



FIGURE 1. Oxana Chi & Layla Zami in *Song Book: The Quotient of Desire*, featuring Romi Ron Morrison, Kumi James (BAE BAE), and Oxana Chi & Layla Zami. Organized by Romi Ron Morrison and presented by The Kitchen at Collapsible Hole as part of The Kitchen L.A.B. Research Residency x Simons Foundation x School for Poetic Computation. Program view, Collapsible Hole, September 27, 2023. Photo by Walter Włodarczyk.

Diasporic Dissolving

(Performing and Listening to)
Black Sonic Itineraries of
Im/possibility

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II-V-I: Performing Scholarship in Patterns

Let me tell you a short story in the form of a trilogy. A story about listening as improvisation, im/possible joy, and liquid songs in praise of Black sounds. My offering takes the process of *dissolving* as a central material and metaphorical response, and I propose im/possibility as a trope shaping and shaped by Black sonic itineraries. By the way, feel free to put on some music while reading. As I write this in Berlin, I am delightfully hearing a vinyl called *Timeless Classics by the Queens of Jazz*, whose warm timbres propel me back to my New York years. Everything feels liquid as the raindrops outside fill in with the beats dropping inside. I melt with(in) their visceral voluptuousness and vocal virtuosity invisibly moving around me. Straight out of her Harlem birthplace, Carmen McRae storms into my university office at the 5/4 pace in her rendering of the song “Take Five.” Next, I listen to her alternative interpretation of Thelonious Monk’s “Round Midnight” and hear an emphasis on the future, anticipated here in ways that render time liquid and make space/time for dreams to take flight.

I think of the meaning of im/possibility in her musical and biographical journey, how she dealt with the impossibility of being fully out as a lesbian, to be both vocalist and pianist as a woman. How possibilities to know who she may have wanted to be, or actually has been, evaporate under the steamroller of dominant historiography. And yet I witness how listening to her voice dissolves assumptions about her itinerary, while allowing me to encounter her through the flow of her

DISSOLVING IS A MATERIAL AND METAPHORICAL PROCESS THAT I PROPOSE HERE TO NAME A POSSIBLE ENCOUNTER WITH BLACK SOUND WHEN WE ALLOW IMPROVISATION IN OUR LISTENING PRACTICE

sounds. Throughout this article, I employ *itinerary* in tune with its etymological baseline, which denotes a journey along a specific way as well as information and signposts making that journey possible.

I also think of the fluid connections between McRae and other African American jazz women, especially the pianist, bandleader, and songwriter Irene Kitchings, known as Irene Armstrong Edie, as well as the influential Billie Holiday. We need to shift our “attention” to acknowledging and understanding how Black women created music “in relation to each other,” to quote Daphne Brooks.¹ As she astutely analyzed, African American female artists “move through, to, and sometimes against the beat of sociopolitical and cultural histories,”² a metaphor that resonates with my listening to McRae’s skilled use of behind-the-beat phrasing. Both the metaphorical and material forms of dissolving the rigidity of a beat, or the relation to it, stretch our understanding of sonic possibility and resonate with my understanding of im/possibility in the Black diaspora as an interstitial spacetime in which the boundaries between what is

made impossible by white society and what is made possible by Black sound can dissolve.

Dissolving is a material and metaphorical process that I propose here to name a possible encounter with Black sound when we allow improvisation in our listening practice. I think alongside the idea of im/possibility as a trope shaping and shaped by Black sonic itineraries, aiming to amplify renewed understandings of improvisation and joy in selected examples of sound poetry, music theater, and dance productions and experiences. By the way, feel free to pause the music now.

My thinking and writing are anchored in the lineage of Black sound studies. While this field has experienced an exponential growth over the last twenty years, it is important to note that the scholarly attention to sound within Black studies is nothing but new: it vibrates in the scholarship of W. E. B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston, and in literary productions by Ralph Ellison, Henry Dumas, and Toni Morrison, to name a few. This legacy, in turn, inspired contemporary Black scholarships by thinkers including

Alexander Weheliye, Daphne Brooks, Nicole Brittingham Furlonge, Carter Mathes, Fred Moten, and Brent Hayes Edwards, to name a few.³ While each one provides a unique form of thinking and writing about Black sound, they all successfully attempt “to trace the rhizomatic reverberations of sonic Afro-modernity”⁴ through a plurality of African American literary, musical, and cultural productions and to emphasize “listening’s centrality in more intentional and embodied engagement with African American expressive culture.”⁵ More recent works by Anthony Reed and Jonathan Leal also provide theoretical compasses. I subscribe to Reed’s understanding of Black sound as an intervening force that “refuses, interrupts, or redirects the energies of extant discourses and their subtending epistemologies,” while I divert from his emphasis on the textual meaning and value of sound.⁶ Leal’s work on “sonic dreaming,” with its attention to disruption—in relation to how bebop music disrupted musical temporalities and by extension social configurations—is helpful in understanding how Black sound expand(ed) “aesthetic and social possibility” even for other people of color beyond African American communities.⁷ Outside the Black diaspora, another important discussion of sound as a mode to think (about) possibility can be found in the writings of Salomé Voegelin.⁸

Out of all musical genres, jazz’s extensive and intensive playfulness with improvisation makes it emblematic of the notion of possibility. In the rehearsal room, a basic exercise in improvisational joy consists of playing over a classic chord progression known as

the II-V-I. As an exercise in experimenting with scholarly thinking and writing, my essay is structured on a II-V-I pattern,⁹ a widespread progression in jazz composition and improvisation. In this aural trajectory, the pattern moves from a melancholic or “blue” feeling (associated with minor chords) and resolves on a major chord, the sonic archetype of joy in conventional music theory. In the middle, we have a dominant chord defined by the coexistence of a major and a minor triad, which opens new possibilities. My use of the chord progression to structure my scholarship does not mean that I literally discuss music written or performed in that chord; rather, it acts as a tuning device. To amplify the sonic quality of each chord for readers unfamiliar with music theory, a poetic quote resonating with the chord appears in each section. Undoing a conventional numerical progression, writing along the II-V-I path dissolves a linear understanding of thinking. This issue of *liquid blackness* invites us to think about “(improvisational) forms of scholarship . . . black sound’s slipperiness demand.”¹⁰ Here is my *response* to the *call*.

The Beat and the Word (Chord II—Dm)

This first section is tuned in what is called the Dorian mode: the main minor scale used in jazz. Only one note makes it different from the Aeolian mode, the so-called classical minor mode I initially learned at the French conservatory. If you take the “classical” Aeolian minor scale and elevate the sixth note by a half-tone—think of it as a tiny half-step up when you are almost at the top of the stairs—you get a Dorian

sound.¹¹ It retains the melancholic “minor” quality while expressing a much more ambivalent, playful feeling. Rather than closure, it emits the sound of a question mark. A subtle step change in the itinerary results in a completely different listening experience. A minor change effects a major impact.

It is in the spirit of the Dorian sound that I will now trace sonic itineraries of im/possibilities in contemporary African American sound poetry. To think *diasporic dissolving* alongside the slipperiness of memory, I listen to a powerful tone poem by Tracie Morris. Her vocal performances are exercises in which speech, narration, and sound liquefy trauma into a formless entity that becomes a space of vocal creativity and performative joy. Morris describes her working process as follows: “Eventually I began to work more and more with the sound itself (trying to tease it away from literal meaning) and started to feel it in the body and adjust it within the body. This led me to make physical not just conceptual segues, uttered and non-uttered choices. (At a certain point, it’s impossible to distinguish between the two.)”¹²

In *It All Started*,¹³ Morris unfolds this performative technique within a single sentence: “It all started when we were brought here as slaves from Africa.” The poet begins in an intelligible way, saying the sentence once with a subtle singing melody emphasizing the words “started,” “slaves,” and “Africa” (video 1). In the next iteration of the phrase, she immediately sounds stuck, akin to the sound of a scratched CD on the first three words, as if it were impossible to move beyond them, yet she does finally reach the word “started,”

which she speaks out loud. Here and throughout the performance, which has a duration of about two minutes, she plays with repetition, and with/in semantic and sonic im/possibilities. Words are broken up, and the rhythm of enunciation creates new words in our auditory perception, such as “whenwe.” Occasional emphasis on specific words such as “slaves” returns speech to the initial intelligibility.¹⁴

After about one minute, gaps enter the sentence; now Morris is no longer repeating parts of the sentence in its initial order, but parts of it get lost, as if swallowed in time, thus condensing the sonic, temporal, cognitive, and affective experience of her performance. If the sentence is a point of entry into a chronological itinerary about the history of African Americans, she lets its linearity implode. As she intensifies the vocal performance, Morris almost turns it into a beat. She demonstrates what Doris Kolesch would describe as the possibility afforded to performing artists of “a withdrawal of breakfree semiotic, mediation, or instrumental use” of the voice.¹⁵ Her use of pace evokes a feeling of being rushed, like a ship rocking against the ocean. It sounds like it is literally impossible for her to speak beyond that initial statement. Yet she (en)counters that impossibility with the possibility to improvise with her voice, to create a beat, a rhythm, to affect the audience emotionally, to transform the narrative into an auditory journey.

Morris’s im/possible speech can be put in a relation of resonance with forms of Black poetry—for example, Drisana Deborah Jack’s “waterpoem 1.” While Jack writes of “the collision of *reluctant arrival* with

resolute departure"¹⁶ in a line evoking the pattern of waves, Morris's improvisational practice dissolves the boundaries between them, and sonically achieves what later emerges in Jack's poem as "the need for interruption / of/and the space in-between."¹⁷ Both demonstrate the ability to play with grammar to navigate phenomenological, epistemological, and ontological fluidity. They emit the quality of a D minor chord, with their poetics of diasporic belonging and nostalgia transformed here through an improvisational relation to language and voice.

Already in her first sound poem, "A Little,"¹⁸ composed while walking the street, Morris worked with one sentence only. Christine Hume described her sound poetry as "improvisational insurrection," arguing that her "sound poems strip language down to its acoustical-rhythmic potencies and potentialities to engage with the world while traveling in it corporeally."¹⁹ I would add that the poems travel with/through language itself. With a single line, her voice implodes into bits and beats of sound, moving along an itinerary in which Blackness becomes an "ongoing irruption that anarranges every line,"²⁰ in the words of Fred Moten. *It All Started* splashes history down like a waterfall, albeit one filled with rocks that obstruct its path. In fact, the performance ends abruptly, unresolved, interrupting itself. She says, fluidly: "It all started, when we" and abruptly stops after the "we," leaving the audience meditating on their relation to this ambivalent, fluid and versatile we, and the political im/possibilities it materializes.

During the pandemic, Morris stated on her web-

site that she "opted out from doing improvisational sound poetry live" until she was "in the room with others," which suggests the importance of an audience to cocreate meaning as she improvises.²¹ Her ways of circling repeatedly around and within the sentence intensify as she improvises with pitch, pace, intonation, and patterns, resonates with free jazz. And we can improvise listening to her like a jazz solo, as if she would improvise over a repetition of chords, akin to a musician becoming more and more unbound to the pattern as the listener gets familiar with it. Indeed, her poetry entangled with jazz dynamics situates her in the lineage of the Black Arts movement. The work echoes Reed's emphasis on Black *soundwork* as "insurgent sonic practice,"²² carrying both the potential to dissolve the "words/music dichotomy" and a "commitment to the dissolution and reconstitution of the 'we.'"²³ Morris's playful itinerary around the "we" leads to the elliptical statement "When we were—Africa." Erasure creates new meaning, and the disruption of speech, amplifies the impossibility to recall or retell.

Morris published another version of this sound poem now under the title "Africa(n)" in *Crosstalk: American Speech Music*, a compilation released by the artist-scholar duo Mendi + Keith Obadike. In the liner notes, they suggest that artists "make use of repeated or reordered utterances to emphasize or change the contexts for the meanings of a given word, or sometimes whole narratives," and that in turn sometimes "reveals more information about the narrative (by altering the processing or the order of presentation)."²⁴ This feeling strongly emerges when

witnessing Morris live, as her improvisational practice dissolves binaries between understanding and feeling the history of the transatlantic slave trade, and blurs conventional distinctions between past and present. Morris describes how she “came up with the notion . . . that the physicality of words would drive the poem, not the text, not even the context.”²⁵ This is intensely felt in her live performances, which disrupt conventional expectations of both lyric poetry and narrative-driven storytelling. As demonstrated above, an extremely brief sentence is turned into a sonic intervention expressing other truths about the Middle Passage, and a soundscape existing at the edge of im/possibility. Morris’s diasporic dissolving liquefies Western linear chronology, traumatic memory, and any attempt to make sense of it. The word becomes a site of improvisational practice existing outside of conventional historiographic and affective frameworks. The physicality of this exercise can be witnessed in her head nods and the occasional closing of her eyes. What Morris achieves is to enact sonic im/possibility by imploding narrative forms, swiftly dissolving language into loss and subtly transforming loss into a multiplicity of meanings opening new possibilities.

The Timbre and the Space (Chord V—G7)

Now, let’s move to the second chord in this improvisational itinerary. We are now in G7, a dominant chord, an interstitial sonic quality. Consisting of a minor (think: melancholic) and major (joyful) component, the chord is one that effectively dissolves boundaries be-

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tween both modes while calling for movement toward the tonic center. Here is a sonic in-between, an audible threshold, a sounding slash. We’ll advance further on an itinerary made of im/possibilities, this time materialized in a sonic encounter with liquid Blackness at a music and dance gathering in New York. In addition to the sonic *im/possibility* conceptualized in the previous section, what is at stake here is a spatial impossibility to be either here (in the Americas) or there (in Africa), paralleled with the possibility to be in both spaces at the same time. What follows echoes the “inexplicable space” of the Black diasporic expe-

rience, as described by Dionne Brand in her *A Map to the Door of No Return*: “There is the sense in the mind of not being here or there, of no way out or in. As if the door had set up its own reflection. Caught between the two we live in the Diaspora, in the sea in between. . . . Our inheritance in the Diaspora is to live in this inexplicable space.”²⁶

For Black people in the United States to improvise a joyful life in this inexplicable space, music has often been key to dissolving space, an idea I would like to amplify by discussing a multisensorial memory of the Soul Summit festivities in Brooklyn. Imagine its sound in the summer of 2022, on a sunlit Sunday in July, in Fort Greene Park, where Soul Summit was founded about twenty years earlier by Sadiq Belamy, Jeff Mendoza, Tabu, and others to revive house culture, and more particularly its free, outdoor resonances. The frequency of the event decreased over the years as the social fabric of the neighborhood, and the corresponding relation to music in the park, changed.

Today, like in older days but unlike other days in the contemporary era, Fort Greene is filled with a majority of Black and Brown people. The history of house music in the United States is embedded in African American queer culture, as I was reminded walking through the park.²⁷ Upon arriving, and before seeing any bit of the party, my friends and I could already hear the heavy, deep bass shuffling through the air. They filled the streets, resonated against the walls, and felt like an ocean of sound to swim in. . . . the closer you get to the sound system, the deeper you

dive. Seeing people nodding their heads, swinging their bodies to the beats in all modes from daringly open to discrete ways, one may feel joy. The fact that we were literally on a climbing ascension to the core of the party amplified the feeling of being on a sonic journey. A few months later, I would listen for Black diasporic echoes of Brooklyn’s Soul Summit when reading the Caribbean novel *Le vent du nord dans les fougères glacées*. Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau tells the story of a community searching for the last traditional storyteller alive. Their quest is narrated as a lengthy and laborious ascension over the hill, disrupted by various encounters, and feels as metaphorical as it is physical.

Back in July, in the embrace of Brooklyn’s summer weather, I witnessed a dreamlike scene of South African artist Zanele Muholi walking silently through the crowd for a video. As we almost reached the top of the hill where we decided to sit, the music reached an amplitude that wrapped me in new possibilities. I decided to continue moving on up. I had been at Soul Summit before, so I knew that up there was a relatively small rectangular spot to be found onto which soles danced the soul of the party. On my own sonic search, I listened for auditory changes punctuating my itinerary. When I was about to reach this improvised dance floor, the soundtrack barely sounded like music anymore; rather, it felt like a bath of beats flowing into my body through each pore. As I arrived close to what felt like a portal to the heart of the party, I slipped into a solace of smiles surrounding me. The first thing I noticed was that some people



FIGURE 2. Percussion instruments at Soul Summit, Brooklyn, New York, September 2022. Photo by author.

seemed quite still. They enjoyed the sounds in subtle steps. Looking toward the right, at the other edge of the dance floor, I could see the DJ and the tech equipment, and I heard house music flooding the crowd. And then I heard these sounds.

Acousmatic beats at first. The thick and slick timbre of drums. “Black aquatic” bubbles rippling up and down my ears.²⁸ I stepped closer to the left edge of the dance floor, diametrically opposed to the DJ. Next, I was in a cipher. In a half-circle, percussionists

played African drums with a dense dexterity and intensity (fig. 2). In my cognition, the traditional and the electronic beats collided with each other, before I eventually entered a mode of attention in which their timbres colluded. This experience enticed me to listen for difference and listen differently. Upon deeper listening, my body tuned to a frequency of im/possibility, in which both aural worlds could coexist. I could not pinpoint whether it required a heightened sense of concentration or rather a full release. I could

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now witness both sonic worlds at the same time and, more importantly, become aware of the movement of sound waves through space in a new, liquid way that dissolved the boundaries between these worlds.

In front of the drummers, at the core of the cipher, dancers would take turn in delivering sumptuous steps, at times in solo, at times in pairs. The drum seemed to spill with joy overflowing around the dancing bodies, themselves suffused with overwhelming energies that dissolved the separation between performer and audience, between performing and listening/watching, between past and present forms of celebration and communication. In this communal improvisation, I could witness the im/possible mnemonics of the memories carried by Black diasporic bodies across the Atlantic.

The traditional drum circle can be experienced as a cipher within the contemporary gathering in which we were performing, listening, and dancing in the diaspora. It felt like an acoustic translation of Brand's poetic "sea in between."²⁹ In this sonic sea shaped by the contrasting textures and tempi of live and electronic beats, wooden and metallic timbres, ancient and contemporary sounds and moves coexisted without conflict. The scenery evoked the possibility of "rethinking . . . black radical politics as a disruptive and dissonant force."³⁰ In *Imagine the Sound*, Carter Mathes reflects on Henry Dumas's 1966 short story "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" He retells of a "mythical afro-horn that is rumored to produce sounds in frequencies and pitches only recognizable to the

ears of those most intimately attuned to its cultural, mythic, and metaphysical dimensions.”³¹ The feeling that I retained from this encounter was indeed the impression that only some of the people attending were aware of the frequencies at play in the cipher, the party within the party, and the sonic im/possibility it represented.

While in Tracie Morris’s improvisation, the performance *It All Started* disrupts linear temporality and historiography, the percussionists described here reshape the house party through a nonspectacular sonic intervention into its spatial configuration. As an artist-scholar of multicultural descent including a Caribbean cultural heritage, I felt invigorated by this experience of sound as a possibility to retain control over one’s own sense of space, time, and body. At the “summit” of Soul Summit, improvisational joy sounded a subtly subversive strategy, a sonic intervention resonating with the deep roots of Black music—and Black history in the American diaspora.

The Song and the Time (Chord I—Cmaj)

This final section shifts to centering *time* as dissolved by the power of Black sound. If we come back to the structuring II-V-I pattern, now is the time for the improvisation to resolve in the grounding major chord, which reverberates the sound of stepping into a warm home after a tumultuous journey. Here we will encounter two performances engaging with the past and present of the Weeksville Heritage Center, a historic site now dedicated to preserving one of the first

free Black communities in the nineteenth-century United States. Situated in Brooklyn, it is now a museum with cultural and educational programming.

In September 2022, Haitian American playwright and director Charlene Jean premiered *BRICKS* at Weeksville as a “changing script-template detailing the history-repeating shared injustice of ‘buried’ towns, [that] considers the spiritual / land-memory implication of gentrification.”³² With Franklin Rankin as a cocreator, Jean’s funk-rock musical tells the story of a child, Maelle, and her mother Colette Etienne. Fearing the potential impact of Maelle’s spiritual gift, Colette gives her glasses that shall prevent her from seeing spirits. Throughout the play, Maelle’s extended family, who raises her, is split on whether to nurture or refrain Maelle in her visions. While embedded in an Afrofuturistic genre, full of joyful and humorous language and moments, the play tackles deep issues related to gentrification, gender, land, and memory for past and present African American communities.

In this first iteration, Charlene Jean described the piece as “a 20-YEAR MUSIC TOUR of RETROACTIVE-REPARATIONS,”³³ implying a questioning of linear spacetime. The performance featured Black trans artist Mercy Kelly in the key role of the Head Matriarch of the realm of Up Yonder, an empire of speculative spirit technology. Through their voice, the Matriarch guides the group into a reclaiming of Black time, and a dissolving of time itself. In a mellow and intriguing tone, the Matriarch addresses the coplayers in a



FIGURE 3. BRICKS, *We have time*. Excerpt from the dress rehearsals at Weeksville Heritage Center, New York, 2022. Screen grab. Courtesy of Charlene Jean.

statement that may as well be destined to the audience (fig. 3). Kelly speaks out in a crescendo, met with audible enthusiasm:

So in Afrocentric, aphrodisiac, high-brown, long-legged pleasure-filled form tonight . . .

We are privileging Black Thought, Black Space, Black . . . time!

The delay between “Black” and “time” disrupts the expressive flow, puts us in a state of acoustic suspension, and conveys the idea that the reunion of both words is not self-evident in the context of speak-

ing. The word *time* is uttered very carefully, held in the mouth the way one would delicately handle a newborn. In a sonic strategy repeatedly used in the piece, the Matriarch counterintuitively lowers their voice precisely when emphasizing specific moments in the narrative. Instead of getting louder, Kelly often gets lower and successfully attracts attention for specific words that are almost whispered. This echoes the argument made by Kevin Quashie in *The Sovereignty of Quiet*—namely, that beyond the buoyant expression of resistance usually associated with Black cultural resistance, which characterizes much of the

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uplifting BRICKS musical, quiet forms also exist and deserve to be taken seriously as powerful counter-hegemonic tools. The Matriarch goes on at a slower pace and in a lower tone:

What if I offered time . . .

. . . one of the most stolen resources we've known, back to us as retroactive-reparations to us folk tonight?

A performer calls in "Take your time, baby . . ." immediately followed by the Matriarch's response "Oh, I will!" Now the group begins to stomp, and engages in a collective speaking-singing, cocreating a never-ending mantra: *We have time, we have time, we have time, we have time!* interspersed with voices mimicking the sound of a clock "tick, tock."³⁴ In the spirit of Afrofuturist genres, the conventional boundaries between past, present, and future are dissolved in a song and sounds that make it possible to reclaim time. This scene epitomizes Black performance-making, singing, and listening as an improvisational

exercise in joy. It reminds us, as poet Arlene Keizer wrote, that

Our music has never failed us, never failed us.³⁵

This quote, both in its verbal and visual expression, synthesizes what I attempt to express throughout this text: a Black sonic itinerary making possible and made possible by gaps, disruptions, and syncopations, which invites us to find joy precisely in these interstitial spacetimes of improvisation.

Another staging of Black temporal im/possibilities at the site of the Weeksville Heritage Center can also be found in the practice of André Zachery—an artist who shares with Jean a connection to the Haitian diaspora—and his Renegade Performance Group (RPG) (fig. 4). Zachery is an artist invested in the power of performance to shape new worlds where bodies can move more freely in space and time. As part of his *Afrofuturism* series, he created *Untamed Space* (2017), an interdisciplinary performance about ma-



FIGURE 4. Renegade Performance Group, *Untamed Space*, Weeksville Heritage Center. Photo by RPG. Courtesy of André M. Zachery.

rooning in the twenty-first century. The work consists of a site-specific project with a photo series, a performance, and a dance film.³⁶ Zachery, who describes the film on his website as “timeless,”³⁷ created the work to “consider the spiritual dimensions of maroon colonies and how the creation of those *impossible* spaces has influenced the contemporary identities” of Black people throughout the Americas.³⁸ He explains that the work is set in the legacy of Kerry James Marshall’s painting *Past Times* (1997), and more particularly what Zachery understands as a representation of Black time, “something that is usually robbed of Black people in this hemisphere.”³⁹

Zachery’s critique of Black temporality in relation to Western capitalism and his activation of Marshall’s

legacy into a contemporary visual and choreographic language strongly resonate with Jean’s work and the song of the Matriarch. In a different aesthetic style, both works address the violent colonial regulation of Black time in plantation-based societies and express the impulse to stage possibilities for Black people to spend free time with each other, and for this time to become a source of joy in their works. In this liberated relation to time, the key role of the sonic dimension is materialized in audi/visi/ble details. In Marshall’s paintings, we see a stereo out of which notes float out vertically, suggesting an ascension. Encapsulated in the score are the lyrics “my imagination running away with me”—a quote evoking the fugitivity trope, while being a citation from The Temptations’ song about

an imaginary im/possible love. Black sound at the threshold of im/possibility, again. Quoting this motif, the performance *Untamed Space* features a stereo prop and an avant-garde soundtrack by Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste, while *BRICKS* proposes a musical intervention that affords the possibility of retroactive reparations affording Black time. In the synchronous stomping, singing, tapping, swirling, and drifting of the bodies, we hear and experience a joyful encounter recalling the traditions of the Ring Shout. What both works share is a strong sense of communication between the performers, be it kinetic or acoustic, epitomized in the connection of individual improvisation and collective synchronicity.

Extension (Open)

In all three sections of my scholarly progression based on a II-V-I jazz pattern, I theorized dissolving as a Black diasporic strategy working with and through sound. Jazz, and correlated forms of expression in Black poetry, theater, and performance, as the ones discussed in this essay, exemplify the possibilities opened by a malleable use and perception of sound. Tracie Morris dissolves linear narratives through language and expresses how liquid Blackness can be reimagined in a sonic approach to language, historiography, and epistemology. The Soul Summit experience bears witness to an encounter with Black sound that invites an improvisational listening, allowing the body to experience sonic porosity in relation to a feeling of freedom. Finally, the last examples discussed account for dissolving time as an improvisa-

tional mode of Black sound, dance, and art making. In all cases, the workings of sound attune the audiences to the existence of a realm of im/possibility. While Moten insists on the “not in between” emerging in “resistant aural performances,”⁴⁰ my argument emphasizes the interstitial entanglements of liquid Blackness, sound, and improvisation. Listening to this fluidity attunes us to other, relational presents and futures filled with joyful possibilities.

In jazz theory, an extension is the process of adding other notes on top of the chord to produce a new tone color, thus expanding the possibilities of your sound. Much of my thinking and writing is made possible by my own experience as a performer composing and playing saxophone and other instruments/sounds in dialogue with Oxana Chi Dance & Art. For our most recent collaboration, “Corpuscular Cores,” a duo commissioned by The Kitchen, we used much improvisation on the pathway toward finding the choreography and composition (fig. 1).

The work was created in response to a graphic score itself created by Romi Morrison in the realm of a research residency with The Kitchen L.A.B. dedicated to the life and legacy of the late controversial composer Julius Eastman. Mapping real and speculative in Eastman’s New York itinerary, the score asks questions such as “How does the edge feel?” and invites us to translate into music and dance how the “tension” between resonating with a place that feels like home and allowing oneself to become errant.⁴¹ Eastman’s works move at the threshold between the impossibility to be fully recognized, and living in peace

WHAT WE HEAR IS ALL ABOUT HOW WE MOVE, WHERE WE STAND AT THE START, WHERE WE LAND IN BETWEEN, AND HOW WE TAKE FLIGHT IN THE END

as an openly gay African American artist, and the possibilities he created by composing avant-garde music, which would inspire the roots of mainstream pop and bring much joy to generations to come. In my response to the score, which can be heard below in one of its iterations, I inhabit Black sound as an im/possible space and time. My use of loops lets musical quotes and improvisation, consonance and dissonance, dance and movement collide and collude in polysemic and polyrhythmic ways. Playing music together with live dance is an exercise in improvisational joy that keeps me alive.⁴²

To warm up on the saxophone, I enjoy playing a II-V-I pattern I learned from a teacher who orbited in Horace Tapscott's Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra. The pattern consists of moving through the chords by playing the first four notes of the minor, then four notes of the dominant chord, followed by playing the full major scale. Ideally, you play it by moving up in the octaves, giving it a sense of sonic progression.

Here, the improvisation may take flight, and it does feel like a joyful itinerary. When you reach the major scale, and sense how all the other chords and notes were encompassed into it, you become aware of the possibility to dissolve differences between chords, emotions, and positions. Playing the II-V-I patterns feels as if listening to a joy that was always, is always already there; it's just a matter of reaching it, which is a matter of time and of how you move within the space of the instrument. What we hear is all about how we move, where we *stand* at the start, where we *land* in between, and how we *take flight* in the end.

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Notes

This article includes video content that may be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1215/26923874-11579606>.

- 1 Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 11.
- 2 Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 12.
- 3 Besides Brooks’s recent book *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, see Brooks, “‘Sister, Can You Line It Out?’” See also Weheliye, *Phonographies*; Mathes, *Imagine the Sound*; Moten, *Black and Blur*; Edwards, *Epistrophies*; Furlonge, *Race Sounds*.
- 4 Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 5.
- 5 Furlonge, *Race Sounds*, 8.
- 6 Reed, *Soundworks*, 23.
- 7 Leal, *Dreams in Double Time*, 10.
- 8 For example, see Voegelin, *Political Possibility of Sound*.
- 9 The roman numerals indicate a sonic move starting away from and finally rejoining a tonal center. To explain it in a succinct way, let’s imagine in the key of C. The chord patterns would be: D minor (Dm), G dominant (G7), and C major (Cmaj7).
- 10 “*liquid blackness* Issue 9.1 CFP—‘Exercises in Joyful Improvisational Practice,’” <https://liquidblackness.com/news/cfpexercises-in-joyful-improvisational-practice>.
- 11 Listeners unfamiliar with this aspect of music theory may find it helpful to listen to a musical example to hear the contrast between both—for example, Mostly Ear Training, “Minor Modes.”
- 12 Morris, “Poetics Statement,” 210.
- 13 Here I refer to my experience of witnessing the work live in the realm of *A Weekend of Jazz by Arts for Arts* at the Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn on October 20, 2019, and to a subsequent viewing of a video documenting Morris’s performance in 2008.
- 14 Morris, *It All Started*, University of Arizona, 2008; for a video version, see Morris, “Tracie Morris *It All Started*.”
- 15 Kolesch and Krämer, “Stimmen Im Konzert,” 11; my translation.
- 16 Jack, *Skin*, 1; my emphasis.
- 17 Jack, *Skin*, 1.
- 18 Morris, “Poetics Statement,” 211. The poem goes, “I am just a little girl.”
- 19 Hume, “Improvisational Insurrection,” 215.
- 20 Moten, *In the Break*, 1.
- 21 Tracie Morris, “Listings and Links,” Tracie Morris’s personal website, <https://traciemorris.com/recent-and-forthcoming> (accessed January 4, 2024).
- 22 Reed, *Soundworks*, 3.
- 23 Reed, *Soundworks*, 2.
- 24 Obadike and Obadike, “Liner Notes.” There is also a version created in collaboration with queer Haitian percussionist, turntables, and improvisational composer Val Jeanty, also known as Val-Inc, who defines herself as Sound Chemist.
- 25 Morris, “Poetics Statement,” 211.
- 26 Brand, *Map to the Door of No Return*, 20.
- 27 On this topic, see also Adeyemi, *Feels Right*.

- 28 Walcott, "Black Aquatic."
- 29 Brand, *Map to the Door of No Return*, 20.
- 30 Mathes, *Imagine the Sound*, 82.
- 31 Mathes, *Imagine the Sound*, 75. For an insightful discussion of the writing of Nathaniel Mackey on the dilation of time through jazz, see Mathes, *Imagine the Sound*, 23–60.
- 32 Jean, "BRICKS Work Sample."
- 33 Jean, "BRICKS Work Sample."
- 34 You can listen to Charlene Jean and Mercy Kelly discussing the play with brief sound excerpts, in the third episode of my podcast *Sonic Interventions*. See Zami, Jean, and Kelly, "Music as Retroactive Reparations." The "time" song starts at minute 18.
- 35 Keizer, *Fraternal Light*, 17.
- 36 Zachery, "Untamed Space."
- 37 Zachery, "Untamed Space."
- 38 Zachery, "Envisioning Black Futures." Here I am referring to a talk given by Zachery upon my invitation in honor of Black Solidarity Day during my tenure as a cochair of Black Lives Matter at Pratt Institute.
- 39 Zachery, "Envisioning Black Futures."
- 40 Moten, *Black and Blur*, 2.
- 41 Morrison, "Introduction." Interestingly, Morrison also discusses queer epistemology in/as the tension between what seems impossible and yet feels necessary.
- 42 Zami, "Corpuscular Cores."

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