Mendi + Keith Obadike interview in Neural Magazine, *Critical digital culture and media arts · Since 1993.*

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Surveillance Surveyed

Mendi & Keith Obadike

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distance: 12 mi, duration: 1:13

Compass Song ScreenShot Guide My Feet

American Cypher at Davos

Your involvement at the end of 1990s in the rising net art international scene, was as one of a small few practitioners establishing a close legacy with African-American culture. Especially, among the works in your 'Black.Net. Art Actions' is your iconic net art piece Blackness for Sale (2001). In this work you were literally auctioning Keith's blackness on ebay.com. The auction was closed after four days because of "the 'inappropriateness' of the item", after receiving twelve bids. Back then, were you more focused on disrupting the blind trust in the internet as the new economic universal system, or were you trying to conceptually quantify discriminated and surveilled identities?

Net art was an interesting scene at the time. In this period we were interested in how bound up notions of identity were with new media aspirations, fantasies and aesthetics. For example, how does offline identity map onto online discussions and transactions? Many came online in the early days to escape the offline world and roleplay in a highly malleable utopia, but we expected the architecture of the internet to produce slightly different results. And, yes, we were watching the evolution online of social spaces increasingly marketed based on group identity or race, while internet art/art-

ists seemed to be completely unaware of this growing trend. Of course, what was happening with interesting sites like BlackPlanet, AsianAvenue, and MiGente.com was the beginning of the social web as we know it today.

Among 'Black.Net.Art Actions', the Interaction of Coloreds (2002), was even more sharply designed to play with these issues, pretending to implement an efficient "Interaction of Coloreds Color Check System® - the world's first online skin color verification system". With the progressive acceptance of surveillance over the years, including its underlying monetisation, how long do you think it would take for the described technology to become real and accepted?

With the Interaction of Coloreds (2002) our pun was both a play on the language of colour theory and race as well as the structure of the privatised web. It was about playing with our social ways of looking and its new tech expressions. The real Interaction of Coloreds is already with us. We see real versions of these kinds of tools in the biometric systems now used at national borders, the SeatID services offered by airlines, and consumer tools like Apple's FACE ID.

1.*

Your involvement at the end of 1990s in the rising net art international scene, was one of the very few establishing a close legacy with African-American culture. Especially, among the works in your 'Black.Net.Art Actions', in your iconic net art piece "Blackness for Sale" (2001) you were literally auctioning Keith's blackness at ebay.com. The auction was closed after four days because of "the 'inappropriateness' of the item", after receiving twelve bids. Back then were you more focused on disrupting the blind trust in the internet as the new economic universal system, or more trying to conceptually quantify the discriminated and surveilled identities?

M+K: Net art was an interesting scene at the time. In this period we were interested in how bound up notions of identity were with new media aspirations, fantasies, and aesthetics. For example, how does offline identity map onto online discussions and transactions? Many came online in the early days to escape the offline world and roleplay in a highly malleable utopia, but we expected the architecture of the internet to produce slightly different results. And, yes, we were watching the evolution online of social spaces increasingly marketed based on group identity or race, while internet art/artists seemed to be completely unaware of this growing trend. Of course what was happening with interesting sites like BlackPlanet, AsianAvenue, and MiGente.com was the beginning of the social web as we know it today.

2.*
Among 'Black.Net.Art Actions', the "The Interaction of Coloreds" (2002), was even more sharply designed to play with these issues, pretending to implement an efficient "Interaction of Coloreds Color Check System® - the world's first online skin color verification system". With the progressive acceptance of surveillance over the years, including its underlying capitalisation, how long do you think it would take, until the described technology will become real and accepted? And did you think it would ever have done it, when you conceived the project?

M+K: With the Interaction of Coloreds (2002) our pun was both a play on the language of color theory and race as well as the structure of the privatized web. It was about playing with our social ways of looking and its new tech expressions. The real Interaction of Coloreds is already with us. We see real versions of these

kinds tools in the biometric systems now used at national borders, the SeatID services offered by airlines, and consumer tools like Apple's FACE ID.

3.*
In your performance and sound installations "Numbers Series" you perform an abstract reading exposure of very controversial numbers, from, respectively: New York Police Department Stop and Frisk data, Ida B. Wells' book The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States, and from 18th and 19th century slave ship manifests.There are sounds generated in the background, seeming to reveal more with their tone and mood, than the careful pronunciation of numbers. Did you use such an abstraction referring to the historical radio 'numbers stations' broadcasting numbers, believed to be heard by intelligence officers operating in foreign countries? Or do you think about it as symbolic of our condition of being fed with data and numbers, which we can't properly relate to, if not primarily with our senses, as we do with sounds?

M+K: With the Numbers Series we were both interested in the aesthetic implications of old radio numbers stations as well as how we currently use numerical data to hide or reveal information. The databases we chose to work with both serve as a document andas a method of obscuring the violence they represent. The point of the clandestine radio stations, which gave us our form, was to secretly transmit a message over radio without being decoded by anyone but the desired audience. However, these broadcasts were at times reminiscent of early modernist electronic music. These things had a strange, hypnotic beauty to them. We wanted to use this form, as well as ideas from other sonic laments around the world, to create our own sonic dirge using data. Rather than obscuring information with these methods, our numbers stations reveal information. We are currently performing a new work in the series using international migrations data. Our questions in the works are: Can we feel a database? Can we as artists make this data visceral?

4.*
You contributed with the "Freaking the machine" chapter to the Sound Unbound anthology of texts, and here you write that "we recognise people as much by

sound as by sight". Can you elaborate more on that? And do you think that sound is likely to be used in the future as a medium to identify and 'quantify' people?

M+K: Much of our work is about how our senses work together to help us create narratives around which we build our sense of reality. If one small bit of sensory information is shifted, we often have to build new stories about the world around us. This interplay affects how we experienceeverything from people to architecture. We think we rely largely on vision, but of course our listening either confirms or invites us to further interrogate what we see. The ubiquity of sound as a prompt for interrogation is what makes it such a powerful medium for artists.

For example: What if you see the face of a friend, but then hear the voice of a stranger? What if you see a famous building on the horizon while hearing the inner working of the structure? How does it feel to hear a familiar tune in a strange place? These are the questions that excite us about working with sound.

5.*
'Americana Suites' was a series of works where you used various sound strategies to bring back and share key elements of the African-American rights movement and history, like the directional audio beams in the streets of Chicago, playing, like a bell, phrases of freedom songs at specific times; or the re-thought social role of Chicago DJs having guided conversations and private listening session using a playlist of similar freedom songs. How important is to be aware of the contexts of sounds we're listening (as well as their authors, dates, lyrics) in an era when the streaming platforms are facilitating a continuous and pleasurable enormous access to produced music, with less time and space for context?

M+K: Well in the Americana Suites many of the musical references are "collective compositions", meaning they are folk songs, refer to folk forms or African-American spirituals. We are interested in deploying these sometimes very recognizable works in new ways in order to speak to specific places. We believe that spaces give shape to music, and music give shape to spaces. By framing space with sound we invite people to reorient themselves in the space and to interrupt their story about when and where they are. Streaming platforms and

contemporary recording conventions of course generally deemphasize context. It is better for mass marketed music to be as portable as possible. And while context may be emphasized in someway, individual authorship is emphazed. With much of the folk material that we reference the point of origin for the material may be unknown, but how the music has been used is common knowledge.

6.*
Similarly you produced a smartphone app to 'sonify' New York's Times Square: the 'Compass' app. It can be used to hear voices with poems, stories about navigating the city, and quotes from the Civil Rights freedom song "Walk with Me", spread over a few blocks, with the background of a modulated drone sound aurally defining the Times Square perimeter. Do you think that mapping the public space with sound gives it a different historical value? And when the space is particularly famous or iconic, how much, in your opinion, there are subjective sounds attached to it?

M+K: Our intervention into Times Square sought make audible the sounds, stories, and music that were already present. Again, we would say it is a reframing of the space. These urban crossroads like Times Square are both sites filled with vibrant histories as well as being a place where people gather for commercial, political, and spiritual reasons. We sang the ambient sounds of the space, told stories that were embedded in the streets, and sang "Walk With Me," a song about seeking guidance while navigating a perilous world.

7.*
You have developed also a few works using sound through architectural elements. "Blues Speaker [for James Baldwin]" was one of them: a "24 channel sound installation that uses the glass facade of The New Schools University Center as a delivery system for the sound, turning the building itself into a speaker". Focused on sounds directly or indirectly related to Baldwin, it defines a sound space literally through architecture. Do you use the relationship between sound and space to allow the audience to specifically locate the sounds, or to allow the audience to gather around a sonic 'locus'?

M+K: With Blues Speaker we wanted to think about creating an immersive environment in which people could both pass through Baldwin's text and be more present with the city. In Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" the characters find greater empathy and understanding through listening. In the work we vibrated the facade of the building with ambient sounds recorded in Baldwin's old neighborhood, text from his writing, blues phrases, and a sonification of his name. We also invited musicians who engaged the blues in their work to come read the story on one of the landings of the building where the sound installation could be heard. This was one of the more directed invitations in the installation for audiences to consider sound in the space, but we experienced other questioning and gathering at the site of the installation during its time.

8.*
In "Fit (the Battle of Jericho)", you similarly used "special wall mounted speakers to vibrate the walls of the gallery" with voices panning back and forth, and using, among the other, a sonification of online data related to Black Lives Matter. How do you experience the juxtaposition between the infinite online space and the finite organic one? Is sound a possible meta-medium among these two dimensions?

M+K: Some of the questions in *Fit* for us were: Can we tell a story about dismantling architecture using this data? Can we make the search data related to Black Lives Matter into a song that takes up space in the room? Related questions are implied in the original song and Civil Rights anthem. We now live our lives steeped in data from the network. The piece was an attempt to make the music of the data have spatial implications. Sound is one way to give abstract numerical data volume.
9.*
You use data, sound and spaces altogether, in a political way. Do you think that when sounds and data become locatable, they assume a different value? And if yes, are locatable sounds more valuable then even from an online capitalism perspective, in your opinion?

M+K: As we said above, capitalism favors sound attached to a single author more than it favors sounds that are locateble. Location does matter, but authorship is much more important.

10.*
Finally, you both grew up with home computers in the eighties and started tinkering with them and other early digital gears. Do you think that that specific disconnected technology, meant to be tinkered and explored, was naively innocent, or just fitting an old different capitalist model?

M+K: Every generation finds ways to be creative in relation to the tools of its times. For us, both tinkering as children and making netart as adults are the result of us responding to the tools we have access to.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK   Mendi + Keith Obadike's SlowDrag is discussed in the last paragraph.

Counterpublic in St. Louis Pushes the Public-Art Envelope

One of the largest civic exhibitions in the United States challenges artists to help invigorate neighborhoods.

By Siddhartha Mitter

May 9, 2023

ST. LOUIS — Counterpublic, the innovative public art exhibition in this city that is holding its second edition this spring, cultivates its distinctiveness.

Its first iteration, in 2019, was a hyperlocal concept: a triennial at storefront scale, bringing projects by St. Louis and national artists to parks, bakeries and taquerias on Cherokee Street, on the city's south side.

This year it follows again a geographic method. But its footprint is much bigger, with 37 commissions along a six-mile axis. They range from monumental to barely-there.

Some are made to stay. Damon Davis, who earned notice for his art around the 2014 Ferguson protests, has built a tribute to Mill Creek Valley, the bustling hub of Black St. Louis that the city abruptly razed in 1959. It is a major public sculpture with eight pillars that embed names and memories of residents. They stand on the plaza of a new soccer stadium, with more pillars planned for other sites along a one-mile route.

In long-neglected North St. Louis, the British Ghanaian architect David Adjaye is erecting a sculpture of rammed-earth walls in a pattern that recalls the symbology of Ghana's Akan people on the grounds of the Griot Museum of Black History, a gift to this strapped community institution. And Jordan Weber, a regenerative land sculptor from Des Moines, is building a permanent rainwater garden for a community land trust.

Other projects are more abstract. A performance video by the choreographer Will Rawls, for instance, offers a m~
map of the intersection of Jefferson Avenue, the thoroughfare that the show follows, and Interstate 44. It feature
dancer Heather Himes Beal and screens in locations where it was filmed, including a library and a McDonald's. (It's
also online.)

In a riverfront industrial zone, a sound-and-video work by the artist X (previously Santiago X) is projected after dark
onto a bluff; it evokes how damming and channeling the Mississippi broke human connection to the river. A
newspaper box in front of the city sewer agency holds a publication by Virgil B/G Taylor, a Berlin-based artist who
has embarked on a kind of technical-poetic study of the sewer system, also yielding an Instagram chatbot.

In a more participatory register, the local artist Simiya Sudduth has created a mural on Jefferson but also welcomes
visitors in her vintage travel trailer turned healing space. Juan William Chávez, also based in St. Louis, has opened
up his native bee garden.

Woven through Counterpublic is some pointed urban sociology. The Jefferson Avenue axis is not arbitrary. With downtown to one side and the wealthier western areas to the other, it traverses the city's core. Some stretches bear marks of chronic disinvestment, others of creeping gentrification, still others of brutal "urban renewal" clearance.

This isn't just context for the show: It's also the creative stakes. Every project seeks to restore erased histories, uphold people or institutions that were or might be displaced, or bolster those who live in the wake. The methods deployed are wildly diverse. This is a program of experiments, pushing the public-art envelope in many directions.

Counterpublic has lofty aims. Its title — drawn from social and feminist theory — refers to parts of the public excluded from official narratives and resources. For public art, this translates to a challenge: Who is really being served? In a time when cities use biennials and other festivals to promote themselves as creative hothouses and destinations, this show seeks to revolutionize the form.

The goal, James McAnally, its executive and artistic director, writes in the catalog, was to create "a triennial that allied itself with generational, cultural, economic and civic change; a post-pandemic, post-uprising exhibition demanding that we, as arts workers and artists, do more to repair our broken world."

Put that way, it's a tall order. According to the organizers, over half the $4.5 million budget will "remain in the community" through local assets or commissions. But the commitment is also to method. The show consulted extensively with residents to shape its priorities. It takes pride in collaborations with local cultural activists. It asserts an explicit stand for the return, or "re-matriation," of Indigenous land.

Study St. Louis a little, and the heightened stakes that Counterpublic declares make some sense — bolstering the implicit argument that this city is particularly well suited to incubate a new exhibition model, responsible and responsive.

"Give it Back: Stage Theory," a billboard by New Red Order, next to Sugarloaf Mound along the Mississippi River in St. Louis. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

In developing the show, the "curatorial ensemble" — McAnally, Allison Glenn, Risa Puleo, Katherine Simóne Reynolds, Diya Vij and New Red Order — read "The Broken Heart of America," a 2020 book by the Harvard historian Walter Johnson that presents St. Louis as the country's epicenter of violent racial capitalism and imperial expansion. The counterpoint, Johnson argues, is the city's strong radical tradition, from cross-racial labor activism in the 19th century to the Ferguson protests.

Move along the route, and there's little denying how blunt power shaped the landscape. Sugarloaf Mound, at the show's southern tip, is the last remaining Indigenous mound in a city once known for them. (St. Louis is part of the greater Cahokia area, seat of a major pre-Columbian civilization.) You reach it by a side road in the shadow of Interstate 55.

"WayBack," an installation of 40 wood platforms marked with Osage patterns, adorned with ribbons, accompanied by an audio work. Made by Anita Fields and her son, Nokosee Fields, the work is displayed next to Sugarloaf Mound. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

In 2009, the Osage Nation purchased back the tallest section of the mound and removed the house that stood on it. It is now fenced off, and not part of the show, but the pivot for several projects. Above the highway, billboards by New Red Order and Anna Tsouhlarakis urge motorists to question their relation to the land. At its foot, the mother-son duo Anita and Nokosee Fields have placed 40 wood platforms marked with Osage patterns, adorned with ribbons, accompanied by an audio work.

After the show, these platforms will be distributed in the Osage Nation in Oklahoma — reinscribing the ties between ancestral land and places where people were sent. As for the mound, Counterpublic has pledged its support to Osage efforts to purchase its remaining sections, on which two private houses still stand.

Moving north, you pass a neighborhood where avenues named for U.S. states cross streets named for Native nations, the grid itself a metaphor for order and conquest. At corners like Cherokee and Tennessee — an association that brings up the Trail of Tears — Counterpublic has installed "Erased History Markers" that retell these facts.

Damon Davis's "Pillars of the Valley," part of the Counterpublic exhibition, is a permanent sculpture at the CityPark soccer stadium. The work is a homage to Mill Creek Valley, the hub of Black St. Louis that was demolished in 1959. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

Davis next to his sculpture "Pillars of the Valley."   Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

Mill Creek Valley too was made to vanish, so much that Davis, the sculptor of the pillars, had not heard of it until recently. The New York-based artist Steffani Jemison tackles this erasure in another vein: Her sound work, a collaboration with the storytellers Jackie and Papa Wright, plays in several gondolas of the Ferris wheel at Union Station. Soaring high, you hear a kind of elegy: names and locations of Black theaters lost in the demolition.

Entering North St. Louis, Jefferson Avenue passes the location of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing projects — where many Mill Creek residents landed until those buildings too were torn down in the 1970s. That site remains vacant today. Just beyond it, a military geospatial intelligence campus is under construction.

That facility's growth at the edge of the once elegant, now rundown St. Louis Place neighborhood has spurred fears of yet another wave of displacement. (Boosters argue that it will benefit the area and spur Black wealth creation.) Counterpublic's northern cluster here includes Adjaye's work (to be inaugurated in June) and a massive black sculpture by Torkwase Dyson that looks like a vessel crossed with a giant sundial; enter and you hear sound based on Scott Joplin's ragtime, a St. Louis invention.

Exterior of Torkwase Dyson's architectural installation, "Bird and Lava (Scott Joplin)" at St. Louis Place Park. Inside the structure, a sound work plays music inspired by ragtime music by Scott Joplin. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

Details of "Bird and Lava (Scott Joplin)" includes structures that seem like stools for sitting. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

Does it all work? There's no disputing the seriousness. This is a deeply thought exhibition that has set itself a high degree of difficulty. It aims to create tangible effects while treading lightly; to amplify grass-roots activism without overwhelming it; to model a practice nationally while committed to one city.

It is not entirely an insurgent act. Counterpublic's co-founder with McAnally is Lee Broughton, who is married to Chrissy Taylor, the president and chief executive of Enterprise Holdings and a scion of one of the city's most prominent business families. The couple are principal backers of the exhibition overall and have funded the $1 million Adjaye project.

Involved too is St. Louis City SC, the Major League Soccer franchise whose stadium hosts the first set of Davis's memorial pillars. (Broughton is part of its ownership group, and its chief brand architect.) The pillars themselves are commissioned by Great Rivers Greenway, a public agency developing amenities across three counties.

The point here is that Counterpublic, for all its radical aspirations, remains enfolded in the kind of public-private-philanthropic architecture typical for biennials and public art in the United States. It's fair to wonder whether curatorial, political and funding interests will stay aligned in future editions.

"Renascence," a sculpture by Matthew Angelo Harrison installed for the duration of Counterpublic at the George B. Vashon Museum Of African American History. Whitney Curtis for The New York Times

For now, the exhibition is particularly affecting when its touch is lightest. Take three sculptures by the Detroit artist Matthew Angelo Harrison, installed for the show's duration at the George B. Vashon Museum of African American History — another community treasure, in a former mansion and funeral home.

Made by encasing African statuettes in polyurethane resin to compelling visual effect, the works are remarkable. But even more so is the museum's vast collection of Black St. Louis memorabilia, amassed by its owner, Calvin Riley. That Harrison's works do not deflect from this trove is part of their success.

In the loveliest project, the New Jersey-based sound artists Mendi and Keith Obadike worked with the St. Louis producer Mvstermind and local car clubs to hold a parade on the opening weekend. Two dozen Jeeps decked in colorful flags led a procession on long loops on the north side, stereos playing an original ballad remixed by 10 local producers.

It was a moment when this ambitious exhibition relinquished control to local culture keepers rarely found in biennials or museums. It was also ephemeral by intention. The aim, the artists said, was to wrap the neighborhood in love. Public art often aims for permanence or impact. The truest trace, it felt as the Jeeps pulled in, is the vibe.

A car procession through St. Louis in April that was part of the exhibition's opening. via Counterpublic; Photo by Tyler Small

Siddhartha Mitter writes about art and creative communities in the United States, Africa and elsewhere. Previously he wrote regularly for The Village Voice and The Boston Globe and he was a reporter for WNYC Public Radio. More about Siddhartha Mitter

Mendi and Keith Obadike: Sound Art, History, Remembrance

Lou Fancher on November 15, 2021

Mendi and Keith Obadike

In the days following a conversation with **Mendi and Keith Obadike** and seeking to offer a gateway into their work, it occurs to me to suggest thinking of one's name and age. These clustered personal letter sounds and numbers form a relatable point of access. Your name, after all, holds your birth story, ancestral history, gender associations, lineage relating to race and ethnicity, perhaps family spiritual practices, or geographic origins. Your age is a minimal, transitory piece of abstract data from which emotional and behavioral narratives and physiological and psychological profiles can be derived.

Similarly, the music, literature, and art produced by Mendi and Keith in works that encompass opera, new media, large-scale public art, museum sound installations, books, CDs, and more, unfold from similar data that is then spoken, sung, manifested instrumentally, manipulated electronically, or transformed into visuals. The resulting sounds and images tell stories of communities, societies, protest movements, tributes to writers, the legacies of musicians and civil rights leaders of the African diaspora, and celebrations of global cultures and traditions.

This artistic team will present *The Bell Rang* as part of the **Mills Music Now Concert Series**. The installation will be in place Nov. 18–21, and the pair will offer an online presentation about the work on **Nov. 20**.

The installation includes bell sounds and voices singing text drawn from the autobiography of Congresswoman Barbara Lee, also a Mills College alum. The text addresses the days following the 9/11 attack on the United States when Lee alone voted, counter to her colleagues in Congress, to oppose the broad

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congressional authorization for the use of military force.

The Obadikes have had long careers creating sound art, dating back to the 1990s. Some of their early work, including the opera *The Sour Thunder* and *Crosstalk: American Speech Music* have been captured on Bridge Records. In addition to albums and sound art installations, the duo has created public art, published poetry and books, and pieces that they call "opera-masquerades," "works that deal with myth, music, and theatrical performance."

Mendi + Keith Obadike: Big House/Disclosure (2007) [sound art installation]

For *The Bell Rang*, what can you tell me about the score and about the bell and its inherent tonalities, textures, and other qualities that were your focus?

Keith: We don't always produce a score, unless we're working with lots of other people. With a small group, we do it orally. In this case, we're working with film recordings we made in the studio. We have a large bell plate we made ourselves; a 46-inch bell plate made of steel we used to make our bell sound, a kind of circular thing. It sounds like a church bell. We start with that and tune it in various ways to make the piece. How the piece works itself, it's a fairly short cycle we're doing slowly over time. It's a two-and-a-half-minute cycle that repeats twice with multiple voices singing text — that short phrase you hear. The voices and the bell are approximately the same amplitude.

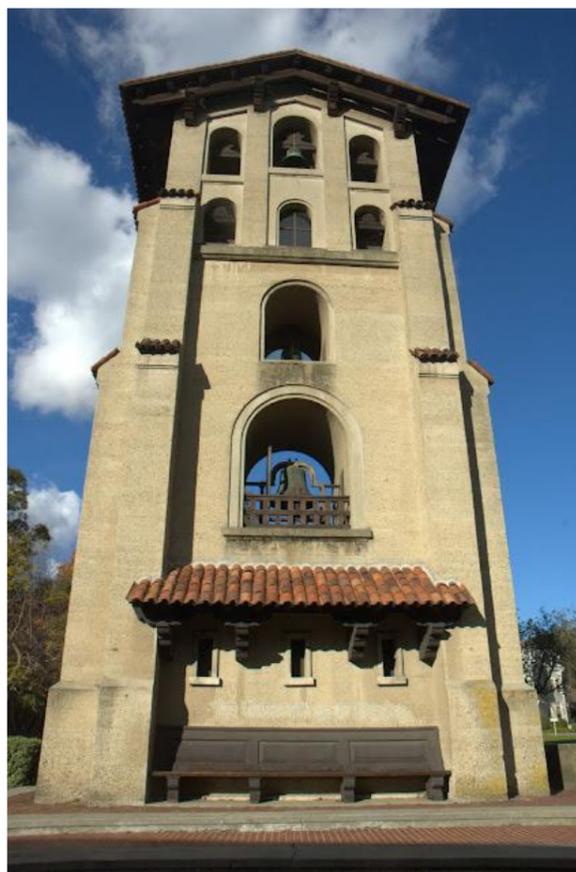**The actual bell sound: what attracted you to it?**

Keith: What we liked about church bells and these particular kinds of public signals is that they are so many things at once for people. They can be nostalgic, romantic, ominous, formidable. It can be all of these powerful things and then can be put in background. It's an amazing cultural thing that comes from people hearing it over lifetimes. We've done a few projects where we have reworked the idea of church bell, or made it slightly unfamiliar. In this case, we've used a voice to talk about another kind of bell ringing.

Mendi: We're referencing kinds of bells: there's the bell of the piece, there's the bell in the bell tower (the text is projected onto the Mills College **El Campanil** bell tower), there's the bell Barbara Lee references in her text. We're interested in the interplay between those three.

The same topic applied to the voices: What is frontal, off-centered, or in other ways explored?

Keith: We're used to people thinking of this church bell sound as something we hear in public, something we can't ignore. The voice, it makes it new. The voice was recorded in close proximity so when we hear that at the loud volume of a church bell, that makes you hear it and pay attention. "What are these voices saying?" We hope it makes people ask, "What's being communicated with me?" The bell is there to tell us something; the voices will explain what that message is.

Mendi: We also deal with time somewhat differently in musical pieces. What is a short phrase is meted out over time and the voices make that possible. You're hearing the phrase over time and because the voice has melody, you are having a different experience of the language than if you were just having the words said to you. That, for us, is a space of meditation. Music can change our relationship to the words and in changing the pacing, allow us to think and feel differently.

El Campanil at Mills College
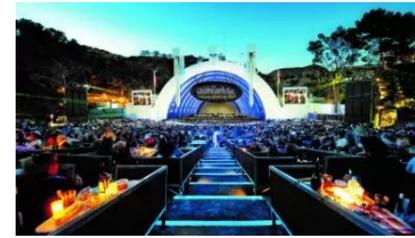
Keith: What Mendi is referring to in this piece is that sometimes the language will feel like it's resolving in the middle of the phrase but it will be clear that harmonically the piece is not done yet. At other times, it feels like it is harmonically dissolving and pulls the language in some way. Playing with that tension between language, melody, and harmony invites people to listen in different ways from how we listen to melodic phrase on its own in a public space.

Mendi + Keith Obadike - Sonic Migration: Morning Comes (2016)

In considering the architecture of the words in the text as an element projected on the tower and conceptually, what thoughts come to mind?

Mendi: Architecture of text. I don't know what you mean by that. What it suggests to me is something about the chart of ascendance. As we thought about melody, texture, and timing, what we realized is how we could break up the sentence and give real time to each part of it. The architecture of the language: I think about the moments in that way.

Keith: We spent time reading a lot of Barbara Lee's writing not only in her [auto]biography but in many of her speeches. One thing that we were struck by is how her language is really, really direct. It's precise and to the point. That is part of why we took this relatively short phrase and stretched it out. By slowing it down, it becomes abstract. By sitting with "The bell rang, votes were cast," if you hear that over 45 seconds, it takes on a different quality. Sit with the word "cast" for 15 seconds and you can think about all the sounds in that word. Why is this piece of language hanging out like that? That's part of the direct nature of Barbara Lee's speech and her writing.

Congresswoman Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, Mills Class of 1973 | *Courtesy Mills College*

Mendi: In her language she says, "the board was full of green lights. There was only one red one." In this case, although we think of green is go and red is stop — and it does mean that in some way — the green lights are sort of ominous. Because what it represents is that there were so many votes she had to stand up against. Although green is a color of prosperity, hope, and positivity, in this case it represents opposition. We had to think about what that means, what is the feeling of that in the music? That was something for us to solve.

Keith: What she's calling for in that moment, with the statement, and what we are trying to capture is: Let's take a pause, let's reflect. That's part of why we wanted to slow it down. Literally she's saying, let's slow down, let's look inside the wisdom instead of going with the action of the moment. How do we convey reflection? It's

interesting because direct language is not something we associate with a pause for wisdom. But she is asking us to go inside. Other texts have said that [same thing] in some way. Not everybody would think of her vote as a spiritual call, but that's how we perceived it. We wanted to shine a light on that.

The choice of location for the projection: What determined your choice to use the bell tower?

Keith: it's a place where a public signal is already happening; something musical. You can think of a church bell as a political thing, musical, a signal. That space is already designated for that sort of thing and we're just remixing its function on the campus. We wanted to think about not so much the person Barbara Lee, but what this moment of courage means in the culture, especially as Mills is changing. That courage is tied to that place, related to that place. A culture developed there. We thought this would be an interesting time to highlight that.

Mendi and Keith Obadike

Thinking generally about public art, people have different proximity and physical scale relationships to the art and might have different purposes in experiencing it. To what extent do those considerations shape the project?

Keith: Thinking about space is central. That's the starting place for us. You talk about human scale in relationship to architectural spaces or natural environments. That's where we start. For example, we worked in Times Square, a place where a lot of people feel smaller. [They are] in the shadow of large buildings and advertisements. We did a piece for headphones, for a quiet voice and music made from the ambient space. You end up with something more intimate. When we're listening to something in close proximity like that, we feel larger, we feel held close. In other ways, we might project sounds from a great distance and people listen, lean in, and that can be helpful to tell a certain kind of story.

Mendi + Keith Obadike -American Cypher at Bucknell Univ. and The Studio Museum in Ha

Mendi, have your research practices changed over time or been influenced by specific projects or experiences?

Mendi: Every experience changes our research and art process. There are some enduring questions in our work. We've been working together for a long time, and since childhood I've been asking questions about dialogue in a piece; about language, sound, and African culture, as those things are in every part of my life. They are in this work, they are also in my dissertations, [and in] poems I wrote as a child. Those big questions

about how sound and language can work together and the cultural resources I have to explore, those have been the same questions. But then, different projects along the way have taught me different things. Not that they've changed those questions, but they taught me different things about life, culture, relating to other people.

What have you learned about using data as a foundation for building a narrative?

Mendi: We have a project called **Number Stations**. What we do with several of them — so far we have three — with each of those projects, we take the numbers from some archive and sonify them and also perform them. The database we use represents stop and frisk numbers. In performing them and making the score from them, we need to figure out a way for each of us to have a different kind of number to perform. We know we are going to go back and forth. We have to figure that out without it being obvious. Figuring that out reveals how we might feel [about] or relate to those numbers.

In *Manifests* [*Number Station 3,* 2016], for example, those numbers are from slave ship manifests. The numbers are weight and height. So sometimes you come across a place where there should be a number but there's no number. The reason is the person was so young they didn't even record the weight. In performance, we actually think about the people we don't have names for and what their experiences might be.

What I've experienced are feelings about people so young. And questions arrive about people so old. Over time, different questions about how to feel about different parts of the project come to mind. Going into performance with certain ideas — ideas I might not even have had while making the score — [emotions] come as I'm actually saying numbers. Each project has something like that: taking time to focus and have thoughts about your database and having feelings about it, is something we learn in the project.

Keith: *Number Station*, when I made it, I'm listening to myself, but I'm really listening to her. In focusing on the numbers, I'm less in a thinking space. I know what the project is about for us, but going deeper into reciting the database, the conscious part of my brain, that turns off. I'm completely in the feelings. I'm not so conscious of where all those feelings are coming from. I'm not conscious of thinking about the unnamed people or the very young or very old. I'm just completely in the emotion of the thing while reciting the numbers.

Mendi + Keith Obadike - Numbers Station 1 [Furtive Movements] - excerpt

You spend a lot of time listening. Have you noticed aspects about how you listen in ways similar and disparately?

Mendi: My immediate answer about how Keith listens is I can see it on his face. When he's listening to something he wasn't listening to before, there's a subtle change. I know he's focused on something that he hears. I don't know how to describe that shift in his face, maybe it's an energy. The shift that happens when he's focused, that's always been an interesting thing to try to then listen myself and see what's calling his attention. He listens very well in conversation with other people, something I've noticed because I can stand back and watch it. For decades, I have noticed what it's like for him to focus his ears on something. I like that very much.

Keith: We listen in different ways; we key in on different things. Mendi has great melodic instincts. Those show up overtly in our musical projects. In day-to-day life, (it shows up) in a granular focus on speech and language. She notices subtle things in the way people speak. My brain couldn't do this, but for her, she notices minor details in people's speech melody, as well as language construction. She can do both of these things at the same time. It grew out of her musical training but it's very natural for her. It shows up in our projects and to me it appears to be some kind of superpower.

The skills involved in attention or intentional focus, as you think about audiences in different environments and contemporary society: Do you observe universal features or prevailing advances or deficits in younger audiences?

Keith: I'm thinking about it generally. In every generation, there are forms that become popular. People might be consuming more short-format art, but plenty of people have the capacity to engage with long forms of all kinds. The dominant form I'm thinking of in this time is probably Instagram. Many people make images or 20-

second stories for Tik Tok or Instagram. At the same time, long-form projects are booming in culture, like memoirs, so multiple things can be true at the same time.

Mendi: We are people who are interested in outliers. We both are more focused on what people say *isn't* happening than what people say *is* happening. I don't notice a trend in what people are capable of. I'm the person more interested in the exception to that rule.

The fluctuating relationship between art and science and audiences for which science has become so political: even abstract data can be manipulated. Does that enter your thoughts on art and science or impact your current projects?

Keith: The relationship of art and science appear in our work as through lines. We're always dealing with these kinds of corners of human belief. Those [corners] are art, science, and religion or spiritual beliefs. We're touching on those things because those are where people's beliefs populate. Art hopefully makes us ask questions about what we believe. Science is something we can rely on and base our beliefs on. Some people base their beliefs on religion or on spiritual systems. All of these things work together even if it's in the background. They form our core beliefs. We try to address those things in our own way. Science is powerful and provides thing for us, but these other aspects, they tug on each other. There's a push and pull.

Mendi: The deeper we go into the questions we've had about science or how information is produced, we find out the creativity scientists are using. This creative element is always there. It makes us ask even more questions about what is this? Where is the line between science and art? We don't always go there for that reason but we always find that question.

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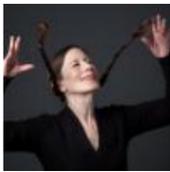
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Sonic Interventions Podcast Interview (with Dr. Layla Zami, Freie Universität) - Feb 2023

00:14
LZ: Sonic Interventions, a podcast by intervening arts. Welcome to our Sonic Interventions podcast, a series hosted as part of the Research Center on intervening arts at Freie Universität in Berlin, Germany. My name is Dr. Laila Zami. I am an interdisciplinary scholar and artist. Today I am recording from a special place which is the P&T NetWare independent bookstore.

A fantastic venue that has a podcast studio, an event space and a cafe, all run by a team of passionate lifelong learners and listeners. You can find them at 180 Orchard Street in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York City. This means that today we are speaking from a place that is part of the traditional territory of the Lenny Lenape called Lenapehawking.

We acknowledge the Lenni Lenape as the original people of this land and their continuing relationship with their territory. For this episode, I am very grateful to be in conversation with two outstanding artists, a married Igbo Nigerian American couple working at the intersection of art, music, and literature. Welcome Mendi and Keith Obadike. Thank you. Thank you so much for being here today on this beautiful, crisp September weather.

I am sure that many of our listeners have heard of your work, but maybe it would still be nice to hear you introduce yourself for some people who might be new to your work.

M: Thank you, Laila. We're Mendi and Keith Obadike. We work at the intersection of art, music, and literature, and most of our projects are collaborative and center on a sound installation of some sort.
K:The works take a lot of forms, installations and books, objects, all kind of things.

LZ: And you also both teach outside of the creative practice. I know you from Pratt Institute, Mendi.

M:Yes. I think for both of us our teaching is very much related to the work just in the sense that we're always exploring new experiences and ideas and that happens everywhere we are. I don't know if you would say it in the same way, but...

K: Yeah, I mean the teaching and the practice are you know, somewhat integrated. They certainly inform each other. Yes, that's true.

LZ: So this year you created new works for the Sonic Innovation Series, which is nested at the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts in its serene and splendid location in Katonah, New York, upstate. And I had the chance to travel there to witness your work, your song sculptures that are called Timbre and Frequency. And I experienced them as being very powerful and meditative at the same time, intriguing and soosing. When I was experiencing time where I

found myself circling around it, and the other work required me to squat down, and I literally had to get down low to witness it. And you actually describe these works as working together, like the A and B side of a record, with each word hinting at an alternate way of listening, quoting from your words. So do you want to tell us more about the inspiration behind these works, and also which alternate listening forms do you have in mind?

03:31
K: And maybe we should explain the A and B side of a record for anyone who doesn't remember records. So, you know, for many years we've done projects that are, where they're companion pieces, where they're pieces meant to be experienced together. And for this site, so the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts is at the center of that site, it's a music festival that happens, mainly throughout the summer, but they have musical programming throughout the year. So concerts. And for many years they've commissioned a site-specific sound installations. And so our pieces exist on two sides of the estate. So there's timbre, sort of genesis for that piece comes from a language in Toni Morrison's novel, The Bluest Eye. And so the phrase that we work with for that piece is truth and timbre. And so what the piece looks like, it's like a golden obelisk, sort of a obelisk with a flat top. It's about 10 feet tall, about 1 foot 12 inches wide, made of steel.

05:07
K: in the piece, we resonate the chamber with the different sounds. So all the sounds that you hear coming from the timbre are generated from the body of the structure itself. So I can say more about that, but on the other side of the Caramoor estate, we have another piece called Frequency, and the language at the center of that work is the phrase "on the lower frequencies", which comes from the Ralph Ellison novel, Invisible Man. And so in that piece, the sound sort of emanates from the ground. So you feel this sort of low frequency vibrations and sort of musical phrases coming from the earth.

06:00
M: So in terms of thinking about the different ways of listening, actually you could think about them in a lot of different ways, just in terms of the literal experience, you know, if you don't think any further than what you see and hear when you get there. Because there's sound coming from the ground and it's low frequency sounds, you might squat, but you also might just feel it in your body for a frequency. And then for timbre, you know, the sound is coming, because the chamber is resonating, it's coming from, in some ways, a structure that might be experienced like another body, only much taller, you might look up. People do a lot of different things. We noticed that a lot of people put their ear to it, which was not something that we expected, but that's something that happened. A lot of people talk about walking around it. And so in some ways, it's just the actual experience of the literal sound is different. But they also come from literature as Keith said. So in The Bluest Eye what's happening when that language, truth and timbre comes out is that there are children who are listening to adults talk about something that they don't quite understand but they understand something about what's being said because of the timbre of the voices and so they're paying attention to that and so that's a way of listening.

07:47

M: And then from Invisible Man, those words are actually the last words of the novel. But what has been understood in that novel, but also in the broader culture, as people have thought about that language, is the idea of speaking on a register that not everyone can hear. And so people talk about this phrase in the context of politics sometimes, you know, there's politics that not everybody's attuned to, but that is affecting something. So there are kind of conceptual ideas about listening there, but then also just literally different experiences of listening that we're pointing to and inviting people to do.

08:38

LZ: Thank you. Yeah, that was definitely a very strong experience for me. In the case of the frequency work, Invisible Man was a formative reading for me actually already as a teenager in Europe. And I found it really interesting to think of this register of the inaudible or barely audible. And what I found compelling was that I noticed the moment where I actually realized that the sound was not coming from where the letters actually are. So that made people in marginalized identities of, you know, having to navigate multiple roles or maybe sometimes having to speak from multiple places. And in the other case, when you mentioned the obelisk, literally I was walking up these stairs and it almost felt like going into church but in an open air space. So it really felt like a spiritual experience to witness that work as well.

M: That's good to hear.

LZ: The sound sculptures are pretty on the quiet register, we may say, right? I perceive them as quiet. The location already is quiet, at least when you come from New York City. I had to think of this book that you brought to my attention, Mendi, which is called The Sovereignty of Quiet by Kevin Quashie, and the subtitle is Beyond Resistance in Black Culture. So I wonder, maybe we should explain that for people who don't know the book, but the idea is that the author acknowledges the meaningfulness and the value of African-American expressiveness and protest, but he wants to bring to the foreground other aspects of black cultural production and thinking. And I've been really thinking about that ever since you brought that book to my attention and I started reading it. So I wonder how quiet is an approach that's relevant to your work. I know you also have another work where hush is also a key term. You had this essay that you released during the pandemic where you invited us to listen to silences or voices that may need amplification. But how can we value quiet without losing the political and the aesthetic values of saying it out loud?

M: I mean, I would say that even though the book is interesting to me, I don't necessarily think about our own work on those terms. I would say that something that is threaded throughout our work is directing listening. And so that kind of conceptual idea of loudness or quietness only plays out. if what we're directing attention to makes someone think about it in that way. Do you know what I mean? It's not kind of what leads our process. I don't know what you would say about that.
 K: Yeah, I guess I would refer back to the two pieces we were talking about earlier, so timbre and frequency. I'm curious to know more about your experience of the pieces at the site. I don't

think of frequency as a quiet piece. So what I think in it. Of course, this is just my experience, is a timbre. It is a kind of quiet piece that, but because of the site where it's placed, it's meant to sort of recede into the background at certain moments. It has a certain kind of proximity to stages there, so a lot of times a piece might be drowned out and then when other things are not going on, hopefully you can hear that there's actually something sort of emerging from this obelisk, with lower frequencies. On the one hand, the piece is about maybe signals that people might not be attuned to, but actually the amplitude can be much louder in that piece. So there's information there and it's actually playing at a loud volume. Interpreting and information might be a different experience and locating it specifically might be another experience. And so all of this is to say that, in my experience, you know...from music and from conversations is dynamics that make things interesting, right? It's the range of sounds that we experience in a conversation, in a musical experience. Those are the things that often engages, and so modulating from quiet to loud is what keeps me interested in everything.

LZ: Yeah, that makes so much sense. I think that's also one of the biggest challenges when you really want to refine or have a practice that really has nuances, right? I mean, to maybe listeners who never picked up an instrument or work with sound, it might sound not so obvious, but actually in the work, we sometimes tend to stay in one specific amplitude or register. So I can see that as being something really meaningful in your work, trying to have different registers. Yeah.

K: I would also say that because so many of our experiences happen online and certainly during the pandemic, and maybe we're still in some phase of the pandemic. I think this kind of sort of, I'm gesturing with my hand, but obviously people can't see the gestures I'm making with my hands. You know, because we're often sort of experiencing each other and so many experiences through a screen and through digital platforms, often this, we experience this with a kind of low headroom, very little sort of real world dynamics. And so part of the enjoyment of sort of being out in the physical world to me is, you know, the sort of range of dynamics that we experience in real spaces with real people. And we can sometimes forget what that's like because, you know, a part of sort of making things digital is really sort of controlling the dynamics and making them manageable or appear manageable. And that's quite a different experience from being in the physical world.

LZ: Yeah, that's very true. There's like a flattening sometimes of the experience and the range of emotions, right? Yeah.

LZ: So I'm wondering, would you actually define these sculptures and maybe other works that you have made? I mean, as you mentioned at the beginning, your work is very manifold, and you have these sculptures. You also have performances, installations, operas, books that accompany the work. So would you define all of this or some of this as sonic interventions?

M: I mean, there can be interventions. I don't think we go into them thinking about them as interventions necessarily. I mean, I do think there's a lot to be learned from listening and sometimes from listening to new things or listening in new ways, which can be new content,

either a lot of different things. So sometimes that can be an intervention, but I think usually we're approaching it as an experience we wanna have first or something we want to know from listening.

K: Yeah, I mean, I guess I would think of an intervention as a departure from what is normally done in a given space. And I'm thinking through our projects. I'm thinking, OK, what would I consider an intervention? We did a sort of sound walk that people could experience through Times Square. And I guess I would say I thought of that as an intervention, in that normally people walk through Times Square, and the sounds are quite loud. many people are already, it's an intervention in some way, many people are already sort of seeking a kind of personal sort of headphone experience in that space and that's part of why we made a sort of piece that you could experience through headphones in that place. So I guess I would think of that as an intervention. I mean, our piece was quite quiet in that place compared to the ambient sound. But yeah, I guess I'm wondering like, what is the difference between an intervention and a dialogue with a site or a dialogue with a particular history?

You know, like our pieces at the Caramoor are, yes, in some ways they're interventions and they're introducing a kind of what I would consider a kind of black listening practice into a space that's largely associated with, you know, white European classical music. So you could think of that as an intervention, but it's also a sort of dialogue with the musical practices that are already happening at that site.

M: Yeah. I mean, I think the same is true of Free Phase. You know, like we did this piece where we had, I'm trying to figure out how to say this succinctly, but there is a piece within another piece of ours called Beacon, where we had phrases from freedom songs that were played at different times of day. And you could look at that as an intervention, this is in different parts of Chicago, but we were thinking about it more as a dialogue, I think, with the people who were there, with the musical practices, and just with how our musical practices relate to time, you know. So...Yeah, we could look at that way, but I didn't really think about it first and foremost in that way.

LZ: Yeah, no that makes sense. I mean it's kind of how we're framing the research in this project that's hosting the podcast and it's always interesting when you kind of discuss with the artist the actual concept that you might be looking at if they make sense or not. And intervention is always the question of course into what in space and time and society right? It's a very broad term.

So you just mentioned Chicago, Mendi. I was also doing some research on some of your older works. And I think it was 2006 or 2007 when you had a commission work for Northwestern University that resulted in a 200-hour long house song installation. Is that correct? And in that work, you were exploring the city's history in relationship to slavery. You mentioned the ordinance and also house music. So I was wondering if you want to tell us more about that.

18:19

M: That was the first of what we call our Americana Suites. Our Americana Suites generally investigate American history, and they all center on some kind of sound installation. But they all have different nodes. That first one, the 200-hour-long house song, was played in the Hall of Funders in the... I can't remember what else was happening in that building.
There's art and art history, there's also German lessons, you know, a lot of things were happening on different floors, but the Hall of Funders is a place where we played it, and also it was playing to the internet so people could experience it that way. And across the course of the 200 hours, you heard snippets of conversations that we'd had with 200 people in the area about aesthetics and slavery and what the legacy of slavery was, and even some of the conversation was about house music.

But I don't know how much to say about this project, but one of the questions was, at that time, Chicago was considering, and they did decide to have an ordinance that meant that any business that did business with the city had to investigate and make public their research about whether they profited from slavery. And so that was one of the questions that people were asked, and it's one of the through lines that happened in that 200 hours.

19:48
K: If a business disclosed that they profited from slavery or descended from another company that profited from slavery, it didn't mean that they would lose a city contract. It just meant that they had to make that information public. So what happened during that time is that you saw banks and financial institutions often sort of issuing press releases saying, you know, the company that we descended from ensured the property of slave owners or somehow funded the transatlantic slave trade. So a larger conversation we're interested in is what is responsibility? right, and who bears responsibility for these kind of things. And so we were interested in what the public thought because much of the public, many people were not aware that this dialogue was happening and the business community or, you know, or this public policy was being discussed, you know, and so we wanted to hear people's thoughts about that. And so, you know, we incorporated that into our long house song that sort of shifted over, you know, 200 hours, it's approximately like eight days. And so, you know, parts of these interviews sort of bubbled up and Also the rise and fall of the stock prices of these companies also shifted music. So it made changes in tempo and bassline and things like that.

LZ: Yeah, that's interesting. I had the pleasure to be in Chicago for the first time this summer. I actually went to the Nick Cave exhibition and you know, think about the sound suits and it was also an event that was reflecting about the history of house and how that has impacted Nick Cave's process. So yeah, I would love to hear more about their work.

But more recently, if we go back to now, I know you also spent time in Germany this year, right? I think you were doing research and also, Mendi, you mentioned maybe you were asked to actively listen to the city. Was it Nuremberg?

M: It was in Nuremberg, yeah.
LZ: And yeah, how was your trip? I mean, do you want to share about that?

M: Where should we begin?

K: Well, we were invited by Louis Chude-Sokei and Mouse on Mars / Jan St Werner was heading this project. So they had already started sort of looking at the city of Nuremberg together on with a collective called DAF. And, and so, yeah, they invited us to come listen to the city and think about its history as well. And so, yeah, we made lots of, you know, field recordings around the city. We, you know, made some recordings and visited the Nazi rally ground. Yeah. We're thinking about projects and we're thinking about what we might do as a collective, as a team, with other artists who were there, but we're sort of working on some recordings and other projects, and we'll see what comes out of it.

M: Yeah. I mean, what really struck me is what it is to listen to historically charged locations with both people who are really foreign to the space and people who grew up in the shadow of the space, and just kind of realizing how charged that could be, but also what it might be to listen differently alongside one another or to just experience places in really different ways because they do or don't hold so much weight in your personal life. And so I'm always thinking about what it is to listen together, but that experience was really interesting for that. And then we were there, we were in Berlin with some of the same people where there's a very different kind of experience of space and listening. And so that was really a great difference to have together with other people, those two experiences.

K: Yeah, I would also say, Nuremberg was strangely familiar as people who grew up in the American South. I mean, you know, there's something about these places where a kind of huge collective trauma has happened, but also, you know, watching how some people sort of embrace that history in different ways and how some people are really trying to bury the history, it felt...strangely familiar and then we felt you know strangely at home in Nuremberg**.**

M: Yeah, I mean that was Keith and I went to the Rally Grounds on different days and had the same response and people were like he said the same thing. I was like yeah it's weirdly familiar.

LZ: Yeah, South Germany and South US right? LZ:I didn't realize where in the South did you grow up? Did you both grow up in?
M K: Yeah, Nashville, Tennessee
LZ: You too?
M: Yeah.
LZ: Okay, wow.

24:01
LZ: Yeah, we briefly talked also in a prior conversation, we were talking about the Harlem Renaissance and kind of, you know, some people from this country going to Europe, Paris, mostly, right, Langston Hughes and all of these artists. So I was wondering also how it felt for you, especially now, still in times of pandemic, with all that has been going on. I think you mentioned it was also just be good to be out of the country. Yeah.

M: Yeah, it was. Well, anytime I take some time away from the United States, it really just helps me see where I am.

24:30
where I usually am better. And then also having not traveled very much during the pandemic, there was that, just the last time I left the United States, the politics was different. And the conversation about politics was very different in the media, for example. So it was, for me, it was really interesting just as a refocusing, but it kind of always is. You know? Yeah.

24:56
LZ: Well, thank you both so much for your time. And I really hope that you can be back in Germany, that listeners who may be listening to this today and are based in Berlin may get to witness and experience your work live as you were mentioning. Also, it's different. Right?

 K: Well, thank you for having us. We'll be back in Germany soon. Yeah.

LZ: Many blessings for your future.

M: Thank you. Thank you for the conversation. Yeah.

Histories for the Future: *Compass Song*
An interview with Mendi + Keith Obadike
Elena Biserna

We believe every structure holds the memory of everything it's ever heard.
— Mendi + Keith Obadike, *Compass Song*

"Walk with Me" is an African-American spiritual that later became a civil rights freedom song. It is the cornerstone of *Compass Song* (2017), a public art project in Times Square, New York, by Mendi + Keith Obadike. Starting from the lyrics of this song, the work branches off, following the cardinal directions, exploring the history of the site as well as its soundscapes through poems, vocalisations of environmental sounds, and of frequencies sonified from the latitude and longitude data of Times Square. The project takes the form of a site-specific app where "a voice accompanies your wandering with poems about searching for freedom, stories about navigating the city, and cross-cultural myths about the cardinal directions (north, east, south, and west)".[1] Like many of the Obadikes' works, *Compass Song* stems from an exploration of African-American culture, especially songs and music, in order to revisit, re-arrange, re-interpret, re-sing, and re-embody it. However, these sources are used not only to reconnect with a history of liberation, struggle, and the civil rights movements, but to project this history into the present and toward the future. In other words, they are not interpreted as records or documents but as materials for liberation, utopian catalysers, or, as they say in this interview, "visitations from the past" that they take with them and bring forward.

In this conversation, we talk about *Compass Song*, its format, its connection with its site, the oscillations between private listening and public space, and all of the layers of its relation with plural histories: the architectural history of Times Square, mythical and mystical accounts informing notions of navigation and compasses, freedom songs, and echoes of African-American movements in Manhattan.

Elena Biserna: If I'm not wrong, *Compass Song* is your only project that takes the form of an audio walk; a mobile app that listeners activate while walking in Times Square. How did you decide to use this format for this specific context?

Keith Obadike: Is that the only soundwalk we've done? Is that true? Certainly it's the only project using an app. The idea came about since we were on the advisory board for Times Square Arts. They were looking for new and interesting ways to do public projects and we just suggested it to them as something they should think about doing with other artists.

Mendi Obadike: Right. But like ten years before. A long time before it came to us to do so.

KO: At that point, they'd been doing a lot of public sculptures and we thought that a soundwalk would be an interesting experience in Times Square. They did a similar project with an artist team a year before us and then we did *Compass Song*. We had the general idea for a while. We've been working with folk songs and spirituals in many

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[1]   Mendi + Keith Obadike, "Public Art", accessed 12 April 2022, http://blacksoundart.com/#/public/.

projects and also here we started with a song: "Walk with Me". We knew we wanted this song to be the centre of the experience. The project then became a mix of field recordings, poems, and the spiritual.

MO: There are elements of *Compass Song* that we had been thinking about for other projects that finally didn't come to be. We have also been thinking for a long time about a kind of "processional" form, so to speak.

EB: I wonder if it was also a way to merge with media uses in such a crowded space. Times Square is a place that people cross, where people come and go all the time. Using this format might be a way to enter into these habits, into everyday spatial practices.

MO: There are also many constraints to what you can even do in Times Square. It's a difficult place to work for lots of reasons. The uses of the space – the fact that people come there using headphones – but also the restrictions on this place made this format an option.

KO: Yeah, one of the things that makes Times Square a difficult site for many artists is the fact that people think of it as a site for tourists. So some New York artists would really say "No, I don't want to do Times Square."

MO: "I don't even wanna go." [*Laughs*]

KO: We were interested in the fact that so many New Yorkers avoid Times Square and will even go out of their way to bypass it. We saw that when New Yorkers do pass through Times Square, they use their earphones or their earbuds to block out the space. So we wanted to work with that impulse. [*Laughs*]

MO: Yeah. And to think about what ways of "being attuned" might work in that context. That's how we approached the project.

EB: So almost infiltrating the already existing practices in order to create a different relationship with space: people pass through as fast as they can with their headphones in order to be disconnected from that environment, while with *Compass Song* they'll use the same tool but in order to . . .

KO: . . . Hopefully to slow down. People make their own sonic world anyway, but we wanted to give them a more considered sonic world and to invite them to slow down.

EB: I'm thinking that many of your projects in both public space and galleries actually imply a mobile audience. I have the impression that you always need to navigate a space in order to experience your works. So it might be just a matter of address: the private listening experience created by the headphones versus the speakers. How do you feel about that difference?

MO: A lot of times, even if people listen together in a gallery, I actually don't know how they receive what they hear. Especially for works in public or semi-public space, I'm not able to see or know how they take in what they hear. So it's kind of difficult . . . I mean, I do think that being in a private sonic world is different from listening to a space that you share with others, but I can't put this difference into words. Do you have any thoughts about that, Keith?

KO: I would say that many of our projects mix public and private, even if we build a piece for a gallery space. Sometimes we've done projects that have a video element and so people watch and have a listening experience together, while in other cases people go in one or two at a time. Sometimes people choose to have a kind of semi-private

experience. With *Compass Song* there is the same split: people are in public space but they have a private listening experience. At the same time, one layer of what they listen to is Mendi reperforming ambient sound: she literally sings and vocalises it. So you don't feel as if you're completely cut off from your context. In this sense, it's private but it's also intentionally public.

MO: I think of it as related to *Blue Speaker [For James Baldwin]* (2015), a project composed of field recordings, music, and vocals. This piece ran along several walls of the New School's University Center in New York, but it was by the windows. So some things sounded like outdoors, you could feel like you were hearing outside even though they were field recordings. You know, it's the same kind of split between public and private listening. I think that *Compass Song* enact a form of listening that is similar to those of other works . . .

EB: You mentioned the fact that one of the layers in *Compass Song* is the vocal recreation of soundscapes. How did this idea come out?

MO: I don't remember the beginning of it, but at some point we got to the idea that we wanted it to feel like the city was singing to you; recording the space and then reperforming it. Do you remember, Keith?

KO: Yes, we had this idea of a listening choir for a while and we've done it in various ways across projects. At times, the listening choir was literally a group of people who would go out and re-perform the sounds of a space. Actually, when we launched the *Compass Song* app, we did have a real choir but in the app Mendi does a sort of multi-layered vocal performing in the space. To some degree, we had already done it in *Overcome* (2014), where we recorded the sound of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. For this piece, we worked with the sounds of the environment through contact mics on an architectural structure, so it was a bit different.

MO: That's right.

EB: That's great! I didn't know about the listening choir but I wanted to ask about the performative launch of the app . . .

MO: In the app itself, we have mapped out certain kinds of lines in different directions. So in each direction we go with one of the lyrics from the spiritual and freedom song "Walk with Me". One of the base layers of sound is singing along one of those lines in north, south, east, and west. When we launched the app, a group of singers came together to sing, and then they went off following these directions and singing the line accordingly. As Keith said, when they came to the space we sang together as the listening choir – singing what we heard – and at the end of the ritual we also dispersed by singing the sounds of the city.

KO: Working with the cardinal directions obviously was one of the central ideas for this project, but it's something that we've been doing in a lot of other projects connected, in different ways, with navigating: maps or compasses or other ways of navigating to listen.

EB: So the performance was a vocal improvisation while listening.

KO: Yes.

EB: Is it something that you continue to do?

MO: We did it a couple of times. You know, if we bring in other performers and we do something live, sometimes we begin and end that way. In the performance that we did . . . How many years ago was that, Keith?

KO: The last time was in 2019, for a piece called *Triad* at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics. We did several songs about silence, in many different ways, and the listening choirs framed that performance.

MO: Some of the performers were the same ones that we had at the launch, so they were familiar with the process.

EB: You talked about navigation. *Compass Song*, the title, plays with the polysemy of the word: the compass as a tool for navigation, but also as a circular path and as the tonal range of a musical instrument. How do you activate these meanings in the many layers of the project?

KO: I guess first we can talk about the sounds in the piece. We made field recordings over a couple of months. A lot of the recordings were made in the middle of the night because we got really fascinated with the kinds of things that happen in Times Square at 2.00 or 3.00 a.m. We were surprised by things like bird sounds. It was also interesting to be able to isolate specific traffic sounds with some of the field recordings made at night. We started with those layers and Mendi reperformed them. Another layer is the sonification of longitude and latitude data. We translated the co-ordinates into frequencies as sine tones and then Mandi would sing them too. When you listen to the app, it feels like an ambient drone, but it's actually a layer in the mix. Then there are some poems and stories related to the specific locations, to the history of Times Square over a few centuries, and, of course, to the spiritual.

MO: There are also some parts about the cardinal directions and the ways that different peoples have thought about them.

KO: Yes, we're particularly interested in all of the mythologies that informed the construction of compasses around the world. We spent a lot of time looking at all sorts of magical beliefs people had about compasses. I mean, we always think of the compass as a tool grounded in science, and that's true, but we were fascinated by all of the mythical aspects that shaped how people have used compasses and how they designed them over the centuries.

MO: Mythical and mystical too. In a way, music also puts us in the same kind of mood as that kind of mystical history. Like: what if you were to navigate by tone? The project kind of plays with that idea.

EB: Yeah. I wonder if considering these kinds of things as scientific – or not – also depends on your own position in relation to these systems of knowledge . . . In modern Western cultures, all knowledges coming from other cultures are considered to be non-scientific.

KO: The lines between these things shift from time to time, decade to decade, century to century. That's an interesting part of the thing. The visual design of the app was informed by looking at different kinds of cosmography. How do people represent the globe or navigable spaces? How do you represent that in a simple image?

MO: And also lifespans. Those things are connected: how do you represent a lifespan and navigable spaces?

EB: This idea of working on the idea of navigation and orientation makes me think about what the philosopher Sara Ahmed says in her book *Queer Phenomenology*.[2] She discusses "orientation" as a way to question how bodies are situated in space and time, and examines the spatiality of sexuality, gender, and race: the spatial dimension of social relationship. She also proposes disorientation as a way to unsettle these hierarchies among bodies. How much disorientation is there in the experience of *Compass Song*, with all its layers?

MO: That's interesting. I don't think we thought consciously about disorientation, but I do think that undoing our habits of orienting was really what we were thinking about. It might be different from the idea of disorientation but very connected as well.

KO: I think of the piece as grounding you in a different sense of space and time. Music allows me to think of and organise time differently . . . Sometimes through music you can exist in multiple spaces and times at once: both literally, through polyrhythms, but also in the way that music always brings up memories. We thought about that aspect and we wanted to do that with stories and through this old song that is familiar to so many people . . .

EB: There's also a whole part where Mendi speaks about getting lost . . . But maybe we can talk about "Walk with Me". A big part of your work is indeed based on reworking the freedom songs and folk music of the African-American tradition. How did you select this song for this location?

MO: Yes, we do often centre our work on a freedom song. In the lyrics of the Black American tradition, the word "walking" is often used metaphorically as a kind of conscious togetherness. It's about becoming aligned in a struggle or in a political event. This togetherness was really important for us to recall in the project, along with literal walking. We wanted to activate the metaphor of being together in walking, together as you are walking.

KO: The layers and possible interpretations of "Walk with Me" were important to us. Of course, our version is a freedom song: the emphasis is not on the spiritual or religious aspect, but on the political aspect. We were also thinking about an event that happened in Manhattan in 1917 called the "Silent Parade". It was a protest done by African Americans, who walked down Fifth Avenue in silence. We thought about the choice to be silent, which is really grounded in that historical moment, versus so many protests that happened afterwards using music, spirituals, and transforming them into freedom songs. We wanted to both meditate on that silent protest and reflect about all the ways we might use music to navigate politically, to navigate literally, to navigate spiritually . . . those layers were very important to us.

EB: I see the march and the demonstration as literal figures of this togetherness in struggle that Mendi mentioned. Much of your work is based on songs, figures, or documents of African-American culture and its struggles. Nevertheless, I have the impression that your relationship with history isn't nostalgic or archaeological but always

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[2]   Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

tends toward the present: you take these cultural objects and figures in order to explore and activate their political or utopian potential now.

MO: I would say that we think of them less as artefacts and more as visitations from the past addressed not only to the present, but to the future. We feel like they are sent here to us from the past and we try to catch them and take them forward.

KO: I would add that music helps us remember all of these multiple moments – past, present, and future – at once. Stories and poems have this role in our projects, but music acts on an emotional level. The stories and poems talk about what Times Square was 100 years ago, 200 years ago, 300 years ago . . . And there are even imaginations about what it might be in the future. With music, we do the same without the need for any kind of intellectual imagining. Music just allows us to live in multiple zones at once.

MO: At some point, we realised that no matter how we thought we were going to respond to a song from the past, we had to perform it, even if we weren't going to use our recording. One of the things we learned is that our relationship to a song changes once we figure out how we play it. So yes: our ability to be in all these times at once is one thing as listeners, and another as players.

EB: I really like this image. As if interpreting these lyrics means also putting these words into your mouth and into your body, to breathe them out, to make them appear again, reactivating their potential through your own body.

MO: Yeah.

EB: Many of your projects – I think of *Americana Suites* (2007–) or *Free/Phase* (2014-15) – address a precise history, a history of liberation or social movements . . . You often start from archival or historical research. How did it happen in Times Square?

KO: I don't remember exactly, it became broad. At the beginning we were curious about the architectural history of Times Square but then it just went on and we kept finding more interesting things about the fact that it was a farm, for example, and not very long ago, maybe 160 years ago . . .

MO: And then there was this archaeological research that told us what it was like before Europeans . . .

KO: I think we had a general sense about it before we started that research. The native American name for Broadway, the street that passes through the middle of Manhattan, for example. But then we found out details and this was really fascinating. You know, you can imagine what it might have been like for people to perform the same songs forty years ago or a hundred years ago. I think we spent a lot of time just thinking about people moving down these same roads or in these directions across centuries and what kind of different experiences they might have had, or how much their experiences might have been like ours.

MO: Yeah. There's a lot of research that didn't make it into the piece too. We just walked down those paths many times thinking about the piece and with this knowledge.

KO: Times Square, more than many other places where we worked, is really a landscape filled with stories . . . So many Broadway plays, so much advertising: it's literally packed with stories. So one big question was: do we add more stories to this? Is it a good thing to put stories here? Or should we just work with music and field recordings? And ultimately we decided to play with the stories we found and sort of remix them.

EB: The voice has a prominent position in the final piece. It's not just a matter of narrative: the voice is used in a wide range of roles and directions, in all its pre-linguistic and post-linguistic forms: words but also mimetism, reproduction of sounds, singing . . .

KO: Yeah, I think we often end up centring our work on the voice.

MO: Language, non-linguistic singing, and sine tones often come together in our works.

KO: I don't know if the audience always experiences things in this way, but I would say that often the voice is a starting place for us.

MO: I don't know if I would call it a starting place but maybe the bond of something you're doing with something else too. [*Laughs*]

EB: Collaboration!

MO: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

Art   Reviews

Reading the Numbers of Stop-and-Frisk

Jessica Lynne September 21, 2015

Mendi + Keith Obadike, "Numbers Station [Furtive Movements]" (2015) (all images courtesy Ryan Lee, New York, unless otherwise noted)

In 2013, Judge Shira A. Scheindlin issued a ruling which effectively dismantled the New York City Police Department's (NYPD) racist **stop-and-frisk policy**. Scheindlin's decision, in the class action lawsuit *Floyd, et. al. v. City of New York*, was a clear victory in a decades-long fight for the reform of a policy that disproportionately affects Black and Latino communities. The numbers show this, and the numbers don't lie.

According to an **analysis** conducted by the New York Civil Liberties Union, 2,592,646 individuals were detained by the police under stop-and-frisk between 2009 and 2013. On average, 88% of those stopped were innocent. In 2009, 510,742, or 55%, of those stopped were Black, while 180,055, or 32%, were Latino. Two years later, those numbers stayed relatively steady: 350,743, or 53%, were Black; 223,740, or 34%, were Latino. Two years after that, they still hadn't changed much: 169,252, or 56%, of those stopped were Black, while 104,958, or 29%, were Latino.

After each stop, the officer is required to fill out a form recording the details of the incident, assigning it — and the person involved — yet another number. Through such interactions with the police, millions of individuals have been reduced to numbers on a spreadsheet, nothing more than data points. This data was the subject of a recent performance and new sound installation, "**Numbers Station [Furtive Movements]**," by **Mendi + Keith Obadike** at Ryan Lee Gallery.

Mendi and Keith Obadike performing "Numbers Station [Furtive Movements]" (photo by the author for Hyperallergic

On September 10, just before the show's public opening, a small crowd gathered in the back of the gallery to witness what had been announced as a performance employing "the radical misuse" of this data. With little fanfare, the Obadikes took their seats at a small table, placed on their headphones, switched on a radio transmitter, and began to read aloud the logs of stop-and-frisk reports from over 123 NYPD precincts. The performance was simply the sustained recital of the numerical tags of the many self-reported incident forms. Each number was read individually, the Obadikes alternating between themselves. After a log was read in its entirety, the artists would take a short breath, flip the page, and begin anew. For 30 minutes, the cryptic nature of all those abstract numbers — the assigned marks of supposed criminality — became public in a new way.

No names were read. There was no way to link each set of data points to any one person. However, knowing that an overwhelming majority of that data represents *actual* black and brown people was a frightful reminder that the truths about inequity cannot be hidden, even when they're masked by bureaucratic numbers. The Obadikes' staccato, monotone reading voices made it clear that the subject of the performance was indeed the data, not the artists themselves. For the duration of the exhibition at Ryan Lee, audiences will have the opportunity to listen to a recording of the performance.

The practice of using statistics to represent Black bodies (and more emphatically, Black trauma) is nothing new. From slave manifests to lynching reports, the codification of Black lives has long been employed by institutions as a means of regulation and suppression. "Number Station [Furtive Movements]" explicitly names the NYPD as another abettor of such fear-inducing mechanisms. The numbers don't lie.

Mendi + Keith Obadike: Numbers Station [Furtive Movements] *is on view at Ryan Lee Gallery (515 W 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 10.*

Mendi + Keith Obadike, "Numbers Station [Furtive Movements]" (2015) (click to enlarge)

Mendi + Keith Obadike, "Numbers Station [Furtive Movements]"
(2015) (click to enlarge)

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"Casting Light"

"Out of Context"

5 Questions to Mendi + Keith Obadike (lull: a sleep temple)

TRISTAN MCKAY on April 28, 2021 at 6:00 am

For the 2021 edition of the Look + Listen Festival, four multimedia artists created work to be experienced in a cozy and familiar venue: your very own home. Husband-and-wife team Mendi + Keith Obadike created an overnight musical work called lull, a sleep temple *for the festival. This 8-hour livestream event is a sonic environment meant to accompany sleep, and features elements such as distended melodies, field recordings, analog synths, and original texts incanted by Mendi.* lull *will have streaming performances on May 8, 15, and 29 (registration is currently full, but more tickets will be released on Monday, May 3rd). Performance times vary, so be sure to check which date works with your sleep schedule. Each stream will be preceded by a live chat with its creators. The first 100 registrants will receive a sleep kit in the mail, which includes a bedtime poem, sachet of lavender, and candle made by the artists.*

WHAT DREW YOU TO CREATE A WORK TO BE LISTENED TO WHILE SLEEPING?

We, like many artists, often find ourselves making what we need from the world. In the past, we have made pieces using text that we wanted to hear set to music or resonating a site that we wanted to hear sounded. In this case, we wanted a sleep piece for ourselves, so we decided to make it with the hope that other people would want to experience something like this, too. Our title, *lull, a sleep temple,* points both to a need for a pause, and to "sleep temples," which are places to rest or dream. Historically, sleep temples were sites in ancient Egypt where people went and entered a sleep-like state for healing and dreaming. In our cultures (Igbo and African-American) dreams are still understood as extremely important. Sleeping and dreaming are understood as a way to connect to something larger than our conscious minds.

It is no coincidence that when articulating a vision for a better world, MLK said, "I have a dream," a phrase he borrowed from Prathia Hall. Maya Angelou famously referred to herself in *Still I Rise* as the "…dream of the slave." Marcus Garvey also talked about his early vision of himself as a leader and that of a future African Empire as a dream. The concept of imagining the world we want to create is connected to the activity of the relaxed and restored mind. We made *lull* while global political protests were happening in the name of BLM and the pandemic was raging. The common media euphemism for moments of political uprisings is a "period of unrest." We have never liked that term "unrest" as a replacement for revolution, and we have recently felt the urgent need for rest. We have also specifically felt the need for dreaming, in order to realize personal and social transformation.

We should add that we have been interested in sounds, language, and music used to induce altered states of consciousness for many years. The music of the late 60s to late 70s that is sometimes called "energy music" or "spiritual jazz," whose most notable practitioners are John and Alice Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders, has been some of the most important music to us. Much of this music grew out of the musicians' explorations of other states of consciousness. While our practice does not sound like that music from the 70s, that music (which focused on sonic exploration and altered states) expanded our ideas about what could be done and certainly laid the groundwork for other related forms that were later called new age music, ambient music, and sound art. We have spent a lot of time looking at musical forms related to trance, hypnotic scripts, and sleep-related musical practices from around the world. These kinds of things have influenced past projects, but this is the first time that we have made a piece that we would truly describe as a sleep piece.

lull, a sleep temple album art

WHAT WAS THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THE SOUND PALETTE FOR *LULL* LIKE?

Most of the sounds are built from live instruments (a mix of acoustic and electro-acoustic), a couple of analog synths (an old Juno 106 and little Moog 32), and of course, vocals. We start by simply recording many multi-tracked pieces, layering guitars, piano, Rhodes, bass, and vocal harmonies. In some cases we are combining a recording of bowing our double bass with our performance on cello from an orchestral kit or a banjo doubling a violin line. We also have many of our own archival recordings of Keith multitracking phrases and songs to 24 inch analog tape. Those pieces provide a lot of warmth to the overall project. We are stretching out these recordings to make these

drifting clouds of sound. Harmonically, we found the need to stay simple and triadic with the occasional minor nine to keep things interesting when blurring sounds in this way. The ideas are composed in chunks that are later assembled into the larger piece. We then go back and perform over large sections together in a dub-like fashion with some vocal and processing choices being made in real-time. So, essentially, there are layers of composed and improvised performances recorded to different media that make up the piece, with a lot of work on the overall textures, but we hope the final work feels much simpler than that.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE TEXTS AND OTHER MULTIMEDIA MATERIALS YOU INCORPORATE INTO THE PIECE?

Our texts are mainly original writing by Mendi, but she has also incorporated her rewritings of some ancient myths involving dreams and fragments of language from historical texts on dream interpretation.

In our "dream kit," which will be mailed out to early subscribers, we included a small bedtime poem with beautiful illustrations by David Brame. The bedtime poem appears in our music, as well. The "dream kit" also includes a small sachet of lavender and a small handmade lavender candle that we made in our studio.
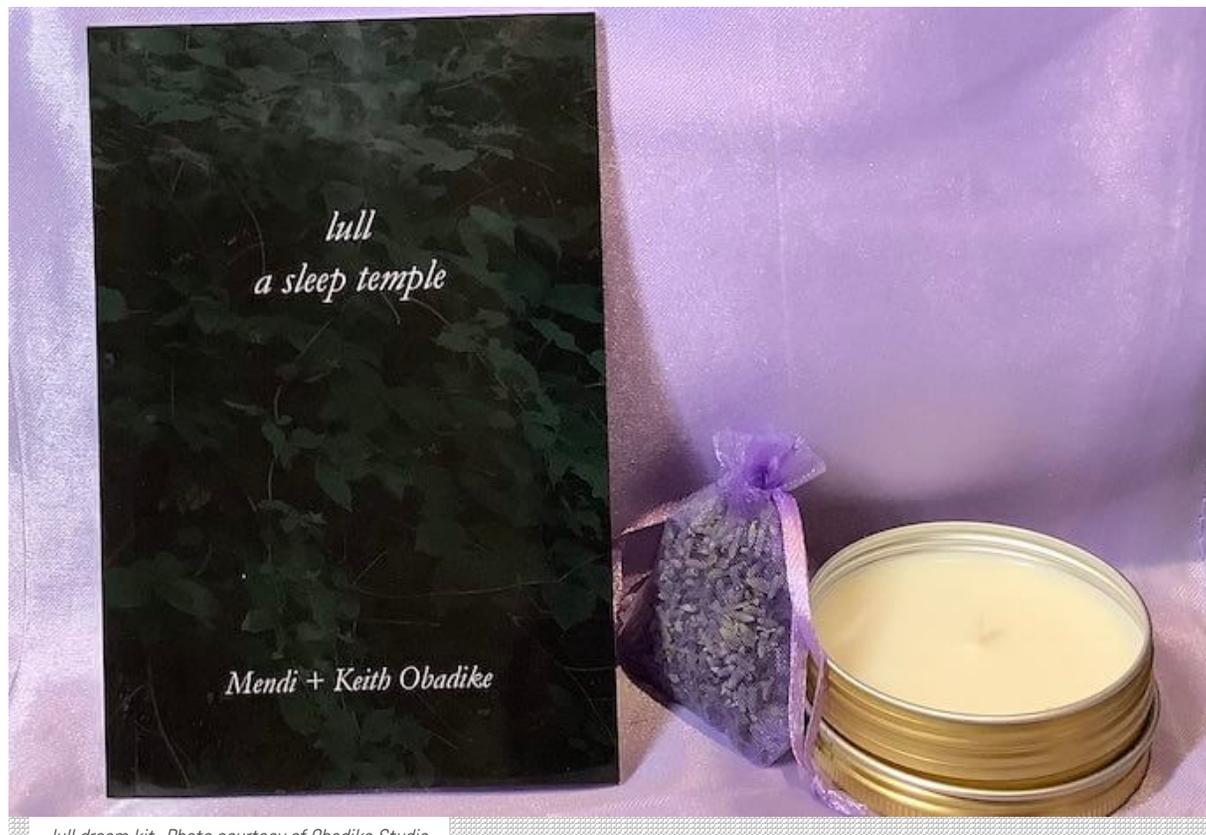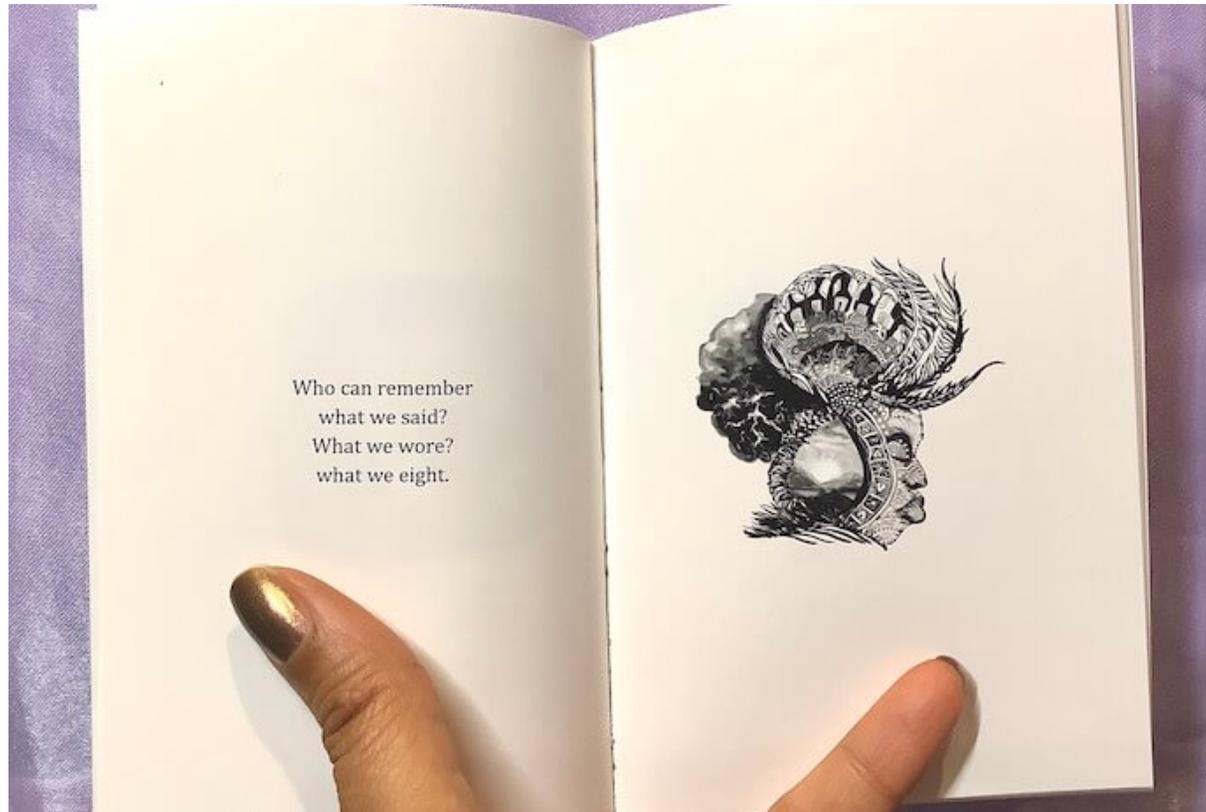
lull dream kit—Photo courtesy of Obadike Studio

DID CREATING WORK FOR A *SLEEPING* AUDIENCE IMPACT YOUR COMPOSITIONAL APPROACH?

Well, yes. We were thinking a lot about both making something that would work for a sleeping audience in terms of dynamics, dissonances, repetitions, themes, and pacing, but it would also need enough of a musical arc and narrative detail to sustain engagement from awake listeners. We stretch melodic phrases out over several minutes with the hope that listeners feel an accruing melody without the kind of conscious melodic listening we might do over a much shorter span.

While the stories vary in style and tone, we approach the narrative with various forms of repetition. One section of the piece (with bowed piano and vocals about 16 minutes in), for example, is built around the repeated idea of seeing oneself in dreams we found in an ancient book from 1275 BC on dream interpretation. Another is a retelling of an ancient story from around 1401 BC about a dream, but in our version, each moment is restated several times with slight shifts in language before moving on to the next moment. We intend for these

approaches to rhythm and narrative to speak to both sleeping and awake listeners. We spent a lot of time thinking about what stage of sleep the sleeper might be in at a given point in the night and what music or text should accompany that state.

lull booklet—Photo courtesy of Obadike Studio

YOU HAVE SUCH AN INCREDIBLE AND DIVERSE BODY OF WORK! WHAT DO YOU RECOMMEND WE CHECK OUT IN ANTICIPATION OF *LULL?*

Thank you. Many of our most recent music/video works are in conversation with *lull*. Our piece *The Sun*, is a meditation on visionaries and an Igbo proverb about the sun. *Lift (Listening Skies)* is a reflection on both the history of aerial photography and the one hundred year old song often called the Black National Anthem entitled "Lift Every Voice and Sing." *Book of Light* is a sound and light show about the concept of internal light in science and mythology. The best place to learn more about these and other works is on our website, Obadike.com.

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TRISTAN MCKAY

Tristan McKay (he/him) is a pianist, visual artist, and scholar based in NYC. His research interests include semiotics and graphic notations, and he teaches at SUNY New Paltz. Tristan plays ice hockey in his free time.

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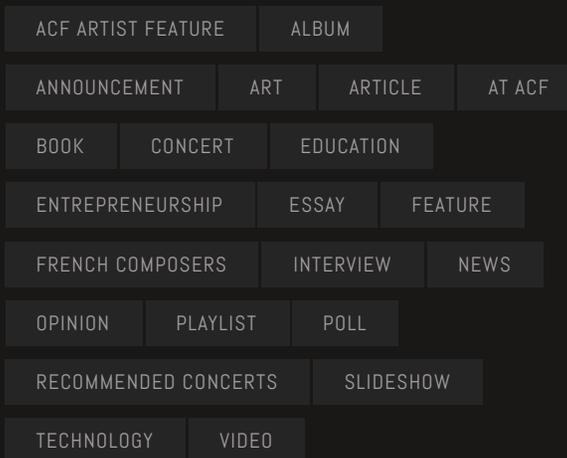
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American Cipher: A Case Study in Collaborative Practice

by lizburden / October 8, 2022

Introduction

For more than 20 years, artists Mendi + Ketih Obadike have engaged in a collaborative "new media" practice, ranging from hypertext, digital, and sound art on the early Internet to large scale multimedia installations in art and community spaces. Their woks deconstruct and reconstruct narratives around American history (stories, data, text, music) to bestow new meaning.

Sound and its relation to the visual is of particular interest for M+K Obadike, as is the power of listening. In their view, sound can be a "sketch," sound can be as a complement to and a completer of sight/the visual; sound can be a medium for articulating and changing space(s).

They collect, analyze, and weave a variety of what they call "ephemeral inheritances"—including artifacts, data, and archival material—-into a finished work. Through their studio experimentation, M+K Obadike (re)solving questions relating the philosophical, technical, relational, spatial, temporal, and practical aspects of artworks that are based on those inheritances.

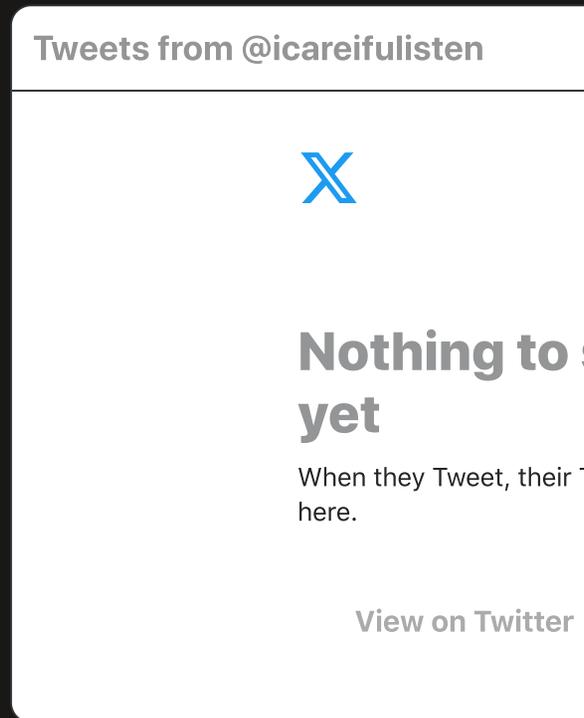In my own practice, I use formal and informal archives and data to reflect on geographies, imaginaries, memories, legacies, and vestiges of historical violence and trauma. It is "a backward glance that enacts a future vision," to quote José Esteban Muñoz.

Using their *American Cypher* (2011-2013) as an example, I will describe the "how" and "why" of M+K Obadike's research-based process and examine their process of multimodal semiotic design.

About the Artists

M+K Obadike have worked collaboratively as an artistic team since 1996. Mendi Obadike received a BA in English from Spelman College and a PhD in literature from Duke University. After working at the Cotsen Postdoctoral Fellow in Princeton, she became a poetry editor at Fence Magazine and an assistant professor in the Department of Humanities and media studies at Pratt.

Keith Obadike earned a BA in art from North Carolina Central University and an MFA in sound design from Yale. He's an associate professor in the College of Arts and Communication at William Patterson University and serves as an art advisor for the Times Square Alliance.

Collaborative Practice Exemplified:
American Cypher

American Cypher is part of M+K Obadike's *Americana Suites* series that deals with key issues in American culture through sound installations, texts, and performance. Mendi Obadike describes the suites as a process of

> investigating the ways that art, music, and literature can function together. And so as a part of that long series of investigations, there are two series of two different kinds of practices that sometimes intersect…. Our series of intermedia suites are focused on the notion of America.
>
> (M. Obadike 2016, "Brown Visual Art, "4:44)

Specifically, *American Cypher* is a series of works that examine stories about race and DNA. It consists of five interrelated pieces, including two site-specific versions of an eight-channel sound and video installation, a series of letterpress prints, and a book.

Mendi + Keith Obadike -American Cypher at Bucknell Univ. and The Studio Museum in Harlem (2011-13)

Figure 1. *Excerpt from* American Cypher *Sound Installation*

Arts-based methods can be seen as a process that "unfolds, guides, and frames the research," formed by several factor including (1) clarifying the subject and starting point of the research, (2) unfolding the presuppositions contained in the subject matter and the viewpoint of the prsearch, (3) possessing the chosen research tools and the subject matter, (4) presenting research logically, persuasively, and precisely, and (5) evaluating the final result (Hannula 2005, 114-116). *American Cypher* could be considered a "textbook" case of these factors.

The starting point of the research was a commission from Bucknell University, but it was an encounter with a simple artifact— a bell that belonged to Sally Hemings— that clarified the project for M+K.

> We were asked to think about this relationship between Jefferson and Hemings. Originally we didn't know what we would say about it. A lot had been written about their relationship. A lot of research had been done about it.
>
> As we started to read much of the research to examine the relationship, we were looking for a sort of material connection to Sally Hemings…. And so we went through Monticello and we went through the historical documents looking for an object, a physical connection to Sally Hemings. And the one object at Monticello that belonged to Sally Hemings was a small bell.
>
> (M. Obadike 2016, "Brown Visual Arts," 16:12).

> This object functioned at the center of our project. It was a sort of a stand in. We needed a kind of physical object that would stand in for DNA for us. And this is her last remaining possession; it's owned by Howard University but it lives in Monticello. We thought that was interesting.
>
> (K. Obadike 2013, "The African Diaspora," 5:14)

Both describe the unfolding that happened, the concepts that emerged, and the viewpoint of their research:

> [Mendi] We were doing research on Sally Hemings, and Thomas Jefferson, who, even during their lifetime, were rumored to have children together. Sally Hemings was an enslaved person on Jefferson's plantation. And she was also the half sister of his wife. And we're doing research, we found that the last known possession of Sally Hemings, that was still around was the bell. And we did that when we read that we didn't really know what it was.
>
> But when we got to Monticello, and found the bell, it was a service bell. So we were really, I don't know, they hadn't occurred to me at all. I don't know if you had thought of it. I was like, "Oh." And this was given to her by Martha Jefferson. So it was interesting to think that, you know…
>
> [Mendi] We don't know what it meant. I mean, what I was imagining something very different. You know, maybe this was like, "Oh, now you're free. I can't call you anymore." I don't know how that happened, what the gesture was.
>
> [Keith] Just a normal gesture between sisters.
>
> [Mendi] But so the fact that this being passed on in this way, passed from Martha to Sally, but also passed down to through generations of Sally Hemings family.
>
> We just got really interested in this and how this stood in for inheritance. And at the same time, some of our research was leading us to a more contemporary engagement with this story, which is that DNA analysis was done in the descendants of the Jefferson family and the Hemings family. We got very interested in what did change after in the way that people talked about their descendants, after the DNA analysis. And that just got us on this whole, you know, investigation on what people want DNA to do, what they think it does and what they want it to tell us about who we are.
>
> (M+K Obadike in Chen 2017, "Artists on Art," 10:57)

In this description of their project, as Chen noted, M+K described how their engagement with the artifact lead them down a conceptual path: from the bell to a gift between two people, to what's passed down to the descendants, to DNA and genetics, to

the modern scientific analysis of DNA, and then to cultural aspects of what individuals and society want from DNA. This progression is indicative of their practice, of compressing or collapsing content, time, and space.

Once they decided that the bell was the focal point, they had to get permission to use it, which involve extended conversation with the staff of Howard University, which owned the bell, and Monticello, which was a bit concerned about the "why" its use. The staff of Monticello gave permission, once they understood that M+K only wanted to record its sound.

This set M+K into the intensive experimentation phase of the project, which involved recording the bell, recording other field sound, and developing a sound score based on DNA data related to the Jefferson-Hemings family. Keith Obadike describes the process thusly:

> I recorded the set and the sound of the bell just, you know, raw sound, and maybe I recorded that over, I don't know, maybe over half an hour, you know, just sort of listening to it and trying to understand it and make making sure that I had enough takes of whatever we might want to use, you know, we didn't know what we were going to make with it exactly. You know, we just knew we wanted the sound of the bell itself….
>
> We knew that we wanted to use the numbers from the DNA analysis as a score in some way, you know, so we knew we were going to tune the bells to the, to those frequencies, and so, you know, we did that process, you know, over, maybe we did a few few different passes over a couple of weeks.
>
> Then we mixed that a little with field recording done from Monticello… you know, like the ambient sounds, conversations with the tour guides… So those things pop up in the installation…. Those things are sort of filtered in, the primary thing that you hear is the sound of the bell sort of stretched out and tuned to these numbers that come from the families' bodies or the families' code.
>
> (Chen 2017, "Artists on Art," 20:10)

M+K note that as the project grew, they started thinking about different ways they could say more about DNA and American identity. At the end of the process, M+K made two versions of the bell piece: an installation in the Bucknell University student center (2012) that consisted of moving speakers that project the sound when an individual interrupted the speaker's beam; and an adaptation presented at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2013). They also created video and print works for five other stories: Barack Obama and his lineage, Oprah Winfrey's claim to be descended from the Zulu, James Watson (who co-discovered the double helix), and two men with different relationships to the criminal justice system (James Bain, who was exonerated after 34 years in prison because of DNA evidence, and Lonnie Franklin, a serial killer arrested because of DNA found in a ancestry database).

Beyond *American Cypher*: Considering the Overarching Process of M+K Obadike

American Cypher was a (heavily) research based project. They used an intuitive process to produce a cohesive and dynamic series that engaged with discourses about DNA, race and lineage. Although intuitive, their process is comprehensive, with clear methods (processes for collecting data), methodology (criteria for how to collect and use the gathered data), epistemology (ways to make sense/ meaning of the data), ontology (description of how they view the world), and axiology (the values that underlie the research).

The project is indicative of their wider practice in which they (1) collaborate on conceptualization/theorization/ selecting the research subject/object, (2) select datasets, (3) identify the elements of the datasets to use, (4) manipulate and transform the data, and (5) make aesthetic choices on how to combine sound, text, visuals to create the final piece. Chen (2017) noted, **"The piece that the audience hears is packed with meaning, but not necessarily immediately graspable. It's almost like an arc, where you do a lot of research that leads to something very streamlined and almost embodied, rather than cerebral."**

Their method of inquiry incorporates both empiricist and interpretive focuses, which is characteristic of discursive methods (Sullivan 2010, 108). They use conceptual and analytical techniques to identify patterns, consistencies/inconsistencies, and logics/illogics in data/information. In their studio research setting, objects, sound, text, and visual images are used as a means to investigate meanings and as sources of meanings across discourses related to race.

This way of working allows for an expanded concept of representation(s) of Blackness. The use of sound as the primary medium allows them to address Blackness/ anti-Blackness without reproducing the violence(s). This is possible because of how sound functions differently from visual, and from the effects of ambient co-habitation. Mendi Obadike notes:

> We're particularly interested in the power of listening and how sound articulates space and we mean both architectural space and social space. That's something that runs through all of our projects. There are three ideas that—they don't tell us what the projects are going to be about but we notice that these ideas that we have about listening run through our projects as well. [1] Often because we're working in a visual art space, the kind of relationship to looking is a question and so one of the things we notice is that when we look, we're not just using our eyes, what we hear and what we think also informs what we see. [2] The second idea is that the way we make meaning of sounds is slightly different from the way we make meaning of images and so one of the main ways that we make meaning of sounds is in relation to an image. [3] And then the last idea is that even when we don't have an image present to stabilize our are listening we have other things like memory and feeling and so we think, we make meaning by calling up other times that listening has helped us feel or has helped us understand something.
>
> (M. Obadike, Being There, 2020, 8:40)

The special grammars, rhetorics, and aesthetics of sound, the form of knowledge it produces, and its intertextuality articulate (as Mendi put it) differently than visual ones. The aurality (as opposed to the visuality) provides a different way of perceiving.

> I would say that you know we have a different goal from um someone who would be communicating to lecture about history, politics, religion. You know, for us we are trying to experience what the sounds hold, the information the sounds hold. (M. Obadike 2020, "Being There," 45:55)
>
> Part of the reason why we like working in this medium is that it operates kind of differently. It's like it in a way can be something that acts on you without you thinking about it and in other ways it can be very very present. So it's unlike other things because it can be both, it can make itself felt and it can also not call attention to itself.] I would say part of the reason we work with some of the other materials we work with, meaning like, working with architecture or light and stories, is because at times sound acts like each of those things. (K. Obadike 2020, "Being There," 50:00)

Their concept of *ephemeral inheritance* is important to this work. They define it as not just material objects that convey belief, philosophies, meaning but also those immaterial things passed down. For example, music is one type of ephemeral inheritance, of which Keith Obadike notes:

> We understand that these things that we're working with have had to carry all kinds of information, you know, philosophy, cosmology, ideas about architecture. Very few built artifacts exist from African American culture, so the music has had to hold everything. And so part of what we see ourselves doing is kind of decoding that and unpacking that, the architectural ideas built into the history of African-American music. How do you unpack that in a physical space?
>
> (SOURCE)

Not only how does one unpack that in a physical space but also in what may be a relatively short encounter. In each of their sound installations, the audible disruption of public cial space is an exquisite exercise in social semiotic design. Other projects, including _Blues Speaker (for James Baldwin)_ (2015), _Number Series_ (2015-present), _Free/Phase_ (2014-15) exemplify this. Keith Obadike said:

> We're always thinking about them [sound installations] as a meditation and meditation on a topic, but also an invitation for meditation. But how you invite people into that kind of encounter is different in the public space, as opposed to, you know, a private gallery space or museum .
>
> (K. Obadike in Chen 2017, "Artists on Art," 7:19)

Decentering the visual produces alternate ways of understanding both the realities of Black abjection and the possibilities of Black transcendence. A colleague of M+K Obadike best sums the finished works that their practice produces:

> Their work looks at and makes audible some of the meeting points among digital and cultural networks as it relates to blackness. They describe it as being about finding personal ways to examine persistent questions in our culture and then making that process accessible. They also know that all of our works spring from a dialogue about things that are just at the edge of language. It is perhaps for this reason that their work often features a sharp twinning of abstraction and materiality….
>
> Whether in the act of Keith putting his blackness for sale on Ebay, or in the sound of Sally Hemings' bell which is used as the material for a composition derived from both Hemings' and Thomas Jefferson's genetic code, their work functions as both a sign and a calling, at once a statement of condition and an invitation to engagement. The strength of their practice comes from a deeply considered lived experience, one that allows a natural production of art from life, and one that sustains both life and art. Their work and working methodologies evidence rigor and insight, clarity and grace, and substantial amounts of joy.
>
> (Ed Osborn in Obadike 2016, "Brown Visual Art," 2:48)

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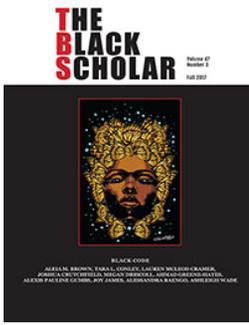Tenses of Being: Art Reclaiming and Animating the Archive

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Color Coded: Mendi + Keith Obadike's *Black.Net.Art Actions* and the Language of Computer Networks

MEGAN DRISCOLL

if you're white you're right / if you're black get back / if you're brown stick around / if you're yellow you're mellow

The splash page of Mendi + Keith Obadike's web-based work *The Interaction of Coloreds* (2002) greets you with a dizzying 2×2 grid of rapidly changing images.[1] After a moment of watching them cycle, you realize that these are pictures of black body parts—the artists' bodies—photographed in front of a brown paper bag. Running your mouse over the grid squares one by one reveals the above lines, first recorded in a Big Bill Broonzy song, since deeply embedded into popular (and literary) consciousness. The association between images and text may not be subtle, but it's incisive: we're looking at a brief history of the ways that color preference has been used to manipulate and oppress black bodies in the United States, from slavery to Jim Crow. Clicking anywhere on the grid brings you into the main site, where the Obadikes imagine how this process might work in the twenty-first century: they've created the IOC Color Check System®, which assigns hexadecimal color values to people in order to help "protect your online community from unwanted visitors."[2] *The Interaction of Coloreds* is one of three net art projects that make

up the Obadikes' *Black.Net.Art Actions*. Produced between 2001 and 2003, the suite deconstructs the language of color on the internet, examining how it reflects the persistence of identity categories like race, gender, sexuality, and class. Together, the works refuse claims for the disembodiment of the internet-browsing subject, while demonstrating how the values communicated by the social coding of language penetrate into the network itself.[3]

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the internet was widely regarded as a post-identity utopia. People still felt they could exert total control over their representations online, slip outside of their bodies to be anyone, or simply be anonymous; and this ability held the promise of transcendence, a world where categories like race, gender, class, sexuality, and mobility would dissolve into one great "virtual community."[4] These idealistic claims tended to obscure the actual internet browsing experiences of many people, relegating conversation about the role of race and gender online to separated (and often subordinated) areas like cyberfeminism and black-oriented social networks. And until recently, scholars have followed cyber enthusiasts' lead in simply ignoring questions of identity. In a detailed meta-analysis of scholarship on the internet, Christopher McGahan points out that even those texts that attempt to define a kind of "cybercultural identity" exclude issues like race as though they were "somehow irrelevant to the conceptualization and conduct of the vast majority of sites of internet culture."[5] Popular and academic discourses have thus worked in tandem to reinforce the perception that our subject positions simply stop mattering when we log onto the network.
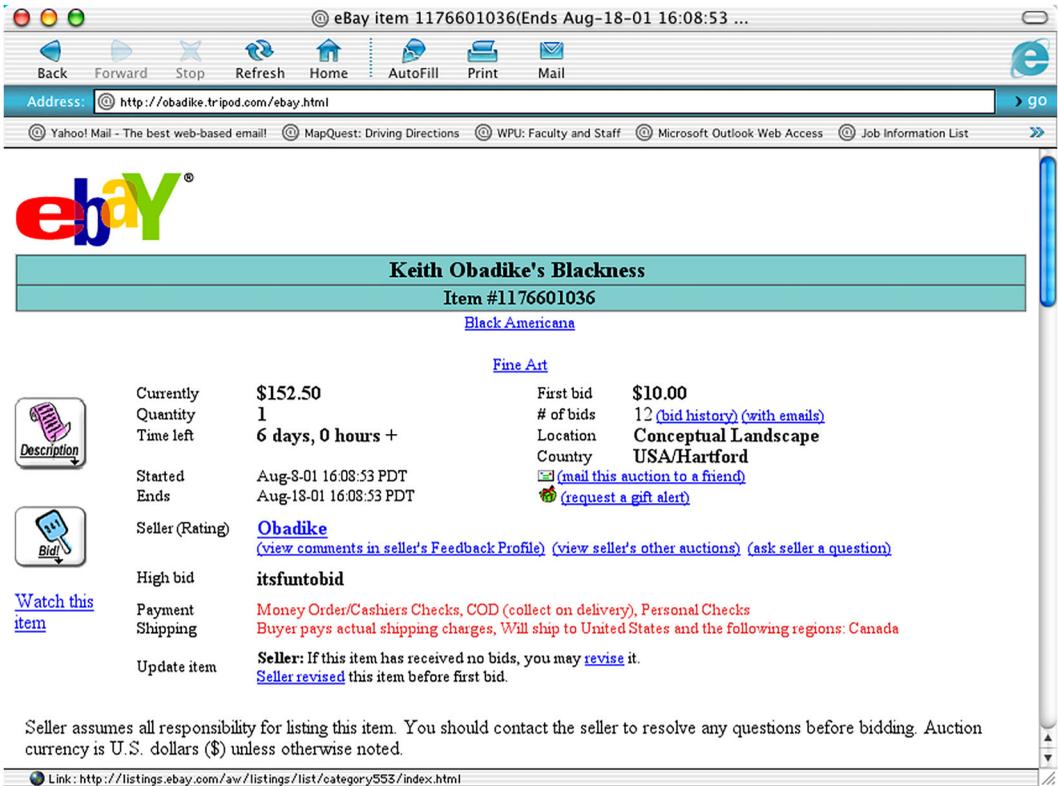
Figure 1: Mendi + Keith Obadike, Blackness for Sale*, 2001.*

The projects that make up the *Black.Net.Art Actions* are among a very small number of internet-based artworks from this period that contradicted these claims to confront how our bodies and our identities are affected by the online environment, focusing specifically on how meaning accrues to color and the different languages we use to understand it. The Obadikes first tackled the subject with *Blackness for Sale* in 2001; when they made *The Interaction of Coloreds* the following year, they realized that the two are linked by a shared interest in the semantics of color on the internet—a theme they expanded on with *The Pink of Stealth* in 2003, which rounded out the retroactively formed suite

and ended up being one of the pair's last works of self-described internet art. This is a somewhat strange claim to make, given how amorphous the categorical boundaries of internet art remain; for our purposes, we can understand the phrase internet art (or net art) as describing works that directly address the technological, social, and/or political basis of computer networks. And by that definition, the entire field of net art was indeed undergoing a major shift in the early 2000s, partly in response to more global changes in how people use the internet that included the rise of social media and a paradigmatic shift in how we think about representing ourselves—and our identities—online. The

Megan Driscoll   57

Black.Net.Art Actions can thus be considered transitional, a series of works that challenge problematic ideals that are rooted in the internet's early years and attempt to set the terms for a more analytic discourse on meaning and representation on computer networks going forward.

The first of the three works, *Blackness for Sale*, is the most well-known of the Obadikes' net art projects. In 2001, they put Keith's Blackness up for sale on eBay in the Fine Arts and Black Americana categories; it received 12 bids over four days before eBay shut the project down, calling the item "inappropriate."[6] The description features a long list of benefits and warnings like "This Blackness may be used for making jokes about black people and/or laughing at black humor comfortably," "This Blackness may be used for dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny," and "This Blackness may be used for instilling fear"; or "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used during legal proceedings of any sort," "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while making intellectual claims," and "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while voting in the United States or Florida." As it ranges across cultural stereotypes, personal experiences, and political events, the text highlights how deeply entangled language is with its sociocultural context. "Blackness" doesn't describe a value-neutral color; it speaks both of a certain quality of a person and the entire history of race relations in the United States, simultaneously signifying danger and vulnerability, political disenfranchisement and cultural capital, power and subjugation. Stuart Hall has described

the communication of this multiplicity of meaning as a process of encoding and decoding, arguing that "there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code"—whether in images or text, communication always follows the rules of language, it is always coded, and this code is always culturally determined. There is therefore no "natural" interpretation of a word or image (or color), no neutral use of language, and when we communicate we encode a broad range of meanings into our message, which then take on further meaning as they're decoded by the recipient.[7] *Blackness for Sale* thus highlights the role of the viewer in activating the artwork, a performative quality that is endemic to net art, which frequently relies on its visitors' clicks, communications, and other participatory acts for completion.

Hall, who was writing about television broadcasting, also emphasized the determinant role of the form of the message: how we communicate structures how we understand meaning. By putting Keith's Blackness on an e-commerce platform, *Blackness for Sale* ask us to examine how this coding process happens in the context of the internet. How do we experience Blackness on computer networks? What does it feel like to be a black subject browsing the web? What does Blackness *look* like on the internet? When we encounter it online, is it as funny, as scary, as vulnerable, as cool as when we encounter it in the offline world? And the specific choice of eBay was not an accident: the Obadikes selected the site in order to direct attention to a whole set of terms that we use to describe browsing and shopping on the internet, and explore how they influence our experience of Blackness online.

What does it mean to sell Blackness on an "auction" site that, as Keith Obadike points out, we might have visited using a web browser called "Explorer" or "Navigator"?[8] And what happens when this Blackness gets put up for sale in eBay's Black Americana category, which also includes just about every form of racist figurine and memorabilia imaginable—can we really accept the site's claim that they are simply a passive "trading post" for these representations of American Blackness even as they decry the inappropriateness of *Blackness for Sale*?[9] No, the work insists, of course not; whether it's the ceramic figurine of a black mammy or the abstraction of an individual's black identity, auctioning a representation of Blackness invokes the history of the sale of black bodies, and doing it on an e-commerce platform refuses the virtual world's claims to have escaped such histories. *Blackness for Sale* thus reminds us that neither the words that we use to talk about computer networks nor the platforms we use to access the internet are neutral; the range of significations that accrue around color language and the embodied experiences that it recalls persist online as well as off.[10]

(Mendi + Keith Obadike, *The Interaction of Coloreds*, 2002 can be viewed as part of the supplemental material.)

A year after the Obadikes put *Blackness for Sale* on eBay, they produced *The Interaction of Coloreds* as a commission for the Whitney Artport.[11] Unlike *Blackness for Sale*, which was a performance that took place on a pre-existing platform, the Obadikes built *The Interaction of Coloreds* around its own website, with an accompanying downloadable sound piece. Launching

the work brings you to a splash page that, as described above, consists of an automatically cycling grid of photographs of the artists' body parts against a brown paper bag, which on mouse over reveals a familiar series of ominous rhymes describing the relative social values assigned to different hues of black skin. The title of the piece, *The Interaction of Coloreds*, is a reference to Josef Alber's *Interaction of Color*, a text on color theory that touches on the relationship between color, personal preference, and desire; the grid format of the splash page images also alludes to the layout of the color plates in Alber's book. This first page thus establishes the conceptual framework for the project, which, like *Blackness for Sale*, examines the field of meaning that surrounds color language and its relationship to race, homing in on how this system is used to hierarchically sort and evaluate human beings.

When you click anywhere on the grid of photographs, you enter the main site where you're introduced to the IOC Color Check System®, which the Obadikes describe as a brown paper bag test for the internet. The background of this page is a photograph of the artists standing side by side, cropped to their torsos and revealing small patches of chest and arm, the relative hues of their skin emphasized by their solid black and white shirts. Gone is the brown paper bag behind them; whatever occupied this space in the original photograph has been removed and replaced with a layer of digitally exact "true white" (#FFFFF). This signals a shift away from old, analog systems of color evaluation into a new world where human beings can be measured so precisely that they're assigned a specific numerical color value. And that is

just what the IOC Color Check System® proposes to do, as the introductory text on the page announces: "Websafe colors aren't just for webmasters. Register with the IOC Color Check System® and protect your online community from unwanted visitors."[12] Visitors can heed this call and click on the IOC Color Check System® link right away, or pause to download the IOC audio, a semi-autonomous piece that mixes music and poetry.[13] The brief recording weaves between delicate sounds and slowly building rhythms, with a female voiceover reading a cryptic rumination on visibility, (in)adequacy, and the worlds in which we find ourselves.

Clicking on the IOC Color Check System® link brings you to a new page that describes exactly how the system works, but in the hyper-enthusiastic tone of advertising. We're exhorted to "APPLY NOW!" if you "represent a money-lending institution" and "need online skin color verification for the purposes of determining projected property value." Or perhaps you're "a member of a new African-American web portal or an old Negro social club" who is "looking for a way to maintain your club's discriminating tastes in the information age." No matter what your specific needs (the artists provide several other possible scenarios), the IOC Color Check System® offers subscribers a way to navigate the relationship between monetary value and skin color in the digital realm by requiring that prospective employees, customers, etc. fill out an online application and receive a hexadecimal color code that will "give you (and them) an exact measure of their color." A sample application is available; clicking on this link will bring you to an extremely detailed form that asks for demographics

and family history, and contains a barrage of questions like "Has your skin color ever been in vogue?" or "Have you ever been allowed" (or denied) "access to a place because of your color?" or "How do you describe your hair texture?" If you fill out the form and submit it along with photographs of your body against a surface that's lighter than your skin tone, the site promises to register you in their international database and issue you a customer number and verified hexadecimal color value.

Like *Blackness for Sale*, *The Interaction of Coloreds* investigates how the polysemy of color functions in the context of the internet, but the later work delves more into the technical language of the web. For example, the phrase "web-safe colors" is no longer just a guarantee that a numerical color code is safe for your website; with the IOC Color Check System® it becomes a guarantee that the human being affiliated with a given color code will be safe too. And it directs our attention to the numerical color codes themselves, which are built into every website you see—hexadecimal codes are one of the most common, and consistent, ways to describe the color of any element in HyperText Markup Language (HTML), the foundational language used to design websites. But *The Interaction of Coloreds* argues that these codes don't just passively generate color; they communicate color, which means that they potentially convey all of its coded meanings: the "true white" of #FFFFFF can just as easily be read as the "right white" of the Big Bill Broonzy song. Thus by connecting the encoding/decoding process of spoken language to the technical language of the web, *The Interaction of*

Coloreds even strips computer codes of their claims for mathematical neutrality, reminding us that the ideologies of language cannot be divorced from any system of communication.

The third and final project in the *Black.Net.Art Actions* suite is *The Pink of Stealth*, which was commissioned by Electronic Arts Intermix and the New York African Film Festival for the 2003 Digital Africa exhibition.[14] The project continues the Obadikes' investigation into color as a signifier for identity, but broadens its scope to look at how color affects representations of gender, class, sexuality, and even health, as well as race. *The Pink of Stealth* is a multimedia work presented in three main parts, all of which revolve around a story written by the Obadikes in response to the way that the color pink is deployed in two movies, *Pretty in Pink* (1986) and *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993). They experiment with fragmenting the story in different ways throughout the work, recalling the non-linear approach to narrative that was popular with many artists and writers who used hypertext during the 1990s. The work's pieces can all be accessed from a central website whose landing page is filled with a disorienting animated gif of oscillating pink and white stripes that automatically generates a pop-up window; the window's background is a photograph of the two artists' left hands, partly overlapping and frozen in a gun-pointing gesture, each wearing pink button cuff shirts with an indecipherable, pinkish pattern behind them. This interplay between digitized and photographed pinkness lingers in our field of vision as we click through the work's main components: a hypertext poem in five variations, a web-based game, and a downloadable audio piece.[15]

The range of meanings that extend outward from the color pink weave through the underlying narrative of *The Pink of Stealth* and into each individual element. In the hypertext poem, we make this connection through the color of the page itself. Clicking on the link labeled "5 Hypertext Variations" opens another pop-up, with a header that reads: "Variation 1: CC6666" and a background in the rich, reddish pink hue described by the hexadecimal code #CC6666. Only pieces of the text are visible; running your mouse over the blank spaces will make the remaining words appear, and clicking brings you to the next variation (eventually, the page will also cycle forward automatically). Each variation displays and is named for a different hue of pink, revealing new phrases from the story and allowing the varying shades of pink to quite literally color your reading of the text. You can then move from the look to the sound of pink with the audio file, which is labeled "The Mauve Mix" on the work's home page.[16] Just over six minutes long, the track begins with a musical intro that moves into the background as a female voice begins to speak in a disjointed rhythm, reading the story in shifting cadences with long pauses and occasional sound effects that mimic the visual fragmentation of the text online. It's impossible not to hear her low tone as seductive, to begin to imagine the sensuality of pinkness as you manipulate your mouse to play with the visibility of the text while listening to the story play with the range of pink significations that the Obadikes have uncovered: boys and girls and their pink parts, their tongues and cheeks; desire, for another person, but also for food and for wealth and for recognition; the hunt, chasing people,

chasing foxes. This quality of pinkness layers onto the explorations of blackness, brownness, and yellowness in *Blackness for Sale* and *The Interaction of Coloreds*, injecting new meaning into questions like "Has your skin color ever been in vogue?" as you consider the relationship between color and desire—the color of desire itself, as well as the color of what you desire.

(Mendi + Keith Obadike, *The Pink of Stealth* (game demo), 2003 can be viewed as part of the supplemental material.)

However, the reference to chasing foxes is not simply a metaphor—historical fox hunts are the most surprising association with the color pink that is excavated in *The Pink of Stealth*, and they form the centerpiece of the third and final element of the work, the game. (The fox hunt also loops us back to the artists' mysterious gun-pointing gesture in the background of the main page.) All that is viewable of the game today is a demo, in which you can watch two dog characters named "Unbeatable" and "Unspeakable" running ahead of a character on a horse, dressed in fox hunting clothes. As the project description explains, the Obadikes came across the phrase "in the pink," short for "in the pink of health" (hence the work's title), from eighteenth-century English fox hunting. The phrase refers to clothing designer's Thomas Pink's popular red hunting jackets—the same jacket worn by the character in the game demo—thereby associating itself with fashion, wealth, upper-class leisure activities, and even the blush of sporting good health. By featuring this relatively obscure reference to pink from outdated fox hunting slang alongside the color's more contemporary associations with

gender and sexuality, *The Pink of Stealth* explores how the range of meanings for color language can seem to spiral endlessly outward, a game of word association whose rules keep shifting alongside social norms.

But there are rules. As Hall reminds us, contextual parameters must structure the possible range of meanings that can be decoded for communication to be possible at all, and there will always be a hierarchy, a set of meanings that are most legible to the dominant social order.[17] In its web-based presentation, *The Pink of Stealth* asks how these parameters are structured online. How does pink signify as we surf the web—can the color of my web page tell you something about my femininity, my desirability, my sexuality, my health, my social class? And if it's no longer an eighteenth-century fashion designer or a twentieth-century Hollywood film, who (or what) sets the limits of this signification? With their changing pink backgrounds and matching hexadecimal code titles, the hypertext poems in particular point to the protocols that limit our experience of the web as a digital arbiter of meaning. When "Variation 1: #FFCCCC" tells us that "He … knew how to … delight … a … Randi … girl" and "Variation 4: #FF9999" tells us that "He … knew how to … delight … a … big … guy," the shift from pale to vibrant pink backgrounds that signifies a shift in modes of sexuality may be encoded by the artists, but the range of possibilities from which they can choose to communicate this message is dictated by the web's precise numerical codes. *The Pink of Stealth* thus expands the conclusion of *The Interaction of Coloreds* to suggest that not only are the meanings that accrue to spoken language

embedded in the language of the web, so too are the hierarchies that delimit what we are expected to understand when we read, or see.

As noted, the *Black.Net.Art Actions* were produced in a time when race discourses online were sidelined, kept largely contained in race-oriented social networking sites like BlackPlanet and AsianAvenue while other advocates for cyberculture simply ignored identity characteristics, assuming they had been transcended in the virtual space of the network.[18] This tendency extended into internet art as well—artists whose work dealt directly with questions of identity were few and far between, and they were frequently marginalized.[19] The Obadikes recall running into disclaimers like "it's outside our scope" as a form of pushback against their work, which was often regarded as unsuccessful net art not only because it talked openly about race and gender, but also because it insisted on being situated in a specific sociohistorical context (primarily, although not exclusively, the United States and the African diaspora), which clashed with claims for the internet's —and internet art's—radical newness and globalizing universality.[20] They riff on this problem throughout the *Black.Net.Art Actions*, commenting in *Blackness for Sale* that "This Blackness may be used for creating black art" but "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used in the process of making or selling 'serious' art," or asking, in *The Interaction of Coloreds*, "Are you an art collector investing in net.art made by a colored artist? Do you need a method of determining the effect of the artist's body on the value of the work?" And the title of the suite itself critiques this absence of open dialogue on race and identity through reference to a

specific subset of internet art. The phrase "net.art" (the dot is crucial) is typically used to describe a highly influential group of mostly European net artists working in the mid to late 1990s whose work so dominated visions of what internet art should be that anything that diverged from its main concerns (which were actually quite varied, but neither oriented toward identity in general nor American history in particular) seemed to simply become unrecognizable.[21]

That this blind spot toward race and identity should carry from general internet culture into internet art was remarkable during the 1990s, and in the United States in particular. This was a period in which many North American arts organizations were deeply invested in working through questions of identity, language, and cultural politics that were quite similar to those being addressed by *Blackness for Sale*, *The Interaction of Coloreds*, and *The Pink of Stealth*.[22] But the ambition to transcend the subject and the history she carries with her isn't without art historical precedent. In some respects, it echoes late American modernism's pursuit of the impersonal, the neutral object (or concept) that would obscure the context of its maker—or, at least, certain kinds of makers. Adrian Piper, for example, has attributed the rapid rise and fall of her 1960s minimalist and conceptual art practice to the eventual discovery of her identity as a black woman, initially concealed by her ambiguous name.[23] Of course, it's important to acknowledge that changing attitudes toward women and people of color in the offline art world were reflected in the internet art world; there wasn't a prohibition on work by female and POC artists so much as a tendency to ignore net art that insisted

on taking identity positions as its primary subject. It was simply "outside the scope" of what was significant in the practice of art on computer networks.

It was into this environment that the Obadikes interjected the *Black.Net.Art Actions*, one by one in 2001, 2002, and 2003. As a group, their primary subject is color, but it's an approach to color that emphatically refuses the neutrality of form, and delves deeply into the social coding of language. The works demonstrate how the technical codes of the web can become a system of communication, subject to the process of encoding and decoding that gives all messages their meaning, and structures the boundaries of that signification. And in the process, they reveal how the ideologies embedded in the way that we talk about color are carried over both into the language we use to describe the web—auctioning Blackness on the eBay, allowing only web-safe color(ed)s —and the language that dictates what we see when we browse the web—#FFFFFF (true white), #FFCCCC (pale pink). *Blackness for Sale*, *The Interaction of Coloreds*, and *The Pink of Stealth* thus not only refute the idea that our bodies and our identities can, or should, be transcended as we browse the internet, but demonstrate that the terms of identity cannot be extricated from how we read the very structure of the network itself.

Notes

1. Mendi + Keith Obadike's *The Interaction of Coloreds* (2002) can be viewed at http://web. archive.org/web/20170108010002/http://www. blacknetart.com/IOC.html.

2. Hexadecimal color values are six-digit strings that represent colors in some computing applications, including the different types of code (HTML, CSS, etc.) that are used to build web pages. For example, #000000 tells your web browser to display black, whereas #FFFFFF tells your web browser to display white. The structure of the code itself is not arbitrary. It uses only 16 digits (0–9 and A–F) and is built of three pairs of digits that each assign a certain intensity to a range of red, green, or blue, then combine to produce a specific color. Because they use the additive color process, hexadecimal colors follow the basic principles of light: #000000 is black because it's a total absence of color, whereas #FFFFFF is white because it's a combination of all colors at full intensity. (You can explore how this works at http://www.w3schools.com/colors/colors_hexadecimal.asp.) So for the computer, the reading of these codes is strictly objective. But *The Interaction of Coloreds* draws our attention to the interpretive layer that is introduced by the human reader of hexadecimal codes and the colors they produce, weighing down these seemingly neutral numeric codes with the social and cultural values that the colors carry in everyday language.

3. It's important to distinguish the three main terms that I am using to describe the internet in this essay. The phrase "computer networks" generally describes technologies based on connections between computers, the phrase "the internet" refers to our sprawling system of computer networks nested within computer networks, and the phrase "the web" specifically describes one of the ways we access information on these networks— e.g., you might be using a web browser right now to read this on a web page.

4. Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 11. One of the most well-known proponents of the idea that the "virtual community" would

transcend issues of race and gender is Howard Rheingold, who articulated his vision in a book on The WELL, which started in 1985 as an online bulletin board system and flourished into one of the internet's largest and longest running social organizations.

5. When the subject of race does come up, Christopher McGahan observes, it has typically been focused on questions of access to the network (the "digital divide") rather than racialized experience on the network. However, a small but growing number of scholars are beginning to delve into this topic. In addition to McGahan, a few of the authors in this area who specifically address visual culture include Lisa Nakamura, Wendy Chun, Jennifer González, and Tara McPherson; for a more detailed list of related scholarship see Christopher McGahan, "Introduction: Racing Cyberculture," in *Racing Cyberculture: Minoritarian Art and Cultural Politics on the Internet*, Routledge Studies in New Media and Cyberculture (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6–8.

6. A full capture of the *Blackness for Sale* eBay listing page is available on an archive of the artists' website at http://web.archive.org/web/20011221173617/http://obadike.tripod.com/ebay.html. It's worth noting that, although the listing describes the item for sale as "Mr. Obadike's Blackness," the description actually scrupulously avoids gendering the potential buyer, introducing an element of ambiguity and flexibility into over-determined tropes of black masculinity like "instilling fear."

7. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 131.

8. In a 2001 interview on *Blackness for Sale* with Coco Fusco, Keith Obadike discussed the "odd Euro colonialist narrative" that structures the way we talk about using the web—"there are browsers called Explorer and Navigator that take you to explore the Amazon or trade in the eBay"—and

how *Blackness for Sale* examines the peculiar position this constructs for black people as internet users. Coco Fusco, "All Too Real: The Tale of an On-Line Black Sale; Coco Fusco Interviews Keith Townsend Obadike," September 24, 2001, http://blacknetart.com/coco.html. Note that Netscape Navigator has been discontinued since the early 2000s, but the default Windows web browser is still called Explorer and Apple has followed this model with their default browser, Safari.

9. Today, Black Americana can only be found on eBay as a sub-sub-section, buried under the Collectibles and Cultures & Ethnicities categories, but it is still dominated by a parade of racist antiques, periodically punctured by items like a vintage Malcolm X poster that generate more than a little cognitive dissonance.

10. A much more detailed analysis of eBay and how *Blackness for Sale* specifically refutes claims for the race neutrality of e-commerce is available in Christopher McGahan, "Re-Collecting Cyberculture and Racial Identification in a Minoritarian Frame of Reference: Keith Obadike's Blackness for Sale, eBay, and the Counter-Performance of Blackness in Cyberspace," in *Racing Cyberculture*, 85–122.

11. Since the early 2000s, the Whitney Museum has used their Artport website as a platform to support internet-based artworks. For the gate pages, which lasted into 2006, the Whitney commissioned artists to use the Artport as a point of entry to a work that was otherwise hosted on the artist's own site. The pages typically rotated each month, and *The Interaction of Coloreds* was featured in August of 2002. You can view the archive of the work's gate page at http://artport.whitney.org/gatepages/august02.shtml.

12. In the early 2000s, there were still a lot of computer monitors that had a limited color range and would substitute another color for one they didn't recognize in a website's code. Thus when building websites, designers would try to stick to a specific palette of "web-safe colors" in an

attempt to ensure that the site would look the same to all visitors. Today, displays are much more likely to have a wider range of color options, so the practice has become less common.

13. The Obadikes work with sound, music, and poetry in addition to visual art, and frequently offer audio tracks as part of their media projects. However, these tracks are generally provided as separate downloads, rather than audio that runs automatically as you view the work. This unfortunately tends to make the sound components feel optional (or at least easy to miss), but they are worth the extra effort; adding the experience of listening to the experience of looking enhances the performative element of the Obadikes' works.

14. *Pink of Stealth* (2003) can be viewed at http://web.archive.org/web/20080425065057/ http://www.blacknetart.com/pink/PINK-1.html. Please note that the project was designed with Flash for legacy web browsers, and some functionality may be altered.

15. Project notes and a link to a discontinued DVD are also available on the main page for *The Pink of Stealth*; the DVD in particular serves as a reminder of the myriad ways that the artists have presented the work, both for home viewing and exhibition (it was shown at the Neuberger Museum in 2004 in addition to the 2003 Digital Africa show).

16. Although the direct download from the *Pink of Stealth* website is no longer working, the Obadikes have included "The Mauve Mix" as a track called "The Pink of Stealth" on their album *Crosstalk*.

17. Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 134.

18. AsianAvenue and BlackPlanet (both owned by media company Community Connect) were launched in 1997 and 2001, respectively; they were both known for having forums where people tackled difficult conversations about race and social politics alongside other social networking activities, and BlackPlanet rapidly became very successful. Cate T. Corcoran, "BlackPlanet's Universe," *Stanford Alumni Magazine*, April 2004,

https://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=36178. Omar Wasow, the founder of BlackPlanet, notes that the site brought much needed attention to the presence of African Americans online, which had been obscured by narratives about the digital divide. Jenisha Watts, "Interview: BlackPlanet's Founder Talks Myspace, Why He Was Skeptical of Twitter, and If Facebook May Have Peaked," *Complex*, March 23, 2011, http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2011/03/interview-blackplanet-founder-talks-myspace-twitter-facebook.

19. Of course, the Obadikes weren't the only artists addressing these topics; for example, in the 1990s the Mongrel collective was making net and software art that examines the relationship between digital color systems and how we think about race. (Two of Mongrel's projects have recently been archived by the Rhizome Net Art Anthology project at http://anthology.rhizome.org/.) And the cyberfeminist movement, including artists VNS Matrix and Cornelia Sollfrank/Old Boys Network, was quite prominent in early net art social communities, although they frequently popped up with the express purpose of combatting the relative invisibility of female-identified participants in technology and media arts. Unfortunately, cyberfeminism was vulnerable to the same kind of idealism that ended up marginalizing a lot of the art that was trying to do this work; one of the most frequent retrospective critiques of cyberfeminist theory is that some writers tended to valorize the identity-neutralizing potential of the internet as a way to escape the limitations of gender.

20. Mendi + Keith Obadike, interview with the author, July 27, 2016.

21. At the same time, arts organizations were struggling to figure out how they related to this new field of internet-based art, leaving works like the *Black.Net.Art Actions* in a strange limbo between internet art groups that were unsure if this counted as net art, and arts organizations that were unsure if net art counted as art at all.

22. By including *Blackness for Sale* alongside artists like Nikki Lee, whose works from the 1990s are known specifically for engaging the role of identity in art and contemporary culture, the recent *Come as You Are: Art of the 1990s* exhibition is starting the process of placing the Obadikes' late 1990s and early 2000s projects in conversation with this thread of practice, supplementing (but not supplanting) their position in narratives on media and internet art histories. For more on *Come as You Are*, see https://www.montclairartmuseum.org/content/co me-you-are-art-1990s.

23. Adrian Piper, "Introduction: Some Very FORWARD Remarks," in *Out of Order, Out of Sight* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), xxxv–xxxvi.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2017.1330110. Supplemental material © Mendi + Keith Obadike. Reproduced here with their kind permission.

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EDITORIAL

Rethinking Acoustic Ecology:
Sound Art and Environment

Gascia Ouzounian

In encountering various sound art works over the last decade, I've had the occasion to hear a rocky hillside sing; listen to what a companion described as the "*ür-tone* of civilization" emerge from beneath a traffic island in Times Square; spend hours inside a sparse room in Lower Manhattan bathed in magenta light and filled with a dense, synthesized drone that seemed to change with every slight movement of my head and body; hear geometries of sound — distinct lines and shapes — form inside a stairwell in the Technical University in Berlin; sit inside a "sound laboratory" outfitted with an acoustically transparent floor and several dozen loudspeakers while listening, perhaps improbably, to recordings of whale song; plug my headphones into the side of a building in order to hear sounds that were generated by the infrastructure of the building itself; ride the S-Bahn in West Berlin while listening to electromagnetic frequencies emitted by objects and architectures around me; and walk through Central Park while listening, through headphones, to Janet Cardiff recount a fantastical story that somehow seemed to correspond with random happenings in the park that day.[1]

These various encounters represent only a fraction of the myriad genres of sound art that have emerged since the late 1960s that foreground the relationship of sound to environment, site, and place. These genres include sound installation art, site-specific sound art, soundscape composition, sound walks and audio walks, sound maps, mobile and locative sound art, and works that are concerned with environmental processes. Together, these various genres encompass a striking range of approaches to

conceptualizing, articulating, and reconfiguring place through sound. Some works, like Walter Fähndrich's *Music for a Quarry* (1999), wherein a marble quarry emits sine tones at the precise times of astronomical sunset and sunrise each day, give voice to a place.[2] Other works, perhaps most famously Max Neuhaus' sound installation *Times Square* (1977–1992, 2002–ongoing), reconfigure the soundscapes of public spaces.[3] Artists have conceived of acoustic environments as "living environments." La Monte Young describes *Dream House*, a sound-and-light installation that has existed in various forms in Lower Manhattan since the early 1960s, as a "living organism with a life and tradition of its own."[4] By contrast, the Austrian sound artist Bernhard Leitner conceives of sound in architectural terms and understands sound specifically as building material. Leitner has written of his work *TON-RAUM TU-BERLIN* (1984), installed in a stairwell in Berlin's Technical University, that "the cubic, static metal architecture [of the stairwell], in whose walls and ceilings 24 broadband and 18 high-frequency loudspeakers are installed, is the supporting structure for dynamic, sound-plasmic spaces. ... Sound is ... sculptural material. Sound is the construction material for space."[5]

Numerous sound works make audible architectures and environments that are normally inaudible. Mark Bain and Arno Brandhluber's *BUG* (2009) enables people to "listen to a building" through the use of seismic sensors embedded into the building's infrastructure. For Christina Kubisch's *Electrical Walks* series (since 2004), listeners are given headphones that have built-in coils that respond to electromagnetic waves, thus enabling listeners to hear frequencies that reside beyond the normal range of human hearing.[6] As such, *BUG* and *Electrical Walks* entail an "audification" process; they transduce inaudible acoustic energy into audible sound. Similarly, numerous sound works, including a dozen or so projects described in "Environmental Sound Artists: In their Own Words" (eds. Bianchi and Manzo, 2016), entail a process that is known as "sonification" and translate non-acoustical information into sound.[7] Andrea Polli's *Heat and the Heartbeat of the City: Central Park Climate Change in Sound* (2004), for example, sonifies data related to climate change.[8]

Countless sound works entail walking. Sound walks, listening walks, audio walks, and, more recently, mobile and geo-locative audio walks invite people to navigate an environment while listening to real or composed sounds. In locative audio walks, audio recordings are typically triggered according to a listener's position in GPS space. A listener can therefore create

his or her own "mix" of these works by navigating a site in a particular way. Other audio walks use fixed audio recordings that are heard (for example) using CD or MP3 players. In Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *Her Long Black Hair* (2004), a listener is given a CD player and headphones and navigates Manhattan's Central Park by following Cardiff's footsteps, the sounds of which are audible on the recording.[9]

Some environmental sound works invite people simply to listen to the sound of a place, using minimal intervention. For Akio Suzuki's *oto-date* series (since 1996), pictograms of footprints that resemble ears are painted onto the ground (or other surfaces) in various locations, signaling that a person should stand in a certain place and listen. After some time, these pictograms simply fade away.

Certainly there are many other works and artistic approaches that could be added to this preliminary list. What emerges from this multitude of activity is that over the last fifty years sound artists have undeniably turned their attention — and ours — to place and environment as rich sources of artistic inspiration and acoustic fascination. For this special issue of *Evental Aesthetics* then, a journal that invites philosophical and critical perspectives on art and aesthetic experience, we might ask how environmental sound art in its myriad and evolving forms can bring new insights to philosophical discourses and how philosophies of place and environment might influence how we make and think about sound art. Or, as I propose to do in this brief introduction, we might consider the ways in which sound art works themselves embody and enact philosophies of place and what can we learn by attending to these philosophies wrought at the intersection of site and sound.

Rethinking Acoustic Ecology

A common area of convergence between philosophical inquiry, sound art, and sound studies is in the realm of acoustic ecology, a term that is most often used to designate an environmentalist approach to acoustic environments.[10] On the most basic level, acoustic ecology invites us to pay attention to the sounds of a place. The very act of "listening to place" was

once regarded as transgressive in relation to occularcentric cultures that have historically privileged visual understandings of place. Today however this idea has been complicated by what some theorists view as overreliance on an outdated term, "soundscape." For Tim Ingold (2007), the idea of soundscape suggests an "emplacement" in listening — a fixity in place that is antithetical to sound.[11] In his widely cited essay "Against Soundscape," Ingold pointedly identifies a "place confinement" in soundscape studies, a kind of positioning that he views as "a form of deafness." He argues that sound "flows ... along irregular, winding paths, and the places it describes are like eddies, formed by ... movement *around* rather than a fixed location *within*." Therefore, in order to listen or (in Ingold's conception) to "follow sound," one must "wander the same paths [that sound follows]. Attentive listening, as opposed to passive hearing, surely entails the very opposite of emplacement."[12] It must be said that Ingold's particular critique, while useful in recuperating a sensorially integrated approach to the experience of sound, does not take into account the various "mobile" modes of listening that many soundscape artists and researchers engage. The composers Hildegard Westerkamp and Luc Ferrari for example respectively use the terms "moving ear" and "wandering ear" in describing their particular approaches to recording environmental sounds and creating soundscape compositions.

Acoustic ecologists who have followed in the footsteps of R. Murray Schafer and the World Soundscape Project are typically concerned with understanding how acoustic environments are affected by environmental change, including, most commonly, increasing noise pollution. Some acoustic ecologists aim to preserve or conserve acoustic environments and might intervene in an environment in order to maintain or increase the "health" of its soundscape. Markers of healthy soundscapes, according to key studies in acoustic ecology, include the density and diversity of "biophonic" and "geophonic" sounds, which respectively refer to sounds produced by biological organisms and geological processes; the ability to hear distant sounds; and what Schafer famously characterized as a "hi-fi" soundscape, referring to an acoustic environment that boasts "a favorable signal-to-noise ratio."[13]

Attending to environmental health is certainly laudable, and indeed it is a pressing concern in the context of a global environmental crisis. Still, what is often lacking in conventional approaches to acoustic ecology is a recognition of the complex socio-cultural factors that contribute to shared

understandings of "sound" and "noise." Put simply, many studies in acoustic ecology fail to recognize that diverse social and cultural groups — or even different individuals — experience sound and noise very differently. Further, the very idea of "noise pollution," which has historically propelled acoustic ecology and likewise underpinned efforts in noise legislation, presumes that certain sounds — or even certain sound levels (as measured in decibels) — are acceptable while others are not and suggests a single, dominant model for distinguishing desired sounds from unwanted noise. What often follows from this is a binary division whereby "natural" sounds are considered desirable while "man-made" are deemed noisy. Acoustic ecology has therefore justifiably been criticized for subscribing to a now-dated Man-versus-Nature binary whereby nature and culture are framed in oppositional terms.[14] Jonathan Sterne has identified a specifically "antimodernist" thread in Schafer's philosophy of soundscape, writing that "[f]or Schafer … soundscape is meant to invoke nature, and the limits and outsides of industrial society. Even as it reaches into the modern world to describe its ambience, Schafer's *soundscape* carries with it a fairly strict — if sophisticated — antimodernist politics."[15] Others have traced anti-urban leanings within Schafer's conception of acoustic ecology.

While my account here is necessarily an oversimplification of this debate, it is clear that blunt divisions between "sound" and "noise" cannot account for the variety of sounds that characterize modern life. Nor are such divisions necessarily helpful in appreciating the wider ecological and socio-cultural systems within which sounds operate. For example, in determining what constitutes a "vibrant" urban environment — one that would evidently include people, whose absence would conversely indicate urban decline — a healthy urban soundscape would necessarily include *the sounds that people make*, including those sounds that are ubiquitous in cities but that are almost always deemed undesirable — like the sounds of traffic. This is not to say that the sounds of traffic should be celebrated but rather that traffic sounds *in and of themselves* do not possess positive or negative attributes; they are only meaningful in relation to the particular environmental, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which they are heard.

In parallel to the work of acoustic ecologists working in the realm of applied acoustics, soundscape artists and researchers have developed alternative approaches to acoustic ecology that trouble easy distinctions between sound and noise. In her project *The Welsh Streets* (2012), the British

artist and scholar Jacqueline Waldock discovered that residents of the Welsh Streets, a low-income housing community in Liverpool that came under a compulsory purchase order as a result of an urban renewal scheme, drew comfort from the "noisiness" of their neighborhood and the ability to hear through the walls of their own homes the sounds that their neighbors made.[16] Nina, a resident of the Welsh Streets housing community who partnered with Waldock and other residents on the project, lamented the decline of neighborhood noise, observing that "I miss people calling their cats in, or shouting at each other or just talking to each other."[17] Nina's perspective, which was echoed by many other residents of the Welsh Streets, contrasted sharply with normative ideas about sound and noise. Waldock writes, "Nina's comments ... challenge the [city] council's assumptions about desirable homes as well as challenging an established aesthetically moralistic norm that the sound coming from neighbours is negative."[18] The *Welsh Streets* project speaks to the ways in which social and economic factors — in this case, complex intersections of class and power — contribute to understandings of sound and noise and the perceived desirability or undesirability of certain sounds and soundscapes. It is notable that in Waldock's study, members of a disenfranchised group reported an altogether different politics of noise than the one that is typically promoted by city officials, revealing how a politics of noise can be used to empower or disempower communities. Waldock's work further shows how studies of acoustic environments can productively extend to domestic and private spheres, spaces that have historically been underrepresented in soundscape studies.[19]

Instruments to be Played by the Movement of the Earth

In Schafer's conception of acoustic ecology, the acoustic environment is seen as an entity that is ruined by human activity and that requires human intervention to "fix." Other artists have pointed towards alternative models of environment whereby environments themselves are seen as possessing agency and voice. An example is Terry Fox's *Instruments to be Played by the Movement of the Earth* (1987). For this work, Fox installed a number of objects inside a gallery such that these objects could be acoustically "activated" by

the movements of the earth. In an announcement for the exhibition, Fox wrote:

> There is no "fixed" installation. Rather, the gradual accumulation of instruments that will sound by vibrations of the earth. These instruments are to be played only in this way. No sound in the absence of vibration. Potential sound. The sounds created by the instruments will correspond to the sounds heard during an earthquake; objects falling, rolling across the floor, rumbling, glasses and plates breaking, glasses shattering, an alarm going off, etc. [20]

For this installation, then, Fox did not collect or exhibit environmental sounds but instead established conditions whereby the earth itself could generate acoustic activity. According to a reviewer who was present at the exhibit, Fox's own preference "was for the instruments to remain silent ... his interest [was] in investigating the tension caused by the expectation and imagination ... as much as in investigating the potential for possible sound." [21] Thus, for Fox, the primary focus of the installation was not the sounds that were produced or experienced therein but instead the sensitization to the heightened perception inherent in attentive listening: an attunement not to "sounds of the environment" but to listening itself as a way of being in the world. We can find resonances with this idea in "Imagined Drone Ecologies," Owen Coggins' contribution to this issue of *Evental Aesthetics* — a performative essay on listening that enacts the tensions and relationships between drone music and environmental sound.

Sonic Facts and Fictions

In acoustic ecology, field recordings (recordings of soundscape) are almost inevitably treated as evidentiary documents, as containers of acoustic "facts": accurate or near-accurate representations of an acoustic environment at a given moment in time. The presence of the sound recordist is thereby typically diminished or effectively erased in these recordings, a topic that Mark Peter Wright deftly unpacks in this issue by introducing the figure of the "noisy non-self" and thus recuperating those identities that have been long submerged, erased, or ignored within soundscape recordings. The use of spectrograms, "soundtopes," and other computational tools for

quantifying, measuring, visualizing, and analyzing data pertaining to soundscape recordings has further helped to establish a scientific basis for acoustic ecology.[22] Conversely, soundscape artists are typically understood as producing sonic "fictions" by creatively altering, processing, editing, mixing, and re-situating environmental sounds in the form of compositions, performances, installations, and myriad artistic interventions. What is lost in this duality between acoustic fact and fiction— between the dual poles that have been erected between soundscape science and soundscape art— is that they obscure a more fundamental fact: that *all* recordings of soundscape are partial and subjective documents, subject not only to the many choices made by the sound recordist and the affordances of the particular technologies that are used to measure, record, store, transmit, and reproduce sound but equally to a politics of listening that (consciously or unconsciously) informs various "hearings" of place.

The dualism between art and science in acoustic ecology also masks the idea that soundscape artworks can sometimes reveal profound truths about acoustic environments, realities that cannot be easily measured or quantified. For his 2003 album *Weather Report* for example, the sound recordist Chris Watson created three eighteen-minute tracks that were each derived from hours- or days-long recordings of various environments in Kenya, Scotland, and the Norwegian Sea.[23] Although these compositions do not pretend to act as documentaries and are clearly time-compressed and highly edited, they nevertheless offer numerous insights into the acoustic environments they represent as well as qualitative information about these environments that would be impossible to glean from spectrographs or other quantitative tools for measuring sound. For this issue of *Evental Aesthetics*, David C. Jackson considers discourses in acoustic ecology in relation to philosophies of the Anthropocene and identifies a "dark acoustic ecology" in the work of soundscape artists whose compositions reveal aspects of environmental change and degradation. Jackson analyzes the track "Vatnajökull" from Watson's *Weather Report*, showing how a dark acoustic ecology— one that "listens in on the sonic conditions and effects of accelerated climate change"— operates therein.

Free/Phase

In proposing the idea of acoustic design — a project that he conceived as an aural analogue to the industrial design project of the Bauhaus movement — R. Murray Schafer suggested that the aim of acoustic design would be to *improve* the world's soundscapes: to give "form and beauty" to acoustic environments that were otherwise chaotic, harmful, and in some cases facing the threat of extinction.[24] As an aesthetic project concerned with beautifying acoustic environments, however, acoustic design can sometimes miss the mark. Forty years after the publication of Schafer's landmark text *The Tuning of the World*, there are numerous examples of sound installations in public spaces that are intended to beautify or improve acoustic environments but that are so incongruous with the particular environments they inhabit (recordings of ocean surf or birdsong played at park benches in Berlin) or so misguided in their aims (recordings of classical music deployed in urban centers in order to discourage "anti-social behavior") that it is questionable whether anything resembling the aesthetic revolution Schafer imagined — or even anything of artistic merit — has actually been achieved.[25]

Far more compelling than these ill-advised attempts to "improve" soundscapes (to my mind) are those public sound art projects that are deeply informed by the histories, cultures, and politics that shape an environment and that invite people to newly experience and appreciate these dimensions of place. For Mendi+Keith Obadike's *Free/Phase: An Intermedia Suite in Three Nodes* (2014–15), a project that commemorated the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War, the artists collected one hundred and fifty African American freedom songs — spirituals and protest songs rooted in the struggle for emancipation from slavery and subsequent civil rights movements in the United States — from the archives of the Center for Black Music Research (CBMR) at Columbia College, Chicago. From this collection of freedom songs, the Obadikes created a three-part project that comprised a public sound art installation, "Beacon"; a video-and-multichannel-audio work titled "Overcome"; and "Dialogue with DJs," a community engagement project wherein the public was invited to take part in private listening sessions and discussions of freedom songs with prominent DJs in Chicago.[26]

For the original installation of "Beacon," the Obadikes installed a large parabolic loudspeaker on the rooftop of the Chicago Cultural Center. This loudspeaker projected melodies from spirituals and freedom songs at 9 a.m., 12 p.m., and 7 p.m. on each day of the exhibition. According to the Obadikes, each spiritual that was chosen for "Beacon" "contains musical & lyrical messages that could have been used for pre-emancipation navigation on the underground railroad or inspiration."[27]

By making audible and indeed "beaming" into public space melodies from spirituals and freedom songs that emerged out of the experience of slavery, subjugation, and persistent social injustice, the Obadikes recover histories that are normally obscured, ignored, or denied within the public sphere. Further, they directly "call" people to come into contact with and contend with these histories. From video documentation of "Beacon," it is evident that the Obadikes chose to present freedom songs in strikingly resonant and ringing yet unadorned and unembellished ways, such that the melodies might be easily identified and clearly heard.[28] In their arrangement of the song "Woke up this Morning with my Mind Set on Freedom" for example, the Obadikes used original recordings they created of various bell sounds, which they blended with overtones from guitar harmonics. In their installation, each note of "Woke up this Morning" clearly rings out into the public square facing the Chicago Cultural Center, a building that itself pays homage to the American Civil War.[29] As such, "Beacon" recalls the church bell, a recurring figure in sound studies and one that Schafer discusses at some length in *The Tuning of the World*.[30] However, "Beacon" profoundly transforms the function of the church bell. By ringing out freedom songs into public space, "Beacon" invites people to connect historical struggles for racial equality with contemporary ones and simultaneously to imagine a different future. The Obadikes write that their work on archives in general "reflects on the information that sometimes vanishes from view, whether because it is ephemeral or because it has been buried. We hope our sounding the archives invites new ways of listening to the past and the future at the same time."[31]

Free/Phase also stands out among public sound art works in terms of how it imagines, enacts, and enables community. In soundscape studies, the term "acoustic community," introduced by Schafer in *Tuning of the World*, is typically used to describe a group of people who share a social bond as well as a common "acoustic space" (Schafer defines "acoustic space" as a physical

space that delimits audibility).[32] In Schafer's words, "[t]he house can be appreciated as an acoustic phenomenon, designed for the first community, the family. Within it they may produce private sounds of no interest outside its walls."[33] After the family home, the second acoustic community described by Schafer is the church. He writes, "A parish was also acoustic, and it was defined by the range of the church bells. When you could no longer hear the church bells, you had left the parish."[34] This idea of acoustic community as defined by the physical limits of audibility has persisted within soundscape studies and sound studies. In the book *Spaces Speak, Are you Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* (2006), Barry Blesser and Linda Ruth Salter develop a similar model of acoustic community, using the term "acoustic horizon" in a way that recalls Schafer's idea of "acoustic space." They write:

> The concept of virtual sonic boundaries leads to a new abstraction, *acoustic horizon*, the maximum distance between a listener and a source of sound where the sonic event can still be heard. ... The acoustic horizon is ... the experiential boundary that delineates which sonic events are included and which are excluded. The acoustic horizon also delineates an acoustic arena, a region where listeners are part of a community that shares an ability to hear a sonic event.[35]

In *Spaces Speak*, "acoustic community" is once again conceptualized as a sociality that is bound by the physiological and physical limits of hearing. By contrast, in *Free/Phase* acoustic community encompasses a complex sociality anchored within social identities, shared histories, collective memories, lived experiences as well as a common purpose. Listeners who are part of this community are not necessarily those who can *literally* hear the sounds of the installation but rather those who appreciate the deeper meanings encoded in freedom songs and spirituals. Following on the work of Cheryl Boots (2014), this community is an "ethical community" as well as an acoustic one; it is bound by ethics and shared ideals and not only by the physics of sound and the physiology of hearing. In her thesis *Creating Community in the American Civil Rights Movement: Singing Spirituals and Freedom Songs* (2014), Boots suggests that the singing of freedom songs produced an "egalitarian resonance" for African American activists, a "shared experience of singing or listening to music together that creates a mutual respect and appreciation."[36] Boots examines the distinctive power of freedom songs, writing:

> [I]n the mid-twentieth century crucible of nonviolent protest, some "sorrow songs" were transformed into "freedom songs" — affirmations of identity, autonomy, and justice in the mouths, throats, and hearts of a new generation leading its elders. Built on the layered meanings and tunes of the spirituals, newly adapted and spontaneously created freedom songs established a common bond among singers. In a "war" where nonviolence was the strategic imperative of the Civil Rights Movement leaders and trained followers, spirituals and freedom songs were non-violent "weapons." They affirmed the identity of African Americans, offered hope to the persecuted, and enacted the communal ideal of a peaceful society where all people would be mutual participants regardless of race. That ethical community — a "common ground" as Howard Thurman saw it, or "the beloved community" as Martin Luther King, Jr., envisioned — continues to be a work in progress, a goal not yet fully achieved in twenty-first century America.[37]

In *Tuning of the World*, Schafer describes a soundscape study he carried out at a French fishing village, Lesconil. The village was surrounded by sea on three sides, and the daily rhythms of its inhabitants were governed by the various sounds that would arrive by sea or by land at different times of the day, subject to wind, temperature, and other conditions that affect the propagation of sound. The sounds that governed daily life in Lesconil, according to Schafer's study, included the village's church bells, farming noises, the sound of puffer buoys at sea, the motors of trawlers, foghorns, and the church bells of various nearby villages. In recounting this study, Schafer suggested that "a consideration of the acoustic community might also include an investigation of how vital information from outside the community reaches the ears of the inhabitants and affects their daily routine."[38] In Schafer's conception then, the daily lives of an acoustic community are governed by specific aural cues or what Schafer calls "sound signals." By contrast, in *Free/Phase* "sound signals" operate in altogether different ways. The "vital information" contained in freedom songs and spirituals was vital both in a literal sense, providing information to people who risked their lives to gain freedom, and in a spiritual sense, acting as a lifeline for survivors, activists, and black communities. Further, the "sound signals" in "Beacon" do not function by signaling *tasks*; rather, they generate community through signaling a shared sense of history and equally a shared sense of purpose among listeners.

Nandi Marumo's review of the *Free/Phase* project, published on the CBMR website, reflects on the relationship between the individual and the collective within this acoustic community. Marumo reviewed *Free/Phase* when it was re-exhibited from June 4–18, 2016, at the Rebuild Foundation's Stony Island Arts Bank in Chicago. She writes:

As I was arriving [at the "Beacon" installation] around noon, I could hear pieces of the song "Woke Up This Morning With My Mind Set on Freedom." I had heard the song before, but what I found so moving and wondrous was the way that it seemed to transform the space around the Stony Island Arts Bank. The neighborhood around the Arts Bank is "underinvested" and underserved, with many unused buildings and empty dirt lots where something used to be, like so many black communities across the country. Hearing that freedom song carried through the wind all around the block changed the feeling of the space from one of a certain kind of defeat to one of pulsing determination, from questions about how we get free under all this weight to an assuredness in our capacities to build ourselves and each other up, an urgency that still takes enough time to tend to our hopes and dreams. It reminded me not only of the importance of music as a way to frame our struggle for freedom, but also as a way to pay attention to the smaller, more intimate parts of our lives that inform and shape our movements for liberation.[39]

Marumo's response to *Free/Phase* speaks to the ability of sound to utterly transform an environment — in this case, transforming an "underinvested" neighborhood characterized by "unused buildings and empty dirt lots" into a place of resolve and hope; of "pulsing determination." This transformation does not take place merely on the surface level of "beautifying" a soundscape; rather, it entails a kind of profound transformation that occurs on the level of history, memory, and society and how individuals and communities are shaped in relation to these.

When considered through the lens of works like *Free/Phase*, the questions that have underpinned so many studies in the realm of soundscape and acoustic ecology are fundamentally reconfigured. A recurring theme in acoustic ecology is the imperative to become "attuned" to our acoustic environments: to notice and observe the sounds around us. But we must also ask — is listening in itself enough? Or is listening only meaningful if it goes beyond the surface level of "hearing" and "sensing sound" to reach other dimensions of acoustic experience? How are histories of inclusion and exclusion inscribed within the soundscapes of public spaces? What would it mean to become "attuned" to these dimensions of soundscape? What would a socially aware listening or an activist listening entail? How are acoustic communities formed along socio-cultural and political lines, and how can the terms of acoustic ecology expand to include these dimensions of community? What would an ethics of soundscape entail, and how would our conception of listening change if listening was understood in relation to an ethics and politics of soundscape?

Notes

1   In this paragraph, I refer to the following works: *Music for a Quarry* (1999) by Walter Fähndrich; *Times Square* (1977–1992 and 2002–) by Max Neuhaus; *Dream House: Sound and Light Environment* (1993–) by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela; *TON-RAUM TU-BERLIN* (1984–) by Bernhard Leitner; a concert of soundscape compositions by Chris Watson at the Sonic Lab, Sonic Arts Research Centre, Belfast; *BUG* (2008–) by Mark Bain and Arno Brandhluber; *Electrical Walks* (2005–) by Christina Kubisch; *Her Long Black Hair* (2004) by Janet Cardiff.

2   Walter Fähndrich, "Music for a Quarry," Walter Fähndrich website, Accessed March 21, 2017, http://www.musicforspaces.ch/en/C2.html.

3   "Max Neuhaus, Times Square," Dia Foundation website, Accessed March 21, 2017, http://diaart.org/visit/visit/max-neuhaus-times-square.

4   La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, "Dream House: Sound and Light Environment," MELA Foundation website, Accessed March 21, 2017, http://www.melafoundation.org/dream02.htm.

5   Bernhard Leitner, "TON-RAUM TU BERLIN," Bernhard Leitner website, Accessed March 21, 2017, http://www.bernhardleitner.com/works/.

6   Christina Kubisch, "Electrical Walks," Christina Kubisch website, Accessed March 21, 2017, http://www.christinakubisch.de/en/works/electrical_walks.

7   Frederick Bianchi and V.J. Manzo, eds., *Environmental Sound Artists: In their Own Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8   For this work Andrea Polli uses an atmospheric model of New York City developed by climate researchers. Polli writes, "The model allows [the researchers] to predict how climate change will affect New York and the surrounding suburbs. I created a series of sonifications attempting to convey the physical experience of the increasing temperatures . ... As you listen to the compositions, you will travel forward in time at an accelerated pace and experience an intensification of heat in sound." See Andrea Polli, "Sonifications of Global Environmental Data," in *Environmental Sound Artists: In their Own Words*, ed. Frederick Bianchi and V.J. Manzo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3–8.

9   Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, "Her Long Black Hair," Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller website, Accessed March 21, 2017, http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/longhair.html.

10 R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, 2nd ed., (Vermont: Destiny Books, 1994).

11 Tim Ingold, "Against Soundscape," in *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice*, ed. Angus Carlyle (Paris: Double Entendre, 2007), 10–13.

12 Ibid., 12–13.

13 See for example Bryan C. Pijanowski et al., "Soundscape Ecology: the Science of Sound in the Landscape," *BioScience* 61, no. 3 (2011): 203–216. In Schafer's terminology, a "hi-fi" soundscape is one in which sounds may be heard clearly. By contrast, a "lo-fi" soundscape is characterized by an "unfavorable signal-to-noise ratio. Applied to soundscape studies a

lo-fi environment is one in which signals are overcrowded, resulting in masking or lack of clarity" (Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 272).

14 See A.Y. Kelman, "Rethinking the Soundscape: A Critical Genealogy of a Key Term in Sound Studies," *Sense and Society* 5, no. 2 (2010): 212–234.

15 Jonathan Sterne, "Soundscape, Landscape, Escape," in *Soundscapes of the Urban Past*, ed. Karin Bijsterveld (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), 183.

16 Jacqueline Waldock, "Hearing Urban Regeneration: Community Composition as a Tool for Capturing Change," in *The Auditory Culture Reader, 2nd Edition*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Black (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 151–162.

17 Ibid., 160.

18 Ibid., 160–161.

19 Jacqueline Waldock, "Soundmapping: Critiques and Reflections on this New Publicly Engaging Medium," *Journal of Sound Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011), Accessed March 21, 2017, http://journal.sonicstudies.org/vol01/nr01/a08.

20 Terry Fox, "Artist Statement. Terry Fox, Instruments to be Played by the Earth," Capp Street Project Archive, Accessed March 21, 2017, https://libraries.cca.edu/capp/prop_r87e001.pdf.

21 "Announcement. Terry Fox, Instruments to be Played by the Earth," Capp Street Project Archive, Accessed March 21, 2017, https://libraries.cca.edu/capp/anc_r87e001.pdf.

22 See Bryan C. Pijanowski et al., "Soundscape Ecology: the Science of Sound in the Landscape," *BioScience* 61, no. 3 (2011): 203–216.

23 Chris Watson, *Weather Report*, Touch Music TO:47, CD, 2003.

24 Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 5.

25 See Fritz Schlueter, "A Soundscape Remodelled," Sonic Agents (blog), January 4, 2013, Accessed March 21, 2017, https://sonicagents.wordpress.com/2013/01/04/a-soundscape-re-modeled/. See also Theo Kindynis, "Weaponising Classical Music: Waging class warfare beneath our cities' streets," *Ceasefire* (magazine), September 29, 2012, Accessed March 21, 2017, https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/weaponising-classical-music-class-warfare-waged-beneath-cities-streets/.

26 Following the exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center in 2015, *Free/Phase* was re-exhibited in June 2016 at Rebuild Foundation's Stony Island Arts Bank in Chicago.

27 Mendi+Keith Obadike, "SO! Amplifies: Mendi+Keith Obadike and Sounding Race in America," Sounding Out! (blog), October 6, 2014, Accessed March 21, 2017, https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/10/06/so-amplifies-mendikeith-obadike-and-sounding-race-in-america/.

28 Mendi Obadike and Keith Obadike, "Free/Phase: Node 1 Beacon," YouTube video, 2:28, July 3, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JF4EGh-5uQ.

29 "The People's Palace: The Story of the Chicago Cultural Centre," City of Chicago, Accessed March 21, 2017, https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp_info/the_people_s_palacethestoryofthechicagoculturalcenterpage2.html.

30 Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 173–177.

31 "SO! Amplifies: Mendi+Keith Obadike and Sounding Race in America," Sounding Out! (blog), Accessed March 21, 2017, https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/10/06/so-amplifies-mendikeith-obadike-and-sounding-race-in-america/.

32 In Schafer's conception, "The acoustic space of a sounding object is that volume of space in which sound can be heard" (*The Soundscape*, 214).

33 Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 215.

34 Ibid., 215.

35 Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are you Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 22.

36 Cheryl Boots, "Creating community in the American Civil Rights Movement: Singing spirituals and freedom songs" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2014), 20.

37 Ibid., 10–11.

38 Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 215.

39 Nandi Marumo, "Review of Free/Phase Exhibit at Stony Island Arts Bank," Center for Black Music Research (blog), June 14, 2016, Accessed March 21, 2017, http://blogs.colum.edu/cbmr/2016/06/14/free-phase-at-rebuild/.

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Excursus 1

CALCULATION AND STRICTURE IN MENDI + KEITH OBADIKE'S *NUMBERS STATION*

At the Ryan Lee Gallery in Chelsea, Manhattan, in September 2015, Mendi and Keith Obadike are sitting across the table from one another, not directly across, but at each of two short desks placed end to end.[1] Both are wearing 1960s KOSS headphones and speaking alternately into microphones. Mendi has a table lamp to illuminate her script, and next to her a radio transmitter. Keith's pages are tucked behind a small mixer and a 1960s reel-to-reel recorder/player which he uses for additional processing and to pan a series of pre-generated sine tones. There are loudspeakers at opposite ends of the room, and the performance is being broadcast over a micro radio station in the gallery. The Obadikes are reading a list of seemingly arbitrary numbers, in clusters of three, going back and forth between them at a regular, steady pace, their unamplified voices bouncing back and forth against the opposite walls. The piece, titled *Numbers Station 1 [Furtive Movements],* references the form of the shortwave radio broadcast in which streams of numbers pronounced by synthesized voices or other sounds have been used since the Cold War to transmit encoded information to intelligence officers. The installation self-consciously points to the period around 1964, which saw the rise of clandestine radio transmission and surveilled sonic communication, including the bugging of civil rights activists.

The performance plays on the secret significance of the numbers spoken. If you were to enter the gallery (or see the video footage online of one of the performances) without knowing anything else about the installation, there is nothing about the artists' demeanor, the tone of their voices, or the rhythm of their speech that would make you suspect that these numbers are an index of violence. The series of numbers is in fact excerpted from the logs of self-reported stop-and-frisk data from 123 New York Police Department precincts, obtainable from the American Civil Liberties Union. Stop-and-frisk entered policing nomenclature around 1964, and this piece is the first in a sequence of three performance and sound installations to sonify data attesting to racialized violence spanning various historical moments. The second, performed in March 2016 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art alongside *[Furtive Movements],* draws its data from Ida B. Wells's 1895 book *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching,* while the data for the third,

performed in July that year at the Fridman Gallery, come from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave ship manifests. The *Numbers* series thus corroborates Achille Mbembe's argument in *Critique de la raison nègre* that the subjection of life to calculation under neoliberal capitalism represents a generalization of the conditions long endured by people of African origin.[2] These data are terrifying indictments of racialized violence, but in the Obadikes' performances there is no expression of horror, no hint of outrage, scant trace of sadness. Neither despairing nor heroic in tone, they exhibit none of the pathos with which someone like Agamben mounts his attack on biopolitics.[3] And this is precisely what makes the *Numbers* series a devastating denunciation of racialized insecurity under contemporary neoliberalism.

FIGURE 1. Mendi and Keith Obadike, *Numbers Station 1 [Furtive Movements],* 2015. Photo by Imani Romney-Rosa. Courtesy of Mendi and Keith Obadike.

The Obadikes' attention to number as a power of abstraction and equivalence, rather than to the inequality typically (and rightfully) decried on the left and which is here only referenced clandestinely, gives these pieces an acute force. At first blush, the *indifference* of the stream of numbers, their seemingly apathetic tone and rhythm, appears to discount the specific violence inflicted upon bodies on account of their difference, as well as the second blow of a systemic failure to make the state accountable for the violence it sanctions—blows that, as was said of the death of Eric Garner's daughter Erica, break the heart. As I write, it is the fourth anniversary of his murder. How, with the memory of this trauma so palpable, could numbers point to the violence just as, if not more, powerfully than the sight of Eric Garner's body pinned down by five NYPD officers or the sounds of his gasping "I can't breathe" under the strain of their deadly chokehold? The constriction of specific differences into more generalized categories is itself violent—a violence that continental thinkers including Derrida and Adorno have often figured through metaphors of the sonorous. In a perspicacious analysis of the Obadikes' performance, Soyoung Yoon argues that *[Furtive Movements]* "confronts the challenge of documenting not the finality of *a* death but instead the structural

violence that caused it and other deaths, not a past event but a present and ongoing condition."[4] Besides carefully eschewing the spectacularizing of racialized violence, the *Numbers* series derives its critical force from the fact that it targets violence not as event but "at the level of habit."

This presents a challenge for our habituated practices of listening. Mendi reflects:

There most certainly is a story there. But it is hard to get close enough to the numbers to feel them. Paring the text down to the numbers helps us get close to them, but we also lose ourselves in them, our minds also drift. The difficulty of staying with a way of listening, of attending to the data, is part of the work.[5]

The rhythmic indifference—indifference *as* rhythm—in the reading of the numbers is decisive here. As Yoon writes:

Our experience of listening to the numbers from one station to the next seems not to differ from one or the other, all eerily, awfully the same, as if the history of the violence that reduced black bodies to a matter of *accounting* was not so much a story as a static, unchanging condition of modern life: not history but still *life*.[6]

That racialized violence remains in America today a regular, quotidian series of punctuating blows *without interruption* is the scandal. There is seemingly nothing arrhythmic—no Hölderlinian caesura—in racialized capital and the ways in which it counts and accounts for lives, and the Obadikes' performance captures something of the totalizing character of its calculation. Everything is subordinated to the "despotism of number," as Badiou puts it.[7] Number, he observes, rules today in the bureaucratization of knowledge, advertising, viewing figures, and algorithmic rankings, as it does in the political sphere where everything hinges on electoral majorities and opinion polls. Badiou was in LA at the time of the 2016 US presidential election, insisting that the choice between Trump and Clinton was simply no choice at all, and when he spoke in New York a few days later, he wryly pointed out that all the protestations about an undemocratic electoral college tended to distract from the way in which the tyranny of number forecloses the possibility of any real *decision*. I want, therefore, to extend Yoon's analysis of the *Numbers* series to show how it serves as a critique of the generalization of calculation under neoliberalism.

What marks the specificity of neoliberal biopolitics—what marks the conjunction of biopolitical governmentality and neoliberal political economy—is the subordination of life to the logic of capital, as we painfully observe in right-wing reactions to COVID-19. An incessant (e)valuation of life coincides with a valorization of life as invaluable in the sense that all life is equally beyond value. "What counts—in the sense of what is valued—is what is counted," quips Badiou.[8] What we have, on the one hand, is a project to make all life commensurable, measurable, countable, and hence accountable, and on the other, the proliferation of philosophies, from Deleuze's vitalist ontology to various Italian post-workerist configurations, that locate the source of insurgency in an invariant power of life,

whether that be living labor, communicative capacity, or the potential not-to. There is, in this way, something of an alliance that the Obadikes invite us to ponder between the asymmetry and division of number and (ac)countability on one side and, on the other, an insistence on an infinite plane of incommensurability with which nothing is, by definition, incommensurable. The cruel reign of number—coextensive, on this reading, with the gathering constriction of the *logos*—thus consists in the suppression of the incommensurable or incalculable, and that is precisely what Badiou is aiming at with a new thought of number that allows for the possibility for event and decision.

Julie Beth Napolin offers a more nuanced interpretation of the violence of impersonality by situating Mendi's voice within a history of Black women's voices giving testimony to Black death.[9] Napolin's analysis situates the numbers spoken by a Black female voice at the intersection of singularity and impersonality:

> The vocal style is impersonal, to be sure—the performer does not passionately react to the numbers. And yet, it is style that moves the voice into that region of the throat where Roland Barthes found the "grain," where timbre most resonates. It burrows in the human capacity for timbre as the singularity of every voice that says, "here I am." When Roland Barthes asked the famous question, "who speaks?" in "The Death of the Author," he delighted in the impersonal domain of the literary, wherein writing becomes "an oblique space" no longer tied to the physical voice of the body writing. We can say that a physical guarantee of white life, its freedom of continuation underwrites the death of the author. In other words, one can die into text, relinquish the tie that binds the first-person to the body writing, and survive those deaths. It was not important for Barthes to ask, "who may die?," as in who might have the freedom of impersonality.

Napolin thus sees another side to impersonality—one that I want to read through Derrida's reflections on repetition and the living-on (*survie*) of writing beyond its author in *Schibboleth* and elsewhere. The impersonality Napolin identifies does not simply subject Black bodies to the domination of equivalence but shows how the reduction of singularity in iterability and survival itself becomes a privilege accorded to white life. The Black female voice here tethers life to the body, denying it not simply the posterity of the white authorial voice but, in a more Derridean sense, the openness to the chance of death that makes life really alive. What makes neoliberal capital biopolitical is that it reduces this uncertainty of living-on by turning both living and dying into something calculable and subject to statistical prediction. Life becomes commensurable, exchangeable, only once it is devoid of chance and hence no longer life in Derrida's sense at all.

Yoon also begins to gesture toward such an analysis from a different angle when she argues that "difference becomes but a matter of spacing, of taking a breath" and what is "at stake is the *capacity* to breathe, that is, the rationality according to which the habit of breathing becomes a capacity to be measured, regulated, and controlled as a matter of race."[10] She thus rightly argues that the repetition of the breath passed between Mendi and Keith calls our attention to both the punctuating event of Garner's ceasing to breathe and also the

suffocating conditions under which he was forced to live day by day. I want to suggest that in this way Yoon shifts the emphasis onto the perversion of the sovereign right to kill not only into a power to make live or let die, as in Foucault's formulation of biopolitics, but furthermore into a power that Jasbir Puar describes as a "will not let die."[11] Borrowing a term from Omar Jabary Salamanca that is equally apt for describing the control of breath in the *Numbers* series and in Garner's death, Puar elucidates the calculus of an "asphyxiatory" colonial power that weighs up how much Palestinian vitality can be withered away through "chokeholds" on essential infrastructure and physical maiming short of exterminating the population.[12]

Outside the context of apartheid, though, I want to generalize this analysis to speak of an asphyxiatory capital incessantly calculating how much life can be constricted before it turns into death and therefore how much capital must *constrict itself* in order to survive. This also means thinking a self-differentiation of constriction. In an analysis of misogyny as efforts to repress refusals to conform to patriarchal norms, Kate Manne distinguishes between choking, as an internal obstruction of the airway, and strangulation, in which external pressure is exerted on the throat or neck.[13] Observing its prevalence in domestic violence against women, she also notes its tendency to have further constricting effects, not least in what Kristie Dotson dubs "testimonial smothering,"[14] which Manne graphically glosses:

> You can put words into her mouth. You can stuff her mouth and cheeks full of deferential platitudes. You can threaten to make her eat certain words that she might say as a prophylactic against her testifying.… You can train her not to say "strangle" but rather "choke," or better yet "grab," or best of all, nothing.[15]

Dotson attributes this constriction to a failure of listening to attune to the vulnerabilities of the speaker and to provide the condition of reciprocity necessary for linguistic exchange. Given, as I shall argue in the third excursus, such reciprocity is always already disrupted from the outset, I am more interested in examining under what conditions this constitutive fragility and betrayal of address and testimony elicits self-smothering. What Manne's gloss amply demonstrates is the complex interweaving of external and internal constrictions—of choking, strangling, and self-smothering—and of the complex interactions between ingestion and speech that are explored more thoroughly in Chapter 3.

This self-limiting logic—which I want to describe in Derridean terms as autoimmune—also militates against an excessive totalization of capital of the kind that abounds in accounts of neoliberalism's extension to every corner of social reproduction and that ignores its contingent specificities and limits. The problem with appeals to an affirmative biopower or shared communicative capacities is that, in the absence of a theory of antagonism, they do not sufficiently explain what would secure the autonomy—the incommensurability if you like—of the insurrectionary multitude from a capital that survives precisely by commodifying the vitality of life in various capacities. At the same time, attempts to show the depths of hierarchization and inequality produced by contemporary configurations of capital overlook the fact that these asymmetries are symptomatic of a system that imposes

equivalence and commensurability as the precondition for unfettered exchangeability. What pervasive neoliberal calculation and ontologies of insurrectionary potentiality share, despite their apparent opposition, is a tendency to strangle the incommensurable decision or the incalculable event *against* the despotism of equivalence.

Mendi and Keith Obadike's *Numbers* series invites us to reflect on these difficulties through the performance of indifference not simply in its rhythmic recitation or the abstraction of its content but, moreover, in its medium. I refer to the fact that the data are not simply spoken aloud but are also sonified as sine tones. What appears to be a direct one-to-one translation (135 searches become 135Hz) camouflages a more complex transformation whereby discrete digits are in this way converted into a smooth analog signal. I want therefore to read these works as meditations on the intersection between neoliberal calculation and digitality.

In his book on François Laruelle, Alexander Galloway makes a clear distinction between digital and analog.[16] If the digital means the one dividing into two, analog involves two merging into one. Whereas the analog is a smooth, continuous variable, the digital is discrete and hence on the side of binarism, division, distinction, and decision—which means that, in making the distinction between them, Galloway reinstates the priority of the digital. There is also a reference to the sonorous and to audio mixing here. In this schema Galloway is following a distinction that Deleuze makes between analog and digital synthesizers:

> Analogical synthesizers are "modular": they establish an immediate connection between heterogeneous elements … *Digital* synthesizers, however, are "integral": their operation passes through a codification, through a homogenization and binarization of data.[17]

Whereas digital filters work through addition, analog filtering is able to produce a continuous modulation. As counterintuitive as it might seem, integration is associated with the digital because to integrate involves slicing up the area under a curve into discrete segments, while to differentiate is to bring together heterogeneous spaces through the tangent. The digital thus posits an originary unity, whereas the analogous presupposes difference.

Rather than argue that the *Numbers Stations* series somehow seeks to reverse the inequality and asymmetry of racialized calculation by converting the numbers into analog sound waves, I suggest instead that the ready convertibility of numbers into sound shows that the digital and analog are actually part of a binary machine working in tandem to reduce the incommensurable, incalculable quality of life. Both, in other words, are kinds of constriction. The digital is the constriction of the dialectic that reduces difference in general to determinate, productive differences, repressing multiplicity into contradictions which may then be sublated. The analog, meanwhile, capitalizes on difference's desire to expand infinitely and in so doing destroys the difference it seeks to proliferate because then there would be nothing outside—nothing incommensurable with pure difference. In this way, difference and indifference are easily exchanged with each other. This is not, though, because capital is fundamentally asymmetrical (read: digital) but because it is a regime for producing equivalence. Inequality is thus a symptom of the fact that, much as any attempt to produce

pure difference yields indifference, indifference cannot preserve itself without constricting itself (digitizing itself?) and thereby producing difference and division. That is why battling contemporary configurations of capital necessitates supplementing the discourses of domination and exclusion, which are deeply rooted in the Schmittian friend-enemy distinction, with renewed theories of exploitation that analyze the violence of abstract equivalence and pure substitutability—or, more precisely, understanding how the latter begets the former.

Derrida may seem an unlikely guide for such an endeavor, especially as both his reading of Marx and the political force of deconstruction have come under heavy fire. Yet what makes Derrida's an attractive orientation when it comes to thinking about the enumeration and evaluation of life is that he has always insisted on the co-articulation of calculation and incalculability—if not of incommensurability *tout court* for the reasons already given, then on the incommensurability of the commensurable and the incommensurable, on their irreducible contamination and the impossibility of sublating one into the other. And yet Derrida has been criticized for foreclosing the possibility of an incalculable event or decision by arguing that any such decision is a "passive" one that precedes anything like subjective agency or collective will. Peter Hallward, for instance, who is largely sympathetic to, though not uncritical of, Badiou's theory of the event, accuses Derrida of "the dissolution of decision through its passive exposure to an 'im-possible' event, to a wholly secret and unrecognizable advent in a domain stripped of all anticipation or expectation."[18] Hallward goes on to argue that, like other thinkers who in various ways absolutize the power of life, Derrida loses the external vantage point and therefore resorts to "an effectively *desperate* politics" in which the decision is withdrawn from all activity and "promises can never be kept."[19] This seems like something of a stretched reading (an over-hearing?) of Derrida, for whom it is not so much that a promise *cannot* be kept than that it is always still possible that a promise, like a decision or an event, will turn out not to have been fulfilled even once it has happened. Derrida insists on this eventality of the event precisely so as to preserve the very incalculability that Badiou wants to think.

In doing so, Derrida manages, to my mind, to fend off a related charge made by Bruno Bosteels, among others, of hypostatizing difference. Working on the assumption that *différance* is necessarily capable of making itself present in singular experiences such as art, literature, and political upheavals, Bosteels lands this seemingly fatal blow:

> Despite the obvious appeal of many of the politico-artistic instantiations that thus will have been invoked, the price to pay for this hypostasis of difference is an inability actually to change those structures of meaning that would be breached from within by the principle of an insuperable gap, dislocation, or discrepancy—a principle that is always and everywhere, without exception, affirmed as the quasi-transcendental law of the simultaneous manifestation and dissimulation of being.[20]

Galloway reaches a similar conclusion when he says:

It would be tempting to say yes [there is an analog event], by explaining that events under the analog regime are simply smooth transitions between states. Simply replace the sawtooth wave of the digital with the curvilinear wave of the analog. But the more rigorous position is the correct one: for, properly speaking, *there is no such thing as an analog event.*[21]

The issue, though, here is whether Derrida can justly be said to be an analog thinker like Deleuze. On the contrary, Derrida evades any Deleuzian hypostasis of difference by insisting on the *quasi*-transcendental status of the event. He maintains the undecidability of calculable and incalculable. In an important passage on the justness of the decision, Derrida argues that "this decision as to the just, if it is to be one … must follow a law or a prescription, a rule" (*FL* 50/251; trans. slightly modified). And here, it seems to me, he gets far closer than Badiouians would acknowledge to the politics of prescription that Hallward advocates as a more relational version of Badiou's event. If it is to enjoy autonomy, Derrida goes on, the decision

> must be able to be of the order of what is calculable or programmable, for example as an act of equity. But if the act simply consists in applying a rule, of enacting a program of effecting a calculation, we might say that it is legal … but we would be wrong to say that the *decision* was just. Quite simply because in that there was no decision. (*FL* 50/251; trans. modified)

What destroys the possibility of event and decision and hence of changing the conditions in which we live is the reduction to calculation or to incalculability, thus rendering them *indifferent*—which is to say the imposition of equivalence by capital. If, for Heidegger, capital and metaphysics coincide, it is not, as Alberto Toscano argues, because the essence of capitalism is metaphysical.[22] Rather—now tracking the argument of Alfred Sohn-Rethel—it is because the material conditions of philosophy's production are rooted in the real abstraction of monetary exchange that philosophy becomes a thinking of ahistorical forms and invariant transcendentals (though this argument does not obtain without itself courting the dangers of a transhistorical concept of exchange that would extend back to ancient Greece, thus turning capital into a kind of invariant). Toscano rightly points out, though, the irony that the metaphysical exclusion of the social is thus an effect of a social relation. Derrida in fact makes a very similar point in the fifth session of the *Théorie et pratique* seminar of 1976–77, in which he argues that the fiction of a pure theoreticism is the effect of a philosophy that has always already overflowed (*débordée*) its boundaries in the direction of praxis (*TP* 104–11/71–76).

What is fascinating for our present purposes is philosophy's tendency to invoke sound as a name for this other whose exclusion founds its sovereign autonomy. Robin James contends that "acoustic resonance (i.e., sound as a frequency or oscillating pattern of variable intensity) and neoliberal, biopolitical statistics … are two different ways of expressing the same kinds of relationships, two sides of the same coin."[23] The virtue of James's analysis is

that it illustrates how both partake of a politics of the exception. I call attention instead to the ways in which historical attempts to rationalize sound have consistently come up against the incommensurable, as Daniel Heller-Roazen's exploration of the fate of Pythagoras's fifth hammer shows.[24] The incommensurable here is not an exception but the shattering force itself whose effect is a tendency to splinter between rule and exception, exception and example, and so forth. What Mendi and Keith Obadike invite us to ponder in their *Numbers* series is that sound is neither completely dominated by neoliberal calculation nor a pure incommensurability without reason. Rather, the calculus of its violence and suppression—of its constricting and being-constricted—must be decided each time in the name of a prescription of justice and always with the risk that the decision will not have been just.