

Harriet Jacobs Gets a Hearing

Ashon Crawley

I

What can one hear in confinement, and how can that hearing be connective lineament? In her grandmother's crawlspace for seven years—compressed as a means to escape, confined with access only to shallow air as a means to flight—Harriet Jacobs was both discarded and discardable.¹ What did it mean to be discarded, for discardable materiality to bespeak an ontological condition? What can we learn from Jacobs's existence in the crawlspace, of her throwing herself into claustrophobic conditions to stage her eventual scurrying away? Her discarded body bodies forth socially and a sociality. What is the social life—as opposed to the social death—of the discarded? Her existence in that crawlspace, as an object that was thrown and thrown away, is cause for celebration. Harriet Jacobs knew something about black performance as a mode of sociality that is still reproduced today.² Sound, for Harriet Jacobs, was an important resource for allowing her thriving, even in the most horrific of conditions.

A small shed had been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by any thing but rats and mice. It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to loose the board floor. There was no admission for either light or air . . . To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total.³

Jacobs's escape is a sonic event: she wrote about the sound she heard in confinement, and that hearing was foundational for the telling of her narrative. This essay considers what it means to hear Jacobs's narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,⁴ how sound reverberates throughout the text, how sound is residue and materiality of thought that memory refuses to forget. Severed sight, eclipsed connection: "And now came the trying hour for

Current Musicology

that drove of human beings, driven away like cattle, to be sold they knew not where. Husbands were torn from wives, parents from children, never to look upon each other again this side of the grave. There was wringing of hands and cries of despair.”⁵ Sound remains. Her text is a songbook. Listen:

When I had been in the family [of Dr. Flint,⁶ the man who purchased and subsequently harassed her daily for sex] a few weeks, one of the plantation slaves was brought to town, by order of his master. It was near night when he arrived, and Dr. Flint ordered him to be taken to the work house, and tied up to the joist, so that his feet would just escape the ground. In that situation he was to wait till the doctor had taken his tea. I shall never forget the night. Never before, in my life, had I heard hundreds of blows fall, in succession, on a human being. His piteous groans, and his “O, pray don’t, massa,” rang in my ear for months afterwards.⁷

Sound remains. Of course, the songbook is replete with lament. To consider the sounds, those piteous groans, is to think about how sound can prompt movement towards escape. But more, sound compels the movement of pen to paper. That is, the sounds Jacobs hears “rang in her ears for months” so much so that she not only remembered the sound, but retold the sound to her audience. That ringing sound, that emanatory vibration, are the grounds for the narrativity of the slave girl’s incidents. Sound—what was heard—thus, was the residual materiality of enslavement.⁸ There appears to be, embedded in the text, what Diana Taylor might call performance as a vital act of transfer, attempting to transfer the knowledge of enslavement to readers by way of recalling and retelling how the institution sounded, how the institutional force of enslavement reverberated, because sight was broken.⁹ The loss of sight and connection is invaginated—cut and augmented—by the sense of sound, by what sound does, particularly by reverberation and echo. For Jacobs, sonic vibrations are a mnemonic reservoir that recalls sights, sounds, smells, and touches. Sound not only recalls memory but is the memory itself. Thus, I argue, the sonic of Jacobs’s text shares a relationship with how she cognized enslavement and how she encouraged her audience, through the reiteration of sound events, to *listen* to the text rather than (merely) read it.

In Jacobs’s recalling, the antebellum soundscape compelled thoughts of fear as well as excitement, terror as well as joy. She told of how slave codes were read aloud on ships: “Every vessel northward bound was thoroughly examined, and the law against harboring fugitives was read to all on board”;¹⁰ how Dr. Flint would read letters aloud to his family and to her grandmother;¹¹

and how sound technology was used to facilitate flight and escape: “It was not long before we heard the paddle of oars, and the low whistle, which had been agreed upon as a signal.”¹² Having spent time under floorboards, in a swamp and years in a crawlspace, Jacobs’s text continually “hears” sound through spaces of darkness, spaces where sight was at best compromised and at worst, impossible. What materializes is a theory of memory, recall and narrative that depends upon lost sight, amplified noise. The senses become, following Fred Moten, an ensemble, a suite.

If the sensual dominant of a performance is visual (if you’re there, live, at the club), then the aural emerges as that which is given in its fullest possibility by the visual . . . Similarly, if the sensual dominant of the performance is aural (if you’re at home, in your room, with the recording), then the visual emerges as that which is given in its fullest possibility by the aural . . . in hearing the space and silence, the density and sound, that indicate and are generated by [the] movement[s].¹³

With Jacobs’s songbook in mind, I argue that in order to understand the conditions of enslavement, escape, the possibilities for kinship, ideas of terror and joy that she recounts, one must attend to the ways sound is inserted in her text. Hers is a text that moves in the way of black performance as a giving and withholding. Not only did she give narrative but withhold names for her own and others’ safety, she gave escape by way of withdrawing from view. What her contemporaneous readers would ascertain about the status of slave girls manifested by a visual that depended upon being unseen, by a soundscape that was intensified. Jacobs’s proto-black feminist project,¹⁴ written particularly to white women to engage them in abolition work, capitalized upon space, silence, density and sound to bespeak the horrors of enslavement so that they would not only visualize enslavement but hear it, taste it, feel it. The sonic in her text functioned in the service of presencing enslavement without allowing a reader’s slippage into mere empathy, which, Saidiya Hartman says, dovetails in a “too-easy intimacy” that effaces the enslaved and “fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead.”¹⁵

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman explores the various ways terror festers in the most unlikely stagings and performances: in dances, songs and prayers.¹⁶ Distilling her argument through the “terrible spectacle” of enslavement, Hartman considers scenes where terror might hardly be detected, showing that the quotidian and mundane occurrences of everyday

life are important, critical sites that must be given attention if the reader is to robustly understand the horrors of such an institution. Hartman explains how “*Incidents*, by utilizing seduction and inquiring into its dangers...is fraught with perils precisely because there is no secure or autonomous exteriority from which the enslaved can operate or to which they can retreat.”¹⁷ I want to think about the sonic dimensions of such declarations—is black humanity possible; is there an exteriority towards which the black subject can escape?—in order to build on Hartman’s rigorous analyses.

Attention to sound in and as Jacobs’s text is critical for theorizing resistance—which she says is “hopeless”—in the crawlspace.¹⁸ The declaration that “resistance is hopeless” for the slave girl highlights the limits of resistance discourse. Since Jacobs was successful with her escape—lengthy and horrific though it was—we must be attuned to how her performances were not (merely about) resistance but were (about) some new thing, some enlivened way to be in the world. N., the main character in Nathaniel Mackey’s *Bedouin Hornbook* offers critical theory to think about compression and confinement, and the possibility for making light, making love, as and in sound. The book is in epistolary form, a collection of letters—not dissimilar to the letter-writing that Harriet Jacobs engaged in the crawlspace—that all concern the nature of sound and sentiment, the nature of the sonic and social world. N., a musician and critical theorist, created a form of writing that I believe is consistent with Jacobs’s dwelling in the crawlspace: she was a Compressed Accompaniment before N. ever wrote about them:

I’ve come up with a very dense form of writing, brief blocks of which are to be used to punctuate and otherwise season the music. Compressed Accompaniments I call them. I’m enclosing copies of the ones I’ve written for this piece. [. . .] What happens is that each station is presided over, so to speak, by one of the Accompaniments, and in the course of the performance each player moves from station to station, at each of which he or she recites a particular Accompaniment which “defines” that station. (I put the word “defines” in quotes because the point is to occupy a place, not to advocate a position. The word “informs,” it occurs to me now, might get more aptly at what I mean.) [. . .] Some would say it’s not my place to make comments on what I’ve written, but let me suggest that what’s most notably at issue in the Accompaniments’ he/she confrontation is a binary round of works and deeds whereby the dead accost a ground of uncatchable

“stations.” The point is that any insistence on locale must have long since given way to locus, that the rainbow bridge which makes for unrest ongoingly echoes what creaking the rickety bed of conception makes. I admit this is business we’ve been over before, but bear with it long enough to hear the cricketlike chirp one gets from the guitar in most reggae bands as the echoic spectre of a sexual “cut” (sex/unsexed, seeded/unsown, etc.)—“ineffable glints or vaguely audible grunts of unavoidable alarm.”¹⁹

Near suffocation, Jacobs had very little room to maneuver her body, very little air to breathe, and very little light through a crack in the wall. Having dwelt in the crawlspace for seven years, she can be said to have “defined” that small, compressed space by her absence, a position she occupied without advocating for its health or safety. Thus, I quoted Mackey because the passage is illustrative of the ongoing preoccupation with movement and compression, antiphony and texture, that animated Jacobs’s performance, which vivifies black sonic performance traditions from Spirituals to Gospel, from Blues to Jazz. Dr. Flint continually focused on Jacobs’s absence, her locale in the purported north, but he should have yielded to what N. called the “locus,” which is the idea of center, source, and flow. Her ability to recall life that transpired while she was in the crawlspace—her mode of escape—depended upon a forced looking away that heightened her awareness of the sound in and around her. The sound heard, generally conceived of as “noise”—of children and horses and wind blowing, for example—was differently intentioned, through imagination, in Jacobs’s text. Jacobs was compressed, indeed, but also accompanied, which is to say in existence with others, pointing us towards the ways in which compression and constraint do not ever remove possibilities for movement, flight, and escape. Listen.

Jacobs’s attunement to black performance—which is to say the transfer of resistance as the force for life, the transfer of resistance as energetic field, through the reiteration of motions, migrations, flights, fleeings, abscondings, escapes—through Jacobs’s own stilled flight, stilled escape in the nearly suffocating crawlspace concerns, quite literally, breath and movement, giving and withholding. Giving herself over to conditions of confinement, withholding as much sound as possible in order to remain undetectable, those movements were held together in her performance of/as escape. Jacobs’s life and escape anticipated and pre-performed Martin Heidegger’s later theory of being, time, and the given. Heidegger lectured on the way in which past, present and future all participate in that which gives time, how each depends on the others in terms of proximities and approaches.²⁰ Barely

experienced, that which is *present* retreats while the past and future share a buoyant, directional relationship with any present: “time appears as the succession of nows, each of which, barely named, already disappears into the ‘ago’ and is already being pursued by the ‘soon.’”²¹ Heidegger states, “Being is not. There is, It gives Being as the unconcealing; as the gift of unconcealing it is retained in the giving.”²² He continues, “Time is not. There is, It gives time. The giving that gives time is determined by denying and withholding nearness.”²³ Heidegger reminds readers that Being and Time are not actual but their givenness, their gifting, their extending outward and manifesting a sociality and relationality are real.

Again, Jacobs anticipated and pre-performed this. She unconcealed herself as a gift by enclosing herself in tight quarters; she discarded herself because of the discarded nature of the enslaved. That discardedness or, following Heidegger, “self-withdrawal” is a giving, it is a gift, that not only takes place in “time” but gives temporality. The text she writes moves quickly and what took place in the span of years shuttles quickly but was no less real. Temporal presencing depended upon the gift of unconcealment. To be attuned to the gift and the given is to consider an irreducible relationship of giving, blackness and the discarded. Daphne Brooks thinks through issues of approach and proximity—and, thus, giving and withholding—in her theorization of black cultural production and performance.²⁴ Brooks’s contention of “motion, migration, and flight” as an “operative trope in the black abolitionist cultural production of the slave’s narrative” elucidated how I think about how this essay opened, how I think about being discarded and discardable, how I think about being thrown and thrown away.²⁵

II

How is it possible for the terribly terrorizing to also be terribly beautiful? Why are occasions for marginalization also taken up as a resource for resilience? That is to ask why motion, migration and flight—even when forced—allow for those moving, those in migration, those in flight to imagine a future, to use the pathway as the occasion to think a different relation to the given world? There was something given in the man’s “piteous groans”—along with “heart rending shrieks,”²⁶ as screams—that Jacobs recounted that exceeded the scream’s limits, an uncontainable outside of the sound given in/as sound. What was given was a gift. But that gift is a withholding. Some excess materiality withheld, against the scream’s sonic materiality. Immediately given in the scream is the condition of what it meant to be enslaved, what it meant to be held against one’s will. But also given in that scream is a desire, a provocation against such an institution. The reverb that remained in

Jacobs's ear for "months" afterward—one could argue years, even, since she retold the story years later in the narrative—was a gift: of movement toward abolition. How is proximity—distance, nearness, or, following Heidegger, "approach"—as that which gives time, gives space, an organizing principle for black performance?

While the "piteous groans" as but one form of screaming quicken Jacobs's knowledge of the distasteful, doleful nature of enslavement, we must also consider what it means to occupy the space of a scream, what it means to position oneself within sonic materiality that bespeaks burden and pain but also allows for the protection against burden and pain.

When you yell/scream, you take a deep breath and basically hold it to get the sound out...so you are not breathing. This leads to decreased oxygenation to the fetus. Oxygenation to the fetus is always important, but becomes critically important during the labor process. The contractions associated with birth have the potential to lead to decrease oxygenation to the fetus, leading to a certain type of heart deceleration, leading to a possible urgent/emergent situation. So yelling in labor can be like a double whammy.

This quote is from an OB/GYN colleague of mine sent through personal communication, concerns the nature of screaming when giving birth. I first began to think about the relationship of sound to birth when my godson's mother gave birth at a natural birthing center in Philadelphia. The midwife instructed her, telling her that screaming would restrict airflow but moaning would allow her to breathe concurrently. Though the pain is acute, screaming blocks air and, as such, is literally *sound without the exhalation of air*, *sound without the exhalation breath*. So the screams of the man that rang in Jacobs's ear are a withholding of breath and the giving of sound. In this instance, the discarded and the discardable is the emission of sound, the scream itself. The discarded and discardable materiality of scream is art; art insofar as in its presencing, it quickens in the hearer a response, whether an averted hearing so as to not respond or as a desire to listen more deeply, more intently. The scream is an aesthetic object that carries the trace and weight of its source of emanation.

Black performance is the ongoing repetition of giving and withholding, of furnishing forth and withdrawal, of the continual (re)birth of avoidance that Nathaniel Mackey calls the "eva[sion of] each and every natal occasion."²⁷ Screams and moans function as sonic resources that speak to and

against each other: moans give breath, screams withhold air, which might suggest a recalibration to the rather insouciant and careless way that “call and response” is invoked as some sort of solitary hinge upon which black performance is articulable. Moans and screams concern the status of breath in incubation, during any moment and by any mode of flight and escape.

But the new, cool thing (re)birthed in Jacobs’s performance also includes play, creativity, taunt and trickery, demonstrated by her writing letters to Dr. Flint from her suffocating crawlspace. She utilized the compressed space to articulate and create herself, self-fashioning subjectivity by imagination and wit. Her letters written to Dr. Flint and others “from” locations she could only imagine in the crawlspace were a chorus, continually echoing the sentiment, “I am not here.” N. in *Bedouin Hornbook* theorizes the chorus as such:

You bring up the possibility of taunt, a distinct quality of tease you detect in the seductive, almost dovelike smoothness we so often get from the chorus. I’m very much inclined to agree, but I can’t help cautioning us both against, again, *overhearing* rather than hearing what’s there. [. . .] What I’m trying to say is that, while I’d agree that there’s an aspect of taunt to the chorus’ contribution, part of what it taunts is our inclination to hear it as taunt, that the chorus whispers so as not to be overheard²⁸

Jacobs understood that if sent to Louisiana, there would be unrestricted effacements to her personhood by Dr. Flint’s son who cared very little for her. She also understood that north of the Mason and Dixon Line was a freedom that she could only imagine. Jacobs was, thus, against Louisiana as an impossible future and imagined—which is to say, held—impossibility of the present moment. The impossible present was the writing of letters to Dr. Flint “from” New York, Boston and Canada. Those places—both south and north—were imagined as an oppressiveness that her stillness in the crawlspace sought to escape, and her writing was generated out of a knowledge of freedom which was held near and dear to her heart.

When Jacobs wrote about the letters scripted to Dr. Flint, a critique of the idea of textuality and narrativity was given, and curiously enough was discovered when Dr. Flint read the letters aloud to her grandmother, while inserting his own words as edits, rather than reading verbatim the words on the page. He engaged in on-the-spot revision, and by his revision of words, he troubled the status of literary text itself, the same disrupting that Jacobs’s writing produced. The multiple letters “from” varied locales liquidate the possibility of abolitionist activism as simply a matter of writing letters.

Though participating herself in the enterprise of literacy, because she infused narrative with sonic claims and memory, Jacobs impels a different sort of ecstatic response. Voices (over)heard in the crawl space beckoned Jacobs's imagination in the two spatial directions that were literally antithetical to the other. She was in a suspended space, stopped time. She obscured the status of the written word, using the confined, constrained mode of literacy as a ruse against the institution that confined and constrained her. She taunted and teased Dr. Flint with her letter writing, compelling him to overhear what wasn't there and to allow what was repetitiously whispered—her presence—go undetected.

Thinking through Jacobs's confinement and compression may help us ask what the sonic—screams and moans, here—shares relationally with birth and/of performance, with blackness. Again: what does it mean to occupy the sonic space of a scream? In the crawlspace:

Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard for in my small den day and night were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. How I longed to speak to them! I was eager to look on their faces; but there was no hole, no crack, through which I could peep.²⁹

The suffocating crawlspace was a scream, it is the withholding of life-force while the yielding a way to and for sound. The scream highlights the exteriority of sound and the interiority of the thing withheld. Jacobs was held within the crawlspace and, with little air, sound heard was issued forth all around her. She was in the sonic position of the scream; in the crawlspace she was held breath, loud noise. In the crawlspace she was sounding out by way of restricted air. What was withheld in stifling silence was her life force, her breath, her animus. That which animated the body was withheld while giving. There is a theological dimension here, a mode of sacred sociality within her withholding. The withholding anticipated Heidegger's theorizing on giving and withholding. The withheld is the excess, given in its refusal to give. The scream bears the trace of a gift, unconcealed by concealment. Jacques Derrida elucidates a relationship of gift to economy useful for thinking about the scream:

If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the

circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible. Not impossible but *the* impossible. The very figure of the impossible. It announces itself, gives itself to be thought as the impossible.³⁰

In the literal economics of enslavement, the gift that is withheld—breath—remains aneconomic to enslavement. The breath is essentially foreign, irreducibly disagreeable to enslavement. That to say—hopefully simply and precisely—that enslavement and the whip could not lash out personhood. Rather, the scream emits—sonically, phonically—to presence the anti-breath, that which remains literally outside this system. The bodying forth of the scream is the refusal of the material gift—air, breath, the capacity of lungs to hold—as essential foreignness, as keeping, holding, arresting, presencing, possessing an irreducibly disagreeableness. The scream also refuses to birth anything, the scream aborts what the whip tries to inculcate.

With the scream, what is heard always exceeds what is audible. With the scream, sound emits by way of the withdrawing and withholding of breath. The screams Jacobs recounts give the gift of withholding relation and relationality, a relationality of antirelativity. This is to say that the whip is irreducibly in foreign relation—sonically—to the one abused. This presencing of the scream implicates a mode of sociality. What does it mean to be this gift, this essentially aneconomic substance that keeps and holds that economy to which it is always foreign; that which is impossible that founds the condition of possibility of an economy of circulation? Sound as discardable. Breath as withheld. Proximity and performance. But breath withheld is no less real, it gives and sustains life against the scream that sounds death. The seen and unseen, the scene and unscene, the heard and unheard: these concern space, place, movement and performance. Blackness sings, hums, holds breath, gives scream. The crawl-space Jacobs occupied for seven years makes this audible. Harriet's "performance" forces us to think the relationship between voice and environment. In this effort, we can solicit the help of more recent reflections on this problematic.

III

Alvin Lucier sits in a room in order to hear himself and the room more pronouncedly, using performance art to question how spaces and voices are mutually constitutive. Responding to Lucier's 1970 performance piece *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1970), Timothy Morton writes that Lucier's work is "a powerful demonstration of the shifting and intertwined qualities of

foreground and background.”³¹ Subjectivity was inculcated at the scene and there is a necessary sonic quality to this production. Lucier’s “I”—the one who sits in the room—is constructed by the mutually constitutive relationship of his seated body and the room. Lucier sat in a room recording the process of recording. As such, it was a recording of recording of recording. According to Morton, the “multiple” recordings of Lucier’s voice in a room on a tape recorder makes audible the “resonance of the room and feeds it back, amplif[ies] and articulat[es] it through the sound of the speaking voice.”³² Multiple recordings on the same tape allow for “the loss of words and for the inscribing of the sound of the room ‘itself,’” demonstrating the way in which we come to realize that the voice and the room are mutually determining. One does not precede the other. The work is situated on a wavering margin between words and music, between music and sheer sound, and ultimately between sound (foreground) and noise (background). Retroactively, we realize that the room was present in the voice at the very beginning of the process. The voice was always already in its environment.³³

What is evinced is that the scene that subjects does not ever escape sonic dimensionality. Noise, particularly outside the crawlspace or above the floorboard that Jacobs hears, cannot be discarded but must be gathered and held. Noise must be likewise conceived as materiality of and for thought, if not the very materiality from which any thought could be said to possibly emerge. Attention to the noise of the background bespeaks the insistence of breath, of life force. There is an unheard, an unseen on which we must likewise concentrate during any hearing, during any scene that exceeds a scene’s subjection.

Environment, noise and blackness converge in performance for Adrian Piper. Piper’s *Art for the Artworld Surface Pattern* constructs a tightly closed room full of sensory information on walls.³⁴ The piece is a rather small room that could fit three to four persons in it. Walls flat with only one small entrance, the room has no furniture and the walls and ceiling are covered with newspaper clippings of various political struggles and world disasters and “at arbitrary places across the photographs the words NOT A PERFORMANCE are stenciled in red.” In Piper’s words, the piece “surrounds you with the political problems you ignore and the rationalizations by which you attempt to avoid them.”³⁵ There is also the insertion of speech with a tape loop, which is the repudiation of the material on the wall as art, it is a stereotyped reply to the aesthetics “that ignored completely [the] topical thrust” of the work.³⁶ The point of both the visual and sonic overload was to create a situation in which, “in order to distance oneself from the work, one would be forced to adopt some critical stance that did not itself express the aestheticizing response.”³⁷

An audience enters this art space only to be confronted with that–which–is–not–art that is the condition of possibility for that–which–is–art. This confrontation takes place on the level of the scene constituted by the seen and the sonic. What Piper does—by including the words “NOT A PERFORMANCE” and the audio loop—is gather and insert that which is typically thrown away. The condition for art is noise, and this condition is necessarily discardable in order to assent to an aesthetic creation. To be attentive to the “surface pattern” is to give attention to that which easily recedes, that which readily is discarded. Attending to the “surface pattern” equally requires attention to that which exists right below the surface, that which is barely there, that which shows up by way of a resistance to showing up. Being in a claustrophobic condition makes this seen and heard. The noisy walls and speech are the material that prompt thought itself, thought that instantiates a “looking away” and a “hearing away” from what is seen and heard in this scene. To think an otherwise aesthetic—an aesthetic grounded in the refusal to look away, to hear away; that is, an aesthetic grounded in a refusal of aversion—occurs at the moment of confrontation with that materiality that is already thought. The ability to withhold (one’s thoughts) that Piper facilitated by means of the tape loop declares the possibility for one to be critical, for one to think. Her rhetoric of “distance” and “critical stance” informs my thoughts on black performance as critically distancing. The distance between Jacobs in the crawlspace and the voices she hears bodies forth the criticality of withholding. Withholding is a critical act and screams and moans make this audible. Noisy sounds just outside the cramped quarters of claustrophobic escape are purposive for thought, imagination, recall and play.

We should also consider the relationship of sound to kinship that was anything but negated. Previous to his mother’s escape to the north, Jacobs’s son “Benny” importantly recounts how noise and mothering inform the other. He heard noise issuing from the crawlspace:

I was standing under the eaves, one day, before
Ellen [Linda Brent’s daughter] went away, and I
heard somebody cough up over the wood shed.
I don’t know what made me think it was you,
but I did think so. I missed Ellen, the night be-
fore she went away; and grandmother brought
her back into the room in the night; and I
thought maybe she’d been to see you, before she
went, for I heard grandmother whisper to her.
‘Now go to sleep; and remember never to tell.’

I asked him if he ever mentioned his suspicions to his sister. He said he never did; but after he heard the cough, if he saw her playing with other children on that side of the house, he always tried to coax her round to the other side, for fear they would hear me cough, too. He said he had kept a close lookout for Dr. Flint, and if he saw him speak to a constable, or a patrol, he always told grandmother. I now recollected that I had seen him manifest uneasiness, when people were on that side of the house, and I had at the time been puzzled to conjecture a motive for his actions.³⁸

What does it mean for him to hear noise, to hear coughing, and have a knowledge of mothering that was thought to not exist for black women in the Antebellum period? What does it mean for him to hear noise and recognize life therein? Noise had a hearing that was generative for understanding life, both on the inside of the crawlspace where seeing was nearly impossible and on the outside where only sound could tether those lines of kinship. Noise on both sides of the crawlspace connects, yields—which is to say, is submitted—to the power of protection and desire for and the giving of love.

IV

The crawlspace is a place not of abandon from her children, family and friends, but a place of lingering, a place of abiding, a caesura, an extended beat. This section will consider the sonic, tonal dimensionality of such abiding presence, augmenting the insouciant discourse in which blackness and rhythm has been presented as if naturally going together, as if African “diaspora” only sounds out through the “talking drum.” Whereas Fred Moten thinks about black radicalism “in the break,”³⁹ I want to think about dwelling in the crawlspace as a means to extend the break, as a means to suspend brokenness as a moment and mode of black performance.

Jacobs extends the measure, and finds a “buoyant device” of an uncomfortable, inconvenient, unprofitable and non-gratifying rationality for our consideration.⁴⁰ Her abiding in the crawlspace is all about love—of herself, of her grandmother, of her children. Her time in that breaking broken space, in that breaking brokenness that could not break *her*; the time therein was, thus an example of “abiding love” in which “the past is nullified by reconceiving any break not as a conclusion but as the inauguration of a possibility.”⁴¹ What does it mean to attend to the sonic dimensions of abiding, which would attend to the the love from a mother that was deemed impossible, or to think that possibility is immanent, is always waiting in potential?

Jacobs's occupying of dark spaces moves us toward a discussion of tone and voice. As a former Pentecostal organist, choir director, singer and songwriter, I would say that if Jacobs were to join a choir that I directed, I would place her in the alto section because of the position this voice occupies in three-part harmonic Pentecostal black gospel choirs.⁴² Within this admittedly small configuration of sounds, the alto section plays a defining role in the harmonics by determining the major or minor tonality of the song. Jacobs's text is about flight and escape and continually stages these movements by lingering in what Jennifer Brody might call the suspended space of the ellipsis . . .⁴³ For the major scale, troubled treble clef part of her escape, Jacobs spends time suspended, in between—grandmother's crawlspace and under Betty's floorboard but above the ground. She is the alto "note,"⁴⁴ using this necessarily in-between position to move towards escape. This is the story of how refuge and escape sound, how the crawlspace is the alto voicing, a forced middling position that both confines and struggles against that confinement by way of imagination and tricky movement. This is about the crawl space and black performance, giving and withholding, breathing and withdrawal.

The way I think "altoness" emerges from the black Pentecostal experience and within this religiocultural movement, harmonic contribution converges with being off and in between; the best changes converge with challenges to the ear; prettiness—or, the beautiful—converges with weird turns; ambiguity converges with difficult classification.⁴⁵ In these churches, for example, when popular black gospel music is performed, those who have a voice in the bass range are generally encouraged either to sing an octave below the sopranos or to strive to sing tenor and many songs chosen to sing intentionally do not accommodate that lowest register whatsoever. It is within this specific sonic world of Pentecostals that I began to ask: what does it mean for a sound—altoness—to situate itself in the middle, regardless of the harmonic chord? To be the middle is to be the alto; the alto is both a giving and withholding, an excess and a lack concurrently. The alto "note" creates suspended space both above and below it, functions like a magnetic field that attracts and repels, acts like a circle that buoys in two directions.

Jacobs's insistence on existing within in-between spaces as a mode of escape lets us think about tonality and its relation to personhood, utilizing the alto "note" as an example. This alto "note," when voiced, brings together sound, subjectivity and sexuality. The alto voice is defined as both "the lowest female" part and "the highest male" part conterminously. In the history of three-part music, the alto occupies an interstitial space, it is literally situated between that which holds and that which is against being held. "[I]n the present context [*alto*] is an Italian abbreviation derived from the Latin

phrase *contratenor altus*, used in medieval polyphony, usually to describe the highest of three parts, the line of which was in counterpoint . . . with the tenor (which “held” the main melody; this word itself originates in the Latin verb *tenere*, meaning “to hold”).”⁴⁶ And though it refers today to voices, it initially named a range, a space, a sonic dwelling. From the Latin meaning the “second highest,” it appears that *alto* is between—literally—the voice that holds (tenor) and that which is the sonic antithesis of being held (soprano). The space the alto occupies is a forced middling position and—in the way I conceive it—is a *with*-holding. That is, the alto is against being held and holds concurrently. So what does the alto range hold? And what does the alto range refuse to hold? There are two resonances of being held: that of the erotic, libidinous and that of the violent, incarcerational.

The sonic situation of the alto is a middle space, a suspension that literally occurs through sound. A middle space, a middle passage, even. The alto range exceeds itself both towards and away from the tenor and the soprano, and in that striving between those two spaces is agitational. But the alto range—like the other two—is also relational. We can think of the sonic position of alto through its constraint by the heights of the sopranos and the depths of the tenors; though the alto can approach either of those two “notes” at any given moment in a song, there are few moments when the alto sings higher than the soprano or lower than the tenor. This space of constraint also creates the condition for creativity to emanate, this space of constraint is the place out of which harmony is voiced.

But what of the libidinous alto, the alto in its zone of amorphous, ambiguous gendering and sexuality, the alto that is both—which is to say, neither—the highest female and lowest male part that is sung, that is sounded out? As an incarcerational space, the alto range allows for all sorts of possibilities by way of the deformational force contained within it. A voicing that is off and in-between, beautiful and weird, constitutive and problematic is the nature of queer diaspora, another zone of possibility eked out through the limitations placed on what is conceived as normal. The alto stands as both anti- and ante- gender, it is also anti- and ante-normality, it is a sonic thought that sounds before the bodies through which it is sounded. So the alto is queer because it is a concept that is thought outside of and aside from the bodies whose voices inside will enunciate. It is a fugitive voice before it sings, it is within the incarcerational space of thought. Jacobs, of course, theorizes this queered space by way of her escape performance through the street:

I had not the slightest idea where I was going.
Betty brought me a suit of sailor’s clothes—
jacket, trowsers, and tarpaulin hat. She gave me

a small bundle, saying I might need it where I was going. In cheery tones, she exclaimed, 'Tse so glad you is gwine to free parts! Don't forget ole Betty. P'raps I'll come 'long by and by.'⁴⁷

We were rowed ashore, and went boldly through the streets, to my grandmother's. I wore my sailor's clothes, and had blackened my face with charcoal. I passed several people whom I knew. The father of my children came so near that I brushed against his arm; but he had no idea who it was.⁴⁸

The incarcerational space out of which the alto “notes” emerge includes the various dark spaces that Harriet Jacobs performed acts of flight and escape—what Daphne Brooks theorizes as places full of opaque possibility. The Pentecostal three-part harmonic's alto range, because of its seeming ontic position, submits and is submitted to regulation. But through the possibility of what Pentecostalism colloquially calls the alto range's “weirdness,” its sounding “off” that it could be said it initiates and instantiates, a possibility of disruption is always already *before* the composition of any harmonic itself. This sonic space is bound up with a knowledge of freedom that the submission to this zone could be said to allow its materialization but not create. One always is surprised, then, by the refusal to submission that is voiced in the very constraints of submission itself. And it sounds beautiful, weird, off, in-between, murky and challenging. Is this not Jacobs in her terribly enriching and beautiful performance? She submits to a regulatory mode of existence and it is this very submission that makes possible the enunciation of her personhood. Or, more precisely, her submission highlights the fact that she “cannot give the consent that, nevertheless, she can withhold.”⁴⁹

Consider what it means to “occupy”—which is to say, to take up and to throw down—the sonic position that approaches and refuses; the alto approaches and refuses, refuses as a means of approach, approaches as a means of refusal. A challenge both internally—across the section—and externally with how that section relates to the others. This voicing is expansive both breadth and depth while also it moves across time and through space. So the alto voice, I think, is fugitivity that opens up and breaks down. This alto is the zone of black social life that is thought as nothing other than social death. The alto is “an irreducibly disordering, deformational force” that is “at the same time being (that is) absolutely indispensable to normative order, normative form.”⁵⁰ We call this normal order and form music . . . but I want to think of it as a mode of flight and escape.

There is a deformational quality to the alto position that exists prior to the enunciation of any note. The alto is an insistent challenge that is—in a Nathaniel Mackeyan formulation—“previous to situation” of song, of composing itself. To compose means to gather together, to organize into, to create form out of that which precedes it. Thus, before any note is ever sung, before any tone had been thought by the writer of any such song, the alto—by virtue of this sonic subjectivity—will have already been that voice that will occupy that middling position. As previous to situation, the materiality of song stands before (and against) its organization as and into music as such. The alto voicing, then, through musical composition practices could be thought otherwise than sound, which brings me to Jacobs’s occupation in dense, dark, desolate spaces.

Jacobs as and in alto—a sonic spacing—gives us room, however small, to think about the emptiness and fullness that Henry Dumas describes as a saxophone in his short story “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?": [H]is soprano sax resting against his inner knee, his afro–horn linking his ankles like a bridge. The afro–horn was the newest axe to cut the deadwood of the world.”⁵¹ Can something that cuts also be a bridge? Lacan’s understanding of language cutting to create subjects approaches this severed/linked binary. Moten discusses “the perception of the absence of a regular pulse in African music” perceived as “that same pulse’s often overwhelming presence.”⁵² What can it mean for absence and presence to linger in the same moment—whether image, sound or text? Not just a presence, but one that overwhelms, a presence that encloses and opens up—like a circle—as the condition of possibility for social life. The presence that encloses as it opens, gives as it withholds, restricts breath as it gives life: this is the position of Jacobs. The possibility for a social life is found even there under the floorboard, in the swamp, in the crawlspace, in any moment and mode of performance of giving and withdrawal.

The alto range mediates, it is a voice of transfer, as a translator. So the alto voice, in the ways I’m thinking of it, concern language, utterance and meaning, and sound. Consider the space between *de rien* (literally “of nothing”) and *you’re welcome*, the structure that is between these two ideas that prompt thought, that which, even when translated, is always mistranslated. In the act of translation itself—an act of movement from, to—there is the agitational force of flight and escape at work. From *de rien* to *you’re welcome*, some excess goes unattended, it is left dangling.

The alto voice *means* in the same manner that the soprano and tenor *mean* in song. But as a transactional voice, as that mediation, as that middling position, as that *held* and *against being held* voice, the alto breaks down

Current Musicology

that which it opens up. Unity and breakdown at the sound of the voice that structures black social life, which is to say, black diaspora. Unity and unison are important, here. The unison voice of black Pentecostal choirs is typically in the alto range, a voicing that is low enough for tenors but high enough sopranos, reached from two different directions. When the voices split apart, when they go to their respective sonic communities, the alto range will typically continue to occupy that same sonic space, not jumping up or down. The alto range, the alto zone, pushes away from itself, moves others as it moves itself. This pushing away from self is what Harriet Jacobs performed in those tight spaces of incarceration. She withdrew breath, performed scream; she submitted to constrained, performed flight. Heeding the sonic consequences of such performances augment the statement: “Always these sounds render the indescribable, implying ‘Words can’t begin to tell you but maybe moaning will.’”⁵³ And maybe screaming will. We learn of giving and withholding, of life and escape by way of sound. Listen to Harriet Jacobs sing.

Notes

1. This essay concerns the piece written by Harriet Jacobs about her experiences of enslavement published, initially, in 1861. In the text, Jacobs uses the name “Linda Brent” in order to ensure the safety of herself, her family and friends; she wanted to ensure that the incidents she recounted would not lead to harm of the ones she loved, given the fact that she was writing in the Antebellum period. Most notable in the text is Jacobs’s seven–years stay in the “loophole of retreat,” the crawlspace of her grandmother’s abode. See Harriet A. (Harriet Ann) Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl : Written by Herself* (Boston : Bedford/St. Martins, c2010).

2. Diana Taylor states that performance is a “vital act of transfer” and here I want to consider the vitality, the force of life, is given and transmitted through the performance of retreat, through Harriet Jacobs’s movement into the crawlspace for seven years. As “black performance,” this essay is in conversation with Fred Moten’s contention that “the history of blackness is a testament to the fact that objects can and do resist” where the object, here, is Jacobs and her resistant movement, her against– the– grain stilling as another movement that privileges silence and quietude. See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire : Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2003); Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition*, 1st edn (Minnesota: Univ. Of Minnesota Press, 2003).

3. Jacobs.

4. Jacobs.

5. Jacobs.

6. “Dr. Flint” is the pseudonym Jacobs uses for the man who owned her, Dr. James Norcom.

7. Jacobs.

8. This is argued forcefully in Shane White and Graham White’s historicizing of the sounds of the Antebellum south. See Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History Through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Beacon Press, 2006).

9. Taylor.

10. Jacobs.

11. Jacobs.

12. Jacobs.

13. Moten, *In The Break*.

14. Anachronistic though such a distinction as “black feminist” may be, I use Hazel Carby’s discussion of Jacobs as support: “Jacobs used the material circumstances of

Current Musicology

her life to critique conventional standards of female behavior and to question their relevance and applicability to the experience of blackwomen” (47). See Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood : the Emergence of the Afro– American Woman Novelist* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1987).

15. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self– Making in Nineteenth– Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

16. Hartman.

17. Hartman.

18. Jacobs.

19. Nathaniel Mackey, *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate: Bedouin Hornbook, Djbot Baghostus’s Run, Atet A.D.*, 1st edn (New Directions, 2010).

20. Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*. (New York, Harper & Row [1972]).

21. Heidegger.

22. Heidegger.

23. Heidegger.

24. Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850– 1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.).

25. Brooks.

26. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Bedford Books in American History. Boston : Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1993.

27. Nathaniel Mackey, *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate: Bedouin Hornbook, Djbot Baghostus’s Run, Atet A.D.*, 1st edn (New Directions, 2010).

28. Mackey.

29. Jacobs.

30. Jacques Derrida as quoted in Alan D. Schrift, *The Logic of the Gift : Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

31. Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature : Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

32. Morton.

33. Morton.

34. Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996.).

35. *Ibid.*.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. Jacobs, i.

39. Moten, *In the Break*.

40. Adrian Piper, *Rationality and the Structure of the Self, Volume 1: The Humean Conception*. (Berlin: Adrian Piper Research Archive, 2008). In this volume, she states: “Buffeted and bruised by the currents of desire and longing for once to ride the wave, we may cast about for some buoyant device from which to chart a rational course; and finding none, ask ourselves the following questions: Do we at least have the capacity ever to do anything beyond what is comfortable, convenient, profitable, or gratifying? Can our conscious explanations for what we do ever be anything more than opportunistic *ex post facto* rationalization for satisfying these familiar egocentric desires?

If so, are we capable of distinguishing in ourselves those moments when we are in fact heeding the requirements of rationality, from those when we are merely rationalizing the temptations of opportunity? I am cautiously optimistic about the existence of a buoyant device—namely reason itself—that offers encouraging answers to all three questions.” It appears that Jacobs, at the very least, found the space—which is to say the capacity—of this buoyant device of reason.

41. Andrew Zawacki, “‘The Break Is Not a Break’: Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Poesis as Abiding Love,” *The Antioch Review*, 62 (2004), 156–170.

42. I make no claims about the “Black Church” as a monolith; this particular theorizing emerges from my personal encounters and interactions within the Pentecostal sects of which I have been a part for a long period of my life. I grew up in the Church of God in Christ, the largest Black Pentecostal body in the world and have choral director within Pentecostal circles for many years. Within that tradition, three– part harmony [soprano, alto and tenor] was privileged above four– part harmony. Of course, there would be occasions when even we would sing four– part harmonic selections but those occasions were far and few in between.

43. Jennifer DeVere Brody, “The Blackness of Blackness . . . Reading the Typography of ‘Invisible Man’,” *Theatre Journal* 57 (2005): 679–698.

44. In non– musical settings, in Pentecostal churches—at least the many with which I have been involved—we designate alto, not by range but by “note.” The ideas I have about “altoness” emerge from colloquial usage of these musicological designations. I’m sure not a few musicologists will be slightly annoyed by the imprecision of such language but be assured that the imprecision is represented as precisely as it would be invoked in the peculiar corners of black Pentecostalism.

Current Musicology

45. I posed a question as a status on Facebook asking what section people preferred in black gospel choirs and the most recurrent answer was the alto section. Many that are familiar with black gospel music in general and black gospel choirs particularly state that the alto section is typically the most interesting sonically. People noted that the parts given to the alto section are challenging and atonal; the voicing can strive towards the heights of the sopranos or the depths of the tenors but never exceed in either direction:

“Altos have the best harmonic contributions”

“Alto, while I love it, always has some off/inbetween notes”

“Altos because they have the best changes ever. It challenges the ear.”

“Altos always have the prettiest parts to me. That middle note takes some weird turns to hold the harmony together.”

“Altos are the ambiguous middle...they often occupy a murky space...not easy to classify”

46. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alto>

47. Jacobs.

48. Jacobs.

49. Fred Moten, ‘Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis,’ *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17 (2007), 217.

50. Fred Moten, ‘The Case of Blackness,’ *Criticism* 50 (2008), 177–218.

51. Henry Dumas and Eugene Redmond, *Echo Tree: the Collected Short Fiction of Henry Dumas* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press : Distributor, Consortium Book Sales & Distribution, 2003).

52. Fred Moten, “The New International Rhythmic of Feelings,” in *Sonic Interventions* (Amsterdam ; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2007).

53. Anthony Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times – 25th Anniversary Edition, Anniversary* (Limelight Editions, 1997).

References

Brody, Jennifer DeVere. 2005. The Blackness of Blackness. . . Reading the Typography of ‘Invisible Man.’ *Theatre Journal* 57: 679–698.

Brooks, Daphne. 2006. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850– 1910*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Carby, Hazel V. 1987. *Reconstructing Womanhood: the Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Douglass, Frederick. 1993. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press.

- Dumas, Henry, and Eugene Redmond. 2003. *Echo Tree: the Collected Short Fiction of Henry Dumas*. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press: Distributor, Consortium Book Sales & Distribution.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1972. *On Time and Being*. New York, Harper & Row.
- Heilbut, Anthony. 1997. *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times – 25th Anniversary Edition*. Limelight Editions.
- Jacobs, Harriet A. (Harriet Ann). 2010. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl : Written by Herself*. Boston : Bedford/St. Martins.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. 2010. *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*: New York: New Directions.
- Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Moten, Fred. 2003. *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition*. Univ Of Minnesota Press.
- _____. Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis. 2007. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17: 217-246.
- _____. 2008. The Case of Blackness. *Criticism* 50: 177-218.
- _____. 2007. The New International Rhythmic of Feelings. . *Sonic Interventions*. Amsterdam ; New York, NY: Rodopi. .
- Piper, Adrian. 1996. *Out of Order, Out of Sight*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- _____. 2008. *Rationality and the Structure of the Self, Volume 1: The Humean Conception*. Berlin: Adrian Piper Research Archive. .
- Schrift, Alan D. 1997. *The Logic of the Gift : Toward an Ethic of Generosity*. New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire : Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham : Duke University Press.
- White, Shane, and Graham White. 2006. *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History Through Songs, Sermons, and Speech*. Beacon Press.
- Zawacki, Andrew. 2004. 'The Break Is Not a Break': Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Poesis as Abiding Love. *The Antioch Review* 62: 156–170.