

Research Article

Dorottya Mozes*

“It Was Like Listening to Someone Laughing Their Way Toward Death”: Black Noise, Vocal Experiments, and Sonic Silence in Chester Himes’s *The Heat’s On*

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Abstract: The article draws together sound studies and Black studies to examine Himes’s sonic inventions and interventions for imagining the persistence of Black life under conditions of extreme domination. Taking up Sharpe’s call for recognizing “insistent Black visualsonic resistance to that imposition of non/being,” it finds that Himes’s soundscapes in *The Heat’s On* offer alternatives to how western sound studies theoreticians think about the relationship between sound, white supremacy, and the environment (21). The article contributes to research on the sonic modalities of resistance and domination as well as ongoing discussions about the importance of listening, specifically, the ways in which listening fosters alternative forms of relationality and spatiality. As far as the sonic subversions and experiments of Harlemites, “Black noise” emerges as something that bypasses attempts at capture, including dominant cultural norms, strategies of silencing, and raciolinguistic attitudes toward vernacular forms of Black English. Finally, the article emphasizes the link between what it terms sonic silence, embodied practices of listening and breathing where keeping breath in the Black body can be seen as a prerequisite to interconnected forms of consciousness and being.

Keywords: African American literature, Chester Himes, sound studies, noise, silence

Introduction

In an interview prompted by the 2020 publication of his new memoir *Afropessimism* Frank B. Wilderson asks, “What does it mean to be a slave and the subject of narrative?” This question is at the heart of Himes’s writing of the nine-part Harlem cycle (1957–1983), and it may not come as much of a surprise that his answer grows more pessimistic as the series progresses. *The Heat’s On*, the fifth book in the series, is still very much organized around the basic premises and forms of the detective genre – even as Himes’s spectacular scenes of Black death and life go beyond it. The domestic series, featuring detectives Coffin Ed and Grave Digger, however, is a progressive undoing of the optimism of the detective genre, culminating in the apocalyptic *Plan B*, published posthumously, which expresses Himes’s conviction that only the end of the world would mean a meaningful change in US race relations.¹

¹ Himes said in 1972, “It is an absolute fact that if the blacks in America were to mount a revolution in force with organized violence to the saturation point, that the entire black problem would be solved” (qtd. in Rzepka and Horsley 486).

* **Corresponding author: Dorottya Mozes**, North American Department, Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen, Hungary, e-mail: mozes.dorottya@arts.unideb.hu

According to Himes biographer Lawrence P. Jackson, in 1961, Himes completed *Ne nous énervons pas!* in Hahenhof, Austria, which was published as *The Heat's On* in 1966 by Putnam (884). As Himes left the US in 1953, returning only for 10 months in 1955, before his final return to Europe, his biographer James Sallis posits that in the novels published between 1957 and 1969 – including *The Heat's On* – Himes's Harlem dates from his earlier impressions of Harlem in the 1940s and 1955, the year of his return to New York (570). In the 1940s and 1950s, the Great Depression further depleted the poor, segregated neighborhood of Harlem. Following the riots of 1935 and 1943, the Black “city within a city” was no longer seen as a “heaven” or “promised land” of the Harlem Renaissance, but a slum whose dwellers suffered from poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, and redlining (Taylor). The enclosure of the Black Belt was sharply defined: “poverty, state violence, extralegal terror, and antiblack racism were essential to maintaining the new racial order” as well as “funneling prostitution, gambling, drugs, and other vice into black neighborhoods and containing it there” (Hartman, *Wayward Lives* 174, 248). It is not surprising then that Ralph Ellison's 1948 essay titled “Harlem is Nowhere” describes Harlem as a ghastly phantasm: “Harlem is a ruin – many of its ordinary aspects (its crimes, its casual violence, its crumbling buildings with littered areaways, ill-smelling halls and vermin-invaded rooms) are indistinguishable from the distorted images that appear in dreams.” As we shall see, Himes's surreal depictions of Harlem embody the neighborhood in its time.

The Heat's On is the fifth novel in the Harlem domestic series, the one that brought Himes critical acclaim, book sales, and financial success in 1966. As Robert Skinner notes, it is “ostensibly about narcotics trafficking in New York City, but on another level it has more to do with race and skin color” and the absurdity of objectification generated by racism (145).² To help contextualize close readings and orient readers who have not read the novel, I will provide a detailed summary. *The Heat's On* begins with Pinky the giant albino pulling the fire alarm of Riverside church to frame “the African” and Ginny, his stepdad's mistress, with Gus's murder. In fact, Pinky had killed Gus by mistake, upon learning that Gus wouldn't take him on an ocean liner called the *Queen Mary* to his plantation in Ghana. Even though he is badly beaten by law enforcement for raising a false alarm, Pinky manages to escape the absurd violence. At the “Heavenly Clinic,” he informs Sister Heavenly the dope peddler/faith healer and her former lover and assistant Uncle Saint of Gus's African treasure map (in reality a map for the pickup of heroin). Following this revelation, Pinky, Heavenly, and Saint wear disguises and stab each other in the back as they look for the hidden treasure – it is only revealed at the end that Pinky had unwittingly incinerated the black eels in which the three million dollars' worth of heroin was hidden. Pinky is painted black so that he can pursue the treasure unobserved. Saint shoots a man following what he believes to be the pickup truck whose trunk the treasure is in. Revenge against Heavenly and desire for the money eventually propel him to blow up her safe with nitroglycerin; he dies in the fatal blast. As for the novel's chief villain, Heavenly, who is “in total command of her environment and of the men who come into her life,” she is after Gus's dog because she believes the heroin to be hidden inside their entrails (Skinner 149). After Digger and Ed find the African – an “innocent bystander” – with his neck cut, Digger is badly injured and hospitalized (161). Ed's lieutenant manipulates Ed into believing that Digger is dead and exploits his guilt for the purpose of hunting down Digger's murderers, the white drug czar's gunmen who are also searching for the dope that went missing. Thus, a furious and grieving Ed is playing catch up with Heavenly, Pinky, and Gus's wife Ginny while the gunmen are tailing him, and he is surveilled by police. After Ed unleashes his monstrous fury on the drop-dead gorgeous Ginny, he lures the villains back to Gus's apartment with a heroin substitute of quinine and sugar. Ed's “theatrical production” traps Pinky, Heavenly, and the gunmen (158). The police are roaring with laughter as they hear Pinky's confession and learn of the aforementioned “three-million-dollar fire” while Ed is relieved to hear that Digger is alive (173). Nonetheless, the price for capturing the white gunmen is the state-sanctioned murder of Black women: after Heavenly kills Ginny, who has been set up by the police, Heavenly is shot by the gunmen standing by. Considering this racial calculus and gendered arithmetic, the ending bears out Himes's pessimism, particularly, what I argue is his Afropessimism.

² “Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racists, but it generates absurdity in the victims. And the absurdity of the victims intensifies the absurdity of the racists, ad infinitum” (Himes, *My Life of Absurdity* 1).

Before the emergence of Afropessimism as a field, particularly its articulation of Black nonbeing in the antiblack world, Himes's objectification of blackness in the context of extreme domination, excessive violence, and interminable captivity posed problems for literary critics. Some concluded that his surreal and hyperbolic scenes of Black death, objectification, and dehumanization reduced the richness of Black life and culture to the racialized stereotypes of minstrelsy. His biographer, James Sallis, writes that some critics have disregarded his work as "potboilers" that "pandered to excessive violence and grotesque characterisations" (74). Michael Denning, for example, finds that "the reduction of people to objects... is a comic absurdity. But one of the difficulties with comedy is its basis in socially constructed... stereotypes" (165). Others worried that Himes commodified and exploited blackness for his French audience. Although there is value in investigating the extent to which Himes's characters are rooted in stereotype and produced by "the violence that undergirded the comic moment in minstrelsy" (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 32), I argue that using the insights gleaned from Afropessimist thinkers we can reevaluate Himes's style as pursuing "the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death" (Sharpe 22).³ That is, Himes's portrayal of the "abject," "negated," and "dismembered" nature of Black life and the "inevitability," "violence," and "gratuity" of Black death represent the grammar of our world, which is antiblack, and its construction of the Black subject "as the subjected" (Sharpe 4). While this article recasts Himes's depictions of Black death and non-being as embodying an Afropessimist stance, it also insists, as Afropessimism does, on modes of Black life and being that contest the "racial calculus and... political arithmetic... entrenched centuries ago" (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 6). In the words of Christina Sharpe whose work on the paradox of Black being "in the wake" is a major contribution to the field of Afropessimism, Himes's Harlem cycle thinks both "antiblackness as total climate" and "an insistent Black visualsonic resistance to that imposition of non/being" (22). My article specifically argues that beyond the visual the sonic is crucial in exploring this tension between Black non-being and being "in the wake."⁴

Critics who examine the nexus of Himes's violence, Black life, and space in visual terms do not necessarily do so in Afropessimist terms. For example, Maleda Belilgne argues that "his use of hyperbole, grotesque imagery, and cinematic representations of the Harlem landscape" subject Harlem residents to gratuitous violence while it also disrupts their bodily and psychic disintegration (101–2). Manthia Diawara's excellent article makes the case for Himes's Black noir. Though the article predates the consolidation of Afropessimism as a field it can be stretched to mean that Himes's Afropessimist noir is a blending of the protest novel with the pessimism and violence associated with noir. Himes's subversion of the main tenets of the white male genre of the hardboiled detective "relocate[s] the genre in a claustrophobic, violent, surreal Harlem" (Horsley 36) and "shed[s] light on the desperate condition of people who are forced to live below," namely, "Black people... trapped in the darkness of White captivity" (Diawara 526). Note Diawara's use of Afropessimist terms when explaining that Himes's "scenes of Black dehumanization, and the depiction of the grotesque" embody Harlemites "choked by powerlessness, economic deprivation, and captivity" (Diawara 529–30). In many ways, my article builds on these arguments about the association of Himes's noir with violence, pessimism, and absurdity, developing an Afropessimist reading of *The Heat*. The article thus hopes to make the case for a renewed interest in Himes, specifically his contributions to Black pessimist thought.

As mentioned before, the interest in Himes's representation of the matter of Black life has been mostly visual. Whereas music, orality, and sonic elements have been studied in the works of Himes's numerous contemporaries such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Ann Petry (among many others), such sonic practices and their attendant listening practices have so far received little attention in analyses of Himes. Therefore, following Alexander Weheliye, the article explores the specific questions and problems raised by

³ What makes the summary of the philosophy difficult is that many thinkers do not explicitly identify themselves as Afropessimist nonetheless contribute to the ongoing conversation about the im/possibility of Black being in the afterlife slavery (e.g., Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Kevin Quashie).

⁴ As she thinks about Black non/being, Sharpe keeps various meanings of the wake in play: wake as a vigil or watch, as a form of consciousness or awakening, as paths left behind moving bodies.

sonic imagery because as he claims in his important study *Phonographies* “the sonic remains an important zone from and through which to theorize the fundamentality of Afro-diasporic formations to the currents of Western modernity, since this field remains,” he argues, “the principal modality in which Afro-diasporic cultures have been articulated” (5). As pointed out by Weheliye and others, Black cultures play a fundamental part in the fluctuation of the noise/music and the speech/song bifurcation (*Phonographies* 12). *The Heat’s On* can thus be seen as epitome of an Afro-sonic text at the intersection of writing and speech, of speech and song, of music and noise, noise and silence.⁵ Throughout the novel, Himes portrays Harlem as a particular, albeit dynamic and constantly shifting soundscape that encompasses representations of Black life and sound outside of the “respectable,” which Petry and other writers tend toward:

[I]t was too noisy to relax and dream of cool swimming holes and the shade of chinaberry trees. The night was filled with the blare of countless radios, the frenetic blasting of spasm cats playing in the streets, hysterical laughter, automobile horns, strident curses, loudmouthed arguments, the screams of knife fights. (23)

He brings together densely layered, disparate vernacular sounds – phonographs, music, screams, laughter, curses, arguments – which might be called a sonic assemblage. For instance, following the “excruciating” silence in the wake of slashing Ginny’s throat in a thin 6 inches-long line when “[o]nly their heavy breathing and the chattering of Wop’s teeth were audible,” Ed listens to a recording of Lester Young’s saxophone solo: “It was like listening to someone laughing their way toward death. It was laughter dripping wet with tears. Colored people’s laughter” (146). Jazz sounds the condition of Black life as mourning, puncturing the line between it and tearful laughter, or as Claudia Rankine puts it, “the laughter of vulnerability, fear, recognition and an absurd stuckness.” As will be discussed later, Himesian soundscapes not only trouble the normative distinctions between music and its others, but also the racially coded binaries enforced by the sonic color line.

The article henceforth foregrounds a sonic approach to Himes’s depiction of Black social life in Harlem. The first section demonstrates how Himesian soundscapes overturn the social color line: it contrasts acoustically violent white noise, an expression of the brutal racial calculus, with the notion of Black quiet and noise as possible impossibilities of Black being. The second section elaborates the concept of the Himesian soundscape: sonic expressions of Black social and intimate life that erect and challenge the wretched geography of the ghetto. The third section analyzes the vocal practices of captives, investigating Heavenly’s “signifyin(g),” a speech riot in the face of inevitable defeat, and Saint’s ventriloquism, which resists racial objectification.⁶ The final section amplifies the sounds of what Sharpe calls “the wake,” particularly, ways of listening to screams and to what I call sonic silence as the foundation for an ethics of care and reciprocity.

⁵ A lot has been written about the reasons for the increasing impossibility of differentiating music from sounds, that is, the inseparability of music from speech and from noise and from silence. Since at least antiquity music has been associated with beauty, organization, and intentionality but audio recording technologies blurred the line between music and its others. Postmodern composers, ethnographic researchers, and sound studies scholars have criticized this archaic definition, the canons and hierarchies it implied (Sakakeeny 112). In contemporary music, there has been a rise of interest in “silence” and “noise.” John Cage’s musical philosophy and particularly his 4’33” (1952) included silence in his musical composition. Composer Edgar Varèse used sirens in his innovative percussion piece *Ionisation* (1929–1931). Feminist, queer, and Black artists revalued the notion of noise in jazz, hip-hop, heavy metal, and punk, “transforming it into a marker of power, resistance, and pleasure” (Cox and Warner 40). Accordingly, the article examines complex intersections and movements from and between noise, silence, sounds, music, and speech, and how these sounds produce Black subjectivity and sociality.

⁶ I use signifyin(g) in the sense of an African American linguistic strategy involving an element of indirection, purposeful ambiguity, or metaphorical reference (see Mitchell-Kernan). In the *Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates explores signifyin(g) in the African American literary tradition as a Black “trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole and litotes, and metalepsis” (182).

Reversing the Sonic Color Line

From Ralph Ellison's "Living with Music," through Richard Wright's "High Tide in Harlem," to Petry's *The Street*, major Black writers of this time period were preoccupied with Harlem's sonicity. Recent scholarship has examined noise/sound in 1940s and 1950s Harlem as well as its representation in the works of these and other major writers. Jennifer Lynn Stoever who works at the intersection of sound and Black studies argues that white supremacy invokes and regulates noise "in direct connection to (or as a metonymic stand-in for) people of color, and particularly blackness" while it violently claims the exclusive right to make noise (50). Consequently, what she terms the sonic color line "arbitrarily enforced noise ordinances and periodic citywide noise abatement campaigns [which] made black neighborhoods in New York City vulnerable to aggressive and invasive policing" (*The Sonic Color Line* 393). A similar intervention by Clare Corbould shows how Black Harlemites wrested noise away from criminalized white conceptions and rearticulated it as an essential part of community life. In "Streets, Sounds, and Identity in Interwar Harlem," she argues that noise-making was a way to build community and to claim space as their own through collective actions such as funerals, parades, street life, and soapboxing. In "Just Be Quiet Pu-leeze," Stoever analyzes discourse around noise in the city's leading black newspaper, *The New York Amsterdam News* between 1945 and 1955. In particular, she explores "how black people articulated their concern (and irritation) with noise – suffering from under-policing that left their neighborhoods vulnerable to blaring sound trucks, all-night craps games, incessant record-store demonstrations, and other sonic irritants" (147). However, her analysis opposes the sonic color line by countering the association of blackness with noise by centering "vernacular conceptions of noise as a crucial, community defining, and solidarity building issue within and against segregation" (147). She also examines noise in Harlem of the 1940s in her latest essay "From 'Dead Spots' to 'Hot Spots'" connecting it to the historical and mythic meaning of what she calls "stratified aural imagery" in Ann Petry's understudied short story "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon."

In line with the above scholarship and Himes's contemporaries' interrogation of the relationship between sound and the space of enclosure, Himes considers sound as an instrument of racialized containment. He demonstrates how the white supremacist racialization of noise and overpolicing bring white noise to Black neighborhoods. In the opening scene of the novel, the loud sirens disrupt the relative calmness of the neighborhood and portend police violence: "The quiet environs of Riverside Drive were shattered with ear-splitting noise as fire engines and police cruisers poured into the street" (7). To cast suspicion on "the African" and Gus's woman, Ginny, for Gus's murder, Pinky rings the fire alarm of Riverside Church. The terror of the police and fire sirens, the fire captain's shouting orders through his megaphone, the hard voices of the cops, the reverberation of the n-word, and the inevitable sound of gunshots all contribute to a soundscape of white supremacist violence. While applying his reading of noise through the lens of violence is reductive, acoustician Federico Miyara's concept of noise as "acoustic violence" is helpful here because it allows us to hear the antiblack "violence exercised by means of sound" (18). The overwhelming noise surrounding his attempted capture signifies the prerogative of the police to capture and subdue Pinky by any means necessary. When a cop fires shots in the ensuing mayhem, "All were gripped by the single thought – the cop had shot him. Reactions varied; but all were held in a momentary silence" (14). While the soundscape of warfare is normalized and deemed necessary, the sound of the gunshot "sober[s]" everyone, for a moment making the whites aware that the whole structure of their psychic and emotional life is based on antiblack violence (14). Coffin Ed points out that, "You can't kill a man for putting in a false alarm" (14). His words echo in the present moment, when police in Raleigh handcuffed Kazeem Oyeneyin, a Black homeowner in underwear, after his friend accidentally set off his burglar alarm. In Himes's version, law enforcement is ready to lynch Pinky for *bringing the noise* of the alarm. Ironically, then, noise becomes a sound that white supremacy needs to silence when it gives voice to the discontent of Black subjects, in Walter Benjamin's terms, a Black state of emergency. Otherwise, the channelization and normalization of noise plays a role in the violent constitution of the white supremacist state of exception that is the rule.

The sharp, cutting, loud police noise that overwhelm the quietness of the neighborhood emphasize the violent nature of policing. Not only does white supremacy have "the power to make noise with impunity" (Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line* 223), but it also has the power to destroy the sounds associated with

blackness, and to eliminate the interiority of racially Black subjects. According to sound studies scholar Salomé Voegelin, sound is noise “when it deafens [the] ear to anything but itself,” violently excluding and destroying other sounds (44). Even though the giant performs the part of the obedient subordinate, when forced into admitting that he raised the alarm knowing there was no fire, the fire captain ignores the Black detectives’ requests to *take it easy*, hits Pinky, and orders the “boys” to take the giant resisting arrest. In sharp contrast to the white men who dismiss Pinky’s entreaties as so much “noise,” the Black detectives Ed and Digger listen to Pinky. They wonder if there’s anything in his insistent pleas to stop the African and his “stepma” from “robbing and murdering” his stepdad. Following their detainment for “unwarranted brutality,” we shall see later that they follow up on Pinky’s claims (10, 54).

If we listen to the soundscape before the irruption of acoustic violence, we can hear Pinky’s and Jake’s bizarre voices suffusing the quietness of Riverside Drive. Pinky’s “whining voice” (39) carries a trace of his grief for his “Pa,” the longing for Africa, the desire for Jake’s friendship, the addict’s insatiable desire, and the outrage of being left behind on account of his albino characteristics.⁷ Described as a “round saw cutting through a pine knot” (5), his voice connotes his formidable strength and his epidermal vulnerability to violence. Pinky is holding his friend, Jake, in a tight grip, his hands closing in around his neck. Jake the dwarf’s terror is animated by the approaching sirens and the tightening choke-hold when the meaning of Pinky’s insistence on friendship through “smoke and fire” dawns on him (6). The pusher, whose clandestine whispers are probably meant to evade the law while reaching addicts, speaks “in a wheezing voice that was accustomed to whispering” (5). Pinky and Jake’s controlled whispers fill up the quietness and, if we listen closely, their sonic acts of agency express the inexpressible messiness of their lives. Thinking with Kevin Quashie, Himes’s representation of the quiet enables a certain form of expressiveness that represents the deep, multitudinous interior life of Black subjects. Pinky and Jake’s grotesque, exaggerated voices articulate the everyday practices of refusal, survival, and improvisation that unfold within the urban space of enclosure. In particular, when we really listen to Pinky’s whines, we can hear his longing for his stepdad and his remorse over breaking his neck. In a sense, Pinky starts the fire alarm to frame “the African” and Ginny for the murder he committed. He claims that he overheard them plotting Gus’s murder; once captured, he tells the police that, “They was guilty in they heart” (172). Pinky’s guilt motivates his ringing of the alarm, in particular, because he is concerned that the police will refuse to investigate the Black janitor’s death. In this other sense, beyond Pinky’s conflicting feelings of grief, anger, and fear, the wailing fire alarm sounds an elegy for Gus, and the others, including the victims of the drug deal gone bad. While the loudness of the siren reveals the violent nature of policing/portends auditory domination, the ringing of the fire alarm is Pinky’s way of sounding Riverside’s 20-ton bourdon bell and holding a wake for Gus. If white noise allows the reader to hear how police violence cuts through and decimates Black neighborhoods, Black noise protests against such violent domination and serves as a commemoration of Black life, death, and world. For Himes, the sonic is not only a site of capture, but also a powerful site of sociality and rebellion.

As we saw earlier, a lot of Himes’s critics overlook the complex humanity of Himes’s characters and reduce them to stereotypes, villains, or criminals. However, using Saidiya Hartman’s concept of waywardness and her method of speculation, we can tend to these types in ways that care for them beyond their criminality. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* a speculative history of Black intimate life in New York and Philadelphia at the turn of the century crafts a “counter-narrative liberated from the judgment and classification that subjected young black women to surveillance, arrest, punishment, and confinement, and offer[s] an account that attends to beautiful experiments – to make living an art – undertaken by those often described as promiscuous, reckless, wild, and wayward” (xiv). This counter-narrative endeavors “to recover the insurgent ground of these lives; to exhume open rebellion from the case file, to untether waywardness, refusal, mutual aid, and free love from their identification as deviance, criminality, and pathology” (xiv). Taking a page from Hartman, my article examines *The Heat*’s addicts, lowlifes, and criminals (ranging from con artists, through drug pushers, to killers) beyond their identification with

⁷ Gus tells Pinky he cannot come with him to Africa because he is “too white” and “all them black Africans” would kill him (173).

criminality, pathology, and vice. Not only does Himes portray them in such a way as to show how “intermittent wages, controlled depletion, economic exclusion, coercion, and antiblack violence” push these characters into criminality or a life bordering on the extralegal and criminal, but also as poets, thinkers, dreamers, and revolutionaries who produce critiques of the antiblack world and embody a search for something different (*Wayward Lives* 237). Like Hartman, I see them “as radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise” (xv). And it is my contention that listening to these radical thinkers decriminalizes them. Their sonic experiments, vocal creativity, and experimentation prompt us to go beyond our racialized, gendered, and classed assumptions, and to attend to the complex, messy humanity of these figures at the nexus of intersectional oppressions.

Himesian Soundscapes

This section discusses the role of music and noise in constituting forms of sociality and listening. Under Sister Heavenly's care, dope, gin, weed, music, the Bear Hug, the Georgia Grind, that is, the “tried-and-true methods” of faith healing are employed (34). As I show, Heavenly's healing racket and the “heavy boogie beat on a piano” are not separable, they constitute one another (32). Himes's description of Black Key Shorty and Washboard Wharton banging on the piano asserts the leaky boundary between music and noise:⁸

Now the sound of music was loud and defiant. Vying with the hard banging of piano notes was the ratchetlike rhythm of someone strumming an accompaniment on a double-sided wooden washboard. It sounded like a cross between bone-beating and rim-rapping The tempo of the piano changed. Instead of two-handed playing with the steady bass beat marching alongside the light fantastic tripping of the treble keys, there followed a wild left-hand riffing the whole length of the board Suddenly the bass came in again like John Henry driving steel and the treble notes ran through the night like the patter of rain The sound of rim-rapping ceased and only the sound of beating bones continued. One side of the washboard conked out. The hand and the bottle reappeared. After which the rapping went wild. (32)

Similar to Ellison's “Living with Music,” Himes's account demonstrates Black music's fundamental imbrication with noise. The musicians' hands appear, disappear, reappear, as they reach for or put down the bottle, beat, strum, or rap the keys or the washboard. Their continuous ingestion of gin not only fuels but also organizes the heterogenous form of their music-making. Their hands detach themselves from their bodies and lead an independent life; they engage in material acts of fecundity such as drinking, riffing, and rapping. The separateness between hands, the instruments, and the gin is overcome; there is “an interchange and an interorientation” of, on the one hand, movements, spirits, and bodies and, on the other hand, of music and noise (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 317). The grotesque materiality of the musicians' playing and their gin-drinking is as much a part of the fierce music's bold “eccentricity” as the paradox of in/visibility. Heavenly's “body swayed from side to side in time with the slow steady beat of the bass” (34), the man she was “ministering” to “was twitching in time to the music” (36). Following Ralph Ellison's theorization of the rhythm of invisibility as “never quite on the beat,” Himes is asking us to listen to the beat and what's between or offbeat.⁹ As the dancers were “swaying back and forth,” their “locked liquid motions steady and unchanging despite the eccentricity of the music, sometimes keeping on the beats, sometimes in between” (33). The eccentric, noisy, and defiant music signifies a Black space of intimacy and experimentation that “challenged the conscription of second-class citizenship and servitude by nurturing... other

⁸ For a discussion of the wavering line between noise and music and the construction of Harlem's public and private space via sound, see Weheliye's discussion of Ellison's “Living with Music.” (114–21).

⁹ Though their analyses cannot be considered in their entirety here, Fanon, Glissant, Hartman, Moten, Sharpe, Quashie, Crawley, among others, attribute special importance to the practice of listening for the unspoken, redacted, and annotated. Gilroy, for instance, argues that Black musical performance “establishes the priority of the personal, intimate, and non-work rhythm of everyday living and uses that focus to institute a community or constituency of active listeners” (203).

arrangements of intimacy, sociality, love, and affiliation” (Hartman, *Wayward Lives* 414). What we can sense in the noisy music and the dancers’ fleshly, erotic, intoxicated rocking is “an erotics of the cut, submerged in the broken, breaking space–time of an improvisation. Blurred, dying life; liberatory; improvisatory, damaged love; freedom drive” (Moten 26). Much like the sounds of the motel, the musical noise played in the Heavenly Clinic articulates not only the lively but also the damaged aspects of the lived experience of blackness.

The piano music is tied to the predicament of blackness but goes beyond it to mark a futurity for Black subjects. Since the “evil of narcotics pervades every corner of this novel [and suggests] the deep disgust Himes must have felt,” it also taints the musical environment of the Clinic (Skinner 148). While the city overdetermines Black subjects from outside, heroin destroys the spirits, psyches, and bodies of “healers” and “pilgrims” from inside (39). Even if the musical ministry traces wayward “flights of fantasy,” the “sad wise eyes” of Heavenly’s nanny goat (32) and the “enormous fear-frozen eyes” (37) of her rabbit, whose rectum serves as a cache for drugs, suggest that the foundation for the choreosonic experimentation is suffering, fear, and powerlessness. Himes’s visual descriptions evince that Heavenly’s faith healing racket feeds off the trauma and vulnerability of the sick: “Her thin, clawlike, transparent hand extended a silver spoon containing white powder toward [the pilgrim’s] face” (34). Therefore, it is no accident that the greed and vengeance of one of her disciples, Uncle Saint, destroys the clinic in an effort to blow up Heavenly’s safe and steal its contents. This reckless attempt at breaking free, however, misfires as Saint miscalculates the amount of nitroglycerin needed; the explosion blows up the Clinic, Saint as well as the nanny goat. Nothing survives the blast, only the piano “could be heard playing up there all alone” (92). Whereas piano music has the possibility to outlive and transcend the poisonous environment of the Clinic, the people and animals enmeshed in its brutal capture perish. Himesian soundscapes may be tethered to death, harm, and exploitation, but they also enact socio-sonic experiments that unsettle coloniality.

Having shown the inseparability of Heavenly’s healing racket and the “heavy boogie beat on a piano,” I consider the sound/noise inside the fleabag hotel as evidence of Black social and intimate life in the uneven geography of the city (32). Himes’s description of the fleabag hotel on 125th Street is noteworthy because it functions as a sonic microcosm. Entering the dilapidated building’s hall, which smells of “male urine, whore stink, stale vomit and the cheapest of perfume,” Sister Heavenly notes that the linoleum floor is worn-out; its peeling wallpaper is decorated with obscene graffiti (132). She asks for a quiet room with a safe lock where she can dissect Gus’s dog, believing the heroin to be inside the canine. The proprietor assures her that, “All of our rooms are quiet... And you are as safe here as in the lap of Jesus” (133). The irony is not lost on her, as the hotel is neither quiet, nor a safe haven. Guided by the owner, she crosses the threshold into a place packed with people cramped together, who make love, use drugs, cook, and argue loudly. As they slowly make their way through the hotel, she overhears the noise of Black private life from behind closed doors:

From behind a door on the second floor came loud voices raised in argument: Who you talking to, you blue-gum nigger!” “You better shut up, you piss-colored whore” From behind another came the sound of pots and pans banging around and the smell of boiling ham hocks and cabbage. From a third the sound of bodies crashing against furniture, objects falling to the floor, feet scuffling, panting grunts and a woman’s voice shrilling, “Just wait ‘til I get loose – ” (133)

Though the occupants are hidden from view, separated by walls, doors, locks, and the like, their sonically marked presence dissolves these separations. Olly Wilson’s notion of “the heterogeneous sound ideal” in African American music is relevant here, as it characterizes the myriad of loud, excessive, contrastive sounds, exhibiting a “high density of musical events within a relatively short musical time frame – a tendency to fill up all the musical space” (159). Within this overwhelming mass of dense sonic texture, we can hear individual sounds full of obscure meaning and resistant to capture, that are nonetheless expressions of collective identity. As Voegelin eloquently states, “[N]oise amplifies social relations and tracks the struggle for identity and space within the tight architectural and demographic organization of a city” (45). The noise produced by those deemed wayward thus signifies the sonic chorus of critique and possibility within the enclosure. In the words of Best and Hartman, “Black noise represents the kinds of

political aspirations that are inaudible and illegible within the prevailing formulas of political rationality; these yearnings are illegible because they are so wildly utopian and derelict to capitalism" (9). As they insist, the vulgar, dramatic, loud noise production of the poor is the consequence of overcrowding, sub-standard housing, unequal wages, and racialized geographies; yet it, too, is an expression of everyday living and loving.

The incongruous, extreme, and constant noise production inside mirrors the noisiness of the urban soundscape. The proprietor appears to be "stone-deaf," he does not give the slightest notice to the cacophony enveloping them (133). According to him, Heavenly's is the quietest room, when in fact, it may very well be the loudest one, as it draws in the noise of social experiments from surrounding rooms and the streets "down below" (92). From the window looking down on 125th Street, "The roar of the traffic poured in. Directly below was a White Rose bar. A jukebox was blasting and the loud strident voice of Screaming Jay Hawkins was raised in song. From the room next door came the blaring of a radio tuned up so loud the sound was frayed" (133). Black noise is associated with the sociality of Black life in Harlem: demographic density, overcrowdedness without privacy, nervous conditions, and the vocals of its inhabitants. The thick, heterogeneous, booming, irreverent, and culturally vibrant noise is fundamentally "the critique of the proper including proper History, proper historical memory, proper historical moment" (Crawley 151). While drawing on the memory and sounds of Middle Passage and antebellum plantations, ungovernable, anarchic, untamed noise gestures to another place, a wild place. As we shall see, the sounds of the altercation between Heavenly and the dog recreate the sonic density and texture of captivity: the cacophony is always-already there, "down below, the jukebox blasted; next door the radio blared. Strident voices sounded from the street; horns blared in the jammed traffic" (135). The thundering diversity of sounds was there when Heavenly went into the hotel and will be there long after she is gone. As was true of the London Riots of 2011 Stefano Harney is describing, so it is of Heavenly's riotous experiments, the call and response are not separated out, but enact one another: "the response is already there before the call goes out" (134). Her acoustically violent search for more is echoed by the cacophony inside and outside.

Vocal Experiments of Captives

Whereas the parasitic nature of Heavenly's faith healing pitch is expressed visually, not sonically, the dog's howling inside the fleabag hotel gives sonic expression to the ominous underside of her ventures. After removing her disguise in the hotel room, she readies herself for the job and establishes herself as a "real" executor by smoking a blunt and putting on rubber gloves and an apron. Unlike the African, who earlier let the wounded dog bleed out, Heavenly talks to the dog kindly, strokes her gently, and deliberately knocks her out with chloroform before cutting her throat: "In just a moment, honey," or, "It won't be long now," she murmurs to Sheba (134, 132). The opposition between Heavenly's sweet whisperings and Sheba's noisy and physical fight for life highlights the violent nature of Heavenly's assault and the dog's fear of death. In the face of impending death, Sheba thrashes, dashes across the room, gives a "long pitiful howl," and "gasp [s] for breath" before her eyes become fixed and she lies still (134–5). Through the disappearance of the animal's loud cries in the city's incessant noise, Himes connects Harlem's antiblack ecosystem to the totality of antiblackness, in which the screams of the dying are ignored, willfully misunderstood, or enjoyed.

Rather than the binarism of the human/animal, I read the scene as not only an encounter between the not-quite-human and nonhuman but also representative of Heavenly's and Sheba's exclusion from the coherence of the human.¹⁰ Sheba, an animal figure, is obviously subject to gendered speciesism. Named after the Queen of Sheba, she embodies the dream of unimaginable abundance, however, after her owner's

¹⁰ On the theory of racializing assemblages, my thinking is indebted to Weheliye's conceptualization of race as "a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (*Habeas Viscus* 4).

death, she is deprived of home, her body is traded, invaded, and violently transformed into flesh, thus occupying a position similar to that of Heavenly, who fled the southern cotton farm she used to call home “to be a whore because she was too cute and too lazy to hoe the corn and chop the cotton” (96). In spite of her captive body, Heavenly is a “completely self-made” villain “who dominates the story and is unforgettable” (Skinner 149).¹¹ She is outside Sylvia Wynter’s figure of “Man” and her wayward practices cannot be understood in terms of “His” logic. As I show here, the fate of the not-quite-human and nonhuman are inextricably intertwined. Their interdependence is expressed through their visualsonic being: the helpless thrashing of the howling canine parallels the strident voices of “[c]olored people [who] swarmed up and down the sidewalks” (135). There is an insistent, discordant quality to the sounds, the noises they make. Moten might call their ensemble the “multiphonic delirium or fantasy” of “the demand” that “undermines the univocal authority of sovereignty” (Harney and Moten 135). The sonic imagery centers those deemed the antithesis of “respectability,” and, what’s more, “the very antithesis of a Human subject” (Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black* 9). By overlaying these strident voices and howls in a sonically dense and multiphonic ensemble, Himes demonstrates how not-quite-humans and nonhumans dispute the disciplining of humanity into racialized hierarchies.

Himes’s literary phonograph archives an urban plantation in which certain forms of destructiveness are foundational. Heavenly’s murderous gentleness and sweetness toward Sheba is not represented as purposeful or deceitful (156). But “honey” (the term of endearment she uses when addressing Sheba) rhymes with “money,” which reveals her unquenchable thirst for more.¹² As the narrator summarily states, “There wasn’t anything [Heavenly] wouldn’t do for money” (135). The act of disemboweling the carcass is “bloody, dirty, filthy, work” (135). Mirroring the Heavenly Clinic’s gory blowup, the operation produces an abhorrent amount of waste, which reproduces the excessive affects, looks, sounds, and smells of the Black settlement: “The hot poisonous air inside of the room, stinking of blood, chloroform and dog-gut was enough to suffocate the average person,” but Heavenly “stood it” and “kept on” (135).¹³ She is “nauseated beyond description. Twice she vomited into the filth,” but she ironically notes that, “It ain’t any worse than some of the tricks I’ve turned” (135).¹⁴ From the root *naus* for ship, the Greco-Latin word *nausea* meaning “sea-sickness, vomiting, disgust” developed the meaning “strife, loud outcry, noise” (Spitzer 260). If we take “ship” to be “a reminder and/or remainder of the Middle Passage” (Sharpe 46), then the horrors of Middle Passage are entangled with Heavenly’s nausea and, to borrow Glissant’s phrase, the “apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise” characteristic of the discourse of enslaved and post-emancipation Black speakers (124). Indeed, if the reader listens closely to Heavenly, one can hear her captivity and desperate struggle to get free.

Heavenly’s vocal utterances subvert mainstream English to articulate these unspoken and unspeakable conditions of extreme deprivation. Once sure that Sheba’s entrails did not contain dope, “there wasn’t anything inside of the dog but blood and filth” (135), Heavenly remarked, “Well, that’s lovely” (135). In Himes’s terms, she’s a “fatalist” (95) – in ours an Afropessimist – whose signifyin(g) speaks to the unintelligibility of loveliness in the ghetto, but nonetheless the unpredictable impossibilities at play retain something of that desire for loveliness. After crawling to the window and sucking in “the hot, stinking outside air,” she takes care to spread her bloody apron “over the bloody carcass” (135). This moment of care may not seem like much, but compared, for example, with the indignity of the 4-h “time lapse” in covering

¹¹ For both Spillers and Weheliye, blackness becomes flesh in Middle Passage when the Black female slave undergoes a violent de-gendering. Nonetheless, Heavenly enables us to think about flesh as the foundation of wayward experiments in living.

¹² The phono-erotic “banging of the same ten keys,” the snake dancer’s lewd shouting “*Money-money-money-honey*,” and baring of her private parts underscores this connection between sexuality, economics, and sound (27,28).

¹³ Her ability to stand the poisonous air and keep on evokes African Americans’ immunity “to the strange air pressures that rendered impossible other human life on the new Atlantis” (35). Derrick Bell’s “The Afrolantica Awakening” is also worthy of mention here because he is another important writer who should feature more prominently in discussions of literary Afropessimism.

¹⁴ In contrast to other characters, all of whom lose consciousness at one point, including the Jake, Pinky, Red Johnny, Ginny, Digger, and Ed, she never once faints. I read her ability to retain consciousness in the face of inhuman pressure as evidence of the suspension of her human vulnerabilities and a form of wayward-becoming.

Michael Brown's body and removing it from Canfield Drive. In contrast, Heavenly notices Sheba's remains with care and immediately covers her. In spite of (or because) the brutalities she commits in the name of (no) more, I read her gesture as one of tenderness in the face of ceaseless violence. The "wake work" she performs brings into view a better world than the fleabag hotel, it does not fundamentally alter her uncontrite character.¹⁵ As soon as she covers Sheba up, she washes and wipes her body with perfume, makes her face anew, disguises herself, puts herself back together, and carries on her relentless hustle.

Heavenly's "sweet" voice (155) evokes what Jarvis McInnis might call the "afterlife of the sugar plantation." Extending Karl Marx's subjunctive rehearsal of the commodity's impossible speech, the commodity (in this case sugar) speaks through Heavenly's voice. Furthermore, her "saccharine voice" implies an excessive or sickish sweetness, an ingratiating or affected friendliness that exposes her toxic hold over the sick who come to her for fixing (156). The connection between her lovely manners and violence is even more pronounced when the sweetness of her voice is directly linked to her murder of Ginny. She refers to Ginny as "honey" when she calls the woman to herself in a "sweet cajoling voice" (156), before saying "sweetly," "Here," as she "plunged the long sharp blade of her knife deep into Ginny's heart" (156). Reminiscent of the "blood sugar" trope in the abolitionist campaigns of the 1790s, the lethal sweetness of her style enunciates the violence she visits upon Ginny. Furthermore, her "cracked voice" expresses the bodily and psychic traumas of enslaved people and their descendants (155). More specifically, the "material, graphic, phonic substance" (Moten 10) of her voice, its sharp, sudden, explosive sound intimates the demolition and disintegration of her beautiful voice. Paradoxically, her "deep, slightly cracked, musical voice" embodies and resists the laws of objectification, for it is an "irruption of phonic substance that cuts and augments meaning" (39, Moten 14). The "remnants of bygone music" (34) in it retain the "trace of some impossible initial version" (Moten 107) of the girl who aspired to a life outside female "respectability."

The phonic substance of her speech cuts through white-authored meanings. On her way out, the proprietor asks her whether the dog will be quiet while she is gone. Feeling slightly hysterical for the first time in 30 years, she signifies on him, replying that "[s]he's the quietest dog in the city" (136). A key aspect of her signifyin(g) is "its indirect intent or metaphorical reference" (Mitchell-Kernan 173), namely, the carcass and the impossibility of quiet in the damned city. When she invokes the city in relation to Sheba's quietness, she names that which does not contribute to the roar of the city. Her heightened attention to the quiet resembles the detectives' surrender to the sonic silence in the proximity of the dead. Not only is the reader asked to ponder the meaning of her signifyin(g), but also to practice a kind of hearing directed at the sound practices of the dying and the silence of the dead dog. In the wake of the dog's loud howling, Heavenly's "language of trickery" plays on the notion of quietness and contrapuntally amplifies the noise of Black social life (Gates 990). Signifyin(g) on the terms "lovely" and "quiet" on the one hand naturalizes/neutralizes the bloody and groaning mess she had left behind; on the other hand, her signifyin(g) dialectically and dialogically parodies the material and sonic excesses of Harlem. With the cacophony of the city and the fleabag hotel still ringing in her/our ears, her meta-joke delivers a deadly, hardened blow of irony. At the same time, her hysteria suggests that her figural, metaphorical signifyin(g) is suddenly haunted by the literal, fleshly remains left behind. As much as she tries to signify it away, the quietness of the dog and, by extension, of the avoidably dead pierces the fatalist veil she shrouds herself in.

Her final act of signifyin(g) brings us even closer to this opaque woman and her wild, wayward experiments. After mercilessly killing Ginny (Gus's partner and the African's lover) whom she believes to be in possession of the dope, Heavenly herself is shot because she is unaware that Ginny had been set up by the police to attract the white gunmen. Right before the white dealer shoots her in the head, Sister Heavenly thinks to herself: "Well now, ain't this lovely?" (157) The saying she had used before is repeated with a difference, signifyin(g) on her own death.¹⁶ Like most people in Harlem, she understands the racial

¹⁵ Sharpe means "wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (18).

¹⁶ Upon finding out that Uncle Saint had been lying to her and is the killer the police is looking for, she exclaims in disgust, "Well, now ain't that lovely!" (62).

arithmetic only too well, “She knew her time was short” (123). Her lethal irony and strategy of signifyin(g) are symptoms of a profound knowing. Her styling indirectly articulates her willingness to pass on from this uneven life; it also embodies a vulnerability, a humility, and a fearless imagination, ushering forth an irrevocable and profound act of liberation, a Bellian moment of awakening in the face of inevitable defeat.

The loveliness she is signifyin(g) is the radiant, serene beauty of otherwise possibility. Her entanglement in the web of problematic possibility neither negates her life, nor empties it of all beauty; to the contrary, without explicating what was lovely, when she felt lovely, how the loveliness of her dreams faded or where the music in her voice went, the multiphonic sounding acknowledges the terrible beauty and brutality of her lived experience. Of course, we cannot bypass the inevitability of her death (already on its way as she is expressing these final thoughts to the unseen chorus of wayward women) or condone the violences she visited upon others. Applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of the picaresque hero to Heavenly, “[she] stands beyond defense and accusation, beyond glorification or exposure, [she] knows neither repentance nor self-justification... [she] is faithful to nothing, [she] betrays everything – but [she] is nevertheless true to [her]self, to [her] own orientation, which scorns pathos and is full of skepticism” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 408, original emphasis). Her double-voiced signifyin(g) advocates for listening differently to “one of the devil’s mistresses” (as she describes herself nastily) and the im/possibilities she brings forth via sound (97).

In addition to the ambiguity of Heavenly’s vocal signifyin(g), Uncle Saint’s ventriloquism operates a form of vocality that is inflected by structures of subjugation and driven by oppositional tactics. Saint is a ventriloquist, a dope fiend, an ex-lover, and an assistant to Sister Heavenly. Beat by the police and in desperate need of a fix, Pinky returns to the Heavenly Clinic, where he is greeted and closely watched by Saint:

“I’ll be right back,” Pinky said. “Sister Heavenly sent me to tap the rabbit.” “Don’t tell me your troubles, I ain’t your pappy,” Uncle Saint said,... His voice sounded as though it had come from the bottom of a well [Pinky said,] “I’m going to Sister Heavenly’s room for a bang.” “You must think I’m the recording angel,” Uncle Saint grumbled. His voice sounded as though it came out of the oven. “Go to the devil, for all I care.” (36–7)

In ventriloquism the voice is still produced by bodily processes but not via phonation. According to philosopher Mladen Dolar, “the voice comes from inside the body, the belly, the stomach” (70). On the one hand, Saint’s voice seems to be an effect without a cause, it seems to speak “by itself” and display “spectral autonomy” (Žižek 58). His voice does not belong to him, it does not stick to his body. His ventriloquism embodies the placelessness of the Black subject, the rift between place, body, identity, and voice. His ventriloquism projects his voice as ephemeral, fugitive, and acousmatic sound (sound one hears without seeing an originating cause).

At the same time, his voice communes with the interior of Heavenly’s Clinic, where her faith healing supposedly cures the “sick people who c[o]me to her” (35). Rather than a puppet or a doll, the house is presumed to be the origin of his voice. His placeless voice emerges from continuously changing locations, traveling from the floorboards, through the bottom of a well and the oven, to the bedroom. Fundamentally organized around the principle of tonal clash and diversity, his ventriloquism is decentered or multiply centered. Nonetheless, Saint’s voice is enmeshed in the Heavenly Clinic, previously shown as a space of Black sociality, intimacy, and experimentation, and one of servitude, exploitation, and drug peddling. His constantly shifting voice suggests that the venom of the clinic empties him out and, in a sense, speaks through him. Even though Saint despises Heavenly, he is too dependent on her steady supply of drugs to get away from her. His attempt to outfox her fails and, tangled up with her goat, he goes up in flames when he tries to blow up her safe. His ventriloquism articulates this uneasy duality: his entanglement in the web of brutalities as well as his fugitive flights from bondage.

When Pinky asks him how long he has been a ventriloquist, Saint talks back:

“Boy, I been throwing my voice so long, I don’t know where it’s at anymore myself,” Uncle Saint said. His voice seemed to come from the bedroom Pinky had just quit. Abruptly he laughed at his own joke, “Ha-ha-ha.” The laughter seemed to come from outside the back door. “You’re going to keep on throwing it around until it gets away some day,” Pinky said.

"What business is it of yours? Is you my keeper?" Uncle Saint crabbed. He sounded like a ghost lurking underneath the floor. (38)

Bothered by the prospect of his voice leaving his body, Saint signifies on Cain's words, "[Am] I my brother's keeper?" (*New King James Bible*, Genesis 4:9). Even though he had just joked about the untraceability of his own voice, the idea of severing his voice from his body irritates him. While verbally refusing Pinky as his keeper, the "inspired materiality" of his vernacular speech summons what Moten refers to as "the complex, dissonant, polyphonic affectivity of the ghost" (196). The sound of the underground shadow calls forth not only Abel's ghost, "the voice of [Cain's] brother's blood [which] crieth unto [the Lord] from the ground" (*New King James Bible*, Genesis 4:10), but also vibrates an otherwise unspeakable history of racial violence, what Audre Lord might call the total Black from the earth's inside. Ventriloquism, a kind of voice-shifting, can be understood as a way of channeling and sounding the bloody cries of the violently abducted, trafficked, and displaced ancestors.

For captives, ventriloquism as a practice involves the breakdown and the aural rewriting of the monolithic and monolingual Voice of Man. Despite the "disembodied" nature of his voice, there are different tonal versions and variations of his thrown about voice: Saint grumbles, he crabs, he laughs, he shouts, and he sounds like a ghost. Building on Bakhtin's influential theory of voicing and Wilson's definition of the heterogeneous sound ideal, we can say that Saint's ventriloquial speech constitutes a special type of internally dialogized, multi-voiced discourse in which "a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound (timbre)" is the norm (160). It is an improvisational refusal of singularity through an oscillation of voice which plays out "in the break" and carries the trace of another mode of organization. Saint's ventriloquized, broken, interrupted speech is itself in a continual act of timbral and tonal regeneration and reconstitution.

Signifyin(g) both fugitivity and enclosure inside the intraracial space of the Clinic, Saint's ventriloquism enables him to project an inviolable body in white supremacist spaces. After he splits from Heavenly, Saint follows the truck from Gus's apartment to the dock because he believes the treasure to be hidden inside. When a white gunman takes aim at him, ventriloquism saves his life: "Abruptly from behind [the gunman] a hard voice shouted, 'Get 'em up or I'll shoot!' [The gunman] didn't see the faint motion of Uncle Saint's lips. He wheeled about convulsively [while] Uncle Saint lunged for his shotgun lying on the floor" (48). So strong is the embodying power of Saint's voice that it creates an illusory body, which supplants Saint's real, visible body. The illusion of the body-less voice speaking from behind his back causes the white assassin to turn around, giving Saint time to reach for and fire his shotgun. Steven Connor's concept of the "vocalic body" or "voice-body" explains the mutually constitutive and reversible relationship between voice and body: "The principle of the vocalic body is simple. Voices are produced by bodies: but can also themselves produce bodies" (35). As he argues in *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, "The history of ventriloquism is to be understood partly in terms of the repertoire of imagings or incarnations it provides for these autonomous voice-bodies" (35). In contrast to the racialized visibility of blackness, Saint's vocalic body is not "fixed and finite," it is "a body-in-invention, an impossible, imaginary body" (36). His "surrogate or secondary body [is] a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice" (35). To paraphrase Connor, by speaking from where the body is not and never speaking from where it is (234), ventriloquism has the potential to disrupt or defer racial violence in white-dominated spaces.

Ventriloquism thus elides Saint's racialized embodiment as the tame "old darky" and circumvents the limits on the body as a bounded, monolithic, and locatable entity within highly policed and surveilled geographies (51). Almost immediately after the shooting, Saint "reverted to the legendary Uncle Tom, the old halfwit darky, the white man's jester, the obsequious old white – haired coon without a private thought" (51). This racialized performance helps him get past the cops at the toll gates, who notice the bullet holes in his car, and eventually return to Heavenly's den in the Bronx (51). Whereas Saint, Heavenly, and Pinky's visual representation emphasizes their determination by and resistance to the cultural imaginary, their vocal practices not only move these characters beyond their racialized identities, but also highlight how they live within and against the dominance of the antiblack world.

Sonic Relationalities: Screams and Silences in /as/ for “The Wake”

To think about another way in which the sonic offers possibilities outside of destruction, I probe a pivotal turn in the narrative when Harlem’s cacophony morphs into silence and then into a scream. After being suspended for the use of excessive force, the two ace detectives return to Riverside Drive to hunt for Pinky and investigate his stepdad’s allegedly planned murder. Inside Gus’s ransacked apartment, they discover the African’s corpse lying in a grotesque position with his throat cut from ear to ear. Blood is everywhere, “over the furniture, the floor, the African’s white turban and rumpled robe” (74). The spectacle and the soundscape of death make them conscious of inhabiting what Sharpe theorizes as “the wake,” the ongoing catastrophe of Black lives: “For a moment there was only the sound of their labored breathing and the buzzing of an electric fan somewhere out of sight The macabre hideousness of the bloody corpse was accentuated by the buzzing of the fan [Digger] located the wall socket and jerked out the plug. Silence came down” (74–75). As they hold a “wake,” that is, “*a watch or vigil held beside the body of someone who has died*” (Sharpe 10), the deafening noise of the city quiets down and slowly the noise of silence materializes.

This silence is different from dominant cultural understandings of “silence” and its relation to whiteness. For instance, Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* argues that silence is the auditory corollary of “impenetrable whiteness” that appears in Poe whenever an Africanist presence is engaged (32). By linking an idealized notion of “quiet” with white middle-class suburbs, Stoeber amplifies the contiguity between whiteness and silence. She argues that white-led noise-abatement campaigns often target communities of color and their noisiness, equating quietness with “responsibility, citizenship, one’s duty to the nation” (150). In contrast, silence needs to be understood here in relation to Quashie’s notion of the Black quiet.¹⁷ While they are listening to the intangible and undefined sounds of silence, what I term sonic silence, the detectives think about the victim’s death and their relations to it. If the (internalized) white gaze constructs, objectifies, and congeals racial blackness into “an object among other objects,” the sounds revealed to their listening ears observe, narrate, and mark Black death, involving them in the tragically and prematurely arrested breathing of the African man (Fanon 109 [1968]). In Quashie’s terms, the sonic silence symbolizes their interiority, “the expressiveness of the inner life, unable to be expressed fully but nonetheless articulate and informing of one’s humanity” (21). Their attention to the quiet represents the depth, the quality, and the aliveness of their inner life. The sonic silence connects them to a deep surrender and knowing that moves the two characters beyond the frame of the detective story into a representation of their humanity. Even as their listening goes beyond the utilitarian listening associated with detectives, it is still tethered to surviving and righting the social world, particularly to hunting for clues as they examine the flaccid muscles of the victim’s body. As their proximity to danger and death enhances their powers of concentration and deduction, they conclude rather quickly that the African cannot have been dead long, and the murderer might still be lurking around.

Furthermore, sonic silence delivers them to the sounds of their making, in particular, the sound of their heavy breathing. As they listen to these fragile, fleeting notes, they turn, in Sharpe’s formulation, “[to] the necessity of breath, to breathing space, to the breathtaking spaces” (109). In this way, the “muffled outside soundscape morphs with [their] inner soundings,” their soundings become the outer soundscape and the

¹⁷ I use the two terms synonymously because silence does not mean an absence of sound. As Voegelin’s intervention makes clear, “Silence is not the space left by sound but the space at the basis of all sound” (98). For that reason, “Silence is about listening, listening to small sounds, tiny sounds, quiet and loud sounds out of any context, musical, visual or otherwise” (Voegelin 81).

¹⁸ Elsewhere I show that Himes’s racializing assemblages suggest what a handful of environmental studies have demonstrated, namely, that African Americans in (formerly) redlined neighborhoods suffer disproportionately from exposure to pollution. Sources include “industry, agriculture, all manner of vehicles, construction, residential sources and even emissions from restaurants” (“People of Color Breathe More Hazardous Air”).

soundscape becomes them (Voegelin 83). Their breathing “in the wake” is crucial since the hazardous and congested Harlem air transforms the breathing of the racially colonized into “combat breathing.”¹⁸ As noted by Fanon, “quite simply” it is “impossible for [the colonized] to breathe” (226 [1968]). To counter the state-enforced vulnerability to respiratory diseases and suffocation, the detectives open themselves up to what Sharpe calls the practice of aspiration, that is, “keeping and putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather” (113). Resting in the breathing space they are thus in the physical proximity to death (of the African and their own): “For a time they stood without moving, holding their breath to listen. Vague sounds drifted in from the street – passing automobiles, the distant horn of a ship, the muted, unidentifiable thousand sounds of the city forming an unnoticeable undertone” (76). Standing still and silent in weather they were never meant to survive, the sonic silence suspends and stretches out linear time, throwing the dialectics of the state of emergency into a standstill. Rather than fighting it, they surrender to the structural vulnerability of Black life, the improbable metaphysics, and the ordinary undertones of the soundscape. The conjoint practices of stillness and aspiration allow them to hear the hitherto hushed sounds of the city – Harlem’s soundscape is drained of buzz and commotion, so that sounds from below, beneath the threshold of hearing emerge. This moment of suspended action in the middle of an action-packed murder investigation is an opening of themselves to the quiet sounds of Black social life lived in/under/in spite of Black death. For, to listen to sonic silence is to hear “the lower frequencies” of sociality, and thereby to gain access to the underground, unidentifiable, undercommon soundscape that prompts the listening – rather than the carceral – imagination.

The imagination that compels the detectives and the reader to listen to the sounds “in the wake” is also a call to speculate about the origin of these quiet, drifting, tiny sounds. As I listen with Ed and Digger, I suspect the “distant horn of a ship” to be the *Queen Mary’s* – the transatlantic ocean liner Gus and his wife Ginny were supposed to sail on to their farm in Ghana (76). The sound is “distant” not only because the *Queen Mary* is docked on the Hudson river at 50th Street, but it is also a symbol of escape, mobility, and abundance, an imaginary counterpoint to the totality of Harlem’s antiblack climate.¹⁹ When the *Queen Mary* departs at noon, “the blowing of the tugboat whistles, the shouting of orders, the screaming of goodbyes from six thousand five hundred throats” expand the sensorily organized field of “the wake” (81). With “enough noise to arouse the inhabitants of a cemetery” (81), it unsettles (in Wynter’s terms) “the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom.” Specifically, the screaming refers to possibilities, which do not yet and cannot exist in the totality of the antiblack weather.²⁰ In spite of the impossibility of this longing to revive the (socially) dead, I fancy that the reverberations of this powerful collective scream can be heard across time and space – 15 min after the *Queen Mary* sails from Pier 90 – in the Harlemites’ singular cry of terror that saves Digger’s life when the drug baron’s white hit men attack him in Gus’s apartment:

But suddenly a woman let out a scream. It was a scream of unbelievable volume and immeasurable terror. You could tell it was a colored woman screaming by the heart she put into it. It was the loudest screaming the hopped-up gunman had ever heard and it shattered his control like glass breaking. He started to run blindly and without direction. (80)

In this scene, the Black woman screaming intervenes in matters of life and death: by puncturing the killer’s “dominant racialized filter,” what Stoeve terms the white “listening ear,” and by making him run backward blindly, it saves Digger’s neck (*The Sonic Color Line* 32). The emotional, vocal, and psychic labor this Black woman puts into the scream amplifies the volume and the duration of sound, “screams kept pouring from her mouth with unvarying, nerve-shattering resonance” (80). Her scream is not simply loud, resonating at a high frequency, but it is just the right frequency for the white Man’s control to break. Jarod Sexton’s theory

¹⁹ In Himes’s text, the Atlantic Ocean signifies otherwise possibilities: “On one side was the devil, on the other the deep blue sea” (127). Through the fragile, soft, distant sound of the *Queen Mary’s* horn, the listening imagination thus traverses the space between captivity and liberation. In reality, however, the *Queen Mary* does not fulfill Gus and Ginny’s dreams of escape; their deaths signify the captivity of the community.

²⁰ For Sharpe, the weather is the ongoing location and production of Black non/being: “the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack” (104). Elsewhere I argue that Himes represents the weather in Harlem as slavery’s wake and the site of Black ecologies.

of “libidinal economy” can help elucidate the white shooter’s disorientation: since antiblack violence makes the non-Black psyche cohere, hearing the scream that appeals to Black life ruptures the cognitive schema of the neurotypical white subject shattering it like glass.²¹ As suggested earlier, Moten also considers “phonic matter” – irreducible to either speech or music – to be a weapon of insurgency against white supremacy (7). He writes that the Black object/commodity “screams poetically, musically, politically, theoretically; the commodity screams and sings in labor. The spirit of the material” (215). By rupturing the structural silences produced by the grammar of antiblack violence, the scream materializes in/as the break, that is, blackness erupts as a material/maternal praxis that disturbs slavery’s wake. The irruption of traumatic sound, the afterlife of Aunt Hester’s “heart-rending shrieks,” wrests Black life from death and performs “wake work.” As the neighbor apprehends herself as her brother’s keeper, the trappings of the individual fall away and a Black feminist ethics of care emerges. The “great black scream” thus erupts “with such force that it [shakes] the pillars of the world” (Césaire qtd. in Fanon 175 [2007]). Unlike Goldy’s violent, bloody, grotesque scream “shaking the entire tenement of the city” in *A Rage in Harlem* (Himes 105), the screams guiding the *Queen Mary*’s passage exceed the boundaries of the event, overflowing into the unknown woman’s scream, becoming a polyphonic, insurgent, excessive intervention against the inevitability and normativity of Black death.²² Rather than reading the scream as a sonic expression of the “devaluation of Black life” (Diawara 530), the woman’s scream revalues and restores Black life by communicating her message to the detectives through sound. Paraphrasing Glissant, the ability to hear the camouflaged word under “the provocative intensity of the scream” gathers Black people together in the relationality of the scream (124).

Conclusion

Himesian soundscapes dismantle culturally dominant and binary conceptions of noise and silence. Noise serves as an index of the inexpressible violence of racial slavery as well as the willful negation and silencing of that violence by the white listening ear. In *Heat’s On*, Black Harlemites liberate noise away from criminalized white conceptions, and reclaim it as an essential part of their collective and cultural identity. Noise attends to the messiness and the disorganization of Black social life, and ushers in forms of being and relationality that are not based on the logic of incorporation and recognition. While the white listening/literary ear is discombobulated by the Black woman’s scream, Himes shows us how his characters resist the norms of white listening habits, practicing forms of listening that disassociate white notions of “noise” from the noisiness produced by Black life. Such Black listening practices defy the normativity of Black death by propagating forms of knowledge, being, and mutuality essential to Black life. By reminding the reader to listen, *The Heat’s On* foregrounds different dimensions of domination and resistance than a more visual perspective, decentralizing criminalized conceptions of Himes’s characters. Instead, Himes’s reliance on the literary “listening ear” centers alternative conceptions of captivity and struggle “in the wake.”

My notion of sonic silence is indebted to Quashie but also departs from it. It points to a fleeting, intertwined, and reciprocal relationship with one’s environment, an undoing of the separation of the inside and outside. Sonic silence compels an active, creative, open form of listening, particularly to faint, vague, tender sounds, that activate the sonic imagination. Silence is also a way in which one can inhabit Sharpe’s “wake” and perform “wake work,” as it implies a heightened consciousness of the dead and the dying, of one’s body and breath. The use of aural silence and auditory forms of listening has rich significance in other

²¹ For Sexton’s theory of “libidinal economy,” see his “Afro-Pessimism” and Wilderson’s summary definition compiled from Sexton’s handout (7).

²² In the brutal noir-style scene in which Goldy’s throat is cut, his scream mingles with the sound of the train. Diawara claims that the loud sound conveys the mobility, power, and freedom of the train, and “a devaluation of Black life,” but does not give further thought to how the scream or other sounds signify in *Rage* (530).

African American literary works as well. In an essay on Teju Cole's *Open City*, I argued that the “phonic materiality” (Moten 197) of silence “generates a space for expanded listening, where the lower and darker frequencies of Black sociality, irrevocably and improbably entombed by official history, can be heard” (Mózes 284). It remains to be explored how sonic silence can be the ground for speculative futures, for example in Du Bois's “The Comet,” where the dreadful, spectral silence of apocalyptic New York City imagines a different world order.

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