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ON BLACK SPECULATIVE MUSICALITIES

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These words—Black, speculative, musicalities—open out onto a vast terrain. None of them resolves to a single meaning; each one points, traces, asks. What might we hope to identify by setting them together?

The word *Black* as I invoke it here spans the last half-millennium, what Frank Wilderson has called "the time of the paradigm,"[1] or what Achille Mbembe describes in his *Critique of Black Reason* – by which he means:

> a collection of voices, pronouncements, discourses, forms of knowledge, commentary, and nonsense, whose object is things or people "of African origin" . . . From the beginning, its primary activity was fantasizing. . . . A range of intermediaries and institutions . . . contributed to the development of this reason and its transformation into common sense and a habitus . . . . its function was to codify the conditions for the appearance and the manifestation of the racial subject that would be called the Black Man (le Nègre) and, later, within colonialism, the Native (L'indigène). . . . [The] goal was to produce the Black Man as a racial subject and site of savage exteriority, who was therefore set up for moral disqualification and practical instrumentalization. We can call this founding narrative the *Western consciousness of Blackness*.[2]

If Mbembe's work is part of a critical deconstructive project, we also have a long history of Black scholars, theorists, music-makers, writers, and others, thinking through and testing African diasporic forms of expression: aesthetics, politics, priorities, and real-life stakes. At the turn of the twenty-first century, David Lionel Smith wrote,

> What then is black culture? No one can answer these questions definitively, because 'black culture' is not a fixed, single thing 'out there' in the empirical world. It is, rather, a complex and ambiguous set of processes and interactions, facts, and fantasies, assertions and inquiries, passionately held and passionately contested.[3]

The *speculative* is associated with counterfactuals, practices of world-building that diverge from empirical reality and imagine different social orders counter to our own. Hence a history of Black speculative thought would span the gamut of the Black radical

imagination: fugitivity, practices of refusal, spirituals, Aimé Césaire's Afro-Surrealism, Dr. King's call for "creative maladjustment," Afrofuturism, abolition, critical fabulation.

In thinking through Black people's expressions and forms of life, Christina Sharpe theorizes,

> Living as I have argued we do in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive, or have been punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness.[4]

Music is our word for how we listen to each other. The first question is, "we, who?" And the second is, what's this zone called "other," to which we listen? And third, what is that other doing that grabs our ear? Those are the methods by which we categorize music: first, by constructing a listening subject, a "we" of which "you" are a member; second, by identifying your relation to the other, the not-you; and third, by solidifying that other's actions into objects that circulate, stockpile, signify, invoke.

A young man on the subway, bearded and tattooed, in a red head scarf and white muscle shirt, wears a backpack from which music emanates. It fills the car with beats and bass, a distressed pseudovoice warbling autotuned minor thirds. His friend, slimmer, hunched, with cornrows, rhymes along to himself, signaling his affiliation. We are plunging downtown from Harlem on a Thursday midmorning 4 train, and the demographic shifts in the usual ways as the doors open and close. Nobody overtly objects to this engulfing cloud of sound, though its extent and power is unusual. It is a palpable repurposing of the moving space into something more like a club, or a sidewalk. Certain bodies' movements, while not quite dance, are somehow reconditioned by these engulfing rhythms and strains, this intervening Black and Brown aural presence that emboldens their steps and stances. Yes, that's our "we," their bodies say. We who live uptown and in the outer boroughs, we who commute to the more moneyed neighborhoods if we're lucky, we who move, sing, speak, listen, feel this way. Music is a connector, an affiliator.

The constellation of practices referred to as Black music confers sonic life on such fugitive, relational qualities: embodied listening, heterarchical interaction, call and response, moving-together-in-time, and ecstatic transcendence. Moten writes,

> The animative materiality—the aesthetic, political, sexual, and racial force—of the ensemble of objects that we might call black performances, black history, blackness, is a real problem and a real chance for the philosophy of the human being (which would necessarily bear and be irreducible to what is called, or what somebody might hope to someday call, subjectivity).[5]

The work of Jamaican cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter speaks to these intersections and faultlines of the humanities, sciences, and Black studies by interrogating this category of

the human being. In "Unparalleled Catastrophe for our species? Or, to give humanness a different future: Conversations," jointly authored with Katherine McKittrick, Wynter considers the conceptual space opened up by Darwin's "epistemological rupture or leap—that is, its far-reaching challenge to Christianity's biblical macro-origin story's . . . divide between an ostensibly generically Christian *mankind*, on the one hand, and all other species, on the other." She adds, "What I'm putting forward as a challenge here, as a wager, is . . . that the human is, meta-Darwinianly, a hybrid being, both bios and logos . . . bios and mythoi . . . together, define what it is to be human." And: "Notice! One major implication here: humanness is no longer a noun. *Being human is a praxis*."[6] So she calls for us to relativize the West's hitherto secular liberal monohumanist conception of our being human, its overrepresentation as the being of being human itself. We need to speak instead of our genres of being human. Once you redefine being human in hybrid mythoi and bios terms, and therefore in terms that draw attention to the relativity and original multiplicity of our *genres* of being human, *all of a sudden what you begin to recognize is the central role that our discursive formations, aesthetic fields, and systems of knowledge must play in the performative enactment of all such genres of being hybridly human*.[7]
To this end she considers the site of Blombos Cave, South Africa, home to the earliest pieces of human art ever found: a 77,000-year-old etching in ochre, in a humanly organized crosshatch pattern, in the context of what is further revealed to be a 100,000-year-old *workshop* holding the tools for artmaking. It is found among evidence of catching, cooking and serving shellfish, an originary site filled with all the ingredients for culture-making: a cave by the sea, where humans have gathered with their creations and creating anew, nourishing and grooming one another, marking objects with images for future generations. Wynter unpacks the significance of these artmaking practices around this master symbol of processed ochre, specifically: what she calls the "*symbolic transformation of biological identity*," as ochre-as-material comes to represent menstrual blood. What is revealed is "the praxis of the ritual initiatory transformation of the first form of life (biologically born individual life) into the second form of life (communal/fictive or *symbolic life*)."[8] She suggests that we need these orienting myths because they *make* the category of the human – not just a scientifically defined biological creature, but bios *plus* mythoi – and so she seizes upon a rehabilitative, reorienting myth that regrounds that category: the first instance, in humankind's cradle, of a ritual of human symbolic transformation of biological identity.

So, where is music, that most impermanent medium, inside this ancient archive? It has to be everywhere. What might such a human lifeworld sound like, a scene of sociality among artisans and others gathered inside the echoic caverns of Blombos Cave, 90,000 years BCE? In order to listen not just across the usual litany of musical genres, but rather to our innumerable *genres of being human*, to listen on a species-wide scale across the eons, we will need to consider music as a sphere of human action that straddles bios and mythoi, as one of our most ancient, most productive practices of *constructing* humanness.

I submit then that it is not actually not music per se but *musicality* that binds us. What do I mean by this? Let's agree that musicality denotes an emergent quality of establishing musicalness, or of becoming musical. Today, not all musical things are called music, and not all music is universally felt to be musi*cal*. In the Anglo-west, to call something *musical*

is to confer a special value on it—much more rare and important than mere music, that ubiquitous substance that wallpapers modern life. To call something *musical* means that something *feels the way you believe music is supposed to feel.* Musicality is an entirely subjective quality of, let's say, feeling called, guided, or hailed into an affective relation with the sonorous acts of another. This quality can come about in innumerable ways: we have diverse musicalities for various modes of relation. Musicalities arise as embodied, which is to say affective and temporal, relation among beings and objects: not just sound-making, but *sonic mattering*.

This is why I argue that our domain of study should be *musicality*, the sphere of relations, not *music*, the object/substance—but furthermore that musicality should be treated as a dynamic, speculative, affectively charged, ritual space, a liminal zone of experience whereby people seek to experiment, create, commune, to hail and be hailed, to hold and be held, to lose themselves and be remade, to become part of something larger than themselves. Musicality, then, is a category that is continually being unmade and remade across humankind's thousand centuries: our many *musicalities* are nothing less than our praxes of being human together.

Let us listen to Black performance as a ritual space for *Black speculative musicalities*: sonically disruptive practices that posit new ways of becoming musical, new genres of being human, otherwise possibilities[9] for Black life and Black subjectivities, and radical futurities for the "philosophy of the human being." With and through Black speculative musicalities, we are bearing witness to an insurgent sonic world-building: moments of Black performance becoming musical, fugitive Black sonic operations affording intercorporeal movement, pleasure, release, ascension.

Importantly, this essay is not specifically concerned with so-called "experimental" or "avant-garde" aesthetics – except insofar as all Black musical creation could be described as experimental. As with Black life, Black sonic mattering can never be guaranteed under the violence of the existing order; so we must hear *every* instance of Black musicality as animated by a speculative life force, a defiant livingness, ideating and calling into being an (im)possible future: that persistent quality of the Black radical tradition that exceeds all frames.

As a non-Black person, I do not purport to make a sweeping pronouncement here about Black musics or Black people. Instead I hope to approach and highlight some scenes in which Black subjectivities, Black music-makers, Black counterpublics, sonically harken new ways of living, relating, listening, and being, new arrangements of time and space, new imaginings of the social, bending, breaking, burrowing under, or flying over the existing order of things: new musical orders, new paths. What follows is a series of subjective accounts, of varying length and focus, of some encounters with recorded and live Black music-making generated via interface: a piano, percussion, a saxophone, knobs on a machine. What different genres of the self do these embodied, transduced acts bring forth from me as I strive to narrate them? How do they offer a sense of their makers' defiant livingness, and of our own?

Duke Ellington: " *Lotus Blossom*" 1967.[10] There's some milling around behind him as he works his way through this bittersweet song by his then-newly departed, longtime musical partner, Billy Strayhorn. Ellington expressed the intimacy of their intergenerational creative

partnership as an embodied fusion: "Billy Strayhorn was my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head, my brainwaves in his head, and his in mine."[11] Here we hear Ellington's hands, haunted by Strayhorn's premature death, lovingly, mournfully retracing the steps of his friend's arms and brainwaves. The limpid, pendular oscillations in the left hand are marking burdened time, like a melancholy ballet en pointe, while the right hand is the dancer's upper body, in its way of reaching, turning, and caressing the melody, now tender, now distraught, reworking it chorus after chorus, staying with the burden, as though searching its corners for a trace of his friend's life.

Even in Ellington's later years, they had to pry him away from the piano every night, after any given concert. Well after the music stands, instruments, microphones, and scores were all packed up, the mop pushed across the floor, a lone figure still sat building, searching, gnarled hands still probing the instrument. His road manager would lean on him, pointing at his watch.

The tendency is to reach for the anecdote about how the man spoke, how he walked, what he wore, what he ate, as if these things made him great. But the laborious, unglamorous zone of music-making is the same for everyone, a great equalizer: full of small failures, dead ends, abandoned drafts, ideas created and annihilated in an instant, and yet suffused with an ethic of care and discernment. The unnerving truth is that this is what made him great, and could indeed make anyone great: a lifetime's worth of tireless, self-assured, emotionally open pursuit, unpacking, scrutiny, and refinement of one idea, and the next idea, and the next, and the next.

Randy Weston: "*Ancient Future*," (2002).[12] What first strikes the ear is a composerly bearing— an attitude towards construction, a way of building or putting-together (which is what "composing" means) with the fundamental contours of interval — and I say "bearing" because he puts his torso in it; you might say that his very stance is audible. There is an insistent repetition with gesture, the telltale mark of the hands; a surprising capacity for digital-rhythmic excitations; an affinity for deep, clangorous vibration, a resonant tolling of the piano's body like a great bell.

A melody contains within it a longing, sorrow, hope, dignity, and a plainspoken grandeur. The left hand guides and shapes while the right hand tells, sings, spits knowledge, traces truths. The refinement of touch, the attention to weight, texture, and melodic shape. We have not yet understood what his right hand's lyrical-gestural insistence meant; we lack the vocabulary to describe what work his unnameable chords did. What are these ancient futures?

A solo piano introduction would plumb the dark, thick, murky depths of a song, then echo them an octave above, in dyads. Then he would set the pulse rolling, majestically, effortlessly, without force. A plainspoken melody contains within it a longing, sorrow, hope, dignity, and grandeur. The left hand guides, shapes, and pushes from below, while the right hand carves from above; it tells, it sings, it spits knowledge, it traces truths. The refinement of touch, the attention to weight, texture, and melodic shape. We have not yet understood what his right hand's lyrical-gestural insistence meant; we lack the vocabulary to describe what work his unnamable chords did. What were these ancient futures?

In an interview I did with Mr. Weston in Guelph in 2014, I asked him about his piano conception. He listed a few points of reference:

> With *Basie* I loved his touch, just extraordinary. But also he developed a concept of just playing a few notes, but each note was so important because it was the blues. So from him I learned that kind of simplicity of the blues . . . *Nat King Cole*. He was a master pianist. Each note was utter beauty. I can't describe him any other way . . . *Art Tatum*. He had a kind of magic: polyrhythmic imagination, everything on the piano. From Art Tatum I got DARING. Never his technique, but that kind of daring . . . When I heard *Monk* play the piano I said, "I can play more piano than this guy . . ." But I went back again, and the first time I heard Ruby My Dear – magic for me. The magic of Africa. When he played the piano everyone used to laugh at him because he was funny, but it was almost like an African ballet. When I heard Monk I heard how music must have been 10,000 years ago. I heard a magic in the piano . . . *Duke Ellington* does a lot of things with the bass of the piano. A lot of pianists don't touch the bass of the piano; I love it. Duke, with his orchestral concept, also his commitment to his people, Duke was way ahead of everybody. To me he was the premier revolutionary . . . So you put them all together, and then you put traditional African music on top of that. Music from Congo, Benin, My experience with the Gnawa people in Morocco. Put all that together – that's Randy Weston.[13]

I, too, adore and am indebted to all of these sources; and so I am here to tell you that much of what Mr. Weston did at the piano could be attributed to *none* of the above. Some of his sounds can only be taken as his own ingenuity. The word "tradition," which has, at least since the 1980s, become permanently conjoined to the word "jazz," has a way of downplaying or even erasing the inventive, disruptive, speculative musicalities of this great Black music — obscuring the simple truth of the matter, that a musician like Mr. Weston pulled off some of his own utterly unprecedented things, his own mysteries, his own magic.

We can hear the history of this music as a history of ideas, and we can therefore state, without exaggeration, that Randy Weston's legacy offers some of the most far-reaching, most coolly inventive musical conceptions of the last century, which are nonetheless some of the least studied and least understood.

We attended Randy Weston's homegoing service at the Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York City. At 92 and 6'7", he was a giant, a leader, a sonic healer, a deep listener, a citizen of the non-West, a Brooklynite, a pan- Africanist, a chief. The spans of his hands, his heart, and his lifetime were vast, and subsequently he spoke for many: a musical dignitary, an emissary of compassion.

That day, the procession of his extra-long coffin was led by a chorus of drummers, a half dozen playing a West African arsenal — djembes, talking drums — and two more with metal clappers playing Gnawa trance patterns. Their rhythmic admixture filled the senses and jerked your spirit aloft.

The rest of us musicians were asked to follow in pairs behind the family, who followed the pallbearers. We all gathered in an anteroom, in close quarters, and the drummers

started. As the rhythm unit lurched into motion, wrapped in bright fabrics, the sound filled the small chamber perfectly.

But what happened next was a sound that I won't forget anytime soon. The doors flew open, and this thunderous ensemble exited the anteroom. Suddenly all those acoustic vibrations tumbled into that cavernous hall, and their sound sprang forth to the distant walls of the enormous church, returning to us as a glorious, diffuse roar. It was a space designed for celestial sounds — pipe organs, choirs, boy sopranos, sounds with imperceptible articulations — but here instead, ten thousand impulses, sticks striking skins across resonant wooden casks, became a many-limbed army storming the place, a tumult of actional sound climbing the walls, bouncing off of every cornice, rounding every flying buttress. To hear those drums spill into a stone-and-mortar cathedral, and to feel the reverberations enveloping us, provided a special, mystical thrill. A swarm of rhythm, a vortex of thwacks and thumps and claps: the Global South, striking back, engulfing the hubristic Western edifice that had been built on their backs.

We followed the procession along the southern wall to the rear of the church and back up the center aisle. By then the drummers had gathered behind the lectern, and were really getting into something. The metal clappers are played in such a way that the tempo travels forward, incrementally yet inevitably, such that the entire assembly cannot help but go with it; it just feels like the right thing to do. The result is an intoxicating rhythmic vector that drives the gathering towards ecstasy. That church, bursting with sound and bodies, summoned forth a million other souls in transit, who joined and merged with Weston's journey across realms in a pulsating swirl of colors.

Ensemble. The composer-pianist Muhal Richard Abrams once said, "When you make music with someone, that creates a bond that can never be broken."[14] It sounds impossible, wishful; but what if we suspend our disbelief, and play out the scenario? If the doing of music - electing to take action together, coordinating what to play and how to play it, synchronizing actions, tuning in, making real-time relational decisions, moving with the same pulse — creates a lasting inter-self, then what kind of work do these unbreakable bonds do? What specific power lies in this invisible tensile web of relations in sound?

We've been in it, zigzagging across Europe. Most days are transit purgatories, strangely stationary affairs as we drift from one standing queue to the next, eventually making our way to a plane seat, a bumpy van ride, a hotel room, a chaotic soundcheck, a rushed plate of food. This twelve-hour trudge is followed by, finally, the point of it all: to shed our skins in public, to access some molten core of raw collective experience — a ritual, a spectacle, a communal reckoning.

This performative doing and being, these ephemeral freedoms, are enabled and upheld by an intense listening, an elaborately detailed, relational interaction. The first requirement is an openness to a rather banal yet strangely intimate kind of contact: a willingness to move together. There's something vulnerable about electing to sense and produce time together, as when asking someone to dance. To join someone in synchronous movement - of the limbs and joints, or of the voice, or in actions mediated through instruments - is to connect spine-to-spine, torso-to-torso, brain-stem-to-brain-stem. It is deeper than touch,

earlier than speech; it is a merging of bodily awareness. This skill can be cultivated, of course; some people get more chances than others; some must seek them out.

As our group navigates through its set — repertoire and solo episodes chosen step by step, in relation to what has happened so far and what impact it has had, ideally moving the energy in the room like a good DJ — the larger message is one of unity; a dense, compact network of affiliations among a half-dozen players, casually expressed through a series of oddly comfortable, rough-and-tumble collective actions. It is the fact that this aggregate of bodies can act as a single system, "moving with its own intelligence," as Wadada Leo Smith once said. The compositions have abundant detail; however, the point is not the details themselves, but rather the story they tell. Our unity implies years of shared history, provoking an observer's imagination: who are they? why them? When and how did they arrive at this understanding about each other? And why do I feel connected to it?

The John Coltrane Quartet. *Both Directions at Once: The Lost Album* (recorded 1963; released 2018).[15] Pulsation emerges, forms a web of relation that entangles anyone in its reach. It is the sound of pendular motion, a pair of fingers on low strings, hands bearing sticks on hammered metal and skin, fingers and palms splayed across ivory and wood — all supported by a group of homologous effectors: human forearms, in various manifestations, wielded at all angles, lifted by muscles and falling with or faster than gravity, being lifted again, falling again, lifting again. We hear in these motions a set of sustained relations to the earth - ways of landing, ways of lifting. The flood of details that surrounds the pulse — the supporting barrage of cymbal patterns, snare attacks, toms, rimshots, bass drum kicks; the resonant piano chords landing firmly on upbeats, and miraculous runs lifting up the beat; the resolutely dancing bass — depict ways of holding pulse while living life, moving together, their freedoms in synchrony.

The saxophonist becomes an odd counterexample in his own band. The location of the beat in his body is largely unrelated to gravity; it exists by analogy. It comes from breath, embouchure, and fingering, and it appears in the timing of individual notes with respect to one another and to the rhythms of the band. His actions relate more directly to speech than to walking: supported by a column of air (which must be replenished between phrases), articulated by the tongue and throat, accompanied by minute gesticulations of the fingers, held sideways.

Drummer Roy Haynes said of Coltrane, "He had the world's greatest drummer inside him." The time emanates from within. That drummer within is the one who walks, pulsation moving across the legs and torso in a balanced periodic distribution. A sturdy, ambulatory homunculus, a bouncing inner version of the self that supports the actions of the outer self who stands more still.

That is the framework across which these canvases are stretched. The temporal armature of music is synchronous movement. So we may attend to what that movement sounds like, how the bodies lift and land with and against each other; and we may attend to the identity of those sounds: the tone colors, note choices, harmonic palette.

In Coltrane's quartet, pulse is paramount. It is not a mere afterthought; it is the crux of the music's action. Given that, there is also much to say about the spectrum of information

that appears across such strongly pulsed time. A listening ear constantly darts from the shape and color of an expressed idea, to the way it pertains to the underlying form, to the feeling as it lands in rhythmic relation, to the way other players kick around responses, support and push back. So-called "solos" are still emanations of the group dynamic, in what Fred Moten likened to a solar flare, foregrounding not an individual but an aspect of the whole, a mode of collective excitation.

I find myself playing a couple of those long-lost Coltrane compositions with the late saxophonist's own son Ravi, himself an imposing musician. We tucked into that opening blues, a compact, slickly severe figure known only as Untitled Original 11383. I found that it engenders a way of playing that is iconically of that quartet: familiar sounds that you might call "McCoy-isms" or "Elvin-ish" for their faithful imitation of Tyner's and Jones's rhythms and colors. But it was also somehow that I was carried forth into that tributary, almost involuntarily. One surrenders to a familiar set of decisions, a well-traveled network of actions, and it manifests as a hexis: a particular way of holding oneself while acting. The spread of the hands, the swaggering intensity of attack, the rhythm and density, the outpouring of the self. Though familiar and possibly cliché, there is nothing closed or un-free about the feeling. It is as though Ravi's presence, as the son of Alice and John, gives us license to step on with him into that iconic, storied, raging river of sound and spirit.

Sun Ra: *Monorails and Satellites* (solo piano), 1968.[16] Formative music, creations full of feeling and storytelling, tuneful, haunting, rhapsodic. From his corner of the universe, Sun Ra arrives at some staggering musical discoveries—an utterly pianistic way of extending tonality and pulse through excitations and exhortations, resonances and impassioned ascents.

A musician who played with Sun Ra for years reported the bandleader's description of a guitarist in the band: "He sounds pretty good, but he plays too many known things. He needs to get into some unknowns."

The perennial question with piano music is: At what point, for the listener, do the hands *disappear*, so that the music can emerge? That is Sun Ra's zone, the DMZ where this material dwells— in that frontier between physicality and the imagination, between earthly reality and the world of spirits, between known and unknown. It could be said that this space *is* the place claimed by Black music, where transcendence *is* embodied, and the word *is* made flesh—or as Sun Ra once styled the phrase, "the were'd made *fresh*" ("were'd" itself an exotic re-tensing of the verb "to be").

In these solo performances, the tactile ingredients of stride, boogie-woogie, and other "jump" piano styles—pianistic behavioral shards, each fragment full of dance impulse and voice-like melisma—are submitted to a radical lifting of their underlying premises, so that we're left with the familiar behaviors untethered to grids of meter or harmony. The result is pure invention: space towers rising up in that place between body and soul.

A persistent faith in the process—of subjecting these piano-player-isms to an alter-destiny of transformation and recombination—leaves us pivoting wildly between sentimental ballads and contrapuntal adventures. On some pieces we encounter one or

the other in isolation, and on others these countervailing tendencies are nonchalantly sutured together.

There's a trickster at work in this music, directly probing, pushing, and worrying the interface of the instrument. It often starts with a distillation of conventional playing—calm stride, or patient ballad playing, or boogie-woogie action—but then it erupts, splits open. From what feels at times like a beginner's chaos, patterning emerges—the spacings of the fingers are not random after all, and is that a melody? A progression? I am at times reminded of "Chordially," Thelonious Monk's only recorded open improvisation.[17] It reveals how, for Monk as for Sun Ra, melody, phrase, harmony, and form all emerge from or through (or, at the very least, are inseparable from) bodily interaction with the keys, a patient tactic that starts rigorously from first principles.

The actual events are important, but so is the feeling of eventfulness. Each mini-episode tumbles and morphs into another. What we find ourselves riding are the *qualities of movement.* "Cognition," for example, shows up with a choppy dance: the Nutty Professor doing the Robot. It is never not fleshy, but you get to suspend your disbelief for a while, and imagine an army of mechanical fingers (or tiny robo-legs) descending upon the keys. You never forget Mr. Blount is there, but sometimes you find yourself saying, Maybe he really *is* from Saturn; where else are these sonic beings coming from—these roving, bending, crawling, wriggling polyphonies? Eventually a right-hand spiraling behavior (fingers? knuckles?) interrupts once, then twice. Suddenly a unifying principle, the pianist's spine, provides the gravity necessary to close the form.

Similarly, the rhythmic underpinning of "Space Towers" is sometimes five beats long, sometimes six, but mostly it subscribes to an immeasurable bodily crawl. It's not quite a bassline but just the implied shape of it, made new with each throbbing iteration, its incremental changes generating progress.

"The Changing Wind" appears as a mischievous dancer whose whims affect the landscape with mostly gentle caresses and light steps, but occasionally gather enough power to destabilize, and at other times eddy around a central thought. In "The Galaxy Way," the hands pick out an abundant path of stars, some piercing through radiantly. As the path unfolds, the stars are less distant, and we feel their gravity. A familiar twelve-beat rhythm bubbles through, and a chording behavior emerges. The pattern is broken with a brusque gesture, as if to redirect the flow. It is taken back up, then halted, then alternated with the opening constellations, creating another formal boundary. (Something about form is actually about memory—about how, in the present, we might be reminded of something from the past.)

"Easy Street" reveals, in its second eight bars, a few runs and cascades that come more from the hands than from the song. This is how Sun Ra often intervenes on a standard—by bringing physicality back into the picture, the part of piano playing that is unsung: the un-song. It is a literal "reach"—the sound of the hand extending itself.

"The Ninth Eye" begins with stepwise motion in the two alternating hands, chords in one and bass notes in the other. Then they produce thick staccato aggregates, then rolling figures. Sometimes a certain figure or series is paused, rewound, and played back, especially when either a blues motive appears, or a surprising resonance, twang, or buzz is detected. Later, the left hand ambles to the basement, lingering in that nearly pitchless

register, a strange attractor exciting a quasiperiodic two-lobe whorl. Across this, a methodical mid-range melody-ing leads to a longer spiraling in the top register. An uneasy chromaticism is born of the hands' ways, gyrating and cycling, evolving and disrupting, creeping and jumping.

Like its titular object, "Skylight" serves to remind you of heaven, perhaps. You keep wanting to say, "I recognize this song/progression/phrase." But it is not "a ballad"—instead it is "ballad-ing," a creative process of inventing plausible ballad forms. If I were from Earth, its creator seems to be thinking, I just might enjoy this song. But unlike the songs you know, this music doesn't repeat, or close; it just constantly reforms and regenerates, until it stops. It is the syntax freed of semantics, singing without a song.

There's a motor in the collection's title cut, a steadily pulsed left-hand patterning, across which occasional melodic fragments move as if following a different, more sentimental tune. Just when it verges on syrup, it breaks into more ferocious rhythmic behavior, black-key glissandi, and that high-register spiraling again. When we get both hands swirling, there is an ecstatic element breaking through, a vibratory communing with the instrument, which leads into a glorious hammering, and a hypnotic tremolo-ing.

We would do well to think in gerunds about this music. For Sun Ra's creative piano utterances are relentlessly fixated on a single process above all: *becoming*.

Alice Coltrane-Turiyasangitananda: "Prema" (solo piano version on NPR, 1981).[18]

"Prema is a Sanskrit word and it translates to Divine Love." Proceeding at its own pace, an elemental ritual, prompting a literal taking of breath.

A deep pedal tone. Widely spread chords encompassing all that is within reach.

Tremolos bloom, a solemn left-hand melody tolls, deep roots shift. An orchestral polyphony – gathering enough energy through a piano to conjure a multitude, grab hold of the trouble, carry the pain and the healing force at once, declaiming to the heavens, or is it from them?

Each modulation upward feels like the turning of a season, the possibility of change itself offering the sustenance of optimism amid our foreboding cries.

The shift to the upper register, each rolled chord a sigh and a cry, the sound of an "us." We are held by all that she bears, her austerities.

The sustained tremolo throughout marks the sheer *work* of this magnanimous, selfless, divine, *maternal* love: the work of the hands.

A dramatic move to major, to joy, hope, a prayer answered. As she once said, "The key to being an artist is giving abundantly." Cascading lines in exaltation of a goddess's blessing.

We have been carried to the vista, drenched in awe, and then pulled back into the everyday, with the sting of enlightenment.

Geri Allen: "Lonely Woman" (1988).[19] Her hands first showed up to my teenaged ears as spiders, scampering through multidimensional cracks in the rhythm. Those hands produced spare, spindly melodies, weaving and twisting around the harmonies, and leaving gauzy trails that accumulated into something majestic: an odd, enchanted web spun into the corner of a song, strange and delicate.

Those ephemeral lines, first appearing as spontaneous drops into the abyss, turned out to be structural moves, executed with care, determination, and foresight. I had the ongoing sense that the owner of these hands not only possessed perspicacious insight into whatever piece of music she was playing, but that she managed also to hear whatever that song *wasn't yet saying*—and that was the exact space where she would begin her work, in the time-honored Black speculative tradition. Such was our impression of Geri Allen, the pianist, as documented on other people's recordings: a constant source of sly, wry conjurings and disruptions, chromatic dislocations and interventions, she seemed to glide, unbothered, from mastery to transgression and back.

Her improvisations were full of space, thought, listening, and a liberatory quality; her groove was deep, her two-hand independence often shocking; her lines and voicings were fresh and unique; she would seem at times to play with great reserves of calm, but when she chose to step up, she would dazzle with fearless virtuosity. She could make a piano sigh, whisper, chortle, shriek, and roar.

"The Short End of the Stick" 1989.[20] What captured and fascinated me, particularly in her playing with the late great drummer Ralph Peterson, was not how she plays the changes, nor how she "builds" her solos –it was how she expresses time, fearlessly unbothered by Peterson's fusillades; how she on occasion emanates out of the ensemble texture, again like a solar flare,[21] seeming to swerve away from the form, only to then miraculously land with Peterson's drums, proving that she was with him the whole time; how she seems to be always both *wholly with* and strikingly *other than* the band. I remain mystified by the surprising absence of chords; there are rarely more than two notes sounding at once. Somehow she constructs dancing arcs of affective intensity without resorting to sonic saturation, rhythmic density, or excessive sustain: let's call them *quiet shouts*. A hushed sequence of dyads feels momentous, even climactic. The sparse yet pervasive left-hand stabs hold a clue, as they are never *not* in rhythm; often landing on eighth-note upbeats that lock tightly with the drums and bass, they convey a subtle rhythmic grounding, a quiet self-assurance that she is rhythmically not alone, and need not force the music. The resulting spaces in her solo express a generosity to her bandmates; she is not looking to dominate the conversation, but rather to motivate, propel, and stretch *with* the ensemble. The silences in her playing, in the tradition of soloists like Ahmad Jamal, Shirley Horn, and Wadada Leo Smith, signify key moments of *listening and interdependence*. Most of all, what captivated me in the late 1980s was how her hands would dance: how the embodied structures and rhythms of her hands generated a contrasting, productive musical form of their own. Her playing showcased the speculative work of the hands, their power to imagine new musicalities that intervene on and push against existing forms.

Yet if this was all you knew about Allen—her way of transforming someone else's band by calmly inhabiting, dancing in, and shouting from its margins—you might be a fan, but you would also be wholly unprepared for her own music. Imagine a sturdy, splendid palace built entirely from the peculiar details found in those spiderwebs: the splayed intervals proliferating and surrounding you as ostinati; the jagged, errant lines somehow doubled, orchestrated, even sung; the asymmetric rhythms stacked in contrapuntal towers; all the mercurial tendencies in her piano playing suddenly solidified

and given full force. It was that same aesthetic from the margins, now made thrillingly central. This was the musical language of Geri Allen: clear, ebullient, and resoundingly complete.

Robert Hood: "Minus" (1994).[22] It starts all of a sudden. You move in your biped frame, but the arpeggio comes in threes, orbiting and breaking your symmetry. Its brutality is that it does not change. As it hangs in the air, you start to notice different things about it, like an endless polyphonic crystal. You notice the reverb cloud that seems to hang in the background, reactivated each 1.5 beats. Then this cloud coalesces into a single note that isn't in the existing chord, does not belong. This B forms shifting moiré patterns with the top Bb of the G minor arpeggio. It pingpongs around that top note, toggling among a half-dozen possibilities, forming iterative, machinic blues relations. Was this a song? Or some other thing? We are left to contemplate the eventfulness of what has transpired, the percolating half-step shifts as form, as melody, as a crux of significance.

The question I must ask when I take on this exercise is, what are my analytical details doing in relation to what the music is doing? How do I stop the violent agenda of musical analysis from hijacking the music's function, or ignoring the conditions to and under which the music is responding?

What is hiding from such analysis is how these musics reconfigure their spaces, reorder sociality; musicality as relation. To listen in earphones is to remain fixed in a single spatial orientation to the music; you are a lone stationary observer, pinned to the sweet spot of the stereo image. But to be in a room with other bodies, with sounds bouncing off of every surface, feels quite different; one moves through and is immersed in the very same air that is the vibratory medium of sound. The bass frequencies hit you in the stomach; they modulate the air in stride-length sine waves. The high-end claps and hi-hats flood the atmosphere, clatter off the ceiling, lift the hair off the nape of your neck. Panned synthetic tones float impossibly around the room. The tweak of a filter knob makes objects change color, on a temporal arc that fuses with your mounting emotional state. The music is not of you; it seems not to be of anybody. And yet you feel guided, invited to move and feel with it. The only body present in the place of any musician, the DJ at a console, you worship as you would an officiant, for they serve as conduit for this unseeable power. Musicality emerges not simply in the inner play of the song's formal attributes, but in your very relationship to the floor, walls, and ceiling, to the vibratory excitations of the very air you breathe, and to the co-beings alongside whom you maneuver and sweat and live, with whom you dissolve into collective sensation and action.

This world that calls you into it did not exist until it did, a few decades ago, in postindustrial Detroit and Chicago; this you is therefore also new; these new musical and human relations are the historically emergent result of Black queer invention.

What I have sought to identify is a series of moments in which Black sonic action becomes musical, interpellating listeners into an impossible future made present. I do not mean to romanticize this quality. When I say impossible, I mean in literal, continual danger of white supremacist terror and anti-Black violence that continue to this day. As a non-

Black person with considerable privilege, I do not intend to make a callous pronouncement, some ineffectual warm assurance about Black music and liberation. Rather I am trying to listen as closely as I can, to moments of instability, insurrection, and especially *reconstruction*—Black subjectivities collectively speculating Otherwise sonic architecture: in Coltrane's phrase, *living space*, or what Sun Ra named *alter destiny*.

In spring 2021, the composer-saxophonist Yosvany Terry and I co-taught a course titled "Composer-Performers of the African Diaspora," in which we studied the creative work of visiting artists Henry Threadgill, Cécile McLorin Salvant, Esperanza Spalding, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Nicole Mitchell, and Tyshawn Sorey, and strove to listen for these artists' methods of self-definition. At the end of term, we asked our students to reflect on any common tendencies they noticed across these artists' work. One student, Joy Nesbitt, offered:

> I'm fascinated by the lineage of the diaspora [among] these artists . . . I think there's this ineffable uniquely Black curiosity inherent to all of this work. I think some of it might actually be passed down from the ancestors in that part of Black creativity is excavating other cultures and locations for a sense of identity that was robbed within the creation of the diaspora.

Perhaps "this ineffable uniquely Black curiosity" is what orients the ear diachronically, ancient to the future, speculatively remaking the category of the human across a multiverse of histories. Black curiosity extends a generous invitation to collectively study and feel our way through the contingent emergence, relationality, and sheer precarity of human sonic relation.

Toward a "critical musicalities"

Music's status is not freely given; it is conferred — it is the result of a process in which you, the subject, feel guided or hailed into an affective relation (that is, a musicality) with the sonorous acts of another. The category of music therefore aligns with the bios-mythos category of the human, which is itself explosively unstable and plastic. In challenging the systemic violent rearrangements of the human category—the coloniality of man—Black queer and feminist theorists have cultivated restorative models of care and repair: again, via Wynter, *being human as praxis*. Following their lead, we understand musicality as a dynamic, intimate sociality.

Therefore we must imagine a pivotal position for musicality/ies in any praxis of being human. As I write these words, I think back to Derrida's admonishment – "But who, we?"[23] – and humankind's endless capacity to eject or abandon entire populations from its own category: humanity's inhumanities. I take a cue from this call issued by Lisa Lowe and Kris Manjapra for "a different humanities":

> "The humanities could be instead a way of thinking, reading, writing, and critically reflecting on the 'plasticity' of the human; the human not as fixed form, but as a shifting

> relation itself. A different humanities based in the analytic of relationality invites a total rethinking of discipline and method. Forging alternatives to the coloniality of knowledge, institutionalized in the very methods of the humanities and the history of the university, requires not only an analytic of relation, but also a rethinking of the archive, which may involve new readings of traditional archives, or finding alternative repositories and practices of knowledge and collection. We ponder what it means to 'recover' historical pasts for which there is no or little documentation or evidence. We investigate the manners in which collective memory practices, apocryphal materials, ephemera, and performance may constitute types of archives."[24]

If today's critical humanities interrogate the category of the human across these histories, I am asking similarly for a *critical musicalities* that might study emergences of musical relation as it has occurred across this violent half-millennium, and beyond, and how they might emerge anew, in our present and in our shared futures. Black speculative musicalities will have once again salvaged, illuminated, and remade our philosophies of the human being, our praxes of being human, our conceptions of "us."

As the term "speculative" assures us, there is an important role for the imagination in the kind of work that is called for here. It will be useful to invoke Saidiya Hartman's term, "critical fabulation," which refers to her practice of triangulating from spectral traces in the archives, working from its fissures and erasures, "to recover the insurgent ground of these lives," to develop counternarratives: "a dream book for existing otherwise."[25]

Notes

1 Frank Wilderson, "Doing Time in the (Psychic) Commons," in Anna M. Athangelou and Kyle D. Killian, eds., *Time, Temporality, and Violence in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 87.

2 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 27–28.

3 David Lionel Smith, "What Is Black Culture?" in Wahneema Lubiano, ed., *The House That Race Built* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 192–93.

4 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 130–31.

5 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 7–8.

6 Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 23.

7 Wynter and McKittrick, *On Being Human as Praxis*, 23.

8 Wynter and McKittrick, *On Being Human as Praxis*, 68.

9 Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

10 Duke Ellington, pianist, "Lotus Blossom," by Billy Strayhorn, recorded 1967, track 12 on . . . *And His Mother Called Him Bill*, RCA 6287-2-RB, 1987, compact disc.

11 Duke Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress* (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 156.

12 Randy Weston, composer and pianist, "Ancient Future," recorded June 2001, track 1 on disc 1 of *Ancient Future / Blue*, Mutable Music 17508-2, 2002, 2 compact discs.

13 "Randy Weston interviewed by Vijay Iyer." Recorded at Guelph Jazz Festival, Ontario, Canada, September 4, 2014. https://vimeo.com/127509880

14 "Jack DeJohnette: Made In Chicago (Album EPK) | ECM Records." Uploaded January 9, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edLWmyTegvk

15 John Coltrane, *Both Directions at Once: The Lost Album*, recorded March 4, 1963, Spotify, Impulse, 2018.

16 Sun Ra, *Monorails And Satellites Vols. 1, 2, and 3*, recorded 1966, New York. Bandcamp, Solar Myth Records, 2019. https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/monorails-and-satellites-vols-1-2-and-3

17 Thelonious Monk, "Chordially," track 11 on *The London Collection, Vol. 3*, recorded November 15, 1971, Black Lion BLCD-760142, compact disc, 1990.

18 Alice Coltrane-Turiyasangitananda, "Prema," from "Piano Jazz with Marian McPartland," National Public Radio, recorded December 4, 1981. https://youtu.be/5fV1M-hlllk

19 Charlie Haden/Paul Motian featuring Geri Allen, "Lonely Woman," recorded September 14–15, 1987 in New York, track 1 on *Études*, Soul Note, 1988, cassette.

20 Ralph Peterson Quintet, "The Short End of the Stick," recorded April 19–20, 1988, New York, track 3 on *V*, Blue Note B1-91730, LP, 1989.

21 Rail: So, music becomes a model of art where a group of people are listening and a group of people are making. Moten: It's the ensemble. And it's the recognition that the solo is an emanation of the ensemble. From Jarrett Ernst, "Close Encounters: Fred Moten," *Brooklyn Rail*, November 2017, https://brooklynrail.org/2017/11/art/FRED-MOTEN-with-Jarrett-Earnest.

Jafa: "One of the many things Fred Moten said that had an impact on me is that we normally think of jazz as a tension between a group and an individual: when the individual begins a solo, the group fades into the background. He argued that a better way to understand the individual is as an emanation of the group. Whenever there's a sun in my work, I'm thinking about that: you see the sun blazing; then, all of a sudden, a flare reaches out and you recognize it as a single entity. Afterwards, it's just absorbed back into the body of the sun; it's an emanation." From Jace Clayton, "As Brilliant as the Sun," *Frieze* 193 (March 2018), https://frieze.com/article/brilliant-sun

22 Robert Hood, "Minus," track A2 on *Internal Empire*, 2x vinyl 12" 45RPM album, Tresor 74321 24772-1, 1994.

23 Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," in *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1972), 136.

24 Lisa Lowe & Kris Manjapra, "Comparative Global Humanities After Man: Alternatives to the Coloniality of Knowledge." *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 5 (2019), 23–48.

25 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), xiv–xv.