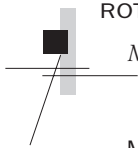


audiotopia

music, race, and america



josh kun



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Audiotopia

MUSIC, RACE, AND AMERICA

Josh Kun

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*For Michael Rogin and David Nash,
saviors and idols both, wherever they are.*

Listen with all your might.

Listen goddamn it!

Listen!

RAHSAAN ROLAND KIRK

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Lastly, to Twentynine Palms, for rescuing me, for finishing it.

Strangers among Sounds

IT ALL STARTED WITH A RECORD store and the Rock Island Line.

When I was growing up in West Los Angeles, my parents gave me a weekly allowance for doing things I should have been doing anyway: cleaning my room, washing the dishes, taking out the garbage. I was supposed to spend the money on weekend food, movies, and arcade games, but I never did. Instead, I would get on my silver BMX street bike, ride down streets that I knew I would see later that night in episodes of *CHiPs*, *Starsky and Hutch*, and *Charlie's Angels* (we lived blocks from the original 20th Century Fox studios backlot), and raid the bins at a used record store that kept its vinyl in musty standing crates too close to the street windows, its cassettes stacked in locked Plexiglas display cases.

The store was my refuge, and I knew its stock from front to back. I knew when a promotional copy of a new album dropped off by a local record exec or music journalist had come in, and I knew when someone had finally bought one of the three weathered copies of *Nugent Live* or the still-sealed pressing of Al Green's *Greatest Hits*. It's where I heard Tracy Chapman a month before her first record came out, where I could find the new Love and Rockets 12-inch, where I bought my J. Geils Band, Musical Youth, and Kool and the Gang tapes, and because you could listen to anything on the in-store turntable and cassette deck and because I was the store owner's most regular prepubescent customer, it was where I could listen to anything

I wanted for as long as I wanted. It was where musical knowledge was just waiting to reveal itself, a living archive of sound, a four-hundred-square-foot library that was made entirely, infinitely, of music. It was the first place I heard jazz and blues, the first place I heard punk and salsa, the first place I heard Jimmie Rodgers and Laurie Anderson and The Clash. There was no artist I couldn't try out, no genre I couldn't sample, no era that was off-limits. As early as fifth grade, music had become my entryway into a boundless social world of difference and possibility, and the best part was that there was no end to it. There was always more to hear, more to dislike, more to admire and covet. It's what, to this day, makes me anxious if I go for too long without a visit to the record store—only two ears, only so many hours in the day, so much more that I could be listening to.

My attachments to the music were so strong precisely because I felt—unquestionably, unflinchingly—that the music was mine, “loud yet so confidential,” as the poet Billy Collins has written¹. Building my record collection was my way of building my own world, creating an alternate set of cultural spaces that, through the private act of listening, could deliver me to different places and different times and allow me to try out different versions of my self. My parents soon caught on, and they began restricting the amount of money I could spend on albums and tapes. I still kept up my habit, but now instead of throwing my purchases into a conspicuous backpack, I transported them as illicit contraband. Albums were slid down the back of my pants, cassettes stuffed into my pockets or wrapped into a folded-up sweatshirt. Once safely in my room, I couldn't put them on fast enough—my fix doing its job, feeding me, taking me away, taking me closer and closer to who I wanted to be in the privacy of a child's bedroom with a red rug, a ceiling light masquerading as a glass basketball swished through a metal rim, and a cabinet full of stereo components.

Later in this introduction, I'll try to convince you that songs can be understood as audiotopias. It's a fancy word that I didn't have access to as a kid, but the concept—that music functions like a possible utopia for the listener, that music is experienced not only as sound that goes into our ears and vibrates through our bones but as a space that we can enter into, encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, learn from—was one I knew intimately. I lived inside the music I bought and to which I listened. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that what defines a utopia is that it has “no known location,” that it exists nowhere.² Which is precisely why music and songs are different. They are almost-places of cultural encounter that may not be physical places but nevertheless exist in their own auditory some-

where. The places music offers may not be material or tangible, but I know where I want to go when I want to get there. I can put on a song and live it, hear it, get inside its notes and chords, get inside its narratives and follow its journeys and paths. Dropping the needle or pressing the play button was the equivalent of walking into a building, entering into an architecture of sound, a space that can be seen and experienced only if it is heard.

When I listened I could see and hear what parts went into the building of that space—a melody from an African American spiritual, a guitar solo cribbed from Zeppelin, a rhythm from the Caribbean. Listening to a song's whole was always listening to its parts, to the crossings and exchanges and collaborations that went into its making. Music can offer maps in this way, and when I was younger the maps I heard were not just the maps of the song's cultural and historical genesis, but the map of my own life, a musical "You Are Here" that positioned me within the larger social world. "Add music, and you can instantly transport yourself, through inner-experience, into a different world," the African American poet Jean Toomer wrote back in 1937. "Music, however, though able to transport you into a different world, cannot keep you in that different world. . . . Once it is over for the time being, you slide back into this world."³ Toomer was right, up until that last part. We always slide back into this world, but, each time, we slide back in forever changed.

The folksinger Pete Seeger probably would have said that my run-in with music's social mapping skills was just another example of what he once dubbed "the world that music lives in."⁴ That was, indeed, what music gave me, access to the worlds it lived in. A song is never just a song, but a connection, a ticket, a pass, an invitation, a node in a complex network. But I was also aware of the other side of it, the worlds that live in music, the worlds that music—or, fast-forwarding again, the audiotopias of music—contains.

Beginning in 1948, Seeger played with The Weavers, a button-down folk quartet with radical race and labor politics who first made it big singing the songs of black folk-blues singer Leadbelly, translating their accounts of black life into musical languages accessible to socially conscious, protest-oriented whites. My father was one of them (he owned all The Weavers albums, none of Leadbelly's), and I was taught that The Weavers were as good as it gets, four lefty white folksingers belting Israeli folk songs, picket-line odes, and prison blues in harmonies that inspired people my parents' age to sing along in unison. Once I got over the sing-along tendency (sure, it happened at Thompson Twins concerts, but it's different when you're wear-

ing fluorescent socks and acid-washed Guess jeans), I heard the true importance of the group: their People's Movement approach to music was not only a way of understanding how culture can work, but a way of resisting the way culture can work. With *The Weavers*, it was impossible not to hear music as a tool of social change and a vehicle for community-building across proscribed social lines.

So there I was, the son of a Bronx-born, Jewish, L.A. doctor being raised on a steady diet of protest songs and sea shanties performed by the gospel-loving union activist son of a Southern Methodist preacher (Lee Hayes), the Paul Robeson—idolizing daughter of a Brooklyn Jewish mother active in the Ladies Garment Workers Union (Ronnie Gilbert), a guitar-plucking Coast Guard vet whose father was a ragman (Fred Hellerman), and Seeger, the Manhattan-born son of a violin-teaching mother and a radical folk-song-collecting musicologist father who got at least some of his inspiration from the family's black housekeeper, folksinger Elizabeth "Libba" Cotton.

I'd listen to Duran Duran with my friends, but at home I'd sing along to the tongue-twisting rhymes of "The Rock Island Line" (especially because its rollercoaster lyrics were more challenging to get right than Duran Duran's "Rio").⁵ Before I began my private elementary school that would get me into my private high school (with the sons of Hollywood elite and home-in-Aspen, home-in-Maui venture capitalists), this was the music I was exposed to. It came from singers who took their name from a German play about rebellious medieval weavers, who mediated between African American life and white folk fans, who, while selling over four million records between 1950 and 1951 on Decca, were advocating antiwar politics and racial justice. Unbeknownst to me then, I was fed the post-World War II era's most popular recorded voices of dissent. *The Weavers* were a four-part harmonic response to the social anxieties, race tensions, and frenetic leftist political suppressions that followed the end of the war, as black servicemen returned to a racially segregated domestic life with a new sense of entitlement and justice, and as paranoid anti-communist patriotism fueled Red Scare witch hunts. The suspect politics of *The Weavers'* music attracted the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and they were soon dropped from Decca and made taboo to booking agents and record store shelf-stockers.

When I was a teenager, my father took me to see Pete Seeger play at a local high school auditorium. It was a benefit for the legendary Sunset Hall, a feisty retirement home for aging leftist activists. It was one of my first concerts, and I watched a skinny white man with a gray beard sing the civil

rights anthem he helped popularize, “We Shall Overcome.” Seeger was a late addition to the song’s evolution from its beginnings as “I’ll Overcome Some Day,” a black spiritual written by a black reverend, Charles Tindley, and first published in 1901. In the early 1940s, Tindley’s version was reinvented by the black Tobacco Workers Union—who sang it as part of their Southern labor struggles—as “We Will Overcome.” Seeger was active at a labor and civil rights movement headquarters, the Highlander Folk Center, when in 1947 the “will” became “shall” and the song became synonymous with social transformation and political struggle.⁶

I wish I could make it easy and say that all this was actually my parents’ scene, that they were hard-core activists, that they actually hung out with black people, that they were ex-union leaders from the Lower East Side who became socialists and who cast write-in votes for Jesse Jackson each election until they went Green Party. But they weren’t. In fact, save for my father’s brief high school stint as a member of a communist youth league, I’ve never seen either of them be overtly political or socially dissenting (my mother is too generous and sensitive not to be a Democrat and my father can’t help being defensive when he admits to becoming a “social liberal, but a fiscal conservative”). But they did play me *The Weavers*, folk music that by then everyone knew was dangerous, and gave me the gift of understanding that, indeed, worlds do live in music and music does live in the world, even when those worlds aren’t necessarily yours.

Having *The Weavers* as a musical blueprint meant that from the beginning I got the message—however subconsciously—that music was about cultural exchange, internationalist interpretation, and radical politics. The *Weavers* were white, English-speaking, highly educated Americans, and yet some of their songs were in Spanish and Hebrew, some of their songs were written by Latin American revolutionaries, South African poets, and African American laborers. They identified as “American folksingers” and yet their America was different from McCarthy’s, different from Jim Crow’s, and different from suburbia’s. Their America was a provisional, ideal America where racial difference did not mean racial persecution, where rights and social welfare were not selective, where, as their partner-in-folk-crime Woody Guthrie would sing, the land belonged to everyone, from the Native Americans it was taken from to the poor black, white, and Mexican farmers who now worked its fields. But their America was also not exceptionalist or isolationist. Their America was part of a series of international flows, where melodies from one country woke up as different melodies in another. Even when *The Weavers* recorded an album to sing the

praises of the American folk song, their nationalism couldn't help but be internationalist: they named it *Folk Songs of America and Other Lands*.

One of the results of this commitment to coupling "America" with "Other Lands" was that years before I would read the revolutionary Cuban poetics of Jose Marti's *Versos sencillos* on my own, I would know how they went because of Seeger's version of "Guantanamera," a song originally composed by Cuban pianist and composer Julian Orbosón and based on a popular 1920 Cuban melody. Orbosón's choice of melody makes the transnational America–Latin America connection even more dense: a song that originally poked fun at Cuban women who fraternized with American soldiers stationed at Guantanamo. Seeger would urge that people sing "Guantanamera"—an exile's ode to an island homeland littered with lynched black Cubans and palm trees—in its original Spanish to "hasten the day [that] the USA . . . is some sort of bilingual country."⁷

As a child, I remember hearing Seeger's 1965 ode to heterogeneity, "All Mixed Up"—where he sings "No race of man is completely pure . . . The winds mix the dust of every land and so will man"—and realizing that it was the first time I had ever heard a musician talk explicitly about the politics of American race and, more to the point, about the impossibilities of racial purity. Seeger's America was a "mixed up" country, a land where hybridity is the cultural norm (and multilingualism ought to be), no matter what illusions racial purists attempt to pass off as fact. "One of America's claims to fame has been the ability to form hybrids," he wrote, "the ability to exploit the ideas given us by others." Seeger should know. His career was fueled by his knack for hybridizing traditions not his own, for "exploiting" ideas that belonged to others in order to create something of his own. "Wimoweh." "Guantanamera." "We Shall Overcome." "Roll Down the Wind." Hybrids and exploitations all.

Even though I never heard him say so, I can't help but think that my father started taking banjo lessons because of how much he liked what Seeger could pull off on his long-necked five-string. Though it has long been associated with white American folk and bluegrass music, Seeger never hid the banjo's roots in Africa. It is an instrument that has become synonymous with American vernacular music precisely because it was unwittingly imported here along with boats full of displaced Africans who woke up as enslaved property for sale on the auction blocks of New Canaan. And, for Seeger, there was nothing indigenous about the banjo's music, either. A search for American roots only led him outside of America, outside of the West. "The American folk style of playing seems to me to be basically non-

European,” he wrote in the early 1950s. “As more Americans take hold again of their traditions of folk music, many also become acquainted with different kinds of songs from various corners of the world.”⁸ This is the America I grew up hearing about, Seeger’s America, a land of the free founded on slavery and disenfranchisement and inequality, a country of slaves, exiles, refugees, and immigrants, a motley conglomerate he described on the pages of the *Daily World* in 1968 as “uprooted people.”⁹

My father’s parents—modern Orthodox Jews—came to the South Bronx in the early 1940s from Paris. They had been running a small Hungarian restaurant in Montmartre ever since they left Hungary, on the run from Hitler’s march across Europe. Maybe my father heard some of that in Seeger, too—music of his uprooted parents, melodies of the legacy he had been handed, songs that were his own private worlds, his own spaces, his own sing-along audiotopias, where he could figure out, just like I would decades later, how to be himself.

“Congratulations, you are all now American citizens,” the U.S. judge performing the naturalization ceremony proclaims. At the close of the service, that most fundamental public ritual of obligatory American civic and political belonging that converts the illegal into the legal, the undocumented into the documented, the national stranger into the national citizen, something unexpected happens, something that Seeger probably could have predicted would have happened.

A song begins.

The song, “Mis dos patrias,” comes from Los Tigres del Norte, the living legends of modern-day *norteño* music who themselves came to California as “uprooted people,” undocumented immigrants, back in 1968, from the Mexican state of Sinaloa. Their song asks us to imagine that on that day, Los Tigres themselves are in that courtroom, just another group of *mexicanos* being inducted into the legal rituals of American nationalism. The song begins when their citizenship begins; the music is their first act of public expression as new U.S. citizens.

That Los Tigres would make such public spectacle of their new citizenship might at first seem surprising. For the past three decades, the band members have proudly asserted themselves as unassimilated Spanish-speaking *indocumentados*, living a Mexican reality that is in, but not of, America. On their album covers, the self-proclaimed “autenticos idolos del pueblo,” have mostly presented themselves in two different guises: down-home, cowboy-hat and leather-vest-wearing immigrant farm workers rest-

ing on top of horses, combines, and broken-down wagons, or slick urban *vaqueros* stepping out in matching tiger-striped and tasseled suits.

Without any help from any of the “big five” U.S.-based multinational record companies, Los Tigres have averaged at least an album a year (half of which have gone gold in the United States) on Fonovisa (the profitable recording arm of Mexican television conglomerate Televisa); starred in twenty films produced and distributed in Mexico, most of them based on the plots of their most successful songs; and won a 1988 Grammy for their *Gracias America . . . sin fronteras*, a *norteño* first.¹⁰ That album’s lead song, “America,” is a direct attack on assertions of U.S. chauvinism and imperialist national identity claims that conflate, and subsequently erase, the entire American continent in the name of the “America” that is the United States. “I am from America,” Los Tigres state with pride, but their America is the America of the Americas. “In the North they call me Latino,” they continue, “they don’t want to call me American.” Los Tigres call themselves American—American in the spirit not of Jefferson or Washington, but of the Puerto Rican *jibaro*, the Cuban *guajiro*, and the Mexican *charro*. The song begins by quoting the bass line from Richie Valens’s “La Bamba,” a song raised in a Pacoima garage in L.A.’s San Fernando Valley, but originally born decades before across the border in Veracruz as a traditional *son jarocho*.¹¹

For Latino audiences within the United States, the songs of Los Tigres are perhaps best known for their commitment to giving voice to the struggles of undocumented Mexican immigrants. When the band performs live, fans pile scraps of paper bearing song requests and dedications to family and loved ones back in Mexico on the edge of the stage. During their intermissions, band members take time to pose for family pictures and sign autographs. The identification between Los Tigres’ fans in the United States and the stories of hard-working, Mexico-proud immigrants that their songs tell runs deep. Partly, it’s because the protagonists of Los Tigres’ songs are not *agringado*. They come to “los United” to work, to earn a living, to forge what they imagine will be a better life. As they put it in one song, California is not the golden land of guaranteed opportunity—the California that, for all of my Weavers and Pete Seeger listenings, I never questioned between trips to the beach and house parties in Bel Air mansions. It is rather a *jaula de oro*, a cage of gold—a dangerous, often vicious trap that disguises crippling lies as bountiful promises.¹² To borrow a formulation from George Lipsitz, the California of Los Tigres del Norte is more “historical California”—the lived experience of California as a mediation zone between con-

flict and coalition—than “rhetorical California,” the California of media boosterism and Hollywood fantasy that promotes fictions of plenitude by ignoring realities of destruction and struggle.¹³ Los Tigres, who have repeatedly supported the idea of an America “without borders,” recorded “Jaula de oro” just one year before the 1986 approval of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, a “take back the border” initiative that increased U.S.–Mexico border policing, doubling the number of active Border Patrol agents and dedicating new funds to promote border clampdowns.

It should come as no surprise, then, that there was more to the presence of Los Tigres in a U.S. naturalization ceremony than newfound patriotism. Los Tigres recorded their citizenship song “Mis dos patrias” as a response to the 1994 passage of Proposition 187, the California measure that denied basic health and education benefits to undocumented immigrants.¹⁴ The protagonist in the song becomes a citizen not to publicly pledge allegiance to the dream of American possibility but to protect his undocumented children from a law that directly puts their lives at risk and renders their humanity insignificant and inconsequential (“187,” as Snoop Dogg and countless other L.A. hip-hop MCs like to remind us, is also police code for murder). Thus, unlike past Yankee Doodle, My-Country-’Tis-of-Thee popular music tributes to the glories of American citizenship I grew up hearing (think Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” or Neil Diamond’s “America”), “Mis dos patrias” engages citizenship as a survival tactic against xenophobic terror, in which Mexicans pledge allegiance to their adopted country for fear of being killed by it.

The singer insists that his new status as a U.S. citizen does not signal his assimilation into American culture or a betrayal of his Mexican identity. He reminds us that he “arrived crying in the land of the Anglo-Saxon” and has since worked hard to take care of his family in a state that has now begun to strip away his rights. Even with his new citizenship, he is still as Mexican as “el pulque y el nopal.” “Don’t call me a traitor,” he urges. “I love both my countries. In mine, I left my dead. Here, my children were born. Defending their rights, I can’t be a traitor.” In “Mis dos patrias” Los Tigres refuse the assumed singularities and national unities of normative U.S. citizenship, insisting that Mexico and the United States might be “two countries,” but now they live “in the same heart.”¹⁵

By staging “Mis dos patrias” as the conclusion to a naturalization ceremony, Los Tigres refuse to accept the scripts of U.S. citizenship being handed them, scripts that urge singular national allegiance, singular national pride, and singular public participation in American national cul-

ture. Instead, Los Tigres approach their new citizenship as an open space of negotiation and they write their own musical script—one that flies two flags, with *pulque* and *nopal* for all—in which they imagine themselves as actors and agents who, as far from the reality of California political life as it might be, might actually have control of the future their new citizenship sets up.

This approach to citizenship, particularly one rooted in migratory communities directly involved with the transnational movements of capital and labor, has in recent years received many different names that add levels of complexity to Seeger’s “uprooted people” model. Among them are Aiwha Ong’s “flexible citizenship” and May Joseph’s “nomadic citizenship,” both of which leave room for voicings of patriotisms not grounded in any one specific, bounded geopolitical territory but instead dispersed across unpredictable cartographies. Both of these emergent models of citizenship get performed across and within national boundaries, rather than obeying the rules and demands of strictly mapped national formations.¹⁶ In Joseph’s formulation, the alternative or counter-citizenship that Los Tigres suggest is one that is both a condition imposed by the institutions and ideologies of the state and a strategy of negotiation with these very forces.

Los Tigres treat citizenship as something they can use and shape, rather than a preordained set of demands that are put upon them. “Citizenship is a status whose definitions are always in process,” Lauren Berlant has written. “It is continually being produced out of a political, rhetorical, and economic struggle over who will count as ‘the people’ and how social membership will be measured and valued.”¹⁷ On that day in that California courtroom, Los Tigres told us exactly who counts as “the people,” and why and on what terms, and they did it in a way that, as we will see in the pages of this book, has been one of the primary means for articulating a public response to the racial and ethnic designations of nationalist U.S. political culture throughout the twentieth century: they did it with a song.

Put simply, Los Tigres know how nations work. Like Seeger, they know that it is the job of the nation to actively assimilate “foreign” elements into the cultural order of a juridically bounded state territory. It’s an argument Zygmunt Bauman has made well: citizenship, both legal and cultural, is the key point of conversion to the national religion, when outsiders become insiders, others become natives, all through the promotion and enforcement of a common culture. Citizenship and cultural conformity start to sound more and more like synonyms, two concepts which, in the context of the

nation, exist in a codependent relationship which no intellectual therapy can undo. Cultural conformity in the public sphere is both the condition of citizenship and the means of preserving it; in the eyes of the state, our cultural lives can be seen as our political lives. The means for the achievement of this conformity, this conversion, in Bauman's terms, into the church of the national state which requires submission of the flock, is assimilation—the process of making the unlike “like,” of dissolving difference into a constructed commonality of experience, history, and beliefs, of making family out of strangers, giving the uprooted the same set of new roots.¹⁸

So with “Mis dos patrias,” not unlike the black spiritual that begot the union song that begot “We Shall Overcome,” Los Tigres embrace political citizenship while trying to avert cultural conformity. They submit to political citizenship to a U.S. nation imagined in relation to a bounded territory and yet continue to identify as free national agents whose identities and lives move in and out of this territory, but whose cultural production works necessarily *sin fronteras*, without borders, and is dedicated to Latino audiences like themselves who approach their citizenship with caution and ambivalence. And as Bauman reminds us, ambivalence is powerful because it is an “undecidable,” both inside and outside, both yes and no, the threatening, evasive monkey wrench in the grinding gears of assimilation.¹⁹

I didn't hear Los Tigres' “Mis dos patrias” until I had finished writing the bulk of this book, but in many ways it encapsulates the reasons why I wanted to write it in the first place. And those reasons are rather simple. First, though you would hardly know it by the way it gets covered in the press and in the mainstream media, popular music is one of our most valuable tools for understanding the impact of nationalism and citizenship on the formation of our individual identities. And second, it is also one of our most valuable sites for witnessing the performance of racial and ethnic difference against the grain of national citizenships that work to silence and erase those differences.

As I heard in the music of The Weavers—a group, we should remember, that was branded as “un-American” in the blacklist 1950s—the histories of popular music in the United States cut straight to the heart of how “American” identities get made, making audible the extent to which the negotiation with citizenship always involves, at some level, a negotiation with strangeness from a pre-fab national norm. “Mis dos patrias” is a way for Los Tigres to articulate both their dual citizenship and their dual strangeness:

strangers to a U.S. nationalism threatened by their presence and strangers to a Mexican cultural nationalism threatened by their departure (a departure all too often figured as betrayal).

Strangeness is identity's uncomfortable, but required, double. To be a stranger to others or to oneself is to unsettle identities already in use, to force identity to look itself in the mirror, take stock, and really understand what it sees in the new light cast from the shadow of the stranger at the door. In his 1975 memoir *The Devil Finds Work*, James Baldwin wrote about the experience of watching movies as an experience of identity formation and identity confrontation, an experience in which the movie watcher watches the stranger and is forced to watch him or herself.

The question of identity is a question involving the most profound panic—a terror as primary as the nightmare of the mortal fall. This question can scarcely be said to exist among the wretched, who know, merely, that they are wretched and who bear it day by day—it is a mistake to suppose that the wretched do not know that they are wretched; nor does this question exist among the splendid, who know, merely, that they are splendid, and who flaunt it, day by day: it is a mistake to suppose that the splendid have any intention of surrendering their splendor. An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger: the stranger's presence making you the stranger, less the stranger than to yourself.²⁰

Baldwin watched movies in the dark of a theater. I listened to records in my bedroom, each tape and album I smuggled home its own world full of strangers. My obsessive, private listenings were, and continue to be, ways of approaching a self through the lives of strangers who I meet through sound. After all, every time we listen to a song, a stranger enters the gates, an identity is menaced, an identity is questioned. Even if we have heard the song before, even if the song is our favorite song, one to which we sing along, lip-sync, or air-guitar, each listening contains the newness of a new context—a different room, a different mood, a different volume, a different time of day. The world we encounter at the level of sound and acoustic experience is a new world of social experience and emotional possibility, but it is also, necessarily, a strange world that we negotiate through listening. I have always been drawn to popular music for precisely this power: its innate ability to refuse to stand still, to frustrate fixity, to confuse authority and baffle totality, to never be the same thing.

How could you not talk of identity when talking about music? When you hear it, music makes you immediately conscious of your identity precisely because something outside of you is entering your body—alien sounds emitted from strangers you sometimes cannot see that enter, via vibration and frequency, the very bones and tissues of your being. All musical listening is a form of confrontation, of encounter, of the meeting of worlds and meanings, when identity is made self-aware and is, therefore, menaced through its own interrogation.

In a synagogue in San Francisco, I felt like Kafka's dog.

Often a stranger to my own Jewishness, and usually a stranger to the tenets and practice of Judaism, I was, nonetheless, a graduate student sitting in synagogue during the High Holy Days with a yarmulke on my head and an open prayer book in my hands. I tell people that I mainly go to these services because I love their music, because nothing turns me inward like the deep, melancholic moan of the cantor, his voice flooding through a language I do not understand to conjure faraway faces and emotions: refrigerated leftover milk and hot cabbage on chipped dime-store porcelain plates, my grandfather's crisp, double-breasted wool suits and Orbach's ascots, my grandmother's baroque costume jewelry that overflowed out of vanity drawers in a bedroom that she rarely left.

My favorite has always been "Hine ma tov," an overwhelming ache of a song based on Psalm 133:1 and composed around a traditional Sufi motif. I only recently learned what its words meant: "How good it is / and how pleasant / when brothers and sisters dwell together / in harmony." Such a hopeful sentiment housed in such dark, crying beauty; such a blissful utopia clothed in such a mournful Old Testament blues. It is the only religious song for which I close my eyes. It is instinctual and automatic: my lids shut, my head tilts down toward my feet, and my body rocks back and forth, back and forth, in an uncontrollable *daven* from an unreliable worshiper, a stranger outside the Torah's gates.

That night the shofar was blown and, as usual, I marveled at the triumph and violence of its sound—a blast of human air sprayed through the horn of a dead ram. When you hear the blowing of the shofar, there is no way to feel at ease with it. It is always an affront, always uncomfortable, always aggressive in its volume and its frequency, in the sheer force of its howling, breathy noise. I had felt that way about it since I was a child, but that night the rabbi gave it a name. Quoting Torah, he called it "a stranger among sounds." The shofar is certainly a stranger among sounds, but it also makes

strangers out of all who hear it. We are strangers among its sounds, its blasts of bleating air confronting all of us in that room equally, forcing all of us to confront our identities as listeners.

But while I was supposed to be taking in the rabbi's words and applying them to my own stake in that Jewish New Year, my mind was elsewhere. I was thinking of *The Weavers*, of Seeger, of *Los Tigres del Norte*, of California and America, of citizens and aliens. This idea of being a stranger among sounds immediately seemed a fitting way to understand how identity and listening work and, especially in the context of "American" music and "American" culture, a fitting way to approach the study of music's relationship to the production of listening subjects, citizens of pop music's myriad republics of sound. Popular music has always been my refuge because it is the refuge of strangers; because in the world of popular music, we are all strangers among sounds made by others.

The job of the listener, or at least one of them, is to register our experience of ourselves by confronting ourselves as strangers in the sounds that we make our own. In the United States, popular music has always offered accessible, everyday cultural spaces where strangeness and familiarity are actively negotiated, where difference and community are actively experienced and imagined, and where opposition and consensus actively butt heads. It hit me hard that night: music is a mode of relation, a point of contact. All of the people who I discuss in this book—all of the people who make and listen to this music of contact—are all strangers who listen and listeners who are strange. They are national strangers because they use music to make strangers of themselves, to hear themselves as different from the music all around them, and to audibly figure out their relationship to a national order they have little control over. They all embody the conflict that was apparent that very night in the San Francisco synagogue: the song's call for harmony, the shofar's call for dissonance; the song's call for unity, the shofar's insistence on difference.

I was reminded of something I read in high school that I barely understood: Franz Kafka's parable, "Investigations of a Dog." It's about a dog who has left "the canine community" but is still a dog, and who comes upon a group of other dogs. He visually recognizes them as dogs, but when they make music, the sounds they utter—which sound familiar, which he should recognize—are instead so inscrutably strange that he is sent into a dog identity crisis. "From the empty air they conjured music," the dog reports, and "everything was music. . . . I was profoundly confused by the sounds that accompanied them, yet they were dogs nevertheless, dogs like

you and me.” His confusion leads to a rejection of the dogs, his refusal and inability join in with their concert, “this blast of music which seemed to come from all sides, from the heights, from the deeps, from everywhere, surrounding the listener, overwhelming him, crushing him.”²¹

In his introduction to one of the first books I ever read in order to get acquainted with the field of American Studies, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Constructions of America*, Sacvan Bercovitch calls “Investigations of a Dog” a “model of cross-cultural criticism.” When the dog’s recognition of strange sounds turns him back inward to examine his own strangeness in a larger world of sound, he does not call for an erasure of that strangeness or the silencing of the differences he hears. Instead, the dog understands his listening as a way of confronting and living with difference and strangeness, his aim “not to harmonize ‘apparent’ differences (in the manner of pluralist consensus), but on the contrary to highlight conflicting appearances, so as to explore the substantive differences they imply.”

Positioning himself as a Canadian scholar who is himself a stranger confronting the alien sounds of American nationalism, Bercovitch hears the rhetoric of American consensus and cultural univocality, rhetoric that for so long characterized the trajectory of American Studies in the U.S. academy as “the music of America.” Yet, Kafka’s dog offers a way out. Kafka’s dog hears “the music of America,” the music that is supposed to collect him into its concert of dog oneness, and cannot recognize it. He understands his difference from it, his strangeness in its acoustic midst, and instead of discarding or ignoring that difference, he lives with it and uses it as the lens through which he interprets and describes the larger social world.²²

The “music of America” that Bercovitch hears—the ideology of American nationalism and consensus that *The Weavers* and *Los Tigres del Norte* had acknowledged and disputed for so long—and the way Kafka’s dog refuses to recognize it and attempts to find new ways of listening to a different music of America where strangers make sounds that are not incorporated into harmonious concert, is precisely the terrain in which this book is interested. Kafka’s dog never appears again in this book, but he shadows every chapter. He is one of my models of investigative, critical listening, a dog who is suspicious of harmony and concert precisely because of how threatening harmony and concert can be to the sustenance of difference. He is suspicious that the harmonies of dog music will define him, a dog who has left the dog fold, merely as a dog. He is suspicious that dog harmony will “overwhelm” his difference as a dog.

The dog even wonders aloud why he is so compelled to not be satisfied with the harmony and sameness he is supposed to sing along with. “Why do I not do as others,” he asks himself, “live in harmony with my people and accept in silence whatever disturbs the harmony, ignoring it as a small error in the great account, always keeping in mind the things that bind us happily together, not those that drive us again and again, as though by sheer force, out of our social circle?”²³ Kafka’s dog performs the same kind of critical listening that Los Tigres do, the same kind of critical listening that all of the subjects of this book do—a critical listening that does not necessarily reject consensus or harmony, but questions its default functionality as an apparatus of obligatory group belonging and nationalist solidarity. All of them hear “the music of America” and, instead of joining in, launch an investigation of just who and what is allowed into its chorus.

I’m showing my cards early. As you’ll soon see, one of the goals of this book is to include popular music in recent debates around the futures of American Studies, multiculturalism, and diversity that have been so extensively carried out by scholars and critics as ideologically varied as Cornel West, David Noble, George Sanchez, Arthur Schlesinger, David Palumbo-Liu, Lisa Lowe, and David Hollinger, among many others.²⁴ In a 1991 essay in *College English*, for example, Gregory Jay went so far as to call for an end to “American Literature,” because of the erasures that the use of “American” demands and repeatedly performs. “As long as we use ‘American’ as an adjective,” he wrote, “we reinforce the illusion that there is a transcendental core of values and experiences that are essentially ‘American’ and that literary or cultural studies may be properly shaped by selecting objects and authors according to how well they express this essence.” The multicultural reality of the United States must instead replace the fantasy of a universalist America where all differences are subsumed under the cloak of an imagined common cultural core. For Jay, “a multicultural pedagogy initiates a cultural re-vision . . . the de-centering of cultural chauvinism.”²⁵

Popular music participates in this, but not as a supplementary accomplice or a sideline example. My contention is that popular music in “America” is an archive of sound, performance, and culture that has cultural re-visioning and de-centering as its organizing principles. As with literature, the point is not that new musical forms are being created by new musical communities and therefore must be “added” or “included” into the definition of “American,” but that music has always been re-visioning America according to a multicultural pedagogy no matter how hard advocates of American consensus have worked to keep it quiet. The music has always

been there and it has always been all mixed up. Its clashes and exchanges and convergences and contests, its never-ending play of differences and particularities, have always been there. The problem is that not enough people have been listening.

By trying to come to terms with Kafka's dog as a minoritized listener defined by his difference, whose "investigations" de-center the chauvinism of the dogs he encounters, I am, in a sense, attempting to foreground popular music's role in the development of what Chela Sandoval has called "differential consciousness," an oppositional consciousness of self, citizenship, and nation that actively refutes and re-orders oppressive hierarchies of power and control.²⁶ The performers and listeners I deal with in this book work through music's differential power, making and listening to popular music in the face of oppressive state systems and ethno-racial hierarchies that seek to erase difference, in order to find new, more sustaining ways of living anew in a world hostile to your survival. Which loops me right back to audiotopias, to music's utopian potential, its ability to show us how to move toward something better and transform the world we find ourselves in. Drawing on the ideas of Richard Dyer, Jill Dolan has written that if cultural performances like music are not "expressly political," they are "usefully emotional." The emotion and the sensibility that music offers is what leads to a change in who we are, who we want to be, and how we want the world to be. For Dyer and Dolan, music does not offer a model of a utopian world. "Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies," Dyer writes. "It presents what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized."²⁷ Music gives us the feelings we need to get where we want to go.

I love popular music for its ambivalences and contradictions, how it can be the stuff of injury, but also the stuff of sustenance, joy, strength, identification, pleasure, defense, and liberation. My aim is not to romanticize popular music as a safe-house for revolution and resistance. Music can't topple regimes, break chains, or stop bullets. But it can keep us alive. Music can always surprise us, be unpredictable, refuse to submit to what is put upon it. Music can always sound different from one listening moment to another, and mean radically different things to all who hear it. There is no one, single, all-encompassing way of listening, and that flexibility (and the infinite possibilities it opens up) is much of what drives this book.²⁸

In this regard, I'm inspired by something the musicologist Philip Brett wrote in 1997 as part of a debate about the role of sexuality in classical music scholarship. Brett angrily refused to allow anyone—scholars, critics, other

fans—to tell him how to listen, how to identify, how to make meaning that in many ways nourished him, kept him alive as a gay man. “My own tactics for dealing with any music with which I identify,” he wrote, “is to insist on the possibility of difference, to hear its separateness rather than its indebtedness to models, to emphasize the value of distinct critical hearings of it, and to try gently to disrupt any totalizing vision as being characteristic of a dominant ideology that has for much of my life contested my right to a valid sentient experience.”²⁹ My hope is that this book investigates popular music for what it does best: its validation of our own sentient experience—the important, vital, and sustaining difference of it—against the grain of the models put upon us by forces beyond our control.

Pete Seeger. Los Tigres del Norte. Kafka’s dog. The sound of the shofar. Music insists on the possibility of difference, even when that difference is a difference from ourselves, even when that difference is something we have not yet learned how to listen to.

Chapter 1 begins with what is surely the single most influential and, at least in the popular imagination, enduring and familiar attempt to approach America as a nation of music, a nation that could be listened to, a nation defined by its songs, its singers, and the people who hear them: Walt Whitman’s 1860 poem “I Hear America Singing.” But when I started working on this book as a dissertation, Whitman was about the last person on my mind. I had been spending most of my free time writing about hip-hop, *rock en español*, jazz, and other forms of popular music that seemed not only to have little to do with Whitman’s grand ideas of democracy and poetic nationhood, but seemed to work in loud, noisy, pissed-off opposition to it. (What did Whitman have to do with L.A.’s NWA or Mexico City’s Maldita Vecindad?) I associated Whitman, and in many ways, as you’ll see, still do, with the kind of nativist and conservative nationalist rhetoric that has, throughout the past century, galvanized right-wing, Republican politics by giving them a safe, bearded, sun-tanned—kinder, gentler—face to hide behind. For me, regardless of what the truth of Whitman’s poems ever revealed, Whitman was always a characteristic signifier of beaming, confident American nationalism who fell into the wrong hands, the poetic poster boy of a soul-stirring patriotic democracy that had for decades left little or no room for the communities and cultures to whose music I had dedicated my life.

But the more I began exploring the relationship of popular music to formations of American national identity and to the performance of racial and

ethnic difference against the grain of imposed and policed monoculturalism, the more Whitman trailed me. He is the quintessential American listener, the American listener whose listenings helped shape the sound of what he heard. “I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen,” Whitman once wrote, “and accrue what I hear into myself . . . and let sounds contribute toward me.”³⁰ Any notion of a nation rendered and revealed through its sounds—nation-formation as an acoustic act, a series of aural events—had some connection back to 1860, when Whitman wrote “I Hear America Singing.” Of course, other American writers before Whitman—in their search to establish a native, exceptionalist, New World American culture distinctly and proudly independent from the Old World of European tradition—had turned to listening, music, and song as ways of expressing national character. Most notably Emerson, who cast American cultural independence as a revolution of listening, writing in 1837, “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.” But Whitman’s poem went the farthest. “I hear America singing,” he proclaimed, “the varied carols I hear.” Whitman turned the nation—the idea of it, the fantasy of it—into a collection of sounds and songs. America was songs, and to be an American was to hear those songs and to live within the ideological swirl of America’s proud music.

The premise of this book revolves around the idea that “hearing America sing” should not mean hearing many voices folded into one across a national terrain with closed borders. That is, hearing America sing should not mean selectively listening for sounds and songs that replicate and reaffirm conservative ideologies of cultural consensus and racial univocality. Music in American life is the story of racial and ethnic difference; it is the story of both nation formation and de-formation, the audible soundtrack to a nation as it continually packs and unpacks itself. The song of America is not singular or pretty or triumphant, but endlessly hybrid, multiple, heterogeneous, and enriching—an always available site of psychological reward, nourishment, and survival for populations who have been taught over and over again that their lives do not matter. In a sense, this book grew out of my desire to take music back from the ideologues who misuse it and to listen to America sing against the Whitmanian grain in order to hopefully hear what has been for so long kept silent—the myriad differences that nationalist American listeners are willfully deaf to, the minoritized voices left out of the national chorus.

An assumption that undergirds almost everything on these pages goes like this: there is no history of racial formation in the Americas that is not

a history of popular music, and there is no history of inter-American popular music without a history of racial formation.³¹ This book is a reminder of something that Stuart Hall has already set out, that we must never forget that popular music, like all forms of popular culture, is hybrid, synchronized, and the result of multiple convergences, compromises, overlaps, recodings, and appropriations. As such, popular music does not simply produce difference; difference is not merely an effect of the popular. It *is* difference. The task of the listening critic, then, is to track what Hall describes as “the mark of difference inside forms of popular culture.”³²

In proposing an American listening that listens for the differences that constitute the musical landscape of America, I’m suggesting a listening that follows a post-nationalist model rather than a nationalist one. In using the term *post-nationalist*, I’m referring to recent work by a group of scholars concerned with finding ways of doing American Studies that do not replicate the mistakes of previous generations of scholars: reinstituting fictitious cultural unities; practicing an intellectual colonialism that claims the Americas as the United States; ignoring racial, ethnic, and sexual difference because it disrupts the national fantasy; enforcing whiteness as Americanness, obligatory monoculturalism as political and cultural citizenship. Popular music is, by its nature, a post-nationalist formation. While it may take root in national formations, impact national audiences, and impact the creation of national ideas and politics, music is always from somewhere else and is always en route to somewhere else. It is always post- whatever context or circumstance defines it. It has always the potential to defy you, move beyond you, be something you never thought it could be. It is made of difference and speaks to difference. Music can be of a nation, but it is never exclusively national; it always overflows, spills out, sneaks through, reaches an ear on the other side of the border line, on the other side of the sea.³³

In that sense, then, I’d like to think that moments of this book are in dialogue with one of the books that inspired it, Greil Marcus’s *Mystery Train*, a landmark study of popular music as a formative part of the American national landscape. Yet because Marcus’s approach to music criticism comes more out of the Perry Miller and “myth and symbol” schools of American Studies—both of which have ties to American exceptionalism—*Mystery Train* still hears through Whitman’s ears. The book ends with a nod to Whitman, with Marcus characterizing the musicians he’s discussed—from Robert Johnson to Elvis to The Beach Boys—as “good democrats.” For Marcus, Whitman is a suitable forefather for American music criticism because, as he puts it, “He was interested in an artist’s ability to determine the

feel of American experience; to become a part of the instinctive response of the people to events; to affect the quality and costs of daily life.”³⁴

Marcus writes passionately about how his musicians make music within this classic American orbit of romantic democracy, but “America” is never questioned. Whose America? The fact that there are different Americas, that there are Americans who inhabit American-ness from different positions and with different relations (some more hostile, some more welcomed than others) undoubtedly disrupts the democratic rush of this new vision of a musical America. Amy Kaplan warns against the recycling of previous American Studies models that leave the fantasy of American consensus and univocality intact, as well as against models that reaffirm the national borders of the American idea. She writes, “American nationality can still be taken for granted as a monolithic and self-contained whole, no matter how diverse and conflicted, if it remains implicitly defined by its internal social relations, and not in political struggles for power with other cultures and nations, struggles which make America’s conceptual and geographic borders fluid, contested, and historically changing.”³⁵

My answer to all this is to propose that when we talk about music in America, and music’s role in shaping American identities and American meanings, we should be thinking of music in terms of the differences it contains, the differences it makes audible, not the unities or harmonies it can be used to fabricate. We should be thinking of pieces of music—be they songs, samples, lyrics, chords, harmonies, rhythms—as “audiotopias,” small, momentary, lived utopias built, imagined, and sustained through sound, noise, and music. This, of course, requires another adjustment, to think of music in terms of space and in terms of its spaces—the spaces that the music itself contains, the spaces that music fills up, the spaces that music helps us to imagine as listeners occupying our own real and imaginary spaces.

Music is, after all, a spatial practice, evoking, transcending, and organizing places along spatial trajectories.³⁶ Because of music’s ability—both before and especially after the age of mechanical reproduction and the rise of economic globalization—to move between places and locations, understanding it according to the rules of space isn’t much of a novel proposal—after all, that was precisely what Whitman was doing with “I Hear America Singing,” using music to map a particular space based on the spaces it is thought to represent. But the key difference here is that thinking about music in terms of its potential for audiotopias does not involve space as a fixed, static, unchanged landscape. The spaces of music may produce

maps, but they are maps that move. “Space is composed of intersections of mobile elements,” Michel de Certeau has written. “It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it.”³⁷

Understanding music spatially is one way of tracking music’s movements, witnessing and listening for its migrations and travels. It follows, then, that the traveling stories of music can also be considered, as de Certeau suggests, “delinquent,” in that they exhibit a “challenging mobility that does not respect places.”³⁸ But music does not respect places precisely because it is capable of inhabiting them while moving across them—of arriving while leaving. Through music, space is constructed and de-constructed, shaped and shattered, filled up and hollowed out. Music creates spaces in which cultures get both contested and consolidated and both sounded and silenced—double acts of delinquency that question both the geopolitical boundaries of the modern nation-state and the disciplinary boundaries that govern its study in the academy.

Such an emphasis on space disrupts the more exclusively temporal and historical epistemological biases that, as the urban theorist and geographer Edward Soja has gone to great lengths to demonstrate, have tended to characterize modern social theory. By embracing the idea of music as an audiotopia, we are embracing music’s role in what Soja calls “the lifeworld of being creatively located not only in the making of history but also in the construction of human geographies, the social production of space and the restless formation and reformation of geographical landscapes.”³⁹ Yet, by calling for a renewed attention to music’s spatialization, to its cartographies and mappings, I not only want to draw direct links between music and the formulation and policing of national spaces—through audible borders and boundaries—but also to suggest that audiospatiality also involves the production of identities in sound.⁴⁰ My teenage record store runs and bedroom listening sessions were themselves acts of musical identity-making, moments when my identity became a geography of crossed and crossing sounds, a mobile space of musical interaction. Lawrence Grossberg has argued that “a logic of spatiality” is one of the key factors in the articulation of identities, that “subjectivity describes the points of attachment from which one experiences the world”—leaving the very process of subject-formation and “individuation” as processes of spatialized belonging and identification.⁴¹

Throughout *Audiotopia* I suggest that this convergence of sound, space, and identity occurs through audiotopias, a concept that deserves further explanation. I began thinking about the possibility of an audiotopia—the

space within and produced by a musical element that offers the listener and/or the musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world—after reading about Michel Foucault’s notion of “heterotopias” in contrast to utopias, inherently unreal spaces that are “sites with no real place.” For Foucault, the heterotopia was the opposite of a utopia precisely because it was the possible utopia, “a kind of effectively enacted utopia” characterized by the juxtaposition “in a single real place of several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible.”⁴² His heterotopia prophesied Ruth Levitas’s revision of utopian thinking, wherein instead of looking for “maps of the future,” we look for “adequate maps of the present” that can lead to a more just world. To echo a similar revision by Rustom Bharucha, these maps point us to the possible, not the impossible; they lead us not to another world, but back to coping with this one.⁴³

Because of music’s ability to do just this—to point us to the possible, to help us remap the world we live in now—and because of its uncanny ability to absorb and meld heterogeneous national, cultural, and historical styles and traditions across space and within place, the possibility of the audiotopia makes sense: sonic spaces of effective utopian longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together, not only in the space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and the mapping of geographical space that music makes possible as well. Thus, reading and listening for audiotopias (through an analysis of both lyrics *and* music) has a dual function: to focus on the space of music itself and the different spaces and identities it juxtaposes within itself, and to focus on the social spaces, geographies, and identities that music can enable, reflect, and prophecy. In both cases, the audiotopia is a musical space of difference, where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other. Thus, in a sense, audiotopias can also be understood as identificatory “contact zones,” in that they are both sonic and social spaces where disparate identity-formations, cultures, *and* geographies historically kept and mapped separately are allowed to interact with each other as well as enter into relationships whose consequences for cultural identification are never predetermined.⁴⁴

Thinking of music as an enacted, lived utopia that struggles against the constraints of racialization and nation-building in order to configure an alternate world of survival is not, of course, a new proposition. Most saliently, it has been a central feature of African American music and writing devoted to African American music, where everything from field hollers to the beats and breaks of hip-hop has historically functioned as a tool of survival and

sustenance and a site of emancipatory hope. As Paul Allen Anderson has recently reminded us, as early as the turn of the twentieth century W. E. B. DuBois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, wrote of the “sorrow songs” of slaves as holding a utopian possibility that could transfer into the realm of social change. “Through all the sorrow songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things,” he wrote. “The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence.”⁴⁵

Building from Du Bois’s legacy, Ray Pratt has similarly emphasized music’s ability to create alternative realities and prophecy what he calls “wider utopian social transformations” in his study of African American spirituals and blues. “Through affectively empowering emotional changes,” Pratt writes, “music promotes the establishment of sustaining relations of community and subculture that are fundamental to the creation of an alternative public realm, a kind of cultural free space made of materials taken from thousands of composers and musicians who contribute the essential elements of what is propagated by the culture industries.”⁴⁶

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy explores a related idea in the context of the African diaspora and its “counterculture of modernity,” by emphasizing black music’s role in generating a “politics of transfiguration.”⁴⁷ For Gilroy, black music gives voice to an extended racial community across the disparate spaces of diaspora, “a community of needs and solidarity.” What is so crucial about Gilroy’s writings on black music here is that he stresses the extent to which a liberatory, transformative politics is not simply reflected in music or represented by music, but actually “made audible” in the music itself. Music is not a stagnant receptacle waiting to be filled with a political urgency toward change and social restructuring. Music is an agent of that urgency, that change, and that restructuring, a politics that Gilroy notes “exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung, and sung about.”⁴⁸ Graham Locke names that frequency—taking a cue from a Duke Ellington composition and the “Astro Black Mythology” of Sun Ra that charged music with the task of transcending the impossible to imagine a better future world—“blutopia,” a musical utopia that is “tinged with the blues, an African-American visionary future stained with memories,” a musical utopia that envisions an alternate future without relinquishing the black past.⁴⁹

Audiotopia is informed and indebted to this work and this tradition but also asks that we cast a wider net. In the pages that follow, I return to the blutopias of the black diaspora—Bessie Smith’s blues, Afro-Cuban jazz—but also consider how audiotopias function in other contexts and other di-

asporas, in the klezmer-pop of Jewish musician Mickey Katz and in the rock hybrids of *rock en español* bands on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border. And while scholars like Locke and Gilroy have geared their utopianist listenings to music more toward the intentions and actions of the musicians making the music, *Audiotopia* also focuses on how listeners approach the music that they hear. What this book is concerned with—and why it begins with Whitman, a listener and a writer, not a musician—is the critical process of listening to music, of how we—fans and critics alike—might listen differently to the music we hear.

In this way, I am inspired by Christopher Small’s suggestion that instead of thinking about music as a single, isolated performance, we think of “music-ing” (the present participle of the verb *to music*)—the entire process and context of a performance that involves everyone and everything that a performance touches, from the roadies to the record execs to the musicians to the audience, “the totality of a musical performance.”⁵⁰ I look at the musicians who make the music (Paul Whiteman, George Gershwin, Mickey Katz, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Bessie Smith, Charlie Parker, Jaguares, Tijuana NO, Café Tacuba), but I also look at listeners who receive the music and make their own music out of it, painters like Jean-Michel Basquiat, writers like James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. They are all, in their own ways, engaged with music’s audiotopias and the differences they make.

As such, this book is an attempt to re-think the relationship between American identity, American race, and American music—an intersection we might summarily think of as the American audio-racial imagination—by focusing on the spaces of music, the spaces of songs, and the spaces of sounds. When Whitman heard America sing, he heard America in the space of songs. But Whitman was not an audiotopic listener. He did not hear America as a space of difference, a space of crossing. Whitman imagined his democratic utopia based on a harmony—on a convergence of songs—that he was already hearing, a harmony that sweetened the sound of difference in the name of establishing the native music of the American new world. The musicians and writers in *Audiotopia* listen and think audiotopically, in that they listen for music that is already made but not yet heard, music that makes audible racialized communities who have been silenced by the nationalist ear.

Whereas the “I Hear America Singing” school of nationalist listening hears an America where racial difference has been indexed and silenced, this book proposes a listening that hears an America whose music is the space of

racial difference, where racial difference is performed against the grain of a suffocating nationalism. If we think of music as an audiotopia—a force of difference—to use it as a tool of nationalism and nation-building eager to eradicate that difference is always already a failed project. This is the reality of the American audio-racial imagination, where race is heard, where the sounds of racial formation and racial identity are made audible in the audiotopias of American popular music.

When I use the phrase “the American audio-racial imagination,” I mean the extent to which meanings and ideas about race, racial identity, and racialization within the United States have been generated, developed, and experienced at the level of sound and music. My interest in the American audio-racial imagination was born from a simple proposition: there is no way of separating the histories of U.S. popular music from the history of ethnic and racial formation in the United States, and vice-versa. The audio-racial imagination is my way of acknowledging a fact all too commonly overlooked in the “culture wars” and debates about diversity and multiculturalism, that race and popular music have always been experienced not alongside each other, not as complements, supplements, or corollaries of each other, but through each other. As Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman put it in the introduction to their edited collection of essays, *Music and the Racial Imagination*, which treats race as a ghost that haunts contemporary musicology scholarship, “music participates in many of the aesthetic and discursive constructions of race, and race provides one of the necessary elements in the construction of music.”⁵¹

Yet, in the case of the United States and the national fantasy of “America,” music does not just “participate” in American racial constructions, it has been central to their history since the eighteenth century. And while race is surely *one* of the elements involved in the construction of music generally, it is arguably the central one in the construction of “American” music as a cultural expression and ideological force used both at home and abroad to promote wider understandings of the racial make-up of American culture. What Jocelyne Guillbaut argues about the music of the West Indies in her contribution to *Music and the Racial Imagination* is equally true for the United States: “Musical discourses are therefore conceived not as the mere reflection of racial projects, but rather as being actively engaged in their very production.”⁵²

Chapter 1 begins exploring this relationship between musical discourses and the production of racial projects by taking up Whitman’s 1860 call to “hear America sing” in greater detail. Specifically, I examine the racial proj-

ect this particular musical discourse created and track its legacy as a mode of monocultural nationalist listening within the rise of the “melting pot” school of American ethnic and racial theory—in pop music, and in attempts by political theorists to further use music to metaphorically conjure a racially homogenous American republic.

One musician born into this period of American singing, musical melting pots, and symphonic nations who went on to make music that disrupted choruses of cultural consensus was the Jewish American musical comedian Mickey Katz. Chapter 2 surveys Katz’s career, and the opposition to it by assimilationist Jewish Americans, while offering his songs as parodic audiotopias where Hit Parade suburbia and Yiddish-speaking immigrant Jewish America negotiate an in-between place of dual cultural belonging.

Chapter 3 moves to the audiotopias heard in the music of blues singer Bessie Smith by African American writer James Baldwin. Baldwin was, indeed, a writer, but I also take him seriously as a listener. I show how music informed and continually transformed the way he wrote, the way he lived, and the way he thought—about race and sexuality, about himself, his country, and the egalitarian swell of humanity he always fought to be unconditionally included in.

In Chapter 4, the audiotopias are paintings and songs—the audible canvases of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the blind but all-seeing compositions, saxophone dreams, and breath meditations of Rahsaan Roland Kirk. In both cases, America is still singing, but what we hear is the continual song of blackness and black liberation—race and racial formation revealed, performed, and experienced at the level of sound.

The African American poet Langston Hughes wrote that he, too, sang America, and in chapter 5 I suggest that he, too, heard America singing, but with different notes and different chords. Hughes’s singing America was not simply a black racial rejoinder to Whitman. It wasn’t just the America of “the darker brother,” as he put it, but the America of the Americas: of Mexico south of the two-thousand-mile-long borderline he so often traveled across by train, and of Cuba, east across the seas he sailed across on steamers to collaborate with Afro-Cuban poets and hear the maps of blackness redefined in rumba clubs.

The transnational musical map Hughes composes in his Latin Jazz poem *Ask Your Mama* fades into the audiotopias of *rock en español* in chapter 6. The America that Whitman heard singing and the melting-pot music of a geographically bounded and racially singular America is a distant memory here, as U.S. rock wakes up singing in Spanish, living in the bor-

derlands between nations, and giving voice to Latino/a migrant communities who move between nations, languages, and cultural traditions. In the music of *Café Tacuba* and *Tijuana NO*—music heard and identified with by Latino/a listeners from Los Angeles to Mexico City—Whitman’s “teeming nation of nations” is replaced by “teeming nations of nations,” the United States as one point of contact, one point of entry for continental flows of ideas, people, and sound.⁵³ The last sound of America singing that we hear, then, is the sound of national identities restructuring themselves as they move back and forth across borders meant to stop them, redrawing the maps of the worlds they want to live in through the music they defiantly make.

Against Easy Listening

Or, How to Hear America Sing

The white cracker who wrote the national anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word “free” to a note so high nobody can reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on earth sounds less like freedom to me.

BELIZE

in Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*

Besides, is not America for the whites?

WALT WHITMAN

Brooklyn Daily Times

My country 'tis of thee
late land of slavery.

W. E. B. DUBOIS

“My Country 'Tis of Thee”

There are words like *liberty*
That almost make me cry.

If you had known
what I knew

You would know why.

LANGSTON HUGHES

“Refugee in America”

WALT WHITMAN PUBLISHED “I HEAR AMERICA SINGING” in 1860 as part of the third edition of his now historic collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*. Yet it was not the first time he put his ear to the people and places of the United States and heard songs. In “Song of Myself,” the landmark poem that opened the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* five years earlier in 1855, Whitman had already positioned himself as a kind of human audio receiver who channeled the voices of common people and the voices of the earth and the cosmos, receiving their signals and broadcasting them outward as his own. “Through me many long dumb voices,” he proclaimed, “voices of the interminable generations of slaves, voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons . . . and of the threads that connect the stars . . . of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung.”¹ And the sounds weren’t just metaphoric or symbolic. They were, he promised, actual music, the music of America: “I hear the chorus . . . it is a grand-opera . . . this indeed is music!”²

These ideas were crystallized in “I Hear America Singing.” Whitman now heard neither voices nor operas, but songs sung by working men and women, the songs of mechanics, carpenters, masons, shoemakers, mothers, wives. “I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,” he wrote. “Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else.”³ The trajectory of Whitman’s poem—in which songs belong only to those who sing them where they sing them, “to him or her and to none else”—sets up a series of basic points that constitute his model of American listening. First, the nation is a sounded terrain and a musical construction. Second, the formation of America depends upon the performance of songs by people whose singing of those songs defines their Americanness. Third, political and cultural citizenship is configured through the performance of popular music and its reception, via acts of listening, by the people. That is, when Whitman hears America singing, we are to believe he is hearing American songs, the sounds that Americans make. The poem posits a direct relationship between musical performance and the formation of national identity. If nations have songs, and if nations involve the generation of what Immanuel Wallerstein has called “peoplehood constructs,” then these people are themselves sonorous—their national and cultural citizenship understood to have an acoustic, aural dimension that sonically interpolates them into the body of the nation.⁴

“I Hear America Singing” didn’t just create a trope that would come to dominate popular discourse about the national arts for the next century, it created a school of thought. To “hear America sing” has come to imply a specific kind of listening, a listening that is nationalist and tuned into the frequencies of cultural consensus and univocality, keeping minoritized voices

quiet, or audible only by proxy (blackface minstrel troupes being the extreme example). Whitman historian David S. Reynolds has pointed out that Whitman “regarded music as a prime agent for unity and uplift in a nation whose tendencies to fragmentation and political corruption he saw clearly.”⁵ He believed that it was music that was loved and shared by all Americans; it was music that could bring the nation together. Predictably, then, Whitman’s American listening was likewise geographically bounded, a listening that—in the face of forces of perceived fragmentation and corruption—experienced its formation in tandem with the wider political rise of imperialist expansion policies that, through appeals to Manifest Destiny, attempted to secure the borders and boundaries of the United States as America.

The school of listening that Whitman unwittingly created has endured as one of this country’s most well-known and marketable ways of understanding itself. Poems, anthologies, murals, CDs, record albums, and musicals have all borrowed Whitman’s idea and used “I Hear America Singing” in their titles and as their conceptual anchor, so much so that it has become perhaps one of the more dominant and familiar slogans of U.S. artistic culture. As recently as 1999, there was *Sing America*, a CD compilation that benefited the Save America’s Treasures foundation, an organization “devoted to preserving the symbols of American heritage and culture.” Officially endorsed by then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, the album began with Leonard Bernstein conducting “Fanfare for the Common Man” and ended with Cher singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at Super Bowl XXXIII.

Perhaps more true to Whitman’s original intent was the 1975 release of *I Hear America Singing* by the California company GRT Music Productions. A decorously boxed album set that conflated listening to the music of America with waving the flag and fighting wars, *I Hear America Singing* was accompanied by a fifty-page booklet that set out to show “how the richness of America—its history and its people can be found in its music—the ballads, the folk songs, marches and hymns, blues and jazz, opera and country music.”⁶ The collection mixed military songs with “Home on the Range,” “The Star-Spangled Banner” with “Dixie,” and early jazz staples like “When the Saints Go Marching In” with “God Bless America.” Whitman’s presence was everywhere. The booklet’s introduction began with a photographic portrait of Whitman himself and a reproduction of his handwritten opening lines to “I Hear America Singing.” “Through music,” the authors wrote, “[eighteenth-century Americans] achieved unity in the presence of diversity.”⁷

When “I Hear America Singing” first appeared as a poem in 1860, it was sandwiched between two other poems, “Me Imperturbe” and “Poets to Come.” The former is a poem of position, with Whitman declaring his coordinates as a lone democratic bard facing the geography of his Americanness. “Me toward the Mexican sea, or in the Mannahatta or the Tennessee, or far north or inland,” he described himself. “Me wherever my life is lived.”⁸ His life was lived within the borders of the United States: the Northeast, the South, far enough inside the United States to be looking out toward the Mexican sea. Whitman was announcing his location as an American, his wandering feet only wandering so far. The latter poem dealt with Whitman’s own limits as a poet and American singer, a candid message to the next generation of “orators, singers, musicians to come!” to carry on a legacy he can’t complete himself. “I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,” he confessed, “leaving it to you to prove and define it, expecting the main things from you.”⁹

Whitman hears America singing, then, after he tells us where his America is and before he tells us that his hearing, his singing, is only the beginning. Such a self-fashioning speaks directly to both the poem’s home in the political and social order of the mid-nineteenth century and to its acknowledged limits as a model of listening. Whitman carried out his nationally tuned American listening at a crucial moment in the history of U.S. nation-formation, during the years between the end of the U.S.–Mexican War in 1848 and the end of the Civil War in 1865. That neither of these events or what they signified—the conquest and subjugation of Mexican citizens and the emancipation of enslaved African Americans—left a sonic mark on what Whitman heard or how he chose to listen to America only serves to emphasize that Whitman’s “hearing” of America was a selective hearing.¹⁰

I stress this precisely because Whitman’s listening was not simply a poetic device.¹¹ Whitman was a music critic. During the 1840s, he wrote about Stephen Foster, opera, white “singing family” groups, and white and black minstrel troupes (who sang what Whitman once dubbed “nigger songs”) for publications such as the *Brooklyn Eagle*, the *Democratic Review*, and *Life Illustrated*.¹² One of his favorite groups was The Hutchinsons, a white New Hampshire family troupe of singing abolitionists who toured with Frederick Douglass and played women’s rights conventions, and who Whitman held up as the great hope of native American music. “We hope no spirit of

imitation will ever induce them to engraft any ‘foreign airs’ upon their ‘native graces,’” Whitman wrote.¹³ He wanted music that reflected “American realities” and spoke to “our national spirit and body also.”¹⁴

Save for the “wild chants” of “negro minstrels” like The Harmonions, the music Whitman was not listening to and was not writing about was the music of slaves and ex-slaves. Nor was he writing about the *corridos* of Northern Mexico that since 1836 had already started documenting battles and bloodshed in the Southwest, or the Cuban, Puerto Rican, and French Antillean Creole-inspired musics of Nicolas Ruiz Espadero and Louis Mureau Gottschalk that by 1850 had begun to hit U.S. shores. And he wasn’t, for that matter, writing about the music of Native Americans, who were already here, saturating the earth over which Whitman walked and the sky under which he traveled.

Whitman’s search for “native graces” and national voices free of “foreign airs” from the throats of East Coast whites echoed his political allegiances. For starters, he was a well-known advocate of western expansionism who saw the West as a region “where the great stretch of power must be wielded.” He was a vocal supporter of President Polk’s campaigns to annex Texas, Oregon, Cuba, and Canada, and to wage war against Mexico—all in the mid-1840s, only fifteen years before penning “I Hear America Singing.” His sympathies with U.S. empire helped him focus on just where the borders of democracy lie. “What has miserable, inefficient Mexico—with her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom, her actual tyranny by the few over the many?” he asked in 1846, two years before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo would turn half of Mexico’s holdings into U.S. territory overnight. “What has she to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race?”¹⁵

A year before Whitman asked this question, the ex-slave Frederick Douglass had already weighed in on the great mission of the New World and the music of crimes committed in the name of noble races. Indeed, Douglass himself had heard America singing in 1845, but he heard a different America and a different song. Douglass’s America was an America of viciousness, of bondage and slavery, of institutionalized, nationalized racial violence wrecked on subjugated black bodies. The songs he heard emerged from a chorus of whips on backs, of leather tearing flesh, of screams howled through strained throats; they were songs of slavery, spirituals that testified to the lived sorrow of enslaved blacks in which “every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer for God for deliverance from chains.”¹⁶

While Whitman listened for the unities of American consensus, Douglass

listened for what that consensus violently silenced—the distortion, feedback, and discord that were faded out as the songs of working-class white merchants were faded in. Saidiya V. Hartman has written that Douglass was listening for “dangerous music” that communicated “dangerous thought,” dangerous because it was sound that disrupted nineteenth-century racial order, sound that threw distortion into the harmony of American singing—music as talk-back, anger, and frustration.¹⁷ It was Edmund Morgan’s famous paradox of American freedom necessitated by American slavery played out at the level of music: Douglass heard the America of slavery that was necessary for Whitman to hear the America of freedom.

WALT, FRANK, BING, AND FRED

In 1964 Walt Whitman was brought back to life as a pop star. Actually, as three pop stars: Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, and Fred Waring. They teamed up to release *America, I Hear You Singing*, an LP that put their three smiling white faces on its cover next to the American flag and above a map of the United States. In *America’s* back cover notes, the album’s producer, Sonny Burke, describes the trio as “three of the most representative Americans in the entertainment world.”

The crooning threesome crown a unique map of the United States on the cover. Like a disconnected pop Mount Rushmore, the three heads hover over a sectioned photographic map that depicts the United States as a visually resplendent “America”—a clearly bounded and bordered, cleanly delimited and delineated single country that exists, in true American exceptionalist style, in complete geographical isolation from the rest of the continent. There are no neighboring countries: the borders of this “America” mark the line not between the United States and Mexico or the United States and Canada, but between the United States and the blank abyss of outer-national nothingness.

Within the map itself, instead of separate states, there are only photographed touristic regionalisms—the blue waters of the Pacific coastline, the cowboys and prairies of the Southwest, the urban neon of Times Square, the forests of the Northwest—that when taken together are meant to suggest a cohesive, visual mythology of America. When the Sinatra/Crosby/Waring triumvirate sing America and when they hear it singing, this is the America made available to the eye and the ear: a nationalized postcard America that is distinctly not hemispheric, an America that is so easily contained, so easily assembled with puzzle pieces of myth and fan-

tasy, that it can be sung and heard in its entirety by three singers on two sides of a long-playing stereophonic record.

Though in the album's sleeve notes Burke claims that he wanted to celebrate "those ideas upon which the country was founded" without "21 guns or five-inch salutes, or an over-abundance of flag-waving," *America, I Hear You Singing* is a staggeringly patriotic recording that is as much a singular performance of patriotism as it is a one-stop musical tour of patriotism's greatest, most hummable hits: Crosby proclaiming "This Land Is Your Land" and insisting "This Is a Great Country" ("Hats off, America . . . If this is flag-waving, do you know of a better flag to wave?"), Sinatra belting "Early American," Waring's vocal choir, the Pennsylvanians, harmonizing through "The Stars and Stripes Forever" and channeling the voice of the Statue of Liberty on "Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor" (Irving Berlin's musicalization of Emma Lazarus's Liberty Island poem).

Even Sinatra's once radical Popular Front performance of Earl Robinson and Lewis Allan's "The House I Live In," which in the past resonated with a sting of proletariat, immigrant, and anti-racist critique (Sinatra once sang it at an Indiana high school when white students boycotted integration efforts), is now just one more call for a color-blind democracy of racial harmony that quietly and swiftly sweeps the threat of difference under the rug of a patriotic liberalism.¹⁸ "The House I Live In" originally appeared in a short film of the same name which donated its profits to the California Labor School and was praised by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences for its "great sermon of tolerance . . . racial equality and religious freedom" when it won a specially created Oscar in 1946.¹⁹ But as Michael Denning has noted, by 1960, the song had become politically passé, replaced as a progressive anthem of social revolution by Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land."

America, I Hear You Singing was musical nationalism *on record*, an attempt to both literalize Whitman's poetic listening as an actual long-playing record, and to capitalize on the poem's association with national unity and democratic spirit. Burke's intention was simple: to record an album that would function as a sonic tool of aurally imagined nationalism, a piece of assembled and recorded music that would unify "the American people" through the figure of "hearing America sing." Indeed, Burke begins his brief sleeve comments by positioning the album in a tradition of using music as "propaganda" in order to "stimulate a strong nationalistic spirit among our citizens." Citing the example of George M. Cohan releasing "Over There" during World War I, Burke writes of *America, I Hear You*

Singing as coming to the nation's aid by instilling "brotherhood" and reminding people of "the real meaning of our Constitution."

Burke then dedicates the album to "you who will listen" because "you are America." According to Burke's casual sleeve note formulation, Sinatra, Crosby, and Waring are "representative Americans" because they sing of America; their songs are dedicated to fellow good Americans, in this case, Americans who listen to lyrics that ask, "Has patriotism gone out of fashion?" Before any of *America, I Hear You Singing's* songs are heard through the speakers of a living room hi-fi, then, the terms of musical citizenship have been set. Listen to these singers, listen to their songs, listen to America sung by Americans. Right before our ears, listening has become a method of enacting Americanness, a mode of cultural citizenship.

The precise type of musical citizenship *America, I Hear You Singing* promotes is made increasingly specific with Burke's inclusion of a series of nationalistic sound bites on the album's back cover. Sinatra, Crosby, and Waring singing America is aligned with Benjamin Franklin discoursing on the "bad moral character" of the bald eagle, Woodrow Wilson celebrating "the rights of man," George M. Cohan shouting "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy!" and John F. Kennedy addressing "my fellow Americans" during his inaugural address. They are also aligned with Theodore Roosevelt, who offers the project's most explicitly monocultural sentiment: "I am exactly as much opposed to English-Americans as to German-Americans. I oppose all kinds of hyphenated Americanism." The man who provides *America, I Hear You Singing* with its discourse is there, too, of course. The opening lines of "I Hear America Singing" follow directly after Roosevelt.

America, I Hear You Singing was recorded in response to the JFK assassination. In the spirit of Whitman's belief in music as a force of unity and a cure for fragmentation, America's visual, scriptural, and musical rhetoric of national unity and good citizenship was meant to be reassuring, recuperative, and therapeutic, a last-ditch effort to sell a public in chaos on the fantasy of a harmonious American national chorus. Instead of confronting this national crisis and its very real stakes, Sinatra, Crosby, and Waring used their music to deny that it was happening. Like Whitman's poem, *America, I Hear You Singing* was a musical cover-up, an attempt to erase the reality of social upheaval and racial violence by hearing an America sing that didn't exist (an America that had in fact never existed).

If they would have listened to the songs that America was singing at the very moment they were recording the album, they would have heard the murder of civil rights activist Medgar Evers; they would have heard the

screams of Birmingham protesters being blasted with firehoses and attacked by police dogs; they would have heard over nine hundred peaceful demonstrations against racial segregation and discrimination in over one hundred cities throughout the South; they would have heard the sound of thirty-five racially motivated bombings; they would have heard the sound of a bomb exploding in the 16th Street Baptist Church and the sound of four black children dying; they would have heard the Civil Rights Act (which was passed the very same year as the album was recorded) and its refusal of discrimination in public housing and employment; they would have heard the KKK murders of three civil rights workers in Mississippi.

“When you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity,” Martin Luther King Jr. wrote the year before the album’s release, “there comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over.”²⁰ This is precisely the America that Nina Simone heard in 1963 when she learned of the church bombings. Her song, “Mississippi Goddam,” which Brian Ward has described as “the closest Rhythm and Blues got in the early 1960s to Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘Letter from a Birmingham Jail,’” is the polar opposite of the songs heard on *America, I Hear You Singing*. Echoing King’s refusal of passivity and hesitant action, Simone sang of “picket lines / school boycotts,” and “hound dogs on my trail / school children sitting in jail.” She looked the America of Sinatra, Crosby, and Waring in the face and called it a liar: “y’all gonna die and die like flies.”²¹

To be extra clear: in 1964, when Sinatra, Crosby, and Waring heard America sing, they listened for Ben Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt, when only months before, King had stood on the Great Lawn in Washington, D.C.; they listened for new proof that the myth of American nationalism could still pass as truth, when only months before King had shown those very same myths to be dangerous lies. In his famous speech at the 1963 March on Washington, King cried out against “the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination” that were crippling American blacks, and he declared the Declaration of Independence a bad check, a failed promissory note. Like *America*’s trio, King also talked about singing patriotic songs, like “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” but he demanded that they be sung differently. He demanded that all of the people of the United States begin to sing America for sure, but to “sing with new meaning.”²² This new meaning, this new song—which contained within its notes all of the bombs and murders and body-blasting water sprays, all of the ethnic and

racial hierarchies—was silenced when Sinatra, Crosby, and Waring put their ear to the nation and chose not to hear it.

Indeed, on *America, I Hear You Singing*—which was aware of the plate-shifting effects of the civil rights movement but chose not to give them any voice—there is no trace of the black music that was doing the cultural work necessary for the political transformations of racial justice underway. Writing a few years after *America* was released, Eldridge Cleaver wrote about black music and its Twist takeover of white youth as a national healing, a musical cure to the “Bing Crosbyism, Perry Comoism” that had “led to cancer,” a cancer that enacted segregation at the level of culture. For Cleaver, the arrival of the Twist and its takeover of young dancing white bodies “succeeded as politics, religion, and law could never do, in writing in the heart and soul what the Supreme Court could only write on the books.”²³

Cleaver was asking us to hear a different America sing, much in the same way that Julian Bond had already done back in 1960 when he was a student at Morehouse College and a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In the premiere issue of SNCC’s periodical *The Student Voice*, Bond rewrote Whitman and re-sounded the America he heard singing. “I too, hear America singing,” he wrote. “But from where I stand / I can only hear Little Richard / And Fats Domino, / But sometimes, / I hear Ray Charles / Drowning in his own tears / or Bird / Relaxing at Camarillo / or Horace Silver Doodling, / Then I don’t mind standing a little longer.”²⁴ Not only did Bond correct the silences of Whitman’s singing nation by hearing black sounds of R&B that reflected a diversity of black experience—drowning in sorrow, relaxing in pleasure, creating through music—but his American listening was a strategic one. The music he heard helped sustain his own social protest as an emergent civil rights activist. The innocent unity and proud optimism of Whitman’s democratic chorus that gets recycled and reapplied by Sinatra, Crosby, and Waring to 1960s America is countered, if not replaced, by the country not heard in that chorus, a country in the midst of social and political upheaval.

Bond’s corrective to Whitman’s poem had a precedent: Langston Hughes’s “I, Too,” in which Hughes spoke up for some of those singing Americans (in his case, “the darker brother”) whose voices were not heard by Whitman. Hughes’s poem was a demand for black recognition, a call for American listeners to hear the song of African America as part of the American chorus. While Hughes’s intervention here worked mostly at the level of musical metaphor (he would write specifically of musical forms and musicians in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”), Duke

Ellington made an even more direct musical intervention in 1941 when he riffed on Hughes's poem for a speech he gave, "We, Too, Sing 'America'" to black Los Angeles churchgoers at a Lincoln Day service. For Ellington, the African American singing of America was far more than a supplementary "we, too" addition; it was the sonic core of the chorus itself, the music that made America its most quintessentially American:

We play more than a minority role in singing "America." Although numerically but ten percent of the mammoth chorus that today, with an eye overseas, sings "America" with fervor and thanksgiving, I say our ten percent is the very heart of the chorus: the sopranos, so to speak, carrying the melody, the rhythm section of the band, the violins, pointing the way. . . . It is our voice that sang "America" when America grew too lazy, satisfied, and content to sing . . . before the dark threats and fire-lined clouds of destruction frightened it into a thin, panicky quaver.²⁵

That same year, Ellington elaborated on his revision of both Hughes and Whitman by describing African American music as central to the song of America, but also as something that always voices its difference. In an interview at the Dunbar Hotel on Central Avenue, while listening to a collaboration of his with Puerto Rican musician Juan Tizol on the record player, Ellington said that African Americans sang America, too, but did so with dissonance. "That's the Negro's life," he said. "Hear that chord! That's us. Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part."²⁶

The dissonance of racial difference that Ellington hears in that Central Avenue hotel room is erased in favor of a universalist harmony over a decade later on *America, I Hear You Singing*. The only allusion to the eruption of that audio dissonance into social and political dissonance in the civil rights movement comes in Burke's sleeve notes, when he vaguely mentions a climate of "hatred" and intolerance. "Today as never before," he writes, "our country feels the need to instill among its people the true feeling of brotherhood and the real meaning of the Constitution." The racial divisions and the racial difference foregrounded by the Civil Rights Act are negated and erased within this call for a return to "hearing America sing," a return to a unified Republic rallied around a flag, a map, a few songs, and the faces of three white men.

America, I Hear You Singing didn't just turn Whitman into a pop star. It turned him into a president: Ronald Reagan. Sinatra may have once been a progressive lefty, but he went on to sing "The House I Live In" at the

Nixon White House and then ended up a Reagan Republican. Sinatra's migration from Popular Front celebrity activist to right-wing celebrity gatekeeper replaced one American singing with another, one that sang for civil rights and one that, when joined with Reagan's voice, sang against it (Reagan had opposed all major civil rights legislation). Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" had become *America, I Hear You Singing* by 1964, and by 1985, it had become Reagan's second inaugural address:

We see and hear the echoes of our past: a general falls to his knees in the hard snow of Valley Forge; a lonely president paces the darkened halls and ponders his struggle to preserve the union; the men of the Alamo call out encouragement to each other; a settler pushes west and sings a song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air. It is the American sound. It is hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic, daring, decent, and fair. That's our heritage, that's our song. We sing it still. For all our problems, our differences, we are together as of old. We raise our voices to the God who is the author of this most tender music. And may He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sound—in unity, affection, and love—one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world.²⁷

This American sound is the sound of *America, I Hear You Singing's* postcard nationalism, the sound of John Wayne and Davy Crockett, the sound of boastful imperialism, the sound of paternalistically imposed racial homogeneity, the sound of triumphantly consolidated national borders, the sound of a musical manifest destiny in which God green-lights the acoustic spread of American ideology throughout the world, whether people want it or not. Forget that in 1985, when New York hip-hop was about to overturn the American sound forever, Run DMC was recording *Raising Hell*, an album executive produced by Reaganomics, in which they declared they were "Proud to Be Black." And forget that in 1985, the American sound's expansion below the border—not just "toward the Mexican sea" but beyond it, straight into the heart of misery, inefficiency, and tyranny—was already being contested by Mexico City's Botellita de Jerez. They made an American sound that was continental and kitschy and in Spanish, a Mexican transformation of U.S. rock that did aural inter-Americanism by wearing *charro* pants and wielding guacamole as a cultural weapon.

Reagan, too, heard America singing, and like Whitman, Sinatra, Crosby, and Waring before him, he heard differences silenced in the name of

unity—a dangerous, fictitious unity that used music to invent, over and over again, the destructive fantasy of an America that never existed.

ORCHESTRATING RACE

The fantasy had precedents.

It has been widely documented that from the turn of the twentieth century through the end of World War I, left intellectuals and writers were obsessed with defining and characterizing the racial and ethnic character of America. But what has received little comment since then is how their obsessions were musical ones; that is, numerous attempts to define the role of race and ethnicity in the formation of a new twentieth-century American national culture—post-Whitman and pre-Reagan—used music and musical metaphors to state their claims, build their cases, and make their arguments. Most generally, this political and theoretical terrain was best summarized by Waldo Frank in 1924 into the figure of “the symphonic nation.”²⁸ Frank’s use of this audio-national designation followed in the wake of a series of cultural and political debates begun by the British playwright Israel Zangwill and his introduction of “the melting pot” into popular consciousness, and responses to him by Horace Kallen and others more aligned with what Kallen dubbed “cultural pluralism.”

For all their differences, neither school of thought did much to disrupt the idea of America as a unified, ordered body of harmonic and orchestrated sound. All of these foundational debates about race and ethnicity come back to the ways in which music can be used to index and organize different racial and ethnic groups within American culture. What all variations on the “symphonic nation” school reproduced was the notion of harmony as a tool of power, an ordering force that when sounded through symphonic and orchestrated totalities sought to give national form to the noise of difference.²⁹

Like all ideas, these discussions and debates were born from the experiences of their time. The first two decades of the twentieth century were marked, on the one hand, by rising immigration numbers and, on the other, by the rising xenophobia that set out to curb the tide of new arrivals. From 1901 to 1920, nearly fifteen million immigrants entered the United States, most from Southern and Eastern Europe. By 1910, New York City, the city most synonymous with melting-pot speak and most associated with the melting-pot debates of Zangwill, Kallen, Frank, and others, was already 40 percent foreign-born. The anti-immigrant, pro-nativist backlash was in-

tense, manifesting itself in everything from the explicitly race-baiting film *Birth of a Nation*, getting a national audience at the White House, to the publishing industry's bid to put biological racism on the bestseller lists (a new edition of Arthur Gobineau's *The Inequality of Human Races*, the first edition of Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*).³⁰

It is in this world that the melting pot became music. And Israel Zangwill started it. In 1908 he wrote a play he titled *The Melting-Pot*, about David Quixano, a Russian Jewish immigrant composer who wants to express his love for melting-pot America by writing what he passionately calls an "American symphony." David's symphony is meant to act as the melting pot's rousing musical counterpart, a symphony that will dissolve different races, ethnicities, and cultural worldviews into the sameness of symphonic unisonance—the sound of a singularly American race. "There she lies," David imagines, with his ear toward a future sound, "the great melting-pot-listen! Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling?"³¹ David's symphony is his version of what he imagined coming from the mouth of the Statue of Liberty—"the voice of America"—when he first arrived after his family was killed in a Russian pogrom. David promises to explain his love for America in the symphony he will write and perform, the finale of which will produce, like the melting pot's supposed product, "the coming superman," a monoracial Frankenstein built through the musical fusion of races in the American cauldron of "God's seething crucible."³²

Zangwill's creation of a musical melting pot immediately generated debate. Nine months after seeing Zangwill's play, a young rabbi, Judah Magnes, rejected the *Sinfonia Americana* that Quixano dreamed of and proposed a different mode of harmonic order to be put in its place:

The symphony of America must be written by the various nationalities which keep their individual and characteristic note, and which sound this note in harmony with their sister nationalities. Then it will be a symphony of color, of picturesqueness, of character, of distinction—not the harmony of the Melting Pot, but rather the harmony of sturdiness and loyalty and joyous struggle.³³

Instead of a uniform sound, Magnes hears notes of difference, yet is still unable to let them stand alone.

Six years later, Magnes's ideas were echoed by another critic of melting-pot ideology, German-Jewish immigrant Horace Kallen, whose 1915 article in the *Nation*, "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot," replaced the Ameri-

can symphony with the American orchestra. Like Magnes, Kallen had a problem with the melting pot's production of uniformity, its dissolution of difference into sameness. In fact, more than any other prominent Euro-American critic on the Left in the early part of the century, Kallen defended difference against the forces of absolutism and totalization, naming it, and not "inequality," as the key thorn in the side of Anglo-American citizenry bent on preserving racial order. And when Kallen put his ear to the national soundscape, he did not hear a singular voice; instead, he heard a "chorus of many voices each singing a rather different tune."³⁴

For Kallen, the melting pot was too close to being a vision of absolute totality—the many melted into the one. Heavily influenced by the pluralism of William James, he proposed seeing America's different racial and ethnic groups as "incompletely unified," coming together not in an unbreakable totality but in a chorus of difference.³⁵ Racial and ethnic identity could not be completely melted away because they were permanent and essential, because, in Kallen's words, "men can change their clothes . . . they cannot change their grandfathers."³⁶ Yet, for all of his appreciation of pluralism, when Kallen hears the cacophony of American life that inevitably results, he is, like so many of his listening peers, not content to let it play, not content to let the different sounds fully emerge. "How to get order into this cacophony" becomes the question that most concerns Kallen. "What must, what can, what shall this cacophony become—a unison or a harmony?"³⁷

Kallen chooses harmony's promise of weaving together separate strands into a single, intricate quilt of sound over unison's threat of imposed audio uniformity, and he wants this new harmony to be played by an orchestra of different ethnicities and "nations" that results in nothing short of "a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind." His detailed plan for just how this ethnic orchestra will be constituted is by now a well-known feature of pre-Civil Rights ethno-racial discourse:

As in an orchestra every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society, each ethnic group may be the natural instrument, its temper and culture may be its theme and melody and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all may make the symphony of civilization. With this difference: a musical symphony is written before it is played; in the symphony of civilization the playing is the writing, so that there is nothing so fixed and inevitable about

its progressions as in music, so that within the limits set by nature and luck they may vary at will, and the range and variety of the harmonies may become wider and richer and more beautiful—or the reverse.³⁸

To his credit, Kallen opens his ears to discord and dissonance. Yet he remains fastened to the very ideas of cultural monism and racial uniformity that he was attempting to transcend and refute. No matter how much he disagrees with the Zangwillian symphonic melting pot, Kallen and his orchestra of civilization leave many of the same apparatuses of uniformity and harmonic gathering intact. There may be specific timbres and tonalities here, musical manifestations of difference, but they are never more than parts of a whole that swallows them into its wholeness. It is “the whole symphony” that remains the privileged goal.³⁹

Like Zangwill’s, Kallen’s symphony didn’t go unlistened to. John Dewey, a leading pragmatist and friend of Kallen’s, wrote Kallen a letter after reading his *Nation* article and expressed concern that, in fact, Kallen’s symphony might not be symphonic enough, that its unities might be too tenuous, that the volume of racial and ethnic difference might be turned up too high. Dewey explained it this way:

I agree with your orchestra idea, but upon condition we really get a symphony and not a lot of different instruments playing simultaneously. I never did care for the melting pot metaphor, but genuine assimilation to one another—not to Anglo-Saxondom—seems to be essential to an America. That each cultural section should maintain its distinctive literary and artistic traditions seems to me most desirable, but in order that it might have the more to contribute to others. I am not sure you mean more than this, but there seems to be an implication of segregation geographical and otherwise. That we should recognize the segregation that undoubtedly exists is requisite, but in order that it may not be fastened upon us.⁴⁰

The response from critic Waldo Frank was more direct: Kallen didn’t understand music. In the lengthy, polemical footnote that closes his 1929 *The Re-Discovery of America*, Frank accuses Kallen of not knowing how a symphony works, of simply assuming that somehow different instruments and tonalities and timbres will come together in harmony. Kallen was not harmonic enough for Frank, who wants his national music and the musicians who make it to revolve around a commitment to “the one Idea of their

music, which they express and variate according to their individual scales and timbres.” This was Frank’s “symphonic nation,” an America of “Wholeness” produced by the willful symphonic dissolution of note-and-timbre differences, rising notes and boisterous chords, into a sonic whole that does not bear a trace of their presence. The separate notes, the disparate melodies, the divergent themes—all of them rise up, speak up, and then “disappear forever.”⁴¹

These responses to Zangwill’s melting pot—from Magnes to Kallen to Dewey to Frank—may be articulated in music’s language, but they are not music itself. For a musical performance actually based on the theory of the melting pot, we would have to wait until 1930, when white bandleader Paul Whiteman starred in *King of Jazz*, Universal Pictures’ first all-Technicolor feature-length musical. Whiteman was not an immigrant Jew, but he went to dramatic lengths to frame his commercially-minded concert hall take on jazz composition and performance as the musical expression of melting-pot America, by which European ethnics became whitewashed Americans (as was the case with the majority of melting-pot discourse that preferred the appropriation of African American culture to actual bodied African Americans, African American musicians were excluded from Whiteman’s melting-pot jazz symphony).

The premise behind “symphonic jazz” was—in much the way David’s American symphony tried to create unisonance out of ethnic difference—an attempt to refine the disruptive, primitive elements of jazz (read: black music) into a refined, civilized sound (read: white music). Or, as Whiteman himself once put it in *Jazz*, his 1926 collaboration with Mary Margaret McBride, “I never stopped wanting to go into the concert halls and in some measure remove the stigma of barbaric strains and jungle cacophony.” For Whiteman and Quixano, the symphonic form was a mode of silencing cacophony and discord—sonic terms that had by then been thoroughly racialized—and refining them into the civilized strains of what Whiteman so memorably referred to as “the wilderness tamed to the ballroom.”⁴²

The central vignette of *King of Jazz* is “The Melting-Pot of Music,” where Whiteman makes the connection between the music and the melting pot perfectly clear: he directly treats the melting pot as a musical performance. As the sequence begins, the film’s narrator, Charles Irwin, introduces Whiteman and “his boys.” Irwin announces, “America is a melting pot of music wherein the melodies of all nations are fused into one great new rhythm—jazz.” The camera cuts to the stage of the performance, where we

see a row of clarion horn players standing around the brim of a towering, bubbling pot.

“The Melting-Pot of Music” goes to great lengths to painstakingly enact the musical process of assimilation into American whiteness, a performative literalization of the melting pot perhaps inspired by Henry Ford’s 1916 Ford Motor Company English School Melting Pot Rituals, in which foreign-born employees were publicly cleansed of their foreignness and—by exiting mock steamships and entering mock caldrons—ritualistically coerced into new Americanized identities in front of two thousand spectators.⁴³ Performance groups supposedly representing various nationalities offer performances “native” to their countries of origin while dressed in their traditional national clothing. Russians, Scots, Irish, Czechs, Spaniards, and Mexicans are all given the opportunity to contribute their unique, singular musical traditions that we are led to suspect will go into the making of the new American jazz language. But the separate national performances soon come to an end, and the music we hear begins to take a more manic and disorganized tone.

The camera cuts to Whiteman, who is shown looming above the melting pot of music, ferociously and demonically stirring together the different nationalities into a more harmonious national brew. Glowing rings of light rise from the stirring pot, and Whiteman looks almost demonic as he single-handedly controls the melting machine. The camera pans into the contents of the pot itself, and we are allowed to glimpse members of the various performing groups being stirred in circles. Once Whiteman—the conductor who uses symphonic jazz to dissolve difference into singularity—is through with the stirring process (stirring the melting pot becoming an analogy for conducting a jazz symphony), the new American and the new American music are ready to be born.

Out of the melting pot come row after row of dancing men and women wearing the same gold clothing: the men in gold top hats and tails and the women in gold tights, shorts, jackets, and hats. All of the separate traditions highlighted before the melting-pot process of jazz have been systematically erased, transformed into a single uniform and a single sound where everyone looks, sounds, and performs the same (they do a group rendition of “Stars and Stripes Forever”). As the melting pot rotates in a circle, we see that the backside of the pot is itself the stage for the Whiteman orchestra, who are playing a medley of jazz and pop standards. Whiteman, then, not only literalizes the melting pot through detailed musical performance but

makes his orchestra of white musicians an extended embodiment of the pot itself. They *are* the melting pot, both what it looks like and what it sounds like. At the end, you half expect Whiteman to wake up from a dream, bleary-eyed and disappointed that his romantic fantasy of American musical culture was not actually coming true.

The Yiddish Are Coming

The Jew speaks the language of the nation in whose midst he dwells from generation to generation, but he speaks it always as an alien.

RICHARD WAGNER

Don't let the schmaltz get in your eyes, don't let the lox get in your socks.

MICKEY KATZ

A Jew and a hunchback are walking past a synagogue and the Jew turns to the hunchback and says, "I used to be a Jew." And the hunchback says, "Yeah, and I used to be a hunchback."

GROUCHO MARX

IN 1965 MY GREAT-GRANDPARENTS celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary in the Gold Room of the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in West Los Angeles. For the occasion, one of their sons, my great-uncle Norm, was put in charge of securing the evening's entertainment. He chose a performer who he knew was a favorite of his immigrant parents, both of whom grew up in Yiddish-speaking households—the bandleader, clarinetist, and Yiddish-English parodist Mickey Katz.

Katz had reached his professional peak during the 1950s with a series of full-length albums for Capitol Records that were predominately heard by Jewish American audiences. Though he had released an acclaimed album of traditional Eastern European klezmer recordings, *Music for Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, and Brisses* (and later his own deferential and nostalgic salute to *Fiddler on the Roof*), in 1965 Katz was still best known for what the sleeve notes to *Mickey Katz and His Orchestra* describe as his "humorous treatment of the nation's favorite songs," a polite way of characterizing the ninety-plus

anarchistic, irreverent, and wildly ethnic klezmer parodies of mid-century popular songs that he recorded from 1947 to 1957.

When Katz received the call from my uncle Norm, he was in the middle of a Broadway run of *Hello, Solly!*, an “English-Yiddish Musical Revue” that was part Yiddish theater, part vaudeville, part stand-up shtick, and part chorus-girl-revue-goes-shtetl. Katz was never one to pass up a gig, so he flew West, corralled a few of his usual sidemen, and after a droll fifteen-minute sermon from my family’s one-time rabbi, took the stage and turned the banquet hall into a Jewish carnival. A few cha-cha-chas, a little “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” some requisite jokes about doctors and *bobbes*, then on to what everyone was waiting to hear: the sound of Mickey Katz making the world Jewish.

First, there was “Downtown Strutter’s Ball,” his send-up of “Darktown Strutter’s Ball,” which took the song’s famous tale of an African American dance ball and turned it into “a real freilach affair at a Second Avenue paladium . . . a mishige matzoh ball!” Then it was on to “McNakatz’s Band,” his kilt-and-yarmulke ode to Scottish Jews done in a homemade Scottish-Yiddish accent, and “Max the Messer,” which recast Bobby Darin via Kurt Weill’s slick and polished mass cult icon “Mack the Knife” as Max, a “big shlub” who works as a kosher butcher on Fairfax Avenue. Toward the night’s end, Katz invited my uncle Norm, still wearing his ceremonial *tsitsis*, on stage for “Yiddish Mule Train” (an uproarious desecration of “Mule Train,” Frankie Lane’s number one frontier fantasy hit from 1949), dressed him up as a Hollywood cowboy, and asked him to crack a whip in time with the band and yell “Huh, Ho!” between choruses. “There’s a package of salami for a Mendel in Miami,” Katz sang with voice-cracking glee. “There’s a load of lox and bagel for a cowboy in Las Feygl.”

THE HEARD OF DIFFERENCE

Myron Meyer “Mickey” Katz was born in 1909 to Lithuanian and Latvian immigrants, just one year after the New York premiere of Zangwill’s *The Melting-Pot*. He was everything that David Quixano feared. Katz turned David’s American symphony—which made it its patriotic duty to fuse many sounds into one—into dissonant and aggressively unassimilated interlingual parodies that spiked English story lines with Yiddish phrases and punch lines, and inserted skilled Eastern European klezmer explosions into a postwar crazy-quilt of swing, calypso, polka, mambo, opera, and rock and roll.¹ No matter the style and no matter the song, klezmer—that Old World

Jewish party music Katz loved to play—just wouldn't melt away. With Katz, where there was a minor key, there was always a way. Where there was English, there was always Yiddish, and where there was a song, there was always a story of Jewish food, Jewish stomachs, and Jewish indigestion.

Katz's music was the melting pot gone awry, the melting pot in which nothing melted. Everything just floated, audaciously, to the surface. His hybrid brand of "antic-Semitic" American pop performed Jewish difference too loudly for many Jews of the 1950s who preferred a more hushed and de-ethnicized entrance into the American national body.² The unabashed "Yidditude" of Katz's playful musical readings of dominant American culture threatened to spoil the melting pot's harmonious broth with unassimilated notes of Jewishness.³

Yet listening to Katz poses a critical challenge, because the majority of inquiries into Jewish difference have not paid attention to what Katz forces us to confront: the aurality of Jewish difference, the music of Jewish alterity. When discourses of Jewishness intersect with discourses of race and racial formation, the point of crossing is most frequently a visual marker—the Jewish nose, the circumcised penis, or any other coordinate along the map of "the Jew's body" that disrupts the hygienic body of the nation.⁴ Scholars such as Sander Gilman, Ann Pellegrini, Jay Geller, and the critics, artists, and curators represented within the 1996 "Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities" exhibit have all put the "visible body" at the center of their studies of Jewish difference. The questions they all pose are vital, yet someone like Mickey Katz, whose mode of performance was primarily oral and audible (not specular and visible), requires us to take Jewish aurality and Jewish noise seriously when investigating questions of race and ethnicity in American culture. In *The Jew's Body*, Gilman does devote considerable space to the history of sounding "too Jewish," yet his focus is language and voice, not the whole of musical performance. And while the allegedly secret, hidden language of the corrupting Jew spoken in "the Jew's voice" is central to understanding Katz's negotiations with postwar American whiteness, it is only part of the overall structure of his hybridized klezmer-pop compositions and aggressive ethnic parodies of the 1950s pop mainstream—compositions and parodies that were, we must remember, more heard than they were seen.

Similarly, "the seen of difference" that Ann Pellegrini has argued for in her important efforts to "re-sight the performative" at a psychoanalytic crossroads of race and gender only gets us so far when dealing with musical performance. Pellegrini roots the "seen" of difference in Freudian the-

ories of identification and sexual difference, where “seeing what the other hasn’t becomes the model for all of life’s misrecognitions big and small.”⁵ Yet how do we approach misrecognitions produced by acts of hearing and scenes of listening? Is there a “heard” of difference? This chapter argues that there is, and by listening to Katz we can explore what Pellegrini names “the problematics of racialized Jewishness” and actually hear sonic manifestations of Geller’s “bio-politics of anti-Semitism.”

Katz’s parodies arrived at a rich and complicated juncture in the history of Jewish racialization in the United States: the 1950s. Before World War II and the racial genocide of the Holocaust, the American Jew was commonly viewed as a racial subject, often “Negro” or “Oriental,” often “less than white” or “off-white,” yet always significantly inferior to and categorically different from the whiteness of the naturalized American citizen. But after the war equated racialization with mass death, Jews walked a tense and sensitive tightrope between early-twentieth-century views of the Jew as a racial group and post-Holocaust attempts to reconfigure the Jew as meltably ethnic, white Americans no different from anyone else on the suburban block. And with race displacing ethnicity as “the paradigmatic problem of America” within the larger culture of American racialization of African Americans, Latinos/as, and Asian Americans, Jews became, in David Biale’s words, “doubly marginal: marginal to the majority culture, but also marginal among minorities.”⁶ Katz performed this ethno-racial in-betweenness: we can hear it in his voice, in his music, in the reactions of his audience, in the denuncements of his critics, in the joy he brought to some, and in the fear he brought to others. At a time when Jews wanted to be ethnic Americans and not racial outcasts, Katz revived what had become a stereotyped greenhorn Yiddish accent, mispronounced his English, chose a *freilach*⁷ over Percy Faith, and wore his difference so loudly on his sleeve that no one knew exactly what to do with him.

One way to explore Katz’s parodies in the context of racialized sound is to listen to them against what jazz critic Gary Giddins so memorably called “the whiteness of the wail,” in his 1977 discussion of white bebop saxophonist Art Pepper.⁸ As Giddins indicates, “the pursuit of the white wail” has historically occurred through the active and witting appropriation of black musical aesthetics. Likewise, discussions of the whiteness of the singing Jewish voice have primarily been concerned with performers who actively negotiate their Jewishness through varied degrees of self-conscious investment in the fetishized identity-morphing potentialities of black culture and black music (and the black bodies that perform it). This may occur

through actual blackface performance or through more symbolic manifestations of racial cross-dressing and racial “surrogation,” by which, to borrow Joseph Roach’s framework, “black music pours from a white face” and burnt cork becomes an aural costume.

We may have begun to learn how to talk about the Mezz Mezzrows, Al Jolsons, and William “Upski” Wimsatts of the world, but how do we talk about a very different tradition of Jewish American identities-in-sound whose voices also produce “echoes in the bone” of whiteness,¹⁰ a tradition of Yiddish and English musical comedy that, while based in some aspect of African American musical tradition (which is, after all, at the center of all American popular music), avoids using the many possible outfits within the racial cross-dresser’s closet to enact a new identity, be it mainstream white American or marginal “white Negro” outlaw. How do figures who preceded Katz (Barton Brothers, Menasha Skulnick, Monroe Silver, Fanny Brice, and Jennie Goldstein) and those who followed him (Belle Barth, Lee Tully, Eli Basse, and Allan Sherman) speak to the role of the Jew within the racial drama of whiteness?

This is not to say that Katz had no engagement with black music. He began his career as a straight-ahead jazz clarinetist playing in white jazz bands in Cleveland, was fully literate in African American jazz, blues, and ragtime standards, and throughout his career joked that his instrumental music ought to be called “Jewish Jazz,” a term that was frequently used to describe early-twentieth-century klezmer music performed and recorded in the United States.¹¹ The difference is that when Katz took any of these standards on as a parodist, he didn’t approach them, like so many of his fellow white Jewish musicians did, as tickets into an authentic Americanness where Jewish difference became masked and silenced. Jazz and pop standards were just one more way for him to enact *his* difference, to turn the world upside down with strategically unleashed Jewishness, and, if only in the three-minute space of one song, bring the Jew out from the cover of the margins, unmasked and unveiled.

Katz’s version of W. C. Handy’s blues classic “St. Louis Blues,” for example, which he recorded as “St. Looney Blues,” was delivered almost entirely in Yiddish, and Katz replaced the saxophone frequently at the song’s center with plaintive violins more typical of Eastern European klezmer. The original’s “St. Louis woman” becomes “my St. Lou-ya madel” who wants a “fox fur coyt,” and after Katz howls, in a mock blues growl, “O mama, ain’t got no naches,” the song shifts from mid-tempo jazz into a frenzied klezmer-Dixieland bridge.¹² Thus, there is no attempt by Katz to hold “St.

Louis Blues” up as a vessel of racial authenticity or treat it as the musical key that opens the cross-racial door to black culture and, by proxy, American culture itself. Instead, the fetishizing of musical blackness that has so often accompanied white participation in black culture and that has so guaranteed the terms of whiteness itself is nearly displaced by Katz’s own fetishization of his Jewishness. The result, then, is a racially hybridized composition, one that switches between languages, bridges tradition and styles and plays on histories of musical racialization.

Katz’s difference from other Jewish American singers and musicians invested in jazz and blues is perhaps most clear in his parodies of “the jazz singer” himself, Al Jolson. As Michael Rogin has so convincingly demonstrated, Jolson is the quintessential example of the pre-World War II Jew who, through blackface performance, used the mask of black music and black culture to transform himself from a racialized “less than white” Jew into a white American.¹³ In the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, “Toot, Toot, Tootsie” is one of the songs that turns Jolson’s character, Jakie Rabinowitz, cantor’s son, into Jack Robin, headlining American entertainer. It is one of the songs that secures his distance from the sacred cantorial melodies of his father’s Jewish traditionalism, the distance between his new de-ethnicized American self and his older Jewish one.

When Katz recorded the song in the 1950s, he went the opposite route, so much so that the song can be heard as Katz’s commentary on the way Jolson elided overt, performed Jewishness in his voracious quest for the whiteness of stardom. The singer of Katz’s version of “Toot, Toot, Tootsie” is an immigrant Jew, not a white American. To begin with, he can’t even pronounce “Tootsie” (“Tchut, Tchut, Tchyootsie”), he replaces Jolson’s famous, warbling “good-byyyyye” with a smug “I’ll send you some pickles and rye,” and instead of the pubs and beer halls that get Jakie into so much trouble, Katz takes us to first- and second-generation Jewish vacation destinations such as casinos and hot springs. After a platform conductor announces, “Trains leaving for Liberty, Monticello, Mt. Clemens, Murietta Springs, and the Desert Inn in Las Vegas” (in Katz’s world, even the conductor has a Yiddish accent), Katz tempers the swinging bravado of Jolson’s farewell to his “tootsie” with “Goodbye, tootse-la, have a good time, go to the mikveh . . . and don’t catch a cold.” Later in his career, Katz even caricatured Jolson’s patented singing style. Toward the end of the slinky after-hours cocktail jazz of “Shleppin’ My Baby Back Home,” Katz slips into a Jolson warble and sings, “Now, we shlep along and I’m singin’ a song, the title is ‘The Thrill is Gone.’”¹⁴ It was a Yiddishified verse that Jolson/Jack

Robin would never have sung himself. When Katz does it, he reminds the jazz singer of his Jewishness.

Of course, the difference between the vocal performances of Katz and Jolson also marked their very different investments in musical performance as a method of cultural assimilation. To evoke the Lower East Side world of Abraham Cahan's 1890 novella *Yekl*, Katz repeatedly failed to properly *oyshgreen* himself into Americanism, and unlike Mary Antin, "the wandering Jew" in Katz never sought forgetfulness.¹⁵ In *The Promised Land*, one of the canonical texts of Jewish assimilation, Antin thought of her Jewish identity as "a heavy garment that clings to your limbs when you would run," and described how she and other immigrant Jews worked to shed both "our despised immigrant clothing" and "our impossible Hebrew names."¹⁶

Whatever it really was that made Budd Schulberg's quintessential Hollywood Jew, Sammy Glick, run had somehow never pursued Katz. So instead of following in the footsteps of the studio Jews and the Tin Pan Alley songwriters who used popular entertainment to reinvent America as a de-Semitized winter wonderland of white Christmases, winter parades, and plantation fantasies, Katz used it to reinvent America as a great big Bar Mitzvah Ranch that stretched from the Catskills to Murietta Hot Springs, from Hester Street to the Friar's Club, and from Broadway to Billy Gray's Band Box on Fairfax Avenue. And as David Kaminski became Danny Kaye, Jerome Levitch became Jerry Lewis, Asa Yoelson became Al Jolson, and Milton Berlinger became Mr. Television, Katz propped himself up on a deli butcher's block on the cover of his *Mish Mosh* album and with clarinet in hand in front of rows of hanging salamis, trumpets, and bagels, laughed mischievously at both the world he created and the world it replaced.

At the peak of his career in the 1950s, Katz turned Tennessee Ernie Ford's 1955 coal-mining tale of manual labor and piling debt, "Sixteen Tons," into a kosher deli work-song ("You load sixteen tons of hot salami / Corned beef, rolled beef, and hot pastrami") and the 1953 hit from *Moulin Rouge*, "Where Is My Heart?" became "Where Is My Pants?"—a hunt for Katz's lost trousers ("I found my galoshes and a package of matzohs / It's mishige, it don't make sense / Where is mein pants?"). For Katz, Patti Page's "Doggie in the Window" was an all-purpose "Pickle in the Window" ("I read in the papers, there are burglars / A ganef who robs you in bed / A pickle will come in so handy / With a pickle I'll break him his head"), and the "Flying Purple People Eater" that had bobby-soxers running for their lives was really a klezmer-loving "Flying Poiple Kishke Eater" who parachutes out of

the sky with “eyes like latkes.” As the sleeve notes to *Mish Mosh* put it, “Mickey’s approach to a song is simple. He grabs the nation’s favorites and gives them the stamp of his unique and abundant wit. The poor unsuspecting tune suddenly finds itself with more twists than a barrel of pretzels and more spice than a plate of pastrami.”¹⁷

But Katz’s anti-assimilationist strategies did not only work at the level of lyrics, they also involved significant Jewish musical interruptions of pop style. Typically about halfway through each parody, Katz would overturn whatever style he was playing and suddenly lead his band, without any warning to the listener, into a spirited klezmer *freilach*. These jarring, often violent klezmer “breaks,” not at all unlike the role of the break in jazz or hip-hop, served as loud Jewish musical ruptures within the pop structure and style of each song—unfettered moments of musical shifting, release, and perforation that turned every pop hit of the day into a piece of Jewish wedding music.¹⁸ The freewheeling minor keys of the mid-song klezmer explosion became as much of a Katz trademark as his lyrical Yiddishisms.

Katz’s reliance on the minor keys of klezmer, the heavy accents and wordplay of Yiddish language and humor, and his in-your-*punim* parodic subversion (“tchyoootsie” instead of “tootsie”) virtually guaranteed his marginality within the entertainment industry. Besides a five-year stint as the DJ of an all-Jewish music program on a Los Angeles radio station in the early 1950s, Katz had never been an American radio personality. Unlike the most widely adored Jewish comics—figures like Milton Berle, Jerry Lewis, Danny Kaye, George Burns, Eddie Cantor, Jack Benny—Katz was never a televised fixture in American living rooms.

And though he made constant reference to the Catskills and the Borscht Belt, though his song “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Katzkills” was featured in the 1972 documentary *The Rise and Fall of the Borscht Belt*, and though Katz’s routines and songs are reminiscent of a veteran Catskills *toomler* (the infamous “tumult makers” who worked as resort social directors), Katz was never a Catskills comic. He never actually played any of the major Catskills landmarks so pivotal to the iconic construction of the Jewish American comic. “As far as I know,” he lamented in *Papa, Play for Me: The Hilarious, Heartwarming Autobiography of Comedian and Bandleader Mickey Katz*, “I am the only American Jewish entertainer who had never played the Catskills. But that’s the way the matzoh ball bounces.” The closest he came was in 1958, when he toured his own B-grade version of “the Catskills,” what he defined as “anything north of Atlantic City . . . every kochalyn and boarding-house from New Jersey to Albany.”¹⁹

As a result, Katz never reached the mass popularity and commercial success of all those other Jewish men—the stand-up shpielers, the variety show ringleaders, the bumbling schlemiels, the post-minstrel toastmasters, the violin-playing Everymen—who would one day be his bridge partners at the Friar’s Club. It was mostly the way Katz did what he did that prevented his achievement of large-scale popularity and success. Mickey Katz was “too Jewish” for 1950s America. Over the course of his twenty-year career as a parodist and comedian, only three of Katz’s songs ever made their way onto the pop charts (and not one of them ever charted higher than eighteen): his 1950 version of “Music! Music! Music!,” his 1951 take on “Come On-a-My House,” and 1952’s “Herring Boats,” Katz’s parody of “Shrimp Boats.”²⁰

In his 1977 autobiography, *Papa, Play For Me*, Katz goes to great lengths to discuss many occasions when his music received far less complementary reactions from Jews working in different branches of the entertainment industry. Katz’s parodies often generated tension and static precisely because of the way he used their comic audiotopias—their “joke techniques” and “laughter-compelling effects”—to sound against harmonic assimilation.²¹

Katz’s parodies are audiotopic here because of the way they encapsulate and articulate the meeting of different cultural and linguistic spaces: English and Yiddish, the private Jew and the public American, the shtetls and pogroms of Eastern Europe and the suburban lawns and mass cultural whiteness of postwar America. These melt-resistant audiotopias—long since derided as either forgettable novelty items or embarrassing portraits of ethnic self-hate and relegated commercially to cut-out bin obscurity—enact a refusal of de-ethnicized Americanness through a defiant sounding of Jewish difference.

JEWISHNESS IN PUBLIC

Only jokes that have purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them.

SIGMUND FREUD

In 1947, as he was finishing up a brief stint as the glug-meister in Spike Jones’s City Slickers “musical depreciation” parody band,²² Katz recorded his first Yiddish-English parodies: his “Home on the Range” spin-off, “Haim Afen Range,” and its B-side, a reeling Jewish hoedown called “Yiddish Square Dance.” The release of the 78rpm record sold out in its first

pressing (ten thousand copies) in New York City and rapidly became a hit in the cities along the East Coast, in Cleveland, and in Los Angeles. Katz's career as a musical parodist had officially begun, and starting with his next hit, "Tickle Tickle" (a parody of Tito Puente's "Tico Tico" that, according to Katz, sold "like latkes at a hadassah breakfast"), he would record four full-length albums of Yiddish-English parodies over the next decade: *Mish-Mosh*, *The Most Mishige*, *Katz Puts on the Dog*, and *She'll be Comin' Round the Katzkills*.

The success of Katz's first two records is a sure indication of his popularity with some first-, second-, and third-generation Jewish American audiences. "I had given the Jewish record buying public something that they evidently wanted and up to now hadn't had," Katz recalls in *Papa, Play For Me*. "I knew that all over America there must be thousands of record buyers who would like to see me in person."²³ Yet to Katz's surprise, when he did perform in public and delivered his parodies in person, he was confronted with moments of often extreme opposition. His "in-group" musical humor may have worked with many within "his group" in the safe confines of the private, but in public, many also found it distasteful, insulting, and offensive—the musical realization of the worst of age-old Jewish stereotypes.

"Mickey's music wasn't for everybody," Katz's wife Grace told me, "'cause sometimes the Jews themselves were anti-Semitic."²⁴ As historian Howard Sachar has noted, the prevailing attitude after World War II was a fear that anything that promoted a "separate identity as Jews . . . would somehow lend credence to Hitler's racial theories."²⁵ The often negative reception of Katz's parodies by fellow Jews working in the entertainment industry made it clear that in the 1950s the memory of such theories—racialized anti-Jewish discourse and the belief in the immutably impure, alien racialism of the Jew—were still viable factors within the American imagination.

In the 1950s, these Jewish fears of self-separatism were of course compounded by the anxious climate of the Cold War and the witch-hunts of McCarthyism. Saturated in political fear, right-wing terror, and left-wing ideological concealment, the 1950s began dramatically for American Jews, with the execution of the Rosenbergs and the House Un-American Activities Committee rifling through the "Jewish Babylon" of Hollywood looking for Jewish Bolsheviks.²⁶ "The acute fear there was in those days, the disbelief, the anxiety over discovery," Murray Reingold tells Nathan Zuckerman in Philip Roth's novel about the era, *I Married a Communist*, "the

suspense of having one's life and one's livelihood under threat."²⁷ The Jewish "anxiety over discovery" was a direct result of the anti-Semitism that characterized much of domestic Cold War rhetoric, and that was all but made doctrine by the 1952 McCarran–Walter Act and its biased national-origins immigration quotas. None of this was easy for Jewish intellectuals, activists, and politicians on the Left who, after the New Deal and the Popular Front had helped assimilate so many of them into mainstream American politics, were suddenly faced, once again, with being stigmatized as Jewish outsiders by the Right.²⁸

It was in the midst of all this that Mickey Katz and his Kosher Jammers took their show—a musical revue of Jewish outsidership if there ever was one—on the road. After Katz's second public performance of his parodies at Slapsie Maxie's in Los Angeles (where he also debuted his "cowboy outfit with 'Bar Mitzvah Ranch' plastered across it," which I will discuss in more depth later), the club owner and manager Sy Devore told Katz: "I will not have this! There will be no Yiddish done in this club! Get that through your head right now!" Though Katz acknowledges that "the Yiddish lyrics were admittedly a problem to those in the audience who didn't understand Yiddish," he knew full well that Devore's reaction to Yiddish had as much to do with accessibility as it did with Jewish performance. In fact, Devore's vehement reaction to the sounds of Yiddish—and the ethnic memory coded within it—was typical of negative responses to Katz's music that emerged during the 1950s. The Jewish manager of radio station KFWB, for example, refused to play Katz's records, "because they're an insult." "He was a Jewish gentleman," Katz wrote, "but he simply would not play my records."

Another Jewish station manager in Philadelphia (who Katz refers to as "one of the most despicable anti-Semites I've ever had the misfortune to meet") had been playing some of Katz's early parodies but then decided to pull them off the air "because some of our listeners are offended." After Katz pointed out that the DJ had played other types of ethnic pop music, such as Italian-American and polka records, the manager got specific: "I will not play any record with Yiddish. Yiddish is the language of the ghetto." Katz continued to put pressure on him and the following exchange ensued:

"My friend," I said, "Yiddish is the language of our forefathers."

"I do not care to hear it."

“Then why don’t you play some of my instrumental records? They’re some of the greatest music in the world, played by some of the greatest musicians in the world—Ziggy Elman, Mannie Klein, Nat Farber—” Again he cut me off mid-sentence. “There will be no Yiddish spoken, and no Jewish music played, on this station.”

In his review of Katz’s parody of Walt Disney’s “Davy Crockett Theme,” the Jewish editor of *Weekly Variety*—Katz calls him “the frightened Jewish editor”—accused Katz of “defiling” the legend of Davy Crockett. Katz was stunned by the editor’s response. “The original Davy Crockett recording was itself a parody!” he responded. Even the comedy radio DJ Hawthorne, the first radio DJ to play Katz’s parodies on the air, was eventually prohibited by his station manager from playing Katz’s records because “he’d gotten a little flak from a few Jewish(!) listeners.” And when Katz was hired to play a gig at the Frontier in Las Vegas, he was told not to perform his Yiddish-English material because, as he put it, “Las Vegas was still fighting the Civil War as far as ethnic shows were concerned.” Katz acquiesced, and “instead of taking a ‘Jewish’ show to Las Vegas,” he came prepared to perform jazz and dance standards. Katz recalled his surprise that not even his veteran Vegas agent, “Bookie” Levin, had “the clout necessary to pull the Las Vegas doors open wide enough to admit Mickey Katz. . . . The house talent booker at the Frontier . . . said I was ‘too Jewish.’”²⁹

THE JEW AND THE YANKEE

Mickey Katz grew up in the age of the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act, which cut off immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe. The act was designed and signed amidst a climate of intense nativism and racism that included the 1920 republication of Lothrop Stoddard’s xenophobic white supremacist tract *The Rising Tide of Color* and the largest rise in KKK activity in years. A direct product of such sentiment, the IRA was the result of federal legislators joining forces with eugenics ideologues, specifically Albert Johnson (chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization), Harry Laughlin (editor of the *Eugenical News*), and members of the Eugenics Committee of the United States of America.³⁰

The bill introduced in Congress based immigration policy on racial pseudo-science and was designed to restrict immigration to anyone of “undesirable racial stock”—especially Eastern and Southern European Jews—

whose biological taint would stain the racial purity of Anglo-Saxon America. "They are filthy, un-American and often dangerous in their habits," Wilbur J. Carr wrote in a report to the Immigration and Naturalization Committee. "They are physically deficient, wasted by disease and lack of food supplies. . . . Ninety percent lack any conception of patriotic or national spirit, and the majority of this percentage is mentally incapable of acquiring it." The passage of the bill was seen as a victory for American racial purity. "A second declaration of independence," Johnson called it. "The United States is our land. . . . We intend to maintain it so."³¹

Two years after the bill was passed, Mickey Katz performed his Yiddish-English parodies for the first time. While working as a clarinetist in Doc Whipple's big band at the Golden Pheasant Chinese restaurant in Cleveland, Katz began to turn classic children's nursery rhymes and bedtime stories into his own musical vignettes—"Little Red Rosenberg," "Hanzel and Ganzel," "Yoshke and the Beanstalk"—and even compiled a small book, *Nonzense on Who's Whoo end Wat's Wat*, which featured illustrations by his "teenage Cousin Bernie."

At a time when anti-Semitism and nativism were central to the political common sense, and when the World War I pressure to maintain and police 100 percent Americanism was still a top priority, Katz flaunted his difference from the imaginary Nordic mainstream. While Burton J. Hendrick's 1923 *Jews in America* warned against how those of "Semitic stock" were ruining Anglo-Saxon America, and while Kenneth Roberts was busy calling Jews "human parasites" in his 1921 series of *Saturday Evening Post* articles, Katz was "faking all the hit tunes of the day" and writing "literary matzo-pieces . . . not-very-Grimm fairy tales." Katz seemed unaffected by the rising political tide. "Gremma, vot's dot horn you got der?" Little Red Rosenberg asks the wolf masquerading as her bedridden *bobbe*. "Dot's no horn, stupid, dot's a shofar!"³²

The belief in Jewish aliens was not just manifesting itself in legislation and political tracts. It infiltrated musical circles as well. Early-twentieth-century boosters of American nativism and anti-Semitism understood Jewish difference as manifesting itself as a *sonic* force capable of destroying American whiteness—a musical agent of aural infection. As Macdonald Smith Moore has so effectively traced, early-twentieth-century champions of a musically realized "Yankee redemptive culture" racialized Jews as "Oriental middlemen between whites and blacks," responsible for the invasion of national culture with foreign elements and primitive sensuality. Critics such as Daniel Gregory Mason and John Tasker Howard gave new

twentieth-century life to Count Arthur de Gobineau's theories of racial biology by accusing Jewish composers such as George Gershwin, Ernst Bloch, and Aaron Copland of being racial aliens of national consciousness, agents of "semitization" and "miscegenation" who polluted "Yankee musical identity" with the musical residue of Negro and Oriental blood.³³

"The Jew and the Yankee stand, in human temperament, at polar points," Mason wrote in his polemical guidebook to American musical nationalism, *Tune In, America*. "Where one thrives, the other is bound to languish." With the increased presence of Jewish composers, songwriters, musicians, and publishers, Mason feared that this natural polarization was under threat of dissolution. What threatened American music most was a Jewish tendency toward "Oriental extravagance, their sensuous brilliancy and intellectual facility and superficiality, their general tendency to exaggeration and disproportion."³⁴

Mason's theories were echoed to a more openly anti-Semitic extreme by Henry Ford. In a pair of essays attacking the "Jewish monopoly" of Tin Pan Alley originally published in the *Dearborn Independent*—"Jewish Jazz Becomes Our National Music" and "How the Jewish Song Trust Makes You Sing"—Ford solidified the image of the musical Jew as a sly and clever rag-man who creates compositions by scavenging from the work of others, picking up pieces here and there, and then repackaging them for profit. According to Ford,

In this business of making the people's songs, the Jews have shown, as usual, no originality but very much adaptability, which is a charitable term used to cover plagiarism, which in its turn politely covers the crime of mental pocket-picking. The Jews do not create; they take what others have done, give it a clever twist, and exploit it.³⁵

Ford was expressing what had become a common sentiment among boosters of musical nativism who repeatedly returned to the alienness of Jews and their music—"the Jewish infection"—as an auditory "menace" to the whiteness of American music. "Jews did not create popular music," Ford decried, "they debased it."³⁶ To Ford's ears, the Jews of Tin Pan Alley had taken perfectly good American music—patriotic songs, operas, folk tunes—and turned it into "Yiddish moron music." Judging by his disgust at a Jewish singer who "could not pronounce English words" and who "sang through his nose," we can only imagine the tenor of his reaction to the sound of Katz's Yinglish transformations of Rossini's *The Barber of*

Seville into the klezmer-pop opera of “The Barber of Schlemiel,” Bizet’s *Carmen* into the tragic Jewish heroine “Carmen Katz,” and the patriotic national march of “Bugle Call Rag” into the deli-counter klezmer-jazz clowning of “Bagel Call Rag.” “Our public taste is in danger of being permanently debauched,” Mason feared, “made lastingly insensitive to qualities most subtly and quintessentially our own, by the intoxication of what is, after all, an alien art.”³⁷ Meanwhile, Katz had begun “faking” hit songs at his Uncle Sam’s tailor shop (with its two-sided sign, one in English, the other in Yiddish) and trying out his Yinglish parodies on his family during weekly living room performances of “Katz’s Follies.”

JEWISH UNCLE SAM

James Baldwin called it “the price of the ticket,” that costly admission fare that buys you access into the world of American whiteness. “White people are not white,” Baldwin wrote, “part of the price of the white ticket is to delude themselves into believing they are.”³⁸ And in order to believe that you are white, you must also believe that you are no longer what you once were. Names get shortened. Identities are hidden. Americans are born. For Jews in the 1950s, the urge to trade in Old World identities and purchase this ticket into American whiteness was so great—in 1952, 160,000 American Jews either shortened or replaced their last names, a number twice as big as pre-World War II numbers³⁹—that it became a nearly compulsory act, the dominant narrative of post-World War II Jewish American life. Katz’s dream of becoming American didn’t entail a becoming-white. To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari, Katz chose the opposite dream: he became-minor, he became-Jew.⁴⁰

His way of inhabiting the racialized terrain of American cultural citizenship was to perform Jewishness, not erase or silence it. His parodies reveled in in-betweenness, in the sound of cultural dualism and, to borrow a term from George Sanchez, “ambivalent Americanism.”⁴¹ This sense of measured, ambivalent belonging, of never fully inhabiting Jewishness and Americanism without always inhabiting both at once, manifested itself early in Katz’s life. In *Papa, Play for Me*, he writes fondly of his “Uncle Sam—my Jewish Uncle Sam—who had a tiny tailor shop where he also sold used clothing” (32). It was at Jewish Uncle Sam’s tailor shop where Katz gave his first public clarinet performances as a young boy, playing “Yankee Doodle” for his uncle and other local Jewish businessmen and friends from the neighborhood. Katz also writes of the monument store

owned by his immigrant grandfather, which squeezed both worlds into its advertising: “Their business sign out in front was in English on the one side and Yiddish on the other” (43).

Once established as a working musician, this duality—this double-sided identity—naturally began to show up in Katz’s songs and on-stage stories. In their 1951 review of *Borscht Capades*—Katz’s first Yiddish-English stage production, subtitled “A Modern Yiddish Variety Revue”—William and Sarah Schack credited Katz with portraying “the hybrid life” of postwar Jews, “the mixed world of halvah and Hershey almond bar, sunny school-room and dingy cheder, Sabbath candles and Fourth of July Roman candles, Simchat Torah and the World Series . . . Johnny-on-a-pony and Jewish nut games, Al Jolson and Menasha Skulnick.”⁴²

According to an early *Borscht Capades* program, Katz and his band would begin the evening by coupling “The Star-Spangled Banner” with the Yiddish hog-calling of “Yiddish Square Dance,” then move into a medley of his parodies, some Yiddish folk music, musical comedy from Patsy “Goldele” Abbot, stand-up comedy from Borscht Belter Phil Foster, Katz’s comic greenhorn monologue “Hershele at the Induction Center,” and before concluding with the Israeli national anthem, he led the band through a Jewish polka he called “A Glesele Beer Berrel Polka.”

Borscht Capades is also where Katz perfected perhaps his most trademark performance costume, his cowboy outfit bearing the words “Bar Mitzvah Ranch.” As Katz’s son Joel Grey would later explain it, “When my father came out on stage wearing a big cowboy hat and a shirt lettered ‘Bar Mitzvah Ranch’ to sing ‘Home On the Range’ in Yiddish, it was his way of saying, ‘I want to be an American.’”⁴³ He wanted to be a different sort of American, though, one that hearkened back to Randolph Bourne’s 1916 vision of a “trans-national America” built upon the music of “the hyphenate” and the dual cultural citizenship sounded within it.⁴⁴ And thus, because it occupied this ambivalent mid-century juncture between Jewishness and whiteness, Jews in the 1950s either found it embarrassing or hilarious, either a proud celebration or a threatening, self-directed insult.

Karen Brodtkin Sacks has located the years following World War II, the very years Katz began to perform Yinglish parodies commercially, as the peak season for the whitening of American Jews. Primarily anchoring her comments in postwar Jewish upward economic and social mobility (a boom period upgrade from working-class to middle-class), increased financial and educational awards (courtesy of federal programs like the GI Bill and benefit-granting organizations like the Federal Housing Adminis-

tration), and the subsequent rush for suburbia, Sacks positions Jews as central participants in the construction of a postwar American whiteness.⁴⁵

Yet it is precisely this 1950s Jewish move toward whiteness that Katz's music complicated. Where Frankie Lane heard the "Cry of the Wild Goose" in 1950, Katz heard the "Geshray of de Vilde Kotchke." When Kay Starr, Bobby Wayne, Eddie Wilcox, Sunny Gale, and the Bell Sisters all tried their hand at the "Wheel of Fortune" in 1952, Katz did it his own way, singing, "I'm a schlemiel of fortune." Guy Mitchell's 1952 hit "Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania" was rebuilt and remapped as a Jewish bathhouse enclave, "Shvitzburgh, Pennsylvania," and when Katz took on established songwriter Johnny Mercer, he made a mockery of the smooth and sophisticated, top-hat-and-tails romance of "That Old Black Magic." "That old black smidgick called love," Katz jeered, aping the crooners and playing one of his favorite roles: the bumbling cosmopolitan (a role he took to the extreme on "Kiss of Meyer," his "Come to papa bubele" send-up of Georgia Gibbs's steamy "Kiss of Fire"). When he replaced a whispered sweet nothing with a shout of "I'm mishige for you," Katz was both having fun with the currency of big screen romantic convention and, in fulfilling his role as the Jewish Jester, having fun turning that convention on its head.

But in order to fully appreciate just how anomalous Katz's records sounded when they were originally released between 1947 and 1957, we must remember the type of pop cultural climate he was working against. In the wake of the Holocaust and in the thick of the Cold War, American Jews working in film, TV, and music wanted nothing more than to become part of what David Marc and Robert Cantwell have respectively called the "emerging alrightnik culture" and "strange detergent culture" promoted by the postwar institutionalization of mass culture and mass media.⁴⁶ The new national market that the rise of the television industry and the advent of the long-playing record (and the continuing presence of radio and film) helped solidify created a new sense of Americanness, one that linked a distinctly American character to the rise of a national consumer culture. The result, in Marc's words, was a televised pop cultural landscape of "dented fenders, forgotten anniversaries, wives with charge accounts, impossible in-laws, the darned plumbing and so on. If there could be no poetry after Auschwitz, there could at least be New Rochelle."⁴⁷

Though there were a number of Jews occupying central roles in prime-time network television in the 1950s—Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, George Burns, Jack Benny—it was the performance of overt and open Jewishness that had all but vanished from the screen (save perhaps for the recurring,

coded Yiddishisms of Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*). Even before the WASP family values of the "domesticoms" took over prime time (*Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show*), Burns and Benny had already celebrated Christmas and played golf at the country club in front of national audiences, and *The Goldbergs* had already made its move from a tenement in the Bronx to a home in the Haverville suburb. By the end of the TV fifties, the immigrant Jewish family had become just another version of Ozzie and Harriet.⁴⁸ But because this was the Cold War, the new-found suburban Americanism of *The Goldbergs* didn't actually matter to the Right. After one of its stars, Philip Loeb—a World War II veteran—was blacklisted as a Communist and rejected from further employment, he killed himself in 1955.

On the big screen, *Marjorie Morningstar* gave us Noel Airman changing his name from Saul Ehrmann in hopes of becoming a crossover entertainer, and a Jewish Marjorie played by the not-so-Jewish Natalie Wood.⁴⁹ But nowhere was the transformation and gradual erasure of representational Jewishness more evident than in the 1952 remake of 1927's *The Jazz Singer*. Instead of a New York City urban shtetl and a Lower East Side ghetto, the new *Jazz Singer* took place in a suburb of North Philadelphia. Al Jolson, the immigrant cantor's son, was replaced by the Lebanese Danny Thomas. The cramped, dingy shul and Orthodox rabbi gave way to an upper-middle-class Conservative rabbi and his spacious, lavishly decorated synagogue. The 1927 character of the mediating and meddling Yudelson (on loan from the Yiddish Theater) was recast as everybody's Uncle Louie, and the prayer shawl that Jack Robin gives his father for his birthday in the original was now a mink coat, a present for his mother on her birthday. Most significantly, though, the central dramatic tension that the original film relies on, the conflict between the Old World and the New, between Jewishness and Americanness, was dissolved. By 1952, Jack Robin's cantor father is so sympathetic to his son's love for mass culture that he asks Jack to forgive him for holding back his dreams of becoming an American entertainer.⁵⁰

This new incarnation of *The Jazz Singer* was part of a much larger "de-Semitization" of American culture that Henry Popkin documented that very same year in a polemical, decade-marking essay for *Commentary* that he named "The Vanishing Jew of Our Popular Culture." Popkin recognized the disappearance of the Jew and of Jewishness everywhere he looked, from the reprint editions of pocket books like Irving Shulman's *The Amboy Dukes* to Broadway plays like *The Grass Harp*. For Popkin, the reasons were many: an overall postwar fear of re-fanning the flames of Nazism, the lin-

gering shadow of the 1934 Hays Code (which prohibited the ridicule of religious groups), and a general 1950s drive toward cultural uniformity and sameness. “Jews are an intrusion,” he wrote, “they do not belong to the pretty picture. Their presence is suppressed just as other odd, unsightly things are suppressed.”⁵¹

KATZ ON THE TELEPHONE

Katz sang in abrasive tones. He used bilingual wordplay and clownish, anarchic delivery. He made English share space with Yiddish.

He couldn't have chosen a more difficult era to sing in. This was the era of “the singer,” when Frank Sinatra, after leaving the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra in 1942, would become known simply as “The Voice.” With the collapse of the big band business after the war, jazz singers moved into the public spotlight more than ever before, becoming the top draws on stage and radio and eventually garnering more commercial success than big bands themselves. “When you want popular music at CBS now,” *Metronome* reported in the mid-1940s, “you turn to singers and singers alone.”⁵²

But Mickey Katz sounded nothing like the singers that were most commonly being turned to: the tough, romantic swagger of Sinatra, the hushed, ultra-smooth baritone of sweet-voiced crooners like Bing Crosby, Russ Columbo, and Perry Como.⁵³ Katz was the anti-crooner, belting, howling, hiccuping, mugging, and glugging his way through rhymed, guttural verses of Yiddish and English. His commitment to continue singing popular songs in Yiddish put him in a camp that included few others in the 1950s—Eli Basse, Lee Tully, and Leo Fuchs (on novelty singles like “Gevalt” and “Kreplach”)—when most major record company labels were discontinuing their branches of “foreign language” recordings (Katz was himself signed to RCA Victor’s “foreign language” series in 1947, before moving to Capitol during the 1950s). With the introduction of the long-playing record and the seven-inch 45rpm single after World War II, the market for “foreign language” recordings had taken a drastic dive. Columbia Records even conducted a market survey in the 1950s of American tastes, and not one of the polling questions made mention of non-English-speaking minority music.

Lloyd Dunn, an executive at Katz’s label in the 1950s, Capitol Records, put the cessation of “foreign language” records directly in terms of ethnicity and American identity, upon his return from a research and publicity trip in Europe. “During my travels,” Dunn reported,

I soon became aware that in Europe, and most of the world, American popular records were in great demand. . . . But our foreign associates insisted that we reciprocate by selling more of their records. They pointed out that there are more Italians in New York than in Rome. And more Germans in Milwaukee than—etc., etc. True, perhaps. But second-generation Europeans are *Americans*, particularly in their musical tastes. [emphasis in original]⁵⁴

Similarly, the sound of Yiddish was being exorcised from the Hollywood big screen. The original print of Warner Brothers' 1946 *The Jolson Story*—released a year before Katz debuted his Yinglish jazz singing on “Haim Afen Range”—contained a scene in which Larry Parks, who played Jolson, performs a Yiddish song. After a test-screening audience responded negatively, the scene was eventually cut.⁵⁵ For Jack Robin in *The Jazz Singer* and Al Jolson in *The Jolson Story*, “jazz” was an instrument of whitewashed Americanism, a way to shed old identities in favor of new ones. A Yiddish song would have disrupted the sound of American assimilation that both *The Jolson Story* and Jolson's career relied on.

The gradual homogenizing of the recorded pop voice, this smoothing over of “foreign” blemishes, only further highlighted just how “different” Katz sounded to 1950s ears. But that his voice registered as different, as dangerously different, had less to do with the 1950s and more to do with past histories of Jewish otherness. Hearing Katz as “too Jewish” cannot be separated from a long tradition of anti-Semitic literature and ideology that hears the Jewish voice as emblematic of a hidden, mysterious, and secret inner language that specifically signifies Jewish difference. By dialogizing English-language pop sounds with Yiddish, Katz's performances of Jewish difference conjure a history of Yiddish as a sign of linguistic impurity and corruption, an audible expression of what Hannah Arendt once described as the Jew's “despised, incomplete symbiosis with the dominant common culture.”⁵⁶

In *The Jew's Body*, Sander Gilman follows the sound of “the Jew's voice” from the Gospels to late-twentieth-century American popular culture, arguing that alongside a visual tradition of seeing the Jew as Other, there is also an aural tradition of hearing the accents, syncopations, gestures, and tones of his voice and spoken language as audible manifestations of the Jew's corruption. He writes of an anti-Semitic study of Jews issued at the beginning of the Third Reich that claimed that even if Jews don't speak

with a recognizable “Jewish” accent, they *judeln*, or “Jew,” in their speech. Something innate in “the Jew’s voice” actively corrupts and transforms language by “Jewing it.”⁵⁷ According to Gilman, “the Jew becomes the agent who uses corrupt language, while the corrupt discourse becomes the embodiment of the nature of the Jew.”⁵⁸

In nineteenth-century Germany, the secret, hidden language of the Jew was most frequently characterized by its *mauscheln*—its use of a Yiddish accent or vocabulary. *Mauscheln*, as linguistic difference, not only became a sign for Jewish difference on the whole, but actually began to stand in for the Jew him or herself.⁵⁹ As Gilman indicates, *mauscheln*’s Yiddish accent of difference posed a threat to national integration and German cultural citizenship. Likewise, for Jews eager to assimilate into the whiteness of 1950s American identity, Katz’s public use of a musical *mauscheln* seemed to come too close to reenacting the nativist and anti-Semitic view of the Jew as a language-corrupting, racial alien. For many American Jews living in the immediate shadow of the Holocaust, the risk of performing this difference from the national mainstream in public was just too great.

But it’s not just that Katz sang in Yiddish, it’s that he sang in Yinglish and that he sang Yinglish in a certain way: through his nose, butchering the English words. He sang in a style that directly recalled the spoken performances of so-called “dialect comedians,” which likewise angered, threatened, and embarrassed many Jews trying to work quietly, ethnically undercover and difference-free in the industry. Jewish dialect comedy is generally understood to refer to comedy—spoken, sung, or otherwise—that derives its humor from the Yiddish inflection, pronunciation, and accent most commonly associated with immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe. The first dialect comedians to emerge around the turn of the century were, not surprisingly, the second-generation American-born children of these immigrants, who found comedy in the linguistic travails of their greenhorn parents.

Katz followed the same pattern. In *Papa, Play For Me*, Katz traces his own dialect techniques back to his Russian immigrant father’s accent and his own mangled English pronunciations of genius (“jin-us”), technique (“tech”), violin (“wiolin”), and Caruso (“Ca-roosel”)—“He’s got a voice.”⁶⁰ The sleeve notes on his first collection of parodies, *Mickey Katz and His Orchestra*, demonstrated just where these childhood listenings had taken him and put him directly within the dialect tradition, billing him as “the world-famed dialect comedian who leaves audiences reeling in the aisles with his hilarious parodies and impish gestures.” Katz performed a musicalized ver-

sion of dialect comedy by incorporating standard conventions of dialect humor within the musical performances of his klezmer parodies.

Dialect comedy (which included caricatures that encompassed everything from blackface and “Dutch” types to the “Yankee”) was a vaudeville staple among a variety of ethnic and racial groups. The early part of the century saw the commercial success of so-called “Jew comics,” or “Hebrew comics,” like David Warfield, who dressed in shabby coats and dusty derbies, wore a shaggy beard, told jokes in a “Jewish” accent, and created characters such as “Sigmund Cohenski,” an immigrant American Jew vacationing in Paris. There were “Hebrew” joke books and even “Hebrew” masks that featured a pronounced nose for the living room comedian to perform in Jewface—both of which openly played on and exaggerated racialized stereotypes of Jewish speech and physiognomy and portrayed the Jew as racially different from white Americans.⁶¹

Indeed, perhaps the most central aspect of dialect comedy is the way it reveled in ethnic and racial particularity, the way it performed Jewish marginality and Jewish difference from the national mainstream. The Jews of dialect comedy were not assimilated, melted Americans; they had yet to “become white” and, even worse, they appeared to have no desire to. Popular routines like Barney Bernard’s “Cohen at the Telephone” or Julian Rose’s “Levinsky at the Wedding” portrayed the immigrant Jew as the outsider unable to adopt to American society, the outsider who was thoroughly out of place at any “American” event he participated in: using the phone, going to the bank, attending a baseball game, wandering into a wedding. Nowhere was the relationship between the dialect comedy Jew and national culture more pronounced than in Monroe Silver’s “Cohen Becomes a Citizen,” which gave us the Jew as failed citizen, the immigrant Cohen who was unable to complete his naturalization examination. When asked if he promises to support the Constitution, Cohen responds: “How can I do it? I got a vife and tree children now to support.” When asked where the Declaration of Independence was signed, Cohen responds: “At the bottom.”⁶²

Early opposition to Jewish dialect comedy proves that the negative Jewish responses to Katz’s use of Yiddish dialect humor in the 1950s were not without precedent. In 1913, for example, Miss Mollie Edna Osherman of the Chicago Anti Stage-Jew Committee led a campaign against Jewish performers who propagated what she called the “buffoonery of the Jew.”⁶³ But in the teens, Jewish promoters and club owners were the ones coming under fire for allowing such “negative” representations of the Jew to reach the eyes

and ears of the public; in the 1950s, it was the club owners, promoters, and radio jocks themselves who were policing Jewish representation.

It was the diminished presence of the Jewish dialect comedian that was at the center of both Popkin's and Ben Hecht's complaints about the disappearance of the Jew from the spaces of popular culture into a "fog of concealment." Popkin laments Walter Winchell's 1947 transformation from a dialect booster (his frequent printing of the Max Mefoofsky jokes) into a dialect censor, is troubled by the "hypersensitive listeners" who accused comedian Lou Holtz of anti-Semitism, and criticizes comedian Sam Levenson for his own attacks on dialect stories and jokes. Upset that now "the best of the tribe live in semi-retirement," Popkin longs for a return to "a freer tradition that could still recognize and present foreigners and foreign accents without excessive self-consciousness or reticence."⁶⁴ To further illustrate Popkin's point, Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner had been performing their neo-dialect routine "The 2000 Year Old Man" at private parties throughout the 1950s, but waited to make their first recording of it until 1960. When asked if their decision to withhold the album's release was due to an unwritten taboo against overtly Jewish performance, Reiner responded,

Oh absolutely. . . . After 1938, when Hitler decided the Jews weren't any good and did all of those terrible Leni Riefenstahl documentaries about the Jew being worse than vermin, we weren't doing Jew comedy at that time, but there were comedians at that time who were doing the Jewish accent but who stopped doing it. The biggest case out here was Dave Chasen. He worked in movies and vaudeville. He gave up his career and became a restaurateur. There was Lou Holtz. You had to sneak it in. There was a brilliant—My Fairfax Lady—Billy Gray out here at the Band Box. . . . So we never thought we'd do it for anybody but our friends who would understand it and our Christian friends who weren't anti-Semitic.⁶⁵

The loss of the Jewish dialect comedian angered screenwriter Ben Hecht enough to make it a key part of his 1944 attack on Jewish invisibility and assimilation in *A Guide for the Bedevilled*. "No greater kidnapping has ever taken place," he wrote. Like Popkin, Hecht remembers when "the stage was full of Jewish dialect comedians. . . . There were popular songs about Jews, sung in accent. . . . The Jew was a comic, crazily human figure to be encountered everywhere. . . . His oddities and his accents were known to all." Hecht blames the exorcism of the comic Jew from American culture on the "Simple Simon Jews" in the entertainment industry, whom he also labels

“oversensitive Jews, overnervous Jews, Jews frightened at the crude reminders of their own beginnings.”⁶⁶ Hecht’s summation of the resulting status of Jewish comedy and caricature (just three years before Katz put that caricature in the middle of the Western frontier with his first musical parody) is well worth repeating here:

He is safe now, the little Jew. No baggy pants, no oversized derby jammed over his ears, no mispronunciations or waving of hands. The caricature has been wiped out. And with it has gone the open-heartedness, the quick sentimentality, the eagerness for fun; most of all this genius for fun—the half-mad capering of irony and jest that is the oldest of all the Jewish tradition. . . . And with the vanishing of the caricature, the original, himself, has become invisible.⁶⁷

One of the “Simple Simon Jews” who lobbied for this invisibility was Sam Levenson, the ex-dialect comedian once responsible for a series of comic “Basic Yiddish Lesson” recordings. In a *Commentary* article written in response to Popkin’s fear of Jewish vanishing, “The Dialect Comedian Should Vanish,” Levenson claimed that he didn’t believe in “between you and me jokes,” and that “to mimic broken English is as painful to the immigrant as mimicking a limp is to the cripple.” He compared a nightclub with a dialect comedian on stage to a Nazi beer hall with SS men laughing at the funny little Jew on stage. It was a common Jewish sentiment of the time: people might be laughing *at* the Jew and not with him, and after the Holocaust, the risk of experiencing the potential consequences of such laughter was just too high. In an article that patriotically ends by trying to equate the immigration of Eastern European Jews to the arrival of the Pilgrims on the *Mayflower*, it is significant that Levenson signals out Katz’s “American-Jewish” Broadway musical revue, *Borscht Capades*, for lacking “any real sense of Jewish culture.”⁶⁸

Katz trafficked in a manic, code-switching mix of English and Yiddish, a rapid-fire, exclamatory fusion of English word fragments, Yiddish monologues and punch lines, guttural vocables, throaty glugs, and manic glosolalia. In other words, a dizzying *mishmosh* of sense and non-sense, of obligatory rhyme and optional reason. “She’s a doll” could be followed by “Yeah, *Yisgadal*,” “You’ll never get rich” coupled with “You old *galitz*.” Indeed, much of the humor and import of Katz’s songs has to do with the way he makes language sound, not so much what he makes it mean. The way Katz delivers his Yinglish lines—nasal, hurried, exaggerated—is as impor-

tant as what he actually sings. As sociologist Herbert Gans put it in a 1953 *American Quarterly* article about Katz (the only published academic piece on Katz I am yet aware of), “the lyrics are not really lyrics, but series of rhymes filled out as many Yiddish phrases and words as possible.”⁶⁹

Katz’s musical Yinglish was particularly reminiscent of the much maligned “potato Yiddish” that was the common linguistic currency of a later stage of Yiddish Theater, the *shund* (or trash). Consisting of “fractured Yiddish and English” and “diluted with . . . Americanisms,”⁷⁰ this broken or hybridized version of Yiddish was seen as both an insult to the “real” Yiddish of “real” Yiddish theater and an embarrassment to upwardly mobile Jews who wanted to discard the “trash” of their ethnic pasts for a future in English. As Alisa Solomon has argued in her study of Yiddish theater and queer Jewish performance, the *shund* was somewhat of a dangerous mode of Jewish performance for Jews who craved assimilation and cultural uniformity because of the way it “magnified, manipulated, mobilized, made merriment of the Jew’s marginality.”⁷¹

The extreme nasality of Katz’s voice and the insider Yiddishisms and Jewish themes of his songs struck terror in the hearts of Jews eager to forget their ethnic pasts, eager for the benefits and masks of whiteness. One man told jazz critic Gary Giddins, “You know I grew up around this music and was always a little embarrassed by it.”⁷² Giddins compares this reception of Katz’s klezmer parodies to the “embarrassment” BB King’s blues caused middle-class blacks, arguing that “the relatively corny rhythms and relentless minor-key melodies of klezmer cut too close to the bone of assimilated Jewish experience, with its reminders of urban shtetls and old-country accents.” Music critic Chip Stern remembers, “I got the distinct impression my folks were ashamed of him. Even today, in my current neighborhood, a devout orthodox woman recoiled in horror at the mere mention of *klezmer*.”⁷³ When I told my great-aunt of my own interest in Katz, she was shocked: “Why on earth would you want to talk about *him*?”

Part of the reason for such reactions was that Katz refused to hide what Albert Memmi called “the double language of the Jew.” Katz sang in English and Yiddish, mixing one voice with the other so everyone could hear it. For Memmi, the Jew spoke this “double language” precisely because of the embarrassment the sound of Yiddish could cause—its “slightly shameful” quality, its status as a “nostalgic domain reserved for our collective intimacy.”⁷⁴ In other words, Yiddish belongs to the private Jew, not the public American. Instead of making music out of Yiddish in “intimate” spaces, Katz loudly inserted Yiddish into the public sphere. Instead of leaving Yid-

dish as a site of nostalgia and pastness, Katz made it current and thrust into the center of contemporary postwar life. Clearly not everyone in the 1950s felt the same way. As Memmi himself described, hearing the sound of Yiddish in public, around others (especially non-Jews), was as “annoying” as hearing “a laughable family secret: this language of our parents and of our grandparents which we no longer wished to hear and which we vaguely regretted that our children already heard no more.”⁷⁵

This is precisely why Katz’s music plays a part in Maria Damon’s meditation on what she explains as the “word-ambiences” of Yiddish (specifically those evoked by Lenny Bruce and Gertrude Stein), those semantic environments performed in kitchens, family scrapbooks, and bedrooms loaded with secret clues and private meanings. “What words in your families were landmines?” Damon asks, “Does your body come alive at the smell of stuffed cabbage because of the loving and haimish dinners inscribed into your nerve endings? Or do you blush and quiver at the sound of Mickey Katz on those rare and cutesified klezmer specials on listener-sponsored radio?”⁷⁶ Like stuffed cabbage, Katz’s music was not only too Jewish but too haimish, too familiar. If heard in private, it might produce pleasure. If heard in public, in front of the wrong crowd, it might be a land mine. His music quickly came to represent an audible, in-your-face call to remember when the impulses of 1950s American whiteness were asking Jews to forget. Or, as Katz put it in 1966, “In those days, Jews were scared to be Jewish. But now it’s different. Now, it’s in to be Jewish.”⁷⁷

THE BORSCHT JESTER

The Jew can be charged with the longest-standing crime in history. He has been able for two thousand years to turn his neighbor into a jackass.

BEN HECHT

A Guide for the Bedevilled

Mickey Katz always considered himself a clarinetist first, a parodist second. Yet it was his parodies that earned him the most notoriety and it was his parodies that most loudly fought their way out of the American melting pot. Which isn’t surprising: parody is not a subtle art. Parody is not quiet. Part of the task of parody (and especially the parody that Katz trafficked in, ethnic parody) is to be noticed, to leave a mark and make a statement, to commit an aggressive, guerilla crime of reversal and takeover. What Katz called a “grabbing” of hit songs was a form of cultural hijacking, a subver-

sive seizure of the exalted by the weak and the small. Alessandro Portelli has divided musical parody into three different modes of attack: reversal (which leaves the original song virtually the same, changing only an occasional word to transform the overall message), appropriation (using “positive connotations” of the original by making selected changes in it), and neutralization (“using only the popular tune as a convenient vehicle for new words”). Katz’s parodies most frequently follow the latter two models—changing the vast majority of the song’s words, feeding off of the positive connotations of the original (the very things which helped secure its mass appeal), and then using it as a springboard for the creation of something recognizably, unquestionably different.

No matter the strategy, though, for Portelli all parody remains a form of criticism. “To parody a song is to criticize it,” he writes, “but also to recognize its power. At the least, it is an acknowledgment of its popularity.”⁷⁸ The only qualification Katz adhered to when choosing which songs he would “appropriate” and “neutralize” was their popularity, the extent to which the song could safely be called a “nation’s favorite.” He chose songs solely based on their acceptance by mass audiences in the 1950s, songs that by virtue of their sales and radio airplay (“Rock Around the Clock,” “That’s Amore”) or merely their place in the national mythology or popular imagination (“Home on the Range,” “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain”), were considered universal hits, national favorites, musical symbols of a unified consumer culture. The more universal a song was thought to be, the more popular, the more representative of a national mass audience, the more necessary Katz thought it was to make fun of it, ridicule it, mix it with Eastern European klezmer, make it Jewish.

Whether he was parodying mambos, polkas, opera, or pop, the end result was always the same. Katz was a musical funnyman out to make fun of whatever music he touched, a 1950s torchbearer of grotesque realism: the Jewish clown, the Semitic fool, the Renaissance court jester gone self-proclaimed “Borscht Jester.” On the cover of his album of the same name, Katz lets us catch him in the act of parodic usurpation. Wearing a multi-colored court jester costume complete with upturned slippers, harlequin cane, and a hooded cap topped with a dangling bell, Katz has so brazenly de-crowned power that now he’s sitting on the throne himself with a mischievous smile, smoking a cigar and holding a salami.⁷⁹

This was Katz’s take on the tradition of the *badchonim*, Jewish “merry-makers” and musical jesters who were the featured performers and MCs at Eastern European Jewish weddings. Weaving “couplets and jingles” with

Biblical and Talmudic phrases, mixing comic monologues with insults hurled playfully at the guests, the *badchonim* were originally known as *leitzim*, or “scholarly comedians.” Some have argued that the *badchonim* became an endangered species of Jewish performance once mass immigration to the *golden medina* (golden land) of the United States reached its zenith around the turn of the twentieth century.⁸⁰ But with Katz’s appearance at my great-grandparents’ anniversary party as just one piece of evidence (between songs, he made cracks about my family’s post-Russia roots in a North Dakota shtetl), it is clear that Katz was giving new life to the figure of the *badchon* not by museumizing it or wrapping it up in East European nostalgia, but by introducing it into the mass marketplace of the 1950s recording industry and the Southern California band-for-hire party circuit of weddings and bar mitzvahs.

By taking successful, chart-topping popular songs and introducing them to the worlds of the secular, “vulgar” Jew, Katz’s *badchonic* recordings and live shows gave grotesque realism a new home in 1950s Jewishness—the Jewish grotesque rendered through hybrid pop musical performance. For Mikhail Bakhtin, the job of the grotesque realist is to “degrade, bring them down to earth, turn their subject into flesh.” Katz’s parodies (and Bakhtin includes parody in his definition of grotesque realism) operate precisely in this way, “degrading” popular songs by bringing them down from the heights of the Hit Parade to the secular, everyday, vulgar world of postwar Jewish America. Katz’s parodies trafficked in a central practice of grotesque style by recasting hit songs according to the sights and smells of the Jewish “material bodily stratum,” the world of the Jewish delicatessen and the “belly, buttocks, and bladder” of the open, self-transgressing Jewish body-in-excess that populates it. Almost all of Katz’s parodies come back to the “substratum laughter” produced by food—*gribbenes*, matzoh, shmaltz, pickles, kishka, bagels, latkes—and its digestive impact on those who consume it.⁸¹

The result is parody’s most threatening and potentially dangerous effect: the displacement of one world by another at the hands of a wise-cracking outcast who hurls jokes from the margins. Freud has argued that all parody—which falls into his category of the “tendentious joke” and its “rebellious criticism”—involves “comic unmasking” through mocking, aggressive acts of exposure: “such and such a person, who is admired as a demigod, is after all only human like you and me.”⁸² There is a different unmasking at work in Katz’s parodies, however. They reveal that the dignitary, the exalted, “the demigod” not as universally human “like you and me,” but as specifically and particularly Jewish, “like us.” It’s a distinction crucial to under-

standing the adversarial position of Katz's work to dominant narratives of Jewish American assimilation and drives toward whiteness.

On *Katz at the U.N.*, for example, an album of spoken comic monologues, Katz apes a United Nations ambassador, casting himself as "the delegate from Delancey St." Instead of an international sophisticate, Katz is parochial, bumbling, and prone to mispronunciation. When he reports on the arrival of a Jewish extraterrestrial, his primary concern is that the new arrival has a ticket for the Rosh Hashanah service at the local synagogue. On the album's front cover, he's dressed in official ambassador attire (tux, war ribbons, ceremonial red sash), yet is speaking into a kosher salami and microphones connected by link sausages. On the back cover, he's using one of the sausages as a microphone and listening to the U.N. interpreter through a pair of bagel headphones.

What Katz did with *Katz at the U.N.*'s spoken parodies was only a sample of what he was capable of when he joined up with his band and took on the world of 1950s pop music. With the financial death of swing and the big band business after World War II, popular music went through a period of unprecedented stylistic fragmentation and genre confusion. From the birth of bebop and the revivalist rebirth of New Orleans jazz to the explosion of rock and roll, the years that followed the war became, in Lewis Erenberg's words, "the most tumultuous era in American popular music." Ethnic genres and labels that once seemed stable and fixed (blues, country, Latin, polka) became unsettled, as David Stowe has written, "reshaping themselves in unexpected configurations" such that "the boundaries dividing these ethnic genres were unusually porous."⁸³ The result was a flurry of ethnic-pop hybrids—from the token signifiers and surface internationalism of Dean Martin's "That's Amore" and Les Paul and Mary Ford's "Vaya con Dios" to the blazing Italian "call of the wildest" heard in Louis Prima's "Zooma Zooma" and the Afro-Cuban mambo meltdown of Perez Prado's "Mambo No. 5." In the liner notes to his 1993 tribute to Katz, *Don Byron Plays the Music of Mickey Katz*, jazz clarinetist Don Byron referred to such chart-topping hits as "little vaccines" designed to make American mass audiences "immune to whatever was not white and American." But what attracted Byron to Katz was the way Katz refused the conjoining of white and American by putting klezmer in the face of pop, creating parodies and instrumentals that were anything but "little vaccines." They were, as Byron put it, "nasty, urban, ethnic shit."⁸⁴ It was a unique, often ethnically charged pop cacophony—the sound of mid-century American music

searching for its identity—and, says Byron, Katz “sensed the ridiculousness of it all.”

Take, for example, two parodies that appeared on Katz’s *The Most Mishige*, “It’s a Michaye in a Hawaii” and “Chinatown, My Chinatown”—Katz’s respective versions of “Hawaiian War Chant (Ta-Hu-Ha-Wai)” (a hit for Spike Jones in 1940 and the Ames Brothers in 1951) and “Chinatown, My Chinatown” (a 1952 hit from *Up and Down Broadway* that had already been popularized by the likes of Louis Armstrong, The Mills Brothers, Ray Noble, and many others). In their original versions, both songs relied on ethnic stereotypes of the exoticized Other: “Chinatown”’s mystery of the East transplanted to the urban West and “Hawaiian”’s World War II serviceman fantasy of South Pacific island paradises and tropical native primitivism. Instead of perpetuating those stereotypes by replicating them, Katz exposed them as stereotypes by performing stereotypes of Jewishness alongside them. “Shalom Aloha from Hono-luya,” Katz proclaimed at the beginning of “It’s a Michaye,” before introducing his listeners to “Waikikishka,” his Jewish version of the South Pacific that came complete with “pineapple matzoh brie-ah” and a new member of his band who can play Hawaiian *freilachs*, “Mendel Farber from Pearl Harbor.”

The original Orientalist pop version of “Chinatown, My Chinatown” is meant to be sung from the point of view of an immigrant Chinese American in a stereotyped voice against the crashing of gongs and the clang of cymbals. But in his version, Katz complicates the song’s Orientalized singing subject by calling him “Fu-Man Shnook,” a “Chinese Litvak,” and by interrupting the Eastern instrumentation with his obligatory klezmer bridges. He mixes stereotypes of the Chinaman with stereotypes of the bumbling Jew, so that calling him “Fu-Man Shnook” becomes a double play on one-dimensional ethnic representation. Both songs, then, were in a sense double ethnic parodies: a parody of one minority group by another, a parody of both Chinese and Jewish musical racialization in America. By deflecting some of the derisive laughter onto himself, Katz is able to overturn the songs’ original intent and strip it of its power to wound.

The effectiveness of these ethnic-on-ethnic klezmer parodies are most clearly felt when heard against the “Exotica” records released in the mid-to-late 1950s by artists such as Les Baxter and Martin Denny that fetishized mythical non-Western geographies as eternally primitive landscapes of tom-tom-pounded ritual, taboo, and savagery (think of the Far East itinerary of *Exotic Percussion* or the imaginary South Pacific of *Quiet Village*).

As Joseph Lanza has written, this was music conceived as “an environmental recreation, a musical whirlwind tour inspired by the notion that the entire non-Western world—from the dynastic palaces of China to the straw hut promenades of New Guinea—really is an assortment of devil-masks, radiant volcanoes, coral reefs, stone gods, jungle rivers, and enchanted seas compiled from fantastic travel brochures.”⁸⁵

Take Baxter’s dark continent soundscape “Quiet Village” from his debut release, *Ritual of the Savage*, which was issued by Capitol, the same label that issued *Mish-Mosh*, the home of Katz’s own mythic African travelogue, “Knish Doctor.” While Baxter’s “tone poem of the sound and struggle of the jungle” wrapped symphonic strings and horns around noises recorded on-site in the Belgian Congo, Katz avoided such exalted exotica. “Knish Doctor” was Katz’s version of “Witch Doctor,” and instead of employing stock primitivist images of Africa in order to ensure its otherness, Katz merges those images with ones closer to “home.” He claims that he came up with the idea for the song as he was “trudging along with lox and bagel through darkest Delancey.” Katz performs a sort of reverse exoticism by turning the ethnographic ear onto himself, away from Africa and the “witch doctor” and toward the wild urban jungles of Delancey Street and its legendary master of delicatessen ritual and street vendor magic, the “knish doctor.”

Katz also took a swing at teen rock and roll and adult pop. On “K’Nock Around the Clock,” he reimagined Bill Haley and the Comets as a klezmer band, the Kosher Komets, and with the *freilach*-rock of “You’re a Doity Dog,” he suggested that what Jewish songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller really meant to say in “Hound Dog,” their classic proto-rock hit for Elvis and Big Mama Thornton, was “You ain’t nothin’ but a paskudnick.” This was yet another example of Katz stepping outside the conventional narratives of Jewish participation in black culture. By singing rock and roll, Katz had become no more American and no more white. He became, once again, more Jewish. Achieving a similar result, Katz also dedicated an entire album to Jewish parodies of Mitch Miller, one of the key architects of late-1950s and early-1960s pop’s lulling, monocultural innocuousness. On *Sing Along with Mickele*, Katz dressed up as Miller (even sporting his trademark goatee), turned Miller’s infamous “gang” into his own “der ganser gang,” and instead of Miller’s usual light fare of standards and popular songs, Katz led them in Yiddish and Hebrew folksongs. The sleeve notes describe Katz as a “beloved little gentleman of music and fun.”

But the set of Katz’s 1950s parodies that perhaps revealed the most about

the interethnic musical crossings he was involved in were his parodies of the Latin Craze. Tapping into 1950s “mambo mania,” Katz transformed himself into a *mambonick* on a series of Yinglish klezmer-mambos that were parodies of the numerous “mamboids,” or watered-down, Anglicized pseudo-mambos of the time, that were flooding the marketplace after the stateside success of Perez Prado in the early 1950s and the adoption of an all-mambo policy by the Palladium Dance Hall in New York City in 1952 (Perry Como’s “Papa Loves Mambo” and Rosemary Clooney’s “Mambo Italiano” among them).⁸⁶

Katz’s “Yiddishe Mambo,” “Gehatke Mambo,” and “Tickle, Tickle,” while all musically competent and nearly eloquent mambo performances—all of which included Katz’s trademark klezmer interruptions—both poked fun at mambo’s commercialization and appropriation within the U.S. mainstream and paid tribute to the genre’s immense popularity with U.S. Jews (the Yiddishe mambo fan, the so-called “mambonick,” became a badge of countercultural pride for many 1950s Jews ensconced in the Latin dance scene). Nearly all major Latino dance bands of the time played the resort ballrooms of the Catskills (Tito Puente’s *Live at Grossinger’s* records one such performance), numerous Jewish musicians recorded their own tributes to the Jewish love of Latino music (from Ruth Wallis’s “It’s a Scream How Levine Does the Mambo” to the Barton Brothers’ “Mambo Moish” and The Irving Fields Trio’s *Bagels and Bongos*), many radio DJs actively involved in the dissemination of mambo and salsa were Jewish (Symphony Sid, Dick Sugar), and more than a few Jewish musicians managed to nearly pass as Latino (Alfredo “Mendez” Mendelsohn in the 1930s, Al “Alfredito” Levy in the 1950s, Larry “El Judeo Maravilloso” Harlow in the 1960s).⁸⁷ “The history of the Jews in America,” the humorist Harry Golden once wrote, “from Sha sha to Cha cha.”⁸⁸

Katz riffed on this historical transition more than most of his Jewish contemporaries. On “Yiddishe Mambo,” Katz’s *bubbe* is “on an Afro-Cuban kick” that unleashes a series of classic Katz rhymes about some of the leading mambo bandleaders of the day—“Her *kugel* is hot for Xavier Cugat,” “She’s baking her *challahs* for Noro Morales,” and “Perez Prado, she loves him a lot-o.” On “Gehatke Mambo,” Katz introduces us to the culinary bandleader “Xavier Cugat,” draws “Buenos Naches you all,” and exchanges Perez Prado’s famous “logoclassic” grunt (“Uggh!”) with his own version of Yiddish-Latino logoclassia, “Everybody kvetch—Ugggh!”⁸⁹

Katz’s first attempt at recording a Yinglish parody of a Latino dance composition was 1947’s “Tickle, Tickle,” his slapstick remake of “Tico, Tico,”

which had been a hit by Miguelito Valdez, Tito Puente, and Xavier Cugat, among others. That year, Katz performed his first major solo show as a musical comedian at the Million Dollar Theater in downtown Los Angeles. According to Katz's account in *Papa, Play For Me*, the audience at the Million Dollar was split between Jews and Mexican Americans and he was "a double-ethnic smash . . . [a] bagels-and-bongos triumph," receiving a much warmer reception than he would months later at Slapsie Maxie's. Katz relished the popularity of "Tico, Tico" with Latino audiences and in *Papa, Play For Me*, tells the following anecdote about the types of cultural crossing he liked to achieve:

There was a music store on Brooklyn Avenue on Boyle Heights named the Phillips Music Company. The clientele was combined Jewish and Mexican, like my fans at the Million Dollar. Bill Phillips told me that one day two little Mexican girls came in. They said they wanted that new record of "Tico, Tico." The clerk asked if they wanted the "Tico, Tico" by Xavier Cugat. No. The one by Tito Puente? No. The one by Miguelito Valdez? No. But this struck a nerve. One of the little girls said, "I know—we want the one by Miguelito Katz."⁹⁰

When many assimilated entertainment Jews were privately liking him but publicly shutting him out, some of Katz's warmest receptions were coming from Mexican American audiences in Los Angeles, from a community that was far more accustomed to the national, linguistic, and cultural ambivalence that Katz's music so loudly spoke to.

JEW ON THE RANGE

Robert Alter has argued that Jewish American writers like Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud have used "the wryness and homey realism of Jewish humor" to deflate the myth-making postures typical of literary high modernism.⁹¹ A contemporary of Bellow and Malamud, Katz was also what Alter calls a "de-mythologizer," and he used the rebellious mockery and subversive laughter of parody to deflate myths of American national identity and make a mockery of national institutions. Songs like "Sound Off" (his take on "Duckworth Chant" as recorded by Vaughn Monroe in 1951) and "Bagel Call Rag" (a klezmerization of the 1930s chart staple "Bugle Call Rag," which finds Dixieland meeting the Deli in an army barracks) poked fun at the U.S. military. Years before Mel Brooks would prom-

ise to put “Jews in Space” in his mock preview for the second installment of *History of the World, Part One*, Katz took the U.S. space program down a few pegs by creating his own Jewish astronaut, “Nudnick, the Flying Schissel,” a song he described as “my personal answer to Sputnik” that details the galaxy travels of a space-age Yid who drops bombs made from knishes, voyages where “Fleishedicke saucers sail from the Milchedicke Way,” and beats out klezmer drum rolls for troops stationed in Little Rock, Arkansas.⁹²

But more than any other region of nationalist American iconography, Katz’s travels led him to the mythologized frontier landscape of the American West and to that figure so central to the construction of Anglo-American masculinity, the cowboy. As numerous critics have noted, the frontier has long been a symbolic and ideological space crucial to American self-making and the construction of American whiteness out of the shards of European ethnic pasts. “In the crucible of the frontier,” Frederick Jackson Turner famously explained, “the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race—English in neither nationality nor characteristics.”⁹³ But the American produced in the crucible of Katz’s frontier—a specifically Jewish cowboy—acted and sounded little like the rugged American maverick of Western myth.

For starters, a frequent part of Katz’s live show and a staple of his act in his Borscht Capades revue was performing a string of Yiddish-Western pop parodies live in a cowboy costume with “Bar Mitzvah Ranch” emblazoned across his chest, elaborating on an earlier tradition of Jewish cowboys such as Will Dickey’s “Yonkle, the Cow-Boy Jew” and Leo Fuchs’s “Shalom Partner” and “Yiddisha Cowboy,” and anticipating Lee Tully’s “The Lone Stranger” and Gene Wilder’s horse-riding Chasid in *The Frisco Kid*. On “Shleppin’ My Baby Back Home,” his lyrical overhaul of Johnny Ray’s hit “Walkin’ My Baby Back Home,” Katz sings of a night of dancing at “the Bar Mitzvah Ranch” and of having to shlep his wife home because she drank too much at the “Matzoball Gulch.” Katz took on Frankie Lane and the Mule-skinners’ number-one 1949 Western hit, “Mule Train,” and put enough Jews in the wagons to re-christen it a “Yiddish Mule Train” that transported salami, lox, and bagels to Jewish cowboys in Miami and Las Vegas. The haunted prairies of Vaughn Monroe’s self-described “cowboy legend” of 1949, “Ghostriders in the Sky” (with its eerie Yippee-ay-ay’s and Yippee-ay-o’s) told a very different story of Western migration than “Borshtriders in the Sky,” in which klezmer becomes the frontier’s new soundtrack while Katz

sings of a Jewish cowpoke who wanders into “a vegetarian restaurant called Nate’s” and injects his horse with enough borscht and sour cream to win a horse race.

There was little that the American cowboy of pop lore had in common with the cowboy protagonist of Katz’s parody of Johnny Mercer’s “I’m an Old Cowhand.” This cowhand hollers “Hi-ho, shmendrick” and “Yippie, ooo, ooo, who-ha!,” oversees a plot of land crowded with overweight cows and Passover tables, and proudly declares his origin on one of the frontier’s rural ethnic ghettos: “I’m a cowboy mensch, from the bar mitzvah ranch.” Katz’s cowboy is a failed one. He is not a cowhand but “an old cowshlub.” He has “never bagged a deer, never roped a steer” and admits that “Tonight, I think I’m gonna lose my shtetl” when he hears of an approaching band of Indians—Jewish Indians, that is, “Apatchke Indians.”⁹⁴

Katz’s career as a parodist actually began on the frontier with his first single in 1947, “Haim Afen Range,” a Jewish hijacking of “Home on the Range.” It was coupled with its equally absurd B-side, “Yiddish Square Dance,” in which Katz impersonates “an Arkansas hog caller calling a square dance in Yiddish.” Katz’s Yinglish makeover of “Home on the Range” re-populated the frontier with unmeltable immigrant Jews and transformed the song’s ponderosa nostalgia and loping Western Americana into a manic, schizophrenic tale of Yiddish-*shpritzing* cowpokes who dream of escaping to “Oy Vegas” while trying to maintain order amidst “alter cougars” and requisite bursts of klezmer madness.⁹⁵

Katz’s choice of “Home on the Range” was strategic: it belongs to a small group of songs that have become virtually synonymous with the grand myths and ideas of America. The song was one of the many “cowboy songs” collected by U.S. audio-ethnographer John Lomax in his 1910 *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, a musical anthology designed to capture the authentic spirit of populist, indigenous American ballads. It was one of the songs that Lomax heard as “human documents that reveal the mode of thinking, the character of life, and the point of view, of the vigorous, red-blooded restless American.”⁹⁶

Yet, as Robert Cantwell reminds us, “Home on the Range” was not a cowboy song. It did not come from a “restless,” “red-blooded” American freely roaming the myth-lined open spaces of the prairie, but from a black cook who worked on a chuck wagon on a San Antonio cattle trail, a black cook bound by the restrictions of labor. Cantwell has therefore argued that “Home on the Range” is far from a document of frontier realities but the

theme song of an “imaginary cowboy Galahad.” Like other cowboys songs rooted in the music of minorities, the canonization of “Home on the Range” as a musical emblem of American freedom and unencumbered individualism obscures its own origin in “a racially and ethnically hybridized subculture.”⁹⁷ By obscuring this origin, the Anglo-American subject is liberated from it. Katz’s hijacking and overturning of the cowboy contests this liberation and returns the cowboy to his ethnicized and racialized roots.⁹⁸

Katz’s most memorable insertion of the Jew into the symbolic spaces of the frontier (cowboys, Indians, frontiersmen) is his rewriting of the story of Davy Crockett, the Tennessee frontiersman who ran for Congress in 1829 and who has survived through legend and pop cultural memory as a symbolic embodiment of the American character. More specifically, Katz parodies the Disney song, “The Legend of Davy Crockett” (recorded for the Disney film *Davy Crockett*), with a tale of a much lesser-known legend who might be considered the disembodiment of the American character, Lower East Side frontiersman “Duvid Crockett.” Instead of the mountaintops of Tennessee, Katz’s frontier hero is “Born in de wilds of Delancey Street / Home of gefilte fish and kosher meat.” In 1813 Duvid Crockett leaves Delancey Street to go fight “redskins . . . all over the shtetl” and learns to chew tobacco. He then heads to the South, where he meets his wife and gets elected president of the “B’nai Mississippi.” Like the legend of Davy Crockett, Katz also has his hero travel West, but instead of the untamed and unclaimed frontier, Duvid lands in Las Vegas, where he loses all of his money and decides to return to Delancey Street. Unlike the heroic victories of Davy Crockett, Duvid is a Western failure, a failed frontiersman who ends up right where he started. Indeed, the repeated refrain that fades the song out to end is “He’s back on Delancey Street.”⁹⁹

If, as Richard Slotkin has written, Davy Crockett has come to symbolically embody the free individual unattached to cultural patrimonies, tradition, and community, Katz’s Crockett was a refusal of Crockett, a Crockett whose alien tongue, immigrant accent, Old World religion, and ethnic culinary preferences prevent him from being successfully melted within the frontier’s crucible of whiteness. Slotkin describes Davy Crockett leaving the “moral or material ruin” of the Metropolis and seeking “self-renewal on the frontier.”¹⁰⁰ Katz’s Crockett seeks out moral and material ruin (in Vegas) and after experiencing no self-renewal is forced to return to the ethnic neighborhood in the metropolis from which he originally departed. In Katz’s parodic legend, the immigrant wanders West only to return East, against the flow of the frontier’s

narrative traffic. For Katz, the frontier was more a place of self-deprecation than self-transformation, yet another stage for the performance of Jewish difference, not the site of its erasure.

HARVEY AND SHEILA

By the time the 1960s had come to a close, there were few audiences left for Katz's parodies. Save for *Hello, Solly's* short run on Broadway, Katz was most at home at places like the Gold Room at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel—at weddings, bar mitzvahs, and socials on the Florida condo circuit.

Now, he is perhaps now best known for his children—his Tony Award-winning son, Joel Grey, and his granddaughter, Jennifer Grey.¹⁰¹ In her first leading role in 1988's *Dirty Dancing*, she did what Katz never could: she played the Catskills. Set in the 1960s, the film is a celebration of Jewish class mobility and a portrait of the Jew as American everyman. Grey plays the daughter of a wealthy physician who falls for an outsider—the resort's genteel, working-class dance instructor and resident leather-jacket-wearing bad boy, Johnny. The world brought to life in Katz's songs is nowhere to be found. Overt references to Jewishness are buried in dreams of medical school and fantasies of hair-greased rock and roll rebellion. The vacationers of *Dirty Dancing* are thoroughly Americanized and assimilated Jews, and all traces of Jewish difference are projected onto Johnny, whose class position (not his religious affiliation or ethnicity) makes him an outsider to their wealth. In *Dirty Dancing*, Jews are the mainstream—the ones with money, power, and leisure time—and it is Johnny who needs to prove himself to them in order to be accepted into the fold of the world they have created.

It was a world best represented by a performer Katz cleared the way for, Allan Sherman. Katz's first- and second-generation klezmerized world of *bubbes*, *zaydes*, blintzes, *shvitzes*, and Yiddish punch lines had become the Americanized, English-speaking world of Sherman's top-selling parodies. The difference between Katz and Sherman is clear: Sherman molded the traditional Jewish song "Hava Nagila" into "Harvey and Sheila" and came up with suburban lawns, Ivy League universities, attorneys, CEOs, trips to Europe, and GOP tendencies.¹⁰² No Yiddish, no dialect accents, no uproarious klezmer *frailachs*. Just humorous and harmless parodies that replaced popular songs with a cast of white Americans who just happened to be Jewish. Sherman's version of 1960s Jewishness was safe enough that he could even be invited to play for President Lyndon Johnson and headline the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

Sherman did write songs like “Seventy-Six Sol Cohens in the Country Club” and “How Are Things with Uncle Morris.” But in his 1965 autobiography, *The Gift of Laughter* (which incredibly makes no mention of Katz), he writes about hearing a voice. “Don’t forget your grandfather and your uncle, and don’t forget who you are yourself,” it told him, before adding, “Too Jewish is no good either. . . . To live everyday as a Jew, whether on a Parkway of the Bronx or in a fancy suburb, is too much.” Sherman was perfect for 1960s American Jews: he performed Jewishness enough to signal a degree of ethnic particularity but not “too much” that he became markedly and unmeltablely different from the American mainstream. His music was the soundtrack to the emergent “philo-Semitism” of the 1960s, “the Jewish decade,” when, as Leslie Fiedler once put, “Zion became Main Street” and the “Judaization of American culture” became an enduring central feature of popular culture.¹⁰³ In the 1960s, Bob Booker and Al Foster’s *You Don’t Have to be Jewish to Think It’s Funny* was a nationwide hit, and *Funny, You Don’t Look It (or How Can You Say the Whole World Isn’t Jewish When Even the Sun’s Name Is Sol?)* didn’t ruffle any feathers.

When Sherman played the Catskills hotels that Katz never could, the distance between the two musicians was never more evident. “I realized I’m at my worst in front of all-Jewish audiences,” Sherman wrote, “because they seem to want something from me that I can’t give them. They want me to fit into a mold that I never made but they did. They want me to be a professional Jew, an inside Jew, and they want me to sit there and laugh their version of the hipsters’ laugh—‘I dig you, but the goys don’t.’ And I can’t give them that—that’s too much Jewish.”¹⁰⁴

What was “too much Jewish” for Sherman was just Katz’s way of adding his “two-cents plain” to the racialized national symphonies of American identity. It was his way of challenging both the trappings of Jewishness and, if only for single musical moments in his size 37 tuxedo, the terms of American cultural citizenship.

THREE

Life According to the Beat

When it rained five days and the sky turned dark as night
When it rained five days and the sky turned dark as night
Then trouble takin' place in the lowlands that night

I woke up this mornin' can't even get outta my door
I woke up this mornin' can't even get outta my door
There's enough trouble to make a poor girl wonder where she wanna go

Then they rolled a little boat up about five miles across the pond
Then they rolled a little boat up about five miles across the pond
I packed all my clothes, throw'd 'em in, and they rolled me along

When it thunders and lightnin' and the wind begin to blow
When it thunders and lightnin' and the wind begin to blow
There's thousands of people ain't got no place to go

Then I went and stood up on some high and lonesome hill
Then I went and stood up on some high and lonesome hill
Then looked down on the house where I used to live

Back water blues done cause me to pack my things and go
Back water blues done cause me to pack my things and go
'Cause my house fell down and I can't live there no more

Hmm, I can't move no more
Hmm, I can't move no more
There ain't no place for a po' ol' girl to go.

BESSIE SMITH (VOCALS) AND JAMES P. JOHNSON (PIANO), 1927

"BackWater Blues"

IN THE WINTER OF 1951, James Baldwin had a nervous breakdown. He was living in self-imposed exile in Paris while struggling to write his first novel when he became so deeply depressed that his Swiss lover Lucien Happersberger rushed him off to his family's chateau in Loeche-les-Bains, a small mountain town in Switzerland. The two lovers lived there for three months in what was, according to Baldwin's biographer David Leeming, the closest Baldwin ever came to "his dream domestic life with a lover."¹

These months were of monumental significance for Baldwin and remain of extreme importance for any study of Baldwin's life and art. For it was here that Baldwin realized the racial and national significance of being the only black man in a European town of alabaster white, and, in the type of revelatory moment that geographical displacement often brings, a black man living in America—double reflections that would provide the experiential content for two crucial early essays, "A Stranger in the Village" and "The Discovery of What It Means to Be An American."

These realizations were made possible by another relationship that Baldwin cemented in that chateau, his deeply and intensely personal lifelong relationship with the voice of renowned blues singer Bessie Smith. During these months of gay domesticity and national and racial self-examination—twenty-eight years after Smith cut her first acoustically recorded sides for Columbia Records and fourteen years after her tragic death in a car crash—her voice was heard every day on the portable Victrola that Baldwin took with him to his mountain retreat. It was the audiotopia of Bessie's blues that forced Baldwin to ask himself the questions that he would later claim were at the root of all music: "Who am I? and what am I doing here?"²

We know of James Baldwin the writer, but what do we know of James Baldwin the listener? Along with his more famous typewriter, Baldwin brought a phonograph and a stack of Bessie Smith records with him to Switzerland. Yet the majority of scholarly work on Baldwin focuses only on his relationship to one of these objects while ignoring his relationship to the others: that talking machine that spoke so directly to the racial and sexual depths of his self-in-process and those invaluable black discs inscribed with endless volumes of replayable sonic information and coded personal confessions. This chapter enters here, in the technological gaps between typewriter and phonograph, in the unexplored and ineffable space between writing and sounding.

In his final interview before his death in 1985, Baldwin declared that "music was and is my salvation."³ He had previously claimed that music, not literature, was his true language, and he frequently expressed his desire

to write like musicians and singers sound, to replicate jazz and blues performance on the page. “I see myself as a blues singer,” he said in 1963. Earlier that same year, he proclaimed, “I’m like a jazz musician.” At times, he got specific. In a letter he wrote to his brother David in 1968, Baldwin is listening to Aretha Franklin singing “That’s Life” while he writes, and he tells David that “the way she sounds is the way I want to write. You now, there is something fantastically pure and sad, heart-breaking, and yet peaceful in all this horror. What a triumph—to be able to sing about it—to give it back to the world—to save the world, or simply another person (which is the world) by making the person look at the person.”⁴

In a letter to the *New York Times Book Review* following a review of his novel *Another Country* in 1961, Baldwin reserved similar sentiments for singer Ray Charles and trumpet player Miles Davis. He heard Davis singing “a kind of universal blues,” and said that his goal was to “try to write the way they sound.”⁵ He went so far as to equate reading *Another Country* to listening to a musical performance. “I would like to think that some of the people who liked *Another Country* responded to it in the way they respond when Ray and Miles are blowing,” he wrote.⁶ Baldwin saw a special kinship with Davis who, like himself, was estranged from his generation, occupied a position on the cutting edge of his art, and suffered from his status as a public legend. For Baldwin, what they shared “has something to do with extreme vulnerability . . . with what we look like, being black, which means that in special ways we’ve been maltreated. See, we evolve a kind of mask, a kind of persona, you know to protect us from, ah, all these people who are carnivorous and they think you’re helpless. Miles does it one way, I do it another . . . Miles has got his horn and I’ve got my typewriter. We are both angry men.”⁷

Baldwin’s desire to write like black musicians sound, to turn his writing instrument into a musical one, was rooted in his belief in the power of black music as a mechanism of liberation and survival in the face of racial subjugation and oppression. “It is only in his music that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story,” he urged in “Many Thousands Gone.” “It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear.”⁸ And in telling their stories, people like Bessie Smith, Nina Simone, James Brown, Miles Davis, and Ray Charles—a list of names Baldwin once described as “a roll call more vivid than what is called History”—transform their captivity into songs of freedom and confront oppression with triumphant visions of perseverance.⁹

Music was where Baldwin made his identifications, where he heard him-

self mirrored, where the performances of others became the stage for performances of his own. My interest in Baldwin lies here, in Baldwin as an active listener in a world of black sounds, an active interpreter of sound and music who throughout his life, to borrow a notion from Theodor Adorno, thought with his ears.¹⁰ For Baldwin, listening to and identifying with music, specifically the audiotopias of the “classic blues” of Bessie Smith, was a way of confronting, voicing, and grappling with his sexual and racial identities.

“Listening speaks,” Roland Barthes wrote, and in the case of Baldwin, his listening speaks to an identificatory crossroads where being queer and being black are not mutually exclusive terms to be kept separate and policed, but are instead sustaining modalities of existence commonly experienced and lived through one another—contingent and overlapping coordinates in an always shifting map of a self-in-the-making.¹¹ As Houston Baker Jr. has argued, the “polymorphous and multidirectional” juncture that is the blues crossroads, the audiotopic X that maps the blues geography, does not produce “a filled subject” but a subject of “ceaseless flux” that is, like the music it emerges from, a “scene of arrivals and departures” that is “betwixt and between” fixed positionalities.¹²

This is precisely the identificatory crossroads that Baldwin began to explore early in his career in two essays that he originally planned as part of a series titled “Studies for a New Morality.” Though the series never materialized as such, the two essays, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and “Preservation of Innocence,” did, and both in their own way found Baldwin grappling with questions of race and homosexuality. In the former, Baldwin critiqued the suffocating effects of fixed racial categories in the genre of protest fiction. He argued that it is the goal of the novelist to portray “a more vast reality” of the human subject, one liberated from “our passion for categorization, life neatly fit into pegs.” For Baldwin, the unitary categorization of the individual as anything but a crossroads is an act of “overlooking, denying, evading his complexity.” The result is that “we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves.”¹³

While the reference of “Everybody’s Protest Novel” was race, the reference of the lesser known “Preservation of Innocence” was male sexuality. Baldwin argued that divisions between the “masculine” and the “feminine” must be questioned and dissolved, and that we must begin to recognize the overlaps and dialogues between and within gender designations. He

launches a critique of hackneyed and flat portrayals of homosexuality in hard-boiled fiction that are riddled with overt, panicked phobia of sex between men. Echoing a theme common to much of his nonfiction work, Baldwin argues that depictions of the homosexual male as “The Homosexual” (like depictions of the Negro male as “The Negro” in “Everybody’s Protest Novel”) are doomed to fail because

they are wholly unable to recreate or interpret any of the reality or complexity of human experience. . . . It is quite impossible to write a worthwhile novel about a Jew or a Gentile or a Homosexual, for people refuse, unhappily, to function in so neat and one-dimensional a fashion. . . . This can only operate to reinforce the brutal and dangerous anonymity of our culture.

Such labels and reified identities strangle and limit the multiple passions of human existence and become the places where we “smother to death, locked in those airless, labeled cells, which isolate us from each other and separate us from ourselves.”¹⁴

For Baldwin, one of the keys that unlocked these identity cells was the music of Bessie Smith. Baldwin’s identification with both Smith’s persona and voice reveals the extent to which he didn’t keep race and the possibilities of gay male desire locked in “airless, labeled cells,” but experienced them together as part of an ongoing identificatory intersection. So back to this particular moment of listening—Baldwin and Bessie Smith in the queerly charged and racially designated confines of Switzerland—this double listening that is instructive both as an indicator of Baldwin’s struggle with “the obscenity of color”¹⁵ central to the American racial nightmare and as a marker of Bessie Smith’s role in the perilous sounding of gay love and gay sexuality.

As a listener who actively interprets, deploys, and engages with the music he chooses to make a central part of his life, Baldwin complicates the role of the commodity listener so famously outlined by Theodor Adorno in his 1938 essay, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.” Here, Adorno continues his campaign against totalitarian systems of control and domination by arguing that popular music listeners are “bad” listeners: inattentive, deconcentrated, and passive victims whose subjectivity is instrumentalized and ultimately destroyed as part of a culture-industry-wide “regression of listening.”¹⁶ Adorno distinguishes between this regressive mode of listening rooted in self-gratification and a “serious”

mode of listening that searches for meaning, truth, and moral consciousness. Baldwin's highly personal, nearly intimate investment in the commodified recordings and sound-objects of Bessie Smith, by being interested in both gratification and meaning, renders Adorno's regressive/serious listening divide arbitrary and obsolete.

Baldwin is more akin to the "new listener" outlined by composer Glenn Gould in 1966 who is "no longer passively analytical: he is an associate whose tastes, preferences, and inclinations even now alter peripherally the experiences to which he gives his attention."¹⁷ In fact, in his short story "Sonny's Blues"—a meditation on listening and the realization of human freedom—Baldwin urges us to become this listener. "You've got to listen," one of his characters urges. "You got to find a way to listen." By listening to his brother playing in a live jazz band (and watching him listen to his fellow musicians), the story's narrator comes to understand the importance of listening as an emancipatory performance. As Sonny takes his solo, as he takes the song and makes it his own, the narrator realizes that the act of performing is a way of living through music, of surviving through music, of grasping liberation through music. But for this to happen, someone has to play it and someone has to listen. "Freedom lurked around us," he realized, "and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did."¹⁸

Both as a listener and a theorist of listening, Baldwin shared much with Barthes, who, in stark contrast to Adorno's early writing on listening, heralded listening as an active psychological and physiological process of "taking soundings" that deeply impacts the formation of the subject. More specifically, and most relevant to the way Baldwin used the music of Bessie Smith to decode and confess secrets of race and desire, Barthes described a dynamic intersubjective *listening-for* that searched specifically for a trace of the secret, the cryptic, the no longer possible. He called it "that which concealed in reality, can reach consciousness only through a code, which serves simultaneously to encipher and to decipher reality."¹⁹ For Barthes, all listening is a reaching out: an ear for a voice, one body for the aural mirage of another, one subject's desire recognizing itself in the desire of another. Or, as Baldwin wrote in "Sonny's Blues," "All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasion when something opens within and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations."²⁰ Clearly, it is only Baldwin's critics who have overlooked the importance of listening and the importance of the relationships he forged *through* listening to

the direction, development, and shape of his work. Baldwin, of course, understood it perfectly well and wrote about it with elegance, sophistication, and passion.

THE VOICE AS RECORD

The voice, in relation to silence, is like writing (in the graphic sense) on blank paper. Listening to the voice inaugurates the relation to the Other: the voice by which we recognize others (like writing on an envelope) indicates to us their way of being, their joy or their pain, their condition; it bears an image of their body and, beyond, a whole psychology.

ROLAND BARTHES

“Listening”

Baldwin made his restful and therapeutic rendezvous with Lucien and Bessie the compelling centerpiece of an essay he wrote for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1959, “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American.” The transcontinental road to this outernational discovery was paved with the sounds of Bessie Smith, specifically her 1927 collaboration with pianist James P. Johnson, “Backwater Blues,” which was a central part of Baldwin’s daily diet of sound while in Switzerland.

“It was Bessie Smith,” Baldwin wrote, “through her tone and her cadence, who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoke when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America (in the same way that for years I would not touch watermelon), but in Europe she helped to reconcile me to being a ‘nigger.’”²¹

The only way Baldwin was able to come to terms with his status as a raced U.S. subject was by listening to these Bessie Smith records. In the audiotopia of Bessie’s blues, Baldwin literally heard a “record” of his past, an audible account of events and memories he had consciously and energetically repressed. Baldwin came to Paris to forget, and the records of Bessie Smith forced him to remember. In a moment of aural epiphany, two records saved Baldwin from forgetting himself. Two records restored something that he had lost. It was a truly remarkable moment of intersubjective listening: Baldwin listened to Bessie Smith, and he heard himself.

As Charles Grivel and Theodor Adorno have written, this is precisely how the phonograph works, as an apparatus of what Grivel calls “mechan-

ical memory”—a mirror device that offers up aural reflections of its listeners.²² Because the listener hears him or herself in the music he or she chooses to play, the self becomes destabilized, split between the self that is heard and the self that is hearing: the self as the object of listening versus the self as the agent of listening. Like all acts of identification, Baldwin’s aural identification with the voice of Smith does not reproduce a preexisting subject that is fully constituted. It is an act that is never fully achieved, always subject to subsequent repetitions and “the volatile logic of iterability.” As Judith Butler has theorized, all identifications are “phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitation; they unsettle the ‘I’; they are the sedimentation of the ‘We’ in the constitution of any ‘I’, the structuring presence of alterity in the very formulation of the ‘I’.”²³

Yet the trick of aural identification is that we recognize ourselves in this alterity, we take alterity as a sonic sign of who we are, or better, who we want to become. The “I” is unsettled, then, through the very act of searching sounds for what the “I” thinks it is. In his 1927 essay on the phonograph, “The Curves of the Needle” (written eleven years before his more pessimistic musings on commodity listening), Adorno explains the listener’s relationship to the “thingness” of the phonograph record through the trope of music’s “mirror function.” “What the gramophone listener actually wants to hear is himself,” he writes, “and the artist merely offers him a substitute for the sounding image of his own person, which he would like to safeguard as a possession. . . . Most of the time records are virtual photographs of their owners, flattering photographs—ideologies.”²⁴ This “mirror function” of the talking machine that talks back to its owner was precisely what one of the first phonograph companies had in mind. An early ad slogan from the Victor Company echoes Adorno’s suggestion and Baldwin’s attachment to his Bessie Smith records: “A mirror may reflect your face and what is written there; but the Victrola will reflect and reveal your soul to you—and what is hidden deep within it.”²⁵

In a 1973 interview, Baldwin similarly spoke of Billie Holiday—who like himself also listened at length to Bessie Smith records—as enabling what he called a “re-creation of experience.” A singer like Holiday, he said, “gave you back your experience. She refined it, and you recognized it for the first time because she was in and out of it and she made it possible for you to bear it. And if you could bear it, then you could begin to change it.”²⁶ The voices of female singers, whether Holiday or Smith, Nina Simone or Aretha Franklin, operate for Baldwin as “effigies,” both in the sense that they pro-

vided Baldwin with an image or likeness of himself and in the sense, as Joseph Roach has articulated it, of a performance that evokes the absence of a figure from the past and “fills by means of surrogation a vacancy created by the absence of the original.”²⁷ Records like Smith’s are “performed effigies,” audio surrogates that sound forth distant absences and conjure up distant pasts. They allow Baldwin to construct aural counter-memories and chart—by putting the needle on the record—aural genealogies of musical performance.

The phonograph as talking audio effigy machine is especially fitting here when we consider that much of early phonographic discourse positioned the phonograph as a tool for talking with the dead, Thomas Mann’s “sarcophagus of music” that channeled silenced voices back into living sound. “Playing a record is like playing the Ouija,” Wayne Kostenbaum writes. “Speaking to the dead, asking questions of an immensity that only throws back the echo of one’s futile question, a repeated ‘myself,’ ‘myself.’”²⁸ When used to sonically reimagine disembodied voices from the past, the act of listening to phonographic recordings continues to involve the search for the bifurcated self, a search that will always only be satisfied for the moment. Like the process of identification and identity formation, acts of listening are never complete. In the relationship between a voice and its listener, there is always something yet to be heard.

In the bawdy demands and mournful wails of Smith’s booming, aching voice—so full of queenly, bodied presence—was everything that Baldwin feared. For Baldwin, at that moment in his personal history of American race, Bessie Smith signified a version of American blackness he had yet to confront. She was the summation of all the stereotypes, all the prejudices, all the projected racial and sexual fantasies, all the watermelons and pickaninnies and dialect speech, and all the externally imposed self-hate. For it was Bessie who in her first studio test in 1922 was rejected for being “too rough.” It was Bessie who both Okeh and Black Swan—the black record label that boasted both W. C. Handy and W. E. B. DuBois as board members—turned down because her voice was too rough, too Negro, too black. It was Bessie who had been born into abject poverty in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and it was Bessie who was the most popular singer of the “classic blues” that many educated, upwardly mobile blacks in the 1920s condemned as crude and embarrassing.²⁹ After all, when Ralph Ellison found himself in “a war of decibels” with an opera-singing neighbor, he would play Bessie Smith records “to remind her of the earth out of which we came.”³⁰

Contained in one voice within the memorial revolutions of spinning shellac were all the things that drove Baldwin to leave America. Or, as Baldwin told Studs Terkel in a 1964 interview about his experience listening to Smith's "Backwater Blues": "I realized that I had acquired so many affectations, had told myself so many lies, that I really had buried myself beneath a whole fantastic image of myself which wasn't mine, but white people's image of me. . . . I had to find out what I had been like in the beginning. . . . I realized it was a cadence . . . a question of the *beat*. Bessie had the beat. . . . It's that *tone*, that sound, which is in me."³¹

THE UNUSUAL DOOR

What does this "beat" in the music of Bessie Smith signify? In his essay "The Uses of the Blues," Baldwin writes extensively on the correlation between the beat of Bessie Smith's blues and the African American struggle to survive and transcend the burdens and trappings of American race. He even singles out "Backwater Blues" as a supreme example of how the blues are used to confront and transform realities imposed from above.³² But Baldwin not only identified with the blues of Bessie Smith as "our witness, our ally" to a common racial history, but as a witness and ally to the workings of male-to-male desire, where discourses of race and sexuality converge.³³ The beat of Bessie's voice, the beat of her blues and the truths her tones and cadence tell, mark the emergent, audible site of identity as a matrix, a "blues matrix," of racial and sexual intersectionality that maps out new and quite different "blues geographies."³⁴

When asked in a 1984 interview what advice he would give to a gay man about to come out of the closet, Baldwin offered the following reply: "Best advice I ever got was an old friend of mine, a black friend, who said you have to go the way your blood *beats*. If you don't live the only life you have, you won't live some other life, you won't live any life at all."³⁵ Baldwin extends the domain of the beat into the domain of human sexuality and suggests a powerful relationship between the beat and the articulation of love and the fulfillment of desire. In his earlier 1979 essay, "Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption," he had already suggested that "the beat" is "the confession which recognizes, changes, and conquers time. . . . Then, history becomes a garment we can wear and share, and not a cloak in which to hide; and time becomes a friend."³⁶ But what is this "confession" of the beat? According to Foucault's famous model in *The History of Sexuality*, it is through the musical confession of the beat that sex is forced into dis-

course, and “it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret.”³⁷ While Foucault critiqued the confession for its forcible seizure and coerced production of private information, Baldwin celebrates the confession of the beat as a site of liberation that enables us to face the truth about ourselves. As Baldwin explained it in his 1951 essay “Many Thousands Gone,” the beat—as cadence, as pulse, as rhythm, as blood, as desire—operates as an audible hieroglyph, a musical sign or symbol that tells its musical stories out of a “dangerous and reverberating silence.”³⁸

Baldwin’s approach to the beat echoes the historical role that the beat has played as a data-rich point of contact between the signifying field of music and the body of the listening agent. In his analysis of Schumann’s *Kreisleriana*, Barthes emphasizes the connection between the beat and “the body in a state of music,” so that in listening we hear “what beats in the body, what beats the body, or better . . . this body that beats.”³⁹ But as we already know from Baldwin himself, the beat of the musical body is also a rhythmic vessel of communication; it carries messages and contains narratives. “Rhythm is a way of transmitting a description of experience,” Raymond Williams has written, “in such a way that the experience is re-created in the person receiving it, not merely as an abstraction or an emotion but as a physical effect on the organism—on the blood, on the breathing, on the physical patterns of the brain . . . it is more than a metaphor; it is a physical experience as real as any other.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Baldwin values music’s ability to articulate what he termed “things unsaid,” sounding and negotiating silences through meanings and messages conveyed in sonic hieroglyphs that make audible what for too long has been swallowed up in an oppressive hush.⁴¹

Baldwin had been immersed in the sounds of black music from a young age, when he was a child preacher in love with the gospel music of the black church. But it wasn’t until he was sixteen and taking shelter in the Greenwich Village apartment of black gay painter Beauford Delaney that he made the first substantial conscious connection between blues and jazz, the construction of black identities, and the possibilities of a desire that transcends the limits and traps of heteronormative identifications. Also a minister’s son, also an artist, and also queer, Delaney became a surrogate father for Baldwin and, in some sense, a role model. It was while living in his apartment that Baldwin received his first extended exposure to the secular black sounds of blues and jazz.

In a rarely commented upon passage in his landmark essay “The Price of

the Ticket,” which has been endlessly discussed for its contributions to debates around American race, Baldwin makes it clear that the price of the ticket also involves sexuality, a crucial link that appears in a description of his days with Delaney and Delaney’s singing of a queer self. “Lord, I was to hear Beauford sing,” Baldwin wrote, “and for many years, *open the unusual door*. My running buddy had sent me to the right one, and not a moment to soon.” Baldwin walked though that “unusual door” that the gay painter sang of as he “walked into music” playing from Delaney’s phonograph. “I had grown up with music,” he continued, “but now on Beauford’s small black record player, I began to hear what I had never dared or been able to hear. . . . In his studio and because of his presence, I really began to hear Ella Fitzgerald, Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson, Lena Horne, and Fats Waller. . . . And these people were not meant to be looked on by me as celebrities, but as a part of Beauford’s life and as part of my inheritance.”⁴² Once “the unusual door” had been opened, new sounds encoded with new sets of meanings began to pour forth and Baldwin was able to listen anew. They were sounds that Baldwin saw as an inheritance, from Beauford down to him, sounds that from those days forward, belonged to him and became a part of his life. By listening anew, by really listening to the music reproduced through a record player in a small Greenwich Village apartment, Baldwin heard a part of himself he had never heard before.

“The unusual door” that this music opened for Baldwin was a door to both his racial past and his sexual future, a door that opened onto Beauford’s music, the music of race and sexuality, and onto Baldwin’s. With the new listening, Baldwin began to sing a new life. Baldwin makes this connection for us—the figure of the unusual door as a node joining race to sexuality—in his final novel, 1978’s *Just Above My Head*, the only novel in which Baldwin depicts sex between two black men. Here, the room where Arthur and Crunch meet to make love in secret becomes a fictionalized version of Beauford’s apartment, for it too can only be entered by walking through what Baldwin describes as “the unusual door.”⁴³

LeRoi Jones has remarked that by the 1930s, when the heyday of the classic blues came to a close with the death of Smith and the end of Ma Rainey’s career, the phonograph had become a “vital artifact” of “the America they sang of and the black consciousness that had reacted to that America.”⁴⁴ Decades later, in Beauford Delaney’s apartment, the phonograph was still a vital artifact of black life in America and it was still playing the records of Bessie and Ma Rainey. Only now it was being listened

to with a difference—as an artifact of black gay America, an artifact of the open, unusual door.

Such artifacts and the identifications they made possible were crucial to Baldwin's survival. "I grew up with music, you know, much more than with any other language," he declared in a 1980 interview. "In a way, the music I grew up with saved my life."⁴⁵ Baldwin attached himself to these recordings partly because their indeterminate meanings allowed him to reshape them to fit the demands and contours of his own life. In her essay "Queer and Now," Eve Sedgwick has shown how queer children "cross-identify" with cultural objects in order to survive, searching for "sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other," which they would then learn "to invest . . . with fascination and love."

Sedgwick writes of books, not records, and how those books produced "perverse readers" whose "near identifications" with the texts allow them to read against the grain of the texts' institutionalized meanings.⁴⁶ Sedgwick's books are Baldwin's records, the cultural objects to which he was intensely attached, the audiotopias which he invested with fascination and love and which were, in the end, necessary to his survival. He became, instead, a perverse listener, listening against the accepted grain of blues and jazz recordings. Baldwin held onto his music because it was all he had, because it contained the songs of his self-in-process. They were sounds, black sounds, of triumphant survival where mourning bred transcendence and suffering produced a song that made it possible to continue living. It is in this sense that Baldwin's relationship to Bessie can be considered, in Lawrence Grossberg's phrase, "an affective alliance," that not only reshaped Baldwin's emotional life but provided him with a safe space for the realization and expression of oppositional desires and pleasures.⁴⁷

Wayne Kostenbaum has similarly documented how gay male opera queens "cross-identify" with opera divas through active identificatory listening. Kostenbaum emphasizes how divas become identificatory sites crucial to the fans' formation and enactment of self. Through a process of what he names "sonic drag," opera queens transform the mechanically reproduced voice of the opera diva into something they can wear and use, something that fits the dimensions of their own lives.⁴⁸ A parallel survival strategy is at work in Baldwin's acoustic relationship with Smith, with Baldwin becoming a blues queen who turns the voice and persona of a blues diva into an identificatory site, a mirror, a fantasy space of self-transformation and literal self re-fashioning. According to Leeming,

The female within the male had long fascinated Baldwin. . . . By the 1980s he had long since given in to a love of silk, of the recklessly thrown scarf, the overcoat draped stole-like over the shoulders, the large and exotic ring, bracelet, or neckpiece. Even his movements assumed a more feminine character. . . . He dreamed of novels he could write about women who would convert the Jimmy Baldwin he still sadly thought of as an ugly little man into someone tall, confident, beautiful, and to use a favorite word of his, “impeccably” dressed in silks and satins and bold colors.⁴⁹

In an essay written late in his life, “Here Be Dragons” (originally titled “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood”), Baldwin put it in his own words. “We are all androgynous,” he proclaimed, “born of a woman, impregnated by a man. Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other.”⁵⁰

It makes sense then that Bessie Smith, the extravagant “empress of the blues,” would hold a special place in Baldwin’s audiotopic musical pantheon. Smith was as famous for her elaborate headdresses and feathers, sequined gowns, costumes of red and blue satin, pearl necklaces and fake rubies, as she was for her “mannish ways” and bisexual desires. Not to mention her insistence on traveling from performance to performance in a private seventy-eight-foot long, two-story-high yellow railroad car complete with seven rooms. As jazzman Zutty Singleton put it, “stately, just like a queen.”⁵¹ From the age of sixteen to his nervous breakdown in Switzerland and up until the final weeks of his life, Baldwin consistently turned to the audiotopias that saved him, over and over again, to the songs of Bessie Smith. He continually identified with her fierceness, her toughness, her celebration of her body, her open bisexuality, her pain, her triumph over poverty, and, ultimately, as he declared in his 1959 review of *Porgy and Bess*, her freedom—her ability to escape the world’s definitions and be that rare, unattainable thing: herself.

OUT OF SILENCE, A SECRET

Nowhere is Baldwin’s identification with the voice of Smith more revealing than in his controversial 1962 novel, *Another Country*, which Baldwin once described as dealing with two of the “most profound realities” at work in American culture, “color and sex.”⁵² On the pages of *Another Country*—which Leeming has gone so far as to call “a blues song of longing”—Baldwin employs Smith’s voice and the beat of her songs as the soundtrack to

a mapping of queer desire across an amorous, interracial geography of silences, secrets, and impenetrable mysteries. Smith becomes an invisible character, a recurring ghostly presence whose songs help fuel the interracial, intersexual search for love that the novel so elegantly and explosively explores.

In 1968 a Montana State University teacher wrote to Baldwin to tell him that he had been accused of being a “smut peddler” for attempting to teach *Another Country*, and that the university had subsequently banned it from the classroom. Baldwin responded by explaining that the characters of *Another Country* were not dangerous perverts or sexual hedonists but men and women on a quest for “self-knowledge and self-esteem—the identity—without which real love is impossible.” Baldwin refuted claims of *Another Country* as pornography and instead saw it as “an attempt to break through cowardly and hypocritical morality. It is a novel which suggests that love is refused at one’s peril.”⁵³

Because giving love and being loved entail a deep knowledge of self and the facing of intimate truths, Baldwin saw all love as a “tremendous danger, a tremendous responsibility,” an intersubjective emotional exchange riddled with peril and fear. He claimed his novels were less about male homosexuality as such and more “about what happens to you if you’re afraid to love anybody. Which is much more interesting than the question of homosexuality.”⁵⁴ The perils of love manifested themselves early on in Baldwin’s life. The great love of his Greenwich Village years was Eugene Worth, a heterosexual with whom he never shared his feelings and who was the inspiration for the character of Rufus Scott in *Another Country*, a black bisexual jazz drummer. Worth jumped from the George Washington Bridge in 1946 (as Rufus does in the novel), and Baldwin wondered that maybe if he had told Worth of his love for him (Worth had said as much to Baldwin) Worth might not have jumped.⁵⁵ “We were never lovers,” he wrote in “The Price of the Ticket.” “For what it’s worth I think I wish we had been.” Baldwin regretted that he had neither broken his own silence nor listened more closely to the song Worth was attempting to sing: “I wish I had heard him more clearly: an oblique confession is always a plea.”⁵⁶

Baldwin’s self-blame for Worth’s death resurfaces in *Another Country*, when Vivaldo similarly wonders if it was his failure to give and show love to Rufus that made Rufus jump to his death. He tells Eric,

I wondered, I guess I still wonder, what would have happened if I’d taken him in my arms, if I’d held him, if I hadn’t been—afraid. . . . When he

died, I thought that maybe I could have saved him if I'd just reached out that quarter of an inch between us on that bed and held him.⁵⁷

The character of Rufus is a doubly charged creation for Baldwin. First, as a jazz drummer, Rufus becomes a personification of the musical beat. Just like the drummer in a jazz ensemble (where the steady pulsing of the beat is the anchor around which the other players improvise), the Rufus character of *Another Country* is the one that ties all of the male characters to one another. After his suicide, Rufus's memory is what sustains the circulation of desire between and across racialized male bodies. Yet, by taking his own life, he is also a symbol of what happens when that beat is not listened to. Though his father once told him that "A nigger lives his whole life, lives and dies according to a beat," Rufus realizes "he had fled . . . from the beat of Harlem, which was simply the beat of his own heart" (6).

Music and inarticulated desire come together in the persona of Rufus, a musician deaf to much of his own music, a drummer who somehow misses the beat of his own blood. "You forgot the beat, the rich thump, the arpeggio / which makes the knees jelly," Kenneth McClane tells Rufus in his poem, "At the Bridge with Rufus." "You showed us not how to live but how mighty the cost."⁵⁸ McClane portrays Rufus as having chosen the music of the wind and the river over the beat of his own heart, the music of death over the pulsing rhythms of life.

In a series of different musically saturated scenes, Baldwin depicts Rufus, along with his two bisexual friends and lovers Vivaldo Moore (an Irish American writer) and Eric (a white southerner), as all listening to and, in different ways, identifying with the voice and words of Bessie Smith. In each scene, Baldwin casts their individual and collective acts of listening—to revisit Barthes—as a means of "decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the 'underside of meaning.'"⁵⁹ By listening to the blues of Bessie Smith and to "the grain" of her voice, all of the male characters are able to confront their gendered incarceration in what Baldwin once called "the male prison," and decipher racial codes and confront sexual secrets that alter the course of their lives.⁶⁰ As Kostenbaum argues, "Every playing of a record is a liberation of a shut-in meaning—a movement, across the groove's boundary, from silence into sound, from code into clarity. A record carries a secret message, but no one can plan the nature of that secret, and no one can silence that secret once it has been sung."⁶¹ Witness one such playing of a record, one such sounding of a secret: as Rufus urinates and holds "that most despised part of him-

self loosely between two fingers of one hand” (83), Baldwin plays Smith’s “Jail House Blues” and we hear her sing, “I wouldn’t mind being in jail, but I’ve got to stay there so long.” In the song, Bessie’s antidote for her incarceration is not the love of a man, but another woman. “Look here, Mr. Jail Keeper,” she demands, “put another gal in my stall.”

Alberta Hunter, another classic blues queen of the 1920s, wrote the lyrics to the first song Smith recorded in 1923 for Columbia, “Down Hearted Blues,” a song that sold 780,000 copies in six months. Hunter also recognized the liberatory power of the shut-in meanings, secrets, and silences within Bessie’s blues. “Even though she was raucous and loud,” Hunter attested, “she had a sort of tear—no, not a tear, but there was a misery in what she did. It was as though there was something she had to get out, something she just had to bring to the fore.” And once Bessie got it out, the listener could never let it go. “She dug right down and kept in you,” gospel legend Mahalia Jackson once put it. “Her music haunted you even when she stopped singing.”⁶²

In an early scene in the novel, Rufus and Vivaldo face their unarticulated love for each other while both sides of a Bessie Smith record play “Backwater Blues” and “Empty Bed Blues.”⁶³ The change of side signals a change in content and tone in each scene, with each song supplying its own stories and its own set of identificatory moments. After “peddling his ass” along 42nd Street following a violent break-up with his lover Leona, Rufus resurfaces at Vivaldo’s apartment following a month of absence as “one of the fallen” (48). In order to break the silence that hangs heavily in the room, Vivaldo puts Bessie Smith and James P. Johnson’s “Backwater Blues” on the phonograph. It is in Rufus’s identification with the lyrics of the song that his emotions and sentiments become articulated, explained, and understood. Through Bessie’s voice, we learn that he too is one of the “thousands of people, ain’t got no place to go” (48). Not unlike Baldwin himself, Rufus hears “in the severely understated monotony of this blues, something which spoke to his troubled mind” (48).

Baldwin uses “Backwater Blues” and its tale of one woman surviving the devastation of a flood to bear witness to the pain and struggle of Rufus, to give Rufus the space and the freedom to wonder “how others had moved beyond the emptiness and horror which faced him now” (49). In the story of “Back Water Blues” and in the voice of Bessie Smith, Baldwin hears Rufus and Rufus hears himself. Faced with the stormy events of his own life of darkness—his troubled relationship with Vivaldo, his sexual and racial violence against Leona, his bar fights with anonymous white men—Rufus

also finds himself without a home, searching for at least one place for a “po’ ol’ girl” to go.

As the song ends, Vivaldo turns the Bessie Smith record over to play part 2 of “Empty Bed Blues.” Bessie sings of the absence left by her male lover, and both Rufus and Vivaldo identify with her voice, her lover becoming their lovers, her empty beds becoming the beds of emptiness and longing within each of their own lives. In the midst of a sexually charged and heavy silence, Smith sings, “When my bed get empty, make me feel awful mean and blue / My springs is getting rusty, sleeping single like I do.” As if he were in church or in the crowd of a nightclub, Vivaldo can’t help but respond to the singer’s call: “Sing it, Bessie.” Rufus then tells Vivaldo that when it came to problems with him and Leona, “there was lots of other things, too—.” These “other things” become loaded with suggestion as Baldwin combines silences and music to construct a moment of intense erotic and sexual tension as “Empty Bed Blues” continues to play:

Then there was a long silence. They listened to Bessie.

“Have you ever wished you were queer?” Rufus asked suddenly.

Vivaldo smiled, looking into his glass. “I used to think maybe I was. Hell, I think even wished I was.” He laughed. “But I’m not. So I’m stuck.”

Rufus walked to Vivaldo’s window. “So you been all up and down that street, too,” he said.

“We’ve all been up the same streets. There aren’t a hell of a lot of streets.

Only, we’ve been taught to lie so much about so many things, that we hardly ever know where we are.” (51–52)

As this exchange takes place, Smith keeps singing, with more and more explicit descriptions of her male lover now serving as direct audio commentary on the tension and desire circulating between Vivaldo and Rufus. Her man comes home “with his spirit way up high” and she gives us a morning-after report: “What he had to give me made me wring my hands and cry.” The “lesson” he “teaches” her leaves its mark, “from my elbow down was sore.” And as traces of unspoken desire continue to fill the room, Bessie brings it home. “He boiled first my cabbage and he made it awful hot,” she growls. “Then he put in the bacon, it overflowed the pot.” The song continues to play as Vivaldo suggests they make a toast “to all things we don’t know” (52). In the space of that room, “Backwater Blues” and “Empty Bed Blues” become amorous audiotopias full of “useful feelings,” two spaces where the unknowable and the inexpressible—those inaudible sexual si-

lences and secrets that live between the beats and sustain the play of desire—can, if not actually be heard, at least be imagined.

As Rufus continues to confront all of the things in his life that he is unable to fully know and understand—the directions and depths of his relationship with Vivaldo, his sexual and racial violence against Leona—Baldwin depicts him “pressing darkness against his eyes, listening to the music.” The combination of darkness, music, and memory makes Rufus aware of the bounds and confines of his individual male body, causing the “air through which he rushed” to become “his prison and he could not even summon the breath to call for help.” And all the while, “the music went on, far from him, terribly loud” (53). With the help of Vivaldo’s comfort, Rufus accepts his pain as his destiny—“this was himself.” He resolves to accept a truth:

His body was controlled by laws he did not understand. Nor did he understand what force within this body had driven him into such a desolate place. The most impenetrable of mysteries moved in this darkness for less than a second, hinting of reconciliation. And still the music continued, Bessie was saying that she wouldn’t mind being in jail but she had to stay there so long. (54)

Baldwin uses the continual presence of the music of Bessie Smith to reinforce and link the ways in which Rufus is imprisoned within himself, the ways in which he is imprisoned by the impenetrable darkness and mystery of all the things he doesn’t know.

The dominant role of the music of Bessie Smith also recurs later in the novel. When Eric, one of Rufus’s former lovers, has just returned from Paris, where he had been living with his new lover Yves, he visits Cass and Richard to celebrate his return. Upon entering the living room, Eric notices that the room is empty except for “the sound of the blues.” He hears what Baldwin describes as “the voice of a colored woman, the voice of Bessie Smith, and it hurled him, with violence, into the hot center of his past” (232). Like Rufus, Eric identifies strongly with Smith’s voice, and like Baldwin in Paris, hearing her voice causes a reluctant return to his past.

While it is left unclear if this “hot center” of his past is meant to refer to his interracial homosexual awakenings during his boyhood in Alabama, his past relationship with Rufus, or his Edenic days in Paris with Yves, Eric nonetheless hears himself in Smith’s voice as she sings, “It’s raining and it’s

stormy on the sea. I feel like somebody has shipwrecked poor me.” The stormy sea of Eric’s past fades into the background as the murky waters of the Atlantic—the very waters that swallowed Rufus into death—blow a breeze through the windows of the apartment that reminds Eric of the “spice and stink of Europe” and “the murmur of Yves’ voice” (233).

Comforted by this flickering remembrance of his days with Yves and “comforted by the beat of Bessie’s song,” Eric is overcome by a state of “peaceful melancholy” (233). Smith’s song accompanies Eric’s almost nostalgic memory of Yves—“the murmur” of Yves’ voice singing along with the murmur of Smith’s voice and over the beat of her song. Aching for “the sound of Yves’ footfalls beside him,” Eric hears the voice of Smith, “weeping and crying, tears falling on the ground” (235). Consumed by the “blinding grace of Yves’ absence” and his anticipation of his opening night in New York, Eric does not “feel safe” and longs to tell Cass about Yves. Eric’s insecurity about seeing Yves again, and his insecurity about having to face the truths of his own heart and body, is reiterated by the voice of Smith, “When I got to the end, I was so worried down.”

Bessie’s voice sings to the relationship between Rufus and Eric and to its open secret, no matter how many “girls” either of them surrounded themselves with. Eric admits to having women around him as a means of keeping the secrets of his desire from himself, “trying to prove something, maybe, to him [Rufus] and to myself” (238). The discussion of these open secrets and this masked set of negotiations between the public and private face of desire take place as “the room was growing darker” and as “Bessie sang” another round of blues. The moment that Eric’s memory is described as being “painfully snagged” on the thought of the women he and Rufus used to mask the truth of their relationship, the needle of the record player scratches “aimlessly for a second,” the voice of Bessie Smith goes silent, and the phonograph turns off (237). As soon as Eric begins to think of “that side of himself” that loved women, the voice of Bessie Smith that once sang so clearly as he thought fondly of Rufus and Yves disappears abruptly into the scratch of an interrupted groove. The voice that once was so knowing—so tangibly present that it moved gay male desire from silence into song—is stripped of the immediacy of its aura and dramatically revealed to be the voice of a talking machine, the repeated effect of phonographic reproduction.

Toward the novel’s end, at the very beginning of Book Three, Baldwin once again reaches for his copy of “Backwater Blues,” only this time re-

playing it in a dream sequence through evocation and allusion. Vivaldo dreams that he is running against time in the midst of a torrential down-pour. As he approaches a high wall covered in glass splinters, Vivaldo—who Baldwin describes as “both fleeing and seeking”—hears a music that makes him certain that he has forgotten something, “some secret, some duty, that would save him” (381). Like the singer of “Backwater Blues,” Vivaldo is looking desperately for somewhere to go, struggling to survive a flood and to climb up a wall to save himself from the ensuing destruction below. Fittingly, Vivaldo hears a blues song marked by a “steady, enraged beating on the drums,” but it is a blues he has never heard before, one which fills “the earth with a sound so dreadful that he could not bear it” (382). The steady, enraged drum beat of this unfamiliar music pulses through a nightmarish dreamscape that includes a reenactment of Rufus’s suicidal leap to death from the George Washington Bridge that ended the novel’s first chapter.

Toward the end of his blues-soaked dream, Vivaldo and Rufus end up next to each other, both impaled on shards of glass. Vivaldo’s renewed ability to tell Rufus how much he loves him invites a “sweet and overwhelming embrace” from Rufus, to which Vivaldo “surrenders,” causing the dream to shatter (381–82). Music, both seen and heard, sounds its way through Vivaldo’s attempt to transcend the “Back Water Blues,” to find the truth about the secrets within himself and give love to Rufus in an eternal embrace that would, at least in the space of a dream, save him from an impending death through the fulfillment of love.

Vivaldo wakes up from his dream in Eric’s arms and the two proceed to make love, an act of overdue consummation that Baldwin portrays as “strangely and insistently double-edged, it was like making love in the midst of mirrors. . . . But it was also like music, the highest, sweetest, loneliest reeds, and it was like the rain” (385). For Vivaldo, the music of gay sex contains seductive mysteries of its own, with the desirous and desirable male body becoming “the most impenetrable of mysteries.” The music composed and performed by Eric and Vivaldo out of the silences of inarticulated desires and out of the sonic dreamscape of “Backwater Blues” leads Vivaldo to turn his meditative lens inward and wonder about the limits and boundaries of his own flesh, of his body’s “possibilities and its imminent and absolute decay, in a way that he had never thought about of it before.” Yet, like any double-edged or double-voiced music, it also causes him to reflect outward and wonder about Eric’s body as well, about “what moved in Eric’s body which drove him, like a bird or a leaf in a storm, against the wall of Vivaldo’s flesh” (385).

Ultimately, Vivaldo recognizes the dialectical possibilities of this double movement of music and love and returns inward only to wonder about the synthesis produced by the coming together of two male bodies, asking himself “What moved in his own body: what virtue were they seeking, now, to share?” (385). Caught in the double play of music and mirrors, Eric and Vivaldo are two separate bodies moved by similar storms into mysteries as impenetrable as the sounds of their own love. As it did for Baldwin, music acts as their salvation, providing the beats and impulses that bring love and desire out of secrecy, into truth, and, ultimately, into life.

FREAKISH MAN BLUES

As a genre, the blues has always been linked to the articulation of love, the enunciation of desire, and, particularly in the case of the “classic blues” singers of the 1920s, the play of sexuality. It has, of course, also always been linked to both the experience of slavery and the experience of slavery ending—a music born from the experience of emancipation’s false promises of a freedom that did not come, a promised freedom that resulted, instead, in the new social shackles of Jim Crow. Blues and jazz pioneer Jelly Roll Morton saw these two blues origins—slavery and desire—as one. “The blues came from nothingness, from want, from desire,” Morton once argued. “And when a man sang or played the blues, a small part of the want was satisfied from the music. The blues go back to slavery, to longing.”⁶⁴

In the case of the classic blues of the 1920s, a period dominated by women singers such as Smith, Ma Rainey, Victoria Spivey, Gladys Bentley, and Alberta Hunter, the use of music to work through sexual desire of all forms played a uniquely central role. Albert Murray has similarly pointed out that for all the political and social emphasis put on the content of blues lyrics by critics and scholars, the majority of blues songs deal with love and affairs of the heart. As his central example, Murray notes that of the 160 recordings made by Bessie Smith, only a few, by his account, do not address the “careless love of aggravating papas, sweet mistreaters, dirty nogooders, and spider men.”⁶⁵ But what Murray does not consider are the aggravating *mamas* and spider *women* in Smith’s life and music, a history of queer blues desire that speaks to Paul Garon’s claim that in listening to and performing the musical erotics of the blues, “previously unimagined dimensions of desire are evoked that potentially transcend existing morality.”⁶⁶

In the case of Bessie Smith and women blues singers of the 1920s, the stories of such unimagined yet transcendent desires have principally been told

by Smith's biographer Chris Albertson. Albertson's work on his 1972 biography of Smith, *Bessie*, led to his compiling of the two-volume series, *AC/DC Blues: Gay Jazz Reissues*, a collection of blues recordings culled predominantly from the 1920s and 1930s (including Smith's 1927 recording of "Foolish Man Blues") that all in various ways address gay and lesbian sex and sexuality. Gathering such queer blues classics as George Hannah's "Freakish Man Blues," Ma Rainey's "Prove It On Me Blues," and George Noble's "Sissy Man Blues" together in one place, *AC/DC Blues* directly challenges any heteronormative assumptions of desire and identification that might otherwise mistakenly be ascribed to the blues, and celebrates a vision of sexuality without gender borders that was characteristic of "the life" that singers like Smith and Rainey openly participated in.⁶⁷ In Rainey's "Sissy Blues," for example, she dreams that she finds her male lover "in a sissy's arms." But instead of pathologizing the sissy, Rainey celebrates him as a skilled lover who satisfies her man better than she can. "Some are young, some are old," Rainey testifies, "My man says sissie's got good jelly roll." This one in particular—"his name is Miss Kate"—"shook that thing like jelly on a plate."

AC/DC Blues also contains Albertson's recorded interviews with Bessie Smith's niece Ruby Smith. In lurid, graphic, and often hilarious detail, she recalls exactly what went on behind "the unusual doors" of the notoriously promiscuous and illicit "buffet flat" parties of the 1920s, which Bessie both frequented and even sang about (listen to her "Soft Pedal Blues"). In the following excerpt from their interview, Ruby Smith tells Albertson of a particularly memorable party in Detroit:

The fags used to dress like women there. It wasn't against the law. That was a real open house for everybody there in that town. . . . Bessie and all of us went to the party . . . at some house, some friend of Bessie's . . . had a house there, a buffet flat. A buffet flat is nothin' but faggots and bulldaggers, an open house. Everything goes on in that house. A very gay place. Everything that was in the life. Everybody that was in the life. Buffet means everything, everything goes on. They had a faggot there that was so great that people used to come there just to watch him make love to another man. He was real great. He'd give him a tongue bath and everything and by the time he got to the front of that guy he was shaking like a leaf. . . . Every room was different. Two women go in to together. A man and a man go in to together. Anything that you want to see is in that place. And if you interested, they do the same thing to you. I wanted to get in with that one cat, but he said it wasn't fish day! So I was out!"

Tales of Smith's defiant, demanding, and aggressive attitudes toward sex and the open secret of her bisexuality are legendary. Her affairs and relationships with the chorus women in her traveling show are documented in detail in Albertson's biography and are recounted by Ruby in her interviews with Albertson.⁶⁸ With her frequent collaborations with gay piano player and songwriter Porter Grainger, the sexual allusions of her lyrics, and her penchant for extravagant outfits (elaborate headdresses, sequined gowns, men's tuxedos), Smith was the dame of an era of transvestism, sexual exploration, and rampant gender-bending. She was a central figure in a blues world populated by stage after stage and rent party after rent party of, as "Foolish Man Blues" puts it, "mannish-acting women" and "skipping, twistin' woman-acting men."

The songs of Smith and many other women blues singers of the 1920s reveal black women eager to actively represent themselves as desiring agents of sexuality. As Hazel Carby has written, singers like Smith were musical agents who used song to craft a self of their own design and explore "the various possibilities of a sexual existence." Though they dominated the black recording industry of the 1920s—the first commercially released and commercially successful blues recordings to reach wide, national audiences were all written by and performed by women—women blues singers still operated as "liminal figures" who were forced to make their own rules about sexual agency and to map new alternatives for inherited definitions of gender. By taking their desire out of the private domestic sphere of the home and recording it onto 10-inch discs, women blues singers enacted the public voicing of private, marginal desire, making it available for consumption by an audience of listeners who would then privatize and reenact those discourses of sexuality and gender through acts of domestic listening.⁶⁹ James Baldwin would be one of those listeners.

Black lesbian poet and essayist Cheryl Clarke made this blues desire the subject of her 1989 narrative poem "Epic of Song." Clarke tells the story of the Eagle Rockers blues band and its three singers—Candy, Star, and Evalena—all of whom become entangled with each other's bodies and hearts throughout the course of the poem. From its very first lines, Clarke positions the poem as a blues song of lesbian desire, "a long-telling song, / telling of us as we once were. / Some device. Some history. / Some mystery. Some misery. / Some form needing to be form" (27).⁷⁰ Clarke's long-telling song reiterates women's blues as a sounded genealogy of homosexuality, of audible queerness, of forms of desire that have been taken the form of the blues. The songs that all three of Clarke's characters sing—

as performing singers on stage, as performing lovers in bed—become the very songs of queer desire.

The character of Candy, the poem's reigning blues matriarch, is reminiscent of Ma Rainey, whose songs often rejected the love of men and, in the case of "Prove It On Me Blues," openly spoke of her well-known lesbian affairs. Candy's signature song could have been taken straight from Rainey's catalog. "I'm a mean woman," Candy sings, "Don't need a man. / I make my bed soft / and take my lovin' hard. / Drink my whiskey straight / and like my coffee sweet" (66). Even when Candy falls ill and her voice begins to fade, "her voice still called to the thousands who wanted sex or the dream of it." Toward the poem's end, we learn that another of Candy's songs, one of what Clarke calls her "private testimonies," didn't simply allude to the dream of sex, but performed it: "I need to be with some womens. / Need to hear they voices. / Need to see them dancin. / To rub some women's asses. / In silk or cotton. / Satin or linen. / Need a woman in my bed. / Wanna suck her breasts" (99).

Clarke's attempt to recreate the sexual culture of women's blues even includes a scene at a buffet flat party. Just like Ma Rainey declaring "It's true I wear a collar and a tie," Candy cross-dresses as a man for the party, which, as Ruby and Bessie knew so well, "ain't nuthin but a house full of mamas and papas, gal / Tonight, I'm a papa . . . I wears the pants when pants need to be worn." Candy dons the pants she caught Star trying on the day before—suspenders, a red shirt, and a bowtie—and is so convincing that if Star "hadn't seen the change herself she / wouldna believed it was Candy but some / exquisite form of man." Star goes femme, wearing a dress, a coat, and a hat with "ostrich tail feathers" (42–43).

But it's in her depictions of lesbian sex between Candy, Star, and Evalena that Clarke makes the most powerful link between women's blues and the sound of gay desire. When Star and Candy first make love, Candy boasts, "I'll hear your secret high note tonight or you won't ever sing it" (50). Like Baldwin's "unusual door" that opens onto gay male desire, Clarke casts black lesbian desire as a "secret high note," rendering it an audible formation that must be sung and listened to in order to be realized and experienced. Once Star has sex with Evalena and is forced to choose between her and Candy, we once again see the slipperiness of song and desire, for to Star, "Candy's body was as much a wonder / as her song and Star began to sing / in new ways, from some place deeper / than her stomach" (64). Much like Baldwin hearing Beauford "sing" and then learning to sing his own song, Star hears Candy sing and learns to sing her own blues song of

desire that gives a form to what had previously been bottled up in a web of silence and mystery.

When Baldwin listened to Bessie, these were precisely some of the songs he heard, the “secret high notes” of black gay desire. This specific, cross-identificatory relationship between Bessie Smith, a singer of Clarke’s “long-telling song” (and all of the sexual codes, secrets, and silences embedded within it), and James Baldwin, that song’s attentive and affective listener, is well understood by black British filmmaker Isaac Julien, who referenced it in *Looking for Langston*, his 1989 filmic meditation on the life, work, and homosexuality of African American writer Langston Hughes. There, Julien posed a connection between the many queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance and those involved with the so-called “black gay renaissance” of the 1980s, a movement for which Baldwin was a major inspiration. While Hughes—his words, his voice, his image, his memory—occupies the film’s central frame of visual and conceptual reference, *Looking for Langston* is dedicated to the memory of Baldwin. The film opens with a reading of “The Price of the Ticket” and contains numerous audiovisual echoes of Bessie Smith, including the 10-inch album cover of “Tain’t Nobody’s Business” and an image of her from the short film *St. Louis Blues*, in which she sings the blues classic to the accompaniment of the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra while drowning her sorrows at the bar.

Julien includes these direct references to Smith in a compelling collage of image and sound. Beginning with a shot of a spinning phonograph record, Julien’s montage of a re-visited and sexually charged “dream deferred” fades the voice of Langston Hughes into “Blues for Langston,” a song by contemporary black gay singer-songwriter Blackberri. In the middle of Blackberri’s song, we see and hear a brief excerpt of Bessie’s performance in *St. Louis Blues*, which readies us for the arrival of Baldwin’s close-up portrait cradled in the arms of a heavenly queer black angel. History will surely have many forgotten angels, but as we hear in the song, neither Bessie nor Baldwin will be one of them.

By including them in his film—one through an act of dedication and memorial, one through an act of strategic audiovisual homage—Julien positions both Baldwin and Smith as two figures crucial to his century-spanning filmic mapping of black gay life. Baldwin and Smith join the ranks of the black gay men and women who Manthia Diawara collects into the figure of “the Absent One,” and their pronounced presence in Julien’s film helps link the queerness of the Harlem Renaissance to Baldwin and, ultimately, to the 1980s renaissance of black gay writing.⁷¹ In an interview

with one of the leaders of that renaissance, Essex Hemphill, Julien emphasized the importance of the blues to the articulation of black gay identity, insisting that “blues songs were some of the first spaces where one could actually *hear* black gay desire.”⁷² In *Looking for Langston*, as in the songs of Bessie Smith as heard by James Baldwin and re-played in *Another Country*, black gay sexuality is, as Julien suggests, heard as much as it is seen.

THE BEAT GOES ON

During the final months of his life, James Baldwin was once again living abroad, this time in the hilltop French town of St. Paul de Vence. With his fragile health rapidly fading, Baldwin was visited by friends who came by to sit with him around his kitchen table to reminisce over the past. One frequent guest at Baldwin’s legendary “welcome table” was his old lover, Lucien Happersberger, with whom this narrative of sound and desire began. One day, the reunited pair were watching television and happened to come across a documentary on the life of Bessie Smith. Together, in another small hideaway in another part of Europe, they watched and listened to Smith sing the very songs they had once lived with in Switzerland. Two days later, James Baldwin died, with the voice of Bessie Smith ringing in his ears and the beat of her music leaving its final sonic impressions on the beat of his blood.

Basquiat's Ear, Rahsaan's Eye

A MOUNTED COPY OF HAITIAN–PUERTO RICAN painter Jean-Michel Basquiat's 1983 triptych *Horn Players* has been hanging in my living room for three years, and I only recently noticed that there's an ear in its upper-left corner. Not the image of an ear, but "EAR," the capitalized word standing in for the capitalized ear of a dismembered black male body. Next to it is a small arrow pointing up to where the painting stops, where the canvas ends. The EAR leads the viewer to a place where there is no vision, no paint, no image; it leads us to the EAR's place, a place of black sound, black noise, and black music, a place where the ear does what it is supposed to do: hear and listen, receive vibrating aural information from the ambient world it comes in contact with, then translate those vibrations into reverberations in bone.

On the canvas of the painting, the "EAR" is written next to the sketched intimation of an actual ear—a small white chalky line curved outward in a semicircle—that belongs to the intimated, piecemeal body-in-parts of Basquiat's great hero of black sound and heroin suicide, bebop saxophonist Charlie Parker. Against a field of black that embodies Parker's torso by erasing it, we see only the fingers of each hand pressing sax valves and the face of his head. "The up-down-up rhythm of the painted head is music in itself," Robert Farris Thompson wrote in "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets." "Aspects of anatomy are coded playbacks of accomplishment."

Playback can also become rewind, stop, erase, and re-record: Parker's legs are replaced by streaks of white paint, a crossed-out "ORNITHOLOGY" (Parker's jazz science of "Bird" sound), and a cube of "SOAP," of hygienic white, of unhygienic cocaine and heroin, of magic white dust that leads to ecstasy, vision, hallucination, paralysis, and death.

Out of the mouth of the golden horn are waves of sound moving up and out, pushing toward the ear and the EAR, pushing the EAR off the canvas—away from the images and words surrounding it. EAR not only signifies the thing of the ear, but the un-thing of what the ear does and what the ear hears by doing it. EAR signifies the un-signifiable, the immaterial, the noisy, the ambient, the musical: sound. Sure, what it hears can be represented on a page, can be given materiality, can be canned, made object, but it's always something more, always left over, always on the run from the capture of its canning—its temporary shell of thingness. The object of sound and music is never all of sound and music, and Basquiat points us to where this never resides—to a place where we cannot see sound, a place where we cannot turn it into image or script. We can only imagine it, hear it, feel it (its vibrations). Getting to that place of sound is what *Horn Players* is, after all, about—two musicians (Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie) who traffic in this world of sound, who work sound, code sound, suck in sound, spit out sound, mold it, sculpt it, make it art, make it violence, make it beauty and anger. In short, two musicians who take sound and turn it into soaring jazz music: "DIZZY GILLESPIE" scrambled in word chains, boxes of "ORNITHOLOGY," and black magician chants of "ALCHEMY. ALCHEMY. ALCHEMY."

Before Basquiat painted *Horn Players*, his friend from his days as a graffiti tagger, Fab 5 Freddy, told him a story that bop drummer Max Roach, who played with both Parker and Gillespie, had told him. It was about a song written by Gillespie called "Salt Peanuts" and a live recording of it with Parker, performed on *Jazz at Massey Hall*, at a time when Parker and Gillespie were at odds with one another. To fan the flames between them, Parker, in a rare moment of speaking on record, introduces the performance himself. What follows is a horn joust between two worthy opponents. Says Freddy: "It was clearly a major duel between C.P. and D.G. Both were blowing as fast and intricate and intense as he could." Part of what the EAR of *Horn Players* HEARS is the jazz sound clash of "Salt Peanuts," the dueling horns of Parker and Gillespie, conflict that moves battle sounds into the imaging and scripting of battle music. By painting it, Basquiat paints himself into a chain of audio influence and sonic genealogy that includes the mak-

ers of the sounds themselves: Parker/Gillespie to Roach to Fab 5 Freddy to Basquiat.

In 1984, the year after *Horn Players*, Basquiat went back to the beginnings of the “Salt Peanuts” chain and painted Roach himself. Using thick swatches of red, pink, white, and gray, he painted Roach as a man-drum with only half a face, an audio cyborg with a kick drum, a hi-hat, and a snare for a body—a body that was the instrument the body played, all music, all sound, all rhythm and pulse and beat.

EYE VS. EAR

This chapter is not just about this one EAR but the ears of two black artists, the ear of a painter who painted visual canvases of sound and the ear of a musician he never painted, Rahsaan Roland Kirk—a musician whose blindness turned his ears into his prime sensory agents and often turned them into his eyes, so he could see the world around him by listening to it. Both Basquiat and Kirk theorized race and the fissures of American identity by establishing a close relationship with the world of sound, specifically (but never limited to) the world of Afro-diasporic sound: spirituals, blues, jazz, salsa, reggae, hip-hop. They are both ideal figures for beginning to approach American race and racial difference as sonic constructions as much as visual ones, two of the great keepers of the keys that unlock the audio archive of race. Basquiat’s paintings transform canvases of sight into painted surfaces of sound, visual turntable records that Basquiat plays like a DJ cutting a needle across a groove, and Kirk’s jazz performances use sound as a political strategy of racial opposition and black survival. Where Basquiat used the visual to hear, Kirk used the aural to see.

Over albums he recorded between 1956 and 1977, Kirk approached his compositions as audiotopias of racial signification, the very places where he performed his theories of blackness. Music was Kirk’s refuge and Kirk’s language, his songs the places he lived in and lived through. Even though his paintings were of music more than they were actual performed music itself, Basquiat was an audiotopic thinker like Kirk; he too understood the spaces of music as spaces of intervention where racial and cultural collision could find both voice and image. This chapter examines both of their audiotopias—Basquiat’s paintings, Kirk’s songs—in order not only to comment on their respective contributions to discussions of race and music in the Americas, but to help expand the scope of audiotopic thinking from ear to eye and back again.

Kirk and Basquiat force us to both recognize and question what so much of this book grapples with—the extent to which, to borrow Martin Jay’s term, “ocularcentrism” has dominated twentieth-century social thought and critical theory. They both resist the hegemony of visibility that has characterized Western philosophical thought in general and in fields such as Cultural Studies, Ethnic Studies, and American Studies, in particular. As Jay, David Michael Levin, and Douglas Kahn have all pointed out in different ways, ocularcentrism’s dominance of the eye has characterized the ways in which culture gets talked about and debated and has virtually saturated critical discourse with metaphors of the visual.¹ “How, for instance, can listening be explained,” Kahn has asked, “when the subject in recent theory has been situated, no matter how askew, in the web of the gaze, mirroring, reflection, the spectacle, and other ocular tropes?”² Levin has gone a step further, calling the eyes the “rulers of the modern empire,” an empire built on “the panoramic gaze.”

Nowhere is this more true than in the way people talk about race and racial identity. Race remains a visual idea, a set of meanings, stereotypes, assumptions, and lies, all rooted in differences that are experienced and indexed most commonly by the eyes. Even Ronald Radano and Phillip Bohlman, musicologists who have devoted their lives to thinking through their ears, define “the racial imagination” as “the shifting matrix of ideological constructions of difference associated with body type and color that have emerged as party of the discourse network of modernity.”³

The work of Basquiat (though it lives most immediately in the world of the visual) and the work of Kirk (though it refers constantly to the world of the visual, with Kirk’s music as his way of seeing a world he cannot see) both confront the racial imagination and, instead of only seeing it, hear it. Kirk’s anti-ocular sound world is far removed from this reign of ocularcentrism, and Basquiat’s paintings urge the viewer to listen to the sound within sight, the sound of sight, and the sound where sight does not go—the beats and improvisations, the riffs and scratches, the rhymes and scats that vibrate across his canvases with such volume and charge that they are the very things that make the paintings possible. The ear-centricity, or audiocentrism, of Basquiat and Kirk raises important issues for contemporary cultural studies and race scholars precisely because so much of critical race theory continues to critique and comment on the visual vocabularies of biological difference perpetrated by nineteenth-century pseudo-science and eugenics. What do we know of music’s relationship to race? What does race

sound like? Or, in Kirk-speak, what is the black sound that God loves so much? What does Basquiat's EAR actually hear?

By asking these questions and pairing the ear against the eye, I am reinforcing a dichotomy that, particularly within African American culture, is a false one continually passed off as true. As the film scholar Jane Gaines has written, "The sound/image dichotomy that informs the development of mimetic technologies in Western culture . . . is not a relation of surrogacy but one of a hierarchy defined by the modes of the socialized body. In this hierarchy, eye is over ear and the body is higher than the voice."⁴ Certainly, a central part of my goal in this book has been to topple this sensory hierarchy that keeps the eye above the ear and thus limits knowledge formation to visual vocabularies of interpretation and meaning and marginalizes sound and music in the study of race and nation-formation. And, certainly, this hierarchy has been more true during certain historical moments than others (namely, the industrial age, when the "regime of vision" ruled with its powers most unchecked by sonic forces).

But I want to question the opposition that makes this hierarchy possible, something that Kirk did so well. He knew that it was impossible to speak of sound without reference to vision, and vice-versa. This is even true in the extreme example of Kirk, who talked of his ears as eyes, who talked about sound—for of all its power as sound—through visual grammars. Kirk made African American art saturated with black sound and did so at the synesthesiac nexus where sound and vision meet and switch places—where eyes become ears and ears become eyes, where sights are heard and sounds are seen. The removal of both the sound/vision hierarchy and the sound/vision dichotomy is particularly crucial in the context of Kirk because he worked directly within the tradition of African American expressive culture and artistic production, a tradition that, contrary to what many scholars have argued, is defined by the removal of these hierarchies and dichotomies where sound and vision, the aural and the scriptural, have always been interlinked. Aldon Nielsen has called this the "iterative continuum" of African American culture, the "ever expanding grammatology" where the dichotomy between sound and vision, writing and sound, graphicity and noise, is toppled.⁵ Nathaniel Mackey has cautioned African American literary critics who ignore this continuum and go too far in privileging the ear over the eye when interpreting African American literature. "The rush to canonize orality as a radical departure from the values of an eye-oriented civilization," he writes, "runs the risk of obscuring the attention paid by re-

cent poets to the way the poem appears on the page. The ‘graphicity,’ moreover, is hardly at odds with the ‘oral’ impulse.”⁶

While Mackey has explored this decanonization of orality from within literary criticism, Arthur Knight has made similar arguments in his analysis of jazz film. Knight rejects the privileging of sound in twentieth-century jazz criticism. “What music looks like relates crucially to how it sounds and what it can mean,” he writes of the 1944 early jazz film *Jammin the Blues*, “The ‘look’ of music influences how listeners categorize what they hear.” The “look” that Knight is referring to here is not, however, a generalized, universalist “look,” clean of difference or cultural contingency. Knight is concerned with the “look” of race, the “look” of color, even when he notes that “music can seem to float free of its players . . . music can separate from ‘colored’ social bodies.”⁷ In his study of *Jammin the Blues*, a visual recording of a jazz performance, Knight pays most attention to the “look” not of music, but of the colored social bodies who are playing the music that the viewer sees and hears.

What I want to do in this chapter is return to the music that allegedly floats free of these colored bodies and argue that it never does—the music is still “colored,” the music still tells listeners about what a “look” can look like. By focusing on the work of Basquiat and Kirk, the representation of race is never only about colored social bodies who can be seen as music floats away. In both cases, racial representation cannot be examined without recourse to the sonic construction of race; in Basquiat’s paintings and Kirk’s songs, it is the music that is “colored.” To borrow a phrase of Kirk’s that makes equal sense for Basquiat, music has “audio color.”⁸

BASQUIAT’S EAR

Basquiat was a painter who listened to a lot of music. But he was also the opposite: he was a listener who painted, a listener who turned what he heard into what he painted. Just as Baldwin’s relationship with his phonograph helped determine his relationship with his typewriter, Basquiat’s relationship to his phonograph and cassette deck helped determine his relationship to his paint brushes and canvases. “Music surrounds and invades the body of its listeners,” Lawrence Grossberg has written, “incorporating them into its spaces and making them a part of the musical event itself. The listener becomes a producer in complex ways.”⁹ In Basquiat’s case, what he produced was another kind of music, paintings that vibrated with the sounds that inspired them—paintings that were audiotopias where the

sound of America singing was the sound of bebop meeting hip-hop, salsa meeting funk, Haiti meeting John Cage.

His visual audiotopias commented on the America singing that Whitman never heard, the impact of generations of American racism on the subjugation and objectification of African American bodies. His paintings fused the musical and the visual to refuse racism and imagine new ways of hearing and seeing blackness. They were his own record albums, and he played them like a hip-hop DJ, moving across their lines, cutting between their grooves, scratching through their words, to disrupt the harmonic sameness of American univocality. On one turntable was a bebop album, on the other was a hip-hop album, and between them stood Basquiat, the painter DJ who morphed into a human mixing board, cross-fading between one version into the other, mixing together records that each howled different eras of black protest into a collage that he threw up on the wall so that everyone could see what it sounds like.

Black's Anatomy, Black's Chant

Basquiat worked in the realm of vision, but his envisionings and imagings were also auditory, the visual renderings of the audio world he inhabited, the visual crossroads where sight and sound meet. He was a sound painter, actively using visual media to express aural information, to capture one sense by channeling it through another. In his 1944 essay, "Silence is Golden," surrealist painter Andre Breton lauds surrealist poets for their pursuit of writing with an ear, writing that hears and listens to the sounds that language makes. "Great poets," he wrote, "have been auditives, not visionaries."¹⁰ Basquiat was a "great painter" because he put an EAR on the body of vision, because in his approach to vision and the visionary, he too was auditive. He painted with acute auditivity.

Basquiat was auditive in deindustrialized 1970s and 1980s New York City, a watershed period in American popular music that witnessed the explosive convergences of Anglo punk and new wave and African American and Latino/a disco, salsa, and hip-hop—"creole Africa to the power of five."¹¹ It's rumored that when he died, Basquiat left over three thousand records behind, mostly a mix of opera and black Atlantic greats—from Puerto Rico's El Gran Combo to U.S. tenor giant Lester Young and black British reggae Babylon crashers Steel Pulse. He was, above all, a devout jazz listener, and he often related to his work as an improvising jazz musician related to improvised jazz—the same music always played differently enough that its sameness was never static. "I don't know how to describe my work because

it's not always the same thing," Basquiat once said. "It's like asking Miles Davis, 'Well, how does your horn sound?'"¹²

He called Parker and Jimi Hendrix his heroes. He grew up in Brooklyn amidst the commercial birth of salsa music among the city's Afro-Latino immigrant population, of which he was a member. His mother was Puerto Rican, his father Haitian. He was a DJ at the New York City nightclub Area. He played in Gray, a noise band that frequently gigged at the Mudd Club, the post-punk and no-wave anti-Studio 54 mecca of New York avant-hipness that attracted the likes of David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Brian Eno, and Sid Vicious. He hung out with a group of graffiti artists, b-boys, and MCs—Rammellzee, Futura 2000, Toxic, Lady Pink—who were central to the birth of hip-hop in the early 1980s. He always traveled with a boom box and a carton of cassette tapes and used a Walkman to record street sounds that he would use in the soundtracks he made for his friends' art videos. He was on his way to a Run DMC concert on the night that his heroin overdose killed him.

So you could imagine, when Basquiat painted, it was a visual event as much as an audio one:

Basquiat activated an LP of free, Afro-Cuban, and other kinds of jazz. Then he resumed work on an unfinished collage. Hard bop sounded. Jean-Michel pasted on letters and crocodiles. He did this with a riffing insistence, matching the music. Digits in shifting sequences, 2222, 444, 5555, further musicalized the canvas, like the chanted numerals of the Phillip Glass and Robert Wilson opera *Einstein at the Beach*. Four styles of jazz—free, mambo-inflected, hard bop, and, at the end, fabulous early bop with sudden stops—accompanied the making of that collage.¹³

Klaus Kertes has argued that Basquiat's Parker homage *CPRKR* approximated "the drawn as . . . painted sound," and Robert Storr called his paintings "eye rap."¹⁴ Robert Farris Thompson concludes that because Basquiat painted so surrounded by sound, his paintings of racialized black bodies and Day-Glo skeletons of entertainment and sports celebrities, chopped up and x-ray irradiated by machines, become visual sound and sounded vision, "incantations of his blackness, incantations of what he was afraid of. Most of all, incantations of keeping his body whole. . . . He chants print. He chants body. He chants them in repeated repetitions."¹⁵

In African American art, the chant is not an exclusively oral/aural event. The chant can leave a mark, a written, scribbled, drawn, or painted trace that may appear silent but that in actuality resonates with sound. As Nielson has argued in his study of postmodern African American poetry—a de-

velopment roughly coterminous with Basquiat's own innovations in African American postmodernism—the chant “bodies itself in the garb of the mark, inscription, calligraphy.” It is this written calligraphy that mediates between silence and sound, that links text and voice and becomes, in Nielsen's memorable phrase, “the calligraphy of black chant.” In a painting like *Horn Players*, written words like “ear,” “ornithology,” and “soap” are calligraphies of chant, scripts that bubble with sound and echo histories of music.¹⁶

Perhaps the most concrete example of Basquiat as a performing multimedia Elegua at the crossroads of sound/vision/script is Gray, the band he led and in which he played bell, synthesizer, clarinet, comb, electric guitar, African drum, triangle, metal files, and wired drumheads. Both Thompson and Basquiat biographer Phoebe Hoban have argued that Gray was the stepping-stone between the music cultures Basquiat inhabited and his canvases. Many of Gray's song titles and lyrics would later end up as the foundations for Basquiat's paintings. Existing somewhere between the modernist avant-garde noise experiments of John Cage and the breakbeat cut-ups and recombinant collages of early hip-hop DJs like Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash, Gray played with found sound and found noise and experimented with new wave dissonance and instrumental clash: “music that isn't really music.”¹⁷

Cage's influence on Basquiat's music and painting makes perfect sense. Cage was a professional ear-centric committed to pushing composition and performance as far into the worlds of sound, noise, and silence as possible—instrumental sound, industrial sound, body sounds (Cage worked with an anechoic chamber), environmental sound, ambient sound, inaudible sound, silent sound. Cage engaged the multiplicities of aural expression in his *Imaginary Landscapes* series with the help of technology, utilizing amplifiers, radios, tape loops, and, most importantly, phonographs—the instrument that in the early 1980s went from being a noisy prop of Cage-ian avant-gardism to being a hands-on-wax mechanical weapon in hip-hop's black and Latino/a underclass battle with Reaganomics.

As a child, Basquiat's favorite book was *Gray's Anatomy*. Gray was said to have been named after it, and many of Gray's songs and lyrics were named after body parts catalogued in the reference book. But Basquiat's paintings are full of “black's anatomy”—or the anatomy of black, or the blackness of anatomy—deconstructed and disarticulated black and Afro-Latino male bodies in parts. Basquiat's black male bodies bear the mark of their objecthood and the violence of their social, political, and economic control: the

black male body as property, as commerce, as entertainment object, as corpse, as meat that can make money even after it's dead. He often names and labels the bodies' parts with scribbled scientific detail, yet *Horn Players* is one of the few of his paintings that gives us the EAR of a disembodied body. So many of his taken-apart black men are left earless, bodies without sound coming in but bodies of bone that still vibrate with the sounds that echo through them. There is a "LEFT EAR" in 1983's *Jesse* and an "EAR" in his 1985 collaboration with Andy Warhol, *Stoves*.

The Phonographic Canvas

There is also an "EAR" on the back of an album cover Basquiat painted for a 12-inch rap recording he also produced, "Beat Bop," by graffiti artist Rammelzee and hip-hop MC K-Rob. "EAR" also appears on the label of the vinyl itself, which spins in circles as the record plays, Basquiat's drawing set in musical motion, his art in revolution, not as if it were played as a record but in revolution because it is a record, a record that he funded and distributed through his Tartown label. The Basquiat-designed album art of an inside-out, anatomically incomplete skeleton spins in the record's center: the spiraling grooves of the record, written on and read by the stylus of a phonograph needle, leading to another dis-body in pieces, to another EAR ready to capture the sound released by writing. The EAR of "Beat Bop," like the EAR of *Horn Players*, both painted by Basquiat in the same year—exists at the interstice of script and sound, of aurality and imagery. The EAR is at the center of the phonograph record, barely to the left of the spindle hole that is the record's non-present center—a center that is a hole, an absence, an erasure of vinyl materiality; a center that is, in a sense, sound. The EAR of "Beat Bop" is at the sound center of the vinyl record's inscribed black body of revolutionary black grooves. It hears the sounds and words that phonography produces and hears what is written in the grooves of the record as aural information. To the left of the EAR is the center toward which the record's sound spins, the void into which it pours, an escape hatch for sound's material capture.

More than Parker's saxophone or Gillespie's trumpet or Roach's drum kit, it's the turntable that can be most loudly heard in Basquiat's painted beats, his scribbled lyrics, and his audiovisual inscriptions of New York City Afro-Latinidad caught between the blow-up of hip-hop, the blow-out of the art market, and blow. For the phonograph—be it Edison's or Cage's or the Technics 1200s of hip-hop DJs or the one Basquiat spun off of at Area—is a machine of sonic inscription, recording, and playback, and phonogra-

phy is literally the “sound-writing” of a needle-stylus inscribing and decoding sound information written into a spinning groove (Kahn has called it “the mechanical etching of any acoustic event”¹⁸). When Edison perfected the prototype of what would later become the phonograph we are most familiar with, he perfected a system of sound-writing: he used a needle to inscribe onto a tinfoil cylinder sheet a mark, a trace, a code, which when re-played by a needle moving over that initial writing would produce that writing as an audible event, as sound. According to Friedrich Kittler, this makes the phonograph into a form of “storage media.” Writes Kittler, “What was new about the storage capability of the phonograph . . . was [its] ability to store time: as a mixture of audio frequencies in the acoustic realm.”¹⁹

Instead of pointing off the canvas of paint, the EAR now points toward the missing center of the record, the hole off the canvas of written-on, inscribed vinyl. The EAR is at the center of invisibility and inaudibility; it hears what is visible but not audible—what is written but not heard without another re-writing, another iterative act of mechanical mimesis. My suggestion that Basquiat’s paintings (which we can see) have phonographic qualities (which we can hear)—inscriptions that produce sound when written on by a stylus—speaks to an intimate relationship between sight and sound present from the very beginning of the phonograph’s invention. One early phonograph pioneer, Emile Gaultier, went so far as to describe phonograph records as “cabalistic photographs” through which “sound can outlive itself, leave a posthumous trace, but in the form of hieroglyphics which not everyone can decipher.”²⁰ Basquiat did it one better—he turned phonograph records into cabalistic paintings, digital dub plates of sound that could be seen with the eye.

The “Beat Bop” cover art contains many familiar Basquiat visual tropes which connect this EAR painting back to the EAR art of *Horn Players*—his crowns, his crossed-out words, his curvy sine-wave-like scribble loops, bones, dollar signs, anatomy codes, and handwritten band and production credits. Missing from “Beat Bop” is *Horn Players*’ five-line repetitions of “ALCHEMY,” and yet the presence of alchemy is present in both—the alchemical processes of *Horn Players* musical performance and “Beat Bop” turntable technology. By naming a hip-hop single “Beat Bop,” Basquiat makes a clear connection between the hip-hop DJ’s trademark manual electronic use of the “break beat” as a compositional building block and the “bop” made famous by the manual acoustic horns of Parker and Gillespie. “Just as traditional instruments can be seen as alchemical transformations

of earth and air, woods and metals,” techno theorist Erik Davis writes, “so can the revolutionary sonic media that followed in the wake of the telegraph—telephone, phonograph, and radio, not to mention theremins, Moogs, and Roland 303s—be regarded as creative transmutations of the new elements that would come to undergird the 20th century’s cultural consciousness: electricity and electromagnetism.”²¹

Basquiat becomes the audiovisual conduit, the articulative human node of connection, between acoustic alchemical saxophones and trumpets (*Horn Players*) and electric alchemical turntables (“Beat Bop”), between these two epochs of alchemical creation—the bebop era his life followed and the hip-hop era his life was coterminous with, the bop of jazz bebop and the beat of hip-hop beat-bop. The bop they share is not just a musical style or genre, however; as Langston Hughes once argued, the bop of bebop also referred to the sound of a police baton “bopping” on the bodies of black people. From its birth, hip-hop has likewise been a “bop” music, a popular form of African American and Afro-Latino/a protest music known for its oppositional “Fuck tha Police” responses to police racism and police brutality against minoritized bodies, and its more general refusals of U.S. racial and social injustice.

Next to the DJs, MCs, and graffiti artists of early New York hip-hop, it is the jazz musicians of 1940s bebop who are the most frequent musical subjects of Basquiat’s paintings. Most of bebop’s principal architects—Max Roach, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Lester Young, Bud Powell, Miles Davis—were engaged by Basquiat’s brush. Basquiat turned one of bebop’s key aesthetic foundations—syncopation—into *Syncopation*, a painting of a jazz ensemble disconnected by the jagged blurs of its own rhythmic improvisation. He turned the album notes of a Charlie Parker album into *Discography II*, Basquiat’s own white-letters-on-black paint scribbles of Parker’s Reboppers lineup and song list. Henry Sayre has argued that in Basquiat’s painting of Parker’s record, in his reproduction of Parker’s original, “the sound, even the music, is silenced. The painting is just the record jacket—all surface, all presentation, all representation.”²²

The problem is that Sayre is only looking at the painting. If he had listened to it, he would have heard its surface vibrate, its lines and grooves alive with the inscribed sounds and written chants of bebop. Just because something is, in Sayre’s words, “repeated, removed from the original,” doesn’t mean that it is silent. The African tradition of iteration and repetition out of which bebop, and later hip-hop, grows, demands the opposite: silence is broken by repetition, repetition is what produces sound and the

innovation of new music. Much of bebop's greatest compositions were themselves repeats and reproductions of originals. The "ORNITHOLOGY" of Basquiat's *Horn Players* references a Charlie Parker composition of the same name, a song that Eric Lott's has called "the national anthem of bop." But "Ornithology" is a reproduction and repetition of the jazz standard "How High the Moon," but in its repetition of it and reproduction of it, Parker creates something new, a new sound, a new music born from iteration that is anything but silent.

This is precisely what attracted Basquiat to bebop: the way it used repetition, reproduction, and improvisation to transform, or "artistically other," the shape and meaning of somebody else's originals, and to do so in the name of black protest against the restrictive social structures of American racism. For LeRoi Jones, what most characterized bebop was its "anti-assimilationist sound," its rapid improvisations, its jagged time shifts, its wild solo flights, its embrace of melodic and rhythmic dissonance—it willfully harsh resistance to being swallowed up into the unisonance of American harmony. Bebop musicians understood the importance of communicating their racial difference from the American mainstream through their music. They understood that American slavery and American racism had made them, as black musicians, separate from America, and instead of wanting to become part of that America, they chose to "make that separation meaningful," to turn that separation into a stance, a platform, a contestatory and argumentative responsive to dominant American life.²³ As Eric Lott has argued, what the Harlem riots were acting out on the streets, bebop musicians were acting out on stage. It was black militancy and black radicalism converted into sound.²⁴

While bebop was the music Basquiat inherited from the radical past, it was the radical present of hip-hop that he was born into. Basquiat was coming up as a painter and graffiti tagger on the streets and subways of New York City just as the music culture of hip-hop was being born on the very same streets and on the very same subways. Like so many of hip-hop's leading practitioners over the years—the Puerto Rican Crazy Legs, the Jamaicans Herc, Red Alert, and Funkmaster Flex, the Trinidadian Doug E. Fresh, the Haitian Wyclef Jean—Basquiat was an Afro-Caribbean immigrant (albeit a middle-class one) schooled in the street art, comic book culture, and pop music life of 1970s urban Brooklyn America. In many ways, Basquiat was hip-hop's first gallery artist, the first audiovisual hip-hopper to be legitimized, popularized, and substantively supported by the official New York art world. Greg Tate argues the Basquiat–hip-hop connection by

focusing on Basquiat's visual mutations of language and script: "Just as Basquiat manipulated language in ways that were not supposed to be the province of young black males, so did the hip hoppers."²⁵

But as Tate has written so eloquently elsewhere, hip-hop is not just an art of word games or even rhythm games. More than a single musical genre or style, hip-hop refers to an entire music culture (rhyming, break dancing, graffiti), an entire way of life, an entire system of organizing and reorganizing cultural and historical knowledge. Hip-hop's approach toward sonic organization impacts its approach toward social and cultural organization as well, and Basquiat was very much a part of the early New York City hip-hop street scene of Afro-Latino rappers, DJs, break-dancers, and *graffiteros* that birthed the beginnings of the hip-hop audio-social reorganization that would forever change the course of pop music history. Though Basquiat never fully identified as a graffiti artist, he did write his copyrighted tag, "SAMO"—roughly "the same old shit"—on walls across the city with a marker. According to a Basquiat associate of the time, "The concept was that everything is just the same old thing, that society repeats itself, and you are just stuck in the loop."²⁶

The use of musical loops and musical repetition—of a break pattern, of a melody line, of a rhythm—is central to hip-hop musical production. In fact, hip-hop's instrumental base is built on the idea of rhythmic repetition, of the DJ manipulating two copies of the same record on two different turntables, isolating the percussive "break" passage on both, and then switching between the two tables while rewinding the needle back to the break's beginning, over and over again to create a continuous (and depending on your skills, seamless) rhythmic loop that serves as the foundation for a new song with new rhymes and new sounds. Hip-hop creativity, then, relies on a musical version of Basquiat's SAMO: the use of repetition—the same old break beat shit looped into a new rhythmic creation—as creative praxis. "To say or to do again is to say or do with a difference," Nielsen argues in his echo of Amiri Baraka's "changing same," "so that there is always repetition and differences. . . . It is not closure."²⁷

Hip-hop's recycling of rhythms to create new ones is in fact a practice it picked up from Jamaican dub and reggae music, specifically the act of "versioning." The word "VERSION" was a Basquiat favorite and he wrote it into numerous paintings. In Jamaican music, a version refers not just to one musician's version of another musician's song, but to the wider Jamaican production standard—first made commercial by legendary engineer King Tubby—of releasing multiple versions of the same record by different

artists, all of them offering their own take on the original rhythms. As early as the 1960s, Jamaican artists began singing over rhythm tracks that had already been recorded and released by other artists. The original tracks would be separated into their rhythm and vocal track components and then the rhythm track would be released to other artists who would lay down their own vocals over the preexisting rhythm. No version was less original than the original; no version was less original than any other. In fact, originality was judged on how good any one version could be, if it was better than the version that came before it. Versioning—copying, replicating, reproducing—always made something new, always moved the music forward.²⁸

Basquiat's versioning of his own SAMO tags landed him in a circle of highly influential graffiti artists that included Fab 5 Freddy, Rammellzee, Futura 2000, Phase II, Daze, Crash, and Lady Pink, and he was part of many art world attempts to make graffiti legitimate by exhibiting it in galleries. In 1981, Freddy curated a "graffiti-based-rooted-inspired" art show, *Beyond Words*, in the gallery of the Mudd Club, where Basquiat's band Gray so frequently played. The show included Basquiat's SAMO work and pieces by all of the above artists. It was at the *Beyond Words* show that Freddy introduced actor Patti Astor to filmmaker Charles Ahearn. Ahearn was just beginning to shoot *Wild Style*—the first feature-length film to document New York City hip-hop culture, which starred Puerto Rican graffiti legends Lee Quinones and Lady Pink—and the *Beyond Words* introduction landed Astor a co-starring role in the film.

Released in 1983—the same year Basquiat went from bop to hip-hop and painted both *Horn Players* and "Beat Bop"—*Wild Style* included a lengthy graffiti-and-DJ mix-collage that featured a turntable performance by Grandmaster Flash: a version of his 1981, six-minute-long "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel." Flash was the godfather of the DJ backspin and, in critic Peter Shapiro's words, "the pioneer of the crossfader, cutting back and forth between records, slicing and dicing them and overloading the mixer's channels with brilliant, arrogant noise. . . . Flash demonstrated that the turntable, despite its normal usage, was a percussion instrument with a tonal range and expressive capability far beyond that of drums, woodblocks and marimbas."

Nelson George's 1982 description of "Adventures" in the *Village Voice* has become nearly as classic as the track itself:

"Wheels of Steel" begins with "You say one for the trouble," the opening phrase of Spoonie Gee's "Monster Jam," broken down to "you say" re-

peated seven times, setting the tone for a record that uses the voices and music of Chic (“Good Times”), Queen (“Another One Bites the Dust”) and the Sugar Hill Gang (“8th Wonder”), and “Birthday Party” as musical pawns manipulated at Flash’s whim. He also repeats Deborah Harry’s “Flash is bad” from “Rapture” three times, turning her dispassion into total adoration. When Flash plays “Another One Bites the Dust” he puts a record on his second turntable, shoving the needle and the record against each other to produce a rumbling, gruff imitation of its bass line. As the guitar feedback on “Dust” builds so does Flash’s rumble and then (throw-down!) we’re grooving on “Good Times.” Then “Freedom explodes between pauses in Bernard Edward’s bass line. His bass thumps and then the Furious Five chant “Grandmaster cuts faster.” Bass. “Grandmaster.” Bass. “Cuts.” Bass. “Cuts . . . cuts . . . faster.” But for me the cold crusher occurs about four minutes into its 5:49. During “8th Wonder” Flash places a wheezing sound of needle on vinyl in the spaces separating a series of claps.²⁹

The relationship between Flash’s “Adventures” performance and Basquiat’s auditive bebop–hip-hop paintings is not just a Mudd Club–meets–*Wild Style* coincidence. Basquiat’s paintings repeatedly contained visual analogues to hip-hop turntable collage production. He crammed his canvases with colors, images, words, codes, and signs in unpredictable combinations and juxtapositions—skulls, crowns, blocks of blue, halos, trademarks, words, words, words, blocks of orange, limbs—in a way similar to Flash’s pastiche of musical fragments in “Adventure.” They both create cut-and-paste quilts of dismembered parts (Basquiat’s body bits, Flash’s song bits) that are re-membered into still un-whole new bodies, new songs built out of spare parts that do not seamlessly fit together. Eshun dubs this new black Atlantic turntable Frankenstein “sonic fiction,” which is exactly what we find in the made-up and make-believe audio-alchemy narratives of “Beat Bop” and *Horn Players*, sonic fictions painted on electric canvases that vibrate with sounds released after the brush has hit the surface.³⁰

Put the needle on the record. Put the brush on the canvas. The wheezing and rumble of the needle against the vinyl record in “Adventures”—commonly known as “scratching”—leaves a visual mark on the Basquiat canvas. Though Flash popularized scratching, it was another DJ, Grand Wizard Theodore, who invented it by accident in 1979 when he was practicing DJing in his bedroom and in order to carry on a conversation with someone at his door, stopped the vinyl mid-spin and heard the percussive grum-

bling noise that the friction of the suspended vinyl made against the sharp tip of the stylus needle. Ever since, the sound of a record being slid back and forth underneath a stationary needle has been an integral part of the hip-hop sound, with DJs using it as a key tool of temporal control (slowing time, stopping, accelerating time, creating temporal ellipses and chronological jumbles), sonic manipulation (bending phrases, reducing choruses to static, turning beats into rhythmic blasts, mutating words and phrases into warped linguistic gibberish), and a lead instrument in a one-man hip-hop turntable band. While many critics have pointed to the DJ's use of scratching for percussive effect, Kodwo Eshun has emphasized the scratch's role as a "word-molecularizer," a technological act that can manually distort and disintegrate the sacred holism of words, grammar, and syntax.³¹ Scratching re-packages and re-orders language and treats it as a collection of interchangeable, separable parts.

In Basquiat's paintings, the scratch of the hip-hop turntable manifests itself in two visual traces. Most obviously, Basquiat smudges out words and images with thick white scratches of paint. He scribbles over and smudges words like a DJ scribbles over the grooves of a record, smudging the clarity of the words and sounds inscribed within it. But Basquiat also visually scratches—his paintbrush the stylus, the canvas his record, his body a human turntable—by crossing words out in a way that still allows them to be read. "I cross out words so you will see them more," Basquiat said in an interview, "The fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them."³² Hip-hop DJs use scratching to do the same—stopping the vinyl on a phrase that they want to highlight, then warping it, blurring it, inverting it, distorting it, in some way "obscuring it," so that listeners listen for it and to it more than they would have if the record had been allowed to simply keep spinning.

In this way, Basquiat is not only a DJ but one of the DJ's Afro-Caribbean ancestors—a "word scratcher." In his *Solibo Magnificent*, Martinican novelist Patrick Chamoiseau identifies himself not as a writer who belongs solely to the world of print and script with no ties to the world of the oral and the aural, but as a word scratcher who bridges the two worlds. He explains, "The writer is from another world, he ruminates, elaborates, or canvases, the word scratcher refuses the agony of orature, he collects and transmits."³³ Word-scratching is sound-writing, writing that contains and communicates through sound, writing that does not kill orality. Unlike Chamoiseau's orator Solibo, who is killed by the replacement of the age of

orality by the age of literacy, Basquiat the word scratcher, Basquiat the paintbrush DJ, stands at the crossroads of both eras, cutting and mixing between the oral and the written through percussive scratches in wet paint.

While all of these moves are present in *Horn Players*, they reach fruition in Basquiat's "Beat Bop" paintings, where his visual scratching and fragmentary cutting and pasting adorn both the cover and the actual label of a record that he produced and that contains, written in its spinning grooves, the very sounds made visible by his brush. And those sounds sound like this: over a slow-motion sci-fi funk lope provided by the Sekou Bunch, K-Rob and Rammelzee battle it out in verse and Rammelzee wins with a free-associative chain of echo chamber syntactical pile-ups, word tumbles, future-shocked freak riffs, jumbled word avalanches, and syncopated black Dadaisms. "Rock on like a finger-lick, finger-poppin, hot-poppin ah don't stop bunny rock, bunny rock you don't stop."

Greg Tate called the song's nightmarish Afro-futurist electro-hallucination "a hip hop horror show . . . a houserocking ritual killing."³⁴ No wonder Basquiat wanted to produce it; it's what his word-and-symbol style was might have actually sounded like. "The production work on 'Beat Bop' invokes a Basquiat painting set to music and verse," Tate later wrote for a Basquiat catalog, "with its things-that-go-bump-in-the-night sound effects, narcotized and down-beat tempo and, through the frenetic ramblings of Rammelzee, cryptic and nightmarish lyrical content."³⁵

But the more the record plays, the more the needle, the listener, and the viewer are drawn, in 33 1/3 circles, toward the absent center—the Basquiat body with a hole in the middle of it. There it is again, the hollowed out body-in-parts, codes standing in for organs. Lung, leg, intestines, heart, jaw—none of them are crossed out and only one, EAR, has a circle painted around it. Look closely and you'll see it's not a perfect circle. Basquiat left it open, with just enough room for Rammelzee and K-Rob to creep inside and, as they put it, "rock you out this atmosphere."

Genius Child Blues

At Basquiat's funeral, Fab 5 Freddy read the Langston Hughes poem "Genius Child." For the most part, he read the lines as Hughes wrote them, but the poem's final line, "Kill him and let his soul run wild," was changed by Freddy so it read, "Free him and let his soul run wild." For some, Basquiat was a genius child. For others, he remained a lucky fraud, a master of repetition, appropriation, and copying, but not an artist. It was a critique that was soon to hit a whole new generation of rappers and DJs who had only

just begun to finesse their experiments with found sound objects, word experiments, and turntable spun and cross-fader-mixed rhythmic collage. But Basquiat would never live to see it, his body now like the bodies he obsessively painted—decomposed, in parts, a skeleton of limbs and organs obscured by color and sound, on the verge of the same molecularization with which he turned words and images into alchemical dust.

A year before painting *Horn Players* and “Beat Bop,” Basquiat painted his own genius child in *Undiscovered Genius*, a Mississippi Delta bluesman holding an acoustic guitar at its neck. For a Basquiat form, he is remarkably intact, a complete upper body. His head is full, his shirt-adorned chest wide and present, his hands and waist clear and identifiable. He is at the drawing’s center, and unlike the center of “Beat Bop,” Basquiat’s bluesman is not a hole or absent—he anchors the drawing. He is surrounded by a dizzying, disordered black Atlantic grid of pictograms, words, crossed-out words, and drawings that nearly spin around him. There is groove after groove of condensed and compressed information about the transatlantic slave trade, plantation slavery, the Reconstruction American South, and the “counterculturally modern” sounds produced by its blues alchemists. Though “free” from the bondage of slavery but not the bondage of Jim Crow, they still bridge the Delta with Africa. Basquiat crosses out “BLUESMAN” once, then writes it in a smaller size. He makes “GRIOT” large—the first word that captures our eyes before they move down to the black singer below it.

We are back in the land that Basquiat came out of, “creole Africa, to the power of five.” The word “AFRICA” appears, as does “THE DARK CONTINENT,” but he crosses out “CONTINENT,” which makes us notice it more—the continental presence of Africa, its size, its location, its materiality as a site of coerced displacement and genocidal violence—but which also makes us confront THE DARK. Born of the lie of emancipation and of the slavery that followed the proclamation of freedom, the blues are one of what Paul Gilroy has described as the Black Atlantic’s “arts of darkness,” the expressive practices of a diasporic black community of connection and dispersal who disrupt the dominant discourse of modernity by sounding a “syncopated pulse of non-European philosophical and aesthetic outlooks.” Basquiat hears what Gilroy hears: this syncopated pulse—“this unexpected time signature”—which supplies “the accents, rests, breaks, and tones that make the performance of racial identity possible,” as well as the tools necessary for “a different rhythm of living and being.”³⁶

Basquiat doesn’t just hear it, though, he paints it, and he paints to it, the

beats and breaks of African-derived popular music that pulse—in repetitious loops, in gradual transformations, in patterns of “changing sames”—from beat-bopping MCs and cross-fading DJs to horn alchemists like Bird and Parker, to a bluesman produced by the meeting of two images that appear in only this Basquiat painting: a copyrighted slave ship and the Statue of Liberty. Basquiat puts himself and his chanting, singing, vibrating bluesman at the very center of the dialectic between the American racial nightmare and the American democratic dream. But unlike in *Horn Players*, there is no arrow that shows the viewer where to go to listen. The black sound made in response to the slave ship landing at Ellis Island—a vessel of bondage and terror arriving at a deceptive port of promise and freedom—is already here; its ongoing genius is its continual undiscoverability. All that’s missing is the EAR to hear it.

RAHSAAN’S EYE

I said to myself: since I have lost the beloved world of appearances, I must create something else.

JORGE LUIS BORGES

Basquiat painted the EAR. Rahsaan Roland Kirk *was* the EAR.

I have listened to seventeen albums by Rahsaan Roland Kirk, albums that range from 1956 to 1977, from *Early Roots* up through *Kirkatron*, from a lilt-ing version of “Our Love Is Here to Stay” to a warped, dream-soaked version of “The Entertainer,” from breaking glass and boogie-man screams to a “Hava Nagila” interpolation and a twenty-one-minute-long saxophone concerto, from playing a single melody to playing three all at the same time, and I can say at least this: for Kirk, who was black and who was blind, it was all about the black notes. It was all about the black notes that played black sound that made black music that made black people. In 1971 he said that they were all that he would play. He called that song “Blacknuss,” a composition entirely built and performed with the thirty-six black notes of the piano.

“We don’t mean to eliminate nothin’,” Kirk said in the song’s introduction, “but we’re gonna just hear the black notes at this time if you don’t mind.”³⁷ It was as much Kirk’s way of celebrating and privileging the role of black music and black people in the history of American musical life, as it was his way of redefining just what black is. “Blacknuss” signified blackness as sound. For Kirk, the experience of being black was not the experi-

ence of seeing and being seen. The experience of being black was the experience of listening and being heard. Race was something Kirk heard and “Blacknuss” was his name for it, his anthemic testimony to its triumphs and its pain.

He wanted to be clear. So throughout the course of the song, he spelled it out, “b-l-a-c-k-n-u-s-s.” Spelling out “blacknuss” made sure nobody missed the point: this was not “blackness,” but “blacknuss,” a different discursive register altogether, seriously altered semiotic ground. The song begins and ends with Kirk and his band repeatedly spelling out “b-l-a-c-k-n-u-s-s,” eventually erupting into an incantatory chant of racial repossession full of howls and screams—“black Mary” “black Elvis” “black fly”—that is repeated over and over again until blackness is fully converted into blacknuss—until the re-spelling of blackness as blacknuss becomes part of the trill of the horns and the crash of the cymbals.

In a move akin to what Nathaniel Mackey calls “artistic othering” (where a “socially othered” member of society responds to marginalization with acts of artistic transformation and invention, choosing othering over otherness), Kirk switched a letter to change a word and invent an idea.³⁸ He artistically othered “blackness.” The musical result, blacknuss, was the ultimate Kirkian trope for the sound of race and racial identity, a neologism intended not simply to add on to critical vocabularies but to open up an epistemological shift, a break in knowledge. By singing and spelling blacknuss, he was refusing to be defined by race and choosing to define it himself: this is blackness to me, b-l-a-c-k-n-u-s-s, the way blackness sounds. “Blacknuss” was the expression of what Kirk had worked toward his whole life and his whole career—a musical language that explores and articulates the aurality of race. The difference between the “e” and the “u” is the difference between sight and sound, between visuality and aurality, between the ear and eye, between the visually dominant American racial order and the one-man aural kingdom of Rahsaan Roland Kirk.

Kirk’s commitment to approaching his songs as audiotopias where race was re-thought through music—blackness re-thought as blacknuss—stands as a firm rebuke of the traditional notion that jazz musicians can only be spoken for (usually by white critics), that as musicians they are not also activists, writers, thinkers, and philosophers who speak for themselves and articulate their own artistic and political visions and agendas. Kirk is yet another prime example of the jazz musician as activist-theorist that Eric Porter argues for in *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*—the jazz musician as not only a producer of music, but a producer of ideas. “Even if musicians’ social sta-

tus as intellectuals has seldom been acknowledged and has been contradictory, “Porter writes, “it is important to recognize that in their efforts to articulate their aesthetic visions and publicly address issues relevant to their lives, they have functioned as arbiters of cultural tastes and cultural politics and have had a significant impact on the meanings circulating around jazz.”³⁹ While I will be dealing primarily with Kirk as an audio theorist of race, George Lipsitz has already made the claim for Kirk as an audio historian. Kirk, Lipsitz writes in *Time Passages*, “created a history that could be hummed, a story of the past that relied on sharps and flats instead of on footnotes, and one that testified to the historicity of experience even while avoiding the linearity and teleology generally associated with historical narrative.”⁴⁰

Audiobiography

These are some Kirk facts:

He played the flute through his nose and three horns at once in his mouth. He could turn John Coltrane into Barbra Streisand through his tenor saxophone, and he claimed he could hear the sun. He was always and all at once: circular breather, professional dreamer, cosmic prophet, standup comic, vibrationist, noise archivist, preacher, “bright moments” philosopher, whistleman, journey agent, librarian of black music from spirituals and New Orleans stride to Parker bop, and the original Eulipian from the land of Eulipia where “song is king.” On more than one occasion, he handed out cards that read “God loves Black sound.”

As a result, Kirk was often written off as a gimmick or novelty, leaving every radical attempt to create his own sound using his own tools (toy flutes, whistles, gongs, walking sticks loaded down with noisemakers) and instruments of his own creation (the tenor stritch, the moon zellar, the manzello) as just further proof that he was, as one of his songs once put it, yet another “freak for the festival.” In his memorial poem for Kirk, “Blind Saxophonist Dies,” David Hilton made precisely this point when he noted the caption under Kirk’s photo in one of his obituaries: “small photo and caption make / him a circus act.”⁴¹ Numerous friends of his lamented that too many audiences were, ironically enough for Kirk’s own agenda, hung up on the visual Kirk—a blind black man loaded down with a junkyard of taped-together instruments playing three horns at once in a dashiki—and missed the audio Kirk. “Were one to believe many writers,” jazz critic Val Wilmer wrote in her chronicle of jazz’s “New Music,” “the exciting and innovative artist Rahsaan Roland Kirk, a man whose expression is not lim-

ited to a single instrument, achieved his fame as a result of ‘gimmickry’ (playing three horns at once) and ‘freak’ effects.”⁴²

Indeed, most critics past and present focus on the fact of Kirk’s ability to play multiple instruments at once, his pursuit of unconventional performance (playing a flute with his nose), and his showcasing of his circular breathing techniques, whereby he recycled his breath for extended periods of time in order to sustain a single note, as ways of avoiding his motivation for turning his body and all inanimate objects he touched into sound. Kirk sought a black liberation rooted in black anima, in black soul, and he would use anything and everything that he could to get there. “People didn’t take Kirk seriously,” Kirk’s longtime producer Joel Dorn has said. “What got him crazy was having to prove what he did was legitimate! . . . He always had to show people what he could do. It was like he had to lift a thousand-pound door just to get out of his apartment before he could do his work.”⁴³

The weighty burden of gimmickry felt so heavy to Kirk precisely because it was the very things that many saw as gimmicks that Kirk saw as his tools of liberation, his means to the end of turning himself into a vessel of black sound that communicated the vibrating history of black people.⁴⁴ And Kirk did understand himself as a sound-being, someone whose very identity was directly tied to the reception and production of sound and music. So much so that three years before his death in 1977, instead of memorializing himself according to the conventions of literary selfhood by writing an autobiography, he began recording an “audio-biography” on a series of cassette tapes recorded on a personal tape recorder. On each tape, Rahsaan recorded his own voice recounting stories of his life, his history, his music, his hearing, his hang-ups, his battles. But more than anything, Kirk’s audio-biography was about his life as the life of black music. “My main points will be to deal with the New Orleans aspect of the music and the position of Black music in the world today,” he spoke into his recorder. “I’ll be talking with and for the pioneers of this music who have never gotten their just dues for creating this music that has excited an ungrateful nation for a century and more.”⁴⁵

Though the “auto” is replaced with the “audio” in Kirk’s spoken chronicle, the sound doesn’t so much replace the self as become the self. Rahsaan chose to preserve himself through the medium and the sense that he lived most truly within—not as an image or a painted portrait, not as a collection of words to be read on a printed page, but as a conglomeration of recorded sounds that coalesce into a single human voice that stands in for the man who birthed it. It was only right that Rahsaan—a man who wore

so many instruments around his neck and fastened to his body with electric tape so that he didn't play instruments so much as he *was* an instrument and he played himself—left us with a life that can only be known by being listened to. “Just as John Cage prepared the piano,” critic Michael Zwerin wrote in his liner notes to Kirk's *I Talk with the Spirits*, “Roland has ‘prepared’ himself. He should not be looked at as a multi-instrumentalist, but as a Kirkophone player. . . . He is all music. There is music emanating from his every pore.”⁴⁶

Early in his audio-biography, Kirk tells the story of his first encounter with the aurality of race, when he was a young student at the Columbus School for the Blind in Columbus, Ohio. “There was this other student,” Kirk said, “a white student who would pull kids hair to find out what race they were.” He claimed it's how his parents taught him to “find out if you were colored or not.” It baffled the seven-year-old Kirk, who remarked: “I thought that was really something because I never had to touch anybody to find out. I could always tell from their voice.”⁴⁷

It was a sensorial switch that would define how Kirk would experience the world he endlessly traveled through for the rest of his life: when he thought about race, when he talked about it and theorized it and made music about it, he did so not through the lens of vision or, like his fellow blind student, through the feel of touch, but through the ear of listening. When Kirk talked of blackness and black civil rights, he did so using sonic vocabularies and made his commentaries through musical languages. For Kirk, the way to transform the American racial order that each year found new ways to subjugate black people, the way to restore power and light and love to an African American community that consistently found itself the victim of white supremacy was not to be color-blind at all, but to listen *for* color. The road to social change was a musical one.

For Kirk, black people are a people of black sound. For Kirk, black history is the history of that sound.

As Vernon Martin, Kirk bassist and resident spokesman for Kirk's Vibration Society, once put it, “The trueness of being black cannot be expressed any more clear than through the sounds of music. Until the people of this country come back into the music halls and start to participate and open their ears . . . it don't mean a thing. So all you black people out there in the black land you better wake up and really know where you're comin' from because you are outta touch with your basic essence—which is sound!”⁴⁸

As a result, listening becomes a vital act of cultural survival. Kirk prided

himself on being a model listener, and he repeatedly urged all around him to open their ears and listen. He claimed perfect pitch. When a car drove by, he could tell you that it was in E-flat. Wherever he traveled he carried a case of records and a phonograph, and he'd often ask his friends to listen with him but in the dark, so they could see the world that he hears. His song "The Seeker" was a seventeen-minute call to listen, a manifesto for listening as a critical practice and mode of knowledge. "Seek and listen / you might find a truth," Kirk professed over chiming bells, microphone feedback, drunken trumpets, and screeching violins. "Listen back / If you listen back / you'll be able to hear / What's happenin' up / If you listen up / You'll be able to take / What's goin' down!"⁴⁹

Rudolf Arnheim would have been interested in Kirk. In 1936, in an essay entitled "In Praise of Blindness," Arnheim celebrated the advent of wireless radio for the way it purified the listening process by eliminating the distractions of the visual and erasing reference to the materiality of the sound source. For Arnheim, the radio gave us sound as sound, "blind music" to be heard by "blind listeners."⁵⁰ Arnheim's sightless world of sound was, as Douglas Kahn argues in his history of sound art *Noise, Water, Meat*, impossible: "Blind hearing even for the blind is a difficult proposition to sustain in a society that so thoroughly internalizes vision into every aspect of its being."⁵¹ So don't misunderstand me: I am not trying to suggest that Kirk's blind world of pure sound was pure at all—Kirk was constantly referencing the visual world in relation to his aural one, using his ears to hear as much as to see. "Sound is to me," Kirk said, "what sight is to you." In his book of fictional jazz histories, *But Beautiful*, Geoff Dyer captured the ear-seeing Kirk in an oft-told adventure with his friend and co-conspirator Charles Mingus: Mingus driving his car in circles with Kirk hanging his head out the window, his ear open to the world spinning around him—hearing it all, in order to see it all.

But I do want to at least momentarily seize his reliance on listening and hearing—his devotion to the black ear—and the way he put that concentrated listening and hearing to work in the theorization of race and the musical investigation of racial justice. Kirk's blindness forced him to generate meanings and knowledge about social experience through his ear, and as a result he possessed a finely tuned comprehension of just how central sound and music have always been to racial formation, racial struggle, and social movements in the United States. Ben Sidran once claimed that black blindness is "both an exaggeration of 'the black man's burden' and a physical metaphor for black life in America."⁵² Yet Kirk's blindness was neither

metaphor or exaggeration—it was a tool, a strategy of self-expression and survival. He used his blindness to theorize and historicize the “black man’s burden” and to think through the pasts and futures of black life in America. His blindness was nothing short of his way of living, his methodology, his point of view, his way of seeing the world and his role in it.

Like the suddenly blind characters in Jose Saramago’s novel *Blindness* for whom a stairwell light becomes the noise of the light’s buzzing timer—translating what they used to see into the sound those very same things made—Kirk lived in a world that he described as “pure sound.”⁵³ “Everything can be music if it’s developed and cultivated,” he once said. “From the hum of the sun to things that are happening down here on earth. The sun sets off a whole lot of vibrations that if people close their eyes enough, they can hear the sun. Sometimes on the tenor I try to get a sun sound.”⁵⁴

Black Mystery Revealed

In Amiri Baraka’s short story “The Screamers,” two tenor saxophonists take the stage and blow jazz that is more than music. They are “ethnic historians, actors, priests of the unconscious” and when they play, they play freedom. Through their horns come hatred and anger, revolt and fire, “so that the sound itself became a basis for thought.” Their sound thoughts about black liberation from white oppression become clarion calls, wordless sermons that create congregations of worshippers out of their audiences. The crowd follows them into the streets, all of them part of “the sweetest revolution,” using the screaming, communal torrent and ecstasy of music to take back the streets, to topple the capital, and “let the oppressors lindy hop out.”⁵⁵

Kirk was a Screamer, a jazz musician wedded to the idea of jazz as revolutionary music and the jazz player as an audio revolutionary—someone with the power to use music to scream out against enslavement and oppression, someone with the power to use sound as a basis for radical thought. “Nearly everything that Kirk did and said,” George Lipsitz writes, “nearly everything that he played called attention to his role as a black musician in a society controlled by whites.”⁵⁶ Kirk viewed his role as a black musician—a black agent of black sound—as part of the struggle for black liberation. There was no disconnect between black music and black freedom for Kirk. To be a witting listener of black music and a witting performer of black music was being an advocate for black freedom. Kirk’s first step was his belief that black people had been taught to forget and unlearn their musical roots, so he fashioned himself a living encyclopedia of black

music past and present. By restoring musical knowledge, he would be restoring history to a people encouraged to believe they have none. “Today black people don’t know their roots,” Kirk once said. “Black people don’t know the roots of where they came from and where their music comes from. And if they know them, they tend to laugh at them.”⁵⁷

But Kirk was not solely committed to restoring a black musical past through musical performance in the present. He was committed to solving what he frequently called “the black mystery.”⁵⁸ It is what Kirk listened to the most—and what he wanted all of us to listen to the most—“the black mystery” that only listening would reveal: the case of the missing black notes, the black notes that Kirk claimed had been stolen by generations of white audio thieves who feed off the beauty and strength and creativity of black music, repackage it and rename it, and then with the help of a racist corporate media leave behind the black sources for a future of success, profit, and recognition.

Kirk had particular disdain for white flautist Herbie Mann (who continually beat Kirk in *Downbeat* polls), he scoffed at the idea of Earl Grubbs as the king of the banjo, and he didn’t like what the Grateful Dead had done to BB King’s electric blues. The Beatles were a favorite Kirk target: he railed against them in his improv sermon “Clickety Clak” (“The Beatles come in the country and they take all the bread, while the police hittin’ black and white folks upside the head”⁵⁹), and at the end of his composition “Volunteered Slavery” he returned the favor and went upside The Beatles’ head by twisting up a few bars of “Hey Jude.” “It’s all right to listen to them,” Kirk said at a 1973 concert at Princeton University, “but don’t make these people heroes because they are not heroes! They are people who are stealin’ apples. A long time ago when black people got caught stealin’ chickens or apples they had to go to jail. These people should go to jail for committing crimes on music. So don’t make it heroic and think that those are the gods of music because we are the gods of music!”⁶⁰

Once Kirk had located the missing black notes and revealed who had taken them (Tom Jones and Engelbert Humperdink were the leading culprits), he set out to preserve them and push them back into the public sphere as black classical music: blues, boogie-woogie, jazz, spirituals, gospel. In 1969, inspired by the civil disobedience and public disturbance of the radical student movements of the 1960s, Kirk and Marc Davis founded the Jazz and People’s Movement, a musical activist project that fought against the extinction of black classical music at the hands of mainstream U.S. media who they claimed had normalized the exclusion of black music and

musicians from TV and radio broadcasts. The collective of fans and fellow jazz musicians grew to include the likes of Elvin Jones, Pharoah Sanders, Freddie Hubbard, Archie Shepp, and Lee Morgan, and drew up a petition that was signed by hundreds of musicians. For the movement, the suppression of black music was central to the suppression of black freedom, a fact explicitly spelled out in the manifesto they issued in 1969. “One of the very essential facets of the attempted subjugation of the black man in America has been an effort to stifle, obstruct and ultimately destroy black creative genius,” the Jazz and People’s Movement “statement of purpose” proclaimed, “and thus, rob the black man of a vital source of pride and liberating strength.”⁶¹ The manifesto held that the restriction of media access to creative jazz musicians—which was a restriction of black music itself—was, in turn, a restriction of what they dubbed “the black quest for freedom.”⁶²

Besides issuing the manifesto and spreading the gospel of the movement in TV and radio interviews, Kirk and friends—in a move that caused considerable disagreement and controversy in the jazz community—disrupted a series of TV shows: “The Tonight Show,” “The Dick Cavett Show,” “The Merv Griffin Show,” and “The Ed Sullivan Show.” On Sullivan, Kirk promised to play a sedate version of Stevie Wonder’s “Mon Cherie Amour” but at the last minute switched into the manic out jam of Mingus’s “Haitian Fight Song,” and on Griffin, members of the movement erupted in the studio audience, blowing small whistles until they created a chorus of high-pitched birds and holding up signs that read “More Jazz Music on TV” and “I Love America’s Jazz Music.”⁶³

It is crucial to remember that Kirk’s black musical activism with the Jazz and People’s Movement and his solo quest to rethink blackness as audio blackness occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, smack in the middle of some of the most tumultuous and significant years of the black civil rights movement—the very years that saw the disappointment generated by the 1964 Civil Rights Act eventually erupt into Black Power. It was the period Michael Omi and Howard Winant write of as “the great transformation” of American race and ethnicity, when the struggle for racial and social justice coalesced into new social movements determined to produce new racial subjects according to the rules of a transformed racial order. “The rearticulation of pre-existing racial ideology,” they write, “is a dual process of *disorganization* of the dominant ideology and of *construction* of an alternate oppositional framework.”⁶⁴

As a black activist musician who used listening as a political strategy and sound as his interventionist weapon, Kirk was a direct, aggressive partici-

pant in these processes of racial articulation. His devotion to black sound as black freedom set out to disorganize and, in the case of the TV shows, physically disrupt dominant ideologies of cultural ownership and racial oppression, while simultaneously constructing radical alternatives—renaming jazz as Black Classical Music and re-sounding the black struggle for freedom as the struggle for music. Kirk’s audio-racial performances were his way of rearticulating black racial identity and black racial struggle. Kirk used music to redefine blackness as blacknuss, retelling the story of black people as the story of black sound. To be black was to be sound, and with the figure of “blacknuss” Kirk brought together the rearticulation of racial politics and racial identity with the sonic histories and musical futures that those politics and those identities make possible.

We can directly hear Omi and Winant’s “disorganization and construction” paradigm at work in Kirk’s 1969 version of Burt Bacharach’s “I Say a Little Prayer,” which he re-imagines as an angry, pissed-off prayer of protest in honor of the recently slain Martin Luther King Jr. Kirk disorganizes the song’s romantic easy-listening pop and uses it to construct something else, a love song to the black freedom lost with the death of King that seethes with betrayal and disillusionment between the notes of Bacharach’s sweet, lulling melodies and choruses. Before Kirk even lets us hear the familiar notes of Bacharach’s original, Kirk re-authors it, introducing his version with a tribute to King. “They shot him down,” Kirk bitterly preaches over dissonant piano tumbles and saxophone whines. “They shot him down to the ground. But we gonna say a little prayer for him anyway.” The short, snappy, and poignant three-minute “forever and ever you’ll stay in my heart” love song that had been a chart-topping hit for Dionne Warwick and Aretha Franklin was now an eight-minute-long black civil rights howl.

Kirk never erases Bacharach’s original, he just pulls it apart, inflates it, stretches it out, puts it to work. To borrow the two performance strategies that Houston Baker Jr. has posited for African American modernism, Kirk’s version of Bacharach demonstrates both an initial “mastery of form” (he can duplicate the original) and then a subsequent “deformation of mastery” (he can then undo the original form and put his own signature on it).⁶⁵ Kirk’s mastery of “I Say a Little Prayer” only to then “de-form” it into a civil rights lament constitutes, in Baker’s words, “a go(ue)rilla action in the face of adversaries.” The band takes solo after solo, riffs build into riffs, bridges collapse into bridges, Kirk moans, and Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme” even gets quoted (a song that is no stranger to the revolutionary politics of black music). The recognizable melody—which never completely disappears

long enough to be forgotten—is worn like a transparent mask over a face of improvisation; the mask is not a minstrel mask (Kirk does not pretend to be Bacharach) but a de-minstrelizing mask (Kirk puts on Bacharach precisely to show just who is wearing who). Or, in Baker’s words, Kirk’s Bacharach mask is not meant to obscure, but to advertise: “It distinguishes rather than conceals.” And just as Bacharach seems to settle right back in at song’s end, Kirk transforms him once again, steering “I Say a Little Prayer” so that it ends in the black church—a secular pop song de-formed into a gospel vamp, a choir shout, a holy moment of collective testimony.

Dreaming in Audio Color

Kirk named his hallucinatory 1975 album of ranting daydreams and experimental jazz and blues collages *The Case of the Three Sided Dream in Audio Color*. In place of King’s dream of color-blind racial harmony, shot down in 1968, Kirk gave us his dream of audio color, or at least three sides of it, which was neither color-blind nor color-deaf. The fourth side of his dream was left blank, just silent black groove after silent black groove, the dream there but still incomplete. The album’s cover art is a classic Kirk statement: the illustrated bust of a faceless man whose entire head is a medusa’s nest of serpentine reed instruments. He has saxophones where his eyes should be.

I, Too, Sing América

If it ever was warrantable to regard and treat the Negro en masse, it is becoming every day less possible, more unjust, and more ridiculous.

ALAIN LOCKE

"The New Negro"

You see, unfortunately, I am not black.

LANGSTON HUGHES

The Big Sea

I wish I could write music. I'd leave words alone.

LANGSTON HUGHES

in a letter to Jan Meyerowitz

Quién sabe? Who really knows?

LANGSTON HUGHES

"Havana Dreams"

IN 1925, SIXTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER Walt Whitman first heard America sing, a young black poet named Langston Hughes decided that the harmonious carols of democracy's song were in desperate need of a rewrite. So the twenty-three-year-old from Joplin, Missouri penned his own lyrics to the song of America. "I, too, sing America," he wrote, and in so doing, volunteered his own voice to the national fray and forever changed its sound. "I am the darker brother," Hughes continued, the one who is sent to eat in the kitchen when the company arrives, the one who decides that the next time he will refuse, the next time he will be the company, too. "They'll see how beautiful I am and be ashamed—" the poem ended. "I, too, am America."¹ Hughes knew what Whitman knew: to sing America is—through

voice, through song, through volume—to be America. But Hughes also knew that he sang what Whitman didn't hear. He said as much in his poem for Whitman, "Old Walt," where he described him as "finding less than sought, seeking more than found."²

Just like Old Walt, Hughes was not dealing in metaphors, either. One year after writing "I, Too," he expanded on exactly what it was that he was singing and hearing in an influential essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"—his famous call for a re-hearing and re-singing of American culture through black ears and black sounds. Hughes defines "the racial mountain" as "this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization." Hughes's prescription for the transcendence and, ultimately, the annihilation, of such a mountain of racial assimilation, homogeneity, and standardization lies in the audible world of black popular music: "Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand."³

Hughes names what Whitman's poem never made explicit: he sings race and hears race, casting what was most certainly a racial debate in markedly audible terms. In Hughes's hands, listening becomes a strategy of refusing whiteness and preserving blackness—both of which are aural constructions in their own right. In order for intellectuals with a tendency toward selective hearing to understand, their ears must be "penetrated" and they must learn to listen to the sound of a different America singing. "I live here, too," Hughes wrote in his poem "Democracy." "I want freedom just as you."⁴

Most accounts of Hughes's critique of American univocality stop here, with Hughes inserting the black voices of blues and jazz into the chorus of American democracy and, in what remains a radical move, re-claiming the music that results as his own.⁵ This chapter, however, explores a different aspect of Hughes's relationship to the audio-racial imagination and suggests that this is not the only trajectory that Hughes's American singing reveals; by singing "America," Hughes was also singing Latin/o America, a transnational geopolitical landscape that he lived in and traveled across, and one that consequently challenged inherited formations of an absolutist American blackness.

Included in Countee Cullen's influential Harlem Renaissance anthology, *Caroling Dusk*, Hughes's poem, simply titled "I, Too," fell into the hands of Cuban journalist José Antonio Fernández de Castro, a leading figure in the Cuban *minorismo* movement of the early 1930s that in many ways echoed the racial philosophies and aesthetic missions of the Harlem Renaissance. De Castro took Hughes's poem—a corrective to the racialist ide-

ology upon which the idea of the United States as “America” was premised—and translated it into Spanish in the Cuban literary magazine *Social*. The poem’s new title, “Yo también honro a América,” dramatically altered the implications of Hughes’s original. For now, the “I, Too” of the title was honoring and singing not America, but América. De Castro could have chosen to translate Hughes’s use of “America” as “los estados unidos” or “norteamérica,” but instead he re-mapped Hughes’s America with the simple, yet monumental addition of an accent mark.

This moment of inter-American singing, translation, and cartographic realignment—when the United States is suddenly displaced by what Edouard Glissant and José Martí have respectively named “the Other America” and “Nuestra América,”⁶ the America of the Caribbean and Latin America—is a way into a much larger discussion of Hughes’s relationship to an inter-American music of national geographies and hemispheric articulations of blackness. Though Hughes himself never specifically replaced the term “America” with the figure of “América” on the printed page, his life and career make it more than clear that the America Hughes sang of was never bound by fixed national borders. Nancy Cunard once described him as “a link between Latin America and American culture.”⁷ Hughes was a performance poet of the Americas, a traveling singer of inter-American songs who was just as concerned with the national moorings of racial belonging as he was with their very displacement in international and “outernational” contexts—ships, ports-of-call, trains, letters, and other sites of coming and going, crossing and navigating, entering and exiting.⁸

De Castro was not the only Latin American intellectual to find relevance and meaning in Hughes’s song. Over the next two decades, the poem is known to have been translated into Spanish an additional fifteen times as “Yo también canto a América,” by writers and scholars from across the Americas, including Jorge Luis Borges’s 1931 translation in the Argentinean journal *Sur*. For Hughes, his singing of América reached its peak in 1968 with an entire Spanish-language anthology of his work, translated and edited by the Mexican writer Herminio Ahumada with an introduction by poet Andrés Henestrosa. In his review of the anthology, Ernesto Mejía Sánchez went so far as to claim that Hughes “considered that undertaking to be the high point of his career, on par with the publication of his *Selected Poems*.”⁹

It is doubly significant that these two translations—a 1928 translation in Cuba and a collected translation in Mexico forty years later—were published in the two Latin American countries that played the most central role in Hughes’s development as a writer and as a theorist of race in the mod-

ern world. And it is precisely to these two countries—Cuba (to which Hughes made three trips in the early 1930s) and Mexico (where he lived intermittently between 1919 and 1921 and to where he briefly returned in 1935)—that this chapter travels. The guides and maps are provided by the audiotopias of two performed poems, a 1995 interpretation of Hughes’s 1920 poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by the black British DJ duo 4Hero and the Afro-Cuban syncretisms of 1961’s *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*. Each reveals Hughes’s investment in forging American identities and black identities that, through the songs they sing and the musical stories they tell, transcend the borders of the United States.

A BIGGER SEA

There has been little critical precedence for positioning Hughes’s literary and musical performances in an inter-American frame. His role as a leading architect of African American modernism and his commitment to developing a shifting racial politics across the black diaspora might, at first glance, make him seem a perfect fit for a study like Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*. Hughes appears to possess all the necessary qualifications: he is an African American intellectual who spent much of his life outside of the United States; he traveled to Europe, made visits to Africa, and was a frequent passenger and worker aboard ships throughout the Atlantic; and he engaged in a discourse of race that skirted ethnic absolutism and racial particularity. Indeed, throughout Gilroy’s groundbreaking analysis of the diaspora’s transnational and transatlantic black “counterculture of modernity,” we meet a series of figures who engage in these very tactics—Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and W. E. B. DuBois among them—who all seek out alternate experiences of race and nation that privilege “processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents.”¹⁰

Ships are central to Gilroy’s study, ships that enabled the travels and flows of people, information, and cultural objects between Africa, Europe, and the United States. As well as recalling the forced maritime travel of the Middle Passage (an event that is perhaps the defining protocapitalist cornerstone of what we understand as “the Atlantic”), ships force us to look beyond nationalism as “micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity” that are always on the move across the spaces between nations—the mobile nodes that connected the black Atlantic’s disparate points.¹¹

Ships were central to Langston Hughes’s life, too. He spent nearly as much

of his life working and traveling on board steamer ships as he did on land. Whenever Hughes found life in the United States upsetting and oppressive, whenever he was unable to concentrate on his writing, he would board a steamer ship and head out to sea. Hughes's journeys aboard ships found him constantly, as he once put it, "crossing the Atlantic," traveling to Africa, Cuba, Haiti, Russia, China, Japan, and Spain. Hughes, who named his memoirs *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*, wrote while in Russia: "Most of my life from childhood on up has been spent moving, traveling, changing places, knowing people in one school, in one town or in one group, or on one ship a little while, but soon never seeing most of them again."¹²

Yet what makes Hughes and Gilroy's black Atlantic model such an uncomfortable fit, however, comes down to a question of geography.¹³ All of Gilroy's examples speak to the Atlantic nexus between Europe, the United States, and Africa, rarely considering the presence of either the Spanish- and French-speaking Caribbean or Central and South America.¹⁴ As a result, someone like Hughes does not neatly cohere with visions of black identities that only circulate between these three nodes of exchange and transit. What happens to "blackness" when it drifts outside of the maps drawn for the black Atlantic? Great attention has been paid to black culture as it travels between Africa and Europe, between Europe and the United States, but how is blackness recontextualized and reconfigured in the "black" and "brown" spaces of Latin/o America?

These are the very questions posed and explored by Joseph Roach, who slightly modifies the transatlantic model toward what he names "the circum-Atlantic world." In his study of performance and transhistorical racial memory in the Americas, Roach places the people and culture of the Caribbean rim at the center of what he calls "an oceanic interculture embodied through performance." Like Gilroy, Roach is interested in the vital possibilities of cultural encounter and in constructing alternate histories and genealogies of modernity "in which the borderlands, the perimeters of reciprocity, become the center, so to speak, of multi-lateral self-definition."¹⁵ But Roach's Caribbean-centered mapping—which, as we will see, is the perfect home for Hughes's *Ask Your Mama*—only goes so far with someone like Hughes, whose engagement with performance in the Americas also involved Mexico and repeated crossings of the U.S.–Mexico border. Indeed, what happens when these interactions, these inter-American performances of identity, happen in Mexico, where being black has a whole separate set of meanings? What alternative inter-American geography of blackness does Hughes's experiences in Mexico compel us to draw?

THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS (RE-MIX)

To begin to answer these questions, I turn to 1995, when Hughes's first major published poem, the 1920 "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," was reintroduced into the transnational circuit of the black pop imagination. It was a surprising and unexpected moment: African American jazz vocalist Cassandra Wilson and Black British jazz saxophonist Courtney Pine teamed up to record "I've Known Rivers," a retooled and highly stylized ambient jazz makeover of Hughes's poem. The arrangement of the poem they employed came from an intermediary source, African American jazz saxophonist Gary Bartz and his NTU Troop, who first recorded "I've Known Rivers" as an eight-minute pan-Africanist jazz meditation in 1973. The chronology goes like this, then: Pine and Wilson's "I've Known Rivers" is a cover of Bartz's "I've Known Rivers," and both are covers of Hughes's poem.¹⁶

The song's evolution gets even more complicated. Before recording it and releasing it on Pine's 1996 solo album, *Modern Day Jazz Stories*, Pine and Wilson handed it over to 4Hero, a Black British DJ duo based in London, who further transformed the original poem by giving it a "jungle" re-mix—cutting, splicing, and thoroughly reassembling Wilson and Pine's composition over a thick, choppy stream of rushing, digitized break beats. The resulting re-mix—where both a 1920 Hughes and a 1973 Bartz get dressed in new 1990s sonic outfits—is a perfect place to begin reinterpreting Hughes through a hemispherically tuned ear.

After all, Hughes wrote the poem when he was seventeen while on a train headed for Mexico. The original lines read as follows:

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raise the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The poem hardly appears to encourage an inter-American reading. Its landscape charts the singing rivers of the contemporary American South—Mississippi and New Orleans—on the same map as singing rivers in “ancient” Africa. Eschewing temporal disjunctures and glossing over historical differences, the poem establishes a clean triadic relationship between ancient Africa, the South of the 1920s and the nineteenth century, and the poet who knows—firsthand—of the rivers that effortlessly flow between them.

Which is precisely why “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” has for so long been celebrated for its wide-eyed, geography-spanning vision of burgeoning pan-Africanism, in which Hughes follows blackness as it travels directly from the American South into the African past. As Kenneth Warren has noted, the poem is suggestive for the straightforward way it makes “a claim of racial identity, of shared consciousness, of a Negro inter-subjectivity in which old world and new world stand together in a mutual relationship that predates European civilization.”¹⁷ But Warren is suspicious of Hughes’s deployment of diaspora as a transatlantic utopia of seamless racial commonality. He demonstrates how various episodes within Hughes’s own autobiography, *The Big Sea*, actually belie such an ahistorical diaspora romance and highlight instead a series of diaspora failures—examples of what he calls “appeals for (mis)recognition.”

While Warren is certainly on to something in his refusal of transcendental racial alignments across the heterogeneous national and cultural spaces of the African diaspora, Warren himself “misrecognizes” another unspoken component of Hughes’s poetic theorization of diaspora. In its very act of being written and in the very mobile site of its composition, Hughes’s poem inherently unsettles the very same U.S.-to-Africa map. The poem had a cross-border itinerary: Hughes wrote “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” while on a train heading across the Mississippi River, into the heart of South Texas, and bound for Mexico City. From Mexico City, Hughes was to catch a ride to the hillside town of Toluca to spend the next nine months with his expatriated father.¹⁸

That Hughes was heading for Mexico City as he wrote a poem built upon pan-African, diasporic sensibilities alters the U.S.–Africa axis that so many U.S.-spawned models of the black diaspora return to. The destination of Mexico, the train’s transnational locomotive movement, and its eventual crossing of the U.S.–Mexico border itself unsettles the figure of “the New World” in the “Negro” imagination. Hughes may, as Warren suggests, “suture” the Old World and the “New” by erasing the historical realities of the diaspora, but Mexico as a coordinate far off the conventional map of dias-

pora altogether disrupts that clean suturing, not by erasing it, but by extending its geography, by charting a new territory on the map of New World blackness. And it is a territory that has long played a vital role in the history of African American social life and popular culture—from being a site of refuge and freedom for runaway slaves to being an accessible getaway for outlaws on the run (*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song's* “run-for-the-border” chase sequence is just one of many film examples).¹⁹

Black musicians have also made the Mexican run. The Coasters immortalized a blues piano player in a Mexicali honky-tonk in 1956's “Down in Mexico,” and later that year jazz pianist Horace Silver gave him a name and a heartbreaker reputation as “Señor Blues.” Mexico was there for Jay-Z and Beyoncé, too—when the hip-hop “Bonnie and Clyde” needed to duck the law in their video for “Me and My Girlfriend,” they found quick-fix freedom south of the border next to Spanish-language Tupac murals and no-name motels. “Cross the Rio Grande,” sang the Drifters in their 1959 song “Mexican Divorce,” “and you will find an old adobe house where you can leave your past behind.”

Back to the re-mix. What is so remarkable about what happens when Bartz, Pine, Wilson, and 4Hero turn “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” into “I've Known Rivers” is that the poem's Mexico City destination gets revealed. That Wilson is from the United States and Pine and 4Hero hail from England, and that the song incorporates U.S. blues and jazz and U.K. jungle might seem to merely perpetuate theories of black diasporic cultural flow that move solely from East to West and solely between the United States and Europe.²⁰ Yet, the Bartz rewrite of Hughes that Pine, Wilson, and 4Hero use prevents such a listening by changing the words of the poem and adding the following lines: “All through Africa and North America, South America and Australia / I've known rivers / I've known rivers in the North and South, I've known rivers in the East and West / I've known rivers all over this world / I sailed some and seen the rest.” By adding “South America” and the coordinates of “North and South” to a mix subtitled “Amazonian Mix,” the poem's original cartography gets extended, as if Bartz knew full well that Hughes's train had a north-south itinerary, traveling between North and South America.²¹

Furthermore, 4Hero's remix of the song gives Hughes's poem its context back: the churning steel sound of the sequenced, hyperspeed beats rushing and clattering beneath the song's words is an uncanny and probably unwitting evocation of Hughes's train speeding along the tracks across Texas into Mexico. 4Hero's re-mix captures the industrial, locomotive mobility

that is the silent, ghostly subtext to Hughes's poem, what he himself described as "the train gathering speed in the dusk."²² In listening to this versioning of Hughes, it becomes impossible not to hear the poem-in-motion, to hear Hughes himself moving across the Mississippi and the Rio Grande, across competing national terrains, across North America and into Latin America. We hear how the train—like the figure of the transatlantic ship that recurs throughout Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*—acts as a conduit of inter-American travel made possible by the commercial partnerships formed between railroad industries in the United States and Mexico during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz from 1876 to 1910.

Indeed, there is an entire body of *corridos*, folk ballads of the U.S.–Mexico border, from the 1930s which sing of the importance of trains as sites of freedom, escape, and labor relief. Lines like the Texas–Pacific took Mexican laborers north from Mexico and Texas into Louisiana, Indiana, and Illinois, states which did not require the arduous work of picking cotton. As Philip Sonischen has written, for Mexicans and Texas-Mexicans in the 1930s, the railroad "represented the great hope, the escape from the poverty, the prejudice, and the back-breaking field work which was his life in Texas."²³

In Silvano Ramos and Daniel Ramirez's 1929 *corrido*, "El corrido de Texas," there is a train that makes the same stops as Hughes's train—Louisiana, Texas—but in a different, south-to-north direction. They sing,

Goodbye state of Texas
with all of your fields,
I leave your land
so I won't have to pick cotton.
Those trains of the T.P. [Texas and Pacific Railroad]
which cross Louisiana,
They take the Mexicans
to the state of Indiana.²⁴

The Texas and Pacific Railroad not only functions here, as José David Saldívar has argued in a related context, as "a complex industrial phenomenon that transforms California into a state and joins it to the United States and to *America Latina* by linking commerce and communication, among widely dispersed local communities, both North and South," but as a vessel of labor relief, work improvement, and, relatively speaking, freedom.²⁵

In 1930 Pedro Rocha and Lupe Martinez recorded another famous rail-

road *corrido*, “Corrido Pensilvanio,” which documents the journey of Concestino, a Mexican national who travels “under contract” by train from Texas to Pennsylvania. The cities have changed, but the sentiment remains the same: the northbound train is a ticket out of the cotton fields. “Good-bye Forth Worth and Dallas, towns of much importance,” they sing, “Now I’m going to Pennsylvania to avoid becoming a vagrant.” And like “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “Corrido Pensilvanio” was written on the train during the journey North itself. “These verses were composed when I was on the road,” sings Rocha.²⁶

Of course, it is not simply train travel that Hughes and these railroad *corridos* have in common. They all imagine and invoke a particular musical geography of the U.S. Southwest. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes describes the train ride like this:

I looked out the window of the Pullman at the great muddy river flowing down toward the heart of the South, and I began to think what that river, the old Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past—how to be sold down the river was the worst fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage. . . . Then I began to think about other rivers in our past—the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa—and the thought came to me: “I’ve known rivers.”²⁷

This is the geography that Hughes sees and imagines, but there is another one, a counter-geography of inter-American flux, lurking beneath the surface. After all, as Michel de Certeau has written, the very premise of railroad travel (which he says is itself a unique mix of incarceration and freedom) entails the imagining of new social and cultural spaces other than those directly available outside your window. For a train, a migratory utopic vessel of “closed and autonomous insularity,” is what can “traverse space and make itself independent of local roots.” The train as a machine of passage separates and distances the mobile seer from the frozen, seen landscape, and it is this very subject/object, viewer/viewed “cutting-off” that de Certeau claims is “necessary for the birth . . . of unknown landscapes and the strange fables of our private stories.”²⁸

With Hughes traveling through St. Louis and into Texas, the geography below the surface that Hughes travels through, his “unknown landscape,” is the Southwest and the U.S.–Mexico borderlands, the very territory which once belonged to Mexico prior to its imperialist annexation in the wake of the Mexican–American war.²⁹ Fittingly, the U.S.–Mexico borderlands that

Hughes's train travels through also go by another name that has been most consistently articulated by Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Pat Mora: "Nepantla," Nahuatl for "the place in the middle."

Mora writes of Nepantla as a physical, bi-national territory occupied and experienced by the border subjects who live within it. Anzaldúa sees it as much as an actual place as a psychic state of continual self-transformation, "that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity."³⁰ This *frontera* zone of Hughes's U.S.–Mexico borderlands travel constitutes "a space between . . . a middle place, composed of interactions and inter-views" that transforms "the void" into "a plenitude . . . an established place."³¹ By recognizing Nepantla as the terrain—both physical and psychic—that Hughes travels through, we can begin to understand how this train ride bound for Mexico speaks to the production of a new identity for Hughes, one bound up in shifting definitions of "black" and shifting definitions of "American." Nepantla is, says Anzaldúa, a "natural habitat" of artists who "partake of the tradition of two or more worlds and who may be bi-national."³²

The very train ride that produced Hughes's poem was a train ride across and between national territories, a train ride that took Hughes not into one nation or another, but into a transnational land of the middle—where cultures and identities have historically existed in a state of contestation, conflict, and hybridity. Far from being simply a "thin" borderline manifested in either a river or a fence, the U.S.–Mexico border is "thick," a more nebulous, heteroglot configuration where, as Alfred Arteaga has written, "human interchange goes beyond the simple 'American or no' of the border check. It is the space to contest cultural identities more complex than the more facile questions of legal status or images in popular culture."³³ Mexico and Nepantla operate here as geographic ghosts, specters of geography that unchain—through allusion and invocation—direct affiliations between race and national territory and prophecy the generation of new identities.

Indeed, knowing that while the Negro was speaking of rivers, he was traveling across the South, the Southwest, and into Mexico opens Hughes's poetic geography up to include another river that he also saw from the window of his Pullman car, a river central to the political and cultural imagination of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands, the Rio Grande. With the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo—which annexed Texas, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, California, and parts of

Wyoming, Colorado, and Oklahoma as U.S. territory—the Rio Grande became a key site of U.S. “manifest destiny” and expansionism, and, like the Mississippi, a central factor in determining national citizenship: the very border that decided just who was Mexican and who was American. After the Mexican-American war, the Texas–Mexico border, originally marked by another river, the Río Nueces, was moved one hundred miles further south to the Rio Grande. The treaty ensured that South Texas, with its 100,000 citizens, became a newly annexed addition to the ever-expanding U.S. empire.³⁴

By symbolically crossing the Rio Grande, Hughes’s poem reveals that it knows American rivers beyond those of the Old South, rivers that mark the porous and policed border between America del Norte and America del Sur. Just as the Mississippi is a racialized marker of the color line of the Jim Crow South, the Rio Grande serves as signpost for that other color line of the Southwest, the borderline meant to divide, in the words of nineteenth-century imperialist William Wharton, the “blood and enterprise” of civilized Anglo-Saxon America from the untamed “wilderness” of South Texas and Northern Mexico.³⁵

It became the liquid *límite* that Américo Paredes “spoke” of in one of his early anti-imperialist poems, “The Rio Grande,” which he published in 1934 in a South Texas newspaper. The poem’s language and themes are so similar to Hughes’s poem written fourteen years earlier that “The Rio Grande” reads like “The Mexico-Texan Speaks of Rivers,” a Tejano commentary on Hughes’s pan-Africanist river ode. Like “the muddy bosom” of Hughes’s poem, Paredes describes the Rio Grande as a “muddy river,” and like Hughes he follows it as it courses “towards the place where you were born.” He even employs a locomotive metaphor, “moving slowly down your track / with your swirls and counter-currents.” Most significantly, however, Paredes also establishes an intersubjective relationship with the river, identifying with its shape, movement, and history, and ultimately, in a very Hughesian move, comparing its currents to his soul, so that his life “resembles” the rivers. “For I was born beside your waters,” Paredes explains, “And since very young I knew that my soul had hidden currents, that my soul resembled you.”³⁶

On his 1994 album *Graciasland*, El Vez parodies and rewrites Paul Simon’s Elvis ode, “Graceland,” with an ode to the Chicano homeland, “Aztlán.” The original opening line of Simon’s song figures the Mississippi delta as a national guitar. El Vez also sings of rivers, but the geography has changed significantly, so much so that the Río Grande doesn’t merely flow,

it leaves a scar in the national body. In Simon's original lyric, the Mississippi river becomes a site of a nationally tuned American singing. Yet with *El Vez*, when the Mississippi gives way to the Río Grande, the figure of the river no longer shines with a national glow; instead, it makes a deep cut in the skin between nations and leaves a national scar home to undocumented immigrants and Chicano homeboys.³⁷

Hughes symbolically joins the Mississippi to the Congo in his poem, but he didn't need to go to Africa to imagine it. As John Gregory Bourke described it in 1894, the Rio Grande Valley was nothing but the "American Congo" itself, an inter-American *frontera* zone shaped by bloody histories of exploration, exploitation, and imperialist conquest at the hands of Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, and the United States. In this way, then, the river and the borderlands that it runs through and defines, generate what Amy Kaplan has called "shadow narratives of imperial histories," narratives which remind us that the terrain of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was a terrain of inter-American expansion, conquest, and occupation.³⁸ So along with being a testament to an imaginary U.S.–Africa diaspora circuit, the poem also conjures the ghostly histories of imperialism and empire within the U.S.–Mexico borderlands.

SINGING MEXICO

Ignoring these other cartographies, these ghostly stops on the itinerary of Hughes's train, is to elide a number of other connections between Mexico and African America that Hughes's work allows. The erasure of Mexico and the Southwest from interpretations of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" discounts the impact of Hughes's crossing of the U.S.–Mexico border on the formation of his racial identity. In fact, the most frequent diasporic "misrecognitions" that occur on the pages of *The Big Sea* involve Mexico, not Africa. In using "misrecognition" somewhat against the grain of Warren's usage, I am referring to the repeated episodes in *The Big Sea* and in Arnold Rampersad's *The Life of Langston Hughes* where Hughes is misrecognized as Latino, as not being a black American but a brown Mexican. Incidentally, it is significant that so many of these brown/black, Negro/Mexican misrecognitions occur either aboard trains or in train stations. In *The Big Sea*, both the train itself and the experience of travel back and forth across the U.S.–Mexico border become sites of racial destabilization, where the signs of race, in this case a presumably nationalized blackness, are disarticulated from themselves. On the train and at the juncture of the train station, bor-

ders are crossed, national geographies are traversed, and racial meanings are rendered more indeterminate, more ambiguous, more insecure.

On his first train trip back to Cleveland from Mexico in 1919, several U.S. whites mistook Hughes for Mexican, choosing to speak to him in Spanish instead of English. According to Hughes, the reason for this repeated misrecognition lay in his French, Indian, Scottish, and Jewish roots and in his construction of a very specific, stylized racial appearance, “since I am of a copper-brown complexion, with black hair that can be made quite slick and shiny if it has enough pomade in it in the Mexican fashion.”³⁹ In a 1954 essay he penned for the *Chicago Defender*, “In Racial Matters in St. Louis ‘De Sun Do Move,’” Hughes recalls how as a teenager leaving Mexico for Cleveland, he got off the train in St. Louis and ordered a malted milk in the station. “The clerk looked at me,” Hughes wrote, “and said, ‘Are you Mexican?’ I said, ‘I’m colored.’ He said, ‘Then I can’t serve you.’”⁴⁰

Hughes occasionally even took advantage of this mistaken racial identity and passed as Mexican when it helped him overcome the color line that faced him in the United States upon his return. On one occasion in San Antonio, just north of the U.S.–Mexico border’s own color line, Hughes knew he would be refused a sleeping reservation in a Pullman car, so he made his reservations in Spanish and secured a spot. “I simply went in the main waiting room, as any Mexican would do,” Hughes wrote, “and made my sleeping-car reservations in Spanish.” His experience with the other color line of the twentieth century—the one that does not cut through strictly white and black domains—coupled with his knowledge of Spanish allowed Hughes to use the logic of the dichotomous black/white color line against itself and, performing “as any Mexican would do,” outwit the constricts of Jim Crow.⁴¹

It wasn’t the first time. In a letter Hughes wrote to his friend Carl Van Vechten in 1925—the same year that he announced “I, too, sing America”—Hughes described a day in Washington, D.C., where he and two of his friends were “amusing themselves going downtown to the white theatres ‘passing’ for South Americans.”⁴² And on the very trip that inspired the pan-Africanism of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes experienced two incidents of Negro/Latino racial misrecognition that further stress the importance of appending Mexico to the map of the black diaspora.

One possible reason why so many discussions of the poem depict Hughes’s itinerary as beginning in Cleveland and ending in San Antonio—a self-contained U.S. journey—is that crossing the border into Mexico also means crossing the border into a different racial vocabulary. For once the

train carrying Hughes crosses the border, the dichotomous discourse of blackness and whiteness is thrown into chaos. On the other side of the border (across the borderline from the color line), Hughes's assumed identity as "Negro" or "black" no longer exists in simple and plain contrast to whiteness. With Mexico and Mexicans now part of the equation, the once fictively stable meanings behind nationally moored constructions of "white" and "black" are far less self-evident and reliable. In fact, as Hughes recounts it, once the train crosses the border, a fellow traveler tells him "that he had known at once that I was a Mexican. I did not tell him otherwise."

When the train finally arrives on the Mexico side of the borderline, in Nuevo Laredo, Hughes spends the night in a cheap motel. He writes,

It's far from being the Ritz-Carlton, but then I couldn't stop there anyhow for I am Colored. But here nothing is barred from me. I am among my own people, for . . . Mexico is a brown man's country. Do you blame them for fearing a "gringo" invasion with its attendant horror of color hatred?⁴³

Like his father, who moved to Mexico to more freely practice law, Hughes also fashions Mexico as site of escape from the persecution and discrimination of U.S. institutional racism, what he calls "color hatred." But where Hughes's father was ashamed of his own blackness and full of his own "color hatred" against dark-skinned Mexicans and lower-class *indios*, Hughes identified with them—he was among, as he once put it, his "own people." This race-based identification with Mexico complicates, if not altogether contradicts, the "shared racial subjectivity" that the poem written on the very same trip attempts to forge. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" may level the gaps and fissures between the United States and Africa in order to shape a seamless black identity, but the southbound trip that fueled it reveals a very different shared racial identity, one that goes beyond the lexicon of U.S. blackness.

Hughes takes his identification with Mexican brownness a step further in *The Big Sea* when he reveals how living in Mexico changes the way he thinks about his own racial status. While in Mexico, Hughes in a sense stops being a U.S. "Negro" and becomes instead what he refers to as an "americano de color . . . brown as a Mexican." As Hughes confirms, race is not an immutable category; as a cultural construction, its meanings and definitions are contingent upon the specific national contexts it is grounded in. Hughes recalls one incident while working as an English-language instructor in a Mexican school in Toluca, when a white woman from the United

States (who had been hired to replace Hughes when he left to return to the United States) visits his class to observe. Having no previous knowledge that the “American” teacher she was to meet was in fact African American, the woman mistakes Hughes for a Mexican student. After Hughes introduces himself to her as the instructor, the following brief exchange occurs:

“Why ah-ah thought you was an American.”

I said, “I am American!”⁴⁴

In the white gaze of his visitor from the other side, Hughes’s “hombre de color” appearance disqualifies him from Americanness. Her collapse of the category “American” into the category “white” reinstates whiteness as Americanness and subsequently makes the idea of a brown-skinned Hughes as an American a national impossibility. Yet we must remember that Americanness is not an exclusively U.S. category, and, ironically, what excludes him from one version of Americanness in the United States is precisely what welcomes him into another in Mexico. Here, his skin color does not make Americanness impossible; on the contrary, it actually creates the possibility for a different formation of racialized “American” identity.⁴⁵

This misrecognition of Hughes as not “American,” and his own self-recognition as an *americano de color*, make it doubly important that discussions of race within the black diaspora take into consideration the changes such discussions undergo in Latin America. When Hughes visits Africa—the common identificatory focal point of diaspora blackness, the romanticized homeland of racial return—he does not experience recognition as African or even as “black” or “Negro.” As Hughes put it, “It was the only place in the world I had ever been called a white man.”⁴⁶ But nearly the opposite happens to Hughes in Mexico, where he finds common racial bonds with other *americanos de color*, other dark-skinned people of the Americas, including the *indios* he frequently defended against the racist barbs of his father. As a result, throughout *The Big Sea*, Hughes experiences more identification with Mexicans than with Africans. In fact, the common pan-Africanist casting of Africa as a racial homeland is nearly displaced by Mexico, where, according to Rampersad, Hughes “felt very much at home.”⁴⁷

All of this, I believe, provides yet another place to witness what Stuart Hall has termed “the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject.” I am not trying to suggest that Hughes’s entanglements with the shifting parameters of racial identification and racial community in Mexico ne-

cessitate the end of blackness. They necessitate precisely the opposite, which, in Hall's words, is "the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences, and cultural identities which compose the category black . . . which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature."⁴⁸

The de-essentializing of Hughes's black subjectivity is further accomplished when we consider that the Mexican destination of the train ride that produced "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was an important site for the early development of Hughes's literary career. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was itself finished in Mexico, and Hughes also sent a number of articles and stories to the *Brownie's Book* black children's magazine in 1920 while living in Toluca. In fact, prior to the poem's landmark publication in 1921 in *Crisis*, *Brownie's Book* had already accepted a series of Mexico-based pieces: "Mexican Games," "In a Mexican City," and "Up to the Crater of an Old Volcano"—all three of which Hughes wrote for young black audiences as introductions to Mexican culture. In "Up to the Crater of an Old Volcano," Hughes details a trip he takes with teenagers from the local high school in Toluca. He goes out of his way to compare the Mexican boys to his black friends in the United States:

These dark faced, friendly school boys were about like other dark skinned boys of my own race whom I had known in the United States. They made me remember a hike that the colored YMCA fellows, in Chicago, took out to the sand dunes one summer. There the car windows were crowded with dark faces, too, and everybody talked at once. The only difference was that in Chicago they were speaking English and when a late member of the party reached the platform, every one cried out "Hurry Up" while here, when Rudolfo, the tardy, came running through the gates, everyone in the window shouted, "Apuresel!" which means the same in Spanish.

Throughout the 1930s, Hughes was also actively involved with various Mexican literary groups, from the circle around *Contemporaneos*, a leading vanguard review of letters, to LEAR (the League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers). In 1931 the playwright and poet Xavier Villaurrutia (who in 1938 would later dedicate his poem "North Carolina Blues" to Hughes) translated four Hughes poems in *Contemporaneos*, and Rafael Lozano translated an additional seven in the proletarian journal *Crisol*, along with his tribute, "Langston Hughes: El poeta afroestadounidense." Hughes also col-

laborated with the Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas, who in 1938 debuted “Cinco canciones,” a composition built around five of Hughes’s poems that included “Canto de una muchacha negra,” based on Hughes’s vivid 1927 anti-lynching protest, “Song for a Dark Girl.” And the slippage between the American South and the South of Mexico that occurred in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” was continued in Abigael Bohórquez’s 1962 anticapitalist poem, “Carta abierta a Langston Hughes,” which drew directly from Hughes’s own “Open Letter to the South.”⁴⁹

The burst of black racial pride exhibited by Hughes in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” as well as in two other poems written in Mexico around the same time—“Aunt Sue’s Stories” and “When Sue Wears Red”—would soon make him a very public part of a growing inter-American artistic movement built upon revolutionary ideology and the overturning of European cultural forms in favor of indigenous expression. This trio of early race-conscious poems, which all appeared in translation in *Contemporaneos* between 1928 and 1932, are, as Arnold Rampersad and many other critics have noted, on a par with a burgeoning internationalist movement that included Pablo Neruda in Chile, Nicolás Guillén in Cuba, and, most importantly in Hughes’s case, Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, David Siquieros, and Jose Clemente Orozco.⁵⁰ In a 1935 letter to Van Vechten from Mexico City, Hughes boasts of meeting “Diego and all his wives.”⁵¹

The inter-American crossings that these channels of literary, political, and artistic influence attest to, and the way they all speak to Hughes’s position as an inter-American writer engaged in the development of a transnationally mapped racial politics, further bear themselves out in two articles Hughes wrote for the *Chicago Defender* in 1943. The very question of who or what constitutes “American” identity was the subject of “Get Together, Minorities,” a critique of nativist Americanism and a call for interracial and interethnic alliances. The piece was spawned from a discussion Hughes overheard while riding a streetcar in which a man, who identifies himself as a “pure American,” harangues another for speaking in a foreign language in public. Hughes immediately links the fever of the “pure American”’s outrage to the then recent events surrounding the racialized proceedings of the Sleepy Lagoon case and the subsequent zoot suit riots in Los Angeles that found Mexican Americans clashing with U.S. servicemen.

“News of the end of the investigation of the Zoot-suit riots in California still found space on the back pages of the papers, when this happened,” Hughes wrote. “I think maybe these riots against Mexicans was what put

in the ‘pure American’s’ head the idea to start bawling a strange man out about his language in a street car.” Hughes uses the incident to question the very basis of Americanism—language? patriotism? territory?—and then surmises that as long as there exist those who claim to be “pure Americans,” all of “pure America’s” others—the colored, the foreign-born, the second-generation immigrant—ought to put their differences aside and band together in “some sort of protective unity” against monocultural domination.⁵²

While in “Get Together, Minorities,” Hughes’s critique of Americanism was both an attack on discriminatory nativism and the perpetuation of Jim Crow by other “impure American” groups, another *Chicago Defender* piece written in the same year, “The World after the War,” extends this critique to national geography and hemispheric social movements. “The World after the War” is Hughes’s vision of post-World War II social and political life that includes the end of U.S. imperialism and a call for inter-American unity and hemispheric collectivity—a call which inherently resists any model of “American” identity that does not transcend the borders of the United States. In the following passage, Hughes discusses the specific implications of the war’s end on the relationship between the United States and Latin America:

In our own hemisphere, Mexico and Haiti, Peru and Venezuela, in fact all of Latin America will no longer be suspicious and afraid of the Great Yankee Colossus to the North. The United States will no longer wield the big stick of economic force over our neighbors. . . . Not domination but cooperation will become the basis of our Inter-American relationships. North and South, America will be friends. No longer will the mixed-bloods, the Indians, and the Negroes of South America fear the Jim Crow customs of the United States. . . . No longer will the bad racial manners of the Texas border seep over into Mexico to the detriment of Mexico’s own dark citizens. No longer will our tourists dare to go to Havana and draw the color line against the Cubans themselves—for after this war, the citizens of the United States will be decent to colored peoples everywhere.⁵³

The contours of Hughes’s inter-American vision are clear. While committed to exploring the play of race and the damage of racism in specific national contexts, Hughes knows that such configurations cannot afford to be understood in “local” or “domestic” isolation. When Hughes sings America, these are his songs: Jim Crow rears its head in Latin America, the U.S. color line interferes with what Hughes once called “the triple color

line” in Cuba, and the “bad racial manners” of the U.S.–Mexico border disrupts Mexico itself.

ASKING YOUR MAMA

Hughes’s invocation of the Cuban color line in “The World after the War” points to the other key coordinate in Hughes’s inter-American map: Cuba. Just as “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” invokes a Mexican map and leads to a destabilization of an essentialized blackness, another poetic audiotopia, Hughes’s neglected 1961 jazz performance poem, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*, similarly interrogates the bounds of blackness. By charting a U.S.–Cuban map through the merger of U.S. blues and jazz formations with a variety of Afro-Cuban soundings—*son*, rumba, and *cha cha cha* among them⁵⁴—*Ask Your Mama* enables an alternate cartography of blackness, an inter-American geography of race that, while rooted in very specific histories of individual nation-building, is not confined and determined by the coordinates of national boundaries. Hughes made three principal trips to Cuba between 1927 and 1930, and, significantly, it was Miguel Covarrubias, the Mexican illustrator who provided the drawings of Hughes’s *The Weary Blues*, who introduced Hughes to his most influential Cuban contact, white Cuban journalist José Antonio Fernández de Castro, thereby cementing both a U.S.–Mexico–Cuba network of exchange and communication and a three-way inter-American friendship.

There are many ways of approaching an analysis of *Ask Your Mama*: a “dozens” insult session committed to paper; an extended civil rights polemic against racism, colonialism, and imperialism; a sly critique of the commercialization and exploitation of black musical forms by white-run corporations and power structures; an African American response to the white-dominated jazz-poetry movement of the 1950s.⁵⁵ Experimenting formally with verses printed in all capital letters, *Ask Your Mama* is built on a structure of twelve different sections, or “moods,” each of which examines different aspects of Afro-diasporic blackness and international civil rights struggles, from “CULTURAL EXCHANGE”’s Southern slave quarter visited by an African State Department representative to “SHOW FARE, PLEASE”’s indictment of black entertainment co-optation as it exists in “THE SHADOW OF THE BOX OFFICE” where “THE TV’S STILL NOT WORKING.”⁵⁶

While my aim is not to discount these issues, I do want to focus specifically on how the Afro-Cuban music inscribed into the poem’s pages adds to Hughes’s inquiry into what it means to inhabit the symbolic and mate-

rial spaces of blackness in a transnational frame—"THEY ASKED ME AT CHRISTMAS IF MY BLACKNESS, WOULD IT RUB OFF?"—and speaks to the "circum-Atlantic" circuit of intercultural exchange and performance that Roach has so eloquently theorized. I will concentrate on how *Ask Your Mama* tracks musical interchange within the black diasporic spaces of the Americas (mainly between the American South and Cuba) and subsequently interrogates the shifting configurations of blackness in a transnational frame. I believe that by writing *Ask Your Mama* Hughes was wittingly complicating the cultural and national assumptions that the very notion of the "jazz poem" had come to rely on, by mixing musical and cultural references understood as "African American" and invocations of Afro-Cuban musical culture.

As a poem about black racial formation in the Americas that takes as its goal the investigation of the category of blackness itself, *Ask Your Mama* becomes a fragmented, discordant chant against black enslavement and a wry, bitter vision of the cultural possibilities of black freedom. "DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES . . . / NIGHTMARES . . . DREAM! OH!," Hughes writes, "DREAMS THAT THE NEGROES / OF THE SOUTH HAVE TAKEN OVER— / VOTED ALL THE DIXIECRATS / RIGHT OUT OF POWER." While Arnold Rampersad has argued that *Ask Your Mama* is "an oblique but deliberate attack on American history,"⁵⁷ reading *Ask Your Mama* within a strictly "American" frame elides Hughes's efforts to construct a politicized poetics that understood American history within an internationalist frame—refusing, for example, to separate the exploitation of black labor in the American South (which recurs in the poem through the figure of the slave quarter or "THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES") to the postcolonial liberation struggles occurring across Africa in the 1950s. *Ask Your Mama* reminds us that in both cases, "EVEN WHEN YOU'RE WINNING THERE'S NO WAY NOT TO LOSE" (31).

Organized around a "dozens" trope of insult—"ask your mama"—the poem is largely regarded as Hughes's most direct and vociferous denunciation of institutionalized racism.⁵⁸ As a phrase, "ask your mama," or more simply, "your mama," becomes Hughes's de rigueur answer to any question posed about his blackness; no matter the question ("WHERE DID I GET MY MONEY," "IS IT TRUE THAT NEGROES—?," "DID I KNOW CHARLIE MINGUS?"), no matter the questioner (Long Island white suburbanites, PTA parents), the response remains the same: "Ask your mama." To perhaps *Ask Your Mama's* most central question, "IF MY BLACKNESS, WOULD IT RUB OFF?" the answer is left equally indeterminate: "I SAID, ASK YOUR MAMA" (8). *Ask Your Mama* is directly concerned with the nature, character, and utter contin-

gency of blackness itself. What is blackness? Is it permanent? Does it rub off? Does it always mean the same thing?

Hughes is primarily able to pose such questions by creating the recurring poetic figure of “THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES.” He fashions the Negro slave quarter as both a site of racialized and commodified song (“WHERE NEGROES SING SO WELL” and “WHERE DINAH’S SONGS ARE MADE FROM SLABS OF SILVER SHADOWS”) and a site of racial shiftiness and ambiguity. Indeed, in the space of the quarter Hughes never depicts blackness as sharply defined; it always exists in a flurry of overlapping and passing shadows, so much so that “BLACK SHADOWS MOVE LIKE SHADOWS CUT FROM SHADOWS CUT FROM SHADE.” When shadows are shadows of shadows, where do we look for the body casting the shadow? In the quarter of *Ask Your Mama*, what casts the shadow is shade.

One of the ways in which the shadiness of racial definition is explored in the words and sounds of *Ask Your Mama* is by locating blackness along an outernational cartography that runs across the maps of the Americas. At the time of the poem’s publication, relations between Latin Americans and African Americans were of a particular concern to Hughes. In 1961 he wrote a poem addressing blackness and Puerto Rican identities entitled “Note to Puerto Ricans (On American Confusions),” which he sent to *The Crisis* but which ultimately went unpublished:

Aw, come on—
Who cares if you
Are half Negro.
Or 2/3 or 1/10 white
Or all black?
Who cares if Africa
Is a distant shadow
Behind your back—
Or if you’re pure
Spain?
(The shadow
Fell there, too,
In Moorish days)
So who cares?
Puerto Ricans
In the U.S.A.
Let’s be friends

Whatever
Others
Say.⁵⁹

In these lines, we can see Hughes consciously working out both the intersections and disjunctures between “black” and “brown” and investigating the role of blackness in the formation of Puerto Rican culture. For Hughes, race is an “American confusion,” a fluid, indeterminate idea that no mathematical fraction of blood or culture can define and secure.

While Hughes suggests that blackness is far from fixed, he knows that prejudice and violence are real. Thus, throughout *Ask Your Mama*’s twelve moods, those who have relegated blacks to the space of the quarter and have made careers out of persecuting their shadows fall victim to Hughes’s snapping wit: seventeenth-century British imperialist George Downing, nineteenth-century Belgian despot King Leopold, U.S. Senator James Eastland, South African apartheid ideologue Daniel Malan, even Folkways record producer and folk archivist Alan Lomax. “DEAD OR ALIVE,” Hughes writes, “THEIR GHOSTS CAST SHADOWS” (19). In their place, Hughes celebrates an array of Third World political subalterns, from Cuba’s revolutionary leader Fidel Castro to African liberationists, such as Guinea’s Sekou Toure, Kenya’s Jomo Kenyatta, Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, and Nigeria’s Nnamdi Azikiwe, and salutes a roll call of revolutionary black musicians, from “SINGERS LIKE ODETTA” to “JAZZERS DUKE AND DIZZY ERIC DOLPHY MILES AND ELLA AND MISS NINA” (41).

LISTENING FOR LANGSTON

Tell them it is the poetry of sound, and that it marks the beginning of a new era, an era of revolt against the trite and outworn language of the understandable.

LANGSTON HUGHES

letter to Countee Cullen, 1923

In order to more fully decode how these “SINGERS” and “JAZZERS” lead us to *Ask Your Mama*’s investment in Latin America, we must first take a minor detour through the poem’s experimentation with literary and musical form. For, once again, Hughes’s experience of racialized, inter-American geographies takes place through a musical circuit of travel, listening, and

performance. As much a printed collection of written verse as a score for musical and poetic performance, *Ask Your Mama* earned the label of “jazz poem” primarily because it was not meant to be read silently by a reader but performed with a jazz band in front of a listening audience.

Bridging a stylistic gap between Harlem modernism and the postmodernist verse experiments of radical 1960s poetry collectives such as the Dasein poets, *Ask Your Mama*, while “graphically stable” on the one hand, was a “performed poem” that was improvised anew by Hughes and a jazz band every time it was performed live.⁶⁰ In a recording Hughes made the year of the poem’s publication, he introduced his reading by explaining that “this poem was written in segments, beginning at Newport, at the Newport Jazz festival, in fact, two summers ago. I suppose that is why as I wrote most of it, I could hear jazz music behind it. And so when I gave the first readings of some segments of this poem, they were read to jazz.”⁶¹

In the margins next to each verse, Hughes included instructions for the type of music that was meant to be heard and played alongside it, “for the benefit of those who might like to hear the music I heard in my mind as I wrote *Ask Your Mama*.”⁶² Hughes’s instructions can be both direct and literal (“happy blues in up-beat tempo”) and colorfully lyrical and wildly descriptive (“Bop blues into very modern jazz burning the ear like a neon swamp-fire cooled by dry ice until suddenly there is a single ear-piercing flute call”). With each musical “mood” designed to signify and riff off the 12-bar “Hesitation Blues”—the poem’s musical anchor around which all else floats, the “same” around which the poem’s music “changes”—*Ask Your Mama*’s soundings, while rooted in blues, Dixieland, bop, post-bop, and free jazz variations, also encompass everything from Jewish liturgical music and German lieder to “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” West Indian calypso, “All God’s Chillun’s Got Shoes,” and traditional Arabic vocal music.

As an introduction to the poem, Hughes included directions for the manner of the poem’s performance and a chart for “Hesitation Blues,” which he calls “a traditional folk melody” that is “the leitmotif” for the poem. With “Hesitation Blues” established as *Ask Your Mama*’s musical root, Hughes then stresses how the poem is meant to be performed through “spontaneous jazz improvisation.” Moments in *Ask Your Mama*’s verse structure also suggest the sound of a jazz performance. At times, Hughes writes as if he were a saxophone player, replicating the incremental progressions of a sax solo in passages such as “SINGERS / SINGERS LIKE O— / SINGERS LIKE ODETTA” (41), and “DE— / DELIGHT— / DELIGHTED!” (69).

To add further emphasis to the poem's performative character, it was dedicated to Louis Armstrong ("the greatest horn blower of all time") and was even packaged "as if it were a record," to resemble a listening object: a 10-inch phonograph record complete with accompanying liner notes "For the Poetically Unhep."

In a letter to one of his editors at Alfred A. Knopf, Hughes requested that the poem be advertised not only in the *New York Times*, *Jet*, and *Amsterdam News*, but "since *Ask Your Mama* is a jazz poem," in prominent jazz magazines such as *Downbeat*, *Metronome*, and *Jazz Day* as well.⁶³ Even before the publication of *Ask Your Mama*—which was originally dedicated to pianist Randy Weston and composer-trombonist Melba Liston and ultimately dedicated to trumpeter Louis Armstrong—Hughes gave a series of "preview hearings,"⁶⁴ performing it with pianist Margaret Bonds in a Harlem gallery and in Santa Monica backed by a jazz ensemble led by Buddy Colette. As part of the poem's original publicity drive, Hughes experimented even further with the poem's original structure, converting it into a jazz dance piece built around a dialogic interplay between actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, with choreography by Alvin Ailey and a jazz score by Weston.⁶⁵

Of course, Hughes's treatment of *Ask Your Mama* as a poetic score for jazz performance did not mark the first time in his career that he experimented with the line between writing and reading; between music, scripture, and the spoken word.⁶⁶ Jazz critic Sascha Feinstein has recently dubbed Hughes "the first major jazz poet," arguing that while it was modernist, Jazz Age white poets like Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Hart Crane who in the 1920s most often earned the title "jazz poet," it was Hughes who pioneered the reading of poetry to jazz accompaniment in the 1920s.⁶⁷

But it wasn't until the late 1950s that Hughes made a public habit of giving jazz poetry readings, most significantly those affiliated with the release of the 1958 album *Weary Blues*, which featured Hughes reading fifteen "poems of protest and joy" to "a surging cadence of jazz" composed by Leonard Feather and Charles Mingus and played by the likes of Red Allen, Milt Hinton, Horace Parlan, and Mingus.⁶⁸ In support of the album, Hughes headlined a series of shows in New York City (at the esteemed jazz club, the Village Vanguard), Hollywood, a Fisk University music festival, and an Ontario Shakespeare festival accompanied by live modern jazz and swing accompaniment supplied by everyone from Mingus and Phineas Newborn to Ben Webster and Earl Hines.⁶⁹

Hughes had already co-written the text for "Scenes in the City"—the opening track on Mingus's *A Modern Jazz Symposium of Music and Poetry*

with Charles Mingus—which tells the story of a man who lives in music, waking up each morning “digging sound” and spending his days sitting atop bar stools, “holding my dreams up to the sounds of jazz music.” According to Melvin Stewart (who performs the piece on the record), “Jazz helps the man in this piece hear himself, the way he is and feels, and every note becomes a part of him and helps him be at one with himself.”⁷⁰

The year prior to the publication of *Ask Your Mama* found Hughes involved in two very different jazz poetry projects. The first was “African Lady,” a song he wrote for Randy Weston that appeared on Weston’s celebration of African independence, *Uhuru Afrika* (Hughes also wrote the album’s liner notes). That same year, Hughes was also an official at the Newport Jazz Festival (where he began composing *Ask Your Mama*). When the eruption of a riot caused the festival to shut down prematurely, Hughes was left to lead the remainder of the proceedings. In a feat of on-the-spot improvisation, he wrote the lyrics to “Goodbye Newport Blues,” which were immediately set to music by blues pianist Otis Spann and performed on the festival stage by John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Jimmy Rushing, and the Sonny Price Trio.⁷¹

Hughes’s public word-jazz performances and the release of the *Weary Blues* album were virtually coterminous with the birth of the white-dominated “Poetry-and-Jazz” movement in the 1957 poetry jam sessions held by Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti at The Cellar in San Francisco. The sessions spawned an entire catalog of white, Beat-affiliated poets reading their poetry to jazz accompaniment (imagine Kenneth Patchen reading Carl Sandburg’s “Mag” to Duke Ellington’s “Things Ain’t What They Used to Be”), culminating in the 1959 release of *Jazz Canto: An Anthology of Poetry and Jazz, Vol. 1*, which featured (among others) the poems of Ferlinghetti, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and Hughes himself. Most of these experiments met with mixed results. “If any jazz style ever bordered on the comic, it was this fusion of jazz and poetry,” Billboard critic Bob Rolontz remarked in a 1958 article for *The Jazz Review*. “As presented in the East, it bordered on the farcical.”⁷²

But for the most part, the Poetry-and-Jazz movement’s only involvement with African American culture was through its music; black poets were rarely invited to participate. In fact, it wouldn’t be until the 1960s, just after the publication of *Ask Your Mama* in 1961, that a black answer to white jazz poetry would emerge. Indeed, *Ask Your Mama* might even be considered a racial turning point in jazz-poetry performance, the first sign of a 1960s recording trend among black musicians and poets to incorporate poetic

narratives and monologues within jazz performances—from Archie Shepp’s *Fire Music* in 1965 and John Coltrane’s *Kulu Se Mama* in 1966 to the *New Jazz Poets* compilation in 1967 and Sonny Murray’s *Sonny’s Time* (which featured Amiri Baraka reading his “Black Art”).⁷³

It was this aural aspect of *Ask Your Mama*’s composition and performance—its refusal to distinguish between poetry and music, words and sounds—which confounded and frustrated many critics in the early 1970s who helped make it the most ill-received of all Hughes’s work. “It should be felicitous when recited at night clubs and will undoubtedly gather partisans,” read one review, “but lovers of real poetry won’t be among them.” While Allen Thornton snidely called it a “so-called book of poetry,” others did understand *Ask Your Mama*’s extratextuality, how it was “almost entirely for the ear” and how “most of us won’t really hear it until it is recorded. . . . What we have here are poems without their musical matrix.”⁷⁴

Yet it is precisely Hughes’s use of musical matrices within *Ask Your Mama*’s lyrical structure that makes its twelve “moods” so unique within the history of African American poetry and jazz performance. As with Hughes’s previous use of music in his poetry—most notably the blues of *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* and the bebop and boogie-woogie of *Montage of a Dream Deferred*—the music heard on the pages of *Ask Your Mama* was not meant as a soundtrack that merely accompanied the work done by the words. Hughes once described his approach to performing with musicians in the following way:

Music should not only be background to the poetry, but should comment on it. I tell my musicians, and I’ve worked with several different groups, to improvise as much as they care to around what I read. Whatever they bring of themselves to the poetry is welcome to me. I merely suggest the mood of each piece as a general orientation. Then I listen to what they say in their playing and that affects my own rhythms when I read. We listen to each other.⁷⁵

Here, Hughes is as much poet as musician, offering his voiced words as instrumental offerings to a jazz performance in process, with the rhythms of his voice improvising along with the members of the band. He positions his words in dialogue with the notes of the musicians, with shared acts of listening operating as communicative bridges between the performing poet and the performing musician. “Jazz seeps into words—spelled out words,”⁷⁶ Hughes wrote in 1956, and *Ask Your Mama* was his longest at-

tempt at seeing just how deeply jazz could seep into words, just how deeply he could immerse his words into the improvisations of the musicians around him.

In a sense, *Ask Your Mama* allowed Hughes to do both, write words and write music; by imagining the specific types of music—different styles, different tempos, different textures—to be heard beneath and alongside his words, Hughes was playing the role of the poet-composer, writing words while writing a score, writing verse-in-music. *Ask Your Mama*'s engagement with black liberation, freedom, and decolonization across the diaspora is yet another example of the "politics of transfiguration" that Gilroy argues characterizes black Atlantic countercultures, in that its meanings are made and performed "on a lower frequency," at the level of "the pre- and anti-discursive constituents of black metacommunication."⁷⁷

It is in this way that *Ask Your Mama*'s sound text falls within an overlooked tradition of experimental black poetics that explicitly seeks to merge the scriptural with the aural and test the structural and discursive possibilities of what Richard Wright famously described as "the form of things unknown."⁷⁸ *Ask Your Mama* is an expression of the unscriptable, a scripting of sound that exists in the gaps between what the poem calls "SCRATCHY SOUND" and "DOORS OF PAPER" (3).⁷⁹ Throughout *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes sustains a tension between the sonic and the scriptural and is content to leave certain songs and whispers "UNDECIPHERED AND UNLETTERED / UNCODIFIED, UNPARSED . . . UNTAKEN DOWN ON A TAPE—" (55). Instead of maintaining an opposition between the oral and the literate, the page and the performance, *Ask Your Mama* reproduces traces of orality on the printed pages of literacy in "an ever expanding grammatology."⁸⁰

LATIN JAZZ POETICS

Ask Your Mama has its blues and its jazz. But it also has the music of Afro-Cuba. It's a significant, almost radical, move that frustrates any attempt to canonize the poem as a nationally moored artifact of African American expression. Instead, it becomes a *son*-poem, a *cha-cha-cha*-poem, an inter-American and Afro-diasporic poetic jam session. With its polylingual mix of languages (from "CA IRA!" to "AY DIOS") and its audiotopic merger of disparate musical geographies, *Ask Your Mama* demonstrates a U.S.-launched version of what Martinican scholar Edouard Glissant has described as a "cross-cultural poetics," a postcolonial Caribbean self-expression carried out through poetic creolization. Like the Cuban painters Wilfredo Lam and

Roberto Matta, Hughes celebrates “the poetics of the American landscape” by charting a poetic American geography of word and song characterized by “the dazzling convergence of here and elsewhere.”⁸¹

Central to Glissant’s vision of a creolizing “counter-poetics” is the incorporation of the oral within the scriptural, the voice in the word. Like Kamau Braithwaite and Derek Walcott’s “drum-poetry” and the “broken rhythms” of Nicolás Guillén’s *son*-poetry, *Ask Your Mama* is marked by the sound and sight of the written becoming oral, a poem that bears the traces of “the imposition of lived rhythms.” With its vernacular base in the street discourse of the dozens and its recommended musical accompaniment, it is full of the “verbal delirium” that Glissant describes as erupting on “the outer edge of speech . . . improvisations, drumbeats, acceleration, dense repetitions, slurred syllables, meaning the opposite of what is said, and hidden meanings.”⁸²

In the poem’s first jazz mood, tellingly entitled “Cultural Exchange,” we enter *Ask Your Mama*’s most recurring poetic site, “the Negro quarter,” which like “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is housed at the intersection of “THE RIVER AND THE RAILROAD, WITH FLUID FAR-OFF GOING / BOUNDARIES BIND UNBINDING” because they have “DOORS THAT FACE EACH WAY” (4–5). The paper door of the quarter is continually blown open to new sounds and new visitors and thus becomes a point of crossing and cultural exchange. Its doorknob “LETS IN LIEDER” (4) and it also lets in Cuba.

For it is this Negro quarter on the inter-American plantation that is home to, among other figures, Fidel Castro and connects what Hughes describes as “THE COCOA AND THE CANE BREAK / THE CHAIN GANG AND THE SLAVE BLOCK / TARRD AND FEATHERED NATIONS” (7). Locating the Negro quarter squarely within the African diaspora forcibly produced by the transatlantic slave trade, Hughes casts both the United States and Cuba as “TARRD AND FEATHERED NATIONS” and links the slave plantation of the South to what Antonio Benítez-Rojo has called “the Caribbean plantation machine.”⁸³ Fittingly, the accompanying music is “the rhythmically rough scraping of a guira” that is soon joined by “two full choruses with maracas,” German lieder, and African drums. *Ask Your Mama* thus begins with a bilateral cultural traffic; as Hughes phrases it, “CULTURE, THEY SAY, IS A TWO-WAY STREET” (9).

This two-way exchange between the United States and Cuba is elaborated on in the second of *Ask Your Mama*’s “moods.” Here, the very same quarter of the Negroes becomes the musical stage for the playful interrogation of Cuban blackness. Using the traces of West African call-and-

response patterns typical to the form of the Cuban *son*, Hughes writes: “IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES / TU ABUELA, DONDE ESTA? / LOST IN CASTRO’S BEARD? / TU ABUELA, DONDE ESTA? / BLOWN SKY HIGH BY MOUNT PELEE?” Which explains how in “Ode to Dinah,” a fruitcake crumbles as it’s eaten “TO A DISC BY DINAH / IN THE RUM THAT WAFTS MARACAS / FROM A DISTANT QUARTER / TO THIS QUARTER OF THE NEGROES” (26). But the fusion of Mississippi and Havana reaches its musical peak in the aptly titled “Gospel Cha-Cha” of mood seven, a celebration of inter-American, African-based religious traditions set to a *cha-cha-cha* shuffle. Here, the quarter of the Negroes is “WHERE THE PALMS AND COCONUTS / CHA CHA LIKE CASTANETS / IN THE WIND’S FRENETIC FISTS / WHERE THE SAND SEEDS AND THE / SEA GOURDS MAKE MARACAS OUT OF ME” (49). Fittingly, the music heard beside it is meant to be “maracas in cha cha tempo, then bongo drums joined by the piano, guitar, and claves, eerie and strange like bones rattling in a sort of off-beat mambo up strong between verses then down under voice to gradually die away in the lonely swish-swish of the maracas” (49). Hughes explains such musical fusions in the poem’s liner notes by remarking, “Those who have no lawns to mow seek gods who come in various spiritual and physical guises and to whom one prays in various rhythms in various lands in various tongues” (90).

Despite the presence of this two-way street between the American South and Afro-Cuba, and despite the fusions of African American and Afro-Cuban musics, the Latin American presence within *Ask Your Mama* has been curiously ignored by most critics. Preferring to position *Ask Your Mama* within a specifically “U.S. as America” frame, critics have overlooked the radical invention Hughes had achieved: African American poetry’s first Afro-Cuban jazz poem. Patricia Johnson and Walter Farrell Jr. were satisfied labeling it a “hard bop poem,” Omwuchekwa Jemie summed it up as “a straight jazz-poem sequence set to the accompaniment of jazz and blues,” and Henry Louis Gates Jr., echoing Rampersad, called it “a twelve section history of Afro-America” produced by the poem’s “synthesis of the Afro-American blues tradition, the formal poetic tradition, and the black vernacular tradition.”⁸⁶

Even José Piedra, who goes to great lengths to make suggestive comparisons between African American blues and Afro-Cuban *son* based on their shared “neo-African logics of performance,” fails to hear how Hughes melds the two forms together in *Ask Your Mama*. While recognizing the similarities between *son* and the blues of *Ask Your Mama*, he neglects the presence of the Cuban *son* on the pages of *Ask Your Mama* itself.⁸⁷ His com-

parative frame keeps Afro-America and Afro-Cuba separate, while Hughes maps them together; he runs the map of the blues (the map of America) through the map of the *son* (the map of América).

What could explain such a willfully misdirected listening and reading? Why haven't more critics commented upon what only one of Hughes's reviewers pointed out, that "Hughes writes of the New Negro that is emerging in the U.S., Africa, and Latin America"?⁸⁸ And more to the point, why have the Latin American sounds that accompanied such an international New Negro emergence been so completely relegated to critical silence? How does the repeated presence of Cuban *son*, mambo, and *cha cha cha* disrupt the clean "synthesis" of vernacular African American traditions with modernist jazz forms like hard bop? What do the repeated references to slavery's inter-American diaspora do to the figure of "Afro-America"? *Ask Your Mama* is as much a poem of Afro-America as it is a poem of Glissant's "the Other America," the America of "civilizations of maize, sweet potato, pepper, and tobacco, cultures created since colonization and built around the plantation system, lands destined to a functional syncretism."⁸⁹

Ask Your Mama is an uncooperative and identity-resistant work. It does not satisfy easy, linear yearnings for stable racial identities and stable national borders. It speaks directly to the disarticulation of race from singular national landscapes while commenting on just how explicitly race and nation inform each other. Hughes's hemispheric recasting of blackness is precisely why *Ask Your Mama* remains a marginal text within African American literature. In his recent study of experimental African American poetics in the 1960s and 1970s—of which *Ask Your Mama* is certainly a major precursor—Nielsen describes such texts as "outliers," works "that are suppressed in the process of assigning stable identity and politics to the canonical margins . . . works that might, should they remain in view, challenge our histories and theories."⁹⁰

Ask Your Mama's Afro-Cuban-tinged jazz moods mark its instability as a "black" poem. It has the potential to change histories and theories of African American poetics that refuse to look beyond the borders of the nation.⁹¹ While throughout the poem the figure of the U.S. South—like the melodies of "Hesitation Blues" that undergird all of the poem's musical variations—operates as a geo-poetical home base, a central "signifying riff," its verses and moods travel beyond the shores of the United States and explore manifestations of race, specifically the changing profile of blackness, in a transnational frame.⁹² *Ask Your Mama* signifies around two central tropes, the Negro quarter of the American South and "Hesitation Blues,"

occupying both and then sending them off across the sea into the watery spaces of the Caribbean. In short, the poem operates much like Martin Delaney's *Blake* does for Paul Gilroy: "It makes African-American experience visible within a hemispheric order of racial domination."⁹³

Hughes is able to do this precisely because of the way he approaches jazz as a musical formation that, instead of being rooted in any one particular geography, is a music of the sea, a music that has always traveled between disparate ports. In 1956, four years before completing *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes wrote "Jazz: Its Yesterday, Today, and Its Potential Tomorrow" for the *Chicago Defender*. He translates his love for sea travel and transatlantic crossings into a metaphor for the way jazz continually washes up in different forms and in different places. In response to the growing popularity of rock and roll, Hughes set out to claim rock as an offspring of the sea of jazz, just one more species of water running through jazz's currents:

Jazz is a great big sea. It washes up all kinds of fish and spume and waves with a steady old beat, or off-beat. And Louis must be getting old if he thinks JJ and Kai—and even Elvis—didn't come out of the same sea he came out of too. Some water has chlorine in it and some doesn't. There are all kinds of water. There's salt water and Saratoga water and Vichy water, Quinine water, and Pluto water. And it's all water. Throw it all in the sea, and the sea would keep on rolling along toward shore and crashing and booming back into itself again. The sun pulls the moon. The moon pulls the sea. They also pull jazz and you and me.⁹⁴

Ask Your Mama follows jazz as it travels back and forth across the currents of the Caribbean's oceanic intercultural and its "fluvial and marine" rhythmic cartography. After all, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo reminds us, "jazz dwells in the Caribbean orbit."⁹⁵ From its dedication to Louis Armstrong to its invocation of Ornette Coleman, *Ask Your Mama* maps an African American transition from early-twentieth-century jazz modernism (Armstrong) to the post-bop radicalism of the free jazz movement (Coleman's pioneering assault on jazz structure and form, *Free Jazz*, was released in 1959, a mere two years before the publication of *Ask Your Mama*). Hughes rattles off a Who's Who litany of post-1930s and pre-1960s jazz names: Eric Dolphy, Charles Mingus, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker.

But we must not forget that all of these artists, along with pianist Randy Weston, to whom *Ask Your Mama* was originally dedicated and with whom Hughes gave some of the poem's first live performances, had been involved

with fusing Latin American popular and folk forms with jazz rhythms and arrangements for some time. Weston's *Uhuru Afrika*, for example, featured a band that included, along with U.S. and African musicians, Afro-Cuban percussionists Candido and Armando Peraza. Like Weston, virtually all of the jazz musicians invoked in *Ask Your Mama* had been active, in one form or another, with significant projects within the world of Latin Jazz.

Jazz's so-called "Latin tinge" has been around since Armstrong's own beginnings in New Orleans, when Cuban *habanera* rhythms were used as the basis for such foundational "African American" jazz classics as Jimmy Yancey's "Five O'Clock Blues" and Jelly Roll Morton's "The Grave" and "La Paloma" (which he called a "ragtime tango"). The impact of Latin American music on the formation of jazz was, in fact, so strong that Morton famously told Alan Lomax, "If you can't manage to put tinges of Spanish in your tunes, you will never be able to get the right seasoning, I call it, for jazz."⁹⁶

The most agreed-upon benchmark moment of jazz's "Latin tinge" arrived in 1947 at New York City's Town Hall when Dizzy Gillespie and Afro-Cuban Lucumí drummer Chano Pozo collaborated on "Manteca" and "Cubana Be" / "Cubana Bop." There had been precedents set: Pozo had already recorded "Rumba in Swing" with Puerto Rican singer Tito Rodriguez, Gillespie had already swapped Latin Jazz ideas with Mario Bauza when both were playing in Cab Calloway's orchestra back in 1939, and Cuban drummer Diego Iborra had already thrown congas into the bebop mix with Gillespie and his 1945 combo (Charlie Parker, Al Haig, Curly Russell, Max Roach) and with Parker's 1947 quintet (featuring Miles Davis), coming up with compositions like "Bongo Bop" and "Bongo Beep." But it was Pozo who really brought the worlds of Cuban rhythm and bebop improvisation together, the first to give the transatlantic mix a compositional future. The man who took off his shirt on the stage of the Rumba Matinee club and greased his chest and arms with oil helped create bebop standards synonymous with urban African America that were structured around the Lucumí chants that Pozo grew up singing.⁹⁷

In her 1982 poem for Pozo, "I See Chano Pozo," Jayne Cortez called Pozo a "connector of two worlds," the Atlantic island link between African tradition in Cuba and the New World modernity forced by the slave trade that would turn the 2/4 rhythms of the Afro-Cuban conga drum into the 4/4 Afro-American drums of bop. The drum had all the stories wrapped into its skin. Chano used his hands to release them, to turn them from dried flesh and silence into living rhythm and pounded memory. "You go see the slave

castles, you go see the massacres,” Cortez wrote. “You go conjurate, you go mediate, you go to the cemetery of drums, return and tell us about it.”⁹⁸

All of *Ask Your Mama*'s jazz characters were carrying on this tradition of Afro-Latino collaboration (mostly with players such as Sabu Martinez, Candido, and Pozo himself) during the very years of the poem's writing and publication. For example, in the “mood” entitled “Bird in Orbit,” Hughes couples the line “CHARLIE YARDBIRD PARKER IS IN ORBIT” (71) with the gendered *afrocubanismo* exclamations “Ay mi negra! / Ay morena!” The coupling was not a frivolous one. Only a decade earlier, Parker was the alto saxophonist for Machito and His Afro-Cuban Orchestra, playing on such instrumental Latin Jazz recordings as “Mango Mangue” and “The Afro-Cuban Suite.” In 1951, Parker even recorded an album entitled *Charlie Parker Plays South of the Border*, which, echoing Hughes's relationship to both Cuba and Mexico, contained jazz versions of Mexican and Cuban traditionals such as “La Cucaracha” and “Mama Inez.”⁹⁹

Parker was far from alone. In 1960 Gillespie recorded the Afro-Cuban jazz symphonics of “Panamericana,” a composition by Argentinean composer Lalo Schifrin that featured the talents of Afro-Cuban percussionists Candido and Willie Rodriguez. The same year, Eric Dolphy led two sessions with bands of Latino musicians: one a series of jazz and pop standards given light Afro-Cuban makeovers and the appropriately named *Caribe*, a session of jazz mambos and calypsos with The Latin Jazz Sextet. In 1966 saxophonist John Coltrane chose to begin his *Kulu Se Mama* album with Juno Lewis's poem “I Juno,” which featured Lewis reading in English and Eutobes, an Afro-Cuban dialect.¹⁰⁰ Trombonist Conrad Herwig's 1996 Latin American tribute to Coltrane's music, *The Latin Side of John Coltrane*—which includes performances by Latino musicians such as Ray Vega, Danilo Perez, Eddie Palmieri, and Andy Gonzales—was explicitly conceived to place Coltrane within the Afro-Cuban musical tradition. According to Palmieri, “The connection is that the African blood that ran through Coltrane's vein, with his comprehension of rhythmical scales which he showed in his playing are of the most complex and are completely complementary to the complexity of the rhythmical patterns we've studied and constantly tried, which are so profound coming from the island of the Cuba.”¹⁰¹

Bassist Charles Mingus's appearance in *Ask Your Mama* was perhaps the most revealing for Hughes: it spoke to Hughes's investments in both Cuba and Mexico. Next to Weston, Mingus was the jazz musician Hughes most frequently collaborated with, both on the 1958 *Weary Blues* album and on

Mingus's *A Modern Jazz Symposium*. Mingus himself had already earned a reputation for his interest in fusing jazz and poetry on *Hear My Children Speak* and *The Clown*. He was also no stranger to Latin America and throughout his career expressed an interest in bridging U.S. jazz forms with Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Colombian musical traditions. He did Afro-Cuban mambo on "Moods in Mambo," Puerto Rican *bomba* on "Far Wells Mill Valley," and Colombian *cumbia* on "Cumbia and Jazz Fusion."¹⁰²

Mingus could count black, white, Indian, Asian, and Mexican in his bloodline and self-identified as a "half-schitt-colored nigger." Like Hughes, Mingus passed as Mexican (to gain entrance to the Musicians Union) and had his own connections to the U.S.–Mexico border (he was born in Nogales and died in Cuernavaca, in the care of a Mexican healer). Mingus's autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog*, is full of accounts of Mingus's sexcapades in Tijuana, and the border city became a sort of racial refuge for him—a key place for this self-avowed "mongrel" to both figure out and escape the entrapping, often suffocating racial binaries of civil rights America. In 1957 Mingus recorded *Tijuana Moods*, his first stereo recording and his first recording for a major label. The album promised to "re-create an exciting stay in Mexico's wild and controversial border town."¹⁰³

John Storm Roberts has argued that the Afro-Cuban craze in jazz came to an end in 1953, but as all of these examples suggest, 1953 did not mark the end of jazz musicians experimenting with Afro-Cuban style and form.¹⁰⁴ A flurry of Afro-Cuban jazz releases were released in the years surrounding *Ask Your Mama's* publication, including Kenny Dorham's 1955 *Afro-Cuban* (featuring Carlos "Potato" Valdes on congas) and his 1963 *Una Mas*. One of the more interesting, and least discussed, was percussionist Mongo Santamaría's 1960 recording, *Our Man in Havana*. A native of Cuba, Santamaría left the island for the United States in 1950 in order to join the bands of Latin jazz fusionists Cal Tjader and George Shearing. When he returned to Cuba in 1960 to record *Our Man in Havana*, he introduced the jazz motifs he picked up in the States to the music of Cuban *orquesta típica*, adding flutes, horns, bongos, bass, and guiro (not to mention other U.S.–Cuban hybrids reminiscent of those Hughes invents in *Ask Your Mama*, such as "Cha Cha Rock.")

Many of the Afro-Cuban jazz experiments of the time were embedded in larger pan-Africanist projects and were part of a widespread jazz trend in the late 1950s and early 1960s to celebrate recent developments in African post-colonialism and political liberation from European rule. McCoy Tyner's "The Man From Tanganyika," Horace Parlan's "Home Is Africa," John

Coltrane's "Africa," Jackie McClean's tribute to Ghanaian independence, "Appointment in Ghana," Lee Morgan's tribute to Kenyan independence, "Mr. Kenyatta," and Art Blakey's *The African Beat* (which featured Blakey and the Afro-Drum Ensemble performing compositions by African musicians) were all intended to generate African American pride in the struggles and achievements of postcolonial Africa.¹⁰⁵

Ask Your Mama followed suit with its own jazz-fueled pan-Africanism. The poem was published only one year after Hughes was himself invited—along with W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King Jr.—to the inauguration of Nnamdi Azikiwe as Governor General and Commander in Chief of the newly liberated Nigeria (Azikiwe read Hughes's "Poem" after taking his oath).¹⁰⁶ References to Azikiwe and many other leaders abound in *Ask Your Mama*—"TOURE DOWN IN GUINEA / LUMUMBA IN THE CONGO / JOMO IN KENYATTA" (72)—and Hughes often makes direct links between them and U.S. blacks, fusing Lumumba and Louis Armstrong into "LUMUMBA LOUIS ARMSTRONG" (63) and proposing that "IF IT BE GOD'S WILL / AZIKIWE'S SON, AMEKA, SHAKED HANDS WITH EMMETT TILL" (64).

Yet, as I have shown, Afro-Cuba figured prominently in this Africanist narrative, and many pan-African jazz projects similarly went out of their way to emphasize jazz's diasporic geography and utilize Afro-Cuban percussion and vocal styles. So when Art Blakey set out to celebrate the diasporic universe created and sustained by the beat of the African drum on his 1957 two-volume *Orgy in Rhythm*, he surrounded himself with an ensemble of leading Cuban drummers: Ray Barretto, Sabu Martinez, Potato Valdez, Jose Valente, Ubaldo Nieto, and Evilio Quintero. His *Drum Suite*, recorded with the Art Blakey Ensemble and the Jazz Messengers (also released in 1957) included "Cubano Chant," an improvised percussion session laced with Afro-Cuban chants.

This notion of a percussive diaspora—of an outernational audiotopia built on the foundation of the African drum—had long been of interest to Hughes. In the early 1950s, when African drums begin to grow in popularity in Harlem, Hughes commented on the importance of African drumming and African rhythms to all music of the black diaspora, especially that of the Caribbean. In 1952's "Return of the Native—Musically Speaking—The Drums Come to Harlem," another of his *Chicago Defender* pieces, he explained:

Behind the beguines, the congas, and the songs of the West Indies, there is always the bare-handed drumbeat, the human fingers beating out basic

rhythms on the taut skins of animals stretched out to cover an end of a hollow log. When the music of Cuba began to gain popularity in the United States and in Europe, along with it came the old ancient African drums played with the finger tips. . . . And the Jimmys and Georges and Joes of Sugar Hill and Lenox Avenue, maybe thinking they have discovered something new, are beating out of their own hearts the ancient rhythms that preceded jazz and swing, bebop and the mambo, by a thousand years.¹⁰⁷

Two years earlier, Hughes communicated a similar sentiment in his *The First Book of Rhythms*. In a passage entitled “How Rhythms Take Shape,” he set out to demonstrate the “changing same” of African rhythms, how a singular rhythm can generate infinite varieties of difference through processes of movement, travel, and migration across different cultural and national geographies. “The music on your radio now is Cuban,” he wrote. “Its drums are the bongos of Africa, but the orchestra playing it is American. Rhythms go around the world, adopted and molded by other countries, mixing with other rhythms, and creating new rhythms as they travel.”¹⁰⁸

BLACK CUBA

Though Hughes expressed these sentiments in the early 1950s, his ears had already been tuned to the migratory presence of Africa in the Caribbean on his early trips to Cuba. Indeed, the very roots of *Ask Your Mama's* Afro-Cuban soundings can be directly traced to Hughes's own travels to Havana. Hughes was a regular at “rumba parties” and rumba dance contests and regularly went to nightclubs and dance halls to listen to Afro-Cuban music.¹⁰⁹ The music he heard in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Havana impacted the way Hughes thought about blackness. It enters *Ask Your Mama* as “tonal memories” or “congealed histories,”¹¹⁰ potent sonic mementos of race and rhythm that thirty years later return to inform a newly realized poetic imagining. “In the dark he heard the special music he had come to investigate for the opera,” Rampersad described one night of Hughes's 1928 trip to Havana, when he was on the hunt for a composer for his new opera. “The rattles, gourds, trumpets, and rums of a typical Cuban orchestra playing in a public dance hall.”¹¹¹

For Hughes, Havana was music, a city saturated with sound and noise. His description of its streets in his autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, is pure ear: “Traffic filled the narrow streets, auto horns blew, cars' bells

clanged, and from the wineshops and fruit-juice stands radios throbbed with drumbeats and the wavelike sounds of maracas rustling endless rumbas.”¹¹² In the book, Hughes is particularly grateful to Fernández de Castro for introducing him to black Cuban musicians in the Mariano district. He writes of them as “fabulous drum beaters who used their bare hands to beat out rhythms, those clave knockers and maraca shakers who somehow have saved—out of all the centuries of slavery and all the miles and miles from Guinea—the heartbeat and song of Africa.”¹¹³

Hughes spent most of his time in what he called the “cafe hovels” and “smoky, low-roofed dance halls” of the Mariano. During the period of the Machado regime (1928–1933), the Mariano was one of the only places to see and hear black and mulatto Cuban performers performing Afro-Cuban music. Elsewhere, due to the state sponsored *afrocubanismo* rage, white musicians and singers performing Afro-Cuban material dominated Cuban popular culture. But in the *cabarets de tercera* (third-rate cafes) of the Mariano and in clubs like El Pampillo and El Rumba Palace, lower- and working-class black Cuban artists dominated the stage.¹¹⁴

Hughes also checked out less black-friendly clubs outside of the Mariano, social clubs like Club Atenas and Club Minerva, where as their Greek-inspired names might suggest, there was a limit to just how “African” Afro-Cuban music could be. He experienced firsthand the bans on rumbas, *comparsas*, and *sones* that were issued at Atenas and Minerva, both of which were open only to educated, upper-class Afro-Cubans, and both of which established “comisiones de orden” that monitored the dance moves of their guests and the instruments used by the band. Both clubs forbade the use of conga drums up until the 1940s and the performance of mambos until the 1950s.¹¹⁵ The racial threat of sounding “too African” and dancing “too black” in Cuba during the early 1930s was not lost on Hughes, who recalled in *I Wonder as I Wander*,

Then no rumbas were danced within the walls of the Atenas. For in Cuba in 1930, the rumba was not a respectable dance among persons of good breeding. Only the poor and declassé, the sporting elements, and gentlemen on a spree danced the rumba. Rumbas and sones are essentially hip-shaking music of Afro-Cuban folk derivation, which means a bit of Spain, therefore Arab-Moorish mixed in.¹¹⁶

Fernández de Castro had also introduced Hughes to another inter-American poet-singer, mulatto writer Nicolás Guillén. Hughes and Guil-

lén visited Club Atenas and Club Occidente, where they listened to “maracas, bongos, a piano, claves, three-string guitars, guayos . . . violins, and flutes.”¹¹⁷ These are important instruments for Hughes. They are both the very instruments that appear on the pages of *Ask Your Mama* and they are some of the principal instruments involved in the Cuban *son*—the closest Latin American equivalent to the African American blues and the musical form Hughes would most associate with Cuban blackness. Hughes’s visit to Cuba in 1930 coincided with the rise of the *son*’s commercial dominance in Cuba. Originally a folk form produced by the slavery-induced fusion of Spanish and African traditions, the *son* sprang from the class and racial margins of Cuban society. It was performed almost exclusively by poor and working-class blacks and mulattos in Havana’s most disenfranchised and downtrodden neighborhoods. As Robin Moore has shown, between 1920 and 1935, the *son* underwent a transformation from “a marginal genre of dubious origins into the epitome of national expression.”¹¹⁸

After listening to *son* with Guillén at Club Atenas and Club Occidente—Hughes was “a hit with the soneros”—Hughes began to recognize the *son* as an “organic base of formal poetry.”¹¹⁹ Seeing the similarities between *son* and blues and reflecting on his own use of the blues in poetry, he recommended that Guillén begin incorporating *son* motifs into his own poetry. Only days after Hughes left the island, Guillén published what Gustavo Urrutia called “eight formidable Negro poems” in *Diario de la Marina* that used *son* to articulate the life and language of Havana’s black underclass (they would soon be a part of the larger *son*-based collection *Motivos de Son*).¹²⁰ In a letter written to Hughes in 1930, Guillén tells him that the “*son* poems” have caused “a true scandal by creating a genre completely new in our literature.” He also warns Hughes that because the poems are rooted in Afro-Cuban vernacular expression they might be difficult for him to comprehend. “They’re written in our creole language,” he wrote. “And many *giros*, locutions, and phrases, I believe, escape knowledge of Castilian Spanish.”¹²¹

In a letter from Urrutia to Hughes written in April 1930, Urrutia himself made the connection between Guillén’s *son*-poems and Hughes’s early blues poems:

The name of the series is *Motivos de Son*. You know very well what this means. They are real Cuban Negro poetry written in the very popular slang. They are the exact equivalent of your “blues.” The language and feelings of our dear Negroes made most noble the love and talent of our

own poets. . . . The spirit of them is the same as the blues, some sones are sad, some are ironical, others are sociological. . . . This is the first time that we have real Negro poems and they are a big hit with the public. Of course, there are a bunch of high-life Negroes who condemn this kind of literature, same as in the states.¹²²

Guillén sent Hughes a copy of *Motivos*, and Hughes began translating a number of the poems into English, which he then sent in a letter to Guillén.¹²³ Upon reading the translations, Guillén responded by telling Hughes, “You know a lot about these things and you know the Cuban mentality sufficiently enough to interpret them. . . . I love the idea of you translating some of the ‘sones.’ They will gain much in your hands.”¹²⁴

Part of Hughes’s intense interest in *son* had to do with what he heard as its essential blackness, its ability to sound out what he called “Negro Cuba.” On his 1930 trip, Hughes’s aural radar for all things “black” was so persistent that he became a wonder to his Cuban hosts. They were somewhat baffled that this U.S. poet “with skin the color of wheat,” who Guillén said looked like “un mulatico cubano,” possessed such an intense interest in seeking out black culture on the island. In an article he wrote for *Diario de la Marina* during Hughes’s 1930 visit, Guillén paints Hughes as a black poet directly engaged in international black struggle from Havana to Dakar. “Wherever he goes he asks about Blacks,” Guillén wrote. “Do Blacks come to this cafe? Do this or that orchestra admit them? Are there Black artists in Cuba? I’d love to go to a Black cabaret in Havana!” Guillén takes Hughes to a black dance hall where a band is playing a *son* and Hughes cries out, “My people!” The report ends with Hughes watching bongo players and exclaiming, “I want to be Black. Really Black. Negro de verdad.”¹²⁵

Yet Hughes knew that his desire for this authentic, musically performed blackness, for being “a real Black,” was a desire for an unattainable and socially constructed racial essence. For throughout Hughes’s writings on Cuba, he demonstrates his firsthand awareness of the arbitrariness of the sign of blackness and the contingencies of racial particularism. Hughes may not have been “really black” at the dance hall, but he was certainly black enough to be banned from a Havana beach, as he was on one occasion during his 1930 trip. The judge who tried the case was mulatto, causing Hughes to remark, “He might have been termed a Negro had he lived in the U.S.,” but he was “white in Havana.”¹²⁶

And while, on the one hand he writes of Cuba as a “distinctly Negroid country,” on the other he acknowledges the variations and slippages within

the category of Negro itself by commenting on what he names Cuba's "triple color line"—a three-tier system of racial classification that he divides into Negroes, mulattos, and whites. Yet even for the extent to which this tripartite system determines distributions of wealth and power in Cuba (the darker you are, the less wealth, the less power), it too is constantly subject to change. As Hughes puts it, "Cuba's color line is much more flexible than that of the United States, and much more subtle."¹²⁷

It was a lesson that Hughes learned the hard way on his 1930 trip to the island, when he was in search of a composer for his new "singing play." In leaving for the trip, Hughes is told by a U.S. travel service that Cuba is restricting Negro, Chinese, and Russian tourists from purchasing tickets. According to Rampersad, the event raised a series of questions for Hughes about the inter-American geography of race: "What was a Negro? Someone darker than white? A dark South American?"¹²⁸ What Hughes was questioning was the very translatability of "race" across disparate national topographies. How could a country that is, in its very cultural make-up, a "black" country, a country produced by the forced intersection of African, European, and indigenous populations, restrict another "black" traveler?

These are precisely the questions that *Ask Your Mama* would echo through its music three decades later. By tracing the presence of these soundings on the poem's pages back to Hughes's 1930 trip to Havana, we are able to track a shifting trajectory of blackness, a geography of race that does not submit to fixed and stable coordinates. In its fragmented jazz moods and overlapping inter-American rhythms, *Ask Your Mama* shows just how far Hughes had come in the way he theorized blackness and sang América since writing "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in 1920 and "I, Too" in 1925. The once hidden Latin American geographies of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" are now openly charted. Rewriting the appealing fiction of transcendental blackness has given way to an inter-American mapping of a blackness-in-difference, one that recognizes the disjuncture between an African American and a "dark South American."

When asked if his blackness will rub off in *Ask Your Mama*, Hughes does not yearn for an answer the way he might have when writing "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" or when sitting in a Mariano dance hall listening to a *son* performance. Instead, he snaps an insult and, ingeniously, leaves the question dangling in the sound-soaked air above the Negro quarter, right where the railroad meets the river meets the sea.

Rock's Reconquista

In a certain sense, the history of Mexico, like that of every Mexican, is a struggle between the forms and formulas that have been imposed on us and the explosions with which our individuality arranges itself.

OCTAVIO PAZ

Can anyone tell me which country we are in?

GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA

ON THE EVE OF MEXICAN independence day in 1996, Mexico's most idolized rock icon, Saúl Hernández, stands shyly on the stage of the Auditorio Nacional, one of Mexico City's largest and most prestigious performance spaces. A long, elaborate row of freshly lit candelabras drip hot wax and bathe him in a warm, Gothic glow. Towering above him are two enormous diamond vision video screens that deliver his adored larger-than-life image—the seductive, piercing eyes, the stringy, unkempt hair, the charming, gap-toothed smile, the tattooed, wiry frame—to the ten thousand screaming Mexican fans who have paid top peso just to be in the same room with him (no matter how big it is) and witness the much anticipated public debut of his new band, Jaguares.

“We are priests,” he whispers to his rapt congregation. “These concerts are our ceremonies.” A video cuts between shots of a tribal healing circle and a mosh pit of slam-dancing *rockeros* and *rockeras*. And in his clinging bell bottoms, powder-blue tank top, and ragged velvet sport coat, this former leader of the now defunct Caifanes (one of Mexico's biggest and most commercially successful rock bands to date) looks every bit the rock and roll *brujo*, poised and ready to lead an arena rock ritual.

The slightest smile, the most uninspired between-song “Gracias,” and the accidental pluck of a single guitar note produce ecstatic screams that can be heard all the way outside the auditorium, where row after row of

vendors sell bootleg Jaguares merchandise to desperate, ticketless devotees. Inside, the audience knows every word that pours from Hernández's mouth. Amazingly, Jaguares' debut album, *El equilibrio de los Jaguares*—which goes gold within three weeks of its release—has only been out for five days.¹

What happens if we “hear America singing” from this stage in the middle of Mexico City? What does the American audio-racial imagination sound like when it echoes in Mexico City as loudly as it does in Tijuana and Los Angeles? What happens when we listen for “America singing” and what we hear is *rock en español*, or rock in Spanish, a once outlawed urban musical youth movement that's been brewing within the U.S.–Mexico borderlands since the 1950s? This *dia de independencia* performance—where the cultural scream of *rock mexicano* echoes Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla's historic 1810 *grito de independencia*—is just one blip on a U.S.–Mexican rock radar that tracks U.S. rock style and sensibility as it gets reborn within the vernacular idioms of Latin/o American culture.

The transnational borderlands audiotopias of Mexican *rock en español*—in which U.S. and British rock and pop styles collide with African American hip-hop, regional Mexican folk and pop forms, Jamaican ska, Afro-Cuban salsa, and other musics of the Americas—challenge the commonsense sound of the United States as “America” and refuse American identities based in rooted, singular national territories and absolutist racial and ethnic formations. *Rock en español* hears America singing—both the geopolitically policed place and the ideologically policed idea—but it hears a contested and contradictory field of hybrid soundings that exceed its own borders. Far from hearing nations as fixed, bounded orchestras striving for symphonic harmony and racial unisonance, *rock en español*'s audiotopias imagine and perform disparate national formations as dynamic musical geographies and densely populated sonic landscapes traversed, crossed, cut up, and reorganized by an ever-expanding array of sounds and noises. In short, the transnational musical maps of *rock en español* and the transnational identities they help shape provide ideal terrain for an analysis of the relationship between American identity and national space that this book began with (Whitman facing out “towards the Mexican sea” in “Me Imperturbe.”).

Rock en español cannot hear itself in Whitman's America. So it re-tunes it, hearing America instead as a continental soundscape of shifting geographies, crossed borders, and transnational imaginings. It hears the sounds of the United States, to borrow Arjun Appadurai's terminology, as a “delocal-

ized transnation” or a “federation of diasporas”—just one nodal switching point in a post-national network of diasporas, migrations, and flows.² It’s a re-tuning that is equipped to deal with emergent discourses of flexible citizenship and with voicings of patriotism that are not grounded in any one specific, bounded geopolitical territory, but instead are dispersed across unpredictable cartographies and unforeseen social and political realities.

The identities the music both produces and is produced by, and the national spaces it both inhabits and travels across, together refuse conventional, bounded mappings of the nation. Rooted in the sounds of the United States and Mexico and supported and performed by audiences within and in transit between both countries, *rock en español* is built around “cultural codes of transnational circulation” that sonically complicate configurations of identity rooted solely in singular territorial locations.³ It’s a music that defiantly exposes a non-hemispheric view of “America” not just as a by-product of classic U.S. chauvinism but, in Xavier Albo’s words, “an error of historical proportions.”⁴ Through the musical styles it incorporates and the dispersed audiences across the U.S.–Mexico borderlands it both reaches and reflects, the audiotopias of *rock en español* disrupt the nationalized borders of a singing America by questioning the one-to-one equivalencies of music, nation, and culture.

SPACE INVASION

Many within the Latin rock community have taken to referring to *rock en español*’s rise in popularity on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border as a *reconquista*, a reconquest of English-language U.S. rock—a racially and culturally hybridized formation to begin with that has itself been the subject of repeated contests for cultural ownership. Both the veteran Chicano rock historian and founder of the Latino rock label Zyanya Records, Ruben Guevara (also known by his performance alter ego Funkhuatl, the unknown neo-Aztec God of Funk), and Victor Monroy, the twenty-year-old lead singer of the Los Angeles indie rock band Pastilla, have compared the emergence of Spanish-language rock in the United States and Mexico to the British “invasion” of the U.S. music rock scene in the 1960s—a suggestive semiotic move given further pop cultural cachet by a recent multi-city U.S. *rock en español* concert tour that called itself “Rockinvasión.”

But for Guevara and Monroy, the idea of a Latino musical “invasion” of U.S. rock spaces and terrains operates as a clever double play on the nativist anti-immigrant rhetoric of California’s xenophobic Proposition 187 that

transforms fear of a Mexican “alien” invasion of California into a bold musical statement of identity empowerment and territorial and cultural reclamation. Thus, rock’s *reconquista* involves both the takeover of U.S. rock vocabularies and stylistic lexicons and an audio-geographical takeover of the national and regional territories signified and represented within the music itself.

This double takeover—a musical conquest that escalates into a symbolic takeover of language, culture, and national space (specifically, the Southwest of the United States)—is precisely what motivated Guevara to compile the first *rock en español* collection to be issued by a U.S. label, which he titled *Reconquista!: The Latin Rock Invasion*. For Guevara, the emergence of *rock en español* movements among Latinos/as within Mexico, the United States, and other parts of Latin America signifies “a reconquest of our respect, our humanity as Latinos. We were here and that was taken away from us. It’s like setting the record straight—regaining our sense of heritage, our sense of identity.” Pastilla’s Monroy, who was born in Mexico City and raised in the Los Angeles suburbs, also embraces the idea of a transcontinental Spanish-language rock invasion, but for Monroy the invasion will take place through the taste strategies and consumer tactics of growing numbers of Mexican and Chicano fans. “We’re gonna see an invasion of rock in Spanish, from here down to Mexico,” he prophesies. “I can just see it. In every little Mexican baby that is born today will be another rock in Spanish fan.”⁵

This particular re-mapping of rock’s geography, “from here down to Mexico,” also has important consequences for the ways in which rock, race, and nation most commonly get talked about. Save for a few notable examples, rock discourse has traditionally been deployed within the outmoded racial binary of black and white, with the vast majority of discussions of rock’s relationship to race never going far beyond the more familiar and ready-made vocabularies of U.S. blackness and whiteness.⁶ *Rock en español*—which, we must remember, is just one large part of an even larger and more general Latino rock movement with distinct histories across the Americas that reaches its most parodic point in the United States with El Vez, the Mexican Elvis, who can turn Presley’s “Viva Las Vegas” into “Viva La Raza” without ruffling his neo-pachuco pompadour—destabilizes rock’s whiteness and rock’s blackness. It begs for new grammars and lexicons that understand the importance of the transnational flow of Latino/a culture to contemporary discussions of inter-American racial formation and Latino/a cultural citizenship.⁷

After all, *rock en español* (like the Latin ska and Chicano Alternativo

scenes that radiate around its generic perimeter), like most emergent rock movements, operates as a youth culture of sound in which music—its performance, its consumption, its recording, its distribution—is at the heart of the formation of community and is the soundtrack to the scripting of emergent identities.⁸ As Benedict Anderson has noted only all too briefly, nationally minded communities are not just scripted around axes of the scriptural and the printed, but around the aural, the sonic, the musical, as well—what he names the unisonance of “imagined sound.”⁹ In the context of the global economy of late capitalism that the recording industry is so centrally a part of, the Latin/o American sound culture of *rock en español*—an aural imagined community if there ever was one—recharts inter-American geographies by applying a transnational ear to the Americas and listening to them as a hemispheric field of sound ripe for plunder, recycling, transformation, and recontextualization.

None of this is happening outside of the marketplace. *Rock en español*'s American re-mapping has been facilitated through the commercial, global capitalist channels of the recording industry. The audiotopias performed and produced by the music of *rock en español* participate in what Jody Berland calls “capitalist spatiality.” Berland has convincingly argued for a reconception of music according to the spaces produced for and occupied by its listeners—their spatial positionality—for “much of the time we are not simply listeners to sound . . . but occupants of spaces for listening who, by being there, help produce definite meaning and effects.”¹⁰ Yet, while Berland is correct to stress the contingency of textual production on spatial production, I am more interested in the inverse of her own declaration: that the production of space is likewise contingent upon the production of cultural texts. By listening for music's audiotopias, we are able to hear these spaces that music itself makes possible, the spaces that music maps, evokes, and imagines.

Furthermore, audiotopic listening within and across the flows of global capitalist culture is one way of approaching the construct of “the global” not as a closed, predetermined system of hegemony but, as Lawrence Grossberg has suggested in his theorization of “spatial materialism,” as an ongoing space of becoming and struggle. As in Grossberg's analysis, the audiotopias of *rock en español* resist a rigid space/place, local/global split that codes “places” as local and full of meaning and “spaces” as global non-sites of passage and emptiness. Instead, they allow us to hear, in his words, “the organization of space and place as a geography of belonging and identification.”¹¹

Mexican *rock en español* represents a transnational musical story that has been four decades in the making.¹² It begins in the early 1960s when the combined effect of Bill Haley and the Comets' 1960 Mexican tour and the wide release of such rock-and-roll-tinged films as *Blackboard Jungle*, *The Wild One*, and *The Girl Can't Help It* helped to generate Mexico's own homegrown version of teenage rock and roll fever. Clean-cut Mexican rock bands like Los Locos del Ritmo, Los Hooligans, Los Apson, Los Crazy Boys, and Los Rockin' Devils quickly emerged, taking plenty of cues from 1950s rock sound and style—wearing thin black ties and short-sleeved white Oxfords, slicking their hair into Elvis-inspired pompadours, and frequently covering songs note for note and giving them thorough, and often excruciatingly literal, Spanish-language makeovers, or “*refritos*”: Los Ovnis translated the Rolling Stones' “Mother's Little Helper” into “Pequeña ayuda de mama,” Los Teen Tops reworded “Long Tall Sally” as “Laguirucha Sally,” and Los Locos del Ritmo simply changed the title of “Peter Gunn” to “Pedro Pistolas.”¹³

It was Mexico's own space invasion by U.S. rock intruders, the inverse of what Guevara and Monroy would prophecy for the United States so many years later. When Mexico's Telesistema teamed up with New York City's Channel 5 in 1961 to compare notes on U.S.–Mexico musical influence, the Mexican report was an alert, “the invasion of Mexico by rock-and-roll rhythms.”¹⁴ As Eric Zolov has shown in his comprehensive study of Mexican rock's early years, the rock invasion of Mexican society produced an emulative middle-class youth movement that offered modern Mexico an alternative representation of itself: out with the mariachi, in with the *rocandero*. But soon enough, the threat of the invasion—would rock and roll turn nice Mexican kids into wild and crazy teens?—got it swiftly “contained,” says Zolov, tamed and domesticated by the joint efforts of the Mexican government and the record companies to preserve the domestic, nation-friendly image of the Mexican “Revolutionary Family.”¹⁵ Once an outlaw rebel form, Mexican rock quickly became “an exuberant, non-threatening vehicle for the expression of liberalism and leisure consumption . . . proffered by the culture industries as the embodiment of familial harmony and social progress.”¹⁶

The reaction by the Mexican government was so forceful because of the timing of the rock invasion: the birth of Mexican rock in the 1960s was roughly coterminous with the beginnings of Mexican socioeconomic mod-

ernization. According to a model outlined by Néstor García Canclini, five structural changes between the 1950s and 1970s transformed what he describes as the Latin American “relationship between cultural modernism and social modernization”: increased economic development; continued urban growth; expanded markets for cultural goods; newly introduced communications technologies; and an increase in radical political movements.¹⁷ Once this period ends, however, so does rock’s governmental taming. Soon enough, the government would want to contain rock for different reasons—it had actually become a counterculture determined to write its own versions of how the nation’s future ought to play out.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, the story of Mexican rock was more and more the story of its suppression, a musical movement at odds with a political apparatus determined not to tame it and use it, but to stigmatize it and relegate it to the margins of Mexican society. Throughout the 1960s, rock bands such as Antorcha, Peace and Love, Toncho Pilatos, and Los Dug Dug’s—all bands who sang in English, all bands associated with the heavily U.S.-influenced scene known as La Onda Chicana—slowly became the dissident, rebel voice of urban Mexican youth and students. Because of their open embrace of U.S. countercultural politics and hippie style, rock became a new version of what it once was: a viable cultural threat to the government-sponsored *cultura nacional*.¹⁸

An event that figures centrally in this history is the brutal 1968 Tlateloco massacre, where student protesters were leveled by national police. For Octavio Paz, Tlateloco was crucial to making Mexico a part of the 1960s “international subculture of the young.”¹⁹ He sees the massacre as the double of the 1968 Olympics, a contradictory historical couple that he puts at the center of modern Mexico’s paradoxical development. Because Mexican rock was a music based in the lives and everyday social realities of urban youth and students, Tlateloco’s “swash of blood” destroyed any possible reconciliation between *rockeros* and *rockeras* and the government, and further guaranteed the music’s subversive, subcultural status. The bands took note: in the mid-1980s, Banda Bostik recorded a tribute, “Tlateloco 68,” and in 1990 Caifanes reminded younger rock listeners of the event’s enduring significance in the now anthemic “Antes de que nos olviden.” “Before they forget about us,” they sang, “we will make history.”

That Tlateloco is a landmark in Mexican rock history is doubly significant because of the plaza’s position within Mexican cultural and political history as a site of mixture and intercultural contestation. A vital center of

pre-*conquista* cultural life, Tlateloco was the last Aztec outpost to surrender to the Spaniards during the conquest. It is “one of Mexico’s roots,” as Paz has written, “an expression of Meso-American dualism.”²⁰ Tlateloco’s dualism speaks to Mexico’s history of *mestizaje*, of political, racial, and cultural contact where Indian, European, and African blood mixed, where Aztec nobles were taught Spanish literature, theology, rhetoric, and philosophy. Tlateloco has since been home to everything from a military prison to low-rent apartment buildings, and is now officially known as “The Plaza of Three Cultures”: an Aztec pyramid, a Catholic church, and a skyscraper (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) all call it home. And while Paz calls Tlateloco one of the “three pillars” of Mexico’s symbolic visual history (along with the Zócalo and Chapultepec Park), the effect of the student massacre of October 2 on the youth movement of *rock en español* has taken Tlateloco’s significance one step further. Its histories of contact, struggle, and mixture have now become part of Mexico’s symbolic audio history as well.

Police repression of Mexican youth culture continued at Mexico’s answer to Woodstock, the 1971 Avándaro “Rock y Ruedas” festival, which is still looked to as the galvanizing moment in Mexican rock history by young and old *rockeros/as* alike.²¹ Drawing an estimated crowd of three hundred thousand *jipitecas* and *fresas*, middle-class kids and barrio kids, Avándaro featured such acts as Bandido, Peace and Love, and Mexican rock’s most durable figures, Three Souls in My Mind (later known as El Tri). Three Souls in My Mind typified the sound and youthful rebellion of early 1970s rock in Mexico. Combining a gritty bilingual mix of psychedelic rock, shuffling blues, and churning boogie-woogie, they would often follow their “Tributo a Jimi Hendrix” with songs like BB King’s “How Blue Can You Get” and Muddy Water’s “Mannish Boy” and then offer their own home-grown additions to the rock canon: “Yo canto el blues,” “Que viva el rock and roll,” and “Abuso de autoridad.”²² It was this mix of sounds, styles, and attitudes that took the stage at Avándaro, a peaceful yet avowedly anti-national musical gathering designed, according to a festival organizer, “to achieve a union of young people . . . to prove that modern culture, which is already all over the world, has also arrived here.”²³ A Mexican re-fry of its gringo Woodstock predecessor, Avándaro was the Mexican counterculture’s grand coming-out party, the mass public debut of Mexican rock’s own prescription for ailing Mexican nationalism—a new nationalism built on equal parts Mexican national culture and U.S. counterculture. The hope, Zolov has written, was “to forge a new collective identity that rejected a static na-

tionalism while inventing a new national consciousness on its own terms.”²⁴ Hence Avandaro’s biggest scandal: flying a Mexican flag stamped with the peace sign.

After Avándaro, *rockeros* became Mexico’s number one social pariahs, and the government ensured that *rock en español* had a difficult time surviving in the public sphere. “The government marginalized all the possibilities of rock to exist,” Jaguares lead singer Saul Hernández explains. “They refused to realize the importance of free expression. Everything changed and rock moved underground.”²⁵ Banned from the public sphere and Televisa—Mexico’s state-monitored television monopoly—rock survived where it could: on street corners, in the *hoyos fonquis* (“funky holes”) of abandoned factories, in deserted movie theaters, and on the backs of flatbed trucks.²⁶ But in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, *rock en español* (or *rock en tu idioma*, as it was being called by industry executives) began to receive increasing record industry attention. It has since become one of the fastest growing and most popular genres in the world of commercial Latin music. Major transnational labels like Warner, EMI, Sony, and BMG have all made *rock en español* bands central parts of their rosters, and rock can now be found virtually anywhere, from multinational, corporate-sponsored rock tours to the Montreaux Jazz Festival to Hollywood film soundtracks to TV commercials for Levi’s and Coors.²⁷

In 1997 Café Tacuba’s *Avalancha de éxitos* sold a breakthrough 120,000 copies in the United States and became the first *rock en español* album to land on the CMJ 200, the leading U.S. college “alternative rock” radio chart. Due, in part, to the domestic commercial success of Café Tacuba and Argentina’s Los Fabulosos Cadillacs, the Grammy Association added a “Latin Rock” category to their awards in 1998. And with the help of MTV Latin America’s twenty-four-hour audiovisual tentacles spreading across more than 7 million homes in over twenty countries throughout the Americas, *rock en español* has simultaneously become a key musical factor in Latin America’s negotiations with modernity and postmodernity and a major, emergent force in global pop music and global pop style.²⁸ “It might be true that rock began in the north,” professes Rocco, lead singer of Maldita Vecindad, “but now its all ours.”²⁹

UN CANTO FRONTERIZO

In recent years, the “ours” at work in *rock en español* has gone up for grabs, and the flow of rock and roll—once seen as primarily unidirectional, from

North to South—has begun to change course. Rock is now re-crossing the border, growing in popularity and size with Latinos across the United States and putting Guevara's "reconquista" into full effect.³⁰ Originally inspired by the styles and sensibilities of U.S. rock culture, Mexican *rock en español*—in an inverted, circuitous cultural migration—has subsequently moved across and within the "transfrontera" spaces of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands to influence first-, second-, and even third-generation Latinos/as in California.

Such a two-way transnational flow of popular sound adds weight to 1970s Mex-rock icon Jaime Lopez's claim that *rock en español* is *un canto fronterizo* (a song of the borderlands), an insightful re-casting of *rock en español*'s origins and futures. "More than talking about an urban song, un canto urbano," he says, "we should talk about a borderlands song, un canto fronterizo, because that's what our song is like, you do it Chiapas, Yucatan, Mexico City, Nogales, Matamoros, or Tijuana. . . . We're border people, not urban people . . . we're between the cement and the plains, those are our contradictions."³¹ Lopez reveals a musically mapped Mexico that echoes García Canclini's characterization of Mexico as a "transborder region," a nation characterized by the repeated crossings of information, populations, and goods.³² The Tijuana–San Diego ska-punk band Tijuana NO also echo Lopez's comments in their own musicalization of border culture, "La esquina del mundo" ("The Corner of the World") when they sing of the border as "the second-to-last street of Latin America / the line that marks us from outside / the boundary between pueblo and stone."³³

Lopez even describes Mexico City, the city from which he drew so much inspiration for his own brand of *rock en español* in the 1970s and 1980s, as *una ciudad fronteriza*, a border city, full of music from outside of its boundaries, music from different coordinates and cartographies. Mexican music critic David Cortes seconds that notion: he has written of the sound of 1970s bands like Bandido, Peace and Love, and Three Souls in My Mind as music characterized by "that limbo that is *la frontera*: taking the best from the United States in terms of technique and making the best use of Mexico as a creative territory."³⁴

In his 1989 micro-manifesto, "The Border Is . . .," U.S.–Mexico performance artist and essayist Guillermo Gómez-Peña defines border culture as a geographically rooted but culturally unbounded space of exchange, movement, and utopian possibility. Among the catalog of things that Gómez-Peña argues "the border is . . ." ("transcultural friendship" and the "creative appropriation, expropriation, and subversion of dominant cul-

tural forms” among them) are what he refers to as “hybrid art forms for new contents-in-gestation.” He mentions such genre-crossing, high-low practices as “techno-altar,” “audio graffiti,” “video corrido” and, best of all, “punkarachi,” the meeting of punk and mariachi.

But while he argues that border culture is home to the hybrid soundings of something like punkarachi (a sound that, we will see, resonates directly in the music of *rock en español* band Café Tacuba), it is important to note that Gómez-Peña also sees such art forms as contributing to something else that the border means, “a new cartography; a brand new map to host the new project.” Gómez-Peña makes a direct link between hybrid artistic production and the reconfiguration of conventional mappings of America. The punkarachi sounds of *rock en español* are part of what “the border is . . .” precisely because they move within and without the border’s spaces and because they prophecy what he calls “America post-Colombina, ArteAmerica sin fronteras.”³⁵ Indeed, punkarachi returns as the soundbed for the second track of another Gómez-Peña manifesto, 1991’s “From Art-Mageddon to Gringostroika.” Here, punkarachi becomes the soundtrack to an increasing traffic between North and South. It is the musical equivalent of what he describes as “a border dialectic of ongoing flux” that generates “a moving cartography with a floating culture and a fluctuating sense of self.”³⁶

The idea that *rock en español*, because of its travels and migrations between the United States and Mexico, contributes to a utopian vision of a “borderless” America in flux is only intensified as the impact of *rock en español* on Latino/a audiences and performers in the United States continues to grow. More and more bars and clubs in U.S. cities with large Latino/a populations—“independent micro-republics” like New York, Los Angeles, San Jose, and Chicago—feature regular *rock en español* nights with live music provided by both local Latino *rockeros/as* and the most popular Mexican bands.³⁷ While in the 1980s and early 1990s U.S. *rock en español* audiences consisted mainly of recently arrived Mexican immigrants, second- and third-generation Chicanos/as have now begun to embrace *rock en español* as a music of Latino/a identity.

Indeed, it is in this way that *rock en español* has begun to generate its own “exilic media system” in the United States.³⁸ The 1990s alone saw the emergence of Latino lollapalooza rock concerts like Guateque and Watcha!, the publication of Spanish-language California rock magazines like *Retila* and *La Banda Elastica* that document *rock en español* culture in the United States and Latin America, and the rise (and fall) of independent *rock en es-*

pañol labels like San Francisco's Aztlán Records, which provided its own record company home to U.S. *rock en español* groups (Oakland's Orixá, L.A.'s Pastilla).³⁹

In recent years, as the amount of Latin American *rock en español* distributed and sold in the United States has increased, more and more bands in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands have found *rock en español* to be an effective sounding board for the interconnected political and cultural fates of Chicanos/as and Mexicanos/as. By serving as a traveling musical bridge between dispersed populations living within the borderlands, *rock en español* creates a floating, migrating musical audiotopia that maps new borderland regions with coordinates like Mexico City/Los Angeles and Mexico City/Berkeley. It is just one of the many “mysterious underground railroads” that Gómez-Peña hears connecting the transnational performance coordinates of what he has gone on to call the “new world border”—an audio circuit of exchange and communication between dispersed listeners and the shifting national geographies they inhabit.

In Gómez-Peña's vision of a “borderless future,” California becomes a site of musical migration and passage, with “grunge rockeros on the edge of a cliff / all passing through Califas / enroute to other selves / & other geographies.”⁴⁰ The performance piece “The New World Border” imagines a hit TV show called Pura Bi-Cultura which broadcasts across the borders of the Americas and features “fusion rock bands that used to be underground now play[ing] their punkarachi, discolmecha, and rap-guanco at NAFTA functions.”⁴¹ And the first scene of “The Last Migration: A Spanglish Opera (in progress)” finds Gómez-Peña “training to face the end of the century” by jumping rope on his Los Angeles balcony while listening to the Mexican rock band Cuca.⁴² Gómez-Peña so frequently returns to the music of *rock en español*—whether as the soundtrack to a coming American apocalypse, a free trade cultural fusion, or a journey into a new migratory self—precisely because of the inter-American sonic mappings it offers, what he describes as its “brave acceptance of our transborderized and denationalized condition.”⁴³

While Gómez-Peña's use of *rock en español* to give musical voice to a “borderless future” is undoubtedly a playful, utopian, and performative one that often threatens to empty the border of its site-specific political realities, the music has, at the very least, been a key point of cultural contact—a sort of musical hyperspace—between Latin/o communities on both sides of the border.⁴⁴ Indeed, two recent independent Chicano films, Miguel

Arteta's *Star Maps* and Jim Mendiola's *Pretty Vacant*, both employ *rock en español* as a music of connection between the United States and Mexico, a music that, in a sense, carries the border with it.

For his debut film about a dysfunctional first-generation Chicano family living in contemporary Los Angeles, *Star Maps* (which begins with the main character returning to L.A. on a bus from Mexico, where he has been living with his grandmother), Arteta tellingly did not go the Gregory Nava route and choose a soundtrack rooted in Chicano rock, pop, and oldies. Arteta instead filled the *Star Maps* soundtrack with *rock en español* bands from the United States and Latin America and hired *rock en español*'s most seasoned and well-known producer Gustavo Santaolalla (who has produced albums by the leading Mexican bands Café Tacuba and Maldita Vecindad) and upcoming L.A. Chicana singer-songwriter Lysa Flores to be the album's supervisors. What the soundtrack to *Star Maps* ends up suggesting is that the music of contemporary Chicano identity is an increasingly transnational formation, both *de aquí* and *de allá*, both *de Los Angeles* and *de Mexico City*, and both the bilingual hip-hop and rock fusions of Mexico City's Molotov and the English-language L.A. folk-rock of Flores.

Rock en español also makes an appearance at the end of Jim Mendiola's 1996 short film, *Pretty Vacant*, which chronicles a week in the life of Molly Vasquez, a second-generation Chicana filmmaker, zine publisher, and drummer for the all-girl punk band Aztlán A Go Go. When she's not documenting the secret relationship between British punk legends The Sex Pistols and *conjunto* accordion legend Steve Jordan, Molly—whose motto is “Soy punkera, y qué?”—tries but fails to avoid her family's annual trip to Mexico. Throughout most of the film, the soundtrack Mendiola strategically employs is a smart mix of U.S. and U.K. punk and rock (Sex Pistols, Ramones, Television, Patti Smith, Pretenders) with Tex-Mex *conjunto* (Steve Jordan, Freddy Fender), but when Molly returns from Mexico, we hear instead “El aparato,” a song by Mexico City *rock en español* band Café Tacuba.

With Tacuba's electro-acoustic pre-*hispano* rock playing in the background—complete with Morse code telegraph codes and Indian chants—the film's frame of reference shifts from San Antonio to Mexico City. Molly tells how she “hooked up with some rockeros at El Chopo” and “turned them on to the new L7 and they gave me some tapes by Café Tacuba and Santa Sabina.” Joining El Chopo's market bustle of underground trading and pirate cassette transactions, Molly becomes a Chicana participant in the Mexico City rock swap meet's transnational exchange of sounds and

goods. After she returns to the United States, the English-language girl-punk of L7 becomes one more sound for Mexican *rockeros* to recycle and “re-fry,” and Café Tacuba and Santa Sabina become the perfect soundtrack for Chicana life in San Antonio.

But it is not only the hybridity of *rock en español* that provides the aural crossroads between Mexico and the United States (that both *Pretty Vacant* and *Star Maps* make evident) but the common political concerns that much of the music most frequently is used to address: the state-sanctioned U.S. racism and nativist U.S. immigration policy that hold dire consequences for Chicanos/as and Mexicanos/as alike. The short-lived Los Angeles-based band of *metaleros* Ley de Hielo—themselves recent immigrants from Guadalajara and Mexico City—used *rock en español* to create the anti-racist critique “El gobernador,” a song which decries the nativist immigration policies and anti-affirmative action stances of California governor Pete Wilson. On their manic, siren-filled “Los Angeles en llamas,” a Latino tries to escape from an L.A. on fire, on the run through streets burning with the acquittal of the police officers who beat African American motorist Rodney King.⁴⁵

Tijuana NO have also taken aim at Governor Wilson and racist anti-immigrant sentiment in “Gringo Ku Klux Klaves” and in “La migra,” a song that loudly voices support for the rights of Mexican immigrants who cross the border—legally and illegally—in order to work in the United States. The song begins with a parody of an INS officer announcing through a bullhorn in broken Spanish, “Hey meckseekanose, go back behind the border. We don’t want you in the United States. You are all too . . . ugly!” and ends, in a classic punk gesture of musical rage, with a scream of “Fuck the USA.” During their live performances, the band’s lead singer, Luis Guereña, performs those lines wearing an Adolf Hitler mustache, raising his hand in a “Seig Heil” salute, and chanting “Heil a California! Heil a Pete Wilson! Heil a 187!”⁴⁶

Such transnational musical bridges can be further explored in two songs by Mexico City rock band Maldita Vecindad y Los Hijos del Quinto Patio. “Mojado,” a song from their 1989 self-titled debut, tells the story of a Mexican national who leaves home to cross the border as an undocumented *mojado* to secure work in the United States. He leaves Mexico believing “el otro lado is the solution” and ends up suffocating to death in a truck along the border. The song is dedicated to “the Mexican workers that illegally cross the border into the United States who they call mojudos. . . . [and] to all those who have been forced to separate themselves from their customs,

loved ones, roots, and everyday realities.” The fatal border-crossing that “Mojado” documents gives literal voice to one of the thousands of so-called “silent deaths” that have occurred in the process of crossing the U.S.–Mexico border at designated border checkpoints. From 1993 to 1997 alone—the very period that saw the rise of such close-the-border campaigns as Operation Hold the Line in Texas and Operation Gatekeeper and Light Up the Border in California—over 1,100 people died from automobile accidents, drowning, exhaustion, and dehydration, trying to find a way into the United States to locate work and reunite with family members.⁴⁷

On the band’s 1993 concert tour (which stretched throughout Mexico, the United States, and Europe), Maldita went so far as to dedicate the tour to “all those hermanos dispersed all over the world and especially for the Chicanos,” using the experience of crossing the border as a means of building musical connections between Mexicanos and Chicanos.⁴⁸ Similarly, when Mexican rock veterans El Tri played a sold-out show at Los Angeles’s Hollywood Palladium in 1991, they insisted that even “more than a rock concert,” the show was “a testimony to our people, to our fans, to our brothers” living in what they jokingly called “the sister republic of hamburgers, hot dogs, and hot cakes.” In the liner notes to the recording of the concert, *En Vivo!!! Ya Todo Calor en el Hollywood Palladium*, the band’s lead singer and songwriter Alex Lora writes that he hopes the concert let the audience forget their frustrations “and above all, that we make you feel at home, that you are in Mexico, and that proudly, we can say that we are brothers and that we are Mexicans.”

In narrating the experience of transborder migrations and drawing audiotopic connections between Chicanos and Mexicans—and in actually trying to use music to turn the Hollywood Palladium into a satellite province of Mexico—both El Tri and Maldita insert the spatial stories of music into what anthropologist Roger Rouse has outlined in another context as a two-way “transnational migrant circuit” of population, media, and information flow between California and Mexico.⁴⁹ As part of a new way of understanding how migration and community function within the U.S.–Mexico borderlands (i.e., it no longer operates according to outmoded, bipolar, push-pull paradigms of one-way traffic), the musical migrations of *rock en español*’s performers and audiences contribute to the need for “a new cartography of social space,” in that they occur through a variety of multipolar networks and “circuits” that are constituted by a shifting set of population and information flows. Heard in this way, *rock en español* provides musical “networks” that connect disparate audiences and ex-

tend the boundaries of community through channels of musical communication.

We can hear these networks at work in another song by Maldita Vecindad, “Pachuco,” which appeared on their critically lauded 1991 album *El circo*. Maldita draw further cultural links between the United States and Mexico by emphasizing the direct commonalities between contemporary countercultural Mexican rock fans and the 1940s pachuco. In the song, a father reprimands his *rockero* son for dressing like a punk, and the son responds by reminding his father that he too used to be scolded for being a zoot-suited pachuco and for dancing mambo after dark. “Pachuco” begins with a brief sample of dialogue from legendary Mexican comic and torchbearer of the pachuco aesthetic, Tin Tan, who was himself influenced by the dress and linguistic experimentation of both Cab Calloway and pachucos in East Los Angeles (in the liner notes to the Maldita album there is even a photograph of a member of Maldita posing with Tin Tan). Leading Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis has written that Tin Tan, who began his career as a musical parodist and impersonator, “walked, talked, and loved as if he carried a sinfonola brimming over with boogie-woogies and boleros in his head.”⁵⁰ Monsiváis also notes that Tin Tan’s mix of African American style and pachuco *caló* (slang) made him “the archetypal *pochó*,” frequently accused of “selling out” his Mexican roots to the lure of Americanization—a claim that is still directed toward the musical *pochismos* of *rock en español*.

But while Monsiváis never actually makes the connection between *rockeros* and pachucos explicit, Ruben Guevara places it at the center of his compilation, *Reconquista! Latin Rock Invasion*. In the album’s liner notes, Guevara suggests that the cultural resistance of the pachuco, along with Mexican revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, is at the heart of *rock en español*, which he christens “the Post New World pachuco hop.” Like *rock en español*, the pachuco—a term which itself has its binational roots on the Ciudad Juárez–El Paso border—disrupts national narrativity with hybrid performances of the self. In his analysis of José Montoya’s poem “El Louie”—an “elegy for a pachuco”—Alfred Artega has described the pachuco figure of El Louie as a hybrid borderlands subject who mixes and matches bits and pieces of cultural expression from both sides of the border, speaks a hybrid language (*caló*), wears hybrid outfits, and dances to a hybrid mix of boogie-woogies and mambos.⁵¹

Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino and John Tagg have similarly positioned the pachuco as a border inhabitant fashioning and enacting an interlingual

and intercultural self according to specific “border strategies” of identity and resistance. They write of *pachucos* and *pachucas* as blurring the dualities of rural/urban, Eastside/Westside, Mexican/American, and masculine/feminine. Viewed in such a way, pachuco culture becomes an exercise in stylized excess that resists claims of ethnic absolutism and racial essentialism, “a survival strategy not of purity, of saying less, but rather of saying more, of saying too much, with the wrong accent and intonation, of mixing the metaphors, making illegal crossings, and continually transforming language so that its effects might never be assimilable to an essential ethnicity.”⁵²

Both of these approaches to understanding pachuco culture and pachuco aesthetics come in direct response to Octavio Paz’s famous rejection of the pachuco in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Paz derided the pachuco as an anarchic dandy, a citizen of nowhere, a cultureless orphan belonging fully to neither the United States or to Mexico. The pachuco suffered from the “spiritual condition” of being neither Mexican or American, whereby “his whole being is sheer negative impulse, a tangle of contradictions, an enigma.” What perhaps most frustrated Paz was that the pachuco flaunted his difference through his language, his dress, and his taste in music. Paz refused to see this aesthetic of stylistic resistance as anything more than “an empty gesture, because it is an exaggeration of the models against which he is trying to rebel, rather than a return to the dress of his forebearers or the creation of a new style of his own.”⁵³ What Paz did not hear was the sound of a pachuco aesthetic that reveled in pastiche, appropriation, and re-assembly, one that did not copy American models but transformed them by re-using them against their original meanings. An amalgam of bold, excessive gesture and self-conscious bodily performance and sartorial cut-and-paste, pachucos took the archetypes of the Southern dandy, the Western gambler, and the gangster, and “subsumed them in their own rhythms.”⁵⁴

HANG ON LUPE

Rock en español is full of pachuco flavor, full of its own rhythmic appropriations, its own adaptation of the already racially mixed strains of U.S. rock to its own rhythms. The very same dilemma that faced the pachuco continues to face *rock en español*: is it an imitation of U.S. musical style and language or does it constitute its own sound? Is it, to borrow Paz’s phrase, “exhibiting a wound,” or is it instead, the very sound of that wound’s creative suturing? Critics in both the United States and Latin America have long

chosen to approach *rock en español* as being purely the derivative and imitative musical residue of U.S. cultural imperialism and domination. But like the pachuco, rock bands in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands do the opposite: they appropriate, recycle, and transform U.S. rock styles and sound in order to create sounds entirely their own, sounds born at the crossroads of culture, language, and nation.

The “cultural imperialism” charge typically goes like this: the unidirectional flow of First World cultural products (English-language rock and pop) has homogenized the diversity of the world’s cultures into a single global monoculture that it has shaped in its own image. Cees Hamelink has also called it “cultural synchronization,” where dominant modes of cultural expression from the metropolitan centers of “core” countries exert their all-encompassing influence over that of “receiving” countries. “The metropolis offers the model which the receiving parties synchronize,” he writes.⁵⁵ The problems with this view are many. It leaves the center/periphery model intact. It assumes the margins are sites of weakness incapable of cultural invention, doomed to forever copy and imitate an original they can never produce themselves. And lastly, it assumes what is farthest from the truth of contemporary popular culture, that cultural traffic is one-way and that the sounds of the core aren’t “always already” saturated with the sounds of the periphery.⁵⁶

One influential study set out to prove this point by looking at the impact of the transnational recording industry on “small countries.” Roger Wallis and Krister Malm propose four different stages of interaction—cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural imperialism, and transculturation—that go a long way to paint a musical picture more complex and multifaceted than sweeping generalizations and oversimplifications like “cultural imperialism,” “cultural synchronization,” or “Westernization” (or, as we shall soon see in the context of Mexico in the 1970s, “Norteamericanización”). But, nevertheless, in every country included in their sample study, Wallis and Malm note that following the flood of U.S. and British pop and rock music that entered the world’s markets in the 1950s and 1960s, the pop music produced by each country tended to “copy” artists like The Beatles, Elvis, and Chubby Checker. Indeed, throughout their study (which does not include Mexico), they uncritically refer to the pre-1970 period as a period of widespread copying and “imitation.”⁵⁷

While Wallis and Malm are right to make a distinction between the more singular “national” pop styles that developed in each country during the 1970s and 1980s, their willingness to accept the notions of musical copy and

imitation as processes void of original signification needs to be problematized. Holding on to the binary of original and copy reaffirms a colonialist, West-centered logic of center and periphery—what Chilean cultural critic Nelly Richard has termed “the pact signed between modernity and centrality”⁵⁸—by which the periphery is condemned to reproduce and copy the center and all of the meanings, discourses, and languages that it reigns over.

To many critics in the United States and Mexico, it is likewise a common perception that rock bands in the 1950s and 1960s—the *refrito* period of 1959–1964—were doing nothing more than emulating bands popular in the United States and England. Some Mexican bands did very little to resist such a perception, yet copies and imitations are indeed generative, aesthetic strategies that produce significant national and cultural difference. Many early Mexican bands may have “covered” U.S. songs, but as their *refrito* nickname suggests, but they did so *with a difference*, changing the meaning of the original lyrics, altering the composition of the sound, and, ultimately, significantly transforming the way the songs are heard and recognized. They were, as journalist Rubén Martínez has put it, “subtly shifting toward a Mexicanness that, many years later, would come to exemplify the best of the country’s rock.”⁵⁹

“Hang On Sloopy” is certainly not the same song when Los Freddy’s change it into “Hang on Lupe,” and when the question “Who Put the Bomp?” is posed as “Quien puso el bomp” (as it was by Los Teen Tops), you receive an entirely different set of answers. Or just imagine the look on Elvis Presley’s and Carl Perkins’s faces when they looked down to see that Los Teen Tops had turned their “Blue Suede Shoes” into “Zapatos de ante azul,” and the cultural force of such a musical makeover becomes clear. “Because it’s a case of duplication, you have to make it even more real for the people who receive it,” Mexican rock great Johnny Laboriel has explained. “It’s like, for example, if I recite a lot of catechism for people whose native language is Nahuatl, I’m going to have to adopt it to their reality. That’s what happened with rock ‘n’ roll taken from English.”⁶⁰ The kind of musical duplications Laboriel is talking about do not aim to wholly reproduce the original but to re-fry them, cooking up songs that taste less like cover versions and more like what the 1980s band Nopalica preferred to call their songs, “refried nopals.”

These bands deploy musical versions of what Frances Aparicio has explored in a literary context as “sub-versive signifiers.” In her discussion of U.S. Latino writers Alurista and Helena María Viramontes, Aparicio notes that “what on the surface appears to be a praxis that signals cultural assim-

ilation may be defined also as a subversive act: that of writing the self using the tools of the Master, and in the process, infusing those signifiers with the cultural meanings, values, and ideologies of the subaltern sector.” Richard has similarly argued that in the context of Latin American cultural production, we need to understand the copy as “the plagiarizing rite . . . a signifying exercise of cultural transvestism” that subverts the hierarchy of the center as the sole source of meaning by seizing control of its discourses, signs, and symbols.⁶¹

Rock en español is, after all, rock *in* Spanish, rock translated into Spanish. And like all acts of translation, something is always bound to be both lost and gained. That is, like all acts of translation, *rock en español* transforms the language it translates and, in an act of Bakhtinian dialogism, makes the languages of U.S. rock “its own.” In doing so, *rock en español* is, to borrow a phrase from Lisa Lowe, “unfaithful to the original.” As Lowe writes, most colonially imposed acts of translation and dictation are driven by a desire for obedient mimetic reproduction, a desire for unflinching equivalence and seamless fidelity. Such early Mexican rock recordings, by failing to perform completely faithful translations, frustrate this drive for equivalency and shatter any intimation of pure audio and lyrical fidelity. These unfaithful musical reproductions reveal translation as both the agent of cultural domination and the very means by which such domination is obstructed, diverted, and ultimately foiled. Acting somewhat like a rock and roll version of “postcolonial mimicry,” then, *rock en español* may bear a “resemblance” to what it musically mimics, but it also threatens, in the end, to be “a menace” that produces more ambivalence than recognition.⁶²

Which is exactly what Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco point to when they feature examples of such unfaithful Latin American musical plagiarisms in their radio performance piece about the growing cultural interconnectedness of the United States and Latin America, “Norte/Sur.” Toward the beginning of the piece, after Fusco reveals her Cuban *tio abuelo* Flaviano listens to Frank Sinatra on Radio Martí, and after Gómez-Peña recalls how his father used to listen to Nat King Cole on Mexico City’s XEW, a voice interrupts the broadcast with “findings of the Rockefeller Report on the export of American entertainment” to Latin America. The assumption is that the report will reveal another dimension of cultural imperialism at work: the export of U.S. products to Latin America causing widespread homogenization. But before the report is able to finish, it is interrupted by Mexican rock versions of “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” and “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” and Cuban *salsera* La Lupe’s version of “Fever.” Instead of bol-

stering claims of cultural imperialism, whereby the export of American pop music prevents local production, the songs Gómez-Peña and Fusco choose demonstrate just the opposite. Far from note-by-note and word-by-word cover versions, these songs only “resemble” the songs they are based on and instead become musical parodies that change the language, meaning, and content of the “original.”

The lyrics to “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” become “Oh, yeah, dame tu mano, quiero rascarme aquí, quiero rascarme acá, quiero rascarme aquí” (Oh, yeah, give me your hand, I wanna scratch myself here, I wanna scratch myself there, I wanna scratch myself here), “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” becomes a raucous jump blues peppered with Spanish jive and scattling, and the finger-snapping cool of “Fever” becomes an excuse for a dramatic and “goo-roo-vy baby” bilingual *descarga*, with La Lupe, the Queen of Latin Soul, signifying all over the song’s original lyrics—growling, laughing, improvising, and shouting her way into a climactic Afro-Cuban “*febre*.” Rather than the result of cultural domination, what these three songs perform is the very critique of cultural domination—the subaltern re-sounding of dominant cultural forms. Or, as the “teacher’s voice” instructs the listener after La Lupe has faded out, these songs offer audible proof of the margins using the mainstream against itself through the counteraesthetics of “la tijuanización, la fronterización, la tropicalización, la rasquachización,” whereby the Third World changes the way the First World gets heard.⁶³

Similarly, instead of conventionally understood copies or imitations, early Mexican rock songs become exercises in re-authorship that sound the subaltern musical self against the grain of dominant U.S. expression. A prime example of this can be found on the early 1960s album by Agua Prieta’s Los Apson, the tellingly titled *Por eso estamos como estamos!* (*Therefore We Are Who We Are*). On the album’s cover, the band is pictured wearing standard early 1960s teen rock attire, only instead of posing in the urban settings typically synonymous with U.S. rock, the band is standing alongside a winding railroad track that cuts through a rural landscape. The majority of the album’s songs are covers of U.S. rock and R&B hits; however, most of them are actually listed as being co-authored by the songs’ original writers *and* members of Los Apson. The band rightfully credit themselves for rewriting “Woolly Bully” as “Becho becho,” “Game of Love” as “Despierta nena,” and “Midnight Special” as “La media noche” because the songs are indeed not the same. The songs on *Por eso estamos como estamos!* are “copies” of originals that, instead of simply reproducing the originals, cre-

ate them anew. These early versions of *rock en español* were already blurring the line between original and translation, between model and copy, and delegitimizing the cultural supremacy of the center. When “Apple Pie” is re-built and re-shaped as “El tren,” the periphery is no longer obedient to and dependent on the original. The copy has become its own original.

The debate between musical originality and imitation in Mexico continued well into the 1970s, with a particularly influential early response to *rock en español* made by leading Mexican left cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis. He devoted a chapter of his 1977 *Amor perdido* to a critique of *rock en español*'s first wave, known as *la onda*, which he periodized between 1966 and 1972. Monsiváis characterized the infatuation of bands of that period with U.S. psychedelic rock and drug culture as suffering from *norteamericanización cultural*. For Monsiváis, bands of anti-national *jipitecas* (Mexican hippies) taking stylistic and ideological inspiration from 1960s U.S. countercultural movements (instead of from *boleros* and *rancheras*) were too easily heard as audible products of acculturation and as colonial copies of First World musical originals. He described the Avándaro rock festival as being both “an autonomous and original response” and “a colonial fact, not because a rock festival belongs exclusively to North American culture, but because of its basic claim: to unproblematically duplicate a foreign experience; that is, once again, putting ourselves at the mercy of servile emulation.”⁶⁴

While Monsiváis's critique sustains the tension between duplication and originality inherent within any cultural exchange, his preference for hearing *rock en español* as “servile emulation” ignores the ways *rock en español* de-programs the very master codes it is supposedly obeying. It leaves no room for the “tactics” and “strategies” of listening consumers—the ways in which the weak make use of the strong—that Michel de Certeau has put at the center of his discussion of mass cultural reception. In looking at the various ways consumers use products imposed on them by the dominant order, de Certeau gives the example of Latin American indigenous populations who transformed colonial Spanish laws and rituals into their own sets of cultural practices. They subverted them not by rejecting them, but by using them against the will of their creators. Anibal Quijano has also offered the example of indigenous Peruvian writer José María Arguedas, whose decision to write in the language (Spanish) and form (the novel) of the colonizers became an act of linguistic and narrative subversion that generated a “new and original literary language.” Similarly, rock performers and fans in Mexico, “users” in de Certeau's framework and subversive writers in Quijano's, use music to work through the dominant cultural econ-

omy in order to transform it, adapt it, and alter the terms and forms of its very operation.⁶⁵

LO NACO ES CHIDO

Instead of being drowned out by claims of cultural imperialism, *rock en español* is better understood through two different processes of intercultural translation, exchange, and creation—Fernando Ortiz’s concept of *transculturation* and the vernacular Mexican idea of the *naco*. They both directly address guerilla aesthetic strategies of recycling across transnational inter-American geographies. In his classic 1940 study of tobacco and sugar in Cuba, *Contrapunteo cubano*, Ortiz uses the musical counterpoint of tobacco and sugar to demonstrate how Cuban history is the result of a two-way transnational cultural contact between Africa and Europe—a process he names “transculturation.” Ortiz originally coined the term as a response to the idea of the U.S. melting pot, and it was his way of refuting any notion of Cuban history as the one-way imposition of the colonizer’s culture onto that of the colonized.⁶⁶

For Ortiz, because the history of Cuba is the history of cultural collision and mixture, conventional terms like “acculturation”—which, while it suggests cultural interaction, also implies a certain level of passive assimilation and de-culturation—need to be revised. “The process of transition from one culture to another,” transculturation, like every cultural union, yields offspring that “has something of both parents but always different from each of them.”⁶⁷ Particularly relevant to my discussion here is Mary Louise Pratt’s elaboration on transculturation as a phenomenon of “the contact zone” through which “subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by dominant or metropolitan culture.”⁶⁸

I emphasize the importance of transculturation to discussions of inter-American rock formations because of the way in which Ortiz uses it to call attention to national cultures as contradictory, shifting, and transitory terrains. He writes,

There was no more important human factor in the evolution of Cuba than these continuous, radical, contrasting geographic transmigrations, economic and social, of the first settlers, this perennial transitory nature of their objectives, and their unstable life in the land where they were living, in perpetual disharmony with the society from which they drew their living. Men, economies, cultures, ambitions were all foreigners here, provi-

sional, changing, “birds of passage” over the country, at its cost, against its wishes, and without its approval.⁶⁹

Ortiz developed transculturation as a means of accounting for Cuban history as the result of a specifically musical relationship—the contrapuntal relationship between the notes and melodies of Africa (tobacco) and the notes and melodies of Europe (sugar). Vernon Boggs has suggested that Ortiz actually derives his notion of transculturation from the inner-workings of Afro-Cuban music. Boggs traces Ortiz’s involvement with the dissemination and study of Afro-Cuban music throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, from Ortiz’s study of the African presence within Cuban music and dance to his role in organizing a public presentation of a *santería* music ceremony at the University of Havana in 1936.⁷⁰

Ortiz made the connection between transculturation and Cuban music clear in a 1952 essay on African dance music. Just as he had tracked the movement of tobacco between different cultural hands and into disparate national spaces, Ortiz tracked the movement of Afro-Cuban dance music from the lower classes to the European royal courts, and referred to it as “musical transculturation.”⁷¹ As much of a cultural object as tobacco or sugar, music enables its own form of transculturation by moving between different performers, listeners, and audiences, all of whom are potentially located in disparate national, racial, economic, and cultural settings.⁷²

Then there is the case of the Mexican *naco*. A term conventionally used to mean low-class, tacky, and trashy, *naco* has been traditionally used as an insult against Mexican Indians, the country’s most economically marginalized and disenfranchised community, “the lowest of the low.” According to Monsiváis, the *naco* is “alienated, manipulated, economically devastated . . . without education or manners, ugly and insolent, graceless and unnatural . . . confirmation of the inferiority of a lesser country.”⁷³ But in contemporary Mexican society, *naco* and all of its class and racial connotations has been recuperated in some circles as a mode of cultural self-fashioning, a set of aesthetic practices of self-enactment that through collage, recycling, and mockery, subvert dominant cultural forms from below. In the world of Mexican popular culture, the emphasis is as much on who the *naco* is as what the *naco* does or, even more generally, how things get *naco*-fied or *naco*-ized.

Take critic and performance artist Yareli Arizmendi, who reads the music and performance of “heavy-Mex” pioneer Sergio Arau through a *naco* lens. She argues that *naco* entails the bottom-up re-writing and re-sounding of

Western cultural forms through the celebration of Mexican traditional, vernacular, and “low-brow” popular culture. *Naco*—the Toltec definition of which is “with or of two hearts”—signals “the insertion of elements clearly associated with traditional Mexican culture in spaces regarded and respected as Western [American].” Which is precisely what is at work in Arau’s music and performance. Arizmendi demonstrates how, in a flagrantly performative *naco* move, Arau appropriates U.S. rock form and style only to recycle it and transform it using traditional Mexican cultural tools, creating a brand of rock performance he calls “*guacarock*,” Mexican guacamole mixed with U.S. rock.⁷⁴

While Arizmendi has used *naco* to de-code and unpack Arau’s more recent work as a performance artist and musician (try his 1994 album of “100% Heavy-Mex” music, *Mi Frida sufrida*), the relationship between the *naco* aesthetic and *rock en español* was introduced in the highly influential music of his first band, Botellita de Jerez. Following in the wake of the many 1960s and 1970s bands who sang in English and closely followed the developments of U.S. rock style, Botellita was one of the first Mexican bands to make it culturally and socially acceptable to sing in Spanish and to mix rock with traditional Mexican music and vernacular culture. When they opened one of Mexico City’s first legitimate *rock en español* clubs, they named it Rockotitlan, “where the Aztecs heard rock.”⁷⁵

Botellita de Jerez’s self-titled debut introduced the musical *disfrasismo* of *guacarock*, mixing conventional rock styles with references to Mexican popular culture on songs like “Heavy Metro” and, most famously, “Charrock and Roll,” which sounds like a traditional Mexican dance song that accidentally ended up on a Chuck Berry playlist, giving the popular Mexican icon of rural masculinity, the *charro*, new rock-and-roll theme music. Their music performs the inverse of the dialogic border aesthetics of *frontera* poet Gina Valdés, who gives us, instead of *guacarock*, or *rock con aguacate*, “English con salsa”: “English refrito, English con sal y limón . . . English lighted by Oaxacan dawns, English spilled with mezcal from Juchitan, English with a red cactus blooming in its heart.”⁷⁶ Botellita’s charrock and roll aesthetic, or, if you will, “Rock re-frito” or “Salsa con English”—of mixing the traditional with the contemporary, the rural with the urban, the American with the Mexican, the *charro* with the *rockero*—is further illustrated on the album’s back cover, where all three band members pose in tight, studded *charro* pants and wear *charro* boot spurs on the back of their tennis shoes.

According to the band’s bassist, Armando Vega Gil, “In a certain sense,

what we wanted was to recuperate images of *lo mexicano*, but in combination with other things. What happened with *guacarock* was the mixture of the avocado with rock and roll, the mixture of Jose Alfredo Jimenez and Jimi Hendrix, of Lola Beltran and Janis Joplin.” Taking their cues from Mexican bands of the 1970s and early 1980s like Three Souls in My Mind, the *rock indigeno* of Toncho Pilatos, and the *rockero*-mariachi sound of Nahuatl, Botellita put musical and cultural hybridity at the center of their style and sound. Fittingly, they were also the first Mexican band to publicly claim allegiance to the culture-hopping pachuco performances of Tin Tan, calling themselves “part pachucos, part tarzanes.” Or, as Gil once explained it, “We were singing in Spanish not because we wanted to sound like Tin Tan, but because we want to be like Tin Tan.”⁷⁷

Along with Tin Tan, another figure central to rock’s *naco* insertion of popular *mexicanidad* into U.S. rock idioms is El Santo, aka Rudolfo Guzmán Huerta, “El Enmascarado de Plata” (The Man in the Silver Mask). El Santo is Mexico’s most famous *lucha libre* (wrestling) champion and the leading crime-fighting star of numerous wrestling films made from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s. Botellita—who also liked to refer to their music as “humorock”—paid tribute to El Santo on their “Guacarock del Santo,” a parodic ode to the wrestling superhero that mocked and deflated the reputations of U.S. superhero icons Batman and Superman, neither of whom, the song claims, would ever last in the ring with El Santo. When the song momentarily lapses into the Batman theme, shouts of “Batman!” are replaced with shouts of “Santo!”

The song begins by mocking the political earnestness of the Cuban *nueva trova* movement by hijacking the introduction to Silvio Rodríguez’s 1978 classic “Sueño con serpientes,” which opens with Rodríguez reading a quotation from Bertolt Brecht. Botellita open “Guacarock del Santo” with the very same quotation, only they make a significant and comic interruption in its meaning. Both songs begin the same way, with the following lines from Brecht, but while Rodríguez speaks them in a hushed and measured tone of seriousness, Botellita’s exaggerated, almost anarchic tone hints at the mockery about to come: “Hay hombres que luchan un día y son buenos / Hay otros que luchan un año y son mejores / Hay quiénes luchan muchos años y son muy buenos.”⁷⁸ But while Rodríguez finishes the line as it was meant to be read, Botellita replace the correct ending—“Pero hay los que luchan toda la vida: esos son los imprescindibles”—with their own, *naco*-ized version: “Pero hay los que luchan todos los domingos: esos son los chidos” (But there are those who fight every Sunday: they are the cool

ones”). And then, transforming a soft-spoken political folksinger into the booming voice of a wrestling announcer, they introduce the arrival of “El Santo, El Enmascarado de Plata.”⁷⁹

Sergio Arau has often performed wearing an El Santo mask and a leather motorcycle jacket embroidered with an image of El Santo. Indeed, references to El Santo and the low-brow *naco* world of *lucha libre* abound in *rock en español*. Bands, from Mexico City’s La Castañeda and Maldita Vecindad to Los Angeles’s Voodoo Glow Skulls, have donned *lucha libre* masks. The recent opening of Arte Libre 3, a traveling California gallery exhibit of visual art inspired by Mexican wrestling, featured numerous portraits of El Santo and a night of performances by *rock en español* bands from San Francisco. And on their 1997 collaboration with Concrete Blonde, East Los Angeles post-punk band Los Illegals update an El Santo film title as the narrative frame for their story of Chicano actor Cheech Marin being chased by *la migra* on “Xich vs. the Migra Zombies.”

Nowhere has the connection between *lucha libre* and Mexican rock been made more explicit than on two independently released U.S. compilations of 1950s and 1960s Mexican rock that are “hosted” by El Santo and his colleague in *lucha libre* justice, *Blue Demon: Mexican Rock and Roll Rumble and Psych-Out South of the Border* (which features a still from an El Santo film on its cover and was released on Santo Discos) and its sequel, *Blue Demon’s Mexican Rock and Roll Favorites*. The latter’s liner notes are supposedly penned (and hand-signed) by Blue Demon himself. “This record of hand-picked *cantos* speaks for itself in *la lengua internacional* of good music,” he writes. “Adios and see you at the *lucha libre* matches.”⁸⁰

Like the intercultural and transnational combinations and appropriations at work in *rock en español*, El Santo movies are Mexican transformations of Batman and Superman that similarly “Mexicanize” U.S. pop cultural spaces by recycling the genres of the crime-fighting superhero and horror B-movie vis-à-vis the popular traditions of *lucha libre*. Mexican wrestling is itself a U.S.–Mexican pop hybrid, originally conceived back in 1933 after Mexican entrepreneurs saw a wrestling bout in Texas and set out to develop the sport locally. Instead of simply replicating U.S. wrestling, Mexican wrestlers hit the ropes their own way—wearing masks. The golden age of *lucha libre*, the 1960s, coincided with the golden age of Mexican rock, the very moment when, like wrestlers, Mexican bands were making their own culture out of imported blueprints.⁸¹

Here’s the theory: El Santo is the aesthetic, political, and moral mascot of Mexican *rockeros*. El Santo first re-fried U.S. superhero movies with

Santo contra el cerebro de mal in 1958, right at the very moment when bands like Los Apson and Los Locos del Ritmo were re-frying Chuck Berry and Bill Haley. Both Santo and the bands wore masks (one you could see, the other you could hear), not to hide from Mexico but to create it anew—new superheroes, new rock utopias. Wearing his trademark mask and glittery silver cape, El Santo is the defender of the poor and the victimized, and he fights society's enemies—which have ranged from zombies and grave robbers to a diabolical half bat/half man and an animated, noise-emitting table lamp—in both the wrestling ring and on the streets, which he patrols in his convertible sports car. El Santo changes the terms of the traditional U.S. superheroes and gives them a populist, urban Mexican twist.⁸²

Unlike Superman and Spiderman, El Santo is never seen without his mask. He has no alter ego, no Clark Kent, no other identity to hide behind. He is always El Santo; he is defined by his mask. Instead of high-tech hideouts like the Bat Cave, El Santo answers his direct line to the police commissioner from the living room of his small, one bedroom home. And in the 1964 film *Santo vs. the Grave Robbers*, when El Santo pulls his convertible out of the driveway, no automatic doors or secret walls open for him. He undoes the latch on his front gate himself, drives the car through, stops it, gets out, walks back to the gate, refastens the lock, and drives off to save the world from evil. No zombies could steal kids from an orphanage with Santo around, and no grave robbers could dig up cemeteries for new specimens. The image of evil in Santo movies may have come in the form of a “diabolical brain,” a “living atom,” a violent wig, or a table lamp that paralyzed you with its death noise, but it was Evil nonetheless and Santo was the beefy, shirtless, and mortal embodiment of Good.⁸³

Today, glam-metal goths Víctimas del Doctor Cerebro keep Santo alive in their name; Plastilina Mosh show Santo films on stage while they sing about monster trucks, porno shops, and Mauricio Garces over guitar feedback and break beats; and the annual “Arte Libre” *lucha libre* art show at San Francisco's Mission Badlands gallery always has local *rock en español* bands playing the opening party. Santo's Good vs. Evil battles get a post-Salinas spin on *Mostrós*, the 1998 album from Mexico City rock fusionists Maldita Vecindad. On the title track, they get specific, musically imagining contemporary Mexican society as a horror flick where vampires, zombies, supernatural beasts, and other “abject humanoids” unleash terror on the innocent. Maldita don't obscure their metaphorical stabs. “Vampire bankers” run the government, the “Aztec mummy” is the labor chief, the wolf man is the monarch. In short, it's a world without Santo. The days of quick sal-

vation, of flying leaps off the ropes and of body-slamming Dr. Zuko in his laboratory hideout, are over. Now, silver wrestling masks are wool ski masks, and the only hope for rescue lies in the promises of a revolution.

The secret relationship between El Santo and *rock en español* does not end at the level of the aesthetic. El Santo became the prototype for the real-life Mexican social activist superhero Superbarrio, who emerged, like so many Mexican rock bands, out of the ashes of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. Superbarrio was the leader of the Asamblea de Barrios, an organization that organized people in the inner city against post-earthquake abuses of landlords and corrupt politicians. Dressing himself as a *lucha libre* wrestler, Superbarrio merges performance art with political activism as he actually becomes what El Santo and Blue Demon could only be on screen: the anonymous defender of justice and the rights of the people.

In Guillermo Gómez-Peña's 1994 radio piece, "Superbarrio Visits the Border," a sample from an El Santo film announces Superbarrio's two-week tour of California that included visits with Chicano migrant farmworker communities and a stop at the Tijuana–San Diego border. While there, Superbarrio joined the Border Arts Workshop in a wrestling ring performance sketch at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in which he saves border-crossing performance artists from a mock arrest by Border Patrol agents. As Gómez-Peña puts it in his narration, "He's not an individual hero who uses physical strength to win, like Superman or Rambo. He's the civilian spirit of a suffering country that has decided to organize in search of a peaceful but definite change."⁸⁴

Both Gómez-Peña and Rubén Martínez have argued that the 1985 quake which produced Superbarrio was the most influential event in the widespread development of *rock en español* as a discernible artistic and political movement in Mexico.⁸⁵ Indeed, bands like Maldita Vecindad, Trolebus, and Botellita de Jerez have all pointed to the social and political shake-up and unrest caused by the Mexico City earthquake as motivating factors in their formation and prime influences on the politicized urban outlooks captured in their lyrics. After the earthquake—which Maldita Vecindad have referred to as "the *parteaguas* of all of Mexican society and all of Mexican rock"—it was hard to find a Mexican rock band still singing in English, and it was in their music that the voice of urban reconstruction and urban identity received its most urgent expression. For Gómez-Peña, rock bands became "the true chroniclers of post-earthquake Mexico," with the quake forever acting as "an existential landmark, a generational parameter, and a key symbol of our artistic languages."⁸⁶

The video for Café Tacuba's "Déjate caer" opens with the band's lead singer, Rubén Albarrán, leaning backward over a panorama of Mexico City, his face cloaked in a black rooster mask. You can't tell if he's falling or flying or just teetering there, floating high above the chaotic metropolis that first gave birth to the band in the late 1980s. It's a perfect metaphor for the music that this group of former graphic design students from the Satélite district outside of Mexico City have been making ever since—complex and style-swapping rock that, while rooted in the daily hustle and manic cultural collisions of Mexico City life, has always flown above its traffic jams and plazas into a worldly sky with no national limits.

Tacuba claim influences that range from the U.S. techno-industrialism of Nine Inch Nails to the melancholic and melodramatic *ranchera* eroticism of Mexico's Chavela Vargas. Their music mixes traditional, acoustic-based musics from across the Americas with rock, avant-garde, classical, and electronica styles solidified abroad. More than any other band currently working in the commercial *rock en español* scene, Café Tacuba do the national and international at once, a global band who never leave the local behind. For years, they used an electronic drum machine instead of a live drummer and yet performed with a traditional Mexican upright *tololoche* instead of an electric bass. They've collaborated with U.S. classical music outlaws Kronos Quartet one minute, then joined Beck on a Spanish version of "Jack-ass" for a 2000 Cinco de Mayo celebration.

When Warner Mexico released their debut in 1992, Tacuba donned sideburns and huarache sandals and came on like satirical *ranchera* punks. They sounded like no other band on the Mexico City rock scene: while Meme went hi-tech on drum machines and *melodicas*, Joselo and Quique watered their family's acoustic roots in Veracruz by strumming a *jarana* guitar and plucking an upright bass. On songs like "Maria," "Las persianas," and "Chica banda," Tacuba goofed on Mexican traditions while throwing them into the mosh pit, blending Mexico's indigenous pasts with its electronic futures. From the very beginning, they delivered the sound of what Gómez-Peña has argued defines contemporary Mexican identity: "a syncretic blend of Amerindian and European cultures, of pre-industrial traditions and imported technology—immersed in the past but always welcoming the new, the other, the foreign, no matter how dangerous it is."⁸⁷

Though Café Tacuba have released a significant amount of new work in the past few years (most notably *Avalancha de éxitos*, an album of cover ver-

sions featuring popular songs from across Latin America, from Jaime Lopez's Mexican *rockero* anthem "Chilanga banda" to the Dominican *bachata* of Juan Luis Guerra's "Ojala que llueva café"), it is their 1994 album of compositional originals, *Re*, which offers *rock en español*'s most powerful audiotopias, the best place to begin a new American hearing. The album covers a relentlessly eclectic musical ground that spans the entire hemisphere, ranging across a disparate set of audio-spatial coordinates, from Mexican *huapango*, *ranchera*, *banda*, *norteño*, and mariachi, to U.S. rock and speed metal, to Tex-Mex polka and *conjunto*, New York disco, Jamaican ska, Cuban and Puerto Rican salsa, and California techno-banda.

Add to this stylistic and territorial collage lyrics which flaunt contradictory cultural identifications and explore queer male desire and you hear Café Tacuba challenging notions of a unified Mexican self firmly rooted in singular identificatory and national locations. On the speed metal assault of one song, "El borrego," Tacuba identify as Marxists, skinheads, disco-bunnies, and eco-warriors, pledging allegiance to an unstable and unpredictable catalog of tastes and affinities:

I am anarchist, I am neo-nazi, I am skinhead, and I am ecologist. I am *peronista*, I am a terrorist, capitalist, and I am also a pacifist. I am activist, syndicalist, I am aggressive and very alternative . . . I like heavy metal, I like hardcore, I like Patrick Miller and I also like grunge. I like Maldita, I like Lupita and I listen to Magneto when I'm with my *noviecita*. I like to wear black with my lips painted, but I am always well-dressed and handsome at the office. I like to throw stones, I like to pick them up . . .

The musical subject of "El borrego" occupies multiple subject positions and speaks from a multiple and repeatedly contradictory set of enunciative modalities—less a unified subject primed for interpellation by national ideology and more of what Norma Alarcón calls a "geopolitical subject-in-process" characterized by "irreducible difference" and "nonequivalency."⁸⁸

According to the band's lead singer (who changes names almost as fast as the band change styles), the cultural and identificatory scope of their music reflects the multiple audiotopic spaces of Mexico City. "Where we live in Mexico City, you hear every type of music," he says. "You go to a restaurant and they're playing one type of music. You ride public transportation and the conductor is listening to another type. All of this is attacking your mind at all times. So we try to represent this moment in which we live as well as the multicultural society and mestizo country we live in."⁸⁹

Blending as many styles, national terrains, and racial legacies as their music does, Café Tacuba make music that draws its own audiotopic maps, a feverishly migratory music full of traveling, spatial stories that question the national ownership of cultural expression. They beg the very same question of national culture that Michel de Certeau has put at the center of his inquiry into the contradictory and crisscrossed spaces of the frontier: “To whom does it belong?” The songs on *Re* operate as audiotopic spaces of musical emergence built upon a series of cultural and geographical interactions, exchanges, and encounters. Heard within de Certeau’s framework, their music represents “a transgression of the limit, a disobedience of the law of the place . . . a departure, an attack on a state, the ambition of a conquering power, or the fight of an exile; in any case, the betrayal of an order.”⁹⁰

It is thus transgressive in that it recognizes the place of the local while also traveling within the space of the global, performing a transnational musical movement that begins to blur the very distinction itself. Café Tacuba’s music exposes the local as constituted by the global and, as is so often forgotten, the global as also constituted by the local. Music operates here in a double movement between local place and transnational space. In short, in the way that their music shuttles across disparate inter-American territories and sonorous landscapes, Café Tacuba gives us the very sound of what García Canclini has described as Latin American modernity’s “multitemporal heterogeneity” in that it sonically challenges “the assumption that cultural identity is based on a patrimony, and that this patrimony is based on the occupation of a territory and by collections of works and monuments.”⁹¹

The nationally transgressive and culturally delinquent border-conscious and border-crossing music of Café Tacuba must also be theorized and understood within a larger process of Latin America’s (re)construction of hegemony in the context of transnational capitalism and the theoretical and universalizing dominance of postmodern discourse.⁹² Café Tacuba’s music evidences how such codes as local and regional music traditions can be recycled and re-formed as they become cultural commodities in national and international marketplaces intended for consumption on both sides of the border.

Nowhere is this more evident than on the song “El aparato,” where the sounds of tradition meet the sounds of the postindustrial, the sounds of the machine, and the sounds of postmodern technology. The song begins with the acoustic strumming of a *jarana* guitar (typically associated with Veracruz’s *son jarocho* musical tradition) and is slowly surrounded by acoustic

bass, acoustic guitar, hand claps, and synthesizers programmed to simulate the sound of indigenous flutes. By the song's end, a chorus of Amerindian vocal chants is overlaid with the digitized tapping of a Morse code signal and keyboard patterns on loan from an early 1980s video game soundtrack. In such a temporally shifting musical web of old and new, where preindustrial ritual singing collides with Morse codes sequenced through digital synthesizers, traditional soundings are neither silenced nor overemphasized, but reconfigured and reimagined in new relationships and new settings. In the context of a typical model of mass and folk cultural collision, Tacuba's music represents neither the conflict model (whereby mass culture erases folk culture) nor the evolutionary model (whereby the folk disappears during modernization), but the additive model, in which folk culture exists alongside mass culture, calling into question the very line that once pretended to keep them apart.⁹³

Like all of Tacuba's style-crossing and genre-dissolving music, "El aparato" represents just one more example of how the practices commonly affiliated with European and U.S. postmodernism (pastiche, quotation, juxtaposition, parody, recycling) are practices that have long been at work within the cultural syncretism and historical juxtapositions of Latin American culture. They have been, as Nelly Richard writes, "the basic mediation whereby Latin America has sought to bridge the gap between center and periphery: between text . . . and reading."⁹⁴ It is not that Café Tacuba's music doesn't follow the rules of postmodernism. It just performs some of the very same practices according to its own, very different vocabularies and logics.

Indeed, Tacuba's music joins this long-standing Latin American tradition of copy, recycling, appropriation, transference, and pastiche that Gómez-Peña has preferred to alternately call "vernacular postmodernism" or "involuntary postmodernism." He specifically points to the involuntary and unself-conscious collision of styles, epochs, cultures, and sensibilities found in Tacuba's hometown of Mexico City, where pre-Columbian ruins stand beside neoclassical Spanish architecture, Indian markets are just down the block from high-tech nightclubs, and where folk music, European classical music, and rock (in both Spanish and English) bump up against each other on the city's radiowaves. Café Tacuba's code-switching juxtapositions of rock and mariachi, *cumbia* and punk, *banda* and disco are akin to the TV screen altars, tennis-shoe-wearing Aztec *conchero* dancers, and Tijuana velvet paintings that, by coupling with the Virgin of Guadalupe with Madonna, Martin Luther King with Cuahtemoc Cardenas, create "a social dialogue" about the relationship between the United States and Mexico. For

Gómez-Peña, all are examples of subaltern cultural actors using consumer culture against itself to create new realities and new artistic alternatives.⁹⁵

By digesting North American and British musical forms and recreating and reinventing them with traditional and popular musical styles from numerous Latin American countries, Tacuba's music loudly participates in what García Canclini has termed "cultural reconversion," by which cultural capital is placed in new settings, relationships, and circuits of exchange and imbued with new systems of meaning and interpretation such that it becomes reconverted. A key part of cultural reconversion is the broadening of the market to include folkloric goods within commercial sectors, demonstrating that modernization and traditional culture are not mutually exclusive. As the musical reconversion of a song like "El aparato" shows, modernization does not require the erasure of preindustrial or paramodern cultural formations but requires, instead, their very transformation.

Tacuba, of course, are not the only *rock en español* band whose musical cannibalism incorporates traditional Mexican forms into modern rock idioms. As early as 1988, Caifanes landed *rock en español*'s first major hit with "La negra Tomasa," a rock-meets-*cumbia* update of a Cuban favorite, "Bilongo," and later inserted mariachi horns and strings into their hit "La celula que explota." On their 1991 song "Mare," Maldita Vecindad combined rock with the oral, proto-rap, Yucatan storytelling tradition of *bomba*, and their 1996 album *Baile de mascarás*—which featured traditional Mexican masks on its cover—contained a variety of Mexican *foclorico* rhythms and indigenous singing. On Tijuana NO's tribute to the Zapatista revolution of Chiapas, "Transgresores de la ley," the band's percussionist, Mahuiztecatl "Teca" Garcia—who is trained in pre-Hispanic instruments—uses conch shells, pre-Columbian flutes, and Andean rhythms as a prelude to a blistering punk declaration of peasant rebellion. Cuca (in collaboration with U.S. punk band Youth Brigade) give a traditional acoustic Mexican *son* an electric, heavy metal bath on their 1997 re-make of their 1992 hit, "El son del dolor." And most recently, Tijuana's Nor-Tec Collective combine techno, house, and ambient beat textures with digital samples of *banda sinaloense*, *tambora*, and *norteño*.⁹⁶

All of this comes together in Tacuba's music, when in the space of one song an electronic drum machine provides the synthesized beat for a lilting mariachi melody, Amerindian chants compete with the beeps and bleeps of communications technologies, *cumbias* erupt into disco infernos, and sweaty ska workouts transform into an accordion-driven *conjunto*. "Instead of the death of traditional cultural forms," argues García Canclini, "we now

discover that tradition is in transition, and articulated to modern processes.”⁹⁷ Café Tacuba’s music celebrates the sociocultural hybridity of contemporary Latin America, its multi-temporality and multi-spatiality, and its mix of the indigenous with the modern, the colonial with the postcolonial, the folkloric with transnational media and communications networks.

Like so much of *rock en español*, because Café Tacuba’s music is simultaneously national and transnational, simultaneously local and global, it becomes an effective site for witnessing the failure of monocultural and geographically bounded national paradigms to understand emergent cultural expression throughout the musical landscapes of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. Ultimately, it allows us to witness the unique power of popular music to overflow out of the national boundaries that pretend to contain it and, perhaps most of all, forces us to continue to find new ways of hearing “America” sing.

CONCLUSION

La Misma Canción

TO END ALL THIS: A FINAL QUESTION, a final listening, a final audiotopia.

What is a DJ if he can't scratch to a *ranchera*?

The question isn't mine. It comes from Ozomatli, a Los Angeles band of urban fusionists and self-professed anarchists and red diaper babies who've been known to toss African American hip-hop into Dominican merengue over North Indian tablas, Havana congas, and Kingston dub. It's a question they ask in the middle of a beat-juiced Mexican *ranchera* hoedown they call "La misma canción." Literally, "the same old song."

When you are a band like Ozomatli, the answer to a question like "What is a DJ if he can't scratch to a *ranchera*?" is simple. That is, it's simple when you are a band of Chicanos and Salvadorans and Basques and Jews and Japanese and Filipinos and blacks and whites and browns; a band synonymous with post-urban-uprising Los Angeles, justice-seeking-janitors-striking-down-Westside-Wilshire Los Angeles, MTA-bus-strike Los Angeles, DNC-rubber-bullet Los Angeles, Rampart-frame-ups-that-put-innocent-bodies-in-jail-and-in-hillside-Tijuana-*dompes* Los Angeles; a band who once called yourself Somos Marcos when you formed at a community youth center as a result of a two-month sit-in to protest Conservation Corps labor inequities; a band whose bass player got snapped in a photo overturning a car during the L.A. uprisings.¹

When you are all of this, the answer to "What is a DJ if he can't scratch

to a *ranchera*?” is simple and it goes like this. The DJ who’s been schooled on funk break beats or jazz bridges or Roland 808 kick patterns, who can scratch to the Watts funk of Charles Wright or the South Central electro of World Class Wreckin Crew but who can’t scratch to the accordions and rural romance of a Mexican *ranchera* is a DJ who will become obsolete. The DJ of now America, of now Los Angeles, whose job it is to create digital audiotopias, to compress cultural worlds and historical epochs with nothing but two turntables and a crossfader, is no DJ if a *ranchera* can’t be turned out under a stylus scratch so you can still get your groove on at a *quinceañera*. The same goes for any musician who can’t reshape *banda* around a rhyme or any alto sax player who can’t freak the funk around *berimbas* and *shekeres*. Because it’s more than a question that Ozomatli poses—it’s a cultural challenge, and you can almost hear them crossing their fingers that we will all rise up to meet it.

The audiotopia of “La misma canción”—the worlds it contains and conjures, the spaces it crosses and combines—speaks to the history of African America and Mexican America meeting each other in Los Angeles. The song unravels Los Angeles as a vital space of exchange and coalition between black and Mexican communities, between populations engaged in the same war against legislative power, white supremacy, and urban renewal—populations that very same power would like to see separated, divided, and, more importantly, at war with each other.

For starters, there is the case of Belvedere Park 1970, when the Eastside riots erupted out of police suppression of the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War. The riot inspired a local band, The VIPs, to change their name to El Chicano. They then had a hit with “Viva tirado”—a cover version of black jazz composer Gerald Wilson’s tribute to a Mexican bullfighter—and went on to tour with Earth Wind and Fire and become the first Chicano band to headline the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Or there is the case of the 1950s and 1960s Eastside sound, when Chicano music was African American doo-wop and R&B, when the Chicano lowriders that would later inspire a tribute song from a band of Long Beach black kids named War would blast oldies off black radio and call them brown.

Or there is Pomona 1962, the Rainbow Gardens nightclub, where The Mixtures—an Eastside band that included both black and Latino members—recorded “The Rainbow Stomp.” Or, again, the case of Watts’s own Mingus—born on the Nogales border, died in Cuernavaca, father to a son who would years later move to Tijuana and for a short spell become the engineer for the Tijuana punk band Tijuana NO. Through the blood of gen-

erations, then, through the black and brown of “La misma canción”’s audiotopia, Mingus is in the “*canto fronterizo*” of *rock en español*, rock and roll that crosses the same borders he once crossed to escape his country and find himself. Then, in 2001, it would come back around to Ozomatli. In the video for their song “Vocal Artillery,” the band would stand in front of the border wall between Tijuana and San Ysidro, on the Tijuana side, in front of a Mexican flag and an American flag, their African American MC throwing music back and forth between “the left side” and “the right side” and then staying right in the middle. It’s the same wall, on the same beach, that Tijuana NO performs in front of in their video for “La esquina del mundo.” Ozomatli calls for “vocal artillery,” Tijuana NO call for a war of their own—a war between flags for open borders.

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear.

The German philosopher Theodor Adorno, who did his own time north of Tijuana in the shadow of the Hollywood sign, once wrote that music functioned as “congealed history.”² The congealed history of “La misma canción”’s audiotopia was born from the great migration of Mexicans north to Los Angeles, to the *tierra* east of the L.A. River, after the Mexican Revolution. They brought their music with them, and, as a result, the *ranchera* got a new Eastside home that would be remodeled with each subsequent generation of Mexican American kids.

“My mother and father are from the land,” goes “La misma canción,” “All of us are from the land.” The “*madre*” and “*padre*” who appear in Ozomatli’s song are from *la tierra*, but so, the song tells us, are Ozomatli. The land is the earth, but it is also Mexico and it is also Los Angeles. The *tierra* of Mexico and the *tierra* of Los Angeles fade into each other, and the shared *tierra* that results is the *tierra* that, the song reminds us, politicians don’t remember—the land of dual belonging, dual culture, dual identity. Instead of contributing to this forgetting and instead of keeping these *tierras* separate, the song—born out of the meeting of Mexico and L.A.—becomes the new *tierra*, a musical home where both *tierras* coexist. The song can feel like nostalgia, a dusty *ranchera* for an older generation, a tribute to the home country for those who remember it, those who are now immigrants in a new country where they’ve forged new lives under new flags and in new tongues. But the song is also not about nostalgia at all, but about the right-now of urban American life, the right-now of *tierras* within *tierras*, nations within nations, generations within generations, an old song for new ways of living. After all, it ends not with a solo from a twangy guitar and not with the bellowing plucks of a *bajo sexto*, but with an imitation of

both by a DJ sliding a record beneath the stylus of a turntable needle. It ends with hip-hop, the wheeze and whistle of a generation reared on beats and rhymes and samples—digital samples of other places, other voices, other nations, other times.

In fact, the question that isn't even mine isn't really even Ozomatli's. They're sampling, too. It was first asked in the early 1980s by pioneering African American rap and electro artist Egyptian Lover. But when he asked it, it was just "What is a DJ if he can't scratch?"—one of L.A. hip-hop's first DJ dares. Ozomatli's addition to it ups the ante on the DJ's skill: it's no longer purely just about technical ability (can you scratch?), it's about creative selection (what can you scratch to?). For Ozomatli, the DJ can't just know hip-hop, can't just scratch over a James Brown "Funky Drummer" break, but must know what to do with the acoustic guitars, accordions, and simple snare steps of a *ranchera* as well. The ability of the DJ working in an African American art form to scratch over Mexican music is the ability to be a cultural crossfader, a DJ who can cut between the cultures he or she lives in, a DJ who understands cultural exchange and cultural collision well enough to make music out of it. After all, part of the point of the scratch is to transform (there is an even a specific kind of scratch that has been labeled "the transformer scratch"), to take one musical unit, change its shape, blur its message, reduce it to skeletal percussive noise, then allow it to gather itself and re-form and re-discover its code, changed and different, a new sound with new tones. Scratching gives the DJ the power of change and transformation, of turning one thing into another, James Brown into Vicente Fernandez, a South Bronx block party into a Northern Mexico ranch.

The question's original owner, Egyptian Lover, was one of the godfathers of Los Angeles hip-hop and a founding member of Uncle Jam's Army, a collective of DJs, rappers, producers, and promoters who organized rap concerts in black and Latino neighborhoods. That years later Ozomatli would throw a *ranchera* into the Uncle Jam's army repertoire wouldn't have been so surprising even back then: the UJA parties were modeled after the Chicano "Woodstocks" that Ruben Guevara used to throw, back before he saw rock's *reconquista* charging over the hill. A frequent UJA participant was East L.A. Chicano Kid Frost, who years later would go on to turn out his own congealed histories of black and brown dialogue and exchange. In 1990 Frost recorded "La raza," Chicano hip-hop's first Aztec B-boy anthem of brown pride, a song that was built around an earlier congealing, an earlier audiotopia: El Chicano's cover of Gerald Wilson. And it would be the same Frost who would later use hip-hop to join up with Tijuana NO to invoke

the spirit of Lopez de Tijerina and demand that the United States return all of the land “Stolen at Gunpoint” from Mexico in the name of the 1848 Manifest Destiny of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear.

The congealed history of “La misma canción” doesn’t just reflect the insertion of Mexico into the musical spaces of African America, the *ranchera* into hip-hop, but the reverse as well: African American rappers from Los Angeles who reach for a *ranchera* record themselves, who know they make music in a city that was once a Mexican *pueblo*, El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora La Reina de Los Angeles. Tupac Shakur’s “To Live and Die in L.A.” is a prime example, a song that seems to be simply a rendering of black Los Angeles, specifically South Central Los Angeles, as a city in a state of emergency. Tupac’s L.A. is a city divided by its neighborhoods, policed by LAPD helicopters, and torn apart by the crack economy’s war for drugs that turned into Darryl Gates and Nancy Reagan’s war on drugs.

His L.A. may be the home of African-Americans entrapped by California’s Three Strikes Law, but for Tupac, L.A. is also *la tierra*, the brown-pride home to generations of Mexicans without whom the city would have no identity. South Central L.A., cemented in the public imagination by the media coverage of the uprisings as the black home of a black riot (when only 36 percent of those arrested were black), is well over half Latino. The Latino population of L.A. continues to grow faster than any other, and as Tupac makes clear, it is impossible to map black L.A. without speaking about Mexican L.A. and Mexican experience. He reminds us that African American cultural activism and struggle must be in chorus with Chicano resistance to nativist legislation like Proposition 187, precisely because Pete Wilson is trying to “see them *all* broke.” Blacks and Mexicans in L.A. may use some different instruments, may occasionally sing in different languages, but they hear the same song, “la misma canción,” the same America singing.

Just to prove him right, Delinquent Habits—a hip-hop trio of a “guero loco,” a Chicano, and a “Blaxican” best known for their use of Herb Alpert, mariachi, and tango records as samples—returned the favor by recognizing Tupac’s recognition of Mexican L.A. They built their song “This is L.A.” on a sampled loop of Tupac’s verse. The exchange that these two songs represent—in George Lipsitz’s formulation, “the families of resemblance” they speak to—are, of course, also part of a “bloc of opposition,” a pop musical conversation that rehearses and enacts a political coalition built on shared resistance to shared systems of oppression within Los Angeles.³ “We might

fight each other,” Tupac sings, “but we’ll burn this bitch down if you get us pissed.” Part Los Illegals’ “El Lay,” (where the LAPD hunts undocumented Mexicans) and part NWA’s “Fuck Tha Police” (where the LAPD hunts blacks in Compton), Tupac’s burning city is still fresh from the uprisings and intimate with the national guard, a Los Angeles ready to go up in flames, be torn down and built anew, always at war.

Ozomatli sang “La misma canción” toward the end of a concert in September 2001, high in the hills above Los Angeles. Just two days earlier, the burning city was Manhattan. Shrouded in ash and rubble, its crowning towers were replaced by empty sky and the smell of death. America’s response was to sing itself anew: fly flags, tout democracy, beam patriotism, invoke good, denounce evil, praise heroes, create villains, smother dissent. Store shelves were being crowded with purchase-power patriotism ready to breed cash-register consensus, from *Independence Day* and *Saving Private Ryan* to new versions of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” reissues of Johnny Cash’s *America*, and a CD single from a character straight out of Whitman’s poem, New York City’s “Singing Policeman.”

But when Ozomatli took the stage in front of a packed house of Los Angelenos of all colors, they were silent. The attacks on the World Trade Center were never explicitly mentioned. There was no discussion of American innocence and Arab guilt, no calls for unity and no calls for revenge. Instead, they just went through their set list, songs rooted in black urban refusal and Salvadoran protest music, Latin American dance floors and downtown L.A. picket lines. They sang of “The Coming War” the same way they always did (the war between those who have and those who have not), and stuck to the title of their newest album, telling the audience to still “Embrace the Chaos,” embrace dissent and revolution and radical beliefs, even when everyone around you seems to be singing the same song. Before the night was over, they spoke of peace and the right of anyone to say no to war. They spoke of being patriots to no one country, but patriots of the world.

That night, the America they heard singing belonged to working men and women, just like Whitman’s America did. But when Ozomatli listened, those men and women were white and black, brown and yellow, citizen and alien, immigrant and resident. Instead of their songs belonging to “to him or her and to none else,” they belonged to each other—the *ranchera* and the rap rhyme—*la misma canción*, the same old song, sung in different voices, sampled and looped over different beats. The democratic chorus had become democratic chaos, and you could hear Hughes and Baldwin, Katz and

Ellington, Kirk and Café Tacuba and Tijuana NO and Pete Seeger. Not their music, or even their message necessarily, but their audiotopias, the worlds they built for us to live in, the spaces they imagined to help us survive. When the show was over, Ozomatli asked the crowd to kneel on the ground in a moment of silence. There were no “open mouths,” no “strong melodious songs,” no symphonies and no orchestras, just a house full of strangers huddled beneath a sky still ringing with sound.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Collins, "Man Listening to Disc."
2. Schmidt, "Observations on Ideal Stage Languages," 162.
3. Toomer, "Music," 276.
4. Pete Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, 423.
5. See The Weavers, *Wasn't That a Time*.
6. Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 2–4.
7. From Mark Greenberg's liner notes to the Pete Seeger collection *Headlines & Footnotes: A Collection of Topical Songs*.
8. Pete Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, 375.
9. These ideas are repeated in many of Seeger's writings from the 1960s. See Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, 425–30 and 545–48, for starters.
10. For more on Los Tigres del Norte, see Francisco Garcia, "Los Tigres Del Norte Hoping for a 2nd Grammy," *San Jose Mercury News*, February 21, 1990; Kathleen Donnelly, "Los Tigres: San Jose's Biggest Stars," *San Jose Mercury News*, February 23, 1992; and Carolyn Jung, "S.J. Band's Rhythms Transcend Borders," *San Jose Mercury News*, March 5, 1994. Juan Gómez-Quiñones discusses a number of Los Tigres songs in his extensive cultural survey of Mexican immigrant popular culture, "Outside Inside."
11. Los Tigres del Norte, "America," *Gracias America . . . sin fronteras*.
12. For a more detailed interpretation of this song, see Saldívar, *Border Matters*.

13. Lipsitz, "Music, Migration, and Myth," 167.
14. For more expansive discussions of the impact and context of Proposition 187, see Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*; and Castañeda, *The Mexican Shock*.
15. Los Tigres del Norte, "Mis dos patrias," *Jefe de jefes*.
16. Ong, "On the Edge of Empires"; Joseph, *Nomadic Identities*, 2–3. See also Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making"; and Flores and Benmayor, *Latino Cultural Citizenship*.
17. Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 20. Lisa Lowe has also argued for citizenship as a contingent national and cultural category worth battling over; see her *Immigrant Acts*.
18. Bauman, "Modernity and Ambivalence," 153–54.
19. *Ibid.*, 145–46. Homi Bhabha has also written of the power of ambivalence to disrupt the imposition of a dominating order, in his case the colonial language and culture that comes with colonial rule (see "Of Mimicry and Man").
20. Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 537.
21. Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog," 280–82.
22. Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, 5.
23. Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog," 280.
24. West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference"; Noble, *Death of a Nation*; Sanchez, "Creating the Multicultural Nation"; Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America*; Palumbo-Liu, Introduction to *The Ethnic Canon*; Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*; Hollinger, *Postethnic America*.
25. Jay, "The End of 'American' Literature," 267, 274.
26. Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 44.
27. Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative,'" 460. For more of what she outlines as the "utopian performative," see her *Geographies of Learning*.
28. Scott Saul might disagree with me a bit here. In his *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't* he does a convincing job showing how hard-bop musicians of the 1950s and 1960s enacted social freedom through the sonic freedom of jazz performance.
29. Brett, "Piano Four-Hands," 151.
30. Whitman, "Song of Myself," 60.
31. In using the term *racial formation*, I follow the lead of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who propose it as an alternative way of discussing and understanding the concept of race. They define it as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (see *Racial Formation in the United States*, 55).
32. Hall, "What Is This 'Black' In Popular Culture?" 471.
33. See, e.g., Rowe, *Post-Nationalist American Studies*; Rowe, "Postnationalism, Globalism, and the New American Studies"; and Radway, "What's in a

Name?” For a summary of the debates postnationalist American Studies can inspire, see Marx, “Believing in America.”

34. Marcus, *Mystery Train*, 177.

35. Kaplan, “‘Left Alone with America,’” 15.

36. I am understanding “spatial practice” according to Michel de Certeau’s definition: “Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice.” Spatial practices are “narrated adventures” which produce “geographies of actions” and “organize walks. . . . They make the journey before or during the time the feet perform it” (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 115–16).

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., 117, 130.

39. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 11.

40. In Felix Guattari’s terms, refrains move across and delimit two different types of cartographies: territories of self and territories of space. Identities, then, become geographies of crossed and crossing sounds, mobile spaces of musical interaction (Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, 15).

41. Grossberg, “Identity and Cultural Studies—Is That All There Is?” 100.

42. Ibid., 24–25.

43. Levitas and Bharucha, “Contextualizing Utopia,” 35, 48.

44. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

45. Paul Allen Anderson has made great use of Du Bois’s writings on sorrow songs to illuminate a broader history of pre-World War II African American musical criticism (see his excellent *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought*, 35). Anderson writes, “Du Bois sought to transfer the engagement fueled by the songs’ lyric of social memory, hardship, and the ‘fellowship in hope’ into activism and social transformation” (92).

46. Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance*, 14. See also Neal, *What the Music Said*.

47. Gilroy, *Black Athena*, 37.

48. Ibid.

49. Lock, *Blutopia*, 3.

50. Small, *Musicking*, 13.

51. Radano and Bohlman, “Introduction: Music and Race, Their Past, Their Presence,” 8. This collection of essays contains a number of different approaches to theorizing race and music with which I concur in this book: Deborah Wong insists that Asian American popular music is as an “encounter between bodies where performance is a constitutive moment for an activist response to racialized inequities” (58); Frances Aparicio discusses the “rhythmic mulata” as a symbol of Caribbean nationhood (96); and Brian Currid hears American popular music as part of an ongoing national publicity campaign that sets up the public sphere as the compulsory stage for the voicing and acting out of national roles by national actors (117).

52. Guilbault, "Racial Projects and Musical Discourses in Trinidad, West Indies," 436.
53. Whitman, "Preface to Leaves of Grass," 5.

CHAPTER ONE

1. Whitman, *The Portable Walt Whitman*, 57.
2. *Ibid.*, 61.
3. *Ibid.*, 182.
4. Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, 78.
5. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 176.
6. See Ertel and Whittingham, booklet to accompany *I Hear America Singing*, title page.
7. *Ibid.*, 7.
8. Whitman, *The Portable Walt Whitman*, 181.
9. *Ibid.*, 182–83.
10. It was a selective hearing of America in both senses of the word—the selective acoustic reception of America as a body of audible sound and music and the selective judging of America, the deliberation of America's future that produced a verdict that further sought to define just what "America" is.
11. Reynolds (*Walt Whitman's America*, 156) has similarly suggested that "I Hear America Singing" was "more than just a metaphor," in that it reflected the existence of a public singing culture, before radio and before the phonograph, by which hearing people sing on the streets and on the docks was not uncommon.
12. *Ibid.*, 177.
13. *Ibid.*, 180.
14. *Ibid.*, 192.
15. Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*, 54.
16. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 58.
17. Sociologist Jon Cruz has argued that what Douglass was proposing was "a new mode of hearing," an "ethnosympathetic" one that listened to black music as a means of listening to the emergence of new black social subjects (see Cruz, *Culture on the Margins*).
18. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 47–48. Hartman notes that Douglass held on to slave songs as oppositional black cultural forms in direct contrast to the music of slave holidays and other forms of slave entertainment sponsored, demanded, and overseen by slave owners that functioned more to contain and subjugate than to liberate.
19. For more on Sinatra's version of "The House I Live In" and its relationship to Popular Front critiques of Americanism, see Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 35.
20. Frank Sinatra, *Frank Sinatra in Hollywood, 1940–1964*.

20. King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," 480.
21. Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 301.
22. King, "I Have a Dream," 406–8.
23. Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, 180.
24. Bond, "Place for Poetry: #1."
25. Tucker, *The Duke Ellington Reader*, 147.
26. *Ibid.*, 149.
27. Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985," 58.
28. Frank, *The Re-Discovery of America*.
29. Attali, *Noise*, 60–61.
30. Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 381.
31. Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot*, 184–85.
32. *Ibid.*, 34. For musicologist Charles Hamm, David Quixano was more than a fictional character. He was Irving Berlin. Hamm's critical biography of Berlin's early years is structured around citations from the play and saturated with comparisons between Quixano and Berlin. Like Quixano, Hamm is quick to point out, Berlin was an immigrant Jewish musician who fled a pogrom, and like Quixano, Berlin was a direct product of multiethnic immigrant New York City. But Berlin didn't just come from multiethnic New York, he made music that eventually took all of those different ethnicities and transformed them into a single sound, the sound of American music. Though Berlin began his career in the vaudeville world of dialect songs and ethnic gags—Hebe songs, Wop songs, blackface, Dutch songs—he would soon declare himself a wholly American composer who wrote wholly American songs (which also meant that he would continue writing material for blackface performance as late as 1942) (see Hamm, *Irving Berlin*, 100).
33. See Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community*, 4.
34. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States*, 104.
35. On a fellowship at Oxford, Kallen was in the audience when James delivered the 1908 lectures on political pluralism that would become James's collection *A Pluralistic Universe*. It was here that James developed his vision of a pluralistic world that was "more like a federal republic than like an empire or kingdom." An opponent of absolutism and totality, James pitted "monism" and "the philosophy of the absolute" against "radical empiricism," advocating the latter state where "the absolute sum-total of things may never be actually experienced or realized in that shape at all, and that a disseminated, distributed, or incompletely unified appearance is the only form that reality may yet have achieved" (James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 43–44). For an in-depth account of James's impact on Kallen, see Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 377–408; and Posnock, *Color & Culture*. Another strong influence on Kallen's notion of cultural pluralism was Alain Locke (see Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 377–408; and Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 113–66).

36. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States*, 122.
37. *Ibid.*, 104.
38. *Ibid.*, 124.
39. Christopher Newfield and Avery Gordon have recently reexamined Kallen in the age of multiculturalism, arguing that his “cultural pluralism” was meant to function as “an enemy of assimilationism.” While criticizing Kallen for his Eurocentrism (only European ethnics are granted seats in his orchestra), Newfield and Gordon emphasize Kallen’s “tilt away from the center,” the extent to which his orchestration model of cultural plurality proposed a “multi-centered national culture,” instead of one based on the supremacy of a cultural core. His was initially closer to what they call a “strong version of pluralism” (similar to 1970s multiculturalist discourse generated by scholars and artists of color), in contrast to “assimilationist pluralism,” where a “pluralism of form” is really a mere smoke screen for a “monism of rule” that bolsters a return to union (see Newfield and Gordon, “Multiculturalism’s Unfinished Business,” 80–81, 84–86).
40. Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, 400.
41. Frank, *The Re-Discovery of America*, 259–60.
42. Whiteman and McBride, *Jazz*, 8–9. Whiteman took his role as the ballroom’s musical lion-tamer and racial missionary literally when he organized the legendary 1924 Aeolian Hall concert in New York City. Planned so it fell on Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, the concert offered a very particular lesson on jazz evolution: watch jazz go from black and primitive New Orleans raw material to a sophisticated and civilized, white, and American orchestra in a New York City concert hall. Black Jazz was there, but only as a disposable source. Whiteman appropriated African American jazz forms only to repudiate them and use formalized composition and constrained melodies to turn what he heard as unpleasant noise into the sweet sounds of a wholly American high culture.
43. For a complete description of these performance rituals, see Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 89–90; and Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind*, 110–11.

CHAPTER TWO

1. Klezmer music developed in the Jewish shtetls of Poland, Romania, Ukraine, and Russia and has long served as the principal secular music of celebration within Jewish communities across the Jewish diaspora. *Klezmer*, a word initially used to describe the musician himself, is derived from the Hebrew words *kley* and *zemer*, which together mean “instrument of song.” Itinerant groups of klezmer musicians were known as *kapelye*, and these groups were typically made up of violins, *tsimbl*, string bass, and clarinet. With the mass immigration of East European Jews to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, klezmer made its first inroads into American popular music, and its popularity contin-

ues to this day. For a cursory introduction to the history of klezmer, see *World Music: The Rough Guide*, 641–47.

2. I borrow the incredibly suggestive phrase “antic-Semitism” from Ronald L. Smith, who uses it throughout his indispensable *Goldmine Comedy Record Price Guide*.

3. Damon, “Word-landslyat,” 384. Applying the impulses of the Negritude movement to the Yiddish word-worlds of Allen Ginsberg, Lenny Bruce, and Gertrude Stein, Damon uses “Yidditude” to allude to the defiant recovery of a downtrodden vernacular.

4. See, e.g., Gilman, *The Jew’s Body*; Eilberg-Schwartz, *People of the Body*; the essays by Daniel Itzkovitz (“Secret Temples”), Jay Geller (“The Aromatics of Jewish Difference”), Jack Kugelmass (“Jewish Icons”), Ann Pelligrini (“Whiteface Performances”), and Marc Shell (“The Holy Foreskin”) in Boyarin and Boyarin, *Jews and Other Differences*; and Kleebatt, *Too Jewish?*

5. Pelligrini, *Performance Anxieties*, 10.

6. Biale, “The Melting Pot and Beyond,” 27.

7. *Freilachs* are syncopated, up-tempo, and highly rhythmic klezmer songs meant to accompany traditional fast-paced circle dances.

8. Giddins, *Riding on a Blue Note*, 252–57.

9. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 69. Here, I am also thinking specifically of Michael Rogin’s work on the Jewish blackface of Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor in *Blackface, White Noise*; Eric Lott’s work on the contemporary resonances of nineteenth-century minstrelsy in *Love and Theft* and in “White Like Me”; Ann Douglas’s work on Irving Berlin and Al Jolson as doubles in *Terrible Honesty*; Maria Damon’s work on Mezz Mezzrow and Lenny Bruce in “Jazz-Jews, Jive, and Gender”; William Upsi Wimsatt’s musings on white hip-hoppers in *Bomb the Suburbs*; and David Meltzer’s overlooked work on jazz as a white mythology in his excellent “pre-ramble” to *Reading Jazz*.

10. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 33–71.

11. See, e.g., Henry Sapoznick’s wonderful compilation *Jakie Jazz’em Up*. In the liner notes, Sapoznick points out that many Jewish klezmer musicians, such as Harry Kandel’s Orchestra, whose song “Jakie Jazz-em Up” gives the collection its name, and Joseph Cherniavsky’s Hasidic-American Jazz Band, often mixed their music with jazz overtones in order to further Americanize the klezmer sound, “fueling the need of their audiences to reconcile the familiar with the foreign.”

12. Mickey Katz, “St. Looney Blues,” *Comin’ Round the Katskills*.

13. Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 73–120.

14. Mickey Katz, “Toot, Toot, Tootsie,” *Comin’ Round the Katskills*; and “Shleppin’ My Baby Back Home,” *Katz Puts on the Dog*.

15. *Oyshgreen* is Yiddish for “to cease being green”; the meaning here is that Katz does not assimilate—that is, he remains a “greenhorn.”

16. Antin, *The Promised Land*, 3.
17. See Mickey Katz, *Mish Mosh*, for “Sixteen Tons” and “That Pickle in the Window”; and *The Most Mishige* for “The Flying Poiple Kishke Eater” and “Where Is My Pants?”
18. See, e.g., Tricia Rose’s discussion of break beats as moments of sonic rupture in *Black Noise*, 75–76. “Breaks” occur when the rhythm section suddenly moves to the foreground of a particular composition. Explains Rose, “These break beats are points of rupture in their former contexts, points at which the thematic elements of a musical piece are suspended and the underlying rhythms brought center stage” (ibid.).
19. Katz, *Papa, Play For Me*, 190–94.
20. All chart information is from Joel Whitburn’s invaluable *Pop Memories, 1890–1954*.
21. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 19.
22. You can hear Katz’s glossolalic throat eruptions on Jones’s “musical depreciation” classics such as “Hawaiian War Chant,” “Cocktails for Two,” and “Holiday for Strings”; see Spike Jones, *Musical Depreciation Revue*.
23. Katz, *Papa, Play For Me*, 123.
24. Grace Katz, interview with author, Los Angeles, California, June 19, 1995.
25. Sachar, *A History of the Jews In America*, 553.
26. For a look at this period through the lens of Jewish history, see ibid., 620–52.
27. Roth, *I Married a Communist*, 248. Roth makes Jewishness and anti-Semitism the center of his Cold War story. Murray Reingold imagines Senator McCarran herding suspected Jewish Communists into concentration camps and tells Zuckerman that the dominant belief of “Gentile America” is that “the Communist under every rock was, nine times out of ten, a Jew to boot” (274).
28. For more on the Jewish role in the New Deal and the Popular Front, see Howe, *World of Our Fathers*; and Denning, *The Cultural Front*.
29. Katz, *Papa, Play For Me*, 126–33, 162–63.
30. For a more detailed account of the role of eugenicists in the racialization of immigrant Jews through federal policy, see Ludmerer, “Genetics, Eugenics, and the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924.”
31. Sachar, *A History of the Jews In America*, 321.
32. Mickey Katz, “Little Red Rosenberg,” *Katz Pajamas*.
33. Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 68–71.
34. Mason, *Tune In, America*, 160–61.
35. Ford, “Jewish Jazz Becomes Our National Music,” 68.
36. Ford, “How the Jewish Song Trust Makes You Sing,” 75.
37. Mason, *Tune In, America*, 160–61.
38. Baldwin, “Introduction: The Price of the Ticket,” xiv–xix.
39. Kugelmass, “Name-Changing—And What It Gets You.”

40. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 26.
41. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*.
42. Schack and Schack, "And Now—Yinglish on Broadway," 588.
43. Grossman, "Klezmer Music Finds Its Soul Man," 3.
44. Bourne, "The Jew and Trans-National America."
45. Sacks, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*.
46. Marc, *Comic Visions*, 73; Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 201.
47. Marc, *Comic Visions*, 73.
48. *Ibid.*, 36–42.
49. *Ibid.*, 34.
50. For more on the 1952 re-make of *The Jazz Singer*, see Carringer, *The Jazz Singer*, 31.
51. Popkin, "The Vanishing Jew of Our Popular Culture," 47–53.
52. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 216.
53. For more on the role of the crooner in the evolution of the jazz vocal, see Friedwald, *Jazz Singing*, 205–22.
54. Gronow, "Ethnic Recordings: An Introduction," 10. While it is true that most major record labels discontinued foreign-language pressings, the practice did continue outside of the industry mainstream on a number of smaller, independent labels such as Falcon, Tikva, and Standard that met the remaining demand among immigrant communities.
55. Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, 300–301.
56. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 66.
57. Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, 2.
58. *Ibid.*, 20.
59. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, 139.
60. Katz, *Papa, Play For Me*, 27.
61. For a more extensive and extremely helpful look at the history of dialect comedy, see Romeyn and Kugelmass, *Let There Be Laughter!*; and Spalding, "Dialect Stories."
62. Monroe Silver, "Cohen Becomes a Citizen." See also Rose, "Levinsky at the Wedding"; and Bernard, "Cohen at the Telephone." Numerous recordings of dialect comedy are included in the sound archives of both the Judah L. Magnes Museum in Berkeley, California, and the YIVO Institute in New York City.
63. Romeyn and Kugelmass, *Let There Be Laughter!*, 36.
64. Popkin, "The Vanishing Jew of Our Popular Culture," 47–55.
65. Carl Reiner, telephone interview with the author, November 5, 1997.
66. Hecht, *A Guide for the Bedevilled*, 208.
67. *Ibid.*, 210.
68. Levenson, "The Dialect Comedian Should Vanish," 168–70.
69. Gans, "The Yinglish Music of Mickey Katz," 214.

70. Cohen, "Yiddish Origins and Jewish-American Transformations," 3.
71. Solomon, "Azoi Toot a Yid," 99.
72. Giddens, "Don Byron: Sketches of Klez," 10.
73. Stern, "Don Byron's Katz," 22.
74. Memmi, *The Liberation of the Jew*, 188.
75. *Ibid.*, 193.
76. Damon, "Word-landslayt," 381.
77. Katz cited in Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 190.
78. Portelli, "Typology of Industrial Folk Song," 172–73.
79. Katz, *The Borscht Jester*. For a broad historical survey of the subversive behavior of the fool and the jester, see Sanders, *Sudden Glory*.
80. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 435.
81. See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 20–21; and Sanders, *Sudden Glory*, 155.
82. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 107, 125, 251.
83. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 212; Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 193.
84. Byron cited in Davis, "Bagels and Dreadlocks."
85. *Ibid.*, 120.
86. For more on the definition and history of the "mamboïd," see Pérez-Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen*. The "mamboïds" by Clooney and Como can be found on the "Saludos Amigos" compilation CD, *Latin-American Holidays*.
87. For a detailed account of both the Mambo Craze in general and its relationship to Jewish America in particular, see Roberts, *The Latin Tinge*, 111–31. Roberts compares the Jewish relationship to Latino music to "the links between Latin and black musicians." In my own research, I have uncovered an enormous archive of Jewish Latin Craze recordings that have yet to be critically accounted for. In addition to the titles I have already discussed, there are also: Irving Fields Trio, *More Bagels and Bongos*; Eli Basse, "When Chana Came Back from Havana"; Al Gomez Orchestra, "Shein Vi Di L'Vone"; Esy Morales Orchestra, "Talk to Me, Baby"; Lou Jacobi, *Al Tijuana and His Jewish Brass*; and Sy Menchin and His Steven Scott Orchestra, *My Bubba and Zaedas Cha Cha Cha*. Plenty of non-Jews realized the connection as well. Recording under the name of Juan Calle and His Latin Lantzman, a band of esteemed salsa and jazz musicians (including salsa percussionist Ray Barretto, salsa pianist Charlie Palmieri, and jazz trumpeters Clark Terry and Doc Cheatham) recorded an album of Latino versions of Yiddish music entitled *Mazel Tov, Mis Amigos*. Pupi Campo, who played frequently at hotels with high Jewish clientele, like the Fountainbleau in Miami Beach and Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, recorded his own version of the Barton Brother's late-1940s Yiddish comedy record, "Joe and Paul." There was also percussionist Joe Quijano's *Fiddler on the Roof Goes Latin*, African-American and blues jester Slim Galliard's "Meshuganah Mambo," and the British-Caribbean bandleader Edmundo Ros's "Latin Shalom."

88. Golden, *Only in America*, 155.
89. On Prado's "logoclassia," see Pérez-Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen*, 87.
90. Katz, *Papa, Play For Me*, 125.
91. Alter, "Jewish Humor and the Domestication of Myth," 27.
92. Mickey Katz, "Nudnick, the Flying Schissel," *The Most Mishige*.
93. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 23.
94. This is Katz's only Yiddishization of Native Americans. Unlike Minikes's "Among the Indians," Eddie Cantor's Indian drag in *Whoopee*, and Mel Brooks's Yiddish Indians in *Blazing Saddles*, when Katz went West he always went as a cowboy.
95. On her album, *If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends*, Belle Barth offers her own rendition of the song: "Show me a home where the buffalo roam and I'll show you a home full of pishartz."
96. See Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 71. For further examples of Lomax's approach to anthologizing musical Americanism, see Lomax and Lomax, *Folk Song U.S.A.*
97. *Ibid.*, 72.
98. I am not trying to suggest that by creating a Yiddish home on the American range, Katz was directly returning the song to the working-class black culture that spawned it, but that his dialogization of the cowboy-frontier myth exposes the song's genealogy outside of whiteness and reminds us of the extent to which the whiteness of American identity has historically been enacted through the appropriation and then suppression of racialized and ethnicized cultures.
99. Of course, Katz was not the only one dialogizing Davy Crockett. In the mid-1950s Chicano musician Lalo Guerrero wrote his own bilingual, Spanish-English parody of the Crockett theme song, "The Ballad of Pancho Lopez," which had success on both the Spanish-language and English-language charts. For Guerrero's own history of the song, see Loza, *Barrio Rhythm*, 75-77.
100. Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, 163.
101. Which is not to say that either Joel or Jennifer Grey have not taken an interest in Katz's music. In 1994 Joel put together "Borsht Capades '94: A Vaudeville Gone Meshugah," a touring show featuring the music of Katz. And on an appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman* in 2003, Jennifer performed one of her grandfather's songs. The release of Don Byron's tribute to Katz in 1993 also generated a renewed interest in Katz's music, resulting in the 1994 release of *Simcha Time*, a CD compilation featuring mainly instrumental compositions and bits of stand-up monologue.
102. Allan Sherman, "Harvey and Sheila," *My Son, The Celebrity*. For more examples of Sherman's work, see *My Son, The Folksinger* and *For Swingin' Livers Only*. For a reading of Allan Sherman more sympathetic than my own, see Gans, "Allan Sherman's Sociologist Presents . . ."

103. Fielder cited in Cohen, "Yiddish Origins and Jewish-American Transformations," 8.

104. Sherman, *The Gift of Laughter*, 171, 288. Sherman continues his attack on Catskills Jews: "I don't know why those same people go every summer to the Catskill Mountains. I don't know why they want to be in a ghetto, even one that's full of mink and thick carpets and championship golf courses and costs as much as a trip to Europe or California, or Hong Kong, or Israel for that matter. What are they afraid of?"

CHAPTER THREE

1. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 78–79.
2. Baldwin, "Of the Sorrow Songs," 90.
3. Troupe, "The Last Interview," 207.
4. James Baldwin to David Baldwin, March 10, 1968, box 1, folder 2, James Baldwin Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
5. Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, 206.
6. *Ibid.*, 249.
7. Troupe, "The Last Interview," 190. Troupe's interview with Baldwin includes a lengthy and revealing discussion by Baldwin of his friendship with Miles Davis. For Davis's take on their relationship, see Davis, *Miles*, 280–81.
8. Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," 24.
9. Baldwin, "Of the Sorrow Songs," 90.
10. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," 19.
11. Barthes, "Listening," 249.
12. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 7.
13. Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 15.
14. Baldwin, "Preservation of Innocence," 21–22.
15. Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," 687.
16. Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening." For a helpful and highly sympathetic reading of Adorno's writings on popular music and its listeners in the context of his writings on "serious" music, see Witkin, *Adorno on Music*.
17. Gould, "The Prospects of Recording," 347.
18. Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 133, 140.
19. Barthes, "Listening," 249.
20. Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," 137.
21. Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," 5.
22. Grivel, "The Phonograph's Horned Mouth," 37.
23. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 105.

24. Adorno, "The Curves of the Needle," 54.
25. Cited in Kostenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 55.
26. The Black Scholar, "The Black Scholar Interviews James Baldwin," 155.
27. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 36.
28. Thomas Mann in Chanan, *Repeated Takes*, 54.
29. Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 391–95.
30. Ellison, "Living with Music," 195–96.
31. Terkel, "An Interview with James Baldwin," 4–5.
32. Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," 164.
33. Baldwin, "Of the Sorrow Songs," 92.
34. On "blues geographies," see Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 106.
35. Goldstein, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats," 185.
36. Baldwin, "Of the Sorrow Songs," 92.
37. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1:61.
38. Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," 24.
39. Barthes, "Rasch," 299, 312.
40. See Raymond Williams in Sidran, *Black Talk*, 8.
41. Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," 24.
42. Baldwin, "Introduction: The Price of the Ticket," x.
43. Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*, 263.
44. Jones, *Blues People*, 120–21.
45. Binder, "An Interview with James Baldwin," 190.
46. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 3–4.
47. See Grossberg, "Postmodernity and Affect."
48. Kostenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 49.
49. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 377.
50. Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," 689.
51. Quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, 244.
52. Baldwin made this characterization in an application he wrote for a Ford Foundation grant in the late 1950s (see Baldwin, "Of the Sorrow Songs," 134; and Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 204).
53. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 200.
54. Goldstein, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats," 176–77.
55. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 46.
56. Baldwin, "Introduction: The Price of the Ticket," xii.
57. Baldwin, *Another Country*, 342. All subsequent references to the novel are to this 1993 Vintage Books edition.
58. McClane, "At the Bridge with Rufus," 151.
59. Barthes, "Listening," 249.
60. See Baldwin, "The Male Prison."

61. Kostenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 51.
62. For Alberta Hunter, see Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, 247; and for Mahalia Jackson, see Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America*, 100.
63. Parts 1 and 2 of "Empty Bed Blues" were released in 1928 and "Backwater Blues" in 1927. The two songs were never released together on a 78 rpm recording, which means that Baldwin either took poetic license in creating such a 78 for his characters to play or that the record in question is actually a long-playing 33 1/3 that compiled a number of different Bessie Smith songs. I thank Michael Rogin for calling this to my attention.
64. Jelly Roll Morton quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, 252.
65. Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 66.
66. Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, 92. Garon claims that at the core of all blues performance is "the search for erotic love." While Garon's purely psychoanalytic reading of the blues is often stretched too thin, his emphasis on the blues as a field of repressed desires and erotic yearnings is helpful for understanding how listeners relate to and identify with the voices they hear.
67. These issues are also discussed with significantly less success in John Gill's *Queer Noises*.
68. See Albertson, *Bessie*. Albertson's complete interviews with Ruby Smith are now available as part of volume 5 of Columbia Records' Bessie Smith box-set collection, *Bessie Smith: The Final Chapter*.
69. Carby, " 'It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime,'" 330–41; see also Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.
70. All references to Cheryl Clarke's poem "Epic of Song" are from the poetry volume *Humid Pitch*, published by Firebrand (1989).
71. Diawara, "The Absent One," 216–22. Smith's voice and Baldwin's name also perform a re-gaying of Houston Baker Jr.'s notion of "renaissancism," in that the film itself enacts a queering of renaissancism's transmission and repeated re-birth of black cultural forms across generations (see Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 8).
72. Hemphill, "Looking for Langston," 178–79.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Jay, *Downcast Eyes*; Kahn, "Introduction: Histories of Sound Once Removed."
2. Kahn, "Introduction: Histories of Sound Once Removed," 4.
3. Radano and Bohlman, "Introduction," 5.
4. Gaines, *Contested Culture*, 126.
5. Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 22.
6. Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement*, 122.

7. Knight, "Jammin' the Blues, or the Sight of Jazz, 1944," 13–14.
8. Rahsaan Roland Kirk, *The Case of the Three Sided Dream in Audio Color*.
9. Gaines, *Contested Culture*, 129.
10. Kahn, "Introduction: Histories of Sound Once Removed," 35.
11. Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets," 28.
12. Belloni, *Basquiat*, 90.
13. Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets," 31.
14. Kertress, "Brushes with Beatitude," 51; Hebdige, "Welcome to the Ter-rordome," 66.
15. Thompson quoted in Hoban, *Basquiat*.
16. Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 30.
17. Hoban, *Basquiat*, 57.
18. Kahn, "Introduction: Histories of Sound Once Removed," 18.
19. Kittler, *Literature, Media, Information Systems*, 34.
20. Levin, "For the Record," 38.
21. Davis, "Undercurrents #1."
22. Sayre, "Pursuing Authenticity," 145.
23. Jones, *Blues People*, 181.
24. Lott, "Double V, Double-Time."
25. Tate, "Black Like B.," 58.
26. Hoban, *Basquiat*, 27.
27. Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 30.
28. Stolzoff, *Wake the Town and Tell the People*.
29. George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps*.
30. Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*.
31. *Ibid.*, 15.
32. Belloni, *Basquiat*, 72.
33. Chamoiseau, *Solibo Magnificent*, 115.
34. Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, 93.
35. Tate, "Black Like B.," 58.
36. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 58, 202.
37. Rahsaan Roland Kirk, *Blacknuss*.
38. Mackey, "Other: From Noun to Verb." Mackey defines *othering* as "black linguistic and musical practices that accent variance, variability" (514).
39. Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, xiv.
40. Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 4.
41. Hilton, "Blind Saxophonist Dies," 83.
42. Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life*, 12.
43. Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 37. Kruth offers two further comments on the subject from Jack Tracy and Stanley Crouch (see 35, 136).
44. There are important comparisons to be made between Kirk and Blind Tom, the nineteenth-century blind son of slaves who was exhibited and dis-

played as a musical curiosity by his white, anti-abolitionist owner, James Neil Bethune. In a 2000 article on Tom in the *New York Times*, Thomas Riis noted how, for all of Tom's unquestionable musical talent (he was composing songs and playing piano at an early age, could play three songs at once, and perform classical standards with his hands reversed), he was always announced as "a freakish curiosity, an untutored idiot." Like Kirk, Tom used his body to convey the sounds of instruments and objects (he even wrote "Sewing Song: Imitation of the Sewing Machine"). Unlike Kirk, Tom was never free from white ownership and never profited from his performances or his published pieces (see Riis, "The Legacy of a Prodigy Lost in Mystery"). I greatly thank Stephen Best of UC Berkeley for first alerting me to the career of Blind Tom.

45. Cole, "The Life and Music of Rahsaan Roland Kirk," 97.
46. Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 102.
47. *Ibid.*, 17.
48. *Ibid.*, 97.
49. Rahsaan Roland Kirk, "The Seeker," *Rahsaan Rahsaan*.
50. Arnheim, "In Praise of Blindness," 25.
51. Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*.
52. Sidran, *Black Talk*, 83.
53. Saramago, *Blindness*, 10.
54. Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 25.
55. Baraka, "The Screamers," 264.
56. Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 3.
57. Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 96.
58. Rahsaan Roland Kirk, "Black Mystery Has Been Revealed," *Left & Right*.
59. Rahsaan Roland Kirk, "Clickety Clack," *Bright Moments*.
60. Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 96.
61. *Ibid.*, 237.
62. For more on the Jazz and People's Movement in the context of other histories of jazz activism, see Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 221, 223.
63. Cole, "The Life and Music of Rahsaan Roland Kirk," 20.
64. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 89.
65. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 49–51. Kirk's "I Say a Little Prayer" might also be considered a "reformation of form," a third term that Veve Clark has added to Baker's formulation in an Afrodiasporic context (see Clark, "Diaspora Literary and Marasa Consciousness," 42).

CHAPTER FIVE

1. Hughes, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 275.
2. *Ibid.*, 100.
3. Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 59.

4. Hughes, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 285.
5. There are numerous studies of blues and jazz formations in Hughes's poetry that have been helpful to this study (see Gayl Jones's *Liberating Voices*, 25; George E. Kent's "Langston Hughes and Afro-American Folk and Cultural Tradition," 162; and Steven C. Tracy's comprehensive *Langston Hughes and the Blues*).
6. See Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 115; and Martí, "Nuestra America."
7. See Mullen, *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and Haiti*, 16.
8. "Outernational" is a phrase heavily circulated within the black British cultural studies work of scholars like Kobena Mercer and Paul Gilroy (see, e.g., Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*; and Gilroy, *Small Acts*).
9. Mullen, *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and Haiti*, 16.
10. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 2.
11. *Ibid.*, 12.
12. Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 101. In 1936 Hughes began collaborating with Duke Ellington on *Cock o' the World*, a never-realized musical written for Paul Robeson. Hughes's description of the main character sounds as if he was modeled on Hughes himself: "It was about a wandering Negro minstrel type who went all around the world, and he was a seaman, a roustabout . . . and there were various scenes laid in New Orleans" (101). For a discussion of the Popular Front context in which the musical was imagined, see Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 310.
13. Hughes is not alone, of course. A similar analysis might be extended to other inter-American black-diaspora intellectuals, such as C. L. R. James, Nicolás Guillén, and Edouard Glissant.
14. For a Caribbean-centered critique of Gilroy's work, see Edwards, "Roots and Some Routes Not Taken"; also see Clifford, *Routes*. For a discussion of Latin America's role in the black Atlantic in a slightly different, more contemporary direction, see my "Against Easy Listening."
15. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 4–5, 189.
16. I thank Herman Gray for alerting me to Bartz's take on Hughes.
17. Warren, "Appeals for (Mis)Recognition," 393.
18. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 53–56.
19. See, e.g., John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger's *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation*.
20. "Jungle" is a hyper-speed club music that draws on U.S. hip-hop and Jamaican dub and grew out of lower-class black British neighborhoods in the early nineties (see Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*).
21. The addition of Australia to the poem's itinerary is also important to the way the re-mix extends Hughes's pan-Africanism to places usually left off that map. George Lipsitz has shown how indigenous musicians in Australia have long identified as "black" through a politically strategic appropriation of an international array of black music, from reggae to hip-hop. Ever since Bob Marley's tour

of Australia in 1979, indigenous Australian musicians have claimed blackness as a weapon of resistance against their control by the Australian government and as a tool of global solidarity with oppressed blacks in the Americas, Europe, and elsewhere. I greatly thank Philip Brett for first putting this question to me and George Lipsitz for generously giving me the answer (see Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 142–46).

22. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 55.

23. Sonischen's observations are from the liner notes to *Una historia de la musica de la frontera, Corridos, Part 1: 1930–1934, Texas–Mexican Border Music, Vol. 2*.

24. Ramos and Ramirez's lyrics are quoted by Ignacio M. Valle in the liner notes to *Una historia de la musica de la frontera*.

25. Saldívar, *Border Matters*, 181.

26. See Valle's liner notes to *Una historia de la musica de la frontera*. One of the more popular of the Golden Age *corridos*, "Corrido Pensilvanio" has been recorded by a number of different ensembles, including Trovadores Mexicanos, Dueto Huerta & Gonzalez, Hermanos Vasquez, and Los Cucarachos.

27. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 54.

28. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, III–13.

29. Both the Mississippi River and the "heart of the South" have their own inter-American significations and manifestations. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, for example, has argued for an opening up of the Caribbean's watery borders to include a profile of "Caribbeanness" that extends through the Mississippi Delta to "the mouth of the Amazon," from the northern coast of South and Central America to areas of the United States once colonized by Spain and France and plantation centers throughout the "Old South." The "South" that Hughes's train travels through, however, is not only a stop on the itinerary of the transatlantic slave trade's "plantation machine" (see Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 176).

30. See Mora, "Bienvenidos," 5; and Anzaldúa, "Border arte," 108–9.

31. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 127.

32. Anzaldúa, "Border Arte," 109.

33. Arteaga, *Chicano Poetics*, 68, 92.

34. For a rich and detailed history of the treaty and its historical aftermath, see Griswold del Castillo, *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*. See also Anzaldúa, "Border arte"; and Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*.

35. Wharton, in Anzaldúa, "Border arte," 7.

36. Paredes, "The Río Grande," 15–16. For a different reading of the poem, see Saldívar, *Border Matters*, 53. One year after writing "The Río Grande," Paredes imagined an even more explicit form of Tejano-derived Africanism, "Africa," a poem that celebrated "black soul with a song and a chain" kept alive by the percussive memory of the African drum ("Africa," 18–19).

37. See El Vez, "Aztlán," *Graciasland*.
38. Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America,'" 4; also see Saldívar, *Border Matters*, 164–68.
39. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 51.
40. Hughes, "In Racial Matters in St. Louis 'De Sun Do Move,'" 66.
41. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 50–51.
42. Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten, in Bernard, *Remember Me to Harlem*, 22. I thank Emily Bernard for alerting me to this letter.
43. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 40.
44. *Ibid.*, 78.
45. In a letter to Van Vechten written from Mexico City after the death of Hughes's father there, Hughes mentions that the Mexicans he meets regard him as "an extraordinarily dark American who has lost his father" (Bernard, *Remember Me to Harlem*, 129).
46. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 123; also see Warren, "Appeals for (Mis)Recognition."
47. Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:47.
48. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 443.
49. See Mullen, *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and Haiti*, 24.
50. See Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:47. Committed to a decolonizing project of working-class artistic revolution, the Mexican muralists—like Hughes's use of the blues and vernacular language systems and Guillen's use of the *son*—incorporated *preconquista* visual elements into their vision of radical social realism. The muralists also saw a particular similarity between Mexico's oppressed underclasses and the conditions of black life in the United States. When many of them actually began painting in the United States, they helped inspire a new generation of African American muralists, such as John Biggers, Charles White, and Hale Woodruff, who translated the political ideologies and aesthetic philosophies of Mexican modernism into a new form of African American visual modernism (see LeFalle-Collins, "African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School").
51. Bernard, *Remember Me to Harlem*, 130.
52. Langston Hughes, "Get Together, Minorities," 30.
53. Langston Hughes, "The World after the War," 124.
54. *Son* is the oldest and most fundamental form of secular Afro-Cuban song, blending syncopated African rhythmic patterns with Spanish melodic structure. *Rumba* is essentially an Afro-Cuban drum and dance music, typically performed with a percussionist and a singer. *Cha cha cha* is a mid-tempo dance and song form—a variant of the mambo—that rose to popularity in the early 1950s. For more detailed studies of each of these forms and their multiple offshoots and derivations, see Roberts, *The Latin Tinge*; and Manuel, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World*.

55. In comparison to other Hughes poems, *Ask Your Mama* has received very little attention; see, e.g., Patricia A. Johnson and Walter Farrell Jr.'s reading in "The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes: A Reflection."

56. Hughes, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*, 41. This and all subsequent page references to the poem refer to the 1961 Knopf edition of this work.

57. Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 2:317.

58. "Playing the dozens" refers to the African American vernacular ritual of insult based on verbal contests, duels, and signifying (see Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 344–58; and Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 99–101).

59. Hughes, "Note to Puerto Ricans (On American Confusions)," 164.

60. For a discussion of Hughes's "emergent postmodernity in colloquy with the still evolving black modernisms of its antecedents" and a lucid analysis of performance poetry as an experimental genre, see Aldon Lynn Nielsen's wonderful study, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism*, 43, 186.

61. Langston Hughes introducing *Ask Your Mama*, on Hughes's recording entitled *The Black Verse: 12 Moods for Jazz*, an anthology of black American poetry.

62. Ibid. By using the literary device of marginal musical notation, Hughes was also making a specific comment on the white, so-called "jazz poet" Vachel Lindsay, who had developed a similar practice (with far inferior results) in his poem *The Congo*.

63. Langston Hughes, from a letter to Alfred A. Knopf's Judith Jones, August 5, 1961, box 88, Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

64. See "A Note about the Author," in Hughes, *Ask Your Mama*.

65. For the actual text, see the original manuscript of *Ask Your Mama: A Poetic Dialogue for a Man and a Woman*, which is included in the Langston Hughes Papers as part of the James Weldon Johnson Collection of Yale University's Beinecke Library. For a more general account of the poem's early development and marketing, see Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 2, *I Dream a World*.

66. Hughes made a number of spoken-word recordings on the Folkways label: *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems of Langston Hughes*, *Jerico-Jim Crow*, *Tambourines to Glory*, *The Story of Jazz*, and *The Rhythms of the World*. Excerpts from each have been collected on a Smithsonian Folkways recording, *The Voice of Langston Hughes*.

67. Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry*, 42.

68. Quotes are from Leonard Feather's liner notes to Langston Hughes, Charles Mingus, and Leonard Feather, *Weary Blues*.

69. Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry*, 74.

70. From Nat Hentoff's liner notes to *Charles Mingus, A Modern Jazz Symposium of Music and Poetry with Charles Mingus*.

71. For a full account of this episode, see Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 2:315.

72. Rolontz, "Whatever Became of Jazz and Poetry," 117. For a more detailed assessment of the jazz-poetry movement of the 1950s, see Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry*, 67–78; Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 176; and Wallenstein, "Poetry and Jazz."

73. Feinstein, *Jazz Poetry*, 67–68. Also see Johnson and Farrell, "The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes: A Reflection."

74. Reviews of *Ask Your Mama* are collected in Dace, *Langston Hughes*, 635–45.

75. Hughes, cited in Johnson and Farrell, "The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes: A Reflection," 12.

76. Hughes, "Jazz: Its Yesterday, Today, and Its Potential Tomorrow," 213.

77. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 39, 75.

78. Stephen Henderson dubbed this tradition "the other side of the tradition" in 1973, and Aldon Lynn Nielsen has more recently theorized it in more detail as "the calligraphy of black chant" (see Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, 5; and Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 24).

79. For a comparison of Hughes's scratchy sounds and doors of paper with the Afro-Cuban *son*, see Piedra, "Through Blues."

80. Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 24.

81. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 117.

82. *Ibid.*, 109, 129.

83. See Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 88.

84. I thank José Esteban Muñoz for pointing this out to me.

85. Jemie, *Langston Hughes*, 95. For the *son* and the figure of "Mamá," see Piedra, "Through Blues."

86. Johnson and Farrell, "The Jazz Poetry of Langston Hughes: A Reflection," 11; Jemie, *Langston Hughes*, 95; Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 101.

87. Piedra, "Through Blues," 127.

88. From the review of *Ask Your Mama* in the *Los Angeles Times* (see Dace, *Langston Hughes*, 636).

89. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 115.

90. Nielsen, *Black Chant*, 10.

91. For Mercer, the sign of blackness is "constantly subject to antagonistic modes of appropriation and articulation" (see Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 293).

92. On the "signifying riff," see Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 105.

93. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 27.

94. Hughes, "Jazz: Its Yesterday, Today, and Its Potential Tomorrow," 213.

95. Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 93, 100. Hughes's description of jazz and Benítez-Rojo's description of the Caribbean make a nice fit: "We are dealing here with a culture of bearings, not of routes; of approximations, not exactitudes. Here the world of straight lines and angles . . . do not dominate; here rules the fluid world of the curving line."

96. Roberts, *The Latin Tinge*, 39.

97. Jordi Pujol, “Chano Pozo: Life and Music of the Legendary Cuban Conga Drummer,” liner notes to Chano Pozo, *Chano Pozo: El tambor de Cuba*.
98. Cortez, “I See Chano Pozo.”

99. Listen to Parker on 1948’s *Machito Jazz with Flip and Bird* and 1951’s *Charlie Parker Plays South of the Border*. For a comprehensive introduction to Parker’s Latin American jazz fusions and collaborations, see his *South of the Border*.

100. See Dizzy Gillespie, *Gillespiana*; Eric Dolphy and Friends, *Hot, Cool, & Latin*; Eric Dolphy and the Latin Jazz Quintet, *Caribe*; and John Coltrane, *Kulu Se Mama*.

101. See Palmieri, in the liner notes to Conrad Herwig, *The Latin Side of John Coltrane*.

102. Mingus’s Latin American experiments are celebrated and explored on Mingus Big Band, *Que Viva Mingus!*

103. Quote is from the liner notes to Charles Mingus, *Tijuana Moods*.

104. Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds*, 227.

105. Many of these tracks have been compiled on the compilation *Afro Blue*. For a broader discussion of the musical and political significance of this trend, see Weinstein, *A Night in Tunisia*; and Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds*. Roberts notes that while there were many sincere attempts to bridge the United States and Africa through jazz and African drumming, there were also a number of attempts to exploit the renewed interest in Africa by making recordings that purported to have African themes but in fact had none (and often just mentioned Africa in the name of the group or song). He singles out Wali and the Afro-Caravan’s *Home Lost and Found* and the Cannonball Adderly Quintet’s *Accent on Africa*.

106. See Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 2:324.

107. Hughes, “Return of the Native—Musically Speaking—the Drums Come to Harlem,” 206.

108. Hughes, *The First Book of Rhythms*, 58–59.

109. Hughes also expressed an interest in learning to dance rumba and translate its lyrics because, like the blues, he found them “risqué in an ingenious folk way” (see Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 10).

110. I borrow the phrase “tonal memories” from Larry Neal’s poem, “Don’t Say Goodbye to the Pork-Pie Hat,” which he dedicated to Hughes (see Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, 290). I borrow “congealed history” from Robert W. Witkin’s study of Theodor Adorno’s writings on music. It refers to Adorno’s view of the composer as working with musical structures embedded with their own historical memory, “historical forms that are the building blocks of the musical culture into which s/he is initiated” (see Witkin, *Adorno on Music*, 13; and Adorno, *Quasi una fantasia*, 281).

111. Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:177.

112. Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 2:6.

113. *Ibid.*, 2:7.

114. Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*, 183.
115. *Ibid.*, 39.
116. Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 8. Hughes alluded to this suppression of blackness in a 1934 short story he wrote for *Esquire*, "Little Old Spy," a fictionalized, first-person account of a black American's trip to Cuba during the final days of the Machado.
117. Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:178.
118. Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*, 104.
119. Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:178.
120. As has happened with much of Hughes's poetry over the years, Guillén's poems have been interpreted by a number of different musicians. Composer Amadeo Roldan developed a 1934 song cycle based on Guillén's early poetry called "Motivos de Son," Conjunto Cespedes recorded *guajira* versions of "Virgen de la Caridad" and "Tengo" on *Una sola casa*, and *salsero* Hector Lavoe riffed off of Guillén's collection *Songoro Cosongo* in his "Songorocosongo" on *Comedia*.
121. Nicolás Guillén to Langston Hughes, April 21, 1930. The letter can be found in the "general correspondence section" of the Langston Hughes Papers, box 65. Translation by the author.
122. Gustavo E. Urrutia to Langston Hughes, April 20, 1930. Langston Hughes Papers, box 152. Translation by the author.
123. Hughes was the translator of Guillén's *son*-based work in Guillén, *Cuba libre*.
124. Nicolás Guillén to Hughes, July 11, 1930, Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
125. Nicolás Guillén, "Conversación con Langston Hughes," *Diario de la Marina* (Havana), March 9, 1930. I quote from the translated version, "Nicolás Guillén on Langston Hughes," which appears in Stavans, *Mutual Impressions*, 152–54. For another version, see Mullen, *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and Haiti*, 172–75.
126. Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, 14.
127. *Ibid.*, 11.
128. Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 1:176.

CHAPTER SIX

1. The beginning of this chapter is adapted from my article for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, "Independence Day: Saul Hernandez and His Jaguares Galvanize Mexico's Rockeros"; also see my "Viva los rockeros!"
2. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 171–72.
3. García Canclini, "Museos, aeropuertos y ventas de garage."
4. Albo, "Our Identity Starting from Pluralism in the Base," 18.
5. Ruben Guevara and Victor Monroy, telephone interview with author,

1997; see also the recordings *Reconquista! The Latin Rock Invasion*, and Pastilla, *Pastilla*.

6. While most studies of rock's racial histories continue to revolve around the conventional black-and-white binary, there have been a number of influential and pathbreaking studies on Latino rock which have begun to carve out new discursive spaces within rock scholarship, all of which inspire and deeply inform my comments here. For Latino rock within the United States, see Roberts, *The Latin Tinge*; Loza, *Barrio Rhythm*; Lipsitz, *Time Passages*; Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*; Marez, "Brown: The Politics of Working Class Chicano Style"; Marsh, *Fortunate Son*; and, especially, Guevara, "The View from the 6th Street Bridge." For rock in Latin America, see Vila, "Rock Nacional and Dictatorship in Argentina"; Duran and Barrios, *El grito del rock mexicano*; Martínez, *The Other Side*; and Morales, "Rock Is Dead and Living in Mexico."

7. For a lengthy analysis of the different meanings and uses of "Latino cultural citizenship," see Flores and Benmayor, *Latino Cultural Citizenship*.

8. For a Latin ska primer, see the *Puro eskañol* compilation disc; and for Chicano Alternativo, see *Barrios artistas, Vol. 1*, and *Sociedad = Suciedad*.

9. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 145.

10. Berland, "Angels Dancing," 39.

11. Grossberg, "The Space of Culture, The Power of Space," 175.

12. The history of *rock en español* in Mexico has yet to be extensively chronicled, and my aim in this chapter is not to offer a complete historical survey of the genre. For available microhistories of the genre, see Martínez, "Corazón del Rocanrol"; and Duran and Barrios, "La larga y triste historia del rock mexicano." For brief introductions to rock scenes in Chile and Argentina, see Vila, "Rock Nacional and Dictatorship in Argentina"; and Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*.

13. While it is less readily available than contemporary *rock en español*, early Mexican rock is becoming easier to find. See, e.g., Los Teen Tops, *20 de Colección*; and Los Apson, *Llegaron Los Apson*. And for a collection of songs by Mexican rock and roll "girl groups," see *Las Chicas del Rock & Roll, Vols. 1 & 2*. Also see the independently released collections of 1950s and 1960s rock, *Mexican Rock and Roll Rumble and Psych-Out South of the Border* and *Blue Demon's Mexican Rock and Roll Favorites*.

14. Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 67.

15. *Ibid.*, 72–73.

16. *Ibid.*, 91.

17. García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 55.

18. For a complete history of this period, see Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 167–200.

19. Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, 222.

20. *Ibid.*, 231.

21. For the continuing relevance of Avándaro to young *rockeros*, see Cruz, "A 25 años del festival de rock y ruedas en Avándaro," 4.

22. See Three Souls in My Mind, *Three Souls in My Mind*; Three Souls in My Mind, *Recluso oriente en vivo!*; and Three Souls Boogie, *Adicto al rock 'n' roll*.

23. Monsiváis, "La naturaleza de la onda," 248.

24. Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 207.

25. Kun, "Independence Day."

26. For more on the history and uses of *hoyos fonquis*, see Monsiváis, "Dancing: The Funky Dive," in *Mexican Postcards*.

27. See *Latin Rock Nights*, a commercially available video which documents performances by Mexico's Cafe Tacuba, Spain's Seguridad Social, and Argentina's Fito Paez, among others, at the 1994 Montreaux Jazz Festival.

28. Robert Hanke, in "Yo quiero mi MTV," has recently written of MTV Latino (since renamed MTV Latin America) as "a 'Latin' audiovisual space of juxtaposition, transculturization, and hybridization." He notes that of all the MTV international affiliates, the Miami-based MTV Latin America is the only one centered in the United States (see also Lannert, "MTV Latin America Headquarters in Mexico and Argentina Cater to All Tastes in Español"; and Cobo-Hanlon, "Heating Up the MTV Latino Connection").

29. Martínez, "Corazón del Rocanrol," 149.

30. See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; and Kun, "Against Easy Listening."

31. Duran and Barrios, "La larga y triste historia del rock mexicano," 34.

32. García Canclini, "Museos, aeropuertos y ventas de garage." For a treatment of the border as a "transfrontier metropolis," see Herzog, *Where North Meets South*.

33. Tijuana NO, "La esquina del mundo," *Transgresores de la ley*.

34. Cortes, "El rock mexicano no está muerto," 72.

35. Gómez-Peña, "The Border Is . . .," 43-44.

36. Gómez-Peña, "From Art-Mageddon to Gringostroika," 56.

37. Gómez-Peña, "The New World Border: Prophecies for the End of the Century," 30.

38. See Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures*. Mexican news services and television programming are also readily available in the United States, including CineLatino, a twenty-four-hour cable service featuring uncut Spanish-language films from around the world that will additionally sponsor the production of fifty-two new cable films each year. CineLatino is currently being offered in California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico (see Snow, "The Morning Report: 'Se Habla Español.'"). There is also the case of Televideo, a videotaping service in Northern California that tapes personal messages from Mexican nationals working and living in the United States and sends them to their families in Mexico.

39. See Kun, "Viva los rockeros!"; and Ferris, "Latin Rockers Find the Beat."

40. Gómez-Peña, "Freefalling toward a Borderless Future," 2.

41. Gómez-Peña, "The New World Border," 37.

42. Gómez-Peña, "The Last Migration," 194.
43. Gómez-Peña, "Danger Zone," 171.
44. For a critique of Gómez-Peña's treatment of the border, see Fox, "Mass Media, Site Specificity, and the U.S.–Mexico Border"; and Fox, "The Portable Border."
45. Both songs are on Ley de Hielo's *Señor Cementerio* album.
46. Tijuana NO, "Gringos Ku Klux Klanes," *Transgresores de la ley*; and Tinuano NO, "La Migra," *NO*.
47. Verhover, "Silent Deaths Climbing Steadily as Migrants Cross Mexico Border."
48. Maldita Vecindad y Los Hijos del Quinto Patio, *Maldita Vecindad y Los Hijos del Quinto Patio*. For the live version, see *Gira pata del perro*.
49. Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism."
50. Monsiváis, *Mexican Postcards*, 106.
51. Arteaga, "An Other Tongue"; and Arteaga, "Beats and Jagged Strokes of Color."
52. Sanchez-Tranquilino and Tagg, "The Pachuco's Flayed Hide," 561.
53. Paz, "The Pachuco and Other Extremes," 16.
54. Sanchez-Tranquilino and Tagg, "The Pachuco's Flayed Hide," 559.
55. Hamelink quoted in Robinson, Buck, and Cuthbert, *Music at the Margins*, 19.
56. For responses to cultural imperialism, see Robinson, Buck, and Cuthbert, *Music at the Margins*, 17–31, 255–79; Garofalo, Introduction to *Rockin' the Boat*; Garofalo, "Understanding Mega-Events"; Goodwin and Gore, "World Beat and the Cultural Imperialism Debate"; and Taylor, *Global Pop*.
57. Wallis and Malm, *Big Sounds from Small Peoples*, 269–303.
58. Richard, "Cultural Peripheries," 73.
59. Martínez, "Corazón del Rocanrol," 156.
60. Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, 64.
61. Aparicio, "On Sub-Versive Signifiers," 202; Richard, "Cultural Peripheries," 158.
62. Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 128–53; Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 85–92.
63. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco, "Norte/Sur," liner notes to the Guillermo Gómez-Peña LP, *Borderless Radio: Solo & Collaborative Works (1985–1993)*. The text to "Norte/Sur" is also available in Fusco, *English Is Broken Here*. For La Lupe's recording of "Fever," see La Lupe, *Reina de la canción latina*.
64. Monsiváis, "La naturaleza de la onda."
65. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xvii; and Quijano, "Modernity, Identity, and Utopia in Latin America," 152–53.
66. Spitta, "Transculturation, the Caribbean, and the Cuban-American Imaginary," 160–63.
67. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 103.

68. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6.

69. Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*, 101.

70. See Boggs, "Musical Transculturation," 76.

71. Ortiz, "La transculturación blanca de los tambores negros," 76.

72. In their study of international pop music culture, Wallis and Malm also propose transculturation as a musical process, yet they curiously do so with no reference to Ortiz. They propose transculturation as the fourth pattern of musical interaction between "big countries" and "small countries" that typically came about in 1970, when transnational corporations began to make their presence felt on the world market. While they imbue transculturation with qualities well in line with Ortiz's formulation—it produces music out of a two-way pattern of exchange—Wallis and Malm can only conceive of transculturation as an effect of transnational capitalism and equate it with what they call "transnationalized culture." As the music I am discussing makes clear, transculturation may indeed happen within global capitalism. But as Ortiz's work effectively demonstrates, its definition is certainly not contingent upon global capitalism, and as a complex, intercultural, and historical process, it goes far beyond a market-produced transnationalized culture.

73. See Monsiváis, *Mexican Postcards*, 52–53.

74. Arizmendi, "What Ever Happened to the Sleepy Mexican?" 107. In the way that *naco*-ization or *naco*-fication uses the "limits" of poor economic conditions to recycle and transfigure dominant cultural forms (using techniques such as irony, parody, camp, and satire), and in the way it enables dispossessed subjects to fashion and perform a self by critiquing dominant culture, it bears much in common with similar subaltern strategies at work in other cultural and national contexts across the Americas: African American signifying, Cuban *choteo*, Puerto Rican *vacilón*, and, perhaps most relevant to my discussion here, Chicano *rasquachismo*.

75. Another 1980s band, Nopálica, followed the Botellita tradition of giving rock an Aztec makeover by announcing that their album, *Refried Nopals*, which contained the song "Taj Nopal," was broadcast from "Nezahualrock City."

76. Valdes, "English con Salsa," 4–5.

77. Duran and Barrios, "La larga y triste historia del rock mexicano," 14.

78. A rough translation of the Brecht lines would read as follows: "There are men who fight for a day and they are good / There are others who fight for a year and they are better / There are those who fight for many years and they are very good / But there are those who fight all of their life: those are the indispensable ones."

79. Botellita de Jerez, "Guacarock del Santo"; and Silvio Rodríguez, "Sueno con serpientes." Also see Rodríguez's *Cuba Classics 1*.

80. See Concrete Blonde and Los Illegals, *Concrete Blonde y Los Illegals; Mexican Rock and Roll Rumble and Psych-Out South of the Border*; and *Blue Demon's Mexican Rock and Roll Favorites*.

81. For more on the history of *lucha libre*, see Levi, “The Adventures of Lucha Libre on the Small Screen.”

82. See, e.g., the films *Santo contra los zombies* and *Profanadores de tumbas*.

83. For more on *lucha libre*, see Monsivais, *Los rituales del caos*, 125–33.

84. Gómez-Peña, “Superbarrio Visits the Border.”

85. See Martínez, “Corazón del rocanrol”; and Gómez-Peña, “A Binational Performance Pilgrimage.”

86. See Duran and Barrios, “La larga y triste historia del rock mexicano,” 13, 21, 65; and Gómez-Peña, “A Binational Performance Pilgrimage,” 26. Gómez-Peña’s comments about rock bands as chroniclers of post-earthquake Mexico are taken from an unpublished interview with the author.

87. Gómez-Peña, *Warrior for Gringostroiika*, 18.

88. Alarcón, “Conjugating Subjects,” 137.

89. Kun, “Viva los rockeros!”

90. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 128.

91. García Canclini, “Cultural Reconversion,” 32.

92. See Yúdice, “Postmodernity and Transnational Capital in Latin America.”

93. See Robinson, Buck, and Cuthbert, *Music at the Margins*, 106.

94. Richard, “The Latin-American Problematic of Theoretical-Cultural Transference.”

95. Gómez-Peña and Fusco, “Bilingualism, Biculturalism, and Borders,” 154–55; and Gómez-Peña, “A Binational Performance Pilgrimage,” 18.

96. See Caifanes, *Caifanes*; Maldita Vecindad y Los Hijos del Quinto Patio, *El Circo*; Maldita Vecindad y Los Hijos del Quinto Patio, *Baile de Mascaras*; Tijuana NO, *Transgresores de la Ley*; and Cuca and Youth Brigade, *Silencio = muerte*. For more on Nor-Tec, visit <http://www.milrecords.com>; and see Kun, “New Tijuana Moods.”

97. García Canclini, “Cultural Reconversion,” 31.

CONCLUSION

1. For a more detailed analysis of this history of Ozomatli, see Kun, “Around the World in L.A.”; and Viesca, “Straight Out the Barrio.”

2. Witkin, *Adorno on Music*.

3. Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 152.

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