THE AESTHETIC CHARACTER OF BLACKNESS

Sounds Like Us

Jemma DeCristo

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To the Black/
Trans/Palestinian/
Unhoused Struggles
for Liberation

& to the tented
streets, alleyways,
tunnels, &
undergrounds that
home them

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Preface

BLACK ART AGAINST BLACK PEOPLE

I don't see how things can get better for black musicians, until they get better for black people.

Archie Shepp, in "Vibrations: Archie Shepp Interview + Lecture"

Vanished from our cities. There are no longer any ghosts who can remind the living of reciprocity

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

On Friday, May 29, 2020, four days after George Floyd was executed by Minneapolis police, a discordant collective rearranged Oakland's downtown into a brilliant cacophony of black rage. During the week following these uprisings, a compendium of important yet insufficient collective projects resurfaced: organized abolitionist teach-ins, robust mutual aid networks, and self-defense trainings. These practices partially revitalized endogenous approaches to sustaining black lifeworlds that had been simultaneously expelled from and appropriated by Downtown Oakland's last two decades of city beautification.

Long before that May night, Oakland had been populated by small pockets of raucous black musical venues and blues dives, black public street culture, and black queer cruising points that the city had all but modulated into a lucrative silence.[1] By early 2020, the combined din of these black sounds paled in comparison to the bombast of perpetually in-construction luxury condos and tech offices and official city art events that were brought in to beautify the area. These state-sanctioned noises became the standard against which black sounds and black life would be policed through noise ordinances and other measures that orchestrated

black displacement. Certified city art events like the monthly Oakland Art Murmur were, I contend, a crucial part of this system of antiblack policing and displacement. Elsewhere called art crawls, these officially permitted events cleared Oakland's streets of an unproductive and too-loud black peopling they would later aestheticize and market as part of Oakland's official culture to facilitate building those uninhabited luxury apartments. The manageable blackness of the Art Murmur humanized the dominance of the encroaching empty real estate. The novel coexistence of black art in the Murmur established the myth that the condos had not destroyed the lives of the people whose neighborhoods they now occupied. Even more insidiously, the dominance of vacant housing, built primarily to prevent black life from living here, further assured that those it had displaced were not only unable to fight back, but that they could be made to work for and beautify the very real estate valuations that displaced them. The black art of the Murmur made it seem like black people could be commissioned to beautify and make more valuable their own violent eviction. This book is about the deceptive violence through which the voluminous sounding of black life is hushed into the aesthetic character of an art murmur.

The coy, almost-apologetic sonic figure of a "murmur" of art is an essential aesthetic vessel with a long history. This low rumble ferries the noisiness of black life into the sociability of a world directed against it, a world the rebellions of 2020 dared to imagine overthrowing. Leading up to those anarchic May nights, Oakland city officials had spent decades colluding with multinational real estate development agencies to construct a landscape of sanitized cultural productivity. The art murmur was a refined melody scored by the long eradication of boisterous black world-making. Lucrative concert venues, chartered art schools, and exorbitantly priced music bars all coincided with the construction of the Art Murmur, replacing more intramural black sonic cultures. For decades, this black sounding had been referred to in local publications as "violence," "gang activity," or "noise."[2] These imaginative justifications facilitated both the extermination of black life by real estate and police and the resurrection of black culture in and as the aesthetic character of a more acceptable and official blackness of the Art Murmur. The displacement and antagonism of black life and black people took place through black art, not without it. The core argument of this book is that the black work of art and the black artist attain value by regulating black life into the value-making project of an art "murmur." I offer the genealogy of a form that achieved this violent process. This book is an argument against the value-making process that is the black work of

art and the black artist, which acquire their regulative aesthetic function through consuming and antagonizing black life. This book is a critique of us becoming works of art.

Art Is After Us

In the weeks following that lively May night, a more insidious and deceptive art murmur emerged. The broken bank windows and cacophony of riotous crowds was quickly remixed and amplified into a series of eye-level commemorative murals that began popping up in June 2020 under the broader slogan of "Black Lives Matter." The innumerable shouts, conversations, and collaborative and improvised strategizing that echoed throughout the streets those rebellious nights and beyond had been refined and transposed into an official arrangement. City monies again quickly flowed into the coffers of recently founded black arts nonprofits, and even into the pockets of some struggling black artists too, to "turn Downtown Oakland into an art gallery," as a social media post by a participating group boasted.[3] The noisy and anarchic black compositions of the previous week were hushed into another art murmur. The antiblack world that had inspired the resistant sounds and sentiments in the murals was not undone but reified through these representations. Nothing so noisy, so rowdy, and so unofficially black would threaten the peace and quiet of this empty real estate anechoic chamber ever again, they promised.

The value of the aesthetic is not just in the art it proffers but also in the creative world-making it holds back and restrains. Some of the artists and groups who built this new "art gallery" were of course transplants whose faux-graffiti aesthetic had been crafted in far-flung art schools. However, just as many who made this new murmur were black artists born and raised in Oakland who had witnessed the decades of gentrification and state-sanctioned antiblack violence I described above. As the variety in the slogans of the murals—"End All Racism," "Black Lives Matter," "Defund Oakland PD," and "We Can't Breathe"—suggest, some merely espoused an aimless anti-racism and many seemed genuinely to advocate for the abolition of the police (see figures P.1–P.4). Yet no matter how different the backgrounds or how radical the political content of those murals was, a new police was re/formed through the black work of art. The absorbing and pacifying function of the aesthetic could justify almost anything so long as it could keep the productive capacities of antiblack world-making in place and restrain the force of anyone and anything fighting against it.

Streets that days earlier had reverberated with righteous black rage were now awash in the sonic circulation of the city's normal; a muted museum we could once again only operate in accordance with some scripted authority of rights and privileges. A once-defiant presence that had peopled in the void of Oakland's downtown buildings disappeared into the ephemera of official political murals that simultaneously memorialized and killed the ongoing revolt. As if confessing their own aspirationally temporary presence, these murals appeared on the transitional façade of nailed-down plywood protecting the fragile glass of mostly empty real estate. Stores, banks, businesses, and tech offices and their abundant interiors were defended from a recurrence of the noisy mischief of the previous nights. A janky piece of plywood covering the window of a recently opened yoga studio said "We Can't Breathe." Across the street in massive relief, more plywood murals shielding the fragile lobby windows of vacant luxury condos shouted, "End All Racism," "Black Lives Matter," and "Defund the Police," each one screaming at street level while massive banners from above still advertised luxury real estate: "Now Leasing," a terrifying echo chamber disguising a world raised against us.

These murals simulated a shout, a breath out, as if they were us sounding. Much like the Art Murmur before them, they aimed at amplifying our

P.1 (*opposite left*) "End All Racism" message on luxury condo under construction in Downtown Oakland, October 8, 2020. Photo by the author.

P.2 (*opposite right*) "Black Lives Matter": another anti-racism message on a luxury condo in Downtown Oakland, October 8, 2020. Photo by the author.

P.3 (*above*) "Defund Oakland Police Department" mural on the window of an empty condominium in Downtown Oakland, October 8, 2020. Photo by the author.

P.4 (*right*) "We Can't Breathe" message on plywood protecting yoga studio windows in Downtown Oakland, October 8, 2020. Photo by the author.

voices while obliterating us. Quite deceptively, these murals were not for us; they were against us. They were for the protection of empty buildings we could never live in. They were banks that flourished from making our communities, homes, and lives unlivable; stores that we, like Banko Brown, could never shop in without being followed, harassed, arrested, and murdered.[4] These black representations expressed an affliction that cohabitated with Oakland's arting. Our resounding and our imaging increasingly liberate the aesthetic; they do not liberate us.

As you move through this public "art gallery" and its absorbing images and slogans, you never needed to look up at the force of the real estate bearing our echoes. You could almost forget that you were walking in a built environment that nurtured only defensive architecture. The whispered world of emergent condos, the noise ordinances they ushered in through their construction, and the noise complaints made from inside their space of private protection had found a new value they could never have attained without our help. The exorbitant values of the real estate that had displaced black people could now hide in plain sight in the mere aesthetics of black life, for the shouts of these murals were meant not to protect us by building a different world but to maintain the current one that is killing us. These murals were conscripted to be bastions for the onslaught of luxury condo lobby windows, radical slogans commissioned to shout "please, don't break our glass (again)." This book thinks in broad ways about what it means for black art to be the surface of a luxury condo's "please." What does it mean that something called black art can live and resound in a world where black people cannot? What does it mean to turn the intentionally evacuated interiority of these condos—of this world—which is always waged against black life, into the plentiful surface that stages our aesthetic value?

The apparently reflective surface of the empty condo glass and the professed depth of the resounded black slogans of the murals are not opposites, and the moment I outline here make this uniquely clear. Both center on the reflective and regulative function of the aesthetic I track in this book, which developed primarily in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The aesthetic is driven toward creating "that which pleases universally," and any passersby should want to see themselves in this globally ubiquitous reflective surface of luxury.[5] The pleasing and pleases of these black murals reify the inclusive speculative capacity of the luxury condo glass; you can't shatter the surface of a world you see yourself progressively reflected in. To the extent that forcefully wielded hammers or wayward rocks and parking sign posts shattered this illusion, the successive frescoes

offered a restorative or corrective. The surfaces of the new murals offer a heavily managed and curated black imagination in which "seeing and hearing ourselves reflected in" ensures that we will not fight back; we will never trouble the rapidly expanding surface's integrity.

The emptiness of behind the glass and the plentitude of the flamboyant surface converge in what they hold back. This is the aesthetic I analyze in this book. While the extraction of industrial black labor has been substantially eliminated from US urban centers of production since the 1970s, the black imagination (which is tucked within that modality too) remains a plentiful resource for propping up the racial capital of this luxuriated aesthetic order.[6] Like the empty condos built to prevent any poor people from living there, black imaginative labor is no longer about the life it can produce or sustain; it is about the life it can confine, guard against, police, and hold back for the production, expansion, and protection of racial finance capital. Black artistic capacities hypostatized in these murals and in other such official culture become verisimilar with the endless emptiness of the condos they are enlisted to protect. Both sites are conscripted to defend the infinite site for the accrual of value. In many ways, this overlapping empty space is the central preoccupation of this work.

I argue that the roots of subjectivity granted to the black artist and the black work of art emerged largely to animate and protect this antiblack abyss of value production in racial capitalism. I begin with the contemporary moment of how black sounds of rage, coordination, collectivity, and rebellion became murals and memorialization to anchor the genealogical journey of the aesthetic character I map in this text. Yet the problem of the aesthetic I unfurl goes back to the discovery and appropriation of black sound as black music in the nineteenth century. Countering the prominent emphasis on correcting, expanding, or beautifying black representation that conflates its improvement with the enrichment of black life chances, I aim to understand how the life of black representation has long been and is increasingly designed to displace and regulate black life. The void of black displacement animated by the black work of art, I argue, is not just about producing art but also about arresting black imaginative capacities to maintain the productive faculties of that antiblack world. The arresting reflective surface of the black work of art and the depths of black life and sounding it extracts from and traverses unite in an aesthetic character that can beautify the constraint and captivity of our imaginations, making the unmaking of this world seem ugly. This aesthetic houses us so long as we remain only a "please" in their ideal world,

in which there is still black art and there are still black art opportunities but there are no more black people.

The Art of Exposure

Part of this monograph comes out of my experience and disillusionment as a black musician and artist during the last decades I have referenced here in the Bay Area, playing, making, and attending shows in increasingly empty rooms. Spaces that once reverberated with black laughter, contentious shouts, banter, and all kinds of carrying on were increasingly hushed by the displacement of black life. The benefits for the black artist were an artists' residency in this emptiness, a room of one's own that several black people used to live in. Black musical performers and visual artists ingratiated themselves in order to access bigger, more official, and more luxurious spaces, no longer just playing in the emptiness but playing the emptiness too. It is easy and important to blame the albatross of venture-capital-fueled tech and real estate development that went hand in hand with the antiblack state policing practices, but black artists and the black work of art played their part too.

Over the years I gradually discovered that for many black artists the desire for a "platform" and the need for representation and to be represented too often operated as a conveyance for power's imaginative faculties, even or perhaps especially when cloaked as some kind of "resistance" or "resistant practice." I watched and confronted many fellow black artists in the Bay Area who justified making work that adorned, and to varying degrees consciously legitimated and defended, the conceptual aegis of real estate projects, wealthy private spaces, gentrifying public enclaves, and even the lobbies of tech offices. The directives and market aspirations of all these entities sought to police, imprison, displace, exploit, and drive toward the brink of death the very poor and working-class black people these artists claimed their work addressed and celebrated.

Their reasons for selling out were rarely monetary—none of them then were compensated anything approaching an impressive sum. They were often instead "paid in exposure." How being exposed constitutes something like being paid and something like having one's needs met is part of that empty space I have alluded to, the empty space that keeps expanding through the black work of art. This void is the essence of black representation, and this is the void I seek to think through and criticize in this work. I pursue the aesthetic in this work to understand how the black

work of art makes us more sociable to the antiblack world instead of making a world that is more hospitable to us and our needs.

A century ago, during the Harlem Renaissance, W. E. B. Du Bois referred to this very predicament as the "deadly bribes" of the black work of art and the black artist: "I will say that there are today a surprising number of white people who are getting great satisfaction out of these younger Negro writers [and artists] because they think it is to stop agitation on the Negro question . . . and many great colored people are all too eager to follow this advice; especially those who weary of the eternal struggle along the color line, who are afraid to fight and to whom the money of philanthropists and the alluring publicity are subtle and deadly bribes."[7] This problem has only gotten worse. Du Bois's language of "deadly bribes" makes overt an always latent subterfuge within not just the form but also the circulation and practice of black art. The deadliness of the bribe seems both the precedent and the afterlife of the black work of art. This black aesthetic labor mimics or prefigures the dead labor Marx famously entombed in the commodity form that was wielded against the life of its producers by making little means of life for them and everything for the lifeless futurity of capital. This deferral of our endogenous needs for the needs of representation is synthesized in the regulation of our needs that alienate us from our living. This aesthetic labor, which I call the black work of art in this book, is unique not just for how it produces products or artworks but also for how it imaginatively restrains and constrains us.

Often black artists are "paid in exposure" or representation because the implicit currency of black art emerges from its negation of an imaginative abundance we already share and operate in among each other—and that we could share much more with each other. The "fight" for the world we need and want is what the aesthetic entices us into fleeing. The stakes of black art's ploy, both the abundance of the black life it draws from and the currency of the "fight" (or to use a term with which Du Bois is more commonly associated, "problem") it admonishes are indeed deadly. We are not just memorializing our fallen kin as cultural totems on commemorative murals, we are arming and aiding the institutions that are killing us. This book hopes merely to spark the realization that we need to steal back our lives, our living, our work, and our needs from this fantastical investment property in which our only occupation is its defense and not ours. It is never real beyond our constant paranoid defense of it. This is an immense task that this work hopes to imagine and think us into collectively.

Introduction

this is about songs
about when they happen about
pieces and absences
of connection about for no reason

this is about practicing
any gap any short for the jump
this is about going about
years with the live fragment

singing it over
and over for years learning its meaning
only accuracy not an aesthetic
only as the most

maybe empirically correct song

Ed Roberson, "the puzzle in bundles"

Mirrors ought to think a bit before
reflecting images

Jean Cocteau, *The Blood of a Poet*

It is impossible to grasp what the black work of art is and what it does without understanding its origin in the invention of black music in the nineteenth century. Black music was not simply a category describing the music-making practices of enslaved black people and their descendants; it was a project of aesthetic refinement that sought to humanize and regulate

the soon-to-be-manumitted for the racist society that had enslaved them. Rather than thinking exclusively about the positive content and expressions black music proffered, which largely guides how it was studied by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars and writers, I situate "the slave society's" aestheticization of black music as part of an emerging form for restraining and regulating black life and resistance.[1] I trace the regulative function of the black work of art and the black artist alluded to in the preface to the mid-nineteenth-century development of black music. How black music became a point of aesthetic regulation is best understood through its earliest and most vocal nineteenth-century exponent, Frederick Douglass.

In some of the most influential lines of his widely circulated *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Douglass composed the form of black music I am concerned with in this book. Douglass's book profoundly transposed the noisy creativity fashioned by the "slave community" into the manageable aesthetic character of a song. While he was not a trained musician and while he has not been regarded in scholarship as an artist of any sort, Douglass's reproductions of enslaved black sonic practices inspired the first serious studies, recordings, and capture of black music.[2] He wrote, "The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit. . . . To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds"[3] Through his authorship and the circulation of his public persona—and here, through his ability to translate relatively inscrutable black cultural forms into representations accessible to and intended for white audiences—Douglass became an early (and important, if rudimentary) exemplar of the black artist.

I single out Douglass's use of quintessentially aesthetic terminology such as "song" and "character" to signal how a shift was taking place. The activities of the enslaved were being deceptively refined and granted a representational quality to justify their living and continued existence "after slavery" to the very society that still held black folks in bondage. This emerging aesthetic justification was quite novel in Douglass's oeuvre. He offered an occupation and use value for the soon-to-be-manumitted by re-forming the sounds of the enslaved as a source of value that could live beyond the increasingly maligned model of plantation labor and rule. Through his account and the accounts of black artists that followed, this book traces how black music, black song, and (later, in the twentieth century) the black work of art materialized as a justification for sociable black life to be

plucked from the brutality of enslavement and racist oppression. I argue that this aesthetic rationalization of black cultural practices provided a way for the slave society to extract value from and install management within black life. Liberated from bondage, black music was freed to revivify and beautify the imagination of the slave society during and after manumission. While black music represents the supreme object of rationalization for this aesthetic character in the nineteenth century, the chapters of this book trace how in the twentieth century, this logic expanded into related forms through what can be called broadly black art. It was not just black music, but a burgeoning conception of the black work of art that emerged from black music, that carried out this aesthetic regulation.

After all, these aesthetic concepts of "song" and (humanizing) "character" differ markedly from the more overtly violent sonic figures that feature prominently in Douglass's *Narrative*: the crack of the whip, the screams of torture and beatings, or the infamous sound of his Aunt Hester's scream, about which Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten have famously argued.[4] Yet his account of black "song" allows us to trace how black aesthetic labor and the black work of art arose through the waning of the slave plantation and the persistence of "the dehumanizing character of slavery," as Douglass termed it. The positive humanizing character of black music was extracted directly and reactively from the brutalized "dehumanizing character of slavery." But equally, this humanizing character derived from the inscrutable black life within the evasive and resistant operations of the slave community and its "wild notes." The songs of the enslaved, following Douglass's narrative, came to form the official language of "black music."

In *The Aesthetic Character of Blackness*, I focus on how black life, in all its unwieldiness, was administered through the aesthetic formation of "black music." Many studies have emphasized the liberatory expressions realized through the loosening of black music from the plantation. However, I complicate what black music's putative discovery liberated. I offer initial skeptical quotation marks around the term "black music" to assert the distinction between the upheaval of black life Frederick Douglass glossed and appropriated and the contemporaneous language of musical and aesthetic refinement and humanization into which that life was being mixed, compressed, and mastered down as music. I think through the far more complex, often dialectical, process wherein the liberation of black forms is in no way reducible to, and may even be weaponized against, the liberation of black life. Black music and the black work of art would prove just as essential in contesting the intrinsic value of the enslaved commodity

form during chattel slavery as they would in reimagining the kind of value that can be extracted from and mobilized against black life "after slavery."

The mid-nineteenth-century "discovery" of black music created a cultural gold rush for the free world. Instead of a precious metal, Douglass had smuggled a uniquely expressive content that would establish a new industry and a new investment in the humanization of the enslaved and soon-to-be-manumitted. As John Cruz's ethnomusicology of the nineteenth-century study of black music affirms, Frederick Douglass's writing was the catalyst for the antebellum and postbellum rush to study, write, capture, preserve, and reproduce black music.[5] The contents and forms of expressions excavated from black music would vary over time, of course, but in this book I provide a partial genealogy for the form of their capture, consumption, and regulation. By building an aesthetic frame for black music, Douglass aimed to dispute the earlier "counterfeit" culture of the blackface minstrel stage whose aim was to justify keeping black folks enslaved by denying their capacity to produce proper dignified human culture and governance. The notion of "black song" was understood to offer a counter to this denigration. Black music would propose a positive liberating expression, a generous act of humanization, re-sounding an imaginative space of escape for black sounds from slavery that mirrored Douglass's own flight rather than a re-formation of captivity by and for the free world. A generation later, texts that began to formally and explicitly champion the idea of black art and the black artist would draw upon Douglass's framing of black music as liberating black expressions from the bonds of antiblack oppression. Seminal works such as Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, Ralph Ellison's *Living with Music*, Albert Murray's *Stompin' the Blues*, Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*, and Samuel Floyd's *The Power of Black Music* all owe some of their emphasis on the liberatory power of black cultural forms' expressive capacities to Douglass's framing.

My interest lies in what the slave society or the free world were "getting" from the alleged liberation of black music and what had to be regulated or extinguished among black folks to ensure such a product. I challenge the progressive framing of black music and the black work of art that is both implied and explicated within an emphasis (sometimes exclusively) on it as liberatory expression casting off captivity. Rather, I show how implicit within the refinement of black cultural expressions is a regulative aesthetic justification of black life as a source of value production.[6] The receptive aesthetic terms Douglass used to reproduce black sounding ("character" and "song") invited outside consumption of black cultural practices in a

way which—as I discuss in chapter 1—ironically resembles the minstrel stage he wished to contest in its total reliance on the justificatory. Douglass was clearly operating under a still-enduring naïveté that Henry Louis Gates Jr. would espouse some 150 years later: the idea that "the only way that you can fight a representation in art that you don't like is to create new art, to create more art, to surround it."[7] The work of creating "new [black] art, more [black] art" to surround the "bad" is part of the postmanumission value production and labor I track in this book. Through the aesthetic, black folks have been made to work on justifying black life and black productive capacities to a society that will only ever use such justifications to arrest them, repress them, and put them further to work.

I argue that the property of enslaved labor's impending re-formation required new value-making sites and capacities that would be powerfully fashioned through the black work of art. This black work of art formed from a world in which black sounds and collective creative practices were metabolized as mere expressions of and pleas for our supposed humanity, as errant shouts in need of refinement, or as reflections exercised against our living. I do not claim that the black work of art, or black "cultural production," fully supplanted or replaced plantation production or labor.[8] Quite to the contrary, I argue that black music fleshed out a new material frontier that would become the quintessence of the aesthetic regulation and production of the imagination. I situate how the slave society that emerged from manumission needed the aesthetic justification of black folks in order to persist and expand. I move through and beyond the framing of black music as a source of "pleasure" or "enjoyment," importantly theorized in Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*. I assert that it was not just an affective economy, but an aesthetic or imaginative economy that black folks' music and artistic labor built for and against the slave society.

I do not pay short shrift to the black cultural even though I deemphasize the sentiments or "feelings" Douglass highlighted. My claims about how aesthetics arrested black life are guided by just how revolutionary and terrifying slave revolt and unmeasured black cultural practices were and can still be to the slave society when they evade official legislation and value production.[9] The secret dances, the too-noisy policed black gatherings, all the inartistic modes of "stealing away" that destroyed the property in enslaved labor time became subordinated to and sublimated within more official aesthetic labor out from slavery as song. Douglass's refinement of black song importantly prefigures the capture, commodification, and reproduction of black sound and the black recording artist through formal

phonographic technologies by several decades. This drives my emphasis on Douglass's oeuvre, for without his aesthetic modeling we would not have the form of material reproduction that is black music and the black work of art, whether that is the artistic refinement that blunted the property-destroying force of graffiti in post-1960s New York City—playfully but pointedly narrated in Charlie Ahearn's 1982 *Wild Style*—or the infamous arrest of black improvisatory composing under the name of "jazz" or the pacifying murals with which I opened this book. The threat of slave insurgency, times of black rebellion, and even forms of deviant unregulatable black life are antagonized by the representations that surround black folks and demand from them their aesthetic justification.

The imagination of the slave society is the material site from which black aesthetic justification is forged and reified. The imagination of the soon-to-be-manumitted, who were for the first time granted such a sentience, and the imagination of the world into which they would be liberated became a new site of speculation for the expansion of racial capitalism. The imagination may sound like a nebulous object or site to draw a whole method and set of problems around. However, aesthetics in the West has long taken the imagination as its supreme object of rationalization and regulation with just such an emphasis. The Kantian project and its Schillerian variation inform part of my analysis here, because they clearly shaped Douglass's relatively contemporaneous outlook and the formation of the black work of art. The laws placed around, the justifications asserted through, and the judgments decreed over imagination surrounded Douglass's terms for reproducing black sound in the free world. Archie Shepp used the phrase "the plantation of the mind" to describe the imaginative site for the "regularizing" and regulating of black life without the overt sound of the whip and its countering liberatory violence.[10] The legislation of the imagination produces as impactful a material reality and set of effects as we might commonly reserve for the traditional "displays of mastery" that governed the slave plantation.[11] My book participates in such a tradition and approach of aesthetic thought, and I take the imagination as a serious and shifting site of inquiry. If the plantation functioned as both a productive container for black labor and a symbolic limit for black cultural practices—as overtly illustrated in the minstrel stage—then the imagination represents a new frontier for black folks' production, speculation, and exploitation.

I invoke the imagination of the slave society to situate how the re-formed exploitation of manumitted black folks was justified to the free world and how the embrace of the free world's re-formed exploitation was

justified to manumitted black folks through the aesthetic. Again to invoke Frederick Douglass's quintessence as the black artist, we can see overtly both his justification of the sounds of the enslaved to the free world and his own imaginative justification of the free world through black sounds. The free world for Frederick Douglass was a mostly quiet place where black song and its attendant form of labor were but a contained reverberation. Later in his same narrative, Douglass spoke of his disembarkation in New Bedford, Massachusetts, remarking, "There were no loud songs heard from those engaged in loading and unloading ships. I heard no deep oaths or horrid curses on the laborer. I saw no whipping of men; but all seemed to go smoothly on. Every man appeared to understand his work, and went at it with a sober, yet cheerful earnestness, which betokened the deep interest which he felt in what he was doing, as well as a sense of his own dignity as a man."[12] The relative tranquility of the free world bore a striking resemblance to the fantasy of a quiet white suburb or gentrifying neighborhood, where the value-making processes of production and consumption are hypostatized in private property as their quietest and most agreeable form for racial capital's luxuriation. The only acceptable site of ruckus noise is consigned to the privation of imagination and the tolerated compliant drone of enabling manual labor. The loud music blaring slightly from headphones or private parlors is reflective of "the private life that regulates the consumption of art in the nineteenth century" and beyond.[13] The consonant obedience, efficiency, and sociability of free labor and the free laborer in building such spaces of privation was augmented by the dissonant sound of enslaved labor. Black song, freed from being heard as an ungainly public spectacle of the slave coffle and transposed into an aesthetically captured "song" by the imagination, would beautify free labor. The imagination of the slave society to which I referred is not just a capacity from without, not just a beautified whip coming from outside that drives black value making but also a compulsion from within the formerly enslaved as espoused by Douglass. Black music's initiation into the imagination became the site of a new material process of exploitation and regulation.

Black music is the "raw material" from which black life would produce value through justification. I move away from and critique the common scholarly framing that black music is a mere adjunct to the abolitionist movement's successful war of propaganda. Frederick Douglass and his white comrades in the abolitionist movement emphasized vehemently that they were ridding the world of one form of oppressive black labor and life, as Douglass suggests in the passage above. Yet this book tracks how a new

frontier of black labor was also created from aesthetic re-formation of slave labor in black music and culture. This new or re-formed black work was created through the sublimation of black song. I enrich and expand Sylvia Wynter's framing of the nineteenth-century extraction of black music: "Black culture, black music in particular, became an original source of raw material to be exploited as the entertainment industry burgeoned. Once again blacks function as the plantation subproletariat hidden in the raw material."[14] This black "raw material" was mined for the restructuring and liberation of the slave society's imagination through this newly legislated aesthetic character.

The transportation of these black sounds to the free world through the space of imagination is an explicit invocation of the power of the black work of art to beautify free labor and the reproduction of the free world. The argument that whites extracted "empathic identification" from black songs is only part of the story.[15] Freeing black sounds from the bondage of enslaved labor liberated them into new and expanded sites of speculation and aesthetic labor. Black music is a contrapuntal force that justified the quiet productivity and value of the free world—of the slave society. The value of black sounds and the loudness of black life was not exclusively an aspect of their form and value under bondage. Just as black song was successfully making slave labor ugly and dehumanizing under Douglass's conducting, it would equally be enlisted to beautify the free world. As I argue in this book's first chapter, many of the very same sounds of black labor would attain a potent formal social character, shifting not just their signifying value as distressing or unpleasant but also the form of their hearing, recognition, and consumption and the worlds they produced and beautified. It is black song that makes the sound and suffering of free labor seem "smooth," for black sounds can and must be driven toward or made more sociable to the telos of labor and life that awaits them as the freedom of the shore. Black music is reflected in Douglass, as is the black work of art, to make black life work anew, for something new, in Gates's words, and not necessarily for itself.

I focus on the aesthetic in this work because it is not the enslaved who would be freed with emancipation, but the aesthetic imagination of the slave society that would be liberated through the capture and reproduction of black music. In this book's succeeding chapters, I discuss the newly "gifted" private property of the imagination of the recently manumitted; what would more overtly expand as the private and domestic property in black music through the birth of the recording industry and the black work

of art. Building from the extensive and supportive work done on the quiet Victorian prose of the nineteenth-century slave narrative and the scholarship on the public prominence of antebellum and postbellum black music, I aim to understand how black song and the black work of art circumscribed and continues to constrain the bounds of black sociability. This will require a more focused and instructive breakdown of my terms that illuminate the organization of the book's chapters as well as the title, *The Aesthetic Character of Blackness*. I will begin with a more in-depth treatment of the aesthetic that guides my definition and use of the concept in this work.

The Aesthetic, Bounded by the Shore

Aesthetics is not a liberation of our living but a liberation of forms through the restraint and constraining of our living and our imaginations. Intending its original usage, I assert that aesthetics is a regulative force crafted to make black folks more sociable to the world instead of making the world more hospitable to black life. My stance here complicates the common attributions of Frederick Douglass's nineteenth-century artistic endeavors as well as those that motivated much of the history of black aesthetics I track in this book in the Harlem Renaissance and even to a degree in the Black Arts Movement. This is why I seek to challenge the conflation of aesthetics with subjective feelings or expression. To the extent that the aesthetic produces our liberatory expressions, it manages them through and against us for the beautification and liberation of the free world over and against us.

The aesthetic imposes a kind of "small mastery" on or over our imaginations. I pull this term "small mastery" from Sylvia Wynter, who locates such an idea originally within the blackface minstrel stage whose re-creation of the plantation emerges from and admits that "all could not be equal masters; one could be a small master," adding that "[there was] the need to be master in order to experience oneself as the Norm, as human."[16] Wynter's stance, re-sounded in Eric Lott's book about minstrelsy, *Love and Theft*, is often only applied to blackface minstrelsy and racial masquerade. I, however, thread this notion of "small mastery" into my analysis of the very aesthetic form that was raised in protest of minstrelsy's romantic reification of black bondage: black music. As Douglass's framing suggests, aesthetics emerged to beautify (white) restraint and capture of black folks from without and from within. Distinct from, yet related to the sound of the whip echoing in the open field or the servant's bell ringing across empty rooms, the imagination becomes an expanded site for the maintenance of

the "lawful external relations" of aesthetics.[17] In its modern formulations and institutions, aesthetics is about formal restraint and being held back, of being internally arrested in and by our imaginations.

The aestheticization of black music and the black work of art becomes a conflicted site for this restraint of the imagination. As I have noted, black sound was framed as troublesome contraband or paltry excess of black nature cum racial pathology. Slaves sang or made noise to affirm their amenability to their bondage, the minstrel stage and proslavery proponents would famously declare. Once liberated from enslavement, these sounds were sublimated to "the formal condition" of participating under the "lawful authority" of the newly available "civil community" of the slave society or the free world, first in the humanizing prose of slave narratives like that of Frederick Douglass, then in the pages of songbooks for proponents of the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement, then in the inquisitive logbooks of early ethnomusicologists.[18] Soon they were committed to the brittle grooves of early mass-produced records. Aesthetics offered and imposed a new mode of self-regulation for the recently manumitted. Part of this self-regulation stemmed from its positive and beautified assertion within the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditions of the aesthetic rooted in a willful character conceived from the shores of freedom, to reference Paul de Man's referencing of Kant's metaphysics or equally to reference the nautical portions of Frederick Douglass's own flight from enslavement to the northern shores of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Black music is not just composed of fugitive expressions, it is also composed of spaces and points of arrival through which new forms of power and captivity are fashioned.

Aesthetics open a new space of speculation in and against black life through the imagination. The imagination becomes a battleground but also a resource for the liberation of the slave society through the self-regulation of black people. Aesthetics are central to the world we hold up in having our imaginations held back and holding our imaginations back. This is a valence of how Saidiya Hartman frames black folks' inauguration into the free world during Reconstruction in terms of "self-mastery" that was implanted in and over the enslaved. Self-mastery, Hartman asserts, is a marriage of "the will and the whip"; that is, "a willing submission to the dictates of former master, the market and the inquisitor within." Hartman concludes that such exigencies effectively "bore a striking resemblance to the prostration of slavery."[19] Though by no means stated in Hartman's oeuvre, an expansion of the resemblance of black self-mastery to slavery, or "the slave" itself, has become prominent in black study over the years. And indeed,

"a return to slavery" or re-formation of slavery would be the widely stated worry of black aesthetic thinkers such as Du Bois and Alain Locke just a generation or so later. My emphasis on aesthetics complicates this pervasive economy of resemblance, however. Aesthetics is important for my argument because its modes of management are quite distinct from slavery but still creatively antagonize black life. A new frontier, new territories, and new spaces of speculation emerge through the imagination that, as Douglass's "song" and "character" suggest, are not quite reducible to the whip.

The "small mastery" over the imagination is not just an exogenous invention of white outsiders and eavesdroppers but an endogenous production that emerges from and through black music and the work of the black artist. The imagination is not something that just happens to or is enacted on black folks, it is an asymmetrical yet shared site of production and extraction. This again sheds light on my initial investment in Douglass as a kind of early black artist (a form I will expand upon shortly) because he articulates and defends this still relatively exclusive province and property of the black aesthetic imagination. Douglass also complicates, even in his perceived exceptionality—an exceptionality which I discuss further in chapter 1 and which will be liberated and expanded to others—the idea that it is not a perpetual metaphysical victimhood that ensures blackness's aesthetic regulation but a kind of regulative "human activity" (where the humanity of that activity must itself be humanized).[20] Indeed, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics is rooted in this promethean power that Douglass enacts to give life to forms without subjectivity.

This vivification of form, which I will shortly define as our "aesthetic justification," dwells in the imagination. As the opening of this book suggests, black aesthetic justification is housed far more than black people are. In fact, it displaces us to attain its luxury; it lives better than us and beyond us, producing a form of futurity without and then against us. I invoke aesthetics because in this book I am most interested in the kinds of life that animate these empty spaces: the domestic space of the mid-nineteenth-century parlor piano, the spaces of the phonographic record's grooves, the empty belly of the phonographic cabinet, the uninhabited life of the law of genre, and the depopulated neighborhoods bearing massive black murals. These are the specific spaces that characterize each chapter of this book. These are the spaces Douglass would fill with black music and the black work of art would build up and defend. These spaces are not just defined by their metabolization and consumption of black music but by their capture and reflection of our sounding-image back at us, as us.

No matter how loud they are perceived to be, the dominance of black representations always carries this silencing and constraining subterfuge. The benefit of aesthetics' property in things marks their "separation from all society" such that society can be rendered as pure instrument of the aesthetic.[21] I frame the aesthetic as instrument to emphasize that it is not only the extracted or appropriated content that is dangerous, but even more so its weaponized form. We no longer need black life when we have murals reflecting its presence as the reprieve from it. This quieted space of reprieve from "the fight" Du Bois described early, the height of which Kant simply calls "luxury," makes us intimate with the quietness of these empty rooms against the noisy intimacy with each other.[22] Only aesthetic values are animated here. In black song Douglass could imagine a free world that was without and even against black life. In the placid life of the free world, he more perilously illustrated the pursuit of a life beyond the slave community or its presumably freed variants. This life of forms freed from the demands of their living has a name in aesthetics: beauty.

No doubt any reader of traditional aesthetics has noticed how glaring the absence of beauty has been from my definition. This is intentional. Most eighteenth-century conceptions of aesthetic thought started or ended with beauty because beauty is often described as the telos or goal of aesthetics. But this is part of the problem I critique. I define beauty throughout this work as a looming nonrelation. Beauty is an intimacy with concept alone. To make this clearer, nothing lives under beauty but judgment and justifications. I oppose this living to black life, through which beauty is so readily and violently channeled and smuggled. Black life is instrumentalized for the sake of creating this beauty. The beauty from the shore that Douglass found in the hush and murmur of the free world's distinctly oppressive labor was an escape from enslavement as well as an escape from the aimless noisiness of the slave community. What sound, what work, and what life cannot be teleologically driven to the beautiful must wash out in the wake of Douglass's arrival on the shore. This journey, what I will elsewhere through the writing of Black Arts Movement theorist Dingane Goncalves call "the plucking of the beautiful," is the grounding of the aesthetic. This book invokes Douglass's journey and indeed the journey of many black artists to think about the practices that prop up, suffocate, and drown before reaching beauty's ashore.

The aesthetic encourages us to stay shore-bound, to never swim out to each other and get wet, never board the ship and fight with and for each other, and never drown together and become the ocean. This is the restraint

the aesthetic places on the imagination and how its form afflicts black life. In exchange for each other, we are given willful artists and artwork that keep us out of the fight. I am bound to and enlivened by a conception of black-being-together-as, that imagined force of the inside of the hold, of the slave community, of the storm inside the ship in the storm that only gets sung as a song from those who swam to the shore.[23] Blackness's differentiation from this ocean is part of and productive to the legacy of the aesthetic I track in this book. I invoke the aesthetic to understand what worlds it keeps us from tearing down and making rather than the works it produces or captures. Part of this restraint emerges from how the administrative function of the aesthetic bears down upon black folks with an apparent saving power, both re-forming and far away from the sound of the whip or the screams of brutalized black kin. In the aesthetic we are differently shipped, but too often we imagine ourselves to be or aspire to be similarly shore-bound. We are surrounded by the blockade of this shoreline, looking at and not enclosed by each other and our needs. While this may seem beyond the purview of what is traditionally defined in aesthetics, it has everything to do with the voyage from "the dehumanizing character" of slavery to the shores of humanization that Douglass and black music navigate.

Blackness, the Humanizing Character

Humanity and its humanizing character were not needs or reveries crafted from the imagination of the enslaved. Humanization had to be shaped as an aesthetic or imaginatively constrictive project. Humanization was a form, a sociable character, that would attempt to bound the imagination of black folks from without and from within for the benefit of the slave society. The shore of humanization that Frederick Douglass arrived at, to which he brought black song, is a limit concept. This limit concept of humanity requires the aesthetic regulation of black life and black sounds to expand its bounds. Humanization itself needed to be humanized, and black music and the black work of art would be an essential conscript of humanization's avant-garde. As part of the professed goals of the Garrisonian abolitionist movement in which Douglass participated, black humanization was enlisted to expand humanity's authority and force. Ultimately, I theorize how humanization is sharpened through its metabolizing of and expansion through black cultural forms; becoming a weapon wielded against black life. Black music is the first and most prolific hinge for humanity's violent cultural re-formation.

It is nearly impossible to overstate the centrality of Frederick Douglass to the humanizing character of black music. The emerging and conflicted space Douglass occupies as an early articulation of the black artist is central for forming the limits of the aesthetic regulation he proffered through the humanizing character of black music. Instead of narrating Douglass within a putative or given system of bondage, I want to highlight the "structuring antagonism" through which the emerging postemancipation order required Douglass's escape to be framed as the liberation of humanizing character of blackness in order to reimagine and expand the imaginative bounds of the value-making processes of the slave society.[24] I start the first chapter of this work, "Emancipating the Spaces of Sonic Capture," with an audiovisual drawing of Frederick Douglass created by the white abolitionist Jessie Hutchison Jr. to grace the cover of a widely circulated abolitionist songbook in the 1840s. As reputedly the most imaged black person of the nineteenth century in the West but also the most prominent exponent of black music, Douglass is a central figure in liberating this giant art project that I call the aesthetic character of blackness over much of the world. However, I focus less on Douglass as a figure of enslavement and instead think about him more as a figure of escape and arrival, one who finds himself initiating yet ensnared in emerging cultural modes of captivity through the aesthetic regulation he helped bear forth.

Under the threat of its disappearing value production in the plantation, black life became ominously formless, something demanding of aesthetic regulation to shape it. Early aesthetes such as Friedrich Schiller confessed that such a terror drove the legislative power of aesthetics: "As far and as long as [man] impresses a form upon matter, [man] cannot be injured by its effect; for a spirit can only be injured by that which deprives it of its freedom. Whereas he proves his own freedom by giving a form to the formless."[25] Against the threat of this unstructured ocean of black living, aesthetics fashion the lifeboat to ferry the sociable world through the impasse of black life. It is more often the liberal Lockean tradition that is (rightly) criticized for the ascetic individuated boundaries it asserts, the endless locking away of life it imagines as liberation. I identify an equally potent and deceptively perilous anti-relationality in the aesthetic humanization of black music. Aesthetics is central to determining what constitutes this formless, purposeless life of the slave community it must be wielded against: "Where the mass rules heavily and without shape, and its undefined outlines are forever fluctuating between uncertain boundaries, fear takes up its abode; but man rises above any natural terror as soon as he

knows how to mould it, and transform it into an object of his art."[26] We can hear Schiller's quote as if echoing through Frederick Douglass's head when he converts the black life and sound of the slave community into the manageable aesthetic character of "song."

I push against the affective, progressive, and liberatory framing of the abolitionist movement's agitprop that reactively argued for black song as a liberatory expression. Instead, I consider how black song was a novel site of aesthetic regulation of the imaginative practices of black folks. This is a critical juncture to start from because the metabolization of black song and black culture in the abolitionist movement paved the way for its early exploitation in the phonographic recording industry and its relatedly expropriated life in ethnomusicological scholarship just a generation or two later. I link the two often-contrasting realms of the aesthetic (and its modes of humanization) and the technological reproduction that follows it through the discovery of black song Douglass proffered. The modern promethean power of aesthetics, the godlike creativity that even the most resolute critics like Nietzsche would embrace and extol, is a self-asserting power to dominate the open sea. Douglass's journey and the scholarship in and discovery of black music it inspires offer a form for expanding into this terrifying expanse. Friedrich Schiller's words again resound, "As soon as he upholds his independence toward phenomenal nature, he maintains his dignity toward her as a thing of power."[27] I touch upon the fears of the dark and unknown black life that drive such a power-grab through the humanizing command of aesthetics and how such fantasies and material realities are mined through black music.

I resituate the limits of the humanization offered through the aesthetic in terms of conflicting relationships of force to free the enslaved. The aesthetic justification of the enslaved arose to negate and delegitimize the use of liberatory violence as well as other forms of unlawful resistance that ironically bore similar symbolic standing to black music's frequent contraband status. Instead, humanization became a force that was visited against that unwieldy watery tumult of black creative practices, especially those that never aspired to the representability and governance of an art. I read this fear of force as something that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic thought, relatively contemporary to Douglass, was grappling with. Kant, Schiller, and indeed much of the enlightenment tradition—even Nietzsche—would pose aesthetics as an edifying defense against force and or an equivalent realization of it ("as a thing of power") yet beyond the mere effects of force, being above the fight, being beyond the whip, and

never being in it or under it but always being its beneficiary. Paul de Man translated Schiller's thinking (referencing Kant's epistemological figure of "a broad and stormy ocean"), stating: "It's better not to be on the boat that's being tossed up and down, it's better to stand on the shore and see the boat being tossed up and down, if you want to have a sublime experience."[28] It is hard not to imagine the black life inside the hold in de Man and Schiller's tossed-about ship as that which the aesthetic, always shore-bound, is necessarily and endlessly raised against. The practices of that shipped and oceanic life, all its complicated and antagonistic togetherness, is not just a symbol, but a set of practices, ways of living, surviving, fighting, and revolting that aesthetics must prevent. Black life, especially during and immediately following manumission, threatens to make more of the shore into the ocean. The practices and potency of black imagination had to be regulated, reined in, and redirected to the humanizing aesthetic. The liberatory violence, the labor organizing, and the ungainly life of the enslaved formed unsettling and "uncertain boundaries"—the unshapely mass, the ring shouts, all the kinds of noise of black life and the terror it can unleash—that had to be sublimated to a manageable aesthetic "character" for the slave society.

By staking out the humanizing capacity of black music in the nineteenth century, I challenge not just the budding development of genre but of music itself as a modern regulative project. Music was, simultaneous to Douglass, being rigorously formalized as both the most essentially human and the earliest stage in a people's "development."[29] This is why music can quintessentially humanize or ferry the justification of black humanization to the slave society. Just a decade before Douglass's framing, Hegel wrote that "music . . . which is concerned only with the completely indeterminate movement of the inner spirit and with sounds as if they were feeling without thought, needs to have little or no spiritual material present in consciousness. Therefore musical talent announces itself in most cases very early in youth, when the head is empty and the heart little moved. . . . After all, we have seen very great virtuosity in musical composition and performance accompanied by remarkable barrenness of spirit and character."[30] For Hegel, because they bespeak a lack of development, the "barrenness" of music's "spirit and character" alluded to an abundance of what Wynter called "raw material." The value of black music to the slave society was that it offered a newly formless clay for outside hands to mold and tame black life through. Black sounds would be transposed into the speculative site of humanity's primitive accumulation and development. The fullness of black music's sentimentalization, its fullness of feeling and presumed emptiness of thought,

are understood to be a product of the dehumanizing character of slavery. The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked the contestation of this argument of black cultural vacuity. Scholars ranging from Anténor Firmin to Melville Herskovitz countered the notion that the Middle Passage and the brutality of the plantation were so total that no putative fullness of African or syncretic culture remained. But these were also responses to Douglass and related mid-nineteenth-century invitations to sculpt the alleged formlessness of black life through black music and culture.

Arguments of black cultural vacuity were and are part of a ploy to impose an austerity logic on black life that can be regulated through the aesthetic. In Douglass's framing, black song emerged initially as a dehumanized counter to the coordinated internal systems and actions of enslaved black people's revolt, music-making practices, care, mutual systems of support, and complex choreographies of movement and dance. These practices were washed away under the brush of emptiness and abjection. Concomitantly, black song was then projected as the fertile territory of the expansion of humanization. The uncertain boundaries of black life and sound are frightening until they can be evacuated into the quiet, dignified contemplation of the imagination as a site of voluminous labor and production. Beyond mere "purposeless form," the form of black music needed to be granted out from its emptiness a plentiful purpose in its distinguished capacity for humanization.[31] It was a new and emerging neighborhood to be gentrified, a fresh and fertile frontier to be tilled with the refined implement of black song.

The Dehumanizing Character of Blackness

In the early chapters of this book, I argue that humanization itself must be humanized and that black music has been an essential conscript of humanization's avant-garde. I am not arguing that black music humanizes black people. The form of de/humanization is itself extraneous to the brilliantly unwieldy worlding practiced by black folks under and out from bondage. We do not and have never needed such a limited category to imagine or practice our liberation and our relation. It is the slave society's de/humanization that I analyze here. The contingent reproduction of enslaved humanity is grounded by the aesthetic as an allegedly civilizing power, a power wielded by this aesthetic character that will ferry the slave society toward liberation on the precipice of its very collapse. For Saidiya Hartman, enslaved humanity emerged emblematically through the violent scenes of subjection detailed in Douglass's narrative. Such scenes risk reifying "the

spectacular character of black suffering," leading Hartman to query: "What does the exposure of the violated body yield?"[32] But how black folks and especially the black artist (whom I will define shortly) were conscripted to humanize and expand the slave society becomes far more complicated than the spectacle of abjection.

I distinguish my own argument and concerns here from Hartman's position in that it is not merely through the symbolic, the abject, or the "exposed" that a new form of regulation arises. I do share an attention with Hartman to the violent construction of and the perils of representation of humanization. However, I tend to focus on the more ambient and mundane sites of its imagination and rationalization. It is the imagination through which the justificatory power of this aesthetic character of blackness became a new site for the expansion and enforcement of the slave society, beyond the impact of the whip. This beautified captivity constructed a new imaginative force of antagonism against black life that was re-formed and proclaimed as the free world. As Douglass's own celebration from the shores of the oppressive silence of free labor attest, this aesthetic imposes a forceful limitation on how black life might be imagined beyond bondage and racist oppression. Dehumanization functions equally as a limit concept that is stuck in a dialectical dance with the humanization I described above. I engage dehumanization for not only formal reasons but to avoid any totalizing romanticization that might be misconstrued in my defense of black life. Black life is not a positive resolution against de/humanization. Black life is a site for which the regulation of de/humanization must be raised as a formal law. My aim is not to offer a positive or romantic rendition of black life so much as it is to understand the aesthetic formalized against it.

In chapter 2, "More Nearly Members of the Family: The Ugly Hiss," I engage slavery's "dehumanizing character" through George W. Johnson, both his childhood as an enslaved black musician and his adulthood as a freed black recording artist. In Johnson, I illustrate a unique traversal of formal black musical capacity captured within or as slave property in order to aesthetically regulate black musical capacity in early sound recording and cultural production. The dehumanizing specter of the minstrel stage, which Douglass largely implicitly reacted to, is fascinatingly overt in Johnson. The passing late-nineteenth-century fascination with Johnson as a novel object of the recently invented phonograph emerges out of the mid-nineteenth-century study that rationalized black music from Frederick Douglass's charge and the virtual disappearance of the formal blackface minstrel stage. These warring cultural oppositions were synthesized to socialize and ingra-

tiate the phonographic machine to the domestic life of the free world. Although the formal dehumanizing sentiments and figures of Johnson's career differ, his work created or was used for a similar site of domestic privation as Douglass. My argument in this chapter is that the aesthetic character of blackness is what ferries across this oft-championed surface of sonic technological reproduction and progress.[33] Johnson's career illustrates the increased prevalence of mastery as self-possession, extending from Douglass, but it also discloses its overt aesthetic limitations. Ultimately, I contend that formally, Douglass's humanization was no different than Johnson's (more overt) dehumanization and that the two merely synthesized the bounds of the slave society's aesthetic or imaginative limit through black music.

Although I do not focus exclusively on black suffering, a related emphasis on representability or making representable guides the arguments I lay out in this work. How black life is made into a representable aesthetic character that polices our imaginations is my primary interest. A common contention by some readers of this text will be that I do not pay enough attention to the fulsome and "inartistic, irreducibly socio-aesthetic, life," the peopling, that precedes and exceeds aesthetic regulation as blackness, as official black music and art.[34] However, I grant frequent and intentionally opaque space and reference to what I refer to as the powerfully illegible assemblage of black life and its sounding. My invocation of black life loosely encompasses a peopling whose theorization is always being enacted in practice and that certainly does not need the temporary governance of a well-intentioned study to recognize it. It is my fundamental position that this paraontological relation of black life should remain unknown and is extraneous to the understanding of any order of "thought," lest I merely repeat the prurient and extractive justifications of Douglass's aesthetic, lest I aspire to be the very black artist and produce the black work of art that I criticize throughout this book.[35]

Black Music, Our Aesthetic Justification

As I have been arguing, black music and the black work of art arose out of bondage as the form of justifying black life to the slave society. Justification was the material or the "how" of this aesthetic. Black song emerged as both a material point of our unscripted being together and a surface that provided our aesthetic justification beyond us and against us. Black music became more than errant intracommunal "wild notes" of relation. It became more than its internal language laboratory that might manifest as an

inscrutable force on the oppressor who, largely denied such a resistant and excessive meaning and world-making capacity, could be generated by the enslaved. Under Douglass's conducting, black music achieved something that was intended to justify the being, meaning, and value of the enslaved and the soon-to-be-manumitted. It justified black folks to those who had already created meaning and value in them through the invention and protraction of enslaved black labor.

In each chapter of this book, I show how, in differing ways, black aesthetic justification became a new kind of labor. To understand and conceptualize the framing of the slave society I offer in this book, I invoke Nietzsche's famous and contemporary nineteenth-century terminology of "aesthetic justification." However, I invert Nietzsche's proclamation and reframe it as a terrifying decree for black life under bondage and after manumission: "We have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified."[36] Aesthetic justification is not a point of reverence for black life but a burdensome yoke and a terrifying decree. Black musical theorists as varying as W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray have proffered arguments for an essential liberatory freedom espoused in black musical forms. I analyze and situate some of these arguments within the justificatory framework I have theorized by paying particular attention to how a quest for the sociable and the beautiful stalks and restricts their imaginative framing of black life. I argue not for black music as influential content but as essential to the form of the justificatory in the West. My treatments in chapter 3 of blues artist Ma Rainey and my treatment in chapter 4 of Dorcas Manfred, the volatile protagonist of Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz*, oppose a kind of messy and bickering black relationality to the justificatory framework that theorists such as Alain Locke were increasingly placing around black life during the Harlem Renaissance. I theorize what many black music scholars are uneasy about considering: how black music has justified us from without and from within to the imagination of the slave society and to our imaginative practices with each other.

The interiority projected into, as opposed to the interiority lived as, black music was a forum for the debate of black will and sentience during the mid-nineteenth century. The space of black song was used to invent and measure the capacity of the newly liberated to participate in the "elegant social intercourse" of the allegedly free world.[37] Schiller asserted that "though need may drive Man into society, and Reason implant social

principles in him, Beauty alone can confer on him a social character."[38] The emerging social character of black folks had to be coercively sculpted and extracted from the raw material of a burgeoning enslaved humanity. Hartman argues that it was through "the pageantry of the coffle, stepping it up lively on the auction block, going before the master, and the blackface mask of minstrelsy and melodrama" that black folks were granted a "restricted sentience."[39] The driving force behind this patronizing bestowal of consciousness produced a valuable and sociable form of black life that could be molded to re-form and benefit the slave society, integrating black life into it rather than letting black life remain outside it—or worse, threatening to undo or overthrow the social character of the slave society. Black song aspired to offer a flirtation with reason through its aesthetic resounding of a black sociability. This black sociability would expand or be used to expand the slave society. The formerly enslaved were to be beauty's vanguard.

Black aesthetic justification, fomented by Douglass, reached a vital cresting point during the Harlem Renaissance under the patriarchal stewardship of aesthete and philosopher Alain Locke. In chapter 3, "Ma Rainey's Phonograph," I demarcate the bounding of the black imagination, which takes its most intensified turn under Locke's proclamation that aesthetics needed to produce a sociable value affirming of a black social that could precipitate gendered black class division. As a contemporary counter to Locke's patriarchal model of aesthetic regulation and cultural production, I engage a series of performance routines by the black queer blues artist Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. Such fleshy and playful performances were, I argue, the primary transgression against which Locke's law of the aesthetic was raised. Through these performance routines and Rainey's broader repertoire, I offer a critique of the epistemological tenets of the privation and domestication of black music through sound recording, racial pathology, and the development of official black culture as a response to the racist yoke of minstrelsy represented in George W. Johnson's rise. In the period 1923–1925, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey carried out an elaborate quasi-burlesque performance routine in which she sang while hidden inside a giant phonograph. This routine precisely referenced and troubled the legacy of black sounds and black performing bodies and their conflicted forms of capture and embodiment through sonic technologies, racial normalization, and gendered domestication. I build on black trans/queer blues scholarship by Angela Davis and K. Allison Hammer that argues against the patriarchal straightening of the black cultural that occasioned its ascension and regulation. Rainey's performance quite literally disrupted and disturbed the aesthetic

justificatory values Locke was attempting to impose on and through black life and music.

The model for the black artist that Locke, and to a lesser extent Du Bois, proffered during this time was rooted in their capacity to initiate black aesthetic justification. Aesthetic justification privileges a relation with black life's capacity to produce a justifiable representational outside rather than the fleshy black queer world of intracommunal meaning that Ma Rainey espoused. Typically, aesthetic justification is born by the willful subject of the black artist that is affirmed by the aesthetic justification they realize.[40] This justificatory power is realized not just through beautiful works but even more importantly through the work, capacity, and duty to beautify the world. Representational technologies that were making black life more audible and visible during the Harlem Renaissance, effectively intensifying the exposure Frederick Douglass had enacted a generation earlier, expanded this power and demand of the justificatory. So while Nietzsche sent the justificatory to save a humanity from its purely technological rationalization, black women blues artists exposed the peril of this aesthetic justificatory force. Black queer women blues artists such as Rainey ultimately challenged the regulatory representational framework that beauty installs in and against black life.

Although Nietzsche's aesthetic justification granted art a saving power, this chapter and others show that no matter how exalted and dignified the aesthetic could be, art will be wielded as a weapon against us. Thus, my focus is on the danger of the black work of art for black life. While many imagine the black work of art as a way to evade the slave society's moralism and jurisprudence, I follow Sylvia Wynter in exploring how the idea of the black work of art is every bit as annihilating and regulating.[41] Beauty is not the law, but it becomes law-like. For Alain Locke, this was quite simply the value of the black work of art. I argue that in this view, the black work of art attains its value from beautifying the violence of black class division, justifying black life as a necessarily classed patriarchal social, and restraining black folks from imagining it can be anything else.

In chapter 4, "Music Against the Subject," I confront the legal character of the black work of art in the Harlem Renaissance's emerging genrefication of "jazz." I formally link and metaphorize the genrefication of jazz with the dignified regulation of the black social during this period. I analyze Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* as emblematic of the attempt to construct a dignified black social through the aesthetic regulation of black life as genre. I look at genre and narration as two related modes of aesthetic capture and

ensnarement: as essential forms for legislating black life and restricting its imaginative possibilities. I focus on how *Jazz* counters earlier and contemporary arguments that black music and art ought to create a sociable black character for representation. I analyze the novel's wayward and chimeric main character Dorcas Manfred and the photographic collection that inspired Morrison's writing of the novel, James Van Der Zee's *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. Through these works I think about how wayward and unjustifiable forms of black life evade and contest the aesthetic capture of the black work of art and its aesthetic justification.

The cultural clerics of the Harlem Renaissance will revel in the litigious implications of this black artist and the power of black aesthetic justification. The black artist as a new emissary of the race, to again paraphrase Henry Louis Gates Jr., will be vested with the power to create the "good" black representations that can drown out the "bad." The justificatory form of the world the black artist ushers in will emphasize representation, dignity, class division—beauty. The Harlem Renaissance valuation of the artist lies in the promethean power of the humanizing character of aesthetics in which the artist's creative capacity counters the prevailing godly prowess of emerging mass representational technologies (the photograph, the phonograph, film, mass-produced print media, and early radio), all of which are suddenly and rapidly producing all these "bad" depictions of black life. In response, Nietzsche proclaims, the artist "feels like a god. . . . Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art."[42] The conflation of black life with black aesthetic character expands during this period, not just from without but from within. If the social can be permeated by the violence of racist aesthetics, it is the Harlem Renaissance that launches a counteroffensive of black aesthetic justification. In black aesthetic justification, the dignity of black "social character" transcends the mere "semblance character" of the work of art by being tasked to relate to and contest the mere "legal character" of black folks in the law, by making more regulations for black living, more beautiful justifications to dominate black life.[43] The black work of art in form will prove black sociability. The black work of art is not merely a representation, it is a legal practice for the world without and a police power that is re-formed for the world within.

Aesthetic justification grants the musician or the artist an aesthetic power to transcend their mere legal rationalization. Harkening back to Frederick Douglass's thinking, we can already glean the seeds of such revelations, for he invoked the music making of enslaved black folks to transcend their legal status and standing as property by imposing and embracing the

law of aesthetics. Douglass and participants in the abolitionist movement believed that black music and culture could counter the law's justification of black slavability. Yet I analyze the underside of this power, for this also means that black music's aesthetic prowess must be a greater justificatory instrument than the knives and hatchets of Nat Turner, the rifle and secretly quilted maps of Harriet Tubman and participants in the Underground Railroad, or the fists Frederick Douglass used to defend himself against his master, Covey. Black art thus fantasizes a kind of freedom neither as property nor as wanted poster, as something beyond the fight and enmity which these imply. It is not just that aesthetics must work on "the cold heart" of the law's rationalization; aesthetics must work on us too.[44] The black artist and the black work of art dull the point and deviate the trajectory of a well-aimed tip of the spear.

The Black Work of Art

The terms "black art" and "black artist" will no doubt conjure as many expectations about this text as they do disagreements with my framings. My stance in this book is that the black work of art becomes the justificatory form of black life to the slave society. The black artist is an agent of this process. Black music and the black work of art re/form enslavement but they do not themselves replace slave labor. The process, I will argue throughout this book, is much more dialectical. The black artist is not a slave. This is crucial—and to a degree obvious in Douglass's own nebulous standing with respect to enslavement at the time of his capture of black music. To adopt such a flattened argument, that the black artist is a slave, would obscure the flexibility of how the domination over black life must be fashioned again and again. Power must be aestheticized; it must be beautified to be expanded. So while black art is not slave labor, it must construct a kind of work that I have referred to throughout as "the black work of art." What black art and the black artist—presaged in Frederick Douglass—will work is the imagination of the slave society. It is within this framework (and guided by a long history of black aesthetic thought) that I situate the black artist and the black work of art in this book.

Despite any inherited assumptions by the reader who might dispute my framing, I must assert fundamentally that what constitutes "black art" and "the black artist" has always been a point of inquiry and open contestation within the circles of those who theorize black art. *The Aesthetic Character of Blackness* extends and participates in that open inquiry. From

early scholarly approaches to the question by W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke to Black Arts Movement theorists such as Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) to the contemporary critics like Fred Moten, Darby English, M. Charlene Stevens, and the late, great Greg Tate, this process of inquiry is an indispensable part of the formalization of black art and the black artist. In this study I attempt to locate black art and the black artist within a long history of the management of black life and of making blackness more sociable and more valuable to the slave society formed through and after manumission. However, this book is not in any disciplinary or scholarly sense an art history of black art.

I do not offer a canon of black art genres or forms. I in no way champion or display a pantheon of great black artists. My avoidance of a strict art historiographical study is not accidental. Black music's hallowed place within broader black cultural formations immediately complicates what sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne refers to as the "visual hegemony" of the aesthetic in modernity.[45] I assert a genealogy in this text wherein black music gives way to and is endlessly sublimated in the creation of black aesthetics and the aestheticization of blackness. Black sound and black sounding thus remain a variable yet critical component of my arguments even in my treatment of "the visual." So while I am guided partially by the multidisciplinarity of sound studies, this text is also not only or entirely a sound studies text.

The critique of visual hegemony within sound studies is important to disarming the authority of traditional art historiographical approaches, which are often dogmatically centered on the visual. However the importance of black music globally, socially, conceptually, materially, and beyond, especially within our varied cultural formations, is self-evident and so central to the construction of the black artistic that "visual hegemony" never quite materializes. My position is grounded in the arguments and the ethos of contemporary scholars such as Fred Moten, Ashon Crawley, Nathaniel Mackey, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Herman Gray, the late Richard Iton, Alexander Weheliye, Fumi Okiji, Carter Mathes, and many others. These contemporary scholars draw upon a longer, substantial black critical blues tradition informed by black blues and improvisatory musicians, some of whom I track here, as well as writers such as Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Amiri Baraka, Toni Morrison, Albert Murray, Nikki Giovanni, and Ed Roberson, all of whom have argued that black aesthetics are irreducibly rooted in black music, particularly the blues.

My approach in this work is no more ethnomusicological than it is art historical, however. If my method is to be outlined, I would say it is more

akin to Foucault's "genealogy of the present."[46] Thus, the earlier materials of this book, stretching as far back as the eighteenth century, are understood as equally "living and continuous" with the more contemporary moments I engage. More pointedly, I do not reduce black music, black art, or the black artist to a history of influential individuals. Although some populate the space of this text as individuals and figures, they are not invoked as a litany. *The Aesthetic Character of Blackness* is more a genealogy of the aesthetic regulation that "prescribes rules of exercise" by which the black work of art and the black artist is made to emerge and operate.[47] No doubt this approach will be unsatisfactory to those expecting a more historiographical or empirical project or even an approach to art approved under one distinct disciplinary regime. However, ultimately the hermeneutic I provide in the text moves primarily as a negation that is not limited to any one aesthetic form. I tend less to offer black art as a wholly positive and positivist conception and instead to situate it as a negative function of our long-standing and prevailing order of instrumental rationality, social regulation, and valuation. The black artist and black work of art chases after, polices, and apprehends our imaginations. This problem and predicament of the regulation of our imaginations has always stalked the question of what constitutes the black work of art and the black artist.

In a 1926 essay on what constitutes black art, "Criteria of Negro Art," W. E. B. Du Bois theorized the human activity of the black artist in a way that shapes and guides my understanding of it in this book. For Du Bois, the black artist is both a conveyance and an agent ruled by the synthesis of beauty, where an individuated black will is sublimated to and sifted through a collective representation of justice. Du Bois provocatively stated, "The apostle of beauty [the black artist] thus becomes the apostle of truth and right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by truth and justice; and slavery only dogs him when he is denied the right to tell the truth or recognize an ideal of justice."[48] As I will discuss in the book's final chapter, a counter strand to Du Bois in black art history and aesthetic thought emerges in Darby English's writing, which asserts that such a stance conflates the space of black artistic imagination with "the space of black representation."[49] While English's emphasis on the regulatory is helpful, it is black life rather than the black artist that is ultimately constricted and antagonized by the justificatory. As the opening of this book asserts, I theorize the integrity of the condo's emptiness—the fantastical room of one's own, even when bereft of black representations, preserved behind the tinted glass—as eminently linked to

the spectacular space of black representation. That the black work of art is integral to protecting the glass in which the vacant space of black aesthetic imagination aspires to live, work, or have an artist residency has a great deal to do with how beauty bounds "the ideal of justice" to which Du Bois refers.

The beauty the black work of art produces is not primarily "the space of black representation" but the ideal of justice that regulates black life. I invoke the black work of art to emphasize this labor and the productivity of the justificatory over the purely representational, which can be incidental to the racial essence it often claims. I argue throughout this work that the value production of the black work of art is primarily rooted in the imaginative restraint it facilitates. Part of this restraint lies in the creative force of the justificatory. Art for Du Bois, not unlike Nietzsche, can never escape the justificatory. The question is merely what and how it justifies: "Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be . . . used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for an art that is not used for propaganda."[50] In perhaps surprising ways in his conclusion, Du Bois partially echoed the utterly humanistic valuation of art championed in Nietzsche's notion of aesthetic justification, although he also importantly and rigorously revised this nineteenth-century inheritance. Both Du Bois and Nietzsche rejected the established and enduring hermeticism of *art pour l'art*. Instead, they ascribed to the black artist a clerical power and drive to affect the social. Yet it is not the purely individuated prowess of the artist in Nietzsche that realizes this power. The black artist is driven and sustained by an "inner and outer compulsion" that Du Bois attributes to a collective or community. It is around this sociality that an overt fissure arises between Du Bois's demand that the artist be a disciple of "justice" and Nietzsche's contention that the artist should be the ultimate model of individuation, which he argued is precisely the "limits of justice."[51]

Part of how the black artist is not enslaved is by beautifying the limits of justice. This beautification effort is something the black artist can possess to the extent that he defends it. The black work of art thus emerges as a kind of property, much like the property of labor in racial capitalism, only to the extent that it is a site of defense against the threatening egress of black life, even and perhaps especially when such life is appropriated and symbolically included. The black artist's labor of beautification occurs by working the imagination of black sounding and black life away from crime and driving it into sociable aesthetic regulation.[52] The defensive architecture of the murals and the art murmur with which I opened this book that were designed to suppress criminal black activity perfectly illustrate the

black work of art and the black artist as a force of deterrence. This again recalls my framing of the aesthetic humanizing character of black music during and after manumission as a limit concept placed on and against black resistance and autonomy, including the resistance of the black sounding it was appropriated from. The contraband of black music making must be re-formed into and legislated as a new sociable law of the black work of art to be waged against the criminal.

The black work of art, like the capture of black music, prevents black life and sounding from becoming black criminality, which is to say force waged against the slave society. The participatory aspirations implied in Douglass's celebration of free labor are made explicit in Du Bois as "the right of black folk to love and enjoy." The black enjoyment that in the nineteenth century was sublimated in the purposiveness of the humanizing character of blackness reemerged positively in the twentieth century as a right. Justice and black enjoyment would litigiously comingle in the black work of art and the black artist. Black "love and joy" had to be regulated into an acceptable and dignified form of art that was surrounded by "rights," lest the dogged pursuit of slavery recapture black life. The rights in love and joy are of course incredibly abstract and alienated notions. Rather than naming and facilitating articulations of black enjoyment and need in the world, the investment is shifted over to the black work of art as the arbiter and depository of such theoretical sites of enjoyment. This move, on the one hand, leads to the infamous appropriation of black poor and working-class cultures by the black bourgeoisie. And on the other hand, this abstraction coerces and cajoles black life into a representative economy in which the black artist is not just a conveyance but an administrator of black enjoyment.

The franchise around black enjoyment is staked out through the black artist who manages the distinction between purposeless black pleasure and justificatory, justifiable, or just black enjoyment through his distribution and defense of the beautiful. This distinction between aimless or purposeless pleasure became central to the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, as I will discuss in the final three chapters. However, the origins of this imaginative restriction around black pleasure can be gleaned in Frederick Douglass's relegation of enjoyment under enslavement to a mere recapitulation to bondage. Douglass quite famously asserted that holidays were "the most effective means in the hands of slaveholders of keeping down the spirit of insurrection among the slaves. . . . These holidays served the purpose of keeping the minds of the slaves occupied with prospective pleasure within the limits of slavery."[53] While Douglass

characterizes black art as a distraction for black social life from the reality of its oppression, in Du Bois's writing, the black artist must fashion the justificatory as a way of working black life, of making black life justifiable against its domination. Much more clearly by the twentieth century, the black work of art produces a way of, in Petero Kalulé's phrasing, coaxing black life into "being right-with," the sociable character of the slave society and with representation itself.[54]

I will expose and challenge this beautification of bondage, however, which I argue moves black life into the internalized subservience to the aesthetic character of black representation. Like the law of right, the law of beauty will manage and limit what activity is imaginable by restricting what is justifiable, what is beautiful. The aesthetic character administrated by the black artist will craft the justificatory as a related kind of repressive servitude that Douglass attributes to black music under enslavement. Ironically, this fear of a return to slavery manifests the limits within which black pleasure is pacified, but this time through the regulation of the black work of art. Woven throughout my study will be the contention that the positive property of the black work of art will be how it holds at bay a "return to slavery" by holding at bay how black folks imagine a world beyond and otherwise—the right of black enjoyment functioning as no more than a disguised regulation and domination by the apostle and concept of beauty.

In chapter 5, "Sounds Like Us," I consider the relationship between the aestheticism of the Harlem Renaissance and the revolutionary ethics of the Black Art Movement around the idea or figure of "black beauty." I consider how the seminal writings of Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Dingane Goncalves and black artist collectives such as OBA-C/AfriCOBRA of Chicago and the Black Artists Group of St. Louis grappled with the relationship between beauty and ethics. I oppose the ethical practices of these groups and theorists, which were inspired by the Black Power Movement, with the emerging violent inclusion of black art as a category and force of the black beautiful, the black artist, and the black work of art most prodigiously by city beautification campaigns. My chief concern in this chapter is the terrifying reality, expanded dramatically in the 1960s but birthed in Douglass's time, that the world wishes to enfranchise more and more of black life into black art.

I conclude that the trajectory of the aesthetic leads to a world in which more and more of black life is rendered as black art. When black music and black art become our aesthetic justification, and become wedded primarily to the justificatory, they will become rigorously dislocated from that which

is unjustified or hegemonically unjustifiable. The revolutionary violent, the criminal, the deviant, and the queer will become increasingly threatening to the society that black art aims to be made more sociable to. What is violently included as well as excluded in our justification is a deadly important consideration. What is policed by the "inner and outer compulsion" of the black work of art? This will be a recurring and central preoccupation throughout this text, for our art will justify us, but our life and its defense will always be crime.

Notes

Preface

I owe much of the framing of this preface and the text more broadly to my fifteen years of conversations with Hassan Khan about art and culture.

1 For some glimpses of this life, see three films by Marlon Riggs, *Long Train Running: A History of the Oakland Blues* (co-directed by Peter Webster); *Tongues Untied*; and *Black Is, Black Ain't*.

2 See these and many other racist screeds published in the *East Bay Times*: Burt, "Violence Darkening Oakland's Nightlife"; and Burt, "Violence Shutters Another Oakland Nightspot."

3 Two weeks after the George Floyd riots and about a week after all the murals went up, a celebratory piece about the murals was published: Webster, "Breathtaking Murals for Justice." This article did not mention those liberatory nights that required the art's arresting capacity. One of the many involved nonprofits was the Bay Area Mural Project (https://www.thebamp.org/), which worked in conjunction with several similar organizations and numerous local artists.

4 If you read one source cited in this work, let it be this one regarding the murder of unhoused black trans man activist Banko Brown: Levin, "A Walgreens Guard Killed a Black Trans Organizer. His Community Wants Answers."

5 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 67. In his formulation of the transcendental judgment, which the aesthetic serves and realizes, Kant wrote quite famously, "The beautiful is that which pleases universally, without a concept." My aim in this book is not to accept, imitate, or reproduce the systematic nature of Kant's thinking, particularly his distinction between "free beauty" (referenced in this quote) and what we can term conceptual beauty. I do not attempt to establish a "before concept," or an a priori, as Kant does, which is a reputed synthetic device. My emphasis is, however, very related to Kant's focus on judgment, on how black art justifies black life, and the role of the justificatory in regulating black life.

6 Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*; Spence, *Knocking the Hustle*.

7 Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 291.

Introduction

1 I take the phrase "slave society" from Binder, "The Slavery of Emancipation." In much resonance with Saidiya Hartman, Guyora Binder argues for a legal distinction between manumission and emancipation, denoting the distinction of manumitting enslaved black people into an enslaving society—that is, a reformed slave society, a society in which they are not truly emancipated but subordinated to beautified and reformed forms of bondage. I will explain this term more thoroughly later in this text.

2 Throughout this study, I will use the term "black" to designate all persons of black descent, although the style is to some extent illogical in light of contemporary trends. I believe that in our incalculable living we need and are entitled to much more than the placating gesture of symbolic sovereignty, dignity, and respectability and the lawful external relations they imply. It is worth noting that W. E. B. Du Bois was not the first black writer to capitalize the N in Negro (see *The Philadelphia Negro*, 1); black newspaper writers in the Chicago *Conservator* preceded him by two decades. The capital N was also used by the avowedly racist weekly paper *Vardaman's Weekly* (run by Mississippi senator James K. Vardaman) and in the condescending strands of liberal racism advocated by the Southern Sociological Congress in its literature. The aesthetics of the capital *N* implied no friends and no enemies, held no love and no rage. See Grant and Grant, "Some Notes on the Capital 'N.'"

3 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 47.

4 See the widely known opening pages of Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* and of course the rejoinder in Moten, *In the Break*, 1.

5 Cruz, *Culture on the Margins*.

6 I am here deeply indebted to the still-too-understudied work of Barrett, *Blackness and Value*.

7 Henry Louis Gates Jr. in Charles Burnett's documentary film *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*.

8 Gray, *Cultural Moves*.

9 For a general history of enslaved revolts, see Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*.

10 "Vibrations: Archie Shepp Interview + Lecture."

11 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 7.

12 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 97.

13 Adorno, "The Curves of the Needle," 50. See also Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*.

14 Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," 149.

15 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 7.

16 Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," 154.

17 For "lawful external relations," see Kant, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, 18. The state this exact terminology applies to or its dialectical correspondent in the human will appear throughout this work. But these terms are interdependent and are often interchangeable or substitutable with one another since they converge in and (re) emerge from a totality. I will often substitute value and authority for this term. I will frequently reference these totalities, as this book is a critique of the coercion that makes possible a totality. Just as the categorical bounding of the human is made possible through an aesthetic, a critique of judgment, so is the categorical bounding of the state and its requisite coercion and paranoia endemic to and protected by the citizen-subject-police. These are all representational projects aimed at extending the authority of the imagination of dominance. Throughout this work, I will argue that being black ought never to cohere into anything like a state and that the desire or lament to do so, to be so, retrospectively and aesthetically overdetermines the contemporary discourse of black (non)being. This is why I do not (or rarely) rely on ontology. Another concession from Kant, even though it is possessed of a rigorously metaphysical outlook, admits: "Whatever concept one may hold, from a metaphysical point of view, concerning the freedom of the will, certainly its *appearances*, which are human *actions*, like every other natural event are determined by universal laws." Kant, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, 11. Kant's concession emerges from his engagement with and departure from Hume (who is an equally relevant origin of aesthetics for Nietzsche in the following footnote) acknowledges the thinness of metaphysics (which emerged from the pre-Socratic Ionian gestures of synthesis of various cosmologies that yielded the Greek logos and later the [law of the] Platonic forms) for collecting all our stories and all our judgments under one singular being. To this Athenian legacy of domination from without as the inheritance of within, Kant proposes autonomy teleologically driven toward "universal history." Autonomy is Kant's marriage of the customs of authority of Greek rationality with the moral authority of Jerusalem and the Christological traditions. A question that is never quite answered in Kant—but debatably answered in his successors—is whether there is an end to the production of law or autonomy and its law always requires and presumes the endless dialectical production of law.

18 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 356.

19 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 134.

20 I repeat Kant's point: "Whatever concept one may hold, from a metaphysical point of view, concerning the freedom of the will, certainly its *appearances*, which are human *actions*, like every other natural event are

determined by universal laws." Kant, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, 11.

21 Kant writes:

> Now the satisfaction in the Beautiful, like that in the Sublime, is not alone distinguishable from other aesthetical judgements by its universal communicability, but also because, through this very property, it acquires an interest in reference to society (in which this communication is possible). We must, however, remark that separation from society is regarded as sublime, if it rests upon Ideas that overlook all sensible interest. To be sufficient for oneself, and consequently to have no need of society, without at the same time being unsociable, i.e. without flying from it, is something bordering on the sublime; as is any dispensing with wants.

Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 145.

22 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 356.

23 Davis, "Reflections on Black Women's Roles in the Community of Slaves."

24 I take the term "structuring antagonism" from Stanley's indispensable *Atmospheres of Violence* to describe a process that is not predestined or synthetically given but dialectically ongoing and unfolding and whose forms and contents carry and carried the capacity to undo the totality under and through which they are sublimated.

25 Quite terrifyingly, Schiller wrote: "When the mechanical artist sets his hand to the formless block, to give it the form that he intends for it, he does not hesitate to do it violence, for Nature, which he is fashioning, merits no consideration for herself, and his concern is not with the whole for the sake of the parts, but with the parts for the sake of the whole." I explain Schiller's broader obsession with the "formless" and its need to be violently corralled to form in chapter 1; here I only raise it as a caution. Schiller, *Letter upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (2016 edition), 29. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent citations are for this edition.

26 Schiller, *Letter upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1910 edition), 281. In the instance of this crucial paragraph I prefer this somewhat esoteric though very aesthetically minded translation of Schiller's text.

27 Schiller, *Letter upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 34. I must admit I am partial to Paul de Man's more succinct if provocative translation of this: "We are dealing only with the case where the object of terror actually displays its power, but without aiming it in our direction, where we know ourselves, in a condition where we know ourselves to be in safety." For this translation, see de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, 142–43.

28 De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, 142. For the Kantian allusion that de Man is making, see Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 354–65, in which Kant writes:

> We have now not only traveled through the land of pure understanding, and carefully inspected each part of it, but we have also surveyed it, and determined the place for each thing in it. This land, however, is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a seductive name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the proper seat of semblance, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg misrepresents new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end.

29 On the "unification" of form with "spirit" and the humanization of music, see Adorno's reading of Mozart in *Aesthetic Theory*.

30 Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 28. I owe thanks to David Marriott for making me, making us, read (in part) this massive and oft-dismissed tome in his fascinating graduate course "Poetry, Language, Thought" at UC Santa Cruz in 2009, in which of course we also read Heidegger.

31 Schiller, *Letter upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 43.

32 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3.

33 Many may notice the absence of Benjamin's work from this book. *The Aesthetic Character of Blackness* is certainly influenced by his work; however, I would hope a form of study and research that *The Aesthetic Character of Blackness* inspires is a consideration of how the arguments here trouble some of Benjamin's founding assumptions. See Benjamin, "Work of Art."

34 Moten, "Notes on Surrender."

35 For a distinct but equally influential conception of what troubles but is sifted through and so remains beyond "thought," see Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro*; and Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*.

36 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 8.

37 I am paraphrasing or modifying Schiller's phrasing: "The man lacking in form despises all grace of diction as corruption, all elegance in social intercourse as hypocrisy, all delicacy and loftiness of demeanour as exaggeration and affectation." Schiller, *Letter upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 48.

38 Schiller, *Letter upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 105.

39 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 23.

40 At the roots of Nietzsche's demand or provocation of aesthetic justification and the assertive impact he imagines it making on and as the world

is the desire to see music achieve a level of development paralleling the authority of technoscientific rationality and the symbolic authority of the law. Nietzsche wrote: "We will have achieved much for the study of aesthetics when we come, not merely to a logical understanding, but also to the immediately certain apprehension of the fact that the further development of art is bound up with the duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, just as reproduction depends upon the duality of the sexes, their continuing strife and only periodically occurring reconciliation." Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 8.

41 Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found," 31.

42 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 18.

43 I am using "legal character" more in terms of how Adorno rightly contextualizes both Kant and Nietzsche: "This is what dialectics holds up to our consciousness as a contradiction. Because of the immanent nature of consciousness, contradictoriness itself has an inescapably and fatefully legal character. Identity and contradiction of thought are welded together. Total contradiction is nothing but the manifested untruth of total identification. Contradiction is nonidentity under the rule of a law that affects the nonidentical as well." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5. Adorno used the term "semblance character" referring to a work of art in numerous places in his writing, most extensively in his explicit writing on music and art. But for now, see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*; as well as Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia*; Adorno, "Music and Technique"; and Adorno and Simpson, "On Popular Music."

44 The phrase "cold heart" is from Friedrich Schiller's lines appealing to and arguing against the pure rationality of the law: "Hence the abstract thinker very often has a cold heart, since he analyses the impressions which really affect the soul only as a whole; the man of business has very often a narrow heart, because his imagination, confined within the monotonous circle of his profession, cannot expand to unfamiliar modes of representation." Schiller, *Letter upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 34. In general, however, the heart is a romantic trope perhaps most associated with the Rousseauean tradition. I will delve further into the role of Rousseauean pity and other romantic references in which the language of "the heart" is more commonly rooted and which (most importantly for this study) shaped Frederick Douglass's framing of black music in his writings and speaking. As a counter to this tradition, see Ebrahim N. Hussein's play about the Maji Maji Rebellion of 1905–1907, *Kinjeketile*.

45 Sterne, *The Audible Past*.

46 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 23.

47 Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 121.

48 Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 103.

49 English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 35.

50 Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 291.

51 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 28.

52 Nietzsche rather famously wrote:

> The pre-condition of this Prometheus myth is the extraordinary value which a naïve humanity associates with fire as the true divine protector of that rising culture. But the fact that man freely controls fire and does not receive it merely as a gift from heaven, as a stirring lightning flash or warming rays of the sun, appeared to these contemplative primitive men as an outrage, a crime against divine nature. And so right there the first philosophical problem posed an awkward insoluble contradiction between man and god and pushed it right up to the door of that culture, like a boulder. The best and loftiest thing which mankind can share is achieved through a crime, and people must now accept the further consequences, namely, the entire flood of suffering and troubles with which the offended divine presences afflict the nobly ambitious human race.

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 28.

53 Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 47.

54 Kalulé, "Being Right-With."

Chapter 1. Emancipating the Spaces of Sonic Capture

1 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 134.

2 What might be read as my awkward phrasing here is an attempt to think with David Marriot's work in *Haunted Life*, about how images of black objects always imply a consecrated practice of "looking" (extending from Fanon's notion of a "look" in *Black Skin, White Masks*). I glean this understanding from Marriott's reading of the (reflected) image of Narcissus in the pool, within a Fanonian lens. Indeed black images are not simply images but the freezing of white practices of looking that constructed them. This also accounts for how I talk about Hutchinson's hands in this chapter or Victor Emerson's hands in the next chapter.

3 Davis, "Reflections on Black Women's Roles in the Community of Slaves," 86.

4 Douglass, *My Bondage*, 265–66.

5 Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*.

6 Berlant, "Genre Flailing."

7 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19–21.

8 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 13.