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Scratching the Threshold: Textual Sound  
and Political Form in Toni Cade Bambara's  
*The Salt Eaters*

. 1 .

In the course of independent filmmaker Louis Massiah's 1995 interview with African American writer, cultural worker, and political activist Toni Cade Bambara, Massiah asks Bambara how and where she learned her first political lessons. She responds by sharing her memories of coming of age amid the cultural vibrancy of Harlem, before focusing her thoughts more precisely on the lasting impact of Speakers' Corner:

Speakers' Corner made it easy to raise critical questions, to be concerned about what's happening locally and internationally. It shaped the political perceptions of at least three generations. It certainly shaped mine, and I miss it today. There is no Speakers' Corner where I live. There is no outdoor forum where people can not only learn the word, hear information, hear perspective, but also learn how to present information, which is also what I learned on Speakers' Corner: how to speak and leave spaces to let people in so that you get a call-and-response. You also learn how to speak outdoors, which is no small feat. You also have to learn how to not be on paper, to not have anything between you and the community that names you. So I learned a great many things and I am still grounded in orality, in call-and-response devices....

(215-16)

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I would like to thank Cheryl Wall, the anonymous readers for *Contemporary Literature*, and my fellow Scholars in Residence at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture for their valuable suggestions on earlier versions of this essay.

Bambara's attunement to the sonic texture of *Speakers' Corner* is compelling in its own right, but I would like to use her recollections to begin framing several interconnected formal innovations that mark the political possibilities pursued within her novelistic reflection on the post-civil rights era, *The Salt Eaters*. I am most interested in how Bambara's response to Massiah's question reveals her attention to sound as a hinge connecting aesthetics and politics. Her focus on the projection and communal circulation of speech on *Speakers' Corner*, and on the complexities of both its past and present resonance, positions Bambara's attunement to aurality as a framework through which notions of tradition and improvisation might be perpetually expanded.<sup>1</sup> Centered on deciphering the political complexities of the late 1970s, the novel uses the expansiveness of sound as an organizing principle. Revolving around the two-hour healing session of a black woman activist recovering from an attempted suicide, the narrative points toward echoes and soundscapes of the past, present, and future as it moves within a shifting web of personal and political histories. Bambara's text defies linearity, both in the aesthetics of its narrative progression and in its thematic concern with transformation in a broader sociopolitical sphere.

Bambara's commitment to using art as an instrument of political critique directs questions of form and innovation toward an understanding of the remapping of narrative as central to imagining alternate modes of political engagement. In an interview with Black Arts Movement writer and critic Kalamu ya Salaam, published shortly after the release of *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara explains how the creation of new narrative idioms is central to her understanding of historical struggle and transformation, in her response to a question regarding her search for an alternative language through writing:

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1. Since the 1980 publication of *The Salt Eaters*, there have been several waves and permutations of critical studies on the novel, and on Bambara's intellectual contributions to black aesthetics and radical thought. Key early works include Hull, Traylor, and Willis. The 1990s witnessed a refocusing on Bambara's writing from a variety of critical perspectives, as seen in Alwes, Collins, and Kelley. Most recently, a volume edited by Linda Janet Holmes and Cheryl A. Wall, *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara*, collects a range of critical perspectives, reaching back into the 1970s and 1980s but also offering several newly penned treatments of Bambara's artistic and political work; see especially the contributions of Wall, Salamishah Tillet, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Rebecca Wanzo, and Avery F. Gordon.

I think there have been a lot of things going on in the Black experience for which there are no terms, certainly not in English, at this moment. There are a lot of aspects of consciousness for which there is no vocabulary, no structure in the English language which would allow people to validate that experience through language....

... I do know that the English language that grew from the European languages has been systematically stripped of the kinds of structures and the kinds of vocabularies that allow people to plug into other kinds of intelligences. That's no secret. That's part of their whole history, wherein people cannot be a higher sovereign than the state....

I'm just trying to tell the truth, and I think in order to do that we will have to invent, in addition to new forms, new modes and new idioms. I think we will have to connect to language in that kind of way. I don't know yet what it is.

(“Searching” 58)

Bambara speaks of the silencing of the unknown and often untranslatable elements of social life and suggests the need to resist this silence through approaches to formal and idiomatic innovation. The subtle distinction she introduces between matters of form and idiom helps outline the notion of idiom as a mode of connection, diffusion, and reception. It signals the process of calibration between a writer's understanding of the political context of artistic production and the utility of a particular work's aesthetic features. As this dynamic becomes a central narrative concern throughout Bambara's oeuvre, I wish to consider how ideas of sound present experimental possibilities within her novel by opening the formal and theoretical space to create outside of already established paradigms of the political imagination, or to borrow her own phrasing, to imagine what it might mean to construct a vision of political engagement “from scratch.” She elaborates on this idea in the conclusion to her 1969 essay “On the Issue of Roles”:

Revolution begins with the self, in the self. The individual, the basic revolutionary unit, must be purged of poison and lies that assault the ego and threaten the heart, that hazard the next larger unit—the couple or pair, that jeopardize the still larger unit—the family or cell, that put the entire movement in peril. We make many false starts because we have been programmed to depend on white models or white interpretations of non-white models, so we don't even ask the correct questions, much less begin to move in a correct direction. Perhaps we need to face the terrifying and overwhelming possibility that there are no models, that we shall have to create from scratch.

(109)

In her effort to envision struggle outside of previously grooved tracks—in a sense, imagining a model-less space of transformation—Bambara fashions a series of textual “structures of feeling” through her experimental deployment of sound and text. Building on this concept, described by Raymond Williams as a kind of political possibility outside of fixed systems—a preformalized “embryonic phase,” a process that is realized within the practice of resistance before “it can become fully articulate and defined exchange”—we should consider the ways in which Bambara is attempting to reorient our focus toward the aesthetics and processes of black radical politics, as a means of more critically processing the finished events or what we come to know subsequently as recognizable “movements” (131).<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, Bambara’s project invokes a long-standing, black radical critique of Western European intellectual hegemony, a position fashioned largely through a critical gaze upon Enlightenment sensibilities of order and disenchantment.<sup>3</sup> Her position here, however, is more layered, as it is in conversation with both the relatively proximate Black Arts Movement aesthetic revolt against ideas of the West (advanced during the late 1960s, most notably by writers such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal), as well as the critiques of Western philosophical and political hegemony advanced within the writings of Frankfurt school philosopher Herbert Marcuse during the 1960s and 1970s. It is not my intention to suggest that Bambara was directly influenced by Marcuse but rather to note the ways in which

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2. At the same time, Williams’s formulation also leads to a metacommentary on the interaction between the dominant trends in Western Marxism and traditions of black radicalism expressed through the possibilities of innovative literary form. I am calling attention to the possibility that when Williams refers to the fixed nature of the category of “the social” being set against the “effective presence” of lived and felt material reality, his formulation might shed some inadvertent light on the vexed relationship between black radical thought and Western Marxism. This contradiction is discussed by Cedric Robinson as a by-product of Marx’s underestimation, as a theorist of labor, of “the actual terms” of the humanity of African slaves. Robinson points out how African labor was not simply labor but “also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality” (121–22). We should consider, then, how Williams’s idea of “effective presence,” extended aesthetically by Bambara, might begin to approximate expressions of black radicalism in relationship to the objective category of the social posed by many renderings of Western Marxist theory.

3. By invoking the term “black radical critique” here, I am placing Bambara’s project in a genealogy of black intellectual work that would include figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon.

her intellectual project moves in the spirit of Marcuse's understanding of one-dimensionality and the aesthetic struggle against it. That is, both Bambara and Marcuse focus on the fact that challenges to established social orders must attempt to revive the alternate dimensions of knowledge and experience that have been incorporated, regulated, and flattened within advanced industrial societies.<sup>4</sup> I want to further explore Bambara's layering of this trajectory of critical thought and consider how she charts a phenomenological pathway toward the reimagination of political struggle in the wake of the Black Arts and Black Power movements by deploying and theorizing sound as a framework for aesthetic and political transformation. Tracing these sonic inscriptions within *The Salt Eaters* allows for an engagement with questions such as the following: What elements might comprise an aesthetic field of black radicalism? What is the place of the sensory within political consciousness? How does narrative space allow for the mapping of nonlinear historical memories?

Bambara's strategy of imagining the political possibility of sound as an opening for the generation of radical critique clearly resonates within traditions of experimentation in black music that were emerging in the long era of the 1960s (that is, roughly 1954 to 1976). Artists such as Sun Ra, Jimi Hendrix, John Coltrane, George Clinton, Lee "Scratch" Perry, and Ornette Coleman (to name only a handful of the most obvious examples) were all experimenting with the instrumental and electronic modulation of sound in the mid-to-late twentieth century as both a challenge to generic classification within black music and an organic, formal disavowal of the hegemonic regulation of social identities.<sup>5</sup> For these artists, the spatiality of sound encompasses possibilities both for musical improvisation and as an expression of the dynamic, unstable qualities of racial subjectivity. Thus the experimental canvas of sound extended by Bambara's literary innovations represents an engagement with the memory of the civil rights/post-Black Power historical

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4. This area of intellectual convergence between the Frankfurt school and black radical thought demands much deeper investigation; it can also clearly be seen in the relationships among Herbert Marcuse, Angela Davis, and Huey Newton.

5. The term "black music" itself becomes politically charged and a viable means for black musicians to assert cultural and aesthetic breadth in defining the music outside of categories designed to facilitate marketing and mass consumption.

moment and its legacy of both realized and unrealized social transformations.<sup>6</sup>

Avant-garde alto saxophonist and ethnomusicologist Marion Brown provides a critical perspective on the historical movement and weight of what I am referring to as “black expressive sound” as he explains how he views the relationship between sound awareness and free jazz improvisation in an essay published in the 1973 *Black World* special issue on black music:

Ornette Coleman took the art of improvisation further. Beginning where Parker left off, he showed how improvisation could be natural, and flow freely without having fixed points in space (harmony and melody), or fixed points in time (rhythm). When his music was heard for the first time, it was thought to be the end of jazz. No one liked or understood it except for those involved. When they heard everyone improvising collectively, they thought, “Chaos!” Perhaps they had forgotten (if they ever knew) that collective improvisation had been the basis of New Orleans Jazz, and that collectively is a manifestation of community.

(19)

Brown’s comments probe the boundaries of black experimentation, as he considers the ways in which audiences are quick to ascribe the label “Chaos” to that which seems unrecognizable to their ears yet ultimately speaks to a more fluid relationship between ideas of tradition, lineage, and rupture within black music. Echoing Amiri Baraka in his landmark essay from 1966, “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music),” Brown situates improvisation within the long history of black expressive possibility, connecting the seeming rupture of free jazz to the sounds of tradition marking early New Orleans jazz. I read Brown as making a case for a kind of strategic chaos that emerges through sound not merely as aural expression but as a reflection of a simultaneous commitment to cultural tradition and the expansion of its aesthetic sensibilities.

Brown’s analysis of sound as both rupture and suture, considered in concert with Bambara’s post-1960s narrative construction of *The Salt Eaters*, pushes toward a conceptualization of the sonic as both a compositional field and a philosophical window into the rhizomatic

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6. The wealth of writing on this topic is large. The works most formative to my thinking here include Marable, *Race*; Harding; King; Allen; Woodard; and Singh.

nature of historical consciousness formed in relationship to post-civil rights era political realities. Part of what is at stake in my analysis is the ability to think through what we might call “the sound of memory” in Bambara’s writing of *The Salt Eaters*, as the novel offers a refracted sense of history and temporality that is both elongated and compressed in her representations of black political culture and collective memory. Bambara’s literary experimentation with sound offers visions of political resistance that encourage us to linger within the contingencies of black history and politics. In invoking contingency, I am referring to what postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe, in an attempt to complicate notions of temporality beyond simply the pre- and postcolonial, has termed a “*time of entanglement*,” or a nonlinear “*interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones*” (16). Thus the idea of something like the crossroads (which we will later see directly worked through by Bambara in a particular scene in the novel) becomes theoretically rich as an intersection itself between literary and philosophical approaches to conceptualizing the contours of time and history. I move between Mbembe and Bambara here to underscore how Bambara’s focus on the inner workings of textual aesthetics might present a challenge to versions of Western modernity, liberalism, and late capitalist racial state formation. For much like Mbembe’s questioning of social theory’s inability to “account for *time as lived*, not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicity and simultaneities . . . beyond the lazy categories of permanence and change beloved of so many historians” (8), and his more general questioning of linearity as a “validation of conscious existence” (17), Bambara’s sonic exposition of political life demonstrates that although historical moments may have temporal distinction, the process of history moves and builds upon itself across temporality through formal registers that destabilize traditional assumptions about subjectivity and consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Working within

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7. I would also like to point to the way in which the conversation with Mbembe’s text regarding time/temporality and black consciousness could be clearly extended to include Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity*, and Brent Hayes Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora*.

this terrain of the sublime and insurgent social theory, Bambara's writing suggests conceptions of late-twentieth-century racial subjectivity that embrace the seeming chaos of multiplicity and interconnection, not as an erosion of particular identities and locations, but rather as crucial starting points for the realization of the political complexity within them.

Clearly this exchange between sound and historical experience can be seen through a long view of the history of black music throughout the Americas, as has been extensively written about from the Harlem Renaissance on, and to a degree commented upon above by Marion Brown. Building upon this general understanding of the intersections of black musical consciousness and historical experience, I am here considering how such an expressive awareness is used to explore a more unconfined, pre-genred sense of sound, how the heard noise of environments, voices, and at times music creates aural contexts through which specific senses of black historical experience can be evoked, enlarged, and articulated. Stuart Hall's notion of articulation is particularly useful in helping to imagine how connections linking literary invention and a radically transforming field of social, political, and racial relations might occur within spaces of contingency rather than along predetermined paths. Hall's words ask us to pay attention to the role of form within the creation of such connections:

An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made? So the so-called "unity" of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary "belongingness."

(141)

Bambara's sense of literary sound, as a particular articulation between aesthetics and politics, speaks to an alternate mode of understanding the practice of black aesthetic re-formation as being based upon moments of heterodoxy forged in the refashioning of subjectivity outside of preestablished structures of memory, the bodily, and the sensory.

## . 2 .

In the opening scene of *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara suggests a sensory framework for conceptualizing the quotidian and inchoate aspects of struggle as they inflect more highly visible versions of collective historical memory. Velma Henry, heavily burdened by her memories of the movements of the 1960s, sits in catatonic recovery after attempting to take her own life, as Minnie Ransom, a widely respected local healer, faces her, “humming lazily up and down the scales . . . spinning out a song . . . running its own course up under the words, up under Velma’s hospital gown, notes pressing against her skin,” as Velma “steel[s] herself against intrusion” (3–5). Bambara positions sound as a force of confrontation and evasion between Velma and the healing powers of Minnie, as Velma is wary of Minnie striking “the very note that could shatter [her] bones” (4). She wants to “resist the buzzing bee tune,” “[w]ithdraw the self to a safe place,” and in a reclamation of her youth, “prop up a borderguard to negotiate with would-be intruders” (5). The opening scene, then, clearly dispels any notion of the sonic as a straightforward pathway toward radical transformation and instead situates Velma’s relationship to sound as reflective of a tension between the potential deception of appearances and the idea of vision as a phenomenological mode of awareness and critique that extends well beyond the visual.

In a striking and suggestive commentary offered as Minnie, in the early moments of the healing, is “cupping gently the two stony portions of [Velma’s] temporal bone,” Bambara begins to depict the psychic space of memory as it emerges through the specific bodily sites of aurality, in this case through the proximity and interaction of sound, mental imagery, and the body created through vibrations of bone (6).<sup>8</sup> Velma’s internal riff as she ponders her situation during the healing session builds upon the importance of the sensory, as she begins to point out a tension between the visual and notions of truth: “The eyes and habits of illusion. Retinal images, bogus images, traveling to the brain. The pupils trying to tell the truth to the inner eye. The eye of the heart. The eye of the head. The eye of the mind.

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8. For contemporary critical approaches very much in line with Bambara’s consideration of the bodily and the sonic, see Kahn, as well as Bull and Back.

All seeing differently" (6–7). I am interested in the way that Velma's ambivalence regarding the possibility of truth emerging from what is seen might be understood in the context of the novel's portrayal of a sense of defeat marking the stagnation of black political movements in the later years of the 1970s. Bambara sketches this atmosphere of black political defeat as an entanglement of conditions and forces, including the lack of any clear agenda to transform the state through cohesive political engagement, the persistence of various forms of gender inequity within and outside of social movements, the menace of a rapidly growing nuclear industry, the depth of environmental toxification in black communities, the impact of global economic shifts on local communities, and the continued destabilization of black movements for social justice through covert government monitoring and violent repression. Indeed, part of what is at stake in the expanse of the novel is the degree to which Velma can move beyond her condition of catatonia as a metonymic reflection of the broader stagnation of black struggle that has partly come to define the post-movement political climate.

This imbrication of the bodily, the visual, and the aural becomes one modality through which the text operates. For example, when Velma considers a "telepathic visit with her former self" as she is posed on a stool, trying to open her eyes, trying to respond to Minnie Ransom's call to "Release, sweetheart. Give it all up. Forgive everyone everything. Free them. Free self," Bambara provides an extended elaboration on memory, song, and temporality as they mark Velma's disembodied memory of her attempt to take her own life:

She closed her eyes and they rolled back into her head, rolled back to the edge of the table in her kitchen, to the edge of the sheen—to cling there like globules of furniture oil, cling there over the drop, then hiding into the wood, cringing into the grain as the woman who was her moved from sink to stove to countertop turning things on, turning the radio up. Opening drawers, opening things up. Her life line lying for an instant in the cradle of the scissors' X, the radio's song going on and on and no stop-notes as she leaned into the oven. The melody thickening as she was sucked into the carbon walls of the cave, then the song blending with the song of the gas.

(17–18)

The eyes roll, through a continuum of body, space, and time, to end up "cringing into the grain" of the kitchen table, watching "the woman who was her" prepare to take her own life. Bambara clearly points out

in this memory how Velma is relying on what she can imagine and remember visually; first as Velma attempts to focus her eyes on Minnie, then as she channels herself back to the moment of putting her head in the gas oven. Song becomes introduced as a hinge fusing the sublime qualities of music with the terror and spectacle of life being extinguished. In this way, the sensory represents a double-edged impulse in that it allows for a deep and textured series of temporally weighted personal reflections while also suggesting that within that mode of memory there exist notes of warning about how the simultaneity of seduction and paralysis, felt acutely by Velma, might be more broadly indicative of formations of post-civil rights black political culture.

The narrative builds upon these seemingly surrealistic interventions, moving between the visual and the sonic, as the kitchen memory is extended through an imagistic blend of telepathy and memory, highlighting Velma's desire both to "be still" and to exist as light, outside of sound:

[L]ooking at the glass jars thinking who-knew-what then, her mind taken over, thinking, now, that in the jars was no air, therefore no sound, for sound waves weren't all that self-sufficient, needed a material medium to transmit. But light waves need nothing to carry pictures in, to travel in, can go anywhere in the universe with their independent pictures. So there'd be things to see in the jars, were she in there sealed and unavailable to sounds, voices, cries. So she would be light. Would go back to her beginnings in the stars and be star light, over and done with, but the flame traveling wherever it pleased. And the pictures would follow her, haunt her. Be vivid and sharp in a vacuum. To haunt her. Pictures, sounds and bounce were everywhere, no matter what you did or where you went. Sound broke glass. Light could cut through even steel. There was no escaping the calling, the caves, the mud mothers, the others. No escape.

(19)

Velma's preference for an undisturbed interiority, a still existence contained within glass walls, a one-dimensional life awash in light, without the possibility of political and material contingency, is confronted by sound's ability to break glass. Light becomes associated with a kind of independent freedom, and sound with a lack of self-sufficiency. Yet it becomes evident to her that the two forces ultimately can't be divided, for "Sound broke glass" and "Light could cut through even steel," leading to a central tension being felt within the narrative—the fact that Velma wishes to become

“unavailable at last” to all of that which has come to define so much of her existence due largely to the highly organic nature of her intellectual and activist life:

To pour herself grain by grain into the top globe and sift silently down to a heap in the bottom one. That was the sight she'd been on the hunt for. To lie coiled on the floor of the thing and then to bunch up with all her strength and push off from the bottom and squeeze through the waistline of the thing and tip time over for one last sandstorm and then be still, finally be still.

(19–20)

In this passage, Velma's removal from noise is equated with the revolutionary act of turning over or freezing time, perhaps the most direct, literal engagement with history one might imagine. This act, however, results only in her own solitude, her ability to achieve and maintain a stillness that avoids any sense of collective struggle within the radical potential of such an encounter with time and history. The ambivalence through which she views sound should not ultimately be seen as a negative evaluation of it, but rather as an awareness of its power to continue outlining the range of connections that she feels have been exhausted in her life. Indeed, here we might think about Velma as sound-fearing. Here, Bambara locates sound, through its absence, as a way of understanding the complexity of sociopolitical forces that Velma is trying to escape from, resist, and set up a barrier against, in a way that seems to more broadly reflect the difficulties of constructing post-civil rights modes of political action.

I am proposing that in Velma Henry's refusal of sound in favor of the stillness of death, Bambara is drawing specific attention to Velma's search for an embryonic language, an inchoate conception of radical change that begins to take shape through Minnie Ransom's close attention to the sublime political and spiritual character of sound during the healing. This transformative power of the sonic, distilled by Minnie, is extended by Bambara through the narrative to other characters and events in the novel, constructing a relationship between the sounds emanating from the healing and the sounds defining narrative spaces of transformation in the text (and here I mean narrative transformation, both as the aesthetic innovations within the text and the depictions of attempts at political transformation), creating a web of expressive moments that force

a recognition of the nonlinear, multisensory reading practice required in order to unravel the political ends of Bambara's literary project. Indeed, sound operates on several levels in the narrative, not simply as the phonic matter that marks moments in the healing session, but as signposts in Velma's memory, and as historical forces helping to direct the characters toward various political possibilities. In many ways, the opening to the novel serves as a compositional head in the musical or sonic sense of the term, because it offers an opening exchange marked by alternating extrasensory duets of historical and personal narration between Velma and Minnie, and between Velma and Sophie Heywood. Indeed, Bambara's use of these duets suggests a framework of black feminist intergenerational collaboration that not only represents a crucial political idea, but also generates much of the interwoven narrative movement of the novel.

The latter pairing in these duets is central to Bambara's engagement with the convergence of sound, history, and narrative form, as Velma's refusal of healing is critiqued by her godmother, Sophie Heywood, a community activist and the co-convenor of a local prayer circle known as the Master's Mind. When Sophie reflects on the scene in the infirmary, specifically Velma's resistance to recovery, she decides that Velma has become unrecognizable, has taken "another form altogether," and she leaves the treatment room, to the protest of the rest of the Master's Mind (14). As Sophie leaves the room, the space between her opening and closing of the door is filled with "the high-pitch wail of birds overhead like whistling knives in the sky," and with the buzzing of her temples, which opens onto her own memories of her son, and Velma's former lover, Smitty, being crippled by the police as he attempts to blow up a Confederate statue during a protest against the draft during the Vietnam War:

Smitty pulled down against the cement pedestal, slammed against the horses' hooves, dragged on his stomach to the van. A boot in the neck. Child. Four knees in his back. Son. The package ripped from his grip. The policeman racing on his own path and none other's. The man, the statue going up Pegasus. Manes, hooves, hinds, the brass head of some dead soldier and a limb of one once-live officer airborne over city hall. A flagpole buckling at the knees.

It is clear from the vivid, visceral quality of this recounting, through the staccato rhythm of immediate reportage and the added commentary of a “Black TV announcer misnumbering the crowd, mixmatching the facts, lost to the community,” that the sonic represents a space through which Sophie is able to record the deep personal weight of historical memory, ironically, in a modality that aesthetically echoes the snippetlike collage style of mainstream media soundbites yet probes more deeply within that formal constraint, expanding it well beyond the tendencies of “misnumbering” and “mixmatching” that the lost black announcer relies upon (15). Bambara does this by deftly remixing, into the memory of Smitty, Sophie’s memory of being beaten, in a jail cell, after a civil rights protest, by fellow community activist Portland Edgers, who is forced to do so, under gunpoint, by the police (in a clear echo of Fannie Lou Hamer’s 1963 beating in Winona, Mississippi, by the forced hands of tortured black inmates). Thus Sophie Heywood comprehends the personal and political violence enacted by the state against those who struggle at an intensely felt and experiential level against its drive toward dehumanization.<sup>9</sup> Her disappointment with Velma’s restrictive focus on self, along with her deep understanding of the potentialities and realities of subjection and psychological trauma at the hands of the state, becomes a refrain that emerges from the sound of her closing the door as she leaves the treatment room, as “there

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9. Hamer’s August 22, 1964, testimony to the Credentials Committee at the Democratic Party national convention in Atlantic City recounts her brutal experience as enacted and choreographed by Mississippi law enforcement officials. Her reframing of this scene is instructive not only for its documentation of state violence, but also in the way that she focuses on the sounds of terror to help her narrate this particular situation within a continuum that might recall apocryphal scenes of subjection under slavery, such as Frederick Douglass’s aural witnessing of his Aunt Hester’s torture. Here are Hamer’s words:

I was placed in a cell with a young woman called Miss Ivesta Simpson. After I was placed in the cell I began to hear sounds of licks and screams, I could hear the sounds of licks and horrible screams. And I could hear somebody say, “Can you say, ‘yes, sir,’ nigger? Can you say ‘yes, sir?’”

And they would say other horrible names.

was something in the click of it that made many of the old-timers, veterans of the incessant war—Garveyites, Southern Tenant Associates, trade unionists, Party members, Pan-Africanists—remembering night riders and day traitors and the cocking of guns, shudder” (15).

The political and historical quality of this click, the layered sense of warning drawing together the contemporary resistance and despair of Velma with the memories of elders gathered at the event, representing a broad trajectory of black struggle, continually echoes from this early, formative moment in the text—through the words, sounds, and images that move from the walls of the Southwest Community Infirmary to the bus approaching it, and through the presence and experiences of the cast of individuals helping to develop the soundscape of the text. The capaciousness of Bambara’s textual sound reveals itself, as the click that enables the scriptural movement of time and space in the text points to the sound of Bambara’s work not only as aural

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She would say, “Yes, I can say ‘yes, sir.’”

“So, well, say it.” She said, “I don’t know you well enough.”

They beat her, I don’t know how long. And after a while she began to pray, and asked God to have mercy on those people.

And it wasn’t too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolman and he asked me where I was from. I told him Ruleville and he said, “We are going to check this.”

They left my cell and it wasn’t too long before they came back. He said, “You are from Ruleville all right,” and he used a curse word. And he said, “We are going to make you wish you was dead.”

I was carried out of that cell into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. The State Highway Patrolmen ordered the first Negro to take the blackjack.

The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolman, for me to lay down on a bunk bed on my face.

I laid on my face and the first Negro began to beat. I was beat by the first Negro until he was exhausted. I was holding my hands behind me at that time on my left side, because I suffered from polio when I was six years old.

After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted, the State Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack.

The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolman ordered the first Negro who had beat me to sit on my feet—to keep me from working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to hush.

representation, but also clearly imagined as a narrative tool through its ability to signify upon the connections between political ideas and historical experiences of varying density and ephemerality.

. 3 .

Bambara's literary interrogation of the civil rights movement through the contours of personal and collective memory is one of the modes through which she reconfigures the narrative expanse of *The Salt Eaters* into a political and historical soundscape that improvises upon the more recognizable strains of collective memory framing the 1960s and 1970s black public sphere. Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall explains the problematic nature of historical memory in narratives of the civil rights era as follows: "[R]emembrance is always a form of forgetting, and the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement—distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks, and various artifacts of mass culture—distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals" (1233). The tracks of memory, as Hall envisions them, enable a sedimentation of the political imagination by manufacturing versions of historical "truth" that obviate the complex, asynchronous nature of historical change. One way of thinking more deeply about the stakes of Bambara's intervention against the hegemonic constructions of historical memory that Hall diagnoses is to consider poet and literary critic Elizabeth Alexander's meditation on the relationship between the "black interior" and the creative project of "imagining the racial self unfettered, racialized but not delimited" (5). Taking Alexander's cue to imagine black aesthetics as a window opening onto possibilities of self-fashioning outside of the external and internalized enforcement of what she terms "Negro authenticity," we can read Bambara's formal innovation as a way of accessing existence and experience beyond "stereotypical black realism" (7). The fact that Bambara's experimentation very carefully details late-seventies intricacies of the African American cultural and political economy is emphasized by a hingelike quality operating across the

temporal expanse of the text, ultimately connecting the sixties era of political mobilization to the evolving social formations of the last quarter of the twentieth century.

This move highlights Bambara's efforts to recast the aesthetic as central to ideas of political struggle, a possibility that Herbert Marcuse elaborates in his late-seventies volume *The Aesthetic Dimension*:

The critical function of art, its contribution to the struggle for liberation, resides in the aesthetic form. A work of art is authentic or true not by virtue of its content (i.e., the "correct" representation of social conditions), nor by its "pure" form, but by the content having become form.

(8)

Marcuse is here discussing the battle for "truth" that is waged across the landscape of aesthetic innovation. This "truth of art" is measured not by a social realism that reflects the recognizable workings of society, but rather by "its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who establish it) to define what is real" (9). In a stance that echoes the critiques of Georg Lukacs lodged in differing, yet overlapping ways by Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and Benjamin, Marcuse seeks to recuperate the role of aesthetics from a characterization as mere expressive form, steeped within a notion of high art and devoid of political engagement, into an active critical presence that might help redefine the means and stakes of political struggle.<sup>10</sup>

Bambara's ideas of politically transformative cultural practice are further elaborated in her essay "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye." In this account Bambara addresses the transformative goals of

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10. For a concise, thorough documentation of these arguments and positions regarding aesthetics and Marxist theory, see Taylor. While I will not be able to fully explore this connection within the space of this essay, it also bears mentioning that Marcuse was writing this work in the context of his affiliation with the new left in the U.S., his personal relationship with Angela Davis, and his proclamation "I still consider the radical student movement and the Black and Brown militants as the *only* real opposition we have in this country. There is no other. Or, if there is, at least it remains concealed to me" ("Movement" 1). My point here is simply that we consider the ways in which Marcuse's ideas, rather than being a template through which to theorize Bambara, might instead be put into a broader conversation reflecting the mutuality of influence between black radical thought and Marcuse's late work.

political art in a third world, anti-imperialist context. Recalling the early-seventies efforts of black independent filmmakers to substantively break with the dominant filmic conventions taught at the UCLA film school, she points out how these creative, political artists “recognized cinema as a site of struggle” (90):

[They were] engaged in interrogating conventions of dominant cinema, screening films of socially conscious cinema, and discussing ways to alter previous significations as they relate to Black people. In short, they were committed to developing a film language to respectfully express cultural particularity and Black thought....

...Proponents of “Third Cinema” around the world were working then, as now, to advance a cinema that would prove indigestible to the imperialist system that relentlessly promotes a consumerist ethic.

(92-93)

I understand the concept of “developing a film language” to more broadly refer to aesthetic attempts at navigating the vexed relationship between radical theories of social transformation, such as Marxism, and the constantly forming, transatlantic body of what Cedric Robinson and others have conceptualized as “the black radical tradition.” Bambara’s efforts to create a sense of aesthetic indigestibility as a critical and artistic enterprise calibrates ideas of resistance with the texture of their representation. In other words, the alternative sphere that Bambara uses sound to fashion within the novel is largely shaped by an impulse to create a form “indigestible to the imperialist system,” a condition determined by the degree to which it can operate through narrative moves and forms of representation that explode the sensibilities of order and progress undergirding mainstream political life.

Bambara’s theoretical points concerning the rejection of conformity as a political strategy are framed at one point in the novel as a tension between alternative organizational structures and mainstream formations of black politics. This critique emerges through Velma’s memory as she recounts a meeting of grassroots community organizers—“A group that sometimes called itself a committee of this organization or a task force of that association or a support group of this cause or an auxiliary of that” (28)—including her sister Palma and her godmother Sophie, who have

come together to decide if they will support Jay Patterson, a presence clearly representative of post-movement black political co-optation, in his bid for county commissioner. Velma's ambivalence regarding Patterson's candidacy gains traction as it becomes clear that he has been exploiting Velma and the other black women organizers as workers "expected to carry the load" by laying the groundwork for his campaign (31). In this way, Patterson fully takes advantage of an unformalized structure facilitating grassroots mobilization while also enfolded the women activists within his self-serving mantle of black political leadership. Bambara uses this window into the complexity of black political transition to focus on the gendered dynamics of retrenchment, co-optation, and black political hegemony, for while the women organize the conferences, make travel arrangements, and complete large amounts of procedural and paper work, they observe that only Patterson and his accomplices relish the limelight, "drinking at the bar" (37). While shifting between Velma's memories of these contentious moments in the Claybourne black community and political organizing, Bambara freezes the narration briefly on segments of Velma's speech signaling the independent position of the more radical, grassroots black women, who term themselves "Women for Action," in opposition to the politically stagnant articulations of black masculinity offered by Bambara's impressionistic rendering of Patterson through Velma's perspective:

Who's called in every time there's work to be done, coffee made, a program sold? Every time some miscellaneous nobody with a five-minute commitment and an opportunist's nose for a self-promoting break gets an idea, here we go. And we have yet to see any of you so much as roll up your sleeves to empty an ashtray. Everybody gets paid off but us. Do any of you have a grant for one of us? Any government contracts? Any no-work-all-pay posts at a college, those of you on boards? Is there ever any thing you all do on your own other than rent out the Italian restaurant on the Heights to discuss the Humphrey-Hawkins bill over wine?

(36-37)

Velma's questions build systematically to show how the male-centered qualities of Patterson's political presence are connected to broader ideas of decadent middle-class comfort and luxury that become points of tension throughout the movement. These dynamics

are highlighted in the text through the narrative turn orchestrated by Bambara's blending of the questioning voices of the Women for Action with Velma's remembrance of her earlier experiences as an activist in a demonstration at the state capital, when the black "leader" arrives with his entourage at the muddy, tent city of weary black marchers. His arrival is cast as an assault on Velma's senses, as his appearance represents a great discrepancy with the material conditions of struggle among the rank-and-file organizers:

Exhausted, she was squinting through the dust and grit of her lashes when the limousines pulled up, eye-stinging shiny, black, sleek. And the door opened and the cool blue of the air-conditioned interior billowed out into the yellow and rust-red of the evening. Her throat was splintered wood. Then the shiny black boots stepping onto the parched grass, the knife-creased pants straightening taut, the jacket hanging straight, the blinding white shirt, the sky-blue tie.

(35)

The sensory nature of Velma's resistance to this style of black political leadership, hegemonically reproducing and reflecting the structures of power being critiqued through the movement, continues in her assessment of the leader, who "looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcolm's, dressed like Stokely, [and] had glasses like Rap" (35). His rendering as more of a collage of recognizable, desirable qualities of black political leadership than as a leader creates an opportunity for Velma to quickly disassemble his veneer of radicalism.

Yet Velma's deeply critical awareness of what is happening is not enough to allay a sense of crisis that moves through the sounds and sensations of her memories. Indeed, memory here moves between layers of temporality and psychic space: Velma's recall of a dinner conversation with her husband, a memory within that memory of the first time they met, a separate memory cast within the dinner conversation memory of the meeting with Jay Patterson, and ultimately, the memory that Velma summons while present at the confrontational meeting over Patterson's candidacy, of journeying from the tent city to use a phone at the hotel where the leader is staying so that she might contact others to bring more support for the hungry, sick, and tired demonstrators dwelling in the tents. The contrast between the tent-city conditions, with Velma's own body breaking

down from the stresses and fatigue of living in the flooded tent city, and the smooth, “dulcet tones” of the leader is too much for her to take: she responds by breaking a mirror in the hotel lobby that is reflecting images of the leader in red silk pajamas and his “men without their sunglasses, hair glistening fresh from under stocking caps and fro cloths . . . the women clean and lean and shining, prancing like rodeo ponies . . . tossing their manes and whinnying down the corridors” (39).<sup>11</sup> The shattered mirror becomes not only a fitting sign of breakdown and crisis brought about by this disjunctive vision of black political engagement amid luxury, excess, and removal from the masses; it also leads to Velma nearly having her neck broken by one of the leader’s men as he physically removes her from the hotel. Recovering from the gravity of this confrontation, Velma finds that she cannot speak, for “the words got caught in the grind of her back teeth as she shred silk and canvas and paper and hair. The rip and shriek of silk prying her teeth apart. And it all came out a growling” (41). The last image before the actual growl of a “rip and shriek of silk” goes back to another key theme in the scene, and chapter in general, because silk travels the length of this first extended memory related during Velma’s healing. It is the silk of the “Chinese pajamas” being worn by the leader in the hotel that Velma begins recounting to her partner, “James Lee Henry, called Obie” over a meal, as their relationship is falling apart and the chain of memory and political thought begins to take shape (20). The deep, discordant growl within Velma’s memory is also heard in the present of the novel, thus bringing the past audibly into the present, as Minnie Ransom welcomes the sound from Velma and takes it as a sign that she will indeed recover.

If we think about these connections spun by Bambara—from the analysis of Jay Patterson and the retrograde gender politics he practices under the guise of black political power, through Velma’s scathing critique of the duplicitous black leader trying to capitalize on the grassroots activism within the tent city, to Velma’s growling

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11. Bambara’s specific use of equine female imagery resonates strongly with an account provided by an unnamed King associate, quoted in David J. Garrow’s *Bearing the Cross*: “He loved beautiful women. . . . The girls he ‘dated’ were just like models. . . . the girls were tall stallions, all usually were very fair, never dark” (375; second ellipsis in original).

response to the situation that serves as a first step in her recovery—there is a way that this blending of sounds and images illustrates a radical possibility for redefining the social and political as acts in process. The historical movement of images, ideas, and ultimately sound reflects the confrontation between Velma’s memories of particular political experiences and the ongoing rearticulation of race and gender subjection. An understanding of historical knowledge outside of linear narratives, into zones such as the bodily and the sonic, offers the prospect of distilling and framing through sound the possibility for radical change contained within the category of lived experience. Instead of simply representing and recognizing the reality of political corruption, the ways in which leaders and ideas behind movements can become co-opted, this account centers these facts as both historical and sublime bodily and sensory knowledge. In this sense, Bambara’s project represents a search for modes of transgressive expression in the face of a political and epistemic U.S. system that utilized the sixties era as a period of destabilizing and integrating civil rights and Black Power ideologies into the increasingly repressive state apparatus.<sup>12</sup>

. 4 .

As the healing progresses in the Southwest Community Infirmary, a parallel scene emerges in which the sonic dimensions of Bambara’s compositional practice create space for the simultaneous consideration of seemingly disparate experiences, weaving the narration through the collective harmony and dissonance of various characters’ memories. This aesthetic formalization of the sensory is enabled through the signification of actual sounds that mobilize memories and which, in turn, provide windows into political histories generated well outside of, but in dialogue with, elements of political reflection and contingency framed by Velma’s healing. The thematic and narrative elements that unfold from this juncture in the story emphasize Bambara’s approach to temporality and rupture as a means of suggestively framing issues of politics and form.

The scene in question is initiated as middle-aged bus driver Fred Holt sits at both a literal train crossing and the metaphorical

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12. There is a wealth of writing on this topic. Prominent texts include Allen, Harding, and Marable, *Capitalism and Race*.

crossroads in his life and that of the book, watching a “flock of birds in a low swoop over the train . . . sharply changing direction and heading back over the roadway as if pulled by an invisible hook” (67); waiting for the train that is “taking its own sweet time” (66); and listening to the women of the Seven Sisters (a radical women of color political art troupe that includes Velma’s sister) discuss their plans for participating in the Claybourne Festival. Holt begins to be brought into a series of thoughts and memories connected by interwoven referents, unleashed by the roar and whistle of the train. Initially, he expands on the presence of the whistle, bringing himself into a set of thoughts that recall elements of classic blues lyrics: “Hear that long lonesome whistle . . . riding the blinds . . . Please please mistuh brakeman, let a po’ boy ride yo’ train . . . O the Rock Island Line is a mighty good . . . How long, how long has the evening train been gone . . . I’m Alabamee bound” (69; ellipses in original).

These internal lyrics are given further weight when Holt refocuses on the visuals surrounding him and quickly begins to meditate on a group of hobos, “in tatters huddled around a burning trash can. . . . It could be the Depression again, he was thinking” (70). This shift becomes an invitation for further historical and political reflection as he provides a recounting of his childhood through the Great Depression, specifically, how his family could get enough to eat only due to his train worker uncle bringing “food from the dining cars wrapped in napkins and stuffed in shoe boxes” (70). A series of mental links between his life and broader issues in the black political economy continues and intensifies as he bridges his memories of the Great Depression with the current conditions of inflation (which he characterizes as “the high price blues”), underdevelopment, and environmental destruction.

Concurrently, another narrative line emerges that remixes the visual destruction that Fred Holt is taking in within his present against layered visions of his own complex history. First, there is the memory of his childhood home burning down, at some level due to his own complicity:

The fire that time and him leaning against the house throwing up his insides. Trees like blazing giants with their hair aflame, crashing down in the fields turning corn, grass, the earth black. Birds falling down out of the sky burnt and sooty like bedraggled crows. The furniture blistering,

crackling, like hog skins crackled on Granddaddy's birthday. His mother dragging the mattress out sparkling and smoldering, beating it with her slipper and the matting jumping like popcorn all over the front yard. And her screaming . . . at him as if she knew. And she probably did.

(83)

The blaze is unleashed in his memory, playing off of James Baldwin's pivotal 1963 essay "The Fire Next Time" while reminding us that the nausea defining his state during the bus trip was also present at this other crucial moment in Fred Holt's life and might suggest the specter of apocalypse. On top of this destruction, as described through Holt's recollection, is the tenement that was erected on the site of the fire and later blown up:

And near the crater that had been their home was the pit that had been the elevator shaft down which he'd dropped Sen-Sen wrappers and matchbooks. . . . And down at the bottom of the shaft the other dumpage. Eleven dead bodies. The rotted remains of bill collectors, drug dealers, wives, husbands, raped and missing girls of East St. Louis.

(73)

This horrific accounting of urban destruction, "renewal," violence, and general loss culminates, first, in his throwing up the lunch of chili that he has been feeling ominously in his stomach the entire trip—a reaction that also seems related to the general unease he feels in wading through the reflections that his senses have helped stimulate and process.<sup>13</sup> Then, as the bus is five minutes outside of Claybourne, Bambara describes the portentous moment following Holt's telling the passengers they are approaching the town: "All conversation stopped. Mouths agape, gestures frozen, eyes locked on the driver's cap, or back, or Adam's apple, arrested, as if the announcement were extraordinary, of great import" (85–86). Not only is movement and sound frozen at this point, but a list is created of where and who the passengers could instead have been, leading to the sense that they

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13. There is clearly a way in which Fred Holt invokes the Yoruba figure of Eshu-Elegba, or Legba, particularly through Bambara's invocation of the crossroads to begin the scene, and possibly reflected in Holt's nausea as symbolic of physical reactions to forms of spiritual initiation or possession. See, for example, the work of Robert Farris Thompson in *Flash of the Spirit*.

also “might’ve been twenty-seven miles back in the moment of another time when Fred Holt did ram the bus through the railing and rode it into the marshes” (86). As they are cast in this moment, “[i]n the sinking bus trying to understand what had happened, was happening, would happen and stock still but for the straining for high thoughts to buoy them all up . . . sinking into the marshes thick with debris and intrusion” (87), they in many ways come to symbolize the participation of helpless people not fully understanding just how dire a present situation has become, in the construction of grand historical moments. This surreal moment in the marshes flows back into the scene of healing in the Southwest Community Infirmary. All of this movement and potential for existence within space and time casts the experience as something ritualistic, a state of awareness and silent stasis being achieved by a small group:

Silence on the bus as at a momentous event. But an event more massive and gripping than the spoken word or an accident. A sonic boom, a gross tampering of the weights, a shift off the axis, triggered perhaps by the diabolics at the controls, or by asteroids powerfully colliding. Earth spun off its pin, the quadrants slipping the leash, the rock plates sliding, the magnetic fields altered, and all, previously pinned to the crosses of the zodiac and lashed to the earth by the fixing laws, released. A change in the charge of the field so extreme that all things stop and are silent until the shift’s complete and new radiations open the third eye.

(87)

The phrasing of this particular moment is rich in its deployment of sound as an epistemological framework, starting with the fact that the sonic boom audibly marking the event is “more gripping than the spoken word,” and concluding with the observation that “all things stop and are silent.” The second-to-last phrase here, “all things stop and are silent,” alludes to how the absence of sound precedes the opening of the “third eye.” If the third eye indeed signifies knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, then the period around its opening would most likely involve a deep awakening, possibly achieved through the recognition of sonic forms that precedes their categorization within vocabularies of communal, ritualistic consciousness.

Meditations on the premusical sonic impulses of black creativity, what Nathaniel Mackey refers to as an attempted recovery of a collective “phantom limb,” are clearly expressed by J.D., a musician on

his way home from prison, who links the political and spiritual awakening on board Fred Holt's bus to the sonic creativity and inspiration that have yet to be commodified in the formal vocabularies of jazz, blues, rap, or perhaps the general category of music:

[H]is fingers splayed out on the horn case, trying to connect with the music. A tune had caught him and held him in a moment when speech, movement, thought were not possible. Something in an idiom that had to be attended to from the total interior, captured, defended.

(87)

This conception of sound as an unfettered force circulating around memory and experience becomes a framework for Velma's later thoughts regarding the sublime quality of the "terrible musicalness." Her memory details the underground life of a sonic virtuosity that creates resistance to racialized subjection out of a commitment to push the aesthetics of cultural expression beyond the knowable:

She could dance right off the stool . . . her head thrown back and singing, cheering, celebrating all those giants she had worshipped in their terrible musicalness. Giant teachers teaching through tone and courage and inventiveness but scorned, rebuked, beleaguered, trivialized, commercialized, copied, plundered, goofed on by half-upright pianos and droopy-drawers drums and horns too long in hock and spittin up rust and blood, tormented by sleazy bookers and takers, tone-deaf amateurs and saboteurs, underpaid and overworked and sideswiped by sidesaddle-riding groupies till they didn't know, didn't trust, wouldn't move on the wonderful gift given and were mute, crazy and beat-up. But standing up in their genius anyhow ready to speak the unpronounceable. On the stand with no luggage and no maps and ready to go anywhere in the universe together on just sheer holy boldness.

(265)

This vision of the creative artist, harnessing the "tone and courage and inventiveness[,] . . . speak[ing] the unpronounceable[,] . . . ready to go anywhere in the universe together on just sheer holy boldness," proposes the sonic as a realm through which resistance and innovation might be considered in their aesthetic and bodily registers. Velma's visions of the musicians, "those giants she had worshipped," in many ways mirror her own trajectory as an underappreciated

political organizer and artist (being a pianist herself). As a political, aesthetic project, the ability to realize these alternate possibilities for reflection and critique outside of a linear narrative of social movement and leadership presents a conjuncture between what Velma, as a community worker, and Bambara, as a creative cultural worker, are searching for.

Bambara presents an idea of musical sound here that bridges Velma's perception of the visionary and transgressive qualities of black musicians with Minnie Ransom's selections of jazz and blues played throughout the healing session. As the healing builds toward its conclusion, the music ultimately becomes fused with the sounds outside of the session, propelling Velma through a kaleidoscope of psychic, imagistic, and phenomenological reflections on her political experience set within an asymmetrical continuum of issues and individuals marking the social and political space of the town:

The music drifted out over the trees toward the Infirmary, maqam now blending with the bebop of Minnie Ransom's tapes. Minnie's hand was before her face miming "talk, talk" graceful arcs from the wrist as though she were spinning silk straight from her mouth. The music pressing against the shawl draped round Velma, pressing through it against her skin, and Velma trying to break free of her skin to flow with it, trying to lift, to sing with it.

(168)

The music being discussed here is beaten out on the drums by the "pan man in dreadlocks and knitted cap. . . . trying to educate people about the meaning of the pan, the wisdom of the pan," and becomes a line of interconnection between Velma's interiority and the present space of Claybourne (167–68). Playing his drum in the Regal theater for Miss Geula Khufu's belly-dancing class, "like a man possessed," the pan man points the way for Velma toward the memory of the marshes, where she arrives after "eavesdropping" on visions of herself and the two men most recently in her life: Jamahl, the New Age prayer partner ("jive nigger in a loincloth and a swami turban" [168]), "whose so-called solutions to the so-called problem always lay in somebody else's culture" (169), and her husband, James (later Obie), with whom she is "locked in a struggle that depleted and strangely renewed at the same time" (168).

As she narrates these ambivalent memories and visions, through reference to the “needle in her mind,” an imagined phonograph playing the sound of her memories back to her, Velma decides to “lift the needle, to yank the arm away, to pull apart the machinery in favor of her own voice” (168).<sup>14</sup> The search for this idiom of her own brings Velma to thoughts of the marshes, a landscape existing between the surrealistic projection and memory:

She waited. And it was no different from the waiting most people she knew did, waiting for a word from within, from above, from world events, from a shift in the power configurations of the globe, waiting for a new pattern to assemble and reveal itself, or a new word to be uttered from the rally podium, from a pamphlet picked up at the neighborhood bookstore. A breakthrough, a sign. Waiting. Ready. She waited as though for a battle. Or for a lover. Or for some steamy creature to arise dripping and unbelievable from the marshes. She waited for panic.

(170)

The stark imagery of waiting set within a landscape marked by the simultaneity of familiarity and dislocation proposes waiting as a mode for considering the contingencies rather than solid lines of defeat and possibility, or perhaps the dialectical emergence of possibility within a notion of defeat. The contrast between what Velma waits for as compared to her sense of what most people are waiting for turns on the point that she does not expect to have her waiting appeased by “a new pattern,” “a new word,” or “a pamphlet” to tell her that a goal has been achieved. Velma’s waiting is instead defined by the indeterminacy of love, war, the supernatural, and the anarchic.

This innovative, fecund quality of the marshes intensifies as Velma connects the feeling of waiting for “panic” in the marshes to the possible meaning intoned by sounds of the drumming of the pan man outside of the infirmary, as Bambara conveys her thoughts: “Panic. Pan. Pan-Africanism. All of us. Every. God. Pan. All nature. Pan. Everywhere. She was grinning, as she always grinned when she was

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14. Separate critical attention should be dedicated to thinking about Bambara’s engagement with the phonograph and psychic space alongside Ralph Ellison’s prologue to *Invisible Man*.

able to dig below the barriers organized religion erected in its push toward a bogus civilization" (170).<sup>15</sup> Recognizing the marshes as a "site of metamorphosis," while hearing the "sounds surround her" amid the force of "a pulling down," Velma strives to find some way of articulating and preserving the transformative potential of this scene (171). She recalls that her earlier visits to the marshes "had failed to inform her days and her nights . . . had failed to inform her mind," thus setting the backdrop for the void in Velma's life leading up to her suicide attempt (172). Bambara uses this pivotal scene to highlight a tension between the terror of historical stagnation and the simultaneous possibility of its dilation. Although the sense of terror or dread is never conclusively confronted by Velma, she is able to lower her barriers to the music, allowing herself to be immersed in it through a sensory modality similar to that experienced in her meditative connections with the natural world. This particular convergence of temporality, space, and the sonic represents a potentially revolutionary movement inside of narrative and historical time for Bambara. Velma's seeming inability to find words or music of change in the presence of the marshes might be replaced by her willingness to merge with the healing sounds of Minnie in the Infirmary, as the scene ends and she "shuddered and sank deeply into the music" (172). This shuddering is a sign of self-knowledge rather than defeat, as Velma realizes that the process of sonic healing represents a search for an expansion of the political that cannot simply be removed if a movement is incapacitated. Sound thus mirrors Bambara's description of Velma's perception of time "not speeding up but opening up to take her inside" (171).

It is this fusion of sensory and political possibility that marks the movement into political renewal for Velma, a renewal through forms of healing which challenge structures of Western knowledge through an eschewal of hegemonic epistemological formations. In the portentous opening to the twelfth and final chapter, Bambara presents this convergence, as Velma enters her final stages of healing,

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15. The possibility exists that the "pan man in dreadlocks" who pays close attention to the possibilities of Word, Sound, and Power and the oneness of life represents a Rastafarian presence in the text, thus expanding the diasporic scope of Bambara's spiritual/political lens on black life.

achieving a state of being in which she is “[u]nderstanding now, still and watching like a sphinx, poised, centered, music coming at her through cracks in the walls, floors, window frames” (251). In this concluding chapter, Bambara moves between the visions of apocalypse and transformative hope as Velma becomes rejuvenated amid a dizzying set of images and comments suggesting an unknown future that exists after a yet-to-come shift, which may or may not be signaled by the beginning of the Claybourne Spring Festival reenactment of a slave uprising (occurring in real time during Velma’s healing) as a stage for a post-civil rights era insurrection and engagement between radical, underground black activists and elements of a retrenched U.S. police state. The music is crucial at this stage of the novel because of its ability to grant Velma a level of atemporal, projective movement through imagined and real political landscapes:

A brass band coming, shiny sounds making the passageway slippery. The barrier down as promised and she can skip along now. Cymbals crashing by her ear and the leaves shuddering as the procession passes. She waits in the branches of Philo 101, time streaming along below her in the tree. Dogs caught in the shower shiver, growl and bite the curbstones. Cats with their ears laid back hiss, seeing what the marchers will not train themselves to see.

(251)

The poetic cadence and collagelike sensory depictions of Velma’s vision render a scene underscored by the fact that it contains a sense of the unknown which exceeds the vision of the marchers. The concluding eruptions of sound in *The Salt Eaters*, whether they are comprised of song, voice, or environmental noise, are imbued with the capacity to remap the expanse of black historical resonance through the way that the aurality of the textual moments fuses memory, futurity, and the present. Bambara’s material literary practice can be seen as an aesthetic engagement that both grounds the local and expands the global aspects of the text. The political and formal qualities of sound emerge from its power to create and relate ideas at a more fluid, functional, and expansive level than might be encountered through a linear conception of temporality and historical narration. In this sense, the healing qualities of musical sound are layered within the momentous quality of the sonic boom that is heard as thunder, as an explosion at the Transchemical plant, and more ephemerally as the moment when Velma “started back toward life,” and as a point at which several other

characters become poised to recognize, only years later, the political significance of this eruption (278). For Fred Holt, it will be “six years later when his son was finally able to trace him to the Resettlement Center” (279). In the case of Dr. Julius Meadows, “none of it would really come together as a coherent and focused narrative until the summer of ‘84 when he lunched with Mrs. Sophie Heywood and Mrs. Janice Campbell . . . and heard the younger woman hold forth on what to expect now that Pluto had moved into Scorpio for a long spell” (282). Velma’s ex-husband, Obie, continues to convey a sense of temporal and phenomenological reorientation instilled by the sounds of historical and environmental rupture as he bears witness to the sonic event while preparing for a more directed series of insurgent political actions orchestrated through the Academy of the 7 Arts. This time line of political action is reinscribed by the force of the sonic event, as Obie “duck[s] to escape whatever it was thundering towards him” (291). His reflections on the situation are framed within the lingering aural-ity of the moment, what can be seen as Bambara’s creation of new political space for the consideration of the unimaginable:

Stripped by lightning, he would say in the days ahead, his flesh fallen away and nothing there on the back step but his soul with the stark impress of all the work done and yet to do, all the changes gone through and yet to come, all the longing and apprehension as he’d watch human beings becoming something else and wondering what it had been like for the ancestors watching the first wheel be rolled down the road.

(292)

Bambara’s balancing of the unknown qualities of the upheaval marked by sonic disruption against the healing renewal of Velma resists a vision of political futurity as linear progression. Working instead through the rhizomorphic qualities of sensory projections, Bambara creates a soundscape of political possibility that forces readers to linger on the moments that might constitute the contours of a political field, rather than a determinate sense of its path. Such a contingent quality of sound is elaborated by political economist Jacques Attali, who explains the political possibility enfolded within the “immaterial production” of musical sound as a mirror that “relates to the structuring of theoretical paradigms, far ahead of concrete production”: “It is thus an immaterial recording surface for human works, the mark of something missing, a shred of utopia to decipher, information

in negative, a collective *memory* allowing those who hear it to record their own personalized, specified, modeled meanings, affirmed in time with the beat—a collective memory of order and genealogies, the repository of the word and the social score” (9). In light of the capaciousness of sound suggested within the formal construction of networks of meaning in Bambara’s novel, I would like to suggest that *The Salt Eaters* presents a model of literary form in which conditions of historical possibility in the text are enacted through an aural map that troubles the lines between sound, image, and text. Rather than looking at Bambara’s project in the general tradition of African American texts borrowing from black music, or steeped within a broader tradition of postmodern literary aesthetics, I see the organization of the text as an effort to think through the political moment of the late 1970s through sound structures that envision spaces of meaning outside the boundaries of more traditionally conveyed history.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Bambara’s artistic exploration of late twentieth-century black history might be recast on a more subliminal plane where, if we think in concert with Toni Morrison, “the underground life of a novel” is able to “link arms with the reader and facilitate making it one’s own” (32). In this way, Bambara mobilizes the capacious power of sound as a strategy for charting the bodily, psychic, and phenomenological possibilities for resistance to the segmentation of political, aesthetic, and spiritual life.

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16. The sense of a space-time continuum that Bambara’s use of textual sound explores and reconfigures does speak to an effort at epistemological disruption of the kind formulated through surrealists in the first half of the twentieth century and theorized by writers such as Marcuse and Fanon in the 1960s. Across these efforts, intellectuals share a commitment to eroding the maintenance of hierarchies of reason, difference, and social stratification. Reading Bambara’s work within this constellation should be seen as part of the larger project of expanding interpretations of black radical thought. On this point, see Fred Moten’s invaluable study.

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