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## On the Fluidity of Honey and Fugitivity of Sound in Trauma, Ecstasy, and Black Radical Tradition

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On the Fluidity of Honey and Fugitivity of Sound  
in Trauma, Ecstasy, and Black Radical Tradition

by

Evgenia A. Grant

A thesis submitted in conformity  
with the requirements for the  
Master's Degree in Contemporary Art  
Sotheby's Institute of Art

2020

13,896 Words

## Abstract

From Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective to Derridean poststructuralist view, to an intersectional force traversing somatic, social, political, and cultural, sound, in its non-linear epistemology, breaks barriers between forms and escapes any structured definitions. Like the insidious stickiness of honey, sound's viscosity invaginates, spreads onto the interior, and, by triggering memories and the somatic, threatens the very totality of our identities. At that rupturing moment, we are not the ones subjecting sound to be known as an object; instead, in its fugitive protest and agency, sound flips the roles of the knower and the known and establishes new possibilities of relating to it, of understanding ourselves, and of listening to the world around us.

Using the theoretical framework of Fred Moten's formative volume, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, the current thesis explores the sound works of two contemporary artists, Christine Sun Kim and Camille Norment, which unsettle the historicity and the ideology of normativity and oppression in sound. By placing these works in close dialogue with Moten's complex critical analysis, I look for the interanimation of the drives behind the Black radical tradition in music and literature mid-twentieth century and the artistic exploration of sound in the last seven years. Furthermore, I follow *In the Break's* provocative engagements between Western philosophy (Marx, Freud, and Derrida) and Black radical thought (Fanon, Spillers, Menakem, and Delany) to uncover the operative functioning of both in destigmatizing the ways we understand and relate to sound.

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## Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to Black voices and the voices of people of color who, in their love and protest, continue to show us the way to freedom.

I am also deeply thankful:

To my thesis advisor, Aliza Shvarts, and the Program Director, Morgan Falconer, for your invaluable support within the “*undercommons of enlightenment*,”

To my mentors, Scott Blossom and Robert Svoboda, who patiently and compassionately tend the fire to know;

To dear SY WAG friends, without whom I would not have done this;

And to my family that supported, loved, and struggled with me all these years.

## Introduction. On Honey.

Honey is a slow-moving liquid; while it undoubtedly has a certain consistency and allows itself to be grasped, it soon creeps slyly from the fingers and returns to where it started from. It comes apart as soon as it has been given a particular shape, and what is more, it reverses the roles, by grasping the hands of whoever would take hold of it.

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning of the seven famous lectures delivered over a series of radio broadcasts in the fall months of 1948, Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggested that we needed to 'rediscover' the perceived world. The philosopher proposed that to arrive at new knowledge, we needed to unlearn, to "lay bare" <sup>2</sup> the very understanding of the world as we knew it before. This means to sacrifice the stability and comfort of preexisting paradigms, to let the form of such knowledge change and flow, 'stick' to our fingers like honey, in strange and unfathomable new shapes, and by reversing the process of engagement between the object and the subject, to open new pathways of relating to the world.

The metaphor of the insidious stickiness of honey Merleau-Ponty skillfully used to describe the existential phenomenology of our perception engages a visual vocabulary of how the bodily experience can change the ways we relate to the world. We can feel that sticky sweetness of honey. Yet the more we attempt to shape and define this substance, the more its viscosity spreads across our fingers, consuming the new surface

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 32

and 'grasping the hands' in unpredictable ways. Always already we are not the ones subjecting the honey to be known as an object, but the honey uses us to find new ways of expressing its nature, flipping seductively the roles of the subjective 'knower' and the object of the 'known.' This visual metaphor, by its projected action on our bodies, becomes a perfect metonym for the ephemeral, doubtful, and temporal nature of sound, the investigation of which is the purpose of this paper.

Using the theoretical framework of Fred Moten and his seminal book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, I analyze the works of two contemporary artists, Christine Sun Kim and Camille Norment, which unsettle the preexisting contextual, sensorial, historical, and political paradigms around sound. By investigating this unsettling and placing it in a dialogue with Moten's complex critical analysis, I am interested in the interanimation of the drives behind Black radical tradition in music and literature in the middle of the last century and the contemporary artistic exploration of sound within the last seven years. More specifically, I follow *In the Break's* provocative engagements between Western philosophy (Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida) and Black radical thought (Frantz Fanon, Hortense Spillers, Samuel Delany, Resmaa Menakem) to uncover the operative functioning of both in destigmatizing the ways we understand and relate to sound, or yet, the ways sound inhabits us and forms our embodied perception of ourselves and the world around us.

Chapter 1 sets the method: tracing historical attempts to define and structure sound, I critically revisit one of the recent efforts in this area and argue that the very (im)materiality of sound makes such efforts of categorization arbitrary and challenging, if not futile. In his book, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art*, Seth Kim-Cohen developed the model of The Expanded Sonic Field to "think through the implications and categorizations of existing works of sonic art and to imagine future

directions for the still-nascent practice of sound art.”<sup>3</sup> It used the prototype of Rosalind Krauss’s *The Expanded Field of Sculpture*, which, in its turn, had originated from Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of Husserl’s phenomenological essentialism<sup>4</sup>. Utilizing this reversed trajectory, I borrow Derrida’s principles of deconstruction and the example of Alvin Lucier’s *I am sitting in a room*, 1969, to destabilize *The Expanded Sonic Field* and to suggest that sound, like Merleau-Ponty’s honey, has the capacity to go past the efforts of structurization and definition, and has yet to be discovered through the critical efforts of the contemporary artists and Black radical thinkers.

Chapter 2 introduces the primal “scene of objection,”<sup>5</sup> with which *In the Break* opens, and questions the relationship between the historical objectification of the Black body addressed by Frantz Fanon, and the impossibility of speech in Marx’s fetishized commodity, and how this specific interdependence forms the arbitrary exchange-value of the commodity. The chapter builds on reading the work of Christine Sun Kim, a Korean artist born in the US, and the stigmas around sound operative in the society today, through the lens of double ventriloquizing Marx employed in *Das Kapital*. Born deaf, Kim uses available to her sound materiality to interrogate the ownership of sound she was subjected to since she was a child and goes past the stereotyped notion of material incompleteness usurped and reproduced by the white ableism. Producing a critical dialogue between Moten’s reading of Ralph Ellison and Kim’s *Closer Captions*, 2020,

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<sup>3</sup> Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 155.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida’s critique of Husserl’s phenomenological essentialism, in this instance, was focused on developing critique of reading an object based on direct perceptual encounter (via senses) and, instead, suggesting reading the object as an element of a more expansive contextual field, within which this object exists and which defines the object. Derrida developed his critique around Husserl’s definition of the *Augenblick* (a blink of an eye) phenomenon, which asserted that the meaning of an object was immediately present, via the direct sensorial experience and without any mediation of indicative signs.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), loc. 86 of 5898, Kindle.

points at a new possibility of understanding sound, which surpasses the limitations of the Expanded Sonic Field model.

Further, the chapter draws on historical parallels between Max Neuhaus' *Listen*, 1966, walk and Kim's twenty-first-century adaptation (*LISTEN*), 2016. The new version of *Listen*, occluded by the two parenthesis marks, on the superficial level, could reflect the occluded audibility of sound available to a deaf person. Yet, upon a deeper inquiry, parentheses' indexicality marks resistance to the ideological operation of normativity in sound. In other words, parentheses directly point at the occluded or "castrated" aurality (what is left unpronounced yet is adding to the narrative, like this very parenthesized addition), which, through occlusion, disrupts the standardizing oppressive understanding of what sound should be; parentheses, in this case, propose a new relationship with sound and the meaning production. Such resistance, in dialogue with Moten, produces the "transformative present of sound," which, like Cecil Taylor's *Chinampas*, becomes "the floating gardens"<sup>6</sup> of possibility: the possibility to understand and to relate to sound in a new way.

Chapter 3 dives into traumatic historical and political implications of sound from the perspective of the body. It analyzes two complex works by Camille Norment, an American artist who lives and works in Sweden. The first, *Rapture*, 2015, a multilayered installation at the Nordic Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2015, explores a range of bodily states produced and activated by sound: from pain to excitement, to ecstasy. Drawing on parallel examples of rapture from the visual art of old masters, the chapter explores the Freudian drives of eros and death animating Norment's architectonic sound installations of female voice and glass armonica. It argues that the "incomplete"

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., loc. 1042 of 5898, Kindle.

materiality of sound predicated on its evasive, residual nature and concurrently reproductive capacity “gives us back the visuality that occularcentrism has repressed.”<sup>7</sup>

The second portion of chapter 3 culminates in splitting the narrative into two simultaneously existing parts. The first part is the analysis of Norment’s second installation, *Lull*, 2016, within the historicity of the traumatized Black body “at the scene of objection.”<sup>8</sup> The second part is a portion of my personal processing of this rupturing historicity and the unspeakable, influenced by *Shorter Views* of Samuel R. Delany and by *My Grandmother’s Hands* of Resmaa Menakem. The complex phonography of such presentation is an intentional attempt to engage with the somatic aspect of sound in language, with everything the language can and cannot bear. It is also an attempt to reflect on the traumatic effect and transformative capacity of the past year, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

From Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological perspective to an intersectional category including social, somatic, political, and cultural territories, sound, in its non-linear evolution, continues to break barriers between forms and escape any structured definitions. Gradually but inevitably, we find ourselves invaded by its subtle viscosity, spreading fluidly inside: as memory, as experience, as trauma, as ecstasy. Like a virus or microbiome, sound also travels between bodies, eventually affecting all and shaping our collective perception of ourselves and the world we live in. Like a fugitive, escaping the role of an object, sound merges with the body and, there, turns into a subject in its own right. We just need to listen.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., loc. 4001 of 5898, Kindle.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., loc. 86 of 5898, Kindle.

### A Note on Limitations of Study.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic disrupted and paralyzed the life of the country and the world for almost a year now, and one of the limitations of the current research lies in the inaccessibility of the printed material and archives.

The libraries stayed closed entirely for at least six months. For specific volumes, either the waiting time took several months after reopening, or the availability never materialized (as in the Brooklyn Museum Archives). Under these circumstances, retrieving academic material became an operation of chance, determination, and random acts of kindness of art professionals in the field.

Similarly, one of the most recent exhibitions of Christine Sun Kim at MIT List Visual Center in Cambridge, MA, has been closed since March 2020. The exhibition included Kim's audio installation, *One Week of Lullabies for Roux*, 2018, originally planned to be included in the current analysis and could not be visited or retrieved online. Thus, the availability of audio and video material online determined the ultimate choice of artworks and shaped the research into its current form.

One more important limitation of the study relates to the limitation of my own capacity as an able white person to address the works of Black scholars and artists, artists of color, and artists of different abilities. I recognize this limitation as a function of the systemic racism externalized in the art and educational fields and internalized in my own, imbedded by the system bias, addressing and understanding which is a continuing work in progress.

## Chapter 1. The Center is Somewhere Else.

In the past sixty years, sound art has evolved from an obscure avant-garde practice into a burgeoning cross-disciplinary area that includes musicology, ethnography, philosophy, physics, critical theory, and more. Today, sonic explorations include and are not limited to sound produced by nature, machines, voice-produced sound, silence as presence or absence of audible experience, musicalized sound, inaudible sound, and noise. The boundaries between the disciplines and objects of study are blurred, just like the physical boundaries of sound cannot contain its ubiquitous nature.

Where does sound start, and where does it end? John Cage, an influential Minimalist pioneer of sound, attempted to answer that question in his studies at the Beranek's anechoic chamber in the 1950s.<sup>9</sup> He became aware of the low-pitched and high-pitched soundwaves emanated by his body, which were interpreted by the technician on duty as the sounds of Cage's circulatory and nervous systems. Regarding his findings, Cage later wrote in the epiphany that there was no such thing as "empty space or empty time."<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the famous minimalist composer found that there is no such space where the sound "is not," it instead is a matter of our ability or inability to register it with the help of our senses. When the sound is within the audible range for human beings, it is referred to as a cochlear sound. When the sound cannot be registered by the ear, it is non-cochlear. Does the absence of sound imply silence or non-existence of sorts? Or is absence simply a mutability of sound's form – from an auditory one or

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<sup>9</sup> Cage was joined by a number of artists working with sound in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Pierre Schaeffer, Luc Ferrari, Alvin Lucier, La Monte Young, Max Neuhaus, and Pauline Oliveros, to name a few.

<sup>10</sup> John Cage and Kyle Gann. *Silence: Lectures and Writings, 50th Anniversary Edition*, 2nd ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 8.

perceptible by the ear, to the haptic or vibrational – registered by the body, to yet visual – in the form of the synesthetic sound or auditory imagination?

The conversation gets more complex when we shift from an essentialist phenomenological point of view requiring and focusing on the raw perceptual encounter with sonic materiality (“sound-in-itself”) to a more expansive context of defining sound.<sup>11</sup> One of the ways to approach the subject is to trace back the poststructuralist lineage of thought: starting with the definition of the Expanded Sonic Field by Seth Kim-Cohen, which was inspired by The Expanded Field of Sculpture Rosalind Krauss developed in the late 1970s, which in its turn, had been informed by the deconstruction theory of Jacques Derrida.<sup>12</sup>

Inspired by Rosalind Krauss’s attempt in the late 1970s to define sculpture outside of the perception predicated by a specific material, Seth Kim-Cohen, in his book *In the Blink of an Ear*, writes, “*it*, it turns out, is never simply *it*.”<sup>13</sup> He continues,

Sculpture as a category of artistic practice is not merely a universe of terms. It is also a product of those terms in *opposition*, *contesting* the groundwork that they simultaneously lay and lie upon. What constitutes the *it* in question is not the terms themselves, but the *friction* between them and the entangled skein of confirmation and denial created by the *interactions* of these terms. Sculpture, then, is not so much a stable and static site of contestation but a dynamic, inconclusive situation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See note 4 above.

<sup>12</sup> “Deconstruction” is one of the most popular terms Jacques Derrida developed. Built upon but less negative than Heidegger’s and Nietzschean notions of “destruction” or “reversal”, *deconstruction* has two aspects, linguistic or literary, and philosophical. The language portion of deconstruction works with the production of meaning and interpretation, while philosophical one aims at pointing out the structural limits and the very basic axioms of metaphysics. See more in David B. Allison, *Derrida’s Critique of Husserl and the Philosophy of Presence* (Dissertation, Xerox Univ. Microfilms, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 151; emphasis original.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 153; emphasis mine.

By establishing binary oppositions in the sculpture's environment, such as naturally formed landscape and artificially built architecture, Krauss defined space that dynamically yet inconclusively positioned sculpture "in-between" these points of reference. These "landscape" and "architecture" environments also had their binaries of "not-landscape" and "not-architecture." In other words, Krauss developed a quadrant of possibilities to define sculpture, where each corner was respectively, "landscape," "not-landscape," "architecture," or "not-architecture" (see Figure 1). Ultimately, the sculpture did not belong to any of those corners but, instead, was placed somewhere "on the periphery of a field, in which there are other, differently structured possibilities."<sup>15</sup> This action created a dynamic and inconclusive view of the sculpture depending on the contextual polarities of its environment. Sculpture no longer existed as an autonomous, pure medium, defined by its internal materiality.

Borrowing Krauss' model to define The Expanded Sonic Field, Seth Kim-Cohen chooses the positive-negative polarities of "noise," "not-noise," "speech," and "not-speech," with "noise" being analogous to the natural environment of the "landscape," and "speech" signifying a built sound environment of the "architecture." (see Figure 2) Within this structure, he locates the sound between the categories of sound-in-itself, non-cochlear sonic art, music, and sound poetry. Attempting to define "a space of praxis for a non-cochlear sonic art,"<sup>16</sup> Kim-Cohen states that it cannot be equated to music, gallery art, or sound-in-itself. Rather than triggering material/medium axis for such definition, the space produced by the oppositional forces within the "cultural situation" is much more conducive to create a temporal structure of the term.

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<sup>15</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October 8* (Spring 1979), 38.

<sup>16</sup> Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 156.

As mentioned earlier, Krauss based her rationalizing around the Expanded Field of Sculpture on Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Husserl's phenomenological essentialism, which took the idealism of the raw perceptual encounter out of the system of axiomatic points of reference to sculpture and introduced the concept of differences between signifiers as an access point to the contextual reading of the sculpture. Namely, as an object of perception in postmodernist practice, the sculpture cannot be understood only within the medium and the materials used in its production; neither can it be understood within the immediate perception of that material. Instead, a specific cultural and temporal context defined by the "oppositions within a cultural situation"<sup>17</sup> is the organizing point to perceive and understand the object.

This is significant in the effort of defining sound and non-cochlearity. If sound has essential nature and depends exclusively on a raw perceptual encounter, autonomous from the social and historical system of references, then how are intrusive memories of traumatic events triggered via particular sound?<sup>18</sup> Or why the glass armonica, invented by Benjamin Franklin in 1761, was banned by the 1820s (being feared as a controversial instrument invoking the spirits of the dead and triggering hypersexuality, hysteria, and occult powers in women)?<sup>19</sup> If the system of references was missing, how would noise be distinguished as an unpleasant sound? Joseph Branden underscored this idea in response to Max Neuhaus's Op-Ed, "the aesthetic refusal to distinguish between proper and improper sounds relates to a political refusal to discriminate between 'proper' and

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<sup>17</sup> Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 43.

<sup>18</sup> NYU Langone Medical Center / New York University School of Medicine, "How exposure to brief trauma and sudden sounds form lasting memories: Study may speed improved treatments for hearing loss and symptoms of PTSD." *ScienceDaily*. [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/08/150824114553.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/08/150824114553.htm) (accessed March 19, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> "Benjamin Franklin's Glass Armonica," The Franklin Institute, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.fi.edu/history-resources/franklins-glass-armonica>

'improper' inhabitants of the urban public sphere."<sup>20</sup> In other words, the system of references formed "within a cultural situation" creates a context of how we see and understand phenomena in the world around us, and specifically, it determines how we understand and relate to sound.

Coming back to Kim-Cohen's definition of the sculpture, I would like to highlight two important points the author makes, which form the introduction to the proposition of this thesis and simultaneously (and paradoxically) work towards the dissolution of the viability of Kim-Cohen's sonic model. They are "*friction* between the terms of opposition" and the "entangled skein of confirmation and denial created by the interactions of these terms" in the quote above, page 9.

The first point, the friction of defined signifiers that contextualize sound with The Expanded Sonic Field, is the resistance of sound, and this resistance comes in two layers. The first is the layer of "noise" – "not-noise" and "speech" – "not-speech" as binary polarities, within which we attempt to define the sound. The second is the layer of "noise" and "speech" polarities. Whether we think of noise/speech or their respective binaries of not-noise/not-speech, the sound, as it will be demonstrated later, defies and blurs the boundaries between the categories. In addition, this resistance directly translates into a broader definition of the environment as a "cultural situation" and socio-political situation we find ourselves in as bodies in the contemporary world.

Second point; the state of the constant tension of sound within the chosen polarities destabilizes the structure altogether, often making such categorization obsolete or too limiting. What would be the synergistic and ultimately cathartic point of destabilization and deconstruction of the structure? What would it look like with sound?

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph W. Branden, "An Implication of an Implication," in *Max Neuhaus: Times Square, Time Piece Beacon*, ed. Lynn Cooke and Karen Kelly (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2009): 63-64.

To answer these questions, let's take an example of Alvin Lucier's landmark work, *I am sitting in a room*, 1969. Sitting in his apartment in Middleton, Connecticut, Lucier read a text as he recorded it on a tape-recorder. He then replayed the recording on the same tape-recorder while turning the second tape-recorder to record the replayed message. He then replayed the recorded track on the second machine while recording its sound by the first device, and so on. The text Lucier read out loud said:

I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech, with perhaps the exception of rhythm, is destroyed.

What you will hear, then, is the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech.

I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.<sup>21</sup>

As the artist replayed and recorded the same track repeatedly, the physical space of the room affected the audible frequencies of the replayed message by amplifying some aspects of sound while canceling out the others. Numerous repetitions of recording not the original voice narration but the resonated frequencies of the voice producing speech producing sound in the room eventually eroded the speech itself and left only unrecognizable amplified metallic pulsing of sound with some traces of rhythm.

The work *I am sitting in a room* operates in different registers, including process-based installation, the semiotics of the performance's content (which also works as instructions for the performance), and the materiality of the work, including the sound/speech of the narrator as well as the resonated sound and gradually eroding speech produced within the spatiality of the room. Yet, I am more specifically interested in reading *I am sitting in a room* through the deconstructing view of The Expanded Sonic Field. The two points mentioned earlier, the resistance and tension of sound to stay

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<sup>21</sup> Alvin Lucier, *Reflections: Interviews, Scores, Writings, 1965-1994* (Cologne: MusikTexte, 1995), 312.

within defined categories and destabilizing the very structure it is determined by, are activated fully in this work. The piece starts with a definition of sound as the speech of the narrator reading the script, but in the process of numerous repetitions, as speech gets eroded via the amplification of the recorded sonic frequencies of the room, the speech slides down the vertical axis towards the “not speech.” The “irregularities of the speech,” as Lucier calls his stutter, as a disjointed continuity, also gets gradually erased by morphing first into a cacophony of noise and later into a musicalized rhythm of the amplified sound. The evasiveness and resisting materiality of sound now slide along the quadrant diagonally up towards “noise,” only to descend vertically down to the musicalized dominion of “not-noise”/ “not-speech.” Following the second point/proposition I made above, the persistent tension and resistance of sound to stay within the given polarities of The Expanded Sonic Field destabilized the model's structure enough that the model itself collapsed in an attempt to define sound by its contextual binaries.

This example produces a close dialogue with Derrida's *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, where Derrida introduced a temporal and spatial point, which he called the “Event” or “rupture.”

Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an “event,” if this loaded word did not entail a meaning which it is precisely the function of structural—or structuralist—thought to reduce or suspect. Let us speak of an “event,” nevertheless, and let us use quotation marks to serve as a precaution. What would this event be then? Its exterior form would be that of a rupture and a redoubling.<sup>22</sup>

And later,

Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278.

center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere.<sup>23</sup>

Derrida states that if the structure is subsumed in the totality defined by the differences between its signifiers, on which it rested, then any such structure would assume a center. Though the center is where simultaneously the structure is expressed in its order and relationships with signifiers (via the definition of the qualitative difference between the signifiers) and in a state of play, which destabilizes that structure.

Applying this logic to Lucier's example, the reduced materiality of sound from speech to not-speech, to noise, to not-noise, in its augmented temporality of a room in time, collapses not only the semiotic meaning of the work but also the physical properties of sound, which contribute to our somatic experience of that sound. The interplay of sound and the binaries of the system kept steadily shifting the center of that structure. From the exclusively audio-visual realm produced by someone stating that he was sitting in a room, sound's physicality eventually leaks into a haptic one, taking away from the ear and the meaning produced by speech. Via that "rupture," the center of the sound totality, produced and reproduced by Lucier, has shifted away and outside of the structure.

Another interesting aspect of sound's resistance to interpretation concerns social, cultural, and political aspects of the environment within which sound and our bodies exist. For instance, how can noise and not-noise be distinguished qualitatively? Luigi Russolo redefined noise in 1913 by introducing roars, thunderings, screeching, and beating on metal into musical compositions. Max Neuhaus took this idea further with his performative LISTEN walks along the 14<sup>th</sup> street in New York, which questioned the socio-political and representative aspect of unwanted and "unmusical" sound (this work

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 279.

will be further elaborated on in chapter 2). As artists developed the concept of noise, even music theorists, such as Torben Sangild, tend to provide multiple definitions of noise; one of them is based solely on subjectivity.<sup>24 25</sup> In other words, the interpretive differences of the signifiers become arbitrary within the sound structure and place the structure in the state of play, which destabilizes it.

Furthermore, to locate and define sound, Kim-Cohen limits the structure of the positive/negative sonic binaries accessible only through hearing, as both noise and speech phenomena are distinguishable by the capacity of the ear to determine the sound. How would non-cochlear sound, inaccessible to the human ear, relate to the limitations of this structure? Or how would an experience of sound by a deaf person fit into the chosen categories? Once again, the dissonance and the interplay of sound and the structure's signifiers eventually bring such structure to the state of rupture or dissolution, as Derrida necessitated.

Resisting the boundaries, slipping into cavities that are “not” and are not “not,” disrupting the structure, the sound has thawed its way out of the system's subjection into new territory. Instead of being the object under the microscope of investigation, just like Merleau-Ponty's honey, sound resists definition and “comes apart as soon as it has been given a particular shape, and what is more, it reverses the roles, by grasping the hands of whoever would take hold of it.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In his book, *The Aesthetics of Noise*, Sangild states, “a single definition of noise is not possible; instead I will provide three basic definitions: an acoustic, a communicative and a subjective definition.” Sangild elaborates that the definition of subjective noise as “unpleasant sounds” seems to be simple, yet is “the most intricate”, and to a great extent is based on “a matter of personal idiosyncrasy and cultural-historical situation.” For the source, see footnote 25 below.

<sup>25</sup> Torben Sangild, *The Aesthetics of Noise* (Datanom, 2002), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 41.

This metonym serves as a perfect entrance to the seminal work *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, of a brilliant and pertinent theorist, Professor in the Department of Performance Studies, Tisch School of the Arts, a poet, and a multidimensional muse for many in the art world, Fred Moten.

Using *In the Break* as the main theoretical framework elaborating the resistance in the Black radical tradition of music and literature mid-last-century, the nature of sound and speech as essential and simultaneously ancillary materiality, and the objects “that can and do resist,”<sup>27</sup> I will analyze the works of two contemporary artists, Camille Norment and Christine Sun Kim. I will propose that sound, emerging from the individual somatic experiences, carrying memory and trauma of the objectified body in its residual, fugitive, and generative capacities, exceeds the confines of an individual. It instead becomes a collective category that defines the process of social and political becoming in today’s world.

Both artists devoted their lives to working with sound. Camille Norment approaches sound as a notion of cultural psychoacoustics, an “investigation of socio-cultural phenomena through sound and music – particularly instances of sonic and social dissonance.”<sup>28</sup>

Christine Sun Kim, a prelingually deaf artist, approaches sound as a practice of “unlearning sound etiquette,” or questioning the way people able to hear are trained to make and relate to sound. For Kim, it is less of a material to be heard and more of an entity to be quantified, objectified, and presented in new ways.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 80 of 5898, Kindle.

<sup>28</sup> “About”, Camille Norment Studio, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://www.norment.net/#about>

<sup>29</sup> Vida Weisblum, “How We Listen Determines What We Hear: Christine Sun Kim on Her Recent Sound Works, Working With Blood Orange,” *Artnews*, September 28, 2015, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/how-we-listen-determines-what-we-hear-christine-kim-on-her-recent-sound-works-teaming-with-blood-orange-4833/>.

Chapter 2. Sound: Object, Ownership, and Commodity. Christine Sun Kim.

Published in 2003, *In the Break* presented a critical and poetic, complex investigation of the aesthetics of the Black avant-garde tradition in jazz and literature during the 1950s and 1960s. Beginning with a painful inquiry into the nature of the subject/object relationships as a historical and catastrophic fact of slavery in the United States, interrogating these relationships against Marx's idea of the "commodities that speak," Fred Moten uncovered the broken and irreducible materiality of sound. He established "the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection" and "the freedom drive that animates black performances."<sup>30</sup>

The very first page inaugurates the premise that will take the book to unfold. Moten states, "I'm interested in the convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance at the scene of objection."<sup>31</sup> The scene of objection he referred to was the "'terrible spectacle' that introduced Frederick Douglass to slavery,"<sup>32</sup> the scene of the violent beating of his Aunt Hester, reenacted by Saidiya Hartman in her book, *Scenes of Subjection*. While temporarily suspending the discussion of this horrific and rupturing aural event as it relates to trauma and the socio-political paradigm we live in, I would like to focus on the aspect of objectification Moten points to concerning the impossibility of speaking by the commodity in Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*.

When we consider Marx's commodity, we allow for the two main premises. First, the commodity is objectified as a product of exchange in the capitalist economy. It possesses a particular exchange value rooted not in its essential substance made of the materials and labor used to produce it but rather in the subjective, social intercourse of

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<sup>30</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 270 of 5898, Kindle.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 4.

the capitalist system that arbitrarily changes such value. In other words, the object of commodity discovers itself and finds its value through the process of exchange. The second premise is based on the impossibility of speech of the commodity. Marx states,

Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values... Now listen how these commodities speak through the mouth of the economist...<sup>33</sup>

According to Marx, commodities cannot and do not speak. This is the reason he employs double ventriloquizing: as commodities cannot speak, he speaks for them, on their behalf, and he speaks on their behalf through “the mouth of the economist.”<sup>34</sup> Are these two premises connected? Does the absence of the use (essential) value relate to the fact that commodities do not speak? Is the commodity’s exchange-value correlated with the fact that it cannot speak, hence someone speaks on its behalf determining subjectively what it is worth in the capitalist market? Moten responds positively and establishes that the exchange value of the objectified commodity is directly related to the impossibility of speech of the commodity:

The truth about the value of the commodity is tied precisely to the impossibility of its speaking, for if the commodity could speak it would have intrinsic value, it would be infused with a certain spirit, a certain value given not from the outside, and would, therefore, contradict the thesis on value—that it is not intrinsic—that Marx assigns it.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, the impossibility of speech means the impossibility of having an intrinsic value, and only (exchange) value assigned by the system of exchange, being

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<sup>33</sup> Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Serge L Levitzky. *Das Kapital, a Critique of Political Economy*, Gateway Edition (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1959), 177.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 285 of 5898, Kindle.

the capitalist system, is the only right and character available and accessible to the commodity.

In a vicious but striking similarity, Moten states that the Black body that under the history of slavery was considered a commodity was objectified and assigned an exchange-value in the very same way. This is not new; Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, unearthed this similarity in 1967, when he wrote, “Disoriented, incapable of confronting the Other, the white man, who has no scruples about imprisoning me, I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from my self, and gave myself up as an object.”<sup>36</sup>

The objectified Black body is directly related to the impossibility of that body's speech, for historically, it was muted – it served as a commodity within the colonial system of exchange. Objectification and commodification imply ownership: I can speak on your behalf because you cannot speak for yourself. In other words, you are mute and, subsequently, you have no (intrinsic) value.

Not any less important than the fact of ownership is the fact that speech, the ability to voice yourself, and the arbitrary exchange value of the body are directly related to the notion of sound. The sound materiality seems to be irreducible and inseparable from voice and speech. While it could be studied separately, with sound being the material itself, disembodied and abstract, as was done by a number of artists in the past, I am more interested in investigating how this sound, which materially emerges from and disappears into human bodies, could be incorporated within the ontological, individual and socio-political fabric of the world.

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<sup>36</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 92.

Christine Sun Kim, an Orange County-born and Berlin-based Korean artist, posits a very similar question in her work with sound. She says,

While growing up, I constantly questioned the ownership of sound. People who have access to sound naturally, own it and have a say in it. There are all these conventions of what is “proper sound.” They would tell me: be quiet. Don’t burp, don’t drag your feet, don’t make loud noises. I learned to be respectful of their sound. I saw sound as their possession. Now I’m reclaiming sound as my property.<sup>37</sup>

In the film made by Todd Selby in 2011, Kim uses the street noise recordings from New York Chinatown, her own breath, and the audio feedback to push the sound to change its form: from audible, to vibrational and physical, to visual. The sound of the street excites the materials attached to speakers; in its excitement, the sound explodes into the physical movement, into the rhythm of the vibration. Color powder and paint seem to dance their chaotic dance of the “seismic calligraphy,”<sup>38</sup> controlled by the sound, which in its turn is owned by the artist. The fleeting, evasive, and inaccessible to the prelingually deaf artist, audibility of sound flows, amplified through the speakers, dissonanced by the feedback, and renders itself material on paper - available to be seen and touched. The mutability of form is evident. By moving through, it defies the boundaries established by the societal preconceptions and the ownership of those who are able to hear. The sound, physical and liquid, like honey, becomes political. It addresses not only the issue of accessibility but the stigma of its dominant audible form.

In the able society, speaking and hearing are two opposite ends of the line that connects them, which is called communication. What happens when the sound cannot be heard and becomes mute to those unable to hear? Society says through the mouths of its citizens, “I will create a Sign Language to fill the gap.” But how is this gap, this cut,

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<sup>37</sup> “Todd Selby x Christine Sun Kim”, *Nowness* (November 9, 2011), accessed February 20, 2021, <https://www.nowness.com/story/todd-selby-x-christine-sun-kim>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

this void space of communication filled? The commodification and objectification, two invisible Marxist forces of the able society, join in: “As you are technically mute, let us fill the gap for you. The able ones will speak on your behalf. They will represent you and determine your exchange value. We will be your mediators.”

The absurdity of this dialogue is predicated upon the absurdity of the society where the commodification of the Black body and racism represent this society’s past and present, and where ableism, accessibility via sound, is predicated upon the societal stigmas around it. A few stigmas that operate in our society today (let me speak on their behalf):

*“To understand sound, you need to hear it.”*

*“How can you understand sound if you are deaf? Sound is irrelevant to deaf people.”*

*“Sound is abstract; it has no form.”*

*“The sound can be pleasant and unpleasant.”*

*“The unpleasant sound is disruptive; it is bad. Whoever generates the unpleasant sound is bad.”*

*“Unfamiliar sound is uncomfortable. It is threatening.”*

*“How can you see sound? It is invisible.”*

*“Shh, be quiet. Being quiet means being polite.”*

*“We need more pleasant sounds and less unpleasant ones.”*

To save time in demonstrating all of the above biases in action, I will address the first two with an example of the artist’s most recent rewriting of closed captions in the video *Closer Captions* for the Pop-Up Magazine.

Christine Sun Kim points out how the quality of captions in movies and TV programs “sucks” as it does not represent how deaf people relate to music. She starts with a simple example where sad, lyrical violin music plays in the background, which is usually captioned as [music] or [violin music], at best. Kim takes on a role of an interpreter who rewrites captions, and from just [music], the possibility of captions grows exponentially:

[mournful violin music]

[mournful violin music that sounds like crying alone in an empty bar]

[mournful violin music that sounds like crying alone in an empty bar in 1920s Paris; you’re wearing a very tiny but fashionable hat that you tip to the bartender as you order a fourth martini]

She says in the video that as a person unable to hear, she is dependent on people writing captions “who have a different relationship with sound and the world.”<sup>39</sup> What does “different relationship with sound” lack? And how does a deaf person “complete” this relationship? A mute video takes over with a qualitatively different set of captions. A few examples of the “closer captions” come:

[the sound of anticipation intensifies]

[the sound of sun entering the bedroom]

[the sound of shampoo scent floating among the fog]

[the sound of skin waking up]

[the sound of strong exhaustion]

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<sup>39</sup> “Artist Christine Sun Kim Rewrites Closed Captions,” Pop-Up Magazine, streamed live October 13, 2020, YouTube video, 7:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffe479qL8hg>.

[sweetness of orange sunlight]

[glitter flirting with my eyeballs]

[the sound of turning something over inside your head]

Would Kim-Cohen's Expanded Sonic Model identify the video and its captions as non-cochlear sonic art? Or sound-in-itself? Or music? Or sound poetry? Does the example of *Closer Captions* land within the "speech - not-speech" or "noise - not-noise" categories? The sound of "anticipation," of "sun entering the room," of "skin waking up," leaks synesthetically and proprioceptively into your body; it spreads, like honey, across the skin, covering the eyes, activating the sense of smell and catching you listening; it subsumes all other senses. The sound then invades deeper, where "the strong exhaustion" rests and where something is "turning inside your head." Very soon, by loosening the boundaries of structured categorization and ownership, sound breaks the model and opens up a new dimension, inaccessible previously to the able humans. It reclaims its value while surrendering into another kind of ownership, "incomplete" ownership by the artist, to the clear and unmediated artist's voice.

Moten quotes Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*:

Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue"—all at the same time. Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. I pour the red liquid over the white mound, watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound.<sup>40</sup>

I want a dialogue that loosens the boundaries of the sound structure. Listening? Visual. Vibrational. Memory. And the anticipation of a new structure, new order, and new

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<sup>40</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 1147 of 5898, Kindle.

society. One that includes not the hegemony of the able possessing the five senses and imposing the meaning of *listening*, but the *resistance* of the deaf whose sensory “incompleteness” pushes and unsettles the boundaries of the agreed-upon system of understanding. The sensory deprivation that will erupt in a multitude of perspectives and depths, in the wholeness of the sonic expression.

I am looking for this dialogue. I dare to add Christine Sun Kim to Ralph Ellison. I hear these “closer captions” opening a new potentiality in knowing sound:

*I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five*

[the sound of anticipation intensifies]

*a certain acoustical deadness in my hole*

[the sound of sun entering the bedroom]

*when I have music I want to feel its vibration not only with my ear  
but with my whole body*

[the sound of shampoo scent floating among the fog]

[the sound of skin waking up]

*What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue*

[the sound of strong exhaustion]

*I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice  
cream and sloe gin*

[sweetness of orange sunlight]

*watching it glisten and the vapor rising*

[glitter flirting with my eyeballs]

*Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound*

[the sound of turning something over inside your head]

When Moten listens to Ellison, Ellison’s written speech as a signifier of music, sound, and the internal states of a Black man, he knows that the boundaries are always already gone. He also knows that Ellison knows it.

Ellison knows that you can't really listen to this music. He knows, before Mackey as it were, that really listening, when it goes bone-deep into the sunken ark of bones, is something other than itself. It doesn't alternate with but is seeing; it's the sense that it excludes; it's the ensemble of the senses.<sup>41</sup>

According to Moten, "that really listening" is predicated on the whole ensemble of senses, in fact, on the specific senses it excludes. Someone may raise an eyebrow, "how does the whole anticipate and allow for the exclusion? The whole, by definition, is the function of completeness." Yet, in both Kim and Ellison, the excluded listening of the ears is augmented by listening of the eyes, of the skin, of the organs registering vibrations, that "sunken arc of bones" listening, which creates a different kind of signification, language, and a different kind of narrative altogether. At that moment, "that really listening" becomes something "other than itself," with the "center of the totality elsewhere," in Derrida's terms, something other than how we knew it to be, how we perceived it in the past, something other than the perspective of white able Americans.

We'll return to the question of the relations between the part and the whole, the hole and the whole. For now it's enough to try to think the whole—as it has been formulated and identified, in a certain kind of poststructuralist thought, as a necessarily fictive, problematically restrictive, completeness — in its relation to and difference from the whole whose incompleteness is always also a more than completeness. These problems lie at the intersection of totality and the materiality of sound.<sup>42</sup>

This very "necessarily fictive, problematically restrictive, completeness" that marked the true incompleteness of the normative and racialized understanding of sound was something Max Neuhaus, an artist and composer, addressed continuously as he worked with sound in the 1960s and 1970s. Contesting rigid distinctions between "proper" and "improper," allowable and excluded sounds in his New York Times editorial in 1974, Neuhaus wrote,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., loc. 2969 of 5898, Kindle.

The law defines noise as “any unwanted sound.” Surely several hundred years of musical history can be of value: At the very least they can show us that our response to sound is subjective- that no sound is intrinsically bad. *How we hear it* depends a great deal on how *we have been conditioned* to hear it.<sup>43</sup>

The Op-Ed was a political response to the publication by the Department of Air Resources of the New York City Environmental Protection Agency, *Noise Makes You Sick*, which under physiological and economic justifications was primarily and disproportionately targeting lower-class and minority populations.<sup>44</sup> Noise pollution regulations were more often than not associated with the discursive treatment of jazz and Black communities rather than applied to the urban industrial sources of noise.

Max Neuhaus highlighted this epistemological and political binary of noise in his *Listen* series marked by the first event in February 1966. A guided Manhattan walk across 14<sup>th</sup> Street, from East Village to the West Side, started with the artist stamping the word “LISTEN” on participants’ hands. “LISTEN,” landing on the skin, marked the body with a different kind of listening – the one that refuses to abide by the preconceptions fetishizing hearing as the only way to experience sound. This indexicality of the body empowered the listener to refuse the preconceived aesthetic indexicality of sound and noise in relation to the soundscapes of the urban living, as it explored the ethnic-minority neighborhood.

Fifty years later, on the half-a-century-anniversary of the first *Listen* event, Christine Sun Kim was joined by a dozen participants on a different (*LISTEN*) walk, creating a 21-century adaptation of the Neuhaus piece. Leading a small group on the Lower East Side and beginning by marking hands with the word LISTEN were the

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<sup>43</sup> Max Neuhaus, "BANG, BOOoom, ThumP, EEEK, tinkle," *The New York Times* (December 6, 1974), 39; emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> Branden, "An Implication of an Implication," 62.

iterative elements of this historic performance. Yet, framed by the parentheses, (*LISTEN*) became a signifier of a more focused, specific space, of a more “incomplete” totality. When I think of parenthesis in writing, an idea of muted digression, addition, or explanation comes to mind. Something that is left unpronounced, something excluded from the continuity of the audible speech, yet crucial and informative in its relationship to the whole. If (*LISTEN*) is an occluded, non-audible invitation to experience the sonic environment of New York, then the question is where does it operate and how such occlusion would “complete” the “listening” experience of the participants? In Moten’s words,

I also want to think about sound and its occlusion and, therefore, to think about how certain earlier versions of these grafts, both unconscious and conscious, operate with regard to sound, voice, their occlusion and exclusion and in light of attempts to remedy that occlusion or at least to mark it.<sup>45</sup>

Leading the participants through the neighborhood, pausing at the sites of special significance or personal memory, Kim used a parenthesized description of different sounds on an iPad to mark and connect the external spatial experience of the place with the internal, somatic experience of sound within the body. Placing the description of the sound in parentheses asks us not to assume and reassert the learned, ingrained in our white, able, Western bodies paradigm, but to raise new questions:

How can I touch and feel (the sound of the pavement floor)?

Where are (announcements vibrating in pockets) located in the body?

Is the able body able to experience (the sound of an urge to punch someone)?

If (fluorescent bulbs moan), what do they say?

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<sup>45</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 2993 of 5898, Kindle.

Perhaps, these new questions could shift not only the cultural binary of ability existing in our society, where deafness is considered a dis-ability; they could allow us to shift the very understanding of sound as a material, cultural, and social category and to create a possibility of space where deafness would be a dif-ability (different ability) or extra-bility of the body in relation to sound. In this sense, Kim's indexicality of parentheses marks resistance to the ideological operation of normativity through the occlusion of the sound's aurality. Or, using Moten's words, "the whole whose incompleteness is always also a more than completeness."

In the end I want to talk about music, not as that which cannot be talked about but as that which is transferred and reproduced in literature as a function of the enabling disability of the literary representation of aurality. I want to linger in the cut between word and sound, between meaning and content.<sup>46</sup>

One more digression. If to assume that incomplete wholeness of the parentheses allows for the totality of possible experiences of sound, then each such experience (marked by the body, in space, at a specific point in time, including the past and the present of that body) would always be iterative but unique, transformative and untranslatable, and will always be present. Such experience could be likened to Moten's experience of Cecil Taylor's *Chinampas*, the poetry and the improvisation of the nonverbal, which in Aztec means "floating garden."

What is the floating garden? Perhaps this: the garden that floats is the one that lingers in another, improvisational sense of the aesthetic ensemble that is no simple return to an imagined and originary singularity. Instead the floating garden marks *the unprecedented present* within which the *aesthetic is "ongoingly" reconfigured and reconfiguring*, bent and bending; within which the illusion of any immediacy of sound is re/written and the overdetermined and deferred fixity of writing is un/written by the material and transformative present of sound.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., loc. 1049 of 5898, Kindle.

In the “transformative present of sound,” in the undetermined presence of the body, the internal/individual and the external/collective experiences of sound become Chinampas, the “floating gardens” of possibility.

Sound as a map, and sound as space. Yet, the sound is also as a body, the materiality of which determines such possibilities but is marked by the unyielding forces of historicity. And the cut between the historical past of the body and the future potential of sound often ruptures into the agonizing trauma of the present. The next chapter will explore that space.

### Chapter 3. Rupture, the Body, and the Maternal. Camille Norment.

In May 2015, Maryland-born and Oslo-based artist, Camille Norment, presented her multifaceted sculptural and sonic intervention at the Nordic Pavilion of the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale under the name *Rapture*. The artistic project included a multisensory installation including the sound of female voices and glass armonica, transmitted through constructions of shattered glass, a series of performances, and a three-volume publication.

The open and light space of the pavilion exuded an uncanny invitation. The expansion of the removed ceiling and brise-soleil created the homogenous quality of light with no shade while massive window frames with shattered glass laid wretched, filling the inside and the outside perimeter of the pavilion. Speakers, like projectiles from above, pointed directly at visitors (see Figure 3). The sensation was heightened by the multilayered and enveloping sound of 12 female singing voices holding the notes of a tritone<sup>48 49</sup>. Breathing, exhaling into the speakers, the voices overlapped with the sine-wave-like sound of glass armonica: light and ethereal, yet unsettling and suspending in tension.

It felt as if something happened in the space: a frozen moment in time as an aftermath of some form of rupture. Or rapture? The difference in one letter could define a violent bursting open or a mystical expression of intense pleasure and, more specifically in the Christian tradition, the ascendance of believers to heaven. The difference in one letter totters on the verge of ambiguity: space where rupture shatters intertwining with

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<sup>48</sup> The tritone has been dubbed the Devil's Interval, or the *diabolus in musica*, because of the unresolved and dissonant sound it produces when the three whole steps or six semitones are played together. It was officially banned by the church during the Enlightenment era because it defied the musical harmony rules.

<sup>49</sup> Mark DeVoto, "Tritone," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (October 9, 2013), accessed January 23, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/art/tritone> .

the potentiality of rapture. One-letter-transformation between tearing apart and ecstasy, from brokenness and trauma to exaltation of the human body. Or is the order reversed, and the evolution flows downward, from excitement to dissonance?

The subject of pain and ecstasy has been addressed in visual art extensively throughout history, with multiple Medieval and Renaissance examples portraying the mystical state of religious rapture, mostly of Christian saints: Saint Francis, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa of Avila, Mary Magdalene.<sup>50</sup> Wrapped in controversy at the time, whether these states were induced by the demonic forces, the general trajectory and idea around them were the one of ascension (from the lower states of the pain of worldly existence to the heights of spiritual ecstasy). The deployed visual vocabulary of canvases and sculpture supported that idea: high contrasts of chiaroscuro, the mystical aura of light, the diagonal composition of the reclined body, the head lolling back, eyes rolled in ecstasy, all spoke of the ascension from the lower realms of the body to the higher states of religious exaltation.

When it comes to communicating emotion, the body takes center stage. Bernini, Rubens, and Caravaggio, all indulged in bringing to the fore the sweet and torturous bend of the female shape, the twisting of her flesh, and the contorted in ecstasy facial expression. What was so potent that pulled the old masters to paint a saint's body in the state of rapture and ecstasy? And what is so unsettling in the projectile-like speakers

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<sup>50</sup> Giotto started a series by painting *Ecstasy of St. Francis* in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, which was followed by Giovanni Bellini with *St. Francis in the Dessert* in 1480, and culminated in Caravaggio's *Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy* (1595). Bernini, Caravaggio, and Rubens continued this noble tradition of depicting religious exaltation with their Baroque versions of Saint Teresa of Avila and Mary Magdalene.

oozing the sound of the female choir overlaying the two notes of the tritone, breathing in and exhaling seductively while holding this unresolved *diabolus in musica*?

Analyzing “the politics of the erotic and the erotics of sound”<sup>51</sup> of Duke Ellington’s music, Moten provides clues to answering these questions:

All this, too, so that we can understand the drives as working in tandem, against, or with each other across the cut of a ruptured and im/possible origin. “The sexual act is an act of aggression with the purpose of the most intimate union. This concurrent and mutually opposing action of the two basic drives gives rise to the whole variegation of the phenomena of life.”<sup>52</sup>

The two drives animating Ellington are the same as the old masters and the same behind the subtlety of the sinister angelic voices flowing through the speakers at the Nordic pavilion: eros and death. Freudian eros is the drive for love, for life, and achievement of “ever greater unities.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, in the impossible loss of its origin, it is intimately connected to the impossible return to the source via disintegration or death. Both of these forces, activated by desire, create the dissonance of opposition and unity, the damaged love, “the sexual cut” of aggression.

From this perspective, the effect of the visual on the eye’s retina is too direct and too limited in its fullness: the psyche relates to the form it encounters, which is too “complete” in its representation as it is limited by the physical boundaries on the wall. The aggression of the fugitive sound, in opposition to the visual, violates the physical boundaries of the autonomous object, and thus, is more potent in its residual effect. Sound envelops and invades the body subtly, regardless of its will; it leaks through the physical boundaries, penetrates the interior, and settles itself in the dark cavities of consciousness. The angelic female voices, dissonanced by the unresolved character of

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<sup>51</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 473 of 5898, Kindle.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Sigmund Freud and James tr Strachey, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1949), 18.

the overtones they are holding, and augmented by the Devil's Interval myth, rupture the ascension towards the divine and disrupt the possibility of unity. The damaged love of the raw eros and seduction, not complete in its anticipative search for resolution and harmony, is suspended in the moment of excitation and the possibility of ecstasy. The sound fills the body yet stays *unheimlich*, or “unhomely” in its space.

Interestingly, the etymology of the word ecstasy, from Greek *existanai*, means “to put out of place, to displace.”<sup>54</sup> Simultaneously, the fugitive nature of sound (from Latin *fugitivus* – “fleeing”)<sup>55</sup> is to run away, to be absent or missing. Thus, one could say that the fugitivity in sound is the vehicle that puts the body into the “unhomely” state – uncomfortable in its own home – and, through the “unhomely” feeling, eventually brings it to the state of “no place” or ecstasy. The link connecting all three phenomena is the displacement, the loss of origin, and the ungroundedness of sorts.

In *Rapture*, this relationship between the materiality of sound, the excitation of the body, and the possibility of ecstasy is further complicated by the sound of the glass armonica projected onto broken pieces of glass scattered on the floor via audio transducers. Attached to the broken pieces of glass, these transducers become “exciters,” literally: the sound projected by them on the glass makes the glass “sing” via the effect of resonance. As a result, the broken singing glass joins the disruptive female choir and creates the multilayered “voice” of the pavilion.

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<sup>54</sup> *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “ecstatic,” accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecstatic>

<sup>55</sup> *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “fugitive,” accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fugitive>

Diving briefly into the history of the glass armonica reveals that this controversial musical instrument was invented by Benjamin Franklin in 1761.<sup>56</sup> It was made of a series of glass bowls and produced sound by the friction of moistened fingers against the rotating glass. One of the most celebrated instruments of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, after the 1820s, it was almost completely forgotten. Prominent composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, and Donizetti composed music for it and even gave lessons to the French queen Marie Antoinette. However, very soon, the instrument acquired a bad reputation for allegedly causing ill effects in listeners and, specifically, hysteria in women. The German doctor Franz Mesmer used this instrument extensively in hypnotizing his female patients while attempting to cure their hysteria.

What is it, if not the sexual cut, at the conjunction of the lost materiality of sound and the pain and ecstasy of the female voice unsettling the body through the dissonance of the prohibited by the church tritone? What is so threatening to the church, to the old masters, and to the patriarchal ideology in general, if not the eros and the invaginative sound materiality of the woman's body, whose moistened fingers rub against the spherical glass bowls and excite the broken glass "to sing," all within the hollowness and excitation of the pavilion's architectonic space? This juncture of the totality of sound, resting in its incompleteness and lost materiality, differently from Christine Sun Kim's operative movements yet similarly in their result, disrupts the hegemony of the visual. The literal and figurative flatness of rapture, painted on canvas and limited by its frame on the wall, is no longer sufficient in the directness and singularity of its visual effect. In Camille Norment's multidisciplinary intervention at the Venice Biennale, the visual is

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<sup>56</sup> "Benjamin Franklin's Glass Armonica," The Franklin Institute, <https://www.fi.edu/history-resources/franklins-glass-armonica>

restored by the incompleteness of the sonic materiality, its unavailable origin, and simultaneously its reproductive capacity. In Moten's words,

Might it not be necessary to hear and sound the singularity of the visage? How do sound and its reproduction allow and disturb the frame or boundary of the visual? What's the relation between phonic materiality and anoriginal maternity? If we ask these questions we might become attuned to certain liberating operations sound performs at that intersection of racial performance and critical philosophy that had heretofore been the site of the occlusion of phonic substance or the (not just Kantian) pre-critical oscillation between the rejection and embrace of certain tones. *Sound gives us back the visuality that ocularcentrism had repressed.*<sup>57</sup>

To unpack the "liberating operations sound performs" further, the most critical question Moten asks still needs to be repeated and addressed: "What's the relation between phonic materiality and anoriginal maternity?"<sup>58</sup> Approaching it will require vulnerability, the unspeakable, and another work of Camille Norment, *Lull*, 2016.

It further requires one more return – to the original scene of the subjection of Aunt Hester, with which Fred Moten opened *In the Break*:

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped the longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I shall never forget it whilst I remember anything ... It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it...<sup>59</sup>

The unspeakable of the "primal scene" that introduced Frederick Douglass to slavery is marked by the origin of the audible event of "the most heart-rending shrieks" of

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<sup>57</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 4001 of 5898, Kindle; emphasis original.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York, Mentor Books, 1987), 259.

his Aunt Hester. The centrality of this event, reestablished by Douglass's recitations of memory and pain, is undeniable: "I shall never forget it whilst remember anything," "it struck me with awful force," "I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it," and finally "it was a most terrible spectacle."<sup>60</sup> The tragedy of the inhumane history of this country, the pain and unhealing trauma of the body produced originally and reproduced innumerable across time and space, by themselves, make discussing this pain questionable and arbitrary. Are we not reproducing this spectacle and becoming voyeurs by reiterating it? But a more prolonged and more vulnerable internalization of this event creates more clarity via producing more questions: what is the relationship between the original scene of subjection and its subsequent reproductions? What are the politics of such reproductions? How does the history of the Black body in pain relate to the present of the Black and non-Black bodies in pain? And more importantly, how does the aurality of the scream/moan/shriek as sound relate to the occularcentrism of the world around us, and how this relationship may navigate the socio-political, economic, and cultural oppression and freedom in this country today?

From the standpoint of these unceasing questions, the reproduction of the event is the exercise of repetition with difference – to break the unyielding totality of the system, which creates and reproduces these iterations of violence, one needs to return to the unavailable originality of the primal scene, to reevaluate the imparted theories of value and to disrupt their totalizing force.

Under the weight of these unceasing questions, my analytical voice ruptures, and the critical narrative is intercepted by the cut of the unspeakable. It is in the spatiality of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

this cut where the rational is no longer adequate to deal with the sound of oppression.

This spatiality requires the unspeakable and somatic experiences of our bodies.

Camille Norment, *Lull*, 2016.

In the darkness of an unlit stage, eyes are grasping for depth. Perspective? Volume? Instead, a disorienting black vacuum wraps visually and arrests in its shallowness. A female voice seeps through the void. A sad, gentle hum, turning moan, turning song, with formless words, tries to soothe and settle (who?), then fades on the edges into quiet grunting. The next moment, the song is cut by an abrasive, ear-splitting shriek of the feedback. The stage is lit by a single spotlight: a microphone is swinging, like a pendulum, over the resting on the floor speaker, from where the recorded song is emerging. The dramatic absence of a performing body on stage is emphasized by a single-spotlight: an aesthetics of real-life, three-dimensional chiaroscuro. The acousmatic female voice, the rhythm of the swinging, the scream of the feedback, the generative repetition of the song, all lull in their mesmerizing dichotomy. The interrupted song is a lullaby. And the installation by Camille Norment, presented at the Montreal Biennial in 2016, is called *Lull*, 2016 (see Figure 4).

*[listen]*

*[i got my education very early and too late. i did not know at the time that both had the very needed quality of synchrony. the first started the end of the acceptance of given choices. and the latter one ended the beginning of insurrection against them. the middle ground has always already been in the center and outside of the structure formed by these synchronous coexistences.]*

The Derridean “invaginative cut” of sound materiality Moten refers to time and again is manifested in the

*[you see,*

*oppositional* layering of the complex aurality of this installation.

The first layer, the fluid quality of the female voice desperately attempting to soothe, breaks down the contextual and linguistic meaning of the lullaby. Devoid of the historically common, uncanny lyrics<sup>61</sup> <sup>62</sup>, the voice utters the syllables “So Ro” with obsessive repetition. What is So Ro? A randomized sound, a spell, glossolalia of sorts? In conversation with David Toop, Norment mentions that depending on pronunciation, it could mean a derivative of “sov rolig” (“sleep calmly”) or could refer to “Så ro” (“Row like this” or “So, row”), but ultimately it functions more as a catalyst sound.<sup>63</sup>

The voice’s exteriority, in its irreducible materiality, breaks down and goes beyond the contextual logocentric meaning. It ruptures the structures of the musical form as well: it doesn’t matter what the lullaby’s words say, words don’t go

*the unspeakable is not only “a set of positive conventions governing what can be spoken of (or written about) in general,”<sup>80</sup> as Samuel Delany noted in the **On the unspeakable** chapter of his book **Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliterary**. the unspeakable here are the personal “specialized tropes” included in this academic writing that are also “specifically not usually*

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<sup>61</sup> What do the words in lullabies usually say? The themes of wolves and monsters coming and taking babies away, themes of death and dying emerge across lullaby lyrics across the world. “Bayu-bayushki-bayu, don’t lie close to the edge; a grey wolf will come, grab you by the flank and will drag you away”, says one Russian lullaby. “Sleep, you black-eyed pig, fall into a deep pit of ghosts”, says an Icelandic one. “Hush little baby, Cuca is coming to get you, papa went to the fields, mama went to work. Black-faced ox, come grab this child, who is scared of grimaces,” lulls a Brazilian version. Who are these lyrics lulling?

<sup>62</sup> Arika Okrent, “12 Creepy Lullabies From Around the World That Will Keep You Up at Night,” Mental Floss (August 29, 2015), accessed February 15, 2021; <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/67896/12-creepy-lullabies-around-world-will-keep-you-night>

<sup>63</sup> (Norment 2016) “Camille Norment in conversation with David Toop,” Camille Norment Studio (April 19, 2016), accessed February 15 2021, <https://www.norment.net/work/text-ind/camille-norment-in-conversation-with-david-toop/>.

<sup>80</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliterary* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1999): 61-62.

there, where the materiality of the song, the materiality of sound is produced.

Words don't go there: this implies a difference between words and sounds; it suggests that words are somehow constrained by their implicit reduction to the meanings they carry—meanings inadequate to or detached from the objects or states of affairs they would envelop.<sup>64</sup>

Following Moten, as words are constrained by their reduction to meaning, to communicate whatever a lullaby attempts to communicate, it would need to be a song, an unfolded narrative from beginning to end. But lullabies rely only on the repetitive disrupted continuation of a story: they build on a short phrase or two, repeated in an endless cycle. The words, the meanings are thus disjointed in their repetitive succession. Ultimately, relying on the broken structure of the verbal, the communication of the lullaby goes beyond the uncanny contextual narrative. It instead communicates the disjointed continuity of sound. The contextual boundaries are left outside of the new structure. Kim-Cohen's Expanded Sonic Model breaks down again: bypassing the binaries of 'speech' and 'not-speech,' 'noise' and 'not-noise,' the humming female voice frees its way out, just to find its center somewhere else. Words don't go there. Where do words go?

*(or ever)"<sup>81</sup> included in the academic writing. yet this second, non-invited and process-based column somehow, at first, determined the existence of this thesis, and later, left me undone in the process of processing, theorizing, and writing it during the past eight months.]*

*[then i saw the body of George Floyd: pinned to the ground by a knee, helpless, in pain, this big Black man was vulnerable like a baby. 'I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe,']*

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<sup>64</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 754 of 5898, Kindle.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

The second layer of the installation's complex aurality is the rhythmic, repetitive feedback that cuts through singing and is produced by the swaying microphone over the lying on the ground speaker. If words don't go there, will sound do? Feedback, in its essence, is the endless amplification of sound upon itself, via the effect of the return of that sound, or a portion of it, through an amplifier or a microphone, back into the speaker. In other words, it is a continuous loop of sound amplification feeding upon itself.<sup>65 66</sup>

In 1968, Steve Reich, in the exploration of musical rhythm and 'phasing,' created *Pendulum Music*, 1968, and defined it as a mixture of an 'audible sculpture' and 'performance art.' Balancing on the verge of entropic installation and performance, the work included three or four speakers lying flat on the floor, with microphones set off in swinging motion by performers above them, like pendulums. The installation explored how randomized synchronization of moving rhythms had the potentiality to morph into a musical composition performing upon itself.

*he repeated nearly  
30 times.  
'I can't breathe'  
was exploding in  
my head and ripping me  
apart.  
gagging but unable  
to throw up, i descended  
into the disorienting oblivion  
of a frozen shock]*  
  
*[repetition.  
repetition with  
difference. sound of the  
scream permeating the  
interior and settling in the  
dark corners of the body.*

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<sup>65</sup> Preoccupied mostly with technological advancements, Max Neuhaus explored feedback as a means of defining space with sound, which was the precursor to the idea of sound installation (*Fontana Mix-Feed*, 1966, performances), but he was also interested in feedback as the potential for decentralization of power in sound production. *Public Supply*, 1966, incorporated audience across the country within the interactive feedback loops produced by radio and telephone lines.

<sup>66</sup> Matthieu Saladin, "Electroacoustic Feedback and the Emergence of Sound Installation: Remarks on a Line of Flight in the Live Electronic Music by Alvin Lucier and Max Neuhaus," *Organised Sound* 22, no. 2 (2017): 268–75. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771817000176>.

Similar in base components but different formally and conceptually, *Lull*, 2016, echoes Reich's minimalist work but shifts the dialogue from the phenomenological exploration of sound to spatial and temporal relationships of a different kind. The sound of the voice is amplified and distorted as the microphone comes in close proximity to the speaker: the soothing texture, humanness, and intimacy of the vocalization are cut and lost by the intrusion of the volatile external environment. The initial singularity of voice is invaded by the randomness of the amplifying exteriority. Sound is no more singular, is no more "sound-in-itself" in this age of information amplification; it is also not the object of essential spatiality needing the experience of the body and other similar objects around it to determine the object fully, as the phenomenology of Reich's piece would suggest. The context of the vocalized sound cut by the interfering feedback sticks to it: aurality explodes, it screeches and bends, and is returned to itself with a difference - broken, augmented by amplification, and transformed to no recognition.

Similarly, in *lullaby as ritual*, a vulnerable message uttered intimately by the mother, lonely in her anxieties, is invaded by the external world of cruelty, randomness, and chance operations, and then returned, changed, every time. Repetition with difference continues; repetition with difference has no resolution and no end. For Khadija al Mohammad, who

*the impossibility of  
the return to the original, no  
matter how you try.*

*are we repeating  
history?*

*is sound reenacting  
the history of the primal  
scene of objection?*

*more than two  
hundred years and more  
than a thousand miles of  
difference between  
Maryland in 1845 and  
Minneapolis in 2020.*

*how much real  
difference IS there?]*

*[‘HANDS UP -  
DON’T SHOOT,’  
‘NO JUSTICE -  
NO PEACE,’  
BLACK LIVES  
MATTER.’*

fled Syria in 2013 to Turkey, displaced by the war, her lullabies changed over time; they changed with her journey.<sup>67</sup> How will the lullabies of mothers across the world change after this unprecedented year?

*the sound of  
incantations  
while marching  
down*

Eventually, another reading of the complex, unresolved aurality of *Lull* resurfaces: the humming of the mother invaded and cut by the randomized environment of the microphone pendulum becomes call and response at the scene of objection. Ruptured phonic materiality, unresolved in its disjointed repetition, produces excruciatingly haunting memories of the not-so-long-gone past: the body was just there (maybe lynched and swinging, like a pendulum, from a tree? Like 21-year-old Townsend Cook in Maryland in 1885.<sup>68</sup> Or 22-year-old George Armwood in Princess Anne in 1933. Or 23-year-old Matthew Williams in Salisbury in 1931. Or over forty other Black people in Maryland eradicated by lynching in 18 out of 24 counties between 1854 and 1933.<sup>69</sup> It was the same Maryland where the torture of Aunt Hester took place), but now the body is gone. Only residual moaning, wailing voice of a

*the Fifth Avenue is  
not the moaning, mourning,  
morning of the Black body -  
stolen, violated, raped,  
whipped, torn, mutilated,  
and killed - over the past  
four hundred years.  
these repetitions will  
never be enough to  
remember.  
but they are enough  
to forget.  
i don't want to forget  
their names.]*

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<sup>67</sup> Hannah Reyes Morales, "What the lullabies we sing to our children reveal about us," *National Geographic* (November 19, 2020), online. Accessed February 26, 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Jonathan M. Pitts, "Bringing a dark chapter to light: Maryland confronts its lynching legacy," *The Baltimore Sun* (September 25, 2018), accessed February 2021. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/bs-md-lynching-in-maryland-20180919-htmlstory.html> .

<sup>69</sup> A interactive map of lynchings in Maryland was put together by Jonathan Pitts (writing and research) and Caroline Pate (design and development) and is available at the Baltimore Sun website online: <https://news.baltimoresun.com/maryland-lynchings/#card46>

mother is left to endlessly soothe the horror of the terrible spectacle.

It would be, however, stopping half-way to focus on the reading of sound only as disappearing auralty locked in the suffocating reproduction of the spectacle. Yes, the incompleteness of sound reproduces and augments the visual, but through that process rebirths itself as a *protest* against the primal scene of violence. It deconstructs the theories of value we are born with and (if we are not lucky and defiant) we die back into. It becomes the possibility of the return with a different outcome:

If we return again and again to a certain passion, a passionate response to passionate utterance, horn-voice-horn over percussion, a protest, an objection, it is because it is more than another violent scene of subjection too terrible to pass on; it is the ongoing performance, the prefigurative scene of a (re)appropriation—the deconstruction and reconstruction, the improvisational recording and revaluation—of value, of the theory of value, of the theories of value.<sup>70</sup>

Jimi Hendrix understood this aspect of sound intimately. Maybe this is why his protest was always “a passionate response to passionate utterance” of feedback to the sound of an electric guitar on stage. As Greg Tate writes in *The Afterlife of Jimi’s Unheard Armageddon (in Three Cantatas)*,

Hendrix, however, was intrigued by eruption and disruption as he was by the blues’ formal elegance. One of the most under-sung aspects of his brilliance was his control and deployment of feedback – harmonised

*[a small plaque on the ground said*

*‘African Burial*

*Ground*

*ca. 1750-1800.*

*This temporary*

*plaque marks a sacred*

*space where at least thirty-*

*six children, women, and*

*men were laid to rest during*

*the second half of the 18th*

*century. The burial ground*

*had been forgotten but was*

*rediscovered in 2013; its*

*extent is unknown. The*

*thirty-six individuals, whose*

*names we do not know,*

*were likely enslaved or free*

*people of African descent.*

*Some were born in Africa*

*and forcibly brought to*

*Charleston aboard slave-*

*trading ships. others were*

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<sup>70</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 300 of 5898, Kindle.

feedback at that. This facet of his work can be heard to grand and near-traumatic effect in his evocation of war and death, 'Machine gun', and in his Woodstock version of 'The Star Spangled Banner.' in those death-defying, soul-snatching performances we can hear a symphony of singing winds and crying beasts - wounded bodies in agony, bodies ruptured and ripped apart by bullets and shrapnel, mass population annihilation rendered by remote control - echoes of the banshee aria that novelist Thomas Pynchon identified in the opening of his 1973 *Gravity's Rainbow* as 'a screaming comes across the skies' in the form of V2 missiles arcing in from Germany to explode all over a bunkered-down London.<sup>71</sup>

In the "death-defying, soul-snatching" audio and visual materiality emitted by Hendrix's guitar (producing the feedback producing the scream) and, via its metonymical extension, by his body, the performances at Woodstock in 1968 and at Berkeley Community Theatre in 1970<sup>72</sup> were, in fact, "the deconstruction and reconstruction, the improvisational recording and revaluation – of value." These performances of the "song cutting speech" and "scream cutting song," these explosive and fugitive allusions to the rupturing body in pain, oppressed by the sonic continuity of the American flag in *The Star-Spangled Banner*, aim at the very fabric of the continuity that created and justified the violence in the first place. The "invaginative cut" within a four-hundred-year-continuity of oppression, the disappearance enhancing presence, become the only conditions under which insurrection is possible.

*American born. they were  
buried with care by their  
loved ones, some in  
clothes, some wrapped in  
shrouds and some with  
personal belongings....'*

*"were likely  
enslaved or free  
people???" bullshit. a  
century before the 13th  
amendment. what IS the  
chance these people were  
free? rewriting history, you,  
white people.  
if they didn't  
remember their names,  
how will we not  
forget?!  
i don't want to  
forget their names.]*

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<sup>71</sup> Greg Tate, "The Afterlife of Jimi's Unheard Armageddon (in Three Cantatas)," in *Rapture 2*, ed. Katya Garcia-Anton, Camille Norment, and Antonio Cataldo (Norway: Office for Contemporary Art, 2015), 46.

<sup>72</sup> The two recordings I am referring to are accessible here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKAwPA14Ni4> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6MM0MA94TE>

We've got to think, then, what it means to "lay awake all night in hushed voices," think the political implications and history of the primal overhearing of a phonic materiality always tied to the ongoing loss or impossible recovery of the maternal.<sup>73</sup>

Moten answers the original question of materiality and maternity: the relationship between phonic materiality and *anoriginal* maternity is the relationship of the ongoing loss and (ir)recoverability. Contextually in *Lull*, the disappearance of the material is tightly linked to the disappearance of the maternal, especially the historically unhealable disappearance that is. The disembodied voice of the mother sings to her child; rhythmic swaying of her absent body, rhythmic swinging of pendulum – both producing sound, both marking time.

*So Ro*

*So Ro*

*So Ro...*

Maternity is one of the driving mechanisms in the depths of sound: to (re)produce, to connect, to reconnect to the origin, and to bear. Through centuries of the disturbing, somatically unbearable, and traumatic history of African people on the American continent, this understanding of maternity becomes broken and estranged. Abduction from the African land during the transatlantic slave trade, rape, mutilation, murder, and denial of the blood rights in the form of separating

*[remembering*

*Resmaa Menakem's*

*words: "while we see anger and violence in the streets of our country, the real battlefield is inside our bodies. If we are to survive as a country, it is inside our bodies where this conflict will need to be resolved."<sup>82</sup>]*

*[in the blindness of*

*the averted eye, memory is*

*produced. in the*

*(un)hearing, unwilling to*

*listen to the screams of the*

*Black man, affect is*

*produced – that turns*

*inward and feeds the*

*memory; and feeds all the*

*tender spaces within our*

*body that are left unsaid,*

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<sup>73</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 695 of 5898, Kindle.

<sup>82</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands : Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), xvii.

mothers and children due to their “commodity status,” upheld by the legal and trade system, along with other atrocities of the system of chattel slavery in this country, become a disintegrating assault on motherhood and lead to “the destructive loss of the natural mother” in the African diaspora. In *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book*, Hortense Spillers asserts that the disruption of the familial bonds and the denied genetic link led to a state where “femininity loses its sacredness in slavery, then so does “motherhood” as female blood-rite/right.”<sup>74</sup> This vicious course was another contribution to the mythologization of motherhood via the epistemological operation of naming<sup>75</sup>, which marks the body of the mother and signifies her role in society today.

As the sound, the moan, the cry So Ro is uttered, who is she, the mother? A wailer or a spell-caster, a protectress or a banshee, “Peaches” or “Earth Mother”<sup>76</sup>?

One of the origins of the word lullaby points to Hebrew *Lilith a-bi*, which later became *Lilla-be* and meant “Lilith be

*unprocessed, unexplained: hungry ghosts that haunt us and cascade off one another, multiplying the force of trauma yet bearing like a mother in labor, an internal moan, a scream. that moan, that internal response to trauma, lulling the pain, digesting the affect, bearing the breakdown of the "me" and the "other," seeps through the tight spaces of our psyche, leaks into the conscious. attaining a more gross form with each new layer it pierces, it comes out of our throats, our hearts,*

<sup>74</sup> Hortense Spillers, “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17 (2, Culture and Counter-memory: The “American” Connection, 1987), 75.

<sup>75</sup> Hortense Spillers starts her milestone work with citing the names Black women historically acquired, which, “*embedded in bizarre axiological ground, [they] demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean.*” (see source above) “Peaches,” “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire,” “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” “Granny,” “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium,” the names demonstrate how the process of signification, via the symbolism of American grammar, marks the bodies of Black women, attaching narratives, erasing history, complicating the gendering, and determining the space for a Black woman, politically and historically.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

gone.” Lilith, in the Talmud, was a dangerous female demon of the night, a sexual wanton who steals babies in darkness, so an amulet was worn on the child’s neck to protect the child from the demon.<sup>77</sup> The historical nature of cultural preconceptions and stigma reflected in myth places the mother irrecoverably within the polarized binary of a virtuous and sinister woman, a goddess and a prostitute, and points at a space, repeating Spillers, “so loaded with the mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean.”<sup>78</sup>

Is there a way out of this hermeneutics? Maybe only via a paradox: predetermined by myth, the lullaby is sound set in rhythm and spatiality of the utterance. The sound amplifies and cuts itself by dissonance and the random chance of its layering. The accidental creates a crack in the predetermined myth – the break – now improvisation: a deviation and defiance of the unavailable origin opening the space for potentiality. A new scream is uttered and a new future. And maybe this sound will determine a new myth to live by:

Thus the myth and the musical work are like the conductors of an orchestra, whose audience becomes the silent performers. If it is now asked where the real center of the work is to be found, the answer is that this is impossible to determine. Music and mythology bring

*our lungs, and manifests in  
the daylight.*

*this seed of  
potentiality, undergoing the  
path from the most subtle,  
unheard, unable to be  
heard, to the more and  
more acoustic, is the path,  
both deeply personal and  
widely political. it is the  
evolution and the revolution  
of individual pain and the  
collective unconscious.*

*this trauma cannot  
be reconciled collectively  
until it is healed  
individually].*

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<sup>77</sup> Rabbi Jill Hammer, “Lilith: Lady Flying in Darkness,” *My Jewish Learning*, 2017, accessed February 2021. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/lilith-lady-flying-in-darkness/>.

<sup>78</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 65.

man face to face with potential objects of which only the shadows are actualized.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 991 of 5898, Kindle.

## Conclusion

This paper began by defining sound from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective: sound, as an object, merging with the experience of the body – through the experience of the body – discovers its own agency. Sound, ambiguous and complex in its material nature, propels itself forward by fleeing, avoiding, disappearing. In fact, the whole totality of sound is keyed on its incompleteness – when the aural activates the inner landscapes, both conscious and subconscious, it touches memory, imagination, and more importantly, unprocessed traumatic experiences of the past that live in the somatic. This experience transforms our understanding of sound as the one not just audible and palpable by the ear, but, instead, becoming the sixth sense of sorts. New proprioception of its locale is more closely related to touch, to haptic, to the internally recovered visual (not through the eyes), which eventually surpasses the hegemony of the external gaze we are habituated into, as humans.

Simultaneously, this work builds on a somewhat contradicting, poststructuralist Derridean<sup>83</sup> view of sound, arguing that sound cannot exist in some abstracted idealized, immediately perceivable totality, irrespective and independent from the context of the environmental signifiers.<sup>84</sup> Sound, in its generative capacities, continues to reinvent and reconstruct itself, never really fully reaching any completeness, though becoming poignant and “complete” within a specific context predetermined by the social and cultural conditions reproducing its meaning. For example, noise as a contextual definition changes, as it was traced, from Max Neuhaus in the 1960s to the work of

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<sup>83</sup> Though Derrida refused to call his position poststructuralist.

<sup>84</sup> Derrida is believed to be a strong critic of the earlier Husserlian phenomenology. Yet, in his later work, especially, *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida, developed a much more intricate view of the phenomenological experience of the body. It differed in the way touch, as a sense, operates, which was significantly different from the visual. Moten seems to be aware of this Derridean position even though he does not cite this Derrida's work directly in his book.

Christine Sun Kim today. Pain, ecstasy, and trauma, as Camille Norment revealed, are also always contextual and never abstract: they are specific to the experiences that happen within the body, to the individual and collective history we inhabit and embody, and to the historical potentiality we reproduce ourselves into, through sound.

Both artists work closely and poignantly with material loss: Kim resurrects haptic, tactile, and semiotic capacities of sound to insurrect against the society's oppression of normativity and ableism; Norment removes the visual presence of the corporeal and frees up the boundaries for the multilayered sound immateriality to reach and confront deeper strata of historicity, racism, violence, trauma, and drive for freedom in our very own bodies. Yet, there is one more force that is activated by the "incompleteness" of sound.

In *Closer captions*, Kim mentions how, as a deaf person, she *relies* on other people, "who have a different relationship with sound and the world,"<sup>85</sup> to write captions and communicate sound. In *(LISTEN)* walk, Kim's experience of sound with her memories marking geographic coordinates of the city, become a parenthesized (occluded in their specificity and context) version of sound she wants other, able-bodied, participants to be *relying on*.

*Rapture* installation at the Nordic Pavilion of the Venice Biennale *relied* on the presence of physical bodies of the visitors, subjected to the invaginative force of sound, in order to activate the architectonic space of the pavilion itself. It was also the *interdependency* of sound oscillations emanated by the exciters attached to glass shards, and the material loss of the disembodied voice of the female choir, with each

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<sup>85</sup> "Artist Christine Sun Kim Rewrites Closed Captions," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfe479qL8hg>.

singer *relying* on another for the length of the breath to uphold the disjointed continuity of sound in the multiplicity of held overtones.

What is the drive in both artists who work intimately with sound to lay bare the vulnerability of the interdependency in sound's nature? Is there a connection between the material loss and the condition of reliance on another body for a "more complete" experience of sound? Fred Moten concludes in his book,

...an erotics of distant receptivity where, in this particular case, phonic materiality opens to us its own invagination, a libidinal drive toward ever greater unities of the sensual where materiality in its most general—which is to say substantive—sense is transmitted in the interstice between text and all it represents and can't represent and the audio-visual and all that it bears and cannot bear. When in this space a material tactility is transferred, the affective encounter of the ensemble of the senses and the ensemble of the social is given as a possibility of this erotic drive that now can be theorized in its most intense relation to the drive for, and the knowledge of, *freedom*.<sup>86</sup>

I want to linger in this "erotics of distant receptivity." In this interstitial, liminal, interdependent sound temporality that transmits something very ephemeral and very non-capitalist: like freedom, like a hum of the mother, like the disjointed continuity and the totality of voices. We are people of color, indigenous, Black people, women, LGBTQIA+, extra-able people's voices. I want to live in the pulse, rhythm, thump, moan, scream, mourn that disrupt the hegemony of the normative. That thump will beat irregularly, ensemblically, cacophonically – pulsing through the veins of another body and reflected in my own – unabridged in all its incomplete uniqueness.

In this "erotics of distant receptivity," sound will not be a fact, a structure, or a given essentialized universal. It always already *is* 'on the verge,' and 'not yet.' This sound will never be neutral. But it always *is* present, absent, changing forms, fluid, subjective, and free. Quite a heterotopic view, isn't it?

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<sup>86</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, loc. 3283 of 5898, Kindle; emphasis mine.

Illustrations

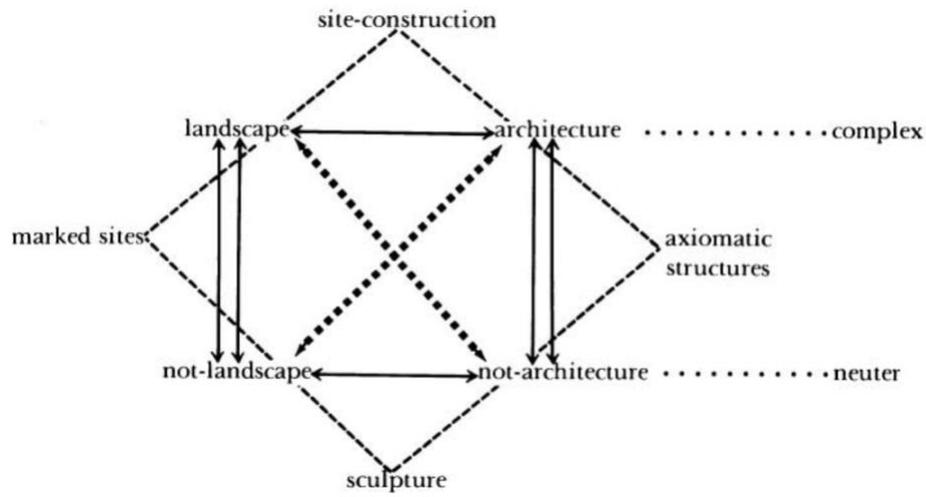


Figure 1. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October 8* (Spring 1979): 30-44, 38.

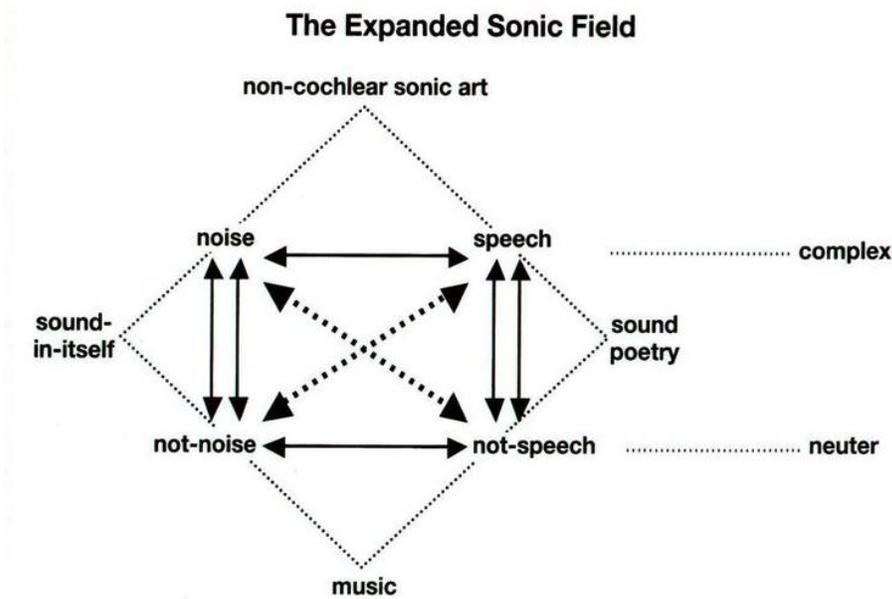


Figure 2. Seth Kim-Cohen, "The Expanded Sonic Field." In *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-cochlear Sonic Art*. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2013), 155



Figure 3. Camille Norment: *Rapture*. Nordic Pavilion at the 56th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2015. Accessed March 3, 2021. <https://vernissage.tv/2015/05/15/camille-norment-rapture-nordic-pavilion-at-venice-art-biennale-2015-interview/>

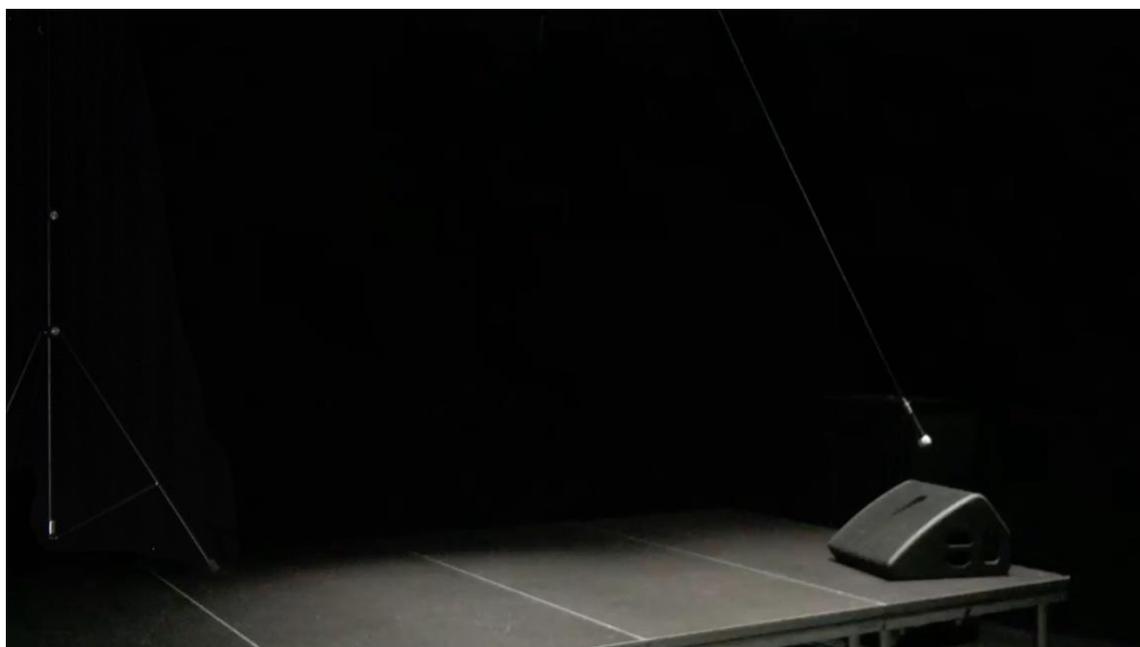


Figure 4. Camille Norment. *Lull - So Ro*, 2016. Camille Norment Studio website. Accessed March 3, 2021. <https://www.norment.net/work/objects-installations-ind/lull-So-Ro/>

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