Jessie Cox

Sounds of Black Switzerland

Blackness,
Music, and
Unthought
Voices

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**BUY**

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# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

Black Swiss

## Many Beginnings

Changing our ears means listening beyond what can be heard. This book is about that kind of musical practice. It is clear to me now that writing this book, this work of placing ink on the page or fingers on the keyboard, with its rattling and percussive sound, is not only an extension of my musical practice but part of it. This might seem strange in some ways. How could the rather dull sound of these buttons be related to musicians playing instruments? How can staring at a mute piece of paper be anything like the flourishing sounds of musicians in concert? It is through an engagement of what musicians do, what they do to themselves and the world, by teaching us to listen, that music commences to ring in our ears, to listen again and again, like the enduring and never-ending rehearsal of our sound. That to me is the lesson of music. It is in this sense, in this ear-transforming sounding that I find also the core concern of this book. What is this sound? What are we learning to listen to through these notes before our eyes? Sounds of Black Switzerland.

This book is a *case*—an offering as well as a petition—of and for Black Swiss lives, to think about Black lives in Switzerland. I want to think about how we make audible, how we bring to thought, that which has been (placed) in silence. This sound is coming to us "in a silent way," to reference jazz icon Miles Davis, but is louder than loud.[1] Its appearance seems unthought, but it has been here all along. To think and write about Black Switzerland was for me a kind of first; it was a kind of new thought that I had to find myself. While it is clear that Black Swiss (and this term, or name, itself) have not been thought about much—a fact that seems at the time of writing this book to be changing—it is still somewhat difficult to relay this experience of having to name something that has claimed, or is claiming, not to exist. When you are a Black Swiss, a common experience is that you are told you are either Black or Swiss.[2] I knew the term *Black* and I knew the term *Swiss*. But Black is commonly thought of as outside of Switzerland, and, as a result, Blackness is taken from Black lives in Switzerland to make them Swiss. And/or Black Swiss are marked as foreigners within where they are from or where they have citizenship or live (i.e., Switzerland).[3] The lived experiences of Black lives in Switzerland are erased. Black Swiss lives should not exist.[4] But I am living as a Swiss and I am Black; Black and *living* in Switzerland—*Black Swiss*. Thus, I began this book before I was able to think it, before I was able to think *Black* and *Swiss* in conjunction in excess of a mixture, and it is this sound-making, as the writing on paper, that brings these sounds to an ear that must keep learning to listen. Here I want to focus on this practice, the practice that Blackness demands: to keep listening without claiming to know it all. For if we can change our ears, if we can learn to hear lives in excess of a fabricated proper life here (a proper citizen from here), then maybe we can imagine another world, one where Black lives matter.

In some ways, this book is about beginnings, but beginnings become a kind of uncovering, where there are multiple beginnings, because in these contexts, where our sound is impossible, we must keep insisting on how there is sound in silence. This means it is not only about revealing antiblack structures but also about how lives are shared and experienced in excess of being denied a voice. While there are a number of groups and initiatives, many of which have received further push from the globality of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, there is still much work to be done.[5] Despite the existence of Black Europeans since before modernity, the notion of a white Europe has been manufactured, and not only socially or symbolically, but also materially enforced through various methods.[6] And even if there are more and more now, who hear this sound more readily—the sound of Black lives, of Black

Europeans, of Black Swiss—I want to elaborate how the experience of having no knowledge of it, of having no way to think my own lived experiences, not only teaches us something about antiblackness but also Blackness and the world. I may speak of it as another way of listening.

I know there are many like me, Black Swiss, or people who care about Black lives, also in Switzerland, who have (or had) no language, no way of speaking or thinking about the situation of Black Swiss. While discourses around antiblackness seem to grow in the aftermath of the national and international uncovering of police brutalities, I want us to think in excess of racism and antiblackness; I want to think about Black lives and the stories they tell, about what kind of radical potential to refigure the world lies in the study of their thought and practices, in this black study. If antiblackness denies our talking about Black lives, then to share our life experiences with each other in excess of what is supposedly properly here is black study's protest-celebration. The study of lives, stories that should not exist, is what I want to engage in, and this study is about us and the world. It is about asking what "us" sounds like, because antiblackness cuts off what we are, what Swissness looks like, what Blackness can't be. So, on the one hand, antiblackness demarcates and delimits what a proper citizen, what life itself, looks and sounds like. On the other hand, antiblackness also encircles blackness. Antiblackness denies Black lives to meet each other in excess of controlled enclosures. Blackness opens the question, the question of who "us" is, without the possibility of ever closing it. It bespeaks relations beyond what can be accounted for.

In 2020, Black Swiss artists wrote a public letter to all art institutions in Switzerland, asking them "to invest more actively in the necessary process to become more anti-racist."[7] They make it quite clear: antiblack brutalities claim lives also here in Switzerland:

> Within the last years, at least three Black men have been killed by the police in Lausanne and Bex: Mike Ben Peter, Lamine Fatty and Hervé Mandundu. None of their murderers have been convicted and therefore no justice has been awarded to these men or their families. One must also bring to light the fact that many assaults due to racial profiling by the police rarely end with the police being charged. The most prominent cases are those of Mohamed Wa Baile and Wilson A.
>
> While these examples speak to some of the most extreme forms of racism, we must acknowledge that anti-Black racism is a direct derivative of white supremacy: an oppressive system of beliefs and

discriminatory set of biases that is inherent in all structures of the Western World.[8]

Their call to action to art spaces is amplified by a recent call to the whole of Switzerland by a team of experts from the United Nations (UN), who have declared that the issue of antiblack racism in Switzerland is "urgent."[9] "Switzerland Refutes the Accusations of Racism by the UN," reads a headline in the national news, following the publication of this report. The basis for such refusal plays into the very mechanisms of antiblackness: that it bespeaks only individuals, and that the report was based on many "assumptions."[10] It is the turning into an exception of events of violence against Black lives that denotes their deaths as accidental and in turn also as outside of concern for study. In other words, the denial of antiblackness reifies and articulates the claim that these deaths are insignificant for study, for an investigation into the reasons behind why they happen, with such also inhibiting the prevention of further deaths and the asking of questions about the causes for them (see chapter 2).[11] The world keeps reproducing itself as antiblack in the very evasion of the question about Black lives and the violence inflicted on them.[12]

One of the artists who signed this open letter, Soraya Lutangu, who goes by the stage name "Bonaventure," created an EP thematizing this violence. It was after her nephew's death that she began working on this EP, and that made her engage antiblack racism. As she states: "It sounds so stupid now, but before that [the death of my nephew] I was fully focused on graphic and book design and I was obsessed with my career. Each time I would have those racist micro-aggressions (that are really common where I grew up) I would laugh about it. It was a way to protect myself, but today I'm not the same person at all. I am convinced that my nephew died also because of the colour of his skin, and this really shocked me, changed me."[13]

The opening track "Supremacy" tackles the problem head-on.[14] It reveals a violence usually willfully disassociated with Switzerland. The static sonic tapestry in combination with crunching, screeching, and pulsing sounds reflects a tenseness, a state of terror, that antiblack brutalities bring with them. But it is also a protest. Bonaventure layers selections of an interview by rap artist and activist Sister Souljah on top of this *state-of-emergency*-like soundscape. In it comes to the fore, as protest, how *Black* is a site for reclaiming not only one's own life but also the world, history, and study. How underneath, in spite of, against, and in excess of antiblackness there are Black lives, Black thought, and Black stories.

It is in this that comes to the fore how blackness bespeaks something that exceeds the confines of a world rooted in antiblackness. Blackness is the very possibility of thinking beyond the already given context of a world that both claims itself against otherness and attempts to keep erasing this antagonistic relation. What if "black" is the heading under which we can hear an (unavoidable) impossibility—the changing of the world towards the unknown, the unimagined, the speculative? By this I also mean that thinking about Black lives is like pushing the "anti" of antiblackness out, like turning the problem into study.[15] It is how by revealing the violence that enforces a normative society against those who must embody danger (i.e., Black lives), there comes to the fore lives lived in excess of brutal control over who *us* may be, who we may make relations with, who may live here, or in general. It is through this music that we learn of Black lives and their stories, where we engage in black study. Through our listening to this EP, we learn about antiblackness experienced in Switzerland, in the world, but also about Black lives. Bonaventure speaks in sound, and through this music our listening may exceed discourses that are entangled in the erasure of Black lives.

Switzerland as a country is connected to different spheres of articulations of Black studies due to its four language regions. The study of Black lives in Germany took its incipit in the '80s with Katherine Oguntoye, May Opitz, and Dagmar Schultz and their seminal book *Showing Our Colors*. The book is a space of meetings among lives, Black lives, and lives close to Black lives—it was the study of Black lives that caused also their meeting. In fact, the very term *Black* cannot exist without Black lives meeting, meetings that at once move past borders of an antiblack world and at the same time open up the possibilities of who *us* may be. Antiblackness controls and limits who may meet, who may make relations, and with whom one may associate. Blackness thus bespeaks making new relations—in life, in thought, in sound, and so forth.[16]

This also means that Black studies, and these terms, must exceed their instantiations, their narratives that emerge in antiblack structures. This is to say that the way in which *Black* becomes reduced to a nation such as the United States, or the reducing of Black lives to certain geographic locations, serves to delimit and erase Black *lives*.[17] These terms like *Black*, or *Afro-German*, must be in excess of these conditions that enclose blackness into distinct categories pre-given by an antiblack world. *Black* bespeaks the dealing with the contexts of the world as a way to change the world. For it is through these terms (*Black*, *Negro*, *Afro-German*, and *Black Swiss*) that antiblackness may be addressed,

that the histories of those who fought against antiblackness may be told, and that the world may be transformed for the better.[18]

Black study in Switzerland has been practiced in the underground and in plain sight. Cikuru Batumike's three books, *Présence africaine en Suisse* (1993), *Être Noir africain en Suisse* (2006), and *Noirs de Suisse* (2014), mark a first in the thematization of Black lives in Switzerland. His initial two books focus on the immigration experience of Africans but his third monograph begins centering the particular situation of Black Swiss.[19] Batumike is a journalist, essayist, and poet who left Bukavu in then Zaire, and today the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in 1982 after having been imprisoned due to his political criticism, and has lived in Switzerland since 1984.[20] Thus, while the study of Black Switzerland has not received much attention, there have nonetheless been incursions by individuals against all odds.[21]

Slowly there is at least more focus on antiblack racism, especially in Switzerland. Exemplary is the very recent edited collection *Un/Doing Racism*, published in 2022, which thematizes a variety of modalities of racialization and unpacks Switzerland's relation to race and racism. While we do have these works, and many more, and they keep coming, the situation in Switzerland requires us to keep learning to learn to listen (because the sound keeps changing) to study Black lives. Similarly, the authors of *I Will Be Different Every Time*, published in 2020 to the library of black study in Switzerland, demonstrate that it is about the stories of us, of Black lives, of Black lives in Switzerland, and about how our stories make us; they are our sound.[22] Black study has been practiced in spaces and discourses beyond what they could know or bespeak, in music and art, where we may listen for some radical thought-work.

I begin this book with an elaboration of cases of antiblackness in Switzerland (chapter 2), how the specific case of Switzerland uncovers antiblackness's fundamental modalities of color-blindness and multiculturalism, followed by a more general thinking through of antiblackness as it relates to the formation of the nation-state (chapter 4). I do so to facilitate a *dive* into Black Switzerland and its sounds.[23] It is only through engaging the study of Black lives, and of blackness in general, that antiblackness can properly be critiqued. If antiblackness is the condition of erasing blackness from within (let's say, Switzerland), then any critical engagement that stops at the critique of antiblackness is still held in a bind with an antiblack world. As Switzerland teaches us, antiblackness polices the inside of the nation, not only in terms of physical geographic borders but also in terms of biological, *cultural*, and otherwise. This policing is an attempt to erase blackness from within. But in critiquing

scenes of antiblackness come also to the fore those lives, those voices, who speak against antiblackness, who live despite antiblackness, who thrive with and in Blackness.

What I want to talk about is Black Swiss lives. I want to talk about the sounds coming from Black Switzerland. Writing these words on pages, I hear how my ears change, how the idea of Black Swissness does something to these enclosed categories. These names turned into something final and fixed. We must stay with this moment, this interstitial space, this temporal break, where the boundaries of enclosed spaces become audible. This is what it means to think and speak about blackness.

### Speaking of Black Swiss

How do we speak about Black lives in Switzerland in excess of discourses, and terms, that are entangled in antiblackness's erasure of Black Swiss? This does not mean that there aren't people who have termed, or named, Black Swiss, who have formed organizations to think and speak about Black lives in Switzerland. Rather, I need to unravel a general situation of having to re-invent names because antiblackness makes *Black Swiss* into something that does not exist. Naming Blackness is about learning: about the world, oneself in relation to others, and coming together with others, being together with the world and others. In Blackness coming together, expressed as the out-of-bound naming of Blackness, like naming Black Swiss, as a way to speak about Black lives, and think about blackness, is a breakdown of names too. This is because such naming does violence to an economy of names based in proper relations—that is, names authorized by a world defined against black. It is a question of naming Blackness because: What do we do with something that has many names and no name at the same time? How do we even think about this lived experience, this fact, that is Black life?[24] For us to come together as a study of Black lives is to make Black lives matter, and such is the sound of lives in excess of what can be accounted for. Black, we must conclude, is not reducible to a name, even though we enter it into the world of names and words, but rather it is an excess of naming that unnames and names anew, where names aren't in themselves. Our situation is one without words for us, so we must make them ourselves. This is the musical creativity of Blackness. Blackness is stealing away from its name, as the continual changing of our sound. How do we come to make a sound? First, we must listen—listen to us, to each other, to the world—beyond what we thought sound could be.

Searching for a sound means thinking about music: whenever I compose music, I search for sounds in many ways, and I make sounds in this search that is the act of writing down notes on pages. Listen beyond what can be seen. Listen to the inaudible sounds beyond what could ever be heard.[25] It is like when you enter the concert hall and the orchestra begins to tune, but this time, instead of tuning to a prefixed pitch, like A, musicians, and us, are listening to each other to hear what we might have ignored in us.[26] When composing, I don't write what was already there; rather, I try to listen for what has escaped my ears, changing, in the process, how I listen. It is about re-learning to listen, again and again, and again. Like when we first learn a word, when a word is an ambiguous sound that we can't quite hear yet, and its meaning is blurry to our mind, although it already bespeaks a complex set of relations (in excess of already existing relations). Can we keep coming back to this moment, between spaces of knowing, where we really listen and change our own listening in the process?

Listening to the sound of Black lives in Switzerland began for me, of course, with finding my own sound—that is the process of becoming a musician. It was the moments in which I met (with my ears) Black Swiss and their sounds that thoughts of Black Switzerland came to me. But this change is illusory—this idea that I was ever listening, or sounding, on my own. For the sound that is me, the finding of my sound, is the process of hearing the meeting of others as me. I hear this me as a coming together of sounds, like music, that opens thought. I hear this book as an extension of this meeting, and as such, it is also opening a space to think about Black lives. It is in this listening beyond what is already accounted for, what I call *interstitial listening*, that our ears are transformed into instruments to join the music. In this book, there are five "Interstitial Listenings" chapters. These are the odd-numbered chapters (1, 3, 5, 7, 9). In them, we listen to the theorizing and thinking that happens in the music of Black Swiss. These are interspersed between the even-numbered chapters (2, 4, 6, 8, 10), which contain theoretical elaborations that are derived from and extend these listenings. We meet Black Swiss in listening to their music, as a relearning to listen, as an interstitial listening.

My use of the term *interstitial* is not a simple in-between space that can be reduced to its proper position as between wholes. The interstitial in this book is both a theoretical device and a compositional method for opening us to improvising new music. Throughout the book I shift our listening, like in a musical composition/performance.[27] The silence, or nonexistence, I show is not the absence of sound or the negative of existence. Rather, silences make sounds. Silence is not the end, or the death of things as the losing of a life

that can be owned. Rather, it is death, the unthought, that which could be, what could have been, and all the possibilities never heard of. Silences are the dreams that make us; silences are sounding music. To hear Black Swiss lives is to encounter the unknown in a fashion that makes what is known unknown, which breaks down the boundary that in-between is supposed to uphold. That is because the term *Black Swiss* does not describe a self-contained, nor existing, or connected, officially recognized community, and so we must think beyond a world that denies Blackness's existence beyond being delimited by antiblackness.[28]

I center a series of musical works bespeaking Black lives in and as Switzerland. While there are numerous Black artists, musicians, thinkers, organizers, and activists in Switzerland, I decided, for this project, not to make a list. This is not because I do not believe in list-making (and I do hope others will continue uncovering Black Swiss musicians). On the contrary, I think that the very act of making lists that are written for and by Black lives, to document them and their lives or actions, can be radically disruptive activism (see chapter 3). This is because antiblackness requires Black lives to be erased, to disappear from here, to have no part, to be unaccountable, except as something that can be owned, or held, in contradistinction, so as to establish proper belonging and authority, through owning others. While there have been lists, lists of the value of Black slaves for example, that have been used to instantiate antiblack structures, these lists turn Black lives into only those kinds of numbers that track capital or serve the narrative that Black lives are no lives at all—an attempt to encircle blackness and hold it off. This bespeaks less a kind of fundamental flaw in numbers, lists, or other kinds of measurements, but rather a specific modality of limiting what can be registered. I will unpack this further in chapter 8 as also a shift in how we listen, and it will become evident how a different modality of thinking about registering is required to talk and think about, and with, Black lives. This also means that the absence of lists is far from a guaranteed counter to antiblackness, as the situation in Switzerland unequivocally proves.

Nonetheless, my approach here, in this work, is more toward trying to follow a theoretical thrust in a couple of artistic works; that is, this refiguring of what it means to count—we might say, of how to tell our stories. To this aim, I have included, firstly, a series of works that think through the situation of Black lives in Switzerland. Secondly, these artists' and their works' relation to Switzerland is not based on a kind of delimitation of belonging that is entangled in antiblackness. In other words, belonging is not reducible to being born somewhere, to naturalization, or other kinds of proper claims to

citizenship that are based in the exclusion of those lives deemed improper. Black Swiss live here, migrated here, were born here, and all other ways of arriving/departing we might have. In this sense, it is about rethinking what it means to be a citizen, what it means to belong without being a citizen. We might say that this is a question of how we engage space and the world, as a question of the relations between each other, or us, and how such a question is not reducible to a proper belonging measured by a system of legality and rights to be able to be in a space, or being part of a space. Thus, for me, thinking about *Black Swiss* has never been about a kind of nationalism that emerged in the nineteenth century, a nationalism entangled in the protection of capital and wealth accumulated through exploitation of Blacks and Indigenous in particular. Rather, I hope to open the door with this term—which is really inevitable, as this term *Black Swiss* cannot not refigure the very notion of citizenship and belonging—a question of how we relate to each other, space, time, planet earth, and the cosmos.

While global Black Lives Matter protests reinvigorated discussions about antiblackness all over the world, they also allowed long-brewing initiatives to come to the fore and gain new steam. These were pushed forward by people working behind the scenes toward a more just world for many years. One of those coincided by mere chance with 2020—namely, the Afro-Modernism in Contemporary Music conference presented by Ensemble Modern, who are based in Frankfurt, Germany, in collaboration with my then doctoral advisor, Columbia University professor, composer, scholar, and pioneer of electronic music George E. Lewis. This conference, of which I was also a part, opened doors in the classical music world, particularly the one that cares about living composers and artists (as opposed to focusing mainly on a death canon). With such, it, and the events or changes following it, also opened my own ears. It was there that I began needing to use the term *Afro-Swiss*, which I turned into Black Swiss, so as to speak about my own experience.

But the first time I had used the term was when I had to reflect on the musical collaborations between me and Jérémie Jolo (whose work I speak about in chapter 3) for a presentation at Columbia University. I had to verbalize how our music bespeaks our lived experiences—to be Black and Swiss, in excess of given ways to think about Black lives or Swissness (or Europeanness). It also reflects our particular experience of antiblackness; for example, of how the divide between classical music and jazz (and pop, rock, and so forth) is entangled in questions of antiblackness and how we navigate these spaces.[29] In some ways, we can say that the music came first, before our recognition of a

term to be able to reflect on it *extra-musically*. Music was our thinking in excess of readily available terms, discourses, and spaces. We were theorizing and studying blackness, Black lives, outside of possible discourses and thoughts. This is how I arrived at the idea that there might be a way to elaborate on the complexities of Black Swiss lives through studying their/our music.

Something popped in my ears at these musical meetings, like when your ears get used to the pressure change when diving into the waters or taking off in a flying object across different mediums. But my ears aren't alone; they listen with the world, and so it is things that happen in the world, such as the Black Lives Matter protests, that change how we listen. Shortly after 2020 I was introduced to the music of a Swiss composer who'd been composing radical sounds for years in St. Gallen, Switzerland. Charles Uzor is a Swiss Nigerian composer, and the discussion of two of his works build the cornerstones of this book (chapters 1, 7, and 9). Both of these works are homages to George Floyd, and both of these works not only critique antiblackness in general but also the form in which it tends to present itself in the classical music world and in Switzerland. At the same time, these two pieces also move beyond critiquing antiblackness to a celebration of Black lives and blackness's radical potentialities for the world and lives. These pieces, and Uzor's collection of works in general, brought me the idea of writing this book about Black Switzerland, because of the depth of the theorizing that I found within them. What Uzor's works for Floyd evince is that Black lives require thinking and living with the global as well as the provincial, the individual and the societal, the universal and the particular. Blackness is about the particular, the local places, individual people, without ever not also being a cosmic question.

While Uzor marks the incipit for this book, Swiss-based German Ghanian artist Akosua Viktoria Adu-Sanyah's artwork *White Gaze II Black Square* is where I found its conclusion. But this conclusion is not a closing of the book or the questions and research directions it opens. Rather, it is a kind of opening, like how a black hole's center, its end, is where it really opens time and space to the unknown (I discuss her piece in chapter 7). It marks the particular situation of Black Switzerland, or Black Europe, as a general question of blackness and the world, and particularly our current historical time.

"White gaze" is a term that comes from the seminal work of Martiniquan philosopher and psychologist Frantz Fanon for describing the antiblack gazing that he experienced when arriving in France.[30] While I unpack the question of this gaze further throughout the book, I want to highlight here simply how this gaze is about fixing negative judgment in blackness and, in turn, this blackness in some people. But Adu-Sanyah is uncovering, with her

doubling down on the gaze, something about gazing, about looking (which is that glossiness, or a kind of excess of reflection and absorption, of blackness), where looking becomes the falling over and into the artwork of the observer.[31] This black square that is so glossy that it is full of noise—it reflects all those observers in an opaque way—exceeds its square hold. Something happens in this scene, this moment of releasing our observations, our listening and seeing, registering, and reading, from the hold of "I" into "II," or I'n'I, through this reflective and opaque black square. Antiblackness means to limit yourself (albeit through holding others, blackness, Black lives as limit) and the world, so as to be an individual, as an infinitely enclosed subject that is by itself and separate to its end (and thus ends and must, inevitably, fail). It's like if the artwork, this black square, remains merely something to orient your gaze against, staying separate from the artwork. Won't the artwork remain inaccessible to you? If the music, the color on the canvas, doesn't change you, changes who you are, and is merely some experience for an unchanging thing, then you are already doomed to end, you've already made your end, right here, in black. You end where the art begins, you end where the music starts. But this doubling of *I* (eye; a gaze/view) that happens in this blackness that sticks to you in its glossy reflectiveness is where the end of you becomes the beginning of I, where any I can only be not-me—it is about caring for us beyond a "mine."

Learning to Listen

*White Gaze II Black Square* is about the question of naming, about what a name does. By naming Blackness, by speaking about Black lives, and studying blackness, we explode the shackles of individuals against each other in an antiblack paradigm for the world that holds blackness in opposition to itself. We must speak about this name, "Black," as the unholdability of names and naming, how whenever we speak about black we must keep studying, we must keep learning about Black lives, about blackness, about us, about the world. Antiblackness is the holding of everything bad inside of this name that is also the attempt of erasing everything with this name "black." But by messing with the word, making it move across death and life, through giving it an uppercase—which denotes Black lives—and then again a lowercase—which denotes blackness as a concept—and by uncovering further uppercases, and changing the lowercase, this name starts moving.[32] It moves, it is alive, in excess of a relation of signs that authorizes them and gives them value, and meaning.

We can only conclude that blackness is not its name, blackness is not its nameability nor its namedness, which is its contextual appearance in antiblackness (as a historically, geographically, biologically contained world)—it cannot be held in a name. This is because blackness must be not its name as it is otherwise simply the demarcation of antiblackness as a categorical self-containedness of the human without black, as unmarked.[33] As I elaborate in chapters 2 and 4, there is this idea of the citizen as unmarked and blackness or race is a mere addition, which actually reifies the unmarkedness of those who are less raced (i.e., those who can inhabit whiteness). Everything that has to do with race, particularly the negatives, including racism, is displaced onto blackness, to the "raced." This is even the case in a social milieu where there are no racial categories, where there is no national account of "racial" identities and no shared discourses around race, racism, Blackness, and so forth. Of course, I am here thinking of Switzerland in particular to make a general observation about the functioning of racism; how the absence of questions of "race" are not the end of racialization and racism. But in the end, Blackness is about more than the question of race.[34] Blackness exceeds the term *race* and it exceeds a system of racism that places some at the top and others at the bottom of the world. The issue is that a conception of some more fundamental—or, let's say, essential—humanness keeps placing blackness as an abject thing of the human, as well as one of the (among other) *instances* of life, while those unmarked remain properly human.[35] Race is placed outside the proper citizen/life in the (negative) ascription of a truth of being, or identity or essence, that being human supposedly is. It is, in other words, through the negative example, the exception to the rule, that those who are not reducible to mere race are made a proper human/subject. Thinking beyond blackness as the loci of mere race, or as absolutely held as only the opposite of whiteness, is necessary to uncover how blackness bespeaks something more than an instance of life—as instances of life have been used as delimitations of time, space, and existence defined against blackness. All these attempts to be without blackness turns blackness into a mere negative of a proper being, a proper sound, a proper world, and so forth. Our celebration of Blackness as and for Black people is not about a necessity of identification; rather, this is about how blackness opens up the question of what may be.

Antiblackness is the erasure of lives on the basis of some kind of fixed thing that we must fit in, that we must be just to be (just to be human, or Swiss, or any other kind of life). That can mean being turned into one among others or an other among ones: how Black lives are made into absolute non-individuals, and at the same time how the very concept of the individual requires

a world of no-ones, under the name "black."[36] But it is this meeting, where Black lives, no-ones without names, become named, or where an unname, like "black," becomes a name; where something happens that transmutates the one into a singularity like a black hole, and there a cosmos is revealed, connected by wormholes.

We must conclude that *Black* as a term, as well as a name, cannot be owned. It makes sense since *property* relations—that is, authorized ownership—begins in slavery and is, as a result, entangled in antiblack structures. It makes sense, since Black lives have always been unnamed by an antiblack world. *Black* has been a term naming the negativity of all things valued. The term bespeaks the undesirable other against which all proper names define themselves. Many scholars have uncovered that it is the situation of "Black" to be of social death, and musician, poet, philosopher, and Afrofuturism pioneer Sun Ra theorized such, "Blackness," as appearing under the name of death.[37] In this scene, the term *black* functions as a kind of limit to naming. This is about how ownership over property is claimed with names, with signing. It is signs that express the value of commodity on the basis that these signs reflect the value of the commodity. And such value, the value of the sign, is a result of the relations of exchange and labor that it is enmeshed in. Like a grammar, that is the value of words due to their relations; names/signs are valued because they are of relations. But if Blacks are marked under the name of death, and if a name is only about contractual relations and are not equitable with what they mark (for example, the commodity), then Blackness has no claim to its name. This is why *Black* is an un-name; it is a word that exceeds the definitions of a world that is based on controlling it. Black bespeaks the unnamed, those whose name is erased—like all those Black lives lost to antiblack violence. What happens when the name is stolen away from the grammar that holds it as its opposite? When *black* ceases to be merely the negative backdrop against which names are defined? Like how life is defined against death/black, how beauty is defined against impurity/black. Claiming the name, turning it into an uppercase *Black*, is the demonstrative act of shifting the whole world in relations, into another way of making relations. This naming, this organizing under this un-name, is our meeting in excess of delimitations of belonging and life articulated in and by antiblack paradigms.

Black as name is always only possible as an excess of names and their embeddedness in a grammar, that is, an overarching whole of words, that determines their value. But there is something that opens up, that happens in a transmutative kind of way, to names, words, terms, or signs in general in this naming of *black*. What if words' need for a grammar, or names' need to

be enmeshed in relations, is nothing other than the fact that they cannot be in themselves? What if the claim to an authority of naming, to a proper accounting of lives using names or using some kind of measuring stick, breaks down when we look under the hood, so to speak, of naming? When new words come to pass, when we make grammar anew, because of lives who migrate, like *Usländerdütsch* (foreigner-German, see chapter 8) or creolization, then that might just reveal how signs are not sufficient in themselves. Words are entangled in the world and the lives that move in it, that shift what it is. Names come out from the unthought, and more unthought, more questions, come when we name. Naming becomes about lives in relation.[38] Signs cease to be self-sufficient, text exceeds the page, and its sense exceeds relation to only other signs. Signs become simply vehicles, conduits, for music.

There is a common issue here that is of the order of a misunderstanding of names. The idea that blackness is just race, or even just racism, is the idea that the antiblack world makes, or made, it. Antiblackness does not own blackness, does not own *black* as term, nor in any other way. I am pointing here to an issue of antiblackness conceived as that which makes blackness. Blackness becomes reduced to antiblackness itself. If we follow this line of reasoning, then antiblackness had the power for self-creation—*which is the very claim that makes it*. Antiblackness is the claim to absolute authority and knowledge over all life and the world. But if that were possible, then it would not have to make the name of blackness as a marker for that which is its own limit, its own end—which is also to say, antiblackness needs to make itself and in so doing needs to mark its own end, or that which is not authorized to be it. This means also to erase that which it makes its end from within it, dispelling it to a border that can be controlled. It is the claiming of authority over the unauthorized that forms the basis for antiblackness's claim to authority—it is the fabrication and control of its own end, its borders, that belies antiblackness's claim for authority. Antiblackness is the confusion of death/end as a finality of itself, and blackness is that which is in excess of one life by itself with a beginning and an end—an end at the borders of me, of a citizenship, of a nation. Thought as a question of names, it is revealed as a question of who has the right to definition. I don't mean that as merely a question of choosing but rather as a question of the way in which the very right to definition, this authority, is rooted in the erasure of the *conditionality* of names, of signs in a general sense. What happens when those who have been denied the right to definition define, through naming, themselves?

Blackness is togetherness as a coming together to search for a name, in the nonposition of that which is un-nameable as the excess of proper naming.

And such meeting is always already a coming together before knowing that we are coming together (as we don't have a name for such meeting/practice). Such name-search as never concluding, as always only made in organizing or being beside oneself, is a radical refiguring of languages made up of signs (as names) that flip the world on its head. Blackness's generativity of naming, its revealing of name's relational and poetic fabrication, is messing with names in a way that un-names, un-signs—like the *X* that is claimed by Malcolm—name's valuation in exchange for relations.[39]

I engage this sound, *Black Swiss*, as an expression of me as never having been (by) myself, as a way to think beyond me as self-contained. We, Black Swiss, don't really have a name; we never really had a name, and we already spoke about those things that are called in by Blackness. Thus, Blackness is the heading of the un-nameable, a naming beyond names as part of antiblack identification methods. For me, this name "Black" contains and invokes, petitions for all of this care that Afro-women (like Oguntoye et al.) in their organizing gave me as a practice for more than me, for "Me, Myself, and I," for our meeting as the telling and writing of our stories—that is Blackness to me.[40] At the end, the idea for this book came to me only when I heard Black Swiss, and listening had always been the site to hear us. Hearing falls over into the music we make when we sing, and write, of Black lives.

INTRODUCTION. BLACK SWISS

1. Referencing Davis, *In a Silent Way*.

2. See, for example, Adu-Sanyah's description of her *Inheritance—Poems of Non-Belonging* series, of which the piece *White Gaze II* is a part. As she writes: "Inheritance—Poems of Non-Belonging is a growing narrative on the incompatible nature of my biracial identity, provoked by the conflicting desires of belonging for once, and yet wanting to be able to define the Self independently from external judgment and categorization, while remaining the other—regardless if I'm confronted with my presence in the white culture I grew up in, or with a temporary appearance in a Black culture." Adu-Sanyah, "Current Work."

It is exemplified in the question "Where are you from?," a question that implicitly makes the proper here as not-Black, nor any other people of color, as white. See Zanni, "Die Frage 'Woher kommst du?' ist rassistisch."

3. Campt points out the similar situation in Germany in the twentieth century. Campt, "Afro-German Cultural Identity and the Politics of Positionality," 113.

4. See Wright, "Others-from-Within from Without," 298.

5. The earliest documented organization I am aware of at this time that centered Black lives in Switzerland was Women of Black Heritage (WBH), founded in the late '80s. Burke et al., *I Will Be Different Every Time*, 58.

6. For a good reference, see the website Black Central Europe, "Home."

7. "To All Art Spaces in Switzerland," Black Artists and Cultural Workers in Switzerland.

8. "To All Art Spaces in Switzerland," Black Artists and Cultural Workers in Switzerland. Also, as Stevens notes, there are many more cases. Stevens, "Many Black People Get Killed by Police in Quiet Switzerland Too."

9. "Switzerland Must Urgently Confront Anti-Black Racism," United Nations.

10. "Expertengruppe zu Rassismus," SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen.

11. Martinot and Sexton, "The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy."

12. See, for example, Jung and Vargas, *Antiblackness*, 8.

13. Kay, "Berlin-Based Producer Bonaventure on Trauma,."

14. Bonaventure, "Supremacy."

15. I am here referencing Du Bois's practice. See Wright, *Becoming Black*, 74.

16. Campt elaborates on how the term *Afro-Germanness* from its inception was not delimitable into a distinct identity category but rather articulated as a "plurality" of identities, or heritages and experiences—from race, to nationality, and gender. Campt, "Afro-German Cultural Identity and the Politics of Positionality," 111.

17. Black Europeans are keenly aware of this modality of antiblackness. See, for example, Batumike, *Noirs de Suisse*, 127; Campt, "Afro-German Cultural Identity and the Politics of Positionality," 123–24; Singletary, "Everyday Matters," 148.

18. Du Bois's choice for the term "Negro" as a modification of an antiblack definition exemplifies such. While Du Bois does mention it to describe a people, his elaboration initially and the following questions opened by his elaboration exceed a notion of a properly delimited group of people. Du Bois, *Writings*, 1220–22.

19. Batumike discusses racism and also briefly the shared experience of Black lives across boundaries of national origin/belonging in Switzerland in *Présence africaine en Suisse*, 40–44.

20. Batumike, *Présence africaine en Suisse*, back cover; L'Harmattan, "Cikuru Batumike."

21. Scholars of Afro-Germany have pointed out the hegemony of US discourses within Black studies. Campt, *Other Germans*, 176–78.

22. Burke et al., *I Will Be Different Every Time*.

23. I'm referencing here the mystical ruminations around Black lives in the Atlantic Ocean, because many Black lives were lost in the ocean during the slave trade. See, for example, Gumbs, *Undrowned*.

24. I'm leaning here on Moten's insistence on staying within the gap of translating Fanon's fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, in "The Case of Blackness," 179–80.

25. As Gordon elaborates:

> In effect, that to see what G-d (in such a presumption) saw was to see that which should not be seen. There is a form of illicit seeing, then, at the very beginnings of seeing black, which makes a designation of seeing in black, theorizing, that is, in black, more than oxymoronic. It has the mythopoetics of sin.
>  Although the subsequent unfolding of theory claimed other sites of legitimacy, where G-d fell to systems of thought demanding accounts of nature without an overarching teleology—instead elevating what could be thought through inescapable or insurmountable resources of understanding, as Kant subsequently argued—the symbolic baggage of prior ages managed to reassert themselves at subterranean levels of grammar. (Gordon, "Theory in Black," 197)

26. Like the way composer Muhal Richard Abrams would tune his ensembles:

> At the beginning of the second rehearsal, Abrams suggested that the brass and woodwinds "tune up." In place of the usual single tuning note, however, Abrams looked down at some paper on his music stand and started assigning pitches to players. The musicians, who probably expected to tune in a conventional fashion, were suddenly scrambling to make sense of Abrams's directions. It gradually emerged that Abrams was constructing four thirteen-note chords, which

he described as alternating between having "tension" and "no tension," and that these chords and their progression constituted his "tune up": "let's see what kind of sound we're getting as a unit," he said immediately before the band played through the chords. (See Hannaford, "One Line, Many Views," 1–2.)

27. And thus the book performs a radical refusal of a certain kind of narrative that is antiblack in its delimitation of time and events. See chapter 1.

28. Like it used to be, and still is, depending on how we define community, the case in Germany: "Black Germans are not a community, and also not an outside." See Campt, *Other Germans*, 103

29. Jazz is grouped with all musical styles that are not classical (or *traditional*) in the musical pedagogical system in Switzerland. For an elaboration of the way that the production of whiteness and classical music intersect, see Thurman, "Performing Lieder, Hearing Race."

30. See chapter 5 in Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

31. Leaning on Moten's elaboration of falling, black squares, and Blackness in "The Case of Blackness."

32. Uppercase *Black* denotes all things to do with Black lives, while *blackness* denotes a concept. I have elsewhere attempted to reopen the question of this continual movement. Cox and Jean-François, "Aesthetics of (Black) Breathing," 106, 108, 110.

33. That is, if blackness is absolutely knowable and encircleable by an antiblack world. We might hear this as a matter of tokenism, where race and otherness are contained within one, or a few, persons of color and, at the same time, whiteness continues to function as the norm. See El-Tayeb, *European Others*, 6.

34. It must be so, for its reduction to mere race is the way antiblackness protects itself, or distances itself, from blackness.

35. We might think of this as how blackness asks us to refigure the human or, alternatively also, as how blackness asks us to think in excess of the human. I am leaning here also on Moten's observation that "blackness cuts the distinction between essence and instance." Moten, *Stolen Life*, 15–16, 241.

36. I hear one of the authors of *I Will Be Different Every Time* transform the notion of the individual when she resists being reduced, as a Black person, to being the voice/image of all Black people (from a question of being an individual on the basis of opposing others to being an individual as the others' refusal of being reduced to one thing). Burke et al., *I Will Be Different Every Time*, 23.

37. Sun Ra, "Death Speaks to the Negro," 0:40–1:20.

38. In poetic relations, to be exact, which requires us to think of relations in excess of relations, as some kind of opaque poetics. After Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

39. Moten uncovers how blackness is a generativity that bursts the seams of language and law or structure. Moten, "Jurisgenerative Grammar (for Alto)."

40. Beyoncé, "Me, Myself and I."

## CHAPTER 1. INTERSTITIAL LISTENINGS I

1. Judy points out that methodology is entangled in domains of knowledge and how Blackness requires a refiguring of them. Judy, *(Dis)forming the American Canon*, 3–5.