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Mecca Jamilah Sullivan

*Bryn Mawr College*, [mjsullivan@brynmawr.edu](mailto:mjsullivan@brynmawr.edu)

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# "LET THE MADNESS IN THE MUSIC GET TO YOU": POETIC POSSIBILITIES FROM THE BLACK SONIC UNDERGROUND (OR, "SOUND CARRIES")

MECCA JAMILAH SULLIVAN

*What is the sound a racial state might inspire? What sound does it initiate? How might the experience of existing within such a state attune one to different sonic possibilities?*

—Carter Mathes, *Imagine the Sound*, 2015

*if you listen /  
you cd imagine us like music & make us yrs.*

—Ntozake Shange, "*takin a solo/ a poetic possibility/ a poetic imperative*," 1978

Where does blackness go to create its own freedom? In a nation-state shaped by racist narratives, where can American blackness sound out stories of the possible? In *Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature after Civil Rights*, Carter Mathes brings us to the "underground," a space of poetic and political life where "resistant

aurality” allows for “a vocalization of black fugitive resistance” that can “diagnose and disrupt the links between white supremacy and ideas of American law, order, and domestic security,” and fathom a blackness beyond the racial logics of the state (2015, 4, 3). In the underground, Mathes shows, this orality gathers and resounds, animated not only by the need to change the structural terms of black living, but also by the need to renegotiate the linguistic terms in which the story of black life is told: it is “a space of clandestine black resistance entangled with the everyday oppressive realities of black working-class life” (4). Leading us through this space of sonic resistance, in the book’s introduction, Mathes invites us in to ask: “What is the literary sound of these underground dimensions” of black radical thought and sociopolitical life (5)? Throughout this dazzling work, he asks us to reframe our understandings of political voicing and social disruption around the literary arts, pushing us to question how resistance, rebellion, subterfuge, and dissent resonate in the soundscape of the imaginary.

The underground Mathes takes up is the space of Ralph Ellison’s “lower frequencies,” from which his self-sequestered invisible narrator speaks the dramas of American race in the twentieth century. It is the space below the hidden “doorways” under which Audre Lorde’s poetic speaker voices the violences of racialized, sexualized homophobia and desubjectivation in her 1978 “Litany for Survival,” insisting we “speak/ remembering/ we were never meant to survive” (Ellison 1952, 581; Lorde 1995, 31). These underground spaces of resistant voicing are permeable, sometimes provisional. Ellison’s narrator can retreat from the multiple binds of his invisibility, but he is always implicated in the riots of racialization burning beyond his hole; Lorde’s speaker speaks from beneath the threshold, defying the pale protections of silence, but she does not escape the fear that attends black queer loving in public and private space. For these writers, the underground is both structure and strategy—it offers space for freedom and re-contextualization, but only within its shifting, porous bounds.

And yet, *sound carries*.

Reading black post-civil rights literature from 1965 to 1980, Mathes shows how the sonic, in black postmodern and post-WWII expression, carries us beyond dominant narratives of American race and racialization (narratives that, by their structure, preserve racist

power structures in the name of a “national mythology of capitalist progress”) and toward new ways of sounding out black political life beyond the conceptual boundaries of the American racial state (2015, 9). For Mathes, this reimagining occurs through a poetic break from American social realisms of the early- to mid-twentieth century, as well as from the frames of visibility and visibility that dominate both western valuations of sensory perception and American literary hermeneutics. Focusing on the works of Amiri Baraka, Henry Dumas, Larry Neal, James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gail Jones, Mathes considers how the sonic presents domains of literary critique and political imagination underexplored in critical scholarship. Engaging with important work in black literary studies and sound studies, Mathes joins an exciting group of critics taking up the political and social implications of black poetics and aesthetics, including Evie Shockley (2011), Anthony Reed (2014), Samantha Pinto (2013), Margo Crawford (2017), Meta DuEwa Jones (2012), Jerome C. Branch (2015), Tsitsi Ella Jaji (2014) and others. To this conversation, Mathes offers a concentrated focus on the sonic implications of American race and racialization specifically in post-civil-rights literature, emphasizing auditory soundscapes as sites for constructing of black political possibility. He urges us into a critical interrogation of the visual, arguing that “diagnosing and confronting the mythic construction of white supremacy entails shifting the focus from simply the visual domain for race in the American public sphere to perceiving the interaction between the apparent, and the more ephemeral, but no less definitive, dimensions of racial formation,”—namely those legible through sound (10). Mathes leads us through an exciting and fascinating sonic exploration of fifteen years of black literary culture, exposing how “sound, the always expanding aural dimensions of perception and experience . . . allow for creative renderings of black life that take seriously the critical possibility of literary expression to diagnose injustice and effect change” (201). Following Mathes and the writers he takes up, we might stop *looking for* ourselves in the visual narratives of the American nation-state, and instead *listen for* the forms of black being we do not (and cannot) see.

In the beats and movements of Mathes’s elegant work, I hear my reading skip constantly back to a question: how do we name imagining beyond image? What language do we have for the creative possibility-making accomplished through sound? As sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne points out, “*Sonic imagination* is a deliberately

synaesthetic neologism—it is about sound but occupies an ambiguous position between sound culture and a space outside of contemplation outside it” (2012, 5). And yet, as Mathes shows, black experimental writers engage sound as a space of contemplation not outside the sonic, but within it. There is a space of transgressive, transcendent creativity beyond the image; standard English simply hasn’t named it yet. But this situation is especially confounding (and familiar) to those of us thinking and living blackness. For us, the vocabularies of fantasy, creativity, and conjecture are necessary for conceiving and therefore enabling our survival. Moreover, standard configurations of English have never been interested in or equipped for the task. And so, we experiment. That concepts like “vision,” “imagination,” and even “apparition” or “mirage” register specifically in the visual and lack auditory corollaries makes Mathes’s point: the landscape of American language and analysis—like the landscapes of the American racial state—has privileged structural economies of the visual that render the full range of black possibility nearly unthinkable.

And yet, *sound carries*.

Thinking with Mathes, I hear a rush of black voices that have broken these structures with sound, often to articulate black experiences of gender, sexuality, and the body. I hear Kevin Quashie’s (2012) work on quiet as a sonic aesthetic that offers up revolutionary modes of living within the black interior. I hear the humming that echoes through Toni Morrison’s *Love* (2003), tying narrators, protagonists, and readers into affective engagement through blackwoman intimacy, erotics, and love. I also hear the Ying Yang Twins’ “Wait (The Whisper Song)” (2005), both an instantiation and a critique of the dangers of sexual silencing, and the staccato roar that shapes the hook of Kelis’s blackwoman anthem “Caught Out There,” (“I hate you so much right now!”) (1999), her scream sonic evidence of the epistemic, psychic, and bodily violences Mathes discusses, and proof that these violences define not only racial but also gender and sexual life for black people (Mathes 2015, 10, 198).

Imagining the sounds of insurgent black poetic possibility after civil rights, I can’t help but hear the “literary acoustics,” both verbal and nonverbal, that carry us from the 1970s into the present moment (Mathes 2015, 168). I hear the signature record-scratching of hip hop’s sonic poetics, sounds that begin as sensory effects of the underground experimental aesthetic technologies of black DJs

in the late 70s and 80s, now iconic pop-cultural sound-signals for social rupture. I hear the screeching laughter that opens Michael Jackson's 1979 "Off the Wall," its notes crackling just above the song's subterranean bass line as Jackson shows us of the reach of Mathes's acoustic underground, and the space it makes for articulating figurations of black life and living that unthinkable in dominant American narrative modes:

When the world is on your shoulders  
 better straighten up your act and boogie down . . .  
 You can shout out all you want to . . .  
 Let the madness in the music get to you . . .  
 Livin' crazy, that's the only way . . .  
 ain't no rules, it's up to you.  
 Life ain't so bad at all, if you live it off the wall. (Jackson 1979)

Writing from beneath the world, Jackson schools us in the necessity of sonic experiment: the song's opening cackle inaugurates a space of black freedom in which sound exists and moves unfettered, carrying with it the possibility of an unthinkable black living. This life that "ain't so bad at all," is accessible through a logic of spatial inversion and reversal, in which "straighten[ing] up" means "boog[y-ing] down," and living the possible occurs not on the ground but "off the wall." This is the space of the sonic underground, which, as Mathes suggests, enables both "a space of insurgency" and "a vision of the underground as a condition of life" amid "the interlocking forces of political, economic, and cultural repression in the post-Civil Rights Era" through a subversive poetics of sound (2015, 5). In "Off the Wall," sonic experiment is black being: one must "let the madness in the music get to you," because, in this space, "ain't no rules, it's up to you."

The cackle that opens "Off the Wall," prefigures the creaks, shrieks, and howls that precede the opening lines of "Thriller" (1982), in which Jackson offers a portrait of black terror and vulnerability framed through metaphors of sounds and soundlessness: "you hear the door slam, and realize there's nowhere else to run"; "you start to scream, but terror grips the sound before you make it." Here, Jackson gives us a sonic glimpse of black bodily confinement and psychic fear that at once unsettles black masculine gendering, and positions sound (here, the thwarted "scream") as an imagined, if inaccessible, site of black life beyond terror. These sounds carry us, later, to the shattered glass that sounds the opening of Michael

Jackson's 1991 "Jam," in which, in the guttural staccato of his 90s singing voice, Jackson proclaims from his own vexed underground, shaped by both racial ambiguity and sexual speculation: "I have to find my peace cause no one seems to let me be/ False prophets cry of doom, what are the possibilities?"<sup>1</sup>

With these sounds, Jackson offers us an experimental sonics of black interiority, carrying us from laughter to terror to rage and back, constantly theorizing black possibility beyond the prevailing rubrics of language. He builds a sonic porthole past what Mathes terms "flattened constructions of blackness," arranging the landscapes of his oeuvre as a "space of constantly unfolding, non-stagnant, irreducible critical energy" through what Mathes terms "aural force" (2015, 59, 164). We can read Jackson's, Kelis's, and other later uses of sonic force as remixes of the "free jazz break with traditional ideas of musical form and conceptualizations of sound" that Mathes traces in the experimental sonic dialogues of John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, and Rashid Ali, which, as Mathes points out, "generate alternate aesthetic and phenomenological possibilities" for black political consciousness and black psychic life (18, 36). These artists riff on and expand the soundscapes of Mathes's archive, offering a literary acoustics of contemporary black gender, sexuality, and bodily life.

*And so, sound carries . . .*

Imagining these sounds moves us through Mathes's robust archive and into the areas where this study does not linger: to the works of black lesbian, gay, queer, and bisexual writers like Pat Parker, Essex Hemphill, Cheryl Clarke, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and others who theorize underground spaces from the closet to the gay club, articulating the many pains and possibilities that echo there and imagining models of black American racial freedom that center gender and sexual freedom as well. It carries us to the critical works of black feminist thinkers like Henderson and especially Kara Keeling, whose black feminist critique of cultural "regimes of visibility" centers the lives of black women and black queer people rendered both unthinkable and silent through visual logics built on respectability politics (Henderson 1989; Keeling, 2005). As Mathes points out, "the political and aesthetic qualities of sound resist . . . perpetuations of white supremacy as they are narrated across the bodies of black Americans," an enactment that results in a "hegemonic penetration of the

quotidian through dominant articulations of the racial state” (2015, 10, 9). Yet for these black queer and women writers, the violent and systemic “penetration[s]” Mathes discusses are both figurative and literal, and the stakes of creative experiment beyond the terrains of visibility are always narrative and bodily at once (9). Despite recent critical and popular attention to black feminism as a notion, black feminist writers’ constant poetic engagements with sound, silence, and voicing are still largely unacknowledged in discussions of contemporary American poetics. Mathes’s fourth chapter, on Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, is helpful on this point. Mathes reads the various dialogic and narrative “duets” between Bambara’s protagonists as a “literary expansion of black feminism. . . . amplifying the specificity of black feminist critique as central to a post-Civil Rights context of emergent struggle” (2015, 141–2). And, as Shange points out, attention to the sonic and musical landscapes of black literature reveals that the nuances of gender and sexual experience heard in black women’s voicing *are* the nuances of black experience (1978, 3).

*Imagine the Sound* is not about music, but it is not a leap to say its theory *is a music*, if we understand music as Angela Davis does, as an experiential form of analysis and critique that “both reflect[s] and help[s] to construct a new black consciousness” (1999, 6). Mathes offers a crucial experiment in the rhythms and sounds of black creative imagination—its consonances, its dissonances, its resounding projections of what black life might be.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Speculation about Jackson’s sexuality swirled from the 1970s onward. Popular rumors included that he was gay, asexual, and preparing to undergo sex reassignment / gender confirmation surgery. In the 1990s, these coincided with rumors that Jackson was bleaching his skin due to racial self-hatred and internalized anti-blackness. “Jam” was released one year before the 1993 child sexual abuse allegations against Jackson, which were settled out of court in 1994. See J. Randy Tarraborelli (2004, 156–8) and “Michael denies sex change; says he is not gay and did not swim nude with Tatum O’Neal,” in *Jet*, September 22, 1977.

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MECCA JAMILAH SULLIVAN is Assistant Professor of English at Bryn Mawr College. Her research explores gender, sexuality, and poetics in Afrodiasporic literary cultures. Her current manuscript,

*The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora*, explores the politics of queerness and experimental form in contemporary feminist literatures and cultures of the African Diaspora. Her critical work on African Diaspora literature and poetics has appeared in *GLQ*, *American Literary History*, *Palimpsest: Journal of Women, Gender, and the Black International*, *American Quarterly*, and others journals, and has earned fellowship support from Duke University, Rutgers University, the Social Sciences Research Council, the Mellon Foundation, the American Association of University Women, and other organizations. She is also the author of a short story collection, *Blue Talk and Love* (2015), and winner of the 2018 Judith A. Markowitz Award for Emerging LGBTQ Writers from Lambda Literary. Her fiction has been published widely.