The Sonic Undercommons: Sound Art in Radical Black Arts Traditions

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Abstract

This article responds to Sara Ahmed's powerful assertion that 'to account for racism is to offer a different account of the world' (Ahmed 2012). Its premise is that artists of color have been largely neglected within existing accounts of sound art, and that sound art discourses would change substantially if they accounted for the work of such artists as Terry Adkins, Charles Gaines, Jennie C. Jones, George Lewis, Mendi&Keith Obadike, Clifford Owens, Benjamin Patterson, and Adrian Piper, among many others. Focusing in particular on the sound works of African American artists, this article investigates what Lock and Murray (2009) have described as a racially-biased 'selective hearing' in relation to emerging canons of sound art. It puts under pressure sound art histories–purported traditions, genres, aesthetic lineages, genealogies—and, equally, confronts the philosophical and intellectual paucity that has resulted from the lack of critical and scholarly attention to the work of black artists. What is missing from 'whiteness-imbued histories' (Lewis 2012) of sound art? How does selective hearing limit what we know and understand about sound art, and how we come to know it?

Listening (Historical)

Terry Adkins did not merely sing. He invoked: called up, conjured, summoned forth, brought into being. To invoke necessarily means to stand between one world and another. Adkins did not merely travel to this in-between place. He lived there. He breathed the air there, filled his lungs with it, and exhaled into ours.

From the late 1990s until his untimely passing in 2014, at age 60, Adkins created a vast body of work he called *recitals*. *Recitals* were sculptural installations that Adkins would activate through performance, either alone or in collaboration with others, most often with his ensemble Lone Wolf Recital Corps. Through *recitals* Adkins recovered and resuscitated various historical figures, 'from musical figures like Lightnin' Hopkins, Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jefferson to political figures such as [W.E.B.] Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, Blanche Bruce and John Brown' (Gaines 2004: 183). Adkins remarked, '*Recitals* are involved with immersive research. I become the person, somehow. Find out everything that I can and then spit it out in an abstract, live recital form' (Reid 2015). Thus, for the *John Brown Recital*, which paid tribute to the radical abolitionist who Adkins once described as 'a spark that started the Civil War', Adkins created sculptures from such materials as fleece, steel, wood and nylon, thereby conjuring John Brown's life as a farmer, and, as art historian Cheryl Finley writes in her poignant essay, 'adding structure, solitude, and symbolic resonance to John Brown's role as a shepherd' (Finley 2004: 52).

Adkins's sculptures were laden with meaning and animus, what he called 'potential disclosure' (Adkins 2004). By activating sculptures through performance Adkins brought even further into being the various universes to which they belonged. As an artist Adkins stood not 'in' time, and not ahead of it, but all around it.

Many of Adkins's sculptures took the form of acoustic or auditory devices, and some—perhaps most famously his four Akrhaphones from the series *The Last Trumpet* (1995-2014), trumpets that had horns so long that they seemed to cross from the past into the present—took the form of musical instruments or sound sculptures. *Behearer*, from Adkins's *Black Beethoven* (2004-2007), a series that explored the idea that Beethoven was a Moor, resembled a pair of eighteenth-century ear trumpets recast as North African ceremonial jewellery. In *Muffled Drums* (from *Darkwater*, 2003), Adkins balanced the instruments of a drum corps vertically on top of one another such that they reached seemingly impossible heights. For Adkins these instruments represented, in part, the muffled tones of black lives taken too early: cut short by gun violence and police brutality, stifled by mass incarceration, the schools-to-prison pipeline, endemic poverty, and other social injustices that continue to resonate through black communities still reeling from the vestiges of enslavement.

To contend with sculptures like these, critical discourse on sound sculpture would need to expand from such concerns as interface and interaction, the relationship between everyday objects and instruments, and the search for new sonorities, for example, to the metaphysical, historical, political, and cultural dimensions of objects. Listening and sound making would need to be reimagined as acts of historical recovery and reconfiguration. The futuristic dreams so often evoked in relation to such celebrated instruments as the *intonarumori* of the Italian Futurists, the *structures sonores* of the Baschet Brothers, or the fantastical kinetic sculptures of Trimpin, would need to turn backwards and inwards, towards a reckoning of historical and musical legacies and the enduring repercussions of empire, slavery, segregation and racial injustice.

Seeing

I first learned about Terry Adkins from a 2001 article by sound artist and composer Keith Obadike, 'What's in a Name? Seeing Sound Art in Black Visual Traditions.' In this article Obadike reflected on the exclusion of black artists from then-emerging canons of sound art. He wrote:

> Many popular histories of sound art trace it back to early Italian Futurist performances by Filippo Marinetti and Luigi Russolo or the American John Cage. This European-centered narrative of sound art is no help in explaining my practice or that of many American sound artists. I place my work in the tradition of artists such as Sun Ra, Adrian Piper, Uche Okeke, Romare Bearden, T. J. Anderson, Acha Debela, and Olly Wilson.
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> While the influence of musicians on sound art might seem obvious, one may question the role of painters and sculptors. There is always sonic information to be gleaned from the performance and object-based work of artists such as Faith Ringgold, Obiora Udechukwu, David Hammons, James VanDerZee, Raymond Saunders, Norman Lewis, and Terry Adkins. Many of these artists are musicians as well (Obadike 2001).

In these brief paragraphs Obadike outlines a genealogy of sound art that stands in stark distinction from the one that most commonly circulates—one that, as Obadike suggests, traces a largely uninterrupted lineage of European and European American artists from Italian Futurists through figures like Edgard Varèse, John Cage, Max Neuhaus and R. Murray Schafer, their various collaborators and students, and subsequent generations of artists who have largely accepted this history and availed

themselves of this inheritance.

While at the time of Obadike's writing scholarly and critical texts on sound art were still relatively few, today there are innumerable articles, books, edited volumes, exhibitions, conferences, and courses on the subject. And yet the contributions of African American artists remains persistently absent from these narratives and these spaces. I would hesitate to characterise Obadike's genealogy as a counter-canon of sound art, however. Rather, to my mind it describes a more accurate canon, one that we must take seriously if we are to take seriously the idea that sound art should be considered an object of study at all. Or, taking a different approach, we must recognize the division that Obadike describes, examine its causes and effects, and 'register those exclusions (not just of race, but also of gender, politics, and belief) that made the consensus view possible' (Piekut 2011: 18).

In a 2014 interview with Terry Adkins, the composer, improviser, musicologist and sound artist George E. Lewis suggests that African American artists who are 'multi-voiced'—who work across disciplines, traditions and genres, like many of the artists identified by Obadike—are at particular risk of erasure due to preconceptions about where black artists do and do not belong. Drawing on the work of curator and art historian Lowery Stokes Sims, who once served as executive director and president of The Studio Museum in Harlem (home to the sound art series StudioSound), and the writings of literary critic Fred Moten, whose book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003) remains a cornerstone of critical improvisation studies, Lewis says:

> [This discussion of the 'multi-voiced' artist] reminds me of what Lowery Sims says about African American artists working in abstract styles; in her view,

> those artists had to struggle for recognition from certain camps of black self-image-making—and not only black self-image-making—abstraction being perceived as outside the integral black identity. Or we could reference someone like Fred Moten, who brings up the putative notion that blackness and the avant-garde have been represented as having an oxymoronic relationship. (Lewis 2014).

What does it say about a discipline when a group of artists as innovative as those identified by Obadike are persistently viewed as belonging outside the very traditions that they themselves helped to establish, if not, in some cases, pioneered? Why do conversations about sound art persistently exclude the contributions of black artists? Valerie Cassel Oliver, who has arguably brought more attention to the work of black sound artists than any other curator working today, asks a similar question in relation to the Fluxus artist Benjamin Patterson: 'If a black progenitor of the avant-garde was rendered all but invisible what of the artists that followed'? (Cassel Oliver 2013: 9).

Moten and Lewis's assertion that abstraction and the avant-garde are seen as separate from blackness—a thesis that Lewis develops (among others) to extraordinary depth in *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (2007)—provides at least one important clue. Modernism, both in music and in the visual arts, has consistently been historicized as a European and European American invention, even as there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the modernist project was transnational, transcontinental, multiethnic, and that certain variants of European modernism were inspired by, if not wholly rooted in, non-Western—and indeed, specifically African—expressions (De Zayas 1913, Sweeney 1935, Baker 1987,

Lemke 1998, Calo 2007, Grossman 2009, Johnston 2011, Burmeister et al 2016).[1]

Sound art, typically cast as a modernist or avant-garde practice, and a tradition that has itself evolved along essentially interdisciplinary lines, straddling music, visual art, architecture, performance art and other domains, has therefore presented a double barrier to entry for African American artists who are 'multi-voiced' and whose work engages an avant-garde or experimental aesthetics.

Origins

In examining the origins of a history of erasure whereby African American artists have been excluded from canons of modernism—a tradition that directly informs the historicization of sound art—we might turn to the writings of Marius de Zayas and James Johnson Sweeney. Both were influential purveyors of modernist art, and both also curated landmark exhibitions of African art in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. De Zayas, a wealthy Mexican artist, curator and critic, was a close associate of Alfred Stieglitz, whose gallery '291' was a key venue for modernist exhibitions in Manhattan during the period 1905-1917. In 1910 de

[1] In 2016 the Museum Reitberg in Zürich and the Berlinische Galerie co-produced *Dada Afrika! Dialogue with the Other*, a major exhibition of over seventy works that focused on European Dada artists' fascination with African art and culture (see Burmeister et al 2016). *Dada Afrika!* marked the centenary of the first Dada exhibition, *Dada. Cubistes. Art Nègre*, which was held at a Zurich gallery in 1917. The press release for *Dada Afrika!* drew attention to the *Soirées nègre*s, which featured absurdist *Chants nègres* 'performed "in black garb with large and small exotic drums". Hugo Ball chanted his sound poem *Karawane* in the guise of a "magic bishop", until he seemingly fell into a trance and had to be carried from the stage. Richard Huelsenbeck sought to drum European music and literature "into the ground" with pseudo-African "umba, umba" chants… Both the pseudo-African drum rhythms of the war years in Zurich and Parisian jazz of the interwar period came across as wild, untamed noise, played seemingly at random. The Dadaists experimented with their "*Bruitism à l'Africain*."' (Reitberg 2016).

Zayas traveled to Paris to find new works to exhibit at the 291. During his year in Paris he regularly observed that European modernists, including most notably Picasso (whose works were first exhibited in the U.S. at the 291), were heavily influenced by African sculpture (dia Holloway 2005). In 1914, at de Zayas's urging, Steiglitz mounted what he would later describe as the gallery's most important exhibit: *Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art*. This exhibit was 'the first documented instance of the display of African sculpture exclusively for its aesthetic qualities rather than as objects of ethnographic interest' (ibid.: 398). De Zayas was not shy about asserting the incontrovertible influence of African art within European modernist art. He wrote, 'In its plastic researches modern art discovered Negro Art. Picasso was its discoverer. He introduced into European art, through his own work, the plastic principles of negro art—the point of departure for our abstract representation' (de Zayas 1914).

Two decades later James Johnson Sweeney developed a parallel thesis in the blockbuster exhibition *African Negro Art* (19 March–18 May 1935) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Sweeney wielded enormous influence as a curator at the MoMA from 1935 to 1946 and director of The Guggenheim from 1952 to 1960. Among his many publications on modernist art was *Plastic redirections in 20th century painting* (1934), a book in which Sweeney literally set African artworks across the page from modernist pieces, showing the unmistakable correspondences between the two.

In preparing the exhibition *African Negro Art* Sweeney mined nearly forty private collections and two-dozen museums in the U.S. and Western Europe. From these he selected precisely six hundred and three objects: sculptures, textiles, implements,

weapons, and household utensil that originated principally from Central and West Africa. Sweeney insisted that these objects should be displayed against stark white walls in the MoMA in order to draw attention to their formal and aesthetic qualities. Like de Zayas he disparaged the displays found in ethnographic museums, wherein objects were haphazardly thrown together in ways that diminished their aesthetic and economic worth (dia Holloway 2005, Webb 2000). He was determined that, through his careful selection and presentation, the African objects on display in *African Negro Art* would be newly rendered worthy of serious contemplation.

Despite both curators' intentions, an undertow of racism and colonialism marred both projects. While De Zayas wholly embraced the idea that African art had permeated, if not precipitated, various genres of European modernist art, he rejected the notion that African art could itself constitute a form of modern expression. Rather, he saw African art as 'a product of the "Land of Fright", created by a mentality full of fear, and completely devoid of the faculties of observation and analysis' (de Zayas 1914). It was, he declared, 'the pure expression of the emotions of a slave race' (ibid.). Sweeney held a somewhat more evolved view, affirming in the opening paragraphs of the exhibit catalogue for *African Negro Art* that African art 'has its place of respect among the esthetic traditions of the world' and that 'it no longer represents for us the mere untutored fumblings of the savage' (Sweeney 1935: 11). In attempting to elevate the status of African art he noted its 'essential plastic seriousness, moving dramatic qualities, eminent craftsmanship and sensibility to material, as well as to the relationship of material with form and expression' (p. 11). Still, on the subject of whether or not African art had been appropriated into European modernist art Sweeney took a more tempered view than the one he had advanced in *Plastic Redirections*, one that required a number of intellectual contortions. He wrote:

> In the early work of Picasso and his French contemporaries, as well as in that of the German "Brücke" group, frank pastiches [of African forms] are frequently to be found. But these, like the adoption of characteristically negroid form-motifs by Modigliani and certain sculptors, appear today as having been more in the nature of attempts at interpretation, or expressions of critical appreciation, than true assimilations. When we occasionally come across something in contemporary work that looks as if it might have grown out of a genuine plastic assimilation of the Negro approach, on closer examination we almost invariably find that it can as fairly be attributed to another influence nearer home. Cezanne's researches in the analysis of form, to take an obvious example, not only laid the foundation for subsequent developments in European art but also played an important part in opening European eyes to the qualities of African art (Sweeney 1935: 11).

In a few short steps, then, Sweeney shifted from recognizing the merits of African art to wholly reestablishing the European basis of modernist abstraction. Indeed Sweeney asserts that it was the work of a European artist, Cézanne, which enabled European audiences to appreciate African art. This was not an uncommon view. De Zayas himself wrote of Cézanne that 'With him began the representation of man through the outside world, an attitude which we find the savages have manifested unconsciously in their plastic expressions' (de Zayas 1913: 32-33).

Snapping

The Cincinnati-born, Brooklyn-based artist Jennie C. Jones (b. 1968) tackles these historical dynamics head-on in works like *Score Against Sustained Ideas (Getragen)* (2011), a composition that not only outlines a genealogy of modernist art and its

various historical omissions, but equally provides a means through which to engage these dynamics through performance. Jones's score comprises three parts: a set of verbal instructions grouped under the headings CLAP, HUM, SNAP and MOVE, a diagram of modernist art from 1890-1935, and a pair of graphic scores that provide instructions on how to execute the first two parts in performance.

In Jones's art history diagram, 'Negro Sculpture', highlighted in a bold coral, is at the center of an historical framework that puts it into direct exchange with Fauvism, Cubism, and their various offshoots. It is telling that the sounds and gestures that Jones associates with the encounter between 'Negro Sculpture' and European modernist traditions are of a violent nature: slamming, hitting, striking, clapping, and otherwise making a 'sharp percussive noise'.

Jones's diagram is perhaps best viewed in conjunction with another, well known diagram of art history, *Diagram of Historical Development of Fluxus...* (1973) by George Maciunas, the Lithuanian printmaker, artist and self-styled impresario of Fluxus. Maciunas's impressively detailed chart was intended to serve as 'an exhaustive chronicle of Fluxus that would also narrate the movement's origins since the beginning of performance-based art' (Feldman 2013). Julia Pelta Feldman, who curated the MoMA exhibition *Charting Fluxus: George Maciunas's Ambitious Art History* (March 6-May 6 2013), suggests that Maciunas's chart is 'an ambitious reckoning with modernism and its legacy'. Maciunas's chart is certainly ambitious: it stretches as far back in time as Church Procession, Roman Circus, Medieval Fairs and Baroque Mimicry. It is also almost wholly Eurocentric. In terms of early precedents for Fluxus Maciunas includes Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Italian Futurism, and

European variants of Surrealism and Dadaism ('Paris Dada', 'Zurich Dada', 'Berlin Dada'), but does not reference any non-Western artists, artworks or movements. This is especially striking given that Fluxus was a keenly international enterprise under Maciunas's own leadership, and that artists associated with Fluxus drew heavily from non-Western forms and traditions including the Japanese haiku, Zen Buddhist philosophy and Hindustani musical traditions.

The American artist Clifford Owens (b. 1971) performed *Score Against Sustained Ideas (Getragen)* as part of his months long project *Anthology* (November 13 2011-May 7 2012) at MoMA PS1. For *Anthology* Owens commissioned scores from twenty-six African American artists including Terry Adkins, Sanford Biggers, Charles Gaines, Jennie C. Jones, Glenn Ligon, Lorraine O'Grady, Benjamin Patterson, William Pope.L and Kara Walker, among many others (see Yew 2011). The project was both a way of addressing the exclusion of black artists from canons of performance art and a vehicle for generating a new corpus centred on the black body. William Pope.L's score closely resembled the haiku-esque Fluxus event scores, but it abandoned Fluxus's Dadaistic tendencies in favour of a more serious proposition. It instructed the performer to 'Be African American. Be very African American.'

One critic saw *Anthology* as a 'springboard for collective authorship' and noted the 'call-and-response' method that Owens used to generate new material (Fisher 2011). In a roundtable conversation on *Anthology* Terry Adkins described the project as 'a beautiful gesture by Clifford to address our invisibility,' noting that Owens had used the platform of a solo exhibition to generate a collective statement (Owens 2012: 82). Adkins also recalled a statement by pianist, improviser and composer Vijay Iyer, in

which Iyer describes a situation whereby artists of colour are excluded from the contemporary canon at large, saying: 'What I've found as an artist of color in America is that we are often called upon to represent yesterday's traditions; to be repositories of the ancient; to perform ethnicity in a way that poses no threat or challenge to modernity. It is shockingly rare that artists of color are invited to become full participants in the national conversation, to respond to today's world, and to offer a glimpse of tomorrow' (p. 82).

Silence

Jones has said that her work allows her to 'pay homage to some of the unrecognized influences on American modernity', and specifically the unrecognized influence of jazz and experimental black musics upon modernist traditions. Jones, who trained as a visual artist, once noticed that she was spending hours a day curating playlists of music to listen to while in her art studio. Once she embraced this fact she began to create work that responded to, reimagined, incorporated, and stemmed from this music, including music by such artists as Billie Holiday, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Muhal Richard Abrams, Nina Simone, Alice Coltrane, Alvin Singleton, Olly Wilson and The Art Ensemble of Chicago. In an hour-long lecture 'Jazz, Minimalism and Abstraction,' the pianist, improviser and composer Jason Moran, who has served as Artistic Director of Jazz at the Kennedy Center since 2012, reflects on a broad range of issues that arise in Jones's work, from the formation of canons, to images of jazz in the popular imagination, to the relationship between jazz and aesthetic movements that are normally regarded as being separate from it, like minimalism (Moran 2016).[2] He says that when he first encountered Jones's work he remarked to

[2] In an essay on Jones, Valerie Cassel Oliver writes: 'As a vital and iconic language that embraced political concerns, minimalism, in its hyperheterosexual leanings and conspicuous

himself, 'I never though jazz was *that*. I never thought jazz was *this*.'

Jones remarks, 'Maybe because jazz, and music in general, was all we had for so many years, it became a cliché and a hands-off topic for African American artists. There are many types of artists who work with sound, but I find that there are not many who work with music or music history directly—reconfiguring or reframing it' (Chun 2011).

Jones's reconfigurations of music and music history are wholly apparent in works like *Slowly in a Silent Way, Caged* (2010), in which Jones sets Miles Davis's album *In a Silent Way* (1969) into dialogue with John Cage's *4'33"* (1952). Davis's album, noted for its use of electronics, comprises two tracks that were each arranged into three distinct sections (by producer Teo Macero), while Cage's composition consists of three distinct movements of unspecified duration that are each marked *tacet* (silent). Jones took a brief sample from Davis's album—a sample in which Davis's trumpet is not audible—and time-stretched it to precisely four minutes and thirty-three seconds, the duration of the premiere performance of *4'33"* and its eponymous title. She describes the work as a 'collision of two notions of silence,' and one that was particularly well suited for the twin galleries at the Sikkema Jenkins & Co. Gallery, where *Slowly in a Silent Way, Caged* was first exhibited in 2010: 'Set for playback on loop, the sound [of the time-stretched sample] will alternate from room to room so when one speaker is "dead" the Cage piece actually will be recreated as the sound of the listeners fills the rest or gap. This also creates a mediated version of Cage's work

absence of people of color, was also marred by its own politics of exclusion' (Cassel Oliver 2015: 16).

where live musicians are replaced with the speaker' (Jones 2010).

In this work Jones contends with the idea that not all silences are created equal. One notion of silence understands it as a physical or acoustic phenomenon, i.e. the absence of sound—the sense in which Cage used the term when he proclaimed that 'there is no such thing as silence'. Another notion of silence understands it in historical and sociocultural terms, as in the silencing of a person or people. Jones's choice of a sample in which Davis himself cannot be heard is particularly telling in this regard, as is her decision to use the Davis track as the frame for generating Cage's composition.

In a Silent Way, Caged is an example of what Jones describes as 'recomposing music'. Her re-composition, however, does not only emerge only as a technical process (i.e. sampling, remixing, etc.), but as an historical one. Jones says, 'There's a very basic necessity to weave these histories together, as they belong together. Sonically, I think of it as layering; I'm layering histories onto each other' (Copeland 2015: 24).

Acoustics

Jones's practice has variously taken shape as sculpture, painting, collage, drawing, audio, photography and composition. It has addressed an equally diverse range of issues and ideas in relation to sound and music: the physical forms of audio media (cables, loudspeakers, headphones, CD canisters, and microphones all appear in various guises in Jones's work); the visual forms of music notation; musical devices like *crescendi* and time signatures (Jones has imagined a 'time signature for blackness'); and acoustic phenomena like reverberation and resonance.

It would be a disservice to Jones's conceptually expansive practice, however, to describe her work as merely referencing or alluding to sound, whether by this we mean the physics of acoustics, the history of music, or elements of music notation, or any other phenomenon we commonly associate with sound and music. Jones's work both encompasses and extends beyond these things, eschewing categories that are as well established or predetermined as 'acoustics' or 'timbre' or, say, 'jazz'. Jones gets into the very soundness of sound, inventing ontologies of music and sound—new ways for sound and music to exist. Jones considers the full breadth of sound's multidimensionality: its material and physical qualities, its affective power, its musical and artistic manifestations, its historical and sociocultural dimensions, and more. Take, for example, the yellow glow that radiates from the series of *acoustic paintings* (paintings made in part from acoustic absorber panels) that Jones exhibited as part of her mid-career retrospective at The Hirshhorn in 2013. What is this yellow glow if not the toneness of tone, the warmth and buzz of sound surging through electrical coils, the feeling of being elevated by music, the power of radical black musicians exposing and tearing through social and cultural systems that would deny their very existence, and the presence of lives lived so boldly that they continue to bounce off every reflective surface and permeate every absorptive one? Jones's *acoustic paintings* are art and art history, and music and musicology at once. They make and unmake these disciplines and the complex webbing of sociocultural systems and histories at their core.

Listening (Relational)

In a recent interview for *Guernica* magazine the pianist Vijay Iyer reflects on the idea of listening as a social act. Iyer is asked what chapter he would add to music critic

Ben Ratliff's *Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty* (2016a). Ratliff's book dispenses with traditional categories of music analysis in favor of qualities like 'slowness' and 'closeness' as a way of traversing normally disparate musical genres. Iyer's response is worth revisiting in full. He says:

> I'm not going to add a chapter to his book. My concern with this approach is that music becomes a substance devoid of people. It's a consumer model of what music is: subjects listening to objects. For me, music is subjects listening to subjects. It's about intersubjectivity. What I've learned from my gurus is that when you hear music, you hear a person, or you hear people, and you hear everything about them in those moments. They reveal themselves in ways that cannot be revealed any other way, and it contains historical truths because of that. To me, that is the most important thing. It shouldn't be a footnote, or the last chapter. It should be the complete thesis of a book on listening (Sriram 2016).

Iyer's conception of listening as a mode of intersubjectivity, while appearing perhaps on one level innocuous, breaks in a fairly radical way from how listening has traditionally been conceptualized, theorized and taught in relation to music and sound. In contemporary Western cultures listening is almost exclusively understood as a form of consuming—absorbing, receiving, evaluating, analysing or otherwise observing—a thing. Certainly there have been numerous critical interventions into how modes and processes of listening are conceptualised. Pauline Oliveros's 'deep listening' as a mode of attention and attunement to acoustic environments (Oliveros 2005), Eric Clarke's 'ecological listening' as a way of learning (Clarke 2005), Andra

McCartney's 'full-bodied hearing' as an expansion of the listening body (McCartney 2004) have all been welcome interventions. Still, Iyer's insistence that music entails *subjects listening to subjects* profoundly reorients the traditional listening gaze. It insists that music is not a product or an object, but a site through which subjectivity, history and 'historical truths' are created and communicated. It also happens to be an apt description of Jennie C. Jones's work, which makes apparent and audible the process of a subject listening to other subjects, as well as the historical frameworks and repercussions of this listening.

Iyer's statement also gives way to another idea, that of collective models of relational listening. While mostly absent from music studies and sound studies, such modes of collectivity regularly occur in the practices of African American sound artists and composers whose work emerges as a product of, and a site for radical collective expression. To give one example among numerous others, the pianist Jason Moran and vocalist Alicia Hall Moran's artist residency at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2012, *BLEED*, could be described as both framing and enacting a radical collectivity through music and sound. *BLEED* was, by all accounts, a fantastically layered and interconnected series of events that featured performances, lectures, film, dance, and poetry, one in which any one of twenty-six performances presented over the course of five days might have itself entailed many linkages and layerings. (I heard, for example, 'Art Songs', an afternoon concert by the Morans that stemmed from, reimagined, and worked through their encounters and collaborations with such varied artists as Joan Jonas, Glenn Ligon, Whitfield Love & Fred Wilson, Wangechi Matu, Lorna Simpson, Pat Steir, Kara Walker, and Carrie Mae Weems). As part of *BLEED* the artist Kara Walker, who performed under the pseudonym Karaoke Walkrrr, presented 'Improvisation with Mutually Assured Destruction' with the group

Bandwagon. During this performance Walkrrr played a recording of the Rolling Stones's 'Brown Sugar'. The track, virtually synonymous with the appropriation of black culture by white artists and the fetishisation of the black female body by white men, provided a ground upon which, and then against which, the musicians played. In subsequent interviews about *BLEED* the Morans reflected on the relational themes involved in the project, saying that 'it really became a community project… it became an ongoing exploration of what our community is' (Byrd 2012). For Jason Moran the residency evolved as a kind of 'living yearbook,' with various collaborators' practices, concepts and sounds 'bleeding' into one another. A critic for *Jazz Times* described the Morans' project as 'an incandescent five-day torrent of music and performance,' remarking that its 'impact on the worlds of jazz and performance art may take years to fully assess' (Russonello 2012).

As with *BLEED*, a number of recent projects focusing on sound art and experimental music by African American artists have emerged within a framework of relationality, collectivity, collaboration, and cultural survival. They include projects that question contemporary canons, like Clifford Owens's *Anthology* and its sister project, the retrospective *Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of FLUX/us* (6 November 2010-23 January 2011) (see Cassel Oliver 2011);[3] group exhibitions including *Black Light / White Noise: Sound and Light in Contemporary Art*[4] (May 26–August 5 2007) (Oliver

[3] *Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of FLUX/us* was first presented at CAMH (November 6, 2010-January 23, 2011) and subsequently traveled to The Studio Museum in Harlem in 2011 and Nassauicher Kunstverein Wiesbaden in 2012. The exhibit catalogue features essays by Cassel Oliver, Marcia Reed, George E. Lewis, John Hendricks, Bertrand Clavez, Fred Moten and Charles Gaines. Lewis has also written separately on Patterson and appears in conversation with Patterson in an hour-long video 'Radical Roundtable: Benjamin Patterson & George Lewis' (see Cassel Oliver 2011, Lewis 2012, Lewis and Patterson 2014).

[4] *Black Light / White Noise*, curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver at CAMH, featured works by artists including Sanford Biggers, Louis Cameron, Kianga Ford, Kira Lynn Harris, Stach Hoyt, Arthur Jafa, Jennie C. Jones, George Lewis, Tom Lloyd, Yvette Mattern, Kori

2007), *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*[5] (November 17 2012-February 16 2013) (see Cassel Oliver 2013), and *Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now* (July 11-November 22, 2015).[6] They also include long-term projects like Mendi and Keith Obadike's sound art practice, which places archival research, historical inquiry, and questions about race, identity and power at the center of a decades-long collaboration (Obadike and Obadike 2014); historical projects like George Lewis's collective autobiography of the AACM and the opera that subsequently emerged from it, *Afterword* (2016); various revivals including the recent revival of Julius Eastman's music, marked by such happenings as a series of high-profile concerts in Los Angeles and London, several new recordings, and the month-long project *Julius Eastman: That Which is Fundamental* (May 4-28 2017, Philadelphia), which featured a concert series and a two-part exhibit curated by Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *A Recollection* and *Predicated* (see Dodson 2017)[7]; and

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Newkirk, Camille Norment, Kambui Olukimi, Karyn Olivier, Benjamin Patterson, Nadine Robinson, and Soundlab (Beth Coleman and Howard Goldkrand) (see Cassel Oliver 2007).

[5] *Radical Presence*, curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, was first exhibited at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (November 17-February 15 2013). It subsequently traveled to the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, The Studio Museum in Harlem, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco between 2013-2015. It featured the work of three generations of African American artists who included Derrick Adams, Terry Adkins, Papo Colo, Jamal Cyrus, Jean-Ulrick Désert, Theaster Gates, Zachary Fabri, Sherman Fleming, Coco Fusco, Girl [Chitra Ganesh + Simone Leigh], David Hammons, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Lyle Ashton Harris, Maren Hassinger, Wayne Hodge, Satch Hoyt, Ulysses S. Jenkins, Shaun El C. Leonardo, Kalup Linzy, Dave McKenzie, Jayson Musson aka Hennessy Youngman, Senga Nengudi, Tameka Norris, Lorraine O'Grady, Clifford Owens, Benjamin Patterson, Adam Pendleton, Adrian Piper, Pope.L, Rammellzee, Sur Rodney (Sur), Jacolby Satterwhite, Dread Scott, Xaviera Simmons, Danny Tisdale, and Carrie Mae Weems. (CAMH website)

[6] *Freedom Principle*, organised by Naomi Beckwith, Marilyn Fields, Larry Fields and Dieter Roelstraete, explored the legacy of the AACM on the occasion of the collective's fiftieth anniversary. It featured sound works by Art Ensemble of Chicago, Stan Douglas, Douglas R. Ewart, George Lewis, Charles Gaines and Sean Griffin; scores by Anthony Braxton, Matana Roberts, and Wadada Leo Smith; as well as mixed media works by Nick Cave (who showed *Speak Louder* from his 'Sound Suits' series), Jennie C. Jones, Terry Adkins, Charles Gaines, Sanford Biggers, Jamal Cyrus, Nari Ward, Renée Green, Rashid Johnson, Cauleen Smith, Anri Sala, and The Otolith Group (Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar).

[7] *A Recollection* and *Predicated* respectively addressed Eastman's musical contributions through an exhibition of archival material and ephemera, and an exhibition that brought

artist residencies that have evolved as collaborative, collective, and relational forms, notably Vijay Iyer's aptly titled *Relation: A Performance Residency*, which marked the opening of the Met Breuer in New York in 2016. Among dozens of other linkages *Relation* featured the sound installation *Fit (The Battle of Jericho*) (2016) by Mendi and Keith Obadike, a work that connects the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement with a nineteenth century spiritual, giving new form to what Amiri Baraka called 'a changing same'.

Sonic Undercommons

What emerges from these various happenings is that there exists a sonic undercommons of black sound artists that has evolved in parallel, and oftentimes in opposition to, predominantly European and European American sound art and experimental music scenes. Like the radical figures in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's recent study, this sonic undercommons creates an 'art that is practiced on and over the edge of politics, beneath its ground, in animative and improvisatory [ways]... emerging as an ensemblic stand, a kinetic set of positions' (Harney and Moten 2013: 73-74). While certainly alive if not thriving, this sonic undercommons is nevertheless hidden from view within most sound art criticism, '[i]ts encoded noise... hidden in plain sight from [those] who refuse to see and hear' (p. 74). In a sense, it is yet another manifestation of the invisible man at the center of Ralph Ellison's profound meditation on black existentialism.

The work of the sonic undercommons poses serious challenges to the ways in which sound art has been theorized. Take, for example, Seth Kim-Cohen's *Against*

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together ten contemporary artists into conversation with Eastman's work: Carolyn Lazard, Beau Rhee, James Maurelle, Sondra Perry, Wayson Jones, Ash Arder, Jonathan Gardenhire, Courtney Bryan, Texas Isaiah, and Yulun Grant (McClodden 2017).

Ambience (2016), a polemical work in which Kim-Cohen disparages the failure of sound artists and curators to engage the various critical movements that have informed the visual arts after 1960: 'conceptualism, institutional critique, feminism, postcolonialism, relational aesthetics and social practice' (p. 10). However, all the movements that Kim-Cohen lists do exist within, if not profoundly shape, the work of such artists as Terry Adkins, Edgard Arcenaux, Jennie C. Jones, Charles Gaines, George Lewis, Jason Moran and Alicia Hall Moran, Mendi+Keith Obadike, Clifford Owens, Adrian Piper, among many other African American sound artists and experimental musicians.

The widespread lack of critical attention to the sound works of black artists has deepened a racial divide within the contemporary sound art world, further inscribing what Jennifer Lynn Stoever has called 'race's audible contour—the sonic color line'.[8] It has also resulted in a philosophical and intellectual paucity in sound art criticism, which has failed to engage with the conceptualism, multidimensionality, relationality and radical politics of black sound artists. Equally, sound art criticism has been diminished through the failure of many critics to address the various exclusionary politics that we regularly perform.

In a 2009 article for *Leonardo Music Journal* the artists O+A (Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger), who create sound works for public spaces, introduce the term 'Sonic Commons' as way of delineating 'any space where people share an acoustic environment and can hear the results of each other's activities.' This concept

[8] This divide is, in essence, a continuation of the 'two avant-gardes' described by Benjamin Piekut in *Experimentalism Otherwise* (2011). In this book Piekut examines the (dis)connections between the (predominantly African American) free jazz movement and the (predominantly European American) experimental music scene in New York in the mid-1960s.

resembles R. Murray Schafer's idea of 'acoustic community,' what Schafer understood as a group of people who inhabit a common 'acoustic space' delimited by the space of hearing (he described, for example, the acoustic community that derives from the family home, the church, and the town) (Schafer 1994: 308-312). In contrast to the Sonic Commons, which is imagined as a unifying space and a unified sociality, the sonic undercommons resists easy notions of sharing or community, reminding us that environments can be divided and fractional, exclusionary and segregated even as they may be physically shared. And while sound itself may conjure a relational space, as Brandon Labelle suggests in *Acoustic Territories* (2011), in a chapter titled 'Your Sound is My Sound is Your Sound', the nature of this relational space doesn't necessarily lend itself to the kind of intimacy and fluid inter-corporeal exchange that LaBelle imagines. Bodies can be sites of reflection and absorption; they can also be instruments of oppression and resistance. The relational spaces engendered by the socio-physics of sound might also emerge as spaces of opposition, struggle and refusal. The 'flows of sound' are not always fluid, open or free.

Valerie Cassel Oliver has observed that many of the artists she works with not only subvert the dominant narratives surrounding contemporary art practice, but that they challenge 'the very historicity of genres' (Cassel Oliver 2015: 8). Taking a cue from Cassel Oliver and the artists whose work she has helped bring to light, we must re-examine the origin myths of sound art, contend with the legacies of marginalized avant-gardes within sound art histories, address the invisibility of artists of color within its canons, and critically examine and address the social, economic, cultural and political institutions and systems that produced these exclusions. As Benjamin Patterson once said, 'developments as conceptual art, text art, video art, performance

art, minimalism, simulation and even the social engineering arts or political art... are being reexamined, and the roots are being found, perhaps in Fluxus. What exactly was my role in all of this? Quite simply I was there at the instant of birth' (Cassel Oliver 2015: p. 16).

WORD COUNT: approx. 6200 excluding footnotes and bibliography

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