation. In fact progressivism and radicalism often reproduce the status of blackness because civil society cannot “even contemplate the possibility of an emancipatory project for the Black position” (Wilderson, 2010, 11). For Sexton the exceptional fact of blackness becomes apparent when set against other racially subordinate positions. He is critical of attempts to use blackness as part of an analogical model of thinking racial oppression. Sexton argues blackness stands in distinction to a more general condition of non-blackness:

The latter group is better termed *all nonblacks* (or, less economically, the unequally arranged category of nonblackness), because it is racial blackness as a necessary condition for enslavement that matters most.

Freedom from the rule of slave law requires that one be considered nonblack, whether that nonblack racial designation be 'white', or 'Indian' or, in the rare case, 'Oriental' – this despite the fact that each of those groups has at one point or another laboured under conditions similar to or contiguous with enslaved African-derived groups. (Sexton, 2010a, 36)

Wilderson suggests the non-ontology of blackness, its complete exclusion, is necessary

to sustain modernity: “The imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle Passage. Put another way, No slave, no world” (2010, 11). Wilderson argues the Atlantic slave trade instituted a set of conditions – built upon “gratuitous violence and void of kinship structure” – which turned the African into a black slave, “a being outside of relationality” (2010, 11). For him this non-being became the means of renewing the human, who in turn became the basis for civil society. Slavery “cathedralized” blackness as non-ontology for the purposes of modernity (Wilderson, 2010, 18).

The roots of Wilderson and Sexton's account of blackness lie in the work of Orlando Patterson and Ronald Judy. They take seriously Patterson's reading of slavery as social death. Part of their project is an attempt to recuperate Patterson's 1982 book *Slavery and Social Death: a comparative study*. For Afro-pessimists, the negative critical reception it received at the time of its publication meant it has been undervalued within Black studies. They combine Patterson's thesis with Ronald Judy's reading of the blackness of blacks as “nonrecuperable negativity” in the work of Kant (Judy cited in Wilderson, 2010, 41). What this results in is the foundation of Afro-pessimistic thought: blackness as social death. Wilderson finds various ways of thinking blackness as non-ontological and therefore as death. In *Red, White and Black* he turns to Marx's account of primitive accumulation (slave labour) and capital to do this. Marx cited the difference between primitive accumulation (slave labour) and the worker (proletariat) as the workers ability to gain something symbolic in exchange for labour power (a wage). Marx suggested this gave the worker some degree of agency. The existence of the slave, in contrast, was predicated on being mastered. Thus the slave has a more vexed relationship to agency than the worker. Wilderson looks to complicate Marx's account of primitive accumulation. Rather than the difference between the worker and slave existing only in the workers agency, Wilderson recasts this wage earning capacity as a power. Through this *power* to turn labour into a symbolic wage, the possibility opened up for a worker to purchase a slave. According to Wilderson, all that prevented Marx from seeing this possibility was social convention. A worker did not possess the social or cultural capital to own slaves. As a wage labourer though the possibility of purchasing slaves was in place. According to Wilderson this places the slave outside of Marx's key revolutionary figure, the worker. Furthermore, the very idea of the worker as revolutionary is built upon the idea of the slave having no access to symbolic exchange. Wilderson uses this as evidence that Marx's concept of revolutionary action does not apply to slaves or their

ancestors.

It is this juncture in Marx which allows Wilderson to pursue the thesis of blackness as social death. If the blackness of blacks “refers to an individual who is by definition always already void of relationality” then this opens up slavery as a form of social death (Wilderson, 2010, 18). Wilderson reads the link between slavery and blackness as “fungibility....the condition of being owned or traded” (2010, 14). Blackness as a mode linked to property exists as a “void” without “analog in the suffering dynamics of the ontologically alive” (Wilderson, 2010, 38). Wilderson acknowledges in some instances blackness may involve “feigning ontological capacity” but this feigning is an avoidance of the fact that “Blackness is incapacity in its most pure and unadulterated form” (2010, 38). For Wilderson blackness is that thing against which the ontologically alive create themselves.

Wilderson and Sexton's diagnosis is bleak. They appear to offer no way out of the void which is blackness. It only seems to exist as something which buttresses the human. There is though some room for manoeuvre. They find space for a politics of sorts by way of the non-ontology and non-relationality of blackness. Wilderson believes it is possible to “theorise the impossibility of Black ontology” (2010, 36). A theorisation of blackness can only occur without resort to analogies. Analogies exist on the level of social oppression and they allow oppression to be measured against other social factors. Sexton concurs with Wilderson on this point. He argues that the failures of racial politics in the West have been a result of the rush to analogise. The rush to analogy renders the exceptional status of blackness redundant and limits the possibilities contained within it:

We might, finally, name this refusal *people-of-colour-blindness*, a form of colour blindness inherent to the concept of 'people of colour' to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of anti-blackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimisation under white supremacy – thinking (the afterlife of slavery) as a form of exploitation of colonisation or a species of racial oppression among others. (Sexton, 2010a, 48)

Sexton believes by undoing “people of colour” politics and seriously thinking the non-ontology of the black, that a truly radical politics can get underway. For him blackness does not represent the totality of racial oppression but it is the “(repressed) truth of the political and economic system” (Sexton, 2010a, 48). Wilderson finds his way to a similar position by arguing blackness is a form of “structural suffering” (2010, 36). The

task of theorising the impossibility of black ontology begins *structurally* with freedom. Wilderson places emphasis on structural elements of blackness in opposition to the comparative model. He believes freedom *structures* the anti-foundational relationship between the human and the black. From the perspective of the human, freedom is a contingent experience. Freedom is always a freedom *from* (i.e., comparative). It is a freedom from an oppressive structure which can be measured. In order to understand one's freedom it must be compared to a case of relative unfreedom. Wilderson believes freedom in this sense only operates as experience, it is not ontological. A freedom which is black does not operate this way, instead it needs to be ontological:

Black freedom would be hyperbolic – though no less true – and ultimately untenable: freedom from the world, freedom from Humanity, freedom from everyone (including one's black self). (Wilderson, 2010, 23)

Wilderson argues if such a gratuitous freedom were to be activated it would render the human an impossible category. By that he means in a world of true black freedom the ontologically human would have to be annulled: “one would have to lose one's Human co-ordinates and become Black. Which is to say one would have to die” (Wilderson, 2010, p23).

In comparison with Robinson's theorisation of the Black radical tradition, the positions Wilderson and Sexton take are stark. Phenomenology, social processes, semantic codes and metaphysics are barely possible in their schema. It seems for Afro-pessimists the only black relation to political or philosophical form is anti-relational. Despite their claims of complete non-relationality, they do offer a possibility of freedom through a rethinking of racial politics. In Wilderson's case freedom is operative only through a structural act of antagonistic cleansing violence. It involves subverting the destructive bind between the human and the black. Wilderson and Sexton's discussion of blackness seems to operate only in relation to white supremacy or other racial categories. Blackness comes into being only against the violence of whiteness but exists as a structural absence from it. Afro-pessimism does not correlate with Robinson's account of violence and blackness. In Robinson's version of the Black radical tradition violence is most often turned inward. The primary concern is with the interior status of blackness, rather than the destruction of an external oppressive force. Blackness is preserved and developed as part of strategic concern. This has some relation to an external system of oppression but is not reliant upon it. For Robinson, the notion that

blackness *is* death or *is* non-ontological would indicate a severe limitation in the theoretical frameworks being used.

### **Black optimism, blackness and black radicalism**

It is self-evident that Black optimism is a counter-point to the concept of Afro-pessimism. Black optimism as a strand within Black studies can be attributed to Fred Moten and has been formulated in response to the work of Wilderson and Sexton. Black optimism is not restricted to Moten though, the work of Nahum Chandler and Hortense Spillers can also be placed under the heading of Black optimism. Moten is in conversation with these theorists in order to think blackness as part of a common political project. He is working on a theory of blackness as a condition for radical possibility. In thinking this project he marks his genealogical debt to Cedric Robinson. For Moten black radicalism as a political project is in a symbiotic relationship with blackness as an ontological category. Like Robinson in *Black Marxism*, he keeps the pathways between radicalism and ontology open. Moten echoes Robinson in the view that the events which became the phenomenological manifestation of black radicalism were always twinned with an internal contestation over the forms and meanings of blackness. In this chapter the examination of what Moten calls Black optimism will centre on his 2003 book *In the Break: the aesthetics of the black radical tradition* and two later essays, “Black Op” (2008a) and “The Case of Blackness” (2008b). There are two issues which become apparent in this material, firstly, Moten's contestation with the Afro-pessimistic concept of blackness as social death. Secondly, the fact that blackness is anything but social death becomes evident by way of a phonic materiality at work in the Black radical tradition. Blackness for Moten is the enactment of resistance as the affirmation of social life. Black resistance is the affirmation of social life in constant escape and this constant escape is at work in the sound of black music. I am not turning to Moten's account of Black optimism solely because of his closeness to Robinson's work. The significance of Moten's inclusion in this thesis is due to the attention he gives to phonic materiality. For him the relationship between black radicalism and blackness as ontology is at its most productive when realised sonically. The way Moten organises his work on blackness and radicalism as a consideration of phonic substance means that his is an important contribution to the conceptual concerns of this thesis. Moten's account of phonic materiality speaks to the question of the relationship between black

music and black radicalism.

“The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist” (Moten, 2003, 1). The first line of Moten’s study of black radicalism as performance, *In The Break*, is a neat crystallisation of his thought. He opens the book by offering a definition of blackness which is organised by the object. Blackness is not related to the object in its static form, it is not that which makes the object inanimate. Instead Moten is implying in this opening line that blackness is evidence of the object's capabilities. The object is capable of resistance and it does resist. Blackness is the means by which the object produces that resistance. The blackness of black radicalism emerges for Moten when an object – which is supposed to be the zero end of capacity - begins to resist. What is significant about Moten's formulation is that the object has begun to trouble the understanding of what it is possible for it to do. He has unsettled an understanding of the object by stating it is possible for it to do. By doing so the black object has put into question the values of resistance. Already, it is possible to see the influence of Robinson on Moten's work.

The three categories, “blackness”, “object” and “resistance” are fundamental to Moten’s work. He connects them through two major historical projects. One, the enlightenment pursuit of proper, rational thought and its companion, the proper, rational subject and two, the Atlantic Slave trade, which saw the conversion of captured people into property. Blackness, for Moten, is the category which shapes the relationship between the enlightenment and slavery. Blackness was deemed to be thing the slave had which rendered it an object to be possessed, and conversely allowed the enlightenment subject to claim subject status against it. Moten believes the relationship between enlightenment and enslavement which blackness occupies is organised by way of a rupture. The rupture or break is “where blackness marks simultaneously both the performance of the object and the performance of humanity” (Moten, 2003, 2). This break is used to secure the position of the human. The legitimate subject is defined as coherent against the rupture. Simultaneously, it is this rupture which becomes blackness. For Moten it is the break which becomes crucial because the break is where blackness exists and it is the break which blackness reproduces.

Moten’s focus is on the break as it structures enlightenment thought and blackness. Unlike Wilderson and Sexton he does not think blackness as the total non-ontological outside. The blackness of black performance involves reproducing the break. It’s a reproduction of rupture which reveals blackness is inside as well as outside the human.

Blackness is “a strain that pressurises the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity”, it is an immanent critique of both categories (Moten, 2003, 1). The “broken” relationality at work here is key to understanding the case for blackness Moten presents (2003, 6). Blackness goes to work in this broken relation. For those who have been deemed to be black and have claimed the category it constitutes an organisation of communal life around a break, but because it lives in this broken relation, what blackness reproduces is forms of life, communality, culture, performance, politics and thought which do not always register. Each affirmation of blackness produces a complication of the divide between the object and the human, between the proper and the improper, between those who are perceived to be ontologically alive and dead. Moten argues that these processes begin at the moment the object begins to resist. The black object's resistance is productive of “the aesthetic, political, sexual and racial force – of the ensemble of objects that we might call black performances, black history, blackness” (Moten, 2003, 7). Moten's account of the break is not only centred on blackness as an ontological category, but also encompasses black history and black performance. The theorisation of history, aesthetics and politics along side ontology, is a key component of the work being undertaken in this thesis. Moten provides a conceptual framework, a language even, for thinking about the relationship between black music and black radicalism in terms of their phonic materiality.

Moten's account of blackness and black radicalism diverges from Wilderson and Sexton. The difference lies in their respective uses of relationality. The Afro-pessimists think blackness as a site without relation; it is a void with no reference to the human, which for them means whiteness. Despite making the claim that blackness is without analog, there is still in place a structural relationship to white supremacy within the work of Wilderson and Sexton. In fact white supremacy, in Afro-pessimism, is the structural basis for blackness. The only way blackness can move out of this non-ontological “dead” state is to annul the human, to break that relation, to rupture whiteness. Wilderson proposes a freedom which comes by way of an almost Fanonian act of violence. Moten, in contrast, moves towards a blackness which enacts “the non-exclusionary improvisation of the human” (1999, 234). Black radicalism for him is always a question that works in relation to blackness; it is both interiorised and exteriorised. Black radicalism involves constantly asking questions of what blackness means and this questioning is also always a questioning of the human. Blackness is relational to the human, but it is relational in that it both ties and breaks the relation to

the human. The category of the human and blackness exist in ruptured symbiosis. Moten argues it is just that this broken connection has proved difficult to theorise.

The limitations of Afro-pessimism have been discussed by Moten in a recent series of articles. Although he rarely names Wilderson, Sexton or other Afro-pessimists in these pieces, it is clear that his theorisation of Black social life moves in opposition to the notion of blackness as social death. It is in these articles that the influence of Nahum Chandler upon Moten's account of blackness becomes apparent.<sup>1</sup>

Moten takes issue with the Afro-pessimistic reading of blackness as a site of complete disorder. His problem with Wilderson and Sexton's account of blackness is not only that they view it as a site of dereliction and disorder, but their model of blackness renders it exceptional. According to Moten Afro-pessimism views blackness as the sole property of Black people. Their account of the non-ontology of blackness, in Moten's view, is tied resolutely to Black people. Thus Wilderson and Sexton see social death as a mode of organisation for and only for Black people. Moten critiques the concept of social death in two articles, "Black op" and "The Case of Blackness". He formulates Black optimism in both of these pieces whilst addressing Black Studies and Fanon respectively. Moten does not simply affirm Black social life as a counter to social death, he also maps out why social death is a highly restrictive view of blackness. It is this restrictiveness which, he feels, points to the flaws of Afro-pessimism as a generalisable radical program.

The exchange between Wilderson, Sexton, Moten and Chandler is being staged here because it is a fundamental to the research question shaping this thesis. As much as Cedric Robinson informs the enquiry into the relationship between black music and black radicalism, the debate over the pessimism or optimism of blackness is also a significant factor. This is not to say that the case studies in this thesis represent an attempt to come out in favour of one tendency over another. Instead the research into black music and black radicalism is animated by a tension at the centre of the exchange between these black studies theorists. I believe by paying attention to phonic materiality, it is possible to tap into this tension over the category of blackness and contribute to these debates.

Moten builds his case for black optimism around Nahum Chandler's concept of the paraontological. In Chandler's work on Du Bois he arrives at the paraontological as a way

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<sup>1</sup> This section on Moten's criticism of Afro-pessimism is also taken from a paper and workshop held at Goldsmiths College (Black Skin, White Marx, 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> June 2010).

of thinking about what Du Bois called the problem of the colour line as also always a site of possibility (Chandler, 2011, 7). Moten pays attention to the “para” in paraontological and uses it as a way to think about blackness. For him Afro-pessimism is limited as a concept of blackness, because it reduces the concept to an exceptional group of people. Moten argues that there is a paraontological difference between the concept of blackness and the people who constitute Black life:

Black studies' inordinate feeling for divisions and collections requires every last bit of texture, as an opening gambit held in reserve – the 'paraontological distinction' between blackness and the people (which is to say, more generally, the things) that are called black. (Moten, 2008a, 1744)

The distinction between blackness as a concept and the things that are called black “remains largely unthought” and it is in this space where Moten produces his own thinking (2008a, 1745). For him it is a misinterpretation of the lived experience of Black people which produces the concept of blackness as social death. What that misinterpretation reveals is a pathological desire to think blackness as social death:

The lived experience of blacks is, among other things, a constant demand for ontology of disorder, an ontology of dehiscence, a para-ontology whose comportment will have been (toward) the ontic. (Moten, 2008b, 187)

Instead blackness is paraontological because the lived experience constantly escapes the designation of blackness as social death. Moten, working with and against a pathological urge in Fanon, claims that Black social life is fugitive. He names that fugitive movement as constant escape:

Perhaps the thing, the black, is tantamount to another, fugitive sublimity altogether. Some/thing escapes in or through the object's vestibule: the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out. (Moten, 2008b, 182)

Blackness, for Moten, is not the social death which Wilderson and Sexton take from the work of Orlando Patterson (1982). Instead it is a disruptive ghosting of the ontological. Paraontology is that which is blackness and that which allows blackness to resist the ontological. For Chandler the positions of absolute negativity which are taken up in Afro-pessimism are inadequate. Blackness in his view is a problem for thought and a possibility for it. Chandler reads blackness as “the general possibility of the

otherwise” (Chandler, 2008, 351). This means blackness is not an identity but neither is it an anti-identity. Blackness is always other than both, a “vortex” built on “rhythmic turns” (Chandler, 2008, 347).

Moten develops the paraontology of blackness by thinking about dispossession. Dispossession involves a renunciation of being which is key to the escape mechanisms of paraontology. Within Afro-pessimism a dispossessive ontology is the sole property of the people that the theorists within this strand of Black studies choose to name black. Moten asks how it is possible to claim dispossession as a position which is only for black people. It is the very conflation of dispossession with blackness and then Black people in Afro-pessimism that actually allows blackness to escape, to steal away. It is through the claims of thinkers like Wilderson and Sexton that blackness operates in its paraontological mode. The problem is that Afro-pessimism fails to attune itself to the paraontology at work in its own mode of thought. It cannot attune itself to Black social life:

Black studies concern with what it is to own one's dispossession, to mine what it held in having been dispossessed, makes it more possible to embrace the underprivilege of being sentenced to the gift of constant escape. (Moten, 2008a, 1745)

The notion of constant escape is vital to Moten's account of Black social life as Black optimism. For him the political possibilities of blackness are not the sole property of Black people. In this respect he believes Sexton and Wilderson are missing something in their view that blackness is impossible, unspeakable and exclusively black. Moten is clear that blackness is a set of effects which were aggressively pursued via the enlightenment, the slave trade and discourses of race, to establish a group of people we have come to refer to as Black. Blackness has disproportionately affected Black people and has inflicted violence upon them on a massive scale, but Moten is also clear in stating it is not limited to them, blackness is not the property of Black people:

What Fanon's pathontological refusal of blackness leaves unclaimed is an irremediable homelessness common to the colonised, the enslaved, and the enclosed. This is to say that what is named in the name of blackness is an undercommon disorder that has always been there, that is retroactively *located* there, that is embraced by the ones who stay there while living somewhere else....stolen life disorders positive value just as surely as it is not equivalent to social death or absolute dereliction. (Moten, 2008b, 187)

The under-commonness Moten puts forward works against Sexton's model of black exclusivity. Afro-pessimism works on the basis that blackness has a home, and that home is non-ontological death. For Moten it is not only wrong, but irresponsible to make such claims. Blackness operates in the difference between having and owning. That is the paraontological distinction. Blackness is something people we call black *have* but do not *own* (Moten, 2010):

the paraontological force that is transmitted in the long chain of life and death performances that are the concern of black studies is horribly misunderstood if it is understood as exclusive. Everyone whom blackness claims, which is to say, everyone can claim blackness. (Moten, 2008a, 1746)

Black optimism moves along these lines; it is heard in the resistance of the black object. Black optimism is the practice of a generalisable project because it involves the simultaneous enactment of and escape from the concept of blackness:

black optimism is bound up with what it is to claim blackness and the appositional, run away, phonooptic black operations – expressive of an autopoetic organisation in which flight and inhabitation modify each other – that have been thrust upon it. (Moten, 2008a, 1745)

In Moten's view the extent to which it is possible to say blackness *is* anything, it is a critique of possession, a critique of the idea of property and a critique of regulation. Importantly Moten argues the same paraontological effects apply to black radicalism. Black radicalism is not only “the performance of the general critique of the proper”, it is also “the normative striving against the grain of the very radicalism from which the desire for norms is derived” (Moten, 2008b, 177). Black radicalism is a paraontological practice of blackness because it is not limited to a radical critique of the proper. Black radicalism is also a striving against the very forms of the radicalism it enacts and is in constant escape of itself. It is Cedric Robinson who makes it clear that black radicalism is under an internalised pressure over the question of blackness as much as it is a response to external oppression.

The features which make up Moten's Black optimism all come together in the attention he gives to the phonic materiality of black radicalism. For him black radicalism's paraontological strain against itself is operative as sound. The phonic is the means through which blackness moves with greatest intensity. Having spent time

outlining how Moten understands the category of blackness, it is now necessary to address the specific ways in which phonic materiality is productive and reflective of this paratontological strain. As stated above, Moten's account of blackness and/as phonic substance informs the focal point of enquiry for this thesis: the relationship between black music and black radicalism.

Moten makes his strongest case for the phonic materiality of black radicalism through a reading of Marx in *In the Break*. He returns to the subject of the opening line of the book when reading Marx: that fact of the object's resistance. He equates the object with what Marx calls the commodity and Moten sets his theory of blackness against Marx's discussion of the fetishism of the commodity. The theory of blackness he puts forward is constructed through Frederick Douglass' slave narrative and Marx's discussion of the commodity in relation to value in his *Capital Vol 1*. The crux of Marx's argument on the commodity is that it possesses no inherent value. The value a commodity or object is believed to possess is merely a magical "chemical substance" imagined by man (Moten, 2003, 8). Marx set out to prove his thesis by imagining a scenario where the commodity could lay claim to its inherent value. This imaginary scenario is one in which the commodity is capable of speech. It is a case of the commodity declaring "I have value". What is critical is not what the commodity says but *that it is saying*. Speech, for Marx, is a sign of inherent value; it is that which man has and the commodity does not. Moten notes that what Marx is doing here is imagining the speech of the commodity in order to dismiss it. The idea a commodity could speak is absurd for Marx and he seeks to show its absurdity by imagining the object speaking. Marx's view is that a commodity does not have any value other than that which man ascribes to it, to think its has inherent value, that it can speak, is ludicrous.

Moten is interested in Marx's imagining of the idea of the object's speech. Even though Marx does so in order to annul the very prospect of its realisation, Moten seeks to use the opening created by this theoretical (im)possibility. Into this opening he inserts "the historical reality of commodities who spoke – of labourers who were commodities, before, as it were, the abstraction of labour power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and 'freedom'" (Moten, 2003, 6). What Moten is referring to here is blackness, the history of objects which resist. He looks to disrupt Marx by invoking this history reality. He does so by turning to Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* and the account he gives of his Aunt Hester's beating at the hands of her slave master. In contrast to Marx, Douglass' account

is a real instance of the commodity's speech and Moten argues Douglass' recording of his Aunt Hester "cuts Marx" (2003, 14). Aunt Hester's beating is much more than a recording of the commodity's speech, Moten refers to it as a recording of "the shrieking commodity" (2003, 14). This shriek anticipates Marx's imaginary scene and it refuses his attempt to dismiss the idea of the commodity's speech as impossible. This is the case because Aunt Hester's screams produce "appositional" twin impulses (Moten, 2003, 21). In one sense the beating becomes the violent enforcement of her object status. Her screams are evidence of the fact that she is property and this evidence is organised through her blackness. At the same time, the beating produces the screams which function as a refusal of the object status the master is attempting to enforce. Her screams are a means of disrupting her fungibility which once again moves through her blackness. Her blackness becomes the site of production for the "(phono-photo-porno)graphic disruption the shriek carries out" (Moten, 2003, 14).

Moten sets up Aunt Hester's beating as a primal scene for Douglass. In his own words, Douglass came to realise what enslavement truly meant after witnessing the beating. Moten argues Douglass' account carries greater significance. In its disrupting of Marx, it is also an archetypal primal scene of blackness. Black radical performance is involved in the reproduction of this type of event. The "phonography of the very screams....open the way into the knowledge of slavery and the knowledge of freedom" (Moten, 2003, 21). The reproduction of blackness as the reproduction of a break occurs by way of the sounds the object makes. This "irruption of phonic substance" is the freedom drive that maintains Moten's account of blackness in the break (2003, 14). Blackness comes into play by way of "the commodity who's speech sounds embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign. Such embodiment is also bound to the (critique of) reading and writing, oft conceived by clowns and intellectuals as the natural attribute of whoever would hope to be known as human" (Moten, 2003, 12). The sonic content of this process is crucial because it is the means by which the black object begins to resist. Thus as Moten argues, this phonic materiality is "painfully and hiddenly disclosed always and everywhere in the tracks of black performance and black discourse on black performance" (Moten, 2003, 18).

It is worth noting that Moten also ascribes a *porno-graphic* disruption to Aunt Hester's shriek. His identification of this scene as sexual points to further elements at work in Moten's theorisation of blackness. The phonic materiality Moten emphasises moves along a ruptured line dividing the subject and the object. When the object resists,

blackness as phonic substance emerges from the rupture and is reproductive of it. What Moten also does, by way of Aunt Hester's commodity shriek, is embed sexual difference into the phonic materiality of blackness. The breakdown of the divide separating the object and the subject also involves a complication of sexual difference. The object's ability to speak produces a black improvisation of the human which is necessarily libidinal. Pornographic disruption becomes a central feature of *In the Break* and allows Moten to introduce Black feminist thought and Black queer theory into his theorisation of blackness as phonic substance. These same areas of scholarship are also prominent within this thesis. As the case studies proceed issues such as gender difference, sexual difference, masculinity, heteronormativity and natality, will become part of the discussion about blackness, radicalism and their phonic materiality. This will require a theoretical commitment to the work of scholars within fields such as Black feminism and Black queer theory as indivisible to the task of conceptualising the relationship between black music and black radicalism. As will become apparent later in this chapter, questions of sexual and gender difference are not only part of a general discussion about blackness and radicalism. They also had an inflection specific to the Black Consciousness movement.

### **Blackness, phonic materiality and methodology**

Returning to Moten, he argues it is in performances of blackness that the phonic modality of black radicalism is at work. The disruptive phonic substance which lives in the break is the basis for black performance. It is Moten's argument that blackness as phonic substance is the condition of possibility for blackness as political *and* performative practice which informs his inclusion in this thesis. His importance becomes even more apparent when he puts together the following formulation: "black radicalism is (like) black music" (Moten, 2003, 24). By examining this formulation closely, I can detail how Moten's account of phonic materiality feeds into my research aims, because he too seems to have identified a relationship between the two categories at the centre of the thesis. In particular, I can outline how the use of phonic materiality in this thesis is discursive and intellectual, rather than a disciplinary and technical undertaking.

With the statement "black radicalism is (like) black music", Moten appears to be reducing black radicalism to black music. On closer examination though the

formulation is about anything but reduction. Rather than a reduction of black radicalism and black music, there is a destabilisation of the categories. He is holding something open in and as the space between black music and black radicalism. The formulation hinges on Moten's use of the bracketed "like". If the brackets are removed, one is left with "black radicalism is like black music". This is an undemanding statement and effectively states there is a likeness between the two. The relationship could even be thought of as metaphorical. Black radicalism and black music may be *like* one another, but they are also distinct practices. Alternatively the brackets could be sealed completely to erase the "like" and Moten's formulation becomes: "black radicalism *is* black music". Bracketing off the "like" makes the formulation more definitive. It becomes a declaration about the interchangeability of both practices. When listening to black music one is also listening to black radicalism. When practising black radicalism, black music is also being produced.

It is these two possibilities Moten's formulation holds open: black radicalism is like black music, and black radicalism is black music. By holding both versions of the formulation open, he never allows the two categories to settle. The refusal to let them settle means that the relationship between black music and black radicalism is paraontological. The relationship between them remains paraontological because it is defined by phonic materiality. It is phonic substance which keeps these categories in productive symbiosis. Moten's account of blackness as phonic materiality is important to this thesis for that very reason. Using his formulation as a reference point, the question of the relationship between black music and black radicalism does not necessarily need to arrive at definitive answers. Instead the research question animates a critical enquiry into the category of blackness. The research question activates an enquiry into the ways blackness is produced (whether materially or psychically), which encompasses both the political and the performative. What Moten's concern with phonic materiality and blackness allows for is the possibility of keeping the mode of enquiry open. In the case studies which follow this chapter, the question of the relationship between black music and black radicalism is never settled. This is because reaching a settlement is not the issue. Instead I am interested in how, during the historical moment of Black consciousness and Black popular music in mid Twentieth century America, blackness was produced from within, and across, the music and the radicalism. My intention is to study James Brown and Amiri Baraka, Martin Luther King and Sam Cooke, The League of Black Revolutionary Workers and Motown, in order to track how

the blackness they produced pressurised the categories of black music and black radicalism, and how that blackness insistently came to pressurise itself.

The proposal I have just set out is organised around the stakes of naming phonic materiality as the methodological focal point of this thesis. The emphasis being placed on the sonic is not motivated by disciplinary aims. It is not a technical exercise (although the technical aspects of assembling an archive made up of phonic substance will be addressed later in this chapter). Instead the use of phonic materiality in this thesis is discursive. The study of phonic substance is the primary means of analysing the intellectual and conceptual questions about the blackness of black radicalism and black music. Phonic materiality allows for an exploration of the ontological, phenomenological and epistemological operations of blackness set out by Cedric Robinson. Moten took these operations on from Robinson and, by way of phonic materiality, made the case for blackness as a constant animation of the political and the performative. Putting phonic materiality to use in this thesis involves paying close attention to the activity of sounds and thinking about how something sounds black and radical; whether the formal qualities of the sound have any relationship to its blackness or radicalism, or whether its qualities are defined by sonic content; and speculating on what this tells us about the broader black radical tradition and the category of blackness.

The reason for emphasising the discursive aspects of phonic materiality ahead of its technicalities, is due to my commitment to Black studies. I am committed to studying the category of blackness, the history of the black radical tradition, and I am committed to taking black performance seriously as a manifestation of both the category and the tradition. I believe that focussing on phonic materiality as it triangulates each of these features, is the most productive way of fulfilling those commitments.

### **Blackness, black radicalism and black music**

Moten's work on blackness and/as phonic materiality is a prominent feature of this thesis. It shapes the conceptual and intellectual content of the research questions. But Moten is not the only theorist contributing to the enquiry into black music and black radicalism. There are other significant accounts of black music, which also emphasise the relationship between its material form and its insurgent content as part of a general black radical practice.

The subject of black music has often been used to stage discussions about the politics

and meanings of blackness. Some of the first major studies of black music in the United States were historical. Amiri Baraka's 1963 *Blues People* established the model for how these studies worked. Baraka used black music as a form through which the African captive's transformation into Black in the U.S. could be understood. Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1978) and Sam A Floyd Jr's *The Power of Black Music* (1996) follow similar paths. Levine traces the history of an black oral tradition which helped slaves survive captivity and generated a post-emancipation culture. Floyd takes an approach whereby black music in the U.S has always carried an African memory as well as the memory of separation. Influenced by the work of Henry Louis Gates and poststructuralist thought, Houston A. Baker developed the theory of the blues matrix in his *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: a vernacular theory* (1987).

Much of this work in Black studies had attended to folklore practices, lyrics and textual analysis as a way to think about how black music informed blackness. It wasn't until Paul Gilroy entered the debate that there was a consistent focus on the sonic content of the music. Gilroy addressed the relationship between Black diasporas in the West, their cultural activities, and their responses to the conditions of modernity. In doing so he prioritised the sonic specificity of black diasporic music. For him the music's sonic content is the site of contestation over the meanings of black diasporic culture. It is through black music that black cultures have disrupted the clean efficiencies of modernity. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* is Gilroy's most extensive account of all these issues. The book laid the groundwork for his discussion of the relationship between the music of black diasporans and their status in the West. It is arguable *The Black Atlantic* also set a new agenda within the field of cultural studies for analysis of black cultures and black music. Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic complements Moten's reading of the paraontology of blackness. There is correlation between Moten's notion of the break which is blackness in constant escape and Gilroy's "slave sublime" which will be addressed later in this section (Gilroy, 1993a, 37).

Gilroy begins with the status of black as a colour and value in the West. For him black is antagonistic because it produces the binarism of black and white and in turn this establishes the manichean discourse of race. Black diasporas in the West have occupied this antagonism because they have been framed as the source of racial difference by the enlightenment project. Against the blackness of Blacks, Gilroy argues that

enlightenment thinkers constructed modern notions of the proper nation state and legitimate forms of racial belonging. This “antagonistic relationship” has been “marked out by the symbolism of colours which adds to the conspicuous cultural power of their central Manichean dynamic” (Gilroy, 1993a, 1).

For Gilroy Black diasporans have not been inactive agents whilst these processes took place. Pointing to the work of numerous Black intellectuals, he argues Black diasporans have always “understood this connection” (Gilroy, 1993a, 2). Not only have they understood it, they have also always sought to break away from the connection. Black diasporic culture has consistently moved in “pursuit of freedom, citizenship and social and political autonomy” (Gilroy, 1993a, 2). Much like Cedric Robinson, Gilroy is not interested in the goals of such pursuits, instead what he gives priority to is the process of seeking freedom itself. This freedom drive was always productive of something: “the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating and remembering” (Gilroy, 1993a, 3). Such structures inform “the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation” that Gilroy calls the black Atlantic (1993a, 4).

The black Atlantic acts as disruption of form, as well as a method of collective organisation. In terms of disruption, Gilroy argues black Atlanticism resists those racial boundaries which come about through thinking blackness as antagonism: “The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through this desire to transcend.....the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (Gilroy, 1993a, 19). Gilroy also points to “the forms of resistance and accommodation intrinsic to modern Black political culture” (1993a, 29). Black Atlanticism does not only seek to rupture the systems of domination at work in enlightenment thought, it is also a practice of building counter structures. For Gilroy, there is a constant attempt to break away from the systematic idea of blackness only as antagonism and start another collective project which leads to “the restless, recombinant, qualities of the black Atlantic's affirmative political cultures” (1993a, 31).

The political and conceptual restlessness Gilroy describes is also directed at internal concepts of Black diasporic culture. Black Atlanticism elides both homogeneity and virulent strains of anti-essentialism. The dangers of seeking out “the highly prized but doggedly evasive essence of black artistic and political sensibility” are obvious for Gilroy (1993a, 31). His critique of anti-essentialism is more nuanced. Black anti-

essentialism he argues is “a pluralistic position which affirms blackness as an open signifier and seeks to celebrate complex representations of a black particularity that is *internally* divided” (Gilroy, 1993a, 32). Such pluralism is dangerous according to Gilroy because it overdetermines race as a social construct, this leads to an ignorance about the way in which race can be used to have powerful material effects.

What is at stake in Gilroy's account of black Atlanticism is a process of rupture which holds black diasporic culture together. The key to understanding how this is possible is Gilroy's account of the slave sublime. Gilroy's is a unique reading of the relationship between enslavement and black diasporic cultures because he views slavery as “a living intellectual resource” (1993a, 39). It is the generative source for the political and aesthetic project which is the black Atlantic.

Gilroy sets up the slave sublime as a contrast to the more common reading of slavery and black diasporic culture. He argues that slavery has often had been understood as a “site of black victimage” (Gilroy, 1993a, 189). In this model, narratives of black tradition have been sought out to counter the victim narrative that point to homogeneous accounts of “a black civilisation anterior to modernity” which survived slavery (Gilroy, 1993a, 190). The danger with this narrative is slavery becomes “a cluster of negative associations that are best left behind” (Gilroy, 1993a, 189). Gilroy argues this leads to a collective inability to remain attentive to continued injustice and violence.

Gilroy points to several black Atlantic thinkers and artists who have used slavery as a basis for their practices. These figures undermine the attempt to locate a heroic black past prior to enslavement. What they have pointed to is that the Atlantic Slave trade was the means of enforcing blackness, in turn blackness became the rupture against which modernity was built. The intellectual, aesthetic and political practices of black Atlanticism point to the “shared sense that the modern world was fragmented along axes constituted by racial conflict and could accommodate non-synchronous, heterocultural modes of social life in close proximity” (Gilroy, 1993a, 197). The “catastrophic rupture of the middle passage” became the impossible centre around which black counter-modernities were produced and contested (Gilroy, 1993a, 197). For Gilroy, using enslavement as an irruptive source does not mean black Atlanticism is limited to performances about it, rather, slavery becomes a foundational experience which shapes the form and intellectual challenge of black diasporic thought and performance:

That they assume this form is all the more striking because the new genre seems

to express a cultural decision not to transmit details of the ordeal of slavery openly in story and song. Yet these narratives of love and loss systematically transcend other forms of yearning and mourning associated with histories of dispersal and exile and the remembrance of unspeakable terror. (Gilroy, 1993a, 201)

The slave sublime works as an irruptive engine for black Atlantic practices: “a catastrophe which prohibits the existence of their art at the same time as demanding its continuance” (Gilroy, 1993a, 218). Gilroy refers to this as “the aporetic status of post-emancipation black art” (1993a, 218).

His account of the slave sublime shares much with Fred Moten and the break which is and (re)produces blackness. For Moten the radicalism of black performances are organised through the break. Black performances are an attempt to build culture on ruptured ground. They move along the tension between what Gilroy calls their prohibition (as black) and their necessity (as life). Again, much like Moten, he situates black diasporic music at the forefront of the slave sublime because the music is the most potent site of production of black Atlanticism as an insurgent break.

The co-existence of black Atlanticism as a counter-culture of modernity and “black musical expression” is self-evident for Gilroy (1993a, 36). Black music is neither tied to “the expression of an essential, unchanging sovereign self or as the effluent from a constituted subjectivity that engages contingently from the endless play of racial signification” (Gilroy, 1993a, 36). It elides the “oppositions between essentialists and pseudo-pluralists” (Gilroy, 1993a, 36). Black music is able to move within this space because of the sonic forms it takes. The belief that black cultural forms can be divided into essentialist and anti-essentialist camps is, for Gilroy, the result of an emphasis on textuality alone. The focus on written language in Black studies and Cultural studies has led to these stagnated positions. Black music “provides a model of performance which can supplement and partially displace concern with textuality” (Gilroy, 1993a, 39). The music, as a formal consideration, is not reducible to text.

In the case of black music, sonic form and content are tied to “the unspeakable terrors of the slave experience” (Gilroy, 1993a, 73). To restate, Gilroy is not to saying black music is only about enslavement, instead he is arguing that the middle passage operates as a foundational rupture which has shaped the form as well as content of black music. It is this rupture which places music at the heart of black Atlanticism as a project of counter modernity. As Gilroy states “though they were unspeakable, there terrors were not inexpressible” (1993a, 73).

To grasp black diasporic music's expressive qualities “requires a different register of analytic concepts” (Gilroy, 1993a, 78). For Gilroy different analytic concepts are required because there is a connectedness in the music between its function as a site of aesthetic experimentation and its moral imperatives. The connection between the form and content of black music is tied to the issue of textuality, which have been intertwined since “the enforced separation of slaves from literacy” (Gilroy, 1993a, 36). Listening to black music, Gilroy argues, involves “making sense of musical performances in which identity is fleetingly experienced in the most intensive ways and sometimes socially reproduced by means of neglected modes of signifying practices” (1993a, 78). Formally black music has engaged in “black struggles by communicating information, organising consciousness and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency” (Gilroy, 1993a, 36). It is, for Gilroy, a testing ground for the forms black political struggle needs to take. These formal concerns feed into the moral content of black diasporic music. Gilroy is interested in “the ethical value of the music and its status as an ethnic sign” but the two are not easily conflated (1993a, 36). The music is not insurgent simply because it is deemed black, neither though can the two things be entirely divorced from one another. By way of Toni Morrison, the question becomes: is black music radical because it is made by black people? Or is it radical and black because of the way in which it is made? (Gilroy, 1993b, 181). Moten and Chandler would refer to this as the paraontological status of black music.

Within Black studies and Cultural studies there has been a recent return to black music. This work can be broadly divided into two categories. One strand has seen the attempt to renew the previous work on black music in light of recent cultural trends (Ramsey, 2004; Phinney, 2005). The other is a more critical attempt to rethink the category of black music itself. Ronald Radano’s *Lying Up A Nation* (2003) can be placed in the latter strand. He takes the view that the category of black music has been over theorised and as a result it has not been adequately historicised. Couching his argument within the United States, Radano believes both the historical discursivity of race and the sonic content of music have not been accounted for in discussions about black music. The category has been theorised in a way which reinforces a set of assumed racial binaries. This “lie” covers up the truth of the inter-racial make up of black music and of the U.S. as a whole. Radano wants to tell another story, “one that affirms the importance of cultural distinctions to the making of black identities while also recognising the efficacy of commitments to singular notions of meaning and form”

(2003, xiii). This means not limiting black music to the “ideologies of race....but also to a flexibility in articulating a broad range of meaning....seen this way black music’s dynamism and heterogeneity become not limitations but sources of potency” (Radano, 2003, xiii). Radano is looking to complicate the relationship between black music and “the myth of a consistent and stable socio-racial position of 'blackness'” (2003, 3). He argues the blackness of black music, both internally and externally, has been used as part of numerous “strategies of containment” which has disallowed black music's ability to address “the contingencies of social and cultural change” (Radano, 2003, 3).

Radano's approach outlines how the music is shaped discursively. He argues it has been too easily identified with specific sonic traits: “soulful, rhythmically affecting, based on collective engagements of call and response, and expressive of multiple levels of feeling and desire” (Radano, 2003, 5). He argues these features stand in place of the blackness of black music. For Radano there is little historical or empirical basis for such categorisations. The music, in the U.S. at least, referred to as black, only began to be recorded in any significant way around the turn of the Twentieth century. Prior to that there is no substantial record of what the music of Black Americans sounded like. Added to this, Radano believes Black Americans were scattered too widely across the country, and subject to too many socio-cultural variations to develop a singular musical style. Despite the common experience of enslavement and “the legacies of oppression and segregation that undoubtedly contributed to black music's distinctiveness [these factors] are not enough to sustain arguments of an unyielding black essence any more than parallel claims of totalities of European heritage or frontier independence defend white ones” (Radano, 2003, 5).

For Radano there is a problematic essentialism associated with the category of black music. Having set out his position, he moves closer to the concepts put forward by Gilroy and Moten. Radano is very clear about not falling into the traps of anti-essentialism Gilroy outlined and he argues it is critical to “reinforce the role of black music as a marker of blackness” (Radano, 2003, xiii). Radano takes this to mean that black music places the category of blackness under pressure. Thus, the blackness of black music also involves an interrogation of its own basis as black: “black music emerges as part of a broader ideological configuration and system of relations that repeatedly reinvented the substance, indeed the very ontology of black music as such” (Radano, 2003, 13).

Radano exemplifies his argument by pointing to types of black performance Moten

would recognise. The defining sonic quality of black music is the point at which those sonic qualities begin to undo the blackness of the black. He cites the slaves use of the voice as such a moment:

voice represented the most sonically conspicuous possession of a body otherwise possessed. The vocal utterance provided slaves with an expressive tool, an audible social force that served to construct group networks and structures of meaning. (Radano, 2003, 14)

Radano takes a similar line to Moten, in that he thinks it is the slave's (as object) ability to use voice that is the foundation for black music. When the captive produces its own sound it begins to disrupt the blackness that has been used to render it an object. At the same time, the object's ability to speak is realised through the same blackness, it is reclaimed through that sound. For Radano the object's sonic resistance achieves two things; it undermines the apparent difference between itself and the human, and claims a broken sonic ground as the place where the blackness of black music resides:

sonic materiality – the miracle of sound arising from the formerly material-less, possessed bodies of African-American slaves – informs the epistemological contours of modernity. Black music epitomises a formulation of sound into text and back again as a social articulation of utterance I am calling in this study *resonance*. (Radano, 2003, 23)

That which Radano names as resonance works along similar lines to Gilroy's reading of black music and the slave sublime. The music is an outcome of the status of Black diasporans within modernity. Its sonic materiality offers methods of countering the violent racial singularity of modernity by pursuing other structures of feeling and modes of organisation:

black music therefore projects a...unity momentarily and fleetingly, only to return us to a cursed modernity and its antagonisms....The miracle [black music] projects....is the presence out of the loss that slavery represents, fulfilling in sound a victory against the enduring scepticism and doubt of a presumably superior whiteness. (Radano, 2003, 23)

By way of Gilroy it becomes clear Radano's critique of the blackness of black music is not built upon pluralism. He does not deny “the racial experience residing in the power of black music” (Radano, 2003, 40). Yet this racial experience “is not a directory of racial essence but a sounding articulation of the 'slave sublime’” (Radano, 2003, 40).

The blackness of black music, he argues, lives in its phonic materiality.

### **Historiographies of the Black Consciousness movement**

So far the research question has been addressed in theoretical terms, which have been set by a series of debates taking place within the field of Black studies. It is important though to also write theory in historical terms. In this respect questions about the blackness of black radicalism and black music in this thesis are couched within what Cedric Robinson named as the black radical tradition. The research questions are also informed by the way Moten takes on Robinson's notion of a black radical tradition and thinks it as sonic practice. Geographically the events from within the tradition to be studied in this thesis occurred in the U.S. Temporally they cover the years between 1955 and 1971. This manifestation of the Black radical tradition, occurring within the U.S., has been given many names: the Black Consciousness movement, the Black freedom struggle, the Black freedom movement, the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, the Black revolutionary struggle. For the purposes of consistency this specific manifestation of the Black radical tradition will be referred to as the Black Consciousness movement. The choice of name is only one part of the task. The other is to ask what it is the movement did in the U.S. over this period and how it is understood historically. The methods of historicisation used to describe the movement have shaped the way it has been understood as an event.

The Black Consciousness movement in the United States from 1955 to 1971. The combination of event, location and period creates a list of associations. They point to names, dates, and organisations which are so numerous they threaten to become limitless: Rosa Parks; Martin Luther King; Montgomery; SCLC; Atlanta; Little Rock High School, 1957; SNCC; Medgar Evers; Robert Williams; James Baldwin; the March on Washington, 1963; Civil Rights Act, 1964 ; Voting Rights Act, 1965; Fannie Lou Hamer and the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party; Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam; Watts Riots, 1965 ; Black Nationalism; Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka; and the Black Arts Movement; Ron Karenga; Stokely Carmichael; Black Power; Huey Newton; Bobby Seale; Eldridge Cleaver; the California State Capitol Building, Sacramento 1967; the Black Panther Party for Self Defence; Fred Hampton; Angela Davis; the Umbra Poets; Detroit rebellion, 1967; Newark rebellion, 1967; the Audubon Ballroom, Harlem 1965; Lorraine Motel, Memphis 1968.

All of these names, events and organisations can be placed under the heading of the Black Consciousness movement in the U.S. between 1955 and 1971 and many more could be added to it. There are three reasons for producing this cursory list as a way to discuss the Black Consciousness movement. Firstly the run of names, events and organisations emphasise the driving force that the movement constituted. If the movement was about anything, it was about a black desire for freedom through self-organisation. The movement was “never limited to [simply] securing the rights of black people” (Singh, 2004, 2). Instead “Black struggles for justice, dignity and self-respect had always been about achieving a broader transformation of the United States into an equitable society.” (Singh, 2004, 2). The struggle was not about achieving a place within American society as it stood. It was a massive attempt to restructure the systems of exploitation and oppression at work in the country which had had the most negative impact upon Black Americans. Thus the Black Consciousness movement “had a habit of exceeding the sanctioned boundaries and brokered compromises of the established political order” (Singh, 2004, 4). It is with this sense of a major transformative project in mind that the Black Consciousness movement is being invoked as a manifestation of the Black radical tradition.

Secondly, the list represents the multifarious aspects of the Black Consciousness movement. Although the list could have gone on for much longer, it contains contesting names, events and organisations. Despite some of the ideological disparities they all operate under the heading of the Black Consciousness movement. The indication being there was never only one model for the movement. It was never a singular project; yet it constitutes a coherent aspect of the Black radical tradition.

Finally, the list has been arranged in a deliberate way. It represents a crude attempt to replicate the narratives applied to the Black Consciousness movement. The story of the movement is often told through the transition from Civil Rights to Black Power. The story of this transition often becomes one about the differences between non-violent protest and armed militancy. It is also about a move from the rural South to the urban North. The common narrativisation of the movement has been presented in the form of a list in order to problematise it. The Black Consciousness movement in the U.S. was never as simple as a shift from the Southern based non-violence of Civil Rights to the urban militancy of Black Power. As part of the Black radical tradition, its transitions were always much more complex.

Recently there have been attempts to address these historiographical issues. The

source of contention for historians of the Black Consciousness movement is the apparent differences between Civil Rights and Black Power. Robin D.G. Kelley argues “the story of the shift from civil rights to 'Black Power' has been told so many times, in books, documentary films, on African-American history courses all across the United States, that it has become a kind of common sense” (Kelley, 2003, 60). For Nikhil Pal Singh the move from Civil Rights to Black Power is misinterpreted to the extent that:

At this point a series of sudden, coincidental shifts are said to have occurred: from Civil Rights to Black Power; south to north; nonviolent to violent; tolerant to divisive; integrationist to black nationalist; patriotic to anti-American, all conspiring to fracture the movement, undermine political support and create a widespread public backlash against what were now seen as excessive black demands. (Singh, 2004, 5)

Peniel E. Joseph views such a narrative as an attempt to apportion blame for the apparent failures of the movement:

Such a description creates a situation in which the BPM [Black Power movement] can be conveniently blamed for the demise of the Civil Rights Movement, rather than being viewed as an alternative to the ineffectiveness of Civil Right demands in critical areas of American life. (Joseph, 2006, 3)

The attempt to frame Civil Rights as “good” and Black Power as “bad” has an effect on how the entire movement has been historicised. This narrative has become prevalent in terms of thinking the Black Consciousness movement as part of the Black radical tradition. The abbreviated periodisation “fails to recognise the historical depth and heterogeneity of black struggles against racism, narrowing the political scope of black agency and reinforcing a formal legalistic view of black equality” (Singh, 2004, 5-6). The fault with this framing of the Black Consciousness movement is also an issue for Adolph Reed Jr. He argues the movement has been poorly historicised because it has only been understood in terms of its outcomes. The problem Reed has with this is it leads to a structural reductionism “once Civil Rights and Black Power activism are reduced to their outcomes, what remains of their genesis is only an objectified tale of the linear unfolding of their present arrangements” (Reed, 1986, 5). This “structuralist and empiricist” method of reading the movement suppresses “the moments of opposition constituted in them both as utopian vision and programmatic radicalism. No matter how fleeting or marginal the oppositional tendencies in black activism were, they existed as discrete options among a number of embedded possibilities in contention to

steer the movement's articulation” (Reed, 1986, 5). The case Reed is making is for a much more nuanced reading of the Black Consciousness movement. He eschews the apparent inevitability of the transition from non violence to militant self defence and instead argues the movement was always in a flux. The question over what form activism should take was constantly posed and at the same time there was a perpetual desire for black unity.

Singh, Kelley and Joseph offer historiographical frameworks which address Reed's concerns. For them the problems of this “neat typology” which “obscures more than it reveals” are periodical and geographical (Kelley, 2003, 62). Singh and Joseph concern themselves with periodisation. They address this issue by respectively coining the terms “Long Civil Rights era” and “Long Black Power movement”. In both cases they are looking to move beyond the limited temporal frame of the 1960s. What Singh calls the short Civil Rights movement account only allows the movement to be seen as a temporary burst of radical energy which lasted a decade. Singh and Joseph are interested in stretching the periodisation of the movement (Joseph to just after the Second World War and Singh as far back as the 1930s). Their aim is to rethink Black Consciousness' current status as a sudden and reactive project. Instead, for them, the movement was the outcome of much lengthier strains of black radicalism in the U.S. which supported both intellectual thought and grass roots organisations.

Adopting this practice, Kelley argues the narrative of the Black Consciousness movement should also not be restricted to the U.S. It is critical to track the relationship between the movement in the U.S. and international Black liberation struggles taking place at the same time. The Black Consciousness movement in the U.S. was the outcome of a flow of ideas across the diaspora:

the most radical elements of the black freedom movement, the movement and activists that spoke of revolution, socialism, and self-determination, and looked to the Third World for models of Black liberation in the the U.S. These movements, while often small and sometimes isolated, confound our narrative of the black freedom movement. (Kelley, 2003, 62)

What Singh, Kelley, Joseph and Reed are arguing for is two fold. Firstly, the Black Consciousness movement was not the result of a spontaneous response to oppression. It was part of a longer collage of events which started much earlier than is thought and took their inspiration from far wider. Secondly, once it was underway, the movement never settled on a coherent path. There was no sudden break from Civil Rights to Black

Power. Instead the values of black radical action were always being contested. The contestations from within the Black Consciousness movement were also made apparent through questions of gender and sexuality. In fact gender and sexual relations were one of the central fault lines of the movement, but have not often been given critical attention. The mid 1960s saw the formation of a militant Black feminist project which pushed for the reassessment of the hyper-masculine and misogynist ideological positions within the movement (Wallace, 1978; Giddings, 1984; Collins, 2000). The Black feminist project and more recent Black queer revaluations of the movement are necessary to the examination of Black Consciousness taking place in this thesis. By extension this will involve thinking about how, if at all, gender and sexual differences apparent within the movement resonated in Black popular music at the time. This aspect of the research will not be restricted to the more formal documentation of either the movement or the music. Instead gender and sexual difference will form part of the analysis of blackness and radicalism through their phonic materiality.

### **Black Popular music and the Black Consciousness movement**

The task at hand is to take the question – *what is the relationship between black music and black radicalism?* - and think it through the mid twentieth century Black Consciousness movement in the U.S. It is by taking a conceptual question and staging it historically that this study engages with the Black radical tradition. It is important to remember that this thesis is not only a study of the Black Consciousness movement. The research question is built on the possibility of a relation between the movement and Black popular music. The notion that there may be a relation between them is justified by the fact that as the Black Consciousness movement developed, an almost parallel emergence of Black popular music came into existence. Like the movement, it also operated under different names (r'n'b, soul and funk). The explosion of Black popular music in the American mainstream also seemed to parallel the increased visibility of activist politics. Like the Black Consciousness movement, r'n'b, soul and funk allowed blackness to become a public concern. The question of the collapsibility of the two practices (to what extent was Black popular music part of the Black Consciousness movement. To what extent was the movement part of the music? Was the music *in* the movement? Was the movement *in* the music?) is central to this thesis. The research is organised around the possibility of a paraontological slide between Black

## Consciousness and Black popular music.

The question of the relationship between black music and black radicalism was posed during the height of the Black Consciousness movement by Amiri Baraka, a writer, poet, playwright, essayist, and activist who was at the forefront of several Black Consciousness projects during the 1960s and 1970s. Baraka constantly explored the basis for a collective black political project and a collective black artistic practice. During his nationalist phase in 1966 Baraka penned the essay “The Changing Same: RnB and New Black Music”, which closed his book *Black Music*, published a year later. *Black Music* was made up of music reviews he had written over the previous six years. During this period Baraka covered a burgeoning sound he named “new Black music” and has since been canonised as free jazz (Jones/Baraka, 2010, 205). He was writing about such musicians as John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Cecil Taylor and the Sun Ra Arkestra. Baraka did not limit his reviews to the technicalities of their playing, he made explicit arguments about the politics of their music. In his view the new sound was a core part of newly developing forms of Black Consciousness in the U.S. The “new Black music” was the radicalism.

Baraka used “The Changing Same” to pull together the ideas he had been exploring in his reviews. He crystallises the new music as a necessary part of the Black Consciousness movement. Significantly in “The Changing Same”, Baraka broadens his remit of what new black music constitutes to include the Black popular music of the time. Baraka believes the newly emerging forms of r'n'b, soul and funk were, like new black music, a manifestation of the Black Consciousness movement: “Rhythm and Blues is part of “the national genius of the Black man, of the Black nation. It is the direct, no monkey business expression of urban and rural.....Black America” (Jones/Baraka, 2010, 210-211). He is very specific about how he makes his case. For Baraka the music was never a re-presentation of the conditions of Black America; it was never simply a reflection of Black social life. Instead he thinks of both new black music and r'n'b as direct participants in the movement. The music was an agent of black struggle: “the initial energy and image are about a specific grouping of people, Black people” (Jones/Baraka, 2010, 211). The likes of James Brown, Otis Redding and Martha and the Vandellas were not only performing new forms of Black popular music, their performances involved putting together new forms of black radicalism. For Baraka in 1966 it seemed that the music was (in) the radicalism and the radicalism was (in) the music (Jones/Baraka, 2010, 216-217).

Baraka's essay bridges the theoretical and historical junctures of this thesis. It ties the theoretical question of blackness directly to the Black Consciousness movement of 1960s and 1970s America. More importantly the essay makes this link by way of the music. Baraka is arguing that the blackness of black music being made at the time was informing and informed by the types of blackness at work in the movement. With "The Changing Same" a ground is laid out for how to listen to the blackness of the music and the blackness of the radicalism over this period. Baraka moves away from a solely lyrical analysis of the music. Neither does he pay attention to overtly political stances taken by artists. What is crucial is the phonic materiality the music. For Baraka the radicalism of Black popular music lay in the blackness of its phonic substance.

Studying Black popular music in tandem with the Black Consciousness movement in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s is not novel. Over the past twenty years there have been studies which have set out to analyse the music in terms of the movement. The tendency is for work which combines cultural analysis with history and sociology (Kun, 2005; Ramsey 2004; Phinney, 2005; Werner 2005 & 2006). There have also been studies on the role of spiritual music during the early period of the movement (Sanger, 1995; Reed, 2005).

What is of concern in this study is not so much a sociological approach to Black popular music. Instead the focus is on specific moments where the distinctions between the development of the Black Consciousness movement and the commercial success of Black popular music became complicated. It involves studying events where the blackness of black radicalism and black music came into close contact by way of a phonic materiality. It is the attention paid to blackness and phonic materiality which differentiates this thesis from historical and sociological approaches to Black popular music and the Consciousness movement. This is not to say this thesis bares no relationship to the previous work in those fields.

*Just My Soul Responding* is Brian Ward's comprehensive cultural history of post war Black popular music in the U.S. He thinks r'n'b was an intra-cultural extension of the Black Consciousness movement. His task is to use r'n'b to "illuminate changes in mass black consciousness during the peak years of Civil Rights and black power activities" (Ward, 1998, 2). Ward pays special attention to the idea of a mass Black Consciousness because for him r'n'b operated on a mass level. It became a source of "psychological empowerment" for African-Americans not formally active in the movement but who invested in the sensibilities of activism (Ward, 1998, 3). Ward believes many Black

musicians and artists were attuned to this exchange and they sought to translate the feelings the wider Black population held towards the movement: “the most popular black musical style and artists...achieved their popularity precisely because they have dramatised and expressed, but also helped to shape and define a succession of black consciousnesses” (1998, 15). The status given to Black popular music was reflective of the importance of cultural activity to Black Americans. Ward argues culture had always been politicised for Black populations in the U.S: “popular culture was one of the most important arenas in which the struggle for black equality has been waged. Popular music and popular entertainment more generally have always constituted major fields of social activity in which black and white racial identities, values and interests have been defined, tested, attacked and defended in America” (Ward, 1998, 9). The music “of oppressed groups usually contain within them – explicitly or implicitly – a critique of the system by which those groups were oppressed” (Ward, 1998, 4). Ward in particular thinks the music produced by Black Americans operated as a site of resistance (whether explicit or implicit) against racial oppression.

Ward does not over valorise Black popular music as a site of resistance. He recognises r’n’b was also always a commodity and was driven by market demands: “Any attempt to use twentieth century black popular music forms to probe mass black consciousness which fails to view them as simultaneously cultural commodities and creative forms of individual and communal expression is deeply suspect” (Ward, 1998, 11). Ward argues it is necessary to access the trends of black consumers when it comes to r’n’b: “Changes in black musical style and mass consumer preferences offer a useful insight into the changing sense of self, community and destiny among those blacks who rarely left the sorts of evidence, or undertook the sorts of activities, to which historians are generally most responsive” (1998, 4). Trends of consumption deserve to be examined “for what they might reveal about the changing state of mass black consciousness in an era of great racial ferment and struggle” (Ward, 1998, 5).

Ward takes up a balanced position on the relationship between r’n’b and the Black Consciousness movement. He wants to avoid the “excessive romanticisations of the counter-hegemonic power of black popular culture” (Ward, 1998, 4). At the same time he is not looking to produce “Frankfurt school style critiques of mass culture” (Ward, 1998, 4). Black popular music, for Ward, was a “deeply paradoxical phenomenon” (1998, 4). It challenged mainstream values in the U.S. by acting as a communicative tool between wider Black populations and the movement. It also affirmed many of those

values by being shaped by market demands.

Despite looking to draw a balance, there are some problems with Ward's analysis. He briefly outlines his approach to the counter-hegemonic expressive power of r'n'b. Alongside the consumer statistics and decisions made by those making the music, he states "there is no substitute for hearing these recordings" (Ward, 1998, 8). Ward acknowledges his attempts to write about the music are "doomed" but this does not prevent him from claiming the "enormous emotional and sensual power" of r'n'b across this period as "the major primary source" of his study (1998, 8). Ward though never adequately follows through on this promise. Throughout *Just My Soul Responding* he rarely addresses the specific relationship between the forms Black popular music took and the forms of political protest. He does not track the changes in the sonic materiality of the music and the status of Black Consciousness at a given moment. What this leaves behind is the remainder of his analysis. The information on the artists, musicians and organisations who made the music and the audiences who bought it is thorough and it makes for an impressive historical document. Unfortunately Ward tends to emphasise everything but the sonic and performative impact of the music.

Mark Anthony Neal addresses the same relationship as Ward; black popular music between the 1950s and 1970s as a conduit for the Black Consciousness movement. Neal's approach in his *What the Music Said* is less resolutely historical and instead he focuses on social and cultural readings of race as a means of grasping the music and the movement. The key relationship for him is between black popular music and the Black public sphere. Neal is interested in the music as a function of community during the Black Consciousness movement: "The books main premise is that the black popular music tradition has often contained the core narratives of these efforts to create and maintain concepts of community that embody a wide range of sensibilities, formations and purposes" (1999, x). The concept of community is central for Neal and he believes Black American's have used various forms of communality to respond to their experiences. Popular music has been vital to this process: "the black popular music tradition has served as a primary vehicle for communally derived critiques of the quality of life in the black public sphere" (Neal, 1999, xi). In this respect he takes a similar line to Ward regarding the role music has played in Black social life in the U.S.

Neal argues the relationship between music and community has been ongoing for Black Americans but the strongest example was "the soul music tradition" and "the Civil Rights/Black Power movements" (1999, xi). In this instance the music is

“generally regarded as the soundtrack of African-American demands for racial and social equality during the 1960s and early 1970s” (Neal, 1999, xi). It is through soul that Neal makes the case for the music as political community. He uses the concept of polyvocality to present his argument. According to Neal key to the development of soul was the ability of Black musicians to take the polyvocality of religious performance and put it to use in a general context:

Soul music represented the construction of ‘hypercommunity’ in that both physical and metaphysical notions of space and community, and all the political and social meanings that underlie such formations, converge with its aesthetic sensibilities. Thus soul music became the ideal artistic medium to foreground the largest mass social movement to emerge from within the African-American experience. (Neal, 1999, 40)

Read in this way soul music was a crucial component of the Black Consciousness movement. Much like the forms of protest associated with the early Civil Rights movement in the south, Neal argues, soul music deconstructed the Black church experienced and amplified its socio-political aspects.

Soul is a rare example of Neal’s arguments coming together because much of his work suffers from two specific problems. These problems are exemplified by his comparative analysis of the Motown and Stax record labels. During a discussion on Motown, Neal likens the company to the politics represented by Martin Luther King and the SCLC. Motown was therefore integrationist and largely middle class which he contrasts with the “realities of black working class life”:

Martin Luther King and the Motown recording label became the dominant icons of black middle class aspiration. Both would evolve during the 1960s, representing significant structural and economic changes within the African-American diaspora. The failure of the traditional middle class driven Civil Rights movement to adequately respond to the realities of black working class life allowed for the emergence of political alternatives like Malcolm X and the young nationalists within the Student Non Violent Co-ordinating committee. (Neal, 1999, 26)

The musical reality of black working class life he points to is Stax records. Stax had a more “authentic sound” according to Neal (1999, 40). The significance of the music’s authenticity as opposed to the integrationism of Motown was “witnessed in the subtle differences between northern and southern racism, as the unpolished and grittier nature of the ‘Memphis Sound’ represented a response to the more brutal and blatant forms of racism as reflected in the American south” (Neal, 1999, 45). Neal produces many of the

historiographical faults discussed in the work of Singh, Joseph, Kelley and Reed. He falls into the two part narrative of the movement (South vs North; Civil Rights into Black Power). By way of Motown and Stax he adds to this a level of class analysis but Neal's is a confused reading of class. Stax is seen as working class because it is Southern and therefore more authentic. This authenticity is allied with the northern development of Black power and Malcolm X. In contrast, the Northern urban sound of Motown is seen as middle class and integrationist. In Neal's eyes, Motown is an extension of King's Southern middle class movement.

As well as the disjointed reading of class, Neal also hears one aspect of the Black popular music (Stax) as a more authentic, class reflection of the movement than another (Motown). When making these claims he does not offer any basis for them other than the self-evident authenticity and integrationism communicated in the music. This points to Neal's poor theorisation of the relationship between the music and the black public sphere. He is never clear how the music went into the assembling the political community. Instead he relies on a folk knowledge to carry his argument and what this leads to is a series of provocative claims about the music and the movement from Neal which are never adequately followed through.

Both Ward and Neal exemplify some of the limitations of social and cultural approaches to the Black Consciousness movement and Black popular music. They do so by not paying close attention to the aspect of the music Baraka prioritises, namely its phonic materiality. Whilst their respective approaches have many merits (such as historical evidence of Black popular music's mass appeal), they rarely focus on the sonic content of a specific record or performance.

### **Phonic materiality and the organisation of a research archive**

The task of the framework chapter up to this point has been to conceptualise and historicise the question of the relationship between black music and black radicalism. Conceptually this has involved staging ongoing debates about blackness and its manifestation as phonic materiality. Historically a link has been proposed between the Black Consciousness movement and Black popular music in the U.S. between 1955 and 1971. The work of this thesis is to bring the conceptual and historical aspects together. The relationship between Black Consciousness and Black popular music will be analysed in terms of the forms of phonic blackness that were produced as these fields

developed over this period.

Earlier in this chapter the discursive and intellectual aspects of studying phonic materiality were emphasised as key to the methodological concerns of this thesis. Yet there are some technical issues that need to be addressed in terms of phonic substance. These issues centre on the organisation of phonic materiality as an object of study. What constitutes a sonic object of study? What are the technical aspects of trying to assemble a research archive that is giving priority to the sonic? Although I will take some time now to work through the archival concerns, these technical questions are not distinct from the discursive issues discussed above. Thinking about the phonic materiality of the archive also always involves thinking about the paraontological relationship between black radicalism and black music.

In the most basic sense the objects being studied in this thesis are made up of a range of materials, which include; pop music records, recordings of public speeches, recordings of poetry readings, archive film and television footage, political documentaries, autobiography, biography, archival interviews, cultural criticism and cultural history. Each case study is organised around a specific confluence between several recordings. With the James Brown and Amiri Baraka case study, the two recordings are Brown's 1971 track "Super Bad" released on the album of the same name and a recording of Baraka performing his poem, "Our Nation is Like Ourselves" in 1970 at the Buffalo State College. The second case study on spiritual experience and Civil Rights uses a recording of a speech-sermon King gave in 1966, known as "The Vision in the Kitchen", and the final speech he gave before his assassination in 1968, "I've been to the Mountaintop". With regards to Sam Cooke there are two significant recordings. One is an account of how Cooke developed his unique vocal signature as a gospel performer from a member of his group the Soul Stirrers. The second is his iconic posthumously released track, "A Change is Gonna Come". In the Detroit case study the focus is on the activity of sounds in two pieces of documentary film footage. The first is a political film produced by the League in 1970 entitled "Finally Got the News". This is followed in the final chapter by a piece for television made by Motown in 1965. It shows the label's group, Martha and the Vandellas performing their hit "Nowhere to Run" on an operational Ford Mustang line.

Setting out the materials to be studied only illuminates part of the process. The aim in this thesis is to theorise the blackness of black radicalism and black music through their production of phonic substance. The emphasis being placed on studying sound shapes

the status of the archive. The analytical questions introduced by focussing on phonic materiality require a different approach to archival organisation in this thesis.

Customarily the practice with an archive is to divide its materials into primary and secondary types. Primary materials tend to be thought of as raw materials. As Richard Lane argues primary materials are formed by the fact they “are seen as being closer to the self-presence of the producing agent (subject or institution)” (2003, 18). Secondary materials are produced as a result of the primary material. They could not exist without it, but neither can they substitute for the primary material: “secondary publications are texts that only exist – at a remove – because of these primary texts” (Lane, 2003, 18). Charles Mereweather refers to the primary/secondary distinction as “the logic of archive” (2006, 17) and according to Antoinette Burton this logic allows the archive to function as a “site of knowledge production, an arbiter of truth, and a mechanism for shaping the narratives of history” (2005, 2). This system for organising research materials produces certain types of work. It leads to research which reproduces normative accounts of agency and presence without questioning the structures which have gone into organising the research.

To organise the research archive along the lines of the primary/secondary distinction does not seem appropriate for this thesis. The emphasis being placed upon phonic materiality requires an alternate archival method. It is possible to speculate on this alternative mode of archival organisation by turning to current debates on within the broad field of sound studies. Debates on the uses of sound a basis for cultural and historical analysis have become increasingly prevalent of late (Kahn, 1999; Goodman, 2009; Toop, 2010). In 2010 *Social Text* published a special issue on the politics of recorded sound and in his editorial Gustavus Stadler set out the shifting terrain of this field. There is, he believes, a move away from “apolitical narratives of the ‘evolution’ of sound recording” (2010, 1). In its place is the idea that “recording takes place within, and is ineluctably shaped by, the social and formal properties of networks of power” (Stadler, 2010, 1). Stadler argues this approach to recorded sound retains the ability to question what a recording constitutes: “a ‘record’ is a flexible thing of far denser, potentially more ominous social and political meanings than we may generally assume it to be” (2010, 2). Addressing the social, cultural and historical status of recorded sound, he argues, still allows for questions “about what actually constitutes a recording and what relationship sound recording has (and has had) to other forms of data collection, information storage and music production” (Stadler, 2010, 2).

For Stadler the history of recorded sound has been too readily dominated by histories of sonic development “isolated from any historical phenomena other than technological advances” (Stadler, 2010, 2). It is this “tendency to naturalise or essentialise media – in short to cede to them a history that is more powerfully theirs than ours” which renders much work on recorded sound ahistorical (Stadler, 2010, 3). Stadler looks to work against this “techno-driven account” (2010, 3). He wants to develop “deeply textured theoretical frameworks” which illustrate how sound “was itself shaped by a mass of social, cultural and historical forms” because the recording of sound needs to be thought of as a “system of living” (Stadler, 2010, 3, 6). Stadler is careful not to overpoliticise sound at the expense of affect. He wants to strike a balance between sonic content and its historical, cultural and social specificity. This means not wiping “affect off the analytical map; to do so would be to affirm a retrograde, ahistorical, apolitical view of affect, as well as to reduce the meanings of affect in relation to the technology to the simplest and most mature forms of significance” (Stadler, 2010, 7). Stadler is making the case for studies of sound which more thoroughly contextualise technological developments within human history, whilst still paying attention to the phonic materiality of a recording.

Jonathan Sterne takes a similar position to Stadler. In *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (2003) he argues Cultural studies and Sociology have not adequately addressed sound:

While writers interested in visual media have for some time gestured toward a conceptualisation of *visual culture*, no such parallel construct – *sound culture* or simply *sound studies* – has broadly informed work on hearing or the other senses. While sound is considered a unified intellectual problem in some science and engineering fields, it is less developed as an integrated problem in the social and cultural disciplines. (Sterne, 2003, 3)

For Sterne the questions for Sociology and Cultural studies is how to deal with sound as an object of analysis. There is a tension shaping this question which lies between “the phenomena of sound and the history of sound” (Sterne, 2003, 10). Much like Stadler he believes sound has remained epistemologically ahistorical: “We treat sound as a natural phenomenon which is exterior to people, but its very definition is anthropocentric” (Sterne, 2003, 11). As a historical phenomenon Sterne argues sound should not be thought of as permanent and unchanging, rather it too has a history which is intrinsically linked to the history of the human. The notion of “transhistorical explanations of sound”

can be compelling but Sterne insists it is critical to think the phenomenology of a sonic event through its historiography: “If sound in itself was a variable rather than a constant, then the history of sound is of necessity an externalist and contextualist endeavour. Sound is an artefact of the messy political and human sphere” (2003, 13). Sterne occupies the same ground as Stadler, in that he argues it is an error to dehistoricise the phonic substance of a recording, but neither should a sound event be understood only through cultural frameworks. There is space of negotiation between the materiality of sound and the context in which it was produced.

The issue is, how is it possible to account for these factors when studying the phonic substance of a recording. It becomes a question of how to locate the sonic performance. Phillip Auslander has addressed this question in his manifesto on performance analysis and popular music. Auslander works from the basis that neither Performance studies, Musicology or Cultural studies have adequately dealt with the sonic content of popular music as performance. Musical performance has been neglected by Performance studies in general. This is an anomaly for Auslander, as music seems to be an appropriate medium for a self-acknowledged “open” field. The absence of any adequate analysis of music may have something to do with the genealogy of Performance studies: “The original paradigm for performance studies resulted from a synthesis of theatre studies with aspects of anthropology, sociology and oral interpretation” (Auslander, 2004, 1). The prevalence of theatre in Performance studies meant music was problematised because it was seen as non-mimetic, a “form whose representations do not refer directly back to the real world” (Auslander, 2004, 2). Auslander’s criticism of Musicology is a commonly held one. Namely, musicologists focus on scores and notation as objects which can be translated to a listener but the performative aspects of music remain unaccounted for. The criticisms he has of Cultural studies are more complex. The Cultural studies approach to music tends to privilege records ahead of performance. He argues there is nothing inherently wrong with this practice, but what it has led to in Cultural studies is a focus on musical reception rather than performance. The Cultural studies approach emphasises certain aspects of production, which “examines the sociological, institutional and policy contexts in which popular music is made, not the immediate context of the work and the artists who make it” (Auslander, 2004, 2).

Auslander is looking to strike a balance between Performance studies and Cultural studies. When it comes to the sonic content of popular music he is “interested primarily in finding ways of discussing what popular musicians do *as performers* – the meanings

they create through their performances and the means they use to create them” (Auslander, 2004, 2-3). This would involve conceiving of a Performance studies approach to a recording, even though, as he argues, Performance studies is only capable of addressing the mimetic aspects of live performance. As Auslander points out though: “The media economy of popular music thus dictates that sound recordings be considered performances, which is how listeners experience them” (Auslander, 2004, 2-3). For a listener the phenomenological status of recorded music “is that of a performance unfolding at the time and in the place of listening” (Auslander, 2004, 5). It is on this basis that sound recordings and music can be considered “legitimate objects for performance analysis” (Auslander, 2004, 5).

Studying phonic materiality in ways which account for the issues Stadler, Sterne and Auslander raise, requires a more nuanced organisation of the archive. It involves recognising the archive is not hierarchically fixed. At the same time it is not expedient to think that the activity of sounds are entirely autonomous. Such concerns manifest themselves in this thesis through the dissolution of the primary and secondary distinctions in the archive. The reasons for dissolving this distinction are inseparable from the study of the blackness of black radicalism as phonic materiality. If it were necessary to name the *thing* which is being studied here, it is the materiality of sound, and it is being studied as the performative basis of black radicalism. The archive in this thesis is made up of the activity of sounds, music, speech, slurs, noise, interference, distortion, and much more. In this respect it is possible to begin with the notion that a sound may be emerging from an object within the archive (say a record or video), the sound is though not limited to that object and it does not make that object primary. The argument I am making is that the record does not possess the sound it produces, the sonic materiality of a black performance also lies in the artists accounts of how it was made. It lies in a writers or listeners account of how the record or performance came across. The sonic materiality also informs how a record or performance has been historicised. What is being studied in this thesis is the way sonic materiality operates across all these materials and more. The phonic substance is produced by all the materials which constitute the archive in this project. The objects being studied are not reducible to objects. There is a resistance to the notion of having stable research objects from which it is possible to extract knowledge. As Ilya Kabakov argues, the desire to organise materials along the lines of primary/secondary only serves to expose “the archive's precarious position between order and chaos, between organization and

disorder, between the presence of the voice and the muteness of objects” (2008, xiii). Rendering objects mute goes against the commitment in this thesis to pay attention to the activity of sounds. Part of this process involves not privileging any specific object as the primary reproduction of a sound event, and therefore closer to its apparent source.

The technical concerns with the phonic materiality of the archive though are inseparable from its political status during the moment of its production. One of the underlying hypotheses about the relationship between Black Consciousness and Black popular music is that all of the sounds produced across all of the materials were, within that historical juncture, a realisation of black radicalism. The phonic substance that was emanating from within, and between, the music and the radicalism was a manifestation of black resistance, not its metaphorical representation. Emphasised in this way, the phonic materiality of black resistance becomes not only a measure directed at external forms of oppression, but it is also always blackness as internalised resistance, the production and breakdown of all the ways blackness can be. This is what is meant by the paraontology of blackness and its relationship to black music and black radicalism. The contention in this thesis is that the archive, due to its phonic materiality, is indicative of this paraontology.

The question is how is it possible to listen to that phonic substance as the substantiation of blackness and radicalism during the mid Twentieth century from our present vantage point in the Twenty First century? How is it possible to develop sensibilities for listening to the sound of Black Consciousness and Black popular music now, a moment where such actualisations seem irrevocably distant, not only temporally but also as genuine political possibilities? Similar questions have been addressed recently by Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray in *Third Text*. In their editorial accompanying a special issue on “the cine-geography of the militant image” (2011, 1) as it informed African, Asian and Latin-American revolutionary movements of the mid-to-late Twentieth century, they point to the difference between “newness” and “contemporaneity” (2011, 3). Eshun and Gray write about the difficulties of re-encountering militant images because the revolutionary projects which they were a part of have been heavily discredited within our current neoliberal moment. What is illuminated by the re-encounter with militant images is their “newness that is distinct from that of contemporaneity” (2011 3). Militant images face us with a newness because of the distance between our contemporary moment and the totality of the insurgent potentials they once held in the world. The act of re-encountering the militant

image now becomes aspirational, one that invokes “a revision of the historiography of the present” (2011, 3).

The distance between newness and contemporaneity that Eshun and Gray point to is one that I want to use in the re-encounter with the phonic materiality of Black Consciousness and Black popular music in mid Twentieth century America. I want to use their formulation of newness to think through the sonic content of the movement and the music as the materialisation of blackness which also always submitted to its own escape. Tuning into the blackness of this phonic substance as *new* in our present involves accepting it is distant. This distance renders the phonic substance difficult to listen to but there are also possibilities contained within that distance. The newness of the possibility that black music might have been black radicalism and black radicalism might have been black music creates the room for a revision of the current modalities of radicalism and militant aesthetics. Attending to the newness of the phonic materiality in this thesis might even lead to a revision of blackness as a genuine, rather than a degraded, political and intellectual horizon in our present.

It is this attendance to the phonic materiality of blackness and radicalism as new (rather than contemporary) which informs the choice of the case study model. The research has been organised into three parts (James Brown and Amiri Baraka; Martin Luther King and Sam Cooke; The League and Motown) because this best accentuates the methodological and intellectual concerns of this thesis. The case study format is a specific model used for conducting and organising research. In 2007 Lauren Berlant addressed the specificities of the case study format in two issues of *Critical Inquiry*. Growing out of psychoanalysis, she states that the case study has been used to organise the relationship between the singular and the general through the logic of exemplarity. As soon as a decision is taken to make a case, the event, subject or object chosen is marked out as worthy of attention. This marking out of a case, according to Berlant, “represents a situation in which people are compelled to take its history, seek out precedents, write its narratives, adjudicate claims about it, make a judgement and file it somewhere” (2007, 33). She describes this as a normalising move because the event, subject or object can serve as an exemplary case which generates “knowledge *in the absence of a theory*” (Berlant, 2007, 666). But by equal measure, the making of a case can also disturb the normative model of historicising due to the fact that the exemplary case also always “creates a louder noise that opens up the field of debate about expertise, modes of description, narration, evaluation, argument and judgement”

(Berlant, 2007, 670). Each of the case studies in this thesis operate on that basis. On one level they represent a historicisation, even a narrativisation, of the conditions which produced the phonic substance which is the focus of each case study. At the same time there is an attempt to trouble historicism by amplifying how that same phonic substance produces questions about what it was that made the music or the movement sound black and radical.

## **Part 1 – Black Cultural Nationalism, resistance and rhythmic unity**

### **Chapter 1 – James Brown**

James Brown is black music; black music is James Brown. For the latter half of the Twentieth century statements of this type became a truism in the United States of America. Over this period James Brown was at the forefront of Black popular music in the country. Early in his career he developed a live act which made him a leading exponent of r'n'b, and later Brown experimented with and developed new forms of Black music. These experiments created a “new breed thing” which was later popularised as funk. During this period of musical innovation James Brown also became synonymous with the political in Black popular music. His 1968 release “Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)” was interpreted as an anthem for the Black Consciousness movement. The lyric “we’d rather die on our feet, than live on our knees” linked Brown’s music to the emerging discourses of black militancy.

The aim in this chapter is to both complement and complicate the narrative commonly associated with James Brown. This narrative can be complicated by unsettling the very idea of James Brown. In the first chapter of this case study I will work on the basis that there was never a singular James Brown, but instead many James Browns. Each James Brown was indicative of a resistance at work in his performance because Brown’s music was centred on rupture. Between 1964 and 1971 he was able to create a new sound in Black popular music by using rhythmic textures to activate those ruptures. The new rhythmic textures he introduced were deemed to be radical because it was felt that the new sound manifested resistance. The new sound was radical and resistant because of its apparent blackness. Brown’s “new breed thing” was thought of as a translation of the black militancy of the period into sound.

Brown’s relationship with rupture, resistance and blackness is the subject of this chapter. Using a combination of his autobiography, the stage performance he developed during the early peak of his career, and the shift in sonic organisation instituted in 1964, in this chapter I will map out how James Brown used rupture to refuse to allow his performances to settle. Brown was often resistant to the idea of James Brown, yet the name “James Brown” became a counter-signature for a music deemed to be black and which contained a politics which was also black. Addressing the question of how Brown performed rupture but produced a militant black aesthetic will require two things.

Firstly it will necessitate a theorisation of rhythm. Turning to the work of John Mowitt, I will conceptualise the aesthetic and political importance of rhythm for Brown. He used it as an organising principle, and it allowed his band to transmit new sonic experiences which were deemed to be radical. This theorisation of rhythm will be combined with a historicisation and conceptualisation of the captive black body as a site of beating. Hortense Spillers offers a thorough account of how of the black body was beaten into object status, and how the marks of that beating were reproduced as the condition of blackness. Spillers not only speaks to something at work in James Brown's performativity, but she also synchronises with Mowitt's theorisation of rhythm as a violent troubling of the difference between subject and object.

What will be developed in this chapter are a set of procedures for listening to the exchange between rupture, beat(ing), unity and militancy which seemed to preoccupy Brown's music. The phonic materiality of this exchange was fundamental to the blackness Brown was producing. Brown's blackness was deemed to be radical in the sense that it constituted a new set of musical parameters, and in creating those new parameters his music was thought to sonically materialise an insurgent form of blackness. As will become evident in this case study's second chapter, Black Cultural Nationalists such as Amiri Baraka were tuning into the phonic substance Brown was producing and using it as the driving force of their radical program.

### **Marked from the getup**

Questions of unity, rupture and beat(ing) appear immediately in Brown's autobiography *The Godfather of Soul* (1987). His resistance to the idea of "James Brown" can be found in the autobiography's preface. It is an example of how Brown was able to unsettle his own authority. At the same time the preface also marks out the way in which Brown's performance was always recognisably his. Conventionally the autobiography is understood as an act of self-narrativisation involving a form of analysis designed to develop a teleological coherency around the subject writing. For Leigh Gilmore autobiography functions as a "Western mode of self-production, a discourse that is both corollary to the Enlightenment and its legacy, and which features a rational and representative "I" at its centre" (Gilmore, 2001, 2). But she and others using the practices of deconstruction and literary theory have sought to examine ways in which normative autobiographical methods have come under pressure (Gilmore, 1994;

Ashley and Gilmore, 1994; Smith, 1995). Using the trope of trauma, Gilmore argues the model of self-representation and truth telling associated with autobiography can be severely tested (Gilmore, 2001, 2). *Godfather* fulfils the normative conventions of autobiographical writing but something far more noteworthy is at work in the book's preface. The preface has textual significance (in terms of what Brown says) and structural significance (in that Brown chooses to say what he says in the preface). What Brown records textually *and* structurally in the preface are the tensions around the question of form that shaped his career:

I was marked from the getup. You might say that I've got a mark on my back that I never knew was there. That's because they fixed it where I couldn't see it myself. But now that I can look back on my life, I realize that what I've done was no accident.

I was marked a lot of different ways. With names, for example. I was marked with a lot of different names. And each one has a story behind it.

As a kid growing up in a whorehouse, I was known as Little Junior. After I broke my leg a couple of times playing football, I was nicknamed Crip. In prison I was called Music Box.

The name of my first group, the Famous Flames, caused Little Richard to say, 'Y'all are the onliest people who ever made yourselves famous before you *were* famous.'

As a performer, I've had names like Mr Dynamite, The 'Please Please Please' Man, The Hardest Working Man in Show Business, Soul Brother Number One, The Sex Machine, His Bad Self, The Godfather of Soul, and The Minister of the New New Super Heavy Funk.

My full legal name is James Joe Brown Jr. Ben Bart, my manager for many years and a man who was like a father to me, always called me Jimmy. Today, I prefer to be called *Mr*: Brown.

But of all the names I've been marked with, James Brown is probably the most mysterious. In school the kids and the teachers always called me by it like it was one word: Jamesbrown. Just like that. But originally my name wasn't supposed to be James Brown at all. It should have been something else. (Brown, 1987, preface)

The "mark" Brown carried from the "getup" undertakes a great deal of work in the preface. Brown immediately identifies it as a physical phenomenon, it is a marking of his back, a kind of wound. On reflection he realises the mark had always been in place ("from the getup"). The physicality of the mark raises questions about the form of James Brown. There is an indication that Brown was not entirely whole, the mark implies physical rupture. The rupture did not occur once Brown was fully formed. The notion of being "marked from the getup" points to the role rupture played in Brown's moment of constitution. He was always *marked* as James Brown.

Brown spends the preface translating the physicality of the mark into the acquisition of names. The relationship between the mark and the name “James Brown” is two-fold. Firstly it appears Brown had multiple names. The names that are of particular concern are those he used “as a performer”. Within this run of names Brown produces a deferral. Although each title (whether it be “The ‘Please Please Please’ Man”, “Soul Brother Number One” or “The Sex Machine”) is recognisable as belonging to him, the name “James Brown” is never fully revealed. This does not mean the name “James Brown” is absent, rather it is marked within each title. Each of the names he took “as a performer” denote different versions of James Brown. The second aspect of marking and naming refers to the proper name “James Brown”. This is the one which the reader waits for throughout the preface. Brown designates it the “most mysterious” name because it is marked by the possibility of its own collapse. The name threatens to fall in upon itself. For him “James Brown” has been irrecoverably cut to sound like “it was one word: Jamesbrown. Just like that”. As well as being both marked and cut, the name “James Brown” is rejected by Brown. This proper name is one the reader has been waiting for in the preface, yet he refuses it. Brown claims his name “should have been something else”.

Textually, Brown's preface to his autobiography raises several issues. At its centre is a self-identified “mark”. This mark puts into question the unity of Brown's body. It meant Brown was ruptured and corporeally insecure. The mark also introduces a vexation over the name. The name “James Brown” was never secure. It was dispersed into several names which pointed to the name “James Brown”, yet that name was never fully announced within them. When using the proper name “James Brown” he felt it was on the verge of collapse. The name had been cut to sound like it was one word: Jamesbrown. The mark Brown identifies in the preface also has a temporal dimension. It has always been there from the “getup”. This implies the mark was not something which happened to James Brown after he was formed and named. Instead it may have been constitutive of him. The mark may have been that which made James Brown. Rupture, he seems to be saying, is his means of emergence. In this respect I believe the preface lays out ways of listening to James Brown. Within the preface lies a combination of the unity of resistance and a resistance to unity which Brown spent his career producing.

## Assembling James Brown

The question of how Brown was constituted has also been taken up by Cynthia Rose. In her *Living In America: The Soul Saga of James Brown* (1990) Rose fixes on the idea that Brown *made* himself as a performer. She interviews those who were witness to his commercial and creative practices. Each of her interviewees note that in putting together his act, Brown was putting himself together. There are echoes in these accounts of his preface. Rose's respondents seem to be telling her Brown was always working in the space between his constitution and dispersal. One of the central members of Brown's band, saxophonist Maceo Parker, tells Rose:

He had an almost uncanny, innate ability to judge character. Not just in musicians either; in every kind of personnel. When James was building JAMES BROWN almost everyone offered potential to him.... His life became so amazin' – he went all the way to the top, and beyond. But he could never accept arriving. He always had one more place to go. (Rose, 1990, 37)

“James was building JAMES BROWN”. A great deal is revealed in this short statement. Parker differentiates between one version of Brown and another. He was able to split himself in order to put together James Brown the performer. Secondly the process of assembly remained incomplete. Parker notes Brown was never able to settle, “he always had one more place to go”. There was a restlessness which meant the building of James Brown never seemed to stop. There is some correlation with the preface here. Parker highlights how Brown used deformation and reformation simultaneously, and therefore Brown's ability to rebuild himself continually rested upon a possibility of taking himself apart. This (re)building was a precarious undertaking and the threat of dissolution even affected his performance. In her interviews with Brown, Rose discovers how he countered this threat:

'Thing about it is', he now says proudly, 'I always *doubled myself*. Whatever it was, I tried for twice over.' (Rose, 1990, 37)

Brown was aware of the precariousness of his performance. Building James Brown involved strenuous labour. He had to double himself and make other versions of James Brown. This need to produce doubles can be read back into the preface. There, the deferral of names he took as a performer was linked to the way his proper name was cut (Jamesbrown). The act of doubling himself can be understood as a cover for the threat

of collapse occupying his proper name.

From Rose's interviews it seems dissolution was a consistent issue for Brown. The cut was something he was always responding to in order to cover its dangers. Yet the process of covering became necessary to Brown as a performer. It necessitated the (re)production of numerous James Browns ("The Please Please Please man", "The Sex Machine", "His bad self"). The threat of collapse carried by the mark became the source for Brown's (re)production. The mark on James Brown's back became the means of insistently building his performance.

Brown's performances were about an interplay between disruption and (re)production. Both processes combined to shape his early reputation as an r'n'b artist. Brown's initial popularity was forged through his stage presence, where he gained a following for his intense mode of performance. Brown's act tended towards what some might call physical and emotional excess. He gave it up for his audience. The 1962 *Live at The Apollo* album was an attempt by Brown to harness the experience of his live act for a wider public. Consisting of recordings from a week long appearance at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, the album documented "that special thing that always happened live" (Brown, 1987, 129). *Live at The Apollo* became a breakthrough commercial success for Brown. In keeping with the emphasis upon recording the live experience, Brown felt the entire scope of his shows needed to be presented on the album. When reflecting on the unique qualities of the record's liveness, he points to his emcee, Fats. Fats carried out two functions. He was Brown's announcer, letting the audience know Brown was due to appear imminently. By announcing Brown's appearance, his other role was to build anticipation. Brown recalls how this worked on the opening moments of *Live at The Apollo*:

So now, ladies and gentlemen, it is star time. Are you ready for star time? *Yeah!* Thank you and thank you very kindly. It is indeed a great pleasure to present to you at this particular time, nationally and internationally known as the *Hardest Working Man in Show Business*, the man that sings, 'I'll Go Crazy'...*a fanfare from the band: Taaaaa!* 'You've Got the Power'...*Taaaaa!* 'Think'...*Taaaaa!* 'If You Want Me'...*Taaaaa!* 'I Don't Mind'...*Taaaaa!* 'Bewildered'...*Taaaaa!* million-dollar seller 'Lost Someone'...*Taaaaa!* the very latest release, 'Night Train'...*Taaaaa!* Let's everybody 'Shout and Shimmy'...*Taaaaa!* Mr. Dynamite, the amazing Mr. 'Please Please' himself, the star of the show...James Brown and the Famous Flames. (Brown, 1987, 135)

On *Live at the Apollo* one can hear Fats vocally prefacing Brown. He not only

announces Brown, he prepares the conditions for his arrival. Much like the autobiographical preface, Fats lists a series of names which stand in for Brown. He is laying out the parts Brown used to make himself. Fats closes by declaring the proper name. This proper name though was one which Brown felt was under threat of collapse and should never have been his. What is at work here is the discordance of the single name "James Brown". It is accompanied by the dispersal of multiple names.

To grasp what occurred when Brown got on stage requires turning to a television appearance recorded in 1964. Filmed in front of a live audience for The T.A.M.I. Show, Brown and his band performed their hit "Please, Please, Please". Part song, part incantation, the track was built around the continual repetition of the refrain, "Please, please don't go". Each utterance of the line by Brown prompted an echoed response from the backing vocalists. Highly unorthodox for the time, the record was a hit. With no discernible beginning or end, the release of "Please Please Please" was limited to two minutes, but on stage the performance could be stretched out to what seemed like infinite extremes. This is precisely what Brown and his band did on The T.A.M.I. Show, but their act was not limited to the song's refrain. To heighten the performance Brown and the Famous Flames carried out the same manoeuvre to accompany each repeat of "Please, please, don't go". Brown, standing at the mic, seemingly overwhelmed by the emotion of the song, drops to his knees. Unable to summon the energy to lift himself, Fats and other members of the Flames arrive to give him assistance. They drape a cape over his shoulders, slowly lifting Brown to his feet. Being comforted by his assistants, Brown is slowly shuffled towards the edge of the stage. All the time the backing vocalists are repeating the refrain "Please, please don't go". The show looks like it is over. Suddenly Brown throws off the cape and stands up tall. Shrugging off his assistants, he leaps back to the mic to continue the song. But it is not long before he is back on his knees and the whole routine begins again.

The T.A.M.I. show recording is about the ecstatic inability to discontinue the performance. Brown is unable to continue with the song. He is unable to plead any more. Yet when the Flames attempt to usher Brown off stage, he refuses to. He refuses to call the performance off. Brown cannot continue the song, but neither can he discontinue it. He is seemingly stuck in a circuit where he repeats his own collapse, reassembly and collapse over and over again. Cynthia Rose's depiction of Brown on stage gives some insight into what he seemed to be doing to himself during the T.A.M.I. show:

He takes his transformed self, the highest, baddest, hippest character he can construct, and - in a gesture which pierces the crowd to its heart – *destroys* it just for them. In the frenzy of his demanding and pleading, even the most elaborate do starts to cascade. And within minutes, wet curls will be clinging to Brown's face and neck, flopping onto his forehead. Within seconds, sweat has softened the sharpest lines and creases of his elegant clothing. Eventually, it will fill his shoes, anoint his back and legs. Off come his glittering cuff links (often flung into the audience). Shirt-sleeves hanging, knees stained with blood, James has visibly 'given it up' – for the listeners before him in the dark. (Rose, 1990, 73)

Rose's transcription and the T.A.M.I. show footage illustrate how the issue of names in Brown's preface transferred into his live performances. The way Brown's name was marked affected the way he experienced his body on stage. Brown was *made* by Fat's vocal preface before entering the spotlights. Yet his act was about the destruction of the performer he took such care to build. Brown's early career was about more than the performance of assembly and deformation. He was replaying these manoeuvres to the extent it was difficult to tell which came first. The mark was both constitutive and disruptive of James Brown.

Following her transcription of Brown's live performance, Rose adds a new element to her analysis of Brown's physicality on stage. She introduces the category of race during a conversation with Brown's hairdresser, Leon Austin. Rose notes how he turns to the difference between the meticulousness with which Brown made himself, and the violence with which he took that making apart:

Let me run it down for you. James is dark, he is *ugly*. He made the ugly man pretty because he made himself pretty. But, first of all that has to do with colour. He made himself pretty in spite of being dark. (Rose, 1990, 72)

Austin points to Brown's epidermal status and introduces chromatism by way of his "darkness". Brown's darkness, according to Austin, is a source of ugliness, it is a source of disgust. But Austin also seems to imply Brown can use this darkness to transform himself. It can work against the ugliness attached to his dark skin. He was able to make himself pretty. Through Austin, Rose brings the racial status of Brown's body into play. Despite the entry of race, the effect of the mark remains in place. His darkness, much like the mark, is a point of transformation. It can be made ugly and beautiful. The distance between disgust and pleasure is not all that far apart in the case of darkness. It is productive and destructive.

There is a link between the mark in Brown's preface and his darkness as a kind of mark. The mark on Brown's back had been there from the getup and it introduced an instability to his name. He had a series of names which stood in for his proper name, which when announced, could not hold. The mark, being on his back, also went to work on his body. On stage Brown was excessively building and then taking himself apart. He shifted between an ornate making of James Brown and the disruption of the James Brown he had made. The process occurred with such frequency that even his destruction appeared to be transformative. Finally there is the mark of Brown's darkness, we might even call this his blackness. This inflection of the mark also had transformative qualities. Whether it was ugly or beautiful, Brown's darkness was always making him. It was constitutive of all those different James Browns, even the one that sounded like it was one word. His darkness, it seems, had been with him from the getup.

### **Blackness, marking and Hortense Spillers**

By way of James Brown the suggestion seems to be that darkness or blackness is a kind of mark. It is a mark carried by bodies deemed to be black. The notion of blackness as corporeal marking has been a central theme of black thought for some time. The theorisation of blackness and corporeality could be said to have begun with Frantz Fanon. His *Black Skin, White Masks* arguably set the agenda for discussions about the black body in the mid-to-late Twentieth Century (1967/2008). Fanon pays attention to the violent experience of the black body in relation to whiteness and the resulting psychic effects upon the black subject. This approach has influenced subsequent examinations of the phenomenological and ontological status of Black diasporans. Notable work on blackness and the body which carries the influence of Fanon includes that of David Marriot and George Yancy (Marriot, 2000; 2007; Yancy 2008). The focus on corporeality and violence in Black feminist thought can also be said to have Fanonian inflections (Sharpley-Whiting, 2008).

When addressing the combination of marking and blackness with James Brown, it is important to focus on the textuality of this phenomenon. Brown only ever names the mark in the preface of his autobiography. He takes an experience and names it in a written text. It is possible to situate Brown's naming of the mark within a wider consideration of blackness and marking in textual forms. This relationship has been a particular concern of Black literary studies. Within this field the starting points have

tended to be slave narratives. The memoirs of Frederick Douglass, Harriot Jacobs or Oloudah Equiano are considered foundational because they prioritise the experience of slaves in the New World as the experience of marked black bodies. Carol E. Henderson has written of the recurrence of the scar in a number of major Black American literary and autobiographical texts. These scars have offered ways of understanding captive Africans' transformation into slaves in the New World. Conversely scarring has also become the organising point for Black American responses to the exclusion and violence they have experienced (Henderson, 2002; 2009). Lisa Woolfork works on contemporary depictions of slavery across a range of media. The traumatic marks of slavery have developed into a "bodily epistemology" that is present in several novels, films and visual arts practices (Woolfork, 2009, 2). The body, she argues, is used as a tool with which to directly confront the past of black enslavement in these works. Saidya Hartman shifted the terms of this debate in her *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). She argues spectacular accounts of slave violence have tended to dominate theorisations of blackness. The result is that the often explicit nature of these accounts have become banal through their over-use. Hartman instead believes it is necessary to pay attention to more mundane accounts of slave performance to trace the complicated relationship between blackness, marking, violence and pleasure .

In her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe", literary theorist Hortense Spillers also examines the cultural legacies of marking and blackness. Marking has created tensions around black bodies, which she argues have had a problematic relationship to subject status. This problem emerged initially through the rupturing of the black body and it was then translated into troubled racial and sexual status for Black people in the U.S. Spillers' starting point is the Atlantic slave trade, where the capture of Africans and their movement through the middle passage was part of a project designed to figure the "enslaved as *property*" (Spillers 2003a, 217):

The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness...which open[ed] the Atlantic Slave Trade...We write and think, then, about an outcome of aspects of African-American life in the United States under the pressure of those events. (Spillers, 2003a, 209)

To designate slaves as quantities raised fundamental questions of their constitution as legitimate subjects. In turn this destabilised their sexual coherency: "The loss of indigenous name/land provides a metaphor of displacement for other human and

cultural features and relations, including the displacement of the genitalia, the female's and male's desire that engenders future" (Spillers, 2003a, 217). Securing the slave as property required the maintenance of this incoherency. The focal point for this process was the enslaved black female. She became the engine for blackness as a site of marking. The control and restructuring of her reproductive uses ensured the "genetic reproduction of the enslaved" (Spillers, 2003a, 217).

The control over the reproductive capacity of the black female was enforced through the skin: "the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange" (Spillers, 2003a, 220). Blackness for the enslaved female was about the "anatomical specifications of rupture" (Spillers, 2003a, 207). The degree of marking led to experiences of a "seared, divided, ripped-apartness" (Spillers, 2003a, 206). Under such conditions it is not only the body which is seared and ripped apart, ruptures are also transferred. As the prime site of marking, the gendered norms of the female were used to place slaves under pressure: "we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of political and cultural manoeuvre, not at all gender related, gender specific" (Spillers, 2003a, 206). What the female becomes is a reproductive machine reproducing blackness as a mark. The attention given to the female was central to the practice of enslavement. As Spillers notes, the slave always followed the condition of the mother. If the female reproduced blackness, and the slave followed that condition, the slave always remained illegitimate. Captive offspring could never have access to paternal law, the security of which was the sole possession of the subject:

We might well ask if this phenomena of marking and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments. (Spillers, 2003a, 207)

According to Spillers, blackness is a ruptured maternal inheritance, and is manifest as a psychic and corporeal mark. In the U.S. blackness as a mark was organised through the condition of enslavement. In many ways Spillers can be used to speculate on Brown's mark because she effectively argues that Black Americans have been marked from the getup. The proper name is the outcome of patrilineal inheritance and in his preface Brown is unable to settle on a single name and neither is he able to stop producing other names. On stage he looped the rupturing of his own body, it was never clear which

James Brown was James Brown; the one he made or the one he took apart. The mark on his back ensured the issue was never settled. Spillers would perhaps agree with Leon Austin's view that his mark was the outcome of his darkness/blackness. Brown used the mark to complicate the line between beauty and ugliness. He was not ripping up a stable James Brown. Ripped-apartness was instead the site of black (re)production for all those performances which operated under the name James Brown.

### **Return to Brown's preface**

So far the textual account of the preface has been used to analyse Brown. The textual account does not address what was identified earlier as the structural features of the preface. Brown's identification of the mark is not the sole significance of the preface, the question it raises over the constitution of James Brown also has something to do with his decision to name the mark at that juncture. Rather than the main body of the autobiography, Brown used the preface as the place to name the mark, and it is not mentioned anywhere else in the book. This use of the preface serves to extend the practices of dispersion and unity that accompanied Brown. To grasp Brown's preface structurally, requires thinking about how the preface is made. It also requires thinking about the preface in relation to the text it announces. In her translators preface to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Spivak examines the process of preface making (1976). Reflecting on preface making is a central aspect of Derrida's own work. His *Dissemination* (2004) opens with an "Outwork, prefacing", in which he discusses the process. For him the preface is spatially and temporally imbalanced (Derrida, 2004, 6) and Spivak takes a similar line in her own preface to Derrida's work. She states that despite preceding the main body of a text, the preface is always an act of reflection. Although it is positioned before the text, securing it as a site of authority, it can only ever be written after the event of the text's production. Therefore as a reading of the text before the event of the text's reading, a preface operates in a spatio-temporal flux. It is out of sync with yet dependent upon the text it announces:

A written preface provisionally localizes the place where, between reading and reading, book and book, the inter-inscribing of 'reader(s)', 'writer(s)' and language is forever at work. Hegel had closed the circle between father and son, text and preface. He had in fact suggested, as Derrida makes clear, that the fulfilled concept – the end of the self-acting method of the philosophical text – was the pre-dicate – pre-saying – pre-face, to the preface. In Derrida's reworking,

the structure preface-text becomes open at both ends. The text has no stable identity, no stable origin, no stable end. Each act of reading the 'text' is a preface to the next. The reading of a self-professed preface is no exception to the rule. (Spivak, 1976, xii)

For Spivak the preface as a formal device contorts the text it announces. Rather than securing the main text, the preface reveals that both are open. The preface is dissociated from the text, despite offering a reading of it. Contrary to convention, a preface is unable to stabilise the text it announces and the attempt to use it in such a way exposes the unstable relationship between the text and preface. Spivak's analysis of preface making is relevant to James Brown's autobiography. Inside the preface he uses the mark to unsettle the singularity of his name, which in turn unsettles the singularity of his body, as it appeared on stage. As Spivak notes, the preface always exists outside of the text it announces, but it is also always tied to it. Due to this enfolding, the preface destabilises the authority of the text. Within the preface Brown is not only refusing his own name, that act is redoubled by its staging it in there. Brown is refusing the authority his autobiography lays claim to. Brown makes it clear he was marked from the getup, and a priori violence was constitutive of him. By naming the mark as a priori to the autobiography, Brown is marking the main body of the text. Before Brown can be read autobiographically, he has already refused that reading. In short James Brown is prefaced by his status as Jamesbrown. The mark is already at work, it always has been, from the getup.

Brown, in effect, performed the content and form of his preface. He was never able to settle as Brown at any level because there was always the rupture of the mark at work. It dissolved the coherency provided by the proper name, the body or the self-narrative. Whatever he produced though also carried the indisputable mark of James Brown. The mark, as an a priori dissonance, was generating performances of James Brown. It created the need for the continual looping of performances by leaving space for transformation. This space was the outcome of the mark, it was the result of something with resembled a beating, a kind of beat. The mark was an "open rhythmic space" and Brown eventually began generating black performances of unity and resistance from within this zone of beat(ing) (Moten, 1999, 230).

### **The new bag/new thing**

*Live at the Apollo* and The T.A.M.I. show represented a distinct period in Brown's career where he spent time honing a live performance style. As Maceo Parker noted, Brown was never able to settle. There was always a desire to move the thing on. The *Apollo/T.A.M.I* period was defined by theatricality because Brown's performance of James Brown took place on stage. From around 1964 Brown moved away from theatricality and focused on his and the band's sound. He developed a way of organising the band which carried the mark of James Brown. In carrying that mark, Brown's new sound was also thought to be a sonic constitution of blackness. This new black sound was soon interpreted as evidence of a new militancy for Brown.

The use of the mark as a sonic source allowed Brown to open up the possibilities contained within the preface. Brown was using the tension of the mark to implement different principles of sonic organisation. Reorganising his sound meant reorganising his group. Therefore the stage act which largely focused on him as a performer became an increasingly communal process. These notions of a new sound and new arrangement of the group came to signify a new blackness. At the same time something Spillers might call the psycho-sexual affects of black marking were also opened up. The blackness of Brown's new sound was accompanied by an eroticism which, much like the marking Spillers outlines, was grounded in violence.

When discussing the sonic shift that took place in 1964, Brown is very specific about how he and the group forged their alternate musical parameters:

You can hear the band and me start to move in a whole other direction rhythmically. The horns, guitar, the vocals, everything was starting to be used to establish all kinds of rhythms at once. On that record you can hear my voice alternate with the horns to create various rhythmic accents. I was trying to get every aspect of the production to contribute to the rhythmic patterns.

I was still called a soul singer – I still called myself that – but musically I had already gone off in a different direction. I had discovered that my strength was not in the horns, it was in the rhythm. I was hearing everything, even the guitars like they were drums. I had found out how to make it happen. On playbacks, when I saw the speakers jumping, vibrating a certain way, I knew that was it: deliverance. I could tell from looking at the speakers that the rhythm was right. What I'd started on 'Out of Sight' I took all the way on 'Papa's Bag'. Later on they said it was the beginning of funk. I just thought of it as where my music was going. The title told it all: I had a new bag. (Brown, 1989, 149,158)

Rhythm became the organising principle for a new version of the band and for Brown's new sound. Brown felt new possibilities lay in getting each of the instruments to play

“like they were drums”. He saw a “different direction” in the way the speakers were vibrating. The new group which emerged out of Brown's changes were much tighter. Organised along rhythmic lines, the differences between the groups parts were no longer so marked. Even the space between Brown and the group was reduced. The distinctions between the parts and the whole, the leader and the group were blurred.

After a lengthy period using this new practice, Brown eventually named the rhythmic texture the band were using “the one”. It became known as “the one” in funk music, the sound Brown's post-64 experiments were said to have created. The concept of the rhythmic one is not entirely of concern here, although it is a related issue and Anne Danielsen's *Presence and Pleasure: the funk grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (2006) offers an extended analysis of the central role “the one” in funk went on to play in Black popular music in the U.S. What is of concern is Brown and the band's initial use of this new practice prior to its codification as “the one” in funk. During this period the group's new sound did not have a settled name. It was referred to as the new thing, the new bag, “James Brown Anticipation”, a move in another direction, and was described as being “ahead” (Rose, 1990, 59). The flux implied by the inability to give the new practice a settled name is significant. It is worth thinking about how the new sonic bag became attached to new militant concepts of blackness which were emerging at the same time. Brown's group were believed to be producing recordings of a new black political feeling.

The group's convergence on the beat did not reduce the scope of the music they played. Brown's introduction of a singular principle in fact led to an intense period of creativity. The group's sonic palette was enhanced by what were seemingly musical constraints. The new rhythmic dominance manifested itself as a series of specific sonic traits. These traits were indistinguishable from musical themes. A relationship developed during this period between what the music was doing, the way the music was experienced and what it was about. Post 1964, if James Brown's music was *of* anything it was determinedly tactile and textured. The sound became almost perceptible as an object. If James Brown's music was *about* anything, it was about blackness. The new sound the group were producing was approaching the status of a black object. Brown began to use this part sound-part object to contribute to the atmosphere of increasingly militant Black Consciousness in the U.S. But each time this new black rhythmic sound-object was recorded, a frustrated eroticism interrupted its full realisation. Brown and the band could never quite get to the place where the feeling of the sound was. Some

violent, sexual thing always got in the way.

From 1964 with the release of “Out of Sight” through to 1971, Brown and the band put their new rhythmic principles into practice. The first three years of the new sound were released on a set of near exemplary pieces of what Amiri Baraka would go onto call “New Black music”. The recordings made by Brown and the band over this period were driven by tensions. These were tensions between: the feel of the music and its seemingly cryptic themes; the sound as an object and sound represented as musical language; blackness and a sado-masochistic eroticism.

Brown and the band announced their new sound with “Out of Sight”. The process of stripping down the arrangement to core rhythmic elements had begun with this track. The implication on this record is that the group are beginning to relocate themselves within a new space. “Out of Sight” marks the initial piercing of a limit and a move in another direction. Brown reveals that he is starting to see and feel something new. What began in “Out of Sight” was more fully realised in “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag” later that year. The track is a definitive arrival at the a new sound. Immediately the sound is imagined as thing, a new bag. This tension between naming the sound as an object and its realisation as such becomes apparent in the work undertaken by the drums and the bass. Holding a tight line they encircle and converge upon a specific spot. By encircling in this way they appear to trace the contours of a potential new object. Despite using rhythm to form a new sound “Papa” is preoccupied by a sense of frustration. The frustration is with an object which resists full sonic revelation. The track therefore acts not only as an announcement of a *new breed thing*, but asks questions of Brown and the band ability to make that thing. The rhythmic materialisation of this new object was a desire as much as a demand.

“Cold Sweat” was a more concerted effort to speculate upon the new thing. The track has unique density and weight. It sounds like an attempt to record tangible blocks of rhythm which drop around the object. But these heavy blocks, rather than leading to a clarity about what the sound object is, once again produced discordancy. The title “Cold Sweat” situates the body intimately within this process. With the band playing almost as one, Brown reveals an intense erotic desire for the physical possession of the object. The new thing is figured by Brown and the band as a feminine object. The new bag sounds like it is being characterised as a woman. This anthropomorphism means the record becomes a violent sexually charged pursuit of desire. Brown cuts away at the material perceived to be extraneous to the female object in order take hold of it and

*satisfy a force*, but again the satisfaction is deferred. The object remains frustratingly beyond the frame, leading Brown to break out - *in a cold sweat*.

“I Got the Feeling” involves a similar set of manoeuvres. The band use their rhythmic expertise to place the squeeze on Brown. They force him into a space between the sound they produce and the thing they seek. Brown responds by declaring that he has *that feeling*. His identification of feeling becomes the engine for the track. Brown's claim that he has *the feeling* mark an intimacy with the object. He is close enough to be able to feel it, but *the feeling* also operates as a limit. It marks the failure by either Brown or the band to have the object in their full possession. Once again a frustrated eroticism arrives to fill this space. In this case it is a stuttered, interrupted plea by Brown, reminiscent of “Please Please Please” but at an accelerated level – *baby baby baby, baby baby baby*.

In the wake of “Papa” the sonic thing Brown and the band were pursuing was not only erotic, feminine and corporeal, it was also black. With “I Don’t Want Nobody To Give Me Nothing” Brown uses the formal demand for Black self-determination to define the blackness of this new thing. He maps out the clarity, immediacy and truth which necessitate the realisation of a self-determined black sound object. No compromise is possible. In the midst of this sonic planning another unavoidable trace of eroticism emerges. This reaches a peak with a moment of pornography which closes the track. The group's desire for a purposeful black militant object is accompanied by a threat of sexual violence if the terms set out are not satisfied. Brown’s forceful demands give the track a political legitimacy, but they also expose an undercurrent of masochism. His imploring *c’mon I got to have it, c’mon I need it, I got to have it, c’mon I need it, I got to have it* signals an erotic desire that is unable to separate itself from this overt document of Black political consciousness.

From “Out of Sight” through to “I Don't Want Nobody” Brown and the band moved “in a whole other direction rhythmically”. This was a move in another direction aesthetically he they also moved in another direction politically. The changes in how the group used rhythm meant they were partially forming, partially pursuing a new sonic object, but their pursuit and formation of this object was frustrated. Across several tracks it failed to fully materialise and its failure to materialise was often built upon an eroticism. The new black object was a source of sexual frustration. Yet this erotic resistance was emanating from within the band. It seemed to be a part of their new aesthetic. By organising themselves according to specific rhythmic principles, James Brown and his band were forming a new sound object. It was a sound object which was

black. The black thing their new rhythmic process was almost recording was being disrupted by the very process of assembling the thing itself. A rhythmic libidinousness constantly appeared on their records to interrupt the formation of the new black thing.

There is a correlation between the effects of what went on to be called “the one” and the mark in Brown's preface. In the autobiographical preface the a priori mark refused the name James Brown and it also reproduced the name endlessly through other names. The mark was constitutive of James Brown as refusal and as reproduction. With the post-1964 experiments, rhythm became a formative principle of the new James Brown group. Something though emerged out of those new vibrations which refused the sonic thing Brown could feel ahead. Getting all the instruments to play like they were drums was constitutive of and resistant to James Brown's new black thing.

### **The skin of the drum**

The connection between Brown's preface and the post-1964 sound lies in thinking rhythm as marking. It lies in the space between beat and beating. Thinking about rhythm in this way complicates a common set of distinctions. Normally musical rhythm is thought of as a beat, which the body then responds to generally as a pleasurable experience. The physical marking of the body though is considered a violent and invasive act of beating. Bringing these formulations into contact blurs the basis of those distinctions. The simultaneous use of “rhythm”, “beating”, “marking”, and “beat” complicates the distinctions between physical violence and musical pleasure. With reference to James Brown, the ensemble of marking, rhythm, beat, beating seem to be attached to blackness. He had a mark he carried from the getup and this was a mark of darkness, perhaps even blackness. Later he reorientated himself and his band towards specific rhythmic principles. The resulting beat he produced was a new thing. The sound was ahead and it was also deemed to be black.

To work out the transferences between Brown's preface, his blackness and his sonic experiments in 1964, it is necessary to follow the movement between instrumental and corporeal beating. Rhythm has been a dominant feature of many musical analyses of black diasporic cultures in the West. Often the focus of these analyses has been the tension between problematic interpretations of rhythm as a natural black practice and the strategic uses of rhythm by Black diasporans. Simon Frith and Ronald Radano have addressed these tensions in their work on race and music

(Frith, 1998; Radano, 2000). Discussions about blackness and rhythm also tend to towards dance and performance. Ifeoma Nwankwo and Mamodou Diop cover many of these concerns in their *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World: Rituals and Remembrances* (2010).

In *Different Drummers* Martin Munro argues the relationship between blackness and rhythm in the Americas has been misunderstood and undertheorised (2010). Significantly Munro discusses James Brown's use of rhythm as a practice of the Black Consciousness movement. After the release of "Out of Sight", Munro believes Brown's music showed that "rhythm is not a static element of black music but a dynamic, evolving force for innovation that projects forward into the future, imagining new functions for the beat and inventing new musical styles" (Munro, 2010, 188). For Munro Brown's focus on the rhythmic one marked out a form of blackness for which, at the time, there did not seem to be an available discursive language. For the purposes of this chapter though John Mowitt's *Drumming, Striking, Beating* (2002) will take precedence over Munro. Mowitt is being given priority because he closely tracks the relationship between musical rhythm and corporeal violence. Mowitt allows for a link to be drawn between Brown's use of marking, rhythm and blackness, and the work of Hortense Spillers. His theorisation of beat(ing) and rhythm correlates with Spillers' work on blackness as psycho-sexual flesh rupture. Through Mowitt's analysis of rhythm it is possible to tie together the textual, theatrical and sonic aspects of Brown's performance. It becomes clear how rhythm can be filtered back into the mark he carried from the get up. Furthermore, it becomes clear how for James Brown, rhythmic marking was constitutive of both a sonic blackness and a disruptive libidinality.

John Mowitt's *Percussion: drumming, beating, striking* is an attempt to theorise "the relation between music and meaning" (Mowitt, 2002, 2). He wants "to come to terms with the sense made in and of senseless beating" (Mowitt, 2002, 2). Rhythm for Mowitt troubles the difference between musical sense and senselessness. To frame his analysis he establishes "the concept of the percussive field" which is defined by three areas, the musicological, the sociological and the psychoanalytic (Mowitt, 2002, 3). The drum relays the divisions of this field because it is a "richly catachrestic instrument":

By that I mean not only that the drum must be abused to be played, but also that in possessing a body, a skin, a head, and a voice, the drum has long represented the expressive interiority that we call the subject, the human being insofar as it intones "I". It is as though the drum cannot be represented without figuring it

through the body; in this sense the drum links the musicological with the psychoanalytical. By the same token, of course, the body has also long functioned as a site of percussive beating.

He continues:

In a more aggressively violent register, flogging, flagellating, scourging, whipping, and spanking all exemplify the same phenomenon. Whether beaten by others or by oneself, the body, and specifically the skin, hinge the individual and the social, serving as the site of social contact in its most banal and intractable sense. Drumming often involves slapping the skin of the hand against an animal's skin (though plastic is now more common) to produce a striking sound that moves the bodies of others through the medium of sonic contact. (Mowitt, 2002, 6)

For Mowitt the drum is catachrestic because it can be substituted for the body. As such it has an attachment to the human. The exchange with the body is activated through the process of drumming. Rhythm becomes the means of materialising the substitution between drum and human, human and drum. For the drum to be sounded its skin must be beaten. Human co-ordination with the material world is also realised through the skin, which too must be beaten. The beaten skin marks the difference between the interior and exterior world of the body and thus allows it to become embedded in social exchange through the realisation of its rhythmic tactility. In both cases violence is at work. The beating of the object becomes its means of constitution. A beating of the skin also achieves the same thing for the body.

Mowitt's "percussive field" is not solely about seamless flows between the body and the drum. His notion of rhythmic hinge implies beating is also a site of breakdown. The relationship between the drum and the body is rhythmic. Rhythm may be a "medium of sonic contact", but a border divides as much as it connects. For Mowitt's transformative reading to work, rhythm also needs to be thought of as a process which violently marks the difference between human, drum and object. The pathway from human to drum to object and back again, is marked by a "striking sound" (Mowitt, 2002, 6). This strike is the hinge where these categories come into exchange. It is the sound of the difference between them.

It is at this point that Spillers analysis of blackness as marking comes into play. Her essay centred on the attempt to rethink captive Africans as black objects through the orchestrated physicality of violence. Beating became the means of suspending subject status for Black diasporans. This violence was primarily disseminated through the female. She was beaten and her flesh marked in order to stimulate the reproduction of

slaves, but her reproductivity had none of the material, sexual, gendered and psychic reassurances that accompanied legitimate maternal practices. For Black diasporans in the U.S. this marking became an inheritance. The wound was passed on and its ruptures came to stand for blackness. As Spillers makes clear, blackness was organised through the “displacement of genitalia”. There was a violated and violent psycho-sexuality at stake in the maternal inheritance which was blackness. The vibrations of beating had been in place since the getup.

The rhythmic exchange between human, the drum and the object maps onto the psychic legacy of blackness as reproduction of beating. It does so in a way that becomes applicable to James Brown. Mowitz and Spillers combine to open up the mark in Brown’s autobiographical preface. Filtered through their work the mark becomes a part of the post 1964 rhythmic innovations. The scene of marking in the preface was an acknowledgement of blackness as inherited anatomical distortion. It was also its activation. Brown’s mark never allowed a singular James Brown to exist. What he was able to do was to use the a priori marking and allow it to propel his career as a performer. Brown’s theatricality was about excess. He was either excessively producing himself or excessively cutting himself. These performances were shaped by a broken circuitry whereby the body refused to be taken apart. The name, which felt like it was one word, recycled itself again, again and again.

The performances James Brown undertook on stage were a preparation for the sonic reconfiguration in 1964. His attempt to cut everything away bar the rhythm could be imagined as the rematerialisation of beating. This was a beat which had marked him from the getup and it was a beat(ing) which was black. Brown’s use of the mark was crucial to the way the music became a pursuit of a black object because the black object also became a site of refusal. The strategic use of rhythm allowed beat(ing) to become productive and disruptive. James Brown and his band were creating a black sonic object, but the object constantly produced a sexual resistance. The act of moving ahead, in a whole other direction, was never resolved. The black object remained a source of erotic frustration. This incompleteness was an important aesthetic and political procedure for Brown and the band, because it meant their use of the mark never settled down. Their production of blackness never settled down. Instead of recording a fully realised black object, James Brown and his band were operating within in what Fred Moten calls an “open rhythmic space” (Moten, 1999, 20) . The performance of blackness as rhythmic thing always remained open to further possibilities.

The phonic materiality of Brown's blackness was not only operative in the records he made. It can also be found in a range of textual and audio-visual documents. What was particular about the black phonic substance which manifested itself across all of these materials was that each time it was produced, it was also always marked, cut and beaten. There was an internalised tension between Brown and the mark on his back, between Brown and his name, between Brown and his band, between Brown and the rhythm. This tension animated his blackness, but also always animated the rupturing of that blackness. Mowitt and Spillers help illuminate a corporeal and sexual economy at work within Brown's performative vexations. All the elements which had been in play since the getup were concentrated into Brown's 1964 sonic innovations. He reorganised his band to push towards the rhythmic constitution of a militant black sound object. Each push towards its making seemed to be accompanied by a refusal of its realisation. The resulting frustration marked the blackness of Brown's sound, both in the drive towards the sound object and the "open rhythmic space" its escape left behind.

The concept of "open rhythmic space" acts as a bridge between the close of this chapter and the turn to Amiri Baraka in the next. From the mid 1960s onwards, unity, rhythm, beating and sexual antagonism were at play in the discourse of Black Cultural Nationalism, to which Baraka was central. The Nationalist program was fixed upon the material and psychic constitution of black territory. It seems more than a coincidence that in pursuing this program, figures such as Baraka listened closely to the sonic form and content of Brown's rhythmic experiments.

## **Part 1 – Black Cultural Nationalism, resistance and rhythmic unity**

### **Chapter 2 – Amiri Baraka**

Amiri Baraka was one of the leading and most controversial black radicals of mid-to-late Twentieth century America. Using a range of practices and always reassessing his ideological positions, Baraka was attentive to the question of black radicalism in the U.S. He continually asked questions of what blackness meant and his answers were often considered unpalatable. Baraka drew such responses because he closely studied the violence which accompanied Black life. Between 1964 and 1975 the version of himself Baraka presented was that of the Black Cultural Nationalist. He was amongst the leading proponents of this project. Black Cultural Nationalism in the U.S. was about black territory. It was a project concerned with the territory required to build a self-determined black nation. Responding to the historical circumstances of Black diasporans in the U.S., Black Cultural Nationalism was as much about the metaphysical as the material pursuit of black territory

Baraka used political essays, activism, poetry, voice, and literature to instrumentalise the case for black territory. When working through each of these practices he was also always building the black nation. Baraka's poetics, writings, actions and use of voice were the theorisation *and* the constitution of territory. As part of his focus on the relationship between theory and its utilisation, Baraka was emphasising the role of black music. He felt that in the materiality of black music lay the possibility for the black nation as collective consciousness and concrete territory. This chapter will focus on Baraka's obsessions with the black music of James Brown. Across a range of his work, Baraka made the case for the post-1964 rhythm experiments of Brown's band as the anticipatory realisation of the Black Cultural Nationalist project. More than that, Baraka used Brown as the template for the phonic materiality of his own practice as a poet. Baraka wanted to use his voice as a black revolutionary instrument in ways which would make it sound like Brown's black militant music.

In this chapter I will pursue this line using a recording of Baraka reading his poem "Our Nation is Like Ourselves" in tandem his theorisations of what was at stake in Brown's music, and set them off against arguably the peak of Brown's "new breed thing", his 1971 record "Super Bad". The hypothesis is that Baraka came very close to achieving his aims, because he tapped into the tension which animated the phonic materiality of Brown's music. Baraka pursued the sonic constitution of black territory by

way of rhythmic marking. Like Brown, each time he attempted to mark out the nation, to push for it, it too broke down because of violent eroticism which accompanied it. What will emerge in the final chapter of this case study, is not simply that the phonic materiality of Baraka's blackness was a mimesis of Brown's. Instead Baraka was pursuing a “place” in his music, whilst not being entirely attentive to the ruptures which were fundamental to its sonic organisation. For Baraka, as a Black Cultural Nationalist, he desired to assemble a place where black people could live which sounded like Brown's music, but he wanted to do so by banishing troubling encounter with the sexual politics of masculinity.

### **Amiri Baraka listening to James Brown**

Baraka's declaration of black political allegiance following the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 marked the opening of his cultural nationalist program. His 1974 break with the doctrine in favour of Third World Marxism signalled its loss of political vigour. Over this period Baraka took on the multiple roles of political figurehead, activist, cultural critic, poet and playwright. This allowed him to enfold aesthetic questions of blackness into the demands for concrete territorialisation. For him black cultural activity was the engine of any black radical project. Thus his 1965 founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School (BARTS) opened the way for the Black Arts movement. The Black Arts movement was the radically charged experimental component of Black Cultural Nationalism (Baraka and Neal, 1968; Gaye, 1971; Smethurst, 2005; Collins and Crawford 2006). Following the collapse of BARTS, Baraka solidified his cultural nationalism under the direction of Maulana (Ron) Karenga and his California based United Slaves (U.S.) organisation (Brown, 2003). The combination of cultural and communal politics came to fruition in his home city of Newark, New Jersey. Here he established an arts centre (know as The Spirit House) but also instigated community activism amongst the city's Black population. This eventually led to a successful campaign for Newark's first Black mayor, Kenneth Gibson. Baraka used these gains to form the Modern Black Convention movement, a series of events which sought to bring together black political organisations from across the country to set a national agenda for Black Power (Baraka, 1984; Woodard, 1999; Watts 2001). Whilst operating in the realm of city based and national radical black politics, Baraka remained highly productive culturally. Poetry (*Black Magic, It's Nation*

*Time*), plays (*A Black Mass*) and essays (*Home: social essays, Black Music*) continually addressed blackness as a metaphysical question. In the context of the U.S. the question of black aesthetics could never not be wrought with political significance.

Baraka's aesthetics were his politics and his politics served as the ground for his aesthetics. As part of the cross-pollenisation of black activism and black art, Baraka emphasised the role of Black popular music. The case he made for Black popular music and/as black radicalism has already been set out in the Frameworks chapter. In order to study Baraka's nationalism through the lens of James Brown, it is necessary to return to his 1966 essay "The Changing Same". There is a passage in the essay where he listens closely to James Brown. The claims he makes in this passage offer an insight into Baraka's politics. The way Baraka listened to James Brown reveals something about how he was theorising black territory.

Baraka builds this section in "The Changing Same" around the "hard, driving shouting of James Brown" (Baraka, 2010, 211). This lends his music a "straight out, open" quality (Baraka, 2010, 211). The directness can be understood as the musical enactment of blackness: "The world James Brown's images power is the lowest placement (the most alien) in the white American social order. Therefore, it is the Blackest and potentially the strongest" (Baraka, 2010, 212). For Baraka, Brown's blackness could be heard as a sonic immediacy which also made it radical. Brown's music felt immediate because its directness was constitutive of black territory:

If you play James Brown (say, 'Money Won't Change You...but time will take you out') in a bank, the total environment is changed. Not only the sardonic comment of the lyrics, but the total emotional placement of the rhythm, instrumentation and sound. An energy is released in the bank, a summoning of images that take the bank, and everybody in it, on a trip. That is, they visit another place. A place where Black People live. (Baraka, 2010, 212-213)

What Baraka hears in Brown is "a place where Black people live". His music summons such a place. This "place" is not summoned because Brown sings about it. Lyrics are not the issue here. Instead the relationship between black place and sound is rhythmic. Brown's emotional placement of rhythm releases an energy and this energy is black place. Brown's music constitutes black place because it accommodates "a people and an energy harnessed and not harnessed by America" (Baraka, 2010, 211).

Baraka makes exceptional claims for Brown's music. Firstly he claims Brown's music is direct and immediate. The immediacy is a manifestation of the blackness of the music

because Brown's sound is "straight, out" blackness. Baraka focuses on the textures of Brown's music. He is attentive to its rhythms as the site of production for black space. The musical space of rhythm is the communal space of blackness. The black nation Baraka was looking to build was already at work in Brown's sound. Baraka could hear in Brown's placement of beat the territorial mark of blackness. There is a sense in which Brown's reorganisation of his band in 1964 was feeding into the Black Cultural Nationalist project. By forming a new group and thus forming a new sound, Brown was creating Baraka's desire for territory. The beating (out) of musical space by Brown, according to Baraka, became a rhythmic production of black space. The attention paid to the activity of rhythm reveals something about the blackness of place. It reveals how notions of black metaphysical and material space were being theorised within the nationalist project.

To comprehend what Baraka invokes when he hears black place, it is important to grasp the value given to "place" within Black nationalist ideology. The desire for "a place where black people live" was the central tenet of nationalist thought. Understanding what Baraka meant by black place will offer an insight into what he heard in Brown's music.

### **Black nationalism and territory**

For Black Cultural Nationalists "place" was not only a formal claim over territory. It was also an emotive register of dwelling. "Place" meant the location of space for black consciousness to dwell. The transference of a discourse of land into questions of blackness, metaphysics and space occurred because of the historically inherent landlessness of Black populations in the U.S. What came forth from Black nationalist programs were concepts of territory, land and nation that were often deemed unworkable. This was a tactical improvisation. It became a means of not only locating space but also rethinking the very structures used to hold political collectivity.

The Black nationalist approach to space, territory and communality has become a major topic of Black studies scholarship. In 1997 William L Van DeBurg put together a comprehensive anthology of Nationalist writings which addressed some of the problematic historiographical approaches to the subject. Essien Udosen Essien-Udom has attempted to understand its appeal for largely urban black communities (1995). Dean E. Robinson's *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought* (2001) put

forward a controversial thesis about nationalist ideologies mirroring trends in mainstream American political discourse. In Michael C Dawson's *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideology* (2002) what becomes apparent is that despite the range of alternatives, the broad Nationalist programme was driven by core ideas of spatial formation and control. The problem for Black nationalist thought was "the central concept of a separate black nation" (Dawson, 2002, 91). Dawson poses a critical question of Black nationalist discourse by asking how a nation could have been located as a landed entity and then realised as a state formation in the U.S. He believes the nationalist response to these questions was to a certain degree paradoxical. There was a desire to forge a collective existence independent of the U.S. that emerged through the black radicalism of the mid 1960s. This was the result of "the bitterness of African-Americans over their inability to protect their land, property and families" (Dawson, 2002, 96). The roots of this idea had already been established by such forebears as Marcus Garvey and W.E.B Du Bois. Black nationalist thought achieved an added potency through the political development of Malcolm X in the early 1960s. He used his public platform during this period to make direct links between the Black population of the U.S., and the Third World anti-colonial liberation movements of Asia and Africa. Malcolm X was attempting to figure Black people in the U.S as a colonised population. He wanted to use this particular version of "place" as a basis from which to launch a black revolutionary struggle in the U.S.

The problem was that Third World nationalisms were inextricably linked to the decolonisation and reclamation of lost territory. Colonised and former colonised peoples in Africa and Asia had direct claims on land which had been taken, but "the land over which the black revolution [was] to be fought was never specified" (Dawson, 2002, 97). In reality "the status of land and statehood [were] ambiguous" for Black nationalists as there was not an identifiable territory to be recovered from the U.S. (Dawson, 2002, 97). Despite the potency of the identification with other colonised peoples, Dawson frames the desire for an independent nation as "a landless quest for self-determination" (Dawson, 2002, 97). The group of Black Cultural Nationalists who took up Malcolm X's legacy were able to work through this issue. What emerged out of the tension between a revolutionary Black nationalist struggle and the absence of reclaimable land was the *nation-within-a-nation*. This concept sought to open up the forceful sentiment of anti-colonialism and make it applicable to black radicalism in the U.S. The nation-within-a-nation operated on the basis that Black populations existed within, but were

markedly distinct from, an American mainstream. This was due to the long history of active Black exclusion from national narratives of liberty, citizenship and democracy, a scenario established through the terms set by enslavement.

The phenomena of 1960s and 1970s Black nationalism was predominantly a movement that grew in the northern cities.<sup>2</sup> The nation-within-a-nation thesis was framed through major black urban centres. These centres were evidence of a blackness, which although existing in the heart of modern American power, was antithetical to it because exclusion was ensured by high levels of disenfranchisement, state violence and poverty. The broad Black nationalist movement saw, to varying degrees, a potential for revolutionary insurgency amongst the Black communities occupying these urban zones. The nationalists believed it required the re-organisation of urban centres into black territories which would lead to control over urban space: “Thus land becomes actualised programmatically with the nation-within-a-nation tradition through seeing land as spatially located within urban black communities, as the basis for community control of black institutions” (Dawson, 2002, 100).

### **Baraka's Nationalism and poetics**

As a leading Cultural Nationalist, Baraka was at the forefront of attempts to reclaim the urban environment. He saw the overabundance of disenfranchised Black people in the ghetto as a basis for his cultural nationalist activities. Baraka's skill was in reducing this political program to the simple maxim of controlling the land underneath one's feet: “Black Power is for control of the space you *can* control called part of the society” Baraka was identifying specific urban sites as the starting points for the black nation: “Neither Harlem, nor Hough, nor Watts are really America. They are controlled by America”. If these minor territories could be claimed, then they would serve as the basis for the nationalist project: “Black Power, as an actuality, will only exist in a Black-oriented, Black-controlled space” (Jones/Baraka, 1968, 121-123). But to build a nation-within-a-nation by laying claim to Black dominated locales was not enough. For Baraka

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<sup>2</sup> Black nationalism and a more militant black radicalism was not exclusive to the North though. It is arguable that one of roots of black militancy lay in the South with Robert F. Williams. Williams was an NAACP branch president in North Carolina and as early as the 1950s was advocating armed self-defence amongst the Black population in the south against the Ku Klux Klan. Williams' stance led him into confrontations with the SCLC and the broader non-violent tendencies within the Civil Rights movement. For more see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

such strategies needed to be accompanied by the reorganisation of blackness as a mode of being: “the power to control our lives ourselves. All of our lives. Our laws. Our culture. Our children. Their lives. Our total consciousness, black oriented” (Jones/Baraka, 1968, 119). In this scenario a (series of) black (urban) nation(s) would only come to fruition if the population are able to reach a state of radical consciousness. This state of consciousness would enable them to fully take control of their immediate environments:

Black Power is the Power first to be Black. It is better, in America, to be white. So we leave America, or we never go there. It could be twelve miles from New York City (or two miles) and it could be the black nation you found yourself in. That’s where your self was, all the time. (Jones/Baraka, 1968, 122)

Baraka was reframing a territorial issue into an metaphysical one. The concentrated pockets of Black populations may have been isolated within major American cities but psychically they existed outside America. Harlem and Watts were separated geographically but they were unified by consciousness. Blackness as consciousness was deployed to bridge the strategic gaps in the nation. The concept of territory as material entity was being reorganised by Baraka and his contemporaries. The black nation was not a coherently singular site, yet it remained unified by its blackness: a one that was not a one. This subtle shift was evident in the language of *black as a country* (Singh, 2004; Jones/Baraka, 2009). The improvisation of territory involved a reframing of colonialism. The project of epistemic violence was shifted from the capture of land and population, to a colonisation marked upon the black body and psyche. The emphasis was placed upon a decolonisation of the mind. Collectively reclaiming the dispossessed could transform an oppressed mass into a radical unit of blackness because they would be autonomous from the mental geography of the U.S. As each of the colonised within America came into being as consciously black, it would signal a further step towards “a place where Black people live”.

Realising this extra-territorial black communality was also for Baraka always an aesthetic project. There were of course vital politically strategic components of the nationalist program, but Baraka felt the metaphysical question of blackness was necessary to any concrete aims. The metaphysical question could be worked out through language, culture, performance and art. Baraka committed himself to creating art which was resolutely black. The resolute blackness of this art would rupture the conditions of

normal life in the U.S. For him though it was important that the blackness of black art was first experienced by Black people. It was through the shared metaphysical experience of black art that Black people could begin to organise new systems of living.

The conceptual and philosophical grounding of Baraka's approach to black artistic practice have been written about at length. Much of this work can be found within the field of Black literary studies. Since the late 1970s Baraka's intense productivity as writer has been analysed in depth (Sollors, 1978; Harris, 1985; Reilly, 1994). One of the more recent efforts is Kim Benston's *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (2000). Benston tells of how Baraka initially flourished as a poet in the New York avant-garde literary scene of the late 1950s and 1960s. Alongside the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, William Burroughs, Diane DiPrima, and Robert Duncan, Baraka was engaged with the major questions of poetic form of the time. Following his move towards radical Black politics in the U.S. and his early formation of a Black Arts program, the nature of this concern altered. According to Benston, Baraka began to transfer his openly militant stance to his work as poet and playwright. This change in approach was built upon the belief that a Euro-American definition of language as an expressive tool was dramatically opposed to primordial blackness, which in its fullest sense had always been denied space in the U.S. In fact a full realisation of blackness involved the "emphatic refusal of eloquence's prestige" (Benston, 2000, 11). The fuel for this fundamental rupture away from a Western philosophy of language was its representational function. For Benston, Baraka believed "representation temporarily, if hurtfully, hides or encodes blackness, allowing the possibility of its becoming present as a history which would not be fiction, as a wholeness which would no longer enact its own fragmentation" (Benston, 2000, 13). Baraka wanted an epistemic breach, whereby breaking the representational function of language would allow blackness to reveal itself.

At stake in his plays and poems was a "sacramental violence" which broke language, allowing for a move through to an anti-representational self-constituted thing beyond (Benston, 2000, 11). In this beyond lay blackness which was a thing in itself. Baraka's attempt to close the linguistic displacement of blackness was based on the belief that its "incarnation as literal presence, [a longing] for the singular revolutionary act that would 'murder' self-difference and heal the breach between black identity and discourse which the original violence of whiteness opened" (Benston, 2000, 11). The cleansing revolutionary violence which, according to Benston, Baraka was invoking moved in

anticipation of a literal unmediated black object. He was in pursuit of a blackness which existed on the hither side of representation. It was an object occupying an altogether different space, something which was unimaginable from the vantage point of whiteness.

Baraka's "indivisible kernel of blackness" was built on breaking the representational hold of whiteness (Benston, 2000, 12). A real black object did exist beyond a set of constraints, but it existed within its own space. This object, free of whiteness, was the primary realisation of the black nation. Baraka's metaphysical blackness was not entirely free of constraints though. As Baraka made black art and conceptualised the cultural nationalist program he placed borders around his version of blackness. Phillip Brian Harper (1998) and Marlon B. Ross (2002) have traced these constraints in Baraka's nationalism and focused on his poetics as the constitutional site of his blackness. Through Baraka's poetry it is possible to see how he defined blackness against a sexual limit. The political and aesthetic borders of black space were marked out erotically.

Harper focuses upon Amiri Baraka and his espousal of Black Arts rhetoric, which was "the aesthetic and spiritual sister" of Black nationalism (Harper, 1998, 40). He argues the dominant strand of such a rhetoric was a call to black unity in response to an external white threat, a unity which was necessary in order to avoid extinction in the U.S. Conversely an element of social division was also necessary for black unification to work: "I want to claim that the response of Black Arts Nationalism to social division within the black populace is not to strive to overcome it, but rather, repeatedly to articulate it in the name of Black Consciousness" (Harper, 1998, 44).

Harper examines Baraka's poem "SOS", published in *Black Art* (1965). He returns to the recurring focal line in this short piece: "calling Black people... / calling all Black people". It reflects the "fundamental impulse to racial solidarity" that was the overriding feature of Baraka's activism (Harper, 1998, 41). The poem carries out a demand for unity and summons "all black people" to assemble. For Harper the significance of "SOS" is that it contains nothing outside of this summons. All the poem does is call "black people in this nationalistic way...the objective for which it assembles the black populace is not specified" (Harper, 1998, 41). The question of what takes place after the gathering is suspended, and according to Harper, Baraka was unable to move beyond the call to the people.

Harper argues this was a practice common to much Black Arts poetry and Baraka was

an exemplary exponent of it. He and many other Black Arts poets worked counter-intuitively with regards to the expected aims of their writing. Rather than being designed to be “*heard* by blacks and *overheard* by whites”, Baraka’s poetics were “being *heard* directly by whites and *overheard* by blacks” (Harper, 1998, 45-46). Harper claims such divisions were actively deployed by the likes of Baraka. He pursues this thesis by re-reading the linguistic patterns of Black Arts poetics. It was a poetry which consistently challenged others to take up the nationalist cause. The performance of this division took place whereby the poetic voice sought to secure a fully radical blackness by differentiating itself from its audience. The audience in this case where those Black people “overhearing” the performance, whom it positioned as “negroes” as yet unable to heed the call:

Thus the project of Black Arts poetry can be understood as the establishment of black nationalist subjectivity – the forcible fixing of the identity of the ‘speaking’ I – by delineating it against the ‘non-*I* person’, the *you* whose identity is clearly predicated in the poems we are considering. (Harper, 1998, 48)

The desire to gather Black people served as a negative foil, against which the poet could stake out a position. The poet was secured in the radicalism of their own blackness by calling on others to raise their level of consciousness and join the nation.

Harper focuses on the lack of inclusiveness in the poetic construction of black communality, due to the deployment of an intra-racial division. He believes in the case of the Black Arts the core rhetoric was rooted in an anxiety over masculinity. Black Cultural Nationalism sought out “a rootedness in the day-to-day exigencies of black life” as its basis and the high-water mark of this was a model of grounded urban black masculinity (Harper, 1998, 49). The *real* black masculine type was sought out due to an anxiety over the role of the artist, writer and intellectual in the context of a black revolutionary project. There was a desire not to be seen as racially effeminate through a connection to a Euro-American tradition of intellectualism. As Marlon B. Ross puts it, there was a “punk” part of the Black Arts self that needed to be expelled in favour of “the *real* Black man of warring action” (Ross, 2002, 295). The primary sign of failed blackness as failed manhood was the homosexual. He was a figure alienated by association with intellectual whiteness from the homosocial collective of *real* blackness. Through Baraka, the Black Arts project was drawn up as an ideological aesthetics which could directly intervene in radical politics. Thus Baraka and his contemporaries adhered

to a “phallic standard of political engagement” (Harper, 1998, 52). According to Ross this was a way for Baraka to distance “himself and his audience from the realisation that as long as he has a pen in his hand, he is deferring picking up a real weapon” (Ross, 2002, 295). Harper identifies the limit within Black Arts rhetoric as a “profoundly problematic masculinist ethic” which works against the objective of racial solidarity and “actually engenders a division amongst blacks” (Harper, 1998, 52). This is not a criticism by Harper because he argues such gendered performativity is “paradoxically necessary to the nationalist project” (Harper, 1998, 53). In fact, he argues, it is a practical impossibility to efface one in favour of the other.

The masculine overtones in Baraka’s poetics are a dominant feature of his 1965 essay “American Sexual Reference: Black Male” published in *Home: Social Essays* (2009). The collection marked the closure of his theatre in Harlem, his return “home” to Newark and the solidification of Baraka’s nationalism. The writings were part of his project to build a “home” for Black people in the U.S. In the essay’s opening lines it becomes clear a phallic standard for radical blackness is being forged:

Most American white men are trained to be fags. For this reason it is no wonder their faces are weak and blank, left without the hurt that reality makes – anytime. That red flush, those silk blue faggot eyes (Jones/Baraka, 2009, 243)

Baraka secures his own position as a real Black man by distancing himself from effeminate whiteness. What this also ensures is that any Black people (namely men) *overhearing* these lines will be made fully aware of the sexual purity deemed necessary to become a part of the black nation. To be queer is not to be black and it is whiteness which is “the nonrealistic, the nonphysical” (Jones/Baraka, 2009, 243). Aesthetic queerness, if not kept at bay, will infect a naturally real urban black machismo: “the black man is more ‘natural’ than the white simply because he has fewer things between him and reality, fewer wrappers, fewer artificial rules” (Jones/Baraka, 2009, 245). What Baraka is doing is using whiteness strategically as the non-black, which allows him to set up an urban blackness as hypermasculine and whiteness as queer. The code buried in the passage is that a queer blackness can not ever be truly black. According to Baraka queer blackness is in fact closer to, and a desire for, whiteness.

### **The Barakan Voice**

Earlier in the chapter the problem of an obvious claim for land was outlined as central to the Black nationalist project. What Baraka and others within Black Arts did was to improvise between the territorial and the metaphysical. The desired black nation was a state of consciousness as much as a material entity. Black space could be constructed through modes of being, it was a geography of the mind. Despite eliding the territorial, Baraka still needed to mark out the psychic limits of black space. Harper and Ross illustrate how Baraka used sexual economies to mark out black territory. Blackness in this context was contained within a policed heterosexuality. The black nation was marked out against queer limits, and effeminacy rendered entry into the radical terrain of blackness impossible.

Baraka built his Black nationalist program on the basis of psychic unity. A series of concentrated but atomised urban black environments could be brought together through a common consciousness. Central to this consciousness though was a reductive heteronormativity. Baraka was able to open spaces within the logic of territory but he simultaneously closed these openings by installing a violent sexual limit upon the nation. As Harper makes clear, it is impossible to separate Baraka's problematic sexual politics from his militancy. The expulsion of queerness was a troubling but necessary part of his nation building project. Expulsion though produced complex resonances as part of Baraka's calls for nation time. Banishing effeminacy as non-black establishes it as a threat. The queer needs to be removed because it is a danger to the real black man and it could weaken the building blocks of the black nation. The act of expulsion though also involves pushing out something that was already inside. To expel something, is first to recognise it was interior. Expulsion, as push, is therefore also touch. It is about coming into contact with an interior object of disgust. Baraka's performance of hyper-masculine Black nationalism therefore always involved an incorporation of queerness. It was there from the getup. As he marked out the territory, the effeminate, less real (and potentially white) black man was being beaten, but also caressed.

The mechanics of expulsion and embrace also powered Baraka's phonic performance of nationalist poetics. These practices fed the vocal assembly of blackness as place. Kim Benston names this as the phenomenon of the "Barakan voice" (Benston, 2000, 192). What Benston is referring to here is not the writerly voice but the way in which Baraka used his voice as a broadcast device. He suggests the Barakan voice was a black sound instrument in and of itself. When performing in public the phonic activity of his voice was as critical as his words. Benston believes the Barakan voice involved a performance

of “perpetual undoing” (Benston, 2000, 192). He was sonically embedded in a “process of restless positing and interrogation” of a limit (Benston, 2000, 192). The Barakan voice projected itself into an anarchic phonographic zone between those who belong to and those exiled from the future black nation. He used his voice to present a manifesto of black freedom “not *for* transformation but *as* transformation” (Benston, 2000, 192).

The Barakan voice was part of a wider set of oral practices which informed Black Arts. Mike Sell believes the project was shaped by “Black logocentrism” (Sell, 2006, 278). Logocentrism in this case was an aesthetic and political concern. Aesthetically it functioned as a black “emphasis on voice and speech as ethical, metaphysical and critical thought” (Sell, 2006, 278). Politically the uses of voice could not be separated from “the concrete, localised project of nation building” (Sell, 2006, 278). Black logocentrism was politicised through a theorisation of the status of text. For Black Arts activists the voice offered the means to break the dominance of the text and written word. It was through the word that Western hegemony had achieved its dominance: “Black Arts vocal theory and practice can be viewed as part of a larger critical tendency, a tendency that worked to destroy whatever threatened the commodification of the Black body, of Black creativity, of Black culture – in short, an effective response to the theories and practices of slavery and colonialism” (Sell, 2006 279). The Black Arts voice became the instrument through which the material, psychic and performative zones of blackness in the U.S. could be unified: “Black voice sounds in singular, transformative spaces. These spaces are both theatrical (created out of the stuff of the stage) and actual (the neighbourhood, the auditorium, the spectator's body)” (Sell, 2006, 280). Sell argues Black Arts activists such as Baraka were aware of the contradictions at work in their logocentrism. They realised they made many of the arguments for logocentric practice by way of text. Further more they also knew they were dealing with the social environment around them as a symbolic text. This self-reflexivity, Sell argues, was one of the strengths of Black Arts logocentrism: “The Black voice is a peculiarly self-conscious voice” (Sell, 2006, 282).

### **“Our Nation is Like Ourselves”**

Recorded at Buffalo State College in 1970, Baraka’s performance of “Our Nation is like Ourselves” is an exemplary case of his vocally generated nationalist aesthetic (Baraka, 1974). Thematically “Our Nation is Like Ourselves” is a continuation of

“SOS” (as described by Harper). It gives an account of what the black nation constitutes, or to be more precise, the poem is an account of what the nation *should* and *should not* constitute. Much like “SOS”, “Our Nation” operates on the cusp of realising the nation. The poem is about gathering black people, but Baraka is motivated by idea that the full possibility of the people as one has not been realised. The nation remains unresolved because the entirety of the population has yet to move within its borders. Baraka’s poem is designed to bring those who are black enough inside.

The Barakan voice, as much as the lyrical content, serves to activate the poem in this recording. The phrase *Our Nation* structures Baraka’s performance as the poem’s theme. What is meant by theme is the poem’s “head” or repeating musical theme - as well as theme in terms of subject matter. Thus *Our Nation* is the de-facto site from which the Baraka voice is delivered. He attempts to assemble *Our Nation* by continually announcing its existence. What is being assembled is a unified black mass which moves in opposition to an existential *individual-individualism*. The individualism represents the thing against which Baraka builds, a Euro-American intellectual alienation which would only fracture the communality of a homosocial blackness. Unified blackness is a materiality all the people can feel, the black nation draws upon *all the blood, gotta get some blood*.

Baraka’s attempt to deliver forth a unified nation is continuously disrupted by an alterior tone. It is a tone which surfaces as the sonic condition of his politics. Working through those *niggers* who have not yet gained membership of *our nation* (*doctor nigger....lawyer nigger please pass some laws about us....liberated nigger with the stringy haired mind....nigger in the treasury department*), he calls them into the fold with the message that *we waiting*. This refrain signals the site of the social division that Harper specifies in “SOS”. The nation is waiting formation, it is waiting the entry of these *niggers*. The act of waiting justifies the militant politics of communalism. There is an urgency to get on with nation time, but the *waiting* also signals the impossibility of the nation’s arrival. Baraka uses the lag of the wait to launch his attack on those same *niggers*. Snarling at their lack of racial pride he secures his own radical consciousness. This double movement marks the negotiation with the vocal limits of his blackness and the ideology of territory. He assembles this succession of *niggers* calling them into the nation, and then places a bar on their entry. He questions whether they can undergo the transformation from racially effeminate individuals into members of the people. The dissonance that emanates from this calling reaches a peak. Baraka’s impassioned *You*

*are our nation sick ass assimulatto!* splices together the opposite poles of his ideological stance. The creation of boundaries comes to mark a site of (re)connection as much as a source of division. It appears to be impossible to separate the alienated *niggers* from the hypermasculinity of the nation. They each became crucial to the masculinism Baraka takes up.

This leads to a marked shift in tone as the performance reaches its conclusion. The denigrating attack upon those *niggers* is rearranged and turns into a pleading. He pleads them to cross the threshold from *nigger* to blackness. Baraka produces a jarred incantation of *please*. Baraka's *please* is an embrace to those *assimulatos* who are the source of his disgust. The *please* is uttered in the hope that they can become fully fledged members of *our nation*, but as is already evident these *niggers* are the necessary outside upon which Baraka's radicalism is being announced.

Baraka's repeated pleading marks a dissonant juncture within the desire for communal politics. On one level it signals the desire for a reunion with those not black enough. At the same time there is the continued impossibility of a reunion, as a reproduction of blackness. Therefore through the ongoing *please*, the limit marks the multiphonic recording of blackness. The *assimulatos* and *niggers* are the resistant limit of Baraka's black voice. The repulsion towards them becomes the sounding board for the militant edge of a blackness that wants to be monolingual but can never quite get there.

The repeated *please* act as sites of sonic dissonance. They are the point where Baraka's blackness is constructed but also breaks down. Having repeated the plea to those *niggers* to come in, Baraka slips into another instance of black pleading: *Like James Brown says, please, please, please*. The summoning of James Brown's "Please, Please, Please" is a significant gesture. If we recall, Baraka felt he heard in Brown a place where Black people live. Specifically, he heard this place in Brown's emotional use of rhythm. The combination of Baraka listening to James Brown, his citation of him at the end of this performance, and Baraka's attempt in the recording (both lyrically and sonically) to mark out the limits of the black nation, point to a unique sonic register in this recording of "Our Nation". His repeated enunciation of *please* is a rhythmic practice. *Please* is a beat. It is a rhythmic method for marking out the nation. In this sense *please* is also a beating. The Barakan voice turns into an instrument which beats out the borders of the nation.

So far in this chapter two moments have been presented where Baraka determinedly

points to the make-up of the black nation. In each case the nation is something which is constituted through sonic activity, and also in each moment he invoked James Brown as the sonic generator of a place where Black people live. Brown's arrangement of rhythm opened up the energies of black place for Baraka. When marking out the limits of black place, Baraka used Brown's model of rhythmic pleading. I would suggest there is something at work between Baraka's method of marking out territory and Brown's assembly of rhythmic textures. Queer theorist Robert Reid-Pharr offers a way of theorising all these elements. He provides a model for thinking Brown's use of rhythm (which was connected to the mark on his back, the mark he had had from the getup), and Baraka's attempt to violently mark out the hyper-masculine limits of the nation. In his analysis of the work of Eldridge Cleaver, Piri Thomas and James Baldwin, Reid-Pharr argues the queer body rhythmically troubled the distinction between being inside and outside black community:

First, as I have argued already, the strike against the homosexual acts as a seemingly direct confrontation with the presumption of black boundarylessness, or we might say the assumption of black subhumanity and black irrationality that has its roots deep in the history of slavery and the concomitant will to produce Africans as 'Other'. To strike the homosexual, the scapegoat, the sign of chaos and crisis, is to return the community to normalcy, to create boundaries around blackness, rights that indeed white men are obliged to recognize.

Second and perhaps more importantly, this violence allows for a reconnection to the very figure of boundarylessness that the assailant is presumably attempting to escape. As a consequence, black subjects are able to transcend, if only for a moment, the very strictures of normalcy and rationality that have been defined in contradistinction to a necessarily amorphous blackness. (Reid-Pharr, 2001, 103-104)

Reid-Pharr extends Harper's reading of intra-racial division in Baraka's poetics. Like Harper, he also sees it as necessary to a radical model of black masculinity. The queer body is a threat to the desire for black communal space, because it comes into direct confrontation with the attempt to build boundaries and it represents a boundarylessness. Therefore the queer body must be struck. It must be beaten. Beating and striking the queer allows the territory of black place to be marked out. Conversely marking out the borders of black space through the queer body means the community is always connected to it. Its apparent chaotic nature is always incorporated into the project of nation building. For Reid-Pharr this second move is critical. As the queer body is beaten

it is re-enfolded back into blackness. As the attempt to demarcate space is punctured, a further transcendent possibility is opened up.

Baraka was enacting such forms of beating. He pulled queerness inside in order to violently expel it from black territory. When he struck it as a site of racial impurity though he was always opening up another place of re-entry for it. The queer body was always coming back inside to disrupt Baraka's nation building program, thus necessitating an intensification of beating. Reid-Pharr's relevance to Baraka does not stop there. He extends the practice of beating and striking into a definitively sonic activity. It is by way of Reid-Pharr that it becomes possible to understand why Baraka could hear in James Brown's emotional placement of rhythm a place where Black people live:

As James Baldwin's Giovanni is slaughtered and as Thomas's effeminate gay men are fucked and beaten, *a type of music is produced*, a music that points the way to new modes of existence, new ways of understanding, that allow the community to escape, however briefly, the systems of logic that have proven so enervating to the black subject. The importance of the (scape)goat, then, is not so much that with its death peace returns to the village, or that crisis ends. The point is not simply to expurgate all that is ambiguous and contradictory. On the contrary, as the kid is consumed and *the drum is beaten*, the community learns to gain pleasure from 'the possibilities just beyond its grasp'. It receives proof of its own authenticity and insider status while leaving open a space for change, perhaps even the possibility of new forms of joy. The boundaries are for a moment re-established, but all are certain, even hopeful, that once again they will be erased. (Reid-Pharr, 2001, 134, emphasis added)

The drum is beaten and a type of music is produced which leaves open a space for change. Reid-Pharr offers a way of conceptualising what Baraka was hearing in James Brown. He identifies links between beating the queer body to create community, beating an object (drum), and rhythm as a constitution of collective space. This is what Baraka was referring to when he said Brown could alter entire environments by getting every instrument to play like it was a drum. Brown's new thing existed in another place, a place where Baraka believed Black people lived. The same connection of beating, rhythm and territory can be used for "Our Nation". Baraka's use of *please* to push away and re-encounter a racially impure and therefore queer outside was not just a lyrical tool. *Please* was also that strike, that beat, that rhythm. Baraka beat that word out. More than a rhetorical reference, *please* was the phono-rhythmic construction of a border.

Reid-Pharr can be used to study the aesthetics of Baraka's cultural nationalism

because his work allows us to conceptualise the over-emphasised masculinity which was a part of Baraka's radicalism at this point. The way in which Reid-Pharr speaks to Baraka encompasses John Mowitt's substitutive exchange between body and drum used in the previous chapter. In turn, this brings the mark on James Brown's back into a discussion about Baraka's vocal performance. The mark was a site of a priori beating, it was both constitutive and disruptive of James Brown. In Baraka's case, what Reid-Pharr calls the open space for change, was a result of his beating out the parameters of black space. This beating was both a material and psychic practice. Each time the beat hit, it left something else behind. This something else contained an unacknowledged possibility and the information contained in that something else was another music. The other music was a confession lingering within his militant poetic tones. Whenever Baraka marked out the heteronormative territory of the black nation, the territory fell apart on those very terms. The new forms of joy Baraka recorded were an unintended outcome of his nationalist project.

Brown's marking affected his performance physically and sonically. On stage he was unable to discontinue his own collapse. Brown made and unmade himself with an excessive intensity. After 1964 he used beating to produce a new black sound which moved in the trajectory of a thing. He sought to create a new sonic object by creating a new black community with his band. It was community organised by way of rhythm. Brown's rhythmic desire for a new thing and new community was troubled though. It was troubled by a sado-eroticism which was wrapped up in his desires. As the group rhythmically beat out the contours of the new object, a frustrated sexual economy was also being produced.

The difference between Baraka and Brown with respect to marking, beating and rhythm is a degree of self-awareness. Brown always knew he had been marked from the getup. He identified it in his preface, naming it prior to but as a part of his autobiography. As with the music, the mark disallowed any settled reading of James Brown. Deployed as musical principle, it dissolved any settled idea of a collective black sonic project. This did not prevent Brown from continually looking to build a rhythmic communalism. The psycho-sexuality of Brown's mark was constitutive and a breakdown of the place where Baraka imagined Black people lived.

### **James Brown's "Super Bad"**

For Baraka the beating out of black space involved an encounter with the mark of sexual indeterminacy. He sought to push this mark so far outside, it passed back into the territories of radical Black nationalism. For Brown, the mark was doing similar work, but was deployed rather differently. To grasp how the sexual and racial economies of marking were translated into rhythm by Brown and then turned into place by Baraka, it is worth returning to Hortense Spillers. Her “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” allowed the mark on Brown’s back to be conceptualised as a performative trope. For Spillers, blackness in the U.S. has always been about marking because the black body was treated as a sexually and racially indeterminate object. In the closing paragraph of her essay, Spillers offers a summation of blackness and marking. For her blackness is a site of beating and embrace. What is embraced and what is beaten is a maternal/feminine interior, the mark which was the making of blackness :

The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the mother, handed by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporise by a fatherly reprieve. This human and historic development – the text that has been inscribed on the benighted heart of the continent – takes us to the centre of an inexorable difference in the depths of American women’s community: the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated – the law of the Mother – only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father’s name, the Father’s law.

Therefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an ‘illegitimacy’. Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself, the infant child who bears life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverisation and murder, including her own. It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood – the power of ‘yes’ to the ‘female’ within. (Spillers, 2003a, 228)

The Black male in the U.S. has been touched and carries the mark of maternal law. It is through maternal law that blackness is produced. The black mark of maternity is a mark of illegitimacy which involves a denial of access to the proper. Not only does the mark repeat illegitimacy and denial, it is the means by which blackness becomes a set of imaginative possibilities. The Black male in the U.S., each time he produces masculinity, is also reproducing the disruption of masculinity. Each time he marks out a border, he produces a puncturing of the border. Each time he stakes a claim for place, he

breaks down place. This is because each performance of hyper-masculinity carries within it an illegitimate femininity. Its outside is buried within.

In this respect Spillers prepares the way for listening to James Brown's 1971 album track "Super Bad". This record is an exemplary case of the possibilities Baraka heard in Brown's music. Although Baraka could hear these possibilities he had difficulties realising them in his own militant aesthetics. In each enactment of his Black Cultural Nationalism, the open place where black people lived was lingering and unacknowledged. This open space was created through Baraka's attempts to enforce more exclusionary models of the black nation. Brown was producing a more non-exclusionary improvisation of black space.

Released originally as a three part continuous single, "Super Bad" arguably represented the peak of Brown's initial experiments in rhythm. This record could be thought of as the final flux before the process which started out in 1964 settled down into the more regulated forms of funk. In this respect I would argue on this record Brown leads the band in the production of highly organised de-articulation. They use rhythm as a dominant practice and through beat(ing) the band form the new thing Brown desires whilst also refusing it. This is not to say that on "Super Bad" a place where Black people live is produced and erased. Rather the record features a momentary proposal for the blackness Baraka wanted to make the basis for his cultural nationalist project. It was a sound he heard as place in Brown's music, but Baraka could not quite get around to acknowledging what was required to get to there.

"Super Bad" was a prime example of the principle Brown had installed in 1964. Every instrument had to play like a drum. The horns, organ, bass, drums and vocals were all aligned. At a certain point though Brown starts an exchange with Robert McCulloch on the alto-saxophone. He pulls McCulloch out of the rhythmic patterns the rest of the group are working on. Calling the alto into the centre of the performance, Brown commands McCulloch to take the band apart. Brown wants the alto to puncture the new sonic unity of the band. He implores McCulloch to do it. He implores the instrument, the musical object to be disruptive. He wants McCulloch to beat the collective rhythm the band are producing.

During this moment on "Super Bad" a type of music is produced that Reid-Pharr might recognise. Brown had spent the previous six years developing a sonic principle of beat(ing) that had allowed him to form a new sound. This new sound was a new thing. By tearing a hole in the new wholeness the band were reaching for, Brown was staying

attuned to new modes of existence, new ways of understanding, new forms of joy. These possibilities were marked within the new black thing Brown had begun to hear in 1964, but they also lay beyond its grasp. Brown had found a way to touch them. He had found a way to say yes to another type of music which was produced when everything was beaten like it was a drum.

Between James Brown and Amiri Baraka there appears to have been a set of repeating patterns at work. These patterns appeared with such regularity between 1964 and 1971 that at times their respective practices became almost indistinguishable. Both were concerned with a violence and rupture which were the condition of possibility for blackness in the U.S. Both paid close attention to rhythm as a theoretical device and as a way of generating feeling. They used the theoretical and sensory aspects of rhythm to suggest different modes of organisation. For them rhythm was a way of holding people or music together. This notion of rhythm as means of holding a band or a people together became attached to new forms of blackness. A new black thing or a black nation could be realised through new placements of rhythm. In both cases though, the beat became barely differentiated from beating. In the slide between beat and beating, a troubled and eroticised masculinity came to the surface. The unresolved question though is which came first, or rather the question is which went furthest out and ahead, Brown's music or Baraka's radicalism?

For Brown, the music he and his band were recording after 1964 was anchored in the mark he had from the getup. In the context of the autobiography the mark tore apart the idea of a singular authorial voice. James Brown could be many names. James Brown could collapse into one name: Jamesbrown, just like that. The collective rhythm experiments also operated on a similar scale. Tracks such as "Cold Sweat" and "I Got The Feeling" were thought to be producing a newly radicalised blackness. Brown's emotional placement of rhythm pointed towards that. Yet, he could never get to that black place where the music was. He could never capture the black thing which the music was making. As evidenced on "Super Bad", the performance never settled on simple associations of beat, blackness and place. A sado-eroticism constantly pushed at the parameters of black sonic object and black sonic territory. Brown both urged the band to incessantly build the new thing and to incessantly tear it apart.

As an activist-theorist of Black Cultural Nationalism, Baraka was attuned to this practice. He could on some level hear it, but equally Baraka could not quite stop himself

from attempting to cut such knowledge off. He could not avoid thinking a violated mark as a threat to the nation building project. As he strained to mark out the border of the black nation, he always invoked James Brown. This is perhaps because Brown and his band were anticipating the feel of something Baraka knew but did not want inside. They were intoning a nonexclusionary version of the black community. The beat was as site of internal and external contact in the black nation. Baraka though could never successfully banish the mark. It remained as the antagonistic engine of his politics and aesthetics. Brown's music pointed to the confession Baraka was always making through his hyper-masculinity, an acknowledgement of the power of yes to the mark of the female object within.

Situating this case study within the wider terms of the thesis, the account of the relationship between black music and black radicalism that has been presented here works in particular ways. The intimacy between the radicalism of Brown and Baraka is clear. What is significant is the emphasis Baraka placed on the phonic materiality of Brown's rhythmic experiments as the basis for his own political project. Baraka felt there was something at stake in the formal arrangement of Brown's sound which made it not only black, but also insurgent because of the blackness it produced. Brown's music was black. It was black both because he was, and also in terms of its construction. Brown amplified the psycho-sexuality of the mark on his black – which was the ruptured mark of his blackness – and redeployed it as the basis for a black militant rhythmic program.

What is central to this case study is the sense of a deeply internalised discourse on the nature of black radicalism taking place between these two figures. The exchange between them was not so much focused on relations with an outside world, but concerned itself with the notion of how to construct a radical black sound object, and how the object, by the fact of its existence, constituted militant black place. This communalised attempt to construct black space by way of black sound also came under pressure from the very blackness that was being assembled. Each time the parameters of the object and place were being marked out, they came into contact with, and were troubled by, an eroticism which refused to be refused as part of their militant rhythmic programs.

## **Part 2 – Civil Rights, vocal instrumentality and spiritual agency**

### **Chapter 3 - Martin Luther King and Sam Cooke**

In *African-American Atheists and Political Liberation* (2008) Michael Lackey assesses the relationship between religious belief and Black American political activism. His proposal is that a rigorous Black American atheism could become a viable political proposition. All that stands in the way is the traditional reliance upon the Black church for political orientation. If the link between the Black population and the church could be discontinued then Lackey believes another politics may become possible:

we could say that, while the atheists in this study ultimately do not endorse abolishing the God concept or religion, they do suggest that there is ample evidence that the God concept cannot bring about positive social transformation for all people. So maybe it's time to give a thorough-going atheist politics a chance. Maybe then we will finally realise the dream of a pluralist democracy that is committed to the project of empowering all people instead of just a chosen few. (Lackey, 2008, 150)

Lackey's thesis is rooted in a wider turn towards atheism and humanism in Black studies. The aim of this humanist project is to rethink the co-existence of Black religious and political motivations. Lackey is placing his work within a strand of thought which seeks to question the commitment to religion as a liberating force for Black Americans (Allen, 1990 & 2001). In the passage above he outlines the secular limits of his political vision. For him religious belief is highly problematic because it does not correlate with political and social change. In the case of Black America, religion has acted as a limit on the "construction of a truly tolerant and egalitarian democracy" (Lackey, 2008, 2). The criticisms Lackey makes are explicit. The God concept in the Black American context has continually violated an investment in democratic hopes. Lackey is precise in identifying where these failures take place in that it is religious testimony which dissolves the possibilities for social transformation. He describes a "leap of faith as an unethical act of the intellect" (Lackey, 2008, 1). A fully committed act of spiritual worship is, for him, unintellectual and has little function in a pluralist democracy. Religious faith has prevented the full realisation of Black political hopes in the U.S.

Lackey's is an exclusionary contribution to the field of humanism and atheism in Black studies. He sees it as intellectually and ethically dangerous to think religious

belief and democracy in tandem. Despite his dismissals, Lackey is worth sticking with, if only as a counterpoint. His work acts as a contrapuntal framework for the combination of religion and politics which shaped the Black American Civil Rights movement between 1955 and 1968. This chapter is a response to Lackey's thesis by way of the Civil Rights project. The political desires of the Civil Rights movement were continually informed by leaps of faith, and at certain points the differences between the two processes were imperceptible, because worship and politics were mutually articulated. This mutual articulation troubles Lackey's thesis that Black American expressions of faith are unintellectual, unethical and politically ineffective.

The Civil Rights project grew from a Southern grassroots activism during the mid 1950s to arguably reach its peak nationally almost a decade later. The movement sought constitutional and material change to the structures of race and poverty in the country. The activists in the movement pursued their goals through various forms of largely non-violent public protest which highlighted the legal and psychic refusals to recognise Black Americans as legitimate citizens. Despite the heightened level of political activism, the Civil Rights movement used the Black church in the U.S. as its resource. In fact the Black church was considered to be the arena for Civil Rights (Battle, 2006, 128). As such it staged the politics of the movement on numerous levels. Institutionally central to Black communal life in the American South, the church was used to organise campaigns on segregation, voting rights and citizenship which were integral to the Civil Rights agenda. Also the theological underpinning of Black Christianity in the U.S. helped to shape a discourse around promises of freedom and justice which had historically been denied to Black Americans. Administratively and ideologically the Black church played a significant role in the movement. This chapter though is a response to Lackey's criticisms of the Black church, and therefore ritual and worship will form the backbone of the analysis. The communal acts of ritual in the Black church allowed the theological investment in the liberatory and the prophetic to operate experientially. Religious belief was forged by the physical act of worship. The Civil Rights project was dedicated to social transformation for Black Americans and it sought to achieve this goal by using the sensory elements of Black church rituals. That which Lackey believes to be unintellectual propelled the movement. The public performances of protest which symbolised Civil Rights were sustained through leaps of faith adapted from forms of Black Christian worship.

My response to Lackey's atheism will be formed through two figures who had

differing degrees of involvement in the politics of Civil Rights. Each of these figures made significant contributions to the questions the project posed of freedom in America. The turn to Martin Luther King Jr. is self explanatory. It is impossible to think Civil Rights without King. He has symbolically been made to stand for the “life” of Civil Rights. From his decision to take up leadership of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, through to his assassination in Memphis, April 1968, King’s career has been transposed onto the successes and failures of the movement. At his most potent King was able to use major public set pieces to voice the political desires of the Civil Rights project as attainable ideals.

By contrast Sam Cooke is not as intensely linked to the movement. Cooke was a gospel and r'n'b artist from the mid 1950s through to his death in 1962. He is often positioned within a historical trend which seeks to link the popular rise of r'n'b with the defining events of the Civil Rights movement. In reality his direct contribution to the campaign is difficult to gauge and it is possible to criticise some writers for overindulgence when attempting to juxtapose the on-the-ground realities of Civil Rights with the careers of singers such as Cooke (Ward, 1998, 291). Instead he should be understood as a cultural figurehead who was both a highly successful recording artist and label owner. Cooke was central to the crossover of Black gospel music and performance into the popular realm. This crossover was part of a general process whereby some of the secluded aspects of Black culture began to move into the American mainstream. This process was a distant offshoot of the integrationist stance within Civil Rights.

The rationale behind bringing together King and Cooke is that they each emerged from the ritual context of the Black church. More importantly – whether at length (King) or momentarily (Cooke) – they converted the performance of faith into the political space of Civil Rights. King and Cooke had an investment in the Black church as a resource, and they used faith to open up mainstream America to what Lackey calls “religion’s contentless essentialism” (2008, 7). Lackey views Black religious worship as unintellectual, unethical and undemocratic. King and Cooke used these same features to demand collective freedom. The aim in this chapter is to take Lackey’s reductive view of faith and rethink it, through King and Cooke, as generative of the Civil Rights project. Tracing their links to acts of worship will culminate in listening to two performances which marked the end of their careers. “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” and “A Change is Gonna Come” have been narrated into the end of King’s and Cooke’s

lives respectively. They are also considered to signal certain kinds of endings around Civil Rights. The performances King gave with “Mountaintop” and Cooke with “A Change” can be located within the ritual traditions of the Black church. They have their roots in leaps of faith and yet are felt to have articulated the ethos of Civil Rights. There were complex negotiations contained in these recordings between experiential religious belief and the politics of liberation. King and Cooke sonically trouble the atheistic objections (one could say the objectionable limits) of Lackey’s thought. They trouble Lackey’s atheism by the way they used their voices and the status the phonic materiality of their voices took on when recorded.

Lackey’s dismissal of black religious faith is not the sole concern of this case study. Thematically the research speaks to the wider thesis by attending to questions of blackness and freedom in terms of their phonic materiality. The research in this case study is driven by an attempt to theorise the sounds of black freedom. This means thinking about how those sounds were generated, their affectivity, and the ways in which those sounds could be considered radical. The focus on blackness, freedom and sound is couched within the religious dimensions of the Civil Rights movement. As a result the question of phonic materiality will be framed through the materiality of religious experience and performance in the Black church. Developing a theoretical architecture for listening to the sounds of black freedom in this way will require the location of resonances within subaltern studies, poststructuralist readings of materiality, and Levinasian thought. The hypothesis is that the performances King and Cooke produced operate within Cedric Robinson’s conception of the black radical tradition as formally incomprehensible. By way of phonic materiality, they generated black freedoms which were so dissociative that they resulted in sensory and interpretative confusion.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first focuses on King and the second introduces Cooke. The final part centres on “I’ve Been to The Mountaintop” and “A Change is Gonna Come”. In the first part King will be located in the relationship between the Civil Rights movement and the Black church in the U.S. He will act as a conduit through which to examine how Civil Rights was sustained institutionally, epistemologically and performatively by Black Christianity. Focussing on King’s training in the “black folk pulpit”, the first section will culminate in a 1966 recording of the speech-sermon “The Vision in the Kitchen”. The recording indicates the degree to which Black church practices were embedded in Civil Rights. It features the sound of

King using a spiritually inspired leap of faith as a starting point for his politics.

### **The Black church and the politics of Civil Rights**

It is Michael Battle who conceives of the Black church as the arena for the politics of Civil Rights (2006, 128). His formulation encompasses several facets of Black Christianity in the U.S. One factor in its sustenance of Civil Rights activism was the communal and institutional strength of the church. The Black church as a material site had historically acted as a vital component of black communality. It was an institution (in its various forms) around which communities assembled to chose preachers, elect church boards and even conduct minor local political campaigns. The church already had structures in place for communicating with local Black populations which became crucial to the formation of the Civil Rights movement. Institutionally, the Black church provided the machinery to elect political leadership and to organise protest. In effect it became the focal point for Civil Rights activism.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from the importance of on-the-ground activities, Battle's Black church as arena thesis also taps into patterns of theological belief. Since it took root amongst captives in the New World, Black Christians in the U.S. have appropriated the Bible. They subsequently developed unique principles of belief. The major theological strands of Black Christianity emerged through an attachment to specific Biblical narratives. These attachments arose due to the resonances selected narratives held for Black Americans. Specific narratives appeared to hold possibilities for social and psychological change. "Exodus" was perhaps the tale that had come to carry the greatest influence in the Black church in the U.S. The attachment to "Exodus" is self-evident because the Black church had grown out of captivity. The story of deliverance and emancipation which had been promised to the Israelites by God through the figure of Moses had served as a productive vehicle for initiating black desires for release from institutional and social oppression.

Battle recognises King's importance to the relationship between Old Testament theology and political discourse. He notes King's specific use of the Exodus narrative by stating he was "deeply rooted in the prophetic tradition." (Battle, 2006, 135). In one respect King's politics were exemplary in that he recognised the Black population in the

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the Black church and political mobilisation see: Wilmore, 1972; Frazier and Lincoln, 1974; Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990

U.S. had serially been denied constitutional forms of justice and freedom. Lewis V. Baldwin argues King possessed a “nuanced understanding of the complexities of American history and her documents of freedom” (Baldwin, 2002, 126). He was able to evoke a “particular myth that found expression” in those documents as the promise of liberty and justice (Baldwin, 2002, 126). Citing the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution and the Emancipation Proclamation, he claimed the promises they held had yet to be delivered to Black Americans.

The importance of King’s Christianity to his politics has become the primary frame through which historians have understood his leadership role. Albert J. Raboteau believes for King “social justice and religion seemed inseparable. It was important that this connection be made because many felt that Civil Rights was really a political and not a religious issue. Christian ethics was personal not social. King was a living contradiction of that position” (2000, 290). King’s interpretation of Christianity was dominated by the view that the Gospel was of more use than individual solace. Instead it offered positive guidelines for everyday existence amongst America’s racial communities. At the same time King’s religion was not purely a social blueprint, he was eager to activate a divine dimension to the politics of protest.

It was in this spirit that King turned to the prophetic tradition. He particularly used parts of the Exodus narrative, and as Gary Selby notes, the narrative had a long presence in the Black Christian tradition. It even “possessed its own potential tyranny” because Exodus was such an ingrained part of Black church, there was a danger it would have no effect (Selby, 2008, 29). King though was able to avoid the dangers of cultural over-familiarity by selectively using its central themes:

The main source for King’s theme of deliverance from oppression – which he propounded virtually every sermon, speech, essay, interview, column and book of his entire career – was the folk religion of American slaves. His equation of Black America and the Hebrew people revived and updated the slaves’ powerful identification with the Israelites suffering under the yoke of the Pharaoh. And his interpretation of the Exodus as an archetypal event expressed the distinctive worldview of those who longed for a new Moses to emancipate them from an American Egypt. (Miller, 1998, 17)

This was a restaging of the Biblical justice of Exodus which moved from its customary arena in the Black church out into public politics. This was a justice which, theologically, had been shown to arrive in the time of human affairs. The Bible told of promises being delivered to the unprotected, which King was able to use the sentiment

of to direct at racial exclusion. This was racial exclusion which had been codified in law. It was the law as text, initially in the form of enslavement, but now as segregation, voting rights, education and housing, which was the source of injustice. The enforcement of man-made laws acted as restrictive barriers on the lives and psyches of Black Americans.

King set up Civil Rights as a project which used Biblical rhetoric to induce crises in the law. The desire to reveal the absence of either justice or emancipation in the legal structures of America was driven by King's commitment to Christian ethics (Baldwin, 2002, 86). King's use of the prophetic tradition placed the legal process under severe pressure. The invocation of Biblical justice and emancipation fuelled protests which sought to disrupt the day-to-day enforcement of segregation. The resulting physical and constitutional hiatus strengthened belief amongst activists. Their proximity to Biblical ethics was creating a unique possibility. The Civil Rights project generated a crisis by opening up the "now" of segregation in the U.S. to an "eschatological future of racial justice" (Miller, 1998, 148). The disjuncture between religious sentiment and political rhetoric created these crises. A biblical narrative contained a range of temporalities and each could be activated within ritual. When the ritual was used in public space, it opened up politics to the effects of spiritual justice. These crises provide a way of understanding King's performative role in the Civil Rights movement. Worship in the Black church tradition was highly experiential. King used the promissory structures in biblical narratives to disturb democratic discourse. His role was to translate these structures into politics through his performances. Rhetorically, phonically and materially King put legal power into crisis by rendering Christian and democratic ethics indivisible. He restaged prophecies of biblical freedom into demands for constitutional freedom. It is important to understand how he went about doing this and the impact it had.

### **Martin Luther King and preaching**

The key to grasping how King induced crises is to recall that he was a Baptist preacher. Before turning to protest, he had been trained in the black folk pulpit and King's political consciousness had grown out of this training. The preacher was vital to the social functions of the Black church as outlined by Michael Battle. He was an organisational figure in Black communities in addition to his role as a spiritual

figurehead. The preachers effectiveness was gauged through his sermonic performance. Before dealing with King as a preacher, it is critical to understanding why the sermon held such value for Black Christians in the U.S. This helps place King within a context.

Hortense Spillers has a unique perspective on the sermon in Black cultural life. Her “Moving on Down the line: Variations on the African-American Sermon” taps into the psychic value of sermonic practice. She also frames the sermon as a sensuous experience. Spillers attentiveness to the sensuousness of the sermon is informed by the primal scene of blackness in the New World:

If African-Americans have been taught anything under the regimes of New World domination, it adheres in the very close analogy between dominant behaviour and the shape of the information in which it is conveyed. If I am captive and under dominance, there can be no doubt of this reading in the woundings and renderings of my own flesh. As African-Americans read their own history in the U.S, the wounded, divided flesh opens itself to a metaphorical rendering both for the principle of self-determination and as a figurative economy for its peculiar national encounter. (Spillers, 2003b, 272)

The Black experience in the U.S. has always been figured through the body. It has been shaped by violence which has rendered the body a site of extreme ambivalence. Spillers argues there is a need to foreground sensuality when engaging with Black American cultural and textual practice. For her the sermon “articulates with ‘inscriptions’ made on the material body” (Spillers, 2003b, 272). She wants to think of the sermon as a textual and cultural practice through this framework because for her there is a relationship between “the very tissue-life of the organism” and the practice of the black sermon (Spillers, 2003b, 272). The sermon was not a textual appropriation of biblical narratives, instead it became a material experience of escape and freedom. Christian worship was adapted to speak to the wounded flesh of the enslaved as a transformative possibility.

Spillers isolates the black “reading” of the gospel as the act which marked a “posture of critical insurgency” (Spillers, 2003b, 262). Her notion of captive reading is not reading in the normative sense. The conventional reading of textual signs was loaded and dangerous in the Black American context, this does not though mean that aural memorisation and improvisation of the scripture did not take place. In Spillers view the insurgency of black reading was realised through the “contradictions of *speaking through* the alien and foreign notation” (Spillers, 2003b, 262). The earliest Black Christians in the U.S were able to read without reading, because they were learning the gospel in a language which was not theirs. Largely operating without recourse to written

codes, they were able to acquire the phonic codes of the text. She argues the aural appropriation allowed for a much more radical gesture from the captives. Initially the introduction of Christianity to the Black population had been viewed as means of control, yet the act of reading became a subversive recasting. The Bible came to be understood not as a text which preached subservience but one which told of liberatory agency for the oppressed:

Without doubt, the Good News that the New World African understood and preached, in its radical *this worldliness*, speaks to us in ways that we had not anticipated, and that is to say, that the words and text of human encounter, of which the Gospel provides an Ur-text, render the most powerful and dangerous marking that we can imagine. The insurgent critical encounter acting upon that encounter becomes the very Gospel re-enacted both in its transformative potential and as it actually arises in the inclusionary praxis of an altered social scene. (Spillers, 2003b, 263)

Spillers introduces sensuousness to this insurgent reading and then links it to sermonic ritual. Her understanding of the Bible as a text which was open to linguistic co-option and rearrangement resonates with the violated bodies of Black captives introduced to Christianity. The revelatory narratives of liberation in the gospel came to represent for Black Christians, the possibility that there would be a time when they could escape. The black encounter with the Bible therefore became invested in themes of change. This was both material and psychic change, the “ever deferred perfections of a becoming” (Spillers, 2003b, 263). In Spillers' schema, the process of becoming that the Gospel offered was a corporeal negotiation with the text. Flesh which had been ruptured by the “regimes of New World domination” became intimate with the insurgent act of reading. The recasting that took place in the black encounter with the scripture was always a recasting of the body forged in captivity.

The sermon came to embody the negotiations between text and flesh, and the black sermonic performance is dense with sensuous experience. The textual promise of the gospel was opened up as physical experience. The sense of imminent liberation in the black sermon passed between preacher and congregation. The sermonic relation was understood through flesh because the Black American relationship to the captive world was violently sensuous. The violence done to the captive body opened up worship as a communal process of becoming. The sermonic reading Spillers proposes is, to reiterate, a reading without a reading. The performativity of the Black church means “the listening ear becomes the privileged sensual organ” (Spillers, 2003b, 252). The

preacher's voice becomes the instrument of delivery: "the churchgoer hears double or in excess, because it is between the lines of scripture that the narratives of insurgency are delivered" (Spillers, 2003b, 252). In the arena of the Black church, the sermonic voice, whilst it moves in a tradition of recasting the text, carries the possibility that the body can become something else. The black body can move elsewhere through the sound of spiritual arrival.

As Spillers indicates the role of the preacher was central to the sensuousness of the ritual. For Paul Carter-Harrison preaching is built upon an attentiveness to the sermon's physical effects: "rather than refining an exterior life [the preacher] attempts to alter the interior reality of the congregation" (Harrison, 2005, 326). The preacher is dependent upon the voice to realise an experience of bodily becoming. His voice becomes the means of disseminating the possibility for spiritual transformation. This creates something that Spillers calls the "congregational ear" (Spillers, 2003b, 252). The sermon is a communal practice, but the preacher is the pivot for action. According to Theophus Smith it is necessary to recognise the "embodied nature of preaching" (Smith, 1989, 384). The preacher has two roles, he facilitates an alteration of the congregational flesh but he also needs to take on that experience for himself. The strength of the sermon comes in the ability to represent "human dilemmas in bodily gesture" (Smith, 1989, 384).

Spillers, Carter-Harrison and Smith outline the schematics of the sermon in the Black church. They explain its formation and the significance of the preacher. Worship in the Black church was developed through the excessive violence enacted upon black bodies. As Spillers suggests, the audibility of the sermon opened up insurgent possibilities in the captive body. The preacher was the creative pivot for all these activities. His body was at the forefront of the sermon. This provides a framework to think about King's preaching. What needs to stay in the foreground are the aural and embodied aspects of his sermonic performance. Examining his preaching methods should shed light on how King was able to transfer the intensity of worship into protest.

As the son of a preacher King had been immersed in the traditions of the black folk pulpit. It was through this tradition that he had acquired the ability to use biblical narratives. The black folk pulpit tradition was built upon communal spiritual experience. As part of this tradition, King used a set of prescribed techniques to achieve the goal of spiritual communality. These techniques had been developed through the historical folk pulpit and were a way of enacting the promise of the Gospel for the

congregational ear. The primary techniques King deployed were Sacred Time and Voice Merging. These were critical for two reasons. Firstly Sacred Time was used to meld biblical time to the present. Through rhetorical twists of tense, he could splice the action from a biblical narrative into the “now” of a sermon. For King it was a means of cutting the time and space between the congregation, himself and the presence of the Holy. The Holy existed in the ahistorical time of the Gospel. This was much the same with Voice Merging. Rather than recounting a tale as it was told in the Bible, he adapted it so it appeared to be happening as he spoke. Sacred Time and Voice Merging introduced a structural malleability. The preacher continually suggested that the spirit could enter the performance and make itself heard to the congregation:

King created himself by repeating, merging, expanding and intertwining various historical identities. Reviving sacred time, he erased time and geography, shoved Biblical occurrences – particularly the Exodus – into the present, conjugated two thousand year old Biblical sentences into present tense, and developed a self within well-known and richly resonant patterns of human personality. (Miller, 1998, 132)

These techniques gave King’s sermonic performance a flexibility which was temporal and aural. His voice became a channelling device. Thus the techniques became key to the goal of King’s preaching: to induce a spiritual encounter for the congregation. All that has been discussed so far (Voice Merging, Sacred Time, embodiment and the congregational ear) was crucial to building up to this moment. Yet when that climactic moment arrived in the sermon, the experience of faith dissolved prescriptive techniques.

In *The Preacher King* Richard Lischer focuses on the climactic moments of King’s sermons. He is interested in the mechanics of the climax. In the traditions of the black folk pulpit King’s role was to produce performances which were psychically and materially effective. King needed to move the congregation by indicating he was being moved by the spirit. His means of achieving this was primarily phonic:

the climax is the moment of greatest intimacy in the sermon. Theologically, it is the moment in which preacher and congregation together break through the poverty and prejudice they experience during the week to the joy of that which is to be revealed. Its ecstasy is a promise, a foretaste, of the final victory that one day will be theirs. Like the union of the believer and Christ in medieval mysticism, the spirituality of the sermon’s final celebration is often couched in sexual imagery. It is a climax. Its purpose is ‘rousements’. It is intensely pleasurable, and it cannot be faked. (Lischer, 1997, 140)

Lischer identifies the climax as the critical moment in the sermon. It is a moment of conjunction between the preacher (King), the audience and the spirit. The language Lischer uses is telling. “Intimacy” and “breakthrough” imply something once separated has become porous. The process is ecstatic but it is only experienced momentarily and there are further experiences waiting. They are experiences promised in a future. At the climax of the sermon all these effects were generated through the voice and body of the preacher. As Spillers makes clear, embodiment and aurality were core facets of the black sermon and the preacher was key to these processes. Lischer synthesises his analysis into a series of claims. The climax of King’s sermons were intense, almost erotically pleasurable, and these experiences “cannot be faked”. Lischer states that at the climax of his sermon King could not fake an encounter with the spirit. This is a significant claim, as it pushes the assessment of King’s sermonic performance into another register. Lischer introduces a question of authenticity. King’s role was to “render an agent of deliverance, that is, not to *illustrate* God but to *create* God and make him present to the people” (Lischer, 1997, 212). He could not be seen to be giving an impression of what it is to achieve a fleeting intimacy with the spirit. Instead, Lischer argues, King had to be seen to be making the experience real to the congregation, which meant making it real for himself. This is why Lischer’s claim that the climax of the sermon could not be faked introduces the question of authenticity. King’s sermonic performance existed in the space between an illustrative mode and something approaching authenticity. It moved between telling of God’s proximity and making that feeling known to the congregation during a sermon. This is where corporeality and aurality come into play. The preacher was required to reach such levels of intensity that it seemed falsification had become impossible. This means, according to Lischer, King may not have been speaking at the climax of his sermon. The intensity being generated may have meant King lost control of his voice and something else momentarily spoke through him.

Lischer’s focus on the climax of the sermon forms part of an array of preaching techniques that King used and then transferred into his politics. Selected biblical narratives were used to create social and constitutional crises. They galvanised the movement by allowing it to appeal to alternate forms of justice. Rhetorical techniques such as Voice Merging and Sacred Time gave the impression religious events could operate in the time of human affairs. This opened the possibility of spiritual intercession into Civil Rights campaigns. These aspects of King’s training in the black folk pulpit impacted upon his actions as the movement's figurehead and raise questions about

Lischer's claim that the climax of his sermons could not be faked. The demand for authenticity may have transferred into King's public speeches. These were the set pieces of the Civil Rights project. King was considered an exemplary orator, as he voiced the movement's demands for justice, liberation and freedom. His skills are thought to have reached expressive heights with speeches such as "I Have a Dream". The question is whether the ecstatic intensity, which according to Lischer "cannot be faked", fuelled King's public performances. If traces of Lischer's thesis can be heard in King's political speeches, it raises questions about what was taking place when he produced those freedom sounds.

### **The "Vision in the Kitchen"**

These are questions about indivisible religious experiences and the politics of Civil Rights and they are being framed through King's sermonic performance. The 1966 recording of King's speech-sermon "Vision in the Kitchen" sets the scene. Referring to this recording as a "speech-sermon" is appropriate because "Vision in the Kitchen" lingers in the space between both. The term "speech-sermon" makes tangible the transference from King's pulpit training to his political goals. More importantly the recording features an instance which touches on Lischer's schema. "Vision in the Kitchen" seems to contain a moment where a singularly spiritual experience enters the heart of King's politics.

Speaking in 1966 "Vision in the Kitchen" features King reflecting on the past decade of the Civil Rights movement. He recalls his entry into the struggle – the 1955-1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott. King reminds his audience of the galvanising effect the Montgomery protest had upon the local community. He also reflects on a tense personal crisis he endured during the campaign. The crisis concerned death threats made against him and his family which tested King's willingness to fully commit to the movement and continue as its figurehead. There is a pivotal moment in the speech-sermon where King describes how he overcame a deep personal dilemma and chose to commit to the Civil Rights project. From his account it seems the decision was built on an act of faith:

*I never will forget one night, very late. It was around midnight, and you can have some strange experiences at midnight. I had been out meeting with the steering committee all that night. I came home, my wife was in bed and I immediately crawled into bed to get some rest, to get up early the next morning, to try to keep*

*things going. Immediately the telephone started ringing and I picked it up. On the other end it was an ugly voice, that voice said to me in substance, 'Nigger, we're tired of you and your mess now. If you aren't out of this town in three days we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.' I'd heard these things before but for some reason that night it got to me. I turned over and I tried to go to sleep but I couldn't sleep. I was frustrated, bewildered. Then I got up and went back to the kitchen and I started warming some coffee, thinking that coffee would give me a little relief. Then I started thinking about many things. I pulled back on the theology and philosophy that I had just studied in the universities, trying to give philosophical and theological reasons for the existence and the reality of sin and evil, but the answer didn't quite come there. I sat there and thought about my beautiful little daughter who had just been born about a month earlier. We have four children now but we only had one then. She was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife who was over there asleep. She could be taken from me, I could be taken from her, and I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak.*

*Something said to me, 'You can't call on Daddy now. He's up in Atlanta, a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can't even call on Momma now. You got to call on that something and that person that your Daddy used to tell you about. That power that can make a way out of no way.' I discovered then that religion had to become real to me and I had to know God for myself. I bowed down over that cup of coffee, I never will forget it. Oh yes, I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night. I said, Lord I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right, I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord I must confess that I'm weak now, I'm faltering, I'm losing my courage. It seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me: 'Martin Luther! Stand up for Righteousness! Stand up for Justice! Stand up for Truth! And lo I will be with you even until the end of the world!'*

*I tell you I've seen the lightning flash, I've heard the thunder roll, I've felt sin breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul, but I heard the voice of Jesus tell still to fight on! He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone! No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me. Never to leave me alone.*

“Vision in the Kitchen” is a recording of a crisis. This is not only the crisis King testifies to enduring on a personal level. It is also that the recording itself presents a religious crisis in the midst of the Civil Rights movement. Michael Lackey would perhaps reduce this to an unethical and unintellectual leap of faith, an act that, for him, is undemocratic. King's sermon, for Lackey, prevents Black political development, or at least his version of Black politics. It may be worthwhile staying with King's crisis as it causes a disturbance in both Lackey's thinking and the conventional framing of Civil Rights.

There are two levels of experience at work in the “Vision”. The first operates as narrative. The “Vision” is a narrative about an act of faith. King experiences a moral crisis and having exhausted his education he finds himself at a loss. Despite the lack of

faith in himself, his fear for his family's safety compels him to make a passionate religious appeal. The voice of the spirit responds to his passion. It arrives to reassure him that "*the cause that we represent is right*" and offers its eternal protection. This narrative in itself is quite remarkable. By recalling Montgomery 1955, King is turning to a moment when arguably the Civil Rights project got underway and he took up his leadership role with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Yet King is telling us that the Holy Spirit had to speak directly to him before he was prepared to take the risk of fully committing to the movement. The implication here is that in the formative moments of a national Civil Rights campaign, he was not in full control of his own actions. He is testifying to the force of a biblical presence at a critical juncture in the formation of his politics. The voice of the spirit compelled him and its promise that it would never leave him, never leave him alone, no never alone, galvanised his faith in a Civil Rights campaign which was instigated at Montgomery.

The crisis King recalls is not limited to the narrative form. It is amplified in ways which strain against the narrative he records. King's crisis in the recording carries echoes of Lischer's work on the sermon. It is important to remind ourselves of what is taking place in "Vision in the Kitchen". The narrative may be about King's experience, in Montgomery 1955, of an encounter with the Holy Spirit. As he states, this experience secured his commitment to Civil Rights. King is though speaking in 1966. He is being recorded recalling that night in Montgomery 1955. According to Lischer this recollection could not operate solely as a recollection. The climax of the speech-sermon requires an intensity from the preacher which would seem to be a real encounter with the spirit. Otherwise the speech-sermon does not work as a collective experience. The congregation cannot feel the momentary intimacy of which the preacher (King) speaks. Therefore this recollection of Montgomery 1955, in 1966, cannot only be a recollection. It needs to be another experience of that voice which spoke to him. King cannot discuss the event as something which happened a decade previously. His speaking becomes another experience of it in 1966.

It is the aural status of the recording which generates all of those aspects of "Vision in the Kitchen". In many ways King's performance echoes several aspects of Spillers' analysis of the sermon in the Black church. What King is doing is reverberating his narrative so it becomes spiritually affective during his performance. The story in 1955 was of him uttering a passionate appeal, the Holy Spirit responded by promising to protect him. The voice was a key feature of his narrative. As he recalls this story for the

speech-sermon recorded in 1966, he needs to render that experience tangible to the audience in front of him now. The voice, again, becomes critical. The voice which spoke to him then, in Montgomery, needs to seem as if it is speaking to him now, in 1966. In fact it needs to seem as if it is speaking through him and to his audience. What King does is amplify the force of his original private appeal (“*oh yes, I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night*”). This allows him to open up the terrain of his voice as he performs “Vision in the Kitchen”. He may be telling us that at the ecstatic moment of his original vision he no longer spoke. It was the voice of righteousness and justice which took over his voice and compelled him to continue with the Civil Rights project. As one listens to his reanimation of this event a decade later in 1966, it may be necessary to accept it is not King's voice we are hearing at the climax. It may be the sound of another voice, one which promises never to leave him.

This is the crisis the “Vision” presents to the listener. It suggests when King reached the ecstatic heights of Civil Rights performance, he gave away his vocal authority and control of his voice to another. The spirit arrived to speak for him during moments of tension and its presence in King's performances became almost unavoidable. The “Vision” carries implications for how one listens to King's political performances. For King to get over to his audiences politically the same way he did when preaching, he needed to produce these effects. The climax of his Civil Rights speeches were as intensely ecstatic as his sermons. Lischer's model for sermonic performance appears to be at work in King's “Vision in the Kitchen”. Lischer talked of the pleasure of momentary intimacy at the height of the sermon which the preacher had to generate. He had to generate it in a manner which allowed the congregation to feel it was not an affectation but that the ecstasy of the performance was genuine. In the sermon, ecstasy was rooted in biblical freedom and justice. It held open the possibility of eventual transformation. King appears to have used these practices in his politics. They became a mechanism for launching a Civil Rights project built on desires for social freedom and justice.

The experientiality and authenticity of the black sermon requires further work for it to be thought as a basis for King's political audibility. Telia Anderson and Glenn Hinson can be used to expand on some of the ideas introduced by Lischer. They emphasise corporeality when analysing Black Christian worship in the U.S. The body is a receiver which remains open to spiritual encounters and the experience of such an encounter becomes the condition for vocal declarations of religious belief. Anderson places the

“strong traditions of an experiential, personal relationship with the divine” at the forefront of her analysis of the black spiritual tradition (Anderson, 2002, 119). An intimacy with the spirit takes precedence in the environment of the Black church. Anderson wants to know how the personal and experiential operate as accepted knowledge in Black Christianity. She is interested in the status of belief and whether it is a precursor to or a result of a personal encounter with the Holy. In the Black church tradition it is understood as a particular mode of being: “Those who are not bound to the conventions and strictures of their singular, present reality may be open to receiving the call” (Anderson, 2002, 115). Anderson is not outlining the psychic conditions of belief, a willingness to believe is not enough. Instead the openness Anderson describes occurs through the body. She is situating the body as the site which, in the performative scope of the Black church, needs to remain open (Pinn, 2010).

Research on spirit possession in the Black church often positions experientiality as the a priori condition of belief. In *Fire in my bones: transcendence and the holy spirit in African-American Gospel* Glenn Hinson talks of the “emotional transport of transcendence” during spiritual encounters (Hinson, 1999, 1). Touch and feel give belief its shape and in order to experience its “transformative power” the participant in the church ritual needs to feel the spirit:

But what *is* this feeling? The term ‘feeling’ is, after all, rather vague. For clarification we can turn to the maxim’s often-voiced variant: ‘I wouldn’t have a God that I couldn’t *feel* sometimes!’ The ‘feeling’ is of God and *is* God. At issue here is transcendent encounter, the experience of the holy, a feeling that so transcends the everyday that it grants certain knowledge and grounds ardent faith. (Hinson, 1999, 8)

Hinson is using “feeling” to draw distinctions between knowledge and experience. Those who participate in the rituals of the Black church accept worldly knowledge can be acquired. It is a process which requires preparedness. Worldly knowledge can thus be measured. In contrast “*spiritual* knowledge.....does not depend on the studious efforts of the self” (Hinson, 1999, 10). The body “receives it with a reported flash of understanding, realising immediately its inherent and unchanging verity” (Hinson, 1999, 10). Understanding spiritual experience as knowledge proves difficult. Analysis falls short because the “flash” is so intense and invasive. Anderson suggests there is only one way to grasp these experiences and that is to adopt the sources of authority within the black sermon: “it is critically important to accept that the experience of the

spirit is the undeniably central phenomenon of calling on the spirit” (Anderson, 2002, 122). To understand how the body remains open to a feeling which is of God and is God requires an immersion in the currency of the ritual.

If Anderson and Hinson’s ideas are applied to “Vision in the Kitchen”, it is possible to understand how a congregation invested in King’s performance. King testified in Montgomery 1955 to having a spiritual encounter where the spirit spoke to him during a moment of weakness. Following Lischer’s logic, when recalling this event in 1966, King needed to reanimate the encounter. He needed to make it seem real for his congregation. That is perhaps what is heard at the climax of the 1966 recording: King is no longer speaking and the spirit is speaking through him. This is the internal logic of “Vision”. It is important to recall “Vision” was not a solely religious performance, it was also a political speech-sermon designed to renew faith in the Civil Rights project. King’s voice was one of the most powerful tools for the movement. He used it to claim equality, justice and freedom for Black Americans. King had learnt how to combine voice and rhetoric in the black folk pulpit. The question is how could Lischer’s notion of seemingly authentic spiritual ecstasy map onto King’s politics? It appears the practices of vocal and physical possession were activating black desires for emancipation. “Vision in the Kitchen” indicates the sound of spiritual feeling was being used to assemble Civil Rights politics.

The “Vision” produces a crisis of political agency whereby King is seemingly able to act politically only when compelled to by a supernatural presence. This presents something of a problem when thinking about Civil Rights, which was understood as a project built on the agency of Black Americans to demand equality. Through King, the ability to speak that freedom became the illustration of that agency. The content of the recording poses questions of how that agency functioned in the Civil Rights movement. It poses questions of how the type of agency at work in Civil Rights discourse was constituted as vocal activity. What King can be heard doing is calling on a supernatural presence to take over his voice and speak for him during a moment of political crisis. Such an act of vocal possession was heard by his audience as real. To the congregation, when he reached an ecstatic climax King no longer spoke. It was the spirit which spoke to and through him. The issue becomes one of attunement. It becomes an issue of how to attune oneself to the activity of King’s voice, and how to listen to that act of vocal possession as a radical gesture.

## King's "Vision", postcolonial theory and subaltern studies

Dealing with this involves moving beyond the frameworks used so far in this chapter. The apparatus required to listen to the "Vision" does not come solely from the study of black religious practices in the U.S. The combination of political agency and religious belief is also a feature of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies. The question of how to comprehend the agency of the subaltern has come into sharp relief in postcolonial studies because the activities of subalterns have often been based on cultural and religious practices which do not cohere with normative understandings of political will. The discord between the motivation behind an act of insurgency and its understanding as insurgent has been an ongoing concern within this field. The approach to spiritually motivated acts of insurgency by subalterns has tended to focus on context. The cosmological invocation of gods or spirits do not map easily onto discourses of political cause and effect. Within postcolonial studies emphasis has been placed upon treating each act of subaltern rebellion separately. In treating each subaltern action separately it is also recognised that such acts tend to resist forms of recording deployed in colonial archives. Despite the focus on context, acts of spiritual invocation are considered generalisable because they operate as a mode of subaltern praxis which allows rebellion to reoccur. David Hardiman's *The Coming of Devi* (1987) is a prime example of such an approach. A member of the subaltern studies collective, Hardiman traces the role of the goddess Devi in the popular movements initiated by Adviasi tribals in 1920s India.

There are two postcolonial theorists who address such questions in a way which lend themselves to listening to the crisis recorded in the "Vision". Dipesh Chakrabarty and Saba Mahmood critique discourses of freedom as they have been tied into individual will and agency. They raise these questions by turning to instances of spiritually motivated acts of subaltern insurgency which appear to work against models of self-conscious action. Chakrabarty and Mahmood place an emphasis upon a willingness to listen to religious claims made by subalterns rather than mapping their actions into prescribed forms.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay "Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts" (2000) responds to the presence of the supernatural in historical archives. He uses this presence for two purposes. Firstly, as one of the founding members of the Subaltern Studies Group, he critiques the attempt to radicalise historical writing by privileging the agency of the subaltern. Secondly he uses that critique as a basis for exposing the depths of a

structural tension which shapes the wider field of historiography.

Turning to Ranajit Guha's seminal essay "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency", Chakrabarty focuses on the account of an 1855 Santal rebellion (a tribal group located in Bengal and Bihar) against the British and non-local Indians. He interrogates Guha's explicit aim to make "the insurgents consciousness the mainstay of a narrative about rebellion" (Chakrabarty, 2000, 102). There is a tension in Guha's essay surrounding the agency the rebels give to supernatural beings. In essence the Santal leaders refuse the role of agents for their rebellion. Instead they ascribe their actions to the Santal God, Thakur ("I rebelled because Thakur made an appearance and told me to rebel"). Chakrabarty cites this as a dissonant yet crucial gesture. By refusing agency as subjects of their own history and giving primacy to the supernatural, the Santal is not only throwing the Subaltern studies project into crisis, but also the norms of disciplinary history:

What does it mean, then, when we both take the subaltern view seriously – the subaltern ascribes the agency for their own rebellion to some God – and want to confer on the subaltern agency or subjecthood in their own history, a status the subaltern's statement denies? (Chakrabarty, 2000, 103)

The Santals' claim, which is really a refusal, produces a series of problems around the attempt to assimilate the subaltern into the space of modern historiography. The traditional disciplinary historian is only able to see "religion simply as a displaced manifestation of human relationships that are themselves secular and worldly (class, power, economy and so on)" (Chakrabarty, 2000, 103). A subalternist such as Guha, even when avoiding the demystification of orthodox historiography, turns to the gestures of anthropology. He is able to grant "the supernatural a place in somebody's belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe it any real agency in historical events will be to go against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past" (Chakrabarty, 2000, 104). The result is that both of these processes only serve to bypass the subaltern. They involve a tactical muting of his/her voice. This is a voice which is the focus of the Subaltern Studies project because "the historian....cannot invoke the supernatural in explaining/describing an event" (Chakrabarty, 2000, 106).

The Santals' ascribing away of agency comes to stand as an experience which the contours of history (even in its radical subalternist forms) cannot contain. The continual

refusal to accept the Santals' gesture as anything other than irrational comes to demarcate a crisis in the type of subject historiography attempts to sanction.

Chakrabarty resists seeking a solution and insists there is none on offer. Instead there is a need to allow the voice of the subaltern to speak directly to us, to let the Santal be our contemporary, no matter how problematic its voice:

to stay with the heterogeneity of the moment, when historian meets peasant is then to stay with the difference between these two gestures. One is that of historicising the Santal in the context of this history of social justice and democracy; and the other, that of refusing to historicise and of seeing the Santal as a figure illuminating a life possibility for the present. (Chakrabarty, 2000, 108)

In effect he is proposing that the types of epistemic hiatus produced by a subaltern experience of the supernatural need to be maintained. It represents not only the fissure of disciplinary boundaries but an opening up of the types of political modernity and subjecthood historicism serves to renew. To listen to the subaltern appeal, even if it involves a denial of singular consciousness in favour of the supernatural “makes the present non-contemporaneous with itself” (Chakrabarty, 2000, 112). It opens up the present to “plural ways of being” (Chakrabarty, 2000, 108). The subaltern giving away its own agency in this respect becomes an instance of the subaltern giving away its own voice to the supernatural. Maybe this could be thought of as the subaltern allowing its voice to *give way* to the supernatural. The voice's willingness to give away/give way to another produces a disjuncting of an agency which is thought to be inherent to the subject. One of the implications of Chakrabarty's essay is that voice becomes a mechanism of subaltern radicalism. This is not necessarily in the formal sense of claiming agency. Instead what is significant is the structural manner in which voice undoes itself and in the process undoes agentic consciousness, by way of the supernatural. According to Chakrabarty this vocal disjuncting is an uncanny experience for a listener outside the terms of the spirit being invoked. The voice rupturing its own terrain opens up alternate ways of remaking itself. It is a vocal opening up of possibilities which are unthinkable to the subject historiography seeks to renew.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Chakrabarty's chapter is part of an exchange with Ranajit Guha about the role of the supernatural in subaltern studies. The stance Chakrabarty takes in this piece has been criticised by some within subaltern studies. The main criticism has been that despite claiming to offer a radical alternative to history as a European discourse, his reading of the Santal rebellion actually reinforces many aspects of this model. Rather than a radicalising move, Chakrabarty actually produces a liberal reinforcement of narrative history. For more on this see Qadri Ismail, “(Not) at Home in (Hindu) India: Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty and the Critique of History” in *Cultural Critique* (68, Winter 2008, p210-247).

With *Politics of Piety* (2004) Saba Mahmood poses similar questions to those asked by Chakrabarty. Although her concern is not with the anthropologisation of faith and the materiality of voice, her arguments around freedom, agency and will are filtered through seemingly problematic examples of religious consciousness. The thrust of *Politics of Piety* is a concern over radical human agency and socio-religious norms as they are determined by secular-liberalism and in particular liberal feminism. Mahmood uses a self aware women's piety movement within a recent Egyptian Islamist revival as the stage for her analysis (Mahmood, 2004, 5).

She wants to use this case study to work against "normative liberal assumptions about human nature" (Mahmood, 2004, 5). The focus on the female presence in an Egyptian Islamic revival is a means of unsettling discursive formations which think "human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them" (Mahmood, 2004, 5). Mahmood is attempting to place under pressure a strand within feminist thought which "locates agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject" (Mahmood, 2004, 7).

Mahmood sets to work on rethinking agency by proposing that the liberatory design within feminist thought has produced freedom as a normative structure. There has been a "naturalisation of freedom as a social ideal" (Mahmood, 2004, 10). Within the liberal tradition this naturalisation has become manifest in the manner in which an individual can only be adjudged to be free if his/her actions are a product of their own will. Only those actions not compelled by customs or traditions are valid. Mahmood argues that within this sphere, even illiberal actions can be tolerated. Freedom no longer becomes a desire but a procedural choice. If the pathways which lead to the decision of free will can be defined and mapped then, the individual's actions are always accepted. Those that fall outside this terrain are deemed, consciously or not, illiberal and even illogical.

For Mahmood the turn towards the female presence in the Egyptian Islamic revival allows her to locate voices, bodies and knowledges which do not easily map onto a design for liberatory politics. She wants to disturb and eschew the "procedural autonomy" which shapes agency in advance of the event of the subject's actions (Mahmood, 2004, 12). To follow such instances she produces a complex critical manoeuvre. Mahmood wants to use a combination of post-structuralism and feminism which critiques the transcendental subject and repressive models of power due to her allegiance to an ethics operating around these fields. At the same time she also wants to avoid the forms of post-structuralism and feminism which only view agency as

resistance to or subversion of norms. The outcome of Mahmood's critical ambivalence is to "detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics" (Mahmood, 2004, 14). The problem with agency as it has been attached to progressive liberal and largely secular politics is that it is always fixed in advance. Agency is already figured as a particular type of act – resistant and subversive. For Mahmood this is problematic. To know agency in advance of its emergence is to ignore the fact that it "emerges through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity" (Mahmood, 2004, 14). In short the ability to effect change is historically specific.

Mahmood extends this formation by arguing that for the type of privilege produced within a liberal-secular and feminist mapping of agency only certain types of events are sought out. Acts of religious passivity and docility are misrecognised within this framework. Due to their religious and spiritual backgrounds, their apparent docility means they are not given the room to be thought of as moments of agentic potential. So Mahmood is looking to *detach* agency from certain types of conceptualisations. It is not a theory of agency that is on offer in *Politics of Piety* but a meaning of agency, one which emerges from "the grammar of concepts within which it resides" (Mahmood, 2004, 34). Detachment becomes important to this process because the detachment of agency from its mapping in advance provides the space for a meaning of agency to emerge, even in its apparent religiously passive forms.

The similarity between Chakrabarty and Mahmood is evident. They both put into question the overdetermined associations between human agency and ideological freedoms through the actions of subalterns. The subaltern events they turn to have grown out of specific religiously motivated contexts and enact forms of analytical hiatus around ideological conceptions of the subject as a product of individual will and source of resistance. What they each suggest is that these disturbances can either be maintained as a departure point for critical investigation or the subaltern claim for religious(ly motivated) agency can be bypassed in favour of a preordained mapping which will render them passive. This returns us to the crisis of King's "Vision in the Kitchen". His performance was part of the socio-political discourse of Civil Rights, yet his performance was also a mode of spiritual possession developed in the context of Black Christian worship. Chakrabarty and Mahmood introduce new perspectives to the "Vision" and it becomes possible to listen to the supernatural voice seemingly speaking through King as an act of political insurgency. It is an act which disrupts the attachment

of political will to individual agency.

Chakrabarty's reading of Guha's essay repositions the Santal leader's claim as an act of giving away or loss. On the part of the subaltern the apparent loss is of voice, agency and political consciousness. This is because the Santal claim marks the genuine presence of a spirit in the world. Significantly Chakrabarty does not view the Santal's invocations as politically reductive. The loss of authoritative coherency is for him also a rupturing of the singular logics of self, consciousness and modernity. The agency given to the supernatural serves to trouble the discursive terrain of the subject and the politics such a formation allows. The performance of vocal loss disturbs the subject's possession of agency through an appeal to the supernatural. Although Mahmood does not discuss the presence of the spiritual voice in the archive, she does rethink agency and freedom by way of the religiously motivated acts of subalterns. There is a desire in her work to foreground the political problems that an actively religious subaltern voice can raise. Her citation of a docility and passivity which is bypassed, hints at Chakrabarty's notion of the Santal voice as lost. Mahmood's introduction of detachment also lends itself to Chakrabarty's language of giving away.

Chakrabarty and Mahmood both add to the discourse on the "Vision in the Kitchen". Through Lischer, Anderson and Hinson it has already been established that King may have seemed to no longer be speaking at the climax of his performance. Vocal possession was rooted in the ritual practices of the Black church in the U.S., where sound, touch and feel were the dominant performative methods. In the process of drawing Biblical rhetoric into Civil Rights, King also appeared to be using experiences of spiritual ecstasy to perform that politics. From Chakrabarty's perspective the fundamental requirement would be to listen to the context of King's political utterances. Even if that means accepting King may no longer be speaking. Mahmood's notion of detachment extends the relationship between King's "Vision" and this ecstatic intimacy. The arrival of the Holy voice to speak to and as King produces a detachment which Chakrabarty may describe as a giving away or loss. It is a detachment of the voice, but it is also King's self generated detachment of his own agency. It is vital to stress that King produced the passionate appeal at the climax of the "Vision" in the name of a Civil Rights project. The "Vision" was a means of renewing his faith in the politics of fundamental liberty, justice and legitimacy for Black Americans.

Acceptance and detachment are critical to this chapter. There is an indivisibility and yet also a difference that shapes their function here. Firstly there is a need to accept

King's "Vision" on its own terms. King recorded the loss of his own voice as a means to regenerate his politics. Acceptance in this respect becomes a detachment from the necessity of listening to King's voice as his own. At certain ecstatic moments King's voice was not a direct reflection of his consciousness. He was not always the agent of his own utterances. For King and his audience, his voice was always giving way and given away. In the context of the sermon this was a fleeting encounter with a spiritual promise of freedom. What King did was transfer this same phonic intensity to the project of constitutional and civil freedom. This was the crisis which drove the Civil Rights project.

This chapter began by citing Michael Lackey's claim that religious faith had been a hindrance to Black democratic hopes in the U.S. King's "Vision in the Kitchen" is an example of the very thing Lackey seeks to disprove. He produces an unethical and unintellectual leap of faith as part of a demand for democratic freedom. It seems the incongruity such an act created gave the Civil Rights project its potency. Despite locating all this within King's performances, there is more to be said on the Black church, spirituality and the Civil Rights program. The discussion can continue through Sam Cooke who was shaped by a similar set of circumstances to King. Cooke was trained in the performative traditions of Black Christian worship as a gospel singer. He then took these techniques beyond the context of the church and this led to a career as a commercial r'n'b singer, but he eventually recorded a song which tapped into the spiritual mechanisms of Civil Rights. Cooke's practice as a gospel singer also carried echoes of King's training in the black folk pulpit. The phonic materiality of the voice, embodiment and ecstatic spirituality were all emphasised during gospel performance. The following sections are designed to analyse Cooke in light of what has been set out above on King. This should lead to a final analysis of Civil Rights as a politics of freedom and justice, but not one which used the formal subject as its phonic reference point.

### **Sam Cooke, the Black church and gospel performance**

The focal point with Cooke is also the climax of the gospel performance where the demands were slightly different to preaching. With King, rhetoric and narrative were key to the sermon. For Cooke, religious ecstasy was transmitted through the contours of the voice. What is at stake here is an instrumentality of the voice. Focussing on the

voice as technical instrument should broaden the perspective on oral detachment as an effect of supernatural agency, particularly with regards to the spiritual resources of the Civil Rights project.

Before focusing on Cooke's voice, it is important to locate him within the performative context of the Black church. His relationship with the ritual practices of the church was defined by gospel music. An introduction to Cooke's gospel career will take place later. First it is important to establish the spiritual and cultural functions of gospel music and its confluences with the black folk pulpit tradition. There are strong similarities between the training Cooke received and King's education as a preacher.

Melonee Burnim understands gospel music as an "actual performance event" (Burnim, 1985, 149). Gospel is not purely theological, it also points to numerous ideological and cultural developments in the history of Black Christianity in the U.S. Gospel music was a relatively modern phenomenon which grew out of the Black migration to the urban North in the 1930s. But it was rooted in the ethos of the traditional Black spiritual: "Because gospel music was spawned and nurtured in the context of ritual, performers are virtually impelled, in all performance settings, to recreate the climate of the Black worship service" (Burnim, 1989, 54). According to Lawrence Levine, the link to Black church rituals meant the "overriding thrust of Gospel songs was otherworldly" (Levine, 2000, 173). The songs were temporally nuanced and they acted as evidence of God as an immediate presence yet they also reinforced the belief that "heaven remained firmly in the future" (Levine, 2000, 176). Gospel worked on the same slippage as the sermon; between the now of a performance and the ahistorical time of the Bible. Much as the preacher, the gospel singer's role was to negotiate these temporalities: "The performer of Black religious music holds an incumbent responsibility to communicate on two levels – culturally and spiritually – and to share this communication with two separate receiving units – God and the listening congregation" (Burnim, 1989, 54). The gospel singer was a pivot between two spaces. The spirit and the congregation existed on alternate planes of experience and the gospel singer, along with the preacher, facilitated an exchange between the two. Burnim argues that seeming to conduct an encounter with the divine was not a simple task for the gospel vocalist: "The important ingredient to the seasoned Black listener is the performer's communication of authenticity" (Burnim, 1989 57). That which she refers to as authenticity is vital. The experiential factors of religious belief were foregrounded in gospel: "black gospel music is as much about the *experience* of the music as the

performance of it” (Burnim, 1989, 57).

There are echoes with Lischer’s work on the sermon here. He claimed the preacher could not fake the climax of his performance and the sermon needed to reach an intensity where it seemed, at least to the congregation, to be an experience of the spirit. Burnim intimates similar demands were made of gospel vocalists. Lischer and Burnim both introduce scales of intensity. The preacher and the gospel singer pushed at the illustrative in order to transmit experiences. The performative demands were to reach a point where it appeared falsification was not possible. For the congregation, the sermon or the hymn needed to seem to be part of a spiritual encounter.

In the sermon, embodiment became the means of broadcasting these experiences. Hinson and Anderson stressed the importance of feel and touch as the conditions of belief. For the gospel vocalist “bodily movement” was also the means of inducing authentic spiritual experience. It was a “performance [which] exists in the realm of kinetics” (Burnim, 1989, 57). Although the body as a general sensing unit was crucial to the promise of spiritual authenticity, the voice was the primary device. It was a vocal kinetics which produced the encounter with the Holy: “the voice must transmit intensity, fullness and the sense that tremendous energy is being expelled. The singer must convey complete and unequivocal absorption in the presentation, thereby *compelling* the audience to respond” (Burnim, 1985, 156-157). When Burnim introduces “absorption” she implies the gospel singer needs to be absorbed into the space of performance in order to generate the ecstasy required to move the congregation. Absorption became a necessary part of the gospel performance when an encounter with the spirit had to seem to be audible. To transmit this experience required an intense resituation of the singer's body. The voice and the body operate in a liminal space between themselves and elsewhere and the demand for spiritual intimacy is the engine of this process. For the gospel vocalist to sing a supernatural encounter which did not appear to be false, involved a brief sonic and corporeal transformation.

### **Cooke's vocal bend**

Sam Cooke’s training in the gospel music field needs to be understood through Burnim and Levine. They, like Lischer, Hinson and Anderson earlier, emphasise the significance of the spiritual act but their focus is on gospel performance. In his early gospel career Cooke needed to produce an experience of the divine for the congregation

and the climax of gospel performance placed a stress upon the voice. What will follow is an analysis of how Cooke trained himself to produce these experience phonically. He did not immediately possess the necessary vocal ability to do so, instead he had to attune himself to the demands of gospel's rituals. Cooke's development as a gospel singer turned on a specific event, during which he learnt the importance of embodiment and kinetics in the gospel environment. Cooke came to realise that to *move* the congregation he needed to be able to *move* his voice.

Cooke's recording career can be split into two phases. The first culminated in 1956 with his success as the lead singer of the country's foremost Black gospel group "The Soul Stirrers". This period was followed, through to his death in 1964, by a move into popular music. In the mainstream he pioneered an r'n'b sound which anticipated soul music. His success as a popular artist had been built on the training he gained in the gospel field but Cooke's reputation as a prolific gospel singer was not one he acquired with ease.

At the time of his entry into commercial gospel, the predominant vocal style had been the "shout". Groups such as "The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi" and "The Pilgrim Travellers" expressed the sincerity Burnim outlined by using an unrestrained vocal delivery. The "shout" or "scream" had become the most effective means of inducing an ecstatic response. Turning out the audience meant using the "shout". Cooke joined "The Soul Stirrers" in 1951 as a replacement for their former lead R.H Harris. Harris had been considered the strongest gospel vocalist on the circuit. He was able to combine the power of the common "shout" with a "winsome light" falsetto (Heilbut, 1997, 82). It was a signature which made his voice "sweet, manly and terrifying all at once" (Heilbut, 1987, 82). Upon becoming a "Stirrer" Cooke possessed neither the rhythmic intensity prevalent in the gospel field or the individuality of his predecessor. This became a problem for "The Stirrers" as he was continually out sung by other leads using the "shout" during public gospel programs. According to biographer Peter Guralnick, Cooke eventually freed himself from Harris' shadow. He began to compete with the demands of the circuit by way of a "stylistic breakthrough.....variously ascribed to accident, necessity and invention":

According to Crain [S.R. Crain], it took place in Fresno, according to J.W. Alexander in San Jose, where 'Sam pitched the song a little high, kind of out of range, and when he got to the highest note in the song, he couldn't make it, so he bent it, and the 'trick' went over so well that Crain told him to keep on doing'.

‘He just floated under.’ Crain said, describing the first appearance of what would almost immediately become Sam’s most recognisable vocal trait, a lilting yodel (whoa-oho-oh-oh-oh) that he could interpolate at will into the body of any song, thereby lending it an altogether different flavour, a yodel that, unlike R.H. Harris’ daunting octave leaps, softened rather than intensified the thrust of the song. (Guralnick, 2005, 94)

Guralnick, and those around Cooke at the time, invest a great deal in this event. Cooke came up with something which shaped the rest of his singing career. He gave his voice a unique texture and it allowed him to move outside gospel and into the popular market. Cooke’s initial relationship to the gospel world was crystallised by his attempt to reach for a note that was beyond his range, because he was under pressure to compete with the intensity of the shout. He did not though call a halt at that point. When he came up against a barrier beyond which his voice could not go, he bent it. Cooke floated his voice under the note with an act of inventiveness, rather than force himself to reach it. When faced with a limit, Cooke detached his voice, passed around the limit and reattached it on the other side. Guralnick calls this a lilting yodel, and even transcribes it as “whoa-oho-oh-oh-oh”. What he is attempting to get at is an vocal flutter which marked Cooke’s singing. When he chose to use it, Cooke could deploy a ripple across the surface of his voice.

This intuitive act went on to have greater significance. Guralnick believes Cooke’s vocal bend reflected a malleability which came to define his singing: “the aching sense of loss, of lostness, that was the unique centre of Sam’s voice” (Guralnick, 2005, 85). There appears to be a relationship between the gesture Cooke “tricked” his way into and a formal structure to his singing, that structure being one of loss. This is loss not as a theme but as sonic practice. Something took place when as a “Soul Strirrer” Cooke reorganised his voice which remained installed as a lost structure. It was a site where the voice's potential to detach and reattach itself was marked.

This event represented a breakthrough for Cooke’s professional career. The vocal bend was crucial to the development of his gospel performance and he began to use it as a sonic reference point. This was an alternative to the overt power of the shout. The subtle lostness of his vocal float became his means of inducing religious ecstasy amongst his listeners. Cooke was able to use the oral rearrangement to produce the intimacy which was required for the vocalist and the congregation to *feel* a supernatural imminence.

As “The Stirrers” lead vocalist Cooke not only needed to transmit to the audience in a

live gospel setting. There was also a significant market for gospel records in the U.S. Cooke's unique texture was central to the group's commercial output. The lost structure at the centre of Cooke's voice became the focal point for many of "The Stirrers" releases. On records such as "Touch the Hem of his Garment" and "One More River" Cooke can be heard working out how best to use that rippling lilt. Cooke though did not leave this lostness behind when he broke with "The Stirrers" to begin his solo career in r'n'b. It was reprogrammed for the commercial market and could be heard in his first major hit "You Send Me". The crucial thing to note is that as Cooke's technique was transferred from gospel to r'n'b it was not as tied to overtly spiritual reference points, yet it still retained a sense of the ecstatic. He used it to shape his pop performance and thus the "whoa-oh-oh-oh-oh" affected a new audience.

With Cooke's vocal bend there are processes which speak to King's training in the black folk pulpit. Both were in an environment where they had to transmit a *feeling* of spiritual encounter. It was important to the congregation that the Holy seemed to be close by and for King and Cooke the voice was central. There are though some crucial differences between their uses of voice. King's enactment of vocal loss was primarily testimonial. He puts forward a testimony where he states he lost his voice to the spirit at the very moment the spirit speaks through him. King's performance was built upon a rhetorical model. This is where agency – who is speaking and when – comes into play. The question with King is who is speaking when he speaks of his encounter with the supernatural. Is it the supernatural itself? This question challenges how the understanding of voice and its agency can be applied to thinking about King's politics.

For Cooke the question of testimony is further in the background. What is critical is how the voice as material instrument can generate religious ecstasy. It is not a claim which dissolves agency. Instead it is the voice detaching itself momentarily from the material subject. Cooke's more acutely material act feeds back into King's "Vision". In the 1966 recording King is also producing a similar performance to Cooke. His enactment of a spiritual presence which dissolves his own agency is built upon material as well as psychic detachment. What can be heard in King's "Vision" is on the scale of Cooke's vocal bend. Chakrabarty's notion that supernatural agency creates a critical hiatus, becomes, in both performances, a physical and sonic hiatus.

The suggestion of feedback between Cooke and King rests on the idea that a basis for detachment can be found in Black Christian practice in the U.S., this being a material, psychic and sonic detachment which occurred during moments of worship. A suitable

place to begin would be Spillers' essay on the sermon. Although it was used above with reference to King, she foregrounds the voice, sensuousness and the aural as the starting points for black performance during Christian worship. Both are crucial because in the United States, the black relationship to the wider environment was understood through corporeal violence. What adapted forms of Christian worship offered were phonic models of emancipation which could be worked through flesh. Spillers concept of the sermon as "ever deferred perfections of a becoming" provides a model for Cooke's vocal bend (Spillers, 2003b, 263). The emphasis she places on process rather than a goal mirrors the stalled doing and undoing of Cooke's voice. Both Cooke and Spillers imply a material transformation which awaits resolution, and Spillers especially ties this into the ecstatic aspects of Black Christian worship.

Anthony Pinn also takes up the sensuality of Black Christian worship. He extends the links Spillers makes between the history of black bodies in the U.S. and their creative possibilities. Pinn begins with the notion that Black life in the U.S. has been defined by an experience of "terror" (Pinn, 2003, xii). In this case "terror" stands for the range of practices used to oppress Black people. The Black church initially offered a response to dehumanisation and since captivity it has evolved along these lines. In this context modes of transformation became strategically crucial: "Liberation from the vantage point of the Black church revolves around a transformation of existing relationships, both physical and spiritual" (Pinn, 2003, 90). The Black church was a productive resource for worshippers because it "reshaped their environment by a liberative understanding of their own agency, practised by a creative ethic of liberation" (Pinn, 2003, 94).

Pinn makes associations between the physical affect of religious experience and emancipatory desire. When doing this he is careful to avoid the Black church as an institution. The structure and doctrines of the institutional church, Pinn argues, are overly regulated and tend not to account for the physical precariousness of Black life: "staying with the physical body is justified in that the body represents the major site of contestation, the space in which and upon which terror is manifest" (Pinn, 2003, 142). For Pinn the body is not a predetermined location, it is the primary site of Black religious practice. The ecstasy of worship acts as a response to the historical mapping of "terror" invoking a kind of reconstruction. The body is experienced in new, possibly liberative ways:

it should also invoke a certain style or rhythm by which the process or struggle for new ontological and existential status unfolds through Black bodies because of the strong connection between oppression and the manipulation of the body. (Pinn, 2003, 140)

Much like Spillers, Pinn identifies a causal relationship between physical oppression, physical manipulation and the experiential focus of black religious practice. The performativity of worship offers ways of reworking the body, it can be realised in another mode. The result is that, even momentarily, the body's relationship with its immediate environment is altered. The intensity of the sermon or the gospel program reorientate the body. Through the flash of spiritual experience, new horizons emerge.

The body being remade is not specific to the rituals of the Black church. Black performance in general involves a negotiation between corporeal violence and remaking. Daphne A. Brooks' *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom* (2006) takes up that mantle. Although Brooks focuses on theatre and the music hall at the turn of the Nineteenth century, her framing of the material domain of black performance resonates with Spillers and Pinn, and offers a further perspective on Cooke's vocal bend.

Brooks' concern is with how black resistance informs performance: "the resourceful ways that African-Americans realised methods to transform the notion of ontological dislocation into resistant performance so as to become agents of their own liberation" (Brooks, 2006, 3). Resolutely physical, these methods are rooted in the terrifying violence that created blackness: "how might African-Americans use this dissonant condition to forge discursive as well as embodied insurgency" (Brooks, 2006, 3). Brooks argues that such methods of terror meant blackness became a form of alienation. This was a psychic alienation, but is also ran through the body. The black body experienced a loss of control over its own determinations but conversely the "traumas of self fragmentation" created an environment for black insurgency (Brooks, 2006, 4). The body torn apart serves as a source for black performance and these performances often go unacknowledged. This is due to the "condition of alterity" in which they emerge (Brooks, 2006, 4). Thus Brooks refers to black performances as "Afro-Alienation Acts", meaning performances which eschew realist methods to convey humanity and value (Brooks, 2006, 5). Instead these black performances resist by opening up the material terrain of realism. Brooks argues that such acts produce an eccentricity. Her play on the eccentric is unorthodox but productive. She uses eccentricity in the formal sense to

imply a lack of alignment, a body out of sync. Yet when applied to black performance, eccentricity becomes an “empowering oddness” (Brooks, 2006, 6). The body off axis possesses the freedom to recreate itself. There is a “lack of central control and hence new possibilities of difference” (Brooks, 2006, 6). Brooks believes that the eccentricity of black performance allows for epistemological as well as material manipulation. There is a possibility for “doing” the body differently (Brooks, 2006, 8). Pivoting around its own “dark points”, black performance creates “figurative sites for reconfiguration” (Brooks, 2006, 8). The black body becomes its own canvass for dissent and moves into “different registers” (Brooks, 2006, 12).

Spillers, Pinn and Brooks outline methods for conceptualising Cooke’s vocal bend. Spillers and Pinn extend the idea that it was a spiritual as well as technical event. They view the body as the prime site of Christian worship. The black body’s continual realignment during moments of religious ecstasy is a response to its precariousness. The body renders itself passive and gives way to the spiritual encounter in order to create possibilities of change. This practice is not limited to the church. Brooks argues that moving out beyond the limits of the body has been a black performative tactic for some time. It is a result of ongoing black alienation which is used to reorganise the body in ways that are often insurgent.

Within the Black Christian tradition this practice of momentary rematerialisation is seen as defacto emancipatory. For example, when Cooke used the vocal bend at gospel meetings, its phonic affects were quickly interpreted as part of a liberatory drive. It was liberatory in the social as well as the religious sense. It is worth interrogating this interpretation in detail. There is certainly a sense of undoing and remaking at stake in Cooke’s vocal practice. The question is whether “becoming” necessarily means “becoming free”. The body during black worship is religiously compelled to rematerialise but it is not clear how the mechanics of that practice are emancipatory, if at all. Between Cooke’s vocal bend and its reception there may be a series of sonic possibilities which remain uncovered.

### **The materiality of Cooke’s vocal bend**

Cooke’s vocal bend was an act of technical precision. When he floated under the note, his voice was never fully detached. To sing spiritual intimacy, vocal severance did not need to be total which is what lent Cooke’s trick its quality of recurrence. There was

a flutter to his voice that implied something was being reached for but resolution was deferred. This is what Guralnick transcribes when he writes of the lost centre to Cooke's voice: the whoa-oho-oh-oh-oh. Cooke's stalled vocal produced what seemed to be a momentary experience of spiritual liberation. The question of how this unresolved act was translated into ecstatic freedom is related to the materiality of Cooke's performances. There is a slide between the claim of spiritual encounter and that experience as phonic materiality.

Cooke's vocal slide seems to be built on a relationship between emancipation and materiality. What Cooke seemed to be doing was altering his voice to generate a spiritual feeling. His voice became a tool to attract what Spillers calls the congregational ear, but it is not specified though how this occurred. When he used that vocal trick, it is not clear why it was immediately heard as an enactment of spiritual freedom. As with King's "Vision in the Kitchen" it is necessary to move beyond the specificity of the Black church to find other ways of tuning into the relationship between emancipation as an idea and as a material experience. There has been some recent poststructuralist work which has attempted to move the discussion of emancipation within this field towards a materialist perspective. The central line in this work is that material experiences arrive ahead of their theorisation as such. Further, the level of activity which produces the material experience never stops. Material action rarely settles within a theoretical framework such as emancipation. The movement flutters, continues and goes elsewhere. Combined with what has already been established about Cooke's voice and the performative context of the Black church, this poststructuralist work sheds an alternate light on why the whoa-oho-oh-oh-oh was thought to be a defacto sound of spiritual freedom.

In *Poststructuralism and the Politics of Method* Andrew Koch frames emancipation as a material event. Koch views political insurgency as primarily a corporeal process. He anchors this thesis in Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, where Derrida finds incongruities between Marx's universalism, his materialism and his emancipatory ideals.

Koch is working against a universalism which defines both the subject and concepts of liberation: "The construction of a universal subject, with the assumptions of universal rationality, equality and moral norms, does not solve the problem of emancipation, but circumscribes its limits" (Koch, 2007, 95). Koch takes his lead from Derrida's reading of Marx. He argues the subject is not universal and neither is its inherent liberatory

character. Instead the subject is developed out of the experiences in a given historical moment. Consciousness is formed through these moments and is not a timeless, essential structure, but has its “origins in the experiential conditions of life” (Koch, 2007, 96). Sensuousness is crucial to this formulation. Emancipation is not theoretical; it is not a pre-programmed procedure. Instead it is a product of moments where different signals converge on the body to transmit experiences:

To put it simply, if the image of the self is historicised as a construction having its origins in the sensuous activity of the body, and if the products of such activity are the sources of our self understanding, then the protection that must be afforded through ‘liberation’ is to the sensing unit itself, the body. Emancipation cannot have as its object ‘identity’ or even ‘class’. Those are social and historical constructions. From a materialist perspective, it must centre on the body. (Koch, 2007, 97)

The promise of emancipation is not privileged through its conceptualisation, instead as Koch states “it must centre on the body” (Koch, 2007, 97). The body as sensing unit is the site of multiple experiences of oppression. Flesh and bone refuse the epistemological closures demanded by universal concepts of the human. To make bodies reorientate themselves to predetermined structures only repeats the forms of oppression they seek to repudiate:

True liberation is from those forces that enslave the body. The idea of emancipation does not justify any bondage. This means that real freedom must consist of liberating all human beings from those conditions which dictate to the body, that establish the conditions which inhibit the free exercise of self construction. (Koch, 2007, 98)

Koch is putting forward transformation as radical method. The body is never experienced as it is theorised (singular and ahistorical), it remains open to further reorganisation. This relative incompleteness becomes a strategic strength. The possibility of sensory reorganisation is retained because “the liberation of consciousness without the liberation of the body is a phantom liberation” (Koch, 2007, 101). It is not possible to imagine liberation without experiencing it, even if only momentarily.

Koch identifies liberation as a practice the body undertakes in response to subjection. The body is the prime site of emancipatory action. Koch’s work complements that of Spillers, Pinn and Brooks on the black body. Whether in the Black church or a general performance environment, the black body was the means of generating experiences of

liberation. The reorganisation of the body was an insurgent practice. Altering the body meant altering an oppressive environment, thus opening up the possibility of wider structural change. If the body could be reorganised, so could oppressive social relations. The notion of transformation as an insurgent and emancipatory act can be taken further with reference to Cooke's vocal bend. In the context of the Black church, the phonic substance of the voice was the means through which the body was transformed, because the congregational ear locked into its movements. Koch's reading of corporeal transformation can be pushed in a way that accounts for the specificity of Cooke's voicing. Rather than being *transformed*, Cooke's voice was always in the process of *transforming*. It had not become something else but was persistently becoming something else. His vocal bend was moving elsewhere but never settled on its destination. The liberative processes of the transformative body need to be understood through that vocal kineticism.

Peter Hitchcock offers a more nuanced version of Koch's model of material transformation. That which Hitchcock calls "oscillation" more closely compliments Cooke's vocal practice. "Oscillation" is Hitchcock's more intense version of a materialist theory of transformation. Hitchcock puts forward "oscillation" as a practice of continuous transformation. It is a mode of "restless inquiry" which can neither complete itself or be suspended (Hitchcock, 1999, 3).

"Oscillation" is incomplete because the energy required to compel transformation is never settled. Once the object that was to be transformed has been encountered, transformation does not come to a halt. The process, unable to escape its own dynamism, folds back in upon itself. This means that oscillation is restless but it is also occupied by "moment[s] of doubt, of hesitation, of wavering" (Hitchcock, 1999, 4). Hitchcock describes this stalling of its own drives as a "hazard of vacillation" which occupies oscillation: "It is a moment of fragile equilibrium in a sea of movement" (Hitchcock, 1999, 6).

This wavering is problematic. The moments of vacillation which accompany oscillation seem to introduce an undecidability. Hitchcock turns this apparent crisis around and argues the pause of oscillation is indicative of further possibilities of transformation: "The vacillation is constitutive of its crisis but also of the possibility for further transformation. The metaphor need not be a substitute for praxis: it can also be its symptom" (Hitchcock, 1999, 97). The stutter within oscillation is a moment of potentiality. Further transformations await but may never be fully realised.

Hitchcock's "oscillation" offers an open approach to Cooke's vocal bend. His notion of incessant transformation touches on Cooke's unsettling vocal. A form of movement that is never resolved and moves back in on itself, "oscillation" becomes a useful way of conceptualising Cooke's lilt. When reshaping his voice during performance, Cooke seemed to produce a level of energy that did not allow for complete transformation. Instead his voice wavered outside its own limits.

Koch envisaged corporeal transformation as automatically emancipatory. "Oscillation" is a rather more indecisive process. An object is opened up and reworked but it is not clear what it is being reworked into. It may be something liberatory; it may not. It is more precise to think about Cooke's vocal bend in this way. There is certainly the sense of his voice being reorganised. Passing the voice under an aesthetic obstacle hints at insurgent action. Rather than overpowering the note beyond his range, or refusing to push his voice that far, Cooke seemed to cut his way around it. This left what Guralnick calls a lost centre to his voice. The absent mark became his phonic signature, a rippling whoa-oh-oh-oh that moved his audiences. Whether this phonic signature is emancipatory is not entirely certain.

Sam Cooke therefore amplifies King's performativity. As a result of training in the black folk pulpit King stressed the testimonial aspects of his performance. He had to testify that the spirit had momentarily entered the sermon. He did this not only through a claim (by stating, "I am not speaking, my God is") but actively gave his voice away. During the ecstatic peaks of his sermon it seemed as if the voice of another may have been speaking through King. With Cooke this practice of giving away/giving way to shifted from a testimonial to an vocal technique. It occurred on the level of the phonic materiality of the voice. The claim of spiritual encounter was transformed into the lilting whoa-oh-oh-oh. Each of the practices used by King and Cooke are mirrors of the other. They encompass the sonic production of religious ecstasy in the Black church. To testify that one's voice has been given away only works as a crisis if it involves using the voice as an instrument. Equally Cooke's vocal rippling needs to be understood as a troubling testimony. His voice seemingly came into contact with the spirit and produced a dislocation. For both King and Cooke, the voice and the body were multiple sites of contestation.

The question in this chapter is how, if at all, did spiritual practices find a way into the politics of Civil Rights. Some answers have emerged from King's "Vision". King sustained his commitment to Civil Rights by seeking ecstatic promises of justice and

freedom. He continued to do this through to his final speech-sermon, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”. In this recording King declared he had seen the promised land. The promised land in this context was a spiritual event taken from a biblical narrative but it was also the engine of the Civil Rights movement, a place where Black Americans could be free.

Cooke’s vocal bend adds a different flavour to this. The oscillation of his voice was potent enough to affect his audiences. He was able to give the impression he had felt the spirit. Yet there is no indication that this is the case. The testimonial aspects were not as dominant with Cooke. He remade his voice but this was not necessarily an emancipatory act, even in the religious context. The vocal bend though did not prevent Cooke from participating in the Civil Rights project. “A Change is Gonna Come” is a song which spoke directly to its aims. Cooke used his gospel training, as well as his adapted vocal trick, to record this song. “A Change is Gonna Come” was exceptional in its synthesis of the *feel* of the movement.

What will follow is an analysis of “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” and “A Change is Gonna Come”. These recordings indicate the Civil Rights project was not always built upon calculable political goals. At its most compelling, the movement’s claims for freedom, justice and equality could not be housed within formally recognisable procedures. The movement exceeded these procedures by destabilising structures of agency and voice. Due to the connections to the Black church, such issues were not organised through the normative subject. King and Cooke therefore, are not symbolic of religious prevention of black political hopes, as Michael Lackey would have it. Instead their respective performances indicated how the Civil Rights project was in pursuit of what Toni Morrison calls “the terror of human freedom” (Morrison, 1993, 37).

### **“I’ve been to the Mountaintop” and “A Change is Gonna Come”**

Morrison’s formulation suggest some instances of freedom operate at a pitch of intensity. The demand for freedom can lead to something which is deemed to be too free. These experiences can be alienating and strange but they also sustain those emancipatory desires. “Mountaintop” and “A Change” operate on this scale. The “Vision” and vocal bend indicate how King and Cooke developed liberatory practices which were particular to Black Christian worship and they were still at work in “Mountaintop” and “A Change”. Both recordings are considered amongst the most

effective claims for Civil Rights and they are also considered final acts. Cooke and King both died shortly after making these recordings. In the case of “Mountaintop”, King’s performance is considered the closing act of the project. The result is that there is a great deal of analytical confusion around these recordings. They occupy the emancipatory urgency associated with the Civil Rights movement but in both instances, mourning as well as freedom are considered part of the anticipatory sounds at work. It is thought the recordings transmit a feeling of freedom to come and predict the deaths that await King, Cooke and the Civil Rights movement.

Delivered on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1968, “Mountaintop” was a speech-sermon given by King in support of a Municipal Waste worker's strike taking place in Memphis. The following evening he was assassinated whilst standing on the balcony of the city’s Lorraine Motel. It is this fact which defines the recording of King at the Mason Temple. The proximity of these two events makes them almost indivisible. There is a tendency to temporarily displace his death because although he died the following day, the assassination is often used as a preface to “Mountaintop”:

Did he know he was going to get killed? If he did know, did he have a special relationship with God? Does that kind of relationship mean that you know when you are going to die? I got a bit frightened, but I was riveted by King's words all the same. (Dyson, 2000, 2)

In the passage above Michael Eric Dyson is reflecting on two things. He is recalling his response, as a child, to King's death. He is also recalling his first experience of listening to the Memphis recording. Dyson gives the speech prophetic value because he believes King produced an almost impossible premonition of his own violent demise the following day. This was somehow linked to his relationship with God. Dyson is reflecting a wider fascination with death, temporality and faith which are associated with “Mountaintop”.

Dyson filters King’s final speech-sermon through a displaced death. It is a death which is yet to happen during the internal time of the recording. For Dyson though there is a feeling that King's assassination hangs over the speech, like a premonition. This begins to make sense if one considers that King addressed his own mortality throughout the speech-sermon. It is arguable that “Mountaintop” was built around a series of passionate utterances of death. The first instance of death appears as a narrative device. King recalls a near fatal incident in 1958 when he received a stab wound to the chest

which was millimetres from his heart. He uses this event, and the possibility that he *could* have died, to reflect on the progress the Civil Rights movement had made. King traces a path from the beginnings of the student sit-ins of the South in the early 1960s through to his arrival at the Mason Temple in Memphis. As he does this he manages to hold the possibility of his premature death over the past decade of activism:

he links his death that might have occurred to events that he would have missed. And though he doesn't say it, or even imply it, we're left to wonder if most of those events would have occurred in quite the same way without his presence. (Dyson, 2008, 39)

King is playing on his own death to produce a teleological displacement. He projects back to the moment he was stabbed and re-assesses the Civil Rights project. What would have happened *had* King died? How would have events taken shape *had* the knife entered his heart? It serves to induce a precariousness around his voice. He could easily not be speaking *now* in Memphis. This could have been the voice of a dead man.

Dyson believes the retroactive imagining of his own death forms part of King's sermonic technique. He describes the teleological use of death as an example of "automortology.....a genre of speech that looked past his death to tell the story of how he should be viewed once his life was over" (Dyson, 2008, 25). "Mountaintop" acts as a "the clearest example of automortological art" (Dyson, 2008, 31). King's combination of death and temporality, Dyson argues, reflects a desire to exert a sense of control over his own demise. He gains control by destabilising teleological order. The possibility of his own death which did not happen – yet so easily could have – threatens the historical arc of Civil Rights. Yet his presence in the Mason Temple is a reassurance against the collapse he has imagined through his death.

The morbidity King displays was not particular to "Mountaintop". King's role as the figurehead of a contentious protest movement meant that the threat of assassination was always a factor. It was something he came to accept and actively used in many of his speech-sermons. As became evident through the "Vision", the threat of death reinvigorated his performance of faith as a function of his politics. If death was a recurring motif throughout King's career, what makes its appearance in "Mountaintop" significant? The recording closes with a climatic return to death. It is this ecstatic return to death as subject matter, which leads Dyson to give the final speech-sermon elevated status.

After speculating on what would have happened *had* he died, King asks what would happen *if* he dies. He asks what the future would hold for Civil Rights if he no longer spoke for it. King introduces this idea by claiming his death is imminent and he feels its proximity. King reassures his audience by countering some of what he said earlier about his stabbing. He believes he is no longer necessary to Civil Rights. The movement can go on without him. The feeling of imminent death and a performative proximity to the spirit have allowed him to see ahead. This foresight is temporal, structural and experiential. He has been able to momentarily leave the sermon and move to the mountaintop. From there he has seen the promised land. It is the place Civil Rights has consistently pursued, a place where freedom is possible.

It is crucial to note how King moved to a point where he can see this place. It is not only through an intimacy with the spirit. The feeling his death was close by also generates this experience. At the climax of “Mountaintop” it sounds as if King is giving himself away, but he is giving himself away to something other than spiritual ecstasy. He is performing in the space of his own absence. The speech-sermon reaches a pitch when it moves through his death. It is at this point he achieves a prophetic potency.

Dyson encapsulates a number of common responses to the automortology of “Mountaintop”. Firstly there is a tendency to listen to the recording in light on his imminent death. King does not foresee the success of Civil Rights, instead he has the vision to see his death the following day. That is why it has become a dominant theme of “Mountaintop”. Secondly King’s talk of his own death is reinterpreted as the “death” of the movement. Automortology becomes a further apparent sign of his prescience. Whilst it is true the Civil Rights project did subside in the years following King’s assassination, this was due to circumstances that would have been beyond his control had he survived. The project had been unstable for some time because an attempted move to Northern cities had not proven successful. In addition the growth of Black Power ideologies was taking grass roots support away from Civil Rights. Despite this evidence, the belief still lingers that King foretold his own and the movement’s death:

In either case, its clear that time is on his mind. And so is death – the death of time, the death of the movement, the death of hope. And to be sure his own death. (Dyson, 2008, 40)

“Mountaintop” is another example of Civil Rights as the production of crisis. The crisis, in this context, rests on the combination of spiritual and political sentiment. The

performance practices of the Black church were used to raise a crisis in the “now” of the U.S. King introduces his own death to raise the intensity. He speaks of what could happen if he was not there in Memphis now. It would, he argues, open up a future he has fleetingly experienced. The crisis of his death becomes the medium for this.

It is important to recall the performative tradition King was drawing on. His climatic proclamations had to seem to be real to his audiences. Whether spiritual, political or mortal he was considered to be enacting those experiences of which he spoke. It had to become real to the congregation, they could not think it was being faked. The crisis of “Mountaintop” is one of synchronicity. There is an asynchronicity between the prescient mourning of death(s) yet to come and the experience of spiritual and constitutional freedom. The recording contains a disjointed exchange between (be)coming (as) death and (be)coming (as) freedom. Death and freedom reveal something about King’s continual turn to the materiality of faith to renew his politics.

A similar set of issues are at stake in Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come”. His last major recording, it was released posthumously in the days following Cooke’s death in Los Angeles, December 1964. “A Change” has gone on to become a popular encapsulation of the hopes of Civil Rights. It is worth examining why Cooke, as a successful r’n’b singer looked to make a record which was so emotive. He considered “A Change” to be his contribution to Civil Rights. It was an attempt to write and produce something which tapped into the groundswell developing around the movement associated with King’s leadership. “A Change” also carried value for Cooke the artist. As outlined by Brian Ward, Cooke had little direct involvement in day-to-day protest campaigns, yet he was still eager to demonstrate his awareness of questions of race and freedom in contemporary America. “A Change” also signalled the process of altering his image as a popular hit maker and broaden some of his creative boundaries. He felt that by using Civil Rights he could fuel this process. Although Cooke was certainly motivated to create a Civil Rights song, it is interesting to note how he performed this song and what made it so potent. There was something about “A Change” which allowed it to resonate with the key social questions of its moment.

The strength of “A Change” strangely lies in its lack of overt reference to contemporary events. It does not directly reference Civil Rights but as Cooke biographer Peter Guralnick points out, the song was still attuned to the deeper cultural currency of the movement:

It was a song at once more personal and political than anything for which Alex [J.W. Alexander, Cooke's manager] might have been prepared, a song that vividly brought to mind a gospel melody but that didn't come from any spiritual number in particular, one that was suggested by the Civil Rights movement and by the circumstances of Sam's own life. (Guralnick, 2005, 540)

There are a number of strands to Cooke's song. Firstly without explicitly being about any landmark Civil Rights events, he used the shared resources of the movement. It is clear it is a song about Civil Rights. Cooke achieves this by evoking the sense of struggle and desire for eventual justice. "A Change" taps into the Black Christianity which fed the movement. Whilst the Black church is at the heart of the song, Cooke was careful not to use a practice common to Black popular music associated with the movement. Customarily the freedom songs Civil Rights campaigners penned used gospel templates and adapted the lyrics to reflect the concerns of the movement. This was an obvious means of using the drive of gospel in the context of racial politics. With "A Change" Cooke decided not to use this technique, instead he made the song's gospel influences explicit through phrasing, as well as the modality of his performance. He produced a song which sat across Civil Rights and the Black church but had no formal attachments to either. "A Change" became a way of releasing sentiments of imminent spiritual justice into the mainstream which could be picked up without the need to fully invest in either the Black church or Civil Rights.

The record's combination of Black Christianity and social consciousness is synthesised in its central line: *it's been a long time coming / but I know a change is gonna come*. The line resonates with the ethos of the Black church at the core of Civil Rights because it is structured around appeals to faith. The fact the Black church was the arena for Civil Rights allows Cooke to use the imminence of faith: change is just ahead, almost within reach. The line has recognisably biblical tones but calls for an investment in a general future.

More than the line itself, it is Cooke's performance that is critical. In Cooke's voice one hears the crisis the song produces. Faith and imminence become more than sentiment. Through Cooke they become sonic texture and his vocal bend is crucial to this. In "A Change" a more refined but no less potent vocal float was at work. The partial oral detachment he developed as a gospel singer and then transferred into a pop career, returns. Used in this context some of the spiritual tone of the vocal flutter is recovered and used to broadcast the experience of a social justice to come.

That which Guralnick referred to it as the lost vocal centre, the woah-oh-oh-oh, propelled “A Change”. Cooke possessed the ability to oscillate his voice, but oscillation does not involve complete transformation. The amount of energy used means it stalls its own transformative processes. Filtered through Cooke’s performance, oscillation speaks to the ripple of his voice. In the context of “A Change”, the sound of partial vocal transformation is significant. Change is gonna come. It is on the cusp, waiting realisation. The whoa-oh-oh-oh of Cooke’s voice is the materialisation of that suspense. The lost centre is the sound of becoming, rather than being, free.

Cooke’s oscillation is, in part, the sound of social crisis. It is a social crisis which is potentially transformative. At the time this did not become the predominant way of listening to “A Change”, instead another factor influenced its reception. In an echo of King and “Mountaintop”, the song is also considered to contain the sound of Cooke’s impending death. The rationale behind such claims has rested on two points. Firstly that Cooke was shot dead shortly after recording the song, and secondly the experience of listening to the song. This theory has remained in place, despite the lack of concrete evidence to link the two. Unlike King’s political assassination, Cooke’s murder in a motel was not associated with the risks of the Civil Rights project. This has not prevented the song being cloaked in a deathly imminence. As with King’s final speech-sermon, “A Change” has been narrated as if it were warning of his death-to-come.

This process is believed to have begun as Cooke was conceiving the record. The theory was that “A Change” had always been a mourning song as much as a freedom song. Cooke’s death was believed to have been predetermined from the moment he began assembling it. Cooke’s close friend Bobby Womack heard one of the earliest versions of “A Change” and he recalls the impact it had upon him:

I remember him calling me and telling me, ‘Now listen Bobby, I want you to come out [to my house], you gotta hear something. I got something. This song is incredible, you gotta hear this song.’

When he finished the song, I told him, I said boy this song is eerie. Yeah man, this song feels like death. It feels like something terrible’s gonna happen. (*Soul Deep*, 2005)

Womack was not the only one for whom “A Change” incited such a response. Peter Guralnick notes that even Cooke’s immediate family could hear something unsettling:

Barbara Cooke, Sam’s wife, said the same thing. Somehow or another there was a

premonition in it. It reminded everybody of death. (*Soul Deep*, 2005)

In both accounts the initial experience of listening to “A Change” was described in specific terms. The language of imminence was common, it was felt the song contained a temporal dissonance. It was even considered premonitory. These qualities were cited as part of the general unsettling emotiveness of “A Change”. As well as temporality, both Womack and Barbara Cooke believed the song contained an unsettling reminder of death. Thus the experience of listening to “A Change” was characterised in three ways. The song produced an unspecified sense of dislocation. Dislocation was then refined into temporality, whereby the song was considered to be prescient. This atemporality was translated into death. The premonition in the song was of Cooke’s death, and thus it seemed to be mourning a death which had yet to occur.

It seems something was at work in the song's sonic structures. The answer may lie in the relationship between the accounts of prescient mourning and the other qualities of “A Change”. The song was also using faith as an imminent device. The investment in faith was a practice transferred from the Black church to Civil Rights. The song was built around structures which allow for a transformative justice in the future. Cooke’s performance redoubles these elements. His ability to float his own voice beyond its material limits amplified the songs imminence. Cooke’s vocal lilt was a singing on the cusp of change, always.

From the accounts of those initially listening to “A Change”, the sound of dislocation was interpreted rather differently. The unsettling qualities of the song sounded eerie to Womack and Barbara Cooke, for whom its eeriness was both the sound of futurity and the sound of death. The sentiment of “A Change” and Cooke’s performativity allowed them to posthumously reinvent it as a premonition of his death. “A Change” produced something which sounded like freedom but it also sounded like death. “A Change” was never simply a mourning or freedom song, it was always in the process of becoming both.

### **Death, temporality, freedom: Spillers and Levinas**

Between King’s “Mountaintop” and Cooke’s “A Change” there appears to be a series of recurrent themes. Dyson, Guralnick, Womack and Barbara Cooke reported hearing varying degrees of prescience. They did not immediately attach these sounds to the

imminent freedoms informing each recording. Instead they reported the dominant sonic quality as deathly. From these accounts it seems the dislocated temporality of each recording was as much about the sound of a death to come as it was about the sound of a freedom to come. The observations made by Dyson et al illustrate the way King's and Cooke's respective deaths have overwhelmed their final performances. The combinations of death and freedom have been used to frame their relationship to Civil Rights. "Mountaintop" and "A Change" have become evidence of their quasi-mystical powers. They were able to experience a time of black freedom, as well as their own demises.

In turn this becomes reflective of the wider dislocation occupying these recordings. This dislocation lies between the sounds King and Cooke produced and how they have been imagined as examples of mourning and liberation. It seems it was possible to hear in their voices a mourning for a death yet to happen and a freedom yet to come. There are reasons why this is so. It is do with the relationship between the religious experiences informing the performances and the liberatory demands which motivated them. The temporal dislocation through which the sounds of mourning and liberation emerged was an outcome of this relationship. Paying attention to religious and social demands for freedom should lead to questions about the Civil Rights project, especially the overdetermination of King's and Cooke's deaths.

Death, liberation and temporality occupy both "Mountaintop" and "A Change" as phonic markers which seem to be incongruous. There are though some common threads tying them together. It is important to recall "Mountaintop" and "A Change" are couched in King's and Cooke's training in the Black church. These recordings are built upon two practices particular to that tradition. Firstly there is religious passivity. Whether in the pulpit or on the gospel stage King and Cooke were rendering themselves passive. To achieve intimacy with the spirit they had to nullify their agentic potential. Evidence of this passivity was transmitted physically and sonically because relying solely on testimony was not enough. The congregation needed to be convinced they had momentarily lost control of their actions due to the presence of the Holy. They needed to transmit certain types of feeling. Embodiment and voice were crucial to this, as evidenced through King's "Vision" and Cooke's vocal bend.

The admixture of death, temporality and freedom which occupies both "Mountaintop" and "A Change" can be thought through the performance of religious passivity. Cooke and King honed these techniques early in their careers. The

dislocations heard on each recording are an outcome of passivity, which was translated into death and liberation and also gave “Mountaintop” and “A Change” a radical potency. This often goes unaccounted for when assessing these recordings. There is a rush to frame them through the real events of King and Cooke’s deaths.

To repeat an earlier observation, Spillers essay on the black sermon privileges voice, embodiment and the aural. Bodies which make and receive sounds shape Black religious performativity in the U.S. Her claim rests on “the historical particularity of the body’s wounding” (Spillers, 2003b, 276). The embodiment of scripture formed the response to “the cultural situation of African-Americans as a wounding or a writing in blood” (Spillers, 2003b, 276). The body and the voice do not undergo total transformation. Spillers emphasises “becoming”. The climatic ecstasy of black worship does not offer resolutions, it is not a case of being made free. Instead the possibility of change is introduced and deferred. Spillers argues the heights of religious worship are experienced as suspension, “becoming” means the performers and congregation are never fixed in the ritual. Instead they operate at “the very limit of identity – the indomitable, irremediable otherness of death” (Spillers, 2003b, 276). In this scenario death is not terminal and does not lead to obsolescence, rather it is a “radicalising move” (Spillers, 2003b, 276). During worship the process of becoming can reach acute levels of intensity. Those taking part produce sounds which seem deathly. Instead they have momentarily moved into the time and space of the spirit. They have rendered themselves passive to its presence, and given way to the deferred promise of freedom. Within Black Christian rituals, performances of emancipation are not all that disconnected from performances of death. Spillers makes the case that the process of becoming is pushed to a sonic limit where it comes under erasure. This passivity is often interpreted as deathly, but is in fact an insurgent sound.

Passivity allowed freedom and death to appear in “Mountaintop” and “A Change”. The spiritual intimacy produced in Black Christian worship required an vocal self-evacuation. King and Cooke transferred this practice beyond the church and used it pursue the socio-religious freedom that defined the Civil Rights project. Thomas Carl Wall’s reading of passivity is applicable in this context. Using Emmanuel Levinas as his reference point, Wall proffers a theory of “radical passivity” which achieves two things. Firstly, through Levinas, he links passivity to experiences of death and spirituality. This has resonances with the analysis of “Mountaintop” and “A Change” above. His conceptualisation of radical passivity as a practice is also significant. Radical passivity

bears a resemblance to the phonic performativity honed by King and Cooke in the church. Wall describes passivity as an a priori practice. It is not something the subject possesses, but exists prior to the subject's knowledge of itself: "radical passivity.....affects subjectivity prior to any memory" (Wall, 1999, 1). This means passivity is "more intimate than any perception, experience or feeling" (Wall, 1999, 2). It operates with a proximity the subject is not always aware of. This intimacy is a result of its a priori status which means passivity does not have a form, nor can it be directed at an object. Passivity only really works on itself. In working on itself its processes are revealed through the subject: "passive with regard to itself, and thus it submits to itself as though it were an exterior power" (Wall, 1999, 1). Passivity renders itself as other, thus passifying itself and reproducing passivity. It submits to its own affects. Wall argues this continues "incessantly" because it has no object but its own practices (Wall, 1999, 2). In this sense it is self destructive. Passivity "cannot conserve itself in order to destroy; [passivity] cannot but incessantly destroy itself" (Wall, 1999, 2). This self-destruction is not reductive, it does not prevent passivity working, rather passivity is reproduced this way. Passivity's submission to its own affects "exposes a passivity", it is occupied by incessant movement and dislocation (Wall, 1999, 3). Radical passivity "opens us to a hollow interval of non-salvageable time that is both without continuation and without cessation" (Wall, 1999, 7).

Wall's concept of radical passivity appropriates much of Levinas' work on the subject. Levinas conceptualised passivity through experiences of death and experiences of God. In both cases Levinas used passivity to divorce experiences of death and God from being. He wanted to think them as prior to the subject. Death, Levinas believes, has been caught in a dichotomy between life and annihilation. He wants to challenge this dichotomy by rethinking the term "decease". Instead of closure, for Levinas, decease implies movement: "A departure towards the unknown, a departure without return, a departure with no forwarding address" (Levinas, 2000, 9). For Levinas death is a process; it is not terminal. Death involved the production of passivity as an affect (Levinas, 2000, 15). Death is affectively productive precisely because it is impossible to experience. It recurs as a fissure in experience, "an ever open *possibility*" (Levinas, 2000, 47).

Levinas takes an almost identical line with experiences of God. Once again intense passivity serves as the motor. He focuses on the act of bearing witness as the moment when passivity is most evident. Levinas describes bearing witness as an act of

destructive non-experience: “The glory of the Infinite is anarchy in the subject driven out of hiding, with no possible escape” (Levinas, 2000, 196). He is arguing that testimony is not enough during such moments. Bearing witness is so disassociative it takes apart the process of bearing witness (Levinas, 2000, 197).

Levinas identifies the voice as central to this disassociative witnessing. Mahmut Mutman's speculations on the sonic content of Levinas' religious voice reveal how this voice is also deathly. Mutman uses the model of passivity as prior to the subject to argue that for Levinas: “the voice of the other is heard before it is listened to. It is something that happens to the self or the subject” (Mutman, 2007, 105). Mutman's description of the aural experience of God in Levinas' work is as much a theorisation of death: “violent, traumatic and expropriating in character” (Mutman, 2007, 106). The phonic substance of the voice in this schema consists of “a strange audibility, quite out of the ordinary.....a rumbling silence....as if the emptiness were full, as if the silence were noise” (Mutman, 2007, 107-108). What Mutman does here is provide an outline of what, according to Levinas, religious or deathly passivity sounds like when enacted through the subject.

There is a strong resonance here with Cooke's vocal bend and King's “Vision”. Cooke's vocal oscillations shaped first and foremost the textures of his own voice. Cooke's voice broke away and folded back in on itself, in a self-passifying and reproductive manoeuvre. The same could be said of King, who used his testimony to passify the agency and materiality of his voice. This undertaking opened up the radical political possibilities of Civil Rights. In both cases the submission to and reproduction of passivity lead to creative dissonance. This is the case with “A Change” and “Mountaintop”. Their passionate performances of sonic passivity produced analytical confusion. It was accepted their performances were potent, yet it was unclear whether the sounds they produced were deathly or liberatory. “Mountaintop” and “A Change” seemed to contain the sound of both.

The notion of a spiritually inspired voice as so sonically disassociative it sounds deathly resonates with King and Cooke. “Mountaintop” and “A Change” were strategically political performances which sat within the discourse of Civil Rights, but they were rooted in the training of the pulpit and the gospel stage. They used techniques of vocal and bodily evacuation to generate experiences of imminence amongst their audiences. That *feeling* was highly dissonant. It was an attempt to record and reproduce the sound of an impossible experience. Thus the performances encompassed both the

phonic materiality of (be)coming free and (be)coming death.

Four performances from Martin Luther King and Sam Cooke have been the focus of this case study. One exists firmly within the Black church tradition (Cooke's vocal bend) and another is couched in the folk pulpit but connects those performances to Civil Rights (King's "Vision"). The other two are iconic Civil Rights recordings. They are iconic because they concentrated the political ethos of the movement but their iconicity also stems from two other features. "Mountaintop" and "A Change" seem to mourn the end of the movement, and the deaths of King and Cook, ahead of their occurrence.

Taken together these performances have been used to question Michael Lackey's claim that religious faith is unethical when it comes to black democratic hopes. The "Vision" and vocal bend illustrate how religious passion is enacted in Black Christian rituals. It involves inducing a passivity which is experienced through the body and voice. King no longer spoke, it was the voice of a spirit speaking through him. Cooke's encounter with the spirit was marked on his voice. It was bent, misshapen but even more sonically potent. With the "Vision" the crisis that shaped Civil Rights becomes apparent. King's climactic demands for protection were resolutely disassociative and he had no agency over these claims. It was the sound of a spirit generating that claim through him. He was pacified by its presence.

These structural crises reached a pitch with "Mountaintop" and "A Change". It is accepted that both are exemplary performances of freedom. King and Cooke use their training to generate emancipatory feelings. The experience is carried in the way they use their voices and record the sound of imminent freedom. It is nearby, just ahead, waiting on the horizon. But "Mountaintop" and "A Change" are also enveloped by the sound of mourning. King and Cooke's abilities to produce temporal dissonances and feel a future were also heard as deathly. In "Mountaintop" and "A Change" they were considered to be prophesising the end of the movement. Their mourning sounds were anticipating the eventual collapse of the Civil Rights project. More significantly the sounds they produced were interpreted as a mourning for themselves. They were singing prescient mourning songs. The only rationale given for this interpretation was that King and Cooke were killed soon after their respective recordings were made.

This framing of "Mountaintop" and "A Change" is problematic because it cuts short the radical potency of their performances. To reroute the sound of a mourning heard in both recordings and connect it to their deaths dulls their sonic potency. It is better, in

this context to not listen to the mourning sounds King and Cooke record as terminal. They are not endings but are productive and liberatory because of the analytical problems they present.

King and Cooke may have sounded like they were mourning their own deaths. Those sounds though were much closer to what Spillers calls death as a radicalising move. Mourning is induced by a radical passivity that occurs during moments of spiritual ecstasy. The speaking subject is evacuated and what is left is a rumbling silence, a freedom to become. This emptiness may sound like death, but it is a freedom of infinitely deferred possibilities. “Mountaintop” and “A Change” are overt political statements and they carry a set of hopes associated with the Civil Rights project. The trace of spiritual passivity in these performances though continually destroys these claims. They were destroyed by the very freedoms King and Cooke were pursuing. The liberation at work in the heart of the Civil Rights project could not be adequately housed within the subject, agency or constitutionality. The sound of those freedoms claims were deinstrumental. They took apart those structures, and left behind emancipation as an impossible experience of terror.

The deinstrumentalising experience of listening to “Mountaintop” and “A Change” carries the trace of what Cedric Robinson identified as the incomprehensibility of form within the black radical tradition. The incomprehensibility at stake in this case study was a function of the phonic materiality of the freedoms King and Cooke were generating. In one sense those performances were incomprehensible because they drew on black church traditions where the expectations were determined according to internal criteria. More importantly King and Cooke used their training in this internal criteria to produce public performances of black freedom which caused acute aural confusion. It was always possible to *hear* their performance, and to hear the way they drew on specific modes of black performance, but to fully commit to listening to them required an attunement to radically different propositions of blackness and/as freedom.

### **Part 3 – Detroit, black labour and (re)production**

#### **Chapter 4 – The League of Revolutionary Black Workers**

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers made themselves heard amongst the industrial machinery of mid-to-late 1960s Detroit. The League were an organisation formed during the peak of the Black Consciousness movement in the United States. Black Consciousness was not limited to Black Nationalism, the Black Arts movement, or Civil Rights. The formation of the League indicates that black radicalism was also a driving force for industrial labourers. The story of the League is in many ways a story of Black Detroit. Writing about the League in relation to Detroit means thinking about how the group's practices were shaped by the material and sonic environment in America's industrial metropolis.

Established in June 1969, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers were formed amongst the majority Black workforce in Detroit's automobile factories. They were an umbrella organisation designed to consolidate a series of Revolutionary Union Movements (RUMs) which had developed in factories across the city. These RUMs had arisen in the wake of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), which formed in May 1968. DRUM had led wildcat strikes of Black workers against the officially sanctioned United Autoworkers Union (UAW) at the Chrysler Dodge plant.

The League were a Marxist-Leninist organisation seeking to unify the Black workforce in Detroit's factories because they felt Black workers were violently oppressed in this environment. The automated production line became the focal point for the League's project. This piece of machinery lay at the heart of the automobile industry in Detroit and as a consequence it was central to modern American capitalism. The League saw the automated production line as a device which violently disciplined the bodies of Black workers. Exploited Black labourers were, through the rhythms of the production line, embedded in the modern American economy, and thus the League's radicalism was aimed at the disruption of the line, as well as the disciplinary environment it produced in Detroit's factories. Such was the force of their critique that the League's project was itself arguably an outcome of the production line process. The disciplinary rhythms of the line became central to the sonic production of their politics.

These issues come together in a documentary film the group recorded in 1970, *Finally Got The News*. It is a presentation of their ideological foundations and

highlights the degree of activism amongst Detroit's industrial workforce. Yet the film also records the material influence of automated production upon the League's radicalism. They pinpoint the production line as the machine which inflicts violence upon the Black worker, whilst also acknowledging that the same worker gains knowledge about capital through the line, which serves the League's radicalism. The League's circular relationship with the violence of the production line was echoed in their at times ambivalent, at times intense, engagement with the question of gendered labour. The League seemed to want to bypass the question of labour for Black women in Detroit's factories, but could not avoid the fact that black female reproductivity served as a structural basis for their politics. Both the production line and gendered labour inform the soundscape of *Finally Got The News*, and in this chapter I will listen closely to these aspects of the film through Marx's account of labour and alienation, deconstructive approaches to the relationship between sonic and vocal content, and black feminist theorisations of natality as labour.

In broader terms the first chapter of this case study represents a turn towards Moten's notion of the resistance of the object, as well as Robinson's identification of a disjuncture between the Black radical tradition and Marxism. Once again it is the phonic materiality of the League's radicalism, as presented in *Finally Got The News*, which informs the relationship to Moten and Robinson. In this first chapter I am concerned with the difference between the sound of black labour labouring and the sound of black labour resisting. I want to trouble the sonic difference between the two by way of a natal reproductivity which structured the relationship between them. What will become apparent in the second chapter of this case study is that these concerns were not limited to the League. All that is to be mapped out in this chapter in terms of black labour, resistance, reproductivity and phonic materiality resonated at Detroit's black musical factory: the Motown recording company.

### ***Detroit: I Do Mind Dying***

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers emerged in a Detroit shaped by the cumulative effects of racial tensions, which eventually resulted in the 1967 rebellion (Darden, Hill, Thomas, Thomas 1987, 73; Thompson, 2004, 3; Widick, 1989, viii). Although many of those initially forming RUMs had been radicalised by these events, the League were focused on the automobile industry dominated by the "The Big

Three” of Ford, Chrysler and General Motors (Darden et al, 1987, 3). They saw in the factories a concentration of the racial tensions at work across the city. The exploitation and discrimination of Black Detroiters, for the League, was most acutely felt on the production lines.

The documented histories of the League vary in range and type. There is at least one book length study (Geschwender, 1977), as well as more more fragmentary analyses (Foner, 1974; Cluster, 1979; Thompson, 2004). Dan Georgakas and Marvin Survin's *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* will provide the bulk of the context on the League in this chapter. This is because their work operates in the realm of what Jacqueline Rhodes calls the “book as action” (Rhodes, 2005, 1). Georgakas and Survin made conscious decisions to privilege the League's own accounts of their politics during the peak of their activities in the city (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, xv, 6). Therefore rather than presenting the League in the customary form of historical knowledge, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* is a text almost active in the production of the radicalism it depicts.

The League fully understood the relationship between Black workers and the automobile industry in Detroit. Using this knowledge they developed a set of strategies which were designed to disrupt and overturn the structures of capital in the U.S. They believed this task needed to begin at the heart of the modern American economy, which lay in industrial Detroit with the Black workforce.

The League's analysis of the power relationship between Black workers and the automobile industry began outside the factory. The inner-city Black population of Detroit was viewed by the Big Three as a cheap and disposable labour force. Black Detroiters were often able to find work in the factories, but the League realised most positions were precarious (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 29-30). This permanent insecurity meant the companies would only offer Black workers “the worst and most dangerous jobs: the foundry and the body shop, jobs requiring the greatest physical exertion and jobs which were the noisiest, dirtiest and most dangerous in the plant” (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 29).

If Black workers were able to secure any medium-to-long term positions, they then faced institutional racism inside the factories. The League were aware that the term skilled labour was not applicable to Black workers. This tactic was, according to the League, in the interests of the companies. White workers would look to defend the minor power they held over Black workers, meaning racial divisions became a barrier to class solidarity (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 30).

Despite these issues the League felt the problems for Black workers were far more fundamental. The crux of the Black workforce's vexed relationship with the automobile industry lay in the automated production line. Working on the line, almost inevitably for Black workers in the most toxic areas, was inimical. Georgakas and Survin reprint in their text a description of the environment on the line taken from the "Inner City Voice" newspaper. The ICV was a monthly Black activist newspaper in the Detroit which took a strong militant line. Many of the staff at the ICV went on to take up senior positions within the League:

Black workers are tied day in and day out, 8 – 12 hours a day, to a massive assembly line, an assembly line that one never sees the end or the beginning of but merely fits into a slot and stays there, swearing and bleeding, running and stumbling, trying to maintain a steadily increasing pace. Adding to the severity of the working conditions are the white racist and bigoted foremen, harassing, insulting, driving and snapping the whip over the backs of thousands of black workers, who have to work in these plants in order to eke out an existence. (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 18)

According to this account the Black worker is attached to the line in a way that is physically oppressive. The Black worker has to struggle to maintain pace with the machinery. Blood is spilt. The portrayal of foremen "snapping the whip" is a barely coded reference to captivity. The League were drawing links between the status of workers on the line and the status of slaves. There may have been hundreds of years between the plantation and industrial manufacturing, but the League felt little had changed structurally. Black people were still treated as labouring objects and the line was a reproduction of that environment. The rhythms of the line dictated the rhythms of labour, and it was an industrial rhythm which disciplined the body of the Black worker (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 26).

One of the reasons why the League became necessary was due to the inaction of the employee's official representatives, the United Auto Workers union (UAW). They felt the UAW were complicit in the racism directed at the Black workforce. Previous attempts by Black workers to call the union to account had been ignored (Foner, 1974; Darden et al, 1987, 70-71; Lewis-Colman, 2008). The League argued this was reflective of a structural problem within the union because the UAW did not represent the interests of all workers. Under the leadership of Walter Reuther the UAW had played a central part in eliminating the communist influence within the American automobile union movement during the McCarthy era. His reward was to exchange union bargaining

powers in return for direct financial support from the automobile companies (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 26-27). The League felt with this level of union and company complicity the communication channels open to workers were rendered ineffective. The official grievance procedure was ignored completely. For the Black workforce, despite the open levels of racism, the intense workloads, serious injuries and fatalities, there was little or no avenue for organised representation.

The League's emergence coincided with a shift in the factory environment around 1965. During this period a significant number of politically active Black workers were recruited onto the production line. They were in tune with the newly emergent forms of Black Consciousness and also had links to various Marxist-Leninist and Socialist groups in Detroit. The influx of this new workforce led to increased levels of radical activity and worker-company-union tension in the automobile plants. Georgakas and Survin cite incidents which paved the way for the formation of the League. The first was a series of wildcat strikes at the Chrysler Dodge Main plant in May and June 1968. These strikes sparked the creation of, and were subsequently led by, the inaugural Dodge Revolutionary Union movement (DRUM).

The DRUM strikes were felt across the city's automobile industry. RUMs spread like a contagion throughout the factories of Detroit (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 76-77). The speed at which these groups were arising created the need for a solid worker platform. Within a year it was decided to set up the League. Organisationally the League eschewed "a strict hierarchy" and instead allowing each individual RUM to retain its autonomy (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 75-76). The League valued this flexibility because they felt it could respond more effectively to the UAW, the companies and the wider governmental structures (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 76).

Despite the League's flexibility, they had clear aims. The League's basic aim was to organise the Black workforce on the production lines in Detroit. Part of the process of organisation involved education. Black workers, according to the League, needed to be made aware of the combined effects of racism, capitalism and imperialism on their daily lives. In this respect the League were treated as an anomaly by the UAW and the companies because they found their politics incomprehensible. The League were not interested in supplanting the UAW in its relationship with the Big Three. Rather their interests lay in bypassing the entire economic structures which bound the two together (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 39).

The League saw themselves as a revolutionary vanguard. They were looking to

disrupt the American economy by disrupting automobile production in Detroit. Black workers, the League felt, were vital to this process. Thus the focal point for the group's actions was the Black worker on the production line. The League took the view that organising workers directly in the plant was a far more effective strategy than community action. Georgakas and Survin turn to League executive committee member Kenneth Cockerel to explain. Recorded at an Anti-Repression conference in Detroit, 1970, he argued:

We say that the point of greatest vulnerability....is the point of production in the economic infrastructure of the system. We say it makes sense to organise workers inside of plants to precipitate the maximum dislocation and maximum paralysis of the operation of the capitalist-imperialist system. We say that all people who don't own, rule and benefit from decisions which are made by those who own and rule are workers. (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 189)

Cockerel's rationale was that the concentration of Black workers on the production lines meant there were a high volume of people experiencing the same conditions on a daily basis often in the same locations. Thus the possibility of communicating easily and directly with large groups of workers became a more viable tactic in the plants than in their homes and communities.

With their focus on the production lines, it was important for the League to maintain a presence amongst Black workers, which meant their communications strategy became significant. Due to the executive committee's links with the ICV, the printing press was central to the League's communications. Several of the individual RUMs had been publishing in-plant newspapers and one of the initial aims of the League was to save costs and centralise these processes. When handed out at factory gates self-produced newspapers carried out several functions. League and RUM newspapers maintained visibility for the organisations, proposed ways for Black workers to collectively address the oppressiveness of their working environment and they also attracted new members.

The League's communications strategy was not limited to the printing press. The executive committee decided to evolve and move into film, which offered a much wider sphere of influence. The League could communicate with larger concentrations of workers and with greater frequency. It was with this set of ideas in mind that the League conceived of *Finally Got The News*.

Newsreel, a New York based radical filmmakers' collective, were brought on board in the spring of 1969 to undertake the project. They had previous experience in producing

films for the Black Panthers, but the League members at the heart of the project (Kenneth Cockerel, Mike Hamlin and John Watson) had a set of precise aims. The League leadership wanted their film to be markedly different in ethos to the previous work *Newsreel* had undertaken with the Black Panthers. They felt the Panthers ideological positions and displays of bravado were limited. The League “definitely wanted the usual ‘by any means necessary’ rhetoric omitted or curtailed” (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 129). The group felt *Finally Got The News* should illustrate “that being a radical does not require becoming an incredible, gun slinging hero who defies the police with every breath” (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 132). There was an insistence “that the film be conceived within a teaching rather than a reporting framework” (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 129). *Finally Got The News* was designed to show Black workers that they could begin to self-organise and use readily available insurgent tactics (wildcat strikes, union elections and the printing press) to become an integral part of a revolutionary organisation.

### ***Finally Got The News***

Released in 1970s and intended to present the League’s political program, *Finally Got the News* also exposes a series of tensions which occupied the group. The film provides an insight into the League’s potent yet also at times troubled radicalism. Before analysing *Finally Got The News* in detail, it needs to be contextualised within the practices of Black documentary making during the Black Consciousness movement.

The League's educational and organisational aims for the film were not unique, as there was a burgeoning field of Black documentary making in the U.S. during the 1960s . In *Struggles For Representation*, Phyliss Klotman and Janet Cutler outline the politics of Black documentary film making. They argue William Greaves set the agenda for this field during the 1960s. Greaves was executive producer of *Black Journal*, a nationally broadcast series which highlighted issues of concern to the Black community and pursued an agenda of socially engaged Black documentary making. As the producer of *Black Journal* he had three set criteria for all submissions: “define black reality, pointing to a problem or a struggle; explain how and why the situation evolved; and most importantly suggest a way out” (Klotman & Cutler, 1999, xv). If Black documentary makers fulfilled these aims their films became “weapons in the struggle for freedom....These films tend to agitate.” (Klotman and Cutler, 1999, xvii). *Finally Got The News* sits within these categorisations. As a piece of radical documentary film

making it acts as an educational and agitating device. *Finally Got The News* was never only a representation of the League, it was also active in their project. The film was an agent of revolutionary consciousness and can be understood as part of a network of militant image production (Eshun and Gray, 2001).

When analysing *Finally Got The News* it is necessary to think about how the film was designed as a weapon. The dominant feature of *Finally Got The News* is the automated production line which shapes the content and textures of the film. From the opening credits the line provides a recurring soundtrack and it becomes a focal visual element. Both of these features centre the analysis because the viewer is reminded, either sonically or visually, that the production line defines the Black worker's environment.

In depicting the relationship between Black workers and the production line *Finally Got The News* exposes the League's double bind over the issue. The automated production line, the League argued, was an instrument of oppression. Their aim was to organise Black workers to disrupt the line, and out of this disruption would come a plan for revolutionary change. The League also recognised one of their strengths was the numbers of Black workers on the line. It provided Black workers with violent experience of American capital. The League were able to put this experience to use to radicalise Black workers. The League wanted to break the hold the line had over Black workers, yet its conditions generated their politics. This is the tension which animates *Finally Got The News*.

The main section of *Finally Got The News* is taken up by the League, although the film does also take in the perspective of the broader workforce in the factory. The action opens with executive committee member John Watson, who was the driving force behind the documentary project. Watson introduces the film with a lecture in which he provides an overview of the current and historical status of Black workers in the U.S. There will be much more on his lecture to follow, as it forms the focal point of this chapter. For the moment it is sufficient to say Watson's lecture is a framing device for *Finally Got The News*.

Much of the film is taken up by the rest of the League executive committee and members. Chuck Wooten, General Baker, Mike Hamlin and Kenneth Cockerel have various roles in the documentary. Some outline the organisations genesis in the city's automobile factories. Others analyse the entire situation in Detroit, addressing the relationship between Black workers and the machinery, Black workers and White workers, and black labour and capitalism. There is footage of the League in action, with

extended coverage of a wildcat protest outside the UAW central offices. This seems to be part of an attempt to illustrate the political bankruptcy of the Black workers official representatives. The League are also filmed organising at a local UAW ballot. These scenes seem designed to show workers that the League were looking to gain some political capital in order to force the UAW to listen to its demands. The viewer also sees the printing press being put to use by the League, a central part of the group's communications strategy.

A notable section is included as *Finally Got The News* draws to a close. A supplementary statement created by Black women workers is inserted into the final parts of the film. This supplement deals with the position of Black women in relation to the League's self-depictions. A woman's voice narrates this segment, and unlike the voices of the League, she is unnamed and unseen. Throughout this segment she makes the case for Black women in Detroit as the true revolutionary vanguard. She argues the Black woman represents a much more militant member of the pool of black labour in the city, and emphasises her argument by constantly using the refrain: "We more than anybody else in the workforce...". This addition to *Finally Got The News* has an strange status. The thoughts of Black women as workers seem only to be attached onto the end of the League's film as an afterthought, and their presence in the documentary does not form a part of the general analysis from the League. Yet the presence of the Black woman, even as a supplement, means it does form some part of *Finally Got The News*. The Black woman is acknowledged, in some piecemeal way, by the League, but her account is not sufficiently incorporated into the overall piece. It will become clear during this chapter that this aspect of *Finally Got The News* is reflective of the troubles the League had with issues of gender difference as it relates to blackness and labour.

To get to grips with *Finally Got The News* requires engaging with the two aspects of the League's politics which inform it. The first is the production line. This piece of machinery generated the League and it also shaped the content and textures of their documentary. Secondly there is the issue introduced above: the labour of Black women. Both the production line and Black women labourers are central to the League's politics. One (the production line) in ways that are apparent, and the other (Black women as labourers) less so. To hear how the two are connected in *Finally Got The News*, it is necessary to analyse John Watson's opening lecture in detail.

The lecture given by John Watson is the early focal point of *Finally Got the News*. The lecture is designed to set out the immediate context of the League's response to the

automobile factories in Detroit, but also to ground the group's tactics within the historical perspective of black labour and capitalism in America. Watson works on a central premise: that the present experience of Black workers in Detroit's factories is the latest manifestation of the destructive bind that has held blackness, labour and capital together since captivity. Enforced enslavement put in place, for Watson, the pivotal role of black labour in the creation of surplus value. Since the assembly of that system, he argues, the Black population in the U.S. have experienced capitalist exploitation with an acute intensity. According to Watson, black labour has been crucial to American capitals wealth accumulation function:

Black workers have historically been the foundation stone upon which the American industrial empire has been built and sustained. It began with slavery over four hundred years ago, when Black people were captured on the west coast of Africa, shipped to the U.S. ....and used to produce surplus value.

Watson's description of black labour as a "foundation stone" is revealing. He seems to be equating black labour to an object, one American capital has assembled itself around. Captivity allowed black labour to be thought of as a tool to be used in the production of surplus value. For Watson this process has been translated several times over and it is now apparent on the production lines of Detroit. Within the disciplinary environment of the production line he specifies the black body as a the foundation stone. The black labouring body is coerced into the pace and practices of automated production. This is experienced as a form of violent duress for the Black workforce. When put to use as an object-tool by industrial capital, an exchange takes place between the exertions of the body and the demands of the production line:

You'll find throughout the history of America that Black people have been in that same position. You'll find this true today. You don't get too many Black people as white collar workers. You don't find too many Black people as skilled tradesmen. You'll find other kinds of cats, you know, who are sitting in the factories, who are converting raw materials into finished products through their own sweat and blood. It's a transformation of sweat and blood – literally - into finished products.

The disciplinarity of the line has a particular impact upon the Black worker cast as object. The physical effluents ("sweat and blood") of the body/object are reconstituted o produce value. Watson seems to suggest that between the black body and the production line there is a space of incoherency. The strenuous exertion demanded of Black workers means the differences between body and machine breakdown. There is a violent

conflation at work, whereby the black labouring body sweats and bleeds, yet it is still an object which is barely differentiated from the machinery of industrial capital. It is a tool which possesses flesh and becomes embedded in an epidermal exchange. According to Watson the products of this exchange are instrumental to industrial capital in Detroit.

The potency of Watson's lecture, as an ideological map of the League's radicalism, arises through his conceptualisation of the unstable space between Black workers and the machinery of industrial capital. For Watson, because the Black worker is almost indistinguishable from the production line, and because the scenario is repeated across the automobile factories of Detroit, it follows that the Black worker possesses potential power. The capacity of industrial capital to convert the "blood and sweat" of the black body into value is a tactical advantage for the League. Watson suggests an organised and conscious Black workforce possesses the labour power to disrupt modern American capital. The points at which the black labouring body is most vulnerable, the points at which the line penetrates the skin of the object, conversely carries the greatest potential for radical action:

We are essential and key to the continued operation, and the continued smooth function of a highly industrial, highly complicated machine, and we can use that power, you know, if we can ever get ourselves organised well enough. We can destroy that machine, or you know, take it over.

The black labouring body is essential to the machinery of capital and it is also capable of its destruction, due to the way in which blackness is materially embedded in the automated production line. The Black worker/tool acquires an epidermal knowledge of the line and can identify its weakest points. As Watson makes clear the processes he identifies are nothing new. What is taking place in the factories of Detroit is part of a longer history of arranging the black body as a labouring object for American capital.

Watson is making a historical case for the structural importance of the Black worker to the American economy, which has reached a synthesis in Detroit through the production line. Watson's lecture anticipates a more formal analysis of blackness, labour and capitalism which Manning Marable undertook. His *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* helps to solidify our interpretation of Watson's lecture.

Marable's basic thesis is that the commonly held view of Black exclusion from mainstream American economic power serves to mask the reality that the Black population in the U.S. have been "integrated' all too well into the system" (Marable, 1999, 2). The perception of black labour's distance from capital, according to Marable,

stands in opposition to its strategic necessity:

Capitalist development has occurred not in spite of the exclusion of Blacks, but because of the brutal exploitation of Blacks as workers and consumers. Blacks have never been equal partners in the American social contract because the system exists not to develop, but to underdevelop Black people. (Marable, 1999, 2)

Black labourers are an exploitative necessity for capital in America. Black underdevelopment is the outcome of an enforced connection to capital. Marable views such connections as part of a strategy which has sought to (re)produce blackness as a target for exploitation since captivity:

Since the demise of slavery, and the emergence of modern capitalism, the process of Black underdevelopment has expanded and deepened. To understand this dynamic of degradation, first, is to recognise that development itself is comparative in essence, a relationship of inequality between the capitalist ruling class and those who are exploited. Underdevelopment is not the absence of development; it is the inevitable product of an oppressed populations integration into the world market economy and political system. (Marable, 1999, 7)

Marable uses “integration” as a way to think the particularity of black underdevelopment. His language of integration feeds into Watson’s analysis of the status of industrial Black labourers. The manner in which Watson plots the movement from the historical necessity of Black labourers to capital and the (re)production of this legacy in the Detroit plants, has echoes of Marable’s work. In effect, Watson outlines the ideological and literal integration of the black body (as object) into the machinery of automated production.

Integration seems to shape the lecture Watson gives in *Finally Got the News*. His idea of black labour being rendered both vulnerable and potent through an integration with the production line is not entirely of his own making. When Watson pinpoints the flesh of the black labourer (object) as being used to produce value, he is adapting a discourse developed by the Black worker. The imagery of blood and sweat lubricating the machinery had its basis in the day-to-day experiences of the line. In their account of the League’s development in the factories of Detroit, Georgakas and Survin address the worker’s relationship to the conditions of labour. They focus on a specific incident at the Chrysler Eldon Avenue plant where over a set period productivity rose by a significant margin. Chrysler management attributed this rise at the time to a rationalisation of the workforce. The majority (70 percent) Black workforce on the production line at Eldon

Avenue though cited an alternative set of factors:

Management credited this much higher productivity per worker to its improved managerial techniques and new machinery. Workers, on the other hand, claimed the higher productivity was primarily a result of their being forced to work harder and faster under increasingly unsafe and unhealthy conditions. The companies called their methods automation; black workers in Detroit called them *niggermation*. (Georgakas and Survin, 1998, 92, emphasis added)

The term “niggermation” indicates the level of critical self-awareness from the Black worker on the production line, as well as their ability to offer a nuanced analysis of their own labour. “Niggermation” seems to operate on the level of thinking the body of the Black worker and the machinery symbiotically. It indicates Black workers knew they laboured at uncomfortable levels of intensity, and such were the demands placed upon them that at times they seemed to integrate with the line itself.

During his lecture, when Watson talks of the literal “transformation of sweat and blood into products”, he is using the logic of niggermation. His visceral imagery is built upon a knowledge which the Black workforce acquired and articulated through their labour. The combination of niggermation and Watson’s translation of this term give a particular impression of the environment inside the factories of Detroit. There seems to have been a violent conjunction between the Black worker's body and the machinery of the production line. The flesh of the workforce seems to have been exerted to the point at which it became a functioning part of the line. The level of slippage here points to the way in which the relationship between black labour and industrialism in Detroit was highly sensual. Being held captive established corporeality as the basis for the encounter between blackness and capital, and this scenario had been (re)produced in the automobile factories of Detroit as a sensual connection.

In this respect the League seemed to have a Gramscian inflection to their politics. In his analysis of automated production in America, Gramsci had specified the “muscular-nervous efficiency of the worker” as one of its major facets (Gramsci, 1971, 303; Denning, 2009). Gramsci's muscularity points to the meeting of machinery and the labouring body in American industry and there is a strain of niggermation in his formulation. Gramsci's formulation also allows Marx to be introduced into an analysis of niggermation, because he brings to mind Marx's early work on labour, the body and alienation. When read alongside the muscularity of niggermation there are moments where Marx's work becomes applicable to the League. More importantly, the League's

use of their experiences on the production line do not entirely map onto his reading of the labouring body and capitalism.

Marx's theories on labour, the body and alienation feature in his "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts", where he examines the relationship between the worker's body, labour processes and the production of objects. He asks what the physical experience of labouring to produce objects does to the worker. The function of capital is to extract labour from the worker and turn it into an object. Marx refers to this process as externalisation:

What the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less he is himself. The externalisation [entauserrung] of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed upon the object confronts him as hostile and alien. (Marx, 1975, 324)

The worker has a physical investment in the object produced, but there is little relationship between that exertion and the object. Marx argues this leads to the objectification of labour itself. Labour becomes an object external to the worker which is given over to produce the object, creating a chain of estrangements:

It is the objectification of labour. The realisation of labour is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy this realisation of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as a loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation. (Marx, 1975, 324)

Marx stresses that the turning of labour into object is not external to the worker. The worker's body is the site for all these processes and it is transformed during production:

estrangement manifests itself not only in the result, but also in the act of production, within the activity of production itself...so if the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. (Marx, 1975, 326)

Labour becomes "self-estrangement, as compared with the estrangement of the object" (Marx, 1975, 327). There are echoes of Marx in the League's use of niggermentation. This seems to be the case with the worker's experience of violence in the capitalist factory. But Marx's diagnosis of this process as self-estrangement on the part of the worker is not in accordance with the League's position on the same issue.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For more on Marx, labour and alienation see: Olman, 1976; Mesazaros, 2006; Musto, 2010

Marx's argument is that self-estrangement takes place once the worker is part of a capitalist economy. There is something the worker is in possession of prior to this situation, which is a part of lived experience, but these relations are destroyed. Labour is alienated from the worker, whereby both labour and the worker undergo an objectification. The Marxian viewpoint is that the worker has something which is lost upon entry into the factory. As Watson states in his lecture, the black labouring body has always been barely indistinguishable from an object. It was never deemed to be in possession of that which differentiated the worker from the machinery. The black body entered the New World under those conditions, and as a result the history of Black labour is a history of objects. Black workers have never been thought of as workers in the Marxian sense. The Black worker, Watson argues, exists in a liminal space where the body has been deployed as an instrument of labour. The League complicate Marx's reading of worker, labour and alienation in the following way. Whereas Marx felt that the alienation of workers from their collective human nature was the outcome of capitalism and could only be broken through the development of revolutionary consciousness amongst the proletariat, Watson and the League are trying put forward a revolutionary program for those who, in Marx's schema, would never have been deemed to be proper workers. They do not perceive the violently muscular connection to machinery as only an experience of alienation from something which Black workers once had and is now lost. They recognise that Black workers have never been given possession of what could be recognised as subject status. The League's political education has taught them that black objects in the U.S. have always used other means to survive and resist. What the League are trying to do is draw on this other legacy and theorise the violence done to the Black worker/object in the factory into a different kind of revolutionary politics. The apparent lack of difference between the black labouring body and the production line is seen as a starting point for organisation. Black workers experience these conditions in numbers, they always have in the U.S. Thus a connection to the line becomes a means of collectivisation.

Rather than alienation, the League were pursuing a politics of sensuality. They were using their muscular connection to the production line to situate niggermentation as a form of radical sensuality. The indistinguishability between body and machine became key to the League's politics. The League's use of blood and sweat as the connecting material becomes interesting when thinking about the group's aims. The League announced their radical project through a connection to modern industrial capital, yet the purpose of that

project was to break the violent epidermal connection between Black worker and machine.

The sensual politics of the League are crucial to understanding how the group functioned. Sensuality not only helps to understand how they turned niggermentation into a political program, niggermentation also formed the textures of that politics. Niggermentation shaped the aesthetics of *Finally Got The News* because the documentary is turned into a weapon through its sensuality. The friction created by the connection to the machinery was the site of production for the League's aesthetics and politics. To work out how these textures are present in *Finally Got The News*, it is necessary to continue to engage with Watson's lecture but on different terms. Sensuality informed more than the content of his lecture, niggermentation also produced the sound of Watson's voice. The phonic substance of Watson's voice was a facet of his radicalism which could not be separated from the content of the lecture.

### **Watson and voice**

With regards to *Finally Got the News* it is not enough to limit ourselves to what Watson had to say because the lecture involves more than Watson's narrative about the League. When Watson outlines niggermentation as the basis of the League's politics, he also activates the sensuality attached to that term. This is possible because of his relationship to the League. Watson can not be adequately separated from the scenario he depicts in his lecture. To speak as a representative of the League in *Finally Got the News*, he needs to have experienced the labours of the production line. The environment facing the Black worker on the factory floor is one he knows in detail. The conjunction of labourer, instrument and machinery is the space from within which Watson speaks.

Thus the terrain of Watson's voice is now the focal point. This is not to supplant the analysis of Watson's lecture which has taken place above, instead the aim is to listen to the sonorous activity of his voice as an extension of what Watson had to say about the League. Niggermentation once again becomes critical. What is at stake here is Watson's voice as a site of sensual activity. The lectural voice in *Finally Got the News* produces an aesthetic through the intimacy between Black workers and machinery. Watson's voice is the result of a "blood and sweat" exchange and is also generative of those processes. Niggermentation is effectively echoed through Watson's voice. The lecture he gives is recorded from within the recesses of the production line where niggermentation

cuts the space between black labour, the object and machinery. The lecture is noise being made by an instrument which conversely gives Watson's voice an unstable potency. It is the sound of the black object speaking, and it is speaking a critique of its labour conditions, of the production line, and of American industrial capital. The lecture is a case of property critiquing the concept of property. Watson not only announced the League's radical program, but also activated it through the textures of his voice, it was a sensual site of production for the group's radical project. What will follow is an attempt to pay attention to Watson's voice in *Finally Got the News* as a sonic instrument. This will involve listening to his voice (re)producing niggermentation as an unstable phonic encounter with capital as part of soundtrack to the film provided by the production line.

The emphasis on the sound of Watson's voice in *Finally Got the News* is not unique. Some of the groundwork has already been laid by Fred Moten in his essay "Tonality of Totality" where he addresses *Finally Got the News* through the series of lectures by League members (beyond Watson's) which shape the film. Moten views each of these lectures as moments of radical performativity and builds his case for the lectures as enactments of black radicalism by filtering them through subalternist readings of Marx. He uses Gayatri Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty to discuss the commodity form, labour power and radical activity. Moten suggests the League's lectures, and the persistent soundtrack of the production line, combine in the film to expose blindspots in Marx's concept of labour power.

"Tonality of Totality" is a valuable point of reference for listening to Watson's voice but this does not mean Moten's methods need to be followed to the letter. His conceptualisation of voice is not as fully realised as it could be, particularly with regards to the emphasis that has been placed on the textures of Watson's voice so far. By resituating certain parts of Moten's essay on *Finally Got the News*, it becomes possible to move his discussion of the commodity form more decisively towards Watson's recording of black radicalism.

There is a moment in his essay where Moten refers to the lectures in *Finally Got the News* as examples of "the radical force of the fantasy of the maternal voice in black politics" (Moten, 2003, p224). This formulation can be used as a commentary on Watson's voice as a form of niggermentation. In order to understand how this is so it is necessary not to read the line solely through Moten's account of subalternity. Instead it needs to be read through a substantial footnote which accompanies the essay where Moten conducts a commentary on Derrida's reading of J.L. Austin and speech-act theory

in his *Limited Inc* (1988). In the main body of the essay there is a gap between the analysis of the commodity form and the radical force of the fantasy of the maternal voice which can be bridged by bringing the footnote on Derrida and voice into the foreground. This should tie the radical force of maternity Moten introduces to the sensuous niggermation which drives Watson's lecture.

Moten's reading of Spivak and Chakrabarty remains important and needs to be situated through his commentary on Derrida, in order to understand how he can hear a maternity in the League's film. Moten's turn to subalternist readings of labour power and the commodity form are related to the ethos of niggermation which shapes *Finally Got the News*. He appears to be defining a wider intellectual context for the radicalism the League set out. In the case of the film this radicalism can be found in "the inscriptive force of the lecture" because for Moten *Finally Got the News* is involved in the "production of black political sound and black political sensuality" (Moten, 2003, 211). The combination of sound and sensuality is what he is plotting through Spivak and Chakrabarty: the sensual encounters with capital which carry the potential for radical phonic interventions. Their readings of Marx speak to niggermation in a similar mode to the reading of Marx and alienation above. Spivak and Chakrabarty expose the differences between Marx's reading of labour power and the condition of subalternity. Moten uses these differences to stage a discussion about the League and their film.

Moten turns to Spivak's reading of Marx on the commodity form, the labourer, labour power and the production of value. Spivak notes though that Marx draws a distinction between the three. For him it is only the labourer (i.e. the human) who has the capacity to possess its own labour-power and thus organise to disrupt capital. According to Marx the commodity form is incapable of such possession. An object cannot assert its own labour power because it has none. Spivak uses the distinction Marx draws to ask what it would mean to think the labour power of the commodity form (object). This intervention of Marx allows Spivak to make a case for subalternity and Moten uses her work to address the recording of black political sound and/as sensuality in *Finally Got the News*:

Indeed, thinking labour-power as commodity requires brushing against, if not necessarily confronting, the trace of a breakdown between the person and the thing that is, on the one hand, before the absolute differentiation of these terms each from the other, and on the other hand, re-established always and everywhere in the fact of slavery. (Moten, 2003, 213)

Moten's language of brushing allows him to bring Spivak into conversation with the League. He locates in Spivak a friction between the commodity, the labourer and labour-power. By thinking this friction through slavery Moten pulls Spivak into the space of *Finally Got The News*. Through their necessity to capital, the commodity, the labourer and labour power are connected and differentiated. The commodity (object) is distinct from the labourer (human) by way of labour power, yet it is labour power (as a point of difference) which brings them into contact. The transfer of labour power to the commodity (object) which Spivak proposes is, for Moten, at work in *Finally Got the News*. It is the source of friction which generates the politics of the League and produces the sensuality of the film's lecture.

Moten continues the reading of subalternity by turning to Dipesh Chakrabarty. He uses Chakrabarty to continue to think the League through an unstable friction which shapes labour's encounter with capital. Moten picks out a discussion in his work on the capitalist factory, where inside the factory the labour force is, according to Chakrabarty, shaped by the instruments which dominate the environment. There is a "disciplinary surveillance" at work, which is "embedded in the technical subordination of worker to machine" (Moten, 2003, 226). In these conditions the labour force also learns the finite functions of the capitalist factory. Chakrabarty suggest that what takes place here is a training of the worker as radical. Buried within technical subordination is also "the condition of possibility of a revolutionary consciousness that threatens surveillance, the domination of the machine and the uniformity of the product" (Moten, 2003, 226). The worker can be both oppressed and radicalised once inside the factory. As with Spivak, Moten is using a sensualism in Chakrabarty's work to make suggestions about the League.

Moten uses Spivak and Chakrabarty in his essay on *Finally Got the News* because of the similarity in strategies these thinkers have with the League. The League were working on a set of tactics within the factories of Detroit which mirrored something Spivak and Chakrabarty had identified in their readings of Marx. It is a discourse on sensualism which brings them into contact with the League. But the important claim Moten makes is that the sensuality Chakrabarty and Spivak set up as critical thought, the League deployed as practice (niggermation). How he is able to give the League this pre-eminence? Firstly there is Chakrabarty and the worker's subordination to the machinery as a starting point for revolutionary consciousness. As made clear in the analysis of Watson's lecture above, the League had already come to realise this. Taking

the experiences of the Black worker in the factory, they had mapped out their role in modern American capital. Moten describes this as a movement in the film between a “disciplinary rhythm, a rhythm of the line” and the League as “adisciplinary” (Moten, 2003, 213, 227). Adisciplinarity is related to the League's idiosyncratic relationship with the production line, that which was described above as a double bind. The League were instruments of the line, they were Black workers subordinated by the machinery and their politics was built on the desire to break that disciplinary hold. Yet their insurgency was born of the line's rhythms. The subordination to the line produced a niggermation which was also adisciplinary and that connection to the machinery, which was also a disavowal, was necessary to the radicalism the League recorded on film. It was an adisciplinary desire to break a disciplinary hold, but their adisciplinarity was a product of a machinic hold.

Secondly there is Spivak's attempt to think the commodity's possession of its own labour power, something Marx considered impossible. Moten's focal point is political sound and sensuality because he thinks the lectures in *Finally Got the News* are the realisation of Spivak's speculative thought. The lectures in the film (I would specify Watson's) trouble Marx because they perform the speech of the commodity. The League were aware the history of blackness and capital in the U.S. was one of violently enforced object status. They also realised if the (black) commodity could speak, then that sound would be the enactment of its (impossible) labour power. What *Finally Got the News* indicates is that despite being fixed as object, black labour can speak. Thus Moten argues the lectures in the film have an “industrial-phonographic power” (Moten, 2003, 226). The voices of the League record an unanticipated sonic radicalism from within the factory:

But commodities speak and scream, opening tonal and grammatical fissures....The League and the audiovisual lectures that move through it [*Finally Got the News*] work that way too. These lectures are delivered by the trace of the commodity. (Moten, 2003, 213)

Moten draws to a close with the argument that *Finally Got the News* is built upon the unpredictable friction of the League's radicalism. The sensual discipline of capital which Chakrabarty and Spivak outline, amplifies the politics of the League. Beyond this he seems to leave the discussion on the commodity and black political sound as sensuality, relatively open. Moten does though hint at the way in which niggermation feeds into the lecture form in the film. The lectures in *Finally Got the News* are

recordings of black political sound as sensuality because, Moten argues, they operate as examples of the “the radical force of the fantasy of the maternal voice in black politics”. This statement is significant, yet it is also anomalous. Black maternity is not discussed elsewhere in the essay, but Moten uses it as a way into the lectures recorded for the film. There is a great deal left unsaid between the commodity form, labour power, the League’s politics, and the radicalism of the maternal voice. The apparent presence of the maternal voice in the League’s lectures requires further investigation, particularly with regards to the fleshiness of the (black) commodity form and the terrain of Watson’s voice.

### **Moten on Austin, Derrida and voice in *Finally Got the News***

The gap can be addressed by turning to the footnote which accompanies “Tonality of Totality” where Moten discusses speech and utterance via Derrida. It seems his intention is to feed into his references to the politics, sound and sensuality of the lectures in *Finally Got the News*. The footnote needs to be read alongside the main body of Moten’s essay, as it illuminates his discussion of the commodity form, the lectures and the statement on the maternal voice. It should open up alternate ways of listening to Watson’s lecture and the League’s politics as recorded in *Finally Got the News*.

Moten stages the discussion in this lengthy footnote in order, I believe, to go into detail as to how he is framing the role of (radical force of the maternal) voice in *Finally Got the News*. The subject matter he chooses is Derrida’s critique of J.L. Austin’s work on speech acts in the essay “Signature Event Context” (Austin, 1975; Derrida, 1988). Moten undertakes a commentary which allows him to mark out how performance, speech and voice are at work in his essay on the League. The position he takes on vocal performance is that analysis should not be restricted to the communication of language (what is being said). It is important to take into account a range of affects which accompany speech as language. This includes the phonic materiality of voices. Moten uses the commentary of Derrida reading Austin to make a set of claims about blackness, speech, voice and performance. These claims point to the labour power of the speaking black commodity and radical maternity as the political, sensual and sonic basis of *Finally Got the News*.

The footnote opens with Derrida’s critique of J.L. Austin and his work on speech-acts and the lecture form. Austin set up the lecture as performatively irreducible. For the

lecture to function it needs to directly enact what is being said. Moten argues he contrasts this with other performatives which are “masqueraders, utterances that look like but are not statements” (Moten, 2003, 293). Moten addresses the distinction between serious (direct) speech and non-serious (theatrical, poetic) speech which Derrida picks out in Austin’s work. Moten begins by using Derrida's point that Austin is unable to make this distinction without including “non-serious” performatives in his own lectures and writings. He must cite these performatives in order to critique them. This slippage on Austin’s part reveals two things. Firstly, Austin seems to be embedded in performance himself, he “needs to perform in order to bring off his serious intentions” (Moten, 2003, 294). Secondly, the necessity of citation in Austin’s work allowed Derrida to introduce iteration. The slippages in his critique of non-serious performatives point to “the undeniable fact of iterability [as] the condition of possibility for a totalising performance” (Moten, 2003, 294).

Moten’s concept of “totalising performance” is very different to Austin’s demand for irreducibly direct communication. Totality is non-exclusionary because it is organised through iteration. What Austin’s use of non-serious utterances reveal is that a:

the serious utterance is always shadowed by an internal other that is the condition of its possibility. What is spoken or taken seriously can always be and must always potentially be, spoken or taken otherwise. (Moten, 2003, 294)

A totalising performance is one where an utterance is shadowed by its opposite. Iterability introduces a ghosting which is included in the totality of voice. For Moten a totalising speech act is not a serious utterance arriving with singular force, but one which carries within it its opposites (Moten, 2003, 294-295). It is possible to avoid univocality and claim iteration without ignoring the whole of the performance.

Moten specifies how, according to Derrida, Austin differentiates direct from non-serious speech. He uses these distinctions to further elaborate how iterability is the condition of every utterance. Austin uses the “merely' phonetic” speech act as his point of reference and argues the difference between serious and non-serious speech lies in the phonic (Moten, 2003, 295). For Austin “the conveyance” of speech needs to be separated from what is said and he applied this distinction to philosophy because he believed philosophical speech should not be considered a phonetic activity (Moten, 2003, 295). Instead it must be tied to strict forms of spoken meaning. If not, then what develops is a form of animalism: “Austin is always

pointing out where the mere making of noises is the purview of monkeys” (Moten, 2003, 295-296). Moten picks on the link Austin drew between pure phoneticism and animality and tunes into the sound he seeks to exclude from philosophical discourse. It is “one that disrupts meaning and the sign, and the hegemony of the signifier over the psyche” (Moten, 2003, 296). This sound is iteration in practice, an utterance's opposite may be excluded from proper speech by Austin but it remains as the condition of its sonic possibility. The merely phonetic consistently shadows utterance: The sonority of the voice combines with speech to totalise speech as performance. This is the case when even slurs, tones and facial movements disrupt what is being said. For Moten performatives are nothing if not augmentative performers, even when they cut speech (Moten, 2003, 294). He is careful not to counter Austin by arguing speech has no effect of presence. Iteration does not mean nothing is conveyed when speaking, rather the effects of performatives are never settled:

It is simply that these effects [of speech] do not exclude what is generally opposed to them term by term, but on the contrary presuppose it in a dissymmetrical fashion, as the general space of their possibility. (Moten, 2003, 297)

It is important to pay attention to the means of conveyance, whether it is harmonic or disharmonic. Using this non-exclusionary space, Moten introduces black performance and/as speech. He draws it from the animal undertones of Austin’s exclusion of phoneticism. In Moten’s view black speech is performatively critical because it encompasses those features Austin dismisses as non-serious, animalistic and noisy:

Black performance is, in part, the amplified, previously given soundtrack of this masquerade, this project of ‘aspect dawning’. There will have been no performance without it. It requires thinking more rigorously how the ‘merely phonetic’ has illocutionary force or produces perlocutionary effects. (Moten, 2003, 295)

Moten uses Derrida's critique of Austin for two purposes. Firstly he follows up on Derrida's rethinking of Austin's exclusionary view of speech and performance. Derrida allows for the inclusion of the differences that lie beyond the legitimate in an experience of speech. Speech needs to be understood in its totality, even if that means listening to sound effects which apparently work against its grain. Secondly, Moten uses this line as a way into blackness as speech. Black speech is the performance of the animalistic noise

which Austin believes is not the proper speech of the subject. Thus to critique Austin thoroughly, Moten argues it is necessary to start with black performance. Black performance involves listening to phonic substance which can, in part, be obtrusive to the desire for direct speech. Considered in its totality the blackness of speech is not only linguistically instructive but phonically and materially gestural. What Moten is putting forward are proposals on blackness, speech and the textures of voice where speech is an outcome of, not separate from, its phonic materiality.

### **Derrida and Cavarero on vocality**

Before thinking about how the account of blackness as vocality Moten presents in the footnote feeds into the lectural performances of the League, his move in the footnote prompts a further examination of voice and phonic substance. It is important to specify how the corporeal phonetics of voice are accompanied by the types of cutting and augmentation which disturb spoken language. Once again Derrida, as well as Adriana Cavarero, indicates how this is so.

Derrida's thoughts on voice, as expressed in an exchange with Verena Andermatt Conley, are an extension of his critique of Austin. He begins by questioning the idea that voices only exist within space, whereby voice needs to appear to have submitted to space in order to move across it. Derrida's interest lies in those voices which appear to have a problematic attachment to space, lack fixed reference points and produce "a strange force of dislocation" (Derrida, 1995, p160). Often those voices where the connection to space or an object is not secure are considered "atopical" and hysterical (Derrida, 1995, 161).

The body, for Derrida, is an example of space to which the voice is attached. Technological developments have revealed that a "voice may detach itself from the body" (Derrida, 1995, 161). The telephone, the radio and recording devices show although voice is nominally a part of the body, it is also "dispossessive of it, it retains almost nothing of it, it comes from elsewhere and goes elsewhere" (Derrida, 1995, 161). This is not to say voice is completely without attachment, rather it can become detached and move onto another body. Voices vibrate between markers fixed to secure spaces such as identity oppositions. Derrida refers to this vibration as "the braided polyphony which is coiled up in every voice" (Derrida, 1995, 162). He sets up voice as a series of junctures, able to move in several directions simultaneously. It does not

submit to the binarism of spatial attachments but instead “carries spacing” (Derrida, 1995, 162). Voice produces space but is not secured to it and it is dangerous to think of polyphonic voice as “representative of a 'drive', a 'word' or a 'thing'” (Derrida, 1995, 162). The only statement Derrida commits to is that voice “let’s itself be heard and it speaks otherwise” (Derrida, 1995, 162). Derrida is careful to avoid the charge of rendering voice anonymous; the voice should not be heard as being in “hypostasis....an indeterminate, empty, negative vigil” (Derrida, 1995, 162, 163). The braided polyphony allows it to avoid predetermined attachments. It is not the case that the voice moves dialectically (it either has an attachment or not), instead it produces a “rebellious force of affirmation.” Consistently breaking away, the voice suggests the possibility of other “assignments” (Derrida, 1995, 163).

Adriana Cavarero examines the connections between the phonicity of the voice and the body. Her work resonates with Moten’s desire to tune into the oral and material textures of blackness. Further still, it lends itself to the sensuality of the League’s lectures. Cavarero’s starting point is the voice and its roots in “the fleshiness of the body” (Cavarero, 2005, 11). The voice for her is a site specific phenomenon, coming “out of a wet mouth and arises from the red of the flesh.” (Cavarero, 2005, 4). Her insistence on the “elementary materiality” of the voice is not an example of the attachments Derrida warns against (Cavarero, 2005, 14). The voice's fleshiness is the outcome of a process Derrida would recognise as polyphonic. Cavarero's theorisation of vocal sensuality serves to further bridge Moten and Derrida. Moten's reflections on phonic blackness that came out of his commentary on Derrida can be placed alongside Derrida's account of reverberatory voices. Critically, Cavarero also leaves room for the voice of radical black maternity to become a part of this exchange. Her own version of polyphony is situated in the acquisition of voice. Vocality emerges prior to and is the condition of possibility for speech, but vocality is not an a priori condition of the human. An infant is not in possession of voice from birth. The sonorousness of the voice is relational, it is developed through echo. The other voice involved in the production of echo is maternal:

The infant recognises the mother’s voice and sings a duet with her. Resonance, daughter of invocation, links the two voices in the form of a rhythmic bond. What makes the uniqueness of the two voices stand out, in fact, is this repetition, echo and mimicry, because they duplicate the same sounds. The voice is always unique, but all the more so in the vocal exercise repetition. (Cavarero, 2005, 171)

The sonorous activity of the echo Cavarero refers to is another name for polyphony and iteration. A voice is not born of the flesh, it is produced through fleshy reverberation. Cavarero states that this other sonic possibility repeating itself through the voice is maternal. Acquiring voice involves a duet with the maternal mouth: “a sonorous texture for two voices, which are structurally for the other” (Cavarero 2005, 171). Echo and rhythm modulate the voice, producing a kind of natal music.<sup>6</sup>

The positions Moten takes on the phonic activity of the voice and blackness can be extended through Derrida and Cavarero. It is not only speech which can never completely carry out its resolutions. The phonic materiality of voice also works under incessant dissimulation. The polyphony of voice not only effects its own fleshiness, it destabilises the attachment of that phonic substance to a singular voice. The sounds the voice makes places in suspension the idea of only having one voice. This is the kind of dissymmetry Moten has in mind when he puts forward an account of blackness as phonetic materiality. Cavarero’s introduction of maternal echo becomes crucial here because her notion of natal echoes offers a way back into the foreground of Moten’s essay and *Finally Got the News*.

Moten’s commentary in the footnotes has a particular relationship to the essay and the League’s documentary. Thinking the voice as a phonic device brings the material discussed above together. In the main body of the essay Moten refers to the League’s politics recorded in *Finally Got the News* as sonic and sensual. He does not though go into precise detail as to how this is the case. His reference to sensuality is an acknowledgement of niggermentation as the basis of their politics. It informed the League’s historical analysis of black labour in the U.S. and their contemporary analysis of the environment on the lines of Detroit. What Moten seems to be suggesting is that niggermentation as sensualism informed the sonic content of the lectures in *Finally Got the News*. The League were fully aware (as indicated by Watson) that a muscular connection to capital was the cause of their exploitation. Figured as objects they knew theirs was an excessively epidermal relation to the production line. Yet the League also came to realise that a sensuous connection to the line also produced a set of unstable relations. The importance of their blood and sweat to the machinery gave them a strategic stronghold. The League knew they were not alienated labourers and they could reorganise the violence of the line by way of their muscular connection to it.

Moten uses his essay to identify sensuality in the work of Spivak and Chakrabarty.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the maternal voice see Silverman, 1998

Their respective readings of Marx on labour power and revolutionary consciousness in the factory are his focal points. Spivak and Chakrabarty each identify encounters with capital that have the potential to be radically rearranged. A sensual encounter between the commodity and its labour power, or the worker and the disciplinary factory, produces instability. Moten appears to bring the League and subalternist thought together in his essay in order to build an intellectual framework around *Finally Got the News*. This comes in the proposals that the lectures enact black political sound and sensuality. They are, he argues, imbued by an industrial phonography, but as stated above, he does not appear to take this further.

It is in the footnote that the claims about phonography are clarified. In the background of the essay he maps out the phonographic workings of the voice. Neither speech nor voice are ever firmly attached to a body. Instead a troubled phonic sensualism is at work, where the voice continually unties those connections. The phonic materiality of the voice, rather than its linguistic content, becomes the primary activity. For Moten, black performance encompasses those vocal practices.

The fore and background of Moten's essay are tied together through the adisciplinarity he attributes to the League. In the formal analysis of *Finally Got the News* he considers the League "adisciplinary" because they were connected to yet intentionally out of sync with the line. Their sensual connection with the machinery of modern capital produced a radicalism which sought to disrupt its processes. Niggermentation powered a politics that was primarily sonic. The voices of the League were themselves adisciplinary and this adisciplinarity was emitted not only as political rhetoric (what the League said) but also through their speaking. As sonorous textural activity the lectures become the enactment of their labour power; commodities producing a sonic radicalism.

Moten locates in this vocal dissymmetry a lingering radical maternalism. As Cavarero might argue, the League's lectures duet with a maternal source. There is a perpetual natal doubling at work. Using Moten's momentary allusion to radical maternity as a starting point, it is possible to think about the adisciplinarity of the League's performances as not only something they recorded but an affect which also placed their lectures under pressure. A core radical technique, the League did not simply broadcast an adisciplinarity which threatened the line. Once they begin to reorganise niggermentation, they were not able to exert complete control over their own adisciplinarity. The intimate connections were productive but also unpredictable.

## **The Natality of “Niggermation”**

Moten’s essay provides the tools for listening to Watson’s lecture. The sensuousness of Watson’s voice can be thought of as a function of his radicalism. It becomes possible to include the phonic activity of the voice in the link between “niggermation” and the League’s transformation of the lines violence into a radical strategy. Watson’s performance in *Finally Got the News* is a recording of such adisciplinarity. The phonic materiality of Watson’s lecture disrupts the power relations between blackness, labour and capital. By the same measure the capability to voice that which is not supposed to be in his possession (labour-power) opens up Watson’s voice and it too comes under pressure from adisciplinarity. This instability is the residue of what Moten calls “the radical force of the fantasy of the maternal voice in black politics”. Buried within the blood and sweat of niggermation as the sonic crux of the League’s politics are a set of natal practices. To tune into natality involves firstly, listening to the language of maternity and (re)production, if and when it appears in Watson’s lecture; and secondly, cross-referencing this against the phonic activity of Watson’s voice, especially the moments when adisciplinarity moves beyond his vocal control.

Central to Watson’s lecture is his historicisation of niggermation. The violent conflation of Black workers with the machinery of the production line is carefully contextualised. The situation in the factories of Detroit is not unique. Since captive Africans were transformed into instruments of labour, blackness had been in an uncomfortable bind with American capital. Slaves and their descendents have predominantly been measured by their value as objects. As Watson traces the roots of “niggermation”, he discusses how it has been possible to continually target blackness as an exploitable labour resource. Subsistence level reproduction was the key to installing and then maintaining the sensuous value of blackness:

Under slavery the amount of surplus value which was extracted from Black people was enormous, because of the fact that the only thing they got back for it was food, a minimum amount of shelter and a minimum amount of clothing, just enough to procreate to produce another generation of slaves

Procreation, according to Watson has been a key mechanism of niggermation. It was though a specific type of procreation. Slaves needed to be reproduced to extend the system of exploitation, but they could not be reproduced as subjects. Procreation for the enslaved was organised with minimum efficiency, the (re)production of slaves was the

(re)production of objects.

Watson inserts a significant piece of analysis into his lecture here. (Re)production is the mechanism through which both enslavement and blackness has been maintained and thus has been crucial to niggermentation. The form of procreation permitted to slaves (re)produced objects which were epidermally attached to capital and this practice has served as the engine of ruptured blackness. By placing emphasis on procreation Watson introduces a female (it may even be a maternal) presence into his historicisation of blackness, sensuality and capital. (Re)production was the programmatic starting point for niggermentation and the body of the enslaved female was central to this.

Watson's introduction of the gendered aspects of niggermentation is noteworthy. Apart from the Black woman worker's supplement discussed above, *Finally Got The News* depicts a variety of homosocial scenes. The footage of the production line is shown as the work of men. All the League speakers are male. The shots of the League in action also tend to depict a radicalised mass of Black manhood. In *Finally Got The News* the muscularity of niggermentation equals masculinity.

When historicising niggermentation Watson points to the importance of the captive female body. The natal capabilities of the female initially structured the sensuous encounter between blackness and capital. It is interesting to note, as his lecture moves into the contemporary environment of Detroit, (re)productivity seems absent. When Watson maps out the niggermentation on the production lines, he does not repeat his earlier claims about the structural importance of procreation. The physicality which makes black objects sweat in the factories does not appear to include the female body.

The gap between Watson's view of black labour's historical relationship with American capital and the immediate conditions facing the League is significant. It raises questions about several aspects of the group's politics. Firstly there is the emphasis placed on muscularity. Watson distils a League argument about the importance of corporeal connections to the line. The sweat and blood encounter gives the League a strategic position within the machinery they seek to disrupt. Black labour has always held this potential, but as Watson points out procreation had been the means of sustaining this sensuality with capital. The female body played a central role in (re)producing niggermentation but this (re)productivity seems to dissolve in the midst of Watson's account of the League. Secondly, niggermentation was also the radical site of production for the League's lectures. The sensuality with the line generated the phonic materiality of Watson's address (an adisciplinarity). Once again a question remains

regarding the significance of (re)production to this speech. The League were able to record a phonic politics by way of muscularity, but an a priori procreativity and the female body seems to be absent. Natality, as Watson indicated, was the condition of niggermation, it also may have been the phonic condition of his lecture.

Watson's performance in *Finally Got the News* is not isolated. It reflects a wider question of (re)productivity which shadowed the League. The body of the Black woman and her labours produced an ambivalence in the group's discourse. At times they acknowledged the role of (re)production and natality, yet they still found it difficult to incorporate women's bodies into the sensuality of their politics. James Geschwender's *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (1977) is one of the few examples of a more conventional attempt to contextualise the League and evaluate their project. Geschwender explains how the League came into being and their ideological roots. In one section he addresses the relationship between the League, the production line and procreation, through the issue of Black women's labour:

Black women constitute a significant segment of the reserve labour force that is called upon in times of need. They are subject to both sexual and economic exploitation when active in the labour force and are the producers of the next generation of workers when not directly in the labour force. The League did not do much to organise black women *qua* women....They placed highest priority upon the organisation of workers. (Geschwender, 1977, 131)

Geschwender stresses the distance between Black women as a potential labour force and the Black workers on the line. Black women are reserves, they are secondary to those who regularly labour under niggermated conditions (men). He does recognise the possibility of sexual discrimination, but it only becomes an issue when women are required in the factory. Black women's labour, according to Geschwender, is not considered by the League to be the prime target of the automobile industry. He continues by restating this gap. Geschwender points to the distance between the labour which takes place on the line (niggermation) and the labour undertaken by women in reserve. Occurring away from the extraction of sweat and blood, their labour is (re)production.

Despite the distinctions he makes, Geschwender still acknowledges a residual link. The labours of (re)production mean that the Black women as a workforce are "the producers of the next generation of workers." Their labour may take place away from

the machinery, but they feed into the line by producing black objects for it. The Black woman, for Geschwender, can only be tied to the brutality of the capitalist factory through her (re)productivity. In the process of making one move, Geschwender folds back in on himself with a second. He excludes the Black woman from the immediacy of the automated production line because niggermentation is not her work. Geschwender follows this by stating the work which is a woman's is (re)production, it allows her to (re)produce black labour units which go on to experience the violence of the factory. It is important to remember that the production line was not only a site of discipline. The League felt the niggermentation it produced also provided radical training for Black workers. They acquired an adisciplinary knowledge through machinic connections. The League's logic on muscularity has implications for Geschwender. It seems the Black woman does not only (re)produce workers who go on to be physically oppressed by the line. These workers, via the League, can go on to develop radical consciousness. In short the reserve workforce of Black women is capable of (re)producing members of the League.

Both Watson and Geschwender seem to acknowledge and then distance the League from a black female (re)productivity which was targeted by capital, and thus allowed the group's radicalism to emerge in Detroit. Watson creates this gap in his lecture by citing procreation as the process which allowed capital to fix itself to black labour during captivity but he does not map procreation onto the sensuousness of the League's politics, despite basing niggermentation in the terms of enslavement. As is evident above, Geschwender does recognise a contemporary form of (re)productive labour particular to Black women but he is resistant to thinking it through the production line; the machinery which is the focal point of the League's program.

There seems to be a feedback loop at work. The moments at which the League attempts to distance itself from (re)productivity, natality and the Black woman's labouring body, they are reasserted at the heart of their politics. There is a suggestion that maternal (re)productivity produces black labour's sensuous encounter with capital. For the League, this means natality may be the source of the niggermentation which produces their radicalism. Watson's lecture may also be affected by a similar feedback mechanism. As Moten points out, the voices of the League in *Finally Got the News* are the result of a sensuous connection to the line. In Watson's case this means the physicality he maps out in the lecture also generates his voice. His vocal presence is informed by machine-body connections but as he makes clear in the context of his

lecture, captive maternity was the central mechanism in the (re)production of slavery and the legacy of this process created the conditions for niggermentation in the plants. This raises questions about an a priori natality potentially attached to the soundscape of his lecture. The sonic materiality of his voice may be the product of a muscularity which is maternal.

This speculative hypothesis requires attention. There seems to be a (re)productive aspect of niggermentation which Watson distances himself from yet it is in the make up of the black political sound and sensuality recorded in *Finally Got the News*. What is required is a concentrated examination of black female (re)productivity and its relationship to capital that maps out the sensual knowledge the League have difficulty incorporating. This is the same (natal) knowledge which feeds back into Watson's voice.

There is a strand of Black feminism which addresses the status of maternity in the U.S. since captivity. The theorists undertaking this work examine the ideological degradation of Black women through their natality. Much of this research reveals that blackness has been figured as object through maternal (re)productivity. The womb was the means of engineering a violent intimacy with capital. This is by no means the only way of thinking black female labour and it is important to note what is being proposed here is not restricting black female labour to reproduction and the womb. This strand of Black feminism is being cited because it introduces questions which trouble the League. There is a great deal of feminist work addressing the muscularity of Black women's labour. The Black woman was often perceived as a labouring unit equivalent to the male and in this environment gender differences were often displaced. Therefore not all accounts of the black female body and labour privilege the womb.<sup>7</sup>

Dorothy Roberts' starting point is the targeting of the captive female for her reproductivity. Black women were "marked...from the beginning as objects whose decisions about reproduction should be subject to social regulation rather than their own will" (Roberts, 1999, p23). The motivation behind this regulation was economic and ideological: "slave women's child bearing replenished the enslaved labour force: Black women bore children who belonged to the slaveowner from the moment of their inception" (Roberts, 1999, 22-23). For Angela Davis the targeting of enslaved females altered the terrain of motherhood: "in the eyes of slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all: they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labour force" (Davis, 1982, 7). The use of violence to produce an economic outcome led to

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<sup>7</sup> See: Jones, 1982; Dru Stanley, 1998; Hunter, 1997

what Davis calls “alienated and fragmented maternities” (Davis, 1998, 213). Under such circumstances enslaved females became “potentially profitable labour machines” (Davis, 1998, 213). She was not understood to be reproducing children, but rather labour units with whom she had no formally recognisable kinship ties.

In *Labouring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, Jennifer Morgan examines captive natality in detail. Reterritorialising the psychic and material meaning of reproductivity for the enslaved required a great deal of force from those in positions of dominance. The body of the enslaved woman needed to be violently disciplined in order to achieve results:

slaveowners appropriated their reproductive lives by claiming children as property, by rewriting centuries-old European laws of descent, and by defining a biologically driven perpetual racial slavery through the real and imaginary reproductive potential of women whose “blackness” was produced by and produced their enslavability. (Morgan, 2004, 1)

The enslaved woman's labour was understood in material and psychic terms. The “real” and “imaginary” value of her natality bridged the two. Thus (re)productivity created a circuit which sustained slavery. Materially the Black woman was able to give birth to children and that was a significant aspect of her work. But these children could not be thought of as subjects. Therefore black maternal (re)productivity stood for illegitimacy. Morgan refers to this illegitimacy as “blackness”. Psychically the captive female became a labouring machine and what she was reproducing was deemed, by way of blackness, to be a series of objects. They too were, due to this corrupted kinship, attached to blackness. The logic of captivity was embedded in the (re)productive capability of the enslaved female. As far as Morgan is concerned “women’s reproductive identity lay at the heart of the matter” when it came to the operation of enslavement, and “women’s lives....always included the possibilities of their wombs” (Morgan, 2004, 3).

At this point it is important to draw a distinction between (re)productivity and “wombs”. I want to be clear, I am not privileging the womb. It is not a singular organ through which an overdetermined form of black female labour can be understood. Such a move would present numerous critical dangers. The womb would become fetishised, it would be reified as the primary means of analysing Black feminism and labour. This fetishisation would repeat the violence a Black feminist project seeks to counter. The

task is to avoid such effects and offer a more conceptually supple way of thinking blackness, labour and natal (re)production. Rather than the womb (as the organ which reproduces), it is perhaps better to think about a set of wombic effects or natal practices. Taking a lead from Deborah R. Grayson, this means “dispersing what was once thought of as a unified entity – mother – and making it into something without a definitive aspect or dimension” (Grayson, 2000, 291). Grayson’s formulation can be applied to this reading of Black women's (re)productivity. The violent encounters between the black female and capital have led to unstable relations where the womb is deterritorialised. This does not mean its natal capabilities become any less potent, it is simply that these practices could be more effectively manoeuvred and used to (re)produce sensual encounters between blackness and capital.

Morgan recognises the dangers of fetishisation. She avoids them by moving beyond the categorisation of wombic practices as only the violent (re)production of blackness. Instead Morgan thinks about the (re)production of black insurgency by asking how “women’s reproductive potential shaped the form and the meaning of their opposition to slavery” (Morgan, 2004, 11). She makes the case for the (re)productive capabilities of the enslaved woman as a mode of black resistance. This is possible because of the way capital targeted the natal practices of the captive female. Her natality was the means of (re)producing units of labour and blackness. It was the means by which blackness as object came into play. This (re)productivity produced an affective field of sensuality. Black objects came to feel the force of capital with great intensity due to a sensuous attachment to maternal processes. The friction between the person, the object and the machinery produced by natality led to a breakdown. The boundaries of the person, object and machine slid across one another and in the midst of capital's violent epidermal impact a space of black insurgency was opened up.

Morgan argues that as the womb was deterritorialised into a practice of black labour, so resistance was reordered. Under the extremities of enslavement normative values no longer became applicable. The intense connections meant the object could act in ways that did not always register as resistant:

‘Resistance’ and ‘accommodation’ are static poles at opposite ends of a spectrum whose intent is to capture the wide range of responses to repression but whose effect, I would argue, is quite the opposite....Is there an agreement about the interpretation of behaviour under an oppressive regime? While we know that social behaviours are transformed under slavery, to presume that an unwillingness

to follow orders, for instance, can clearly be interpreted is to presume too much. (Morgan, 2004, 166)

This is a significant proposal. Resistance acquires its character from the internal relations of the domination within which it emerges. The captive female was violently reorganised to conflate her natal capabilities with a (re)productive labour. Her work involved using these practices to produce blackness and black objects. Each lingered on the edge of the legitimate and rubbed up against capital. What the targeting of women's natal capabilities opened up was blackness as the interruption of those processes which led to its formation. "Blackness", in Morgan's case, is a deterritorialised field of natal (re)production. It involves "the simultaneity of violation and creativity" (Morgan, 2004, 11). In this space disciplinary violence can (re)produce an adisciplinary insurgency. Due to the way in which the wombic effects have been made to labour, insurgency becomes acutely detached but its effects are not singular. Instead they are dispersed and unanticipatable. The (re)productive capacity of the Black woman operated as "a space of freedom that is at the same time a space of captivity" (Hartman, 1997, 9).

Morgan's analysis alters the perception of Watson's lecture. As he historicises niggermentation, he cites maternal (re)productivity as the basis for enslavement. Moments later he does not acknowledge these same natal practices as generators for the niggermentation occurring in the factories of Detroit. Watson summons forth a wealth of knowledge and then sets it aside when discussing the League. The picture of Watson's encounter with natal (re)productivity is now more precise. His acknowledgement and dismissal reveals something about the sonic performativity of the League's politics. The sensuality which shapes the League's relationship to the line seems to be echoed in their relationship to black maternity. In terms of the production line, there was a complex sensuality at stake. Niggermentation meant Black workers were indelibly connected to the line. As objects their attachment to the machinery was epidermal. At the same time niggermentation became the formative point of the League's politics. The intimacy with the machinery gave them the knowledge to disrupt the factory. The automated line provided them with a radical training. Similarly the League recognised it was natality which allowed for niggermentation. They knew both historically and during that moment in Detroit, maternal (re)productivity was creating the sensual encounter with capital. This was the source of their oppression and their political radicalism. Yet they would not permit those natal practices into their political program. They seemed to pursue a

radical muscularity which was resolutely homosocial. Niggermation was as much scored into the voices of the League as it was into their formal politics. In *Finally Got the News* the viewer hears a sonic performance of niggermation and its radical instrumentation. Watson's voice is, in Moten's terms, adisciplinary. It is the voice of a black object which should not be able to speak, should not possess labour power and should not develop a revolutionary consciousness. The phonic materiality of Watson's voice threatened to deterritorialise capital but maternal practices are the engine of niggermation. They allow for the (re)production of blackness as object. They prepare the black object for entry into the line. Does it not follow that these maternal processes are also scored into the voice? This is perhaps what Moten is referring to when he talks of "the radical force of the fantasy of the maternal voice in black politics". Natal practices were prior to and the condition of the niggermation which produced the radical phonic substance in the voices of the League. A sensuous attachment to a machinic maternity was crucial to Watson's sonic performance.<sup>8</sup>

### **Watson's lecture and radical maternal fantasy**

Natality was a troubling issue for the League and the manner in which it caused trouble returns us to Watson's lecture. It returns us specifically to the phonic materiality of his lecture. He installed a conceptual gap in his lecture between niggermation as the League's political starting point and the prospect that the groups muscularity turned on natal practices. Phonically the League's program was equally reliant upon a sensual connection to the line and Watson's lecture is in effect a recorded outcome of niggermation. This prompts the question of whether Watson's performance is also shadowed by natal practices. The space between the blood and sweat poured into the machinery and an a priori maternal (re)productivity may have shaped the sonic materiality of his voice. It may be possible to hear other affects within the textures of his delivery. Affects which test the contours of his voice. This vocal gap was perhaps connected to the radical force of maternal fantasy which Moten can hear at work in *Finally Got the News*.

After opening *Finally Got the News*, Watson returns at a later point in the film to complete his lecture. He closes his address by making an explicit case for the vanguard status of the League. They are, he argues, not an exclusive group who organise solely

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<sup>8</sup> For more on female reproductivity as machinic labour see: Rothschild, 1981; Petchesky, 1995; Wiener, 1995; Martin, 2001.

for Black workers. The League are acting in the interests of the entire industrial labour force in the U.S. Yet it is with an organised black labour force in the factories that revolutionary change will begin:

Black people represent, you know, the most forward, and progressive, and militant movement inside the plant....In reality they ain't calling for the destruction, you know, of the white working class. The demands which are being presented, you know, are demands which are calling for the uplifting of the working class as a whole.

And the actual fact of the matter is that the movement of Black workers as a class movement is calling for a total change in the relationship between workers and owners altogether.....We aren't calling for anybody to be exploited. We're calling for the elimination of exploitation in the plants. We're calling for the elimination of racism in the plants. We're calling for the elimination of any kind of conditions inside of the plants, you know, which are bad, you know, for the basic, you know, health and enjoyment of life.....We're not calling for a situation in which white oppressors will be replaced by black oppressors. We are calling for the ending of oppression all together.

Once again a dead-end reality is transformed into a political program. The progressiveness and militancy he claims for Black workers is where the conversion of niggermentation to vanguardism takes place. They are "the most forward" because they have operated in such proximity to American capital. The configuration of bodies into instruments means the difference between the skin and the machinery is minimal. Thus when black labour (in this case the League) organise; they become a vanguard. Industrial capital has disciplined them with an undue intensity and the League were able to convert that epidermal and psychic intensity into radicalism.

Watson's case for the vanguard status of the League centres, once again, on niggermentation. It is used to establish the claims he makes for the League as revolutionary vanguard. Equally niggermentation becomes the point of phonic production for the League's vanguardism. This fits with the model of Watson's lecture in *Finally Got The News* where the material experience of the line is used as both an analytical and phonic device.

Something new occurs during this closing part of the lecture though. Throughout his appearance in the film, Watson's voice has been sustained by friction. This is the friction caused by the meeting of production line and black labouring body (niggermentation). Thus there is an agitated and urgent edge to his delivery. This is not at all surprising because what Watson wants to communicate is born of violence and seeks to introduce

another radical violence to the factory. He is outlining the power the Black workforce possesses as it operates at the heart of America capital. All that is required to realise this radical power is the development of a collective consciousness and organisation. Watson is making it clear that the black object does possess labour power by making that power the phonic crux of his lecture. He is an insurgent object speaking, he has become another type of disruptive noise making machine.

To make this clear Watson speaks with an urgency. He needs to get his message over as directly as possible to Black workers in Detroit. This is the case when Watson stresses the League are “the most forward” element in the plant, and thus the vanguard opposition to modern American capital. His utterances are forceful and immediate. Black workers, by way of their sensual connection to the line, can work in the interests of the entire labour force in the factories. Niggermated Black workers can lead the way for their counterparts. The League are an example for other radicalised workers and they are creating the space for cross racial class alliances against the interests of capital in Detroit.

Yet as Watson urgently makes these claims, the texture of his voice momentarily alters. The agitated tone he uses pushes his voice, fleetingly, into a higher register. Intensifying the delivery of his lecture to make a claim about the League's vanguardism briefly introduces a new pitch to his voice. This new pitch is high and even more disruptive, but this time it disrupts the form of his own lecture. When Watson states the League are *the most forward, the most progressive, the most militant* element in the plants, an internal interference affects the phonic materiality of his lecture. Watson temporarily loses control over his voice.

Over the course of the chapter I have developed a vocabulary for thinking about the sounds Watson's voice makes at the close of his lecture, sounds which seems internal to it but are not consciously produced by Watson. It is a vocabulary which came out of Moten's theory of black vocal performance. Moten built his theory on a series of proposals. Firstly that speech never fully enacts itself, it is always unsettled. Speech is shadowed by that which runs counter to its internal meaning. These shadows of speech constitute another condition of speech. More importantly this shadowing tends to move through the phonic materiality of the voice. Derrida and Cavarero offer readings of voice which extend Moten's version of black phonicity. They both argue the voice is not singular in its psychic attachment to the body. Instead the voice iterates and is polyphonic. The voice shifts between and creates new attachments.

Moten's version of the vocal performance of blackness is applicable to Watson's lecture. It particularly comes into play during the discordant moments outlined above. Firstly Watson's voice is itself an example of the blackness of speech as another sonic condition of possibility. Moten points out through Spivak that the lectures in *Finally Got the News* are a form of speech Marx believed impossible; a commodity enacting its own labour power. Thus Watson's lecture is also polyphonic. For Marx the voice is only the possession of the labourer, in this performance voice (as labour power) has attached itself to the (black) object. Niggermation is central to how this operates. Secondly it is important to note Watson's lecture is not immune from the affects it produces. The phonic performance of blackness is not static, instead it is rebelliously affirmative. Watson's voice comes under pressure from those processes which led to its formation. This is what is at stake during the intensified agitation that is audible as he concludes the lecture. Another sound shadows the surface of the voice.

During this polyphonic moment in Watson's performance it becomes possible to pinpoint "the radical force of the fantasy of the maternal voice". The discordance at the edge of Watson's lecture is not in and of itself the maternal voice. I am not making the case for the radical sound of natality only as distortion and interference. Instead what can be heard is an internal radical space assembled by Watson coming under pressure. It is a contour he tries to maintain as he makes the League's politics audible. This contour is the result of niggermation and the natal resonances which trouble it. Watson and the League use niggermation as the phonic basis of their radicalism. They also briefly acknowledge the importance of maternal (re)productivity to this process. There is no League without niggermation and there is no niggermation without the natal labour of Black women. Despite this, Watson and the League attempt to distance this knowledge from the enunciative and programmatic heart of their politics. Through niggermation, the League even hold out the possibility for cross racial class alliances within the factory. The League can envisage working with (other homosocial) workers on the lines, but the natality of niggermation is excluded from the sonic content of their politics. They create a space around the sensualism which allows for a muscular and radical connection to the line. It is a spacing which keeps the natal (re)productivity that generates that sensualism outside. What Watson and the League were doing was installing a heteronormative disciplinarity into their radical politics despite the fact they used an adisciplinarity to disrupt industrial capital. At certain points though they attempted to keep its effects under control. A disciplinary limit was reinstalled to refuse

the black natal labour processes which had always operated in the closest proximity to U.S. capital (the most forward). The (re)productive potency of Black women was the source of the League's blackness. It was also the source of their sonic adisciplinarity.

This is all being recorded as Watson returns to conclude his lecture in *Finally Got the News*. He argues the League are a revolutionary vanguard and both this formulation and its utterance are built upon his version of niggermation. His lecture comes under pressure because he is using muscularity to voice that claim and simultaneously the natal practices which are the engine (mother) of niggermation are pushed outside the League's political domain. Disentangling the two is an impossibility. As Watson positions the League as *the most forward, the most progressive, the most militant* presence in the factories his voice is threatened with breakdown. Embedded within that claim is breakdown as a maternal echo. The (re)productive capability of the captive female was targeted by capital to (re)generate blackness. Natal practices had long been the condition of possibility for what the League called niggermation. Thus radical black maternity was *the most forward, the most progressive, the most militant* presence in the factories. The sonic and vocal content of Watson's lecture moves along this discrepant edge. It is just that at this point in the film, the enfolding that those who speak as the League must conduct becomes overt. Watson's radical voice was generated by the disciplinary rhythms of the production line, but its braided polyphony (its insurgent edge) was being driven by a natal labour taking place in the line's undercurrents.

*Finally Got the News* documents the environment in which black radicalism emerged in mid 1960s Detroit. The League grew out of a combination of industrial machinery and the materiality of black labour. This scenario was an extension of a long held proximity between the labouring black body and the procedures of capital in the U.S.

Watson's lecture in *Finally Got the News* encompasses several aspects of the environmental factors which informed the League. Firstly, he maps out how the League's radical program was formed through the automated production line. The blood and sweat exchange between the black object and the machinery attuned Black workers to the processes of industrial capital. The League used this attunement as a strategic starting point. Secondly, the phonic materiality of his lecture marked the performative importance of niggermation. The friction with capital had given the League more than a strategy, it was also the generative point of the phonic substance of their politics. When Black workers (objects) spoke the invoked an adisciplinarity which reordered the

epidermal connection to the line. Finally, Watson's voice itself was rendered unstable by niggermentation. His lecture was built upon the League's pursuit of a heteronormative but troubled muscularity. In *Finally Got the News* Watson's lecture was undercut, conceptually and vocally, by a priori maternal connections. Natal (re)productive labour was the basis of the violent intimacy between blackness and capital. The (re)productive capabilities of the black female had become the cipher for exploitation. Yet those same natal practices were generative of unanticipated insurgency. Watson, and the League, displayed an ideological and sonic ambivalence towards this knowledge.

The focal point of this chapter was the traffic between the sound of black labour labouring and the sound of its resistance to labour. In many ways the League exemplify the central thesis of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*. This being that Marxist thought has not developed an adequate understanding of racial capitalism and therefore cannot fully account for the specificity of black radicalism, even as it disrupts capital. Black radicalism needs to be understood as emerging through and against Marxist thought. This is the case with the League, and becomes evident when considering the phonic materiality of *Finally Got The News*. In the documentary the League's radical program is organised by the sonic capabilities of black labour which is intimate with machinery, yet the ultimate aim was to break the epidermal link with the production line. The predominance of the lectural form, especially John Watson's lecture, was an illustration of this.

The flow of traffic in *Finally Got The News* was not all one way. It was not simply a case of soundtracking the movement from black labour to black labour resisting. As Moten makes clear, the fact of the black objects resistance, which is marked in its ability to speak, opens up a field of possibility that is itself resistant. What the League and Watson were involved in with this film was the sonic production of a disciplinary black radicalism which worked both for and against itself. It worked for itself in that through his sonic performativity, Watson was able to cut to the heart of the racial capitalism which was the open secret of the system. It worked against itself in that each time Watson spoke as disciplined black labour, a persistent disruption made itself heard and undermined his ability to speak for black labour. All this tension between the resistance of black labour and its resistant breakdown functioned by way of a natal reproductivity was the condition of possibility for the League, as well as being resistant to them.

Watson's lecture is not the definitive statement on black radicalism in 1960s Detroit.

The combination of black labour and industrialism was at work in uncannily similar ways at the Motown recording company, which is the focus of the next chapter in this case study. Motown may appear to be incompatible with the radicalism of the League but the company were deeply rooted in the disciplinary principles (of rhythm) which could be heard on the city's production lines. Motown also targeted the labour power within black bodies. The company focused on the speech-sounds Black workers were capable of producing. Motown offers an alternative critical lens through which to think the issues raised by John Watson's lecture. In particular, the recording company's labour practices and mode of production offer different perspectives on the natality of niggermentation.

### **Part 3 – Detroit, black labour and (re)production**

#### **Chapter 5 – Motown**

The Motown Recording Company was formed in 1959 by songwriter Berry Gordy and quickly gained a reputation in Detroit for promoting local musical talent. By 1965 the company had become a household name across the country, with Motown artists, such as The Supremes, Marvin Gaye, Mary Wells, and The Temptations dominating the American pop charts. Such was the extent of this domination that “by 1965 Motown had a gross income of around \$8 million, and was the nation's leading seller of singles. Five years later it was the richest enterprise in African-American history” (Ward, 1998, 268).

Motown was not unique simply because it was a Black owned independent label. There were many other Black owned independent labels at the time and each had varying degrees of success (Ward, 1998, 275-276; Guralnick, 2002). What differentiated Motown was its level of success. From its beginnings as a small Detroit operation, Motown went on to undermine the major labels' hold on the pop music marketplace. It had achieved this using a staff of predominantly Black writers, producers and musicians. More significantly, Motown had taken a roster of young Black artists and presented them in a way that made them palatable to primetime American audiences.

Motown was able to achieve this level of success because of the way Gordy organised the operation. He put structures in place to ensure the company was able to maximise the value of its staff's creativity (Ward, 1998, 260). The company ran with such efficiency because of the organisational model Gordy had in mind when he established Motown. Following a brief stint at the Ford factory he had wanted to adapt the working environment of the automobile industry to the recording studio. Gordy envisaged Motown as an alternate Detroit production line.

Due to its levels of success, Motown came to regard itself as “Detroit's Other World Famous Assembly line.” (Benjaminson, 1979, 84). This may have been a crude piece of self-promotion but it is also revealing. There are many points of comparison between Motown, the factories and even the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Although operating under different circumstances to the League, similar concerns seemed to be at play at Motown. The production process was finely orchestrated and this allowed high quality commercial popular music to be produced with regularity. The workforce tended to be made up from Detroit's inner city Black population. Labour at Motown for these

other Black workers involved adhering to constraints. There were significant demands placed upon the bodies of the performing artists and their voices became the focus of these labour demands.

A short promotional film made by the label in 1965 will be the focal point of the comparison with the factories and the League. It features the group Martha and the Vandellas performing their hit "Nowhere to Run". This footage was shot whilst the group were sat on a fully operational Ford Mustang line and a car is built around them as they sing. The Vandellas performance seems like a realisation of the company's assembly line claim but the film also carries echoes of *Finally Got the News*.

This chapter constitutes a further examination of the traffic between the sound of black labour and its resistance. On this occasion though the manufacturing of black musical performativity into a product for the market place is the focal point of the research. In this respect I will draw upon theorisations of musical performance as labour, with a particular focus on the materiality of the singing body, the status of black popular music within a capitalist market place, and also return to blackness, natality and reproductivity. By addressing the sonic dimensions of black labour and its resistance, this chapter also speaks to Moten's resistant black object and Robinson on the incompatibility between Marxism and black radicalism. The aim though is to reorder much of what was set out in the previous chapter with regards to the League. Analysing Motown using the frameworks of the previous chapter, I want to argue that black labour, black labour resisting, and the adisciplinarity of black natal reproductivity, all contributed to the phonic materiality generated from within the musical factory, but they operated at differing degrees of intensity. The Motown recording company was another instance of racial capitalism, and there was resistance to the working conditions from its black labour force. The ecological organisation of the company though meant that these tensions manifested themselves in highly ambivalent ways. Motown manufactured black musical product which was marked by both an ambivalence and resistance from black labour. This is nowhere more apparent than in the phonic materiality of the Vandella's performance on the Ford Mustang line.

### **Motown as production line**

Motown's claim that it was a production line was due to more than an accident of geography. The links with the automobile industry were embedded in the label's

beginnings. The factories had always been the main source of employment for Black Detroiters. Before founding Motown, Gordy had had two stints in the factories and despite their relative brevity each influenced his conception of Motown.

Gordy's first experience of the automobile industry came via the Ford foundry. It was here that the raw materials for the manufacturing of cars were produced. The foundry had a high concentration of Black workers and was also notorious for having the most physically demanding conditions in the factory:

The foundry was hell, a living nightmare. Hot, blowing furnaces, loud clanging noises, dust, smoke and soot everywhere, red molten metal pouring out of huge stoves on conveyor belts. When the bright red liquid steel arrived at my station, it would be cooling down from red hot to black hot. We had to wear large asbestos gloves to keep our hands from burning....

After five minutes on the first day, I was dead. Every fifteen minutes when we got a ten minute break, I stumbled out of the foundry room. I could see people talking, but couldn't hear a word they were saying....

Finally the eight hours were over. I could hardly walk. My wrists were swollen.

My body was stiff. My head, arms and ears, everything ached. I slowly made it to the car, a crippled man. (Gordy, 1995, 68)

Gordy's first experience of the automobile factory was visceral. The conditions were so intense that he felt his body was being violently manipulated. In the heat of the foundry parts of him swelled and other parts were rendered stiff. Such was the exhaustion that he almost felt he had died. It was an experience akin to death, but not quite. The foundry, for Gordy, was a living death, a "hell", a "nightmare". His account of the factory is not exceptional. In post-war Detroit exhaustion was the defining experience for Black workers in the factories and it is interesting to note that Ford had a reputation amongst Black Detroiters as a "house of murder" (Denby, 1989, 35). Gordy only lasted a single shift in the Ford foundry and it was not this experience of the factories which he consciously used to shape Motown. What he did learn though was of the violent relationship between black labour and industrial capital. As will become evident later, some elements of this violence did form a part of the Motown production line because the disciplining of the black body through labour became one of the focal points of his operation.

Gordy soon moved from the foundry and took up residence in the main plant. It was here he encountered the automated production line. Working on the line initially appealed because there were "no furnaces, fire or hot metal" (Gordy, 1995, 69).

Through daily exposure he also noticed its “pleasing simplicity” (Gordy, 1995, 69). Gordy worked on the Lincoln Mercury line for two years and he believes it was here that the core elements of Motown were put in place:

My own dream for a hit factory was quickly taking form, a concept that had been shaped by principles I had learned on the Lincoln Assembly line. At the plant the cars started out as just a frame, pulled along conveyor belts until they emerged at the end of the line – brand spanking new cars rolling off the line. I wanted the same concept for my company, only with artists, songs and records. I wanted a place where a kid off the street could walk in one door an unknown and come out the other a recording artist – a star. (Gordy, 1995, 140)

Working in the factory was as revelatory as it was oppressive for Gordy. In the foundry he experienced its violence and acute brutality towards the worker's body. The League would recognise this as niggeration. On the assembly line though he witnessed the efficiency of the factory. The predominantly Black workforce was arranged so as to maximise production. It was from being a worker on the line that he envisaged a way of making Black popular music. The automated production line seems to have been coexistent with Motown, at least from Gordy's perspective. Yet he also knew the violence directed towards Black workers in the factory. The practices of violence and efficiency were repeated at Motown. Gordy was unable to separate the two when arranging his own black labour systems through the production line model.

Despite Gordy's testimony there is debate regarding the practicality of thinking popular music as an extension of industrial capital. There is a tendency within Cultural studies to be critical of the view that the production of popular music is comparable to mass industrialism. Such accounts of popular culture are thought to be lacking in critical knowledge of both popular music and capitalist modes of productivity.

Bernard Gendron neatly summarises these criticisms and uses Theodor Adorno's charge of industrial standardisation in popular music as his reference point. Gendron takes the position that such comparisons are fundamentally limited:

the assembly line is simply an inappropriate model for the production of texts-as-universals. This is not to say that the production of musical texts (as compositions or performances) cannot be technically rationalised to maximise the power of management. ...It does mean that it is and always will be a mistake to look at the techniques of mass production or the economics of market concentration for an explanation of industrial standardisation in the culture industry. Whatever they are, the factors accounting for standardisation in the production of musical texts

must be significantly different from those which account for standardisation in functional artefacts. (Gendron, 1986, 28)

Gendron accepts that there are some traces of standardisation in popular music. He argues though it is a folly though to think that it operates in exactly the same manner as industrial capital. For him there is too much difference between musical products for their constituent parts to be considered fully interchangeable. Gendron criticises the mapping of the industrial production line directly onto Motown, especially as a way to give credence to its commercial success. For him such an overlaying tends to flatten an understanding of popular music.

In contrast Suzanne Smith makes the case for the viability of the “Motown as production line” thesis. She argues the label was critically linked to the environment of the city and Motown emerged during a crucial moment in Detroit’s industrial, racial and political history:

the Motown Record company cannot be understood apart from other aspects of Detroit’s urban life. Hitsville, U.S.A., [Motown] emerged from a city that was economically dominated by the automobile industry, yet manufactured a product completely independent of this industry. Using the technologies of automobile manufacturing to produce and market its music and applying industrial methods to record production, Hitsville, U.S.A., was able to reach the largest audiences in the history of Black cultural production in Detroit. It was an achievement that had both political and racial implications. The company defied the more common and disadvantaged position of Blacks within Detroit’s automobile based economy by appropriating the methods and emerging technologies of industrial manufacturing to produce Black culture. (Smith, 1999, 116-117)

Motown was a unique case for Smith precisely because of its association with the automobile industry. The company could not escape the fact it had been formed in inner-city Detroit. Motown put to use the array of available industrial techniques to manufacture and sell its product. Yet Smith also states that what Motown was able to produce was independent of the Detroit automobile industry. Its music surpassed the limitations placed upon the city’s Black population. According to Smith, Gordy used the techniques of the assembly line to record Black popular music which signalled the possibilities lingering in Black Detroit.

Despite Gendron’s concerns, Suzanne Smith’s reading of Motown seems more applicable. It is difficult when assessing the company to divorce it from its immediate context in Detroit. The automobile production line was the major influence upon Black

working life in the city. Gordy's organisation of Motown meant the line also marked the label's music. This is not the same form of marking which Gendron believes is unworkable. Gordy did not apply the "techniques of mass production" directly to his company. Rather it seems to have been a case of transferring a set of environmental factors over to Motown. Whilst briefly exposed to the line, Gordy saw a highly productive way of arranging a workforce to make Black popular music. The production line model was a means of concentrating the productivity of black musical labour into a set of practices. The music recorded at Motown was not manufactured as automobiles would have been, rather the production lines created an environment for black labour in Detroit which Gordy sought to deploy.

The "pleasing simplicity" of the production line model was felt in a variety of ways at Motown. The most obvious influence was the systemisation of the labour process, where the workforce was arranged into groups with specific responsibilities. There were other less apparent but equally significant production line influences. As Motown rose to prominence a sonic imprint unique to the label took shape. The resulting Motown sound was ubiquitous but fluid. The artists at the label also felt the effects of Gordy's production model. They were disciplined into adapting to the performative parameters put in place.

Motown's first base of operations in Detroit was a converted home on West Grand Boulevard which Gordy bought in 1959 and named "Hitsville, U.S.A.". It was here that he began to experiment with production line practices whilst recording Black popular music. Perhaps the vital resource Gordy had access to was a pool of Black musical talent within Detroit. There was a swell of non-industrial Black workers eager for opportunities who included not only vocalists, but also musicians, songwriters and producers. Gordy had a Black workforce to hand when he pursued his vision of Motown running as efficiently as a production line.

At Hitsville the clearest evidence of an industrial influence came in the strict compartmentalisation of the record manufacturing process:

I broke down my whole operation into three functions: *Create, Make, Sell*. I felt any business had to do that. *Create* something. *Make* something and then *sell* it. Using this slogan kept my thinking in focus. (Gordy, 1995, 140)

Gordy's decision to subdivide the labour process was strategic because it ensured high levels of productivity. The "create" phase was made up of teams of writers and

producers whose role it was to create hit songs for specific artists. Due to Motown's initial standing as a minor independent, the decision was made to limit the number of releases to those which were felt to have the potential to be a major hit. In the Motown lexicon a hit record did not mean a big seller in the r'n'b chart. Crossover pop records were required.

The competition amongst the writing and production teams was fierce. There were significant financial incentives on offer for a hit, along with the prestige gained within the company. Gordy allowed this intense competitiveness to reach culmination in the weekly Product Evaluation meetings. These were occasions where senior figures at Motown, as well as writers and producers, would meet to adjudicate on which records to release:

The Friday morning meetings were *my* meetings. They were exciting, the lifeblood of our operation. That was when we picked up the records we would release. Careers depended on the choices made those Friday mornings. Everybody wanted to be there. The producers, whether or not they got their product on [the] approved list, wanted to be there to protect their own interests and to challenge each other and me. (Gordy, 1995, 151)

This type of compartmentalisation had several advantages. The competition amongst writing and production teams increased productivity but it also raised the quality of the records being made because of the limited opportunities for release. The benefits for Gordy were not solely financial. Dividing his labour force into separate processes allowed him to maintain control over the entire operation at Hitsville:

On a typical day I'd go from one end of the spectrum to the other – songwriting to corporate finance – problem solving, encouraging, motivating, teaching, challenging, complaining. It might be giving the guys in the control room tips on balancing, or just being a fresh ear for someone who had sat too long at the mixing board. At whatever stage of production I jumped in on, I was in songwriter's heaven going from room to room telling those creative people – writers, producers, artists – how I thought they could make something better. (Gordy, 1995, 175-176)

The production line model was practical for Gordy if nothing else as it ensured individual workers concentrated on a set of immediate goals. He used financial as well as creative competition to keep productivity and quality high. It was only ever Gordy who could step back and assess the entire operation.

## **The Motown Sound**

The city's non-industrial labour resources also provided Motown with a house band: The Funk Brothers. Made up of players in Detroit's jazz underground, Motown offered The Funk Brothers the novelty of a regular pay cheque. Gordy was eager to hire musicians from the city's jazz scene because he saw the benefits their training could offer. They would add efficiency to the recording process by being able to quickly interpret the arrangements put in front of them. Furthermore they would give the music the polish Gordy sought for the crossover into the American mainstream. The Funk Brothers were a vital part of the "make" phase of the Motown operation and they were critical to the engineering of the Motown Sound.

Motown's rise to national prominence was built upon the release of records which registered favourably in the U.S. pop charts. It appeared Motown had hit upon a formula for producing popular music which could exist across the country's racial and cultural divides. This was often attributed to a unique sound produced in the studios at Hitsville. The Motown Sound has been the cause of much debate. Some critics differ over which elements went into its production, whereas others question whether the sound was a conscious design on the part of Motown or a convenient accident. There are even those who question the existence of the Motown sound at all, arguing it is a cultural myth which the company has been happy to fuel. John Fitzgerald is of the latter school and questions the "actual uniformity of this Motown sound" (Fitzgerald, 1995, 5). The notion of a Motown sound implies a degree of premeditation and such a level of control would have been impossible over so many artists, producers, writers and musicians. He argues detailed analysis of Motown records proves there was little uniformity. For him the idea of the Motown sound masks the levels of freedom and agency available to Motown's creative employees: "In fact to deny the individual contribution of various Motown artists is to overvalue this notion of control." (Fitzgerald, 1995, 2-3).

Brian Ward has a more open approach to this debate. He engages with the possibility of there having been a Motown sound. The music recorded at Hitsville was, according to Ward, both "instantly recognisable" and "analytically elusive" (Ward, 1998, 262). He makes a critical distinction here. Ward introduces the idea that the Motown sound is recognisable because it possesses core sonic elements but eludes a strict sense of definition. Ward takes this further by stating that the apparent "ubiquity" and "fixity" of the Motown sound has been exaggerated (Ward, 1998, 263). For him the differences

between the artists and the music produced at the label is evidence enough of this. Instead he prefers to think of the Motown sound as an example of “constrained diversity” (Ward, 1998, 263). Ward offers greater fluidity when discussing the Motown sound. He moves away from a perceived sonic singularity, yet he does acknowledge there was a sense of design at Hitsville.<sup>9</sup>

Ward's argument chimes closely with Gordy's account of how the Motown sound was formed. When reading Gordy's version we get a sense of how the production line ethos was adapted to the environment at Hitsville. He realised the line could not simply be installed as it had been at the factory. With the Motown sound Gordy was looking for some sense of ubiquity but he also acknowledged the system needed to be supple. Without some flexibility the company could not make best use of the talent they had available. It is worth listening to the instructions he gave to the Funk Brothers:

Many of these guys came from a Jazz background. I understood their instincts to turn things around to their thing, but I also knew what I wanted to hear – commercially. So when they went too far, I'd stop them and stress, “we gotta get back to the funk – stay in the groove.” Then I'd make it as plain as possible: I would extend my arms a certain distance apart, saying, “I want to stay between here and there. Do what you want but stay in this range, in the pocket.” But between “here” and “there” they did all kinds of stuff – always pushing me to the limit and beyond. (Gordy, 1995, 125)

This is the most complete account of the Motown sound. Gordy does admit to enforcing a limit on the band but the limit is not necessarily musical. It is spatial as well as sonic. He wants the Funk Brothers to adhere to a boundary yet crucially he also realised this would not always be possible. The exchange between Gordy and The Funk Brothers rests on an understanding of musical performance as labour. Robin D.G. Kelley sets out the groundwork on this issue:

Musicians are rarely thought of as workers. Instead we tend to see them as entertainers and, more often than not, powerful celebrities rather than wage labourers. Or we tend to think of musicians as engaged in “play” rather than work. And yet, if we think about the work of making music and the context in which this work takes place, we cannot help but acknowledge the myriad ways musicians are affected by the whims and caprices of capital, the routinisation of labour and the often dehumanising conditions of production.

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of the Motown sound see: George, 1985; Early, 2004; Licks, 1989; Storyville, 2002; Connell and Gibson, 2003.

Furthermore, musicians are not considered workers because they do not work, they perform. They produce art, and as such, their work is often also a conscious act of self-expression. In some instances, their self-expression may come into conflict with the goals of their employers. As creative labouring artists, they could be fired not only for incompetence, but also for innovation. (Kelley, 2002, 124-125)

Kelley is attempting to close the gap between musical performance and physical labour. He argues musicians and performers are affected by the same issues which impact upon more recognisable forms of labour. Musical performers are subject to poor working environments, alienation, monotony, and the need to comply with the demands for productivity. He makes the case that those who labour as musicians and performers are in a more precarious state. They are required for their creative labour, yet there are often strict aesthetic limitations placed upon them. Therefore an excess of aesthetic production, or the wrong type, often leads to a loss of work. There is a demand to perform but not to be overproductive.<sup>10</sup>

Gordy's exchange with The Funk Brothers is evidence that he was thinking along similar lines to Kelley. He understood how musical performance functioned as a form of labour. What Gordy sought to do was use the tensions over musical productivity to his advantage. The border Gordy installed was not designed to organise the musicians. Instead it was a productive point of tension. The spatial limitations (“between ‘here’ and ‘there’”) gave The Funk Brothers something to work against as much as within and this tension was essential to the Motown sound. It generated the sound Gordy required (“commercially”) by cleverly deploying the instincts of the musicians (“to turn things around”). The Motown sound was not in and of itself a border but the outcome of one. Gordy's discipline was a productive constraint whereby he enclosed the sonic palettes available to The Funk Brothers in order to get them to rub up against a limit. This led to the “constrained diversity” unique to the Motown sound. It was a tension between the self-evidence of performative innovation and an adherence to a limit. Gordy's ability to work The Funk Brothers this way shaped his attitude towards vocal performance. The practices he developed with the band were applied to the work of creating a Motown star.

### **Motown and its performers**

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<sup>10</sup> For more on musical performance and labour see Miller, 2008

When Gordy first reflected on his exposure to the production lines, he envisaged a means of making a star. Despite the importance of “create, make, sell” and the Motown sound, the recording artist was his focus. By transposing the production line method to popular music, he felt he could turn Black singing talent into recording artists for Motown. It was possible, Gordy felt, to create stars using the raw materials of Detroit. Motown’s method was modelled on Gordy’s experience of the line and as a result there was a strict compartmentalisation of the performer’s training. Departments such as Artist Development dealt with choreography, dress, diction and public comportment, alongside an in-house artist management wing which handled bookings and contracts. The primary concern for Motown artists though was the labour of singing and performing.

Gordy’s statement of intent (to make a star) is revealing. Work for Motown artists meant recording and performing because Motown was in the business of creating stars and producing hit records. The company needed to harness musical talent and then put that talent to most effective use on a record. The combination of a star performer and hit song was crucial. The artists at Motown had unique status. They were employees and were paid for their labour as the rest of the workforce but their value was much higher. They were valued not only because Motown invested in them as stars but because their labour formed the central part of the final product – the record. The artist’s voice was the cumulative point of a process involving writers, producers and musicians. If the vocal did not hit the mark, the record failed. There was a requirement for the vocalist to be productive, yet they needed to produce certain types of performance when prompted. Their labour was scored into the final product. In fact with recording, touring and media appearances, at times there was little difference between performer and product. Thus the artists were extensively disciplined because their bodies and voices became the concern of the company. When recording, the demand was to stay within the Motown sound. As with The Funk Brothers, there was a tension between what the singer produced and what the label required, but for the artists the tension was much more visceral. The Funk Brothers could mediate the labour demands placed on them through their instruments. The horns, drums or bass guitar became a buffer between them and the environment at Hitsville. In the case of the Motown recording artists, there was no such buffer because they were the instrument. Rather, they were the instruments vital to making the final product. As performers they also at times became that product.

The artists were of the opinion that excessive force was used to get them to work,

especially in the recording studio. Marvin Gaye recorded his most popular early solo hits under the production of Norman Whitfield. “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” and “That’s the Way Love Is” launched Gaye as a major male solo artist. Recording with Whitfield, despite the success, involved an intense physical strain:

He made me sing in keys much higher than I was used to. He made me reach for notes that caused my throat veins to bulge. (Ritz, 1991, 124)

Targeting the throat appears to have been a common Motown strategy. The voice was the singers primary tool, it was the source of their value. It seems that some performers though (in this case Gaye again) required extensive disciplining. Their voices would not always synchronise with the Motown sound:

Marvin Gaye was incarcerated in that booth for hours....while producers whipped up on his voice until it was raw enough for his 1963 hit “Hitch Hike”. (Hirshey, 2006, 125)

Synchronicity seemed to be a key facet of performance at Motown. The vocal often needed to be coerced from the singers. Mary Wells, one of the label's earliest female solo acts, was also worked in this manner. In the recording booth there was little difference between the physical duress of the performance and the emotional duress of the song:

Sometimes toughness was forced on her in the recording studio, where the producers demanded twenty or thirty takes until sheer hoarseness got the pain across. (Hirshey, 2006, 141)

Distress became a confusing emotional register. The emotional pain (of love) contained within a lyric often masked the vocal pain (of work) for the artist. These are not isolated accounts from disgruntled employees instead they shed light on a part of the labour process. Management figures were quite explicit about the methods used to get the right vocal. Motown executive Maurice King recalls:

We heated the performers until they cracked, then we heated them up again. There were times when they couldn’t hardly stand the strain because of the pressure, when they could hardly remember anything because they were so exhausted, crying and disgusted with themselves because they couldn’t get it perfect. (Benjaminson, 1979, 39)

A culture of performative exhaustion existed at Motown. The body which sang was seen as a device to be heated and cracked. The artists had to comply with the demands of the various production processes, even if this meant being violently manipulated. The sound of the record took precedence.

As the company grew it was no coincidence Gordy began to describe the operation as a “more and more finely tuned...Motown Machine” (Gordy, 1995, 244). His experience on the assembly line had been the stimulus for success and the effects of the line can be found in the environment he created at Motown. He put in place mechanisms which carry the mark of the factory. Competition and intensity were used to stimulate the production of hit songs. An aesthetic barrier placed around the Funk Brothers created a sound which allowed r’n’b to cross into the mainstream. Hitsville though was ultimately geared towards the creation of stars. He wanted to polish raw vocal talents and match them to hit records. They would then become Motown assets - Create, Make, Sell. To become a Motown employee involved accepting the system in place at Hitsville, an experience which was particularly acute for the performer. They were heated until they cracked. Sang until they were hoarse. Recorded until their throats bulged. When Gordy transplanted the ecology of the production line to Hitsville he took with it an excessive physicality. Black workers in the automobile factories were already aware of what took place on the line. In the accounts of Gaye, Wells and King they would have recognised elements of niggermentation. It is arguable that Gordy also knew this. In the factory he too had been heated until he cracked. His body had been pushed to the point of swelling. He had learnt the value of black blood and sweat. Gordy envisaged in the efficiency of the production line a means of recording Black popular music and he used that model to write songs, produce a sound, and create stars. Yet when he relocated the production line Gordy could not avoid bringing with it those practices he had found physically abhorrent. Black labour had a violent relationship to industrial machinery and he could not avoid reinstalling that at Hitsville.

### **(Re)productive labour and women performers at Motown**

Gordy’s account of the company’s origins is considered the most authoritative but it is not the only account available. Smokey Robinson, with his group The Miracles, had been one of Gordy’s first signings to Motown. Once at the company he gained stardom as a vocalist whilst also becoming a successful song writer and producer. For showing

such loyalty to the company Gordy awarded him the role of Motown vice president, the only artist of note to move into a senior management position. Robinson had been alongside Gordy from almost the beginning and was active in the growth of Motown from a Detroit independent to a music industry power. He has a different story to tell about Motown's origins. Robinson's narrative does not include the factory. He did not have first hand experience of the production line. Robinson identifies another resource for Motown's production of high quality Black popular music:

West Grand Boulevard was the name of the street. Berry had bought a routine, B-Flat two storey house on the same street as a funeral home and a beauty shop. We were wedged in between. [...] Downstairs became headquarters. Kitchen became the control room. Garage became the studio where we'd cut 'Way Over There' and 'Shop Around'. The living room was bookkeeping, the dining room, sales. Berry stuck a funky sign on the front window – 'Hitsville USA' – and we were in business.

*The house was the womb for an astonishing number of artistic births.* That's where we were nourished, where we grew and fought and loved, played and provoked and produced and sang an array of songs that would enter the lives and souls of millions of people. (Robinson and Ritz, 1990, 103, emphasis added)

Robinson turns to the image of a womb. In his view the dominant atmosphere at Motown was not industrial. The artists did not move along a production line. Robinson uses natal associations to claim Hitsville was the site of artistic births. Working at Motown was about growth and nourishment. The performers were not assembled instead they were incubated before being released.

There seem to be two versions of Motown's origins. Firstly there is Gordy's adapted industrialism which allowed him to coerce productivity from his Black workforce. As has been outlined above, he seemed to achieve his aims. Robinson's comparison of Hitsville to a womb is still worth taking seriously as it challenges the understanding of labour at Motown outlined so far, especially the physical disciplining of the performers. Furthermore, Robinson's account accentuates the echoes between Motown and the League. In the previous section a link was drawn between the League's view of the line as violently and radically productive, and Motown's use of its practices. With Robinson's introduction of natal (re)productivity the volume of those echoes increase. A cross Detroit resonance with the League was at work where the combination of black labour, machinic production, natal practices and voice seemed to reappear at Motown. Although these elements did not affect the label in quite the same way as they did the

League, there is an opportunity to apply the knowledge mapped out earlier on black natal practices to Motown. That circuit of black labouring body, natal (re)production, machinery and voice gathered with particular potency around female performers. It is through the labour of female artists that we can explore Robinson's "Motown as womb" narrative.

As pointed out above Mary Wells had experience of the recording booth at Motown. She had learnt the violence of working as a performing artist at Hitsville. Yet Wells had made an active choice to join Motown. She wanted to go there because the label offered her the chance of stardom. As a Black woman born in Detroit she was aware her other options were limited. Wells realised Motown represented an alternative to regular forms of Black life in the city:

Until Motown, in Detroit there were three big careers for a Black girl....Babies, the factories and daywork. Period. (Hirshey, 2006, 140)

Wells was conscious of what work meant for Black women in Detroit. First there was the work of "babies", the implication being this was a form of labour strongly associated with Black women. Reproduction and child rearing was one viable career option. In the equation of "babies" with work, Wells seems to draw on the cultural knowledge of black female (re)productivity. The other option is the factory, the destination for the majority of Black Detroiters. As the League stated, this meant the oppression of the production line but they also argued Black women were a reserve labour force whose work took place away from the line. Black women's work, for the League, was (re)production. For Wells Motown offered a way out of this bind. She could avoid the factory, and her labour would not be restricted to "babies". Her value was attached to her voice. Yet Motown did make strenuous demands of her and put her under epidermal pressure to produce. This was perhaps because Motown was an attempt to restage the production line. Similarly the discipline Wells received at Motown would, according to Smokey Robinson, have been nurturing. She would have been trained within a natal atmosphere, her body and voice turned into affective tools which became sources of value to her.

Despite offering an escape, Motown was residually linked with the labours which restricted Black women in Detroit to "babies" and "the factory". The label seemed to operate somewhere between the two in order to record Black popular music. There was

a particular sonic activity at stake when artists such as Wells were the focus of the Motown production process. A black female performer at Motown had a particular relationship to the musical factory. Her natality was also overloaded with associations. I am interested in what took place when Black women were made into Motown stars. There are echoes of and differences from John Watson's lecture in *Finally Got the News*. The League recognised black maternal (re)production was the primary target of capital but they could not allow these practices to be heard as part of their revolutionary program. Did the same process occur at Motown when Black women were made to sing?

Martha Reeves, of Martha and the Vandellas, provides some of the answers to that question. Reeves' recollection of labour at Motown is in the same vein as Marvin Gaye and Mary Wells. Being the lead singer of Martha and the Vandellas left palpable marks upon her body:

She says she did suffer some permanent physical damage. She has had a loss of hearing in one ear and is very sensitive to light, having injured her eyes from straining into so many megawatt spotlights. (Hirshey, 2006, 152)

Once again there is a sense of performance at Motown being violently demanding. Her body was used as a device to make and sell the record. The performers were so close to the production process they were effectively niggermated. Reeves goes on to discuss the events behind her removal from Motown. Over a period she was slowly withdrawn from the roster of frontline artists and when the company left Detroit for L.A. in 1971 she was finally jettisoned. Reeves believes Motown abandoned her because of her actions beyond the recording booth and the stage. She openly questioned the methods used to pay artists at the label:

Her big mistake, she says, was in trying to check on matters outside the recording studio. She asked to look over her royalty statements and cash allowance vouchers and was heard wondering, a bit too loudly, about their size and frequency. (Hirshey, 2006, 153)

Martha Reeves was not a fully pliant Motown product. As Mary Wells points out the label offered Black women something beyond the factory and their own (re)productivity. What they had to do in exchange was record the performance that was demanded of them, no matter the damage to their bodies. Reeves had been embedded in

this process and disciplined to produce a performance but she did not believe she was getting full value for her labour. She questioned the status of the female artist at Motown. She wondered “a bit too loudly” about her pay. Her job entailed using her voice to make records, but Reeves also produced a phonic materiality which was out of place. It was a little too loud. She asked too many questions. She was making the wrong noises. As a performer Reeves was not supposed to be critical of Hitsville. Her voice was there to do the work of recording and performing.

### **The performativity and politics of “talk back”**

Reeves voice was her instrument of labour but she was using it to undertake a different type of work. Reeves was talking back to Motown and the company considered this type of work a threat. With Martha Reeves there are two forms of talk back at stake which combine to encompass her labour as a vocalist and her status as a Black woman.

Milla Tiainen outlines “talk back” as a practice which is particular to vocalists (Tiainen, 2007). “Talk back” is part of the process of singing as a form of labour. She begins with the premise of vocal performance as embodied action. Tiainen is relevant to the schematics of Motown and Reeves because she sets up vocal performance as a negotiation between the singularity of the vocalist and the disciplinary parameters of the sonic environment. For Tiainen the bodies of vocalists are “continuously under construction in unpredictable ways” (Tiainen, 2007, 156). The singer is not though able to generate this change independently. It is an outcome of the sonic environment. The reconstruction of the singer’s body is not an internal act. It is a tuning of the body towards the phonic demands of the performance:

They consist of experiments with or “tunings” of singers bodies so that they would utter certain vocal pitches, volumes, durations and other expressive qualities. The experiments vary endlessly, since the muscular impulses and kinaesthetic energies bodies must produce are always singular. They depend, on one hand, on the specific musical effects sought at each moment. On the other hand, they depend, at least as importantly on the bodily subjects who produce these effects, with their divergent histories, layered habits and even instant-to-instant inner differentiations. (Tiainen, 2007, 156)

It is here that Tiainen introduces “talk back”. The vocal performance only functions if

the body of the singer is able to orientate itself to the environment surrounding it. Absolute submission to the environmental demands of the performance does not work. The singer's body needs to flex as much as it gives way. It needs to "talk back" and force a reassessment of how sonic demands cohere:

the corporeal actions of the subject do not necessarily comply with the conceptual impulses aimed at them, at least not in the intended ways. (Tiainen, 2007, 157)

The voice and the body of the singer become creative pivots. They are able to negotiate with a variety of stimuli. These can be other voices, bodies, performative instructions, or even non-human devices such as machinery, instruments or static objects:

Bodies intersect then with social and semiotic practices, technological environments, alimentary supplies, musical sounds and vibrations and so forth. They form machinic connections with a varying wealth of other components. Hence, they act always already as parts of broader supra-individual, even supra-human assemblages. (Tiainen, 2007, 159)

The singer's body and voice are embedded in a series of circuitous flows. The voice is able to dictate and "talk back" to its environment as much as the sound of the performance is induced by pre-ordained design. There is a flux where the singer stands on the cusp of numerous possibilities for herself and her environment. The voice moves along these possibilities, awaiting realisation.<sup>11</sup>

bell hooks sets up "talking back" as a Black feminist practice and there is a correlation between hooks' and Tiainen's reading of "talk back" which feeds into Reeve's situation at Motown. In general terms hook's understands "talk back" as speaking directly to an authority figure. As such "talk back" can "invite punishment" because it involves a disturbance of power (hooks, 1989, 5). "Talk back" takes on extra significance for Black women because hooks argues that even within African-American culture "the voices of black women....could be tuned out, could become a kind of background music, audible but not acknowledged as significant speech" (hooks, 1989, 6). Unacknowledged audibility is key for hooks. Black women have not been denied speech within Black social contexts, instead limitations have been placed upon what female speech constitutes. Black women have been instructed "it was important to

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<sup>11</sup> Also see Tiainen, forthcoming; Dunn and Jones, 1997

speaking, but to talk a talk that was itself silence. Taught to speak and yet become aware of the betrayal of too much heard speech” (hooks, 1989, 7). *Too much heard speech* implies a restriction where for Black women voice is often in danger of being deemed sonically excessive. It can easily be considered noise.

For hooks the politics of voice takes on different characteristics for Black women. The task is not to move from silence to speech to to make Black women's speech audible (hooks, 1989, 6). This is where “talk back” becomes important as a transgressive practice. “Talk back” involves the use of voice as a troublesome phonic instrument:

For us, true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such it is a courageous act – as such it represents a threat. (hooks, 1989, 8)

For whoever is speaking, the resistance of “talk back” becomes transformative. To make oneself heard leads to an alteration of status “from object to subject – the liberated voice” (hooks, 1989, 9).

Tiainen and hooks respective theories of talk back are about responses to domination. They show how power can be re-routed to those in positions of subordination. Considered in its totality, “talk back” is really a theory of adisciplinarity. To say Reeves was producing “talk back” is also to say she was producing adisciplinarity. To question the Motown line was adisciplinary. To make too much heard speech was adisciplinary. Reeves’ “talk back” implies the working methods used at Motown were not always effective. The adapted production line Gordy installed did not always extract the performance required of the artist. On occasion the body and the voice did not always comply but reflexed. The voice reordered its immediate sonic environment and Motown would often (as in the case of Reeves) seek to control these adisciplinary practices.

It is important to recall where the term adisciplinary comes from. It was coined by Moten in his essay on *Finally Got the News*, where he used it to name the phonic materiality of the League’s lectures. The League’s voices were adisciplinary because the League were the product of a sensuous attachment to the line. The line had niggermated them and it was the line they were disrupting. The sonic content of their voices became the starting point for disruption but the League were not immune to the effects of their own “talk back”. The sound of the League’s lectures also undercut their own radical

adisciplinarity. These sounds were produced by way of a further radical voicing. There was another sound putting the parameters of the League's voices under pressure. It was the sound of a natal radicalism. The League had refused to countenance this maternal sound as part of their program. Even though it was the engine of niggermation, which in turn was a resource for the League. By way of niggermation, natal (re)production had always been crucial to the phonic materiality of the League's politics.

Reeve's vocal adisciplinarity offers a similar insight into Motown. Her critique (which was a bit too loud) correlates with Robinson's "Motown as womb" narrative. Reeves' "talk back" is part of the insurgent tradition outlined by Jennifer Morgan in the previous chapter. Morgan argued the violence directed at the deterritorialized captive womb meant natality shaped black resistance to enslavement. Black female (re)productivity did not only involve the (re)production of black labouring objects, it also meant the (re)production of black insurgency. "Talk back" offers evidence of how these dual forms of (re)productivity shaped Motown. As an automated production line, Motown pressed for the labour from its performers. As a natal formation it sought to accentuate the performative potential of its artists. When placed at the heart of these processes, the black female performer was pushed to a limit yet she also flexed back. In the case of the female artist, a set of (re)productive associations were already attached to her body. The (re)productive associations were her condition of possibility as a Black musical worker. Through the mechanics of the production line those associations were used to record her musical performance. During the process of labouring the distinctions between the transmission of musical pleasure and the strenuous working over of her voice became blurred. Yet the blackness of her natality, which informed her status as a Motown performer, also acted as the condition of possibility for the recording of another voice. This other voice was the outcome of the same processes which defined her work at Hitsville. This other voice was critical, out of place, and a bit too loud. The "talk back" heard in Motown was a form of (re)productive insurgency.

When Gordy installed the production line at Hitsville, he brought with it an efficient method of producing Black popular music. He had also transferred along with those processes a violent disciplinary relationship to the Black worker's body. The production line model could not be used to arrange black labour without reverberating with natal effects. The relationship between blackness and capital had been structured through the (re)productive practices of the black female. Thus production in Detroit was reliant upon and susceptible to these practices because they were its condition of possibility.

The League, via niggermation, partially recognised this. Robinson could hear it at work at Hitsville. Artists such as Martha Reeves recorded troublesome reminders of it. As much as the production line ethos was a means of control for Gordy, it also involved the production of resistance.

### **“Nowhere to Run” at Ford River Rouge**

The speculations on talk back lead into the film of Martha Reeves and the Vandellas performing “Nowhere to Run” on the Ford Mustang line. The dual forms of production which shaped Motown are a central feature of the footage. What becomes apparent in this live recording is that talk back itself was disciplinary. It was not always consciously generated by the artist. Rather when body met machinery, production met (re)production, the sensuality of niggermation meant “talk back” was unanticipated.

In 1965 Motown was approached by the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity to take part in a public television campaign. The campaign was designed to alert young school leavers to temporary employment in Detroit’s automobile factories. Working with disc jockey and television host Murray “the K” Kaufman, Motown decided to take up the offer. They saw it as a chance to promote Martha and the Vandellas' latest hit “Nowhere to Run”. Motown wanted to shoot a promotional film to be screened on Kaufman’s CBS show “It’s What’s Happening, Baby”. He came up with the idea of recording the group directly on the Ford Mustang assembly line at the company’s River Rouge Plant in Detroit (Smith, 1999, 127; *Motown*, 2009).

The footage shot for “It's What’s Happening, Baby” is built around a relatively simple but well executed conceit. Martha Reeves and the Vandellas are filmed performing “Nowhere to Run” whilst sat directly on a fully operational production line. As the group sing, a Mustang is assembled around them. The film depicts the elements which were dominating 1960s Detroit; Motown (in the form of the Vandellas and the song) and the automobile factories owned by the Big Three (Ford, Chrysler and GM). Motown and the automobile industry were symbolic of Detroit and each used (a version of the) production line to mediate their relations with the Black population of Detroit.

The Vandellas performance of “Nowhere to Run” in this film is the fruition of a project Gordy got underway in 1958. He envisaged Motown as a version of the production line and attempted to shape it as such. The stars and records he was looking to produce could be assembled using a highly disciplined process. In this video the

viewer is presented with something that is almost the culmination of Gordy's original idea. Martha and the Vandellas are performing a track (both products of the Hitsville assembly line) on a piece of machinery which inspired their creation. On the production line itself another product which was central to Detroit is being manufactured - the automobile.

The notion of the Vandellas returning to the scene of their conception is a crucial element of this video. As the Vandellas sing "Nowhere to Run", the signature incessant yet curtailed rhythm of the Motown sound takes prominence. It sounds as if the beat of the song is setting the pace of production on the Mustang line. This becomes a fascinating proposition if one follows the logic of Gordy's original inspiration for the company. His use of a production line ethos allowed him to install a sonic disciplinarity amongst the musicians and performers at his disposal. There were a defined set of aesthetic parameters at Hitsville which went into the engineering of the Motown sound and moulding the performer. In this respect the Vandellas and the song (as products of Motown) not only enter the heart of modern American industry, but also subsume the movements of the production line. The factory line itself was built upon a regulation of movements and rhythms which determined the pace of production. With this video the Motown sound and the production line have become entwined.

The impression of return and dictation to the machinery takes on further pertinence if one considers the origins of the song's unique rhythmic accent. During the recording sessions for "Nowhere to Run" the production and writing team, Eddie Holland, Lamont Dozier and Brian Holland, had sought to introduce a different flavour to the rhythm section of the track. After a series of experiments they realised the sound they wanted to hear by recording the sound of car chains being beaten against their hands. Holland-Dozier-Holland introduced a unique percussive texture to "Nowhere to Run" by using the guts of the automobile (Smith, 1999; *Soul Deep*, 2005).

There is something at stake in the regularity of connections between Motown and the factory in this video. Gordy used production principles to "create" Martha and the Vandellas. Car chains were used to manipulate the rhythmic textures of "Nowhere to Run", and the Vandellas are filmed performing the song on an operational Ford Mustang line. It is as if there is a feed back loop at work. The video is a staging of Motown products enveloping the production line. Yet the Vandellas performance of "Nowhere to Run" is also generative of a series of other sounds. At certain moments the sonic dominance of "Nowhere to Run" slips away. The noise of the Mustang line interrupts

the Vandellas soundtrack. Short bursts of machinic rhythm drown out the song. There are moments where “Nowhere to Run” is rendered inaudible by disturbances which sound like a reflex action from the machinery. The production line sounds like it is responding to the Vandellas. It could be argued that it is talking back to Motown.

This is not such an outlandish proposition if one thinks about the role of Martha and the Vandellas in the film. The group are an alien presence on the production line. They are not part of the Mustang being manufactured. Nor are they members of the Black workforce assembling the car. There is though a latent connection between the two. The Vandellas are the products of Motown’s own adapted production line process. They are also part of the pool of Black workers which manufactured the records at Hitsville. At times the Vandellas would have stood in for the record itself and became the product. With the video for “Nowhere to Run” the viewer is witness to the Vandellas working as performers and as products for Motown. The group create the Motown product through their performance of it. The Vandellas going about their work generates the muscular-sonic reflex from the machinery. It is their proximity to the production line in the factory which induces the line to produce another sound. This sound is produced because two seemingly incongruous, but psychically connected systems have come into contact. From studying the League in the previous chapter, we already know the production line in Detroit was deeply embedded in the effects of natal labour. The Black woman's body had long been shaped as a tool for reproducing blackness. The reproductive capabilities of the womb had specifically been targeted. American capital needed black labour, and the Black woman's natality was the means of reproducing it, but these natal practices were also the point of reproduction for black resistance. The environment in industrial Detroit was an extension of this scenario. The maternal object was coerced into reproducing more labouring objects. Those labouring objects resisted by making themselves heard through an audibility which came by way of a natal mark, even if there was difficulty in acknowledging its presence. The Vandellas and other female artists at Motown carried all this knowledge with them when they went to work on the Hitsville line. Their musical labour was the thing which allowed them to work at Hitsville. It allowed them to become musical instruments, musical products and stars. At the same time the (re)productive knowledge they carried meant they did not always have to fully submit. At times they could produce another voice, one which was often troublesome. It was not what Motown wanted to record yet it hinted at another music. The presence of the Motown product (the Vandellas) on the line generates the noise of

the Mustang being built. Both the line and the Vandellas work in the tradition of things which had an unacknowledged audibility. They could talk, but that talk was always deemed to be out of place. As Gordy had always intended, the mechanisms of the assembly line were cut deep into the design of Hitsville. He perhaps didn't realise how deep those connections were.

The footage of "Nowhere to Run" at River Rouge is embedded in crosscurrents. There are signals cutting between a form of industrial production using black labour to manufacture cars, and another production line organising Black workers to make popular music. A set of connections were being formed across Detroit. They brought the Vandellas performance into the realm of the League's *Finally Got the News*. Next to the League's film, the footage of "Nowhere to Run" is a further depiction of the automobile industry in Detroit. The footage of the Vandellas shows the working environment of the production line. This was central to the League's documentary. Both films include the line's movements, rhythms and noise. The Vandellas performance is also imbued with sensuality of black labour. Before even making this film Martha and the Vandellas had experienced some forms of niggermation. Motown viewed its stars as employees who worked on its production line, as well as products to be manufactured. In this video the process is redoubled in a way that meets up with the League. The Vandellas are filmed working in the zone which was the focal point of the League's radicalism. The League emerged from the indistinct space between the labouring black body and the machinery of industrial capital. This was a space where black blood and sweat was transformed into finished products.

The fascinating aspect of "Nowhere to Run" is it is not only another instance of niggermation. The way the Vandellas undertake niggermation marks a difference from *Finally Got the News*. The Vandellas performance on the production line disrupts the niggermation which informs *Finally Got the News*. Their performance troubles the League's thinking on black labour. Martha and the Vandellas working in the heart of the assembly line become that which shadowed the League ideologically: Black women with a muscular connection to the machinery of labour. The Vandellas presence directly on the line as a Mustang is assembled accentuates their status at Motown. Their presence on the line accentuates the fact that as performers they too were sensually disciplined by the systems Gordy established to make Black popular music. But the fact that they were female performer-products points to a slippage between the dual production systems at Motown. One which was industrial, the other natal.

The combination of blackness, labour, and natality indicate how sound and voice occupy each film. With *Finally Got the News* the League's aesthetic was generated through black labour's proximity to the operation of capital. The contact with the production line was violently oppressive, but the muscularity of that friction also produced the adisciplinary phonic substance of the commodity. Muscularity formed the basis of the League's critique of capital. The argument put forward in the previous chapter was that when naming niggerism as the phonic grounding of their radicalism, the League continuously set aside maternal labour as the a priori condition of niggerism. When voicing their politics, the League were troubled by the phonic substance of natal practices which they acknowledged and disavowed. Their muscular insurgency was built upon a natality despite the League's performance of muscularity as masculinity. In *Finally Got the News* John Watson set out the case for black labour as *the* revolutionary vanguard due to its proximity to industrial capital in Detroit. His lecture was interrupted by another unanticipated lecture emanating from within his own voice. This other lecture was an unregulated natal flex. Watson was being talked back to by the muscularity of maternal (re)productivity.

For Martha and the Vandellas the targeting of the voice and body formed the basis of their labour. The labour required at Motown involved a material targeting of the voice. As Tiainen indicates, the body which sings can flex. The vocal demands placed on a performer can be reshaped. There was a tension at Motown between a disciplinary training of black vocal labour and the reflex from the voice-body which had been nurtured in the same environment. The recording of "Nowhere to Run" on the "real" production line allowed for the intensification of this process. The Vandellas entry into the line opened up a further space of "talk back". The sound of the production line momentarily blotting out the Motown soundtrack is an occurrence of natal "talk back". In this instance "talk back" is a sound emerging unanticipatedly from an object. A labouring machine that should only be capable of (re)production is producing sonic interruption. There is a danger that this noise, which is too much, constitutes speech. The Vandellas arrival on the Mustang line was the catalyst for this machinic flex. Their performance for the video (re)produces the (sonic) legacy of black natality which had long been reorganised into an instrument of labour.

Black radicalism in mid 1960's Detroit was built upon four features; the materiality of black labour; the various incarnations of the automated production line; the phonic

activity of the voice; and (re)productive practices associated with the black female body. For the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, niggermation formed the heart of their politics. It was vital to the group for several reasons. They knew since captivity niggermation had been used to connect labouring black bodies to capital. The League knew this was the background to their status in Detroit's modern factories. The League also realised niggermation was the site of production for their radicalism. Black labour's epidermal connection to the line generated resistance. The League's adisciplinarity was realised through voice. At its most potent it was a phonic activity of the voice. This became evident in *Finally Got the News* through the use of the lecture form. By ostensibly being objects which spoke, the League disrupted common understandings of labour power. They achieved this by forming unanticipated connections between the object and labour power. The League reordered the connections between machinery, the black labouring body, the object and voice.

The vocal intensity of the League's radicalism was also troubled by maternal (re)productivity and its connections to niggermation. Watson acknowledged the historical link between maternal (re)productive capabilities and the practice of niggermation. The League also acknowledged the importance of natal practices to black labour in the factories of Detroit. The work of the Black woman was to (re)produce workers for the line. These workers carried the possibility of being retrained as League radicals. The League though were resistant to thinking natal practices as part of their politics. It was not considered a part of their muscularity (which was masculine). Thus they resisted allowing natal practices to inform the sound of their radicalism. They attempted to wipe the trace of the Black woman's labour from their voices because the line was no place for women to work. The problem for the League is that (re)productivity was always already at work in their politics. It was always already marked in the sensuous terrain of their voices. Natal practices were the engine for their radicalism. The (re)productive capability deemed to be unique to the black female was the means by which the violent black encounter with capital was initiated. The natality of the captive female was also generative of insurgency. This goes some way to explaining the tension which can be heard at the close of Watson's lecture. As he argues the League are the vanguard (the most forward and militant), because of their proximity to the line, an a priori natal technology feeds back into his lecture. This technology is generating Watson's voice and at the same time being excluded from it.

Across Detroit, there seemed to be an uncannily similar set of arrangements in place

at Motown. The key feature was the production line. Gordy had adapted this piece of machinery to Hitsville. He did not literally install the machinery at Motown but instead sought to use the practices of the line to create a similar working environment. He saw this as an efficient process for recording high quality Black popular music.

What Gordy also brought over from the factories were echoes of the violence that took place around the line. There was a disciplinary relationship to the workforce which came to the fore with the artists signed to Motown. They were physically disciplined to adapt to the working demands at the company. Their bodies and voices were pushed to produce the vocal labour required. As in the factory, these practices were not entirely top-down. There was not a one-way movement of power from machinery to black labour. Labour could at Motown, much like the League, respond. Vocal labourers at Motown responded to the demands made of them by way of natal practices. These forms of “talk back” were particularly potent for the black female artist. For Black women in Detroit, labour was largely restricted to (re)production. At Motown there were a series of female workers embedded in the line. With female vocal labour being targeted by the production process, those natal effects appeared frequently across the company. Talk back became a means of reworking some aspects of Gordy’s operation. These ruptures at Hitsville occurred in much the same way as another (maternal) sound had disrupted Watson’s lecture and the League’s politics. They were unanticipated. They could arrive at any moment and were the result of machinic intimacy.

With both Motown and the League there was an insistent natality generating labour, radicalism and sound. Yet it also always undercut those processes. Each organisation was reliant upon but not immune from the force of the radical fantasy of the maternal voice in black politics and black music.

The theorisation of the difference between black labour and black labour resisting in this case study has revealed that the difference is barely perceptible on a sonic level. Machinery which violently oppresses black labour also becomes the means of generating radicalised blackness. Submission to a systemised labour process can also stimulate an insurgent flux back from the black labour object. It is not simply a case of charting the movements back and forth between process A and process B though. What is at stake here is a general field of activity, opened up because the means through which blackness is rendered available for objecthood – natal reproductivity – makes a claim over the status of the object. Thinking black radicalism as phonic substance on the level of labour, requires an attentiveness to a series of micro level aural operations. The

blackness and radicalism of black labour is always under negotiation. It is always being produced by way of a resistance from the object, whilst simultaneously an unanticipated resistance pushes against and away from the very ground of that resistance. By paying attention to the minute yet incessant movement of this phonic materiality, we can begin to grasp the depth of Moten's claim that blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.

## **Conclusion**

*What is the relationship between black music and black radicalism?* The question which opened the thesis now returns at its conclusion. As explained in the introductory chapter, this question shaped the research in specific ways. Firstly, it established blackness and radicalism as two of the central research categories. Secondly, contained within the question was the underlying assumption of an additional category - phonic materiality - which was at stake in this thesis. These three categories informed the way black music and black radicalism were analysed both as distinct practices, and in terms of the way they related to each other. The thesis was organised around the idea that there was a way of conceptualising blackness, radicalism and phonic materiality simultaneously. The proposal made in the introductory chapter was that it was possible to theorise blackness, radicalism and the relationship between them as sonic activity.

All of the concepts at work in the research question could not be adequately studied in their totality. Instead they were filtered through a specific juncture of mid Twentieth century Black history in the U.S. The question of the relationship between black music and black radicalism was staged as one about the Black Consciousness movement and Black popular music in the U.S. between 1955 and 1971. As the latest manifestation of the Black radical tradition, and a new black musical aesthetic with mass appeal, respectively, the argument was made that during this moment the relationship between Black Consciousness and Black popular music tapped into the concerns of the research question.

Thinking about this historical juncture in terms of blackness, radicalism and phonic materiality lead to the creation of three case studies. These case studies covered a range of ideologies, temporalities, and events associated with the Black Consciousness movement and Black popular music. They were organised around two fundamental ideas. Firstly each case study represented a conjunctural moment, where the music and the radicalism seemed to be tuned into the same frequencies. Secondly, and as a result of this conjuncture, these case studies represent different inflections of the way blackness and radicalism were produced as phonic materiality. The task of this conclusion is to detail the ways in which the work presented in the case studies has addressed the terms of the research question. It is important to understand how each case study has mapped out ways of theorising blackness, radicalism and/as phonic materiality.

In the first case study on James Brown and Amiri Baraka questions of form and content were at the focal point of the research. This was evident in the way both chapters mapped out the sonic production of black militancy which seemingly could not avoid rupturing itself. The way black production always seemed to invoke the production of a black breakdown centred on Brown and Baraka's respective use of rhythm and corporeality.

What was set out in this opening case study was a particular theoretical framework for thinking about blackness, radicalism and sound. Across the two chapters there was a detailed description of how a rhythmically militant black music and rhythmically militant black voice were produced by these two figures in this historical moment. Beyond a description of its making, there was analysis of how that making was put to use as part of a black militant programme. It became evident though that between its making and its utility, the process was riven by an intense level of sonic disruption. The blackness and radicalism of Brown's new sound and of Baraka's phonography were marked in ways which refused what was thought to be the full realisation of these practices. The argument I made in this case study was that these sonic ruptures and refusals, which manifested themselves psycho-sexually, were of absolute necessity to their performances. They could not be separated from those forces which drove Brown and Baraka. The resistances, refusals and dissonances which broke down the blackness and radicalism they were making, were a remanifestation of the marks, cuts and breaks which generated their blackness and radicalism. When their performances seemed to fall apart, this should not be thought of as evidence of Baraka and Brown's radical drives reaching a limit. Instead it is evidence of the incessant production of the blackness which generated their performances. When they pursued a program of making an object, voice and place which sounded definitively black, they could never adequately call a halt to the production of blackness. All of this information was contained in Brown and Baraka's use of the phonic materiality of rhythm. It is through an attentiveness to rhythm that we can develop an apparatus for listening to the ways in which Brown and Baraka constructed black sound objects. But in the continual pushing of those objects to the point of phono-sensual refusal, they were also always producing a blackness which was the condition of radical possibility for the black object.

The concept of black radicalism as incessantly productive, even as it ruptures itself, was continued in the next case study. In this chapter the sonic experience of black freedom, as it was constituted by Martin Luther King and Sam Cooke, was at the centre.

The sonic experiences of black freedom they generated were hyperbolic and disassociative. To understand how this was so, it became necessary to study the terms and conditions of their phonic production.

The blackness of their performativity was determined by Black church ritual. There were two sets of institutionally negotiated criteria at stake for King and Cooke. The first was a collective investment in religious testimony. The testimony of spiritual faith was not a representational act. It did not stand in place of spiritual presence. Instead testimony was the enactment of the experience it named. It was an ecstatic manifestation of Holy spirit. Secondly, as performers within the Black church, King and Cooke had been trained in techniques which allowed them to use their bodies and voices as instruments of this spiritual agency. They were able to generate performances which acutely marked their own ecstatic annulment as they gave way to a spiritual presence.

These practices were accepted within the context of Black church ritual, but when the liberatory ethos of these acts were transferred into mass political discourse, the way they were received shifted. By way of their ability to deinstrumentalise their voices - and the agency attached to voice – King and Cooke produced a great deal of interpretive distortion. The sonic effects they generated made them sound like they were no longer present in the time and space of the performance. It made them sound like they were no longer existing in the world. This was because the freedom sounds they had been trained to generate could not be contained within a normatively comprehensible political program. They were designed to do more than pressurise the American national discourses of freedom and equality. They also always had to pressurise their own interpretative systems. King and Cooke return us to blackness, radicalism and sound as a question of form and content. In this case study black freedom sounds appeared to escape content in and as form. When Cooke bent his voice, or King gave his ability to speak away, the subject matter of black freedom seemed break away as an orientation towards black liberation as new form.

The turn to mid 1960s Detroit in the final case study illuminated two areas of concern. In one sense the chapters on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and Motown allowed for the development of a theory of black labour and sonic resistance. More significantly, and the reason this case study closed the main body of the thesis, it placed the relationship between blackness, radicalism and sound under pressure. What took place during the study of the League and Motown was a nuancing of the ways

blackness, radicalism and phonic materiality had been set out in the previous two case studies. With the research into black labour in Detroit the notions of an incessant rupturing of blackness as the continual production of black sound, and black performative gestures which continually emptied out the sonic form of political discourse, were complicated. This complication took place because thinking about the League and Motown meant listening closely to blackness and/as natal reproductivity. The recurrent themes of both chapters were the slippages produced by natal reproductivity when theorising black labour. It was the means through which blackness was designated as object-status, and therefore rendered those deemed to be black as tools available for ownership. Yet natal reproductivity was also the condition of possibility for the black object's resistance. The deterritorialisation of black natality had left the space open for insurgent operations. But more than this reflexive movement, what came to the fore with the League and Motown was that black natal reproductivity never remained passive. It was never just a means to generate insurgency. It was also always active, and made sonic claims over black radical programs, even if it meant disrupting them. The result was that in this case study on Detroit, the theorisation of blackness, radicalism, and phonic materiality had to be supple enough to carry the fact that the sonic content of a recording could simultaneously mark the violent enforcement of blackness as labour, that labouring objects insurgent flex back at power, and a further internal pressurisation of that insurgency.

Having detailed how each individual case study related to the terms of the research question, it is worth thinking about they respond to those terms as a whole. The research question on the relationship between black music and black radicalism was not posed in a vacuum. Instead it is in conversation with selected accounts of blackness, radicalism and phonic materiality which were set out in the "Frameworks" chapter. These being Cedric Robinson's essay on the nature of the Black radical tradition, and the ongoing theoretical debates on the category of blackness taking place in the field of Black studies.

Beginning with Robinson, I would argue that the three case studies presented in this thesis speak to his claim that black radicalism's primary focus is the preservation of blackness as an ontological totality. This instinct to preserve meant, according to Robinson, not only that black radicalism has an internalised focus, but it involved the preservation of the ability to ask questions of blackness as ontological totality. In this respect the research in this thesis has been structured by a series of deeply internalised

debates. Each conjuncture of musical and radical performance worked resolutely on its own set of terms. These debates and terms involved a contestation over the very blackness of black music and black radicalism. There was a focus in each case study on how black music and black radicalism were made, what made them black and radical, and what the function of the blackness of the music and radicalism should be.

In the same essay on the nature of the Black radical tradition, Robinson also spoke of the tradition's incomprehensibility and incommensurability. Both were an outcome of the interiorised contestation over the ontological and epistemological forms of the tradition. In terms of incomprehensibility the forms that black radicalism took (whether musically or politically) within the case studies did not always register because of their phonic materiality. The focus on sound in the research meant understanding the ways in which interpretations of sonic phenomena were often restricted to certain categories. They did not register as concretely radical because of the ways in which the black radicalism they embodied was being produced. What was going on in the case studies in terms of incomprehensibility was an incessant questioning over the very blackness of black radicalism and black music by way of sound. The performances were defined by a constant phonic rethinking and repositioning of form. As a result these performances demanded a practice of close, attentive listening.

The incommensurability of the blackness and radicalism presented in these case studies was an outcome of the history of blackness as a category. As Robinson argues the Black radical tradition has been built by those deemed incapable making their capabilities self-evident. Black radicalism is often unanticipated, and goes unaccounted for. The main body of the research in this thesis has been organised by the incommensurable relationship between pre-determined forms of radicalism and a) the intention and capacity of those things which make black music; b) the intention and capacity of those black things who spoke; c) the intention and capacity of those black things who made themselves heard. The incommensurability of black radicalism in the case studies was an outcome of thinking blackness as a break. It was an outcome of thinking blackness as a break operating within, undermining, reproducing and escaping the difference between the human and the object. To listen to the phonic materiality of black radicalism required following a Robinsonian method: staying with the incessant internalised contestation over the forms black radicalism should take.

The emphasis placed on phonic materiality points to the other account of blackness and radicalism set out in the Frameworks chapter. The manner in which the case studies

speak to the research question is not only determined by Cedric Robinson. The exchange between Afro-Pessimism and Black optimism as new black intellectual projects is also a significant factor. As set out in the Frameworks chapter, the research in this thesis is not necessarily defined by a preference for one mode of thought over another. Instead what I have attempted to do is tap into that which animates the debates between these Black studies theorists. The exchanges between Fred Moten, Frank Wilderson, Nahum Chandler and Jared Sexton are, in some respects, evidence of Robinson's thesis on the nature of the Black radical tradition. The work they have produced over the past decade is shaped by a deep contestation over, and a refusal to eliminate, the immanent possibilities held in the category of blackness. I would argue that the same contestation, refusal and immanence shapes the relationship between black music and black radicalism. To the degree that I do show some preference, it is for Fred Moten's account of blackness and/as phonic substance. It has shaped much of the intellectual and methodological direction of this thesis.

Paying attention to phonic materiality allowed the enquiry into the blackness of the Black Consciousness movement and Black popular music between 1955 and 1971 to remain open. It allowed for an attentiveness to the ways in which blackness and radicalism were always under contestation, and always being produced, even if that meant radically breaking up black production. There seemed to be an internalised resistance at work within the phonic materiality of the movement and the music which never let them settle. The refusal to settle acted as a persistent questioning of the phonic materiality produced as the blackness and radicalism of the movement and the music. It is for this reason that; James Brown and Amiri Baraka's respective black communal programs were defined but also taken apart by a rhythmic psycho-sexuality; Sam Cooke and Martin Luther King's attempts to generalise the intense spirituality of black freedom began to sound like atemporality and death; and neither Motown or the League could engender the discipline they felt a revolutionary project or mass black music required because that discipline was about gendered labour. This thesis has not been about identifying the apparent "failures" of the Black Consciousness movement or Black popular music. Instead it has been an attempt to amplify the sound of the blackness that instigated those events, sustained them, but which could not be called to a halt. It is by privileging the phonic materiality of the archive that I have been able to attend to both the formation of and the strain against the blackness of black radicalism and black music. Phonic substance was necessary to the modalities of the music and the

radicalism but it was never simply the basis for opposition to racial oppression. The phonic substance which was blackness was constantly used to work out radically different ways blackness could be. The phonic substance structures the relationship between black music and black radicalism as blackness, but it is also a blackness which strains against them. This is the paraontological relation; blackness in constant escape, pressurising its own ontological ground, its own phenomenological features, its own basis as an epistemology. Each time the music and the radicalism do this, they do it as a black sonic operation.

Returning to the wider field of Black studies, in this thesis I assembled an archive of sound recordings, television footage, documentaries, interviews, personal testimonies, criticism, cultural analysis and a range of other materials to constitute the historical juncture of Black Consciousness and Black popular music in the U.S. The phonic materiality marked across all of these materials is a realisation of the ways in which blackness is testament to the fact objects can and do resist. The black object resists by rendering itself audible and black radicalism is a tradition in which objects have made themselves heard. It is a tradition of objects which have recorded their strain against their designation as objects. In this instance blackness does not operate as a total outside, it is not non-ontological, it is not without analog and is not social death. No matter how much intellectual, psychic and material energy is invested in rendering these claims true. Instead blackness is the immanent critique which lives in the life of the object, which may not be recognised as life, even when it strains to do so, but cannot be denied as life. Neither can it be denied the strain against its own affirmation of life. It is a life, and a strain against it, which lives in the phonic substance the black object produces. The life of the black object lives in the sound it makes and that sound stands as a common project of blackness, which may be dismissed as inchoate noise, as excessive feeling, as lacking in revolutionary discipline, but this dismissal occurs because when the object resists, it rubs up against the divide between noise and music, excessive and proper feeling, discipline and unruliness. The blackness of black radicalism, like the blackness of black music, lives in that break, and constantly breaks, away.

The debate within Black studies over what blackness is and what blackness does is still being contested. With new work on the way from Fred Moten, Nahum Chandler and Jared Sexton, this only offers possibilities for continued speculation. To repeat, the discussion over what blackness means within Black studies is not a minor dispute

within a relative sub-discipline of Cultural studies and Critical theory. It is, as Chandler has pointed out, necessary to thought, because blackness is a necessary problem for what is deemed to be thought. But Chandler is very careful to remind us that this means blackness is also, paraontologically, a possibility for thought. In light of this coming work, I believe it is necessary to continue thinking about how this debate is informed by the phonic substance which is blackness, and which blackness escapes from, even whilst that phonic substance escapes from it. In short, it remains vital for me to continue to be a student of Black studies.

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