

FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN

## **When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality**

**p**icture the following:

1. Marian Anderson singing at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939.
2. Whitney Houston singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the Super Bowl in 1992 during the Gulf War.
3. Aretha Franklin singing "The Star Spangled Banner" at the 1992 Democratic National Convention.
4. Santita Jackson singing "The Star Spangled Banner" at inaugural events for William Jefferson Clinton, January 20, 1997.
5. The anonymous black woman who sang at the first public memorial for the victims of the Oklahoma bombing.
6. Jessye Norman singing at an event at New York University Law School's Tishman Auditorium in support of Clinton before his impeachment, December 14, 1998. (Toni Morrison speaking at the same event.)
7. The anonymous black woman singing "Amazing Grace" immediately following the Littleton, Colorado shootings or the Texas church shootings.
8. Chaka Khan singing at the close of the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, August 2000.
9. Related but distinct: Mahalia Jackson at the 1963 March on Washington.
10. Related but Distinct: Fannie Lou Hamer at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City.

I say picture because these images and our memories of them are as much about the

spectacle as the sound. The recognizably black woman—singing rather than speaking—is a familiar sight for American audiences. While each instance, each woman, each voice is unique—these women do not “sound” alike—the physicality is familiar. The woman stands before a crowd in front of a microphone, mouth open, positioned to sing.

The patriotism of the first eight moments is striking. Each occurs when the nation is trying to present an image of itself to itself and to the world. On at least three of these occasions the black woman’s voice is the clarion call following heinous displays of American racism and its ugly relatives. The last two scenes are also created in response to American racism, but they signal a challenge to, a critique of the United States.

Marian Anderson sings at the Lincoln Memorial because the Daughters of the American Revolution refuse to allow her to sing at Convention Hall. The Oklahoma federal building was bombed by avowed white supremacists. The shooters in the Littleton, Colorado tragedy espoused racist beliefs. The other instances are not quite as explicit, but just as ironic. Whitney Houston rallies the nation behind a war that has nothing to do with democracy, behind an army made up of the poor, disproportionately poor blacks, whites and Latinos who turn to the military because the nation denies them employment and educational opportunities. Jessye Norman serenades a president who, though more comfortable in the presence of black people than his predecessors, ended “welfare as we knew it” and in so doing sank thousands of poor women and children into greater poverty; a president who, as a candidate, left the campaign trail so that he could execute a retarded black man; a president responsible for silencing the voices of two black women—Lani Guinier and Jocelyn Elders. Nonetheless he is a president with unprecedented popularity amongst a large number of African Americans. He has even been called (not without controversy) the so-called first black president.

Only Mahalia Jackson’s and Fannie Lou Hamer’s voices were used to rally the troops for social struggle. Because the vision proposed by Marian Anderson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial had not been born by the 1960s, Jackson’s was a voice insisting on a hearing, standing between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial as the illegitimate daughter of the American Revolution, demanding a seat at the table. Fannie Lou Hamer’s voice helped folks to withstand the police batons and fire hoses of the segregationist South. Hers was also the voice raised as witness to the hypocrisy of the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Bernice Johnson Reagan picked up where Mrs. Hamer left off when she sang with the SNCC Freedom Singers and has continued to do so as the founding member of Sweet Honey in the Rock. In the 1960s Abbey Lincoln’s articulate screams on Max Roach’s “Freedom Now Suite,” and Nina Simone’s defiant “Mississippi Goddam!!” joined Aretha’s call for “Respect” to provide not just the sound track but the announcement of a new militancy. Unlike Mahalia at the March on Washington, these women made demands, not requests. Black audiences endowed them with the responsibility of communicating black frustration, anger, aspiration, and hope.

Approximately two decades following Mahalia Jackson’s appearance at the

March on Washington, in 1997 Santita Jackson sang at the inauguration of Bill Clinton and implied that the demand was heard; that we are now one big, unified, biracial family. The younger Jackson sang for a party for which her father is a powerful operative and in which her brother would become an elected official. Perhaps the most cynical of these images (for I do not believe they are all cynical), is Chaka Khan appearing as part of a parade of colored faces performing multiculturalism at a convention whose delegates were overwhelmingly white and whose platform offered little to the majority of black Americans. (Ironically, it did produce a powerful, speaking black woman cabinet member in Condeleeza Rice.)

These various images demonstrate the way the black woman's voice can be called upon to heal a crisis in national unity as well as provoke one. As scholars such as Benedict Anderson have noted, the nation is a fictive construct of community. The image of the "mother of the nation" is one that allows this construct to figure itself as reproduced. But the spectacle of the singing black woman at times of national crisis does not represent the "mother of the nation"; instead that spectacle sometimes invokes a figure that can make no claims on the family unit, though she is "just like one of the family." A figure that serves the unit, who heals and nurtures it but has no rights or privileges within it—more mammy than mother. Here I am not suggesting that the individual women themselves chose to serve as mummies but instead that this figure of the singing black woman is often similar to the uses of black women's bodies as nurturing, healing, life and love giving for the majority culture. This representation of the voice is in stark contrast to representations of that voice in the service of disenfranchised black people, as a voice that poses a challenge to the United States revealing its democratic pretense as a lie. And, yet, this image contains both these possibilities.

Certainly, racism is as American as the African American women's vocal tradition. Perhaps more so, in fact, because it is central to the founding of the nation; whereas the voice, that peculiar black voice, is in it but not of it at the nation's beginning. Since Marian Anderson, the voice and the spectacle of the singing black woman often has been used to suggest a peacefully interracial version of America. In the majority of these spectacles there is the suggestion that the black woman singer pulls together and helps to heal national rifts. This singing spectacle offers an alternative vision of a more inclusive America. It may not be representative of the United States as it is, but it projects an image of what participants long for it to become. On the other hand, the black woman's singing voice can signal a crisis in the spectacle of national unity; it can even invoke such a crisis by mobilizing dissent and forging a space of resistance. Representations of the voice suggest that it is like a hinge, a place where things can both come together and break apart.<sup>1</sup>

What other American voice resonates in this way, mobilizes in this way, evokes a picture of national unity at times of crisis and yet is also capable of invoking a crisis in a tenuous national unity as well? How does a vocal tradition that first emerged in the creation and service of an oppressed people end up in service to a nation that has been hostile to the aspirations of black people? Of course, "the voice" is not stable and unchanging. It varies in tone, timbre, and meaning; it changes according to artist, time, and context.

What follows is more meditation than theory, more questions than conclusions on the meanings of black women's singing. Here I am focusing on representations of black women singers across genres including gospel, jazz, opera, and rhythm and blues over a period of one hundred years. First I will review the language early white observers and later black writers have used to define the sound and the power of black American singing voices in order to situate the voice historically and to demonstrate its place in narratives of nation. In so doing I will try to tease out the meanings with which this voice has been invested. I will then explore an alternative myth of a black woman's singing—a myth of origin for other forms of black expressivity, especially jazz. These myths are also myths of origin for a black nation, where the originary voice is rendered as female but represented by males. My project shares much with and has benefited a great deal from the brilliant work of Lindon Barrett in *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*. We are both concerned with the black singing voice as “a site of the active production of meaning.”<sup>2</sup>

### **How Shall We Sing The Lord's Songs In a Strange Land?**

By the rivers of Babylon,  
 There we sat down  
 Yea, we wept when we remembered Zion.  
 We hanged our harps upon the willows  
 In the midst thereof.  
 For there they that carried us away captive  
 Required of us a song:  
 And they that wasted us required of us mirth,  
 Saying,  
 Sing us one of the songs of Zion.  
 How shall we sing the Lord's songs  
 In a strange land?

—PSALM 137

Black Americans have long seen parallels between our own situation and that of the Old Testament Jews, captives exiled in Babylon. “How can we sing the Lord's songs in a strange land?” But sing they did and in so doing created one of the richest vocal traditions the world has known. Black women's voices are central to that tradition.

*Before I am accused of essentialism, let me clarify what I mean by the black woman's voice. First, I am here most interested in the way that voice has been described. I am as concerned with the image as I am with the sound. Second, I do not mean the voice that comes out every time any black woman anywhere opens her mouth to sing. Nor do I want to imply that there is something in the structure of the black diaphragm, neck, throat, and tongue, teeth, or mouth that contributes to a certain vocalization. No, I don't mean a black voice as markedly different as skin*

color or texture of hair. Instead I am talking of a cultural style. A particularly New World style with roots in West Africa. (The centrality of the singing voice is something shared with many West African societies from which the enslaved were taken.)<sup>3</sup> In the United States it is a style transformed, nurtured, and developed in the tradition of the spirituals, field hollers, and work songs and sustained in black church and/or blues and jazz venues.<sup>4</sup>

One finds the most in-depth discussions about the existence and origins of “the black voice” in opera. (For some time black singers were considered interlopers in the field, prompting one critic, the German Dr. Geerd Heinsen, to claim that the black voice was “too Negroid for the French vocal line.”<sup>5</sup>) Here we find adjectives used to describe singing voices: “rich,” “dark,” “heavy,” “throaty.” These are adjectives borrowed from colors and textures—things that appeal to senses other than sound—a practice Roland Barthes found particularly irritating.<sup>6</sup> Students of black music such as Zora Neale Hurston, Christopher Smalls, Amiri Baraka, Nathaniel Mackey, Brent Edwards, and Robert O’Meally encourage us to think less in terms of adjectives and more in terms of verbs when describing black cultural practices including singing. These writers stress functions, effects, and processes in their descriptions of black music. They use words like stretching, reaching, conversing, sliding, imitating, swinging, rocking.<sup>7</sup>

According to Eileen Southern, during the early days of the nation black singing was described as “distinctive for its high intensity and use of such special effects as falsetto, shouts, groans and guttural tones. A strong, clear voice was favored, but Europeans generally described the sounds of the African voice as ‘a rud noyse,’ ‘a strong nasal sound,’ or ‘very loud and shrill’” (14). These descriptions assert the unfamiliarity of the voice, the “otherness” of it. In these descriptions black voices are *other* as in *foreign*. The black voice is part of the black body; the black body was deemed the very antithesis of all that was white and therefore human.

Many white American observers writing during the Civil War contributed to this discourse on the black voice. They stressed the impossibility of notating black American singing on the Western scale. Lucy Kim Garrison, coeditor of *Slave Songs in the United States*, observed:

It is difficult to express the entire character of these Negro ballads by mere musical notes and signs. The odd turns made in the throat and the curious rhythmic effect produced by single voices chiming in at different irregular intervals, seem almost as impossible to place on the scale as the singing of birds or the tones of an Aeolian Harp.<sup>8</sup>

Her coeditor William Allen lamented:

What makes it all the harder to unravel a thread of melody out of this strange network is that, like birds, they seem not infrequently to strike sounds that cannot be precisely represented by the gamut and abound in “slides from one note to the another and in turns and cadences not in articulated notes.”<sup>9</sup>

Numerous others cautioned about the impossibility of “writing out” or finding “musical characters to represent” black singing. In both instances we get black singing compared to the singing of birds. Birds are part of the natural world; for many whites black people were thought to be closer to the natural world. Bird’s songs are beautiful, mysterious, and functional. Furthermore, they are not thought to be the products of intellect, though recognized as a complex form of communication.

Interestingly, from the anonymous composers of the spirituals and folk tales to later poets such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Abbey Lincoln, black people have likened themselves to birds: birds in flight, birds incapable of flight, caged birds, free birds, but most especially singing birds. For the white observer black singing is birdlike because it escapes categorization. It does not attend to the rules of Western literacy or notation. Nathaniel Mackey refers to this as the “fugitive spirit” of black music in its refusal to “be mapped, captured, notated.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this is why the black singing voice not only struck an unfamiliar chord but at times a threatening one as well. Lindon Barrett writes:

Notations of the disturbing acoustic qualities of the diaspora singing voice often accompany the misrecognition of its cultural significance and its dismissal as a meaningful artefact. . . . In New World slave societies affront to Western aesthetic sensibilities one often finds a further corollary in fears concerning the potential threat posed by the singing voice to Western sociality or polity. . . . The singing voice proves a disturbing announcement of the vacuity of African and African diasporic cultures, but nevertheless, also an announcement of a threat to Western societies and psyches. (63)

(A brief aside: Not all black observers were as distinct from whites that heard the voices for the first time. Rebecca Primus, a freeborn Northern black woman who established a school for the freedmen on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, was one black listener who found black southern singing strange and unfamiliar.)

In addition to the distinctive, different sound of black singing, observers also noted the strange effect that sound had on listeners. Eileen Southern writes, “American literature contains numerous references to female slaves of colonial times who kept young audiences spellbound, and adults too with their ancient tales.” In all these cases the voice is unfamiliar, uncanny, almost otherworldly. (Years later this would hold true for jazz vocalists such as Billie Holiday, Shirley Horne, Carmen McRae, and Cassandra Wilson, all of whom possess the power of holding audiences spellbound with their “stories.”) It is a voice capable of casting spells. It is certainly a voice concerned with its connection to the world of the spirit, its ability to invoke the presence of the divine. So the sound heard as “other,” as in “foreign,” is also a sound that is “other” like the mystery that is God.<sup>11</sup>

In the instances cited by Southern, it is not just a matter of the voice but the way it tells the tale; the form in which it relays the message. The tone of the voice, its inflections, its register, the cadence, the pauses and silences—these are all as im-

portant and in some instances more important than the words themselves. Patti LaBelle's version of "Isn't It a Shame" is an example of a vocalist's ability to render meaning without words. In the midst of a song that mourns the end of a relationship, Labelle stops singing lyrics altogether and begins to moan. The pain about which she sings is beyond conventional speech. She moans a melody that tells a familiar tale of loss and desperate loneliness. It starts with a simple phrase, climaxes in a moan that is almost a holler, before resolving to a whimper. At this point the voices of the other two singers, Nona Hendryx and Sarah Dash, come in to help lift her back up, providing aural support so that she can stand and reenter the realm of language and lyrics.

Now of course I don't want to suggest that Patti Labelle and those unnamed black women cited by Southern represent one invariable, unchanging style, but rather that there is a tradition that values experimentation and risk taking in form as well as content. It is a tradition that seeks to, in fact needs to, communicate beyond words when they are no longer capable of rendering meaning. I imagine this was especially important for persons who were forced to speak in a tongue that was not their native one.

Interestingly, in other cultures "blackness" has been used as a descriptor of certain voices and not of the singers. This quality of "vocal darkness" usually comes from cultures where the pitch of the speaking voice is lower.<sup>12</sup> However, in an essay titled "Cante Moro," the Spanish poet García Lorca offered a meditation on the "dark sounds" of the music of the Romany people, another dark-skinned oppressed people, known as "gypsies." Both Ralph Ellison and Nathaniel Mackey have drawn links between these dark or Moorish sounds, flamenco, and black American blues. In the United States "vocal darkness" is associated with an oppressed minority, identifiable by their skin color; we hear a whole range of meaning in the voices of black singers. For instance, anyone familiar with the racial history of the United States will probably hear irony as well as patriotism when Ray Charles sings "America"; it is not a matter of his individual politics but the vocal tradition out of which he sings, the voice. This is a voice that resounds with echoes of the cotton and tobacco fields, chain gangs and railroad, juke joints and storefront church.

The black church has been the primary site for the development of a distinctive black singing style and tradition. Ralph Ellison describes that style and tradition in his essay "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia," noting that Mahalia Jackson's voice is part of an art form that "depends upon the employment of the full expressive resources of the human voice."<sup>13</sup> Gospel music seems to contain most of the elements identified with black singing. The gospel quality has come to characterize other types of singing associated with black people most especially rhythm and blues and soul as well as jazz. Portia Maultsby notes that across genre black vocalists

bring intensity to their performances by alternating lyrical, percussive, and raspy timbres; juxtaposing vocal and instrumental textures; changing pitch and dynamic levels; alternating straight with vibrato tones and weaving moans, shouts, grunts, hollers, and screams into the melody.<sup>14</sup>

To experience the growl, falsetto, humming, and moaning in one song listen to Andy Bey sing “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To,” Nina Simone sing “Be My Husband,” Sweet Honey in the Rock or Shirley Caesar sing anything. “Be My Husband” is based on a traditional African American work song. It provides an excellent example because the lack of elaborate instrumentation allows us to hear the dips, curves, bends, and flights of Simone’s voice. At one point her voice shifts focus from melody to rhythm—keeping time like a hammer or hoe might have. Here she demands, there she pleads: She is both strength and vulnerability. When not singing we can hear an audible breathiness reminding us that the voice is situated in the body. At times she will substitute her voice with clapping hands, again embodying the song. Instead of hiding the breathing, denying the body of the singer in an effort to mimic an out-of-body spiritual transcendence, here we have a reminder of the relationship between body, breath, and spirit; a reminder that transcendence is acquired through the manipulation of bodily functions (chanting, singing, breathing, shouting, dancing).

While the black church is the training ground for many of our most well-known singers, from Miss Anderson to Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan, Aretha and Whitney, it is not the sole repository of this sound. One can hear many of these qualities in the voice of Billie Holiday, a Catholic girl who didn’t have the huge voice of her sisters but did have a certain way of approaching a note that is also born of this tradition. Billie Holiday, whether singing “Strange Fruit” or “Lover Man,” exposed our national and personal frailties, obsessions and secrets. In her voice, first and foremost, we hear an almost brutal honesty.

Descriptions of black singing, particularly black women’s singing, have been especially important to black writers. Frederick Douglass’s classic description articulates a theory of the relationship between black singing and the social and political condition of black people’s lives:

They would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. . . . They would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject would do. . . . They were tones loud, long, and deep. . . . Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains . . . to those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery.



Douglas sets the tone that future black writers would employ in their own attempts to represent and interpret black singing. There is the secretive and communal nature of the performance, in the woods (in contrast to the public entertaining function of singing the songs for an audience of whites). There is the emphasis on the meaning conveyed in the sound and on the sound as more representative of the people's condition than words in a book. And yet the only access we have to the sound is his written effort to describe it. The most elaborate articulation of this aesthetic comes nearly a century later in the work of Leroi Jones, especially his important *Blues People* (1963).

Toward the end of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, an army of black women march to 124—the house where former slave Sethe, her daughter Denver, and the ghost of slavery, *Beloved*, reside. Once there, their voices rise in a wall of sound that exorcises the ghost.

Where the yard met the road, [Sethe and *Beloved*] saw the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed; others looked at the hot, cloudless sky. Sethe opened the door and reached for *Beloved*'s hand. Together they stood in the doorway. . . . Women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off Chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

The ocean of sound, a virtual force of nature, that which continues to communicate when language breaks down, baptizes Sethe. Black women singing in unison confront the evil legacy of white supremacy and the slave trade, fight it and, in this instance, win. In a text so obsessed with dismembered and abused black bodies and psyches, the voice emerges as that part of the body and psyche best suited for creating and healing community. In this text the physical violence of slavery and its aftermath dismembers black bodies, but the discourse of slavery that deconstructs and categorizes black people as inhuman is as substantial and even longer lasting than physical violence (“list her animal characteristics on one side her human on the other,” Schoolteacher instructs his “pupils”). Slavery and white supremacy enact physical and discursive dismemberment; the voices of singing black women dismember the ghost of slavery and break the back of words both in order to communicate beyond them and to destroy their power over black bodies. And it is this dual action—the breaking of physical and discursive bonds—that precipitates the healing. (*Beloved* the novel might be likened to a song that attempts to do the same thing.)

There are numerous literary and historical examples of how black women's voices or representations of black women's voices not only soothed white children with lullabies but also healed, nurtured, sustained black people. Importantly, all these discussions of black women's singing focus as much on the listener as they do on the singer. In other words, voices create an aural space where listeners can mo-

mentarily experience themselves as outside of themselves, as “home” or as “free.” This space can be simultaneously political, spiritual, and sensual.<sup>15</sup> It is the context of the listening or the hearing that embodies the voice with meaning.

Black singing helped black people gather the strength to fight when they had no weapons; it invited and prepared the way for visitations from ancestors and the Holy Ghost. It saved the souls of sinners and made the saved backslide. It laid the foundation for diverse artistic visions. It expressed their longing for safety, for shelter, for love, for divine retribution, and for freedom.

It is this understanding of the meaning and function of black women’s singing that informs a century-old myth that situates a black women’s voice as the origin of black male literary and musical productivity and as the originary, founding sound of the New World Black Nation.

### **When Malindy Sings: A Myth of Origin**

G’way an’ quit dat noise, Miss Lucy—  
Put dat music book away;  
What’s de use to keep on tryin’?  
Ef you practise twell you’re gray,  
You cain’t sta’t no notes a-flyin’  
Lak de ones dat rants and rings  
F’om de kitchen to de big woods  
When Malindy sings.

You ain’t got de nachel o’gans  
Fu’ to make de soun come right,  
You ain’t got de tu’ns an’ twistin’s  
Fu’ to make it sweet an’ light.  
Tell you one thing now, Miss Lucy,  
An’ I’m tellin’ you fu’ true,  
When hit comes to raal right singin’,  
’T’ain no easy thing to do . . .

Y’ ought to hyeah dat gal a-wa’blin;  
Robins, la’ks an’ all dem things.  
Heish dey moufs an’ hides dey faces  
When Malindy sings.

She jus spreads huh mouf and hollahs,  
Come to Jesus, twell you hyeah  
Sinnahs’ tremblin’ steps and voices,  
Timid-lak a-drawin’ neah;  
Den she tu’ns to “Rock of Ages”  
Simply to de cross she clings,

An' you fin' yo' teah's a-drappin;  
When Malindy sings

Who dat say dat humble praises  
Wif de Master nevah counts?  
Heish you mouf, I heyea dat music,  
Ez hit rises up an' mounts  
Floatin by de hills an' valleys  
Way above dis buryin' sod,  
Ez hit makes its way in glory  
To de very gates of God!  
Oh, hit's sweetah dan de music  
Of an edicated band;

An' hit's dearah dan de battle's  
Song o' triumph in de lan'  
It seems holier dan evenin'  
When de solemn chu'ch bell rings,  
Ez I sit an' ca'mly listen  
While Malindy sings . . .

— PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR,  
“WHEN MALINDY SINGS,” 1895

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“In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like.” This statement comes from one of our greatest wordsmiths—Toni Morrison. Not light at the beginning, but a universe of sound: Birds, wind, water, and the human voice, a woman’s voice, and, depending on the teller of the tale, a black woman’s voice. A number of writers and musicians identify a moment of hearing that voice as an epiphany: a moment that leads suddenly to insight, understanding, and a hearing of the potential of one’s own artistic voice (if not at the moment of hearing, then later, upon reflection, certainly at a signal point in the text). This sound, which is not captured, is represented by the artist in poetry, prose, and music. While it is often the singing of men and women that constitute the moment of epiphany, it seems most often to be the woman’s voice that structures the myth.

Let us now turn to four such instances: W. E. B. Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk*, Jean Toomer in *Cane*, and Miles Davis/Quincy Troupe in *Miles: The Autobiography* (later elaborated in Troupe’s *Quincy and Me*). We will close with Cassandra Wilson’s contribution to or revision of this myth. There are numerous other examples that will not be examined here but two of the most significant are worth noting before we move on. James Baldwin famously attributes Bessie Smith’s recordings with helping him to access the language and tone of his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. August Wilson asserts hearing Smith’s recordings of “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jellyroll Like Mine”

was a birth, a baptism, a resurrection and a redemption all rolled up in one. It was the beginning of my consciousness that I was a representative of a culture and the carrier of some very valuable antecedents. With my discovery of Bessie Smith and the blues I had been given a world that contained my image, a world at once rich and varied, marked and marking, brutal and beautiful and at crucial odds with the larger world that contained it and preyed and pressed it from every conceivable angle.<sup>16</sup>

But here, we shall focus on three sons of the North or Midwest who encounter the sound of black singing in the South and in whom it strikes some ancient cultural memory. (Du Bois hears concertized spirituals at Fisk, Toomer hears the singing in rural Sparta, Georgia where he has gone to work in a school, and Davis in rural Arkansas where he visits his grandfather's farm. Wilson is a daughter of the South who hears her own voice in Miles's horn.) Consequently, one mythical source of black modernity is the haunting voice of a black woman.<sup>17</sup> By calling these encounters mythical I am by no means suggesting they did not happen, that they are not situated in history; in fact it is possible that they happened so much, that the tale is told so often it is recognizable, familiar, and therefore easy to invoke. But I am most interested in the rendering of the tale and in the cultural work of the telling.

Scholars Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones identify "myths of vocal gender" throughout Western culture. The sirens who lure men to death are but one of the many archetypal figures that "anchor the female voice in the female body" and confer upon it "conventional associations of femininity with nature and matter, with emotion and irrationality." Dunn and Jones write that from classical myth to nineteenth-century opera [we find] a fantasy of origins "that serves to explain and justify the placing, or rather displacing, of the female voice in a patriarchal culture through its alignment with the material, the irrational, the pre-cultural, and the musical." This voice is then contained "within a textuality identified as masculine, thus opposing her literal, embodied vocality to his metaphorical, disembodied 'voice'" (p. 7). To this list I would like to add the singing New World black woman whose voice, linked to nature, inspires cultural memory in the hearer and sets him on his own path of creative discovery.

The title of this section (and of this essay) is taken from Paul Laurence Dunbar's classic dialect poem, "When Malindy Sings," first published in 1895, later set to music by Oscar Brown Jr. and performed and recorded by the extraordinary Abbey Lincoln. The poem sets up many of the tropes of the myth of origin that appear in the later works I mention above. (Of course Douglass's description precedes even this, as does Lucy McKim Garrison's.) First, we read of someone trying to describe Malindy's voice—we never hear that voice, neither speaking nor singing. The poet's persona relays it to us, and we know this witness is black because of the use of dialect. So Malindy's voice, which sends notes a flying, the voice that rings from the kitchen to the woods, a voice based in her so called natural organs, is set in opposition to written Western music—the lines and dots. When Malindy sings,

musicians with instruments stop playing and even the mocking bird is intimidated. Her voice goes “to de very gates of God!” Dunbar formalizes the description of a black woman’s voice as of nature and of the divine, as racially essential based in biological difference, as incapable of capture in notation. He is not the first to give these kinds of descriptions, but he sets them in poetry in a way that has implications for our myth of origin. We, as readers, as hearers far away from the plantation, have access to this voice only through the words of the learned male poet who represents it to us in the voice of someone who has heard it. So we are twice removed from Malindy’s song, which has become the basis and inspiration for the poem.

In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois closes his classic *Souls of Black Folk* with a meditation on the meaning of black music: “The Sorrow Songs.” Of the spirituals he writes:

The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words, and in it we can trace here and there signs of development. My grandfather’s grandmother was seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries ago; and coming to the valleys of the Hudson and Housatonic, black, little, and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longing at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees. . . . The child sang it to his children and they to their children’s children, and so two hundred years it has traveled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music. This was primitive African music; . . . the voice of exile.

Du Bois gives the songs a lineage that is almost Biblical in nature. It is ancient in origin and historically situated in the terror of the slave trade. Here we see the careful construction of the myth. His grandfather’s grandmother is African. She is black, little, and lithe. The landscape of New England is utterly foreign to her, and, out of a longing for home, she looks to the hills and sings in an unknown tongue. This moment of passing the tradition on to the child between her knee initiates a familial and racial tradition. Malindy’s forbear is here not just a black woman who can sing but an African woman who is most importantly a mother: Mother of a New World race. Du Bois adds another dimension to the tale—we know little of what the words mean, but that doesn’t matter because the meaning is in the sound and only the initiated can hear. The lyrics he reproduces are:

Do bana coba gene me, gene me!  
Do bana coba, gene me, gene me!  
Bend’ nuli, nuli, nuli, nuli, bend’le.

As Du Bois renders these lyrics and transcribes the melody on the pages of *Souls*, they appear as a modified blues form, with the repetition of the first two lines before the resolution of the third. Furthermore, he transcribes the song in the complex, dark key of D-flat, one of the keys favored by African American improvisers. In *Souls* Du Bois claims his grandmother was Bantu. However, scholars and lin-

guists have not been able to locate these lyrics within a Bantu language group. Du Bois's biographer David Levering Lewis notes that the closest translation seems to have come from a Wolof song from Senegambia—a song about confinement and captivity: “gene me, gene me, [gene ma, gene ma,]” “Get me out, get me out, get me out.” Significantly, a large number of the enslaved Africans brought to the Americas came from the Senegambia region. Some scholars have drawn a connection between the musics of this region and the blues forms that developed in the United States (especially in Mississippi Delta).<sup>18</sup> While here Du Bois's grandmother is a “little black Bantu” living in New England, in other versions of the tale told in *Dusk of Dawn* and elsewhere Du Bois attributes the song to his great grandfather's wife or to another ancestor named Violet. In all cases the song is transmitted by a black woman.

Twenty years after Du Bois, Jean Toomer draws from his experience in Sparta, Georgia to render the black woman's singing voice as an indelible part of a changing landscape and a dying era. In his autobiographical writings Toomer recalled hearing the voices in Georgia:

A family of back-country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not too far away. They sang. And this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. . . . I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out.

Here Toomer recalls the voices of a family, not of a woman or of women. He also notes that the spirituals represented a dying tradition: one that he sought to preserve in *Cane*, which he called a swan song. These voices float above and through the narratives and poems of *Cane*. In “Blood Burning Moon,” the story that closes the first southern section of the book, Louisa, a young woman torn between two lovers, one black and one white, begins to sing as she goes to meet the black Tom. Her song is a foreboding and a foreshadowing of Tom's murder of her white lover and his own eventual lynching by a white vigilante mob.

The slow rhythm of her song grew agitant and restless. Rusty black and tan spotted hounds, lying in the dark corners of the porches or prowling around back yards, all over the countryside dogs barked and roosters crowed as if heeding a weird dawn or some ungodly awakening. They put their noses in the air and caught its tremor. They began plaintively to yelp and howl. Chickens woke up and cackled. Intermittently, woman sang lustily.

Here again the voice is otherworldly not because it is from another planet, because it is part of an unseen world that parallels our own rational one. It is both spiritual and material, both mystical and natural. As with Dunbar before him, Toomer represents the voice carried by the breeze, held by the trees, creating a mystical landscape and leading directly to the ears of God. It is a prophetic voice, yet it is one

that we cannot hear, that is only brought to us in the work of the literate male poet. It is his source and his inspiration, contained and refined for our consumption.

By the time Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe construct Davis's life story, they are able to contribute to this myth of origin by situating Miles as the hearer of her song, and in so doing they help to construct him as a mythic figure. The mythical voice comes at the end of a chapter where Davis and Troupe chronicle Davis's musical origins. The chapter has situated him as a child of black privilege: professional, college educated parents, his mother the musician who played violin and piano, his grandmother an organ teacher. So his musical lineage is maternal before he meets the great musical fathers who will shape him. "I got my looks from my mother and also my love of clothes and sense of style. I guess you could say I got whatever artistic talent I have from her also" (14). It is a world that witnesses the 1917 race riot to which he attributes some of his distrust of some white people (although his neighborhood was integrated). At the close of the chapter he highlights two formative experiences: listening to a radio show called *Harlem Rhythms* (it was around this time he started taking music lessons.) and hearing a black church-woman sing.

At the end of the first chapter of the *Miles: The Autobiography* we are told:

But before the lessons, I also remember how the music used to sound down there in Arkansas, when I was visiting my grandfather, especially at the Saturday night church. Man that shit was a motherfucker. I guess I was about six or seven. We'd be walking on these dark country roads at night and all of a sudden this music would seem to come out of nowhere, out of them spooky-looking trees that everybody said ghosts lived in. . . . I remember a man and a woman singing. . . . Shit, that music was something especially that woman singing. But I think that kind of sound in music, that blues, church, back-road funk kind of thing, that southern, mid-western, rural sound and rhythm. I think it started getting into my blood on them spook-filled Arkansas back-roads after dark when the owls came out hooting. So when I started taking music lessons I might have already had some idea of what I wanted my music to sound like.

Music is a funny thing when you really come to think about it. Because its hard to pinpoint where it all began for me But I think some of it had to have started on that Arkansas road. (29)

Ending the first chapter this way is as much a political and aesthetic choice as it is a genealogical one. The paragraph starts emphatically with "But before the lessons" (a preliterate state). And then we get a description that elaborates upon that of Toomer and Du Bois. From a country road, a country church, the woman isn't described nor is her voice, really, but its eerie, haunting sound and its connection with nature again seem to act as a conduit between different realities. So Davis situates this supernatural, southern, black female sound as the source of his own. Mu-

sic lessons will help to structure and distill that voice, and once again the male artist will become our only access to that earlier, more “primitive sound.”

Three different renderings of the myth of origin for a written and musical art form. The myth then becomes structured in history and helps to create a myth about the hearer. In Quincy Troupe’s *Miles and Me* Troupe returns to this story and elaborates upon it in a way that only a poet familiar with the tropes of the tradition might do. The quotation is lengthy by necessity. Troupe writes:

The lonely voice of an old black church woman singing plaintively in the dusky glow of a backwater country evening, somewhere few come to, save mosquitoes or rats or evil white men dressed in bed sheets, carrying guns and flaming crosses.

In the midnight air the trains never seem to stop whistling past their wheels humming. The roads are unpaved, empty, and eerie in the twilight just before the hants come out to enter everybody’s imagination and shut down those dusty roads. The voice of the old black woman floats above the shadows and trees, disembodied yet whole. It rides up there and cruises alongside the night birds circling above some unseen church or log cabin, in some out-of-the-way location back in the bushes, hidden. The voice also circles. Plaintive. Haunting. Achingly real.

And if you had the privilege of hearing that voice, perhaps you wouldn’t file it away as anything special, something to imitate and relate to for the rest of your life—a reference point for your own life’s experiences, making you sensitive, alert, cognizant of other beautiful, necessary things. But that’s the way Miles heard it.

Perhaps the voice would remind you of a lonely trumpet sound. But maybe you wouldn’t know that what you heard was special because you couldn’t see that old Black woman’s face. And, if you could have met her, you might have been too busy watching her chew on some snuff to see the wisdom in her old eyes. But Miles did see that face, saw it when he heard her voice. He saw the whole scene, took it all in. Knew that it was real and special and filed it away for later use. (2–3)

This rendering situates the young boy Miles in the midst of a Toomeresque landscape. The mythic tropes are catalogued: an old black churchwoman’s voice, ghosts, nightriders, and trains. This is the landscape that produced the blues. It is an age-old myth with historically specific resonance. The voice again floats above the trees—“disembodied”—removed from its source. It is “plaintive” “haunting,” “achingly real.” The authenticity (real) is guaranteed by its proximity to violence and terror (achingly). And the young boy Miles is special from the very beginning because in hearing the voice he can see the face. And, as if seeing the face of God, he is forever changed, is himself touched with a bit of divinity and chosen to pass it along through his horn. To hear the voice is to witness the history. To embody the voice, to play it, to represent it, is to bear witness to that history. The Miles of



these passages situates the origin of one of the most original, recognizable, and innovative sounds in the music within a matrilineal lineage that is black and southern.

Long before his death Miles Davis was a mythic figure. This mythology provides a way of dealing with the complexities of the historical, the human Miles. By situating his musical origins in this particular cultural narrative, he becomes as inaccessible as that old black woman's voice, or accessible primarily as inspiration, as mythical ancestral figure who himself floats above as the source of others' creativity. Nowhere is this more evident than in Cassandra Wilson's "Traveling Miles," which ironically returns the sound to the mythical source—the voice of a outern black woman.

Now of course this particular southern black woman is herself an accomplished musician who had to master the complexity of Miles's music before lending her interpretation to his myth as well as her own emerging one.

Within the lyrics and the music of her CD, *Traveling Miles*, Cassandra Wilson conjures Miles the ancestor, who is not unlike the legendary wandering blues men; but he is also the urban jazz sophisticate. He travels from country roads to Seventh Avenue, from Manhattan to the Nigerian city and mythical land of the Yoruba deities—Ile Ife, from this world to the world beyond:

#### **Traveling Miles**

born with the lightning and thunder  
sound descending proud and bright  
restless as the wind  
singing god in the night.  
traveling miles  
crossing time  
shifting style  
traveling miles . . . and miles

you can hear him humming on a country road  
as the shadows grow to night  
swinging through seventh avenue  
underneath the city lights

ringing out with no fear or doubt  
we can live our dream right now  
right now

This moment he sits at the crossroads like Esu, the next he is born of lightning and thunder like Shango. His horn, like the voice of the old black woman, emanates from the landscape and through the heavens. Though the music, lyrics, and stories they tell invoke Davis, Wilson is the teller of this tale, the conjurer of this

set. Davis paved the road she travels to this space: a space she creates by producing, writing lyrics, composing music, and singing. She is in full control of the narrative.

The very first song on the CD is Miles's "Run the VooDoo Down," for which she provides lyrics. The CD closes with a VooDoo reprise, and this time Wilson is accompanied by West African vocalist Angelique Kidjo, who is from Benin. So not only do we have the voice of the black southern woman, but she is in dialogue, conversation with a voice that represents Du Bois's African forbear. The duet between the two women dominates: sung in English and in Yoruba, the song returns the sound to the "source": the black woman's voice. And yet these are thoroughly contemporary voices whose meeting is made possible by the circulation of global musical culture. The song, like the spiritual tradition it invokes, makes connections between Africa and the Americas and provides a context for contemporary Africans and African Americans (broadly defined) to forge a common cultural identity. In other words, it isn't about sources and origins at all. Kidjo calls in Yoruba; Wilson responds in Yoruba. Eventually the women's voices overlap and it becomes impossible to distinguish the call from the response. Finally, Wilson answers in the first-person blues narrative with which she opens the CD. Through her rendering of Davis's music, which he claims has its origin in the absent black woman's voice, Wilson reclaims the authority of the female voice, locating it not only as a mythical point of origin but as an ongoing participant in the construction of the music we call jazz. (An earlier and quite extraordinary attempt to render the black female voice as central to the making of improvisatory music while also acknowledging important connections between Africa and the Americas is Amina Claudine Myers's masterpiece, "African Blues" [*Amina Claudine Myers Salutes Bessie Smith*, 1980]).

### **Blue Notes and Butterflies**

Significantly, in both instances the black woman's voice that calls into being a version of the United States as it wishes itself to be and the black woman's voice as the source of black artistic creativity, the voice expresses a quality of longing: longing for home, for love, for connection with God, for heaven, for freedom. It also seems to be a conduit between what and where we are and what and where we want to be.

Perhaps it makes perfect sense that this black voice in the United States has become a quintessential American voice. It parallels the development of the nation. It is one of its founding sounds, and the singing black woman one of its founding spectacles. But because it develops alongside and not fully within the nation, it maintains a space for critique and protest. Here I am reminded of Jacques Attali, who writes that the "appropriation and control" of music "is a reflection of its power. . . . With music is born power and its opposite: subversion." He asserts, "Music, the quintessential mass activity, like the crowd, is simultaneously a threat and a necessary source of legitimacy: trying to channel it is a risk that every system of power must run."<sup>19</sup> The spectacle of the singing black woman at times of crisis as

well as the myth of the black woman's voice as the source of and represented by black male creativity are both evidence of this attempt to channel the power and subversive potential of music.

If we consider the ways that the American State Department selected jazz to represent national culture abroad during the Cold War, even as the government continued to deny black Americans full citizenship at home, or the contemporary global circulation of contemporary hip hop culture, then the black woman's voice as representative American voice doesn't seem so ironic after all. When we consider the United States's uncanny ability to co-opt and commodify voices of dissent, it doesn't appear so contradictory.

However, contemporary uses of black women vocalists at times of national crisis is not always an act of cynical co-optation. (Nonetheless, because there is more than cynical co-optation does not mean that vigilance vis-à-vis this possibility can let up in moments of profound healing.) If this voice soothed white children in the early days of the nation, then it nurtured whites in the same way those black women nannies and mammies did and thereby became a mark of their identity as well, even as they deny it or view it with condescension. For black Americans, black women's singing has articulated our most heartfelt political, social, spiritual, and romantic longings and in so doing has given us a sense of ourselves as a people beyond the confines of our oppression.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, because of its ability to express human longing for love, freedom, and spiritual meaning, this voice is representative of much of the human condition whether it be a people's longing for home or freedom or a nation's longing for an idealized vision of itself.

This was especially evident in a memorial service following the events of September 11, 2001. As part of a number of ecumenical services that took place around the city of New York, Riverside Church hosted an afternoon of dance, music, and prayer on September 16, 2001. Lillias White, an extraordinary African American vocalist who has appeared on Broadway, sang Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday." Throughout his career Ellington and his collaborator Billy Strayhorn often used singers for wordless vocals in their extended compositions. Singers such as Adelaide Hall and Kay Davis were used like instruments in these works and produced exciting and unique performances. Ellington was steeped in the classic studies of black life and culture (at his death he is said to have had a library of eight hundred volumes on African American history), so it is not surprising that in his own epic work inspired by that history, *Black, Brown, and Beige*, the black female voice would come to occupy a central place. In the first section of the extended work, "Black," Ellington offered "Come Sunday," a spiritual. At its initial performance Johnny Hodges provided the exquisite saxophone solo, but subsequently Ellington added words and invited Mahalia Jackson to sing them. Her rendition was recorded in 1958. Ellington later wrote, "This encounter with Mahalia Jackson had a strong influence on me and my sacred music, and also made me a much handsomer kind in the right light" (Ellington. *Music Is My Mistress*) "Come Sunday" returns in his later sacred concerts; he even recorded an especially beautiful version with the white Swedish vocalist Alice Babs.

Listening to versions of "Come Sunday," reading accounts of Ellington's writ-

ing and presenting it make it clear that *Black, Brown, and Beige* was not only an effort to “create a tone parallel to the history of the American Negro,” as Ellington has said, but that it was also a gift to the world. As an astute student of African American history and a major contributor to its culture, Ellington knew that history and the cultural traditions it has produced can be healing balms during times of uncertainty. This is one of the reasons why we so often turn to black musical traditions during times of national crisis. When Lillias White made her offering of Ellington’s “Come Sunday” she helped to articulate national pain and confusion, and one had the sense that, like Malindy, her voice took those concerns to the very ears of God. The “my people” of “Come Sunday” was initially meant to be the descendants of U.S.-born slaves, an oppressed minority. However, in this instance it not only articulated the confusion and pain of the diverse peoples of the United States but also of “God’s People”—at any given moment the inhabitants of the United States, Jews, black Americans, Palestinians, Iraqis, or Afro-Colombians—any people suffering the consequences of violence and oppression.

The moment White’s voice joined the air, like the blue notes it rendered, it was a voice that brought with it a specific, collective blue-black history, capable of expressing human desire. As with butterflies (whose beauty is born of fierce, difficult, and dangerous struggle),<sup>21</sup> that voice and those of us transported inside its sound are *momentarily* transcendent, ephemeral, beautiful, and, for a time, free before returning to a reality that might still be filled with danger and struggle.

## NOTES

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1. This listing is iconic and not empirical. In other words, I have not done an empirical investigation of how many times black women have sang at all moments of national crisis, but, instead, I am interested in moments that stand out in the national memory.
2. See Barrett, *Blackness and Value*, p. 76.
3. See Maultsby, “West African Influence and Retentions in U.S. Black Music” and “Africanisms in African-American Music”; Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*; Stuckey, *Slave Culture*.
4. In *Black Power* Richard Wright writes of his disappointment in a Ghanaian church choir because they don’t sound like African American singers. He cites Dunbar’s poem to describe the kind of singing he prefers: “I’d much rather have heard the kind of singing that Paul Laurence Dunbar described in his poem: “When Malindy Sings”: “She just opens her mouth and hollers, / ‘Come to Jesus,’ ’til you hear / Sinners’ trembling steps and voices / Timidlike a-drawing near; / Then she turns to ‘Rock of Ages,’ / Simply to the Cross she clings, / And you find your tears a-dropping / When Malindy sings. But that Gold Coast hymn evoked in me merely a cough of embarrassment behind my cupped palms” (p. 148). Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995).
5. Story, *And So I Sing*, p. 186. According to Story, “Black singers (but not all them) have been said to possess inordinate ranges and indescribably warm, dark sound.” She notes,

“In the high voices the lower end of the black voice is deeper, richer, more voluptuously shaped than that of many white singers.” Joan Sutherland feels that black singers have “beautifully rich, mellifluous and warm sound . . . with great sympathy, a loving sound.” Story interviewed Barbara Moore, chair of the Voice Department at Dallas Southern University, who explained that the black singing voice is actually the result of speech patterns and culture. According to Moore, most of her black “students grew up listening to and emulating the decidedly low-voiced inflection of gospel singing and rhythm and blues.” For Moore the “dark quality may be an extension of the speaking voice.” Consequently, she says her black students are much less likely than the white ones to explore the top range of their voices. This may be the case, although it doesn’t explain the clarity of coloratura soprano Kathleen Battle.

6. Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice” in Barthes, *Responsibility of Forms*.
7. See Mackey, “Other”; Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow, 1963), Zora Neale Hurston, “The Sanctified Church (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981), Brent Edwards, “The Seemingly Eclipsed Window of Form: James Weldon Johnson’s Prefaces,” *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* edited by Robert G. O’Meally. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.” Robert O’Meally, *The Jazz Singers: A Smithsonian Collection*
8. Quoted in Mackey, “Other,” p. 269.
9. Ibid. Mackey also quotes Henry Spaulding in 1863 who wrote, “The most striking of their barbaric airs would be impossible to write out.” See also Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, pp. 81–83.
10. Mackey, “Other,” p. 269.
11. Nathaniel Mackey identifies black singing as part of a larger universe of black linguistic practices “that accent variance [and] variability.” He calls these practices “othering practices” that “implicitly react against and reflect critically upon the different sort of othering to which their practitioners, denied agency in a society by which they are designated other, have been subjected.” See Mackey, “Cante Moro.”
12. See Story, *And So I Sing*. Story contends that “blackness as a description of the voice is not necessarily racial . . . it is a quality of vocal darkness, found in the sound of the Russian Feodor Chaliapin and the Italian Ezio Pinza. But a case is made for the particularly identifiable sound of certain geographic regions. . . . The Italianate, the Welsh, and the Slavic sounds all are determined by what the individual culture, through language and ethnic tradition, determines is beautiful” (p. 187).
13. Ellison, “As the Spirit Moves Mahalia.”
14. Maultsby, “Africanisms in African-American Music,” p. 92.
15. I am reminded here of the voices of Patti Labelle, Nona Hendryx, and Sarah Dash on “You Turn Me On”: three women’s voices, overlapping, all-powerful, bursting outside of language. It recalls Michael Poizat’s rendering of the opera diva’s voice as one where “the body’s libidinal drives emerge in sound unmediated by language, producing a sensation of radical loss, whereby castration, difference and subjectivity are annulled.” Dunn and Jones, in *Embodied Voices*, write that this “experience of loss threatens the stability of the patriarchal order” (p. 9).
16. Wilson, “Preface to *Three Plays*.”
17. So this is not about jazz per se except to the extent that there are some streams of jazz that are related to forms of artistic and intellectual production that find their inspiration in African American expressive culture. Let me say that while I do not have time to focus on them here I might also include George Gershwin on the Sea Islands or

Frederick Delius at the St. John's River in Florida who is said to have heard black plantation workers singing at night and described that moment as "a truly wonderful sense of musicianship and harmonic resource in the instinctive way in which they treated a melody and hearing their singing in such romantic surroundings it was then that I first felt the urge to express myself in music" (Jack Sullivan, p. 19).

18. Sam Floyd writes:

The impetus, tone and emotional quality of the blues may have come from Senegambia. Michael Coolen (1991, 3) has shown, for example, that Senegambians suffered inordinately from the slave trade, due to their convenient proximity to the Senegal and Gambia rivers, on which "slave factories" were located and where ships arrived to pick up human cargo. The consequent large concentration of Senegambian slaves in America . . . is the reason for the structural and tonal similarities between the blues and the Senegambian fodeet, which (1) uses cyclical form, with phrases played or sung to an "alternated use of tonic and secondary tonal centers," (2) commonly has AAB text structure, (3) makes use of a vocal practice in which the song begins on a high pitch and "gradually moves to lower pitches at the end," and (4) contains a low level of virtuosity with the option of a "hot" performance always available (16). This description, obviously, could be applied as accurately to the blues. (THE POWER OF BLACK MUSIC, 75)

See also "From Mali to Mamie: The History of the Blues," part 1, *Southern Cross the Dog* (Winter 2003), pp. 13–16: "Because of its proximity to Spain and Portugal, the chief slave-trading countries, most of the first slaves necessarily came from this region on the West Coast of Africa. This is the locus of the griot tradition and the strongest strain in the American Blues Tradition, with an emphasis on solo vocals. . . . Stringed instruments—predecessors to the banjo and the guitar—dominate the instrumentation, as does a distinct middle Eastern influence (again a matter of geography) that results in long droning melody lines" (p. 14).

19. Attali, *Noise*, p. 14.

20. Barrett convincingly argues that for Black Americans the singing voice "provides a primary means by which African Americans may exchange an expended, valueless self in the New World for a productive recognized self. It provides one important means of formalizing and celebrating an existence otherwise proposed as negative and negligible" (*Blackness and Value*, p. 57).

21. Here I am speaking metaphorically. I am not comparing the sound of White's voice to the "sound" of a butterfly.

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