Distortion: Authority, Authenticity, and Agency in Zora Neale Hurston's Black Folk Recordings

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In Digital Humanities "Distant Listening" scholarship with sound, the expectation is that the data set will be clean and audible and that its metadata will be descriptive and informative. [1] In contrast to this notion, this talk demonstrates the importance of distortions in approximately seventy-five brief "tracks" or recorded songs, stories, and explanations from a folklore recording trip Zora Neale Hurston took in 1935 to Florida and Georgia with Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle for the Library of Congress. To enable this consideration, I first rehearse Hurston's complex history as an ethnographer and a writer who resisted gendered and racialized social and professional norms around her practices, situating the recordings in time and place. I then rely on theories in Saidiya Hartman's "scenes of subjection" (1997: 3), Simone Browne's "dark sousveillance" (2015: 21), and Gilroy's "politics of transfiguration" (1993: 37) to consider how social and technical distortions—evident in how I listen to and access Hurston's recordings today—function in conversation with readings of Hurston's repertoire on race and identity.

The "Traditional Music and Spoken Word Catalog" from the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center notes more than 700 tracks from the trip, each a few minutes long (American Folklife Center, n.d.). The catalog identifies only seven tracks with a specific role for Hurston. By my listen to the recordings, Hurston was not only recording or performing, she was consistently and actively participating on at least seventy-five of the 1935 recordings by directing, information gathering, and otherwise engaging the performers. The reason for these catalog distortions are both social and technological. In the first instance, Hurston's influence would have had to have been recognized as authoritative by her white collaborators including Alan Lomax who wrote the recording log from the trip, which forms the basis of the information included in the Library of Congress catalog and subsequently the online metadata. In addition, the continued silencing around her participation could be the result of the MARC (Machine-Readable Cataloging) standard, a standard schema used to describe and catalogue cultural artifacts, including these recordings. From the sound of Hurston's activities, she did not fit the schema for its prescribed roles. Technical distortions also mark why the recording log, the metadata, and prevailing scholarship for these artifacts elide the complex and influential roles that Hurston played during these recording sessions. Digitization notes kept by the Library of Congress in the 1980s during digitization indicate other causes for audio distortion including that the recordings were often "overmodulated" or the grooves are "poor" "bad" or "collapsed" causing the needle to skip as well as the editing choices sound editors made to ameliorate these distortions in order to create a "cleaner" preservation copy, including, in some cases, that in the transference from disc to digital some audio was deleted.

Distortion is a perception. It is a twisting awry or out-of-shape. It is what Hurston calls, something "off-key" from an expectation. Distortions are not without their pleasures. Malapropisms can be illuminating, and sound distortions in music can be expressive and right on-key for the situation. Regardless, a diverted expectation is an opportunity for reflection, for reconsidering the process by which what I perceive as "right" occurs. Listening for social and technical distortions in Hurston's audio recordings presents an opportunity to question what we think we ought to hear, when and why, and the perceptions and values we hold that shape these expectations. The presence of these sociopolitical and technical distortions invites questions about the broader role of authority, authenticity, and Black subjectivity in Black folk scholarship as well as in large-scale audio analysis projects like my own High Performance Sound Technologies for Access and Scholarship (HiPSTAS) project. In short, distortions are a reminder that space, time, and personhood are relative to the tools and people at hand. The presence of distortions directly influences a scholar's ability to assign Hurston the authoritative role of "questioner," and simultaneously begs the questions, Who and what has authorized which and how historical artifacts are made available for scholarship? Through and by which technologies? Close listening to her 1935 recordings reveals that social and technical distortions are in line with how Hurston expresses the complexities of authority, authenticity, and subjectivity in her writings, which amplifying black epistemologies of self-making and creating resonant possibilities for imagining new transgressive formulations of cultural identity. This talk will consider how distortions play an important in large-scale digital projects with sound in the humanities.

Notes

1. Some projects include "Structural Analysis of Large Amounts of Music" (SALAMI), the "Mining a Year of Speech" project, The "Harvesting Speech Datasets for Linguistic Research on the Web" all project from the very popular Digging into Data Challenge, supported by funding agencies across the Western hemisphere. These and other projects are described and evaluated in Williford and Henry (2012).

Bibliography

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