

# In the Break

*The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*

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University of Minnesota Press  
Minneapolis • London





May Joseph, David Eng, Barbara Browning, Nahum Chandler, Paul Kottman, Karen Hadley, Sandra Gunning, Kate McCullough, Mary Pat Brady, Stephanie Smith, José Muñoz, and Tom Sheehan (my spiritual coauthor) has meant everything to me.

Laurie Chandler, Joe Torra, Alice Key, Kate Butler, Gwen Rahner, Maya Miller, Alycee Lane, Kevin Kopelson, Doris Witt, Max Thomas, Margaret Bass, Helene Moglen, Anna McCarthy, Herman Bennett, André Lepecki, Angela Dillard, Phil Harper, Bob Stam, Robin Kelley, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Griffin, Jason King, Anita Cherian, Lara Nielsen, Heather Schuster, Tracie Morris, Abdul-Karim Mustapha, Eric Neel, Kevin Floyd, Hakan Dibel, Cynthia Oliver, Phil Round, Linda Bolton, Dee Morris, Brooks Landon, Ed Folsom, Fred Woodard, David Depew, Mary Depew, Mary Ann Rasmussen, Stephen Vlastos, John Nelson, Alan Weiss, Christof Migone, Richard Schechner, Jennifer Fink, Lisa Duggan, Lauren Berlant, Laurence Rickels, Julie Carlson, Peggy Phelan, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, Randy Martin, Charles Rowell, Ange Mlinko, Jim Behrle, and Murray Jackson have been supportive friends, editors, and colleagues.

I thank José Muñoz and Laura Harris for reading all of the manuscript and Sarah Cervenak for her help with the index.

Robert O’Meally accepted me with grace and friendship into the Jazz Study Group he convenes at Columbia University. The chance to join the scholars he brings together has been a highlight of my intellectual life and very important to the work I have tried to do in this book.

Over the past three or four years, in the course of finishing this book, I have often returned to Stanley Cavell’s words at the end of *A Pitch of Philosophy*: “Am I ready to vow . . . that I have the ear, that I know my mother’s mother tongue of music to be also mine?” My mother, B Jenkins, taught me the value of trying to reach for something and in her “absence” that value, the essence of her tradition, dawns on me every morning in a different way as old and new desire. I want to go as far out from where she was as she wanted me to go, all the way back to her ground and line. All my work is dedicated to her with all my love.

## Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester’s Scream

The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.<sup>1</sup> Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that rearranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity. While subjectivity is defined by the subject’s possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses. I’m interested in what happens when we consider the phonic materiality of such propriative exertion. Or, to invoke and diverge from Saidiya Hartman’s fundamental work and phrasing, I’m interested in the convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance at the scene of objection.

Between looking and being looked at, spectacle and spectatorship, enjoyment and being enjoyed, lies and moves the economy of what Hartman calls hypervisibility. She allows and demands an investigation of this hypervisibility in its relation to a certain musical obscurity and opens us to the problematics of everyday ritual, the stagedness of the violently (and sometimes amelioratively) quotidian, the essential drama of black life, as Zora Neale Hurston might say. Hartman shows how narrative always echoes and redoubles the dramatic interenactment of “contentment and abjection,” and she explores the massive discourse of the cut, of rememberment and redress, that we always hear in narratives



where blackness marks simultaneously both the performance of the object and the performance of humanity. She allows us to ask: what have objectification and humanization, both of which we can think in relation to a certain notion of subjection, to do with the essential historicity, the quintessential modernity, of black performance? Whatever runs off us, a certain offense runs through us. This is a double ambivalence that requires analyses of looking and being looked at; such game requires, above all, some thinking about the opposition of spectacle and routine, violence and pleasure. This thinking is Hartman's domain.

A critique of the subject animates Hartman's work. It bears the trace, therefore, of a movement exemplified by an aspect of Judith Butler's massive theoretical contribution wherein the call to subjectivity is understood also as a call to subjection and subjugation and appeals for redress or protection to the state or to the structure or idea of citizenship—as well as modes of radical performativity or subversive impersonation—are always already embedded in the structure they would escape.<sup>2</sup> But if Hartman moves in this field she also moves in another tradition that forces another kind of questioning. Consulting Frederick Douglass on all of this is mandatory and the best place to consult him is in the moments when he describes and reproduces black performance. But this is to move in the tradition of a mode of reading Douglass that conflates his story (and its graphic and emblematic primal scene) with the story of slavery and freedom; this is to risk an uncritical covering of the assertion of Douglass's originarity; this is to approach the natal occasion that our musico-political tradition must evade. In order to sidestep this problematic, Hartman has both to avoid and to arrive at Douglass, must both repress and return to him.

Everything moves, for Hartman, after an opening decision regarding these questions of comportment:

The “terrible spectacle” that introduced Frederick Douglass to slavery was the beating of his Aunt Hester. . . . By locating this “horrible exhibition” in the first chapter of his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass establishes the centrality of violence to the making of

the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement “I was born.” The passage through the blood-stained gate is an inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved. In this regard, it is a primal scene. By this I mean that the terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another; this is confirmed by the event's placement in the opening chapter on genealogy.

I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body. Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. . . . At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator. Only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and terrible. In light of this, how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the numbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays? This was the challenge faced by Douglass and the other foes of slavery, and this is the task I take up here.

Therefore, rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned. . . . By defamiliarizing the familiar, I hope to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle. What concerns me here is the diffusion of terror



and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism and property.<sup>3</sup>

The decision not to reproduce the account of Aunt Hester's beating is, in some sense, illusory. First, it is reproduced in her reference to and refusal of it; second, the beating is reproduced in every scene of subjection the book goes on to read—in both the ritual performances combining terror and enjoyment in slavery and the fashionings and assertions of citizenship and “free” subjectivity after emancipation. The question here concerns the inevitability of such reproduction even in the denial of it. This is the question of whether the performance of subjectivity—and the subjectivity that Hartman is interested in here is definitely performed—always and everywhere reproduces what lies before it; it is also the question of whether performance in general is ever outside the economy of reproduction.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that Hartman tries but cannot make disappear the originary performance of the violent subjection of the slave's body. Indeed, Hartman's considerable, formidable, and rare brilliance is present in the space she leaves for the ongoing (re)production of that performance in all its guises and for a critical awareness of how each of those guises is always already present in and disruptive of the supposed originary of that primal scene. What are the politics of this unavoidably reproducible and reproductive performance? What is held in the ongoing disruption of its primality? What shape must a culture take when it is so (un)grounded? What does this disturbance of capture and genesis give to black performance?

Douglass's *is* a primal scene for complex reasons that have to do with the connectedness of desire, identification, and castration that Hartman displaces onto the field of the mundane and the quotidian, where pain is alloyed with pleasure. However, this displacement somehow both acknowledges and avoids the vexed question of the possibility of pain and pleasure mixing in the scene and in its originary and subsequent recountings. For Hartman the very specter of enjoyment is reason enough to repress the encounter. So lingering in the psychoanalytic break is crucial in the interest of a certain set of complexities that

cannot be overlooked but must be traced back to this origin precisely in the interest of destabilizing its originary and originary in general, a destabilization Douglass founds in his original recitation, which is also an originary repression. It's the ongoing repression of the primal scene of subjection that one wants to guard against and linger in. Douglass passes on a repression that Hartman's critical suppression extends. Such transfer demands that one ask if every recitation is a repression and if every reproduction of a performance is its disappearance. Douglass and Hartman confront us with the fact that the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance is performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production. The recitation of Douglass's repression, the repression embedded in his recitation, is there in Hartman as well. Like Douglass, she transposes all that is unspeakable in the scene to later, ritualized, “soulfully” mundane and quotidian performances. All that's missing is the originary recitation of the beating, which she reproduces in her reference to it. This is to say that there is an intense dialogue with Douglass that structures *Scenes of Subjection*. The dialogue is opened by a refusal of recitation that reproduces what it refuses. Hartman swerves away from Douglass and thereby runs right back to him. She also runs through him into territory he could not have recognized, territory no one has charted as thoroughly and as convincingly as she has done. Still, this turn away from Douglass that is also a turn to and through Douglass is a disturbance that is neither unfamiliar nor unfamiliar. *In the Break* addresses such resemblance by way of the following questions: Is there a way to disrupt the totalizing force of the primality Douglass represents? Is there a way to subject this unavoidable model of subjection to a radical breakdown?

My attempt to address these questions will, I hope, justify another engagement with the terribly beautiful music of Douglass's recitations of the beating of his Aunt Hester. The engagement moves initially through and against Karl Marx, by way of Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach. I want to show the interarticulation of the resistance of the object with Marx's subjunctive figure of the commodity who speaks. According to Marx, the speaking commodity is an impossibility invoked



only to militate against mystifying notions of the commodity's essential value. My argument starts with the historical reality of commodities who spoke—of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and “freedom.” But I am interested, finally, in the implications of the breaking of such speech, the elevating disruptions of the verbal that take the rich content of the object's/commodity's auralty outside the confines of meaning precisely by way of this material trace. More specifically with regard to Douglass's prefatory scene and its subsequent restagings, I'm interested in establishing some procedures for discovering the relationship between the “heart-rending shrieks” of Aunt Hester in the face of the master's violent assault, the discourse on music that Douglass initiates a few pages after the recitation of that vicious encounter, and the incorporation or recording of a sound figured as external both to music and to speech in black music and speech.

In his critical deployment of such music and speech, Douglass discovers a hermeneutic that is simultaneously broken and expanded by an operation akin to what Jacques Derrida refers to as “invagination.”<sup>5</sup> This cut and augmented hermeneutic circle is structured by a double movement. The first element is the transference of a radically exterior auralty that disrupts and resists certain formations of identity and interpretation by challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form. The second is the assertion of what Nathaniel Mackey calls “‘broken’ claim(s) to connection”<sup>6</sup> between Africa and African America that seek to suture corollary, asymptotically divergent ruptures—maternal estrangement and the thwarted romance of the sexes—that he refers to as “wounded kinship” and the “the sexual ‘cut.’”<sup>7</sup> This assertion marks an engagement with a more attenuated, more internally determined, exteriority and a courtship with an always already unavailable and substitutive origin. It would work by way of an imaginative restoration of the figure of the mother to a realm determined not only by verbal meaning and conventional musical form but by a nostalgic specularly and a necessarily endogamous, simultaneously

virginal and reproductive sexuality. These twin impulses animate a forceful operation in Douglass's work, something like a revaluation of that revaluation of value that was set in motion by four of Douglass's “contemporaries”—Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Saussure. Above all, they open the possibility of a critique of the valuation of meaning over content and the reduction of phonic matter and syntactic “degeneracy” in the early modern search for a universal language and the late modern search for a universal science of language. This disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project is of fundamental importance since it allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence. More specifically, the emergence from political, economic, and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout their graphic (re)production.

In *Caribbean Discourse* Edouard Glissant writes:

From the outset (that is from the moment Creole is forged as a medium of communication between slave and master), the spoken imposes on the slave its particular syntax. For Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse. . . . Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise.<sup>8</sup>

Lingering with Glissant's formulations produces certain insights. The first is that the temporal condensation and acceleration of the trajectory of black performances, which is to say black history, is a real problem and a real chance for the philosophy of history. The second is that the animative materiality—the aesthetic, political, sexual, and racial force—of the ensemble of objects that we might call black performances, black history, blackness, is a real problem and a real chance for the philosophy



of human being (which would necessarily bear and be irreducible to what is called, or what somebody might hope someday to call, subjectivity). One of the implications of blackness, if it is set to work in and on such philosophy, is that those manifestations of the future in the degraded present that C. L. R. James described can never be understood simply as illusory. The knowledge of the future in the present is bound up with what is given in something Marx could only subjunctively imagine: the commodity who speaks. Here is the relevant passage from volume 1 of *Capital*, at the end of the chapter on “The Commodity,” at the end of the section called “The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret.”

But, to avoid anticipating, we will content ourselves here with one more example relating to the commodity-form itself. If commodities could speak they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values. Now listen how those commodities speak through the mouth of the economist:

“Value (i.e., exchange-value) is a property of things, riches (i.e., use-value) of man. Value in this sense necessarily implies exchanges, riches do not.”

“Riches (use-value) are the attribute of man, value is the attribute of commodities. A man or a community is rich, a pearl or a diamond is valuable. . . . A pearl or a diamond is valuable as a pearl or diamond.”

So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond. The economists who have discovered this chemical substance, and who lay special claim to critical acumen, nevertheless find that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects. What confirms them in this view is the peculiar circumstance that the use-value of a thing is realized without exchange, i.e. in a social process. Who would not call to mind at this point the advice given by the good Dogberry to the night-watchman Seacoal?

“To be a well-favoured man is the gift of fortune; but reading and writing comes by nature.”<sup>9</sup>

The difficulty of this passage is partly due to its dual ventriloquizations. Marx produces a discourse of his own to put into the mouth of dumb commodities before he reproduces what he figures as the impossible speech of commodities magically given through the mouths of classical economists. The difficulty of the passage is intensified when Marx goes on to critique both instances of imagined speech. These instances contradict one another but Marx comes down neither on the side of speech he produces nor on that of the speech of classical economists that he reproduces. Instead he traverses what he conceives of as the empty space between these formulations, that space being the impossible material substance of the commodity’s impossible speech. In this regard, what is at stake is not *what* the commodity says but *that* the commodity says or, more properly, that the commodity, in its inability to say, must be made to say. It is, more precisely, the idea of the commodity’s speech that Marx critiques, and this is because he believes neither in the fact nor in the possibility of such speech. Nevertheless, this critique of the idea of the commodity’s speech only becomes operative by way of a deconstruction of the specific meaning of those impossible or unreal propositions imposed upon the commodity from outside.

The words Marx puts into the commodity’s mouth are these: “our use value . . . does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value,” where value equals exchange value. Marx has the commodity go on to assert that commodities only relate to one another as exchange-values, that this is proven by the necessarily social intercourse in which commodities might be said to discover themselves. Therefore, the commodity discovers herself, comes to know herself, only as a function of having been exchanged, having been embedded in a mode of sociality that is shaped by exchange.

The words of the commodity that are spoken through the mouths of the classical economists are roughly these: riches (i.e., use-value) are independent of the materiality of objects, but value, which is to say



exchange-value, is a material part of the object. “A man or a commodity is rich, a pearl or a diamond is valuable.” This is because a pearl or a diamond is exchangeable. Though he agrees with the classical economists when they assert that value necessarily implies exchange, Marx chafes at the notion that value is an inherent part of the object. “No chemist,” he argues, “has discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond.” For Marx, this chemical substance called exchange-value has not been found because it does not exist. More precisely, Marx facetiously places this discovery in an unachievable future without having considered the conditions under which such a discovery might be made. Those conditions are precisely the fact of the commodity’s speech, which Marx dismisses in his critique of the very idea. “So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond” because pearls or diamonds have not been heard to speak. The impossible chemical substance of the object’s (exchange-)value is the fact—the material, graphic, phonic substance—of the object’s speech. Speech will have been the cutting augmentation of the already existing chemistry of objects, but the object’s speech, the commodity’s speech, is impossible, that impossibility being the final refutation of whatever the commodity will have said.

Marx argues that the classical economists believe “that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties.” He further asserts that they are confined in this view by the nonsocial realization of use-value—the fact that its realization does not come by way of exchange. When he makes these assertions, Marx moves in an already well-established choreography of approach and withdrawal from a possibility of discovery that Douglass already recited: the (exchange-)value of the speaking commodity exists also, as it were, *before* exchange. Moreover, it exists precisely as the capacity for exchange and the capacity for a literary, performative, phonographic disruption of the protocols of exchange. This dual possibility comes by a nature that *is* and at the same time is social and historical, a nature that is given as a kind of anticipatory sociality and historicity.

To think the possibility of an (exchange-)value that is prior to exchange, and to think the reproductive and incantatory assertion of

that possibility as the objection to exchange that is exchange’s condition of possibility, is to put oneself in the way of an ongoing line of discovery, of coming upon, of invention. The discovery of the chemical substance that is produced in and by Marx’s counterfactual is the achievement of Douglass’s line given in and as the theory and practice of everyday life where the spectacular and the mundane encounter one another all the time. It is an achievement we’ll see given in the primal scene of Aunt Hester’s objection to exchange, an achievement given in speech, literary phonography, and their disruption. What is sounded through Douglass is a theory of value—an objective and objectional, productive and reproductive ontology—whose primitive axiom is that commodities speak.

The impossible example is given in order to avoid anticipation, but it works to establish the impossibility of such avoidance. Indeed, the example, in her reality, in the materiality of her speech as breath and sound, anticipates Marx. This sound was already a recording, just as our access to it is made possible only by way of recordings. We move within a series of phonographic anticipations, encrypted messages, sent and sending on frequencies Marx tunes to accidentally, for effect, without the necessary preparation. However, this absence of preparation or foresight in Marx—an anticipatory refusal to anticipate, an obversive or anti- and anteimprovisation—is condition of possibility of a richly augmented encounter with the chain of messages the (re)sounding speech of the commodity cuts and carries. The intensity and density of what could be thought here as his alternative modes of preparation make possible a whole other experience of the music of the event of the object’s speech. Moving, then, in the critical remixing of nonconvergent tracks, modes of preparation, traditions, we can think how the commodity who speaks, in speaking, in the sound—the inspirited materiality—of that speech, constitutes a kind of temporal warp that disrupts and augments not only Marx but the mode of subjectivity that the ultimate object of his critique, capital, both allows and disallows. All of this moves toward the secret Marx revealed by way of the music he subjunctively mutes. Such aurality is, in fact, what Marx called the “sensuous outburst of [our] essential activity.”<sup>10</sup> It is a passion wherein “the senses have ...



become theoreticians in their immediate practice.”<sup>11</sup> The commodity whose speech sounds embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign. Such embodiment is also bound to the (critique of) reading and writing, oft conceived by clowns and intellectuals as the natural attributes of whoever would hope to be known as human.

In the meantime, every approach to Marx’s example must move through the ongoing event that anticipates it, the real event of the commodity’s speech, itself broken by the irreducible materiality—the broken and irreducible maternity—of the commodity’s scream. Imagine a recording of the (real) example that anticipates the (impossible) example; imagine that recording as the graphic reproduction of a scene of instruction, one always already cut by its own repression; imagine what cuts and anticipates Marx, remembering that the object resists, the commodity shrieks, the audience participates. Then you can say that Marx is prodigal; that in his very formulations regarding Man’s arrival at his essence, he has yet to come to himself, to come upon himself, to invent himself anew. This nonarrival is at least in part an ongoing concealment internal to a project structured by an attunement to the revealed secret. What remains secret in Marx could be thought as or in terms of race or sex or gender, of the differences these terms mark, form, and reify. But we can also say that the unrevealed secret is a recrudescence of an already existing notion of the private (or, more properly, of the proper) that operates within the constellation of self-possession, capacity, subjectivity, and speech. He can point to but not be communist. What does the dispropriative event have to do with communism? What’s the revolutionary force of the sensuality that emerges from the sonic event Marx subjunctively produces without sensually discovering? To ask this is to think what’s at stake in the music: the universalization or socialization of the surplus, the generative force of a venerable phonic propulsion, the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection, the old-new thing, the freedom drive that animates black performances. This is all meant to begin some thinking of the possibility that the Marxian formulation of sociality-in-exchange is grounded in a notion of the proper that is disrupted by the essential impropriety of the (exchange-)value that precedes exchange.

Part of the project this drive animates is the improvisation through the opposition of spirit and matter that is instantiated when the object, the commodity, sounds. Marx’s counterfactual (“If the commodity could speak, it would say . . .”) is broken by a commodity and by the trace of a subjectivity structure born in objection that he neither realizes nor anticipates. There is something more here than alienation and fetishization that works, with regard to Marx, as a prefigurative critique. However, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, and in extension of Marx’s analytic, the value of the sign is arbitrary, conventional, differential, neither intrinsic nor iconic, not reducible to but rather only discernible in the reduction of phonic substance.

In any case, it is impossible that sound, as a material element, should in itself be part of the language. Sound is merely something ancillary, a material the language uses. All conventional values have the characteristic of being distinct from the tangible element which serves as their vehicle. It is not the metal in a coin which determines its value. A crown piece nominally worth five francs contains only half that sum in silver. Its value varies somewhat according to the effigy it bears. It is worth rather more or rather less on different sides of a political frontier. Considerations of the same order are even more pertinent to linguistic signals. Linguistic signals are not in essence phonetic. They are not physical in any way. They are constituted solely by differences which distinguish one such sound pattern from another.<sup>12</sup>

The value of the sign, its necessary relation to the possibility of (a universal science of and a universal) language, is only given in the absence or supercession of, or the abstraction from, sounded speech—its essential materiality is rendered ancillary by the crossing of an immaterial border or by a differentializing inscription. Similarly, 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. The speaking



commodity thus cuts Marx; but the shrieking commodity cuts Saussure, thereby cutting Marx doubly: this by way of an irruption of phonic substance that cuts and augments meaning with a phonographic, rematerializing inscription. That irruption breaks down the distinction between what is intrinsic and what is given by or of the outside; here what is given inside is that which is out-from-the-outside, a spirit manifest in its material expense or aspiration. For Saussure such speech is degraded, say, by accent, a deuniversalizing, material difference; for Chomsky it is degraded by a deuniversalizing agrammaticality, but Glissant knows that “the [scarred] spoken imposes on the slave its particular syntax.” These material degradations—fissures or invaginations of a foreclosed universality, a heroic but bounded eroticism—are black performances. There occurs in such performances a revaluation or reconstruction of value, one disruptive of the oppositions of speech and writing, and spirit and matter. It moves by way of the (phono-photo-porno-)graphic disruption the shriek carries out. This movement cuts and augments the primal. 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>13</sup> It’s the ongoing event of an antiorigin and an anteorigin, replay and reverb of an impossible natal occasion, the performance of the birth and rebirth of a new science, a phylogenetic fantasy that (dis)establishes genesis, the reproduction of blackness in and as (the) reproduction of black performance(s). It’s the offset and rewrite, the phonic irruption and rewind, of my last letter, my last record date, my first winter, casting of effect and affect in the widest possible angle of dispersion.

It is important to emphasize that the object’s resistance is, among other things, a rupture of two circles, the familial and the hermeneutic. The protocols of this investigation demand the consideration of that

resistance as we’ll see Douglass both describe and transmit it. More precisely, we must be attuned to the transmission of the very materiality that is being described while noting the relay between material phonography and material substitution.

Impossible, substitutive motherhood is the location of Aunt Hester, a location discovered, if not produced, in Hortense Spillers’s improvisational audition of sighting, non-sight, seen; of the heretofore unheard and overlooked (overseen) at the heart of the spectacle. Spillers explains what Douglass brings in his prefigurative disruption of and irruption into a fraternal science of value that emerges in a “social climate” in which motherhood is not perceived “as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance”:

The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the *mother*, handled by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by a fatherly reprieve. This human and historical development—the text that has been inscribed on the benighted heart of the continent—takes us to the center of an inexorable difference in the depths of American women’s community: the African-American woman, the *mother*, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the Mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from *mimetic* view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father’s name, the Father’s law.

Therefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an “illegitimacy.” Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the *only* American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn *who* the female is within itself, the infant child who bears the life against the could-be fateful gamble, against the odds of pulverization and murder, including her own. It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the “power” of “yes” to the “female” within.<sup>14</sup>



Listen to the echo of Douglass's performative reproduction of a performance inextricably bound to his attempts to repress the learning that Spillers describes. But note that this attenuated covering of the maternal mark in Douglass is itself part and parcel of a kind of counterinscription before the fact, a prefigurative rematerialization constitutive of his recitation that returns as an expansive, audiovisual discourse on music. Meanwhile, note the indistinctness of the conditions of "mother" and "enslavement" in the milieu from which Douglass emerges and which he describes and narrates. This is to say that enslavement—and the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness (or, perhaps less controversially, the essence of black performance) is a *being maternal* that is indistinguishable from a *being material*. But it is also to say something more. And here, the issue of reproduction (the "natural" production of natural children) emerges right on time as it has to do not only with the question concerning slavery, blackness, performance, and the ensemble of their ontologies but also with a contradiction at the heart of the question of value in its relation to personhood that could be said to come into clearer focus against the backdrop of the ensemble of motherhood, blackness, and the bridge between slavery and freedom.

Leopoldina Fortunati puts it this way: "The conflicting presence of value and nonvalue contained within individuals themselves obviously creates a specific and unresolvable contradiction."<sup>15</sup> She is speaking of a certain dematerialization that marks the transition from precapitalist to capitalist production and that works analogously to a dematerializing operation animating the movement from slave labor to "free" labor. These transitions are both characterized by

the *commodity*, [as] *exchange value*, taking precedence over *the-individual-as-use-value*, despite the fact that the individual is still the only source of the creation of value. For it is only by re-defining the individual as non-value, or rather as pure use-value, that capital can succeed in creating labor power as "a commodity," i.e. an exchange value. But the "valuelessness" of free workers is not only a consequence of the new mode

of production, it is also one of the preconditions, since capital cannot become a social relation other than in relation to the individuals who, divested of all value, are thus forced to sell the only commodity they have, their labor power.

Secondly, under capitalism, *reproduction is separated off from production*; the former unity that existed between the production of use-values and the reproduction of individuals within precapitalist modes of production has disappeared, and now the general process of commodity production appears as being separated from, and even in direct opposition to, the process of reproduction. While the first appears as the *creation* of value, the second, reproduction, appears as the creation of non-value. Commodity production is thus posited as *the* fundamental point of capitalist production, and the laws that govern it as *the* laws that characterize capitalism itself. Reproduction now becomes posited as "natural" production.<sup>16</sup>

Fortunati joins Marx in a minute but crucial declension from use-value to nonvalue. The individual, enslaved laborer is characterized as use-value that, in the field of capitalist production, is equivalent to no-value, which is to say operative outside of exchange. But if this theoretical placement of the enslaved laborer outside of the field of exchange positions her as noncommodity, it does so not by way of some rigorous accounting but rather as a function of not hearing, of overlooking. This is despite the inescapable fact of the traffic in slaves. And because neither Marx nor Fortunati is able fully to think the articulation of slave and commodity, they both underestimate the commodity's powers, for instance, the power to speak and to break speech. And yet, Fortunati, in her analysis of reproduction and in her submission of Marxian categories to the corrective of feminist theory, sees, along with and ahead of Marx, that the individual contains value and nonvalue, that the commodity is contained within the individual. This presence of the commodity within the individual is an effect of reproduction, a trace of maternity. Of equal importance is the containment of a certain personhood within the commodity that can be seen as the commodity's



animation by the material trace of the maternal—a palpable hit or touch, a bodily and visible phonographic inscription. In the end, what I'm interested in is precisely that transference, a carrying or crossing over, that takes place on the bridge of lost matter, lost maternity, lost mechanics that joins bondage and freedom, that interanimates the body and its ephemeral if productive force, that interarticulates the performance and the reproductive reproduction it always already contains and which contains it. This interest is, in turn, not in the interest of a nostalgic and impossible suturing of wounded kinship but is rather directed toward what this irrepressibly inscriptive, reproductive, and resistant material objecthood does for and might still do to the exclusionary brotherhoods of criticism and black radicalism as experimental black performance. This is to say that this book is an attempt to describe the material reproductivity of black performance and to claim for this reproductivity the status of an ontological condition. This is the story of how apparent nonvalue functions as a creator of value; it is also the story of how value animates what appears as nonvalue. This functioning and this animation are material. This *animateriality*—impassioned response to passionate utterance—is painfully and hiddenly disclosed always and everywhere in the tracks of black performance and black discourse on black performance. It is both for and before Marx in ways delineated by Cedric Robinson's historical analysis of "the making of the black radical tradition." This book is meant to contribute both to the aesthetic genealogy of that line and to the invagination of the ontological totality whose preservation, according to Robinson, inspires a tradition whose birth is characterized by an ancient pre-maturity.<sup>17</sup>

Here, then, is one such disclosure, famously and infamously made by Frederick Douglass in his 1845 *Narrative*. By way of a set of resonant nodal points along the massive trajectory it extends, I want to think about this disclosure as an unavoidable anticipation, the prefigurative response to an epochal counterfactual, the always already belated origin of the music that ought to be understood as the rigorously sounded critique of the theory of value.

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 the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it. . . .

Aunt Hester had not only disobeyed his orders in going out, but had been found in company with Lloyd's Ned; which circumstance, I found, from what he said while whipping her, was the chief offense. Had he been a man of pure morals himself, he might have been thought interested in protecting the innocence of my aunt; but those who know him will not suspect him of any such virtue. Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d—d b—h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for the infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. He then said to her, "Now, you d—d b—h, I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!" and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor. I was so terrified



and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me. I had never seen anything like it before. . . .<sup>18</sup>

Now consider that passage's relation to an almost equally well-known one that closely follows it:

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow slaves, were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would sing most exultingly the following words:—

“I am going away to the Great House Farm!  
Oh, yea! O, yea! O!”

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were

tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathy for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him in silence analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul;—and if he is not impressed, it will only be because “there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.”<sup>19</sup>

What does it mean to move in the tradition of these passages, a tradition of devotion both to the happy and the tragic possibilities embedded in passionate utterance and response? Passionate utterance and response together take the form of an encounter, the mutual, negative positioning of master and slave. This encounter is appositional, is shaped by a step away that calls such positions radically into question. In this sense utterance and response, seen together as encounter, form a kind of call wherein Hester's shrieks improvise both speech and writing. What they echo and initiate in their response to the oaths—that must be heard as the passionate utterance or call—of the master helps to constitute a questioning, musical encounter.

Having been called by call and response back to music, let's prepare our descent: let the call of call and response, passionate utterance and response—articulated in the scene Douglass identifies as “the blood-stained gate” through which he entered into subjection and subjectivity; articulated, more precisely, in the phonography of the very screams that open the way into the knowledge of slavery and the knowledge of



freedom—operate as a kind of anacrusis (a note or beat or musicked word improvised through the opposition of speech and writing before the definition of rhythm and melody). Gerard Manley Hopkins's term for anacrusis was encountering. Let the articulation of appositional encounter be our encountering: a nondetermining invitation to the new and continually unprecedented performative, historical, philosophical, democratic, communist arrangements that are the only authentic ones.

In the long advent of a movement called “free jazz”—a beginning as long as the tradition it extends—Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, and Oscar Brown Jr. collaborated in making a recording/performance called “Protest.” Lincoln hums and then screams over Roach's increasingly and insistently intense percussion, moving inexorably in a trajectory and toward a location that is remote from—if not in excess of or inaccessible to—words. You cannot help but hear the echo of Aunt Hester's scream as it bears, at the moment of articulation, a sexual overtone, an invagination constantly reconstituting the whole of the voice, the whole of the story, redoubled and intensified by the mediation of years, recitations, auditions. That echo haunts, say, Albert Ayler's “Ghosts” or the fractured, fracturing climax of James Brown's “Cold Sweat.” It's the re-en-gendering haint of an old negation: Ayler always screaming secretly to the very idea of mastery, “It's not about you”; Brown paying the price of such negation, a terrible, ecstatic, possessive, dispossessive inability to stop singing; both performing historical placement as a long transfer, a transcendental fade, an interminable songlike drag disrupting song. The revolution embedded in such duration is, for a moment, a run of questions: What is the edge of this event? What am I, the object? What is the music? What is manhood? What is the feminine? What is the beautiful? What will blackness be?<sup>20</sup>

Where shriek turns speech turns song—remote from the impossible comfort of origin—lies the trace of our descent. That place—locus of an ongoingly other recording of event, object, music—is Abbey Lincoln's narrative. This is a recording, an improvisation, of her words, troubled by the trace of the performance of which she tells and the performance of which that performance told.

I was born the tenth of twelve children . . . /I visited a psychiatric hospital 'cause Roach said there was madness in the house. He said it wasn't him, so I figured it must be me/They had me hollering and screaming like a crazy person; I ain't hollering and screaming for my freedom. The women I come from will take something and knock you . . . /Monk whispered in my ear, “Don't be so perfect.” He meant make a mistake; reach for something/I didn't think a scream was part of the music/We were riding in the car with my nephew who was eight years old and who said, “The reason I can scream louder than Aunt Abbey is 'cause I'm a little boy/Went all over the world hollering and screaming; it increased my depth as an actress and a singer/I didn't write it, I didn't conceive it; I'm just the singer on it/I got rid of a taboo and screamed in everybody's face/We had to go to court; somebody thought Roach was killing me in the studio/My instrument is deepening and widening; it's because I'm possessed of the spirit/I learned it from my mother—the preacher, that's what they called her/Betty Carter: we came to the stage about the same time; it was a great surprise when she died; she was a year older than me and I've been feeling frail ever since . . . It's easy for me to cry; I'm an actress/You gotta sing a song; you can't sing jazz/When Bird was around he knew he wasn't playing jazz. He was playing his spirit. And I think that's the problem for a lot of the musicians on the scene now. They think that they're playing jazz. But there's no such thing, really/I'm possessed of my own spirit/This is the music of the African muse/I just want to be of use to my ancestors/It's holy work and it's dangerous not to know that 'cause you could die like an animal down here.<sup>21</sup>

Lincoln demands another rethinking, of “Protest” along lines I only thought I knew, lines I never thought I knew. Her relation to Roach disturbingly and rightly echoes Hester's relation to the master and to Douglass. Roach's double identification and desire link him to Douglass and are all bound up with Lincoln's political, musical, and intellectual lingering in a quite specific and brutal kind of horror as Roach's object, accessing and performing, recording, that history, moving in the doubleness of possession, the sexuality of spirituality and the anoriginality of black performances. Not the reduction of but the reduction to phonic



materiality where re-en-gendering prefaces and works itself. No ordinary configuration of attributes but an ongoing shiftiness, a living labor of engendering to be organized in its relation to a politico-aesthesis. It's always going on and has been. Abbey Lincoln starts, in classic (anti-, ante-[slave]) narrative fashion. That black radicalism cannot be understood within the particular context of its genesis is true; it cannot be understood outside that context either. In this sense, black radicalism is (like) black music. The broken circle demands a new analytic (way of listening to the music). So we move with but also out and outside of Douglass's repressive, annular attunement to the secret, the audio-visual materiality of a maternal substitution, identification, and cathexis that he tries to forget, the ongoing re-entry into a vexed self-knowledge that he covers by entering into a discourse on music. Douglass (and, by extension, Roach and Brown and the entire line of mastery's disruptive, oppositional, anoriginal recording) was already sexually cut and augmented, already anticipated and improvised, already re-en-gendered by the sound of the one who comes before him, the one we keep calling on to arrive again, here and now, so we can get to the content of the epigraph.

## CHAPTER 1

**The Sentimental Avant-Garde****Duke Ellington's Sound of Love**

The title comes from a Mingus composition and brings a scene to mind, a triptych, a set of questions concerning the content—the weight and energy in and of sound—of Ellington's life and love, Ellington's eros, (the Ellington) ensemble.

This is about the politics of the erotic and the erotics of sound in Ellington's music, remembering with Ellington's most radically devoted follower, Cecil Taylor, that anything is music as long as you apply certain principles of organization to it. Eros in Ellington is not but nothing other than sexual, moving along lines that Freud lays out in his theory of the drives. This doesn't sanction any strict Freudian analysis of Ellington because Ellingtonian meaning swings in a way that Freud probably can't quite reach. But in this swing there's something that Freud might help to illuminate even as whatever light he sheds is cut and augmented, if not eclipsed, by Ellington's sound. What drives Ellington? How does drive function in Ellington? Swing is given only after the fact of the content—again, the weight and energy in and of sound—of Ellington's drive, which is to say his love. For Freud, eros, life, love, is the drive “to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus.”<sup>1</sup> This notion of Freud's gives you something to work with in an attempt to appreciate Ellington, to understand at least part of what was contained in what was, for him, the greatest possible compliment: “beyond category.”