

Fillmore with the vivacity and conviction of her gospel vision. Generations of Black women's musicianship have repeated the quotidian miracle of artists like Scott who was improvising her own time and Williams who was making music of the juke, the music that "map[s] the spatiotemporal experience of afterhours." Their artistry attests to the many ways that Black women invented sonic alterities for themselves and for their brethren, designed a socio-cultural lexicon in sound, and expanded the articulation of what's possible.⁵⁰

They used their own performing bodies to precipitate modernity's shock of the new, and they have shown a particularly meaningful ability to cultivate our sense of community, to "surrogate" our shared affinities, to invite us to imagine ourselves as a "we" by way of the seductive power of their sonic storytelling.⁵¹ They are the ones who have laid down affectively and aesthetically sophisticated ways of *being with* each other through their sonic moves. Like Baldwin's Sonny, they are the ones who can call attention to the terms of our belonging and simultaneously forge new symbolic arrangements to belong.

Eccentric indie jazz vocalist René Marie often plays out this drama in her contemporary sets, swinging from left field in her daring performances that wend their way through the thickets of racial history, mixing and matching well-known compositions ("Dixie" and "Strange Fruit") in order to draw to the aural surface tensions between the mythical united state of the nation and the volatile experiences of the dispossessed. Her intricately arranged and much-discussed disturbance of state narrative and presumptions of the American collective in 2008 is a prime example of her style and strategy. Invited to sing the national anthem at Denver's mayoral inauguration that year, Marie delivered a now-infamous performance that unsettled the terms of civic propriety and pulsated with the concentrated energy emerging out of her brave and abrasive aesthetic choices. She made herself a world in that moment, closing her eyes and leaning into a measured, steady reading of two classic songs at once, interpolating the words of James Weldon Johnson's 1900 declaration of Black collective determination to "lift ev'ry voice and sing" into the fabric of "The Star-Spangled Banner." It was a feat that hinged on referencing and yet also dissolving the anthem's imperial bombast and simultaneously rendering precious the language of New Negro fortitude and uplift. Before a visibly bewildered audience, Marie turned the nation's song of itself into the O.G. African American battle cry with its insistence on facing the "rising sun" and "march[ing] on 'til" racial justice "victory is won." Her sonically curated historical drama altogether troubles the proper and disrupts "the common sense of 'the national anthem.'" It is a performance that makes audible the tensions between the stars and stripes "Banner" and the "Voice" of Blackness by, in part, calling attention to the op-



René Marie performs “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” at Mayor John Hickenlooper’s State of the City address, Denver, July 2008

posing sensorial strivings of these two anthems. One hears in Marie’s startling double reading one song invested in selective sight (“O say can you see . . .”) and another predicated on a sound uprising, the call to raise voices so high towards the “listening skies” that they might shake heaven and earth. It is Marie’s keen abilities as both arranger and musician, as Shana Redmond reminds, that frame the terms by which she executes what amounts to an “a cappella experiment in the practice of citizenship” and a refusal to “resolve the contradictory positions and practices that define black women’s citizenship.”⁵² Calmly, pointedly she turns over each word of Johnson’s while yet still holding down the compositional blueprint of John Stafford Smith’s English drinking song that white supremacist Francis Scott Key had cribbed for his ode to early American military might. Carefully, she moves to merge these two songs as if both detonating one bomb and preparing to set off another. Rhythmically, she displaces Key’s lyrics for Johnson’s, enacting a triple reading—of Johnson’s verse, Key’s military victory song, and Johnson and composer brother J. Rosamond’s musical conversation with Key’s work.⁵³

Marie’s performance amounts to more than mere arrangement as it both “disturbs and questions the work (of the arranged as well as of the arranger)” and depends on the Blackness of her embodied witnessing, her insistence on making a scene out of the interfacing of two songs at dramatic odds with each other.

This is labor that amounts to sonic curation, radical “interpretation,” fugitive “storytelling,” and a commitment to hailing the audience in the renovation of this master song that was never meant for Black folks. This is her bid to amplify the sounds of those who tread the blood-stained “path” of the “slaughtered,” those who toiled to reach the precipice of a “gleam[ing]” new tomorrow forecast by Johnson. She puts Johnson’s anthem to work with surgical precision, interrupting and also slyly harmonizing with Key’s hallowed yet hollow composition in a different register, turning up the volume on this Blackest of calls to “rejoice,” come what be and though “stony the road we trod . . .” Marie is, here, the curator as well as acoustician, manipulating the soundscapes of Key, composer Stafford Smith, and the Johnsons’ respective works, laboring over them so as to leave her own “acoustic signature” and, in the process, opening up their (public yet secret) relationship to one another.⁵⁴

This is the anatomy of modern sonic culture of which Black women artists have been the architects—which is not to say that every sister rolling up on a microphone is crossfading colonial era patriotic cuts with postbellum uplift hymns. What Rene Marie exemplifies, however, is the particularity and poignancy of Black women musicians’ consistent resolve to turn to sound as a form of historical recourse.⁵⁵ Armed with the “prostheses” of a “phonographic listening instrument” that is her own musical virtuosity, René Marie, the “transducer” of sounds, shares with her stunned audience a secret from the realm of the subterranean: that Black women have been radically recording, archiving, and rearranging the modern era right before our very ears.⁵⁶ They are the technicians and the designers of sounds that have been captured, mimicked, and reproduced by instruments of technology that constitute the making of our modern life. And they are also the authors of their own (exhausting) instrumentation that has actively produced that life, recording it, replaying it, and providing us with the means to listen to the rich and intricate complexity of their own survival. Their sounds are “not just the annunciation of modernity itself but the insurgent prophesy that all modernity will have at its heart, in its own hold, this movement of things, this interdicted outlawed social life of nothing.” Theirs is “the antiphonal accompaniment to gratuitous violence—the sound that can be heard as if it were in response to that violence, the sound that must be heard as that to which such violence responds.”⁵⁷

No one would dispute the fact that the brothers—everyone from Satchmo, Monk, Miles, and Trane to Otis, Marvin, and Stevie—have actively participated in the making and fierce preservation of this tradition too, and the many cornerstone works in jazz studies, soul, R&B and hip hop studies attests to this—largely at the expense of paying greater attention to the exceptionalism of the

African American women on the frontlines of this cultural phenomenon. The question becomes, then, whether we might be able to imagine a pop (culture) life with Black women at its full-stop center rather than as the opening act, the accompanying act, or the afterthought? Can we be like Jayna Brown who, in her important study of Black women performers “in motion” in the early twentieth century, notes the critical role that these dancers and actors, comedians, and all-around entertainers played as they traversed the “shifting terrain” of the modern city armed with their resilient imagination and shaking up cultural life along the way. Like Brown, I care for and about the cultural work of Black women and tracing the accomplishments and wonders of their creative lives as well as the ways that they marked their experiences as modern subjects in active, sensorial relation to their worlds. We might think of the artists in this study, then, as akin to Brown’s flaneurs who are wholly resourceful in their execution of vision and movement and in their navigation of changing socio-cultural landscapes and socialities.⁵⁸

I have set myself to listening to the Black women whose labor can be measured in sound, the ones who “pus[h] against the grain” and as Richard Iton would have it, innovate “potentially transformative” and “thickly emancipatory and substantively post-colonial visions . . . in their lower registers.”⁵⁹ These artists, the revolutionary engineers of social and cultural modernity, repeatedly confound modernity’s racialized and gendered tenets rather than “displacing” its tenets altogether. Black women musicians and Black feminist thinkers are, it would seem to me, the progenitors of sonic forms, aesthetics, and strategies, as well as *ideas* about the sonic that have destabilized and reordered our sensorial and expressive lives, and such a revelation demands that we account for how their imaginative and analytic practices have made massive contributions to the ways in which we cognitively and affectively make sense of our place in the everyday world and how we move through it. The women in this study disrupt modernity’s negation and violent expenditure of Blackness and Black womanhood in particular.

I would add too that my own thinking on this topic takes seriously the drop-dead radical claims made by Black feminist poet and theorist Simone White. While I diverge from her important and iconoclastic criticism in significant ways, White’s bold line of theorizing involves, in part, a wholesale reinterrogation of “the Black Music Juggernaut,” as she refers to the criticism of Moten and poet-music theorist Nathaniel Mackey as well as Amiri Baraka and others, which I still find useful in this book. For White though, this “Juggernaut” is an often masculinist, overdetermined “aspect of thought that is of the devil—insofar as it describes the unobservable and unheard (of) and allows for communication

only via belief in a certain attunement to how it feels to be a problem.” What she is after is an “alternative to the image of blackness as a sound, an archive of sound,” for it is sometimes presumed in these authors to be wholly entangled with racial terror, with “the advent of modernity.” She instead wants to think expressive practices beyond this moment, so as “to come into other existences again and after, with modernity’s ebb and flow,” and she thus proposes the capacious figure of “the fold,” a “metaphor” that can move us “toward understanding how life can begin to take place where black people are concerned; some whole understanding of the space inside which individual black life (continuously unfolding expression) can take place, not in defiance of opposing powers, but paying them no mind, remaining nonetheless attuned to their structuring presence.”⁶⁰ *Liner Notes for the Revolution* searches for a similar place, but it significantly and obviously does so without letting go of the belief that the *practice of sound* and *sound performance* as made and executed by Black women in relation to power—as well as the writerly philosophizing of such sounds by women critics—remain a source of severe analytic neglect. Theirs is the kind of event that I am not yet ready to discard and move beyond, because there’s so much information about this crisis stored up in this work of the sisters that we’ve yet to even sit with—let alone discover—whether in the vaults of Paramount Records or housed in the memories of my nonagenarian mother.

In other words, while White’s work challenges us to think about the problem of the brothers who are writing toward, after, and alongside one another about Black music, it shouldn’t take us away from the far-too-often-rendered-as-invisible women who make up “the chorus.” I focus resolutely on the ones who, as Hartman makes so vividly clear, were engaging in disorderly “experiments in living free,” those who were making music so as to offer “a fierce and expanded sense of what might be possible,” those who were articulating “the ardent longing to live as one wanted.”⁶¹ Through their sounds, she argues in her symphonic meditation on this subject, “you can hear the whole world in a bent note, a throwaway lyric, a singular thread of the collective utterance. Everything from the first ship to the young woman found hanging in her cell. Marvel at their capacity to inhabit every woman’s grief as their own. All the stories ever told rush” from the “opened mouth[s]” of these artists, who emerge as an ensemble array of actors in the archive.⁶²

Reckoning with their sounds reminds us that everything is possible. Their art is both the key to and the contestation of modernity. They make and store up the sounds that reflect new times, other places, other ways of imagining our connections to one another through their wholly influential, widely imitated, and felt expressive forms. As records (living archives) and recorders (archivists),

Black women sonic artists are, as I have stated throughout, listening, arranging, curating, performing, and, by way of these practices, scripting modernity. We might hear more clearly the way they are creating original works and, likewise, (re)arranging that which has already been created. They sing, sign, write, and rewrite in concert with one another's labor, designing works that comprise many voices and listenings. Their artistic and critical aspirations call on us to take note of the fact that they were always more than "object[s] of modern power and the subject of . . . modern life."⁶³ "Who else," Hartman asks,

would dare believe another world was possible, spend the good days readying for it, and the bad days shedding tears that it has not yet arrived? Who else would be reckless enough to dream a colored girl's or a black woman's future? Devote even an afternoon musing about the history of the universe seen from nowhere? Or be convinced that nothing could be said about the Negro problem, modernity, global capitalism, police brutality, state killings, and the Anthropocene if it did not take her into account? Did not reckon with the disavowed geography of the world: the barracoon, the hold, the plantation, the camp, the reservation, the garret, the colony, the attic studio, the bedroom, the urban archipelagoes, the ghetto, and the prison? The chorus bears all of it for us.⁶⁴

Like "literature," which, she observes, "was better able to grapple with the role of chance in human action and . . . illuminate the possibility and the promise of the errant path"—providing, that is, a break from coercive, disciplining societal norms that have policed and surveilled Black women before, through, and beyond the modern era—sonic performances are sometimes sumptuous, sometimes tempestuous forms of potentiality, dreaming, planning, negotiating, exorcising, proselytizing, and prophesying.⁶⁵

Sound performances—that formalistic elixir of what Black radical tradition philosopher Sylvia Wynter refers to as "bios and mythoi"—are the means through which these artists forge a different epistemic relationship with the world, one that allows them "to climb out of our present order of consciousness' . . . to know/think/feel/ behave and subjectively experience ourselves—doing so for the first time in our human history *consciously* now—in *quite different terms*." The sound performances of the artists in this study enable us to think of Black womanhood as "hybridly human," as contesting the limits placed upon conceptions of the Human as defined by the West. Mary Lou Williams, Esther Scott, and René Marie are but three examples of artists who redefine their own modern condition by expanding it through sound, and by using sound to "detach themselves from

imperial knowledge and subjectivity.” As Wynter scholar and collaborator Katherine McKittrick asserts, “the science of the word is writ large” in “music and music making.” These are the forms and performance strategies in which “the physiological/neurological human being” who “assembl[es] creative texts... understand[s] and perceive[s] the world as necessarily connective.”⁶⁶

For this reason alone, the records matter. *Liner Notes for the Revolution* pays attention not only to the expressive singing voice in the making of the modern but also to the recorded expressive practices of Black women musicians and the ways in which said practices constitute innovations in modern, technological cultural production. Black women musicians are experimental mediators in the story that I’m telling here. They are figures who modulate and remix his- tory—our felt and distinct relationship to specifically powerful conceptions of time and place, our identifications and disidentifications with community. And while it should be obvious that all sorts of gifted performers across any combi- nation of expressive forms are privy to such skills, the “stakes is high” for those who’ve been historically deprived of determining and defining the experiences in and on their own time. Throughout this book’s journey, Black women musi- cians use, manage, exploit, and reimagine sonic and visual technologies—the phonograph, microphones, cinematic and video production—in ways that both subtly and overtly push against prescribed notions of how Black women artists sound, look, and move in the popular music imaginary. And they use these de- vices toward their own exuberantly conspiratorial ends.

Think, then, of Black women musicians as the invisible media—or the “vanishing mediator,” as Jonathan Sterne might have it—through which the West experiences itself as “new” and constantly, dramatically shifting, “evolving,” becoming. As conduits of sounds that altered the sociocultural economy in the first half of the twentieth century and reshaped the political and affective meaning and utility of popular music in the second half of that century and into the new millennium, the performers in this study have turned to the sonic in the face of white patriarchal supremacy’s structural negation of their per- sonhood. As women who listen, who record and bear witness as distinct and often “noisy” records of racial, gender, class, and sexual specificity in the mar- gins, they trouble the unspoken antitechnological romance of the “aura,” that Benjaminian concept of aesthetic essence and presumptive inviolability so often attached to white masculine art in our cultural imaginary. That which is “authentic” and “original” is made by white men. That which is mimetic and lacks innovation is made by everyone else. So goes a tale that gained traction and power in the age of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy, but whose roots are, we know, centuries older.⁶⁷

Benjamin's famous hand-wringing focused entirely on machines and modernity, the anxiety of what technology might do to the art object's "nature" as it dislodged that object from its original context and reproduced it for the masses. But the myth of aura shares much in common with the white masculine pop music canon in that both depend on a perception of the world in which dialectical exchange and "otherness" have no influence, no consequence, no potential to shape or shift existing ("white") objects of their putative essence. Black sonic womanhood unsettles this myth by calling attention, often in a curatorial mode, to the palimpsest, the networks of listening bound up in the act of performance, the presence of multiple voices, multiple histories, aural entanglements, cultural memories encapsulated in sound as the vital and innovative framework for art itself. To think of these women artists as modern media, as crafting performance practices that anticipate, reflect, and refract the practices of early sound reproduction, is to recognize the extent to which, like this media, their work sustains "recurring relations among people, practices, institutions, and machines." "The medium is the shape of a network of social and technological relations," argues Sterne, "and the sounds produced within the medium cannot be assumed to exist in the world apart from the network." He is referring here, of course, to "studio art," to early phonography, telephony, and radio and the range of sound-reproduction technologies emerging out of these inventions that informed and transformed "the messy and political human sphere."⁶⁸

By focusing on Black women's sound labor, *Liner Notes for the Revolution* insists on thinking modernity in different terms. It aims to take us to a place where the artists themselves are mapping, singing, playing out, and curating strategies that call attention to the ways that Black folks—and Black women in particular—are figuring the Human as an ongoing, co-relational doing (from noun to verb). The musicians and thinkers in this book are each, in her own way, invested in imagining the fundamental condition of "being" as fluid rather than stable, changeable rather than fixed, and above all else, free—in spite of the external world's efforts to tell them otherwise. The category of the Human, for these culture workers, is powerfully and thrillingly mediated by art-making, by poetic, kinesthetic language, by the "science of the word" that "*feels and questions* the unsurvival of the condemned, dislodging black diasporic denigration from its 'natural' place through *wording* [and sounding] the biological conditions of being human."⁶⁹

This art quests and questions; this art offers the performer/listener the chance to have a different epistemic relationship with one's environment and with one's autopoietic, genre-specific living system (the "status quo"); this art unsettles our perception and acceptance of "imperial Humanity" born out of

the locally realized, globally ordained Enlightenment West; this art demands that we redefine the terms of what it means to be “enlightened” altogether. This is art that both poses and sings a revolutionary response to this question: What does it mean to be modern when humanness is an ongoing, hybrid, improvisational praxis? What if, rather than assuming the role of being “conscripted to modernity” as an end point, Black women artists draw on the “conditions of possibility” emerging out of this situation to paradoxically affirm and articulate that which is in excess of the modern, that which goes not wholly against it but beyond it altogether? What kind of language might we use to lay claim to Black women’s sound modernity and its ability to create new places, new times, new ways of being?⁷⁰

What this book is after, then, is a way to talk about the entanglements of “modern life” and the sonic imagination of certain daring Black women artists. What I’m after here is a way to tell a story of modernity from the vantage point of those who have been excised and exiled from the foundations of the modern but who, nonetheless, invented performance languages and expressive modalities that have dramatically reinterrogated and reordered human experience. Black women’s “sonic imaginations bring us to particular conjunctures and problems, but they also redescribe them from unexpected standpoints.”⁷¹ Theirs is a dense “cultural front,” to borrow Michael Denning’s formidable analytic formulation, and by virtue of Black folks’ historical disenfranchisement and rejection from institutionalized power structures, they were always and already producing a kind of public culture that perpetually, in its structures of feeling, generates radical expressive forms and forges potent “allegiances and affiliations.”⁷² They have crafted an alternative archive of modernity that both is shaped by and accounts for the violence of their presumed invisibility in and dispossession from the body politic and yet exceeds that violence by evermore attempting to rehearse and record “a new set of social arrangements.”⁷³

My argument hinges on recognizing the ways that, at tremendously important junctures in time, Black women’s sonic performances functioned like phonography, that modern technology that evolved into a medium. Sonic Black womanhood shatters the “aura” of white mythical sound practices and allows us to be privy to the polyrhythms of their fully realized lives. Their sounds, which respond to the maelstrom of Man, as Wynter might have it, ultimately run fugitive from Man. To be both record and recorder means not only to unsettle the terms by which we understand Man, it also signals the ways that Black women artists generate and store counterknowledges to those who deny their humanness altogether. As records and recorders, they manage and mediate both bios and mythoi, invoking embodied sounds that constitute and reflect the foun-

dations of their being as “homo narrans,” that Wynter coinage that reminds us of our species’ “storytelling” origins.⁷⁴ Through sound, they preserve and pass on stories of Black womanhood that exceed the script bequeathed to them by Man. Through music, they create electrifying networks for Black women to move through and use as a means to self-making, self-reinvention, and co-relational insurgency. Like the formidable and intrepid young Mary Lou, they are archivists digging for knowledge in the sonic work of other women, documenting, preserving, and disseminating the performances of others. Like Esther Mae Scott and René Marie, they are listening, (re)arranging, reframing, and curating the music that they carry inside them and pass on to others. Their multiple, intersecting publics constitute radical cultural networks of aesthetic rupture and transformation; their music is a kind of “musical criticism *in music*,” and as critical, intellectual, and artistic forces, their practices, methods, and innovations insist to us the multiple ways that Black women musicians are the engines of modernity.⁷⁵

“Everything Is Possible”: Black Studies, Rock Criticism & the Feminist Hereafter

Think, then, of these boisterous vocal sisters as the “little women” who steer *Liner Notes for the Revolution* and subterranean blues study more broadly. For they are the kind of sharp and knowing figures who, like Ralph Ellison’s trenchant figure in his classic essay “Little Man at Chehaw Station,” lurk in the most unexpected places, observing and evaluating the broad American cultural scene. In that landmark work of cultural criticism, Ellison reflects on the sage advice that he receives from his Tuskegee music teacher, cosmopolitan classical pianist Hazel Harrison, who imparts the famous, transformative riddle to her young charge to “*always* play your best, even if it’s only in the waiting room at Chehaw Station, because in this country there’ll always be the little man behind the stove.”⁷⁶ Her advice sets young Ellison on a journey to figure out, among other things, the meaning of performative virtuosity as well as the recognition of cultural hybridity in America.

Much critical attention has focused on the figure of the “little man” as a symbol of the listener who sits (quite literally) at “the crossroads” of Chehaw Station and who thus serves as a reminder of the importance of performing multilingually—playing, writing, singing in both classical and vernacular idioms (because you never know who might be listening). The little man is also, as Ellison sees it, a “connoisseur,” a “critic,” and a “trickster . . . a day-coach, [a]

cabin-class traveler. . . . Sometimes he's there, sometimes he's here." To Ellison, his cultural fluency and fluidity are signs of American democracy's open secret, of which he was a true believer: that "our 'Americanness' . . . creates out of its incongruity an uneasiness within us, because it is a constant reminder that American democracy is not only a political collectivity of individuals, but culturally a collectivity of styles, tastes and traditions."⁷⁷ Ellison's interest in America's "complex and pluralistic wholeness" is one that I share in this book. However, as cultural critic Nicholas Boggs points out, Ellison's focus on the "little man" has come at the expense of considering Harrison's critical role in guiding him toward an understanding of the meaning of cultural plurality in the first place. Few have taken note of Harrison's "sphinx-like" presence as the core interventionist figure who, through musical proverb, teaches her student a lesson not only about heterogeneous Black subjectivity in American culture but also about the critical meaning of Black womanhood in relation to that culture. She is, Boggs suggests, the "little woman" who guides Ellison toward embracing the profundities of democracy's promise as well as the exigencies of sonic expression as the complex articulation of self.⁷⁸

Ellison's own pedagogy on this score has guided me as well. As a Black feminist literary and cultural critic who grew up making regular pilgrimages to the now-defunct Tower Records and loitering at the magazine rack reading rock rags, I can see no other way of telling this story of Black women's sounds and intellectual culture without considering the criticism that shaped perceptions of these sounds. Given my own roots, it seems right to acknowledge what I have in common with the "little man" who, "*as a reader . . . demands that the relationship between his own condition and that of those more highly placed be recognized.*" The little man "senses," as Ellison points out, "that American experience is of a whole, and he wants the interconnections revealed," as do I.⁷⁹ As a result, other kinds of thinkers—critics, novelists, playwrights, visual artists and their respective works—matter in the story that I'm telling here in that they create expressive forms or meaningful aesthetic dialogues with the artists in this book, as do other intimates and companions and public audiences—the crowds, the diverse publics whose competing desires and feelings for these artists often figure prominently, as both inspiration and antagonism, in the repertoires of these women.

The point of these sorts of efforts is to, in effect, invite a motley bunch of readers—some of whom may find this work's prolonged engagement with archival Black feminist figures foreign, illegible, or irrelevant to their interests, and others who may not recognize or care about the stakes involved in confronting white male-dominated rock and blues criticism at all—to reassess

their presumptions. In many ways, this book yokes together two seemingly disparate worlds—the alternative cultural arts criticism born out of the New Left and counterculture revolutions of the sixties and the illustrious line of African American radical thinkers who have long innovated profound theories about the meaning, purpose, and possibility of culture and its ability to reframe and reform the fabric of our lives. *Liner Notes for the Revolution* calls attention to what I see as the urgent need for rock lit and Black studies to “speak” to each other, to account for the overlooked and undertheorized value of Black women as cultural actors and innovators, and most importantly, to reckon with the lasting impact of a Black feminist intervention *in both fields all at once*. If the bold and ferocious analytic mischief of critic Greg Tate teaches us anything, it’s that a crucial and unprecedented merging of these spheres of thought might serve as a touchstone for pushing the boundaries of both the language and the conceptual framework for reading pop culture with Black fantastic genius at its center. As Tate, the iconoclastic freedom-fighting brother from another planet of arts writing and theory puts it bluntly, “What I myself have really been intrigued by all along is something less quantifiable than Black Culture and even Black Identity and Black Consciousness, and that something is what my friend Arthur Jafa has termed Black Cognition—the way Black people ‘think,’ mentally, emotionally, physically, cryptically how those ways of thinking and being inform our artistic choices.”⁸⁰

Liner Notes for the Revolution is thus no “history” in any conventional sense of the word. Like critic Hazel Carby, who once famously distanced herself from the Black feminist theoretical impulse to rely “on a common or shared . . . experience” in exploring the work of Black women writers, I do not set my sights on excavating a “tradition” of Black women’s musical aesthetics. I do, however, pursue the idea of Black women musicians and entertainers as sociocultural intellectuals and as archives of cultural memory. I focus on the ways that cultural critics, scholars, and collectors emerge as integral figures in the production of Black women’s sonic cultures and their discontents. And I aim to tell a twofold story: of how an array of daring Black women artists engaged with historical memory and fragments of Black folks’ sociocultural past through sound, and of how these same artists innovated their own distinct and innovative modes of critical practice *within* Black sound. The flipside of this story focuses on the ways that critics and record collectors have documented and produced divergent knowledges about Black women artists and devised very particular ways of reading their work. The juxtaposition of these two worlds—that of the musicians and that of the critics—is crucial here because at its heart, this book insists that Black women’s popular music culture, sound archives, music critics,

and collectors are deeply entangled with one another and that Black women musicians have strategized myriad pathbreaking ways to navigate said entanglements. The story of these women cannot be told without paying attention to the white and mostly male critics and the archives that documented their lives and work but were just as prone to forgetting them.

While it may seem of little or no consequence in the third decade of the twenty-first century to address and treat Black women musicians and performers as thinkers, as artists with intellectual questions and formidable desires, and as figures whose work generates relevant and sometimes pivotal sociocultural commentary and is often rooted in some form of critical, transformative action, consider the following. Since Farah Griffin's landmark 2001 publication of *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*, the first scholarly book by a Black feminist critic that fundamentally reshaped and elevated critical conversations about Lady Day as a musician, full-length studies in this vein are still few and far between.⁸¹ Instructive on this score is Brent Edwards, whose deeply eloquent meditations on the aesthetically and analytically adventurous role of the jazz musician as writer resonate with my approach to exploring the artists in this study. Edwards's razor-sharp focus on how the music of African Americans "contains not only emotional surges and rhythmic propulsion but also the 'character of cognition'—commentary, insight, and even lucid critical analysis" and, perhaps most powerfully for my purposes, his claim that "the music can provide the model for criticism because the music *already is* criticism—itself, autonomously, purely in the medium of the sound" inform my own thinking about Black women's sound practices.⁸²

Yet here too we gently part ways—not only because of my interest in foregrounding gender (Edwards's magnificent *Epistrophies* includes only one chapter on a woman artist) but because I remain steadfastly focused on exploring Black women musicians' performance labor as encompassing a constellation of intellectual and historiographical practices.⁸³ Like Edwards, I am drawn to exploring what he refers to as this "ancillary" form of writing about music that has the power to "emphatically frame the way a recording is heard, whether by noting the stylistic trends it exemplifies, making an argument for its historical significance, pointing out its shortcomings, or sketching an alluring (or off-putting) 'persona'" of the artist in question.⁸⁴ To aspire to the level of writing or producing knowledge akin to liner notes is, for Black women artists and Black feminist sound critics, to intervene in the framing practices of others who have either denied or discounted their work. It is critical meditation that questions, contests, and welcomes improvisatory and experimental ways of

thinking, performing, and writing through and about the many meanings of Black women's sounds.⁸⁵

As a result, *Liner Notes for the Revolution* takes seriously that which has been marginalized, trivialized, and disappeared in popular music culture and American culture more broadly. It remains mindful of Frankfurt School theory, that body of interwar European philosophy that wages a multifaceted critique of, among other things, capitalism and its culture industries, bourgeois consciousness, and ideologies emerging out of Western civilization on the whole. Rock star critics like Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and a dynamic cluster of other Weimer Republic thinkers who constitute the Frankfurt School were drawing on Marx, Hegel, and Freud to build a new philosophical radicalism. They were working out wide-ranging theories that, in part, dissected the failures of the social, the fallacies of material culture, and the crushing oppressiveness of cultural hegemony, the structures of domination produced by the ruling class. Adorno, in particular, appears in pointed cameos at various moments in this study, but he also remains an important foil. What his work tells us about music's ability to radicalize our senses, to disturb and reorder our consciousness, is a point of deep inspiration to me, but his infamous rejection of *popular* music as a manifestation of the culture industry's hold on the masses is a critique that leaves little room for the complexities of Black expressive emancipation. As Lindon Barrett famously points out, Adorno "completely misses the antagonistically transformative relations that jazz and the African American communities from which it arises have to Western market societies—that, upon examination, prove the actual objects of his denunciation."⁸⁶ The Germans, therefore, can only get us so far when it comes to tracing the explosiveness of Black folks' sounds and especially those made by Black women.⁸⁷

Instead, this book insists on forging a different kind of path with a sound set of Black women and their feminist allies leading the way. It offers a self-consciously unfinished map for future users, a "subterranean" cultural cartography of Black women's musical innovations and performative aesthetics that both predates the meteoric emergence of the early twentieth-century Black women's blues era and tracks these cultural moves into the new millennium. *Liner Notes for the Revolution* listens along to a series of historically situated musical "events" and "happenings" that reflect, shape, and—sometimes quietly, sometimes at full volume—transform (sub)cultural scenes as well as public notions of "Blackness" and "womanhood" across the modern era. It draws its inspiration from a variety of sources and thinkers that include academics, outlaws, critics, and critical miscreants (with a few who are one and the same). Yet in its

insistence on recording the “secret” life of Black women and sound, it is most immediately in conversation with *Lipstick Traces* (1989), foundational rock critic Greil Marcus’s swirling, mystic, phantasmal, and kaleidoscopic “secret history of the twentieth century,” which presents an epic saga of punk and Free Speech, Situationists and Letterists, Johnny Rotten and Little Richard, and Adorno as (re)covered by the Sex Pistols.

Marcus, too, is wary of “tradition as arithmetic,” choosing instead to go in search of a story that “disrupt[s] the continuities of a tradition, even the discontinuities of a smoky, subterranean tradition, with a certain simultaneity.” As critic-turned-curator, he arranges a radical assemblage of cultural actors and traces a variety of sonic disturbances and socially disturbing gestures in order to illuminate a “history” that is “comprised of only unfinished, unsatisfied stories” that “carr[y] tremendous force.” Repeatedly, Marcus seizes upon the “task,” as critic, to encourage others to “stop looking at the past and start listening to it” so as to “hear echoes of a new conversation. . . . to lead speakers and listeners unaware of each other’s existence to talk to one another.” The job of the critic, he declares, is “to maintain the ability to be surprised at how the conversation goes, and to communicate that sense of surprise to other people.” The “secret” for Marcus is one in which artists and activists, intellectuals and would-be criminals across time share a discontinuous yet undyingly passionate resolve to reject ideology, to make culture that revolts against and exposes “the whole received hegemonic propositions about the way the world was supposed to work . . . a fraud so complete and venal that it demanded to be destroyed beyond the powers of memory to recall its existence.” More than two decades after Marcus published his molotov tome, its central hook remains seductive: “Nothing is true / everything is possible.”⁸⁸

Or, as Black Rock Coalition legends Living Colour might rephrase it, “Everything is possible / but nothing is real.” At the risk of pushing the eighties thing a bit too hard here, I cue up the lyrics from that band’s song “Type” in order to mark the Robert Johnson crossroads, in order to plant the flag at the point on the highway where Marcus and the Pistols’ secrets cross paths with Black folks and where, just as well, Blackness holds many secrets of its own. “We are the children of concrete and steel,” sings velvety crooning hardcore lead vocalist Corey Glover. “This is the place where the truth is concealed / This is the time when the lie is revealed / Everything is possible, but nothing is real.” The god-fathers of Afrometal assured us that they heard Marcus loud and clear on their Elvis-is-definitely-dead 1990 album *Time’s Up*, but in their insistence on calling attention to an urban (“concrete and steel[y]”) people’s ability to “reveal” the “lies” and make “everything” possible in the third installment of the Reagan-

Bush regime, guitarist and songwriter Vernon Reid and his group were also staking a claim in the negationist game.⁸⁹ Living Colour reminds us that the Frankfurt School's negative dialectics, which fuel Marcus's potent intellectual shove, is already and has always been a Black operation,⁹⁰ as people of African descent's survival has always depended in part on negating the "truth" that's been fed them since their days in captivity, since before and after Frederick Douglass resolved to love everything his master hated.

When I bang my head in time to Living Colour as well as Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*, I'm left, then, with this question: What would it mean to put it all together and to put it in the service of the sisters? What if we could get everybody in the same room and around the same table to do some hardcore Black thinking, some mindful meditation on the capaciousness of Blackness, some deep listening to the sounds and performances that evade easy logic, and what if, still more, we could mix it up in the mosh pit with rock and roll criticism in order to tell a different story about popular music culture, one that takes seriously the women who made new sounds and, likewise, thought hard about how to go about writing down and recuperating the value of said sounds for the ages? Can we even imagine a history of popular music that regards as priceless the innovations of a different cast of lead characters from the ones so often deified? The possibilities are endless if we could only stretch our curiosity and imagination to, for instance, ponder the crossed-eye moves of a young Josephine Baker, a Parisian music hall sensation refusing the primitivist line; to expand the cultural lexicon in which we think about the queer blond hairdo and gutbucket vocals of on-the-verge Etta James, a New Frontier teen and former gangbanger finding her voice through the blues; or, as this book aims to do, to keep pushing our exploration of "dance or die" Janelle Monáe's early career in the guise of an android superhero composing her own epic, multimedia adventure.

Black women musicians show us myriad ways of doing "Black Cognition" through exhilarating and sometimes "cryptic" forms of artistry. To borrow a line from those rock crit darlings and riot grrl revolutionaries Sleater-Kinney, they "invent [their] own kind of obscurity." That white feminist legendary band, coled by Walter Benjamin-fluent polymath Carrie Brownstein, speaks in these lyrics of a kind of poetic truth to power that shares affinity with Black studies thought as well, a point that further drives home the kinds of connections that this book insists on. In the world of Black studies, the "right to obscurity," as Fred Moten famously argues, "corresponds to the need for the fugitive, the immigrant and the new (and newly constrained) citizen to hold something in reserve, to keep a secret." Moten reminds us that, "The history of Afro-diasporic art, especially music, is the history of the keeping of this secret even in the midst

of its intensely public and highly commodified dissemination.”⁹¹ And to this, poet and critic Mackey adds that “one of the reasons” that black diasporic music “so often goes over into nonspeech—moaning, humming, shouts, nonsense lyrics, scat—is to say, among other things, that the realm of conventionally articulate speech is not sufficient for saying what needs to be said.” It is the diasporic condition of a perpetually, sometimes utterly, other times subtly eccentric Black musicking that is, Mackey insists, “dialogical in quality,” and it “can be heard in a number of different idioms and forms.”⁹²

Such wondrous forms, this book asserts, cannot be accounted for in straight-ahead history, per se. This is why, for instance, genius poets like Moten and Mackey have made such dazzling inroads in Black sound studies by altogether pushing the language that we use to talk about the prodigious complexity of Black music, the magnitude of its weight and depth. The field-altering work that Mackey and Moten have each executed by way of issuing what amounts to a series of poetically rendered correctives—about, for instance, the presumed “legibility” and tenacious resonances of Black sound—are crucial to any study of modern sonic culture because their work forces us to confront with, among other things, the long historical arc of Black phonic meaning that precedes, rivals, and runs parallel to the characters whose acts are “really happening” in Marcus’s study. As Moten makes plain in his by now legendary *In the Break* opening conversation with Hartman, Marx, Freud, Derrida, and others, if we recognize the fact that Black subjects who are conscripted to the realm of commodities can speak, then we’ll have to come to terms with the “commodity’s powers” to also “break speech.” This is “the always already belated origin of the music that ought to be understood as the rigorously sounded critique of the theory of value.”⁹³ And still here, we might think of the ways that my dear brothers, too—as they would surely agree—follow a Black feminist model of formalistic philosophizing, the kind of which Morrison speaks when she talks of the importance of “getting language out of the way” in her approach to writing about slavery and its afterlives. The majesty and invention of her speculative prose revolutionized Black Studies thought as well as the style and content of said thought for the last half century. I, too, follow the Morrisonian path of the speculative at key points, drawing inspiration from Hartman and others as well so as to open up our relationship to the depths of the opaque Black sonic past.

Liner Notes for the Revolution suggests that the Black women who expanded our notions back to the right now, women who made this music as well as the women who saw fit to take note of it, are the revolutionary ones who expanded our notions of what’s expressively possible, powerful, and humanly restorative in a world that never showed them enough love. If, then, as Patricia Ybarra makes clear in

her incisive rereading of Marcus alongside Adorno and the Rude Mechs Theatre Company's stage adaptation of *Lipstick Traces*, punk as a "performed," quotidian event is "performance as historical articulation," it is, indeed, a very old, new thing. And ain't nothing wrong with that. The thrilling part is, perhaps, to listen to all that noise, that "lost matter, lost maternity, lost mechanics that joins bondage and freedom" that one can hear when these secrets are put in the mix with one another.⁹⁴ Think, for instance, of Zora Neale Hurston challenging the Southern world order with her reco(r)dings of Black song, and Abbey Lincoln sitting on the edge of Mahalia and Ellington's "Sunday" dispensing her own sound knowledge. These two Black women artist-intellectuals, along with two white, Jewish feminist critics—one a vinyl archivist and the other a pioneering critic of rock and roll vinyl—add to the critical cabal that shapes the contours of this book. Each carries Peetie Wheatstraw's wheelbarrow of blueprints for what lies beneath the surface, in the subterranean realm where everything is possible.⁹⁵

To get to that place, I'm drawing from the secrets of the thinkers already mentioned. This book asserts that to go to the site where blues and rock criticism can better handle, better care for the sisters making marvelous sound, we're going to have to lean hard into Black study. To better hear both the women at the bottom of the archive and those that sit at the top (yet beg for a different kind of attention), to better "think sound" and do some better "sound thinking" in relation to music criticism on Black women, we might surprisingly take a cue from Bob Dylan, the artist whose 1965 agit-prop lament "Subterranean Homesick Blues" is one of the sources of inspiration for my work and an artist who knew a thing or two about Black women's musical virtuosity and genius.⁹⁶ "They keep it all hid," declares our electric man; "better jump down a manhole." Dylan's would-be escape route is one that runs down to the place where you'd better "light yourself a candle" and not "wear sandals." His high-stakes folk blues rightly mistrusts this man's, man's, man's world of corrupt leaders and white supremacists holding the "firehose" and seeks, instead, cover in darkness, taking the leap that Ellison's masterpiece *Invisible Man* did some thirteen years before his song dropped. That writer's Afromodernist working-class hero is, however, anything but "homesick," discovering instead revelation and light in the underground, the place at "the end" that "is in the beginning and lies far ahead," the place where Satchmo and reefer upset time signatures and give way to the sounds of "an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco" while yet another woman, "a beautiful girl the color of ivory plead[s] in a voice like" the protagonist's "mother's as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body."⁹⁷

That great American novel's prologue whispers to us that, if we run the tunnel from the rock and roll Bard back through to Black literary modernism's patron saint on through to the sounds of subjugated Black womanhood, we reach the "fugitive spirit" that Mackey so influentially describes as a voice full of flamenco, that which is "a sound of trouble," as he refers to it, an "eloquence of another order." It is a voice as well of musical, existential supplication, an "unquenchable thirst" that is "a longing without object," a voice full of "Weltschmerz" that is escapist and alienated.⁹⁸ It is a voice that deserves its own set of liner notes. The women way down in the Ellisonian dreamscape are the architects of this "African American fugitivity," the ones who deserve a cultural criticism they can call their own. They are the ones designing "a mobile, mercurial noninvestment in the status quo" that is born out of forced migration and captivity and that gives body and soul to these spirituals. The maternal and the material body of Black womanhood, though often overshadowed by Louis Armstrong's "Black and Blue" "beam of lyrical sound" in readings of this novel's most famous scene, nonetheless anchors our hero's descent into the "blackness of blackness."⁹⁹

Invisible Man's sonic women are the stuff of familiar Black literary mythologies, as Farah Griffin has so convincingly shown us, the kinds of "mythic tropes" that we've come to expect: "an old black churchwoman's voice, ghosts . . . night-riders. . . . This is the landscape," she argues, "that produced the blues," filled with the "'plaintive' 'haunting,'" and the "'achingly real' To hear the voice is to witness the history. To embody the voice, to play it, to represent it, is to bear witness to that history." Griffin makes plain the ways that these voices are the origins "of black male literary and musical productivity" stretching from Frederick Douglass to Miles Davis and beyond. Likewise, they are the "founding sound of the New World Black Nation." What does it mean to be so audibly recognizable, so fundamentally crucial to the self-formation of others? she asks in her game-changing essay. What does it mean for "that peculiar black voice" to be "in it but not of it at the nation's beginning"?¹⁰⁰ What does it mean to be the source of epiphany, the gateway to transcendence for others? To these questions we might add, What would it mean to reckon with the ways that Black women's voices are indispensable to modern sound?

Better to leave it to Edouard Glissant to tell us which way the wind blows. The late Caribbean poet, novelist, and critic repeatedly returns to the subterranean as a site that is loaded with counterhistorical meaning, the place where buried New World truths lie. I aim to follow and trace the music that comes from that very direction, the place where, at the bottom of the sea, we encounter the traumas beneath the traumas, "all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy

vessels and felt too weak to put up a fight. *They sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence.*" The subterranean is the repository of all that has been discarded yet remains with us at the very core of our everyday lives. It is the "invisible ink," as Marcus would say, the basement tapes of a Blackness born out of violent subjugation, denied yet stored up in the sediment of culture. For, as Iton reminds, "the excluded are never simply excluded. . . . [T]heir marginalization reflects and determines the shape, texture, and boundaries of the dominant order and its associated privileged communities." Glissant's subterranean is, still more, the sphere of the "spatially mobile," as postcolonial performance theorist May Joseph refers to it, the place "where the histories of those peoples once reputed to be without history come together."¹⁰¹

The subterranean blues of *Liner Notes for the Revolution* articulates how central Black women musicians are to modernity and, likewise, how modernity and its cultural archives repeatedly betray these artists, the conduits of "nurturing, healing, life and love giving for the majority culture," as well as their own legacies. For precisely these reasons, it might seem impossible for some to imagine their subcultural strategies of survival. How is it possible for Black women popular musicians (an Aretha, a Whitney, a Beyoncé)—some of the most widely imitated artists in the world—to exist simultaneously at the fringe and yet at the center of the culture industry? Perpetually they remind us that, as Nicki Minaj put it ever so plainly in her summer 2015 "Twitter beef" with Taylor Swift, it is high time that we reckon with "a system that doesn't credit black women for their contributions to pop culture as freely / quickly as they reward others. . . . We are huge trendsetters, not second class citizens that get thrown crumbs. This isn't anger. This is #information."¹⁰² Minaj's wake-up call forces us to ask whether we have a language for these artists, the Ellisonian "little women," who both make and unsettle the means and ends of popular sonic production while perpetually being disappeared from it. Minaj's spitting-fire remarks force us to ask, Do we have a language by which to discuss the work of these women who "refuse that which was first refused to [them] and in this refusal reshape desire, reorient hope, reimagine possibility and do so separate from the fantasies nestled into rights and respectability"? Do we have a way of even beginning to tell the story of those women, the ones who, as the pioneering Black feminist pop music critic Danyel Smith, puts it, "have been overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated for too long . . ."? Like Smith, I, too, long for a story that amounts to "a pageant," one "that starts as far back as the women hacking sugarcane and threshing rice. . . ." How, then, to convey a history this "vast," one that takes account of "the world" that, as she reminds, Black women "nurtured and cleaned—and imprinted and built . . ."?¹⁰³

The Birmingham School cultural studies critics, those germinal thinkers influenced by Gramsci—from Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige to Hazel Carby and Michael Denning—have given us the tools to answer these questions for more than thirty years, showing how, for instance, class struggle plays itself out on the terrain of culture, how subcultures “continue to exist within and co-exist with the exclusive culture of the classes from which they spring,” and how these subcultures “challenge the symbolic order” and yield “expressive forms” that sustain “a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives.”¹⁰⁴ And *Liner Notes for the Revolution* is nothing if not cognizant of the dynamic subcultures that Black women have forged through musical experimentations and collaborations that did just this. Hazel Carby told us as much when she kicked open the door to this field of study by robustly and rigorously exploring the mobile insurgencies of blues women’s culture coursing through the Harlem Renaissance era. She introduced us to a new critical lexicon for reading Black women’s cultural work both alongside of and beyond the realm of literary culture. Add to this Mackey’s, Robert O’Meally’s, Griffin’s, Moten’s, and Brent Edwards’s respective and lyrical theorizations of the “dislocating tilt of artistic othering” tactics performed by Black musicians who “accent variance [and] variability,” “innovation, invention and change” in their work and one gets a better sense of how Black folks have been ghosting the machine through sound for some time now, centuries longer than punk’s “critique of mass culture now paraded as mass culture.”¹⁰⁵ This is, in fact, the subterranean secret of Black culture—that which has been perpetually co-opted and commodified and yet also repeatedly finds ways of disturbing (if not always unseating) its own market exchange.

In spite of all this, we have ignored the massive role (pace Minaj) that Black women artists across both time and the pop music spectrum have played in conceiving and shaping this invention and change, these “form[s] of Refusal” that constitute the “noise” that is “the flip-side to Althusser’s teeth-gritting harmony.” To listen for that, we’d have to start by acknowledging the existence of a vast Black women’s sonic counterpublic, what Michael Warner calls an “odd social imaginary established by the ethic of estrangement [from the dominant order] and social poesis in public address.” As this book suggests, although the majority of the women in the chapters ahead are crucial to multiple (r)evolutions in modern culture, and many (yet by no means all) aspire to reach the center of mainstream culture and multiple publics, they are also fascinatingly, defiantly, and unpredictably subcultural and counterpublic, and their performances hold the traces of rich and complicated histories that suggest the extent to which their sounds are “surface manifestations of long, and largely

unrecorded, histories. They do not tell those histories in (of) and by themselves, but, like footsteps in the dark, they alert us to be aware, to be on the lookout for things that may be all around us but not yet seen" . . . or heard.¹⁰⁶

Liner Notes for the Revolution moves from a meditation on the importance of intellectual labor and Black women's sonic cultures (Side A) to an exploration of elusive Black women musicians and the critics and artists who have focused their attention on their legacies in a variety of ways (Side B). The Conclusion asserts the arrival of a new revolution in Black feminist archival and curatorial performances in sound. If Side A aims to recuperate the intellectual history of Black women's sonic worlds and to, likewise, excavate the language, methods, theories, and forms of imaginative writing that have been and that we might yet still innovate in order to care for and about this remarkable body of women's work, Side B is the "deep cut," so to speak, akin to the tracks that take flight during late-night studio jam sessions and are never intended for "regular rotation" airplay. Such "B sides" are often quirky and unexpected, and sometimes taboo. They are the kinds of tracks where Prince and Sheila E. bend gender and sexual mores into delicious soul avant-gardism (on "Erotic City"), or where Freddie Mercury could get his bandmates to sing along to an all-hyperbole stadium chant ("We Will Rock You"). B sides are sites of experimentalism, and so it seems fitting to shift the focus in Side B of this book to the importance of the speculative in Black feminist revolutionary sounds and sonic performances. This section thus zeroes in on a crisis in care for the lives and work of Black women musicians as well as the women who love them, and it pursues the multiplicity of ways that we might fundamentally transform the matter at hand. It comes in part, as I will argue, through identifying the means by which the artists themselves are able to push the sonic experience into the realm of what historian Robin Kelley has poetically dubbed the "freedom dreams" of those invested in "abolishing exploitation" as well as the "four-hundred-year-old dream of payback for slavery and Jim Crow."¹⁰⁷ This side of the record moves, then, towards flying with these women out the window and onto the speculative terrain of revolutionary possibility.

Chapter 1 explores the cultural labors of Black feminist artist-intellectuals who engage the politics and poetics of sound—from postbellum vocalist, journalist, novelist and all-around "polymath" Pauline Hopkins to twenty-first century Afrofuturist queer, Black feminist punk rebel Janelle Monáe; from transgenerational jazz pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams to Civil Rights-era experimental vocalist and activist Abbey Lincoln—in order to demonstrate how Black women artists disturbed the modern by figuring themselves

as records and record keepers of lost, elusive, and undertheorized Black sounds. Each of these women invokes sound as an epistemic tool to, in effect, ask how we know what we think we know about Blackness, womanhood, and the politics of freedom and self-making. Their music demands that we know more (and know different things in different ways) about each of these topics. Likewise, each of these women has sought recourse in critical projects extending beyond and yet also complementary of her sound performances. Hopkins's post-Reconstruction fiction and journalism, Williams's unpublished essays and letters, Lincoln's public lectures on the history of Black women's musicianship, Monáe's avant-garde liner notes are all key objects of inquiry in the chapter. Their distinct and daring cultural moves, I argue, complicate facile perceptions of the time and space and communities forged by and through the figuration of sonic Black womanhood.

Chapter 2 asks that we take seriously the idea of the iconoclastic Harlem Renaissance anthropologist, novelist, and playwright Hurston as a groundbreaking cultural critic whose theories of African American music, in particular, generated a new lexicon and unprecedented conceptual frameworks for interrogating Black sound during the height of modernist fascination with racial primitivism. Hurston's recalcitrant meditations on Black vernacular life and culture posited a dense and sophisticated oppositionality to dominant myths about Black otherness, and she rooted her theories in sound testimonies, Works Progress Administration recordings of songs collected out in the field and offered up as her own renditions, drawn from her own memory and delivered in her own unvarnished vocal stylings. This chapter travels with Hurston as she sets out in her legendary cars, traveling the Gulf States, and devotedly "get[ting] in the crowd" so as to absorb the music, the mores, and the history of Southern Black folk whose record of life was seldom deemed a thing of value. Her scholarly essays on what she saw as the specificity and distinctiveness of Black sonic expression do a dialectical dance with Hurston's performances preserved on tape. We might think of them as, in effect, liner notes for her own recordings as well as essays that ultimately constitute some of the most extensive critical theories of Black sound produced by a Black woman intellectual in the first half of the twentieth century.

Chapter 3 turns its attention to examining the labor of a sui generis blues record collector, record label pioneer, and second-wave feminist intellectual who dedicated her life's work to excavating "lost" Black women's sounds. Jewish New Yorker Rosetta Reitz's story plays a central role in this book because of the ways that her own voluminous archive of blues album liner notes, journal notes, epistolary exchanges, and intellectual marginalia serves as proof of the hidden

feminist intellectual counterhistory of modern popular music culture. This chapter, in other words, leads with the principle that critics—both African American and otherwise—have played a crucial role in shaping the cultural imaginary of Black women’s sonic cultures. Reitz self-consciously situated herself and her historic blues women’s record label, Rosetta Records, in opposition to pop music culture’s white patriarchal hegemony, and along the way she innovated radically illuminating ways of writing about intersectional sonic performances.

Chapter 4 traces the trajectory of insurgent feminist music writing produced by pioneering journalist and essayist Ellen Willis, one of the most influential and aesthetically groundbreaking rock critics who ever lived. Yet another Jewish New Yorker, Willis, in her lauded column for the *New Yorker* magazine in the late 1960s and early 1970s (becoming the first critic to hold such a post at the publication), set a precedent for writing about rock during what has come to be known as the “golden age” of that genre of cultural criticism. But she is hardly associated with Black feminist cultural politics and rarely wrote about Black music or race throughout her long and storied career. Yet a single document in her own archive reveals the seeds of a generative—albeit passing—connection between a college-age Willis and the legendary queer Black feminist playwright and Black freedom struggle activist Lorraine Hansberry. This chapter is, in effect, an overt exercise in making these two seemingly far-flung fields of rock music criticism and Black radical tradition thought speak to each other in the service of illuminating what Hansberry’s Black feminist intellectual history means to this form of white bohemian arts writing and vice versa. The chapter’s framing foreshadows the speculative focus of this book’s second half. It seeks to reveal the ways in which the politically potent desires and aspirations of both women manifested themselves in their respective radical writings. Taken together, like Reitz’s work, the substance of their intellectual lives prepared the ground for the legacies of revolutionary music writing which inform the very foundations of this book.

Side B turns its attention to the most storied network of collectors and critics devoted to unearthing blues women’s recordings. The hunt for Southern musicians Geeshie Wiley and Elvie Thomas, artists who released their exquisite six sides of oblique country blues on Paramount Records in the 1930s, spans from the era of the 1960s folk revival through the twenty-first century, and Chapter 5 traces that search, one that encompasses a striking combination of eccentric loner savants, powerhouse independent scholars and artists, devoted collectors, and feeling and inventive journalists, many of whom have hotly pursued the story of these two mysterious artists and the music they left behind. The