

Perle Noire: Meditations for Josephine

Aesthetics, Discussion, and Reception

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Abstract

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This dissertation, organized in two parts, is comprised of an essay on my song cycle *Perle Noire: Meditations for Josephine* and its scores. *Perle Noire* consists of a flexible musical score that I composed for soprano Julia Bullock, select members of the International Contemporary Ensemble, and myself, with two performance editions. The primary edition, which stems from part of a production conceived of by theater director Peter Sellars, includes recited poetry about Josephine Baker by Claudia Rankine and choreography by Michael Schumacher. The second edition is a musical performance with neither poetic texts nor choreography. The world premiere of *Perle Noire* took place at the 2016 Ojai Music Festival in California, with subsequent performances at Lincoln Center in New York; Da Camera in Houston, Texas; and the Stony Island Arts Center in Chicago, Illinois. The entire performance of the 90-minute song cycle entails the following five recompositions and one “head arrangement” for a mixed ensemble of improviser-performers and soprano: Part I—1. Bye Bye Blackbird, 2. Sous le Ciel d’Afrique, 3. C’est ca le Vrai Bonheur and Madiana (medley); Part II—4. Si J’etais Blanche, 5. C’est Lui, 6. Terre Seche (Negro Spiritual)

The essay centers on the compositions in Part II of *Perle Noire*: “Si J’etais Blanche,” “C’est Lui,” and “Terre Seche” (Negro Spiritual). To begin, I briefly discuss my aesthetic exigencies in relation to the Black creative musics initiated during the latter

part of the twentieth century as well as the inspiration informing the creation of this song cycle. Next, I discuss the aforementioned songs to demonstrate how my aesthetics play out in this work. Finally, I detail the controversial critical reception of the song cycle's world premiere performance and my response to it.

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Introduction – Aesthetic Exigencies

Music, to me, is simply the greatest, most direct means through which I express my life experiences. From my earliest days it has fascinated me. Growing up in the inner city of Newark, I did not limit myself to the ubiquitous Black popular music of the day; rather, I listened broadly to myriad musics—irrespective of genre and regardless of what I was “supposed” to listen to, ideas purported by my peers. Somehow, I knew that there was a lot more music out there: I followed my curiosity and sought it out through radio, record collecting, and audio and video recording.

Ever since I began to develop my compositional voice my music always has been in conversation with both composition and improvisation. Learning early on not to concern myself with social pressure, I resolved to pursue what I consider a necessary avenue: creativity through design and interaction. As I came of age I realized that making music with other artists (i.e. fellow musicians, dancers, poets, etc.)—whether experimenting as an improviser or interpreting a score—is an aspect of creativity that I thoroughly enjoy. Furthermore, it is a driving force through which I transform as a person and as an artist. Personal and communal growth through the expansion of consciousness and participation in the act of music making are central to my work. For these reasons improvisation and structure are two fundamental elements that are present in many of my compositions to date.

My Approach to Improvisation-Composition

As an improviser-composer, my music and performance practice operate as part of various traditional and experimental lineages that include but are not limited to the

work of Anthony Braxton, Alexander Scriabin, Roscoe Mitchell, Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington, Hale Smith, George Lewis, Arnold Schoenberg, Muhal Richard Abrams, John Coltrane, Wadada Leo Smith, Morton Feldman, Lawrence “Butch” Morris, Toru Takemitsu, Jean Sibelius, Miles Davis, John Zorn, Harold Budd, and Steve Coleman. Notwithstanding their methodological differences, these individuals all have produced seminal work that not only informs the way in which I compose and perform, but also contributes to my cultivation of an aesthetic that draws from a multitude of cultural and musical traditions. Braxton writes of such a principle:

All of the various creative musics [that] have interconnected to black creativity have helped to advance the forming of a *world creativity*, for the thrust of a given source-transfer phenomenon does not only affect one aspect of its encounter – when you are really touched by someone, that person becomes a part of you and you [become a part] of him or her. [...The future] promise[s] to see even greater occurrences of source-transfer information conversion, and this will also profoundly affect the essence balance of earth-principle information lines. If this is true, then there will be no such thing as black, white, or Asian creativity (just as it is now, only we don’t seem to know it).¹

“World creativity,” as referred to by Braxton, celebrates the idea of “trans-idiomaticism.”² My performance and, to an extent, my compositional practice, values this concept as well. Put another way, I like to remain open to exploring different types of music and ritual. This approach stems not only from my formative listening experiences, but also my work with such musicians as Braxton, Mitchell, Coleman, Lewis, and Smith, whose work directly or indirectly engages multiple performative traditions and media.

¹ Braxton, *Tri-Axium Writings*, 1, 188. Emphasis added.

² Braxton defines trans-idiomaticism as a tenet of spontaneous and formal creativity that involves intense study of various musical forms originating from all over the world. For him, this concept, “reflected my set of balances as a friendly experiencer who recognizes that the greater forces, the cosmos, have given us an incredible opportunity to be alive, to have consciousness where we can have an array of alignments.” For further explanation, see Braxton, “Anthony Braxton Keynote Address at the Guelph Jazz Festival, 2007,” 5.

My compositional methodology operates as a mutable, musically omnivorous stream from which I draw influence while simultaneously problematizing the pan-European model of musical composition. For myself, as for Lewis, composition that comes from the Black aesthetic not only “appropriates” and “challenges” this model, but also is “[in dialogue with] African, Asian and Pacific music traditions” and employs “compositional methods that [do] not necessarily privilege either conventionally notated scores, or the single, heroic creator figure so beloved by jazz historiography.”³

The multi-instrumentalist Joseph Jarman remarked that in order to pursue music making that does away with generic, methodological, and racial categorizations, one must assume the responsibility of “find[ing] out everything you possibly can about every form of music in the universe.”⁴ In line with Jarman’s insight, my engagement across a broad array of musical and experimental idioms has informed my development and perspective as a musician as well. Having been influenced by both Braxton and Jarman’s catholic interests, the multifaceted nature of my activities as an improviser-composer strongly emphasizes my preoccupation with an inclusive aesthetic.

Like many improviser-composers who work primarily in the field of African American experimental music (a tradition with which I strongly identify), collaboration is equally essential to my work as well. I attempt to create a body of work that brings together musicians of any stripe, so long as they are open to challenging their assumptions and conceptions of improvisation and to conceiving of it as an imaginative procedure. In considering collaborators, then, I seek musicians who independently bring their own ideas and perspectives to each iteration of my work and who are willing to take

³ Lewis, “Experimental Music in Black and White,” 128

⁴ Ibid., 110

mine into account too. As such, the performers I select are usually longtime or affiliate collaborators with whom I share musical affinities.

Improvisation in my music is not an opportunity to “take one’s time” or “take a solo.” Rather, it is a feeling of aliveness that asks performers to address the unforeseen in the most explicit manner possible. In my music I use improvisation to explore memory; to negotiate scored material and harmony (when applicable); to engender creative autonomy, intuition and counter-intuition, and ritual and ceremony; and finally, to transpose spirituality and metaphysics into music.

When I improvise alone or in an ensemble context, I do so compositionally. From the moment I begin playing I simultaneously begin to think about and craft—constantly in dialogue with my improvisation—structure and organization. Firstly, my state of consciousness arrives at a state of heightened awareness. In this moment I decide anew to create a spontaneous work that celebrates the values that have become meaningful to me during the more than twenty years of work that I have dedicated to this domain:

- Structure: the fundamentals of music performance, formal organization, harmonic decision-making, directionality, and non-directionality
- The unforeseen: what sound I produce, when and how I decide to produce it, and negotiation of intention and non-intention
- Affect/becoming/transformation: evolving the improvisation over time, connecting with the self and listeners, negotiating time, and *feeling* through engagement with the music

Inversely, this approach also applies to the way I address composition. I take into account many of these values in each and every composition that I create. The structural component, however, demands a great deal of planning, especially when engaging with external source material, as has been the case with constructing both *Sentimental Shards*

(2014) and *Perle Noire* (see below for a discussion of my approach to creating these works).

When musicians openly take on the ever-so-challenging act of improvisation, its inherent aspects of surprise often lead to the greatest rewards. There are times when even the most experienced of improvisers make unwarranted mistakes; this is not necessarily a bad thing, for it is simply an expression of one's growth as a musician. In any of my compositions where spontaneity is encouraged, improvisers must not only explore their own resources, but also deal with the sonic or harmonic environment generated by the piece as a whole.

To that end, the collaborative process ensures that a finalized score can never exist. In light of this, my works are written to adjust flexibly to the creative particulars of the ensemble environment. I remain committed to composing a body of work that entails the feeling of musical spontaneity, either with or without improvisational directives. No matter the amount of notation and regardless of idiom, I hope to inspire feeling, creative intelligence, and fresh decision-making in every performance of each composition.

Composition and Life Experience

I remain particularly interested in experimental improviser-composers who often remain misunderstood or miscategorized and whose works are shaped by their performative, metaphysical, and spiritual experiences. I appreciate that they approach performance of their scores with a great sense of spontaneity and ritual and that the polyvalence of their works celebrates a Black or global aesthetic.

Alto saxophonist Steve Coleman has written and performed hybrid works that champion engagement with non-Western folklore, astrology, ritual practice, and

traditional musics in several of his ensembles. In addition, he has contributed a number of recordings and writings that demonstrate an inventive approach to form, notation, improvisation, and collaboration, particularly from a rhythmic standpoint.⁵ From 1965 onward, multi-instrumentalist Roscoe Mitchell has composed challenging long-form works for his ensembles that exhibit breadth in scale and concept, paving the way for an unprecedented approach to improvisation in American creative music practice.⁶ Furthermore, beginning with his collaborations with bassist Malachi Favors, Mitchell and his ensemble have explored non-Western concepts and have utilized an assemblage of homemade objects as well as percussion instruments from myriad traditions to explore maximum sonic possibilities within a given performance. During the early 1980s Anthony Braxton devised a system of “coordinate musics” or “collage formings” with his “classic quartet.” In this technique, musicians perform up to any four Braxton compositions simultaneously or juxtapose particular fragments of compositions concurrently with other compositions and open improvisation.⁷

Inspired by the work of these individuals in particular (coupled with years of learning and collaborative experiences with them), my work as an improviser-composer is both instinctive and formally detailed. I strive to balance creative, individual expression of lived experience through a holistic, hybrid approach to composition and improvisation, with a grounded understanding and avowal of historical musical traditions and media. I not only do so to express my own life experiences, but also to challenge

⁵ See, for example, Coleman, *The Sign and the Seal; Genesis; The Sonic Language of Myth*.

⁶ See, for example, Mitchell, *Sound; Roscoe Mitchell Quartet; L-R-G / The Maze / S II Examples*.

⁷ See, for example, Braxton, *Quartet (Coventry) 1985*.

essentialist notions of African American creativity and to bring about inner fulfillment through music. As a drummer, pianist, trombonist, composer, and improviser, my work engages jazz, rhythm and blues, eighteenth- through twentieth-century-pan-European classical and contemporary musics, free improvisation, hip-hop, Ethiopian and West African musics, Tibetan ritual ceremony, and klezmer. I am interested in establishing new artistic models that primarily build upon the legacy of African American creative musicians and improviser-composer collectives who have advocated for self-empowerment and higher self-consciousness through artistic work and have explored music as a form of spiritual and intellectual expression. Simply put, I seek to continue to develop a unique, honest, and powerful body of work that resonates emotionally and spiritually with listeners.

Music and Meditation

In 2006 I developed a practice of listening as a form of meditation: I regularly sat in a dark room and listened to particular pieces by Anton Webern, Roscoe Mitchell, Morton Feldman, and Anthony Braxton—over and over and over. Through Webern’s early works, Mitchell’s *Sound*, Feldman’s *Piano*, and Braxton’s *Three Compositions of New Jazz*, for example, I became fascinated with the music’s unfolding over a very long time and its subversion of expectations. In pieces like these, I may expect a loud sound to happen and it doesn’t, or I may expect to hear an underlying pulse. Instead, the music is like a flat surface, with little change in dynamics, or so slow that one doesn’t feel a regular pulse. At the same time, these areas (i.e. dynamic contrast, underlying pulse) are not necessary because the music makes up for them through supple textures and rhythms.

During the same period I began to listen to the music of Tibetan ritual ceremonies as well. There was something about the power of it that spoke to me in the same way that Mitchell and Braxton's music did. Although it contained some very loud parts that contrasted with soft slow chanting, it unfolds very slowly, much like the work of Mitchell and Braxton. In addition, by incorporating bells, gongs, and other metallophones, the two approaches to sound—to a certain extent—overlap timbrally. Most importantly, these musics evoked in me a similar feeling and resulted in a newfound approach to art.

Later in 2006 I was on tour in Japan with pianist Yayoi Ikawa. On a day off I found myself wandering around, and encountered books on Zen and Taoist thought by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Thich Nhat Hanh in English. I purchased Watts' *Way of Zen* and read it on the twelve-hour flight home. After that I became a student of the Zen concepts of *wu-wei* (the state of non-doing) and mindfulness.

Taken together, these practices changed my life and transformed the way that I experience music. Through mindfulness I developed a heightened sense of awareness in whatever I am doing, came to value things that I may otherwise overlook, and began to conceive of improvisation as a quotidian activity rather than something that only exists in music. Through meditation and meditative listening I began to explore "silence," or the absence of human intentional sounds. Following up on areas that I largely had not thought about when performing or listening to fast or rhythmically busy music, I attended more closely to slowness and meditative-like qualities in sound through resonance, decay, just noticeable differences between in/audibility, and direction/non-direction. In general, I developed a new approach that centers on how one *feels* the music, which ultimately became part of my compositional aesthetic.

Social and Musical Discussion of *Perle Noire: Meditations for Josephine*

Perle Noire consists of a flexible musical score that I composed for soprano Julia Bullock, select members of the International Contemporary Ensemble, and myself, with two performance editions. The primary edition, which stems from part of a production conceived of by theater director Peter Sellars, includes recited poetry about Josephine Baker by Claudia Rankine and choreography by Michael Schumacher. The second edition is a musical performance with neither poetic texts nor choreography. The world premiere of *Perle Noire* took place at the 2016 Ojai Music Festival in California, with subsequent performances at Lincoln Center in New York; Da Camera in Houston, Texas; and the Stony Island Arts Center in Chicago, Illinois.

The entire performance of the 90-minute song cycle entails the following five recompositions and one “head arrangement” for a mixed ensemble of improviser-performers and soprano: Part I—1. Bye Bye Blackbird, 2. Sous le Ciel d’Afrique, 3. C’est ca le Vrai Bonheur and Madiana (medley); Part II—4. Si J’etais Blanche, 5. C’est Lui, 6. Terre Seche (Negro Spiritual). The essay centers on the compositions in Part II of *Perle Noire*: “Si J’etais Blanche,” “C’est Lui,” and “Terre Seche” (Negro Spiritual).

Theatre director Peter Sellars originally conceived of the program as *Josephine Baker: A Personal Portrait*.⁸ In an e-mail conversation, Sellars composed notes that ebulliently articulated his inspiration and motivation behind this production, as well as

⁸ The world premiere of the composition was assigned this title for the 2016 Ojai Music Festival and for its Zellerbach Hall performance in Berkeley, California.

his desire for soprano Julia Bullock (starring as Baker) and me to consider Baker's misfortunes.

Of course, one of the most brutal conflict regions was her own heart. Her vision, her instinctive daring and generosity, were heartbreakingly eclipsed by her bad judgments, high-handedness, and lonely, desperate determination. Her life story is exemplary for its inspirational achievement, and for its crushing setbacks and wounded, blinded mistakes. Through it all, she kept singing...in costumes that became more and more extravagant and bizarre. Our evening will trace her exhilarating breakthroughs and terrifying descents across a series of songs. [These were] songs that can't begin to bear the emotional weight of this woman's neediness, hunger, and yearning---but which were the only songs she had---the charming, sentimental ballads of the French Music Hall---because she had never learned to sing the blues.⁹

Further discussing our intentions for this work, Sellars, Bullock and I held that the piece should not perform a masquerade of Baker. Rather, it should deconstruct the notion of her as *only* a Black entertainer. Listening to her singular vocal performances (notably, her powerful lyric interpretations) and reading historical documentation, I wanted to attend to the emotional complexity and vulnerability present in Baker's life in a personally expressive manner.

Since its world premiere, I have held some reservations about its title, as I felt that it was somewhat misleading and that it did not adequately represent what I hoped to achieve through it. As with several extended works by African American improviser-composers of previous and current generations, this piece serves as a way for me to express my take on some relevant social and racial issues that not only Baker had to endure, but also with which we continue to struggle.¹⁰ Through this composition I

⁹ Sellars, "Notes for Josephine Baker: A Personal Portrait."

¹⁰ Here I refer to a few large-scale compositions and suites by creative artists that proved inspirational for me in the formation of this work, as better evidenced in the final three

address issues of identity and race relations in America and the commodification of Black female sexuality, as well as commenting on Baker's life as a Black expatriate female entertainer in interwar Paris. Although the work focuses on musical selections that Baker performed during her long career, it eschews simple nostalgic excursion.

In the program notes for the world premiere performance, Bullock writes:

I was first compared to Josephine Baker when I began my studies of classical music in college and was told that because of the way that I looked, I would likely be often asked to sing exotic repertoire. Sparked by complex feelings and questions of identity, I began to research the life, performances, and music of the entertainer, who—at that time—I identified as “the woman who danced in a banana skirt.” [...] For me, Josephine Baker is not merely an icon for women. She is not just an icon for black people. She is an icon of liberty.

I've never had an interest in impersonating Josephine Baker. When I first shared her music a few years ago, I sang songs that touched on themes that seemed to pervade her life and the roles that she played: an exotic entity in a foreign place, a charmer, an activist, a nurturer, her struggles with exploitation and objectification, issues of identity, and the difficulties in maintaining intimate relationships.¹¹

In understanding Bullock's ambivalence about simply “impersonating” Baker as an entertainer, I am reminded of what musicologist Ralph P. Locke refers to as “All the Music in Full Context Paradigm”—a model that proposes a broad, multivalent compositional approach in which musical exoticism considers “foreign” stylistic markers (evidenced in the original recordings of “C'est Ça Le Vrai Bonheur,” “Madiana,” and “Terre Seche”), while accepting that such markers need not be displayed.¹²

ensemble movements. Of particular importance are Wadada Leo Smith's *Ten Freedom Summers*, Matana Roberts' *Coin Coin*, and Max Roach's *We Insist!*.

¹¹ Bullock, “Program Notes - Josephine Baker: A Personal Portrait.”

¹² Locke, “A Broader View of Musical Exoticism,” 483.

Musical exoticism is the process of evoking in or through music—whether the latter is “exotic sounding or not” —a place, people, or social milieu that is not entirely imaginary and that differs profoundly from the “home” country or culture in attitudes, customs, and morals. More precisely, it is the process of evoking a place that is *perceived* as different from home by the people making and receiving the exoticist cultural product.¹³

Locke further contends that in a given work, employment of exotic sounds is readily available, essentially, as one of many *choices* within one’s compositional schema.¹⁴ Quite naturally, then, *Perle Noire* functions well within the Full Context Paradigm in that its recompositions draw their inspiration from a wide array of musics and media (including the original Baker recordings) that have aided in Baker’s portrayal by the evocation of situations and emotions that center on the aforementioned themes outlined by Bullock.

Motivated in part by Bullock’s writing, I changed the title to *Perle Noire: Meditations for Josephine* prior to its Lincoln Center performance.¹⁵ The meaning of the new title is threefold: First, it refers simply to the sounds of most of the music, which—like much of my music from 2006 onward—unfolds very slowly and is inspired by meditation, clarity, and ritual. From that time until the present day I have held this approach dear to my heart, never having much desire to write fast or up-tempo music, a type of music with which I do not yet fully identify as a composer. Second, the title refers to Josephine Baker herself, who was well known as “the Black Pearl” by many artists and intellectuals of her day. Finally, I detail the third reason for retitling the work in the

¹³ Ibid, 483-84.

¹⁴ Ibid., 491

¹⁵ The third performance of the work in its abridged version was presented at the 50th Anniversary Mostly Mozart Festival.

following section, as it speaks to issues of composition, arrangement, versions, and artistic collaboration: in short, the formation of *Perle Noire* itself.

The Formation of *Perle Noire: Emotional and Compositional Directionality*

Several years back I was asked to arrange John Adams's "Sentimentals," the third movement from his work *American Standard* (1973), for a performance at Walt Disney Hall in Los Angeles. In "Sentimentals" Adams created a graphic score that derives from Duke Ellington's composition, "Sophisticated Lady" (1932). One obvious choice in "arranging" this work would have been to attempt a verbatim notation of Adams's instructions from the graphic score. In approaching this task, however, I wanted to take some fundamental elements from it that I liked and highlight them through a recomposed version of the piece—or even, one might say, an original creation. While respecting both Ellington and Adams' work, I also wanted to interpolate my own aesthetic sensibility by spreading out the rhythms of the melodic material to the point that "Sophisticated Lady" is rendered nearly unidentifiable. The resulting work is a great departure from both the Ellington and Adams pieces, and as such, I consider it a work unto itself, titled *Sentimental Shards*, an original composition for string quartet, two vibraphones, glockenspiel and piano, with a short coda for chamber orchestra.

Inspired by that project, which entailed a request to "arrange," I imagined the collaboration between myself, Sellars, Bullock, Rankine, and the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) as a unique creative opportunity to respond to musical forebears while at the same time realizing my own aesthetic and political sensibilities. Through this project I continue to call into question assumed distinctions between

improviser and composer and improvisation and composition, as well as adding a critique of the assumed distinctions among work-arrangement-version and between collaborative process and individual expression.

In reconceiving and recomposing the Baker selections, then, I initially wanted to maintain the featured melodic lines for each song, while creating new music to reflect the nature of the lyrics. I largely wrote the recomposed selections in the key of the original performances to maintain some fundamental and immediately recognizable features of the Baker recordings. I found it advisable to write original vocal melodies in a manner that would simultaneously deviate from the recorded melody while keeping the lyrics the same. In addition, I engaged meditative and spiritual aspects through the substantial transformation of tempi, techniques that I use, ultimately, to critique the stereotyping of Black performers.

In the world of commercial music, Black people are often thought of or positioned solely as people who entertain. In other words, one dominant image of Black people centers on somebody who is there to promote “a good time,” like a musician, producer, or an athlete, for example. Growing up I was taught that, as a person interested in music, I would have value only if I were “famous” or “commercially successful.” The very famous or commercial spaces in which many Black performers find themselves--not always, but very often--do not allow for one to perform or show all the aspects of oneself that make up the whole person. Instead, they very often present an “ideal” that is only a superficial projection.

As an artist I feel that such projections or “ideals” limit my expression. I have found myself in situations where I have had no choice but to go against them. By

engaging music and meditation, which entails great slowness, deliberateness, and mindfulness—constraints that are very much antithetical to such images—in *Perle Noire*, I made the conscious decision to abandon these stereotypical images and limitations that have been imposed upon me both from within and outside of my community.

In “popular” music, I find that enjoyment of vocal music often hinges on up tempos, driving dance rhythms, and even, melodic contours that work in tandem with these temporal issues. Consequently, the lyrics in “popular” song are often misunderstood or overlooked altogether. On the other hand, my experience listening to slower music that features vocals (whose topics usually center on love or heartbreak) often makes me pay very close attention to the semantic content.

A primary goal of *Perle Noire* is to foreground the social issues dealt with in the lyrics. When asked to write this music, I wanted to evoke Baker’s struggles in a way that makes listeners not simply listen to them, but *feel them* so that she, and the message she sings of is *being heard*. To intensify the seriousness and inherent tragedy of the lyrics of the Baker songs, I slowed down the tempo and spread out the rhythm of melodic line.

Given the lyrical, historical, and social importance of the original musical selections, I seriously considered emotional affect in writing *Perle Noire* as well. The musical content of the complete work—when experienced as a single movement—suggests a relationship to directional form that is both rounded and linear. By rounded directional form, I mean the musical progression that is bookended by the slowly moving harmonic dissonance that begins and ends the song cycle. A complicated trajectory of emotions and realities—ranging from quotidian subjects like finding happiness,

appreciation for nature, and unrequited love, to issues concerning racial identity and the ongoing struggle and plight of African Americans—is represented through such rounded directionality. On the other hand, the song may be heard as employing a directional form that is linear given its increasing chromaticism, which implies harmonic areas that are not recapitulative: During the first two-thirds of the cycle (Nr. 1–4) I employ mostly tonally- or modally-based harmony, with occasional dissonance. The last third of it, however, gradually moves toward a much higher rate of chromaticism and dissonance, reflecting the evolutionary nature of the character and mood. These harmonic changes align with the lyrical content and contribute to the overall *feel* of the music, transforming from a pleasant, light-hearted atmosphere to a painful, raw, troubled energy with a tinge of hope.

Finally, *Perle Noire* creates a sound world that is at once visceral, immediate, and painstakingly detailed. Moving towards a more focused discussion of what propels the entire song cycle and what makes this recontextualized setting of the recordings compelling, I would like to point out that compositional directionality served as a primary consideration for the development of this piece. I organized the two halves of *Perle Noire* with respect to the order and the serious nature of themes. In looking at some of the fundamental aspects of the music in Baker’s recordings, I found a compositional strategy in which several musical aspects (e.g. affect as depicted in the treatment of harmony and tempo, lyrical content, musical *character*, degree of consonance vs. dissonance, and improvisational directives in conversation with notation) demonstrate how the piece transforms as time passes. This idea holds true when viewing *Perle Noire* as either two separate shorter movements (Nr. 1–3 and 4–6, respectively) or as a complete single-movement work.

Compositional Procedure, Conception, and Collaboration

As I stated earlier in this essay, collaboration is key to my compositional methodology. Over the years I have cultivated a working relationship with ICE and composed several works for them that challenge the improvisation/composition binary and celebrate collaborative modeling. While the compositional and conceptual process of creating *Perle Noire* was one of the most arduous tasks I have ever undertaken as a composer, the collaborative spirit proved invaluable and contributed immensely to its success.

As I have neither pursued nor had the opportunity to compose pieces for vocalists (until very recently), *Perle Noire* is the only composition of mine to date that features voice and ensemble. Several listening and discussion sessions with Bullock informed and were essential to my creation of *Perle Noire*. In our initial encounters we listened to the original Baker performances (occasionally, there are songs that exist in multiple versions sung by Baker) and noted relevant issues to consider while conceptualizing the full score. We not only considered the complex variety of singing approaches exhibited by Baker, but also the inherent socio-musical issues relevant to her powerful vocal performances embodying the racial and gender issues that she faced.

Subsequently, and contrary to my usual manner of composition, I have spent a long period of time alone listening to the original performances and reassessing my own impressions of them prior to writing the music. I did this to gain a thorough contextual understanding of the songs and to internalize each and every lyric. I endeavored to make the listener pay very close attention to these sung words. I also wanted to combine and to

balance my creative desires, Bullock’s powerful vocal skills, and ICE’s willingness to explore the unforeseen (even while “on the page,” so to speak).

In addition to Bullock, the performers of this living work were all members of ICE: Alice Teyssier (alto flute), Ryan Muncy (alto and tenor saxophones), Rebekah Heller (bassoon), Jennifer Curtis (violin), Daniel Lippel (guitar), and myself (drum set, percussion, piano, melodica). As discussed in the introduction, I find that selecting co-performers is central to my aesthetic. My experience with *Perle Noire* was no different and choosing to collaborate with Curtis and Lippel, in particular, was crucial to the compositional process. In my long-standing relationship with ICE, I have shared affinities and several collaborative experiences with these two improviser-performers in impromptu performances. In writing *Perle Noire*, I wanted to provide a context in which, at times, the three of us would be able to engage musically both on and off the page concurrently with the winds, who mostly perform notated material. Moreover, I composed the work with the idea that it would be performed many times by a single collective of musicians operating as a regular “band.” Additionally, I have performed with Teyssier, Muncy, and Heller in pieces by other composers.

While much of the music is fully notated and contains a great degree of tonal harmony, chromaticism, and pandiatonicism, the musicians were amenable to exploring a variety of structural and improvisational parameters. Such parameters include—but are not limited to—the referencing of specified pitch sets, use of extended techniques, and application of notated content within an improvisation, among others. Through extensive rehearsal I was able to gauge the musicians’ improvisational approaches and the sonic and timbral qualities of their instrumentalities, all of which led to my decisions regarding

flexibility—where the score would call for improvisation, being tacet, or playing a given passage *ad libitum* or as written as well as unplanned deviations from the score altogether.¹⁶

Finally, I received Rankine’s completed poetic contributions texts during the final dress rehearsal at Ojai’s Libbey Bowl that, consequently, augmented the overall shape and performance of the music. Bullock’s powerful recitations of these texts called for possibilities for creative spontaneity that would sometimes alter the feel of a given song, or an improvisation that precedes it. Stemming directly from my experiences performing spontaneous compositions with local spoken word artists in Newark, my improvisations in *Perle Noire* respond to the manner in which these texts are intoned. These non-prescribed improvisations move seamlessly from one song to the next.

Nr. 4 – “Si J’etais Blanche”

Background

Composed by Henri Varna and recorded by Baker in two versions, “Si J’etais Blanche” (1932) is the first of three compositions in the second half of *Perle Noire*. The original performance of Baker’s signature tune (from the revue *La Joie de Paris*) demands that Baker be treated with equality, respect, and dignity, providing an early and striking example of how “jazz” music has been employed to directly and poignantly protest racism. A provocative song for its time, its verses speak about the longing to be a

¹⁶ For example, in recent performances I have performed *Perle Noire* in its entirety without a score. Memorizing the music proved beneficial in this regard, in that I can decide at any point how and when I execute notated material. This is also one of the reasons why I did not assign dedicated parts for the ensemble; everyone reads from the same score. Thus, the shape (and sometimes the length) of the music remains malleable.

white woman in order to “please you better” while pridefully maintaining that her skin is darker “because nature wanted me that way.”

Like the many other Black artists who have influenced the progression of my work, Baker’s performances directly relate to and complicate her past experiences. While the desire to appear lighter suggests an embrace of white standards of beauty, this work should be understood as a deconstruction of simplistic, primitivist views of Baker held by French music hall critics and socialites.¹⁷ At the same time, she was keenly aware that French audiences expressed admiration largely for her blackness and not for her artistry alone.¹⁸ Olivia Lahs-Gonzalez locates “Si J’etais Blanche” as a satirization of the fashion for sunbathing by French women, describing the song as a revolutionary smash hit that simultaneously mocks and erodes racial stereotypes while altogether subverting the glorification and commodification of Baker’s blackness and sexuality.¹⁹ In her 1973 appearance at Carnegie Hall, Baker comments on this same issue, jocularly reminiscing to the audience about how these French women would douse themselves with oil and tan themselves all day long: “Mind you, I was one of the first people of color in America who went [to Paris]. And the Parisians weren’t used to us. And they did all that they could to be like us. [...S]ome of them got sick, but they said, ‘isn’t it beautiful to be kissed by the sun [in] that way?’”²⁰

¹⁷ Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life*, 63.

¹⁸ Hammond and O’Connor, *Josephine Baker*, 91.

¹⁹ Lahs-Gonzales, *Josephine Baker*, 47.

²⁰ Baker, *Josephine Baker at Carnegie Hall, 5 June 1973*.

Brief Overview and Conception

Baker's first rendition of "Si J'etais Blanche" was accompanied by a large big band augmented by strings in a fast-moving 4/4 "jazz swing" style. The lesser-known (and extremely difficult to obtain) 1933 version was performed in a cabaret style that features a faster tempo with a ragtime feel and Harlem stride piano-inspired accompaniment. Deriving from those commonly found in jazz and American popular music of the day, the harmonic and formal devices in these performances of the song are nearly identical. While I enjoyed Baker's performance, I felt that the music did not adequately reflect the seriousness of the lyrics. This is mostly due to the driving quasi-Dixieland feel in the rhythm and the simple harmonic progressions.

I used lyrics from both of the aforementioned recordings as source material for my version of "Si J'etais Blanche." In our listening sessions, Bullock and I listened only to the first rendition of the tune.²¹ She informed me, however, that there were more lyrics that (curiously) had been omitted from that recording. After our meeting I took it upon myself to listen and to research further, only to soon discover that Baker indeed had included these "missing" lyrics in the cabaret rendition.²² It remains unclear, however, whether these lyrics were left out of the original version or if they were added to the later version. Given race and gender relations in America during the 1920s and 1930s as well as Baker's complex, ironic manner of questioning and challenging era-centric racial identity and primitivism, it is indeed plausible that these lyrics were left out of the original recording. Bullock and I therefore agreed to include these omitted/included lyrics

²¹ Baker, *Si J'etais Blanche*.

²² Baker, *If I Were White*.

(indicated in brackets) in my recomposed version for *Perle Noire*. The following discussion centers on some of the salient features in this version of “Si J’etais Blanche” as well as its relationship to the original verses.

Discussion

In “Si J’etais Blanche” I wanted to completely do away with the recording’s driving tempo and instead challenge the members of the ensemble to interact fully with Bullock’s phrasing of the lyrics while establishing a meditative zone that reflects their serious and ironic nature. In marked contrast to the song’s original versions, I decided to create a drastically slower multi-sectional rendition that interweaves improvisation in prescribed modal sound worlds with composition in tonally ambiguous ones. I wanted the first four verses to be sung very slowly with a break between each line, portraying her imagining what it would be like if she were white. Additionally, I sought to give the song a more ominous character by lowering the key of the 1932 recording, which was in G major, to its relative minor.

Moreover, the score contains directives for the ensemble to improvise during a static brooding instrumental texture played on piano that builds without reaching a climactic point. As this rumbling texture brings the opening section to a close, a trio of woodwinds enters to perform a sad chorale. Moving occasionally in and out of dissonance, it evokes the conflicted feeling of admiration and melancholy to foreshadow the following two verses:

*Étant petite, avec chagrin
j’admirais dans les magasins
la teinte pâle de poupées blondes.*

*Being little, with sadness,
I admired in the stores
the pale complexion of the blond dolls*

*J'aurais voulu leur ressembler.
Et je disais à l'air, accablé,
me croyant toute seule brune au monde.*

*I would have liked to resemble them.
And I said to the air, weighed down,
believing myself to be the only brunette
in the world.*

As the lyrics speak of Baker's desire to have her skin color resemble that of white dolls beginning at m. 55, a supporting bassoon-tenor saxophone duet complicates the unsettled feeling that is represented by a tonal ambiguity in which the winds shift between passages in G major/E minor and octatonic figures that eventually lead to a V7/vi chord (see Figure 1: Bassoon and tenor duet with soprano). To further illustrate Baker's conflict with her racial identity, the winds perform a two-part chorale interlude in E major whose antecedent—despite its many harmonic twists and chromatic turns—brings us to another V7/6 chord. Without transition, the winds briefly perform the consequential passage in the new relative minor key (i6/4 of C# minor or vi6/4 of E major), landing loudly on a non-functional tritone-fourth chord that abruptly ends the section and is followed by a grand pause.

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for Tenor Saxophone, the middle for Bassoon, and the bottom for Soprano. The Tenor Saxophone and Bassoon parts are in E major, while the Soprano part is in E minor. The score shows a duet between the Tenor Saxophone and Bassoon, with the Soprano part providing the vocal line. The lyrics are: "J'au-rais vou-lu leur re-sem-bler, et je di-sais a l'air ac-ca-ble Me cro-yant toute seu-le brune au monde".

Figure 1: Bassoon and tenor duet with soprano (untransposed)

*Moi, si j'étais blanche – sachez que mon
bonheur qui près de vous s'épanche
garderait sa couleur.]
Au soleil c'est par l'extérieur que l'on se
dore.
Moi, se la flamme de mon cœur qui me
colore*

*[Me, if I were white – know that my
happiness, which pours out near you,
would guard its color.]
In the sun, it is the exterior that one tans.

For me, it is the flame of my heart by
which I am colored.*

The music that follows at m. 70 begins abruptly with an extremely loud and violent two-fisted cluster in the piano's lowest register. Then, as the pianist plays fisted clusters in the low register of the melodica the fisted cluster dies away. These new clusters creep slowly in and out of the otherwise soft, modally based improvised music (similar to that which begins the song) played by alto flute, guitar, and violin. The contrast in these two simultaneous events signifies Baker's relinquishing of her desires to be white and acknowledges a newfound pride in her natural self as evidenced in the verse's last two lyrics: *Au soleil c'est par l'extérieur que l'on se dore. Moi, se la flamme de mon cœur qui me colore.*

*[Et si ma figure, mon corps, sont brunis,
c'est parce que la nature me voulait
ainsi.
Mais je suis franche, dites-moi,
messieurs...]
Faut il que je sois blanche pour vous
plaire mieux?*

*[And if my face, my body, were browned
(tanned), it is because nature wanted
me this way.
But I am honest, tell me gentlemen...]
Must I be white to please you better?*

In the final verse, which begins at m. 87, the trio of woodwinds proceed to perform another chorale that, while mostly in G major, contains even more changes in harmonic direction than the first chorale and moves swiftly between consonance and dissonance. The music itself revisits both E minor and E major to not only illustrate Baker's biracial black-white identity, but also reflectively portray her in a new light.

After the lyric *c'est parce que la nature me voulait ainsi*, the music returns to signify Baker's admiration of the blond dolls. This time, however, the mournful character of the alto flute melody that begins in C# minor and returns to E minor, along with the elongated dissonances in mm. 92, suggests grieving for Baker's inability to embody their pale complexion in spite of her attempts to do so (see Figure 2: Alto flute melody and tonal shift from C# minor to E minor). As a way of provoking a moment of contemplation the music then suddenly stops again. In measure 95, the music is somewhat similar to that in the original recording: first, the final lyric is sung using the exact melody of the original; second, the music feels like it *wants* to return to its original tonality (G major) but quickly moves away from it. Instead, the instrumental music that follows finds us again in E minor and then moves again to its parallel major for a short time, where the vii7/V in E major descends to a ii chord in G major that arrives at its medial I6/4 voicing. Finally, the plagal cadence in m. 102-103 concludes the song in a somber tone.

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Alto Flute, Tenor Saxophone, Bassoon, and Soprano. The Alto Flute part is highlighted with a red box starting at measure 92. An orange arrow points from 'c# minor' to 'e minor' in the Alto Flute staff. The Soprano part has lyrics: 'ain - si... Mais je suis fran- che... dites moi Mes- sieurs Faut il que'.

Figure 2: Alto flute melody and tonal shift from C# minor to E minor

Nr. 5 – “C’est Lui”

Background

In 1934 Baker made history as the first Black woman to star in a motion picture in the French film, *Zouzou*, directed by Marc Allegret. Accompanied by the French radio jazz orchestra Jazz du Poste-Parisien under the direction of Al Romans, she recorded composer Vincent Scotto’s famous love song “C’est Lui” that same year. In *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image*, Bennetta Jules-Rosette describes Baker’s performance of “C’est Lui” as the film’s torch song that sets multiple complicated love stories into motion, all of which simultaneously benefit and disadvantage *Zouzou*.²³ Jules-Rosette expands on both the film’s twisted plot and torch song, noting, “*Zouzou*’s observations of the emerging affair between Claire (daughter of the laundry owner) and Jean (*Zouzou*’s white orphan brother for whom she harbors passionate feelings) reflect her exclusion and powerlessness both as a woman and as a marginal cultural outsider in France.”²⁴

Earlier in her career, Baker tried to emulate the work of African American blues singers Clara Smith, Bessie Smith (no relation), and Ethel Waters, and after performing an outstanding rendition of Waters’ hit song “Dinah,” she felt that her voice would never match that of Waters. She decided, with the encouragement of Vaudevillian producer Caroline Dudley, that to achieve a successful performing career would require her to

²³ Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life*, 88.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

accept that blues singing was not really her style.²⁵ My version of “C’est Lui” seeks to negotiate the complex reservations and obstacles that Baker faced vis-à-vis African American musics of her time (excluding “jazz”), as well as the fact that, despite her long and celebrated career, there are no extant recorded examples of Baker singing traditional blues music.

Brief Overview and Conception

“C’est Lui” is one of the shorter selections in *Perle Noire*, at around six to eight minutes. In its re-composed version, it contains various degrees of expressive timing and mood, constant tempo changes and flexibilities, semi-rubato/improvisatory phrasing, and harmonic gesturing, providing the listener with a variegated structure. As the music transforms from one compositional environment to the next, each of these elements reappears for short spans of time throughout the composition. The harmonic content is more static in my version of this tune until its middle section, where it transforms into a traditional 12-bar blues structure that is evocative of blues recordings made during this area. The film’s scene, along with the pioneering work of Clara and Bessie Smith and Waters, were inspirational in my desire to integrate this type of material into the sonic fabric of the music. The compositional structure is multifaceted and perceivably more “rounded”: beginning at m. 72, the music functions as a recapitulative formal device and ends with voiced harmonies in the woodwinds that utilize the first six degrees of this modified “minor blues” pitch set (in this case, C# D# E F# G G# B#). The following

²⁵ Schroeder and Wagner, *Josephine Baker*, 27–29, 31.

discussion centers on some of the salient features in this version of “C’est Lui” as well as its relationship to the film and the song’s original verses.

Discussion

The original recording of this song is not a blues in the traditional sense, but the lyrics bear a resemblance to it. My work maintains many of the primary harmonic attributes found in the original recording (alternating from C# minor to its parallel major). I wanted, however, to exploit these attributes in a seemingly ambiguous and unclear way as the dialogical relationship between consonance-dissonance and spontaneity-interpretation mirrors all the characters about whom Baker (hereafter referred to as the character Zouzou) sings.

*Quatre fois par jour, par douzaines,
des messieurs très amoureux me
proposent une vie de reine
pour que je me donne à eux.*

*Four times a day, by the dozens,
some gentlemen, very much in love
propose to me the life of a queen
so that I’ll give myself to them.*

Y en a qu’un qu’a su me plaire.

*There’s only one who knew how to
please me*

*Il est méchant, il n’a pas le sou, ses
histoires ne sont pas claires.
Je le sais bien, mais je m’en fous...*

*He is mean, he is penniless, his stories
are not clear.
I know it well, but I don’t care*

I interpolate two primary elements of the original recording in mm. 1–18 of my recomposition of “C’est Lui”: first, the central pitch G#; and second, the key of C# minor. From there, however, my treatment of the song diverges: I displaced the rhythm of the tune’s original melodic line, which I ask performers to interpret precisely. While written in 12/8, the interaction between soprano and the piano resists a metrical feeling of four, three, and twelve. Rather, it gives the impression of floating stressed pulses. Along

with the voice, the central harmonic structure of this section is represented in the piano part, which I refer to as another modification of the “minor blues” pitch set. It includes multiple chord spellings mostly using the pitches C# D# E F# G G# A B B# (see Figure 3: Opening of “C’est Lui,” supple rhythmic activity between soprano and piano).

Additionally, this section functions as a harmonically static modal field containing only two main alternating sonorities that are not only dissonant in character but are also in constant motion rhythmically. The pianist may alternate freely between executing the written passage and inserting improvised accompaniment that references the indicated chord symbols above each measure while following the score (this activity may occur at any point from the beginning through the second half of m. 16). Finally, the slow, complex melodic material accompanied by the piano’s optional weaving between consonant and dissonant harmonies and lacking a constant pulse allude to the many lovers who have pursued Zouzou four times a day.

The image shows a musical score for the opening of the song "C'est Lui". It consists of two staves: a Soprano staff and a Piano staff. The Soprano staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a time signature of 9/8. The lyrics are: "Quatre fois par jour par dou-zai nes Des mes-sieurs tres a-mou-reux Me pro-po-sent une vie de rei-ne". The Piano staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. It features a complex, rhythmic accompaniment with many accidentals and dynamic markings, including a *ppp* marking. The piano part is characterized by a constant motion of chords and a lack of a clear pulse.

Figure 3: Opening of “C’est Lui,” supple rhythmic activity between soprano and piano

*Pour moi, y a qu'un homme dans Paris,
c'est lui.
Je peux rien y faire, mon cœur est pris
par lui.
Je crois que j'en perds la tête – il est si
bête qu'il ne l'a pas compris.*

*For me, there is only one man in Paris,
it's him.
I can't help it – my heart is taken by him.
I think I'm losing my head over it – he is
so stupid that he doesn't even know
it.*

Depicting Zouzou's infatuation with Jean and the breathtaking emotional impact that this "one man" has had on her, the next section features the first of a two-part chorus and change in mood and key (the original song's parallel major). I wanted, however, to compose modal passages that not only alter the character of the music as analogous to that of the original recording, but also to signify further Zouzou's reminiscence of her love for Jean. Measures 18–28 find us in C locrian mode (in D \square major) with a simple repeated six-note piano gesture functioning as a supportive role to the otherwise fast-moving contrapuntal texture by the winds and the soprano. Measures 18–21 demonstrate a sort of call-and-response by the soprano and bassoon in the first line of the chorus. Additionally, the bassoon melody in m. 21 very closely resembles the original melody of the first line.

*Pour moi, y a qu'un homme dans Paris,
c'est lui.
Je passerais dans un trou souris pour
lui.
Chaque jour je l'adore, bien plus
encore...
Pour moi, y a qu'un homme dans Paris.*

*For me, there is only one man in Paris
for me, it is him.
I would spend time in a mouse hole for
him.
Every day, I love him - even more than
before...
For me, there is only one man in Paris.*

Measures 32–35 feature a much lighter texture during the second half of the chorus with a cross-rhythmic passage in the piano, supported by bassoon and alto flute. Drawing on my experiences in performing cross-rhythmic tuplet ratios as a platform to extend

improvisation (i.e. in the collaborative group Fieldwork, as well as with saxophonists Braxton and Aaron Stewart), I wanted to include a short segment of music that conveys this influence. Influenced by the music of sub-Saharan Africa and Steve Reich as well, I used the ratio 10:3, where $5(2)=10=$ and $6/2=3$ (see Figure 4: 6:10 cross-rhythm) to complicate perceptions of a 5:3 tuplet. Alternatively, the pianist may play the passage indicated in mm. 32–35 at a tempo independent of the performers, provided that m. 36 is executed correctly when alto flute and bassoon finish playing their respective passages. Meanwhile, the alto saxophone countermelody in mm. 34–35 accompanies the soprano in a quasi-improvisatory passage. Finally, the music dissolves into a piano-soprano duet (mm. 37–43) that harmonically is both derivative of and yet unlike the original harmonic progression that ends the chorus.

The musical score for Figure 4: 6:10 cross-rhythm features five staves. The Alto Flute staff begins at measure 32 with a circled '32' and a 'molto rit.' marking. The Alto Saxophone staff begins in measure 34. The Bassoon staff has a circled '32' and a 'PPP' dynamic. The Soprano staff has lyrics: 'Pour moi y'a qu'un homme dans Pa-ri-s c'est lui Je passe-rai-s dans un trou. de sou - ris.' The Piano part has a circled '32' and a 'PPP' dynamic. A box in the Piano part says 'M. 32-35: This passage may be played strictly as written or ad-libitum.'

Figure 4: 6:10 cross-rhythm

Suddenly, the music transforms from its lush, modal, and slow-moving state into an instrumental segue that features the alto saxophone again, but this time, as an

improvisation that calls for the use of inflections found in jazz and blues. As part of the collaborative process I recommended that Muncy listen to recorded selections by saxophonists Johnny Hodges, Coleman Hawkins, and Ben Webster that demonstrate the use of such inflections. I wanted him to develop a blues-inspired improvisation that would *draw from* these specific techniques, but not copy their performance languages. Some of the extended techniques include—but are not limited to—the use of heavy vibrato, short staccato passages, microtonal pitch bending (“dipping”), slow pitch glissandi, and growling. Additionally, the pianist and violinist improvise in a supportive manner during this activity (or the violinist may be tacet).

After some time, the pianist transitions from freely improvising to performing the written repeated passage at m. 45, all the while bringing the ensemble to a precise tempo. Finally, the alto saxophonist begins to wrap up the improvisation as the alto flutist and bassoonist play a passage in m. 46, which serves to cue the rest of the ensemble to resume reading the score. These activities lead into the song’s penultimate section, which by this point has transformed into a sound world heavily immersed in the blues.

*Il court après toutes les filles.
Elles sont toutes à sa merci.
Son regard les déshabille.
Ses mains parfois aussi.
Je ne fais rien pour qu'il m'aime.
Aux autres il donne le bonheur, mais il
est à moi quand meme, puisqu'il est
dans mon cœur.*

*He chases after all the girls.
They are all at his mercy.
His gaze undresses them.
His hands sometimes, as well.
I do nothing for him to love me.
To others he gives happiness, but he is
mine anyway, because he is in my
heart.*

Beginning at m. 50 “C’est Lui” fully engages in a hard blues structure that alludes to Zouzou’s glamorous image, which is now in conflict with her powerlessness and jealousy of Jean’s love for Claire. The corresponding verse centers on Jean’s betrayal of

Zouzou's love for him. The new blues-inspired setting, however, temporarily empowers Zouzou, doing away with the sad, defeatist tone set by the original recording (by which the music returns to C# minor). The music increasingly builds in volume, instrumentation, and intensity as the lyrics charge ahead. With the lyrics *puisqu'il est dans mon cœur*, however, the blues structure suddenly arrives at the song's quiet final section (m. 71). The music in the following measure may be perceived as a false recapitulation signifying that while the empowered Zouzou just exhibited an extraordinarily glamorous performance on stage, there is still doubt regarding whether she will finally go on to live happily with Jean.

Il est si bête qu'il ne l'a pas compris.

He is so stupid that he doesn't even know it.

Chaque jour je l'adore bien plus encore.

Every day, I adore him more.

Un homme – dans Paris.

One man – in Paris.

C'est lui...

That's him...

The increasing tension exhibited by the woodwinds and violin (mm. 72–81) adds to Zouzou's wonder of why she continues to love Jean, in spite of his betrayal of her. The song is brought to a close as Zouzou's inevitable defeat and loneliness is illustrated in the descending woodwind-violin passages (mm. 82–84) along with the lyric *C'est lui* sung quietly by Zouzou in her lowest register.

Nr. 6 – “Terre Seche (Negro Spiritual)”

Background

In 1952 Brazilian songwriter Ary Barroso composed “Terra Seca,” a song that speaks about the troubled life of the Negro.²⁶ Seven years later the jazz arranger and

²⁶ See Fléchet, « *Si tu vas à Rio...* ».

composer Jo Bouillon (then Baker's partner) created an original arrangement of "Terra Seca" whose lyrics would be translated and sung in French by Baker in her production and recording, *Paris Mes Amours*.²⁷ "Terre Seche (Negro Spiritual)" is the final composition of *Perle Noire*. The longest in duration, it lasts anywhere from 18–22 minutes. While depicting Baker living in America during the 1950s and 1960s—a time in which the Civil Rights Movement reached its zenith—the recomposed version of the song is largely in French, but with some English near its conclusion.

"Terre Seche," acerbic and trenchant in its overall character, simultaneously alludes to the pain, despair, and suffering inflicted upon African Americans and the demand for freedom and brighter days on Earth. I felt strongly about including this piece in the song cycle because I wanted to show a side of Baker unfamiliar to many listeners. Compared to the semi-ironic "Si J'étais Blanche," we now see Baker twenty-seven years later in her most explicit form; "Terre Seche" is Baker's most direct song of protest against marginality and racism.

Brief Overview and Conception

Like the original, the tonal center of the work is scored in A minor and it moves between different *qualities* of this key (natural, harmonic, melodic, and notably, modified versions of the Ukrainian Dorian mode).²⁸ Unlike the original score, however, the music does not move from A minor to A major, but modulates directly to E major in its middle

²⁷ Baker, *Paris Mes Amours*.

²⁸ The Ukrainian Dorian mode is in minor (with a raised fourth scale degree) that appears several times throughout this song. In Jewish liturgical music, this mode is referred to as *Mi Sheberach* (Hebrew - "may He who blessed"). For a discussion of the names of this mode, see Feldman, "Bulgareasca/Bulgarish/Bulgar: The Transformation of a Klezmer Dance Genre," 123, nt. 56. It symbolizes great meaning for me as over the past eight years I have appreciated Jewish cantorial works and performed klezmer music.

section (where the two Southern slave songs *My Father, How Long?* and *Poor Rosy* are interpolated as part of the structure of the composition) before dissolving back into the austere, ambiguous chromaticism which imbues the song. The following discussion centers on some of the salient features in this version of “Terre Seche” as well as on its relationship to the original verses.

Discussion

Inspired by the lyrical content of “Terre Seche” and guitarist Dan Lippel and bassoonist Rebekah Heller’s performance in the world premiere of my composition *Ode to Gust Burns* (2012), I wanted to convey a haunting feeling in the song’s opening section. To do so, the composition begins with a short improvisation featuring Heller intoning loud multiphonics and myself violently striking large percussion instruments that builds to a near fever pitch. Meanwhile, the guitar’s looped and menacing three-chord passage interjected by heavily distorted improvisation accompanies this texture. This improvisation eventually settles into a precise tempo while retaining the music’s gloomy character to usher in the first verse (mm. 6–7).

Le Noir traîne sa vie sans espoir.

The black man drags out his life without hope.

Le Noir n'est jamais rien qu'un pauvre Noir.

The black man is never anything more than a poor black.

Ah, j'ai si mal – vois ma souffrance.

Ah, I'm so sick – see my suffering.

Pauvre Noir que je suis, toujours seul sans appui, sans defense.

Poor black that I am, always alone without support, without defense.

This verse, unlike in the original recording, is repeated twice. The repetition signifies my experiences as an African American growing up in an economically depressed neighborhood and watching the struggles of homelessness, addiction, and

familial dysfunction, among other difficult circumstances. The lyrics in mm. 6–25 are sung slowly as menacing guitar chords—musically depicting a continuous downward spiral—keep reappearing in sequential order and veer towards a slight diversion and a sudden absence of tempo. A haunting, repetitive instrumental interlude appears from out of nowhere (mm. 26–37), reminiscent in character to the music heard in the opening section, and builds to a screeching halt. Without musical transition, the second iteration of the verse begins (mm. 38–41). Here, I wanted to convey an affect that is somewhat analogous to what the lyrics suggest by including a supportive obbligato alto flute melody that weaves in and out of the melodic vocal line.²⁹ Meanwhile, the guitar plays harmonically odd phrases with static pedal points in contrast to this interwoven texture, giving the listener a sense that “the black’s” life remains hopeless, even when (s)he is not alone or “poor.” The winds interrupt this section in the middle of the verse with an inverted cadence while the bassoon plays a brief descending figure that introduces the Ukrainian Dorian/Mi Sheberach mode, which sets a somber “prayer” tone for the remainder of the song.

In a manner similar to its previous appearance, the alto flute returns briefly as an ornamental accompaniment to the vocal phrase, “Ah, j’ ai si mal,” performing in unison with it. The music that follows in mm. 43–57 largely emphasizes the next phrase, “...vois ma souffrance.” A call-and-response event between the violin-guitar duet and the trio of woodwinds sets up an intense musical environment that asserts “the poor black man’s” suffering. The lyric “ma souffrance” is mirrored in the sad, quiet violin-guitar passage in mm. 45 and 47 that function as bookends for a short woodwind interjection that questions

²⁹ In jazz, the term “obbligato” refers to a scored countermelody that fortifies the main melodic vocal (or instrumental) line.

whether or not one notices the suffering. The significance of this phrase is highlighted not only by the sudden changes in the previous music, but also by its alarming demand for the listener to “see it!,” as asserted by the bassoon and woodwinds from m. 48–57 (see Figure 5: Bassoon and woodwinds’ “See it!” motive). Finally, a series of forceful improvised percussion exclamations and heavily distorted guitar passages heighten the emotional intensity of the “see it!” bassoon-woodwind motive, all of which abruptly halt.



Figure 5: Bassoon and woodwinds’ “See it!” motive

During the final two lines of the verse (mm. 58–64), the music diverges from that in mm. 38–41 in several ways. Two countermelodies played by bassoon in its high register and tenor saxophone in its mid-low register exemplify the restless, troubled energy in the music at this point. In addition, they support the mournful tone of the lyrics, now sung in Ukrainian Dorian/Mi Sheberach. This is followed by a short *doina*-like melody played by the violin and accompanied by woodwinds that calms the soul, alleviates the misery and sadness felt by “the poor black man,” and functions as a transition into the next section (see Figure 6: Violin *doina*-like passage).³⁰

³⁰ Originally Romanian, the *doina* is a semi-improvisatory genre that klezmer musicians adopted as music for listening. For a discussion of the genre, see Beregovskii, *Jewish instrumental folk music*, 13. I found it appropriate to include this kind of music here (and, later, Negro spirituals) in order for the spiritual essence of “Terre Seche” to emerge.

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Alto Flute

Tenor Saxophone

Bassoon

Soprano

Violin

Guitar

Percussion

crash cym.

Le Noir.

Figure 6: Violin *doina*-like passage

Le Noir reste lié à sa chaînes.

The black man remains bound to his chains.

Il ne possède rien que sa peine.

He possesses nothing but his pain.

In the original recording, the character of the music changes considerably with the entrance of the first two lyrics in the next verse, seemingly conveying a somewhat more pleasant feel (in A major) and a sense of optimism. Upon listening to this performance and reading the lyrics, however, I felt that this affect was inappropriate in this part of the song. Rather, I wanted to give the *illusion* of such a transition without departing from the growing musical tension displayed during the opening verse. I wrote the instrumental accompaniment to the remaining lyrics of this verse in a mood commensurate with the emotional weight of the words:

*Il était plein d'entrain et de vie, lorsque
les Blancs l'ont traîné jusqu'ici.
Mais il en a été tellement trompé,
tellement battu, qu'il se sent las et
meurtri, et son cœur n'en peut plus.*

*He was full of spirit and life when the
whites dragged him up to here.
But he was so soaked, so beaten, that he
feels weary and bruised, and his
heart can't take it any longer.*

The “illusion of pleasantness” that I refer to in mm. 76–85 is sensed by the momentary change in instrumental texture from ensemble to a guitar-voice duet. This texture may include light, free accompaniment on drum set, which the percussionist may decide to play in accord with the moment. Notwithstanding the lighter feel, the density and rate of non-functional, freely chromatic harmonic activity occurs at a very fast pace, complementing the disturbing nature of the lyrics. This goes on until the ensemble enters again with an exclamatory version of the violin’s previous “ma souffrance” passage in the middle of the second line (m. 86) that does not resolve itself.

The harmonic progression in the woodwinds, which opens with a borrowed diminished chord ($vii^{\circ}7/V$ in A major) and functions in two ways in mm. 89–91, depicts the “weariness” and “deceit” intoned by the lyrics. The $vii^{\circ}7/V$ chord deceptively modulates up to another minor key ($i6/5$ in B \square minor). This brief change signifies the whites’ deceit and lies told to “the poor black man” before the $V7/V/V$ chord (in A major), played by the woodwinds, ultimately concludes this section.

From mm. 93 through 148 I wanted to take the song’s overall concept in a new direction and further complicate the general public’s notions about Baker through the interpolation of African American spirituals. When I discussed the idea with Bullock (who is also very well-versed in this tradition), we proceeded to exchange ideas about which spirituals would work well to heighten the emotional impact of not only “Terre Seche,” but also *Perle Noire* in its entirety. Bullock observed that to include spirituals

that are “heavily steeped in the oral tradition of American Negro music [would allow for] a new voice and representation of music that is authentically Black American.”³¹

In re-composing “Terre Seche” I hoped to achieve a feeling of unity, mindfulness, and hope for the greater good of the world. My belief in the power of non-denominational human spirituality has been informed, first, by Art Ensemble of Chicago member and multi-instrumentalist Joseph Jarman, who commented that all of the musicians in the ensemble “look[ed] for specific sounds to express the music that was flowing through their consciousness. [...] Also, there was another challenge – to investigate an infinite number of forms. [...] When we worked on it and did it right, you can feel the spirit click in – you could feel the spiritual uplift of the universality of the music.”³²

Second, my belief has been inspired by my adolescent experiences coming out of the Black Christian church, as well as revisiting Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington’s sacred jazz suite, “Third Sacred Concert.” Both this artistic mandate and this work led me to pursue a “spiritual uplifting” in the entirety of “Terre Seche,” which by this time, has transformed from a composition that speaks bluntly about the suffering of a poor black to one that is about calling on The Lord for help to overcome times of tribulation and adversity through life and in death.

To expand on the “spiritual” aspects introduced previously through the *Mi Sheberach* mode and the doina-inspired violin playing, I relocated the music within the Black Christian church. I incorporated two American Southern Negro slave songs that I felt worked well as a transition from the previous French lyrics to the final verse of “Terre Seche.” The first, “My Father, How Long?,” is a plea to The Lord that asks, “How

³¹ Bullock, “Spirituals for Terre Seche.”

³² Beau, *Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future*, 75.

long [shall the] poor sinner suffer here?” and is performed by alto flute, tenor saxophone, bassoon, and violin as an instrumental chorale. The second, “Poor Rosy,” is also performed by the winds, but as a responsorial hymn.

I asked the winds and violin to perform these two selections in a way that evokes Black gospel choir performance. Additionally, this “Negro Spirituals” section invites the alto flute, violin, and bassoon to employ improvisatory melisma and ornamentation in a vocal style. Finally, I provided the lyrics to the spirituals in text boxes to give the players a context for interpreting the music in a way that takes into account this “spiritual uplift,” but also foreshadows the French lyrics to follow.

*Aïe, pourquoi lui reprocher la couleur
de sa peau?*

*Ce n'est pas un péché...de n'être qu'un
négro!*

*Seigneur, ayez pitié de moi. Écoutez ma
prière.*

*Ah, why blame him for the color of his
skin?*

*It's not a sin to be nothing more than just
a negro!*

*Lord, have mercy on me. Hear my
prayer.*

For mm. 149–151 I decided to extrapolate and reveal some of the melodic and harmonic characteristics of Bouillon’s arrangement that begin the closing section. First, I kept the melodic contour of the verse similar, but not identical to that of the original. Second, beginning at m. 149, the weary descending chromatic line played by the ensemble picks up from where the music left off in m. 92. The first four pitches played by the ensemble (C# C, B, B \square) also function as the third chord degree for each of the fast-moving descending chords heard in the original version. Finally, as evidenced in the guitar’s introduction of two non-harmonic sonorities, the music gradually dissolves back to its unsettled harmonic state while the winds continue to increase the rate and intensity of chromatic descent (mm. 152–153). I wanted to then create a more disturbing energy by

re-introducing trio music (mm. 154–161) whose harmonic features are similar in tone to that in mm. 78–85.

A false “recapitulation” begins the next part of the closing section. Meditative and dirge-like in its pace, the guitar line is somewhat reminiscent of the opening measure of the song. Woodwinds and violin (with added improvised soft percussion accompaniment) quietly accompany by playing their pads to lead into to a final violin *doina*-like extended passage that interrupts the dismal atmosphere (see Figure 7: Final *doina*-like passage played by violin). Resembling the passage in mm. 66–71, the music suggests to the listener not to relinquish the hope that better days are upon us, for all of humanity, and that “it won’t be long” before the black “poor sinners” suffering ends.³³ When the music quickly descends back into its meditative stasis, the “prayer” to The Lord re-emerges in vocal form as “My Father, How Long?,” but now sung in an exclamatory fashion in English.

My father, how long?
My father, how long?
My father, how long will your people suffer here?

³³ The lyric: “...and it won’t be long” is also part of “My Father, How Long?”

*Seigneur, je ne demande qu'un peu de
bonheur sur la Terre!*

*Lord, I only ask for a little happiness on
Earth!*

This version of “Terre Seche” concludes with the final line that not only completes Baker’s unanswered prayer in its dire request and demand for happiness on Earth, but also implies that “the black man” continues to live in a cruel society marred by subtle or overt racial tensions that remain presently unresolved. Musically, these issues are engaged by the ensemble’s crescendoing, unresolved harmonic progression that violently and abruptly ends the piece.



Figure 7: Final *doina*-like passage played by violin

***Perle Noire*—Critical Reception and Response**

As an African American improviser-composer I seek to create a body of work that celebrates and extends the legacy of musical boundary erosion,³⁴ which is in part a response to racialized depictions of musical genres. As such, it is important for me to address the critical reception of *Perle Noire* that attempts to restrict my work to *particular types* of music and fails to consider it vis-à-vis the multifarious realms of

³⁴ Here I employ Amanda L. Scherbenske’s idea of a “tradition of boundary erosion,” which she uses to discuss musical multiplicity among my generation of New York City-based improviser-composers, as building upon the musical and political engagements of elder generation African American experimental musicians who “sought to distance them and their musics from racial stereotypes and simplistic identities...[and] to move beyond genre circumscription and espouse values that celebrate hybridity” “Multiplicity and Belonging among New York City Improviser-Composers, 2000-2011,” 34.

Black music. In the creative lineage with which I identify, the “serious” work of African Americans has a long history of being wrongly criticized, underrecognized, disrespected, and misunderstood: I find that this is especially the case if the music involves creative spontaneity or eschews music as entertainment.

Perle Noire has received polarizing critical responses from journalists from influential publications and spectators in attendance at its world premiere as well. I contend that several factors have precipitated this reception: First, the work openly questions the trope of the “black entertainer” by rejecting its exclusive adoption. Second, some reviews fail to separate the image of the “black entertainer” from me as a human being, confronting racial issues and internal struggles throughout the work. Moreover, individual *discomfort with these topics* may exacerbate such issues. In this work an African American improviser-composer, singer, and poet—through collaboration—directly and stridently challenge the notion of the Black “entertainer” through music and spoken word. Finally, the music fails to meet assumptions about cultural “authenticity,” ultimately disappointing at least some listeners.

Consciousness of the Black Self

Improviser-composers within the African American creative music tradition who reject “jazz musician” as a totalizing label inspire me. Following the pathways forged by these predecessors, I have long resisted generic labeling and racially essentialized, social categorizations of my own work. I renounce the label of “jazz composer” or “jazz arranger” for this composition. This overly suggestive term, which is often incorrectly applied to my music by critics, does not describe the realization of the music itself. For

these reasons it is crucial for me as a Black creative improviser-composer not only to define my terms of creative music making, but also to demonstrate how such criticism incorrectly deals with *Perle Noire* in general.

From the 1970s onward, Smith has argued for the importance that Black artists establish their own definitions for their work and self-publish related literature.

It is particularly necessary during these times for the Black creative artist to be self-conscious (i.e., because the rules, by which the world is dealing, result in the present social, economic, and political syndrome, it is necessary that every black artist documents, for himself/herself, all that they have to say). [...] It is now time for us to take unto ourselves the process of recording our own history – to take this process from the control of those who are alien by the very existence of their identity group to what it is that we are doing. We do not *need* our creations to be dissected by others who [do] not know what they see. We must not wait for others to document their own distortions of that which we can say, rightly, for ourselves. So, I am self-conscious, and I want every Black person to be self-conscious.³⁵

Braxton similarly asserts the necessity to document one's work to inform the general public's (and especially the critic's) comprehension of one's creative activity, "for not properly document[ing] one's activity is to be at the mercy of the collective forces of Western cultur[al] interpretations – and nothing can be worse than this."³⁶ In conversation with Smith's argument, he maintains that Western forces of power have altered and manipulated criticism and documentation (including the lack thereof) systemically to exclude or evade discussion (favorable and unfavorable) of exemplary contemporary contributions offered by non-whites as well as women up until the present day.³⁷

³⁵ Smith, *Notes*, iii.

³⁶ Braxton, *Tri-Axium Writings*, 1:363–64.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

As a composer who has been “self-conscious” about the politics of race since I began to write and present my work in a variety of contexts, I have had similar experiences, particularly with regards to my concert works. On one hand, several of my compositions performed in “classical,” “new music,” or “art music” contexts have been subject to strident criticism or have not been reviewed altogether. On the other, my performances in “jazz” contexts have received much praise in numerous leading publications. This polarization exemplifies the continued positioning of African American improviser-composers like myself as mere “jazz performers.”

As I have experienced with my own work, the alternative explanation would be that perhaps such performers are not successful in “classical” or even “contemporary” musical composition. I have learned that such judgment is predicated on a number of subjective factors—not least of which are class and race—that preserve critical reception’s history of espousing a predominantly white cultural position (i.e., middle to upper class Euro-American/trans-European). As such, this espousal continues to influence and even dictate the musical fields and parameters in which African American composers and/or performers of any class or musical background operate.

Critical Reception

Two days following the world premiere of *Perle Noire* at the Ojai Music Festival, classical music journalist David Mermelstein referred to it as “the festival's biggest disappointment” and “a misstep, in a year when Ojai did so much else right to recognize

the contributions of women in music.”³⁸ He further contended that “Ms. Bullock sang well, but Sorey’s arrangements of Baker’s signature songs and his interstitial music were *painfully monochromatic and enervated—everything Baker wasn’t.*”³⁹ In accord with such comments, a discussion of the piece with an audience member on Facebook suggested a number of racist undertones:

Only one song out of six (maybe 5 minutes out of a nearly interminable 90) bore any resemblance to the incandescent, witty, salty and seductive singer. [Bullock] dug in with verve and vocal splendor, given the opportunity. A bit later her fleeting moment to shine as a mover also vanished too soon. The arid stretches of *dull academic modernism - music derivative of mostly irrelevant White intellectuals* - left me confounded by this tragically lost opportunity.⁴⁰

These writings bring to the fore the decades-old problems of essentialization and authenticity encountered by African American improviser-composers, which ultimately relate and lead to exclusion. It is, therefore, imperative that I address such claims (however “self-conscious” the following statements may appear to the reader), which are largely informed by a negligible understanding of not only Baker but also Black music and its inclusionary aesthetics.

First, the writing limits the scope of the work to entail Baker only as an entertainer. The statements propose a politics of exclusion that locates the song cycle in a musical zone reflective of Baker’s better-known qualities, or in other words, within a

³⁸ Mermelstein, “A Lukewarm Celebration at the Ojai Music Festival, Led by Peter Sellars.” Emphasis added.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Anonymous. “Untitled” *Facebook*, June 25, 2016. Emphasis added. While this post was attributed to its author on Facebook, I have decided to anonymize it as I am more concerned with the circulation of such ideas *in general*, rather than in a rejoinder aimed at an individual.

popular and hyper-sexualized zone.⁴¹ The implication is that as a Black composer who deals with Baker as a subject, both Baker and I should be “kept in our place.” More broadly, it exemplifies the age-old problem of positioning Blacks as entertainers, not artists. Many of the issues that Baker herself confronted for most of her life as a “black entertainer” reappear in several of the responses to my work. Moreover, in an era where blacks continue to live in precarity, *Perle Noire* fully rejects the idea of dealing with Baker both *as a subject* and in a replicative manner: instead, it deals with the very real aspects of Baker’s life that entail struggles with racial discrimination and prejudice as well as other personal strife.

My reasons for presenting *Perle Noire*—or any other piece of music—have nothing to do with assuming the role simply of an entertainer. Nor am I interested in presenting Baker as a “fiery” iconic black expatriate entertainer, a presentation that would erase the fact that she—like many visionary black entertainers of her day—was also a marginalized figure who faced many battles with racial and gender essentialism and discrimination both in the United States and abroad. Instead, I made it my mission to offer a cycle of musical works sung by Baker that, straying from the original recordings, reveal a side of her that is not only reflected by the lyrical content, but *also* by the music itself.⁴² Contrary to what the author above describes, the music does not belong to any one genre—as in the case of equating the entertainer with the popular—and yet, it

⁴¹ My discussion deals primarily with the positioning of Baker as a popular entertainer. An analysis of the positioning of Baker as hyper-sexualized merits a substantive discussion as well, and therefore, is beyond the scope of the present essay.

⁴² In program notes and interviews leading up to the performance, Bullock noted related intentions as well.

encompasses many. Rather, *Perle Noire* deliberately reimagines and deconstructs essentialized, simplistic views of Baker.

Second, the writing seems to be based on the premise that music written by a Black composer cannot be authentic if it is inclusive of the work of “white intellectuals” or pan-European music. The author of the Facebook post, for example, advances that *Perle Noire* lacks (Black) cultural authenticity in the following statements: “I did not hear the cultural richness that you map out, except in the third song, which thoroughly engaged and (dare I say it), *entertained* me.”⁴³

Will next year's music director and the artistic director of the festival offer any valuable feedback to help shepherd this major young talent toward something that feels *culturally rooted and authentic*? Mr. Sorey is to be featured in 2017. I look forward to having a change of heart next June.⁴⁴

I often find when reading reviews of works presented by some of my non-Black composer colleagues that the questioning of cultural influence is rarely, if ever, present. Black composers like myself, however, have had to endure such scrutiny for cultivating a musical aesthetic that contains pan-European influence.⁴⁵ Moreover, s/he suggests that

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Anonymous. “Untitled” *Facebook*, June 25, 2016.

⁴⁵ As Braxton observes: “I never heard anyone say that Stan Getz’s music has borrowed heavily from [African American creative music practice]. It’s taken for granted that a trans-European (white) ‘jazz’ saxophonist has borrowed some aspect of African American language. Why should it be such a big thing that I have learned from Europe? [...] Why is it so natural for (English saxophonist) Evan Parker to have an appreciation of Coltrane, but for me to have an appreciation of Stockhausen...why is that somehow out of the natural order for human beings to experience? I see it as racist.” Braxton, *Quartet (Coventry) 1985*.

I also find many similarities with Braxton’s experiences with racial essentialism. In a recent interview with Alexander McLean, Braxton speaks about his defiance of “cultural authenticity” in his own work that extends as far back as the middle 1960s: “[In the 1960’s the] emergence of Black music and Black identity [came] to the fore. My feelings about [this emergence] are complex. It became a little bit too easy to separate and to talk

other, more “experienced” cultural arbiters police my engagement with my own identity (or “blackness”).

As demonstrated in this writing, *Perle Noire* has been influenced by myriad Black musics (particularly the work developed by members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, Black Artists Group, and Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascension) as well as the music of Jo Bouillon, Morton Feldman, Arvo Pärt, Johann Sebastian Bach, and Per Nørgård. Not only does the writer—positioned, along with Mermelstein, as a cultural arbiter—fail to acknowledge any of *Perle Noire*’s African American musical influences, but s/he also fails to acknowledge the intent in the scope and direction of the music. In its practice of exclusion, this assessment speaks to the first part of Lewis’s assertion that, in the climate of critical reception (then, as now), “the African American composer trained in the Western European art tradition is troped as a *tragic* mulatto figure—shunned by white-dominated systems of cultural support, and supposedly a non-factor in black culture as well.”⁴⁶

In an open dialogue with both the Facebook author and critic Rodney Punt, who deemed the song cycle a “miscalculated [...] bleak jazz score” that is “lugubrious” and

of music in racial terms. I was never interested in talking of music in racial terms because I was interested in composite reality, and I also wanted to be able to listen to whatever I *wanted* to listen to. My influences are African, European, Asian, and Hispanic. The time period of the 1960’s was when my work started to become suspect: *Is it black enough? Is it white? Is it too cerebral?* [...] And when I think about [the current] time period and this idea of “authentic blackness,” I would say that I am very happy to be an *inauthentic* black person. [Because] I see my work as separate from the ethnic racial games that are being played in this time period.” McLean, *Anthony Braxton Interview*. Emphasis added.

It is not only evident that Braxton and I share this sentiment, but *Perle Noire* also has unsurprisingly been positioned as a work that is “not black enough” and “cerebral” to several white listeners and critics. Like Braxton, I was influenced by music that extends well beyond my cultural and social background and all of my work serves to extend this experience.

⁴⁶ Lewis, “Experimental Music in Black and White,” 130.

full of dirges,⁴⁷ I responded to their suppositions regarding what Black expression means and should entail by clarifying the intentions and influences of the work on social media. First, these suppositions similarly express what Lewis describes as the “putative ‘jazz’ label” that is typically assigned to people like myself.⁴⁸ In addition, the ability to create an intellectual African American expression that resourcefully draws from a multitude of compositional and creative influences while simultaneously playing against the limited notion of entertainer is seen as culturally “inauthentic.” While the nature of my performance practice is trans-idiomatic and is not limited by cultural or stylistic boundaries, my music is almost always thought of as “jazz,” even when it does not resemble it as such, given the simple fact that I am an African American improvising behind a drum set.⁴⁹ The music that I make is otherwise in agreement with neither of these racist conclusions.

Throughout the history of creative Black music, extending more than a century, there have been countless reviews that either do not consider the social significance and intention behind a work’s conception or that ascribe meaning to (and judgment of) it based solely on social prescription.⁵⁰ In reviewing *Perle Noire*, these writers suggest that

⁴⁷ Punt, “Women Composers Reign At Subdued 70th Ojai Festival.”

⁴⁸ Lewis, “Experimental Music in Black and White,” 119–20.

⁴⁹ The cornetist-composer Taylor Ho Bynum (a former student of Braxton) commented that, “As a black man with a saxophone, he (Braxton) is most often lumped into the [jazz] category, regardless of whether he is leading a quartet or conducting an opera.” (See Molleson, “Anthony Braxton Still Knows No Boundaries.”)

⁵⁰ In a mostly unfavorable review, Punt also made a concerted effort to highly criticize Rankine’s poetic texts, asserting that they “obliterated Josephine Baker in an all-too-familiar recitation of grievances that see no future [...], with insufficient affection or responsibility for bringing her greatness and complexity into focus.” Punt, “Women Composers Reign At Subdued 70th Ojai Festival.” To discuss Punt’s critical assessment of Rankine’s poetry, however, would be beyond the scope of the present essay.

Black intellectual and artistic engagement with the “all-too-familiar grievances”⁵¹—like racial stereotype and depressed conditions of Black life—is irrelevant to the present and the future, thereby forcefully wresting the Black experience from art itself. This type of reception effectively seeks to keep work that necessarily and directly expresses such grievances—faced not only by Baker, but also by Black Americans generally—out of contemporary music. It contends that issues of social injustice, which inordinately continue to impact Black America, are somehow—despite their ubiquity—obsolescent.

The assertions of Black poet and scholar Fred Moten are germane to *Perle Noire*, where these topics are addressed both through the music and Rankine’s poetic texts: “(Black) performance is the resistance of the object [i.e., social injustice] and the object is in that it resists, is in that it is always *the practice of resistance*. And if we understand race, class, gender, and sexuality as the materiality of social identity, as the surplus effect (and cause) of production, then we can also understand the ongoing, resistive force of such materiality as it plays itself out in/as the work of [Black] art.”⁵² I believe that through art in general, and through *Perle Noire* in particular, such issues and social concerns may not only be considered, but also resisted and reassessed.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² For further discussion on the connection regarding the performance of the “surplus effect” and the Black avant-garde, see Moten, *In The Break*, 31 nt. 14. However complex Baker’s persona was as an entertainer and iconic cultural figure, she too was a human being who through her art cultivated an aesthetic of resistance. *Perle Noire* simply touches on this very aspect of Baker’s life, and to deny expression of this aspect was to not fulfill our collaborative objective.

Conclusion

Classical music journalist Zachary Woolfe describes *Perle Noire* as “one of the most important works yet to emerge from the era of Black Lives Matter”⁵³ This statement suggests not only its musical, but also social import. In researching the life and music of Baker, I found many of the challenges that she experienced to be the same ones that African Americans continue to face in the present. Largely for this reason I turned to musical expression to address a variety of social and artistic issues in the work.

First, *Perle Noire* engages the unknown performatively, conceptually, and aurally. It synthesizes improvisation and composition, offers variable levels of performer autonomy, and examines Baker’s self-consciousness and vulnerabilities (rather than her fame, fortune, and glamour), qualities that are little known to most listeners.

Second, the second half of the cycle considers cultural narratives of self- and racial identity (“Si J’etais Blanche”), gender marginalization and collective powerlessness (“C’est Lui”), and suffering and brutality inflicted on blacks (“Terre Seche”). I submit that the Baker performances are timeless masterpieces that sonically have manifested her life experiences. Given their equal relevance today, I found it necessary to offer a contemporary reimagining of them in which lyrics, poetry, and music all interact to express these narratives.

Lastly, *Perle Noire* reflects and expands upon African American inclusionary aesthetics while necessarily and uncomfortably deconstructing racially essentialized notions of African American creativity and expression. My recompositions of the Baker

⁵³ Woolfe, “At Ojai, Peter Sellars Has a Personal Yet Global Playlist.”

songs augment both African American collaborative musical modeling and my longstanding commitment to the improvisation-composition continuum as well.

Composing this piece entailed a careful, rigorous process of selecting co-performers. For those with little to no experience in operating along such a continuum, the music posed formidable challenges. Nevertheless, by including performers with a variety of backgrounds, the piece proposes a sound world that is informed by a multiplicity of musical approaches, with each iteration uniquely beautified by individual contributions. As such, each performance has allowed me to expand my ideas for not only this work, but also for subsequent compositions. Finally, spontaneous and preconceived structure, the unforeseen, and attention to affect—characteristics that have contributed immensely to my work—aid in both the composition of *Perle Noire* and the musical model that I continuously strive to establish: one that is about life, experience, and becoming.

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