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“Sandcastles” and Beyoncé’s Break

Paula Harper, Columbia University

Like so many of her actions and performances across the 2010s, Beyoncé’s 2016 visual album *Lemonade* seemed to compel response—an ocean of tweets, a deluge of think pieces. As a visual album, *Lemonade* is a bold political treatise. It’s a dreamy, poetic fantasy. It’s a dense tapestry showcasing the power and beauty of myriad forms of black womanhood; it weaves together afrodiasporic identities, traditions, images, sounds, spirituality, stories. It flows nimbly through genres, from gospel and trap to country and rock. This exploration is a kind of history-making too, a reminding and a reclaiming of sonic space alongside guitars, harmonicas, drum kits—a reminder that country and rock have their roots in black creativity and cultural production. *Lemonade* blurs the universal and the unique, the personal and the collective.



Album Cover of Beyoncé’s Lemonade

This brief article catalogs a few of *my* responses to *Lemonade*—in particular, my response to a moment in the track “[Sandcastles](#).” On my first encounter with the album, my breath caught at a striking moment in the second verse, a point of what seemed like weakness or fracture, a break in Beyoncé’s celebratedly virtuosic voice.

Dishes smashed on the counter
From our last encounter.
Bitch, I snatched out the frame.
Bitch, I scratched out your name
And your face.
What is it about you
That I can’t erase?

For me, the moment of vocal break in “Sandcastles” instigated a site of heightened sonic and affective engagement, via the medium of voice. But I contend that the visual framing of “Sandcastles” within the *Lemonade* visual album *disrupts* an easy collapsing of this moment into a single, accessible emotional affiliation between a viewer-listener and Beyoncé. Instead, by foregrounding Beyoncé’s workmanship and real-life labor as a singer and artist, “Sandcastles” opens up multiple avenues

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“Sandcastles” and Beyoncé’s Break (cont.)

for reading the song and larger project, particularly in terms of claims about gender, race, and agency.

“Sandcastles”

Much of the *Lemonade* visual album is a dreamscape, or a fantasy. Beyoncé floats through a flooded bedroom of poetry and voice, ruminating on the glories and revulsions wrought on and through the female body. She is birthed glorious and enraged. She is a goddess, a bandleader, a priestess, moving in slow motion through fire and water, knitting together dances as unexpected rituals, filled with haunting, sometimes familiar, faces.

Released in April 2016, *Lemonade* followed the 2013 release of the self-titled album *BEYONCÉ*, the wildly successful surprise visual album that achieved massive sales without any prior industry promotion. Like *BEYONCÉ*, *Lemonade* came packaged as both audio and visual tracks; twelve singles woven together into an hour-long movie, sutured via the poetry of Somali-British poet Warsan Shire, read aloud as voiceover by Beyoncé. If the 2013 visual album cohered around themes of Beyoncé’s biography, her role as a musician, wife, and mother, and variegated expressions of her sexuality, the 2016 follow-up centered around the experiences of black women more broadly. The album also was seen to aestheticize Knowles-Carter family drama; the album was initially launched

as a live special on HBO, and fans watching in real-time were quick to interpret the album as a specific confirmation and denunciation of Jay-Z’s infidelity to Beyoncé, which had been a subject of periodic tabloid conjecture for years throughout the 2010s. Fans speculated on social media that the *Lemonade* premiere might have been serving as an audiovisual divorce announcement. Ultimately, though, titles superimposed across the film tracked a trajectory from indictment to pardon: from intuition, denial, anger, to forgiveness, resurrection, hope, redemption.

The song “Sandcastles” comes at the pivotal turning point in this trajectory—“Forgiveness”—with lyrics that speak of the pain of failed relationships; the song opens “We built sandcastles that washed away,” and a recurring refrain laments that “Every promise don’t work out that way.” As a viewer I might have expected to see an angry, bitter, or impassioned Beyoncé—I would have anticipated that her body’s outward appearance conform to the striking and audible fault in her voice, the rasp and almost-scream suggesting a surfeit of emotion, an excess, a loss of control. The actual visual for “Sandcastles,” however, surpasses and complicates these expected images. The section of the *Lemonade* film entitled “Forgiveness” begins—and indeed, the viewer is at the water.



Screenshot from Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade*

“Sandcastles” and Beyoncé’s Break (cont.)

This is the dream world of *Lemonade*—all black and white, slowly panning through trees covered in Spanish moss, intercut with shots of a mesh-shrouded Beyoncé lying on a beach, just touched by languid ripples of the water’s edge.

Despite the suggestion of the title, the dreamy shore is precisely what’s left behind in the transition to the song “Sandcastles” itself. The film moves from outdoor settings to the interior of a domestic space, and shifts from black-and-white to color. The diegetic sound shifts too, from the buggy chirps and whistles of the south in the summertime, to the crackle of a fire and a familiar record, off in the distance—Nina Simone’s “The Look of

But that first shot of Beyoncé-as-recording-musician sticks, and it re-writes a simple understanding of what might otherwise have been understood as sincere vocal failure. Let me return to the voice, then—Beyoncé’s voice as it breaks over the words “your face” and “what is it about you.” As she slides up to the first b-flat of “what” in full chest voice. As she flips to head voice when she pops up to it again to end the phrase on “you.” As instead of clear tone and pitch she rasps, we hear the grain of her throat, the constriction of her vocal cords. It’s visceral, it’s affective, it wrenches attention to the materiality of Beyoncé’s body, and forges a connection between that body and the body of her listener.



Screenshot from Beyoncé’s “Sandcastles”

Love.” Then, as “Sandcastles” begins in earnest, these diegetic domestic sounds are silenced and a piano track starts. Beyoncé sits surrounded by the contemporary electronic accoutrements of her profession—a keyboard, a laptop, headphones and a pop filter.

The viewer sees Beyoncé—not enraged, not perturbed, not even within the world of the song’s textual narrative. Instead, she’s focused, hard at work at the craft of producing contemporary pop music—this music, the music we as listeners and viewers are consuming. As the song progresses, the video’s narrative shifts away from this focus, moving to imagery that’s perhaps more expected—shots of a seemingly-pained Beyoncé, close-ups of her face, intimate, mirrored interactions between her and her husband Jay-Z.

Voice

In thinking of the voice as a powerful medium or conduit, I’m connecting myself to a whole line of scholarship, on voice broadly and on popular music and Beyoncé more specifically. Steven Connor frames voice as a paradox, a production emanating from a specific body, but an entity separate from the uttering body in its utterance. Connor’s term vocalic space encompasses “the ways in which the voice is held both to operate in, and itself to articulate, different conceptions of space, as well as to enact the different relations between the body, community, time, and divinity.”¹ The voice takes up space, extends the body—Beyoncé is distributed out to her listeners, her voice mediated by the modern technologies of sound reproduction and amplification.

“Sandcastles” and Beyoncé’s Break (cont.)

Listening specifically to Beyoncé, Regina Bradley has suggested how sound and voice offer areas of slippage for Beyoncé to navigate and undercut otherwise binding tropes of race and gender expectations.² Additionally, Bradley theorizes what she terms a sonic pleasure politics, in which she argues for a “need to recognize sound as a reservoir of pleasure, raunchiness, and sexual work” and suggests ways in which layers of signification might offer avenues of agency;³ Robin James has similarly suggested ways in which black female musicians “use extra-verbal vocal sounds to re-script gendered bodily pleasure.”⁴ These scholars draw parallels to the work of Ashton Crawley and Shakira Holt, connecting black female pop and hip hop vocalizations to soundmaking traditions of black praise and Pentacostal singing, noisemaking, breathing.⁵

Much of this scholarship on voice explicitly connects voice and pleasure as a conduit within the performer who produces sounds through her voice, both distinctly her own and distinct enough that she can experience them as pleasurable in her own body. But there’s also a relationship that extends from the performer, through the voice, to the listener. As Connor suggests: “When we hear a song that we enjoy, we find it hard not to sing along, seeking to take it into our own bodies, mirroring and protracting its auditory pleasure with the associated tactile and proprioceptive pleasures.”⁶

So in thinking this way about voice, I’m also threading through my own situated and embodied responses to this music and album. Beyoncé’s voice extends from her to me, through my headphones or the speakers in my car, vibrating into, over, and through my body. Imagining what it would be to sing the words and pitches (or perhaps not imagining, perhaps indeed singing), I re-sound her voice in my own chest and throat and face. I feel the sound break across my palate and through my nasal cavities. Francesca Royster reminds me that “Throats are part of the erotic act, commanding, whispering, swallowing.”⁷ As I listen to Beyoncé sing “Sandcastles,” I think about my throat closing with tears, or wracked in the aftermath of sobs and screaming.

“Rocket”

Though it features an entirely different manifestation of Beyoncé’s voice, I hear the song “Rocket,” from the 2013 self-titled visual album, as an important precursor to the peculiar alignment of voice and visual narrative in “Sandcastles.” “Rocket” is arguably the most explicitly sexual song on that album—a feat, considering that the album was widely discussed for its frank musical, lyrical, and visual depictions of sex and sensuality. “Rocket” is a sonic map of an act of sex, of lovemaking. Beyoncé’s vocal techniques alternate between growls and breathy headvoice croons; often, a dense choir of overdubbed Beyoncé’s sing in close harmony, with synchronized, overlapping melismatic fills atop a base of sinuous electric guitar and a languorous drumbeat. While the audio track features a relatively standard pop song form, the visual album’s video version more explicitly suggests the trajectory of a sex act—ending abruptly after the shattered, shimmering vocals and quick-cut, overlapping images of the bridge’s climax. In a behind-the-scenes video from the album, Beyoncé describes the song as having the contour of a sexual act, but she also characterizes it as being “about *singing*...harmonies, and ad-libs, and arrangements.”⁸ Musical labor is blurred with—acknowledged as—bodily pleasure.

Moments in the “Rocket” video’s visual layer similarly suggest this departure or complication. Alongside and in between the concupiscent images that make up most of the video—slow motion, extended shots that linger on Beyoncé’s curves—are more anodyne ones: Beyoncé on a bed surrounded by sheets of paper; Beyoncé at a piano, her back to the camera. If the former thread of shots situate the viewer in the fantasy position of a familiar lover, these latter images catch Beyoncé in a different productive act, that of songwriting and music-making. Like in “Sandcastles,” the “Rocket” video complicates a straightforward musical interpretation by interrupting the audiovisual space with a glimpse behind the scenes—even as that glimpse itself is unambiguously framed as artificial and highly-produced, wrapped in the same filmic aesthetics as the music video narrative surrounding or interspersed with it.

“Sandcastles” and Beyoncé’s Break (cont.)

It is a common strategy in the framing and editing of music videos to encourage identification of the singer/performer figure with that of the protagonist of the music video’s narrative, augmenting extant tendencies to autobiographically attribute the narrative or emotive content of a popular song to its singer (and perceived author figure). I argue that “Sandcastles” and “Rocket” offer interruptions to these layered affiliations—the videos complicate reading the vocalizations of “Sandcastles” or “Rocket” Beyoncé as “real” or “authentic” expressions of jilted angst or coital ecstasy. Instead of reinforcing a single identity—Beyoncé the singer/songwriter, singing her “authentic” feelings about a real situation in a direct communication via the song, something that is then reinforced via realistic visual narrative in a video, we are presented with the appropriate scenario for that—and then are confronted with a reminder of the constructedness of these vocalizations, the ways in which they are not just unmediated expressions of Beyoncé’s real experiences. But what I find fascinating is that this doesn’t necessarily decrease the power of these vocalizations. Instead of hearing them as real in a straightforward, collapsible pop music reality extending from singer to listener via song, we encounter evidence of a more complicated, confounding reality—Beyoncé’s vocal virtuosity, which we might incorporate into our own bodies sympathetically, erotically, is evidence of work, of labor and virtuosic authority, not just of her unfiltered emotional or bodily expression.

In his work on black female performance artists, Uri McMillan suggests that such performers’ ambiguous status as both real persons and theatrical representations of themselves serves “as an elastic means to create new racial and gender epistemologies.”⁹ In the videos I’ve discussed above, Beyoncé performs herself-as-musician, draws attention to this performance, and, through exactly this re-focusing, makes herself *less* immediately available to her viewers and fans. I’m aware that can’t access her pain at the betrayal of her marital relationship, can’t access her body in sex—instead I’m confronted by her voice as at once a gateway and an obstacle, a reminder of herself as an artist. I experience what Steven Shaviro

theorizes as “allure,” an obsessive awareness of a figure’s distance from me, “the way that it baffles all my efforts to enter into any sort of relation with it.”¹⁰

As I mentioned above, Robin James and Regina Bradley have both suggested ways in which sound might trouble visual information in music video, offering a route through which black female performers can evade or undercut stereotyped roles or objectification. My reading of “Sandcastles” suggests ways in which sound and visual narrative might trouble each other; breaks or excess in Beyoncé’s voice might evidence emotional or bodily expression, but, via the video, might also be read as evidence of her hard work, her authority as a performer and songwriter. Lapses in vocal control are reframed, almost paradoxically, as in fact highly controlled, highly premeditated utterances. Beyoncé, we viewers are reminded, has precisely authored these sonic lapses—when we take them into our own bodies, replay them in our throats and chests and mouths and soft palates, we don’t have to be out of control—or not *just* out of control. We can choose to have these sounds become part of our bodies, to emanate *from* our bodies. We can elect to sound this pleasure, or to construct and construe pleasure in moments and sites of emotional pain and distress.

Fred Moten speaks and writes virtuosically about breaks, cracks, cuts—when he attends to the voice of Billie Holiday on vinyl, he suggests that:

The lady in satin uses the crack in the voice, extremity of the instrument, willingness to fail reconfigured as a willingness to go past.¹¹

This is the kind of orchestrated failure that I’m hearing in “Sandcastles”—an excess that draws attention to itself as performance, that might invite a listener into Beyoncé’s and her own body through the erotic connective fluid of voice, even as it reminds that viewer of the illusion of any other kind of imagined audiovisual intimacy. Moten’s

“Sandcastles” and Beyoncé’s Break (cont.)

description of Holliday also includes something that I read as a direct personal caution, however:

She resists such interpretation, is constantly reversing and interrupting such analytic situations, offering and taking back that mastery, finally reaching radically around it. Therefore, motherfuckers are scared. Got to domesticate or explain the grained voice. Got to keep that strange—keeping shit under wraps even though it always echoes.... Check yourself in the midst of an explanation that could only reveal the trace of what can’t be explained—both in the actions of a dark lady and in her grained voice.¹²

Perhaps, then, this article comprises a futile attempt to domesticate a text that’s not for me—Inna Arzumanova calls the visual album a work of “proprietary” black expression.¹³ Beyoncé’s voice touches me—but no matter how many times I run it through my earbuds, or try to bring it to reside in my own body—it’s not mine. *Lemonade*, like so much of the artist’s output, remains an alluring, carefully orchestrated sonic and visual world that doesn’t have—or need—my pale white self in it. Beyoncé’s voice captivates me; it resists my domestication.

Notes

1. Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.
2. Regina Bradley, “I Been On (Ratchet): Conceptualizing a Sonic Ratchet Aesthetic in Beyoncé’s ‘Bow Down,’” *Red Clay Scholar* (blog), 19 March 2013, <http://redclayscholar.blogspot.com/2013/03/i-been-on-ratchet-conceptualizing-sonic.html>.
3. Regina N. Bradley, “The (Magic) Upper Room: Sonic Pleasure Politics in Southern Hip Hop,” *Sounding Out!* 16 June 2014, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/06/16/the-magic-upper-room-sonic-pleasure-politics-in-southern-hip-hop/>.
4. Robin James, “What Feels Good to Me: Extra-Verbal Vocal Sounds and Sonic Pleasure in Black Femme Pop Music,” *Sounding Out!* 21 June 2017, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2017/06/12/sonic-pleasure/>.
5. Ashton Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (Fordham University Press, 2017). Shakira Holt, “‘I Love to Praise His Name’: Shouting as Feminine Disruption, Public Ecstasy, and Audio-Visual Pleasure,” *Sounding Out!* 11 June 2012, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2012/06/11/i-love-to-praise-his-name-shouting-as-feminine-disruption-public-ecstasy-and-audio-visual-pleasure/>.
6. Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 10.
7. Francesca T. Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), 117.
8. Beyoncé, “‘Self-Titled’: Part 5. Honesty,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFXJGr7sYDk#t=1m33s> (accessed 16 May 2018).
9. Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York University Press, 2015), 6.
10. Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (John Hunt Publishing, 2010), 9.
11. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minnesota University Press, 2003), 107.
12. *Ibid.*, 104.
13. Inna Arzumanova, “The Culture Industry and Beyoncé’s Proprietary Blackness,” *Celebrity Studies* 7:3 (2016), 421–424.

Institute News

Our Music in Polycultural America speaker series entered its fifteenth season this year. With the help of the Wolfe Institute for the Humanities, we are delighted to continue contributing to the intellectual life of the Conservatory of Music and Brooklyn College at large. On 19 March Brooklyn College professor **Elaine Sandoval** presented “Venezuelan Música Llanera, through Crisis and Migration” discussing the dire situations facing many musicians in that South American country, and their attempts to make a new life in New York. **Matthew D. Morrison**’s “Blackface, Blacksound, and (Mis) Appropriation in Early American Popular Music” on 17 April traced new theories of the development of black expressive culture in America, and fostered a lively discussion with students from a variety of departments. Finally, **Marc Hannaford**’s timely “Beyond Category: Muhal Richard Abrams’s Creative Universes” on 24 April offered a music theorist’s insights into the late musician’s style, and was also followed by an insightful discussion.

HISAM’s Graduate Assistant **Lindsey Eckenroth** presented a paper titled “Cars and Guitars: The Sounds of Liberation?” at the 2018 Music and the Moving Image conference. This paper, which was excerpted from her larger dissertation chapter on rockumentaries situated in cities, explored the audiovisual representations of the MC5 and Detroit’s automotive industry in the 2002 rockumentary *MC5: A True Testimonial*. And our College Assistant **Whitney George** has earned commissions from a variety of ensembles and artists, including the Naked Eye Ensemble, trumpeter Ashley Hedlund, oboist and vocalist Kristin Leitterman, and Fresh Squeezed Opera. Kudos to both!

—JT

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The New York Loft Scene: Two Views

Russell A. Spiegel, Barry University

An anomaly in New York's real estate situation led to a brief flowering of an underground music scene in Manhattan. With the demise of manufacturing in downtown and midtown New York after World War II, old industrial lofts had been vacated and were either left empty or were taken over by squatters as their surrounding neighborhoods become depopulated and decayed. Left empty, unused, unwanted, and, due to zoning regulations, legally uninhabitable, the owners of these buildings also tended to neglect the upkeep of the premises.

By the mid-1950's, artists and especially jazz musicians realized these large open spaces could be used for artistic pursuits as studios and performance spaces, and, due to their neglect, could also be surreptitiously inhabited, usually with a small rental fee for these purposes. Owners, happy to receive any rent at all, tended to turn a blind eye to the use of these buildings and artists began to proliferate, establishing many such locations as unlicensed and unregulated "underground" rehearsal and performance venues. By the early 1970's, close to twenty such lofts were established and provided jazz musicians—especially those promoting newer, less commercially viable musical styles—with a much needed place to live cheaply, meet, rehearse, and perform.

Ironically, as these venues became more established and the artists organized and began to fight for new zoning regulations to allow themselves to acquire the rights and responsibilities as tenants, politicians and real estate developers began to see the advantages of rezoning and developing these buildings to revitalize and create a more economically viable area in Manhattan. Subsequently, as the laws changed, rents went up, and the artists who helped create the interest in these areas began to be priced out of the very places they helped develop. By 1980 the New York jazz loft scene was deemed at an end.

Two very different releases have been recently published that deal with the phenomenon of the jazz loft. The first is Michel C. Heller's in-depth academic account *Jazz Loft: Improvising New York in the 1970s* (University of California Press, 2017). Heller's book has seen a good deal of well-deserved reviews in publications such as the *Village Voice* and *Downbeat*, and has received glowing acclaim by well-established musicians and academics William Parker and Ingrid Monson. It is a thoroughly researched study examining the many ways in which the New York loft scene can be examined: historically, artistically, socially, and contextually. Heller, though, spends considerable time covering any detractors by including numerous caveats, thus positioning his book in the academic, PC present. By doing so he takes many of his truly interesting insights and relativizes them, making this study a more taxing read than it needs to be. Though he has conducted interviews with numerous musicians involved in the loft scene and perused much background material, Heller's book is based primarily on his interactions with musician and community activist Juma Sultan, who for many years ran Studio We on Eldridge Street. The book thus suffers some from Heller's lack of attention to other loft organizers, who may



Musicians outside Studio We in New York, c.1973

The New York Loft Scene (cont.)

not share Sultan's insights and points of view (as was evidenced by my own interaction with fellow musician Mo Morgen, who ran the Jazzmania loft, but whose input is noticeably absent from Heller's study). Heller's story gets further muddled when he dedicates a chapter to jazz archival approaches, which, while they may be of relevance to someone specifically interested in this area of study, appears rather tangential to the topic at hand. This acknowledged, Heller's book is a much-needed reference for further studies into this fascinating subject.

WNYC's documentary film, *The Jazz Loft According to W. Eugene Smith*, by comparison, provides a very different and visually stunning narrative. Smith, a photographer for *Life* magazine, was badly wounded in World War II. After recuperating he returned to his family in upstate New York only to soon abandon them, relocating to the city to live, work in, and document the activities in the loft he began occupying in Manhattan's flower district in the late 1950's. Under Sara Fishko's capable direction, a story unfolds of a truly tortured genius who placed himself at the center of a burgeoning creative loft scene, obsessively documenting nearly the entirety of the loft's activity via both thousands of photographs and hundreds of hours of recorded sound, as Smith placed microphones throughout the entire loft complex. As the film follows the timeline of events, it returns to show Smith's background and artistry in photography as the viewer is introduced to the many stellar jazz artists who graced the loft's premises. The centerpiece of the movie is the introduction of fellow loft denizen composer and arranger Hall Overton, a much-neglected personality in the jazz canon. Overton, who shared a wall with Smith, lived, worked in, and conducted lessons in his section of the loft. The story then follows his interactions with Thelonious Monk. The two greats combined to create the large-ensemble arrangements for Monk's well-feted Town Hall concerts, captured in a historic recording. After this event, the film winds down and the viewer follows the slow demise of this particular loft and a quick overview of Smith's final years.

In all, the two publications work in tandem: Fishko's movie puts flesh on Heller's book and brings the story to vivid life the story of an underground jazz scene that for the most temporal of reasons flourished for a time in New York and led to some truly innovative experiments and music.

Fellow Travellers

Jeffrey Taylor, Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center, CUNY

I have often written remembrances in this journal of scholars and musicians from the field of American music. Several years ago, after one particular difficult issue, I remember announcing I felt something like *AMR*'s obituary editor. Of course it is important to celebrate those who pass, along with those who are still vibrant presences in the field. As I grow older, the remembrances increase, even as does the addition of younger scholars into our field. In looking back over the past year, I decided it was important to honor three individuals we have lost. Not all of these people are equally well known, though all have been honored in print and in the media. But these were people who I met at important junctures of my life. I did not know any of them particularly well, but my encounters with them enriched my own work and my life.

I first met **Rae Linda Brown**, who died far too young on 20 August 2017, while a graduate student at the University of Michigan. I didn't know it at the time, but she was beginning her first teaching gig after getting her doctorate from Yale. I enrolled in her African American Music class and I remember at the time thinking she was initially somewhat uncomfortable in front of the class—a circumstance all too familiar to me just a few years later as I faced my first group of students at CUNY. It was a marvelous course, though, and I still have the pack of readings. At the time I had set my sights on studying American music, probably jazz, but had just completed the general Western music history and theory classes. Rae Linda's class marked my first exposure to the writings of Eileen Southern, among others, and opened a world of scholarship on black music, much of it beyond jazz. For example, I knew little of the black art music tradition represented by composers like H. T. Burleigh, William Grant Still, and Florence Price, the latter of course inspiring much of Brown's research and a magnificent edition of Price's first and third symphonies, coedited with Wayne Shirley.

Strong memories are lodged in my mind from that term. I had become interested in the work of R. Nathaniel Dett (1882–1943), composer and leader for many years of the choirs at the Hampton

Institute in Virginia. I talked my classmate Barbara Dobbs (Mackenzie), now my colleague at the CUNY Graduate Center, into a performance of some of Dett's arrangements of Negro spirituals. This resulted in a heated discussion of musical ownership—whether white performers spared the devastating legacy of slavery had the right to present these pieces which had, nevertheless, been set by Dett very much as European art songs, with piano accompaniments evoking Brahms and Wolf. Both Barbara and I vividly remember this experience to this day.



Rae Linda Brown

Not long after Rae Linda gave me a ride home following a performance of Anthony Davis's opera *X* in Detroit. We lingered in the car before she dropped me off, and became immersed in one of those conversations I wish I could revisit; we dug deep into the issues raised by that class experience, and I was led to question many of my prior assumptions about black artists, composers, and performers. She also spoke with great passion about her own work as well as the music we were studying in class, giving insights into a generation of black composers who modeled their work on that of European composers, while honoring their own heritage. This was a rich vein in American music history that at the time lay largely untouched. My final project became a study of Dett's oratorio *The Ordering of Moses*, a moving work still not

Fellow Travellers (cont.)

widely known or performed (though revived in 2014 by the Cincinnati May Festival). I remember Brown suggesting this piece, and looking over that paper from so many years ago I note the sense of discovery, not just of a composition but of a creative process that was deeply sincere and truly unique. I saw Brown many times after this, especially after she became president of the Society for American Music, but it was this conversation, which opened my eyes and ears to a new world of African American musical scholarship, that immediately came to mind when I heard of her passing.

Olly Wilson (1937–2018) was internationally known as a composer, writer, and teacher. But we developed a friendship because of his connection with the great jazz pianist Earl “Fatha” Hines, who had been a Bloch lecturer at UC Berkeley in 1980. Wilson discovered that Hines was born on the exact day as his own father, and often joked that the nickname “Fatha” took on a special meaning for him. He ultimately became a co-executor of Hines’s estate, which led me to contact him while I was doing dissertation research on the pianist. At the time, all of Hines’s possessions had been placed in storage because of a thorny tax dispute, but Wilson invited me out to the Bay Area to look at the materials. We drove down to a huge storage facility south of Oakland, and I remember vividly as several large wooden storage containers were brought down by forklift. I spent several days with these materials, most of which have ended up at the Earl Hines Archive at UC Berkeley. But what made the experience especially poignant was that virtually the entire contents of Hines’s Oakland home had been moved into storage. Band arrangements were stuffed in bags along with phone bills and takeout



Olly Wilson teaching at Oberlin College, 1968

menus. One case held Hines’s extensive toupee collection. And in a rather chilling moment, I found an obituary for Hines’s daughter inserted in a folder with her high school graduation photo (sadly, both of Hines’s daughters, and his wife, preceded him in death). Though he could easily have informed me these materials were simply unavailable, Wilson instead allowed me a very personal view into the life of this remarkable musician, and the experience has stayed with me ever since. I ran into Wilson several times after this visit, and we always talked about “Fatha” Hines, a palpable presence for both of us.

Many years ago I walked into the office of my department chair at Brooklyn College to find **Cecil Taylor** (1929-2018) seated discussing the possibility of using the College’s pianos for practice. I had a brief discussion with him then, during which I made the mistake of calling him a “jazz musician”; he pointedly corrected

me, insisting he was “a composer.” Years later he received an Honorary Doctorate at the College’s commencement ceremony, delivering one of the shortest and most memorable acceptance “speeches” I have ever heard. Seated next to him at the reception following the event, I learned quickly that he was not interested in answering questions, but if allowed just to talk shared fascinated glimpses into his life and his highly original mind. But my most vivid memory of Taylor came at the Harlem Stage Gatehouse, in 2012, where he presented a solo concert. I was familiar with Taylor’s work on recordings and films, but I had never experienced his playing live. Seated just a few feet away from him, I watched as he walked to the piano with a single sheet of notebook paper, and proceeded to play for over an hour, interspersing his improvisations with poems. I don’t recall ever being

Fellow Travellers (cont.)

so transfixed by a solo performance, and I left the venue unable to describe what I had seen in musical terms, but somehow transformed. I am still not certain what took place that evening, but it forever changed the way I thought about creative improvisation, and convinced me of the necessity of witnessing this music live to truly do it justice. Recordings remain pale sketches of Taylor's artistry. Now his voice has been stilled I regret not seizing other opportunities to hear him live.

There are many who knew these three gifted people far better than I, and in different circumstances. However, these seemingly minor experiences took on special significance for me as I first read of their passing. I know I am a better teacher, scholar, and listener because of my acquaintance with these fellow travelers, and for that I will continue to be grateful.



*Cecil Taylor performing in 1987
Photo by Frans Schellekens*

Contextualizing an Old Genre within New Research in a New Era

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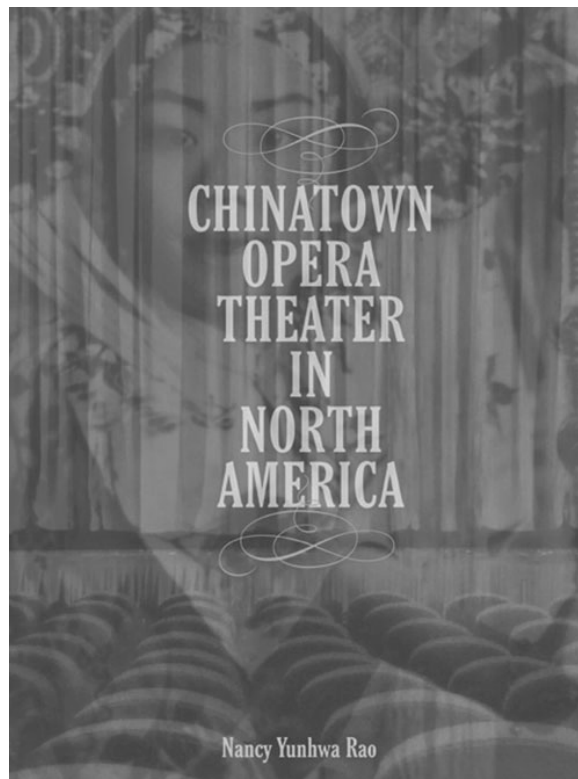
By 1920, Cantonese opera had been heard in the largest port cities of North America, where Cantonese-speaking Chinese had been living and working since the mid-nineteenth century. In *Chinatown Opera Theater in North America* (University of Illinois Press, 2017), Nancy Yunhwa Rao recovers a genre, performers, musicians, venues, and communities that have not been assembled and organized within a single narrative before. As I read I was struck—sadly—with just how similar the current travel ban and minority restrictions resemble the issues of nearly a century ago. In her examination of the prosperous, yet fraught, era of 1920s North American history, Rao bridges political, social, and cultural issues that cross an ocean, reside in multiple countries, and impact opera companies during the “Golden Age of Cantonese Opera.” Rao supplies readers with voluminous and important details, presenting us with a historical circumstance that continues to resonate today. Her book arrives at an influential moment in the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology when issues of social relevance and canon are being reassessed.

Rao organized *Chinatown Opera Theater* into five parts to introduce perspectives to understanding Cantonese opera within the North American environment. The opening, “Transnational History and Immigration,” provides a crucial socio-political backdrop because the participants of Cantonese opera and their North American audiences have been marginalized or ignored for decades as a result of local pressures and an unexplored geographical web. She achieves a complete view with details from international, national, and local viewpoints. Within these complicated matrices, Chinese-owned

businesses and organizations contributed financial support that made Cantonese opera thrive and succeed. Chapter two is devoted to a thorough evaluation of the American 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which directly impacted the communities and transnational flow of this musical genre.

The second part of the work offers an introduction to Cantonese opera as a genre. Here, the aesthetics, repertoire, and roles are vividly described. Through extant phonograph records and the recovery of thousands of playbills, Rao reconstructs the events, musical numbers, musicians, and actors. In chapter five, she compares and contrasts two recorded versions of a “Shilin Jita” aria that is found in the opera, *Madame White Snake*. Rao, a music theorist by training, provides a detailed musical transcription of the two versions alongside her analysis. It is in this chapter that I have a quibble. In the front matter, she sets forth her decision to use Mandarin pinyin for transliterations of Chinese names and terms for “consistency” and “ease of reference” within the book and between other studies. (xvi) Furthermore, in an opening chapter, Rao stresses

the importance of language for Chinese-American immigrants, where the language of the community conveyed their “beliefs, practices, and social relationships.” (35) In names and terms, I can accept the choice; however, the aria transcription creates a sonic error that can impact understanding and reconstruction. While Cantonese pinyin is not a uniformly codified Romanization system, the choice of Mandarin pinyin within these arias has important implications. Some scholars might construe this choice as a linguistic disjuncture, while others could view it as an inauthentic representation of a recording. If one were to hear these recordings or



Contextualizing an Old Genre (cont.)

wish to reconstruct these “Shilin Jita” arias from this chapter, the musical examples would neither be accurate linguistically nor represent the practice of the Cantonese aria.

The following three parts document practices at Chinatown Opera Theaters from multiple North American geographic perspectives. Rao begins her narrative in British Columbia, discussing of the Chinatown communities in the port cities of Vancouver and Victoria, which regularly received singers from southern China, in part because the Canadian exclusion policies were less restrictive than those in the United States. She credits these theaters as significant influences of the revival in the American theaters. Rao includes critical details about the communities in North America, highlighting prominent events, such as annual Chinese New Year celebration and the Canton–Hong Kong 1925–26 labor strikes that directly impacted the migration of performers and the Cantonese opera recording industry of southern China. She features the growing importance of female performers in a once male-only genre.

American music scholars, such as Rao, have repeatedly included many non-canonical approaches and repertoire, which has been significant in recent statements of scholars and actions of music department curriculum. Harvard University Music Department has altered its undergraduate curriculum to be more flexible and offer more options to study non-western music.¹ In addition, Cornell ethnomusicologist Alejandro Madrid argues effectively that academic scholarship should be “. . . a critical intervention that would help us better understand and make sense of the worlds we live in and the routes we have followed to get where we are and to relate to each other in the way that we do.”² Rao’s book is an important text that should be included in musicology or ethnomusicology courses, not only for the historical and cultural reference that it brings to bear, but also for how the genre of Cantonese opera improves our understanding of the world today.

Notes

1. William Robin, “What Controversial Changes At Harvard Mean For Music In The University,” *The Log*, <https://national-sawdust.org/thelog/2017/04/25/what-controversial-changes-at-harvard-means-for-music-in-the-university/> (accessed 6 June 2017).
2. Alejandro L. Madrid, “Diversity, Tokenism, Non-Canonical Musics, and the Crisis of the Humanities in U.S. Academia,” *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 7 (2017): 125.