

SONOROUS PASSAGES

MEINA
YATES-RICHARD



BLACK MATERNAL SOUNDINGS
and the LIBERATION IMAGINARY

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BUY

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Black Maternal Soundings and
the Liberation Imaginary

MEINA YATES-RICHARD

DUKE

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For Jewel Faye, always.

And for Julian and Lailah—you are my heart's song.

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Cry aloud and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion. —ISAIAH 12:6, KJ21

The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water. —TONI MORRISON, *Beloved* (1987)

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PROLOGUE

I Sound My Grandmother's Voice, Listening for Freedom

Dianne Reeves's "Better Days" centers Black (grand)maternal knowledge in a young girl's tale of becoming.¹ The character of the music shifts throughout the song, moving from contemplative, to assertively questioning, to ethereally soaring and back again, (re)cycling these sonic gestures throughout. In the contemplative moments, Reeves sonically and narratively frames the grandmother as an arbiter of familial wisdom who has "four generations of love in her face," positioning her as a reservoir for historical forms of care. Thus, the grandmother represents the generationally resonant and sustaining love necessary for Black survival, achievement and, ultimately, forms of liberation that exceed and refuse prescriptive notions either of flight or of assimilation to white citizenship as constituting freedom. This grandmother cautions patience while vocally projecting future-dreams of freedom for her curious granddaughter. Reeves's song attests to how, as Bettina Judd notes, Black women undertake forms of "vocal work" as "knowledge production that documents and transmits and enacts revolutionary—that is *transformative*—praxis by being within and transmitting song made to change one's condition."²

In a soaring alto, Reeves sings near the top of the register, "Oh, Grandma . . . / Can you see me now, lady," and we hear the exultant child-cum-woman practicing freedom-in-relation, understanding that her grandmother's counsel and the sonic vibrations of her nocturnal sermons still thrum and hum within her own diaphragm, expelling themselves powerfully from her vocal cords to assert Reeves's own place in the world.³ Awash in audile memory, Reeves croons, "When night gets in my way / I could still hear my Grandma say . . . / You can't get to no better days / Unless you make it through the night," testifying to how

her grandmother's words resound within a future to which she cannot bear witness, echoing Lutie Mae Johnson's reliance on (grand)maternal song in *The Street* and Linda Brent's attunement to the otherworldly echoes of her mother's voice "in many an hour of tribulation" within the pages of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.⁴ I begin here, amid the historical reverb that joins these nurturing soundings in resistance to and anticipation of more painful aspects of Black freedom imaginings in the afterlives of slavery, and to honor my own maternal lineage.

These scenarios echo my own (heard, felt, and remembered) beginning—one in which I clung to every sound and groan and word and breath and heartbeat of my own grandmother, who is not here to witness the ways I practice (and fall short of practicing) the freedoms she imagined for me. *What she told me, would mold me, and hold me / Together . . . / Can't get to better days lest you make it through the night*. In this nocturnal *longue durée*, the night of slavery's afterlife, I dream and sing my grandmother's liberatory soundings. We follow our mothers' and grandmothers' voices—those who, as my brilliant colleague Calvin Warren told me, "cultivate sonic spaces of protection" for themselves and their kin that precipitate auditory and experiential forms of liberation.⁵ I find myself in a season of (re)turning to the songs and sighs and sounds of my forebears, for in these resonances resides a freedom impulse that is not bound to a dynamic of mere resistance to subjection, though subjection presses all around: This impulse rests in the knowledge that we are ever meant to be free, and that worlds are re/imagined and re/created in the wake of these echoing soundings. As a child, I lived in the resonances of a Black maternal sonority that reverberated into all the corners of my world, touching and shaping and holding me, though at the time I could not name that sonority for what it was.

I was raised in an environment of second hearing, which is akin to second sight. When my grandmother said, "I heard you twice the first time," it meant that she engaged in a double listening for the resounding echoes of her own personhood that were not bound to the systems that oppressed her, though she heard their calls trying to hail her into nothingness. Hearing twice the first time embodies Barbara Christian's notion of "theorizing," an active set of practices engaged in by people of color—and by Black women specifically—in the form of "narrative . . . stories . . . riddles and proverbs" and speculation "based on [a] multiplicity of experiences."⁶ My grandmother practiced an active listening that simultaneously comprised an act of refusal against socially imposed

limitations on Blackness, womanhood, and motherhood. She listened beyond the audible registers toward the unsaid and the unsounded, and the resonances to which she was attuned offered rhythmic traces of her own and her community's acts of freedom amid oppression. My grandmother is why I am here now and why I now hear things that she never said but that throb and thrum within my blood to remind me to listen beyond, to listen for myself, to audit liberatory possibilities. Her hearing twice the first time in its doubling and reduplication was also an inner listening for and to whom God has made one to be. It is in the secular sense a listening toward liberation that understands and undermines white supremacy by refusing to cede to its definitional imperatives. It hears and it sounds Black freedom as birthright.⁷

Double listening in this monograph comprises a multivalent set of practices for adaptively auditing sonic phenomena as they surface, recede, or simply exist in Black Atlantic textual production. It honors the fact that Black Atlantic literary production often “compels [us] to read differently” in order to access a text’s multivalent meanings.⁸ Double listening is at some times the work of excavation, while at others it is an attentive listening to and for echoes, and at yet others it is a reauditing (or hearing again) that dislodges familiar sounds from their sedimented meanings. At all times, double listening performs interpretive (or reinterpretive) actions “through which we access other realms” of meaning and relation and “the pulse of other consciousness” by attuning the ear to yet un/heard possibilities for liberation.⁹ As such, double listening also turns to vibration, frequency, and the environment as reservoirs of Black maternal sonority that urge us toward forms of otherwise listening—listening around corners, listening with and through the whole body—that engenders an imaginative and predictive auditing that hears freedom’s resonances both as future-anterior possibility and also as historical birthright deferred.¹⁰ Double listening also engenders a state of communality that I call “rhythmic attunement,” a connective model rooted in shared sonic and embodied orientations toward the vibrating rhythms of resonant testaments to slavery and its afterlives that resound on a planetary level.

We listen to what lies and lives in the break. Spirituals. Blues. Screams. Raucous, rib-scraping laughter. Sizzling skillet and hot combs. Dominoes slapping on the table. The shuffle and slice and thump and whisper of cards. The snip-snip-snip of scissors slicing through fabric. The pedal and whirl and hum of Singer sewing machines. The galloping

of children's feet and their air-splitting laughter. Quiet-as-its-kept whispers in the night. The cathartic droning of an old-100 commingled with the papery flap of fans and church programs as the saints help a lost soul cross over. The sinner's testimony sounded in the guttural grain of the blues cry, "Lawd have mercy on me."¹¹ The emphatic proclamatory prayer, "He brought me from a mighty long way."¹² Sensuous sounds of Black life and living, mourning and yet mocking the specter of impending violence, outwitting death, and desiring and making and multiplying Black life. Black life that is always worth living. Black life imagined completely free. For freedom cannot be given, but rather must be collectively imagined, claimed, wrested, practiced, honored, carried and held.

Granny, listen to me now. Hear yourself.

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INTRODUCTION

Listening for Black Maternal Sonority

Of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman. —ANNA JULIA COOPER, *A Voice from the South* (1892)

We had not asked ourselves a fundamental question: What does it mean to be free? —RUBY SALES, *The History Makers* interview (2003)

Jericho Brown's 2019 poem "Riddle" invokes the kidnapping, brutal torture, disfigurement, and murder of Emmett Till in 1955 by white vigilantes in order to poetically assert that "we do not know the boy's name nor the *sound / Of his mother wailing*."¹ The quotidian yet spectacular racial violence that claimed Till's life prompted the sounds of his Black mother's wailing, a far too common sonic phenomenon in US cultural life, recorded and replayed across centuries, and one that has been largely misheard and unheeded. Brown's poem reechoes that wail, with "we have / *Never heard a mother wailing*," and later, "Shhh. We / Can't take that sound. What is / A mother wailing?"² Subtle but meaningful shifts occur in the poem between "never heard" and "can't take" that suggest willful refusals to engage with the Black maternal screams that punctuate the Americas' soundscapes as a keynote sounding.³ Further, "What is / A Mother wailing?" subtly transposes "who" into "what," while "We / Can't take that sound" gestures toward a dual dynamic of refusal and thwarted extraction. Brown exemplifies how wailing (Black) mothers' screams are heard but are refused ethical listening. Their cries are in/audible to hearers who "do not / Recognize music until [they] can/ Sell it."⁴ Black maternal sounds seeking political reckoning are typically excised from public consciousness. Brown evades racial descriptors in the poem, implying that Black maternal silencing is a shared social imperative that I suggest reinforces carceral logics of violent enclosure

and exclusion that echo plantation soundscapes. It is a persistent sonic and political suppression that construes freedom as flight both from spaces of confinement and also from the sounding maternal figures who occupy them.

While Brown's poem addresses a specific US historical event of antiblack violence and national refusal either to remember Till's name or to hear "his mother's wailing," the foundational cries of Black maternal figures must be understood within a broader Black Atlantic framework, as they echo throughout multinational histories of bondage, care, survival, and resistance.⁵ Tracking these cries and other sounds produced by Black maternal figures illuminates how they embody and engender "politics . . . on a lower frequency" as it was shaped in the wake of the Atlantic slave trade.⁶ Following these sounds also allows us to address and attempt to redress the ways that "the Black Atlantic—as a critical frame—escapes 'the female'" by hearkening to other resonances that carry knowledges of and from the Black maternal.⁷ Amid the violent processes of New World slavery, Black maternity became reconstituted such that Black mothers were figured as "the principal point of passage" between slavery and freedom.⁸ At the same time, the "belly of the boat"—the "womb abyss . . . generates the clamor of . . . protests" and "produces all the coming unanimity."⁹ The boat, the womb, the abyss, and the plantation's "blood-stained gate" resound with the screams, the crack of the whip, the brand's sizzle, the cries, the moans that become song—all of which constitute the soundscape of a repeating "primal scene," an echoing "inaugural moment" of Black (enslaved) subjectivity in the Americas.¹⁰ This echoing and ongoing clamor saturates Black maternal "sound signals" and "soundmarks" that, as Fred Moten notes, "open the way into the knowledge of slavery and the knowledge of freedom" for New World Black subjects.¹¹ These sounds demand reckoning and open aporetic interstitial spaces of liberatory possibility for Black Atlantic subjects, from which they may imagine and enact forms of freedom beyond legislated emancipation, flight, or citizenship.¹²

Sonorous Passages: Black Maternal Soundings and the Liberation Imaginary argues that Black maternal soundings within Black Atlantic literary and cultural productions function as key mediators of both freedom and unfreedom. This work recognizes how the "acoustic continually reverberates . . . in the Black literary tradition and imaginary as a mode of radical revision, sonic insurgency, and fugitive possibility."¹³ *Sounding* as deployed herein draws from and combines its typical uses

as a synonym for “resonant” or “sonorous,” as well as its definitions as “emitting or producing sound” and as “*information* . . . ascertained as a preliminary step before deciding on a course of action.”¹⁴ A sounding is a resonance that is sometimes audible and at other times inaudible. Soundings thus present resonant sonic archives of knowledge that help guide Black subjects toward enhanced liberatory possibilities: They comprise a crucial part of a set of phenomena that I call “Black maternal sonority.” Black maternal sonority designates a collection of diverse sonic matter and its “phono-graphic” literary representations, including cries, screams, songs, music, speech and other vocalizations, echoes, vibrations, onomatopoeia, and mechanical and environmental sounds.¹⁵ It also encompasses modes of aurality not directly tethered to linguistic meaning that often resist transparency and translation, militating against culturally and literarily enforced “voicelessness” through “the textual construction of the [Black] woman as silent.”¹⁶ Black maternal sonority and its producers’ interstitial locations warrant sustained attention. Together, they create loci of freedom imaginings and practices amid ongoing subjection—sonic loopholes of retreat.

Sustained critical attention to Black maternal sonority allows access to diverse liberatory imaginings and praxis that lie beyond flight and beyond normative constructions of the politically empowered citizen-subject. This sustained attention is best carried out through forms of double listening that are insurgent, otherwise, and disobedient.¹⁷ Double listening eschews normative models of racialized and gendered listening that cede to, conform to, and affirm state power.¹⁸ It is a Black feminist listening praxis of attentiveness to the un/said and mis/heard and of receptivity to the ways Black maternal sonority sounds and resounds. Double listening requires attunement to the in/audible registers—the ineffable, the lower frequencies, and planetary vibration—through which resonances that do not conform to white supremacist structures of hearing propagate, travel, are received, and resound. It is through this practice that we may audit immanent, though publicly muted, sounds of Black freedom’s possibilities.

While we typically understand Black maternal cries as aural rem(a)inders of Black communal and bodily dispossession, as with Till’s mother’s wails, herein I forward Black maternal sonority as an auditory praxis that foment liberation imaginings even as it is often conscripted within ideological systems that mute and devalue Black women’s sounds. During slavery, Black maternal figures became marked as reproducers of

Blackness, and thereby were collapsed within an auditory matrix of violence and loss that marked them as acoustic and often acousmatic emblems of Black suffering and unfreedom.¹⁹ As putative bearers of both enslaved subjectivity and slavery's repeating woundings, Black maternal figures are excised from the frames of multiple liberatory discourses as subjects in freedom. In the Middle Passage epistemology that emerges from this set of conditions, Blackness becomes constituted as shameful *mater*-ial inheritance that must be transcended through movements away from the Black maternal.²⁰ While fugitive self-emancipations constitute nascent movements toward freedom, we must understand that the inherited logics that undergird these movements mandate that someone remains left behind.²¹

Black maternal figures' persistent emplacement as those left behind unearths an echoing historical paradigm that warrants a double listening. The Black maternal is imaginatively represented in Black Atlantic literatures as residing within static figures whose sounds nevertheless travel and echo to engender emancipatory political thought even as Black mothers are barred from the conceptual realms of putative Black freedoms. As Angela Davis notes, during slavery "the black woman was assigned the mission of promoting the consciousness and practice of resistance."²² Black maternal sounds palimpsestically provide spaces of refuge and regeneration that locate Black subjects within fields of relation from which they may imagine and undertake individual and collective forms of liberation.²³ Black maternal sonority bridges the perceived sonic and theoretical gaps between sounding, singing, silence, screaming, moaning (*mo'nin'*), and frequency.²⁴ It attunes us to the knowledge that imagining, enacting, inhabiting, and practicing liberation are persistent, multipronged, polytemporal processes of remembrance, reevaluation, and remaking. It unearths a generational inheritance of creative reimagining that affirms Black life and Black living.

Attending to Black maternal sonority also necessitates an understanding of these sonic resonances, as well as the figures that produce them, as "material-discursive" loci for Black liberation imaginings.²⁵ Borrowing language from Barad, I suggest that the "intra-active process[es]" within the historical and material arrangements of slavery and its afterlives re-create and resignify Black maternal abjection, even as Black maternal sonority, which moves against and within these constraints, forms a locus for liberation thought that relies upon a Black model of what Moten names "*being maternal*."²⁶ Locating Black

maternal sonority within the register of the material-discursive acknowledges how the Black maternal body has been constituted as a vector for conflicting sexual, material, and social desires, while also insisting upon understanding Black maternal sounds as irreducible to their imposed functions, such that we hear within them resonant calls to imagine liberation otherwise.²⁷ Black maternal sonority resists, reframes, reforms, and refutes totalizing narratives of Black maternal abasement and reorients attention to misheard and underexplored freedom imaginings. I suggest that pursuing Black freedom(s) requires that we attentively listen to and for Black maternal sonority's resonances.

Returning briefly to Mamie Till Bradley's cries, we must hear how they not only bear witness to and record her son's brutal lynching but also how they keen for reckoning. Till Bradley's actions reorient attention to the unheeded burdens borne by Black mothers and mis/heard sounds of Black maternal grief, located in the register of a photovisual *mo'nin'* that re/sounds historically embedded cries and screams.²⁸ Till Bradley leaves her son's casket open to enforce a violent and violating viewing—one that paradoxically produces auditory space for sounds that echo against and refuse Black death and Black non/being as both natural and inevitable. In the aporetic opening of im/possibility made available by Black maternal sonority, Till Bradley's sobs, sighs, and screams of mourning issue a demand and interdict white conscription into pleasurable listening. *We / Can't take that sound*. Within and against structural silencing enforced through refusals to ethically listen to Black maternal figures, Till Bradley forces an auditory reckoning with Black maternal sonority that many credit as an impetus for increased activism in the US Civil Rights Movement.²⁹ Then, too, the images of Till's tortured and mutilated form compel double listening for the in/audible vibratory resonances that emanate from the photograph, which redouble in intensity on the pages of *Jet Magazine* in barber and beauty shops and living rooms, entraining people to their nearly imperceptible resonances—unheard but felt on the lower frequencies.³⁰ These dual registers of photographic in/audibility echo the registers of Black maternal sonority that Till's vibrating, whistling image represents. They compel us to listen for, to receive, and to linger in resonance—to be affected at the level of the body by that which is typically understood as ineffable, the structurally imposed site of the Black maternal. Till Bradley enacts a meditation on Black freedom from within this cacophonic, disorienting gulf—the abyss—of her own echoing loss to imagine and enact future-anterior liberation.³¹

Sadly, Till Bradley's actions echo into today's sociopolitical landscape as a commonplace, wherein Black maternal grief, loss, dispossession, and familial severance function as quotidian, un/heard and unheeded aspects of global soundscapes.³² One need only recall the litany of Black mothers' children who have been sacrificed to antiblack state and extrajudicial violence in the twenty-first century—Sandra Bland, George Floyd, Rekia Boyd, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Eric Garner, Atati-ana K. Jefferson, and Aiyana Stanley-Jones, among so many others who echo and echo here—to hear how vocalizations of Black maternal pain saturate the political field to initiate action, redress, and justice, only to be met with deafening political silence. Sybrina Fulton notes how Black mothers' cries are structurally ignored, stating “If they *refuse to hear us*, *we will make them feel us*” (emphasis added).³³ Fulton's words address the US juridico-political system's denial of redressive measures to Black maternal figures seeking justice. Sounds of Black maternal grief prove both quotidian and necessary within a global system that is rooted in the systematic dispossession, fungibility, and disposability of Black life, and that also ideologically constructs Black maternity as the site of reproduction for Blackness and its attendant social disadvantages in the *longue durée* of slavery.³⁴ Auditory amplifications (and suppressions) of Black maternal sonority saturate and impact Black Atlantic political soundscapes, requiring double listening for how they shape the contours of the literary, sonic, and liberation imaginaries.

In the pages that follow, I ask: What does Black maternal sonority offer for Black liberation imaginings and praxis? What knowledges and possibilities does it make available? And how might we grapple with, hear, and receive residual, resonant, and resistant sounds and vibration that are still reverberating through our individual though interrelated bodies and through our affective, social, and political relations to sonically foment generative forms of relation and liberation? Within and beyond the purely musical, we hear Black maternal figures' auditory actions at the very core of freedom imaginings—a politics of sound that demands a double listening for the ways it auditorily enfold and inspires liberatory activities.³⁵

Episodically and recursively structured, *Sonorous Passages* offers an exemplary rather than an exhaustive auditory-textual archive, and it models double listening to proffer insights about possibilities for liberation engendered by hearing and heeding Black maternal sonority. Freedom as discussed herein is a malleable imaginative and discursive

construct shaped by, within, and in opposition to oppressive forces that include modalities for hearing race and gender that have been imposed upon the Black maternal. Thus, across and even within texts, mutable definitions of freedom sound themselves in relation to their specific sonic contexts of emergence, demanding insurgent double listening practices. Practicing what Mae Henderson calls “aural reading,” with its emphasis on hearing as the preeminent mode of interpretation, I mark the slave narrative’s prototypical deployment of Black maternal sound as acoustic symbol of the ineffability of enslaved experience as a limiting conceptual and representational inheritance, tarrying with several male-authored texts to unearth and to attune our hearing to Black maternal sonority.³⁶

The generic commonplaces of male-authored slave narratives typically construct Black maternal figures as abject victims who emblemize communal suffering and who sound warnings to freedom seekers.³⁷ Their vocalizations provide transitory spaces, or passages, through which an/other attains freedom, even as these figures sound emergent critiques of their own conditions and otherwise possibilities. This generic commonplace echoes throughout the corpus of Black Atlantic literary production, beckoning us to “uncover . . . different ways of knowing that emerge from aural engagement.”³⁸ Maternal sonics have functioned as the ground of Black liberation ideologies, ranging from negritude to various forms of cultural and militant nationalisms before and into the 1960s era of Black nationalism to contemporary social justice movements. However, the primacy of Black maternal sonority often becomes suppressed within liberation ideologies that center Black men as the active agents of Black freedom. The precarity of Black male life and political manhood presents long-standing concerns in liberation activism that contribute to persistent gendered tensions and exclusionary logics. Thus, it is imperative to listen toward Black maternal sonority as gestating liberatory ethea that are not (always already) structurally tethered to the nation-state.

Attentive double listening provides a method by which we may clear auditory and social space for reimagining liberation and interrelation made possible through rhythmic attunement and subjective permeability to Black maternal sonority’s resonances. Histories of Black liberation activism reveal the bifurcated aims of freedom movements that ultimately sublimate Black maternal figures’ needs while symbolically leveraging their cries to forward political imperatives. Across

centuries and geographies, Black maternal figures comprise a necessary, though frequently disavowed, locus of sonic activity that foment liberation thought. Opening the ineffable to considerations of the aural and in/audible facilitates a critical recovery of muffled aspects of Black maternal sonority that have been obscured by the narrative collapse of the Black mother, unfreedom, and the ineffable. Surfacing these submerged sounds reveals how freedoms are imagined and emerge from within resonant modes of interrelation engendered by sonic attunements to Black maternal sonority that have previously been rendered politically inaudible.³⁹

Ultimately, I suggest that we might (re)imagine liberatory possibilities by listening to resonances emanating from Black maternal sonority. Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* obliquely models the attentive double listening that undergirds this current study. He begins, "My mother has a tendency to *dream out loud*," (emphasis added) ushering in his discussion of freedom's possibilities through Black maternal sonority.⁴⁰ Kelley describes his mother's keen awareness of visible, tactile, and environmental manifestations of antiblack violence meant to constrain their opportunities. Even as Kelley's mother observed these damning conditions, she audibly dreamed of freedom with and for her children, vocalizing future possibilities for a world that is "free of evil and violence, free of toxins and environmental hazards, free of poverty, racism, and sexism . . . *just free*" (emphasis added).⁴¹ Shoniqua Roach marks Spillers's conceptualizations of the "feminine [as] a critical idiom of the imagination, and the feminine and/as imagination," both of which provide "critical resources for black survivorship."⁴² Kelley's mother's dreaming out loud merges Spillers's "definition of the feminine as imagination" with sound, suggesting their interrelation within Black liberatory thought.⁴³ Kelley's recollection centers a mode of maternal care suffused with future-anterior longings that facilitates unseen possibilities in the realm of the sounded. He locates Black maternal sonority at the crux of his own political awakening and Black liberation imaginings writ large, illuminating the necessity of listening to and for the mother within as crucial to imagining and practicing freedom.

Kelley's musings succinctly encapsulate and demand the practices of double listening that this monograph models and explores, resisting the commonplace suppression of the Black maternal within liberation thought by listening to and heeding his mother's soundings. His words

predictively echo the ethical orientation and overarching aims of this monograph. The succeeding chapters follow Kelley's mandate, listening for the resounding possibilities of a freer Black world. Structurally, the monograph follows rhythmic traces and shared motifs rather than a strict chronology to organize its objects and insights. In this way, it comprises an act of what Daphne Brooks names "sonic curation" in its "reimagined terms of arrangement" of Black Atlantic textual matter in ways that "engage and invoke the historical, social, and political ideas and conditions that inform the . . . work" through attention to auditory information.⁴⁴ This allows for unique juxtapositions that sonically reframe and deepen our understandings of Black Atlantic letters by attending to persistent echoes, suspended notes, and ongoing refrains that reside within and stretch across these works in a polytemporal fashion. *Sonorous Passages* thus forwards double listening as an interpretive method that requires repeated revisitations, reinterpretations, and revaluations of muffled and silenced figures in the literary and liberatory imaginary. It performs dynamic acts of syncopation by accenting previously unheard sounds across a broad swath of creative productions from mid-nineteenth-century slave narratives to twenty-first-century sonic artistry.

Beginning in the first chapter by listening for Black maternal resonances in W. C. Handy's and James Weldon Johnson's early twentieth-century blues drifter narratives, the text oscillates in the partita to Richard Wright's refiguration and reauditing of the blues drifter and his relationship to Black maternal sonority. Taking a cue from the ways Wright trains readers to "listen to the listener," the text returns to its primary leitmotif in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* in the Soprano Obligato. Hopkins's obligato attunes our hearing for the historical, contemporary, and future echoes of Black maternal sonority in nationalist ideologies that will then be explored in chapter 2. Oscillating between the United States and the Dominican Republic, chapter 3 moves into a broader Atlantic frame, highlighting shared rhythms, differently accented beats, and persistently unheeded sounds. Chapter 4 listens to environmental and inherited soundscapes of Black maternal survival and resistance in the works of Michelle Cliff, while chapter 5 traces sonic, ecological, and conceptual resonances across the distinct geographic and temporal landscapes of Aimé Césaire's and Toni Morrison's works. The coda listens to twenty-first-century Black sonic artistry to audit the grain of a historical Black maternal sonority embedded therein. Each

chapter in this work functions as a movement that can be understood separately, though they are best understood together as a composition in cyclic form that revisits and resounds the dominant leitmotifs of Black maternal sonority and Black liberation.

Chapter 1, “‘Your [Memphis] Blues Ain’t Like Mine’: Lynching, Maternal Sonority, and the Echoing South,” traces blues echoes between W. C. Handy’s *Father of the Blues* (1941) and James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). In these texts, the blues function as aural maternal palimpsests of Black heritage that index vulnerability to the violence of white consumption represented by the specter of lynching. Within these questing tales, Black mothers are reservoirs of and conduits for sustaining a racial heritage that their sons attempt to transcend in the early twentieth-century United States via movement and their musical offerings. This chapter considers how Black maternal figures represent the ends of political legibility for sons who understand freedom in terms of flight and citizenship. In Johnson’s and Handy’s texts, the blues function as a fecund maternal locus of Black creativity and liberatory possibility that furthers a representational legacy that future Black writers resound and reshape over time.

The partita, “Songs of the *Native Son*: Fugitive Freedom Impulses and Emergent Black Maternal Sonority,” carries with Richard Wright’s layered soundscapes in *Lawd Today* and nuanced considerations of listening in *Native Son* and *Black Boy* to audit how Black maternal sonority in the Black masculinist liberation imaginary is often framed in response to how these sounds are leveraged in the interests of antiblack violence. Wright’s depictions of Black male listening ultimately unearth sonic and familial collectivity—beholdenness—that is persistently invaded by white structural violence even while resisting that violence, offering an interstitial space of double listening through which maternal voice protectively resounds.

“Soprano Obligato: Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* and Black Maternal Sonority” explicates how Hopkins’s work of Black feminist futurity leverages a possessive and redoubled Black maternal sonority as the arbiter of an inheritance of Black freedom and power. *Of One Blood* attunes our hearing toward the future-anterior promise of an a priori Black freedom by imagining a Black world.⁴⁵

Chapter 2, “‘WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER’S NAME?’: Maternal Disavowal, Flight, and the Reverberating Aesthetic of Black Maternal Pain,” turns to the US slave narrative to explicate its sonic, narrative, and

conceptual inheritances concerning Black male political subjectivity within nationalist frameworks. By contrapuntally listening to Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* through Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), I elucidate how Douglass's text mandates maternal abandonment in order to produce Black male (proto)nationalist identity. I then trace how Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* resounds Douglass's textual-sonic paradigms before turning to the literary meditations on 1960s Black nationalisms in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. In this work, Morrison performs a double listening to Black nationalist uses and suppressions of Black maternal sonority to conjunctively resound interstitial possibilities for collective liberation.

Turning toward US and Dominican diasporic relations, chapter 3, "Sounding Ephemeral Freedoms: Hearing, Not Heeding Black Women's Cries in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," analyzes *Oscar Wao* as a work of Dominican diasporic/Black Atlantic fiction that explores slavery's traumatic echoing acoustics. Díaz's *fukú americanus* presents a cacophonous rendering of multifarious cries that attest to the Black Atlantic's founding. Through his multivocal, polyphonic text, Díaz interweaves this foundational resonance with Black maternal sonority in an attempt to radically reimagine Black liberation as contingent upon earwitnessing its resonances.⁴⁶

The fourth chapter, "Inherited Soundscapes: Michelle Cliff's Marketwomen and Double-Listening for Black Maternal Resonances," listens to Michelle Cliff's Clare Savage novels. Afro-Jamaican marketwomen's musical expressions and historically submerged, resistant Black maternal sonority prove the contested ground of *Abeng's* mediations on (un)freedom. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, Clare undertakes post-Independence psychic, physical, and sonic returns to the Black maternal and heeds the call for reckoning and liberation. A double listening across Cliff's textual-sonic archives allows us to hear the ways that Cliff negotiates a politics of staying in place as a desired liberatory framework that is made accessible through Black maternal sonority.

Chapter 5, "'Across Distances Without Recognition': Black Maternal Sonority in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*," listens for how Aimé Césaire and Toni Morrison each position Black maternal figures as sources for liberatory diasporic soundings and their resonances, which are sonically transmitted through water, air, and landforms. In *Notebook*, the particularities of Martinican experiences of slavery and colonialism resound throughout

sonorous poetic depictions of imbricated landscapes, waterscapes, and Black maternal figures, while *A Mercy* resounds and ecologically refigures the slave narrative genre's uses of Black maternal sonority. Both authors model planetary paradigms of subjective interrelation made possible through attunement to Black maternal sonority, unearthing heretofore untheorized planetary, maternal, and sonorous connections that resonate between *Notebook* and *A Mercy*.

The coda, “‘Music of Future Worlds’: Re-Sounding Freedom,” traces echoes of Black maternal sonority across twenty-first-century sonic productions to audit the aporetic openings and relational matrices it offers Black subjects to contemplate and enact liberation. The works of contemporary artists Janelle Monáe, JoVia Armstrong, Mendi and Keith Obadike and Moor Mother prompt us to listen again to this monograph's textual archive. In so doing, we hear again the sonic and conceptual resonances of future-anterior freedom dreaming and liberatory praxis that echo and echo, in/audibly transmitting crucial knowledges that enable Black subjects to imagine, access, inhabit, practice, and carry freedom as Black maternal inheritance and imperative.

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12 INTRODUCTION

NOTES

PROLOGUE

- 1 Reeves, “Better Days.”
- 2 Judd, *Feelín*, 107.
- 3 Reeves, “Better Days.”
- 4 Reeves, “Better Days”; Petry, *The Street*, 17; Jacobs, *Incidents*, 153–54.
- 5 Calvin Warren, personal communication, March 2022.
- 6 Christian, “Race for Theory,” 68, 76.
- 7 My understanding of double listening aligns in many ways with Silverman’s explication of the “vocal mirror,” wherein a child comes to “hear itself” and to “recognize itself” through maternal vocality. *Acoustic Mirror*, 80.
- 8 Christian, “Race for Theory,” 78.
- 9 Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias*, 9, 12. Brown writes of “practices, real and imagined” that offer access to “other realms—planes of materiality and consciousness that [are] . . . always with us and around us.” Sound constitutes one of these realms, and herein I suggest that double listening as praxis allows entry into not only sonic but also material and conceptual realms that facilitate liberatory thought and actions for Black Atlantic subjects.
- 10 Steve Goodman notes that “vibration . . . connects every separate entity in the cosmos.” *Sonic Warfare*, xiv. Attending to vibration, then, illuminates forms of relation rendered invisible and inaudible, facilitating forms of otherwise listening which, *pace* Ashon Crawley’s *Blackpentecostal Breath*, constitute imaginative acts that refuse the limiting registers through which Blackness is heard and interpreted.
- 11 I hear Bobby “Blue” Bland’s “Stormy Monday Blues” here in Judd’s terms as a “sacrosexual” testament to Black life and living, and a plea for relief. Judd, *Feelín*, 96. Bland, “Stormy Monday Blues,” track 11 on *Here’s the Man!*
- 12 This oft-spoken phrase functions as a public acknowledgment of God’s fulfilled promises by those experiencing current hardships. It is a future-anterior sounding for deliverance.

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INTRODUCTION

- 1 Jericho Brown, "Riddle," emphasis mine.
- 2 Jericho Brown, "Riddle," emphasis mine.
- 3 Schafer, *Tuning of the World*, 9. R. Murray Schafer defines *keynote* as a sound within a soundscape or aural environment that is "the anchor or fundamental tone" that may be obscured in importance, and "[does] not have to be listened to consciously," but nevertheless becomes a "reference . . . point [from which] everything else takes on its . . . meaning" (9). These sounds, Schafer notes, are of "archetypal significance," are "created by 'a landscape's geography,'" and "outline the character of [the people] living among them" (10, 9). The screams of Black maternal dispossession, I submit, produce a fundamental resonance within Black Atlantic soundscapes to which we must attend. Musically, the keynote is the central note of a musical key around which a tonal composition coheres.
- 4 Jericho Brown, "Riddle."
- 5 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 15. In this work, I follow Paul Gilroy's insight about the "Atlantic as [a] complex unit of analysis" that offers access to interpretive frameworks for Black cultural production and experiences that are attentive to national and local particularities, but are not bound to the nation as a singular and overdetermining site of analysis.
- 6 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 37.
- 7 Roach, "To Put Afoot a New Black Woman," 111; Spillers et al., "'Whatcha Gonna Do?,'" 305.
- 8 Spillers, "Interstices," 155.
- 9 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
- 10 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3.
- 11 Schafer, *Tuning of the World*, 10. The term "sound signals" is drawn from Schafer's definition of "signal" sounds as those in the "foreground" that constitute "acoustic warning devices" that may be organized into "elaborate codes" that transmit complex messages to "those who can interpret them" (10). "Soundmark" denotes a "community sound which . . . possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community" (10). I suggest throughout that Black maternal sonority functions simultaneously as a keynote or ubiquitous sound in the Black Atlantic; as a soundmark knowable to Black subjects in slavery's afterlives; and as guiding signal decipherable by those attuned to its resonances. Moten, in *In the Break*, articulates how the sounds of Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester screaming hail Douglass into both subjection and subjectivity, as well as give him access to forms of knowledge that were previously unavailable to him (21–22). Douglass's attunement and response to the

- sound of this scream, I argue, models a broader communal relationship to Black maternal sonority, which operates as a soundmark that hails Black Atlantic subjects into collectivity, relation, and knowledge, and which ultimately propels them toward liberation.
- 12 Rinaldo Walcott draws a crucial distinction between “the legal processes of emancipation” and freedom as an “extralegislati ve experience.” Walcott, *Long Emancipation*, 36.
 - 13 Ivry, “How to Listen Otherwise,” 14.
 - 14 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “sounding,” accessed March 16, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sounding>; *The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Contemporary English*, “sounding,” *Encyclopedia .com*, accessed March 16, 2025, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/military-affairs-nonnaval/sounding>, emphasis mine.
 - 15 Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 16. Alexander Weheliye theorizes the relationship between written and auditory production in Black letters.
 - 16 Davies and Fido, *Out of the Kumbia*, 21.
 - 17 Crawley, *Blackpentacostal Breath*, 140. Ashon T. Crawley writes of refusing the overwritten social meanings that traditionally characterize Blackness as “noise” in order to reimagine possibilities for Black life, Black liberation, and Black being. Otherwise listening, in this case, positions Black maternal sonority as a site of generative potentialities—of imagination—rather than reducing it to the sounds of unfreedom.
 - 18 Christine Balance characterizes disobedient listening as “an ethical, social, and political practice” that attunes us toward and helps us create “new languages and spaces of possibilities.” *Tropical Renditions*, 4, 52. Jennifer Stoeve r, in *The Sonic Color Line*, notes how normative listening practices uphold hegemony by conforming to the logics of state power (1–2, 4).
 - 19 *Acousmatic sound* refers to sounds heard without the originating cause or source being seen. While Black maternal sonority is visually traceable in some instances, it frequently appears and literarily resounds through echoes, memories, vibrations, and resonance in the absence of embodied maternal presence. Black maternal sonority, then, sonically and literarily reflects the mandated absenti ng of Black maternal figures from imagined realms of liberation, though their audition resonates therein.
 - 20 M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 7, 44, 73. Michelle Wright assesses the ways that a Middle Passage epistemology is rooted in a “linear progress narrative” wherein Black subjects move incrementally toward enhanced freedom and civic rights in Western nations, and that this epistemology demands forms of erasure of nonnormative Black subjects, wherein normativity is coded as “heterosexual male.” Angela Davis writes that “lingering beneath the notion of the black matriarch

is an unspoken indictment of our female forebears as having actively assented to slavery.” This fallacious understanding suggests that Black mothers collude with oppressive forces to tether Black men to unfreedom, and that movement away from the maternal becomes prerequisite to attaining freedom. “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role,” 2.

The term *mater*-ial here proceeds from Moten’s understanding of the coconstituting aspects of materiality and maternity under chattel slavery that cathect within the Black maternal figure, forwarding an “impossible, substitutive motherhood.” Moten, *In the Break*, 17. I use *mater*-ial here to underscore the ways that the material conditions of (anti)Blackness have been constituted as a distinctly matrilineal inheritance.

- 21 Walcott notes how flight, fugitivity, and marronage have been collapsed within Black studies into an understanding of freedom that more rightly can be called “freedom’s violence.” “Freedom Now Suite,” 156.
- 22 Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role,” 3.
- 23 I suggest that Black maternal sonority provides what Houston Baker calls “salvific sound[s] that become a spirit house and space of black habitation,” and what Farah Griffin calls “an aural space where listeners can . . . experience themselves as ‘home’ or ‘free.’” Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 95; Griffin, “When Malindy Sings,” 113.
- 24 See Moten, *In the Break*, 192–211, for a discussion of “mo’nin” and mourning.
- 25 Karen Barad’s discussion of the material-discursive understands materialization as “an iteratively intra-active process of mattering whereby phenomena (bodies) are sedimented and actively re(con)figured through the interaction of multiple material-discursive apparatuses.” Significantly, Barad also attends to how the material-discursive informs understandings of abjection through a discussion of the “objectification of the pregnant woman and the exclusion of her subjectivity” through “material arrangements” that “both facilitate and are in part conditioned by political discourses insisting on the autonomy and subjectivity of the fetus.” Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 210–12. I suggest herein that frameworks of freedom rooted in complete autonomy render Black maternal figures abject within liberation discourses.
- 26 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 210; Moten, *In the Break*, 16.
- 27 Kaplan, “Love and Violence/Maternity and Death,” 96. See also Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds* for a thorough discussion of the “racist-patriarchal uses” of Black women’s reproductive bodies under slavery.
- 28 Moten, *In the Break*, 200.

- 29 Erica S. Lawson understands Mamie Till Bradley's decision to display Emmett's body as "an example of maternal politics" that "is widely credited for quickening the pace of the Civil Rights Movement." "Be-reaved Black Mothers," 724. Shareefah Al'Uqdah and Frances Adomako similarly note that Till Bradley "contributed significantly to the civil rights movement." "From Mourning to Action," 92. Henry Washington Jr. notes how Lezley McSpadden, Michael Brown's mother, "mothers by publicly grieving" her son's death in ways that "force our attention beyond the event's spectacular portrayal" and which "insist that Brown's life mattered." "Making a Scene," 142.
- 30 Emmett Till's funeral photos and other photos of his mutilated body were published in the September 15, 1955, issue of *Jet Magazine*. Tina Campt offers methods for attending to "felt sound" in photographs that recognizes that sound itself is "an inherently embodied modality constituted by vibration and contact." Campt, *Listening to Images*, 7.
- 31 *Future-anterior* as deployed here and throughout draws from Weheliye's cogent explication of Spillers's theoretical feat of locating Black womanhood in the wake of transatlantic slavery within a conceptual grammar that theorizes and imagines liberation "in the future-anterior sense of the Now" and from Campt's invocation of a "black feminist futurity" that resides in the "tense of anteriority," is in "tense relationship to an idea of possibility," and that "impels us to realize . . . aspirations" of "what should be." Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 39; Campt, *Listening to Images*, 34–35.
- 32 Rhaisa Williams notes how Till Bradley was constructed "as an icon for Black maternal mourning" that "laid the foundational work in contouring our ideas of iconic Black maternal mourning where the mother articulates her anguish *through grievance*." "Toward a Theorization of Black Maternal Grief," 21.
- 33 Fulton, "Trayvon Martin's Mom."
- 34 Rhaisa Williams writes that Black mothers are "locked in a constant state of grievance" whereby "the perceptions of the Black woman as matriarch work to silence her demands for redress, particularly if her child has been murdered by a state actor. . . . her requests for justice in the wrongful death of her child are not set apart from quotidian issues." "Toward a Theorization of Black Maternal Grief," 20.
- 35 Here, I listen alongside Shana Redmond, who hears "singing and listening" as "a method of participation within the freedom dreams and liberation projects of an emergent diaspora." Redmond, *Anthem*, 2.
- 36 Henderson, *Speaking in Tongues*, 13. Following Gilroy, I take seriously the notion that "though they were unspeakable, [slavery's] terrors were not inexpressible," *Black Atlantic*, 73. Tracking Black maternal sonority allows access to how testaments to slavery's

traumas were sounded beyond the realm of the purely musical and to the ways that liberatory thought emerges from engagement with these multidirectional soundings. I am indebted to Farah Jasmine Griffin for guiding me toward this paradoxical model of reading Black male authors to listen for Black women. Her discourse-shifting work “When Malindy Sings” attends to how Black women’s voices are rendered originary sources of Black male musical and literary creativity, and as generative aural spaces that evoke feelings of freedom for auditors.

- 37 Frances Smith Foster explicates how within male-authored slave narratives, female enslaved persons were most often associated with sexual violation, child loss, and the most extreme depravities of enslavement. Foster, “In Respect to Females . . .,” 66–70.
- 38 Furlonge, *Race Sounds*, 2.
- 39 Koritha Mitchell, in *From Slave Cabins to the White House*, helpfully reframes engagements with Black performances and enactments of citizenship to assert that “homemade citizenship exceeds American citizenship” because “its value does not rely on civic inclusion” (16). However, Mitchell’s study of Black achievement and responsorial white violence also notes how Black women historically have had to navigate “rigidly patriarchal agendas” through negotiating and challenging the prescribed role of “race mother,” which naturalized Black women’s self-sacrifice for the betterment of African American communities (105–6). It is the framing logics of Black maternal sacrifice in conjunction with flight and equality as political ideals that I assert excise Black maternal figures from the imagined realm of citizenship and thereby from Black freedom imaginings. Mitchell’s insistence upon understanding forms of citizenship that are disengaged from civic inclusion offers us ways to imagine citizenship otherwise and showcases another strand of “freedom dreams” that persists amid antiblackness. Mitchell, *From Slave Cabins to the White House*, 16, 105–6.
- 40 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 2.
- 41 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 2.
- 42 Roach, “To Put Afoot a New Black Woman,” 119.
- 43 Roach, “To Put Afoot a New Black Woman,” 119.
- 44 Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 14.
- 45 Kevin Everod Quashie opens *Black Aliveness* with an “instruction” to “imagine a black world” (13). Frances Harper’s work, as I shall elucidate, leverages Black maternal sonority to imagine and facilitate access to a Black world in freedom.
- 46 In her explication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Henderson helpfully discusses Phoebe’s presence as an “empathetic listener or

hearer” who “highlights the . . . aesthetics of the aural” in witnessing Janie’s tale. Henderson, *Speaking in Tongues*, 8. I assert that through his uses of textual-sonic techniques, Díaz similarly positions *Oscar Wao*’s readers as listeners who must empathetically bear witness to the novel’s multigenerational saga.

ONE. “YOUR [MEMPHIS] BLUES AIN’T LIKE MINE”

- 1 Handy, *Father of the Blues*, v.
- 2 Muir, *Long Lost Blues*, 109. Handy, as Adam Gussow also notes in “Make My Getaway,” was criticized as inauthentic as “he neither lived nor wrote the ‘real’ blues”—he was seen as a transcriber rather than a creator (12). Handy’s use of “Mama Don’t Allow” as the basis of “Mr. Crump” and later “Memphis Blues” seemingly aligns with this assessment.
- 3 Muir, *Long Lost Blues*, 109.
- 4 Gussow underscores how “violent subjection . . . gave the lie to a ‘freedom’ grounded in one’s putative right to travel” within Southern blues-scapes. Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 93.
- 5 Muir, *Long Lost Blues*, 111.
- 6 According to Brent Edwards, for “Du Bois, what makes the music powerful as evidence is precisely that it cannot be translated—that it marks a certain inaccessibility . . . a certain resistance.” *Practice of Diaspora*, 57. Even given this resistance, Du Bois, Johnson, Toomer, and Handy, among others, actively attempt translation in the face of certain failure, to convey what they perceive as truths about the value of Black culture and Black life, cutting and “mix[ing]” the aural and textual in distinctly “phonographic” literary practices. Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 45, 73.
- 7 Griffin charts the “landscape that produced the blues,” asserting that “authenticity . . . is guaranteed by its proximity to violence and terror,” and that “originary voice is rendered as female but represented by males.” “When Malindy Sings,” 105, 117.
- 8 Griffin, “When Malindy Sings,” 117.
- 9 For discussions of the construct of “common sense,” see Wahneema Lubiano, “Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense”; Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight*; and Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias*.
- 10 James Weldon Johnson, *Along this Way*, 331.
- 11 Mark A. Johnson, “The Best Notes,” 60, 55.
- 12 Gussow, *Seems Like Murder*, 94.
- 13 Mark A. Johnson, “The Best Notes,” 52.
- 14 Earlier in 1912, Smith and Brymn published “The Blues,” followed by Franklin Seals’s “Baby Seals Blues” and Hart Wand’s “Dallas Blues.”