

## Performance Matters

# Surface Listening: Free Association and Recitation in the Wooster Group's The B-Side: "Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons" A Record Album Interpretation

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Volume 8, Number 1, 2022

Sound Acts, Part 2: Receiving and Reflecting Vibration

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089678ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089678ar>

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### Publisher(s)

Institute for Performance Studies, Simon Fraser University

### ISSN

2369-2537 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Napolin, J. (2022). Surface Listening: Free Association and Recitation in the Wooster Group's The B-Side: "Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons" A Record Album Interpretation. *Performance Matters*, 8(1), 54–72. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089678ar>

### Article abstract

This essay is a critical narrative of an experience of listening to the Wooster Group's The B-Side: "Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons" A Record Album Interpretation (2017). The performance is a verbatim recitation of a 1965 ethnographic recording by Bruce Jackson of African American men toasting and singing works songs just before Texas prisons were desegregated. African American actors on stage hear the album through earpieces and re-perform songs and toasts in real time as the LP plays on a turntable visible (but mostly inaudible) to the audience. Their interpretation "transmits" the album to an audience. The essay, continuing that work of transduction, draws from the psychoanalytic notion of "free association" in order to think through the possibilities and limitations of listening across race and gender. It argues that association is a reciprocal way of listening and making theatre. It is also a way of working through history (recorded and unrecorded) in the face of intractable frameworks of racial antagonism in the United States. The essay assembles and "associates" photographs, songs, and excerpts of interviews with the show's makers, as well as pairing concepts from the literature of listening and the archive of Black sonic performance.

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## HERMENEUTIC LOOPS

### Surface Listening: Free Association and Recitation in the Wooster Group's *The B-Side: "Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons"* A Record Album Interpretation

Julie Beth Napolin



Untitled, 1965. From left to right: Unknown, W. D. Alexander, Mack Maze, Joseph "Chinaman" Johnson (squatting), Lawrence Smith. Ellis Prison, Huntsville, Texas. Photo by and courtesy of Bruce Jackson.

In 1964, incarcerated men in a segregated Texas state prison gathered before an ethnographer's field recorder and sang work songs, toasted, and told tales known intimately to them. They had likely never recorded their voices before. In one of many photographs taken by the ethnographer, Bruce Jackson, some of the men gather in the plantation fields of Ellis Prison, their work shirts open, looking down in the attitude of listening at something difficult to see. Nearly concealed in the frame, a tape recorder sits in the overgrown grass and plays back their voices. I sense a sound from the photograph, having listened many times over to *Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons* (Elektra, 1965), a mass distributed recording of their voices captured by Jackson just before these prisons were to become desegregated. Perhaps they already imagined the propagation of their voices beyond that moment of recording, beyond the photographic frame, beyond the record itself. Half a century later,

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the Wooster Group's *The B-Side: "Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons," A Record Album Interpretation* (2017), directed by Kate Valk, presents a verbatim recitation of Jackson's 1965 ethnographic recording. Three African American performers—Eric Berryman, Jaspar McGruder, and Philip Moore—listen to the recording live on stage through in-ear receivers and re-perform the record in real time as the LP plays on a turntable visible (but mostly inaudible) to the audience. The performers hear the recording and then “transmit” it to us. They are its medium.

*The B-Side* is, to some extent, about Berryman's desire, he says in the show's preamble, “to learn the songs, *really* learn them.” Berryman, the MC and cocreator of the show, had already been learning to recite the songs and toasts on *Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons* when he attended a performance of *Early Shaker Spirituals*, a 2014 Wooster Group performance, also directed by Valk. It “channels” a 1976 LP of the same title. Its performers listen to the recording of religious songs through in-ear receivers and present a verbatim recitation. Berryman, who is Muslim, heard in that technology an artistic possibility for the record he had been studying.<sup>1</sup> Sitting in the audience of *Early Shaker Spirituals*, a multiracial cast of both men and women, Berryman thought to himself, “I have to figure out how to do this with work songs.” Prison songs, he also thought, could be enjoyed in the way that one readily enjoys and sings along to Bessie Smith (Berryman, interview by author, June 6, 2020). After the show, he drafted an email to Valk. He did not yet know her or that they would work together to create a show.

It is undecidable whether the company joined with Berryman or Berryman with the company, a story I will not so much relay as transmit here. *Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons* became the source of a companion piece to “*Early Shaker Spirituals*” (hence “the B-side”). The record testifies to experiences in prison and what predates them, the men being inheritors of songs whose origins lie in slavery: recitation is essential to the record's formal existence. Recitation, Korean American novelist and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha ([1982] 2001) has shown, is a linguistic tool of colonial education as well as a politically necessary tool of testifying to histories of collective violence. The two exist side by side, painfully but not irreconcilably. *The B-Side* has everything to do with the politics of playback and the ethical implications of reciting, where voices also appear beside rather than against one another.

The Wooster Group works as an ensemble, with its longstanding and salaried members but also a number of artistic “associates” whose main work traditionally lies elsewhere (Berryman, McGruder, Moore, and Jackson are all associates, and some, like Jackson, are not actors). These associates continue to be listed in the company's biography to the extent that they continue to be “current” and work with the ensemble. There are, finally, “founding and original members.” As an artist leaves the company or ceases to associate, they are no longer listed. The biography of the company is somewhere between a foundational past and the most-current present. The in-between is not so much elided or even “lost”—a term favoured by archivists and so-called “blues hunters” (Brooks 2021) alike—as it is no longer a node or continued site of association. Something of this temporality resembles the psyche. To free associate as Freud understood it is to follow the “train” of whatever might come to one's mind, so as “to make it possible for the analysand to form relationships between what was and what is” (Silverman 2005, 40).<sup>2</sup> Thought assumes an audience—the Freudian Pair—which refers “the monologic nature of solitary inner speech to the dialogical structure of a two-person relation” (Bollas 2002, 7).

*The B-Side* would at first appear to be monologic. Yet, it takes inner acts of listening and bears them before an audience so as to engage in a number of pairings—between performer and director,

performer and ethnographer, performer and audience, and the Wooster Group and itself. This latter pairing involves a self-conscious commentary on the work and traditions of the Wooster Group, returning the makers to the company's previous work. Free association can include the "return of the unwanted," such that its freedom is also framed by resistances (Bollas 2002, 9). "Thus free association is always a 'compromise formation' between psychic truths and the self's effort to avoid the point of such truths" (9–10). The show's provocation, for me as only one listener, is the question of what it means to associate across race, gender, and age, for Berryman to associate with Valk and Jackson, to have entered the Wooster Group's Performing Garage, and to change the group's longstanding way of making a performance.<sup>3</sup> A largely white theatre audience in New York City—and in the kind of black box theatre whose spatial politics are tied to a long history of white performance—is asked to listen to a work that is listening to itself and to Blackness.

"The song tradition documented in this book no longer exists," Jackson writes in the preface to *Wake Up Dead Man: Hard Labor and Southern Blues* ([1972] 1999). "It ended the day segregation in prisons ended" (vii). It depends on who is writing the history, on "who speaks," as Roland Barthes ([1967] 1977) might say, but also on "who listens" (Napolin 2017, 2020). *The B-Side* reopens Jackson's declarative statement to inquiry. The tradition, which began on "brutal plantations of the Deep South" then to survive the Civil War on the southern agricultural prison farm (Jackson 1972, vii), no longer exists, but the songs surely do. In the Atlantic world, Blackness is tied up with strategies of orality as memory and performance as historiography. The songs and tales, oral in their beginnings, travelled from mouth to mouth, from body to body, being collective in their authorship and purpose. The recording by Jackson captured these still-transforming songs in one shape that continues to be transmitted. But it is only one record of what was and is multiple.

Jackson made this recording on the cusp of de jure desegregation, which remains an ongoing, incomplete event, as much as the "imagined community" that is America might claim or wish otherwise (Anderson 1983). Race in the United States continues to be lived and framed through narratives and experiences of an intransigent Black and white antagonism. It feels like an intractable framework of American life. *The B-Side* does not so much escape these antagonisms as unfold a series of ethical implications about what it means to listen, and under these conditions. The freedom of its association—how Berryman, Valk, and Jackson came together to make the show—bears profoundly on the songs whose beginnings were unfree. They are recited in a world where the past is not yet past.

Ron Vawter, one founder of the Wooster Group with Elizabeth LeCompte, remarked that their work involves "going back over the tapes of the twentieth century to see what had happened, to see what had gone wrong" (Etchells 1999, 102).<sup>4</sup> It is a concrete summary of the politics of recitation as pedagogy: to understand what has gone and is still going wrong, you have to go "back over" it. This movement is a foundational modernist concept of ego psychology. I have described elsewhere how, with the composition of "Mourning and Melancholia" in 1920, Freud understood the ego to be a kind of phonographic record that stored and replayed voices from the past; they are the voices most hurtful to and indicting of the self.<sup>5</sup> In the talking cure, one goes over and recites these voices with another—listening and self-listening open the possibility of transformation.

In the case of the Wooster Group, these records, though linked to the company through personal attachment and desire, are cultural, historical, and iconic. In pursuing "what had happened, . . . what had gone wrong," Freud sought the hidden depth of voices recorded by the ego. The Wooster

Group preserves their surface. New York choreographer Annie-B Parson (2016) describes surface as the “exterior of the work,” that is, “how it appears” (n.p.). It can be lifted and placed onto another surface, as would a layer that shapes the presiding surface differently. French historian Michel Foucault (1982), whose aversion to psychoanalysis is well documented, would perhaps call this going back over the surface of things a *remanence*. It is an enunciative analysis that deals with appearances, which contrasts with a historical analysis that seeks a statement’s originating subjectivity or a postulated interior to which its imputed meaning can be traced.<sup>6</sup> Literary theorists Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus would here invoke the notion of “surface reading” that deals in “presences,” rather than hunting for imputed absences. Such remanence is to “let ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts *of*” (Best and Marcus, quoted in Klein 2013, 666). Verbatim recitation is to go back over the tapes, not their animating event, but in the enunciative surfaces events leave behind.

To repeat and retransmit also forms the ligaments of circum-Atlantic historiography, where to engage in song, dance, gesture, and ritual is already to have remembered (Roach 1996). In *The B-Side*, then, the Wooster Group’s traditions of enunciative analysis, or sourcing, replay, and reenactment collaborate with Black sonic historiography and its traditions of memory. Those traditions, though they predate modernity, were also sundered by it. They cannot be separated from the fact that, from the moment enslaved people made contact with the New World, traditional memory was violently suppressed. The wrongdoing *The B-Side* rehearses is foundational to modernity in its memoriality, that is, its constant sense that to do is to do again without being fully able to undo. The work necessarily trades in the suppression of memory and its remanence even as it goes over the tapes and what escaped them.

To interpret this going over, an association between Black performers and a historically white company, demands that one move between two literatures of listening. *The B-Side* joins the archive of Black sonic performance as surrogation (Roach 1996). What Foucault calls the statement’s “survival in time” (1982, 124) is paired with fugitivity and escape. “The fugitive enacts by enunciative force,” writes critical theorist Ashon Crawley, “by desire, by air, by breath” (2016, 6). Oral enunciation depends upon an atmospheric passage and, as such, cuts through the concept of the individual, which is premised upon the property relation.<sup>7</sup> “From the Latin *ex-* meaning out and *nunitus* meaning messenger,” Crawley continues, “enunciation . . . carries a word, a phrase, a plea, a praise, a prayer, a psalm” (36). African American singing—whose condition Crawley rescues as the simplest attempt to “keep on breathing,” which lies behind all “narratives of escape”—has always been dangerous in the New World (35). The Wooster Group’s techniques of reenactment and their formal arrangement of the ethnographic artifact become what they could not have been otherwise: a future historiography. It is “gifted,” as Du Bois ([1902] 1999) says of the African American spiritual, “with second-sight in this American world” (10). In singing, toasting, and preaching, the three performers enunciate the recording anew; two and perhaps more spaces associate.

I sat in the audience many times over. What follows is an ensemble and a critical narrative that free associates, bringing the literature of listening, quotations, songs, and interviews into contact. I present on the page listening to and remembering *The B-Side*, all acts of listening being what critical theorist Peter Szendy (2008) calls an “arrangement” (99). I have arranged these associations, some of them scenes of listening within listening (mise-en-scène becomes mise-en-abyme), some of them things overheard and left unsaid. Listening, as a concept, is at the heart of what it means for *The B-Side* to associate. In making his field recording, the ethnographer listens to incarcerated men; these men listen to themselves and each other; the actors listen to the LP as it is played; and they listen to themselves listening, as they also sing what they hear; and the audience listens. The source material

(the phonograph record) and its “place” (recorded in Texas but replayed in New York) moves from location to location, encounter to encounter, enunciation to enunciation: a record album makes contact with the performers’ own associative memories and desires, but also those of the audience. The force of enunciation in *The B-Side*, its “voice,” will prove to be fundamentally expropriated. For one link in the chain of associations willingly admits what is outside of it. This voice is associative not only in its logic but in its being: it is not quite itself, never quite in its place, not belonging to anyone except when to be found in the redoubling strategies of association, as a way of being together and making theatre.

### Free Association, or “Low Waves of Meaning”

Berryman, a young man of thirty, comes to the foot of the stage and introduces himself. He is dressed in a t-shirt, khaki pants, and sneakers, standing before the audience both as an actor and as himself. Berryman is positioned behind a small table where a record player sits. He holds up the old record cover for the audience to see. I linger on a photo of Berryman and Moore taken by Jackson (who on many nights sat in the audience). It captures a *mise-en-scène* that stayed in my memory long after seeing the show for the first time.



Eric Berryman and Philip Moore in *The B-Side: “Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons,” A Record Album Interpretation*. Photo by Bruce Jackson, 2017; courtesy of the Wooster Group.

The photo, like the phonograph record, captures a fleeting moment. Berryman looks into the distance, palms opened and gaze raised, as if in worship. Lying on the table next to the record player is Jackson’s book of oral history, *Wake Up Dead Man*. It begins with a series of voices of incarcerated men, also taped by Jackson between 1964 and 1966 and transcribed by him. Jackson excerpts and

collages these voices, testimonies to life on a penal farm, by placing them in rapid succession and without attribution, as if to capture in print orality and what Jackson experienced as a chorus of sentiment (“a new heading indicates another speaker, another time, another place,” he notes of its associative presentation [1]). Berryman reads one of the voices transcribed there, and throughout the show, he reflects on the tracks to come by returning to the book while also, without the audience’s awareness, adding from Jackson’s other publications (it is more important that he appears to be reciting the book verbatim, highlighting the show’s pedagogy even as it conceals some of its making). A talking book, he gives voice to the once spoken but now written testimonies as well as to their framing by Jackson.

Jackson took the photo above and many others, photography having accompanied his writing and recording practices from the beginning. His most well-known photos are printed in the book that accompanies Alan Lomax’s recordings of Parchman Farm, a state penitentiary in Mississippi. Now in his late eighties, he sat in the audience of the Performing Garage half a century after having travelled to Texas to record and photograph the men at Ellis. The photo of Berryman and Moore is not unlike the first photo of the men listening in the field in being a recording of a recording. Behind Berryman is a screen, and projected onto it, a video image—somewhere between still and moving—of the intimate, private space of his apartment in Harlem. The shifting image of the apartment is situated at the threshold of the public and private. In one image, I see his bed and a pile of phonograph records, and in another, a chair and a window bearing a dreamcatcher. Superimposed on this private space is the live-video image of Moore, who faces Berryman out of frame (in this moment, his back is to the audience, and he and McGruder sit in chairs on stage facing Berryman, an audience inside of an audience). Here, Moore’s visage is only visible to the audience because the live camera feed, a longstanding technique of the Wooster Group, projects it onto the screen. Moore doubles himself, both present and telecommunicated. They are photographed by Jackson, not as an ethnographer but as an audience member, who is, too, encountering multiple selves.<sup>8</sup>

Berryman does not stay stationed behind the table in the traditional position of the DJ. He moves around, both DJ and MC. The show is a constant rearrangement of the physical space of listening in the black box theatre, which lacks a proscenium stage and its implied fourth wall. Here, however, he has moved beside or alongside the record player. His position is exemplary of what I have called, after the philosophies of Du Bois ([1902] 1999) and Martin Heidegger, an “alongside voice,” as a way of being with, listening to, and aesthetically deploying quotations in the world (Napolin 2020, 134, 281n65). The aesthetics of being alongside involves transferring across—the domain of both translation and transduction, from the Latin *trans-* or “carry over across”—but without overcoming or subsuming physical, spiritual, and political difference in a field of associations. In this way, each object in the photograph of Berryman’s apartment marks a distance in space and time from the fields and penal spaces of Ellis as they were fifty years ago. The audience is meant to see him as a “modern man,” Valk says (Kate Valk, interview by the author, February 7, 2019).

The superimposed image of the apartment is, in this way, a hinge between realities, but also between ontologies of repetition and supplementation, which is to say whiteness and Blackness. The Wooster Group’s techniques of superimposition engage a “black technopoetics” that defines the doubling strategies of technology in the Atlantic world (Chude-Sokei 2015, 11).<sup>9</sup> The LP that Berryman, McGruder, and Moore listen to is inaudible to the audience, but in some moments, the off-stage sound engineer brings it up into the house mix. An echo of it persists just below my awareness, and that trace of audibility contributes to a dynamic event of synchronization and desynchronization. The technologies of the record player, in-ear receiver, and stereo amplification summon the ghosts:

it is a dub, from the patios *duppy* or “ghost” or “spirit,” a word that took on global significance as it moved from out of the dancehalls of Kingston, Jamaica. The Wooster Group’s techniques of doubling are given new meaning in *The B-Side* as a Black diasporic art, one audible in dub and the Yoruba trickster figure. The power of the mix, double exposure, and echo is to inflect one reality dialogically with another other.

I consider the two photographs alongside each other, 1965 and 2017. Berryman once told me that the photograph of the men gathered listening to the tape in the fields of Ellis hangs in his apartment, so I imagined it before I saw it; I wrote to Jackson to ask if he could send it to me. “Often a purely formal bridge—a position, an accent, a detail—effects the passage from one place or an image to another,” writes French playwright Jean-Christophe Bailly of associative logic (2020, ix). For Bailly, two seemingly unrelated photographic images “slipped below consciousness,” as if in a dream: one a ladder in pastoral France, the other a nuclear shadow of a ladder burned into a wall in Hiroshima or Nagasaki (it is not known which). “The two images thereby revived,” he continues, “but they began to function in tandem, and to emit a unique, low wave of meaning” (ix, xii). A dream, but also a historical truth. One photograph haunts and makes way for the other, a channel, such that it is no longer possible or, indeed, necessary to say which comes first in a series. To listen in the mode of free association is to find a “word, image, body movement or turn of phrase striking,” Bollas notes. The listener “will not know why this is so” (Bollas 2002, 30).

Only a few years after seeing the show for the first time did I see Jackson’s photograph of the men of Ellis. Both images, of Berryman’s apartment in Harlem and of the men listening to the recording in the field, are conditioned by a tremendously brutal yet invisible force in the making of the New World. To be sure, such force stands behind and is archived within the enunciation of the state apparatus that incarcerates. It is literalized in the police hail— “Hey, you!”—to which Marxist theorist Louis Althusser (1970) credits subjectivation, or the becoming-subject of the individual before the law. But the singers’ enunciative force—fugitive and vibrating between spaces and times—is unrelated to the subject and the individual.

It becomes necessary, then, to distinguish the kinesis that moves between the images—also between the men of Ellis, Berryman, his cop performers, and their audience—from the force that characterizes the making of the subject in the Western philosophic tradition. The kinesis of the form is “elemental,” musicologist Shana Redmond (2019) describes in the context of the African American spiritual. These elements, including vibration, are the “fundamental, indivisible . . . pieces that, when combined, produced the new world,” Redmond writes. “These elements compose the past that we compel ourselves to recall and the futures that we do not yet know” (Redmond 2019, xi–xii).<sup>10</sup> The enunciative force of *The B-Side* is an announcement, irreducible to an Althusserian scene whose principal purpose is to subjugate and individuate.

As its enunciative future, the photograph of Berryman’s apartment ghosted by Moore is already implied by the photograph of the men listening to themselves in the field at Ellis. This earlier photo is implied as a concrete nonabsence, not a presence, for the men of Ellis did not know how far and in what way their voices would carry nor for whom and for what kind of profit.<sup>11</sup> Being a low wave of meaning, the truth of their association is vibratory. This vibration does not so much precede the images (a chronology) as it is ongoing. It is embodied in one moment by their proximity and wordless intimacy, their association. The low wave, though no doubt overdetermined and contingent, cannot be separated from the way it appears in a particular association. One photograph



could not simply be replaced by a similar one: their existence in time and space, as well as their relation, are singular.

The dream catcher in the simple apartment and the men of Ellis gathered for a moment of rest and enjoyment: together, these images become not iconic but vernacular. Photographs of Black vernacular life, photography historian Tina Campt suggests (2017), emit a vibration unrelated to the sensibility awakened by the confrontation with the spectacular, neither the silence of the grave nor the snuffing out of voice by violence, but a quietness. They may capture a person's movement through institutional worlds, like the immigration photo. They move a viewer in their primacy, "constituted primarily by vibration and contact and . . . defined as a wave resulting from the back-and-forth vibration particles in the medium through which it travels" (Campt 2017, 7).

Though opposed, these dual forces—kinesis and subjugation—together organize the recitative sensorium of *The B-Side*. Behind it is the quotidian fact of a pair, the fact that one association can move and link to another. Moore appears superimposed in the live video as a ghostly image in Berryman's photograph of his apartment (ostensibly where he first listened to Jackson's recording). In perceiving that image, also an arrangement, the audience is asked to mark a space or opening for the predecessors, those who are no longer with us but who made the event possible. In its pairing of two rooms, the image is tilted, as if seated on a precipice of the invisible. The dreamcatcher is both a corridor through which images pass and a gatherer, which catches and absorbs. It is a mark of a pan-Indigenous space in the violent making of the Americas but also a marker of the ongoing chain of associations. To be sure, this sign has often been commodified, appropriated, and misused. I dwell on it meditatively, seeing there an escape route, a hatch into the unseen.

This photograph physicalizes the ethical question of how one can become open and receptive to otherness at all. The question is not one of retrieving the ghosts or past selves, as if something about the past might be objectively known (which, as I will return to, includes the fraught past reception of the Wooster Group itself). The show begins with a comportment—the opening—by which one can become aware of the uncaught, nonaccumulated sonic trace. This alertness, sensing behind and beyond oneself, unseats the imperial feeling of knowing, of having been first on any scene. To write alongside *The B-Side* is necessarily to participate in its ongoing, low wave of meaning. The phonographic device ceases to be premised on the nineteenth-century imperial desire for capture and preservation, which entangled the invention of the phonograph with the technologies of canning and embalming (Sterne 2003). Such a desire echoes the erection of cemeteries in the New World. These "cities of the dead," according to Roach, were a sanitizing barrier between the living and the dead meant to suppress Black assembly. Yet, "amid the formal requirements of Eurocentric memory," Roach continues, "there erupts a counter-memory" (1996, 61)—a Black historiography.

*The B-Side* is an encounter with storage and reproduction technology attenuated by these spiritual and racial meanings: the ventriloquist is no mere reproduction but sounds "prognosticating echoes" (Chude-Sokei 2015, 73). This sense of association—forecasting through repeating, or a prognostication through harkening back—begins even before the record plays and the performers sing on stage. Berryman does not move the tone arm to begin the act of playback until reading the names of the departed men on the album sleeve. It is a memorial:

Johnnie Adams, W. D. "Alec" Alexander, Virgil Asbury, John Bell, Douglas Cannon, James A. Champion, William Evans, John Gibson, James Hampton, James W. Hobbs, Louis "Bacon & Porkchop" Houston, Johnny Jackson, Floyd James, Lemon Jefferson, Jesse "G. I. Jazz" Hendricks, James Johnson, Joseph "Chinaman"

Johnson, C.B. “Snuffy” Kimble, Henry Landers, L. Z. Lee, Clem A. Martin, Leroy Martindell, Mack Maze, D. J. Miller, Houston Page, Marshall Phillips, Johnnie H. Robinson, Arthur “Lightning” Sherrod, Albert Spencer, Lee Curtis Tyler, David Walker, Jesse Lee Warren, Venesty Weles, George White, Morgan White, Matt Williams, and Eddie Ray Zachary.

Names have an uncanny dual power to summon: they both call what is by its name and call it into being (the language of Adam and Genesis). The hail is purely reiterative, an empty placeholder inhabitable by anyone (European philosophy’s phantasm of the subject). Berryman’s enunciation is thus suspended between incantation and recitation. It is both a genesis and harkening back. This duality of Black enunciation is literalized in the figure of the phonograph record itself, which becomes on the scene a “tabula rasa” upon which something new can be written only because something else has been erased (Marriot 2018).<sup>12</sup>

Reading aloud, Berryman both rewrites and overwrites. Its many logics function side by side, *The B-Side* being a lesson in reconciliation. Standing before the phonograph and the public, he does not say anything about how audience members are to listen; there are no instructions or mandates about how to respond, whether to give or withhold applause, whether to be silent or laugh. The recitation of names is a pedagogical clue in *The B-Side* that teaches me how to listen, marking the space and cutting it into two: the “here” and “there” of the receptive opening. The space is caught between the rewritten and the as-yet-unwritten, history and the dream, the overdetermined and underdetermined. If antagonism is determined in advance, where everything has already happened, then association depends upon the gift of contingency, a chance encounter.

### **Working and Working Through**

The lights fade just after Berryman holds up his copy of the record and tells the audience it is from his personal collection. Positioned between selves, between the personal and the theatrical, the present and the historical, the spontaneous and the recitative, he tells a story. “So, I was workin’ in a Chinese teashop,” Berryman begins. His first enunciation at the threshold of the stage has the curious power both to insert his personality and to withhold it (I can’t be sure if the show has begun or not). The audience is loosely constituted and assembled by this direct address. He tells us how he had first met Valk by overhearing her and a companion talking at a tea shop. He struck up a conversation and asked if they worked in theatre. Yes, she said, I am an actress in the Wooster Group (some in the audience laugh). In overhearing, the listener becomes a catcher in relation to a sound, the ear overleaping the dyadic unit of linguistics and subject formation, the addressee and addresser, to create an oblique space operating alongside the sanctioned one. Berryman’s own obliqueness—his proclivity to overhear—is itself a lesson in receptiveness. For me, some of the pleasure of the story derives from his dissimulation, particularly because to “know” the Wooster Group is also to know that Valk is a critically acclaimed actress.

Berryman continues to tell the story. He says to Valk that he realized he had just seen her directorial debut in *Early Shaker Spirituals*. On stage, Berryman recalls the show’s cast as a “bunch of white ladies.” In reality, it was multiracial, but the joke works to underscore the “place,” as it were, of his Blackness, localized in the visual fact of his skin as it appears in this historically white space, but also the place, more unlocalizable, of his voice in relation to his acts and modes of listening. To whom

shall the show be credited? If it is to be credited not to a voice but to listening, then such a question becomes misguided. The preamble is less concerned with fact than it is with framing.

It was not long after their first encounter that they came together to develop the show. After its initial development, Valk and Berryman had been unsure how to begin. Valk recorded and transcribed Berryman telling the story of their chance meeting to an audience in Korea, Berryman later learning that transcription and reciting it verbatim. He becomes a speaker, listener, and reader at once. It is unclear and perhaps unknowable if, when speaking to the audience in Korea, Berryman intentionally elided the “g” of “working.” Berryman reproduces a version of himself as he was before that particular audience abroad (it is possible that the performers were the only Black people in the room that night). Recorded and transcribed by Valk, perhaps the pronunciation is an artifact of white listening, just like Jackson himself drops the “g” from “working” in his opening transcription of anonymous African American men at Ellis in an effort to write their accents. The effect of Berryman’s recitation is uncanny and polyphonic, somewhere between spontaneous, colloquial speech and the reproduced, or rehearsed and strategized. Musicologist Derek Baron (2020) describes the effect as a “flickering” between vernaculars (135). The elided “g” signifies, but what? His Blackness or his Americanness, or both and for whom? Perhaps it is a sonic trace of migration. “I have no deep ties to the American South, all of my family has primarily for more than a century been based in Maryland and frequented Philly and New York,” he replied when I asked. “I am born and raised in Baltimore. Which is not the Deep South but is technically the south and was a slave state. I never thought of myself as southern until I got out of Baltimore and somebody heard me say ‘Y’all’” (Berryman, email to author, November 2, 2020).

Berryman told me that the songs, for him, represent “the root” and “the beginning” (Berryman, interview by the author, June 6, 2020). What is the origin of a voice? To speak is already to sound like others. One must seek not origins but what Edward Said (1985) calls “beginnings.” The ear of the other may, nonetheless, restlessly attempt to “root” a person’s voice, to suss out the traces of origin. But the “voice” is made of the most pliable material, not only rooted but “routed” (Lipsitz 1997). From the moment *The B-Side* begins, it poses the question, what does it mean to sound Black? The old literary question, “who speaks,” can only be answered through a pairing: who listens?<sup>13</sup>

Berryman is well aware that he stands before the mostly white audience in the Performing Garage, which has never before seen an all-Black cast in this space. When he sees Black people in the audience, Berryman tries to find them after the show, curious to know how they heard of it at all. He told me about this curiosity after performing one night, just before scooting away to find some young people he had seen, a scene of listening within a scene of listening, a paratextual encounter. Berryman also told me that McGruder and Moore are neighbours in the same apartment building. Moore, a long-time associate of the Wooster Group, joined *The B-Side* when Berryman and Valk came together to develop it. He told McGruder about it in their shared hallway. McGruder said he knew that record and its songs well. A performer himself, he joined the cast. These are the informal spaces where theatre begins, not unlike the empty chair below the dream catcher in Harlem in which I imagine Berryman listening to music.

The story of the Chinese tea shop both marks and transgresses the boundaries of inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. The story, as recited, is ambiguous and leaves open the possibility that Berryman served Valk in a more traditional sense. It introduces a different register of labour in a show that takes work songs as its material and gestures to, without underscoring, the fact that an audience may harbour questions about a power imbalance. What he does not say in his opening

address is something Berryman corrected in my earliest draft of this essay. “I was not working” at the shop, he wrote to me. He was apprenticing to become a tea master. But that is not the line in the show, repeated night after night. It is significant that Berryman rejects the very phrase that appears in his studied, onstage self-description (I will not say “originates in” because who knows what conversation took place between actor and director to direct the story). To be sure, speakers continually adequate themselves, their words, and sonorities to a hypothesized or sensed reception of others. Black speakers must continually modulate the voice in a world defined by anti-Blackness (Stoever 2016). Perhaps “working” (or “workin’”) was the best way to explain it that night in Korea; perhaps it remains the best way to explain to an audience at the Performing Garage.

The preamble indirectly addresses a skepticism that some audience members might bring to the Garage in advance. To go back over the tapes in *The B-Side* involves a self-conscious commentary on the Wooster Group’s use of blackface in the past, in *Emperor Jones* and other shows directed by LeCompte. *The B-Side* was not directed by LeCompte, who, to some extent, steps aside in her own company so that others can inhabit new roles. It was directed by Valk, an actress who appeared in blackface in other shows. Though an oblique commentary on the Wooster Group’s traditions, the self-consciousness of *The B-Side* is not an attempt to undo them. For that would be to claim that the current work is merely a reaction. Berryman’s opening story begins in medias res (“So, I was workin’ . . .”). *He* tells us how far back to go (recall that the company bio includes only the foundations and the present). If you want to know where to begin, in other words, listen not to the depth but the surface. Berryman tells Valk what show he had seen (*Early Shaker Spirituals*). It is a story of chance encounter. The show is “about” what it means, or what it *can* mean, for Berryman to have encountered the company and, in turn, for the audience to have encountered Berryman and the record through the company.

In this midst of this association, the video image of the apartment in Harlem inserts a cut or *nota bene* in the theatre: a reminder that the threshold of the room, the one in which I, or “we,” sit listening, surpasses its tentative boundaries and four walls. It is a meditation on the theatrical space’s social constitution and limits. This “we” is not formed in advance, and it will also vary from night to night. Writing of the Rodney King trial in the United States, Black feminist theorist Christina Sharpe (2012) notes King’s often-quoted question in the aftermath: “Can we—can we get along?” In its stutter or redoubling, it is an “almost unaskable yet repeatedly asked question surely connected to a history of terror; surely connected to the pronoun ‘we,’” Sharpe writes. To seek a language for white consumption of Black suffering and for “historical and present violence,” Sharpe continues, is labour that splits Black people into both “witness and participant.” King’s repetitive question indexes that split, as if two selves speak, or one speaks and another listens, the one a witness and the other a participant. This self-reflexive split is endemic to recitation itself. Sharpe suggests, after the work of Elizabeth Alexander, that for King to have repeated the almost unaskable question (the almost unaskable first-person plural) is to look “for the join” (2012, 828).

*The B-Side* asks its audience to listen to the join. In joining Berryman, the Wooster Group takes up something far less contained than in previous works. *The B-Side* resounds four hundred years of the Black Atlantic, making the theatre its transducer. Black being is in the room. In this preamble, also a metaphysical opening, the audience is asked to take a risk, and not only because familiarity with the Wooster Group will not go very far. It amplifies the space of encounter qua encounter, which frames the replaying of the record. Berryman recounts on stage how he told Valk that, not knowing her, he had already hoped to be in touch. After he sat in the audience of *Early Shaker Spirituals*, he immediately started drafting on his iPhone the email “to someone named Kate Valk.” Not yet

having an address, he saved a draft without an addressee. The chance encounter is an oblique space where associations drift outside of the dyadic units of subject and object, which are unoccupiable and empty linguistic placeholders.

Indexed on the stage in a corner, where a teapot and two cups sit, tea is a marker of that space as well as of Berryman's praxis as an artist: to become suffused. Berryman comes from a family of prominent jazz musicians, and he often heard music played at home, also learning saxophone from his uncle. Because his battered copy of *Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons* was without the original liner notes, Berryman laboured over the tracks, replaying them again and again as mp3s, struggling to hear the words through the men's bygone southern accents. He was engaging in the work of transcribing the songs while also learning to sing them: he was working over their surface. The songs, but also toasts and tall tales, were so stunningly present to him that he thought they must not simply be listened to but recited.

When he and Valk began working on the show, Berryman was twenty-seven years old, the same age as Jackson, a Jewish man from Brooklyn, when he took his recording trip to Texas funded by Harvard. Berryman found Jackson's email address and, after writing to him twice, had not heard back. The emails were lost in a digital non-space until they arrived, much delayed. Again, something of free association is outside of the sender/receiver dyad. The show is an accumulation of these associative, contingent movements. It is not a given that the show would take place. Its having happened is premised upon almost having not. Berryman learned that Jackson had already written down the lyrics of the tracks in the original liner notes, which he sent to Berryman. The two began to correspond, forming a friendship premised upon reciprocity, a love of music, orality, tales, talking, and listening. Two techniques and motivations; one shared object (the record).

The technique of verbatim recitation involves becoming host to what Valk calls the "source." "You are thinking, I know this . . . but you have to go back always to listen. . . . We go back together, collectively. You perform and then you come back, come back to the source" (Valk, interview by the author, February 7, 2019). From this perspective, the source cannot be fully mastered. It is absolute in its capacity to produce differences. These differences are constituted as much by the strength of individual collective memory as by its weaknesses and failures. The past reproduces itself in the present, but, like the source, it is infinite in its detail.

To go back over the tapes and see what went wrong is not to master the past but to return to it so that a different relationship to the present can become possible. Certainly, a cultural institution can engage in antiracist training or receive a mandate to change from without, but that cannot take the place of going back over the tapes, a version of what Freud called "working through." Though Freud meant the depth of the self, he also meant its surface. Linguistically, mental processing or "working through" (*Durcharbeitung*) is a close companion to revision (*Verarbeitung*, or "workmanship" in the sense of processing and finishing). The two terms, one theoretical and the other practical, are closely related in Freud's corpus. He was an author who announced his ongoing proclivity to revise his texts. To repeat, Freud also contended, is a failed form of memory; where we cannot remember, we repeat. In the Pair, we recite the past so as to open up the chance—not without its risks—that the story can end differently this time; it is a repetition with a difference.

Berryman explained to me how, in one early rehearsal, Valk directed Berryman to deliver a particular line differently. It was not a line from one of the songs, but from the pauses in between, where Berryman addresses the audience (reading from Jackson's writings and transcriptions). He remembers that she said, "You sound angry." Berryman explained to Valk that her remark was

injurious: it was freighted, though not intentionally, with a history of a white failure to listen but also with the fact that white women can call upon the force of the law to snuff out Black men. To associate is not to be free from the social; it is to be committed to it, committed even to “the return of the unwanted.” To take a pause such as this is to ask others to hear themselves and become witnesses to their own speech, or to do the work. It is to ask someone to become responsible (from the Latin, *respondere*, or “to respond”) for its effects, which can never fully align with intention. In *The B-Side*, performing and directing maintain themselves in acts of listening and returning; incomplete, sometimes, they must vulnerably and, still wounded, begin the work again.

*The B-Side* participates in this work of the chain of associations as both receptivity and risk. Its beginning is not with the Wooster Group nor with Jackson; it is with Berryman’s encounter with the record, which happens again, night after night. It is vocation, whose etymology shares that of vocalist, from the Latin *vocare*, or “to call” or “to invoke” (Cavarero 2005, 81). Berryman displays his iPhone on the stage, a sign of vocation in a transmedial, transitional space. There will be a calling. His phone sits on the stage next to the tea set and across from the analog record player that becomes strangely contemporary. It is oriented toward desire. Berryman’s opening address is a lyric one moving between two realities and temporalities, a given and a not yet.

## The Source

Nearing the second side of the record, the performers sing “See How They Done My Lord,” a spiritual that meditates on death and resurrection. Berryman’s vocal apparatus channels that of Houston Page, the tenor and lead on the original recording, someone who cannot sing as well as he, also an older man who hears a bit flat but also in quarter tones. Berryman reproduces Page’s swallowing, a man who seems to sing to himself, just before Berryman again becomes our narrator and MC, sliding into a youthful and well-projected vocality. The ghost flits away just after having overtaken him so completely. Berryman told me he had been drawn to the Wooster Group’s techniques precisely because they were an alternative to putting the record in a museum. The Wooster Group’s work, Valk said, “is an act of transduction. . . . The past comes through us, comes through our being. . . . We put ourselves with the artifact” (Valk, interview by the author, February 7, 2019). In *The B-Side*, the exactitude of recitation yields an ongoing, collective transduction. In Berryman’s phrase, he is not singing along to a voice; he is “in the voice”—a document of what Alexandra Vazquez (2013) might call “listening in detail.” The singer does not possess or master the voice, nor is the distance across which it sounds intractable. The recorded artifact is, in some precise sense, a resonator.

Berryman’s statement is, then, a subtle reversal of yet a companion to Valk’s comment on technique, that the “past comes through us.”<sup>14</sup> It relates to the cultural, aesthetic, and ontological specificity of what it means for African American performers to be channelling the voices of those whose ancestors were also property. Recitation is expropriating, not because it appropriates, but because it rejects the property relation of “having” a voice. Through the in-ear receiver, the vocalist hears not himself singing in the inner vibrating sanctum of self-hearing, but the voice of the other he is to surrogate. To listen to the record is to listen to the self. Traversing the in-ear receiver, listening folds the sounds outward from the interiority of reception. The sound is their reception; the reception is the sound, the ongoing work of listening twinned by sounding.

Before playing the record, Berryman turns his attention to the surface of the record, to the practice of cleaning it and the needle. It is a ritual of care for an artifact. The performer stands before the artifact as what Valk calls “the relic.” The relic appears: as a surface, it is visible, tangible, and open to the senses. Berryman’s desire “to learn the songs, *really* learn them,” an act of personal discovery, partners with but is irreducible to Valk’s desire and perspective as a director. No relic is indifferent to its modes of handling and listening, or what bell hooks (1992) calls, in the context of ethnography, “the perspective and standpoint” of the one who discovers (152). Finding and abandoning so-called “raw material” are not neutral matters of “personal choice” (152). The relic risks being appropriated by the white artist, but also the collector.<sup>15</sup> With *The B-Side*, the record is not something to have. Nor is it what Szendy (2008) calls “something to be heard” (99). In this case, to listen to the record—among its listeners are the singers on stage—is to “assume *responsibility for its making*” (Szendy 2008, 99). The three performers sing as they are listening; they are re-sounding the recording, such that singing and listening are simultaneous acts.<sup>16</sup> Berryman returns to the record with each new track, moving the tone arm. The record never leaves the stage and maintains its split status, both declarative (“this is a record”) and enlivened. *The B-Side* does not allow you to forget the artifactual existence of the recording, its distance and singularity, nor the voices of the enslaved people that, unrecorded, resonate through it.

The prison, as it echoes the slave plantation in the fields of Ellis, is connected to others like it along the Brazos and Trinity rivers, and cannot be heard directly in *The B-Side*, except in fleeting moments. “Rattler,” a song that moved along the rivers through Texas prisons, transmits knowledge of how to evade Walker hounds (Jackson 1965). In the recording, I can hear traces of the outdoors, the faint sound of birds just beyond the inner corner of the DOC where Jackson recorded it. In 1964, he did not yet own a portable recorder. The men were not singing in the field but rather anywhere Jackson could set up his device, like the prison dentist’s office. In a duet, these and other felicities of the source material, like Joseph “Chinaman” Johnson’s inimitable whistling, rise briefly into the house mix (the room where I am listening). *The B-Side*, as chronotope, does not so much include details as it refuses to diminish the situation of the recording’s event, its ambient setting. The performance is not only voicing and re-voicing; it is situating and resituating. It means something to be resituated here in the Performing Garage, and by Berryman, who has no direct experience of incarceration. The fundamental situation of sounds—incarceration and penal labour—is invisible except through these resonant and acousmatic contingencies. Through the continued presence of the video screen on stage, which displays not a prison, but Berryman’s apartment, the entirety of the performance remains an acousmatic event, a sound whose source is unseen.

It is imperative that there be no fictional elements in *The B-Side*. The theatre is continually heard declaratively as a theatre, never becoming something other than what it is. The performers do not attempt to look like the men in the recording, nor are there metonyms that would remind the audience of agricultural prison space.



Untitled, 1965. Ellis Prison, Huntsville, TX (photographer unknown; courtesy of Bruce Jackson). “I recorded a lot of tree-cutting songs that day,” Jackson wrote to me. Looking at the entire roll of film, Jackson did not see a field guard in any of the frames but supposes he had given his camera to the guard “and asked him to take the photos.” There is a missing third gaze framing and aestheticizing, but also containing and controlling the scene of encounter.

*The B-Side* does not attempt to overcome an emotional aporia, the gap between this free space and the unfree one, the painful fact that the performers, and “we” through them, are listening to men who were in prison. The performers ask for a certain kind of justice in not positioning themselves as speakers. They position themselves chiefly as listeners and receivers; they listen to what the record says, and in singing, they both testify and listen. The performers never claim to occupy the place of the missing men. It is in that distance that all the performance’s ethical charge is produced.

If in recording one can give “second life to things” (Coles 1997, 249), then in *The B-Side*, life and death, finitude and infinitude touch. The live video image visualizes the *memento mori* and multiplying effect. The three—Berryman, McGruder, and Moore—become the many, the community. Each of the performers is doubled, such that the three men are both themselves and, through projection, a visible sign of missing others, including Asian Americans and Black women.<sup>17</sup> Three men gather around the phonograph, hands placed on the table, below which sits a vestige of a stage, a small fragment or sign. It is just enough to create a minor distance through which theatre occurs. It is the natal space that opens each time storytellers and actors face each other and start something new.

When the record draws to a close, the last track, “Forty-Four Hammers,” continues to play from a small on-stage speaker. It was performed by the younger men of the DOC, and it bears traces of their modernity, their experience with AM radio and its modes of presentation, including the desire to be recorded and broadcast. Moore and McGruder leave the stage, and the stage lights dim. Berryman sits, his back to the audience holding his iPhone, to watch a final and fleeting moment of



cinema projected before us. It is a shard of archival footage, shot by Jackson and Pete Seeger, of the men at Ellis labouring in the field. It is the only image of penal space in the show. The audience sees their bodies swinging axes (“hammers”) in unison. Berryman’s face is projected onto the same screen through the live video camera pointed at him. I watched Berryman watching, thinking, and listening as the echo of the men’s axes filled the room.

Berryman brings the audience to the record album that compelled and haunted him. But what circulates in *The B-Side* is the part of the self that is not itself at all. The song issues not from the inner but the outer, which owes itself to others, whether ancestors or strangers. The Shakers called their practice “labor” and their songs “gifts.” Through transduction, the artifact maintains its being as a gift. The spiral groove disappears into the centre and returns to its source.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to the many forums that listened to versions of this work over the years. Gratitude to Daphne Brooks, Brian Kane, and the members of the “Black Sound and the Archive Working Group” at Yale; the “Black Entanglements of Visual and Expressive Culture” panel at the 2019 ASA convention; the organizers and members of “The Revolutions in Sound” conference in 2020 at the University of Maryland; David Buchanan, David Eng, Dixon Li, Kerry McAuliffe, Paul Saint-Amour, Chi-ming Yang, and the members of the “Latitudes Working Group” at Penn; Eric Berryman, Michael B. Gillespie, Bruce Jackson, Kate Valk, Julia Stern, and the anonymous peer reviewer, whose comments greatly improved this essay.

## Notes

1. Though I did not ask him, I wondered how the recitative valences of the Quran could be heard in *The B-Side*.
2. Silverman here describes the dynamics of transference, which carries the developmental past into the present as the analyst and analysand sit together in a room.
3. McGruder was already an associate. Moore had long been working in downtown theatre and with other company associates and members.
4. The Wooster Group has continually returned to forms of exact recitation of archival footage.
5. For a discussion of race, melancholy, and sound technology in Freud, see Napolin (2020).
6. In the enunciative field, statements “are residual,” that is, “they are preserved by virtue of a number of supports and material techniques” (Foucault 1982, 123–24).
7. Stephen Best writes, “Property is individual, i.e. indivisible (Latin, sixth century, *individuus*, from Greek *atmos*, not cuttable, not divisible)—‘not divisible,’ incapable of possession by any other than that ‘one’ who bears ‘title’” (2004, 326n91). Atmosphere is derived from *atmos*, and thus part of this semantic field. One thinks, too, of the *dérive*, which according to French Marxist theorist Guy Debord is “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances” ([1958] 2021, n.p.).
8. It would be another project to consider what it meant for Jackson to return to his ethnographic recording made so long ago and to listen to it made art by the Wooster Group (at present, he is writing such a project). Berryman continually asks Jackson, now in his late eighties, questions about his moods and writerly intentions when he produced these works in his twenties, stirring up memories of an old self that Jackson had forgotten.
9. Chude-Sokei adopts the broadest possible definition of the term “technopoetics” as the manifestation of the technological in the cultural, literary, and philosophical. “Black,” as a modifier of technopoetics, involves

the simple “historical fact that technology itself has carried racial meanings” prior to its engagement (2015, 11).

10. The “we” of Redmond’s statement is all human beings, but she never loses the sense that the kinetics of the African American spiritual, its “movement formula,” includes a “proximity to enslavement and other unfree labor.”

11. The carrying poses a fundamentally different relation to death and mortality than that ordained by racial capital. Slavery historian Daina Ramey Berry (2016) has shown how enslavement persists beyond death, enslavers accumulating value from slave mortality through a variety of legal and financial instruments, including speculation and insurance. In this way, futurity is harnessed not only through birth but in death. This harnessing goes for the recorded voice in its ongoing production of value through sales and distribution.

12. Drawing from Walter Benjamin’s Judaic thought, critical theorist David Marriott describes inscription and erasure as they characterize the messianism of Blackness and the anticolonial itself, which he names after Frantz Fanon, a “tabula rasa.” The anticolonial is, Marriott writes, “radically *unwritten*” (2018, 3).

13. For a discussion of the cultural politics of listening in relation to Black and white antagonism in the US, see Stoeber (2016). For a discussion of timbre in relation to African American music, see Napolin (2017) and Eidsheim (2019).

14. Thank you to Masi Asare, whose comments on the draft of this essay were invaluable to revising this section.

15. Daphne Brooks (2021) describes the expropriating practices of the blues hunter, the subculture of white men who travelled to the South in search of “lost” 78rpm records: “they pursue and stow away this precious ‘thing’ that they identify in the record” (281). It would take more space than I am allotted here to discuss Jackson’s complex relationship to the men he recorded, but it is important to recall his galvanizing sense that a tradition of song was about to disappear, or a salvage ethnography.

16. Working with Valk, Berryman learned this longstanding Wooster Group technique, and he says it took him more time than he anticipated to get used it. Becoming a student in this way, his voice was defamiliarized to some extent, since Berryman is not only trained in but teaches Lessec, a vocal method.

17. Asian Americanness and its uneasy relation to Black/white antagonism are marked by Chinaman’s unexplained nickname, Berryman’s apprenticing at “a Chinese teashop,” and the importance of the show’s early performance in Korea. Black women are among the storytellers the performers watch on a monitor that plays Bill Farris’s 1975 documentary *I Ain’t Lying* just out of the sightlines of the audience (they see it; we do not). Berryman borrows movements from the footage, stitched into his performing body. On the record, the men also sing to each other about women, longing for sex and romantic intimacy, as well as for the mother. Historian Shobana Shankar (2013) notes that work songs are historically associated with African American men, despite having been sung by incarcerated women (and also recorded by Lomax and others). “The fact that these women have remained largely invisible,” Shankar writes, “despite their public performances for men who became eminent figures in musicology, suggests a great deal about layers of inequality and silence—racial and gendered—in the very projects that aimed to reveal and record the Delta Blues” (2013, 184). See Brooks (2021), the first of a three-volume series dedicated to studying these and other African American women invisible to official history.

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