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John Cage, Julius Eastman, and the Homosexual Ego

RYAN DOHONEY

1.

JOHN CAGE COMPOSED his mammoth musical anthology *Song Books* in 1970 for the vocalist-composer Cathy Berberian and vocalist Simone Rist. Premiered in Paris at the Theâtre de la Ville that year, *Song Books* was subsequently taken up by the Buffalo-based S.E.M. Ensemble, led by composer-flutist Petr Kotik. The group performed versions of the piece regularly from 1971 to 1975 and again in its complete form in 1982. After a number of well-received performances, Morton Feldman invited the group to perform *Song Books* at his first June in Buffalo festival on June 4, 1975. Kyle Gann recalled the performance in a 1988 *Village Voice* review of writings on Cage.

> Julius Eastman (a fine composer/performer and a gay activist) used the direction "Give a lecture" as a pretext to undress a male student onstage and gesture sexually. Cage's reaction was inscrutable, but the next day, the man whom no one could imagine even swatting a fly fumed, in impressively subdued tones, about the difference between *liberty* and *license*. Unbelievably, he banged his fist on the piano and shouted (or perhaps only paraphrased) the too-little-famous words that appear in caps in his book *A Year from Monday:* "PERMISSION GRANTED. BUT NOT TO DO WHATEVER YOU WANT."[1]

With some variation, this is how the story circulates. Eastman defied the composer's instructions, sexualized the *Song Books*, and provoked the ire of Cage, who uncharacteristically erupted in a fit of rage. The S.E.M. Ensemble's performance raises important problems for critically approaching the

US experimental tradition. I will explore two of them in this essay. First, an immediate question might be, "Who is Julius Eastman?" or, more to the point, "What would it mean to take a minor figure like Eastman seriously as part of the history of U.S. experimentalism?" Eastman is perhaps best known as a vocalist and particularly for his star turn on the first recording of Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King*.[2] Since his death in 1990, he has experienced a small revival and become known as an eclectic and affecting composer, thanks due in large part to composer Mary Jane Leach.[3] In order to take Eastman seriously, I'll reconstruct the events of the S.E.M. Ensemble's *Song Books* performance of 1975 and his role in it. In doing so I'll argue that Eastman gives us a view on a tradition of queer experimental music that affords us an opportunity to reconfigure "experimentalism" as a production of subjectivity that joins the sonic and the erotic. Both Eastman and Cage were part of a network of gay and lesbian experimental musicians going back to the 1930s. Each experimented with sound and sexuality in conflicting ways—Cage with a so-called homosexual aesthetic and Eastman with a queer experimentalism. Each composer strategically managed sexuality as part of his practice, and both exemplify historically contingent modes of gay subjectivity performed through music.

2.

Feldman inaugurated his June in Buffalo festival in 1975 and envisioned it in part as a US counterpart to the Darmstadt summer composition courses. At the first June in Buffalo festival, Feldman celebrated his own experimental tradition with a series of concerts devoted to the "New York School," including the music of Cage, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, and himself. The festival was based at the State University of New York at Buffalo and featured the musicians of the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, known colloquially as the Creative Associates.

Throughout its history, lasting from 1964 to 1980, the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts was the first major academic home for experimental music in the United States. Given startup funds by the Rockefeller Foundation, supported by the New York State Council on the Arts, and given support and performance space by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the Center became renowned its performances and was a space of cultural exchange among Europe, the United States, and Japan. The international character of the Center was maintained through a frequently changing group of US, European, and Asian musicians, and the Center participated in the sort of cultural diplomacy and exercise of soft power

that characterized much state-supported cultural production in the latter half of the twentieth century.[4] Music in the Center's concerts both in Buffalo and in New York City's Carnegie Recital Hall featured a wide range of styles, including music of Charles Ives, Pierre Boulez, Iannis Xenakis, Lejaren Hillier, Sylvano Bussotti, Henri Pousseur, David del Tredici, Joan La Barbara, Jo Kondo, and Feldman—just to name a few.[5]

By the 1970s funding for the Center was in decline. Feldman's arrival in 1972 and subsequent appointment to the Edgard Varèse Chair in Musical Composition in 1975 did little to staunch the flow of resources away from the center, despite the excitement his appointment elicited. Feldman's founding of June in Buffalo attempted to restore some of the vitality of the Center's early days and return it to a position of prominence. As with many of Feldman's activities from the late 1960s on, institutionalization worked to bolster his narrative of experimentalism and his coterie's place within it. That Feldman devoted the inaugural June in Buffalo festival in 1975 to Cage, Wolff, Brown, and himself was certainly strategic—legitimating his avant-garde history and the importance of the New York School. The stakes were high for the festival, and its performances were granted a certain authority and authenticity by Feldman's imprimatur.

Among the performers chosen for the festival was the S.E.M. Ensemble. Petr Kotik joined the Creative Associates in 1969 after emigrating from Czechoslovakia and founded the ensemble in 1970. The early group roster of the S.E.M. was composed largely of Kotik's fellow Creative Associates—Jan Williams (percussionist), Julius Eastman (voice, piano, composer), and Roberto Laneri (a graduate student in clarinet) and later expanded to include Garrett List, Judith Martin, Joseph Kubera, and many others over the years. Unlike the Center's varied taste in new music, Kotik focused his programming on the New York School, other US experimentalists in that lineage (Alvin Lucier, Phill Niblock, Eastman), and sympathetic Europeans (Cornelius Cardew and Kotik himself). He had taken a strong interest in Cage's *Song Books* nearly from its inception and met with Cage during its composition in the summer of 1970. Kotik shared with Cage an interest in the formal ideas developed in *Song Books*, particularly the nonhierarchical superimposition of unrelated compositional elements. Kotik used such ideas in his own music from around the same time, especially *Alley* and *There Is Singularly Nothing*.

Julius Eastman's tenure as a Creative Associate began in 1968, shortly before Kotik's arrival. Eastman had studied composition and piano at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and came to the attention of Lukas Foss (the Center's director) after his graduation. Foss invited him to join

Fig. 1. Members of the S.E.M. Ensemble in 1971–72: Julius Eastman, Roberto Laneri, Jan Williams, and Petr Kotik. (Photograph by Jim Tuttle. Courtesy of David Tuttle.)

the Associates, and Eastman remained a vital part of the Center and the S.E.M. Ensemble until his relocation to New York City in the summer of 1976. Eastman served in both groups as a composer, pianist, and vocalist. As a composer his practice included techniques developed by the postwar avant-garde, particularly sonic collage, improvisation, electronics, and theatricality. Eastman composed a number of theatrical musical works in the early 1970s ranging from *Thruway* (for magnetic tape, children's choir, and ensemble) to *Tripod* (1973), a piece in which performers cattily gossip and periodically stab one another with toy knives to the accompaniment of live musicians and a prerecorded tape.[6]

Eastman also composed long-duration works assembled from repeating melodic cells that required limited improvisation from the players (similar in notational style to Terry Riley's *In C*). *Stay On It* (1973), premiered by the Creative Associates, was one such composition, as were *Joy Boy* and *That Boy*, performed at the Kitchen in 1975 by the S.E.M. Ensemble. While later composition titles such as *Gay Guerrilla* (1979) and *Nigger Faggot* (1977)

mark a militant turn in Eastman's politics in the late 1970s, his titles from earlier in the decade evince a more playful homoeroticism. *That Boy, Joy Boy*, and the two-piano piece *Touch Him When* give indications that same-sex intimacy rendered in sound was his going concern. Other works, such as *Creation* and *Macle*, are raucous performances in which gay signifiers are part of chaotic electronic and improvisatory sonic assemblages. Eastman's experimentalism shared some tropes with Cage's, particularly the juxtaposition of disparate sonic materials, amplification, electronics, and tape music. *Creation* (ca. 1973) is exemplary in this regard. Eastman composed it for the S.E.M. Ensemble, and it was played by Kotik, Eastman, and Williams on their European tour in the summer of 1973.[7] The piece is, like *Tripod* and *Thruway*, bifurcated into a prerecorded sound collage and a live acoustic component. Eastman's tape collage brings together wildly divergent sounds—vocal drones on an open fifth, sounds of screaming, laughing, crying, and electronic feedback. On the recording Eastman, Williams, and Kotik quote popular songs ("Danny Boy" and "The Girl from Ipanema" stand out). Gay signifiers emerge periodically as well on the tape. Eastman and his fellow performers affect a lisping comic tone of voice while discussing subjects more expected in a John Waters film than in a classical music concert. This tape accompanies live sounds of percussion, flute, and piano that blend repetition, improvisation, and virtuosic displays from the performers. Eastman's inclusion of queerly surreal material is in line with a long tradition of avant-garde shock techniques in which abject subject matter is joined to an equally disruptive musical surface or formal conceit.

While *Creation* is certainly a bountiful sound world, its diversity is rather meager in comparison with the plenitude of Cage's *Song Books* and its extensive stylistic and compositional variety. Like Cage's works from the late 1950s, such as the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, *Song Books* is an anthology of "solos." Here they come in four types: "Song," "Song with Electronics," "Theater," or "Theater with Electronics." Cage composed each of the ninety solos to be either relevant or irrelevant to the theme "We connect Satie with Thoreau," a line Cage had written in a diary in the late 1960s but left undeveloped until the *Song Books* commission. The musical and theatrical material was either newly composed or recycled from earlier compositional styles.[8] Cage instructed: "Given two or more singers, each should make an independent program, not fitted or related in a predetermined way to anyone else's program. Any resultant silence in a program is not to be feared. Simply perform as you had decided to, before you knew what would happen."[9]

Cage described his ideal performance: "These people all make their

programs separately, and then they are superimposed so that the whole situation becomes a rich unpredictable field of irrational things not thought out together."[10] As Branden W. Joseph has elaborated, such compositions are "'field[s]' or 'constellation[s]' . . . that not only potentially surrounded [the audience] but opened onto and interpenetrated with random acoustical occurrences 'outside' and therefore beyond any single intentionality."[11] Furthermore, though not stated in the instructions, Cage allowed no rehearsal before performance. Kotik recalls that when he met with Cage during the composition of *Song Books*, the prohibition of rehearsal was a point of contention between the composer and performers:

> [Cage] made absolutely sure that I understood that this piece must not be rehearsed. All parts must be prepared individually and separately without the regard of other performers preparing their parts. He believed rehearsal might create a situation in which one performer influences the other, which might create a hierarchical situation. . . . He said, "I'm preparing a performance at Carnegie Recital Hall, but the singers [Cathy Berberian and Simone Rist] insist on rehearsing and if they insist on rehearsing I will cancel the plans." Sure enough the performance never happened. That was another indication for me how serious he was about forbidding rehearsals.[12]

Beginning in 1971, Kotik and Eastman occasionally performed Cage's *Song Books*, once on Joel Chadabe's "Free Music Store" series at the State University of New York at Albany and again at the Kitchen in New York City three months before June in Buffalo. Kotik recalls that it was on the basis of Eastman's strong performance that the group was asked to participate in the festival.

> We did several full evening performances and Julius, being a singer, was always the star. We did it at a festival at the State University at Albany, organized by Joel Chadabe. . . . And after the performance, everyone was totally taken with Julius. Cage and Tudor talked about it. Half a year later, I met Tudor and he still talked about the *Song Books* performance and what impression Julius made on him, how fantastic it was. So, when Feldman asked me to perform *Song Books* with S.E.M. on his June in Buffalo festival, I was convinced that the reason was Julius Eastman.[13]

The S.E.M. Ensemble performed *Song Books* in the latter half of the second concert of the festival. It was preceded by a performance of *Atlas*

Eclipticalis (1961–62) realized by Jan Williams and played by the Creative Associates.[14] In S.E.M.'s version of *Song Books*, Judith Martin sang many of the songs with electronics, Williams executed a typewriter solo, and Kotik performed various theatrical actions.[15] Eastman realized "Solo for Voice No. 8," a preexisting work that Cage had composed some years earlier and titled *o'oo" (4'33" No. 2)* (1962). The instructions read, "[I]n a situation with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action. With any interruptions. Fulfilling in whole or part an obligation to others. No attention to be given to the situation (electronic, musical, theatrical)."[16] The score evinced Cage's pursuit of themes already present in his work—discipline and obligation toward others. This particular "Solo for Voice" appears five separate times in *Song Books*, suggesting its importance to Cage's thinking at the time. Cage's own realization of *o'oo"* had emphasized responsibility and sociability. His writing the score and dedication to Yoko Ono and Toshi Ichiyanagi constituted the "disciplined action" of the first performance. In a 1965 performance Cage wrote letters on an amplified typewriter. Both events prefigured the kinds of theatrical actions required in *Song Books*.

Cage drew attention to the sounds of the ordinary by performing his daily responsibilities while Eastman considered his obligations in different terms. For his realization of *o'oo"*, Eastman chose to give a lecture in which he outlined "a new system of love" that was given as a mock anatomy lesson using two assistants named Mister Charles and Miss Susiana.[17] Kotik remembers the June 4, 1975, performance like this:

> He took a man and woman and sort of undressed them on stage and acted as if he would be some kind of examiner, presenting these two species to the public. It was hilarious in a sense that it brought the house down. It was not really a scandal as far as the audience was concerned. In fact there was strong applause afterward, but Cage was deeply offended. I looked on the stage during the performance and I thought, "What the hell is going on?" What happened was the girl freaked out and didn't allow herself to be undressed. So Julius only managed to get the guy naked and being an outspoken homosexual, he was making all sorts of "achs!" and "ahs" as he was pulling his pants down. He was all over the guy while the girl was standing there rather embarrassed. Cage thought that this was some kind of mockery about him. He was scandalized.[18]

Jeff Simons's review for the Buffalo *Evening News* confirms Kotik's account: "By the time Eastman's little performance was finished, Mister Charles

was completely undressed and Eastman's leering, libidinous, lecture-performance had everyone convulsed with the burlesque broadness of his homoerotic satire."[19] It is unlikely that Cage was the target of the performance; such camping and queer signifying were crucial elements of Eastman's own practice (as in *Creation* and *Tripod*). They were also of a piece with the composer-performer's theatrical aesthetic developed during his tenure with the Creative Associates and honed in his nonmusical theatrical performances of the work of Jean Genet.[20] Eastman cultivated a distinctly gay experimental practice in nearly all of his performances; as Kotik notes, he was an "outspoken homosexual," and Gann refers to him as a "gay activist." Experimentalism was for him as much sexual as it was musical, and it often took the form of critical camp. David M. Halperin's description of camp aptly describes how artists like Eastman figured their relationship to authority structures.

> Camp, after all, is a form of cultural resistance that is entirely predicated on a shared consciousness of being inescapably situated within a powerful system of social and sexual meanings. Camp resists the power of that system from within by means of parody, exaggeration, amplification, theatricalization, and literalization of normally tacit codes of conduct—codes whose very authority derives from their privilege of never having to be explicitly articulated, and thus from their customary immunity to critique.[21]

Eastman's camp is markedly distinct from Cage's conception of power relations. Camp performance works amid systems of domination in order to dismantle them; Cagean indeterminacy, however, imagined a line of flight escaping power relations. Eastman's camp realization of "Solo for Voice, No. 8" took as its target the language of psychoscientific authority. With the American Psychiatric Association's removal in 1973 of homosexuality from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and an intensified gay rights movement following the events of the 1969 Stonewall uprising, there was an increased awareness among gay activists of the use of scientific discourse as a means of control, a theme subsequently examined in Michel Foucault's *La Volonté de savoir* (*History of Sexuality*) in 1976. Eastman's performance displayed just such awareness. He mocked the scientific discourse of sexuality by adopting a therapeutic discourse that theatricalized the production of erotic knowledge through a reversal of agency. A homosexual subject took the initiative to speak on his own behalf with the goal of experimenting with an as yet unknown form of love. As Halperin

notes, camp consciousness makes a virtue of its minor position within social and sexual power relations, and indeed Eastman's performance critiqued local targets. With his performances Eastman resisted the social strictures of his community as much as he did general homophobic discourse. Kotik described the environment in Buffalo in the 1970s.

> To think that you could, in the early 1970s, exist in Buffalo and be some kind of a gay activist is absurd. The Buffalo elite, so to speak, Mr. [Seymour] Knox [patron of the Albright-Knox Gallery] and his friends who supported us [the Creative Associates and the S.E.M. Ensemble] were the most conservative group of people you could imagine. I suspect that they are still that conservative. . . . These people funded all that was going on in the arts in Buffalo. They were very nice people, but they had their own ideas. Now can you imagine someone functioning as an "open homosexual" in this environment? It's absurd.[22]

Yet Eastman did, in performance after performance, function as an "open homosexual," building a gay aesthetic and experimenting with its musical possibilities. Although Cage, as Kotik suggests, may have thought himself the butt of Eastman's perceived joke, there were other, more pressing targets. Cage, it seems, was collateral damage. Even so, Eastman's gay aesthetic, once inserted within *Song Books*' multiplicity, revealed the limits of Cagean acceptance and the degree to which Cagean freedom was contingent on performers having internalized Cage's own tastes and preferences.[23]

3.

Cage was not happy with the performance. Following the event, the composer confronted both Eastman and Kotik: "So I said to Julius, 'Which of the solos were you doing and why did you do one?' He told me that through performing the work too many times he's become bored with it. I said, 'If you are bored with it, why do you do it?' And he said he thought he wouldn't do it in the future and I said, 'I'd be very grateful to you if you wouldn't.'"[24] Cage also directed his anger toward Kotik. In Cage's view the director had failed in his responsibility for the performance even though Kotik had abided by the rule forbidding rehearsal.

> Right after the performance, Cage came on stage and said to me, "What was this? What was the meaning of this?" I looked at him

> and said, "I had no idea what was going to happen," to which Cage answered, "But you are the director," putting clearly the responsibility for Julius's act on me. . . .
>
> It took me some time to come to terms with what Cage said and in the end, I completely agreed with him. This whole event and the realization of the consequences of what happened shaped my understanding and attitude toward performance for the rest of my life. . . . [O]nce the work leaves the composer's desk and is given to the performer, it is the musician who has to decide how to go about preparing the best performance. No excuses.[25]

Cage's ire at Kotik was based on a perceived failure of leadership, and Kotik later came to feel that Eastman's performance was "a misunderstanding of the music" even as he felt that Cage's instructions were of little help in realizing a good performance.[26]

Cage reserved a different line of criticism for Eastman, one that addressed problems of subjectivity and intention attendant to indeterminacy. The following day, among the assembled student-composers and colleagues, Cage gave a lecture dealing with "the question for which there is probably not a solution—the question being of writing something and it being performed, and the question whether the performance is acceptable or whether something else has happened." He said that he would also go on to address "the problem of composing and performing . . . in relation to the performers themselves."[27] Cage then disparaged the S.E.M. Ensemble's performance and described his response to it.

> Now, last night when the S.E.M. Ensemble performed the *Song Books*, I regretted that I had composed it. I regret that I have, that my work exists now, as something so widely misunderstood. . . . [I]f we could somehow get everything to be magnificent and good in terms of our intentions and whatnot, we would—wouldn't we?—have to exert pressure. And I, as you know, don't wish to do this. I wish to make suggestions. I wish even to make those suggestions ambiguous so that people will have some freedom to share, as it were, in the exploration of things beyond their imagination that started me off in the first place.[28]

By repudiating the performance and rejecting *Song Books* as his piece, Cage marked the limit of what he considered useful to his "exploration of things beyond [our] imagination." Eastman's performance, per Cage's

understanding, forestalled what Joseph has called the "subjective expansion" Cage sought through work—a desire to open up a field of experience that "surpass[es] the capacity of any one subject to take it all in, placing him and her within an infinite totality of which any grasp would be partial and thus distinct . . . from that of any other individual."[29] Cage identifies here the delicate balance of creating a situation over which one has authorial control and in which one does not impinge on freedom. It is a fundamental tension within indeterminacy that reiterates its genealogical link to the nineteenth-century work concept and the model of authorship related to it. Cage wants authorial control over even the unknown and unforeseen; such an expanded author function is a subjective expansion of a different sort in which all sounds in a given performance are attributable to the composer. Authorship, initially, seems to be the dilemma fueling Cage's ire.

> When you see that Julius Eastman, from one performance to the next, does the same thing, harps on the same thing . . . and . . . his thing unfortunately has become this one thing of sexuality. . . . Admittedly, he performs beautifully and if it were not for the fact that the performance was connected with my work, I could easily find it enjoyable.[30]

Cage connected Eastman's performance to a larger problem with the translation of his music from composition to performance: "I have apparently done my work in such a way that when people do their worst work and throw every consideration to the winds, they connect it with me. When they do the least thing that they can imagine to do, and repeatedly do it, they connect it with me."[31] Bad performances were judged less on their attainment of new sonic awareness and more on the extent to which Cage was willing to authorize the activities done in his name. As a result of Eastman's confusion of freedom with license and his redefinition of discipline, the limits of Cagean anarchy were exposed.[32] As he turned to this topic, Cage returned to an old story first published in the collected writings titled *A Year from Monday*, in which the themes of authority and race figure prominently.

> I have told in one of the diaries this touching story. I am, as you know, if a politician at all, an anarchist. And there was a book I wanted to read called *Man Against the State*. And I thought the man who had written it lived in the neighborhood, or one who had the last copy, someone, either one or the other. Anyways, I got in touch with

> him and drove over. . . . And he had lived alone all his life, and then just recently he had adopted two little black children. And when he brought them back to live with him—and this was the first time anyone had lived with him, and he had devoted his life to anarchy—these children were so happy to be in this house, and away from institutional living, that they jumped up and down on the beds. And he told me—and this is what was so touching—that he found it necessary after a whole life devoted to anarchy, he found it necessary to make a rule, and this rule was "no jumping up and down on the beds."[33]

The story suggests a need to strategically realign one's political commitments at moments of conflict to prevent harm. When situated within a lecture whose target was Eastman, most likely one of the few African Americans at the event, this story of white paternalism correcting unruly black youth was not so much touching as it was condescending and troubling with regard to how Cage conceived of his role as compositional rule maker. Even the moral of the story was politically questionable in this situation: one should adjust one's views to be more authoritarian when the need arises, whether as a corrective to kids messing up the sheets in celebration of their new, noninstitutional setting or a composer-performer using Cage's "Solo for Voice, No. 8" to develop an experimental erotics.

Cage followed up his story with an amateur psychoanalysis of Eastman. Drawing on lessons from Daisetsu Suzuki, Cage described the ego "as being able to close things in or open them out, to get things flowing or to constrict them, [Suzuki] said Zen wants us to get it flowing." Cage's compositional situations also attempted to "get things flowing" by creating happeninglike events of anarchic sonic interpenetration. By way of contrast, Cage interpreted homosexuality as a limit on subjective expansion, and he condemned Eastman for including gay and camp elements within the performance, even as he was misinformed about the S.E.M.'s previous realizations of the *Song Books*.

> I was told before I came on this trip that the performance of the S.E.M. was very controversial with respect to my *Song Books*. I had seen Julius Eastman perform some four or five years ago, or three, or whatever, in Albany and it was a beautiful performance. I had been told that the last time he performed this piece here he made homosexual advances to a young man in the audience and did so under the pretense that it was part of my composition. The piece is written so

> indeterminately that almost anyone, anything that one could think of doing, could be excused, as I will shortly tell you Julius asked me to excuse himself. But again last night, with two other people, the question of homosexuality arises again, and sexuality generally. And it's particularly not implied in this work, since the basis of this work, if one reads the directions—one assumes the performer does—we connect Satie, with Thoreau. Neither Satie nor Thoreau is known to have had any sexual connection with anyone or anything.[34]

Eastman's earlier performances had not included homosexual content—Kotik refutes this—and had only been praised by Cage and Tudor. Eastman's attempt to attach homosexuality to it elicited the composer's most vehement refusal: *Song Books* should not include any form of sexuality in the field of experience. To make this prohibition clear, Cage further defined the proper interpretation of *Song Books* by emphasizing its biographical basis in the life and work of Erik Satie and Henry David Thoreau. Cage stated that the theme that gave rise to the piece—"we connect Satie, with Thoreau"—governs all solos and therefore should inflect all performances. Cage seemed to forget that each solo's connection to the theme had been determined through *I Ching* operations as either "relevant" or "irrelevant" and the status of each is indicated in the score. Certainly other meanings would of course be part of any performance. Cage expected performers to disavow the chance operations that governed the score and treat the theme as a skeleton key to the work, ensuring a proper performance practice.

Going further, homosexuality marks the limit of Cage's acceptance of Eastman's performance.

> Let's begin now with why I don't approve. I don't approve because the ego of Julius Eastman is closed in on the subject of homosexuality. And we know this because he has no other idea to express. In a Zen situation where his mind might open up and flow with something beyond his imagination, he doesn't know the first step to take. He's said to be a composer. Why then is he a performer? He's said to be a performer. Why then doesn't he try to do the work that he sets out to perform in its spirit? I asked him after it, I said, "Which solo were you doing?" And I was so disturbed by the whole situation that it didn't even occur to me then that he had turned a solo into a trio. He needed two assistants to make a solo. I had very carefully written the word solo, and neither he nor I last night realized that was his preliminary mistake.[35]

Cage faults Eastman for a lack of fidelity to the work; his "preliminary mistake" of using additional performers was the first in a chain of misinterpretations that culminated with the sexualizing of *Song Books*. Here Cage sharply contrasts forms of subjective expansion. Cage views Zen as a means of opening up unexpected relations while homosexuality initiates psychic blocks and immobilizes the ego.

As I argued earlier, Eastman's gay aesthetic was as much a form of experimentalism as his musical practice and it is with this sensibility that a crucial distinction emerges between "gay" performance and "the homosexual" as understood by Cage. Eastman and Cage were both gay men working in the largely straight world of experimental and late modernist music. Unlike Cage, Eastman was also African American and of a younger generation (Cage was born in 1912, Eastman in 1940), meaning that the way each composed his subjectivity, and the manner in which their musical practices participated in that composition, was inflected by differences in historical and social-cultural position. By invoking a generational distinction between Cage and Eastman I do not wish to map a pre- or post-Stonewall distinction onto the two artists or fall into a simplistic notion of identity, with the younger composer representing a supposedly more liberated status of gay men and lesbians in the 1970s. Overt political statements regarding sexual difference were present in experimental music before Stonewall and have a long tradition in experimental music, particularly in the work of Lou Harrison and Pauline Oliveros (who was Eastman's collaborator in the early 1970s).[36] Some scholars have also attributed gay meanings to Cage's work, particularly that of the early 1950s, in an attempt to recuperate his aesthetics of silence as a distinctly homosexual practice. This reparative strategy, scholars note, was shared with a coterie of gay men with whom Cage associated in the 1950s, namely, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, and Cage's romantic partner for most of his life, Merce Cunningham.

The notion of a homosexual aesthetic in the work of Cage was first articulated by art historian Caroline A. Jones, who framed Cage's desire for self-negation as a response to what she called the "Abstract Expressionist Ego," an ego whose closures and blockages no doubt appalled Cage for its overweening agency and pride in its supposed ability to express a tumultuous, sublime, and (probably) heterosexual interior life.[37] She links Cage, Rauschenberg, and Johns through the ways in which each artist figured bodily absence—the veiled bodies of Johns's *Target with Plaster Casts*, the absent bodies of Rauschenberg's *Bed*, or the immobile bodies of Cage's *4′33″*. Such obfuscation and silencing evinces a homosexual aesthetic that,

according to Jones, exists as "a negativity within dominant heterosexist culture."[38] Jones also describes how Cage's development toward "disembodied practices" extended his resistance to abstract expressionist aesthetics with their faith in the representation of internal affective states. Although *Song Books* is hardly disembodied—many songs call for lively actions that are often amplified—Cage does legislate against bodily interaction, which, while not its exclusive vector, would limit the possibilities of erotic enjoyment. Eastman's transformation of a solo into a trio violated this stricture in his realization, opening up *Song Books* to eroticism. It gave Cage grounds for an initial disqualification as it broke down the individuated anarchic environment he hoped to create.

Jones's interpretation of Cage's silence was grounded in the particular needs of his community—the resistance he met at the Eighth Street Artists Club, his friendships with Johns and Rauschenberg—and qualified her description of a homosexual aesthetic as localized, not universalized, practice. A subsequent interpretation by Jonathan D. Katz took a stronger tack and transformed Cagean silence into political resistance to a monolithic, homophobic Cold War culture. Treading again over much of the ground covered by Jones, Katz offers a more psychological and speculative portrait of Cage. For Katz, Cage's newfound aesthetics of silence was the result of his assumption of a homosexual identity in the 1940s and the attendant personal and political needs that went along with maintaining that identity. Along those lines, Katz links Cage's embrace of Zen to the social structure of the closet in which the former transfigures the latter, "not as a source of repression or anxiety, but as a means to achieve healing."[39] Cage's self-silencing was not (only) remaining in the closet but a form of resistance to or refusal of the demands of heterosexist culture. Self-silencing and the avoidance of bodily interaction are models for the preemption of power relations; hierarchical situations (which Cage abhorred) could not come into being if networks of performers were kept apart, if sounds were themselves and not human communication. Resistance was not active but passive, or nonengaging. Katz approvingly cites the following anecdote as an example of Cage's politics of silent resistance.

> I said that noises had not been liberated but had been reintegrated into a new kind of harmony and counterpoint. If that were the case, that would mean that we had only changed prisons! My idea is that there should be no more prisons. Take another example: Black Power. If blacks free themselves from the laws whites invented to protect themselves from the blacks, that's all well and good. But if they in

> turn want to invent laws, that is, to wield power in exactly the same way as whites, what will the difference be? There are only a few blacks who understand that with laws that will protect them from the whites, they will just be new whites. . . . Today, we must identify ourselves with noises instead and not seek laws for the noises, as if we were blacks seeking power![40]

As Katz describes it, silence was a strategic aesthetic historically appropriate for Cold War America; it was not, however, the only option practiced by gay artists, musicians, and poets. Harrison, the poet Frank O'Hara, and the filmmaker Jack Smith, among others, were more open in their lives and art in the same period. Their often surreal camp queerness shares much with Eastman's own aesthetic. What the *Song Book* event shows is an end to the strategic usefulness of silence and that by 1975 such silent resistance could be used against other musicians (like Eastman) judged by Cage to be "seeking power" over his compositions. Cage's homosexual silence, with its reliance on the ambivalent force of the closet, was all too easily transformed from self-preservation into condemnation of another gay musician. Eastman, like numerous queer artists before him, experimented with other strategies and used his compositions, improvisations, and performances as modes of creating gay life. More than a Cold War–era model of closeted resistance, Eastman produced experimental assemblages that brought gay subjectivity into relation with formal experimentation, camp resignification, and aural technologies.

4.

By the 1970s preexisting gay cultural practices assumed greater prominence in the United States. Dance music culture, sadomasochism (S/M), women's music, and Eastman's form of experimental music all offered modes of queer community building.[41] Inspired by this emergence, Foucault redefined homosexuality not as a pathologized identity or ego blockage but as a set of possibilities. According to him, the questions that gay men and lesbians should ask are not:

> "Who am I" and "What is the secret of my desire?" Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, "What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?" The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships.

> And that is why homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable.[42]

Cage's view of "an ego closed upon the subject of homosexuality" aligns with the two questions Foucault poses initially, in that they assume a stable relationship among sexuality, desire, and identity. Foucault makes a crucial move, derived from the various aesthetics of existence gay men developed in the twentieth century, that views sexuality as a set of possibilities for life and relationships, based on what can happen when bodies come together in new and surprising ways (not always erotic, often musical).

Eastman engaged in many of the world-making practices that Foucault himself experienced and discussed in his later interviews. In the 1970s and 1980s Eastman was involved in disco culture, performing with composer-producer Arthur Russell in the collective Dinosaur L, and was known for participating in the experimental sexual practices of New York's S/M scene, such that he was known as "Mr. Mineshaft," after the sex club in Manhattan's meatpacking district.[43] In my interview with her, Meredith Monk recalled him wearing a leather vest, white t-shirt, and jeans with keys hanging from the belt—the gay "clone" uniform.[44] It should be of little surprise that Eastman, who identified strongly as both a gay man and an experimental musician, worked out possibilities for gay subjectivity in his compositions, improvisations, and vocal performances.[45] A final example will suffice and illustrate how gayness—conceived of not as a static identity but as a field of possible relations among other constituent elements and subjectivities—animated his musical practice.

Along with his performances of Cage's *Song Books*, Eastman composed a number of theatrical musical works. *Macle* is one of his most chaotically queer. He composed it in 1971, and the performing score comprises a series of graphic boxes that indicate actions and types of vocalizations to be performed. The Creative Associates programmed it several times in 1972. Eastman was joined in the performance by Kotik, Laneri, and Williams, as well as John R. Adams, who was a Creative Associate that year.[46] Similar to *Song Books*, *Macle* is full of varied types of sonic events for amplified voices electronically manipulated by Eastman. Unlike *Song Books*, however, there is significant interaction between the musicians. The performers produce animal noises, recite nonsensical stories, utter sounds of sexual pleasure, give biology lectures, sing pop songs ("My Funny Valentine"), or erupt into Czech folk tunes. As the performers progress, each vocalist in turn begins an anatomical lecture in authoritarian tones, this time on the heart, its qualities and abilities. As in Eastman's performance of *o'oo"*, romantic

love is the topic, and the mock seriousness of the lectures often dissolves into the sounds of sexual pleasure, made by all the men at once, charging the music with a homoeroticism that just as quickly melts into a kitschy jazz standard or shifts to Williams holding forth with a story about a farmer and his cheese. At the piece's end, Eastman recites something of an origin story for *Macle*.

> I took a trip to the country with my lover and he got tired and he sat down by a tree and I wandered off into the distance and there I saw a man. He was sitting there and he all of a sudden asked me, "Why are you doing what you're doing?" And I said, "Well, I don't know, I mean, well, one must have job." And he said, "You know, those very wise men always know what they're doing when they're doing it, you see, and those who do not, waste time. And the thing of it is, that on the death bed you will then, how can I say, know the true meaning of time." As he spoke these words I became more disturbed, more distracted, how can I say, I left myself and I seemed to faint and as I fainted, because this was a very strange thing, I began to sink into the ground, but as I sank into the ground I made a very strange noise.[47]

Here gayness is presented matter-of-factly, and this bit of pseudoautobiography draws into focus the suggestive homoerotic soundscapes produced by the all-male ensemble. Like *Creation*, gay signifiers are part of an assemblage of zany aural dissociation that equates aesthetic and sexual experimentation. Williams recalls that following the performance one of the Center's major patrons was "livid."[48] Such reactions also caution against a too sanguine view of Eastman's experimentalism as a liberating antidote to Cage. Even as Eastman's performance brought gay signifiers into composition, both he and Cage still relied on the shock value of transgression—a tried and true strategy of the historical avant-garde that violates artistic and social norms to achieve its power. It could, on the one hand, yield a comic satire as in Eastman's version of *Song Books*, or it could present a field of noisy abject materiality as in *Macle*. Ideally, Eastman's performances transgressed norms in order to reconfigure social life as a space of interaction, in contrast to Cage's individuated and solipsistic aural experience.

Writing about the creation of new forms of gay culture, Foucault cautioned against composing distinct queer lives, separate from the world.

> We have to *create* culture. We have to realize cultural creations. But, in doing so, we come up against the problem of identity. I don't

> know what we would do to form these creations, and I don't know what forms these creations would take. . . . Yet, I am sure that from the point of departure of our ethical choices, we can create something that will have a certain relationship to gayness. But it must not be a translation of gayness in the field of music or painting or what have you, for I do not think this can happen.[49]

Eastman does not propose the "translation of gayness in the field of music," but he offers assemblages in which gay erotics participate in a broader range of aural and affective experience. On a social level, the close-knit ensemble and friendships uniting Eastman (who was the only gay man in the S.E.M. Ensemble but not in the Creative Associates) with his heterosexual collaborators points to queerness as a mode of life, one useful for experimentation and forging unforeseen associations in performance. Indeed, beyond a closed notion of homosexuality as defined by Cage, Eastman used experimental musicality to forge a queer community among his collaborators.

In this essay I've been using the word *experimental* in a broader sense than it is usually considered in the musicological literature. Experimentalism has resonance beyond the musical practices of Euro-American modernity and opens onto other concerns of sexuality and processes of subjectivity. Attending to the experimental refrains sounded by these two musicians also warns us against treating experimentalism as a necessarily progressive practice (reinscribing a narrative of modernist aesthetic advancement) but suggests that it might be better conceived as a pragmatics that should be continually critiqued and recomposed.[50] Julius Eastman's conflict with John Cage is an event in which musical experimentalism and experimental forms of gay life in the 1970s were drawn close to see what they might become together. Both experimental musicians and gay communities reconfigured intimacies and alliances while seeking new modes of sensibility and sound. In Julius Eastman's practices they converged.

NOTES

I would like to thank Tamara Levitz, Bryan Markovitz, and Benjamin Piekut for their comments on this essay.

1. Kyle Gann, *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 168 (emphasis original).

2. Peter Maxwell Davies, *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, with Julius Eastman and the Fires of London, Unicorn-Kanchana DPK 9052, 1987, compact disc.

3. Julius Eastman, *Unjust Malaise*, New World Records 80638, 2005, 3 compact discs. Leach gathered many difficult to find recordings and produced the record.

4. See Danielle Fossler-Lussier, "American Cultural Diplomacy and the Mediation of Avant-Garde Music," in *Sound Commitments: Avant-Garde Music and the Sixties*, ed. Robert Adlington (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 232–53.

5. On the Creative Associates see Renée Levine-Packer, *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

6. Tom Johnson gives a description of a performance of *Tripod* in his review, "Sights of the Second Music," *Village Voice*, June 15, 1972, 37.

7. A streaming recording of Eastman's *Creation* is available online, accessed June 9, 2012, http://www.archive.org/details/CM_1973_08_26.

8. On Cage's compositional process for *Song Books*, see James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 166–73.

9. John Cage, *Song Books*, vol. 1 (New York: Edition Peters, 1970), 1.

10. Steve Schlegel, "John Cage at June in Buffalo, 1975" (MA thesis, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2008), 32. Schlegel's thesis includes as an appendix a transcript of Cage's lecture given on June 5, 1975. Following quotes from Cage's lecture are taken from his transcript which I have modified in some instances. I am grateful to Peter Schmelz for bringing Schlegel's work to my attention.

11. Branden W. Joseph, "The Tower and the Line: Toward a Genealogy of Minimalism," *Grey Room* 27 (Spring 2007): 58–81, 61.

12. Petr Kotik, interview with the author, November 14, 2008. I have been unable to verify this anecdote, although there is no record of a performance of *Song Books* at Carnegie Recital Hall.

13. Ibid.

14. Williams's realization consisted of his choice of sections of *Atlas* (flute, violin, three percussion parts, and electronics), as well as the placement of the performers on stage. Williams also remembers coaching performers less familiar with Cage's music. E-mail message to author, August 24, 2010.

15. Cage accused Martin of arbitrarily choosing solos as she went along, as discussed below. Williams performed "Solo for Voice 15," which instructs the performer to type a sentence by Erik Satie with an amplified typewriter thirty-eight times.

16. Cage, *Song Books*, vol. 1, 31.

17. Peter Gena's account suggests that "Miss Susiana" was Eastman's sister. However, Eastman did not have a sister. "Mister Charles," however, could likely be Eastman's boyfriend at the time, known to Eastman's friends as Chucky. This is to say that Gann's memory of Eastman stripping a male student is likely incorrect. Ned Sublette, interview with the author, February 18, 2009; Renée Levine-Packer, interview with the author, December 12, 2008. Levine-Packer, Eastman's close friend and former managing director of the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts, gives a brief account of the performance—in terms sympathetic to Cage—in *This Life of Sounds*, 146.

18. Kotik, interview with the author.

19. Quoted in Levine-Packer, *This Life of Sounds*, 146.

20. Eastman performed the role of the Black Queen in Genet's *The Blacks*. See ibid., 92.

21. David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 29.

22. Kotik, interview with the author.

23. Moira Roth was among the earliest to insist on scholarly attention to Cage's "cultural focus, tastes, and biases." See her "Five Stories about St. John, Seven Stories about St. Pauline, Surely There Is Trouble in John Cage Studies Paradise, and Readings from Today's Headlines in the *New York Times*," in *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp, and John Cage*, ed. Moira Roth and Jonathan D. Katz (London: Routledge, 1998), 141.

24. Schlegel, "John Cage at June in Buffalo," 32.

25. Kotik, interview with the author.

26. Ibid. Kotik has continued to modify Cage's instructions in order to achieve a more harmonious working environment for musicians. He has conducted Cage's *103* despite the composer's explicit prohibition. See his recording *John Cage: Atlas Eclipticalis & Winter Music/103*, with the Orchestra of the S.E.M. Ensemble, conducted by Petr Kotik, Asphodel ASP 2000, 2000, 4 compact discs.

27. Schlegel, "John Cage at June in Buffalo," 29.

28. Ibid., 30.

29. Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 235. Joseph offers this description of subjective expansion as a point of alliance between Cage and Jack Smith; however, Smith's use of abjection and transgressive sexuality is at odds with Cage's sensibility and rejection of the possibilities of subjective expansion worked out by gay artists. Whereas Joseph sees Smith working within a lineage of Cage and Artaud, I find abjection and Cagean discipline incommensurable.

30. Schlegel, "John Cage at June in Buffalo," 32.

31. Ibid., 30.

32. On other "bad" performances of Cage's music, see Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

33. The book Cage refers to is James Joseph Martin, *Men Against the State: The Expositors of Individualist Anarchism in America, 1827–1908* (New York: Libertarian Book Club, 1953). The story was first published in "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) Continued 1966," in *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969). There it reads, "I visited an aging anarchist. (He had the remaining copies of Men Against the State.) He introduced me to two Negro children he'd adopted. After they went out to play, he told me what trouble he'd had in deciding finally to draw this line: No jumping up and down on the beds" (59).

34. Schlegel, "John Cage at June in Buffalo," 31.

35. Ibid., 32.

36. On Oliveros's "lesbian musicality," see Martha Mockus, *Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality* (London: Routledge, 2008).

37. Caroline A. Jones, "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 628–65.

38. Ibid., 653.

39. Jonathan D. Katz, "John Cage's Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse," in *Writings through John Cage's Music, Poetry, and Art*, ed. David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 45.

40. John Cage, *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles* (London: Marion Boyars, 1995), 230–31, quoted in Katz, "John Cage's Queer Silence," 60–61.

41. Judith Peraino has described many of these queer musical practices through Foucault's notion of the "technologies of the self." See her *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

42. Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, vol. 1, *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 135–36.

43. On Eastman's work with Arthur Russell, see Tim Lawrence, *Hold On to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973–1992* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). On activities in New York's gay sex clubs, see Joel I. Brodsky, "The Mineshaft: A Retrospective Ethnography," *Journal of Homosexuality* 24, no. 3 (1993): 233–52; and Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 16–26.

44. Meredith Monk, interview with the author, January 14, 2009. On "clone" culture, see Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

45. My book in progress documents Eastman's varied communities in New York's downtown from 1975 to 1990.

46. The performances of *Macle* in 1972 were given on February 13, 15, 16, and 17 at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (Buffalo), Carnegie Recital Hall (New York City), Orange County Community College (Middletown, NY), and State University College at Geneseo. My description of the piece is based on the archival recording of the Buffalo performance in the Music Library at the State University of New York at Buffalo. I am grateful to Mary Jane Leach for providing me with a copy of the recording.

47. Transcription of Eastman's performance from the archive recording. See note 46.

48. Williams, e-mail message to author.

49. Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," trans. John Johnston, in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, vol. 1, 164 (emphasis original).

50. My understanding of *experimental* is sympathetic with Isabelle Stengers's use of the term. See her "Experimenting with Refrains: Subjectivity and the Challenge of Escaping Modern Dualism," *Subjectivity* 22, no. 1 (2008): 38–59.

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