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James Baldwin's Soundscape and Grain of the Racialized Body

by

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Music pervades the body of James Baldwin's work. There are few who read the language he composes into narrative and do not experience the musicality he creates. Jazz and Blues are alive in most of his novels, short stories, and essays—the piano or trumpet never fall silent. The sounds are present; there is no denying this fact, but at some point the art forms of writing and music bifurcate. What happens when we are confronted by the difficulties of writing *about* music, *about* sound? How does the substance of sound transfer from the restrictive formalities of language to an aural experience? James Baldwin's focus on the sonic expression of the Black body by way of instrument or the sensual merits exploration, and will at the very least, be the vanguard guiding us through encounters with literary, music, and sound theorists such as Fred Moten, Roland Barthes, and Jennifer Stoeber, in an attempt to explore this problematic.

I: In the Beginning there was Roland Barthes & "Sonny's Blues"

To begin, it is vital to focus on some of the specific ways in which language is a limiting factor in our engagement with music in text. French philosopher and literary theorist, Roland Barthes, argues that the restrictive nature of language forces one to rely too heavily on the adjective when discussing music. In Barthes's 1972 "The Grain of the Voice" he elaborates on his distaste for poor descriptors:

How, then, does language manage when it has to interpret music? Alas, it seems, very badly. If one looks at the normal practice of music criticism (or, which is often the same thing, of conversations 'on' music), it can readily be seen that a work (or its performance) is only ever translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective. The adjective is inevitable: this music is *this*, this execution is *that*. No doubt the moment we turn and art into a subject (for an article, for a conversation) there is nothing left but to give it predicates; in the case of music, however, such predication unfailingly takes the most facile and trivial form, that of the epithet. (*Image Music Text* 179)

Barthes argues that the history of music criticism and even mere conversation around the subject are inherently flawed and inadequate due to the system of communication we employ. Once music becomes a subject to consider, linguistic and literary precedent confines us to the adjective or epithet, as Barthes proclaims.

Though Roland Barthes is unable to fully solve this quandary around music's lazy modifiers, he proposes a shift of focus:

...rather than trying to change directly the language on music, it would be better to change the musical object itself, as it presents itself to discourse, better to alter its level of perception or intellection, to displace the fringe of contact between music and language. It is this displacement I want to outline, not with regard to the whole of music but simply to a part of vocal music (lied or milodie): the very precise space (genre) *of the encounter between a language and a voice.* (*Image Music Text* 181)

Because we do not easily access the language that provides us with an alternative to the adjective, Barthes asks for us to linger within the distinction between the musical language and the musical object. It is within this space where the new possibility for encompassing the experience of music lies. He also offers the opportunity for a more focused study attuned to the specific registers of musicality. Instead of grappling with music in its entirety, he limits his focus solely at the voice, specifically beacons of the classical European vocalist tradition.

Before fully declaring Barthes's concept, it is important to understand his process and what theory he uses in order to differentiate between the musical language and musical object: "I shall use a two-fold opposition: theoretical, between the phenotext and the genotext (borrowing from Julia Kristeva), and paradigmatic, between two singers..." (Barthes 181) According to Kristeva, the phenotext is the

“language that serves to communicate...a structure (which can be generated, in generative grammar’s sense): it obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee” (“Genotext and Phenotext” 86-87).

According to Noelle McAfee, “it is a mappable piece of communication” (“Genotext and Phenotext” 25). The phenotext is the symbol, syntax, semantics—it is language in material form. The genotext is largely abstract. Kristeva explains:

...the genotext is not linguistic...it is rather a process...which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral (unstable, threatened by drive charges, “quanta” rather than “marks”) and non-signifying devices... [it]will include semiotic processes but also advent the symbolic... The genotext can thus be seen as language’s underlying foundation. (“Genotext and Phenotext” 86-87)

The genotext reveals all the possible signifying processes. It is able to articulate the fleeting or ever-present energies that are later signified and confined to symbol and solidified as specific text. According to McAfee, “The genotext is the motility between words, the potentially disruptive meaning that is not quite a meaning below the text” (“Genotext and Phenotext” 24). Kristeva offers clarifying analogies of both concepts. She believes the genotext can be seen as a sort of topology, while the phenotext is similar to algebra—“the first points to the shape of some entity, whereas the second lays out the structure” (McAfee 25). The genotext and other renditions will be a leading point of focus in the rest of this essay.

As I previously stated, Roland Barthes borrows from Julia Kristeva’s theories on the phenotext and genotext. Because his own focus is on music and the voice in particular, Barthes offers the “pheno-song” and “geno-song”:

The *pheno-song*...covers all phenomena, all the features which belong to the structure of the language being sung, the rules of the genre, the coded form of the melisma, the composer’s idiolect, the style of the

interpretation: in short, everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression, everything which it is customary to talk about, which forms the tissue of cultural values...which takes its bearing directly on the ideological alibis of the period ('subjectivity', 'expressivity', 'dramaticism', 'personality' of the artist). The *geno-song* is the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate 'from within language and in its very materiality'; it forms a signifying play having nothing in to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression; it is the apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language – not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters – where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work. It is, in a very simple word but which must be taken seriously, the diction of the language. (*Image Music Text* 182-183)

Like the phenotext, the pheno-song encompasses all structural components of music. It includes genre, language, and performance styles. It is also an obvious communication and reflection of emotions and culture. The geno-song is the intangible, yet a product of the material, of the body, of the throat. Barthes believes that it does not serve as a means of communication. Rather, it is the depth, volume, and range of the sound-signifiers that exist without the harness or formalities of music. However, I must point out an important factor that Kristeva mentions which Barthes hardly alludes to and allows to spill through his theoretical sifter. Barthes explains that the geno-song is not to serve as a form of communication, and to a certain extent it seems that Kristeva agrees. But what we must recognize is that although there are no communicative formalities, it does not negate the possibility of communication. Kristeva explains that the genotext "will include the semiotic processes..." these processes "include drives, their disposition, and their division of the body, plus the ecological and social systems surrounding the body" ("Genotext and Phenotext" 86). If the genotext is "unstable, threatened by drive charges," then

shouldn't it be able to *communicate* something about the ecological and social systems that surround this body? (Kristeva 86) This will be an important factor when I later discuss questions of aurality and Black embodiment in the work of James Baldwin.

The unraveling of Roland Barthes's process finally leads us in to the "fringes of contact between music and language," somewhere between the pheno-song and the geno-song. Barthes offers the concept of the "Grain of the Voice", which he describes as the "precise space of encounter between language and voice." Just as a grain of wood is distinct and unique to that particular object, "The 'grain' is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue...it is in the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose" (*Image Music Text* 181-183). It is in the places of articulation, the spaces of resonance. It is a product of the body in its most elemental form. But why particularize the voice and localize "the grain" in the throat? It seems futile to dismember the body when sound is generated from it in various capacities and parts. Why not apply this theory to the body in its totality? Further, what will be produced if this concept is applied to the *racialized* body? As Barthes suggests, I will linger somewhere in between music and text and music *in* text—a space where the genotext/phenotext and geno-song/pheno-song coexist. There is no better home than James Baldwin's literature. Based on his work, I will argue that attention to the Black expressive musical and narrative forms would make audible and visible "the grain" of the Black body riffing off of and elaborating on Roland Barthes's "The Grain of the Voice".

If there is any one of James Baldwin's narratives that is a reservoir of Jazz and Blues music it is his short story, "Sonny's Blues". It is a locus of transposition – a place where music and text both meet and resist one another. "Sonny's Blues" was written in 1957 but found its home in the short story collection, *Going to Meet the Man*, in 1965. According to PBS's, "James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket – Biographical Timeline", James Baldwin was at a pivotal point in his literary and political careers. In 1957, he made the first of many trips through the South. He met with Martin Luther King Jr. and began to participate in the Civil Rights Movement. During this period, the South was in the midst of copious amounts of political transitions. Jazz and Blues music were not only rooted in the South; they echoed its histories, present realities, and fearful premonitions of the future. Though "Sonny's Blues" was set in New York City, his narrative is Baldwin's contribution and archival effort.

Sonny is a young man from Harlem who struggles to meet the world where it would like him to stand. He is a bit of a transgressive character who has seen the inside of prison, been plagued by addiction, and who can only find peace and purpose at a piano. His nameless brother, the narrator, is set as Sonny's opposite. The narrator has chosen complacency. He is a schoolteacher with a family who lives a very calculated life and seems afraid of any deviation beyond his perceived norm. I would like to begin by suggesting loose parallels in order to later develop into a larger context: Sonny is the genotext and his brother is the phenotext in the body of this narrative. Not only is the narrator's life an untenable symbol of structure, such as the system of language, but also his character serves to provide structure to

Sonny's life and shape meaning out of Sonny's experience for himself (the narrator) and, in turn, the reader. Sonny is the fleeting energy, the "motility" between the narrator's words. Sonny is an ephemeral yet ever-present figure throughout his brother's life, a life the narrator is constantly attempting to control and make sense of. It is not only until the narrator reads about Sonny in text, in material language, that he begins his journey of truly attempting to understand, or better yet, experience his brother, rather than contain him:

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out his story, I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside...He became real to me again.
(*Going to Meet the Man* 103)

There are some obvious attempts at encompassing the pheno-text and geno-text within this passage. The newspaper article becomes the symbol and construction of Sonny's life for the narrator, but it also resurrects the geno-text for him, for us. Beyond the text he can now see Sonny again, an apparition in the faces around him and his own, yet something still outside of himself that he cannot regulate and instead describes as a roar outside. Sonny is the "underlying foundation of the text" his brother holds.

Roland Barthes makes a deliberate attempt to transpose the genotext to the geno-song and the phenotext to the pheno-song in order to have it fit the realm of music. But because I would like to explore the ways in which music and text meet, then bifurcate, or where language falls short in its efforts to communicate sound, I will endeavor to demonstrate some instances where the geno-song and pheno-song

exist within “Sonny’s Blues”. In order maintain the loose connections made between the characters and the geno-/pheno- concepts, I will argue that Sonny falls within the notion of the geno-song and his brother, the pheno-song.

While Sonny is living with Isabel, the narrator’s wife, and her family, he obsessively practices his music on their piano. After a while it seems that his personhood began to diminish in the eyes of those around him and he becomes only an audible presence:

Isabel finally confessed that it wasn’t like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound. And the sound didn’t make any sense to her, didn’t make any sense to any of them—naturally. They began, in a way to be afflicted by this presence that was living in their home. It was as though Sonny were some sort of god, or monster. He moved in the atmosphere, which wasn’t like theirs at all. (*Going to Meet the Man* 125)

What Baldwin describes is not the *way* that Sonny sounds but the essence of it.

There is no longer delineation of the corporal and the sound it carries into the world. Sonny becomes it. He becomes the “volume of singing...the apex or depth of production”. There is no communication, representation, or expression. It is not about “what [it] says, but the voluptuousness of [its] sound-signifiers” (Barthes 182). Sonny’s sounds exist outside of, or better yet, before the family’s musical schema. He exists within their atmosphere, but is a presence they cannot identify. His sounds can only be deified or determined monstrous.

In contrast to Sonny, the narrator exhibits qualities of the pheno-song. Or at least, some of his statements and actions attempt to impose the pheno-song’s elements onto Sonny. When Sonny first expresses his desire of becoming a musician to his brother, he is met with resistance, confusion even. The narrator explains, “I

sensed myself in the presence of something I didn't really know how to handle, didn't understand." He asks Sonny, "I mean, so you want to be a concert pianist, you want to play classical music and all that or—or what?" (*Going to Meet the Man* 119-120) Though Sonny's wants to play Jazz (which is absolutely a construction of the pheno-song because it is a *genre* and serves to communicate), the genre does not require the same formalities as classical music. Improvisation and history shift the scope of these formalities. In Jazz Sonny is be able to put the "presence" that the narrator "didn't know how to really handle" to use, to music. This is the same presence Isabel and her family cannot decipher.

Sonny is the geno-song within the musicality of the text. He is beyond the blinded knowledge of his brother, beyond what the pheno-song would allow the narrator to hear. This is a space where Baldwin perfectly illustrates the inadequacies of language and the ways in which it incessantly fails music-- the way language falters whenever we attempt to contain music and sound within it.

Towards the end of the text, the narrator makes the following claim:

All I know about music is that people never really hear it. And then on the rare occasion when something opens within, the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for the same reason. (*Going to Meet the Man* 137)

I find that this is the summation of all that I have been discussing thus far, a summation of Baldwin's efforts to grapple with the lack in language around sound and music. Though I have centered language, this narrative heavily focuses on the motif of listening, and it is one we will revisit theoretically in the finally section of

this essay. Sonny feels unheard by his brother in both a literal and figurative sense: “Sonny. You hear me?” He pulled away. ‘I hear you. But you never hear anything I say” (*Going to Meet the Man* 137). As I have previously stated, the narrator cannot truly understand or “hear” his brother because of the order he clutches onto. He can only hear what makes sense to the blueprint he follows, the pheno-song. He understands that most people will not be able to *listen* and that the endeavor lies in him hearing what exists within him:

It’s something terrible, inside...that’s what’s the trouble...there’s no way of getting out the storm inside. You can’t talk it and you can’t make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize *nobody’s* listening. So *you’ve* got to listen. You got to find a way to listen. (*Going to Meet the Man* 133).

Sonny, “the man who creates the music is hearing something else.” (*Going to Meet the Man* 137) He is hearing the geno-song that exists within and outside of him. The substance, “the roar rising from the void” and the order he imposes on it “as it hits the air” produces what Roland Barthes theorizes as the “grain” – “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue.” (Barthes 181)

I end this section with a return to the “Grain of the Voice”. As I have previously mentioned, Barthes describes the “grain” as the “encounter between language and voice” and “the materiality of the body” in its most elemental form. And although Barthes attempts to focus primarily on the voice, I choose to elaborate on the “grain” of the racialized body. The reasons are two-fold. One, I feel it is imperative to view the Black body as a whole, rather than a sum of its parts, considering its history of dismemberment both literally and figuratively. Two, I previously provided Julia Kristeva’s theory of the genotext, which is “unstable,

threatened by drive charges” and includes “the ecological and social systems that surround the body.” (“Genotext and Phenotext” 86) Although the genotext offers no communicative, expressive, and representational formalities, it does not negate the possibility of communicating what the drive charges of the ecological and social systems impose on the body. And the body, of course, experiences as a complete entity. We will explore more of this in the following sections where we focus on Jazz and Blues music histories and what they can communicate via the “grain” of the body.

II: Amiri Baraka, Jacques Attali, & James Baldwin Speak to us in Jazz

Shortly after Sonny returns home from addiction rehabilitation, he wanders through his neighborhood in Harlem and listens to the sounds and music around him in a way that perhaps was sullied before:

While I was downstairs before, on my way here, listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through—to sing like that. It’s repulsive to think you have to suffer *that* much. (*Going to Meet the Man* 132)

Roland Barthes warns us against confusing the “grain” with fragments of the pheno-song, which offers style and expressivity. But what I believe Sonny is witnessing, or what is resonating with the substance within him, has something to do with the shared and collective histories and experiences of the Black body.

Jacques Attali is a French economic and social theorist, politician and is perhaps most known in academia as the author of *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. In this body of work, Attali discusses the economy of music and the importance of music in the evolution of society. He describes music as the “organization of noise”. Attali states:

Now we must learn to judge society more by its sounds, by its art, and by its festivals, than by its statistics. By listening to noise, we can better understand where the folly of men and their calculations is leading us, and what hopes it is still possible to have (*Noise* 3).

In order to understand the “grain” of the body, it is important to study the art that displays it and the histories that have produced them.

The historical trajectory of Blues music is one that can effortlessly demonstrate Attali’s notions of noise and music, and the ways in which their

evolutions and/or deviations serve as reflections of a given society: “Music is inscribed between noise and silence, in the space of social codification it reveals. Every code of music is rooted in ideologies and technologies of its age, and at the same time produces them” (*Noise* 19). Blues music was born from West African traditional music. Its history in some ways seems convoluted and at times disjointed. But this is because there is no singular or linear timeline in its development. Many Blues renditions were surfacing in different areas of the South simultaneously. According to Amiri Baraka, so-called “primitive” Blues music comes out of slave work songs, but “work songs and later blues forms differ very profoundly, not only in their form, but in their lyrics and intent. The work song is a “limited social possibility” because of its emergence from slavery. The shouts and hollers were strident laments...they were also chronicles” and happened in collective settings. (*Blues People* 60) But “primitive blues-singing actually came into being because of the Civil War...the shouts and hollers were still their accompaniment of arduous work...but there was solitude to this work that had never been present in old slave times.” (*Blues People* 61) Given the new economic status of the “Negro” they were now clearing, planting and harvesting crops on their own land. Work songs that were once laments over slaves’ lack of freedom became laments about their lack of financial stability: “No slave song need speak about the slave’s lack of money” (*Blues People* 65).

Atali mentions that music, the organization of noise, “is rooted in the ideologies and technologies of its age.” (*Noise* 19) I would like to provide an example that not only displays the way “primitive” Blues music reflects the technologies of

the period, but also, and more importantly (given the lens on the corporal in this essay), simultaneously demonstrates the music created from noise based in and produced by the body. Amiri Baraka explains:

Since most Negroes before and after slavery were agricultural laborers, the corn songs and arwhoolies, the shouts and hollers, issued from one kind of work. Some of the work songs, for instance, use as their measure the grunt of a man pushing a heavy weight or the blow of a hammer against a stone to provide the metrical precision and rhythmical impetus behind the singer. (*Blues People* 67)

The music produced from the grunt and the hammer perfectly exemplifies the materiality of the body. I believe it is the most raw and exposed version of “grain of the body” that can be heard in music form.

Blues and Jazz histories are similar, with slight differentiations Baraka states:

Jazz, or purely instrumental Blues, could no more have begun in one area of the country than could Blues. The mass migrations of Negroes throughout the South and the general liberating effect of the Emancipation make it extremely difficult to say where and when Jazz, or purely instrumental Blues (with European instruments), originated. It is easy to point out that Jazz is a music that could not have existed without Blues and its various antecedents. However, Jazz should not be thought of as a *successor* to Blues, but as a very original music that developed out of, and was concomitant with, Blues and moved off into its own path of development. One interesting point is that although Jazz developed out of a kind of Blues, Blues in its later connotation came to mean a way of *playing Jazz*, and by the swing era the widespread popularity of the Blues singer had already been replaced by the Jazz players. By then blues was for a great many people no longer a separate music. (*Blues People* 71)

These circumstances move to witness the “grain” of the body by way of extension via the instrument. Jazz allows for a focus on sound—to hear an instrumental Blues, a Blues communicated via body instead of word –though this does not negate the importance of the vocal, non-verbal sounds that the Blues is known for.

The differentiation and/or similarities of Blues and Jazz in the narrative of “Sonny Blues” are important to clarify. When reading this short story, one might get the impression that both genres are being used interchangeably. The title references Blues music, Sonny declares he wants to be a Jazz musician and at the end of the narrative he plays with a Jazz band. But then, the final song played, the one that seems to almost resurrect Sonny, is a Blues song, “Am I Blue”. Discernment becomes necessary when discussing the history of “Uptown” and “Downtown” Jazz musicians and Creole elements of the genre.

At the end of “Sonny’s Blues”, James Baldwin formulates a narrative that symbolically coalesces some Jazz history. According to Amiri Baraka, in New Orleans (one of the originating areas of Jazz music), the genre was split in two ways:

The mulattoes, or light-skinned Negroes, in New Orleans...adopted the name *Creole* to distinguish themselves from other negroes...The Creoles adopted as much of the French culture as they could and turned their backs on the “darker” culture of their half-brothers. New Orleans negroes became interested in the tubas, clarinets, trombones, and trumpets of the white marching bands...The marching bands that were started by Negroes in imitation of the Napoleonic military marching bands fell into two distinct categories. There were the comparatively finely trained bands of the Creoles and the untutored, raw bands of the Uptown, darker New Orleans Negroes.
(*Blues People* 72-73)

Though for a long time the Creoles were able to “successfully” assimilate and play “Downtown Jazz” in white spaces, the segregation laws soon put an end to it. Creoles began to lose their jobs and were forced to continue their careers on the margins and immerse themselves in the culture of the Uptown Jazz musicians. They were quickly reminded that “Creole” or not, trained or not, they were still black bodies to their white counterparts.

In the final scene when Sonny and his brother arrive at the club, Baldwin presents the reader with small nods of this history:

We went to the only nightclub on a short, dark street, downtown...Then 'Hello, boy,' said a voice and an enormous black man, much older than Sonny or myself, erupted out of all the atmospheric lighting and put his arm around Sonny's shoulder. 'I been sitting right here,' he said, 'waiting for you.'...Sonny grinned and pulled away a little, and said 'Creole, this is my brother'... 'Well. Now I've heard it all,' said a voice behind us. This was another musician, and a friend of Sonny's, a coal-black, cheerful-looking man, built close to the ground... (*Going to Meet the Man* 135-136)

Though this narrative is set in New York City, which contains a different history of Uptown/Downtown musical scene locations, the scene is set in a Downtown club. As I have previously mentioned, those were the Jazz clubs where the Creoles performed, and Creole also happens to be the name of the man who welcomes Sonny and is leading the band. But Baldwin does something interesting. He makes sure to describe Creole as a "large black man". He also mentions the other musician's dark "coal-like" hue. This distinction is important because the merging of these qualities becomes the melding and representation of two distinct histories: the light-skinned Downtown Creoles and the dark-skinned, Uptown marching band musicians. Again, Baldwin recreates the schema we have been following thus far: lingering in the space and exploring the product of two distinct entities or forms.

III: The Grain, The Blue Note, & The Sensual

As I mentioned at the end of Section I, the genotext is “unstable, [and] threatened by drive charges” and includes “the ecological and social systems that surround the body” (Kristeva 86) Given that we have briefly explored the histories of Jazz and Blues music, and considering the circumstances in which they have developed, we are that much closer to understanding the “grain” of the racialized body in music and text. In the essay, “On the Sound of Water: Amiri Baraka’s ‘Black Art’”, Sherry Brennan states: “The sound of music is without language or the sense of language, yet it is not without sense...these sounds have meaning and sense, yet they are without linguistic sense” (299). It seems that the “sense” Brennan speaks of is a sort of memory or outside influence the sounds hold. They have meaning, but none in the linguistic realm. This quote reinforces the claim that the substance – and eventually the “grain” – can also communicate.

Sherry Brennan then provides a poetic parallel that seems to direct us to the “grain” that Barthes theorizes, further reinforcing the statement above:

But what sound does a body make of language? ... So I ask, instead, why, or where, or what makes the sound of water? It is not the water. It is the sound of the water moving. It is the sound of what the water is doing and how it is moving and going, and where it is going, against or with what—against or under or over rock, or against sand, or against window panes at night, or on roads or clay or against tin roofs, or among leaves, or sucking in small pools among cliffs, or crashing violently (“On the Sound of Water” 301).

Please allow me to unravel Brennan’s complexities and propose how it can be applied to the context of this essay. What sound does the body make to create language? And what makes this sound? It is not the body itself, but the sound of the drive that precedes it. The sound is in the product of that drive: the movement. The

sound can then be heard in the materiality of that body when it meets or encounters elements in its given environment. We cannot only see the “grain” in this description, but also perhaps a metaphor for Sonny and his experience.

However, the parallels between the Black experience (and/or Sonny’s experience) and Brennan’s water are somewhat problematic. Brennan’s theoretical metaphors rid the Black body of any agency or thinking, it just becomes a moving and shifting object through space that only responds to matter and obstacles, but there is something to say about where the “grain” of the body lies here. The “grain” exists between the body (or the experience of that body) and music, an intangible force that can only exist between two parts.

Though Roland Barthes focuses on classical music, it is possible to apply his theory of “the grain” to Blues within and outside of “Sonny’s Blues”. First, we must consider the Blue Note, which is a sound that Barthes may have not been able to fathom. In the essay, “Signifying the Blues”, Robert Switzer explains: “...the Blue Note is not really a note at all, in the ordinary sense of the word. That is, it does not have a fixed pitch relationship to its neighbors, but rather a movement...notes that lie between the notes of Western scales...” (55). Because it is not “fixed”, I dare to make the claim that it cannot be paralleled to the formalities of most genres. Therefore, it is not completely tied to the elements of the pheno-song. But if we loosely borrow from Barthes’s definition and Brennan’s reinforcement of “the grain”, it seems that the Blue Note is “the grain” itself. It is the sound, the notes that exists between the movement of the body and a full rendition of Blues music. On a guitar, the strings are bent to produce a high pitch sound, wind instruments are

overblown, and on pianos the Blue Notes are produced by sliding off a black key onto a white one with force. The voice is bent by the lips and used to deviate from the standard and expected pitch. All instruments are used differently than intended. Baldwin provides us with a scene that illustrates the beautiful yet arduous display of the Blue Note by way of Sonny:

And, while Creole listened, Sonny moved, deep within, exactly like someone in torment. I had never before thought of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own. He has to make it do what he wants it to do. And a piano is just a piano. It's made up of so much wood and wires and little hammers and big ones, and ivory. While there's only so much you can do with it, the only way to find this out is to try; to try and make it do everything. (*Going to Meet the Man* 138)

The Blue Note is more than sound; it is “the grain”, the materiality of the body. The instrument is just an apparatus until it is wielded by the drive and movement the body contains. Sonny has to pull from something within him; he has to revisit the substance of his torment. And with this, he can make the piano say everything.

I would like to place “the grain” of the body in a different setting. There are some ways in which James Baldwin nods at the idea that Sonny is himself the Blue Note, “the grain” of the body of this narrative. For example:

Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the Blues...There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness. And this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on the strings, has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation. Listen, Creole seemed to be saying, listen. Now these are Sonny's blues... (*Going to Meet the Man* 139)

Sonny becomes the personification of the Blue Note. Creole assumes the role of Sonny's narrator in this scene. He also uses utilizes Sonny to reveal his humanity

and in turn, his connection with the world and generations to come. These have always been the working elements of Blues music.

The central theme of the texts provided is the experience of music, be it resisting the adjective or focusing on the corporality of sound. A unique attribute of Blues and Jazz music is the intended corporality in the acoustics of the instruments played. These are qualities Barthes may have appreciated given his theories around the “Grain of the Voice”. According to Amiri Baraka:

Blues playing is the closest imitation of the human voice of any music...blues scales proceed from the concept of vocal music, which produces note values that are almost impossible to reproduce on the fixed Western tempered scale (*Blues People* 28).

For example, in Blues, “the guitar had to make vocal sounds, to imitate human voice” (Baraka 69-70) and “saxophone players, would vie to see who could screech, or moan, or shout the loudest and longest on their instruments” (Baraka 172). So it seems, “the grain” of the body and/or voice are used as spaces for experimentation, imitation, and expression of their most basic humanity, perhaps even their sensuality.

Sonny’s specialty is the piano. Baraka brings attention to the fact that “earlier blues styles were not really pianistic, Negro blues pianists tended to use the piano in a percussive and vocal fashion...” (*Blues People* 90). Barthes creates a connection between sensuality and the piano that I would have never considered:

As for piano music, I know at once which part of the body is playing—if it is the arm, too often, alas, muscled like a dancer’s calves, the clutch of the finger-tips (despite the sweeping flourishes of the wrists), or if the contrary it is the only erotic part of the pianist’s body, the pad of the fingers whose ‘grain’ is so rarely heard... (*Image Music Text* 189)

As I previously mentioned the Blue Note on the piano is played by sliding the fingers off of the black keys onto the white ones with force. Barthes writes that he considers the pad of the fingers to be the pianist most erotic part. And of course, that is exactly where the Blues piano player produces their sound. I will elaborate how sensuality performs as “the grain” of the text.

Barthes’s work provokes the question: Is it possible to hear “ the grain” of the text? If Barthes can hear the “grain” of the voice in the sound created by the body, could we do so in the narrative? Barthes writes, “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs” (*Image Music Text* 188). But what if we pushed this idea further and search for “the grain” of the body in the silence of James Baldwin’s writing?

If there is one thing that is consistent in James Baldwin’s work, it is sensuality. There is an unwavering hyperfocus on the materializations of the body with sensuality being at the forefront. Though Baldwin’s definition of it might be a bit broader than one might expect: “To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread” (*The Fire Next Time* 43). James Baldwin’s understanding of sensuality encompasses all bodily functions from eroticism down to the way we nourish and feed it. Knowledge of the body’s function is key to understanding, seeing, and/or hearing its materialization or possibly, its “grain”. If Baldwin can depict so honestly and intimately the body in his text, then should we not know what the grain should sound like? Barthes explains: “...according to the image of the body (the figure) given me. I can hear with certainty – the certainty of

the body, of thrill – that the harpsichord playing of Wanda Landowska comes from her inner body” (*Image Music Text* 189) If Barthes knows where the sound (grain) is coming from by just watching the figure of Wanda’s body, then is it possible to transpose the visual to the aural via Baldwin’s text? I return to the scene when Creole is playing and begins to musically narrate Sonny’s Blues. Here we can center the aurality of the body: “And in this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings...listen, Creole seemed to be saying, listen” (*Going to Meet the Man* 139).

This resonates with Max Wertheimer’s visual sensations in “Gestalt Theory”:

It has always been agreed that a stimulus evokes a corresponding sensation, that this sensation is constantly coordinated to the stimulus. Given a certain stimulus, I must, fundamentally, experience a certain corresponding sensation; when the stimuli are different beyond a certain degree, I experience two different sensations. (316).

According to this theory, sensations are physical responses to stimuli, which means that it is indeed possible for visual stimuli to create sensation in another sensory organ. Though it is overly simplified, does this theory make possible the notion that the visual experience of the body in a particular form, allow you to experience the sonic aurality of “the grain” in Baldwin’s text? In the essay, “Baldwin’s *Baraka*, His Mirror Stage, the Sound of His Gaze”, Fred Moten quotes French Philosopher, Jacques Derrida, whose answer to the preceding question would be no. Derrida takes a more dry-cut and scientific approach:

It is well-known that Saussure distinguishes between the “sound-image” and the objective sound. He thus gives himself the right to “reduce,” in the phenomenological sense, the sciences of acoustics and physiology at the moment that he institutes the science of language. The sound-image is the structure of the appearing sound which is anything but the sound appearing....The sound-image is what is *heard*;

not the *sound* heard but the being-heard of the sound. Being-heard is structurally phenomenal and belongs to an order radically dissimilar to that of the real sound in the world. (*in the Break* 189-190)

But what if we apply, for lack of a better theoretical term, a “4D” approach?

Critical theorist, Fred Moten argues, “Attention to the sound—and not merely to the sound-image—of the gaze he represents gives us access to the whole *substance* of Baldwin’s materiality” (*in the Break* 191). What I believe Moten is trying to offer is that if we were to focus more closely on the actual “phonic materiality” of sound, without minimizing our attention to the sound-image, it “would in turn lead to an augmentation of the experience of the audio-visual in its substantive im/materiality, which would in turn allow for a fuller experience of the ensemble of the sense as it is experienced in Baldwin’s writing” (*in the Break* 191). Instead of reducing the relevance of one sense over another, building on them will provide us a well-rounded sensory response that James Baldwin’s texts provide. What an enhancement this provides to Roland Barthes’s body-image and the “grain”, no?

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IV: Going to Meet the Sound

An acute understanding of our racialized aural landscapes is necessary when exploring sounds of the Black experience. The distinction between music and noise is particularly important to Black music because each element of noise is captured by the everyday essence of Black life. I am reminded of a passage in James Baldwin's novel, *Another Country*:

A nigger, said his father, lives his whole life, lives and dies according to a beat. Shit, he humps to that beat and the baby he throws up in there, well he jumps to it and comes out nine months later like a goddamn tambourine. The beat: hands, feet, tambourines, drums, piano, laughter, curses, razor blades; the man stiffening with a laugh and a growl and a purr and the woman moistening and softening with a whisper and a sigh and a cry... (6-7)

As I previously mentioned, Jacques Attali believes that "by listening to noise, we can better understand where the folly of men and their calculations is taking us, and what hopes it is still possible to have" (*Noise* 3). What Attali describes as noise or sound is important to understanding the world we inhabit. But what is not considered in this particular statement is the subjectivity of each experience and how the experiences of that noise, sound, and even music differ-- based on the space you occupy within a given society. Perhaps we can determine these differences by applying Jennifer Stoeber's theories of the "Listening Ear" and "Embodied Ear".

James Baldwin grapples with and explores all things relevant to how this world negates or validates one's humanity, race being one of the most considerable leveraging factor for the powers at be. But he does not allow that to hinder his ability to question his own reality or to become a witness to the lives of other Black people. Love, intimacy, sensuality, and the reclamation of one's body are only a few

points of discussion. But James Baldwin makes it clear that the way Black people experience themselves and others is inextricable to the race relations of this country. This is why, in order to study and listen to sounds and music in the work of James Baldwin, one must understand the “Sonic Color Line”-- a term coined by Jennifer Stoever. In her book, *The Sonic Color Line: Race & the Cultural Politics of Listening*, Stoever explains:

The Sonic Color Line describes the process of racializing sound—how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds—and its product, the hierarchical division sounded between “whiteness” and “blackness”. (7)

Stoever named the “Sonic Color Line” after W.E.B. DuBois’ visual color line, which was a term used to describe racial segregation in America: “Using the visual metonym of the veil.. Du Bois’s key intervention called out the color line and segregation as causes of social difference, rather than its inevitable result...” (Stoever 9) Now, borrowing from or building on the “scholarship of Alexander Weheliye and others to rethink Du Bois’s concept of the veil as an audiovisual entity, one that helps us understand the relationship between sight and sound in the production of racial identity,” Stoever moves further into the direction of the “Sonic Color Line” (Stoever 9). She opts to focus on the aurality of the color line and the ways in which sound is racialized. There are two places of reception—listening by those in power of aurality and those who are oppressed and controlled by it. The “Listening Ear” is the driving force behind how the “Sonic Color Line” is carried and fortified:

The listening ear drives the sonic color line; it is a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on

individual listening practices to confirm the sonic color line's norms.
(Stoever 7)

The "Listening Ear" becomes the default listening practice. It is the way in which the sonic and aural are stratified. Hierarchy is created and becomes easily identifiable based on the accrual of listening practices. Lastly, Stoever describes the "Embodied Ear":

Represents how individuals' listening practices are shaped by the totality of their experiences, historical context, and physicality, as well as intersecting subject positions and particular interactions with power. (*The Sonic Color Line* 15)

Your status determines your "Embodied Ear". The "Embodied Ear" is your perspective of the aural environment based on your placement within it. The short story, "Going to Meet the Man", by James Baldwin, in many ways narrates theories of the "Sonic Color Line". The story's perspective is that of a racist white police officer, Jesse, who clearly exhibits the internal and external tensions that occur at the Sonic Color Line and unmistakably perceives the world with a "Listening Ear". There are two things that bookend and are consistent within this narrative: sound and music. James Baldwin connects us with Jesse's experience largely through aural imagery and memories that are triggered by these sounds. He also reinforces the immense aurality connected to the Black experience and tradition. In this portion of the essay, I will focus and elaborate on examples of the "Listening Ear" and the "Embodied Ear" within this piece of work, as well as explore the various layers of the "Sonic Color Line".

This narrative begins with Jesse, in bed with his wife. James Baldwin pulls us into one of the most intimate and vulnerable spaces in the police officer's life. He is

struggling with impotency while explaining the violence he took part in that day. There were black men and women protesting at the courthouse, but Jesse was not clear as to why. He mentions a registration line, but fails to explain what did or did not happen that sparked this protest that included the blocking of roads, surrounding the courthouse and the use of protest music. The protestors changed the lyrics, but that did not stop the music from triggering physiological changes within Jesse's body, pulling him into memories of his adolescents and young adulthood:

'All that singing they do', he said 'All that singing.' He could not remember the first time he had heard it; he had been hearing it all his life. It was the sound with which he was most familiar—though it was also the sound of which he had been least conscious—and it had always contained and obscure comfort. They were singing to God. They were singing for mercy and they hoped to go to heaven...He knew that the young people had changed some of the words to the songs. He had scarcely listened to the words before and he did not listen to them now; he knew the words were different; he could hear that much...It would never end. It would never end. Perhaps this is what the singing had meant all along. They had not been singing black folks into heaven; they had been singing white folks into hell. (*Going to Meet the Man* 236)

There are a few points that can be made about this passage. The first is the way in which the lyrics have very little, if nothing, to do with that way the songs are heard and received. Much of the focus on Black music in many ways has been in the transcribing of lyrics. But here, we see that although there is *some* attention to the shift in words, the strength of this music lies in its sound. Here, Jesse's "Listening Ear" performs a "willful white mishearing and auditory imagining of blackness" (Stoever 1). Although Jesse cannot quite decipher the meaning of the songs, he attaches his own understanding of Blackness to the music that manifested in

protest. They were no longer “singing black folks into heaven; they had been singing white folks into hell.”(*Going to Meet the Man* 236) Black empowerment is heard as black defiance.

Because the “Listening Ear” is a racialized filter, it makes sense that it simultaneously silences in the process. In the Afterword, “The Politics of Silence and Sound”, according to Susan McClary:

...the theories of music that have shaped our perceptions and consumption of music have been instrumental in conditioning us not to recognize silencing –not to realize that something vital may be missing from that experience. (*Noise* 150)

This insight alongside the “Listening Ear” further reinforces the silencing that occurs in the passage above. The first sign of silencing occurred prior to that excerpt, when Jesse fails to fully explain why the music and protest began:

They had this line you know, to register—he laughed, but she did not—and they wouldn’t stay where Big Jim C. wanted them, no, they had to start blocking traffic all around the courthouse...and Big Jim C. told them to disperse and they wouldn’t move, they just kept up that singing... (*Going to Meet the Man* 232)

Jesse cannot and will not explain or try to rationalize why the protest and singing began. The point is completely irrelevant to his “Listening Ear” and in turn becomes irrelevant to who listens to his version of the event. Because Jesse holds power and authority, he then perpetuates and further reinforces those damaging effects that occur when the “Listening Ear” silences Black people.

In returning to the passage that begins with “all that singing they do...”, the notion of silencing occurs when Jesse does not care to listen to the lyrics of the song. As McClary explained in her theory of music conditioning, he did not dare or care to recognize the way his perceptions of Black music silenced those who performed it:

“He had scarcely listened to the words before and he did not listen to them now; he knew the words were different; he could hear that much...” (*Going to Meet the Man* 236) Though we have been focusing more on sound and music there is still value in the lyric. Jesse’s disregard for the lyrics and words trying to communicate the realities of Black people are again unheard.

The “Embodied Ear” is present in the work of James Baldwin, both from the perspective of the young man and Jesse. In the excerpt below Big Jim C. is beating the young man and there is a direct focus on the ear:

He was lying on the ground jerking and moaning...blood was coming out of his ears from where Big Jim C. and his boys whipped him...I put a prod to him and he jerked some more and he kind of screamed—but he didn’t have much voice left. ‘You make them stop that singing,’ I said to him, ‘you hear me? You make them stop that singing.’ He acted like he didn’t hear me and I put it to him again...‘You all are going to stop your singing,’ I said to him... (*Going to Meet the Man* 232)

It seems that James Baldwin is playing out the way the “Listening Ear” and the “Embodied Ear” function in the most literal sense. Just as Jesse has, Big Jim C., personifies the “Listening Ear”. The young man on the other hand personifies the “Embodied Ear”. The “Listening Ear” being what drives and reinforces the “Sonic Color Line” also shapes the ways in which the “Embodied Ear” understands the aurality of the world it exists within. The fact that the young man’s ear is whipped and made to bleed by the hands (or pistol) of Big Jim C. mirror Jennifer Stoever’s theory of the “Embodied Ear” and the way it is “shaped by the totality of their experiences, historical context, and physicality, as well as intersecting subject positions and particular interactions with power.” (Stoever 15) As Baldwin’s narrative continues:

The boy rolled around in his own dirt and water and blood and tried to scream again as the prod hit his testicles, but the scream did not come out, only a kind of rattle and a moan...'You hear me?' he called. 'You had enough?' The singing went on. 'You had enough?' ...You going to make them stop singing now?...those kids ain't going to stop singing. We going to keep on singing until every one of you miserable white mothers go stark raving out of your minds. (*Going to Meet the Man* 233)

Both the young man and Jesse understand the power of music. The young man perceives it as ammunition to be used when confronting a racialized world, and Jesse knows that the singing is an assertion and reclamation of power. In this scene, regardless of what is being done to the young man's body, he is determined to have the singing persist. Here we are met with the coexistence or connection of corporality and sound, but also the ways in which they differ and can exist separately.

In the passage above we witness the way physical abuse of the body literally silences the screams of the young man. This of course is a tactic historically seen in more than one form. One of the most profound aspects of this passage is the young man's declaration, "those kids ain't going to stop singing. We going to keep on singing until every one of you miserable white mothers go stark raving out of your minds." (*Going to Meet the Man* 233) Again, the young man is aware of music's function in resistance, but as one who is reading and *listening*, it is apparent that "...music is a locus of subversion, a transcendence of the body." (Attali 13)

According to Jennifer Stoeber, the transcendence Jacques Attali speaks of is far more than metaphorical. Science and the "Sonic Color Line" offer us an opportunity to push the above scene, further:

White fears of black agency were greatly exacerbated by the emerging scientific discourse that emphasized sound as a form of vibrational “touch” ...it is ability to touch at a distance...In short, listening became increasingly, thrillingly, and uncomfortable material and erotic, as the notion of being touched by sound vibrations seemed suddenly more concrete and less metaphoric. Arising at the same time, the Sonic Color Line attempted to control the dangerous potential of cross-racial aural traffic...the Sonic Color Line affectively delineated the ‘black’ and ‘white’ borders of such encounters. (*The Sonic Color Line* 37)

The corporality of sound continues to present itself. Music offers a different algorithm of physical connection. Just as Jesse represses the young man’s voice by way of physical abuse, he attempts to use the “Sonic Color Line” to “control the dangerous potential of cross-racial aural traffic” (Stoever 37). Jesse does not only wish to destroy the communication between the Black protestors, he is also afraid of the ways they are “singing white folks to hell” (*Going to Meet the Man* 236). Perhaps he is also afraid of the ways the singing can change the minds of white people and distort the borders set in place by the “Sonic Color Line”.

It is also vital to discuss what some would consider its counterpart: silence. Though I do not believe silence is the absence of sound, it is the presence of much more. In the essay, “Listening to Silence”, Andrea Sabbadini states, “Silence is an element of human language, not its opposite...Silence is not, just an absence of words, but an active presence” (231-232). We can also still consider the “Sonic Color Line”, “Embodied Ear, and “Listening Ear” when thinking about and navigating silence. It is actually necessary when focusing on silence in the work of James Baldwin.

How does James Baldwin manipulate the mechanics of silence? What occurs in the potential of this nothingness? Licia Fiol-Matta recently published a book titled

The Great Woman Singer. It follows the career trajectory of four iconic Puerto Rican singers. Borrowing from the theories of Hegel, Heidegger, and Lacan regarding the concept of “nothingness”, Matta refers to these women as “place-holders of nothing” (228). For example, Benítez “directly refuted any injunction to represent anything, and continues to do so...she performed forgetting and searched for silence and thought in her audiences” (229). Matta uses the phrase, “radical negativity” to explain what these women embodied and the spaces they occupied.

If we apply Fiol-Matta’s theory of radical negativity in conjunction with the “Sonic Color Line”, “Listening Ear”, and the “Embodied Ear”, to a couple of scenes in short story “Going to Meet the Man”, the purposeful silences come alive and much more is heard in those silences than expected. Jennifer Stoeber provides us with an example of the way silences are heard by the “Listening Ear” in reference to Black people:

Silence...offers black people no guaranteed refuge from state and police violence. In October 2015, a young black girl at Spring Valley High School was accused by her teacher of refusing to leave the class after using her cellphone; she quietly stared forward at her desk until the school’s ‘resource officer’ grabbed and violently pulled her to the ground, desk and all. After he handcuffed and dragged her across the room, he arrested her for ‘disturbing the school’... (*The Sonic Color Line* 3)

This story is very similar to the narrative we find in the short story “Going to Meet the Man” when the young man is repeatedly beaten by Jesse and Big Jim C., mostly because of his silence and refusal to speak to them and to the protesters.

In her practice and observations of others in her field, psychoanalyst, Andrea Sabbadini explains the way silences are generally perceived and the dangers of responding based on our own notions and perceptions of what silence means:

I have insisted on the significance of analytic silences and warned against responding to them through a retaliatory silence or through a flood of premature interpretations. These inadequate reactions often stem from the analyst's own anxiety evoked in him by the patients' silence. Anxiety and silence are closely connected. ("Listening to Silence" 233)

As Sabbadini explains, inadequate reactions to silence often stem from one's own anxieties, but when sound or the lack of sounds are racialized, these anxieties are amplified and "sounds heard and unheard, have histories" (Stoeberl 3).

The "Sonic Color Line" not only functions in sound, but also in the silences of the short story "Going to Meet the Man". This is apparent early on in the interactions between the young boy and Jesse, the police officer long before their violent encounter at the police station. The young man asks Jesse if he remembers a woman he used to call "Old Julia" and Jesse recognizes the young man's face and is pulled into memory:

He looked at the boy, whom he had been seeing, off and on, for more than a year, and suddenly remembered him: Old Julia had been one of his mail-order costumers, a nice old woman...He had walked into the yard, the boy had been sitting in a swing. He had smiled at the boy, and asked, "Old Julia home?" The boy looked at him for a long time before he answered. "Don't no, Old Julia live here." ... He watched the boy; the boy watched him...He didn't have time to be fooling around with some crazy kid. He yelled, " Hey! Old Julia!" But only silence answered him. The expression on the boy's face did not change. The sun beat down on both of them, still silent; he had the feeling he had been caught up in a nightmare, a nightmare dreamed by a child; perhaps one of the nightmares he himself had dreamed as a child. It had been that feeling—everything familiar, without undergoing any other change, had been subtly and hideously displaced: the trees, the sun, the patches of grass in the yard, the leaning porch and the weary porch steps and the card-board in the windows and the black hole of the door which looked like the entrance to a cave, and the eyes of the pickaninny, all, all, were charged with malevolence...He looked at the boy. "She's gone out?" The boy said nothing. (*Going to Meet the Man* 234)

Though I have provided a very long excerpt, it felt necessary to offer the details given then way silence and its interpretations find their home in very subtle and poignant places. Jesse's initial interaction with the boy is met with silence. After Jesse smiles and asks for Old Julia, the boy stares at him for a good while before answering, which set the tone for the interaction. Already, Jesse perceives the young boy's resistance. As they both watch each other a minute, without any doubt that he might be mistaken, he thinks to himself that the child must be "crazy", there is never any question about the possibility of his own mistake, or that perhaps there was a misunderstanding. What seems to reinforce the significance of what is perceived in the silence of the child is that it immediately shifts into what Jesse parallels to a nightmare. The objects belonging to Old Julia and the boy were now negative spaces, "the entrance to a cave" and a "black whole". He then calls the boy a "pickaninny," which is a racist and derogatory term for a Black child. The most telling is that he claims the child's eyes are "charged with malevolence". Further reinforcing Stoeber's claim that silence does not protect a Black person from harm, because in the midst of Jesse's own silence and internal tension, the workings of the "Listening Ear" take place. Although it seems the boy understands that his own performance of silence is a form of resistance, it does not seem like enough for Jesse's imagined and amplified perceived threat.

We later learn why the boy was silent and refused to acknowledge Jesse calling his grandmother "Old Julia": "My grandmother's name was Mrs. Julia Blossom. Mrs. Julia Blossom. You going to call our women by their right names yet" (*Going to Meet the Man* 233). According to Sabbadini, in her psychotherapeutic

sessions with her patients, she feels, “It could be useful to consider the silent spaces within a session as a sort of container of words—words that for complex, over-determined, unconscious reasons cannot be uttered” (“Listening to Silence” 229). There are perhaps two reasons the boy chooses silence over an explanation in that moment. The first reason for his silence, as I have stated before, is most likely an act of resistance. In the boy’s eyes, the image of the woman Mr. Jesse thought of did not exist. The second reason could have been a preventative tactic. Had the boy corrected Jesse, that conversation more than likely would not have ended with him being able to walk away. Jesse’s “Listening Ear” may have heard defiance, violence, and even danger. These would have all been Jesse’s justifications for potentially hurting him. The boy’s 10-year-old “Embodied Ear” already understands this. It is also possible that the reason for his silence encompasses both.

In a memory Jesse describes, there are times when Black people perform community silence under the threat of danger. When Jesse was a young boy his family and the white community took part in capturing a Black man who commits an unknown “crime”. On their way to witness the death of this man, Jesse remembers the silence that emanated from the communities and homes of Black people:

...he had not seen a black face for anywhere for two days...no black people anywhere. From the houses which they lived...no smoke curled, no life stirred...There was no one at the windows, no one in the yard, no one sitting on the porches, and the doors were closed...They passed the nigger church—dead-white, desolate, locked up...(Going to Meet the Man 234-244).

The Black people of this community understand that silence and absence are the only things that can save them until some of the tension dies down. They are aware of the fact that their sounds and visibility can be considered a threat or interpreted

as a reason for their bodies to be hunted next. Merely living and existing were enough to trigger the “Listening Ear” of white people. Stoever explains:

Without ever consciously expressing the sentiment, white Americans often feel entitled to respect for their sensibilities, sensitivities, and tastes, and their implicit, sometimes violent, control over the soundscape of an ostensibly “free,” “open” and “public” space. (*The Sonic Color Line* 2)

Any suggestion of what Stoever calls, “Sonic Blackness” is considered a disruption of peace. Jesse reinforces this notion when expressing his thoughts about the Black people he comes into contact with: “[They were] laughing and talking and playing music like they didn’t have a care in the world, and he reckoned they didn’t...” (*Going to Meet the Man* 231). The soundscape described is no different than what any other community might sound like, especially a white American community. But because when Jesse speaks of the Black community, his negative tone and distaste for its inhabitants are apparent.

Daniel Barenboim states that “sound is in permanent relation with silence” (Barenboim “Sound – Daniel Barenboim | Deconstructed”). One cannot exist without the other. Andrea Sabbani reinforces this statement by stating the following:

It should suffice to glance at any musical score to realize that rest marks belong to it...there would be no music at all if a pause became too long, without rests there could be no music either. Even further, as Gustav Mahler once remarked, the most important thing in music is not in the score. (“Listening to Silence” 231)

In noting these insights, and applying them to the music James Baldwin offers in his literature, I would like to take a closer look at what occurs in the silences of one passage in particular in the short story we have been discussing:

I stepped in the river at Jordan.

Out of the darkness of the room, out of nowhere, the line came flying at him, with the melody and the beat. He turned wordlessly toward his sleeping wife. *I stepped in the river at Jordan.* Where had he heard that song?...

I stepped in the river at Jordan/The water came at my knees.

He began to sweat. He felt an overwhelming fear, which yet contained a curious and dreadful pleasure.

I stepped in the river at Jordan./The water came to my waist

It had been night, as it is now, he was in the car between his mother and his father...The singing came from far away across dark fields ...They had said goodbye to all the others...They were almost home.

I stepped in the river at Jordan,/The water came over my head,/I looked away over the other side,/He was making up my dying bed!

I guess they singing for him, his father said... (*Going to Meet the Man* 239-240)

Before focusing on the silences, it is important to analyze the Negro spiritual James Baldwin chose to use for this particular scene and narrative. There are two passages in the Christian bible that are quite telling and provide some insight on the message behind this song and why it is used as a device to tell this story. The first passage states, "For you are about to cross the Jordan to go in to possess the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall possess it and live in it" (*Deuteronomy* 11:31). The second passage reads, "When you cross in the Jordan and you live in the land that the Lord your God giving you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies around you so that you live in security" (*Deuteronomy* 12:10). The first passage states that in order for the chosen people to reach the Promised Land they must cross the Jordan River first. The second passage states that once they reach the Promised Land, they will not only inherit the land, but it will provide refuge from enemies. Jesse finds the memory of this song overwhelming, but it also carries for him a "dreadful pleasure". That pleasure, perhaps being where his subconscious will carry him. Based on what we know about Jesse's anxieties over what has happened

on that present day and what he will expect to come the following morning between himself and the “enemy”, it only makes sense that he finds comfort in a song that pulls him into a memory where he finds refuge—the memory, where as a young boy, his father takes him to the lynching, castration, and burning of a Black man.

If we apply Barenboim’s theory that sound is in permanent relation to silence, we must pay close attention to the way the silences between the song lyrics and the lyrics themselves function together. The pattern of this passage moves from lyric to memory, but it also progresses. As the crossing into the Jordan deepens, so does the memory. Baldwin begins with: “*We stepped into the river at Jordan*”, and then in the silence, we see Jesse’s memories triggered but not yet fully present. He then continues: “*The water came to my knees*” and in the silence following this line, he has an emotional and physical response to what is brewing in his subconscious. The song then progresses to: “*The water came to my waist*” and Jesse is now remembering parts of that day. After the final line, “*I stepped into the river at Jordan/The water came over my head*”, Jesse is then fully submerged in his memories and we begin to follow him into the details of the day that completely changed Jesse’s life. (*Going to Meet the Man* 239)

By way of music, sound, and silence in this narrative, James Baldwin is performing a crossing into what Jesse considers his Promised Land. The crossing of the Jordan in actuality is the crossing of Jesse’s memory. It is a refuge into a place where he is safe from his enemy, where black men are not a threat, and his space belongs to him and those who look like him. It is the opposite of his current reality,

where Black men and women are no longer silent and afraid. Where the following day brings the possibility of more conflict.

As I previously quoted, Sabanni theorizes that silence performs and is a container of words. But I would like to add that it also functions as a container of the aural imaginary. Jennifer Stoever's "Sonic Color Line", "Listening Ear", and "Embodied Ear" all function within and outside of it.

Jennifer Stover mentions concepts such as "soundscapes" and "aural territory" in relation to the way white people seek to control the sonic geographies they inhabit. Consider a panel discussion featuring Fred Moten and Professor Robin D.G. Kelley. Kelley mentions the concept of counter-mapping and the ways in which it was used to resist imperial and colonial powers that were usually responsible for creating maps and borders in order to seize and control territories. (Kelley & Moten "Robin D.G. Kelley & Fred Moten In Conversation") If we return to Stoever with the notion of counter-mapping aural territories, we are provided with a mechanism to widen our views of and acquire new perspectives on the function of music in James Baldwin's literature. Counter-mapping is a term coined by Professor Nancy Peluso in 1995. In the essay "Counter Mapping", by Robert Rundstrom, he explains that Counter-mappers "co-opt the mapping techniques and conventions of the colonizer" in order to resist land dispossession, resource abuse, social disruption, and population decimation. Counter-mappers "seek to represent places in a manner that not only counters the maps made by state and corporate authorities but also reveals the hegemonic politics inherent in those maps they are countering" (314)

Blues and Jazz music are counter-maps. As I have previously described by way of Amiri Baraka, Blues and later Jazz, were essentially, music genres that resisted the conventional use of western instruments and the “pure” sounds they were meant to produce. They remapped the sonic geographies of the classically trained ear and also declared grievances caused by the hegemonic powers that be.

It is historically evident the way music was used to counter-map their oppressive experiences and environments. Song and sound are used at almost every protest or act of resistance. We see the way the sounds of spirituals and work songs disrupt the aural territories of Jesse in the short story, “Going to Meet the Man”. This character nearly murders a young Black man because he will not quiet the singing crowds.

Although, in the novel, *Just Above My Head*, James Baldwin also uses sonic counter-mapping in a way that is not as obviously connected to the narrative, but more so in aesthetic and form. Baldwin is known for inserting spirituals, gospels, Blues music, etc. in the headings of his chapters and in between paragraphs. This provides a musicality, sets the tone and/or resists the context of the narrative in general. As an example I will use a homoerotic scene between the characters Crunch and Arthur in the novel, *Just Above My Head*:

Well. It was Crunch’s cock, and so he sucked it; with all the love that was in him, and a moment came when he felt that love being trusted, and returned. A moment came when he felt Crunch pass from a kind of terrified bewilderment into joy. A friendly, joyful movement began. *So high, you can’t get over him...So low*—and Crunch gasped as Arthur’s mouth left his prick...*you can’t get under him*. Arthur rose, again, to Crunch’s lips. *So wide. You can’t go around him...Crunch* moaned in absolute agony, and Arthur went down again...*You must come in at the door...He* dared to look into Crunch’s eyes. Crunch’s

eyes were wet and deep *deep like a river*, and Arthur found that he was smiling *peace like a river*. (211-212)

Parts of the quote above are referenced in a book of essays called, *in the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, by Fred Moten. In his interrogation or exploration of the way sound functions in literature, Moten references Lee Edelman's essay, "The Part for the (W)hole". In this essay, Edelman reminds us that during the time Arthur and Crunch are being intimate, they are "performing in a gospel quartet on a tour of the South". In the quote above, the italics signify the gospel song lyrics that Baldwin included in this passage. While Edelman believes that music is the manifestation of their conscience and whose meaning can be doubled to reflect what was being performed, I feel we can push this notion further. I would like to argue, that the interweaving of song lyrics, was a way for Baldwin to sonically counter-map. The act of love making between two Black men in "juxtaposition of a repressive political geography", is being positively reinforced, nurtured, and re-mapped by the sounds of sacred gospel music (Moten 188). James Baldwin is resisting racist and homophobic ideation by pairing the "sacred" (religious music) with the "profane".

Part of Fred Moten's exploration in his essay, "Baldwin's *Baraka*, His Mirror Stage, the Sound of his Gaze", was his desire to "listen to what sound does to interpretation" (177). I believe that is exactly what James Baldwin performed (intentionally or not) when choosing to include the music within this passage in particular. The sound that he offers undoes the white hetero-normative interpretation of what it means for individuals such as Crunch and Arthur to be intimate. It also provides an inclusive soundscape.

Fred Moten reminds us “that the nonexclusion of sound, the nonreduction of nonmeaning, is tied to another understanding of literary resistance, one that moves within and without the Black tradition... (*in the Break* 186). James Baldwin’s use of music in his work performs the kind of resistance mirrored by Blues and the Uptown Jazz musicians. Its use and production are the driving force and counter-maps that are key to Black survival.

All four sections of this exploration encompass the difficulties of discussing music and literature, sound and literature, and the ways in which the “Sonic Color Line” further complicates those dilemmas. James Baldwin’s work provides a space to explore and grapple with notions such as Ronald Barthes’s “Grain of the Voice”. Fred Moten wrote, “James Baldwin knew something about the way that sound works, something about the work of sound” (*in the Break* 185), and he is absolutely correct. For someone who claimed to not “know” music, James Baldwin most certainly understood the necessity of its function in literature and Black life. “What is held and carried in that gaze is the eruptive content of a transfer history; the material substance of a music that is more than aural: anticipatory, premature, insistently previous, Jazz” (*in the Break* 185). So let there be music from “God’s black revolutionary mouth” (*in the Break* 174).

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