



King's Vibrato

Modernism,
Blackness,
and the
Sonic Life
of Martin
Luther
King Jr.

Maurice O. Wallace

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In memory of my mother,
Tommie Catherine Wallace,
who would have been excited past words

And for my father,
Ronald Van Buren Wallace,
my pillar

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I wish this book had been finished years ago. I know now, however, that *that* book would have been very different from the present one. *That* book I might have wrestled into being with the critical tools of literature, cultural studies, religious studies, and gender critique. This one, however, would not be forced by any means; I had to tarry for it, wait for its coming in the fullness of these shocking times. Perhaps I am a slow study; I admit that possibility. But slow study or no, I doubt I could have written this book before the Black Lives Matter movement or the Black Studies debates or, indeed, before my time in the Christian pulpit came to its current close in 2017. I needed critical distance from the last of these, the pulpit, and to experience the felt urgency of Black Lives Matter and Black Studies to realize the subtleties of argument I hope are plain and not hidden to scholarly readers in particular. Moreover, my mother's passing in 2017 opened me up to thinking deeply about black mother-loss in this book, and I owe to her memory, which still brings heartache, gratitude for the guidance her spirit gave me along the way. That I endured her loss was a miracle all its own. Only lasting through the darkest, most despairing days of the COVID-19 pandemic to finish *King's Vibrato* came remotely close to vying with that wonder of wonders. My mother's hand is throughout this book, then. What's more, from a deep-seated place of grace invisible in me, she urged it done.

Many others, too, tarried patiently with me for the delayed coming and completion of *King's Vibrato*. No one, though, has been more patiently present with me than my wife, Pamela Sutton-Wallace. I can't imagine the mediocrity that might have been produced if she hadn't believed that my thoughts had merit. She, too, is my pillar. I hope my strengths buoy her as hers do mine. My daughters, Sage Alexandra and Amaya Olivia, were both

entering college at the time *King's Vibrato* was finally taking shape. As members of Generation Z, they were mostly amused by my thought-trances and old-man fixations on all things "Dr. King." Pam, on the other hand, would not allow me to only write and theorize black sociality. She encouraged my work *and* my presence in the world.

If my family was even more patient than my friends who have also looked forward to this book with me, this is not to discount my friends' support. Since the inception of this project, I have enjoyed invaluable encouragement from a small informal council of professional friends, field and institutional leaders at a half-dozen major campuses whose generosity with research leads, urgent reading recommendations, critical improvement to underdeveloped ideas of mine, and collective wisdom about the peculiar exigencies of black work-life balance rescued this book when it threatened to sink under the weight of fatigue brought on by overcommitment or the social climate nationally. I owe Cynthia Young, P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jacqueline Goldsby, Anthony Foy, Psyche Williams-Forson, Andréa Williams, and Daina Ramey Berry profound thanks for their direct and indirect advice on the direction and arguments of this book, and for helping me always to stay on task. I was also inspired in this work by my brotherly connections to Michael A. Walrond Jr. and Scott H. Adams, both brilliant churchmen. In the context of *King's Vibrato* and beyond it, Michael and Scott have been my most reliable interlocutors. Though their work in black religious practice and its futures is not often reflected in print, both are scholars in their own right and my engagements with them are reflected in many of the most ambitious ideas of this book. Also, without always knowing it, Johari Jabir and Ed Pavlic have pushed me to ever higher levels of excellence in black sonic and musical reflection. Their understanding of the musicking of black thought and worldly reimaginings is deep. I hope I've captured some of the depth of their insights here. Perhaps only my onetime colleague at Duke, Fred Moten, has had as significant an influence as Johari and Ed have on my thinking about the depths of blackness obtaining to Martin Luther King Jr.'s sound and oratory. Fred's influence is conspicuous in these pages. I am appreciative of his early encouragement to stay with this project. Also, Richard Lischer at Duke Divinity School could not have been a warmer interlocutor as I undertook my first efforts to outline a theory of the affective power of Martin Luther King Jr.'s preaching and speech-making. I hope *King's Vibrato* flatters him and his essential scholarship on King, the preacher and orator.

At Duke I have others to thank, no less important to the finish of this book. But for the incomparable Karla FC Holloway, of course, there'd be no

book or academic me to speak of. My most faithful mentor and supporter, Karla has been an advisor, dean, advocate, counselor, best teacher, interlocutor, and, with Russell Holloway, trusted friend. My debts to Karla are infinite. She, too, pushed me to finish this book and be heard. Mark Anthony Neal, Tom Ferraro, Priscilla Wald, Wahneema Lubiano, Robin Weigman, Charlie Piot, Kerry Haynie, Richard Powell, Len Tennenhouse, Luke Powery, Ashon Crawley, Allison Curseen, Pete Moore, Jonathon Howard, and Chris Ramos also lent me early and diverse audience for this work when it was still unformed. At the University of Virginia, a new set of colleagues aided my thinking about King. The collegiality of Steve Arata, Marlon Ross, Lisa Woolfork, Anna Brickhouse, Sylvia Chong, Mrinalini Chakrovorty, Njelle Hamilton, Jennifer Greeson, Chris Krentz, Carmen Lamas, Andrew Stauffer, Charles Marsh, Claudrena Harold, Jennifer Geddes, Charles Mathewes, Matt Hedstrom, Martien Halvorson-Taylor, Nichole Flores, Larycia Hawkins, Grace Hale, Sandya Shukla, Andrew Kahrl, Talitha LeFlouria, Kwame Otu, Sabrina Pendergrass, Lisa Shutt, Ann Rotiche, Bonnie Gordon, John Mason, Deborah McDowell, Francesca Fioroni, Bill Wylie, Lawrie Belfour, James Hunter, Garnette Cadogan, and Tony Lin was deeply valued. I want to extend special thanks to Caroline Rody, Asher Biemann, and the members of the faculty of the Jewish Studies Program at UVA for the kindness of giving me an audience for, and a set of important criticisms concerning, this book's third chapter, "The Cantor King: Reform Preaching, Cantorial Style, and Acoustic Memory in Chicago's Black Belt." A Sesquicentennial Sabbatical Fellowship at UVA afforded me valuable writing time in the fall of 2017.

My present appointment at Rutgers University afforded me exactly the close community of Black Studies thinkers I needed to polish this work. The ground for this sort of synergy across periods and fields was cleared early at Rutgers by one of the most generous figures in the entire professoriate: the late (and irreplaceable) Cheryl A. Wall. I was fortunate to come on board at Rutgers just before the last year of Cheryl's service to Rutgers English began. The Board of Governors Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English at Rutgers, Cheryl was a widely admired colleague and expert in African American literature, American literature, and feminist criticism; she spent nearly fifty years at Rutgers and helped transform the institution. Today, the State University of New Jersey is led by an African American president, Jonathan Holloway, whose appointment, I do not doubt, owes something to the decades of quiet institution-building Cheryl helped see to before her abrupt passing in 2020. Cheryl read many of the pages of this book in draft form. In them, she encountered my debt to her writing on the

gendered construction of genealogical lines in African American literary and cultural history and black women's critical and creative renegotiation of the idea of lineage in *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (2005). I won't soon forget her seeming assent to this effort of mine to have us all hear Martin Luther King Jr. again with new ears. Nor her humility or her gentle prodding to get this book done.

Though Cheryl's loss has been deeply felt, I am grateful to belong to a genuine community of others who continue her work. The deeply cooperative and yet still critical conversations about black life and literature I enjoy with Carter Mathes, Erica Edwards, Doug Jones, Evie Shockley, Abena Busia, Ryan Kernan, Imani Owens, Bode Ibironke, Stéphane Robelin, and Mukti Mangharam have been gratifying past words. In whatever ways this book may succeed at the level of thought, it is owing, in no small part, to the deep dedication and intelligence of these colleagues' adjacent ideas about blackness and gender and sound, and the further influence of their published works on thinking about King. Also, the support of Rebecca Walkowitz and Michelle Stephens (especially, but not exclusively, in their roles as departmental and university leaders), Meredith McGill, Brad Evans, Jeff Lawrence, Dana Luciano, David Kurnick, Colin Jager, and, at nearby New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Nathan Jérémie-Brink has contributed significantly to an environment perfectly congenial to this work. At Rutgers I have also drawn inspiration from the examples of Deborah White, Brittney Cooper, Nicole Fleetwood, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and Donna Murch.

Today, it is impossible for me to conceive I could ever have succeeded in getting these pages in print-ready condition without the editorial support of Sara Appel. Sara entered into dense thickets of prose where I had nearly lost myself and helped me recover my vision and my voice, all the while affirming my determination to give my mind breathing space on the page. This, of course, is no easy tension to hold in balance. Wherever I may succeed, it is to Sara's credit; where I do not, she bears no accountability. Her struggle to keep my excitable mind on track was mighty. I owe debts, as well, to more than a couple of research assistants. Dionte Harris, Landon Wilkins, Heidi Siegreist, Bria Page, and Angel Dye were all tremendous in their talents and commitment to this work. All were indispensable to bringing this book into being.

Anyone who has had the privilege of working with Ken Wissoker at Duke University Press knows how generous and committed Ken is. I've known Ken from way back, as the expression goes, and he is the same engaged editor today leading the press as he was so many years ago when he gambled

on *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775–1995*. Given the remarkable output of Duke University Press in African American literature, black cultural theory, cultural studies, and critical theory since then, I am flattered by Ken's early and continuous investment in the realization of *King's Vibrato* among so many other fine works in the Duke catalogue. These few lines don't come close to conveying my appreciation to Ken and, of late, Ryan Kendall for their labor on my book's behalf.

Here, too, it seems appropriate to express thanks for the ongoing support of three friends whose interest in this project kept it going when the writing or inspiration lulled. Cathy Davidson, Shawn Michelle Smith, and Robert Patterson have, each in their own way, moved this book along. Similarly, I would be unprofessional not to acknowledge the services of the staffs at the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection at the Chicago Public Library, and the National Park Service National Register of Historical Places. Chapter 5 of *King's Vibrato*, "Four Women: Alberta, Coretta, Mahalia, Aretha," would have been diminished by half without the attention it pays to Dameun Strange and Venessa Fuentes's "Mother King." I am grateful to them both for permission to quote from their unpublished libretto.

A few of the ideas developed in this book have had polite audiences at the University of Georgia, the University of Virginia, the annual meeting of the Canadian Anthropology Society, and the Harriet Tubman Institute at York University (Toronto). Profound thanks to those from each of these institutions who invited me to lecture on their campuses or participate in their conferences. Finally, a part of chapter 4, "King's Gospel Modernism," was previously published in the journal *Religions* 10, no. 4 (April 23, 2019): 285 under the title "'Precious Lord': Black Mother-Loss and the Roots of Modern Gospel." The special issue, "Between Self and Spirit: Mapping the Geographies of Black Women's Spirituality," was edited by Carol Henderson. I thank the Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI) for permission to reproduce those pages here.

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And before those demonstrations and underneath the melee and after the bleeding and the lockups and the singing and the prayers, there was this magical calm voice leading us, unarmed, in the violence of White America. And that voice was not the voice of God. But did it not seem to be the very voice of righteousness? That voice was not the voice of God. But does it not, even now, amazingly penetrate/reverberate/illuminate: a sound, a summoning, somehow divine? That was the voice of a Black man who had himself been clubbed and stabbed and shot at and jailed and spat upon, and who, repeatedly and repeatedly and repeatedly, dared the utmost power of racist violence to silence him.

June Jordan, "The Mountain and the Man
Who Was Not a God" (1992)

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Introduction

The vibrato is present in all King's preaching.

Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King* (1995)

The prehistory of this book is both academic and autobiographical.

King's Vibrato: Modernism, Blackness, and the Sonic Life of Martin Luther King Jr. had its first tentative articulations in a talk at the Dartmouth College Black Theatricality conference a decade ago. Then, as now, I wanted to understand the sonic power of preaching in the life and career of Martin Luther King Jr. I proposed a reading of what has regularly passed as transcendent preaching but which I eventually came to consider a function of the acoustic calculus of voice, architecture, organology, and audience. Together, the acoustical considerations of modern ecclesial architecture in the United States, the pipe organ as a statement-object of cultural and theological cultivation (even and especially among middle-class African American congregations in the first half of the twentieth century), and that experience of black audition Hortense Spillers describes as “a special relationship of *attentiveness* to the literal Word that liberates” established the conditions for the natural vibrato in King's voice to “speak” to and for black audiences in tones well past words.¹ As a figure for the sound of black cultural memory and its modern reflections, I argued at the Black Theatricality Conference, King's vocal vibrato opened up his unique voice to new possibilities in hauntological theory like that posited by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1994) and, later, Avery F. Gordon in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008). In the final analysis, I concluded,

greater sonic sensitivities to King's career invite glimpses of the new world possibilities King not only saw (*I looked over and Is-e-e-e-n the Promised Land*) but heard like a slow-gathering storm. In the sound of his voice was the sound of a people's racial hope and resistance.

Later I was to learn that my sense of the significance of King's iconic timbre had been shared by others long before it came to me, even if it had not been one of the prevailing currents in the abundant scholarship on King's life and career. Not long after King was assassinated in 1968, in fact, the surviving leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) proposed "An Audio History of Martin Luther King, Jr." The national civil rights organization that King cofounded with Ralph Abernathy, Joseph Lowery, Fred Shuttlesworth, Bayard Rustin, and Ella Baker had already conceived and mounted a weekly thirty-minute radio program, *Martin Luther King Speaks*, airing speeches and sermons by King to over ninety broadcast stations across the country with an audience totaling five million people nationwide. Although the broadcast format for *Martin Luther King Speaks* grew over time to include a variety of voices—Abernathy, Andrew Young, and other SCLC staff members were frequent on-air guests—clips of King speaking opened and closed every broadcast. Committed to "the collection, preservation, organization and dissemination of the auditory record of Martin Luther King, Jr.—in action,"² the audio history SCLC leadership aimed to tell from these clips would not just archive the public life of *Martin Luther King Speaks* for posterity; it would essay a more expansive record of King's own public life and work than written testimony alone allowed.

The brainchild of William S. Stein, the producer of *Martin Luther King Speaks* and director of SCLC Radio, the idea for the audio archive followed from Stein's belief that "at this juncture in history . . . the printed word neither inscribes a total scope of narrative events nor provides perspective for an overview of such events."³ The new technology of the twentieth century, he proffered, "with its concomitant emphasis on audio-visual forms of communication,"⁴ was especially pressing to the project of modern historiography he proposed to engage in the preservation and expanded narrative effort. To Stein, the audio archiving of King's sermons and speeches was particularly urgent because the pace of King's activity as a Baptist preacher and public orator left him little time to keep a diary, maintain a travelogue, or compose his memoirs—those traditional genres in which the development of a moving figure's thoughts are usually to be found. So far as Stein was concerned, King's recorded speeches thus constituted "the definitive documentation of this man and his ideas."⁵ To be clear, this was no mere

cataloging of speeches “A Proposal for an Audio History of Martin Luther King, Jr.” suggested, however. Rather, the SCLC avowed that “Dr. King’s words—*the sounds themselves*—have a special importance in this transitional and critical period in our history. We are in a remarkably favorable position to retain these words and thereby to *retain the sound of the man*. The nation does not have the voice of Washington or of Lincoln, and our knowledge and understanding of the impact of these men would have been immeasurably expanded if such audio history were available. An audio history of Dr. Martin Luther King will clearly become more and more important as time passes.”⁶

“Dr. King’s words” projected an essential aurality onto the civil rights struggle, the SCLC maintained. To their imagining, he who called himself, famously, a “drum-major for justice” didn’t only establish the beat of black political and economic activism nationwide; in a very literal sense he set its tone, too—lent it a sound. Unlike Washington or Lincoln, the SCLC theorized, “much of Dr. King’s public impact was *because* of the particular ‘sound’ of his words.”⁷ “An Audio History of Martin Luther King, Jr.” aimed to track that sound.

For all of the visionary effort that went into its planning, the Martin Luther King Jr. audio archive never materialized. *King’s Vibrato* is my attempt to pick up on the scent (mixing metaphors) of the “particular ‘sound’ of [King’s] words” Stein and others discerned as a triply historical, acoustical, and racial phenomenon. I depart from those countless volumes of study about King’s career intent upon deriving a coherent ideology or social philosophy from King’s sermons and speeches. Instead, I propose to demonstrate how King’s words sounded with vagaries of an imminent irruption poised to break in sonically on the racial order, one aimed at a disordering of the expressive terms of engagement under the Western logocentric regime. Like King’s SCLC contemporaries, I have heard these vagaries in King’s voice for as long as I have known of a “Dr. King.” Until I undertook the research and deep thought I committed to for the sake of this book, however, I did not know a great deal about what they meant.

Just as a five- or six-year-old today comes to know, unconsciously, the lyrics and rhythms that issue from a parent’s regular playlist without having actively listened at all, I came to recognize, very early in my life, King’s deep, measured, Southern tones as commonplace features of my youth’s soundscape. Before I came to a conscious awareness of the performative peculiarities of King’s oratory, that is, his voice was already living with me.

Its “undulating tones,” “lyrical, idiosyncratic diction,” improvisatory enjamments, and “the towering majesty of his concluding words,” to repeat Eric Sundquist,⁸ all inhabited our house, and thus my life, from bare-butt infancy to adolescence. As a matter of fact, it would not be too romantic to say that in routinely filling the house I was formed in with its incantatory sound, King’s oratory came to dwell in *me* just as fully. Over extended periods of my boyhood, my father—a small-town activist and deputy organizer in Havre de Grace, Maryland—set playing most weekend mornings *The 1963 Great March on Washington DC, August 28, 1963*, a vinyl 33 recording he spun on a turntable inside the console stereo we knew as the living-room hi-fi. From its built-in speakers, A. Philip Randolph’s theatrical introduction of “the moral leader of our nation” (the expressiveness of which my father especially loved) and King’s radiant “I Have a Dream” oration were trumpeted into my sleep. To my father, a former Air Force police officer, King’s leonine eloquence was the perfect Saturday reveille.

My parents met and married in the Air Force as enlisted personnel in 1965. Upon being honorably discharged some months after they married, Ronald and Tommie Wallace made their home in Maryland only fifteen minutes from my father’s hometown. Swan Meadows was a public housing complex just south of Havre de Grace in Aberdeen and bordering Aberdeen Proving Ground (APG), a US Army installation. Although the barracks-styled duplexes populating Swan Meadows must have felt familiar to my ex-military parents, Swan Meadows was not formally a part of APG but a federal housing development constructed during World War II to house civilian construction workers tasked with APG’s wartime expansion. In 1966, Ronald and Tommie rented the unit at 70 Liberty Street, where thunderclaps of large munitions testing from the proving ground were every day’s weather. It wasn’t until decades later that I considered those daily explosions, so routine as to be banal, as an especially deleterious form of sonic pollution, the environmental impact of which was to be unfairly and disproportionately borne by the overwhelmingly black, low-income community where my family lived opposite the base. I imagine, though, that my mother had considered them threatening from the start.

Eight hundred miles away from Aberdeen, in segregated Birmingham, Alabama, sounds more ominous than ordnance exploding just a few thousand feet away had beset the black residents only a few years earlier. Between 1949 and 1965, black Birmingham saw so many homes bombed at the hands of hate-filled segregationists that the city where my mother lived with her own mother, stepfather, and eight siblings gained the ill-famed nickname

“Bombingham.” She had been away from her home city just five years when she settled with my father in Aberdeen to start our family. The sounds of the munitions blasting close behind our little house must have unnerved her for a time; or, they didn’t and she accepted them as part of the natural soundscape of black life in America.

Sometime later, with my sister and me added, our family reached the low rungs of the middle class and moved out of our Swan Meadows duplex into a split-level single-family home a couple miles away. There, on Walker Street, Saturday mornings resounded with the incanted preaching of he whom Daddy loved to hear introduced as “Dr. Martin Luther King, *J-R!*,” the voice that connected me, by way of a public housing unit on the edge of a military weapons testing installation and my mother’s girlhood in Bombingham, not only to the sound effects of America’s long history of racial terror but to the black insurgent countersounds of hope-in-resistance as well. As a boy, I was not yet awake to the intimacy between this history, this hope, and me. Today, though, as an academic, an erstwhile preacher/pastor, and something of a contemplative, my sense of black cultural hearing—what I will call later *black audition*—is acute and well developed. *King’s Vibrato* is a demonstration of this avowal.

Expressed less personally, *King’s Vibrato* argues that however systematic or intimate our scholarly knowledge may be of the rhetorical style and strategies obtaining to Martin Luther King Jr.’s celebrated speeches and sermons, neither the structural grammars of King’s orations nor their “strategies of style,” to quote Richard Lischer,⁹ disclose as much as they might about the effectual *sound* of those orations. For the sound of King’s voice—the “grain” of it, I propose—is, if not also *something else*, then clearly *something more* than so much admiring description. Very little about his “mesmerizing style,” “undulating tones,” “lyrical . . . diction,” or the “towering majesty of his . . . words” as descriptives deepens our understanding of the aural charms of King’s voice. Roland Barthes’s “grain of the voice,” however, affords one of several generative tropes this book applies in approaching the exorbitant condition in King’s speech.

To summarize, “the grain of the voice” refers to “that very precise space (genre) of *the encounter between a language and a voice*” in Barthes’s theory of voice.¹⁰ It is “the body in the voice as it sings” or performs.¹¹ “Listen to a Russian bass,” he invites the doubtful, “something is there, manifest and stubborn . . . beyond (or before) the meaning of the words, their form . . . and even the style of execution: something which is directly the cantor’s body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down

in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages. . . . Above all, this voice bears along *directly* the symbolic, over the intelligible, the expressive. . . . The ‘grain’ is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue.”¹² Similarly, the grain of King’s voice, that something else that was there “beyond (or before) the meaning of the words,” is dimly discernible in that soaring vibrato-speak whose pathos and authority are so gripping to King’s listeners. Embodied as much in him as the singing voice is embodied in the singer, King’s vibrato—the play of overtone and resonance, lament and ecstasy—is the approach of one to a black meta-voice of accumulated black injury, rage, creative suffering, and *jouissance*, the sound of which the adjectival obsession with his speech-making seems often enough to foreclose.

Although this complex of insurgent black sounds—the sounds of injury, rage, suffering, and jubilee routinely repressed in black oratorical representation—is indeed the main object of my inquiry in *King’s Vibrato*, I cannot avoid the epistemic and methodological implications that follow from the sensorially restorative ambitions of this study. King, therefore, is not so much a *biographical* figure in this work as a *figure for the aural exorbitance of black cultural history itself* and for the insufficiency of the normative grammars and protocols of historical practice to thoroughly apprehend the black witness to history in sound. Moreover, as the embodiment of the sound of modern black thought and protest in the South, King’s preaching and speech-making as platform performances of black speech and audition challenge the hegemony of dominant historical methods, those carrying the day though hard of hearing. Jacques Attali posited that hegemony as an exceptionally long and epistemically visual one. “For twenty-five centuries,” he wrote, “Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible . . . Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise.”¹³ Against our enduring Enlightenment predispositions, then—against the habits of those who conceive of history visually in discrete sequential frames, I mean—it is crucial we acknowledge that the past, per Attali, is also intensely acoustic. The audio record of King’s public career (such as it is) powerfully discloses this.

Following Attali, I insist that history generally, and black cultural history in particular, is—or ought to have presently attained to—a considerably noisier recording of events than is conventionally rendered in scholarly discourse. Fortunately some historians, as Mark Smith attests, have started “listening to the past with an intensity, frequency, keenness, and acuity unprece-

dented in scope and magnitude.”¹⁴ According to Smith, “this intensification holds out the prospect of helping to redirect . . . the visually oriented discipline of history.”¹⁵ Smith’s own edited volume *Hearing History: A Reader* is a valuable intervention toward that reorientation. In it, Shane White and Graham White’s “Listening to Southern Slavery” is a compelling example of the sort of challenge posed by (black) sound to traditional historical foci. “Listening to Southern Slavery” hints at, and is a part of, a shadow archive of black sonological and acoustical thought largely submerged beneath and between the lines of the history of modern aural experience. This imagined shadow archive of historical and critical attention to black musical and extramusical soundways includes representative musings by W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), even Frantz Fanon.¹⁶ Not a few later thinkers, hewing closely to the formulations of these forerunners, have followed a more formal academic path toward black sound study. If Du Bois, Hurston, Ellison, Baraka, and Fanon are ancestral to the present formation of black aural history and the theoretical interventions of black sound studies, then scholars as various as Houston Baker, Paul Gilroy, Fred Moten, Alexander Weheliye, Emily Lordi, Ashon Crawley, Shana Redmond, Nina Sun Eidsheim, Kara Keeling, Josh Kun, and Carter Mathes are the present future of that ancestral call to acoustic cultural memory. As a work devoted to exploring the modern acoustemologies of black speech, song, and spatiality informing the peculiar vocalic acts and aesthetics of Martin Luther King Jr. himself, *King’s Vibrato* is an experiment in the tradition of the present future.

While the past fifty years of scholarly reflection on King’s life as a modern civil rights leader and icon have never *not* made a point of noting his oratorical style, I examine the deep sonic properties inhering to King’s unique preaching and speech-making powers. Rather than viewing these properties as the innate inheritance of a familial legacy of black preachers dating back to the Civil War, however, I consider them as absorptive instincts developed within the totality of sounds and silences animating black lifeworlds across modern time and space including King’s own curated voice, other ensemblic voices, the environmental sounds of black peril and progress, architectural acoustics, new sound technologies, and the general tenor—or keynotes—of his day. While I dedicate further space to each of these features of the black civil rights soundscape in the section that follows, this last reference to the general tenor of the times and the historicist approach to King’s speech-making power that the keynote trope helps to crystallize merits a more immediate commentary.

To sound historian R. Murray Schafer, “keynote sounds” convey “the anchor or fundamental tone” of a soundscape. Analogizing their significance to the “ground,” which visual phenomenologists say “give[s] the figure its outline and mass,” Schafer conceptualizes keynote sounds uniquely in spatial terms. Setting-specific, they are largely the emanations of “geography.”¹⁷ Yet the titular “world” in Schafer’s *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* is more than the geographical sum of the earth’s environments; it signifies temporality, too—the time of the earth’s becoming. The “tuning of the world,” therefore, is also necessarily the tuning, or intonation, of time’s/the times’ keynote sounds, the ubiquitous surround (i.e., the “ground”) by which one differentiates and comes to know past, present, and future worlds aurally. Not only the world environment, then, but the very history of the world and its constitutive lifeworlds is sonic to those with ears to hear. History’s acoustic condition is not a property of the audible objects of its deliberation projected onto the nonobject of the past’s pastness, but the ontological reality of history as the memory of time gone by. In other words, to argue for history’s sound (by means of which I approach the sound of blackness in the modern era in this book) is to maintain belief in a sonic materiality immanent to history *as such*. It is to hold truck with the mystic conception of “the angel of history” Walter Benjamin advanced as at once an onlooker and *earwitness* to the past of history’s concern formally, which Benjamin portrayed as a long-drawn-out cataclysm “which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of [said angel’s] feet.”¹⁸ The thunder of this crashing wreckage is the keynote sound of history experienced from above. From below, the sound is elegiac, funereal, dark, and tremulous.

Out of this mournful surround that is the sonic ground of black aural history in the West comes the figure of the particular sound (we shall call it), asserting itself over and against the sonic surround. Like that which Schafer calls, in a word, a “signal” sound, the particular sound of blackness evolves, bends, and modulates its tenor over time, as historical listening practices, black phenomenologies of audition, and new technologies for the black “tuning of the world” adjust to the imperatives of the political or cultural economy of race in their moment.¹⁹ Just as “sound signals may often be organized into quite elaborate codes permitting messages of considerable complexity to be transmitted to those who can interpret them,” so with the particular sounds of blackness covered in this book—namely, the vocal vibrato, the shout, vocal growls, and laughter, among them.²⁰ The title, *King’s Vibrato*, refers to one such particularity of the complex encryption of black signs and signals into

the twentieth-century racial soundscape. While I foreground the vibrato sound in King's preaching and speech-making, specifically, I am clear that King's vibrato did not develop out of a vacuum, but out of a promiscuous interplay of figure and ground—out of the ensemble of signals that reflect black speech and audition in the foreground as they materialize from the background sound, or ground, of modernity itself in its constitutive violence against black people.

Still, the near-universal recognizability of King's dark-toned and measured voice, arguably first among black public voices in modern memory, is *sui generis*. Perhaps no national voice is more readily identifiable by Americans of any generation. Well beyond the intimate familiarity many Americans have with King's most remembered idioms—"I have a dream," "I may not get there with you," and "Tell 'em I was a drum-major for justice," to cite only three of many more of these known set phrases—who can dispute that this far-reaching knowledge of King's voice has a great deal more to do with the singular grain, cadence, and tone of it than with its discursive pronouncements? To lionize King's *oratory*, then, with its too-narrow and specific concern for argumentative proofs and rhetorical formulas, above the supralingualism of his *preaching*, by contrast, is to risk the protraction of a habituated deafness to the material sound of blackness enlivening King's speeches to propheticism. With a similar worry in mind, Richard Lischer hoped *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word That Moved America* would go a considerable ways to "restore its hero's voice" from formalistic domestication by classical homiletics and rhetoric.²¹ In *The Preacher King*, Lischer set out, "to the extent it is possible for a book to make a sound,"²² to re-sound the particular voice of the preacher King. *King's Vibrato* follows a similar inclination—to give spoken soul its voice back.

In the spring of 1968, a young black writer, new on the scene, sketched out in broad irreligious terms a portrait of what he referred to as "spoken soul" in *Esquire* magazine. His article "The Language of Soul" defined spoken soul as the "incorrect . . . language" of black American speaking subjects over against the linguistic and grammatical correctness of speech ascribed to white Americans. Claude Brown was still a neophyte at the time compared to more visible black prose writers like Baraka, James Baldwin, Julius Lester, Maya Angelou, and Alex Haley, but his debut work, a gritty 1965 autobiography titled *Manchild in the Promised Land*, made for an auspicious start to a professional writing career. Pointedly, Brown's "The Language of

Soul” explained what the freshman writer took the task of black writing to be and mean. It took on the blackness of modern black literature by way of a meditation on the politics of sound black speech acts coolly, if subversively, voice.

Tucked discreetly behind *Esquire*’s April feature on Muhammad Ali, Brown’s piece cast spoken soul as “more of a sound than a language.”²³ Published just days after King’s assassination, as it would happen, “The Language of Soul” posited that spoken soul “generally possesses a lyrical quality which is frequently incompatible with any music other than that ceaseless and relentlessly driving rhythm that flows from poignantly spent lives. . . . To the soulless ear the vast majority of these sounds are dismissed as incorrect usage of the English language and, not infrequently, as speech impediments. To those so blessed as to have had bestowed on them at birth the lifetime gift of soul, these are the most communicative and meaningful sounds to ever fall upon human ears.”²⁴ Coming so close to King’s death, Brown’s *Esquire* article seemed a fitting nod to the lyrical expressiveness of King’s own “poignantly spent” nights and days. Even as Brown’s article tended to identify spoken soul with the hardscrabble soundscape of the industrial urban North, the linguistic sounds of blackness that “The Language of Soul” posited were not wholly separate from the South. Growing up on the segregated east side of downtown Atlanta, King was far from a small-town country boy. Not unlike Beale Street in Memphis, the Auburn Avenue neighborhood that formed his youth and young adulthood was in fact a social laboratory of black middle-class achievement and aspiration. Decidedly urban in its commercial and cultural life, “Sweet Auburn,” though still yet a Southern community in sensibility, projected enough cool black urbanity and industrial hum to have imparted a discrete soulfulness into King’s speech and manner worthy of Brown’s reflections. By virtue of space, place, time, and tribe, a broad form of spoken soul, I mean to say, was part of the preacher King’s heritage as well, heredity meekly giving way to the aural force of history and culture on his most public speech habits.

In this connection, King’s sermon voice boasts a musical quality in *The Preacher King*. “It is a beautiful voice,” Lischer enthuses, “with a breathtaking range.” Lischer’s wonder at King’s genius goes on: “Within a few minutes his voices moves from husky reflection to the peaks of ecstasy. . . . Like a good singer, he will open his mouth wide to hit the notes but will not reach or strain. His voice never breaks.”²⁵ Lischer focuses not on the preaching lessons King received from instructors at Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University—lessons heavily slanted toward matters of form—but on “tonality,

timbre, [and] rhythm,” all issuing from “a second, nondiscursive, track on which the [black] sermon proceeds.”²⁶ Keenly attuned to what he calls the black sermon’s “sound track,” Lischer’s approach to King is as much an acoustemological one as it is a study of rhetorical strategy. His concerns for pitch, blue notes, cadence, and glissando, for instance, tend to ally King more closely to a vernacular preaching tradition than many scholars, playing to respectability politics, have allowed. In its designs to not only parse and catalogue the rhetorical and affective distinctives of King’s preaching, but represent them on the page in a phonological script—to *sound them out*, in print²⁷—*The Preacher King*, thirty years on, remains perhaps the most estimable work on King’s oratory.

Enduring as Lischer’s study is, however, and despite his best effort to lay down the “nondiscursive track” of sacred black sound typographically, reproducing King’s preaching voice on the page also proves its own impossibility in *The Preacher King*. “The written word cannot adequately convey the pathos of King’s voice.”²⁸ This scarcely comes as any surprise—for Lischer, it is a kind of self-own—since a certain disability constrains words, Fred Moten reminds us, “by their implicit reduction to the meanings they carry—meanings inadequate to or detached from the objects or states of affairs they would envelop.”²⁹ Too, “an absence of inflection; a loss of mobility, slippage, bend; a missing accent or affect; the impossibility of a slur or crack and the *excess*—rather than loss—of the meaning they imply” all undermine any attempt to either describe or transcribe King’s preaching verbally.³⁰ And yet despite this disability, Moten considers words’ impossible representation of nondiscursive communication enabling insofar as it necessarily calls up that which has been occluded by the very adjustments to normative spelling or pronunciation intended as a remedy or, at the least, a work-around for words’ impairments.

Nothing about the irony of “the enabling disability” of words to portray pathos, say, or indignation appears lost on Lischer as *The Preacher King* betrays *exactly* that which it is helpless to faithfully represent in its pages: namely, the vibrato which “is present in all King’s preaching.”³¹ Though occluded from his sermons’ manuscripts and transcriptions, the vibrato sound in King’s preaching haunts every graphic mark quieting or silencing—or attempting in vain to reproduce—what is clearly heard “in all King’s preaching.” In a word, King’s vibrato essays to name “the *excess*” Moten describes shorn of the presumptuousness of words alone to convey meaning in King’s musical speech-making. Not unlike the incessant hum or hiss of currents running all but noiselessly to and from an electric receiver, say, not wired to code,

King's vibrato, diffused into the aural atmosphere, goes on against the quiet which pretends to have overcome it. The sound of King's vibrato is thus unrepresentable and irrepressible all at once. It bears a spectral aspect. Try as the critic might, none can amply re-sound, nor, on the other hand, utterly repress, the luminous resonance of the vibrato-effect in King's public speech and preaching. *King's Vibrato* theorizes why.

By way of the power of metonymy, I give a name to the full range of aural occlusions written words, especially, may strain to ventriloquize but cannot entirely exclude from hearing in any case. I take the vibrato in its fullest signification to be a figure for what I call *diacritical noise*, those an-archic³² flights or inflections of speech away from the systematized pronunciations of printed words—those tones or tenses of utterance, one might also say, that the diacritical marks attending to written representation aim to approach, laboring in that effort because they are simultaneously antecedent to writing and outside the logic of pronunciation and the proper. Diacritical noise is resistive sound, profligate, against the law. It is sound refusing the control of words' graphic and phonic coercions, sound figured as external to representation in otherwise-than-sonic modes of signification.

To put this another way, I mean to subsume under the sign *vibrato* a symbolic range of nondiscursive sound effects arising from the notional and expressive energy of black hope and insurgency condensed in, and reflected by, King's spoken soul. Within this range of noise, from eloquent roar to indistinct inflection, lie the diffusive sounds of blackness one hears in the gospel intensities of Ray Charles, for instance, or James Brown's mighty scream. One hears them, too, in Mahalia Jackson's melisma, and, more subtly, in the whistling sibilance beneath W. E. B. Du Bois's late-career speech.³³ These effects, stemming neither from "incorrect usage of the English language" nor "speech impediments,"³⁴ as Brown stresses in "The Language of Soul," color the soundscape blue. Unlike black slang, which is to be understood in its adaptive function to the extant rules of conventional English, as Brown argues, the vocal intensities belonging to the vibrato-as-metonym are opposed to such adaptations. In relation to the rules slang adjusts to, these effects are resistant, irrelative.

In this way, King's vibrato is a natural trope for the insurgent operations of black sounds. No simple adornment or overwrought force of sermonic expression, his vibrato is the aural index of an irrepressible counterwitness of fugitive sounds the preacher-orator has harnessed to black liberatory ends. But what Lischer calls King's "natural vibrato" isn't natural in the way one might expect if by that descriptor one means having developed out of a

hereditary endowment or biologic accident of ability. King's vibrato is natural only insofar as it is born of the everyday complex of sounds and feelings that make up the common history of black life in twentieth-century America. It is the reflexive sound of blackness no one who fears black freedom in modern contexts wants to have to hear. It is the storm warning of the counterthreat of black modernism stirring. Unfortunately, however—and lessening our sense of its material force on historical experience—notice of its exorbitance has mostly gone lacking.

Until Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* in 1987, that is, scant attention was paid to the influence of black expressive culture on modernism and still less to the “modern Afro-American sound” as a consideration in modernist thought.³⁵ In fact, as Douglass Kahn has written, though “read and looked at in detail,” modernism has been “rarely heard” at all.³⁶ *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, though, took up precisely sound—even more precisely, “the meaning of speaking (or *sounding*) ‘modern’”—in interrogating modernism's specifically black expressivities.³⁷ Baker's appeal to African American poetics, and to black “speaking manuals” and “singing books” like Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* and Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* as prefigurings of the sounding of black literary modernism, very plainly inferred its critique of the visual prejudice easily obtaining to US and European modernism even if it did not assert the tone-deafness of traditional modernist history and criticism outright. Vital as Baker is to approaching here what I have referred to as *the particular sound of blackness* for which King is a key figure, Kahn's *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* reckons explicitly with the unhearing history and criticism of (white) artistic modernism in its generality. For the sake of the general, I want to turn again to Kahn so that I may say somewhat more about the broad historical and cultural conditions within which *King's Vibrato* posits black modernism temporally.

While modernism's audible past would seem to have escaped others, not so Kahn. Astutely, he notes that “the early days [of artistic modernism] were concurrent with the advent of the phonograph,”³⁸ for instance, and the coincidence is far from insignificant. For the phonograph produced more than new sounds mediated by its machinic preservation and reproduction designs; it also engendered, as Kahn writes, “a new status for hearing.”³⁹ Phonography, that is, ushered in “a new day in aurality” in America.⁴⁰ Midwife to the new era, phonography was an active agent in modernism's proud arrival. Because it did more than produce new sounds and new ideas about sound, but “produced audibility,” Kahn explains, phonography “heard past physiological constraints to the imaginary realms of conceptual sounds,

ancient and future sounds, voices of inner speech and the dead, subatomic vibrations, and so on.”⁴¹ Phonography, therefore, helped effect a stirring of the imagination of what the modern was, or might become, in historical time. Imbricated with science, technology, war, and imperialism, cultural modernism called up more sounds and placed greater emphasis than ever on listening. One could say, in fact, that for all the *new* attention (since Kahn significantly) to the constellation of soundings recently narrated into Anglo-American and British modernism (e.g., mechanical engines, early automobiles, radio, the gramophone, typewriters, dialect speech), it was the metaphysics of *audition* that most forcefully intervened on thought and time to modernize the world. Perhaps, as Julian Murphet, Helen Groth, and Penelope Hone have together suggested, Edvard Munch’s 1893 painting *The Scream* does indeed index well the scale and impact of the aural revolution.⁴² The desperation of the figure of Man in Munch’s painting to close his ears to the rumble of new earsplitting auralities is not only a defense against more sounds that it cannot sanely bear but also a panic triggered by the prospect of a more crushing sensorial regime than one dares imagine, which more sounds now threaten to install.

Somewhat against this picture of white American and European modernism that Virginia Woolf famously proposed as having arrived around December 1910, a peculiarly black modernism was unfolding in tense contradistinction. To the extent it seems appropriate to locate its appearance in time, no more precise hypothesis than Baker’s has been offered for historical consideration. On September 18, 1895, in an oration by Booker T. Washington at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Baker proposes, black modernism spoke its first tentative words behind the disarming sound of a few well-staged minstrel inflections. But if Washington’s oratory and its strategic manipulation of “Afro-American *sounds*” set black modernism to a slow blaze, then I believe it was King’s oratory, a half-century on, that set it roaring. Whereas Washington’s speech-making may have heralded a New Negro movement, in other words, it was King who bore it in haunted tones from 1957 to 1968, the clear and woeful end of a *longue durée* of black modernist optimism and racial opinion.

This study, which focuses little on the historicity of concrete events associated with King’s life and work or on King’s social thought systematically, labors instead to theorize the historical force of King’s voice at the level of sound. Moreover, it aims to contextualize that force within the cultural field, to attend to the wider range of sonic material in the black cultural milieus of the urban church, the public auditorium, and the civil rights

protest march as an intrinsic part of this theoretical exercise. In general terms, *King's Vibrato* doubles as a cultural history and critical theory of black modernist soundscapes, North and South, that helped produce the vocal timbre and time signature of the figure whom Lischer crowned "the preacher King." These soundscapes include the acoustic energy and imprints of black women's musicianship, urban "renewal" and industrialization, embodied black listening, and other vital soundmarks. This book is as much about those influences as it is about King imagined as a singular figure of black modernist speechcraft. My Martin Luther King Jr., I mean to suggest by this, contains multitudes.

King's Vibrato is organized in three parts. Part I, "Architectures of the Incantatory," explores the acoustical architectures of those African American churches in Atlanta and Chicago where history records King having held forth with especial eloquence. Specifically, chapter 1, "Dying Words: The Aural Afterlife of Martin Luther King Jr.," considers King's voice as a sound object for "acousmatic" or reduced listening. It posits King's April 9, 1968, funeral (and Coretta King's insistence on her late husband's own recorded voice in place of a eulogy) as an unparalleled occasion for the study of black voice *in itself*, the sign and signifier of a black radical critique of the modern order of things.

Chapter 2, "Swinging the God Box: Modernism, Organology, and the Ebenezer Sound," is concerned with how the history of Protestant church architecture helped to give rise to the sound of what Lischer has called "the Ebenezer gospel," that soundscape which is perhaps most directly responsible for the texture and tenor of King's preaching and speech-making voice. Chapter 2 devotes considerable space to the evolutionary history of Protestant church architecture in the United States with the particular acoustic design of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church in mind. It also gives important attention to the history of the modern pipe organ. Behind and beneath the modern black preaching voice, from the 1920s to the 1960s, the vibratory and aspirational sounds of the pipe organ were essential instrumentation for the sacred soundscapes of black modernity. Ralph Ellison, whom Alexander Weheliye has called "one of the foremost intellectual architects of Afro-modernity," is the key theorist in this chapter.⁴³ His unfinished second novel, *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*, I show, illuminates the cultural power of the pipe organ as "God box" in the material culture of black modernism.

Chapter 3, "The Cantor King: Reform Preaching, Cantorial Style, and Acoustic Memory in Chicago's Black Belt," contemplates King in cross-cultural

context. On August 27, 1967, at Mt. Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago, King preached a sermon titled “Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool” based on a Lukan parable. Considered one of King’s great sermons, it was successful partly because of the acoustical design and sonic memory of the former Jewish synagogue where the preaching event took place. Chapter 3 traces the early history of Mt. Pisgah to two prominent Jewish Chicagoans—an architect, Alfred S. Alschuler (1876–1940), and a radical Reform rabbi, Emil Gustav Hirsch (1851–1923). The space designed by Alschuler to maximize the dynamic preaching of Hirsch at then–Sinai Congregation was acoustically suited to King’s own “reform” preaching decades later.

Part II, “Nettie’s Nocturne,” comprises two chapters, “King’s Gospel Modernism” (chapter 4) and “Four Women: Alberta, Coretta, Mahalia, Aretha” (chapter 5). Chapter 4 locates in the gospel blues of gospel-music pioneer Thomas Dorsey a productive tension between the imagined primacy of voice in black expression and the print imperatives of cultural moderns. This tension, I argue, is reconciled in Dorsey’s early gospel compositions as a voice-and-vellum miscegenaeity exemplified by King’s 1963 book of sermons *Strength to Love* and his repertory preaching of those sermons for the five more years of his life and career to come. King’s stylized, resistive preaching in those years was in sync with the modern gospel sound popularized by Dorsey and overtaking the religious landscape of black Chicago. King’s 1966 reprise of “A Knock at Midnight” at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Chicago, three years after its appearance in *Strength to Love*, powerfully demonstrates this aesthetic harmony. Chapter 4 ends with a consideration of the politics of loss reflected in and by Dorsey’s most famous composition, “Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” a dark hymn inspired by the death of his wife, Nettie, and their firstborn son, Thomas Jr., in childbirth. The history (past and present) of black maternal and infant mortality is, I argue, at the social and sonic foundations of the history of modern gospel.

Chapter 5 is a black feminist critique of the modern gospel sound and its influence upon King’s resonant sound. I explore the radical meaningfulness of King’s mother, Alberta Williams King, in her role as the main organist and musical director at Ebenezer (and where, seated at the organ, she was fatally shot during a Sunday service in 1974). I not only mean to underscore here how profoundly formative the organ’s vocalizations were on the tone and texture of King’s preaching and oratory, but I posit a black feminist genealogy of influence for King’s oratorical talent, one that sets aside King’s much-vaunted descent from a long line of African American male preachers for another that shows King in sonic relation to Alberta King, Coretta

King, Mahalia Jackson, and Aretha Franklin. I appeal to black feminist theorists Hortense Spillers and Alexis Gumbs and to contemporary feminist musicologist Susan McClary in this chapter, to show King's debt to black feminist sound and performance.

Like part II of *King's Vibrato*, part III, "Technologies of Freedom," is constituted of two chapters. In chapter 6, "King's Vibrato: Visual Oratory and 'the Sound of the Photograph,'" I bring together Slavoj Žižek, Fred Moten, and Shawn Michelle Smith to explore a brief history of visual culture associated with King's speech-making and the repressed sounds of terror and triumph that photographs of King holding forth bear for those with ears to hear. A new reading of "I've Been to the Mountaintop," one that extrapolates from the collision of visibility and aurality obtaining in the sermon's close, is at the heart of this chapter. It is about the deadly perils of black speech-making as a spectacle event, and the fugitive threat of black vocalicity to visual (i.e., "photographic") thought. In chapter 6, as well, a black performativity of gesture stands in for the liberative impulse of black subjects to escape their framing under the modern colonial capture of pictures and politics.

Chapter 7, "Dream Variations: 'I Have a Dream' and the Sonic Politics of Race and Place," considers the evolution of two deliveries of "I Have a Dream"—in Detroit in June 1963 and, famously, in Washington, DC, in August 1963—against the memory of an earlier one in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in November 1962, with a view toward contrasting the acoustical conditions of each. Variations in sound amplification, microphonic technology, and even the built and natural environments in Detroit and Washington (the street versus the reflecting pool) lent themselves to quite different deliveries, and therefore auditions, of the same speech, differences having more to do with available technologies than with essentialist ideas about black speech and improvisation.

Combined, it is hoped that these chapters, with an epilogue-meditation on black grief in the aftermath of George Floyd's death spectacle in May 2020, open up to keener hearing the sounds of blackness in their historical time and aid us the more in hearing history in black for a change.

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I

**Architectures
of the
Incantatory**

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