

Two hundred and forty-six years of outward submission during slavery time got folks to thinking of us as creatures of task alone. When in fact the conflict between what we wanted to do and what we were forced to do intensified our inner life instead of destroying it. We developed turtle shell. So when folks come feeling around they find something smooth and round and simple on the outside. Like the six blind men who felt all over the elephant. But if more had been known about us, this mistaken simplicity never would have got abroad.

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON, “You Don’t Know Us Negroes”

INTRODUCTION

Quiet as it's kept, Black women of sound have a secret. Theirs is a history unfolding on other frequencies while the world adores them and yet mishears them, celebrates them and yet ignores them, heralds them and simultaneously devalues them. Theirs is a history that is, nonetheless, populated with revolutionaries: turn-of-the-century vaudevillian Muriel Ringgold rocking her "entirety" in full costume as "the sea"; blues trailblazer Mamie Smith breaking the era of modern records wide open all crazy in Stagolee-style love; opera ingénue Anne Brown rewriting "Bess" to Gershwin's "Porgy"; High Priestess Nina orchestrating a Brecht and Weill tempest aimed at overturning Jim Crow; and slinky Afrocosmopolitan Eartha staging her own geopolitical cabaret. It's a history wide enough to encompass rebel-with-her-own-cause rock and roller Etta James in a fast car out on the open road and folk historian Odetta going deep into scholar, thinker, rule-breaker Zora's precious vault so that the real work (songs) can begin. It's teen Aretha in shimmering sequins attacking Al Jolson's "Swanee" and those glam ambassadors, the Supremes, pointing us toward "Somewhere" one day after a King had been slain. It's the body and soul of a grown-ass musician building bridges over troubled water for her listeners; the electric kinetics of Anna Mae Bullock breaking free from domestic tyranny; funk philosopher Betty Davis inventing her own erotic lexicon; and intergalactic trio Labelle delivering Afrofuturist theory all up in the club. Theirs is a history of the utopic and the transformative, the strange and the strategically unruly: Diana reaching out and touching the hands of the multitudes in the Central Park rain; Afropunk Godmother Grace driving Atlantic World nightlife right to the edge while Poly Styrene and Skin work on burning the whole house down. It's Whitney's melisma lighting up post-Civil Rights America, and it's Ms. Hill with her renegade contralto scoring a thousand turn-of-the-century sorrow songs for

the hip hop generation. It's a hardworking, H-town, new millennium storn system performing radical Black pop feminism to fight catastrophe, and it's her avant-garde genius baby sis staging a Blackest-of-Black uprising right in the center of the lily-white Guggenheim. Theirs is a history of game-changing art that stands as an affirmation of our past as well as the unrecorded future of sound, that which is booming in the not yet, the place where all those sisters of the yam are running us straight into the dawn.

"Shake That Thing": The Secret & the Subterranean Dimensions of Black Women's Sounds

Liner Notes for the Revolution tells the story of how Black women musicians have made the modern world. It is the first extensive archival interrogation of what ethnomusicologist Christopher Small has famously referred to as the "music . . . extending in all directions in our world" made by women who have been overlooked or underappreciated, misread and sometimes lazily mythologized, underestimated and sometimes entirely disregarded, and—above all else—perpetually undertheorized by generations of critics for much of the last one hundred years.¹ These critics and tastemakers, collectors, and far too many scholars have engaged in a long game, one that involves oversimplifying, simplistically romanticizing, and, at key moments, rapturously "cry-me-a-river" sentimentalizing the complexities of Black women musicians' work. It is the problem of their hold on the narratives about Black women's sonic artistry that constitutes a significant portion of this book.

But make no mistake. They are not the stars of this show. Rather, it is the remarkable sisters who both have made and have been thinking and writing about Black women's music for over a century now. They are the ones who stand front and center in this study, and they are the ones who have so fundamentally reshaped structures of feeling and expressive cultural forms in the popular domain since the dawn of the twentieth century that one would be hard-pressed to imagine an American culture without their influence. But do we even know some of these sisters' names? These women, this book argues, are culture *makers* who often labor right before our very eyes and ears without our recognition of the magnitude of their import. And the revolution that they waged was one in which the articulation of "more life" could, for a dispossessed people, be sounded out in many registers and tied to the core meaning and vision of liberation itself. Implicit in so much of their work is the stirring and glorious declaration once made by Zora that "you don't know us Negroes."²

Black women's musical practices are, in short, revolutionary because they are inextricably linked to the matter of Black life. Their strategies of performance perpetually and inventively philosophize the prodigiousness of its scope. But also—and quite crucially—Black women's musical practices are revolutionary because of the ways in which said practices both forecast and execute the viability and potentiality of Black life. This is not, I argue, a pessimistic operation, though the book does throughout take seriously the ways that various artists have wrestled with the ongoing crisis of precarity hanging over Blackness and its conditions of possibility. As we shall see, the performers and their accompanying scribes and theorists who populate *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, the sisters who were getting it all down for the record, are in this together, and they are “busy,” as the literary lioness Toni Morrison might say, “busy being original, complicated, changeable—human.”³ Theirs is a revolution in intellectual labor. I use the term “labor” here very self-consciously so as to reference Black radical tradition theorist Cedric Robinson's classic observations about the way that Black work matters in relation to modern life. He insists that we “pay close attention to what Du Bois was saying: slavery was the specific historical institution through which the Black *worker* had been introduced into the modern world system. However, it was not as *slaves* that one could come to an understanding of the significance that these Black men, women, and children had for American development. It was as *labor*. He had entitled the first chapter to *Black Reconstruction*, “The Black Worker.”⁴

The profound urgency of Black women's culture work cannot be overstated, and it is perhaps best conveyed by simply suggesting that one consider just how “riotous” an act it was for Mamie Smith to break the sound barrier in the anti-Black recording industry on August 10, 1920, one year after America's “red summer” had told Black folks that no “new deal” with democracy was on the table for them following the First World War.⁵ Smith's “Crazy Blues” effectively blew up the segregated pop cultural scene by seizing hold of modernity's new sonic technologies, the kinds that had been used to continue the centuries-old tradition of turning Black cultural labor into forms of capital for which they were systemically denied the returns. If white folks had controlled the conditions of Black folks' sonic reproduction since the origins of the modern recording age (looking at you, Victor Emerson, New Jersey Phonograph Company everyday hustler), and if white folks had also effectively colonized the blues, a Black vernacular form that white artists raced into the studio to record before them (looking at you, Marion Harris, Sophie Tucker, and a parade of your peers), then Smith's breakthrough was a rejoinder to all that. And yet, it was also more. If Black thought, Black rage, Black desire had few free and unhindered channels

for expression in the age of Jim Crow terror, “Crazy Blues” was a missive sent out to Black publics who bought her joint in droves. It said to them that all that feeling, all those strategies for living, could be improvised in the music, in sonic performances that bucked convention, mixed and made new forms, and expressed the capaciousness of Black humanity. Everyone from Frederick Douglass to Angela Davis has told us this truth.⁶

Liner Notes for the Revolution enters into this awesome, generations-spanning tradition of meditating on the insurgency of Black sound in three ways. First, it lays claim to the idea that modern popular music culture would cease to exist in the ways that we’ve come to know it without Black women artists. The book builds on landmark Black feminist scholarship produced by Davis and other pioneering critics to mount this case. I make a point of turning to lesser-known figures as well as dearly beloved icons, all of whom curate sonic performances that not only push the boundaries of musical experimentalism and invention but also produce daring and lyrical expressions of Blackness and womanhood that affirm the richness of their lifeworlds. These Black women artists refuse the terms of being scripted as objects. Instead, they choose to design their own mischievous and colorful, sometimes brooding and rage-filled, and always disruptive and questing definitions of a self that is intent on living a free life.

Second, this book takes seriously the notion of the archive—both the documentary record preserved by institutional powerbrokers and the faded pages we might imagine stored in an elderly sister’s trunk—as a crucial, culture-making entity that Black women musicians and critics have had to negotiate in relation to their own artistic ambitions and to the problem of Black historical memory more broadly. Black women artists have played crucial roles as archives, as the innovators of performances and recordings that stood in *for* and as the memory of a people. Though often trivialized and minimized for their import, their cultural acts have amounted to a potent and forthright response to the class in control of libraries and universities, the publishing apparatuses and the awards councils, the film industries and the television industries, which saw fit to merely use up and dispose of the sounds created by Black people—to say nothing of the cycles upon cycles of “love and theft” that resulted in the obliteration of the history from whence these sounds first came. As archives, these Black women artists have operated through their music as the repositories of the past. Just as well, however, they have often engaged in active projects to archive their own creative practices, to document the intellectual and creative processes tied to their music, all of which, as we shall see, amounts to a Black feminist intellectual history in sound that has thus far gone unmarked and unheralded.

Third, *Liner Notes for the Revolution* excavates a counterhistory of popular music criticism, that deeply undertheorized form of critical writing that for several pivotal decades of the twentieth century was closely entangled with the social and cultural economy and sustainability of popular music culture. No surprise to most that this school of criticism has long marginalized African American women's role in popular music history, resulting in a grossly skewed understanding of their place at the center of modern music innovation. Obscuring or misreading the depths of their importance in this regard amounts to nothing short of a crisis in our collective cultural memory. But this book seeks to push up against this machine. It counters by detailing the ways in which Black women have long been, themselves, fugitive thinkers, critics, and theorists of sound. If we are willing to shake up the standard perceptions of who makes culture and who gets to think and write about it, if we are willing to cross the putative racial and gender boundaries that divide critics and artists, we might yet see and hear the myriad ways that Black women have labored in and through sonic culture, from its margins to its white-hot center, and they've done so in all sorts of roles—as creatives and intellectuals, as musicians, journalists, and celebrated essayists, as independent critics and marvelously nerdy and obsessive feminist collectors, as indie record label owners, as visual artists and poets, and above all else as dreamers who laid claim to music as a site to wrestle with crucial ideas about themselves and the world. To understand this, I argue, we must listen hard to the ways that all of these Black feminist publics who live on the lower frequencies have been insisting to us for over a century and in a multiplicity of ways that Black women's music—made by many and not just the exceptional few—profoundly matters in spite of what the gatekeepers continue to say.

Ahead, then, I read against the grain of dominant critical perceptions of Black women's sonic culture that, for instance, are quite comfortable mourning Aretha but are less interested in probing the long tradition encapsulating the historical, social, political, and material conditions from whence she came, and the racial, gender, class, and sexual politics that framed the conditions of her being. And this is to say nothing of the Black women artists who came both before and after her. The readings in this book are meant to help us think in microspecific ways about the uniquely transformative aesthetics and performance strategies of Black women musicians developing their artistry in different social and cultural spaces and at different moments in time from the eve of the birth of the recording industry to our present day. Like the literary critic Valerie Smith, who is interested in drawing connections between the ways that Toni Morrison's work resonates with other African American women writers, so, too, does this study recognize and remain interested in the shared expressive strategies and

experiments forged by women whose country gave them nothing and who, in return, gave the country the defining popular art of the twentieth century. To think of them as engaging in a shared aesthetic affinity “means,” as Morrison herself puts it, “that the world as perceived by black women at certain times does exist.” *Liner Notes for the Revolution* is by no means, a comprehensive or encyclopedic study. But it does affirm and extend Morrison’s thinking by cutting a wide swath across multiple popular music genres and intellectual and cultural practices in order to explore the kind of meaning that Black women artists have made, as well as how their labor has evolved alongside, is entangled with, and sometimes has played a hand in generating and responding to historical events, social and political phenomena, and material, social, and cultural life in America from the late nineteenth century through the first two decades of the new millennium.

The inspiration for this sort of an effort arises, in part, from the liner notes genre that emerged in the early to mid-twentieth century, and which evolved along parallel lines with the birth of the long-playing record. What began as a line of advertising designed to promote the artist or the recording in question (on the very “lining,” the sleeves for the records) gradually transformed into a sphere that held the potential for literary and analytic experimentation. At the peak of their cultural and critical influence and sophistication in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, album liner notes served as a site where writers might spin complementary metanarratives and expansive discursive meditations on a sonic work in question, ideally opening up the conceptual universe of a record to listeners as they settle in to absorb its multiple layers of meaning.

By way of an essay that either anoints an artist and a musical object as being of value and thus calibrates the taste of the listener (think of the trenchant work of Leonard Feather, Nat Hentoff, or *Rolling Stone* cofounder Ralph J. Gleason) or serves as a discursive space wherein the musician might expand on, complement, complicate, and subvert the accompanying sonic text (think of those legendary, far-out notes produced by Sun Ra, John Coltrane, Bob Dylan, or Frank Zappa), liner notes hold out the possibility of operating as critical, fictional, or experimental works of writing in and of themselves. Conventional liner notes often walk a fine line between pedagogy and socialization, between sociohistorical and cultural reportage and heuristic conditioning (here’s how and why to love the artist in question). The most ambitious notes strive toward the narrative realization, or the narrative reimagining, of a sonic collection of songs altogether. And there was a time when the notes had the potential to shore up the supposed import and ambition of a recording, amplifying its intellectual resonance by *writing* its value into the cultural imaginary. It should come as no

surprise that during the heyday of this now nearly dying form, whose viability has plummeted with the rise of the digital age, women and especially women of color artists and critics rarely had access to this sort of hustle.

The title of this book thus invokes a requiem for this oversight. These are the “notes” that I have tried my best to compile, to piece together, to reconstruct as recordings, as evidences of dreams manifest in sound, as an extended supplementary accompaniment—at its best, I hope, a discursive dialectical jam session—with the performances made by sisters who valued themselves through sound even when the world repeatedly told them that they were of no value at all. I offer these “liner notes,” of sorts, for the artists and critics covered in this study—some of whom revolutionized the uses of popular music as forms of cultural memory and self-making, and others who gave us the language and conceptual vision to value the music itself.

This is a study that aims, in short, to “contextualize, to explain and describe, to provide a sort of discursive padding for the listener’s approach to the music.” Throughout all of my own journeys in sound as a fan, student, teacher, scholar, and critic, I have tried to write *beside* all of these sisters (as queer feminist thinker Eve Sedgwick would have it), to take “note” of and generate, as best I can, mindful narratives about their radical triumphs and lifelong labors in sound, to revel in the beauty of arresting prose made by my collaborators and coconspirators in music thought, and to likewise wrestle with some of the blind spots and missed opportunities in the oeuvres of some of my fellow critics.⁸ This is my attempt to score an accompaniment to the “secret history” of Black women’s sounds as well as the intellectual labor that engages their sounds, that which amounts to, in my opinion, a grossly unacknowledged revolution in culture and the making of modernity. This is my attempt to answer the question posed by historians Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, “[c]an we recover the intellectual traditions of thinkers who were often organic intellectuals and whose lives and thoughts are only modestly documented?” Above all else, it is my attempt to probe the reasons why it is that the dominant tales told by classic blues and “rock lit” and popular music criticism do not and cannot “imagine or include black women at their center,” as Gayle Wald makes clear.⁹ In the pages that follow, I’ve dedicated myself to instead turning our attention to the women artists and thinkers who have invented their own radical theories and tales and philosophies about sound, and who have innovated sonic aesthetics outside and beyond the center. Call it “running the world” while nobody was really seriously looking or listening, as Beyoncé once so famously proclaimed. Call it a revolution.

For this very reason, I propose that we add some different connotations to our traditional understanding of liner notes. There is, of course, the aforementioned

album-framing essay form, the kind of writing that captured my imagination in my teens and college years as I swam deep into the world of rock music writing. This book's "liner notes" are most certainly in conversation with that genre, but they are just as well dedicated to that which was born out of Black vernacular struggle and labor, the fierce and focused lining out, for instance, that one sees and hears in African American oral culture (discussed in Chapter 2). The book takes seriously the prodigious role of the lead vocalist in said culture, the figure instilled with the responsibility of clearing a path in a particular arrangement and charged with guiding and shaping the arc of a particular performance while shepherding an entire ensemble. Black women artists and the critics who look after them all emerge as heroes in *Liner Notes for the Revolution* as they tread into uncharted territories with their cuts-like-a-knife melismas and their sharp, analytic *cris de coeur* in print, as they push the culture in unexpected directions that upend our sensibilities. Like the Black folks and immigrant peoples who lined the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century railroad tracks across America, toiling away at building the industrial infrastructure of modernity's nation, a nation dead set against acknowledging their full humanity, these women built contemporary popular music culture by lining out sounds that altered and enlivened our relationship to time, the spaces that we inhabit, and our conceptions of community. This book aspires to listen to what they made with the ears of a fearless Florida anthropologist sister, and it is dedicated to lining out the stories of the women who, like said sister, laid down the deep-cut tracks of modern cultural life.

Doing this kind of work, getting down to this kind of *labor in listening*, requires grappling with a history that has no hall of fame, no landmark biopics, no Graceland pilgrimage sites, no *Hamilton*-size musical to memorialize the depth of its lasting impact. Such absences, blind spots, and silences—cultural manifestations of what Morrison famously refers to as “the disremembered and unaccounted for”—demand nothing short of a revolution, that which might bring Black feminist thinking and Black radical tradition study to the forefront of popular music criticism.¹⁰ Such a move would, as this book seeks to show, allow for ways to (re)discover the heroics of a whole range of artists who have made music that repeatedly rejects the negation of Black life. In short, then, this book asks, What would we be without them, those everyday blues women who, for instance, invented an expressive popular lexicon that not only captured the vicissitudes of modern life but dreamed beyond such a life, folding both history and futurity into their sounds? What would we be without the women who galvanized the centrality of popular music as a popular art form in America? Without the ones who both upset and reinvigorated our conceptions of the modern world and who have given us myriad cultural tools to navigate that vol-

atile and violent world? Without the ones who set in play a throughline of radical sounds and sonic responses to said world that extend from before the time of Mamie to the present day of our Lady of *Lemonade*? That mammoth latter artist, as the Epilogue of this book insists, is the brilliant and mindful manifestation of all that history and, just as well, the spectacular sonic investment in Black futurity. Her work insists, like the figures in the second half of this book, that speculative music, art, and performance are the operations of our survival, the critical restoration of that which few monumental institutions have seen fit to call precious and care for.

This intellectual revolution in Black feminist sound is one that builds on a late twentieth-century experimental movement in form and content led by poets, Black feminist fiction writers like Morrison, and visual artists, who devised bold and brilliant new strategies for confronting history's opacities and dreamed up new methods for our survival. The arc of this book moves toward the recognition that such a movement's legacies are especially alive now in the world of the sonic and especially in the repertoires of a trifecta of risk-taking musicians who are disrupting and reinvigorating collective memory by offering up their own dense archives of sound. Like the insurgent musicking of the Black women artists who came before them, the speculative nuances of their often unpredictable, beautifully old-school-meets-new-school curatorial performances necessitate a kind of intellectual labor that might strive to keep time with them, that might try to approximate the kind of critical revolt waged by feminist thinkers in these pages who knew how high the culture stakes really were and who used their work, time and again, to cut through what legendary rock critic Lester Bangs once referred to as the "white noise supremacy."¹¹

For the Record: Black Women Sound Modernity

Above all else, *Liner Notes for the Revolution* reads Black women musicians and performers as intellectuals—as figures who innovated sonic, visual, and kinesthetic styles that documented and served as catalysts for transformations in cultures of modernity and who, likewise, radically critiqued and questioned the forces of the modern. It is a study that considers the myriad ways that Black women artists crucially informed, questioned, and at times contested the evolution of modern structures of being and social and cultural formations for over one hundred years.

To recuperate this tradition, this book takes some of its inspiration from literary Afromodernism's insistence on emphasizing the scores of ways in which

Black individuals assert their complex, fluid humanity, face traumatic sociopolitical challenges, and harbor a range of intimate desires through musical practices. But like pioneering Black feminist cultural critic Farah Griffin, it questions the ways that classic literary scenes often mount such truths with limited regard for Black women's quests or desires. The (Black) modern moment in literature, as Griffin has brilliantly shown, so often depends on the masculine transcription of Black women's sounds, as well as the masculine translation of Black women's performative feeling into literary legend and romance.¹²

The rituals of sonic ensemble performances remain shrouded in masculinist legend in Black cultural imaginaries. Think of Sterling Brown's tender and yet quixotic memorializing of "Mother of the Blues," Ma Rainey, in his classic 1932 poem and the way that his poem figures an unnamed "fellow" as the one who conveys Rainey's ability to get "way down inside" of a migrant peoples' souls. Or think of James Baldwin's soaring denouement to his 1957 short story "Sonny's Blues," a lyrical meditation on improvisational catharsis forged between jazz men in the live set. They are the brothers who work it out, who sweat, toil, and sacrifice for a community that bears witness to the title hero's "ontological tonality" that gradually unfolds into a bridge for others to cross.¹³ Stirring and stunning as these scenes are, and as much as they lay claim to the power of the sonic as a transcendent form of world-making for a subjugated people, such scenes of the Black radical marvelous nevertheless do little to remind us of the countless women who were listening to one another and who, in turn, transformed their experiences as listeners into aesthetic innovations that unsettle and vibrantly design and reconstitute modern life.

Such artists exist on the "edge," the "fringe," the "margin," where women who are all ears make sense of their worlds and each other in a kind of methexic reciprocity that envelops and yet also exceeds Sonny's bluest notes. These are the women who are both the records and the recorders, the phonographic subjects who produce but also pick up and interpolate the sounds of a new age into their repertoire, driving, influencing, changing, and disrupting a rapidly developing culture industry along the way. To imagine them playing for, with, alongside, in memory of, and as an answer to each other—as doing their own necessary and vital work in concert with one another—is to rethink the figure of the ensemble through a Black feminist conceptual lens, to imagine sisters who make music and the ones who listen to them in the round with each other and forging their own big, wide sonic universe of ideas.

Liner Notes for the Revolution aims to play along with this tradition, in part, by following the blueprint set by turn-of-the-century proto-Afrofuturist thinker Pauline Hopkins in that it explores the work of Black women musicians across

multiple spaces and times. Like the protagonists from Hopkins's 1903 diasporic music epic *Of One Blood*, this study moves cyclically among past, present, and occasionally future visions. And as in that novel, wherein Black self-formations are shaped, in part, by sounds performed both long ago and far away as well as up close and right in the moment, this book oscillates between worlds and epochs, sociopolitical crises and sociocultural trends, as it follows the sonic cartographies of Black women artists producing new knowledges about their worlds and the place of Black women in said worlds.

To get at the particulars of this tradition of sonic lives in motion, to draw out the polyvalence of these artists' performances as cultural forces that dialectically shape and speak back to the world, I draw on multiple modes of reading and making meaning out of their work. *Liner Notes for the Revolution* explores performances and recordings that bear witness to the labor that went into the art, biographical details that illuminate the complexities of the artist's aspirations, desires, and obstacles that they faced. It remains mindful of an attendance to historical, social, and political conditions that inform, deepen, sustain, and drive musical choices in multiple directions, and it keeps in the mix a recognition of the specificity of place and space in the production of sound.

In this regard, the panoramic sweep of this book takes some inspiration from Alex Ross's sprawling and majestic *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. Like Ross's work, each chapter "cuts a wide swath across a given period, but there is no attempt to be comprehensive: certain careers stand in for entire scenes, certain key pieces stand in for entire careers, and much great music is left on the cutting-room floor."¹⁴

But this story is about the sisters: the ethnographer rolling in her jalopy and collecting local songs for her recorder; the indie record label owner determined to revalue the blues queens; the iconoclastic songwriters and instrumentalists who transgressed genres and tore up the live set; the superstars as well as the (seemingly) minor figures and marginalized artists who posed questions about the meaning of intersectional citizenship and the category of the Human; the obscure rebels and the seasoned veterans who flirted with "criminal" forms of self-making; the early pop vocalist who, as Saidiya Hartman might put it, read the riot act through her music and ended up turning the record biz on its head.¹⁵ It's also a story of the women who were critics, journalists, and quotidian fans who have insistently and incessantly immersed themselves in the music and sought to document, theorize, excavate, and analyze the work of these artists for over a century now, but whose voices are seldom recognized as crucial to the circulation of Black women's sonic cultures. I pay close attention to the observations of fellow artists in relation to each other, how they remember and

mount conversations with the work and ideas of other women, and I follow the paths of these visionary artists as they move through, to, and sometimes against the beat of sociopolitical and cultural histories while remaining in dialogue with a range of publics. Above all else, I take seriously the centrality of sound in Black women's lives as a foundation for developing and sustaining pivotal, profoundly meaningful world-making sociocultural networks and forms of intimacy with one another.

In this regard, then, *Liner Notes for the Revolution* pays homage to that which the grand dame of early Black music writing Pauline Hopkins long ago already knew. Honoring Hopkins's legacy means paying close attention to both the richness of individual Black women artists' work as well as the broader communities, social forces, and cultural landscapes that they navigated. This book sees each of its figures as historically provocative in her own right, each artist steeped in the cultural memory manifested in her work. It addresses lines of past affiliations, encounters, chance meetings, collaborations, and other forms of labor and sociality that bear on the music at hand. Some might call this approach "rhizomatic," meaning the apprehension of multiplicities as mapped out by those sexy academic Euro Marxist philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The comparison is, to an extent, apt and useful.¹⁶ I do approach Black women's sonic cultures as "collective, nomadic," and as always entangled with multiple, imbricated histories.¹⁷

But my aim in doing so is to fundamentally recuperate a genealogical line of cultural theory and philosophy innovated by Black women intellectuals themselves. Generations of Black women improvisational musicians have woven together their own "fabric of the rhizome" with its "conjunction . . . and . . . and . . . and . . ." To say these women model for us "another way of traveling and moving: proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing" is to insist on a different theoretical point of entry for "exploring ourselves as subjects," as Barbara Christian so famously encouraged Black feminist scholars to do all those years ago when she reminded us of "what Celie knows that you should know."¹⁸

The phenomenon of their culture work centers on the historical, social, and political stakes and impact of Black women's musicianship on modern life. As such, "woman" as a social formation serves as the overarching gender rubric in this study, in short, because the majority of figures in the book identify as such; however, queer sociality undergirds the core spirit of this book's focus. Queer and gender-nonconforming artists are, as any number of scholars have shown, the backbone of Black sound, and the fugitive intimacies of and between Black women frame and fuel the alternative history of the blues proposed in the

second half of this book.¹⁹ Just as importantly, the forces of migration give rise to the critical frames in which these musicians experiment with sounds that both generate and address shifting temporalities, spatialities, and communities.²⁰

I see the cultural performers in this book not only as musicians but also as *listeners*, *arrangers*, and *curators*. To that first point, I not only pay close attention to the sound produced by the artists themselves (as Alexandra Vazquez does so brilliantly in *Listening in Detail*) but also *listen to the listeners listening*—to each other, to distant live performers, to beloved recordings, to nonmusical sounds, to ideas about other sounds composed in the privacy of their own vibrant imagination. Film theorist Giuliana Bruno would call this “an archeological intertextual approach,” and to be sure, her mobile way of reading culture, her “kinetic analytic,” has offered me a map for how to read Black women’s aural worlds in this way, how to revel in and dissect the *sonic palimpsest* that these artists extend, explore, and respond to by way of their performances.²¹ As Black women’s cultural lives remain supposedly marginal as well as marginalized—even as their cultural labor shapes the backbone of (inter)national life—their sound performances tell a richer, if often fragmented, story of self-making and world-making than typically meets the ear and the eye. Listening to the sonic palimpsests, the layers of social and cultural memory embedded in their music, allows for ways to navigate the lacunae of histories that obscure Black women as the resourceful heroines of a pop culture industry that views them as irrelevant and disposable.

To the question of *arrangement* I ask this: If we pay close attention to Black sonic women’s listenings, what more about the depths of their craft might we ultimately hear? This book suggests that, if we think of Black women as “adaptor[s], transcriber[s], orchestrator[s],” as the kind of “arrangers” that sound theorist Peter Szendy has in mind, we might better recognize the ways that their active forms of listening both produce and record modern life. For “the arranger,” as Szendy insists, is “a musician who knows how to *write down a listening* . . . knows how, with any sonorous work, to *make it listened to as . . .*” The kind of arranging I am thinking of is performative, embodied, sometimes written down, but more often sung, played, (re)covered, spoken, and shared. It is a kind of arranging that holds the potential to be both loving and contentious, affectionate as well as combative. This kind of arranging, this kind of “plastic listening,” as Szendy would have it, elasticizes our relation to sonic performances, opens up and reveals the multiplicity of roiling publics who come together to create musical work. This work—their work—shakes up presumptions about how we define sonic modernity and how it is (un)made.²²

Still more, we might think about the importance of curation in relation to this singular form of Black women's culture making. This book asks that we imagine the labor of Black feminist sounds as often moving beyond arrangement and into the realm of *sonic curation*, an even broader conception of an endeavor that, in art and museum worlds, entails not only serving as a "caretaker charged with the safekeeping of museum objects" but also "deal[ing] with the orchestration of ideas, concepts, and happenings." The former pertains to the kind of "stewardship" of which Kara Keeling speaks, and the latter refers to the more recent turns in curatorial theory in the art world outlined by museum studies scholar Halona Norton Westbrook. These approaches, she points out, emphasize "interpretation," "storytelling," and "a reorientation toward audience acknowledgement and participation."²³ *Sonic curation* encompasses the reimagined terms of arrangement of which Szendy speaks, and yet it also calls attention to an even wider array of expressive and performance practices—visual, kinesthetic, and choreographic practices—but also, perhaps most importantly with regard to the artists in this study, it refers to practices that aesthetically engage and invoke the historical, social, and political ideas and conditions that inform the musical work in question. While arrangers lay claim to the dazzling work of producing a listening, operating as the bridge figure between a particular work of sound and the audiences who are ready to receive an artist's interpretation of said work, the sonic curator is pulling from a vaster reservoir of multiformalistic expressive modalities. She is arranging an experience that moves beyond the musical work itself, creating a sphere of alterity and possibility not unlike the best and most transformative exhibits that one might attend.²⁴

Think of the distinction as being the difference between something like Beyoncé's moving (to some, polarizing to others) arrangement of that gospel song-of-songs, Thomas Dorsey's "Precious Lord," which she and her team prepared for a 2015 Grammys performance, and her history-making *Lemonade*. The first, in promotional videos that she released as supplements to the performance, documented her connections to the song as a memory tied to the maternal and her mother's recordings of Mahalia Jackson's version of the song, which she describes in the video as having captivated her as a young girl. Beyoncé's felt arrangement of "Precious Lord" here calls attention to her own inscription of listening to Mahalia in this moment; it opens up the connection to multiple publics, her household included, which are bound up with the song.²⁵ Conversely, *Lemonade*, her 2016 sonic, visual, multimedia Black feminist magnum opus, stands as the curatorial summation of the citational practices she has been honing for nearly two decades as a pop icon. The intel-

lectual and cultural sublimity of *Lemonade*'s form and content demands studious, multi-sensory immersion as it calls upon history, politics, and the radical scope and breadth of Black life to constitute its contours. As we shall see, artists in the second half of this book assert their own form of curatorial performances, but it's my belief that they are indebted to blues pioneers in this regard as well, women who pulled from all of the cultural aesthetics they had at their disposal to make popular music that was heterogeneously conceived and spoken in many aesthetic tongues. Theirs was a music whose voice was not one.

Let us listen, then, to the sisters who were listening to each other and making big things out of what they heard, making new arrangements for living and curating entirely new sounds out of their encounters. Let us take seriously, just as does Jennifer Stoeber, the concept of "black performers and writers as theorists of listening." It is impossible, for instance, to understand the evolution of jazz, the "soundtrack to modern culture," without considering the lasting intensity of a preteen Mary Lou Williams's engagement with the live performances of "the lady pianist" Lovie Austin, a musician who captures Williams's imagination as she marvels over her sitting "cross-legged at the piano, a cigarette in her mouth, writing music with her right hand while accompanying the show with her swinging left!"²⁶ The particularities of Williams's lived experience as a young artist developing her craft and straddling cultural epochs in the process (growing up in the era of the blues, coming of age as a swing musician, pushing avant-garde categories so as to innovate bebop, and foraying even later in her career into religious musical experimentalism) tells us something about the ways that Black women musicians both responded to and ignited cultural change. Their work poses its own question: What happens to modernity when we hear it taking shape through the ears and voices and instrumentation of Black women?

Put differently, what is the transformative sonic "history from below" of artists like Esther Mae Scott, born in Warren County, Mississippi, in 1893, the seventh of fourteen children raised by sharecropping parents, a woman who would go on to accompany Leadbelly, Bessie Smith, and others on guitar? Scott's life and career is a story of the local and the mobile, the transregional and the community-oriented. It is a story of the multiplicity of ways that a sound life held out possibilities for Black women workers to reconstitute conventional notions of temporality, spatiality, and community so as to both steer and disturb the arc of the modern world they inhabited. Scott's journeys—from the Polk plantation, where she started playing music with her family at a young age, to her teen years hawking hair products in a traveling medicine show, to her



Esther Mae Scott, blues traveler

itinerant life as a guitarist while maintaining employment as a domestic worker, to her senior years as a Washington, DC, Civil Rights activist and folk musician—encapsulate the cultural heterogeneity of the lives of these women. As artists they formed a bridge between shifting eras, rapidly evolving technologies, and vastly diverse regions and peoples.²⁷ Scott's will to move is a blues woman's prerogative, as many a Black feminist critic has noted,²⁸ but what especially fascinates me about her story, and that of all the women in this book, is the way that her relationship to sonic culture complicates and ultimately transgresses the conventional material conditions in which historians and pop critics tend to read Black women musicians. The networks of cultural intimacy emerging out of Scott's commitment to and passion for her craft constitute the lost records in early pop music history, the unreleased tracks that remind us of all the unnamed sisters in the juke who make the blues. These were the women who utilized their own "modern ears" to enact prodigious forms of world-making. In their own "sonorous time," they invented "omni-dimensional" space for themselves, resonating in relation to one another.²⁹

And they were plotting, strategizing, *listening*, *arranging*, *curating* by way of the sonic and devising ways of moving through the world against the tide of their perpetual subjugation. What these Black women musicians offer, in

short, is another way of hearing, reading, theorizing, *making* the modern. Black women of sound sign *and* sing themselves through their listening such that they reframe archaic philosophies of the “Self” born out of high Enlightenment thought that never had them in mind. At the forefront of the recording industry’s first cultural phenomenon, the blues, they managed to both own the aesthetic innovations of that early scene and yet still disturb the conditions of their own commodification. The dialectic between production and consumption for them pushes beyond “the leverage point of capitalism,” beyond culture *as* industry that stupefies the masses.³⁰ When I say that Black women artists make the modern world, I am signaling the ways in which we might acknowledge how their sonic innovations have shaped our social and cultural connections and intimacies through forms as varied as blues laments and sensual soul arias. Their sonic work is its own form of affective technology, and it is work that has shown the power to generate daring modes of artistic survival. Their music fundamentally disturbs the terms by which we define “modern life,” the condition born out of dramatic shifts in perceptions of time, space, and collectivity. In the *longue* (and unfinished) *durée* of Black Emancipation, Black women musicians have innovated sounds that amount to essential fuel, the kind that keeps Great Migration peoples “flowin’” just as the aching restlessness of Ma’s music would urge them to do. Their aesthetics both capture and anticipate those shifting terrains of power in our homes and out in the streets, from the “One Hour Mama” demands of sexually assertive Ida Cox to the forceful proclamations of our wholly realized selfhood voiced by Queen ReRe on the Civil Rights scene. Their art spans the range of, keeps time with, and makes history voiced by everyone from “I ain’t about to be nonviolent” Nina flexing her Black Power to that Afrostarchild Solange who spots the “Cranes in the Sky” and sings us through our chronic weariness. Across epochs and through many changes, these women have done the work. They invented sonic maps of underground folk communities all fluent in intricate coded languages and hieroglyphs, that which Zora did her best to record. This is the musicking that serves as the cornerstone of cultural modernities. These are sonic ways of being that roll with, absorb, and even have the power to produce “the shocks and displacements of society reformulating its very experience” of the temporal and the spatial rhythm of life. These expressive practices were technologies of the body, emanating from the throats, the fingers, and joints of artists who invented sonic works through the complexity of their own exquisite performing selves, through their own “resonance chambers” and felt listenings that created conditions of possibility for the modern and that which exceeds the modern.³¹

“So Low You Can’t Get under It, so High You Can’t
Get around It”: The Blackness & Modernity Question

Only Black studies scholarship can show us the way to that subterranean realm, the place where Black women artists’ aesthetic battles with and (re)invention of the terms of modernity are constantly unfolding.³² “We the people who are darker than blue,” as Curtis once so boldly crooned, have been scripted in the romance of the West as the wholesale “victims” of time and change rather than as the architects of such matters. Yet Black radical tradition scholars tell us otherwise. By now we know better than to assume that Black folks just rolled over—or got rolled—by modernity. More than three decades of Black studies scholars have wrangled over modernity’s racial discontents and, likewise, wrestled modernity from its putatively hegemonic logic. From the very necessary Stuart Hall, who laid the framework for this critical intervention by way of his consistent interrogation of the very definition of the term, to Cedric Robinson’s groundbreaking critique of the racialized structures of capitalism, *Black Marxism*, which set the terms by which we’ve come to recognize the central role that African peoples have played “in the creation of the modern and the premodern world,” Black thinkers have illuminated the philosophical and cultural modes of opposition to the institutionalized negation of Black humanity.³³

Black feminist scholars have long paved the way in making these points manifest in Black Studies, illustrating and painstakingly dissecting the ways that racial, gender, class, and sexual modes of power have figured as the tools of choice in the invention of the modern. And it makes all the sense in the world that they would play a decisive role in pushing forward these critical conversations since they bear the frontline legacies of the disaster that modernity hath wrought, the disaster that resulted in the acute horrors that Black women in particular faced as captives, as humans who were forced into the role of concubines and breeders in the iniquitous grammar of the Atlantic Slave Trade. What theorist Hortense Spillers told us in the early 1980s about the systemic and structural modes of defining Black women according to “a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically,” the binary inversion of those in power, makes it ever so clear that they are “*the route* by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and ‘other.’ . . .” Spillers’s work and that of her generation of Black feminist scholars has, in short, been sounding the alarm on modernity for many years now and making possible the decades of Black thought on this topic that would subsequently follow.³⁴

The crew that extended these ideas have posed different—if at times complementary—perspectives and questions about the where, the when, and

the how of modernity in relation to Blackness and Black peoples. *Liner Notes for the Revolution* is principally concerned with culture-making and modernity, and it is therefore in conversation with scholars like Paul Gilroy, who explicitly emphasizes the role of culture in Black Atlantic self-making practices. Black folks' very proximity to racial terror, he famously asserts, informs their ability to produce unique modes of expression shaped by and yet radically disturbing the conditions of forced migration and captivity. The sonic performative emerging out of these conditions is, he argues, one of the many "willfully damaged signs" that "partially transcend modernity, constructing both an imaginary anti-modern past and postmodern yet-to-come. This is not a counter-discourse but a counterculture that defiantly reconstructs its own critical, intellectual, and moral genealogy in a partially hidden public sphere of its own." He concludes by asserting that "[t]he politics of transfiguration therefore reveals the hidden internal fissures in the concept of modernity."³⁵ My work lights off, in part, from Gilroy's in its consistent presumption that this terror is the thing that Black women musicians have had to both negotiate and transfigure in their own art. But still more, I am insisting that the specifics of Black women's historical subjugation frame the conditions by which their sonic performances amount to "ironical grace," as Spillers refers to it.³⁶ These conditions form the grist of the radicalism endemic to their sounds.

The conversations that Gilroy reignited about Black culture as a revolutionary rejoinder to the terrors of the modern constitute some of the scaffolding for this book, but so does the work of the late and marvelous critical theorist Lindon Barrett, whose take on the predicament that Black folk face in relation to modernity remains instructive to my thinking about these kinds of questions. Barrett's work effectively lays bare the epistemologies that undergird racial capital and dominant definitions of "the human" and reminds us of the ways that Enlightenment philosophies invented and institutionalized a kind of "humanity" that was tethered to letters, literacy, discursive self-making acts, and "the singing voice," as he refers to it. If the New World dominant regime scripted Black captives as "excessive," illegible, without a voice of value and worth, "the singing voice" of African Americans, as he counters, is the means by which a "socially and psychologically tyrannized population" could "recor[d] and celebrat[e] individual lives as well as the life of their culture." If Western modernity invested a kind of foundational power in literacy, Black folks countered by singing their ontological presence and worth so as to "refus[e] . . . the basis of Western systemic thought."³⁷ Barrett's insistence on thinking through the violence of Atlantic World slavery and racial capitalism as it frames the terms of Black cultural value in the West has everything to do with this study's approach to reading the recording industry and

popular music culture more broadly as a terrain of fraught racial, gender, and class struggle. To modernity's Euro gangster theories of the Human which famously favor "the mind" and immaterial speech over the body, Barrett's bold and demanding work counters by calling for a reclamation of materiality and the "ludic corporeality" of the human voice. The African American singing voice, he argues, "disturb[s] the *presence*" of signification in New World philosophies of reason by interpolating a disruptive, embodied performative labor into civic as well as intimate modes of self-invention.³⁸

And it is the singing voice, this prodigious tool capable of shaping narrative and conveying character, and delivering formidable and complicated feelings and ideas about self and world, that is the thing for which Black women musicians have been most often simplistically championed. Critics have casually glorified them as unparalleled innovators of popular vocalizing and yet rendered them unworthy of serious and sustained intellectual care for their creative labors. Historically, their music has been the source of critical elision, chronically devalued for failing to meet the masculinist cultural paradigms and standards—the virtuosic performances and craftsmanship in the form of instrumentation *other than that* of the workings of the human voice—that cause taste-makers to salivate. Barrett's ideas open up space to argue for, as I do here, the pivotal roles that Black women popular musicians have played in modern self-making practices.

I am not seeking to show how Black women are exhibits of the modern as much as I want to demonstrate that they redefine what we think modernity is and does. Alexander Weheliye's classic work on Blackness and modernity is, thus, instructive, particularly because of his expansive definition of these two mutually constituted categories. Weheliye reads against the presumed split between writing (the graph) and sounding (the phono). He insists that Black cultural practices and sound technologies intersect in the making of the modern; they are central to "this thing called life," as Prince might have it, this radically altered experience of our felt world and environs so particularly and dramatically emergent across the last one hundred years in the West. Black folks' culture makes this modern condition both possible and palpable, his work reminds. And this is why Black subjects, those uniquely complex individuals shaped by DuBoisean double-consciousness, "second-sight" superpowers, and positioned as the selvage of humanity, remain both "within and against Western modernity." They are critical to its formation, rather than merely "minor" or "counter" to it as the anti-Black philosophies of Jefferson, Hegel, and all 'dem good old boys might have it. The (re)production of Black sounds in the modern world—whether by human, embodied performance, musical instrument, or "modern information technologies"—generates "a series of compounded materiodiscurs-

sive echoes in and around sounds in the West,” argues Weheliye. And it is this “sonic Afro-modernity,” in his terms, that “holds out more flexible and future-directed provenances of black subjects’ relation to and participation in the creation of modernity.”³⁹ In his account, Blackness and modernity are inextricably linked to each other, mutually constitutive of each other, held in tension with and dramatically generative in relation to each other. Or, as Black diasporic anthropologist David Scott puts it, “modernity was not a choice New World slaves could exercise but was itself one of the fundamental *conditions* of choice.”⁴⁰

Weheliye’s work makes possible ways of considering how “black culture has utilized and created the technological innovations that now characterize sound technologies.” But imagine, this study asks, what happens to our recognition of the cultural world as we presume to know it when we put Black women and their feminist allies—musicians as well as the critics who looked after them—at the forefront of modernizing endeavors. Such a reimagining might push up against the grain of how we experience structural power on a day-to-day basis as a zero-sum game if the next thing we say after answering June Jordan’s light-the-fuse question (“Who in the hell set things up this way?”) is this: “But we *made* this.”⁴¹

The conversations and debates waged between Gilroy, Barrett, and Weheliye concerning Blackness and modernity are, of course, anything but settled.⁴² And like these aforementioned thinkers, I remain so wary and weary of romanticizing modernity—especially when it hath wrought unprecedented disaster for Black folks and Black women in particular, as Sylvia Wynter, Toni Morrison, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and numerous other Black feminist scholars have so clearly spelled out for us.⁴³ Why should we think of Black women as having had a hand in this nightmare? But by sounding it, this study suggests, Black women produced a modern experience with a consistently forceful critique built into its very social structures and cultural landscape. The equipment for living produced by Black sonic revolutionary women informs modernity, is coterminous with it, and yet still evermore does battle with it. No one critic has shown the magnitude of Black sound’s move-the-ground-beneath-you worth, struggle, and necessity more formidably and lyrically than Fred Moten. His work moves improvisationally in, through, and outside these meditations on Blackness and modernity by expanding, rearranging, and elasticizing the epistemic repertoire in which we think these concepts together with philosophical might and majesty, and he poses several undeniable facts, which are these: Black life is inextricable to the world as we know it today; it is a cosmically urgent force that has framed how the West defines what it means to be Human; Blackness remains a massively potent, ubiquitous, and beautifully ineffable phenomenon so fundamental to our conditions of being and structures of life that it

defies facile speech, thought, and study. Rather than thinking Blackness with modernity, or not, Moten improvises outside the narrowness of these categories and how one defines them altogether. His aim to tell “the story of how apparent nonvalue functions as a creator of value” and to also tell “the story of how value animates what appears as nonvalue” demands that we recognize Blackness as a radically capacious entity that exists before, as well as willfully, belatedly after, and also volatily, mutually in relation to the philosophical apparatuses that produce the modern. Moten’s versioning of Black studies shifts analytic focus and force so as to recognize the ways that “Western civilization is the object of black studies,” and his epic exegeses and indispensable critical methodologies exhume the corpus of Western philosophical thought—Hegel, Heidegger, Kant, and friends—in order to dissect the Blackness that exists within and yet also exceeds and supersedes such thought.⁴⁴ Moten’s commitment to tracking prodigiously complex Black ontologies expands the playing field of how we think and interrogate and pull apart race and modernity by working from within the framework of this massive, unregulated thing called the “Black condition.”

Above all else, *Liner Notes for the Revolution* remains invested in following the paths of creatives whose Black feminist work radically cares for this condition. Moten’s transformative vantage point enables us to see, as he famously argues, “what’s at stake” in Blackness’s “fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic—a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, to break every enclosure.”⁴⁵ His theoretical explorations, which demand everything (ethical, political, imaginative) of us, arc toward the “air of the thing that escapes enframing . . . an often unattended movement that accompanies largely unthought positions and appositions.” Having not only survived the conditions of captivity but also “escap[ed] the Hegelian positioning of the bondsman,” Blackness is, according to our friend Fred, “perhaps best understood as the extra-ontological, extra-political constant . . . an ensemble always operating in excess of that ancient juridical formulation of the thing,” a “dangerous supplement,” a “special ontic-ontological fugitivity of/in the slave.” This *thing* called “Blackness” is its own technology that enables Black subjects to perform under duress (and otherwise) and perpetually escape confinement by way of “exhausting” their own performative abilities.⁴⁶

The sisters who are making the modern in this book have figured their sonic bodies as principal to modernity’s equation, reminding us through the brilliant innovation of their work that, though Man’s cruel steamroll of domination, annihilation, industrial expansion, and material consumption has hinged on the

long historical exploitation of their bodies as reproductive vessels in bondage and beyond, this was not the end of their embodied will to selfhood. Rather, their musicking is the massive rejoinder to being defined as “the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality” and “reduced” to “being for the captor . . .” as Spillers describes it.⁴⁷ Sound as archived, arranged, curated, and performed by these culture makers remains the way in which they put their own designs on modernity while remaining vigilant about exploding the entire game from within it.

Black Women’s Sound Labor & the Art of Black Feminist Modernity

The rituals and aesthetics of Black sonic women are emphatic bodily acts, full-throated gestures behind the microphone, all-of-me inflections at the keyboard, willing and intimate connections made with a strapped-on guitar. Such statements of the musical everyday are keys to the subterranean blues that Black women perform in “the undercommons” of our modern world. They are the blues that create the conditions for the “sonorous time” that Esther Mae Scott initiates outside the labor contract that frames her domestic work, and they, likewise, lay the groundwork for the social intimacies of a boisterous nightlife culture in experimental sound, one that ultimately dazzles a young Mary Lou Williams, drives her aesthetic ambition, and sets her off on her own path towards achieving new heights of sonic innovation. As this book seeks to make clear, the music of women like Scott and Williams, the art of their blues and jazz, is the sound that “mov[es] inexorably in a trajectory and toward a location that is remote from—if not in excess of or inaccessible to—words.” Their labor conveys depths of history and feeling consolidated and transduced into the felt guitar licks of, say, a sister who saw fit to live beyond and outside the boundaries of domestic time and another who, as Chapter 1 suggests, composed jazz piano works capable of cultivating jubilant Black space that could “continue the night beyond the closing time regulation enforced by the city.”⁴⁸ As Black women, the very reclamation of their own bodies from being scripted as the “beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, [and] awaiting *their* verb” is a bid to become instead their own instruments of wonder, orchestrating social and cultural transformations as a revolution of the first order.⁴⁹ And so across the century they sing, as did Bessie with depths of insight and sorrow, leaving it all on the floor for the ones facing a flood of devastation. They play, as did Aretha at the piano, shaking the foundations of the interracial rock and roll