NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Sound Figures in Postcolonial African Literature, 1970s to the Present

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of Comparative Literary Studies

By

Scott Newman

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

September 2020

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ABSTRACT

"Sound Figures in Postcolonial African Literature, 1970s to the Present"

This dissertation examines the impact of sound on the African literary imagination since the 1970s. I posit the sonority of postcolonial African writing in order to draw out the relatively ignored but remarkably rich stylistic innovations and political interventions oriented around sound. While the orality–textuality debate in African literary studies is largely resolved, this dissertation's investigation of the human voice alongside non-human sounds offers fresh perspectives on the multiple meanings of phonic matter in literature. I consider how the introduction of new audio technologies, the internationalization of African music, and the social ramification of late twentieth century globalization led a new generation of authors to think about sound's social, phenomenological, and material signification through writing. My project presents a repertoire of what I call *sound figures*: textual strategies that embody the extra-linguistic features of the human voice. I draw on sound studies and postcolonial theory to investigate works by Dambudzo Marechera, Sony Labou Tansi, Yvonne Vera, Patrice Nganang and Binyavanga Wainaina.

My first chapter compares the grotesque sound figures in Dambudzo Marechera's novella *House of Hunger* and Sony Labou Tansi's dictator novels *La vie et demie* and *Les septs solitudes de Lorsa Lopez*. I argue that screams and stutters in these texts render the violence of (post)coloniality. Simultaneously, they prize sonic expressive immediacy and parody the racist notion of black vocal illegibility. Next, I trace the merging of historical acoustics and embodied memory as echoes in Yvonne Vera's fiction. I adopt a practice of historical acoustemology in my analysis of the novels *Nehanda* and *Butterfly Burning* to show how Vera challenges masculinist

visions of history. My final two chapters jointly articulate a poetics of the crowd in the work of one Anglophone and one Francophone author. In chapter three, I consider rumor as a sound figure that metonymically represents the crowd in Patrice Nganang's novel *Temps de chien*. Drawing on interdisciplinary social theories of rumor, I uncover the narratological influence of rumor on the African novel and its abiding use in sonically rendering plural voices in the novel. In chapter four, I interpret the crowd's constitution by ordinary sound figures in Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir *One Day I Will Write About This Place*. I highlight the polyphonic and multilingual techniques of "ordinariness" that constitute the autobiographical listening subject's place in the crowd. Through close readings of texts in English and French from Cameroun, Congo-Brazzaville, Kenya, and Zimbabwe alongside auditory material in transnational cultural contexts, I demonstrate how authors have innovated sound figures to refract and rethink the postcolonial condition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In May of 2019, as I was beginning work on the book *One Day I Will Write About This Place* discussed in chapter 4 of this dissertation, the author Binyavanga Wainaina passed away. May his soul rest in peace.

First thanks are to my committee members Doris L. Garraway, Evan Maina Mwangi, and Nasrin Qader. Doris inspired an avenue of research into Haitian literature alongside this project and provided timely guidance on publishing. Her feedback is always terrifically insightful. Nasrin responded positively to my early inquiry into applying to Northwestern and I am grateful for her encouragement. In Nasrin's graduate course on postcolonial theory I discovered that reading with her is a rewarding activity. She has been a spirited conversation partner. Evan served as my dissertation advisor and in that capacity shared his encyclopedic knowledge of African literature. He has been patient and cheerful company on my meandering research path and always urged me to "strategize."

My six years of study at Northwestern University were funded by Northwestern's Graduate School, the Program in African Studies, and the Buffett Institute for Global Affairs. I am particularly grateful for the Buffett fellowship that gave me precious time me to devote to this project in the last two years.

This dissertation was strengthened by the feedback I received in a number of venues where I presented my research. Thanks to my interlocutors at the Institute for World Literature in Lisbon in 2015, the Summer School in Global Studies and Critical Theory in Bologna in 2016, the African Literature Association conference at Yale in 2017, the Comparative Literary Studies Colloquium at Northwestern in 2017, the Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies graduate workshop at

UCLA in 2018, the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom conference at Birmingham in 2018, the Africa Seminar at Northwestern ("AfriSem") in 2019, and the Northeast Modern Language Association conference in Boston in 2020.

Northwestern provided a stimulating intellectual environment, where many colleagues became friends. I had the privilege of joining a stellar graduate cohort in the Comparative Literary Studies Program and finding comparatists, Africanists, and scholars across the humanities who challenged my thinking and contributed to my growth at Northwestern. I cannot pretend to remember everyone here—truly, there are so many—but I am grateful for all who read or discussed my work, those I shared seminars with, and those I just got to listen to and think with. Thanks to Amy Swanson, Anisha Bhat, Arif Camoglu, Bonnie Etherington, Caitlin Monroe, César Braga Pinto, Chris Abani, F. Delali Kumavie, Harris Feinsod, Iboo Tall, Ilana Emmett, Isaac Ginsberg Miller, Jan Cao, Jonas Rosenbrück, Kritish Rajbhandari, Kyle Kaplan, Maïté Marciano, Menglu Gao, Miriam Piilonen, Mlondolozi Zondi, Rachel Mihuta Grimm, Sam Weber, Simran Bhalla, Sonia Li, Susanna L. Sacks, Tamara Tasevska, Taymaz Pour Mohammad, Tyrone S. Palmer, and 'Yemi Ajisebutu. Thanks to Susannah Gottlieb and Alessia Ricciardi who were both supportive Program Directors. Thanks to Sarah Peters for her administrative assistance and kindness. Beyond Northwestern, thanks to Sarah Arens, Matthew Lecznar, Cécile Feza Bushidi, and Christina Horvath.

The writing of this dissertation took me many places I did not expect to go. Beyond the libraries, cafés, and usual haunts around Evanston and Chicago, much of the writing took place at Summerdale, 22nd St, Alalia, and Lochnest. In the last few months, during the great dislocation of the COVID-19 pandemic I have had more than enough time for reflection on the friends near and far who have supported me throughout my graduate school career. Thanks to the far away ones

who visited or had me to stay. Thanks to Becca, Glen, Gracie, Jasmine, Kate, Lizhi, Maria, Mushana, Matthew *in memoriam*, Ndaku, Simba, Suet Wa, William, and Zsofi. Special thanks to the brunch chicks (in order of appearance) Tamara, Kyle, Jamie, Simran, Thomas, with cameos from Loci. Discussing cinema with this beloved group was a joyful and fiery endeavor. It made the punishingly solitary process of writing about literature a lot easier.

My family has expanded in recent years and continues to offer me an abundance of encouragement. Thanks to my new Australian family—all McNamees, Mansours, and Mornanes—for bringing me into the fold. Thanks to my Zimbabwean family who have kept close, with WhatsApp helping to shorten the distances between Newmans, Burrows, Prices, and Padburys. At last, Charlie no longer has to ask, "how many years to go?" Thanks to my mum and dad. I have deep, deep gratitude to them for the sacrifices that they made for my education—and just look where those bedtime stories took me! Finally, thanks to Loci, my life partner, who always encourages me to write and when I'm struggling at that helps me find meaning in the unwritten. Nothing compares.

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INTRODUCTION

> We always arrive, in the final analysis, at the human voice, which is to say we come up against the human being.
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> — Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*

"*Hors du puits des siècles d'hier, comment affronter les sons du passé ?*" (How are the sounds of the past to be met as they emerge from the well of bygone centuries?) asks the narrator of Assia Djebar's 1985 novel *L'amour, la fantasia* as she ponders the present impact of the violent history of French imperialism in her native Algeria.[1] She continues: "*Quel amour se cherche, quel avenir s'esquisse malgré l'appel des morts, et mon corps tintinnabule du long éboulement des générations-aïeules*" (What love is to be found, what future to shape up despite the call of the dead? And my body resounds with the constant avalanching of ancestral generations). It is important to note that this young woman, who has recently discovered the joys of reading history and writing love letters is at that moment engaged in the act of reading. She is deciphering swirling visual hallucinations of Arabic script and French words, a synesthetic process that solicits the senses of smell, sight, and hearing—nevertheless it is an act of reading. It requires her to contort her body: "*Pour lire cet écrit, il me faut renverser mon corps, plonger ma face dans l'ombre, scruter la voûte de rocailles ou de craie, laisser les chuchotements immémoriaux remonter, géologie sanguinolente. Quel magma de sons pourrit là, quelle odeur de putréfaction s'en échappe ? Je tâtonne, mon odorat troublé, mes oreilles ouvertes en huîtres, dans la crue de la douleur ancienne*" (To read this text, my body has to bend over backwards, plunge face-first into the

[1] Assia Djebar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985; Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 69. My translation and original italics.

shadows, carefully examine the rocky or chalky vault, attend to the timeless whispering, the blood-stained geology. What magma of sounds is rotting in there, what stench of decay oozes out? I feel my way, my sense of smell stirred, my ears wide open, amidst the flooding of ancient pain.).[2] In this instructive passage, Djebar imagines reading closely paired with listening: reading is an act of geological excavation that yields rich historical knowledge, while listening is a seismological tool that detects that same knowledge through bodily reverberation (*tintinnabulement*). The sounds of the past (a topic I address in detail in Chapter Two of this dissertation) are the terrain on which the action of *L'amour, la fantasia* plays out. They intermingle with the direct speech of named characters and a host of loudly animated voices that are often presented in the form of a list such as this: "*Râles, ruisseaux de sons précipices, sources d'échos entrecroisés, cataractes de murmures, chuchotements en taillis tressés, surgeons susurrant sous la langue, chuitements, et souque la voix courbe qui, dans la soute de mémoire, retrouve souffles souillés de soûlerie ancienne*" (*Wheezes, streams of abyssal sounds, springs of crisscrossing echoes, cataracts of murmurs, whispers in twisted thickets, hushed trickles under the tongue, hisses, and the voice bent-double salvages sullied sighs of past indulgence from memory's hold*).[3] Djebar's richly sonic vocabulary is evident in this repercussive and sibilant line that also extends the geological motif to suggest that sounds, like memories, must first be hauled up from their underground location (*la soute de mémoire*) before they come to bear on the body. As Djebar's autobiographical narrator reckons with the pleasure and peril of revealing herself in writing, it is actually the reverberating self that makes identity legible and, crucially, audible.

[2] Djebar, 69.
[3] Djebar, 156.

As critics Alison Rice, Dorothy Blair, and Kathryn Lachman have observed, the Djebar's training in classical music, her interest in language (both oral and written, particularly the conflict between standard French, colloquial Arabic, and local Berber) and her expertise in Maghrebi history are all reflected in the musical structure and style of her writing.[4] I agree with these critics and recognize the recurrence of technical terms from music at both a macro and micro levels: the title *Fantasia* refers to musical composition; the final part of the novel is arranged in five "movements" reminiscent of orchestral movements; and the musical lexicon is employed immeasurably. However, in my estimation, the novel demonstrates a broader engagement with sonority—the capacity to produce, carry or perceive sound—that exceeds the category of music, as the quotations above suggest. For example, whispered ancestral voices, battle cries, and the bomb blasts of imperial invasion do not carry direct musical connotation; rather, they evoke the way that sound is represented, embodied or materialized in *L'amour, la fantasia*. Djebar's novel thus exemplifies the use of what I will call *sound figures* in postcolonial African literature. Furthermore, *L'amour, la fantasia* provides a theoretical model for the interpretation of sound in literature that is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's archeological method. In plumbing the depths of the text (close reading), one is able to unearth *les sons précipices* hidden below and embedded deeply with meaning (close listening). If sound constitutes the grounds on which postcolonial African literature rests, my task is to excavate the stratified significations of sound buried within.

* * *

[4] Djebar's English translator Blair further speculates that "she is clearly in love with the musicality of French, which she exploits in those passages of prose poetry printed in italics, and in which she makes the prose approximate to music, both structurally and sonically." See the Introduction to *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, xviii. Cf. Alison Rice, *Time Signatures: Contextualizing Contemporary Francophone Autobiographical Writing from the Maghreb* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006); Kathryn Lachman, *Borrowed Forms: The Music and Ethics of Transnational Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 59–88.

The central idea informing this dissertation, which the introduction will theorize and the following chapters will further exemplify and expand, is that postcolonial African literature thinks *about* and *through* sound. I seek to respond to a key set of interlocking questions. What are the particular sounds that animate this literature? I delineate four categories of sound figures—the grotesque, the historical, the plural, and the ordinary—which organize the overwhelmingly broad auditory field into manageable units of analysis. How do authors craft the sonority of their writing? I interpret the literary forms and styles that sound demands by considering the dilemma of textual representation of auditory phenomena on the seemingly silent medium of the printed page. Among the many strategies, I point to examples of accentuation, metonymy, apostrophe, direct translation, repetition, ellipsis, and onomatopoeia. Why do authors turn to sound to enrich their imagination? I present biographical information to understand the personal artistic choices for turning to sound, along with historical contextualization that identifies contributing factors such as the development of new audio technologies, the internationalization of African popular music, the prevalence of sonic tropes in African public discourse, and other effects of late twentieth century globalization.

These sounds figured in African literature are richly embedded with social and historical meaning that benefit from an interpretation with tools borrowed from the disciplines of anthropology, musicology, philosophy, history, and literary studies, while drawing on theoretical insights from critical race theory, postcolonial theory, disability studies, and sound studies. Although Eurocentric theories of the epistemology and phenomenology of sound do not always fit readily with the African texts studied here, their encounter yields for me a newly nuanced critical vocabulary. Unsurprisingly, that encounter is not always harmonious, but I do find that such theoretical dissonance is generative, not least for discovering alternatives to hegemonic auditory practices. My method for tracing African literature's reinvention of literary sound is first to

position my chosen texts as interlocutors in an ongoing conversation about the sonic and the literary, and second to undertake historically informed close readings.

My project aims to connect the techniques for figuring sound that have developed synchronously (or not) in discrete African national, regional, or linguistic contexts—a gesture inspired by what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih call "minor transnationalism."[5] Not every chapter pairs contemporaneous authors. However, take the example in my first chapter of Sony Labou Tansi and Dambudzo Marechera who were both preoccupied from the start of their writing careers in the late 1970s with screaming as a subversive vocalization. The two authors never met, and in all likelihood did not read one another's books—at least in the early years before they gained notoriety. Marechera wrote his first book in the United Kingdom where he lived until his return to Zimbabwe in 1983 after six years living abroad. Meanwhile, Sony Labou Tansi lived and worked in Congo-Brazzaville where he independently embarked figuring the sonic grotesque in his magical realist novels and activist plays. The pair were bound together by their distant but similar experiences of the same global political climate, a resonant mood of disillusion with postcolonial African governments in particular, and by a mutual reaction against the championing of "orality" in African literature of the preceding decades. However, I do not insist that the two authors were unbeknownst part of a continental "moment." My broader theoretical point here is that through comparative critical reading we might intone how shared idioms are given different forms in English of French.

The oral and vocal features of postcolonial African literature have not gone unnoticed; however, their interpretation has been curbed by a number of trends. One the one hand, *orality* has

[5] Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

been undermined by the insistence on its almost exclusive signification in nativist terms (i.e. as pure and authentic pre-colonial tradition) by mid twentieth century thinkers and readers. *Vocality*, on the other hand, has been overdetermined by postcolonial theorists as the metaphor of political resistance par excellence. For this reason, my project focuses on the *sonority* of African writing in order to draw out the relatively ignored but remarkably rich stylistic innovation and social meaning of its sound figures. By doing so, I am able to provide an account of the human voice alongside non-human sounds that constitute the African auditory field.

Defining Sound Figures

R. Murray Schafer's concept of the "soundscape" is probably the best known import from sound studies to literary studies.[6] The Canadian musician and pioneering scholar of sound first defined the soundscape as the "sonic environment" in general or an "acoustic field of study" in particular in his 1977 book *The Tuning of the World*.[7] "What the soundscape analyst must do first," Schafer prescribed, "is to discover the significant features of the soundscape, those sounds which are important either because of their individuality, their numerousness or their domination."[8] Just as Schafer's coinage draws from the geographical landscape, so landmark yields another term "soundmark" or "figure" to refer to a "community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community."[9] Following

[6] For example, see two works of cultural criticism that draw heavily on literary archives in the articulation of soundscapes in Victorian England and the Black Atlantic respectively: John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Edwin C. Hill, *Black Soundscapes, White Stages: The Meaning of Francophone Sound in the Black Atlantic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).
[7] R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1977), 274–75, 7.
[8] Schafer, 8.
[9] Schafer, 10. He explains further on how these terms—which are just a couple in a broader set of vocabulary that he introduced throughout his scholarship—derive from the field of visual perception: "the figure corresponds to the

Schafer's prescription, this dissertation surveys the soundscape of postcolonial African literature, maps its most aurally striking relief, and pinpoints what I will refer to as *sound figures*. I adopt this term sound figures, instead of simply sounds, to capture the sense that the sonic phenomena in the text are not actually audible originals but traces of sound, that they are self-conscious attempts by writers to mediate or replicate sounds by giving them textual form. Although writers are aware of the imperfect status of this representation, the fact of inaudibility and untranscribability does not detract from the integrity of sound, which I believe has no authenticity to lose in the first place. By identifying sound figures I call attention to the way that sound is represented, materialized, and embodied in literature—three "problems" discussed in turn below.

Representation

As far back as Plato, writing has been understood as a secondary instantiation or displacement of the human voice onto the page.[10] However, that Western understanding was majorly transformed in the 1800s with the invention of audio recording devices. Indeed, the etymology of the word phonography, which combines the Greek *phonē* (sound or voice) with *graphē* (writing), reveals the new nineteenth-century belief that audio recording machines were engaged in sound-writing or voice-writing. The American inventor Thomas Edison's 1877

signal or the soundmark, the ground to the ambient sounds around it—which may often be keynote sounds—and the field to the place where all sounds occur, the soundscape," 152.

[10] In Western metaphysical discourse, exemplified by works such as Walter J. Ong's *The Presence of the Word* (1967), voice is construed as a guarantor of truth and presence or an expression of self and identity while writing, following Plato, is treated with suspicion. This ideal is the primary subject of Jacques Derrida's critique of what he calls logocentrism—or the privileging of the voice—in his influential books from the same period *De la grammatologie* (1967) and *La voix et le phénomène* (1967). In Derrida's broader critique of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl he insists that the idea of voice as self-presence hides the more fundamental fact of difference that constitutes meaning. It is essential to note that Derrida's popular concept of logocentrism does not refer necessarily to the literal speaking voice, just as *écriture* does not always denote literal writing. On rare occasions, however, he employs the word "phonocentrism" which does invoke the favoring of the sound of the voice. Cf. Weheliye's critique of Derrida's focus on the linguistic in his conception of speech/writing in *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 30–6.

phonograph was the first instrument to "reproduce" recorded sound "in the sense of rephenomenalizing them or playing them back."[11] The insistence on reproduction and not imitation in the marketing of such devices challenged the way that we understand "original" sounds and their "copies," as Jonathan Sterne notes in his book *The Audible Past*.[12] These developments in audio technology influenced literature's regard for the fidelity of its own textual representation of sound. In the same way, late twentieth century technological developments and social formations combined to incite the African writers studied in this dissertation to invest in their texts' sonority. In view of this longer history of sound reproduction and the interventions made by the authors themselves, I am hesitant to claim that postcolonial African literature "represents" sound, so I contend instead that it *figures* sound. My project uncovers a range of sound figures, including linguistic sounds like rumors, chants and accents; extra-linguistic sounds like stutters, whispers, and sighs; and even inaudible sounds like resonance, aphasia, and lip-sync. *Figuring* invokes the way that these sounds eschew preservation in the text yet unrelentingly proliferate writing.

My proposal is inspired by Michel Chion's theory of sound in cinema and David Nowell Smith's theory of sound in poetry. For Chion, sounds are rendered (*rendu*) in cinema, meaning that "a sound is recognized by the spectator as true, effective, and apt, not that it reproduces the sound made in reality in the same sort of situation or by the same cause."[13] Rendering is akin to translating or expressing, explains Chion, and it demands a spectator who is "exceedingly tolerant of the fact that a sound does not resemble what would be heard in reality."[14] Chion gives the

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[11] Patrick Feaster, "Phonography," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 142.
[12] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 217–24.
[13] Michel Chion, *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise*, trans. James A. Steintrager (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 158.
[14] Chion, 159.

example of the sound effect of a falling body hitting the ground that renders the violence of the act palpable in a film even if it is obviously unrealistic. The cinematic example is a helpful reminder that sonic resemblance or even approximation is to be valued less than the affective force it produces. Meanwhile, in poetry Nowell Smith suggests that sound and particularly voice "becomes thinkable only being figured."[15] He makes a further distinction between the figuring of voice *as* speechsound, persona, and subjectivity on the one hand, and the figuring of voice *through* poetry's prosodic and rhetorical techniques like alliteration, assonance, glossolalia, paranomasia, and onomatopoeia on the other.[16] Nowell-Smith's formula for figuring in poetry is naturally more lendable to my analysis of prose than the Chion's conception of sound in cinema. I will investigate how sound becomes thinkable as a result of figuring as/through a range of literary strategies. To anticipate one of my own examples, in Chapter Four I will argue that Patrice Nganang's Cameroonian novel figures the auditory experience of a multilingual crowd without reproducing realistic sounds. Nganang calls this the "ambiance" of his French-language text.

An additional point regarding representation that is worth making here is obvious but cannot be overstated: sound is figured through language.[17] Each of the authors studied here does something new and innovative in the English or French language, sometimes pulling directly or indirectly from indigenous languages, composites, or dialects including Kikongo, Lingala, Medumba, Camfranglais, Sheng, Swahili, and Shona. The recruitment of a variety of linguistic vehicles to carry sound testifies to the artistic merit and philosophical depth of these works, which

[15] David Nowell Smith, *On Voice in Poetry: The Work of Animation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7.
[16] Nowell Smith, 3.
[17] For a discussion of how language captures—or more often fails to capture—the full range of vocal sounds, see Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014).

are all born of their local, vernacular settings. So while the verisimilitude of sound is not literature's most striking representative feature, it does powerfully reflect how language responds to the social.

Materiality

The concept of sound figures advanced by this dissertation is distinct from what musicologists understand to be a naturalized concept of sound as a static noun conceived through characteristics like pitch, duration, and timbre of musical notes. Musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim laments that the "figure of sound" has been retained as the dominant framework for classical singing and vocal pedagogies that teach students to imitate ideal sounds internalized in the singer's inner ear, ultimately divorcing abstract sound from the body.[18] Eidsheim instead proposes what she calls an intermaterial vibrational framework, which accounts for the intrinsically human, multisensory, and material dimensions of producing and perceiving vocal sound.[19] My own approach strongly favors Eidsheim's in that my readings do not rely on sound as a purely abstract quality but treat it as part of a synesthetic element of literary language that combines all the human senses to apprehend sonic materiality. The material properties of sound remain the hardest to convey in writing since they encompass those properties measured by music scholars (pitch, duration, and timbre) as well as the less tangible and describable. What Roland Barthes calls "the grain of the voice" (*le grain de la voix*) is one such attempt to describe an unquantifiable property. Barthes describes the grain as "the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue" and it is identifiable in "the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs."[20]

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[18] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing & Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 2, 187n4.
[19] Eidsheim, 161–65.
[20] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne, trans. S. Heath (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 506.

Embodiment

Finally, I intentionally evoke the human body with the word "figure," which denotes the shape of the human body, especially the face. As Steven Connor recalls, "face and voice come to represent the emergence of figuring out (*figura* = face) of form itself."[21] Figuring therefore captures the inscription of sonic materiality onto the body of the text. This project's focus on sound's embodiment in literature helps me to combine the issues of relationality and identity in my analysis. "Sound is intrinsically and unignorably relational," writes Brandon LaBelle; "it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates, and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others; it binds and unhinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving, the mind dreaming, the air oscillating."[22] This property of sound has inspired several continental philosophers in their articulation of humanist theories of relational ontology, as in Jean-Luc Nancy's *Listening* or Adriana Cavarero's *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*.[23] Cavarero regrets that philosophical interest in *logos* has blocked what could be another productive avenue of thought on the "uniqueness" of individual voices and what she calls the voice's "embodied, phonic, and fleshy" dimensions.[24] Attending to the embodiment of voice also requires consideration of how sonic ontologies index identity, notably along the axes of race, gender, and ability. For example, my first chapter on Dambudzo Marechera's speech dysfluency is particularly attuned to the way that the disabled body is sonically construed while my second chapter on

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[21] Connor, *Beyond Words*.
[22] Brandon LaBelle, *Background Music: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2008), ix.
[23] Jean-Luc Nancy, *À L'Écoute* (Paris: Galilée, 2002); Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005). Cf. Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2014).
[24] Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 11.

Yvonne Vera's feminist resounding of history investigates how women's voices are symbolically amplified in nationalist discourse but remain "unheard."

This dissertation pays particularly close attention on the racialization of sound and thus follows the robust extant work of black sound studies. While much of this scholarship deals with African American, Caribbean, and black diasporic cultural production, I address the way similar issues are taken up in specific local, national, or transnational settings in African literature. Theorists have put forward various helpful analytics, for example: sound drives black avant-garde aesthetic experimentalism (Fred Moten and Carter Mathes); sound is decisive in the speculative or science fictional reimagining of the world (Kodwo Eshun and Louis Chude-Sokei); sound is an analog for black political solidarity (Tsitsi Jaji and Shana Redmond); sound as "noise" is a site of contestation over racial legibility (Tricia Rose and Edwin Hill).[25] Collectively, this scholarship rethinks the optics of racial identity and urges closer consideration of how black identities in particular are both self-composed and perceived sonically. Alexander G. Weheliye intervenes on this subject with an argument that modern black subjectivity is constructed through audio technology. More specifically, Weheliye argues that the invention of the phonograph at the end of the nineteenth century radically interrupted the flow between sound and human source and therefore "blackness necessitated redefinition in relation to this new technology, as it could now be imagined phonographically."[26] The new formation of *sonic blackness* underlies the importance

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[25] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Carter Mathes, *Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature After Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998); Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016); Tsitsi Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Shana L Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: NYU Press, 2014); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994); Hill, *Black Soundscapes, White Stages*.

[26] Weheliye, *Phonographies,* 40.

of sonority in signifying race. Since the nineteenth century, then, a "sonic color line" has existed as an ideological and perceptual barrier between race. This term sonic color line was coined recently by Jennifer Lynn Stoever who was inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois's earlier concept of the "color line" that relied on the visual metaphor of the veil separating races in the United States. Stoever submits that the listening ear also discerns racial difference, and by its logic nonverbal sounds are often negatively associated with blackness, femaleness, and animalism.[27] The invisibility of race in the auditory field therefore calls for a careful mode of listening that is attuned to the racialization of sound.

Building on the work of black sound studies, on the one hand, I am mindful that the Kenyan, Congolese, Cameroonian and Zimbabwean contexts I study will require tailored articulation of local histories of ethnic, linguistic, national, religious, and regional differences. On the other hand, the authors I study are acutely aware of the global currency of *sonic blackness* in diasporic songs, books, and other cultural products that "return" to Africa for circulation, as well as the way their own identities are presented to an international readership through the publishing industry. The concentration on embodiment along with representation and materiality in my term *sound figures* therefore follows in stride with local scholarship attuned to global theories to "figure out" the sound of postcolonial African literature.

Theorizing African Literature: From Orality to Sonority

[27] Stoever explains in further detail: "The listening ear drives the sonic color line; it is a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line's norms. Through the listening ear's surveillance, discipline, and interpretation, certain associations between race and sound come to seem normal, natural, and 'right.'" Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 13, 7–8.

The following discussion on the theories of sound, literature, race, and postcolonialism that I engage with in this dissertation is not conceived as a separate prologue to the later chapters in which abstract theories are then "applied" to literature.[28] To reiterate my earlier point, the African literary texts themselves creatively theorize sound's representational, material, and embodied properties in writing, so I position the authors of my primary texts in dialogue with scholars and theorists. My aim here is to familiarize the reader with the relevant scholarly debates and to explain my contribution to them. I maintain that African literary texts are uniquely disposed to sonic readings because of their recurrent featuring of oral tropes and their challenging of the authenticity of sounded language and identity.

Books in sound studies often begin by bemoaning the fact that the auditory field has been "overlooked" in favor of the visual field. Jonathan Sterne criticizes what he dubs "audio-visual litanies" that call attention to the imbalance and dialectically posit equivalents across the two fields, because such theoretical sketches are not particularly generative and by now predictable.[29] It would appear that African literary criticism is exempt from such a tendency since it has consistently grappled with the status of the oral in the written, however, my goal is to challenge that assumption further by disentangling orality, textuality and sonority. Before addressing the latter phenomenon, I will consider how orality and textuality have been conceived in the field of African literary studies, focusing on the influential critiques of Eileen Julien, Abiola Irele, and Ato Quayson.

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[28] In this respect, I am inspired by Olakunle George, *Relocating Agency: Modernity and African Letters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

[29] Sterne saves us some time by rehearsing a typical chart of a dozen points such as: "hearing is spherical, vision is directional; hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective; sounds come to us, but vision travels to its object" and so on. Cf. Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 15.

Orality has anything but disappeared in the era of capitalist globalization, notes Liz Gunner. It has "adapted itself in its many different forms to become a vehicle for the expression of the fears and hopes of new generations of Africans" and become "dialogic" with print and digital media, she notes.[30] Orality here encompasses a range of spoken word practices including folktales, proverbs, riddles, epics, and praise songs. Often interchangeable with "orature" which refers more specifically to codified genres, orality can also be read under the broad umbrella of "texts" in African popular culture, as Karin Barber has urged in order to disintegrate the sharp boundaries of literariness.[31] It is by now a well-established paradigm that written literature is continuous with orality in Africa, and that the novel in particular was influenced by oral forms in the 1950s and 1960s.[32] However, criticism has had to overcome a stark oppositionality between orality and textuality which, as Irele explains in his book *The African Imagination,* can be accounted for by the influence of post-structuralist linguistic approaches to literature. Irele points out that earlier in the twentieth century, African thought leaned more to the notion of "complimentarity" of the oral and the written—a notion he unreservedly espouses. Irele suggests that there is "a continuity between the oral tradition and modern African imaginative expression," likening the "principle of

[30] Gunner writes that: "Orality needs to be seen in the African context as the means by which societies of varying complexity regulated themselves, organized their present and their pasts, made formal spaces for philosophical reflections, pronounced on power, questioned and in some cases contested power, and generally paid homage to "the word," language, as the means by which humanity was made and constantly refashioned. Orality was the means by which Africa made its existence, its history long before the colonial and imperial presence of the west manifested itself. In this sense, orality needs to be seen not simply as 'the absence of literacy' but as something self-constitutive, *sui generis*." Liz Gunner, "Africa and Orality," in *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, ed. Abiola Gikandi Irele and Simon Gikandi (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.
[31] Karin Barber and Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, eds., *Discourse and Its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham: Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1989).
[32] See chapter three "Orality and the Novels of the First Generations" in Pietro Deandrea, *Fertile Crossings: Metamorphoses of Genre in Anglophone West African Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002).

reciprocity" between African oral tradition and modern African literature to that between history and fiction.[33]

Quayson adopts a similar perspective in his book *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* where he proposes reading the "interdiscursivity" of literature and orality.[34] Apprehending the thorny relationship in this way guides us to a better consideration of historical contingency too. According to Quayson, the interdiscursivity of orality and textuality, or "filiation" as he later calls it, positively redeems the dominance of Europhone African writing in the global publishing industry and academic criticism since it remains "a useful way of making indigenous cultures gain access to a wider audience."[35] This observation highlights another factor explaining the retention of orality as a major theme for authors and critics alike: orality is the site on which postcolonial language politics plays out. However, my goal is to show how reading for the sonic keeps this critical imperative close.

Whether we approach orality as oppositional, interdiscursive or complimentary to textuality (read here as a shorthand for written literature), it remains important to understand the symbolic and ideological functions of the oral in twentieth-century Africa.[36] In *African Novels and the Question of Orality,* Julien persuasively critiqued orality's assigned function as a symbol of

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[33] Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa & the Black Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 101, 102.

[34] Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality & History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka & Ben Okri* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 16. Quayson's *interdiscursivity* understands a literary text as a "prismatic field of interaction between cultural discourses and literary ones," eschewing any notion of African literature as "a mere precipitate of culture" (16). It also promises greater concern with historical contingency.

[35] Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, 158.

[36] Orality has also been considered highly significant in black literatures elsewhere. For example, Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his influential study of African American literature coined the term "speakerly text" which he defined as a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition, designed "to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the illusion of oral narration.'" *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 181.

precolonial, pure and authentic Africanness, or what she calls the "thinking that an African essence can be found in, and is indeed bound to, orality."[37] Julien approaches the essentialist myth of Africa as the oral continent through readings of Mohamadou Kane, Mbwil a Mpang Ngal, and Léopold Sédar Senghor and she finds that the *Négritude* movement is largely responsible for cultivating the fervent belief in orality as "a sign for original Africa."[38] In the search for distinctive cultural origins to define African aesthetics, *Négritude* elevated orality and counterintuitively bolstered European prejudice against the literary heritage of Africa. Julien encourages readers to view speaking and writing as shared practices of both continents. This view is upheld by the Cameroonian author Patrice Nganang, whose work is examined in Chapter Three, when he describes orality as "un procédé clairement européen, pratiqué par plusieurs courants littéraires" (an evidently European process, practiced across several literary movements).[39] Nganang further insists that "un texte s'entend. Il s'agit d'un patrimoine littéraire, pas d'un patrimoine spécifiquement africain" (one hears a text. It's about literary heritage, not a specifically African heritage).[40] Since the publication of Julien's 1992 monograph, critics and authors alike have continued eschew ideas of orality as a natural or intrinsic quality to Africa and its people, repurposing the oral for contemporary, urban, or global signification too.

The critical interest in African orality is concomitant with the troping of vocality in postcolonial through. Indeed, vocal enunciation has occupied a central role in postcolonial studies

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[37] Eileen Julien, *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 10.
[38] Julien, 21. Julien further states that "it is no coincidence that a particular reverence for the 'oral character' of Africa should mark the writings of the *Négritude* writers and other pan-Africanists who have looked to cultural origins as a way of differentiating and shoring up the identity of Africa vis-à-vis Europe. This adherence to a view of orality as distinctively African compliments the tenets of *Négritude"* (18).
[39] Patrice Nganang, "L'écrivain à l'école de la rue : entretien avec Taina Tervonen," *Africultures* 37 (March 2001), http://africultures.com/lecrivain-a-lecole-de-la-rue-2009/.
[40] Ibid.

since at least the 1988 publication of "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational essay that cautioned against ventriloquizing the other.[41] While Jacques Derrida and Laurent Dubreuil have explored the close connection between coloniality and language, and the predicament of Europe's "others" attempting to *prendre la parole* or speak out in Europhone languages, Caribbean theorists such as Édouard Glissant and Kamau Brathwaite have argued keenly for the politically subversive and community-affirming power of Creole voicing.[42] As Christopher Miller summarizes, "the voice remains our central metaphor for political agency and power."[43] Efforts by contemporary African writers to reclaim their voices is largely a response to the historical processes of literal and symbolic silencing of African subjects. Considering even briefly European-authored literary texts that dramatize colonial encounters, it is plain to see how racist denigration was rationalized by biased auditory perception. William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* (1610) is an iconic example in which the native islander Caliban memorably remarks on the acquisition of his master's language: "…you taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is I know how to curse."[44] Three centuries later, Marlow, the narrator of Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), on his journey up the Congo River in search of Kurtz, develops an obsession with the mysterious rogue agent's exceptional eloquence ("The man presented himself as a voice"), all the while describing the African continent's menacing and inscrutable soundscape,

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[41] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

[42] Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre : ou la prothese d'origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996); Laurent Dubreuil, *L' empire du langage: colonies et francophonie* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2008); Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon, 1984); Édouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

[43] Christopher L. Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 248.

[44] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.366–8. Cf. Bill Ashcroft's book inspired by the figure of Caliban and his inheritors across the postcolonial world. Bill Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice: The Transformation of English in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London, UK: Routledge, 2009).

filled with the native inhabitants' "savage discords," excessive shrieking," "wails," "yells," cries," "howls," "weird incantations," "strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language."[45] Black cultural producers continue to be heard in disturbingly familiar terms. According to Edwin C. Hill, since the seventeenth century, black artists on all sides of the Atlantic were recognized by their disorderly sounds or *le tumulte noir*.[46]

Amidst the cacophony perceived from overseas, Africa's rich linguistic diversity has been the source of a well-rehearsed "language debate" in postcolonial literary criticism since at least the 1960s and persists as a core theme here.[47] The most fervent exponents in the debate of that era were the Nigerian Chinua Achebe, on the one hand, who was strongly committed to the idea that the English language was "able to carry the weight of [his] African experience" and, on the other, the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o who memorably bade farewell to writing in the English language in favor of his native Gĩkũyũ.[48] Given the fractious coexistence of indigenous and ex-colonial languages in Africa, one might expect the boundary between Anglophone and Francophone literatures to be relatively unremarkable, an amicable zone of reciprocity. A 2010 interview with two prominent authors, the Congolese Alain Mabanckou and the Kenyan Binyavanga Wainaina,

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[45] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Paul B. Armstrong, 5th ed. (1899; New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2016), 47, 39, 40, 46, 46, 43, 45, 65, 66.
For more on the suppression of native women's voices with reference to Shakespeare and Conrad, see Abena P.A. Busia, "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female," *Cultural Critique* 14 (Winter 1989): 81–104.

[46] Hill, *Black Soundscapes, White Stages*.

[47] For a synthetic account of the debates surrounding the 'language question' in twentieth-century African literature, see Mukoma wa Ngugi. *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018)

[48] Chinua Achebe, "English and the African Writer," in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1965; London: Heinemann, 1975); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986). Other provocative interventions include Obiajunwa Wali, "The Dead End of African Literature," *Transition*, no. 75/76 (1997 [1963]): 330–35; Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983).

indicates that the reality of contemporary interlingual exchange is in fact quite fraught. Wainaina blames the likes of the French Ministry of Culture and the vested interests of major Western funders for the ghettoization of literary culture on the continent. He laments that, "divisive politics do not serve *Françafrique*—France's official (and often clandestine) policies toward certain African governments. The net result is simple: no Ivorian Francophone writer is read across the border in Anglophone Ghana, for instance."[49] For both writers, there is a nostalgia for the collaborative networks of previous generations, as well as a desire that I spotlight in my research to articulate and improve cross-linguistic literatures *within* Africa. I am even less inclined to describe the situation today as two 'camps' riven by any one philosophical disagreement, stylistic preference or commercial competition. It would also be dangerous, as critic Abiola Irele has warned, to insist rather simplistically on aesthetic variation between the two literatures based on differences between forms of colonial rule by the French and British Empires.[50]

While *Négritude* poets sought to "sound African" with oral tropes, writers who have adopted French continue to have their authenticity contested on multiple accounts. For example, returning to Djebar briefly, the Algerian writer argues that the label *francophone* has placed her in a "no-man's land," "on the margins," in oscillation between languages, between the North and the South, between body and voice, between the solitary self and a collective history.[51] In the late 1990s Djebar proposed the term *francographie* in place of *francophonie*, thereby shifting the emphasis from voice (*phone*) to writing (*graphe*). This notion of *francographie* captures the interior struggle with multiple languages—colloquial Arabic, Berber, the body—that necessarily

[49] Binyavanga Wainaina, Interview with Alain Mabanckou, *BOMB*, no. 112 (2010): 31.
[50] Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1981).
[51] Assia Djebar, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent . . . en marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 29–30.

precedes and informs her writing in French. On the other hand, critic Alison Rice offers an alternative English orthography *Francophony* in order to draw attention first to the perceived "phony" or false status of certain writers interloping in the French language and, second to the proximate word "cacophony."[52] In a similar vein, Rey Chow revisits the Achebe–Ngugi language debate in her book *Not like a Native Speaker* and proposes her own term *xenophone*, or "the foreign-sounding speech/tone." Chow argues for "a revision of language practices in postcoloniality that can encompass quotidian and seemingly simple but in fact ideologically loaded phenomena such as accents and intonations."[53] I follow both Chow and Rice and their call to attend to the questions around production and intonation of the voice as I examine the narrative voices in my corpus. I extend this line of inquiry by asking how the sound of the voice—including narrative point of view and vocality—shares the same representational challenge.

Although this project does not recruit an individual theoretical luminary for guidance, Mikhail Bakhtin—who provided the epigraph to the introduction—is often lurking in the background. Despite warning from Caryl Emerson and G. S. Morson of flat paraphrasing and mechanical application of the Russian formalist critic's vocabulary, Bakhtinian terms have remained popular in African literary studies and have influenced many studies of voice in the novel elsewhere.[54] My own engagement with his concepts is most explicit in the discussion of the

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[52] Rice further explains: "Writers from the Maghreb are not always concerned with creating harmony, either in theme or form. In fact, recent writing has been increasingly marked by disonnance, by innovation that departs from established spellings, syntax, and treatment of the part, the personal, and the political. While "cacophony" often carries negative connotations, writing that may initially impress readers as discordant and arrhythmic can strike unique chords if we approach the text in new ways, learning to "read by ear," the only appropriate manner to come to Cixous's writing, in Khatibi's analysis." Rice, *Time Signatures*, 7, 27.

[53] Rey Chow, *Not like a Native Speaker: On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), 23.

[54] Emerson, Caryl and G. S. Morson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990. See Rita Barnard's defense of Bakhtinian concepts in African contexts in her essay, "On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*." *Novel* 37, no. 3 (2004): 283–4.

grotesque in Chapter One and polyphony in Chapters Three and Four, but my general theoretical thrust is a challenge to the purely narratological reading of voice and a case for alternative modes of voicing.

This dissertation project emerges from the marriage of the criticism on African orality/textuality discussed above with sound studies, which effectively recalibrates the significance of sonority of texts. The focus on orality in literary studies has required us to think principally if not solely on the human voice's legibility, without accounting for the moments of distinct and intentional vocal illegibility. Focusing on sound here as I do here provides a way of understanding extralinguistic utterances (and silences) that appear asemantic but are in embedded with multiple meanings. While sound studies grew out of Eurocentric media studies and has generally focused on Western auditory culture, it has more recently turned to the Global South, as indicated by edited volumes like Ronald Michael Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan's *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique* (2016) and Gavin Steingo and Jim Sykes's *Remapping Sound Studies* (2019).[55] In the last decade, there have been a number of studies that successfully bring the insights of sound studies to bear on twentieth and twenty-first century literature as I seek to do in this dissertation. For example, Tyler Whitney has examined the idea of "sonic warfare" in modern German literature; Marília Librandi has written about the "aural novel" in Brazil; Julie Beth Napolin relays the impact of acoustics on modernist form in Europe and the United States; and Carter Mathes makes a case for what he calls the "acoustics of unfreedom" on experimental

[55] Previous publications such as the Oxford *Handbook of Sound Studies* (2011) or Routledge's four-part *Sound Studies* (2013) included very little material from outside Europe or North America. Cf. Gustavus Stadler, "On Whiteness and Sound Studies." *Sounding Out!* July 6, 2015. Blog. https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/07/06/on-whiteness-and-sound-studies/

African American literature.[56] In African contexts, scholars have pointed to the influence certain musical genres have had on written form and style. For example, Pim Higginson and Michael Titlestad have respectively shown how diasporic jazz influenced Francophone African and South African literature.[57] Meanwhile, Imani Sanga and Julie Anne Huntington have explored the importance of indigenous musical figures such as drumming.[58]

Monographs like Tsitsi Jaji's *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (2014) and Jennifer Solheim's *The Performance of Listening in Postcolonial Francophone Culture* (2017) afford a more expansive perspective on sound in postcolonial literature, both covering a range of cultural forms but ultimately showing how sonic motifs have been used by postcolonial artists to build solidarity and empathy.[59] While Solheim advances listening as a critical practice and a performance to be studied might help understand cultural texts by Francophone migrants, Jaji theorizes a more dynamic transnational black solidarity across modernist media, taking into account "intentional collaboration and collective improvisation, but also noise and static, reverberation and echo, feedback and interference."[60] This scholarship has helped to highlight how postcolonial literature is shaped by the politics of language through interlocking ideas about migration, otherness, speech production and language acquisition that all

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[56] Tyler Whitney, *Eardrums: Literary Modernism as Sonic Warfare* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019); Marília Librandi, *Writing by Ear: Clarice Lispector and the Aural Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Julie Beth Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance: Modernist Acoustics and Narrative Form* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020); Mathes, *Imagine the Sound*.

[57] Pim Higginson, *Scoring Race: Jazz, Fiction, and Francophone Africa*, African Articulations (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2017); Michael Titlestad, *Making the Changes: Jazz in South African Literature and Reportage* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2004).

[58] Imani Sanga, "Sonic Figures of Heroism and the 1891 Hehe–German War in Mulokozi's Novel *Ngome Ya Mianzi*," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 55, no. 5 (2019): 698–709; Julie Anne Huntington, *Sounding Off: Rhythm, Music, and Identity in West African and Caribbean Francophone Novels* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009).

[59] Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*; Jennifer Solheim, *The Performance of Listening in Postcolonial Francophone Culture* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

[60] Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 23.

come into focus in my dissertation. I specifically build on Jaji's and Solheim's transnational analytic models in order to explore how sound figures imagine cartographies between and outside the nation, command abstract transnational lines of thought.

Outlining the Chapters

This dissertation assembles a repertoire of grotesque, historical, plural, and ordinary sound figures in African writing in English and French published between the late 1970s and the present. The texts in my corpus are sometimes emblematic of broader trends in African literature, while at other times texts have been selected because they explicitly respond to or depart from earlier African literary history and thus represent a tropic or stylistic change. Most often, I have selected these texts because they exemplify how literature thinks about and through sound. The sonic imagination of these authors reveals ideas present in Africa about racialized voice practices, classed listening practices, and gendered audio preservation practices. My authors repeatedly invoke sound and silence to describe the innovation of their writing; they repeatedly invoke the mouth and the voice to assert the socio-political interventions of their texts. Take, for instance, Yvonne Vera's axiom that history is carried "under the tongue"[61] or Sony Labou Tansi's speculation that "mon écriture vient tout simplement […] de la grande honte que j'ai de mâcher les mots" (my writing quite simply comes from a shameful habit of mincing [chewing] my words).[62] Yet Vera and Sony Labou Tansi, like the other authors examined closely, have both opted for a seemingly silent medium. Poetry is conventionally understood as a privileged form for

[61] Yvonne Vera, *Without a Name; and, Under the Tongue* (1996; New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002).
[62] Sony Labou Tansi, "Sony Labou Tansi : L'homme qui dit tous les hommes," interview by Edouard Maunick, *Demain l'Afrique*, November 19, 1979, 82.

reading or listening to sound, often because verse is intended to be read aloud or performed, and there has been a great deal of scholarship on the sound of poetry.[63] While I have not approached the task of amplifying sound's role in fiction as a means of systematically elucidating a single genre or literary mode, all the texts I have included reflect my sense that prose is neglected ground ready for exploring sonority.

The comparative dimension of interpreting texts beyond their immediate national contexts—and specifically between the Anglophone and Francophone—is imperative. While the sonic tropes studied in this dissertation vary depending on their historical contexts, I follow Jaji in arguing that sonority has an abiding capacity for overcoming a strictly ethnic or national framework and creating a more dynamic transnational imaginary. For example, while the *benga* music discussed in Chapter Four appears specifically Luo, contextualizing the genre reveals the cosmopolitan development necessary to understand it as an African sound figure. Likewise, in Chapter Two when discussing the literary echoes of the Zimbabwean heroine Mbuya Nehanda, I propose a reading outside of the ethno-nationalist frame. Therefore, while some case studies appear to be bound to a particular location or paradigm, I expect that the broader juxtapositional effect will permit a holistic view.

By focusing on an interlingual literary history, my research insists on situating contemporary African authors in a broad, transnational context, and seeks to understand how current writing practices depart from those of previous generations. It is worthwhile explaining,

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[63] Charles Bernstein, ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Marjorie Perloff and Craig Douglas Dworkin, eds., *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Additionally, I note that several earlier studies of sound in prose have focused on a depoliticized stylistic analysis. Cf. Adam Piette, *Remembering and the Sound of Words: Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, Beckett* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990)

then, how I conceive of bracketing the time period under consideration. The significant shift we have witnessed in the field of postcolonial African literature since the 1980s makes this a particularly compelling period to study. With an increase in the number of English-French translations in recent decades,[64] the intensification of intertextuality and artistic dialogue on the continent,[65] and most recently the rise of the Internet connectivity,[66] African authors have gained more access to novels, poetry, and short stories from other parts of the continent than ever before. And this is to say little of the transformation in material conditions of living in Africa brought on by globalization, ongoing economic inequalities, and the tumult of regime changes. In this dissertation, then, I join a number of scholars seeking to make sense of these convergences and asymmetries, in addition to understanding what is "new" about "new African writing." Critics such as Brenda Cooper or Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton who have commented on the Nigerian context specifically, have described new writers in generational terms.[67] Other concerned critics like Dobrota Pucherová, Akin Adesokan, and Ogaga Okuyade have drawn attention to the influential role that publishers and literary awards such as the Caine Prize for African Writing have in determining a text's value and its ability to circulate in the world.[68] Writers like Wainaina and

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[64] Kathryn Batchelor and Claire Bisdorff, eds.. *Intimate Enemies: Translation in Francophone Contexts* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); Claire Ducournau, "Instituting African Literatures? The Case of Writers from Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa." In Institut*ions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, edited by Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen, 160–73 (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[65] Evan Mwangi, *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

[66] Stephanie Bosch Santana, "From Nation to Network: Blog and Facebook Fiction from Southern Africa." *Research in African Literatures* 49, no. 1 (2018): 187–208.

[67] Brenda Cooper, *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture & Language* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2008); Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, "Introduction: Everything Good Is Raining: Provisional Notes on the Nigerian Novel of the Third Generation." *Research in African Literatures* 39, no. 2 (2008): vii-xii.

[68] Dobrota Pucherová, "'A Continent Learns to Tell Its Story at Last': Notes on the Caine Prize," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 1 (2012): 13–25; Akin Adesokan, "New African Writing and the Question of

Helon Habila have also spoken out about the constraints of catering to the desires of a Western readership.[69] Recently, Madhu Krishnan has encouraged "postnational" approaches to contemporary literature while Tejumola Olaniyan, for his part, has called for a turn toward the "postglobal."[70] With these critical perspectives in mind, I propose a corpus of primary texts published between 1978 and as recent as 2013 that can be understood as *new* equally because of their aesthetic innovation and their response to present socio-political realities. Yet, I decisively retain the term "postcolonial" in an effort to underscore the longer colonial histories that continue to resonate in writing even when writers are not actively instrumentalizing sonority against it.

This dissertation draws heavily on insights from interdisciplinary fields, including: the ethical motivation of postcolonial studies, the regional expertise of African studies, the theoretical insight of the philosophy of language, and the critical apparatus of sound studies; all these provide me with the conceptual and contextual knowledge as well as the interpretive tools needed for a thoroughgoing analysis of sound in African literature. Fundamentally, this project is a work of literary criticism: it does not seek to adjudicate nor theorize the nature of sounds "out there" in the "real world" since the primary ambit is the interpretation of sound's representation, materialization, and embodiment in literature. In the interpretive process, I focus on the techniques developed for figuring sound, the meanings embedded therein, the literary trends over time

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Audience," *Research in African Literatures* 43, no. 3 (2012): 1–20; Ogaga Okuyade, "Continuity and Renewal in the Endless Tales of a Continent: New Voices in the African Novel." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 44, no. 1 (2013): 1–24.

[69] Helon Habila, review of *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo, *The Guardian*, June 20, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/20/need-new-names-bulawayo-review; Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write About Africa," *Granta* 92 "The View From Africa" (2006): 91–6.

[70] Madhu Krishnan, "Introduction: Interrogating the Postnation in African Literary Writing: Localities and Globalities." *Research in African Literatures* 49, no. 1 (2018): vii–xv; Tejumola Olaniyan, "African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocations on Field Commonsense." *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (2016): 387–96.

(roughly the last forty years) and space (sub-Saharan Africa). The order of approach is conveniently chronological, however, my argument depends on the historical accumulation of sound figures over time. Finally now, I sketch out summaries of my four chapters.

My first chapter compares the grotesque sound figures in experimental fiction by the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera and the Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi from the 1970s and 1980s, arguing that their use of screams, stutters, and other extralinguistic vocalizations convey the violence of (post)coloniality. I revise theories of the grotesque by Bakhtin and Mbembe and propose a new conception of the sonic grotesque as the excessive, hyperbolic figuring of sounds that simultaneously prizes expressive immediacy and parodies the racist notion of black vocal illegibility. While Marechera employs grotesque sound figures to illustrate how the colonial regime of speech in Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) determines the production and perception of his voice in his autobiographical book of short fiction *The House of Hunger* (1978), Sony Labou Tansi's dictator novels *La vie et demie (*1979), *L'Étax honteux* (1981) and *Les septs solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* (1985) critique the afterlife of that same regime in the repressive postcolonial politics of voice in Congo-Brazzaville. I respond to existing criticism of Marechera that concentrates on the prominence of literary allusion and intertextuality in *The House of Hunger* by offering a reading of the text alongside neglected biographical detail and the author's own comments on his habit of stuttering. Drawing on disability studies, I consider how Marechera's speech dysfluency is grotesquely figured through the autobiographical protagonist's struggle with aphasia, logorrhea, and other patterns of broken speech. Marechera's speech is not inherently grotesque, but he deliberately configures the proximity of voice to violence to produce what he calls "limitless black resonance." This chapter juxtaposes Marechera with Sony Labou Tansi whose three dictator novels rely on lexical innovation to animate the grotesque. I provide historical context from Congo-

Brazzaville where the writing of these novels coincides with state militarization and development of new *rumba* music performance styles. My exploration of the grotesque is aided by Sony Labou Tansi's own commentary on literature which provides me with the concept of sonorous tropicality, the chief thematic in the author's work that self-consciously embraces so-called primitive or ugly aesthetic forms to accentuate their grotesque status.

Chapter Two focuses on the Zimbabwean-born author Yvonne Vera's use of "echoes" to figure the sounds of the past in her historical fiction. The analysis in this chapter responds to criticism that has focused on the issue of speech and silence in Vera's fiction by proposing a new interpretation of her corpus based on historical acoustemology. The concept of historical acoustemology, borrowed from Steven Feld's work in sound studies, promotes consideration of how sounds of the past produce knowledge, with a focus on how sounds were perceived differently according to their historical situation. Approached in this way, I maintain that Vera's writing does not seek to preserve nor faithfully reproduce sounds that have been lost to history. My contention is that these past sounds are written into the body of the text as echoes. In other words, Vera's echoes are not to be understood as copies, but as original sounds mediated by history and embodied in writing.

The chapter examines two of Vera's English-language novels written in the 1990s and set retrospectively in colonial Zimbabwe: her first novel *Nehanda* (1993) about the role of the nineteenth-century spirit medium Mbuya Nehanda in the anticolonial rebellion of 1896-7 and her fourth novel *Butterfly Burning* (1998) about the lives of black urban migrants in the city of Bulawayo's Makokoba township between 1946-8. My close reading of the two texts traces the merging of historical sound and embodied memory in Vera's writing, referring to these literary techniques as echoes. In *Nehanda*, such techniques can be found in the novel's presentation of the

practice of ancestral spirit possession as a model of listening to and decoding the meaning of past sounds. The novel also relies heavily on ecological imagery to suggest the cultural value of echoes. One evocative example of such imagery discussed in the chapter is the juxtaposition of the heroine's mystical listening with the practice of echolocation used by bats. Considering the longstanding cultural tradition of representing Mbuya Nehanda as a national icon in Zimbabwe, my analysis contrasts Vera's feminist acoustic representation with the dominant masculinist visual tropes she is usually associated with. Meanwhile, I distinguish a different but related set of techniques in *Butterfly Burning*, where the ecological imagery of the earlier novel is replaced with a mechanical lexicon more appropriate for the echoes of the 1940s township space. For instance, trains, with their blowing whistles and grinding engines, function both as vehicles of memory for characters living in the township and as auditory reminders of that historical moment for readers. The production and reception of township music is another crucial conduit for remembering the past in *Butterfly Burning*. By providing contextualization of the musical genre *kwela*, I point to the novel's emphasis on memorialization through sound and its associated movements. Ultimately, through the practice of historical acoustemology, Vera presents her characters as privileged historical listeners and invites her readers to appreciate the mnemonic function of echoes.

Chapters Three and Four share the same goal of theorizing a poetics of the crowd. By examining figurations of the auditory experience of crowds written by one Anglophone East African writer and one Francophone West African writer, I identify literary techniques for representing vocal plurality and I highlight their shared use of polyphonic and multilingual techniques in particular. In a departure from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony as the inclusion of multiple semantic perspectives, the final two chapters contribute an alternative model for the interpretation of how contemporary African authors vocalize the multitude.

Chapter Three examines Patrice Nganang's novel *Temps de chien* (2001) in which rumor is employed as a sound figure to convey the text's vocal plurality. Critics have not fully accounted for African novelists' use of rumor—or *radio-trottoir* (sidewalk radio) as it popularly known in many parts of French-speaking Africa. This chapter situates Nganang's novel in the context of this literary tradition that extends at least to the 1980s, while also highlighting how the Cameroonian text reinvents it with a sonic lexicon. I engage with interdisciplinary theories of rumor from anthropology and sociology and, in a departure from predominant conceptions of rumor in Africa as a perpetuation of traditional oral genres, I conceive of rumor as an urban auditory technology with rich social signification. Rumor is written into the text with a variety of literary devices. For example, rumor is personified as a character in the bar where most of the novel's action takes place; rumor also metonymically represents the Cameroonian crowd by referring to its collective voices. My contention is that in both of these examples, and in the others studied in the chapter, rumor conveys the sound of multiple voices. I offer some background on the postcolonial national political cadre of Cameroon—especially the political restriction on media and the press between 1990-2 in which time the novel is set—in order to understand the author's exigency for making the novel multi-voiced. Rendering the crowd audible is key for Nganang's articulation of liberal democratic values of free speech.

Chapter Four investigatew Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina's use of ordinary sound figures to advance a poetics of the crowd in his memoir *One Day I Will Write About This Place* (2011). I extend the previous chapter's articulation of multilingualism and polyphony as crucial properties, but I also introduce the critical perspective of cultural and political theories of crowds. My close readings of pivotal crowd scenes in the text seek to understand how the author employs ordinary sound figures to locate his autobiographical self. Wainaina's neologism *kimay* epitomizes

the ordinary sound figure. *Kimay* is a word invented in juvenile whimsy to denote sonic plurality as perceived by the individual, encompassing the linguistic (local languages and foreign accents), the extra-linguistic (sighs and nasal sounds), and other quotidian orality (the crunch of biscuits). Additionally, I point to the significant role music plays in Wainaina's memoir in signaling feelings of familial and national belonging, and ultimately the individual's place in the crowd. Through my interrogation of the author's identification with sound in the text, I show how his everyday auditory practices are transposed onto social/musical categories like the "traditional" (Kenyan *benga* albums), the "national" (Brenda Fassie's Afropop and official national anthems), or "global" (Boney M.'s diasporic disco). Atop the autobiographical structure of Wainaina's memoir (a genre that typically prizes individuality) I identify, counterintuitively, a text that resounds the crowd.

CHAPTER 1

Grotesque Sonority in Experimental Fiction by Dambudzo Marechera and Sony Labou Tansi

Introduction

In the *Avertissement* or "Notice" prefacing his 1985 novel *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez*, Sony Labou Tansi declares that his writing will not stick to the page but scream out in defiance of literary norms. "Mon écriture sera plutôt criée qu'écrite simplement," the Congolese author explains, "ma vie elle-même sera plutôt râlée, beuglée, bougée, que vécue simplement" (My writing will be screamed instead of simply written down. My own life will be groaned, bellowed, and stirred up instead of simply lived).[71] Sony Labou Tansi often used the paratextual space of the *avertissement* to contextualize the plot of his novel, to shield himself from state censors, and to state briefly and lightheartedly his belief in literature's function. For this his fourth novel, he advises the reader about the performative sonority of his visceral prose that he achieves with an abundance of wordplay, as suggested by the homophony of the French verbs *crier* and *écrire*. Furthermore, the choice of words *criée, râlée, beuglée* points to an important feature of Sony Labou Tansi's writing: his use of grotesque vocalization. In this chapter, I examine how Sony Labou Tansi employs grotesque sound figures in his writing as a reprisal of historical violent trauma, as a challenge to fetishization of sonic expressive immediacy and, crucially, as a satirical response to Western colonial misconceptions of the noisy African continent. I read Sony Labou Tansi, alongside the

[71] Sony Labou Tansi, *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), n.p. Hereafter abbreviated as SS and cited parenthetically in the text. My translation. I have also consulted the English translation by Clive Wake, *The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995).

Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera whose writing displays a similar set of figures. While Marechera employs grotesque sound figures to illustrate how coloniality determines the production and perception of his speaking voice in his autobiographical book of short fiction *The House of Hunger* (1978),[72] Sony Labou Tansi's dictator novels *La vie et demie (*1979), *L'Etax honteux* (1981) and *Lorsa Lopez* (1985) parody the repressive politics of speech in the postcolonial era. [73] Since the late 1970s when both authors began writing, they have both invoked grotesque sonority—and screaming in particular—to experiment with the phonic limitations of textuality and to challenge aesthetic limitations of literature.

Marechera elicits these very themes in a 1986 lecture given to the Zimbabwe-German Society in Harare. He reflected on his experience of European literature as an African writer, carefully rejecting categorical identity "pigeon-holing" and celebrating the "healthy interchange of technique and themes" between a wide range of authors including Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Marechera goes on to make an intriguing observation about the ties between these modernist writers.

> Though the heat may differ in temperature, the heat is everywhere the same. The degree of pain may differ but the torturer's technique is the same. We are not at the beginning, we are not at the end—we are at the mid-point of the scream, the eye of the storm. That, for me, is the unifying factor in the scenario of contemporary literature in Europe and in Africa.[74]

Mixing sonic and meteorological imagery, Marechera suggests that African writers are closely connected to their European counterparts, united by the same enigmatic "torturer's technique" and

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[72] Dambudzo Marechera, *The House of Hunger*, African Writers Series 207 (1978; London: Heinemann, 1993).
[73] Sony Labou Tansi, *La vie et demie* (Paris: Seuil, 1979). Translated as *Life and a Half* by Alison Dundy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *VD*. Sony Labou Tansi, *L'Etat honteux* (Paris: Seuil, 1981). Translated as *The Shameful State* by Dominic Thomas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *EH*.
[74] Dambudzo Marechera, "The African Writer's Experience of European Literature," *Zambezia: The Journal of the University of Zimbabwe* 14, no. 2 (1987): 100.

resonating the same "scream." Marechera chooses not to align himself—and by extension African literature—with a concept of the literary as rational and meaningful; he instead seeks to debase literature's pretentions of linguistic order and civility. Like Sony Labou Tansi in his *Lorsa Lopez* preface published one year prior, Marechera reduces African literature to an apparently incoherent scream but, importantly, he also reduces European literature to that same phonic matter. This claim raises a set of questions that the present chapter will address. What are the scream's political connotations and literary effects? Is it necessarily grotesque? Recalling the pioneering scholar of sound Schafer's claim in 1977 (just one year before Marechera's first publication and two before Sony Labou Tansi's) that "the world soundscape has reached an apex of vulgarity in our time," I might also add the question: why do these two African writers embrace the scream in this precise historical moment?[75] Whereas many early European modernists understood the scream as an immediate and unfiltered outward-expression of pure inner-feeling, the late African modernists Marechera and Sony Labou Tansi consciously employ the scream as a performative artifice of interiority. To be sure, the scream is just one of the grotesque sound figures that these two authors adopt in a mode of heightened self-awareness: they knowingly render its "ugliness" in order to contest sonic measures of beauty.

My contention is that grotesque sound figures establish the literal and conceptual proximity of voice to violence, especially colonial violence against the body which very often determines the conditions of possibility of vocalization. These figures further politicize the sayable by casting doubt on the governability of language in both its phonic and graphic iterations. This chapter expands upon two influential theories of the grotesque by Mikhail Bakhtin and Achille Mbembe.

[75] Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, 3.

In Bakhtin's classic study of the French Renaissance writer François Rabelais, the term grotesque refers to depictions of the human body—especially the mouth, nose, stomach, genitalia, and anus—as oversized or overactive.[76] The "gaping mouth" plays "a leading role" since it "is related to the image of swallowing, this most ancient symbol of death and destruction," however, Bakhtin does not find a supporting role for the voice—except when "oaths, curses, and various abusive expressions are a source of considerable importance for the grotesque concept of the body."[77] Contrary to Bakhtin, who calls abusive expressions in Rabelais grotesque because of their *semantic content*, I argue that the grotesque is also figured in the *sound* of such utterances. If for Bakhtin the grotesque is the province of ordinary people undermining authority, then Mbembe's seminal 1992 essay "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony" identifies it as an essential feature of the processes of "erecting, ratifying, or deconstructing particular regimes of violence and domination" by authoritarian African governments.[78] Mbembe's Foucauldian analysis of the performance of power is well-attuned to material and sensorial dimensions, yet it remains focused on the visual field, drawing many examples from political cartoons.[79] Several literary scholars have drawn on Bakhtin's and Mbembe's thought in their criticism of Marechera and Sony Labou Tansi. For example, Anna-Leena Toivanen, Maurice Vambe, Sarah Arens, Flora Veit-Wild, and Clémence

[76] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 316–7.
[77] Bakhtin, 325, 352.
[78] Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," trans. Janet Roitman and Murray Last, *Africa* 62, no. 1 (1992): 5. Mbembe later describe this phenomenon as the "l'esthétique de la vulgarité" (the aesthetics of vulgarity) in his book *De la postcolonie*.
[79] Mbembe's primary case study is Cameroon, but he considers other Francophone West and Central African countries. He draws on a range of discursive practices, including speeches, figures of speech, media events, and satirical cartoons in newspapers. He also mines the literary archive, extensively citing Sony Labou Tansi and the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola. However, Mbembe's theory posits the grotesque as an idiom of political power, not as a literary feature.

Kasinga have all called the descriptions of corporality and sexuality in their fiction grotesque.[80] Yet grotesque sound has been almost entirely neglected. This chapter posits the nonverbal, sonic terms on which the human voice—and African voices in particular—is perceived as grotesque.

The chapter begins by proposing the scream as an exemplary grotesque sound figure. I present a brief history of the scream as an aesthetic trope and concept twentieth century critical thought and art, including visual, musical and literary practices, focusing on the racialized connotations of the scream as a black vocal expression of suffering in Africa and the diaspora. This review also situates Marechera's and Sony Labou Tansi's repeated figuring of screams against the earlier expressionist and primitivist traditions in modernist literature. My analysis of *The House Hunger* responds to criticism on Marechera that insists on the importance of literary intertextuality in the book of short fiction. Drawing on insights from sound studies and disability studies, I argue that Marechera's grotesque sound figures disrupt the textual stability that the literary allusions would otherwise enact. Marechera, who was a lifelong stutterer, chooses to render his own speech dysfluency grotesquely in his autobiographical fiction with a protagonist struggling with aphasia, logorrhea, and stuttering. Finally, I examine Sony Labou Tansi's grotesque figuring of primitive and tropical sounds. Drawing on the author's paratexts, interviews, and other statements, I read pivotal scenes from three of his dictator novels and call attention to the close configuration of voice and violence as in Marechera's writing.

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[80] Sarah Arens, "Narrating the (Post)Nation? Aspects of the Local and the Global in Francophone Congolese Writing," *Research in African Literatures* 49, no. 1 (2018): 22–41; Clémence Kasinga, *L'esthétique romanesque de Sony Labou Tansi* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015); Daniel Matokot, *Le rire carnavalesque dans les romans de Sony Labou Tansi* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011); Anna-Leena Toivanen, "Grotesque Intimacies: Embodiment & the Spirit of Violence in *House of Hunger*," in *Reading Marechera*, ed. Grant Hamilton (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2013), 38–56; Maurice Taonezvi Vambe, "Dambudzo Marechera's *Black Sunlight*: Carnivalesque and the Subversion of Nationalist Discourse of Resistance in Zimbabwean Literature," *Journal of Literary Studies* 16, no. 3–4 (2000): 76–89; Flora Veit-Wild, "Carnival and Hybridity in Texts by Dambudzo Marechera and Lesego Rampolokeng," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23, no. 4 (1997): 553–64.

A Brief History of the Scream

In her review of *The House of Hunger*, Doris Lessing wrote that "it is no good pretending this book is an easy or pleasant read. More like overhearing a scream."[81] Yet, how exactly does one perceive such a sound in the text and why does it make reading difficult or unpleasant? What are the scream's inherent significations—if any—and how are they redirected by writers and readers, musicians and listeners? One always recognizes a scream by its spine-chilling and blood-curdling effect. From the "Wilhelm scream," a sound effect created in Hollywood in 1951 reused in countless action movies and the American psychologist Arthur Janov's 1970 book *The Primal Scream* which inspired John Lennon's anguished howling in his music, to the screaming emcees on Congolese rumba albums of the 1970s and 1980s like Empire Bakuba, Choc Stars, and Quartier Latin. Biologists and neuroscientists have recently attempted to explain how the human brain reacts to the volumetric, high-pitched sounds we call screaming.[82] From his research on the different neural responses elicited by a hungry baby's cry or an adult's shriek of distress, neural scientist David Poeppal concludes that "screams are the one uncontroversially universal vocalization."[83] But if as cultural critics working in sound studies have argued listening is a highly subjective practice, then we should think carefully before quickly categorizing a particular vocal sound as "universal" or even "grotesque." The listening ear is always in engaged in "surveillance,

[81] This description pleased the publishers who printed it on the cover of later editions of the text. Doris Lessing, "A Cultural Tug-of-War," review of *The House of Hunger*, by Dambudzo Marechera, *Books and Bookmen* 24, no. 9 (June 1979): 62–63.
[82] Luc H. Arnal et al., "Human Screams Occupy a Privileged Niche in the Communication Soundscape," *Current Biology* 25, no. 15 (2015): 2051–56.
[83] Cited in Cari Romm, "A Scream is the Same in Every Language," *The Atlantic*, July 16, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/07/science-of-screaming/398729/.

discipline, and interpretation," as Stoever has argued, making "certain associations between race and sound come to seem normal, natural, and 'right.'"[84] The scream is especially susceptible to categorization according to perception of gender, race, class, ability, and so on. In cinema, for instance, screaming is frequently associated with feminine hysteria.[85]

The scream is located before the semantic and after the sayable. It is an outer expression of inner affect—often the most intense, primal affect, such as sexual desire, pain, anger, or fear. As Brandon LaBelle writes in *Lexicon of the Mouth*, through screaming and shouting, "the physicality of voicing comes forward, to perform as a direct conveyance of emotional struggle, pain, or anger."[86] In Mladen Dolar's psychoanalytic framework, this is the "presymbolic manifestation of the voice."[87] Being asemantic and unsayable, the scream is an outward expression of pure feeling. But as many artists show in their work, consciously or not, the purity and authenticity of that feeling is called into question as soon as it is expressed outwardly. In fact, the very outer–inner barrier is shaken up by any attempt at harnessing or representing the scream with brushstrokes, bars of music, or letters on a page. Volumetric and dissonant, the scream is often—though not always—an index of suffering for Marechera and Sony Labou Tansi, as well as many of the other artists and thinkers discussed in brief below.

In the Euro-modernist imagination, the scream has strong metaphorical and mimetic purchase. From the *fin-de-siècle* period onwards, the scream was repeatedly invoked as a sound figure of individual and expressive purity. Critic Daniel Albright identifies the scream as the

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[84] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7–8.
[85] See Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
[86] LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, 56.
[87] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 56.

unifying form of vocal expression that connects artistic collaborators across, music, literature and other arts. Albright explains that modernist composers were particularly invested in the scream because of its ability to capture primality:

> All aestheticians who despise fakery in the arts, who seek authenticity, will tend to be connoisseurs of screams: for a scream is, arguably, the primal human response to the world, a response in no way prevaricated, or dissembled or embellished.[88]

The scream, for modernist musicians, was a mode of (re-)producing raw and unmediated human expression, a kind of "phonic essence" or "ultimate discharge of undifferentiated psychic energy."[89] The German philosopher and music theorist Theodor Adorno was one of the fiercest proponents of expressionist aesthetics that broke the mold of traditional classical music. Writing in 1942, Adorno explained that modernism's ideal of "expressive immediacy" could borrow from literary practices—"in analogy to the literary ideal of the scream [*Schreis*]" which seeks truthfulness through maximal dissonance.[90] In much the same way that German expressionist music is truthful because it jolts the attention to make it worthy of the listener's ears, several decades later, Marechera jolted the attention of his readers with what he called "literary shock treatment."[91]

So too in visual arts, the expressionist ideal of the scream as a primal human expression has proven to be a predominant formal issue, connecting to questions of individual ontology and

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[88] Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 20.
[89] Albright, 20.
[90] Adorno shunned the phony primitivism of the composer Igor Stravinsky, but admired Arnold Schoenberg whose 1924 opera *Ewartung* (Expectation), he believed, achieved maximal dissonance and authenticity of human feeling. For Adorno, this kind of expressionist music "seeks the truthfulness of subjective feeling without illusions, disguises or euphemisms." Theodor W. Adorno, "Nineteen Encyclopedia Articles on New Music," in *Night Music: Essays on Music 1928-1962*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Hoban Wieland (London: Seagull Books, 2009), 275.
[91] Dambudzo Marechera, "Slow Brain Death Can Only Be Cured by Literary Shock Treatment." Interview by Alle Lansu, in *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on His Life and Work*, ed. Flora Veit-Wild (1986; Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004), 41.

affect. The most canonical European example is Edvard Munch's *Scream* (*Skrik*), a painting that is well-aware of its own failure to reach the realm of the sonorous and more generally of the scream's incompatibility with this medium.[92] The British painter Francis Bacon similarly depicts muted expression of extreme affect in his *Head* series (1948-49).[93] In his book on Bacon, Gilles Deleuze contemplates Bacon's intention to paint "the scream more than the horror."[94] Deleuze writes that that "si l'on crie, c'est toujours en proie à des forces invisibles et insensibles qui brouillent tout spectacle, et qui débordent même la douleur et la sensation" (if we scream, it is always as victims of invisible and insensible forces that scramble every spectacle, and that even lie beyond pain and feeling).[95] For Deleuze, the scream is composed of two parts: the material scream-sound represented visually as a wide-open mouth in the Bacon's *Heads*, but equally important is how the scream is sustained by invisible and inaudible forces, a kind of imperceptible excess.[96]

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[92] In the introduction to his book *Postmodernism*, Frederic Jameson notes that Munch expresses key modernist thematics such as alienation, isolation, and social fragmentation, but more interestingly, he reads the painting "as a virtual deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression itself." Jameson explains that *The Scream* troubles the metaphysical presupposition behind the notion of "expression" as an outward projection of inward emotion; in this case, the scream "expresses" modernist social anxiety. He goes on to say: "The very concept of expression presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and outside, of the wordless pain within the monad and the moment in which, often cathartically, that 'emotion' is then projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling." Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 11-2, 14.

[93] A wide-open mouth is often the only discernible facial feature in Bacon's six *Head* paintings of abstract, disembodied human heads, while the more fleshed-out figures in his later Pope paintings still appear animal-like, as in *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953). Cf. Rina Arya, "The Animal Surfaces: The Gaping Mouth in Francis Bacon's Work," *Visual Anthropology* 30, no. 4 (2017): 328–43.

[94] Francis Bacon, cited in Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003), 60.

[95] Deleuze, 60; Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon et la logique de la sensation* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 60.

[96] Deleuze further elaborates on the two kinds of violence involved here. *Violence of spectacle* is simply the depiction of the horrible screaming mouth; he suggests that Bacon digs deeper in his painting in order to depict the *violence of sensation* which are invisible and imperceptible (61).

As with expressionist music, here too in the medium of painting lies the question of how to express intense affect. But the irreconcilable silence of the canvas and the page make painting and writing poorly suited media for figuring affect sonically. And yet, prose writers frequently invoke sonority—not only to call attention to the limits of expression, but to actualize a form of grotesque that is not necessarily beyond the page but can still capture the condition of excess and intensity. What Deleuze refers as *excess* is important in my conceptualization of the scream as a grotesque sound figure. Inspired by Deleuze's writing, affect theorist Marie Thompson calls the scream "a sonorous-affective force."[97] The scream, for Thompson, exceeds both the sounds expressed by an affected body, and the sounds that affect the human body; Thompson's third definition in her essay "Three Screams" captures the Deleuzian idea of a scream's excessive force: "an affect in and of itself, as something that has an existence independent from expressing and perceiving bodies."[98] While understanding the scream—and grotesque sound figures more generally—as an affective force helps us to think about it as an essential excess of violence, this framework detracts from its communicative value. In other words, does the scream have anything to say? Is the scream a pre-linguistic or an extra-linguistic vocal expression? Literature makes clear the significance of this prefix because it signals the causality of vocal phenomena in relation to language and violence.

Elaine Scarry, in her study of physical suffering *The Body in Pain*, argues that pain breaks down language, suggesting that the scream as an interruption of linguistic order. Scarry writes: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an

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[97] Marie Thompson, "Three Screams," in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*, ed. Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 148. Inspired by the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, and Brian Massumi's assertion that affect pertains to aliveness, Thompson describes the scream as "a sonic expression of life, of vitality" (p. 153).

[98] Thompson, 147.

immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."[99] A number of critics have revised Scarry's claim that the pain of torture breaks language. Among them, Alexander G. Weheliye notes that "Scarry assumes the world and language preexist and are unmade by the act of torture, which imagines political violence as exterior to the normal order rather than as an instrument in the creation of the world and language of Man."[100] For Weheliye, physical and political violence are constitutive of language and modern subjectivity in general, but black subjectivity in particular.

Scholarship at the intersection of black studies and sound studies has offered some useful perspectives on how to interpret cries, screams, shouts, and shrieks, and related utterances in black cultural production.[101] Critics have repeatedly returned to *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1845) for theorizing black subjectivity in the United States, and in particular the famous passage in which Frederick Douglas describes "the most heart-rending shrieks" of his Aunt Hester as she is whipped by the slave master Capitan Anthony.[102] For instance, Saidiya V. Hartman describes this act of violence—recalled by the narrator in his first chapter as a formative childhood memory—as a primal scene.[103] Critic Fred Moten in his reading of Douglas's *Narrative* focuses the scene's phonic materiality and points out its close juxtaposition with a passage about the songs that were an essential part of slave life in nineteenth-century America. In Moten's interpretation, such physical violence determines the limited access to speech of the enslaved person as a

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[99] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.
[100] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 125.
[101] Rose, *Black Noise*; Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*; Weheliye, *Phonographies*.
[102] Frederick Douglas, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," in *The Classic Slave Naratives*, ed. Henry Louis Jr. Gates (New York: Mentor Books, 1987), 259.
[103] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

commodity.[104] Moreover, Moten suggests that Aunt Hester's shrieks continue to echo in US black cultural production.[105] Indeed, as Toni Morrison puts it in her 1987 novel *Beloved,* "they ain't in love with your mouth." The character Baby Suggs goes on to preach ominously: "What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear."[106]

Transatlantic slavery has a psycho-linguistic legacy elsewhere in the Americas. In Martinique, for instance, poet and philosopher Glissant explains that screaming and other grotesque vocalizations on the plantation have profoundly shaped Creole language and poetics. In Glissant's account, "l'implacable univers muet du servage" (the unrelenting silence of the world of slavery) determined the importance of speed and pitch in oral communication:

> Puisqu'il est interdit de parler, on camouflera la parole sous la provocation paroxystique du cri. Nul n'irait traduire que ce cri si évident puisse signifier. On n'y supposera que l'appel de la bête. C'est ainsi que l'homme dépossédé organisera sa parole en la tramant dans l'apparent insignifié du bruit extrême.
>
> (Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise.)[107]

Importantly for Glissant, the scream is not oppositional to meaning; it merely disguises it.[108] This conceptualization contrasts sharply with the earlier European modernists who believed that the primal scream removed the artifice of language. Although there is no longer a practical need for

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[104] Moten highlights "the phonography of the very screams that open the way into the knowledge of slavery and the knowledge of freedom." Moten, *In the Break*, 21–2.
[105] Moten, 22.
[106] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; London: Vintage, 2005), 103–4.
[107] Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 239; Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 123.
[108] The value of asemantic vocalizations is often overlooked in black cultural expression. Ashon T. Crawley makes this point in his study of US Blackpentecostal church practices like whooping breathing, shouting, tarrying, and speaking in tongues. According to Crawley, such practices are both aesthetic and intellectual work. *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

the secrecy of "extreme noise" in everyday Martinique, Creole has retained the structure of "délire verbal" (verbal delirium), which includes "hachures, tambourinages, accélérations, répétitions drues, bavures des syllables, contresens du significant, allégorie et sens cache […] toutes les phases de l'histoire de cette langue dramatique" (improvisations, drumbeats, acceleration, dense repetitions, slurred syllables, meaning the opposite of what is said, allegory and hidden meanings—[…] all the phases of the history of this dramatic language).[109] Glissant concludes that while "la langue criée" (screamed speech) emerged amidst physical and psychic violence as an involuntary "technique de survie" (survival technique), it has persisted in Caribbean poetics.[110]

Following the line of thought from Douglas to Glissant, we might say that there is a bond between suffering and speech that has been impressed upon black cultural production in the Americas. In Africa, there is a different story to tell. The shared experiences of imperialism and the influence of Afro-diasporic cultures on the African continent are suggestive of a synergetic relationship of sound figures. Like the metaphor of voice in general, *le cri* is an abiding motif of self-affirmation and political will in anticolonial and pan-Africanist discourse. For theological scholar Jean-Marc Ela, *le cri* is a spiritual interpolation for postcolonial Christianity.[111] For the Négritude poets, *le cri africain* was a clarion call, declaring "here we are!" with a forcefulness that was heard around the world, but often still fell on deaf imperial ears.[112] Similarly, in naming their journal *O Brado Africano* (The African Cry), Mozambican and Angolan writers insisted on raising the volume of their anticolonial avant-garde poetry. However, *le cri* could be detrimental, as the

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[109] Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 242; *Caribbean Discourse*, 128.
[110] Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 242; *Caribbean Discourse*, 129.
[111] Jean-Marc Ela, *Le cri de l'homme africain: questions aux chrétiens et aux églises d'Afrique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1980).
[112] Patrice Nganang has called Aimé Césaire "le père du Grand Cri Noir—du moins pour la littérature francophone" (the father of the Great Black Cry—or even Francophone literature). Patrice Nganang, *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine : pour une littérature préemptive* (Paris: Homnisphères, 2007), 151.

Martinican Frantz Fanon noted on the first page of his 1952 *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*). Unlike Sony Labou Tansi's fearless promised that this writing will be screamed, Fanon cautiously begins by *saying* rather than *screaming* his urgent critique of colonization and racism. "Car depuis longtemps le cri est sorti de ma vie" (Because I've long given up shouting), explains Fanon.[113] Fanon is aware that by screaming his critique would be willfully misheard. He further acknowledges how voices are racialized, and just how quickly that racialization clinches when he raises the volume of his voice—both his literal speaking voice and his authorial voice.[114]

More recently, in his 2007 *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine* (Manifesto for a New African Literature), Patrice Nganang reflects on "le cri affamé" (the famished cry) that characterizes literature when, in the wake of colossal human disaster like genocide, "récit" (narrative) is unavailable to writers. Nganang explores the many sides of *le cri*, simultaneously drawing attention to its jolting interpellation ("sa forme c'est l'interrogation saccadée du monde qu'il interpelle pour lui demander sa signification"); attention to how it frees the animal in the human ("le cri c'est la libération de l'animal en l'homme"); how it corporealizes ("l'art fait corps avec le cri"); and finally how it endures as an impossible fullness of speech ("reconnaissance d'une impossible plénitude de la parole").[115] *Le cri*, he concludes, is the instinctive response of survivors, witnesses, and writers alike after tragedy. Nganang is thinking specifically of the 1994 Rwandan

[113] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), 25; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), xi.
[114]Nelson Maldonado-Torres interprets this remark as Fanon's recognition of importance of adopting "the composure of discourse." See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 130.
[115] Nganang, *Manifeste d'une nouvelle littérature africaine*, 146, 147, 148, 148.

genocide and how it has transformed contemporary African literature—not unlike Adorno's oft-cited comment on the inadequacy of poetry after Auschwitz.

While Marechera and Sony Labou Tansi both wrote prior to the Rwandan genocide, they did follow the disaster that was colonization, making it necessary to read their fiction against the backdrop of colonial regimes of speech and their afterlives. The national-historical conditions in which they wrote differ considerably, and thus we might expect their repurposing of the scream as grotesque to function differently. Marechera published his first book *The House of Hunger,* in Heinemann's African Writers Series in 1978 just one year before Sony Labou Tansi's début novel came out and just as Zimbabwean independence was just on the horizon. Marechera was living in the United Kingdom at the time but he moved back to his newly independent home country in 1983. Until his death in 1987, Marechera was known as an eccentric and iconoclastic personality in downtown Harare, where he roamed the streets nightly, drank profusely, wrote erratically, and gave occasional, flamboyant readings.[116] Sony Labou Tansi was born in the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) but spent most of his life in Congo-Brazzaville. *La Vie et demie* was written during the turbulent transition of power between Presidents Marien Ngouabi and Denis Sassou Nguesso. Sony Labou Tansi also died tragically young in 1995, by which time he was well-known in France, French-speaking Africa, and in his adopted city of Brazzaville where he ran the theater troupe Rocada Zulu Théâtre and served briefly as an elected local official.[117]

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[116]As critic Memory Chirere puts it, Zimbabwe has been gripped by "Marechera-mania" since that time. For more on his biography, see Flora Veit-Wild, ed., *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on His Life and Work*, U.S. ed. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004); Memory Chirere, "Marechera-Mania among Young Zimbabwean Writers and Readers," in *Moving Spirit: The Legacy of Dambudzo Marechera in the 21st Century*, ed. Julie Cairnie and Dobrota Pucherová (Zurich: LIT Verlag Münster, 2012), 111–17.

[117] Born Nsoni za buta Tsi, the author published his six novels with the Parisian publisher Seuil as Sony Labou Tansi, although the emphasis and orthography of his pseudonym varies in his manuscripts and his published plays (Sony Lab'Ou Tansi, Sony La Boutansi, SONY Lab'ou-Tansi, etc). Different scholars have called him by each of the three components of his name, indexing his works variously under the letters "S," "L," and "T." To avoid confusion, I have opted to use the full name Sony Labou Tansi. For more on his pseudonym and his biography, see

Despite the multiple parallels, I have found no evidence to suggest that the two authors ever met and can only speculate whether they read each other's work.[118] Marechera and Sony Labou Tansi were not always in agreement. The Congolese author firmly maintained what he saw as the importance of conveying the Kikongo worldview in his writing in French.[119] This was more true for his work in the theater, which he explicitly said was an attempt at building on Kikongo dramatic forms and conventions, but he regularly underlined the Africanness of his aesthetics and politics.[120] On the other hand, Marechera often denied the identarian appellations—but this too was one of his many subjects of contradiction. In bringing the two together in this chapter, I show how grotesque sound figures were developed in two separate national political contexts to refuse black vocal illegibility with expressive immediacy.

Limitless Black Resonance in *The House of Hunger*

Marechera once described his writing process as "discarding grammar, throwing syntax out, subverting images from within, beating the drum and cymbals of rhythm, developing torture chambers of irony and sarcasm, gas ovens of limitless black resonance."[121] This statement reveals Marechera's goal to closely combine sound (drum and cymbals) and violence (torture chambers and gas ovens) in his experimental fiction. Marechera rarely identified himself as a black writer,

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Jean Michel Devésa, *Sony Labou Tansi: écrivain de la honte et des rives magiques du Kongo* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 78–80; Dominic Thomas, *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 207n4.

[118] Two of Marechera's books have recently been translated into French—*La Maison de la faim* (2010) and *Soleil noir* (2012). It is worth noting that Sony Labou Tansi was an English teacher and did have access to Anglophone African literature. Sony Labou Tansi's plays were translated into English and performed abroad in the 1980s, but just one English translation of a novel was published in his lifetime: *The Anti-People* (1988).

[119] Sony Labou Tansi, *Sony Labou Tansi à Lomé le 15 février 1988* (Talence, France: Centre d'étude d'Afrique noire (CNRS), 2000); Georges Ngal, "Les tropicalités de Sony Labou Tansi," *Silex* 23, no. 4 (1982): 134–43.

[120] See the appendix in Devésa, *Sony Labou Tansi*.

[121] Dambudzo Marechera, "Interview with Himself," in *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book*, ed. Veit-Wild.

so his formulation "limitless black resonance" exhibits a particularly striking emphasis on the potent permutation of blackness in the mixing of sound and violence.[122] My goal here is to explore the expression of that limitless black resonance through grotesque sound figures in Marechera's *The House of Hunger*. The book of short fiction opens with an 82-page novella of the same title, a coming-of-age story told retrospectively from the perspective of a twenty-something university drop-out who has journeyed—just like Marechera—from his home in a rural township, to an unnamed mission school, and eventually to the city of Salisbury (now Harare) where he befriends students, activists, and artists. In the other nine stories in the collection, there is an assortment of slightly different male protagonists who are sometimes older, sometimes in England, sometimes in Rhodesia, but there is good reason to believe that they are all versions of the author.[123] I respond to criticism on Marechera that insists on the dominance of literary intertextuality in his writing and instead I make a case for his sonic imagination.

In the opening pages of *The House of Hunger*, the reader immediately encounters the configuration of violence with the sonority of both human and non-human voices. The novella begins in the present with a declarative statement "I got up my things and left" (1) as the protagonist makes his way to a bar from where he recounts much of the action in the novella through a meandering stream of consciousness that pauses at numerous formative moments. In many of these memories, he is the victim of physical beatings by parents, his brother, school bullies, and white Rhodesian vigilantes. The first scene he reconstructs takes place in the Rusape township where he grew up. As he reads by candlelight, his brother Peter is physically abusing his

[122] Marechera is well known for his rejection of racial and national identification in one fiery quip: "Either you are a writer or you are not. If you are a writer for a specific nation or race, then fuck you." Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book*, 121.
[123] Marechera stated in an interview: "I think that I am the doppelganger whom, until I appear African literature had not yet met." Veit-Wild, 221.

partner Immaculate. The narrator observes the "raw courage in [Immaculate's] wide animal-like eyes" and her soundless suffering of Peter's "great hand swinging yet again to smash" her (4). Unlike Douglas's account of Aunt Hester's screams, the narrator here does not record the victim's vocal responses, but he does record peripheral noises: "I heard something—a cat—scream in agony. […] I could hear through the window children saying 'Break its neck'" (4, 5). Immaculate's inaudible suffering is muffled by the cat's audible scream, which mingles with the crying of the baby in the next room.

> It was then that I realised that the baby in the next room was hollering its head off and must have been screaming for quite some time. But neither the girl nor I moved. She was panting painfully somewhere in the dark of the room. I could only think how very young she sounded. […]
>
> 'Immaculate, are you alright?' […]
>
> After another long silence she said something like ssshh.
>
> 'What? I can't hear you.'
>
> 'Don't talk,' she said.
>
> In the next room the baby continued to scream. A heavy stone rattled upon the roof: our neighbour's children were at it again. Another stone—it must have been a brick—thudded onto the roof. (5)

This early scene establishes a couple of key sonic features in the text. First, in Marechera's text, the metaphorical voicelessness of women—as subjects without agency—is transcribed as literal voicelessness. Second, the eponymous "house of hunger" is not a quiet place. The titular conceit is open to several interpretations: it refers the narrator's literal township house made of corrugated iron and it also alludes to the narrator's physical confinement in Rhodesian colonial space. Over the course of the text, spatial confinement gradually transfigures into mental confinement. As the narrator explains, "the House has now become my mind; and I do not like the way the roof is rattling" (13). The township dwelling is repeatedly depicted as noisy, notably in the story "Are

There People Living There?", in which the protagonist—a journalist and another alias for Marechera himself—responds to a magazine's call for "stories and articles with a Modern African Family slant" (149). As he sits down to write, sonic distractions abound:

> Not a minute passed night or day but was drowned by the sound of quarrelling, the din of cats and dogs raining down from the sky, and the interminable half-lewd, half-innocent whisperings of my vicious but sweet brood of children. All this meant that I literally did not have anywhere to rest my elbows and stain pain with my inky articles. (150)

He fails to share the magazine's vision of a home for model black bourgeois consumers because his own rooms are overcrowded, filled with the "sound of quarrelling" and the loud "din" of rain on the corrugated-iron roof. He finds no escape either in beerhalls where he listens to a singer "not so much singing as farting in an unnatural base voice" (25). Indeed, far be it from a quiet place, "la colonie, c'est un lieu propice au bruit" as Achille Mbembe has quipped (the colony is also a very noisy place).[124]

Along with the scatological and disease motifs reminiscent of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* published one decade earlier in 1968, these sonic disruptions constitute the grotesque aesthetics of the "hunger-scoured hovel" (3). They also make way for the

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[124] Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 185; Achille Mbembe, *De la Postcolonie : essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine* (Paris: Karthala, 2000), 235. Mbembe's book focuses on the performance of power in the *post*colony but in his chapter titled "Du Hors-monde" (Out of this World) he describes the discursive construction of the colony. His broader point is that the phenomenology of violence instituted in the colony has an afterlife in the postcolony. In the section on "delirium" Mbembe satirically recapitulates the colonial logic of native excess which finds expression sonically: "La colonie, c'est un lieu propice au bruit. C'est, avant tout, le bruit du tam-tam. Mais il n'y a pas de tam-tam sans danse, c'est-à-dire une manière de pas, des gestes, une façon de soumettre le corps à des torsions. […] Et tout à coup, le mouvement se communique aux pieds, au rythme de cris et de battements de mains qui ne font que plonger davantage l'assistance dans un état d'ivresse. […] Que serait la colonie si elle n'était plus le lieu des éclats de voix inattendus, des gestes brusques, du temps aboli, qui s'écoule à la manière d'un fleuve […] ? Que serait la colonie si elle n'était plus ce lieu propice au déchaînement de toutes sortes de fabulations : le lieu du délire gratuit et imbécile ?" (235; The colony is also a very noisy place. There is, above all, the noise of the tom-tom. But there is no tom-tom without dancing—particular steps, movements, a way of contorting the body. […] Suddenly, the movement is communicated to her feet, to cries and clapping that only drive the crowd into a further state of intoxication [. …] What would the colony be, if not a place where all sorts of mythical fabrications could be unleashed, the place of unbridled and crazy delirium? 185)

prominent role of voices in the text: voices drive both characterization and give structure for the narrative, more than the literary allusions do. The narrator pays close attention to the voices of characters and throughout the text provides details of how voices sound, as well as their material origins in the body. Examples include his love interest, Julia, whose "lips were a flaming crimson like blood" (20). Whenever "she gritted her small sharp teeth" the "sound made [him] wince" (47). Meanwhile, Immaculate's voice has "an inner light stirring within in; the way clouds seem to have in their heart a trembling clarity" and when she spoke she did so "with an intensity that seemed to refract [his] character the way a prism analyses clearly the light striking its surfaces" (28). Patricia, with whom the narrator also has an affair, is a nomadic artist who skips the border for a long period of time and when she returns she is "half-blind, feverish, and with her voice gone" (71). Her eyes heal, but she never regains the power of speech.

The extant criticism on Marechera has largely ignored the prominence of voices and the pervasive grotesque sonority in particular in *The House of Hunger*. Many critics have commented on the book's literary intertextuality and, in doing so, have diminished its sound effects. This is likely the outcome of its routine interpretation as a *Bildungsroman*. The charting of a love of books is typical of the African *Bildungsroman*, and this autobiographical fiction is no exception.[125] What sets Marechera's novella apart from other classic *Bildungsromane*—such as Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (*The African Child,* 1953), Ngũgĩ wa Thing'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964), or fellow Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988)—is his swerve away from realism. Marechera read many of the "first-generation" African writers such as Achebe, Soyinka, and

[125] For more on the genre of the African *Bildungsroman*, see Apollo Amoko, "Autobiography and Bildungsroman in African Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, ed. F. Abiola Irele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 195–208; Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2009).

Ngũgĩ in high schooland was well aware of the recurrent dialectical themes in their novels, such as tradition/modernity, indigenous/colonial language, and of course orality/textuality.[126] Marechera reconfigures these same themes catachrestically, as when *The House of Hunger*'s protagonists asks, "Was I perhaps one of those Africans who despised their own roots? Shouldn't I be writing within our great tradition of oral literature rather than turning out pseudo-Kafka-Dostoyevsky stories?" (143). At other times, his tone is not so ironic. When in the short story "The Writer's Grain" a cat bothers the protagonist in his office, he grabs a stack of books to throw at the stray. In a heavy-handed metaphorization of the psychic violence that colonial educators inflict on native students, the man hurls copies of Shakespeare, Hardy, and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at the unfortunate feline (110).

The House of Hunger contains many such literary references, bearing witness to the author's training in the European canon with little credit to his local Shona culture. From his education at an Anglican mission school in the Eastern Highlands of colonial Rhodesia and his studies in English Literature at the University of Rhodesia and the University of Oxford in the 1970s, Marechera developed a broad repertoire in Classical, Biblical, and modern European culture.[127] The narrator of *The House of Hunger* often compares himself to Shakespearean or Homerian tragic figures while literary references serve in the characterization of the boisterous

[126] Dambudzo Marechera, "Soyinka, Dostoevsky: The Writer on Trial for His Time," *Zambezia: The Journal of the University of Zimbabwe* 14, no. 2 (1987): 106–11.

[127] Marechera was first expelled from the University of Rhodesia in 1973 for his involvement in protests against racial segregation. He was then expelled from Oxford in 1976, after two years at the university, upon his refusal to undergo psychiatric treatment following an arson charge. For more biographical details, see *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book*. For more on the influence of colonial and missionary schools in the development of Zimbabwean literature, see Flora Veit-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature*, (London: Hans Zell, 1992).

Harry who hides *Playboy* magazines in his trunk and loudly misquotes Yeats or the wimpish boy Edmund who sets off "tiny firecrackers of his laughter" (61) when he reads Gogol.

Bill Ashcroft calls these literary references "a radically *performative* intertextuality that is fundamental to the Menippean disruptiveness of his narrative."[128] Neil ten Kortenaar, for his part, describes the narrator of *The House of Hunger* as stuck with "the condition of being covered by and unable to escape printed words on paper."[129] While books are often closely accompanied by physical violence in the novella, as ten Kortenaar helpfully points out, in my view, Marechera does not monumentalize his protagonist's encounter with print culture as an emblematic entry into Western modernity. Nor does Marechera depend on the dialectic relationship between indigenous orality on the one hand, and European textuality on the other. In this regard, Marechera departs from the conventions of the African *Bildungsroman*. He also departs from the majority of Zimbabwean novels in English that prize orality as a symbolic conduit for pre-colonial, indigenous history or—as Maurice Vambe puts it—as "a form of cultural memory that is critical in restoring a sense of collective identity."[130] Vambe goes on to say that "where some Zimbabwean writers such as Mutswairo, Ndhlala, Samkange, Katiyo, and Vera exploit various aspects of orality in their fiction, to invoke and construct a stable narrative of post-colonial resistance based on the 'African

[128] Bill Ashcroft, "Menippean Marechera," in *Reading Marechera.*, ed. Grant Hamilton (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2013), 88.
[129] Neil ten Kortenaar, *Postcolonial Literature and the Impact of Literacy: Reading and Writing in African and Caribbean Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 179; Madhlozi Moyo, "Classical Allusion in Marechera's Prose Works," in *Reading Marechera.*, ed. Grant Hamilton (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2013), 145–56. Also see Moyo.
[130] Maurice Taonezvi Vambe, *African Oral Story-Telling Tradition and the Zimbabwean Novel in English* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2004), 7. For instance, the protagonist in *Nervous Conditions,* Tambudzai, struggles to reconcile the enormous epistemological difference between the oral histories her grandmother gave her on the farm before she is inducted into literary/textual/formal education at the colonial school. Also consider Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*, which poetically reimagines the biography of nineteenth-century anticolonial Shona icon Mbuya Nehanda with a focus on her role as a spirit medium transmitting ancestors' messages through her voice.

image,' Marechera writes in a way that undermines that image."[131] Marechera's subversion of the "African image" was met with hostility from some early African critics.[132] For example, Musa Zimunya argues that "Marechera pushes the frontier of the African psyche until his angst begins to *sound* European and modern" (emphasis added).[133] Meanwhile, Mbulelo V. Mzamane suggests that the foreign literary illusions "misfire" and "rob his work of a Zimbabwe authenticity."[134] Juliet Okonkwo also claimed that the "vulgarity and histrionic nature" of *The House of Hunger* is "alien to Africa," placing the book closer to the "avant-garde art that is characteristic of modern European culture."[135] These comments exhibit enthusiasm to arbitrate morality and authenticity, but also reluctance to endorse the avant-garde status of an African writer.

Although Marechera was ambivalent about local culture and rejected any consecration of indigenous orature on nativist grounds, he also declined to unequivocally celebrate literature. Recall his mischievous jab at "pseudo-Kafka-Dostoyevsky stories."[136] Ultimately, Marechera unsettles the orality/textuality dichotomy in *The House Hunger* with recourse to figuring voices as phonic, material, corporeal, and of course grotesque. Against the traditions of realism and orature, Marechera aligns himself a new kind of writing. In a 1986 lecture, he cites the influence of the Russian Andrei Sinyavsky's technique of "fantastic realism" and his utmost admiration of what

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[131] Vambe, 98.
[132] Marechera had a hostile reception for much of his career. His British publishers initially rejected his second book manuscript, *Black Sunlight*. When the novel was eventually published, it faced charges of obscenity by the new Zimbabwean Government's Board of Censors and was banned for a short time. See Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book*, 290–9.
[133] Musaemura Zimunya, *Those Years of Drought and Hunger: The Birth of African Fiction in English in Zimbabwe*, Mambo Writers Series (English Section) 9 (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1982), 97.
[134] Mbulelo V. Mzamane, "New Writing from Zimbabwe: Dambudzo Marechara's *House of Hunger*," in *Recent Trends in the Novel*, African Literature Today 13 (London: Heinemann, 1983), 212.
[135] Juliet Okonkwo, review of *The House of Hunger*, by Dambudzo Marechera, *Okike*, June 18, 1981, 91.
[136] In his 1983 review of the anthology *Oral Poetry from Africa*, Marechera confessed, "I like many others I always vaguely thought that oral poetry was more or less something static, frozen, passed from generation to generation. This book clearly probes that oral poetry is unceasingly dynamic, echoing and commenting on the delirious changes in society." See "Review of *Oral Poetry from Africa*" in Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book* (359).

Bakhtin calls the "Menippean novel."[137] Marechera's awareness and affiliation with the literary theorization of the grotesque through Bakhtin affirms my own focus on his grotesque sound figures.

A closer examination of Marechera's voices reveals a similarity between the grotesque corporality theorized by Bakhtin and the grotesque sonority I am proposing. Consider the abundance of sonic details ascribed to all the characters in *The House of Hunger*: his mother's "hoarse bass voice" wrecked by alcoholism and her language that would take on "an earthy hue" when nagging him (9); his father's "broken teeth, tobacco-stained, [like] those of an ancient horse which even the boiler glue would reject" (79); his parents' "maniacal symphonies […] tremendous groans and grunts" during sex; his school master Jet's "special voice, one specifically cultivated for talking to idiots" (6 3); Edmund's "whining, jabbering distractedly like an animal" when he is beaten up so badly "most of his front teeth had gone and his jaw seemed to be hanging on by a thread" and all he can utter is "I'm a monkey, I'm a baboon" (66); Stephen's nightmares prompting "fearful screams [that] could be heard almost every night" (64); and finally, his black classmate at Oxford who "tried to purge his tongue too, by improving his English and getting rid of any accent from the speaking of it" (93). Taken together, these repeated descriptions of body parts clearly inscribe Marechera within the tradition that Bakhtin has theorized as the grotesque. Voicing in Marechera's text is an activity that occupies similar anatomical loci identified by Bakhtin: from the belly, up the respiratory system and throat, through vocal chords and the orifice of the mouth, past the tongue, teeth, lips, and beyond.[138] In another exemplary passage, Marechera's narrator

[137] Marechera, "The African Writer's Experience of European Literature," 101. Cf. Mikahil Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984.
[138] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

encounters a white racist in a bar, he strategically describes his vocal production as grotesque in order to underscore the semantic content of the hateful speech. "'Kaffirs at the back'" says the "white old age pensioner's face" with a "pink mouth embedded in meagre strings of pink fat […] sticking with saliva like stalagmites and stalactites." The mouth "show[ed] an obscene toothless razor wound, spluttered with spittle; mumbled: 'Kaffirs…'" (56). In this instance, Marechera metonymically reduces the racist to a face with a fleshy mouth oozing phonic saliva.

In her reading of Marechera's corporality, critic Ewa Macura-Nnamdi argues that bodies organize the narrative time of the novella:

> If the narrative realm of "House of Hunger" seems slightly incommodious and strangely circumscribed, it is perhaps because it is delineated by the (narrator's) body. […] The flashbacks are, in one way or another, tied to his body or the bodies of others. Confined, as it were, to his head, they are lodged in, and emanate from, what he calls "that House of Hunger."[139]

Macura-Nnamdi's compelling analysis of Marechera's depictions of the narrative body and physical body offers a helpful alternative to the Bakhtinian framework. Yet, her discussion of the discursive performance of bodies in the text ignores vocal production. In fact, voices also play a significant role in structuring the narrative temporality. The continual analepses are frequently triggered by a vocal interjection, just as a spoken word in the narrator's memory re-connects him (and the reader) with the present. For example, while the narrator is at a bar chatting with his old schoolmate Harry, a mnemonic sound in the narrator's head—"I could hear the baby still crying in the next room" (17)—sends us back to the earlier scene with Immaculate. He recites a short poem out loud to Immaculate, in turn reversing the action to the present in which both characters are confused by the narrator's state of reverie:

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[139] Ewa Macura-Nnamdi, "The Alimentary Life of Power," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 1 (2015): 101.

> ‘What?’ she asked.
> She looked extremely puzzled.
> ‘A poem,’ I said.
> But Harry leaned forward and upset my glass.
> ‘A poem I’m writing,’ I said, ‘I’ve just recited the first three lines.’ (18)

And so goes the perplexing and circular narrative development of “House of Hunger,” always skipping between the narrator’s memories and the present, confusing characters and readers alike. With more alcohol—which the narrator consumes copiously—the reveries intensify both in length and richness of imagery. A few pages on, still at the bar and a few more beers into the night, the narrator has another chance encounter, this time with his friend Julia:

> ‘Fuck!’ she exploded casually and sat down.
> For some reason I began to recount to myself trivial incidents which had left me feeling like a cat thrown without extreme unction into a deep well. (25)

Here, too, a return to the past is sparked by a sudden vocal exclamation. The reader is forced to take a sudden narrative detour, only to be catapulted back to the present some 15 pages later by the repetition of the expletive— “‘Fuck!’ Julia exploded” (41)—and the bar scene resumes.

For the self-absorbed narrator detached from reality, hearing of voices anchors him in the moment— “her voice, laughing, brought me back into the room” (55)—but imagined sounds also interrupt and distort his awareness, especially on booze-fueled nights: “Something shrill tore into my eardrum. […] The maddening high-pitched needles were coming from Harry. But he was not making any sound” (92). While the shrill sound dramatizes the narrator’s intoxication in this instance, elsewhere in the text he hallucinates voices, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section. These haunting voices during his angsty teenage years embody his internal linguistic conflict between Shona and English specifically, and, more generally, the psychological toll of living in the colonial state. As I have already demonstrated, these grotesque sound figures disrupt the textual stability that the literary allusions seek to construct. If the traditional *Bildungsroman*

charts a young naïf's entry into modernity through learning and literature, then Marechera's anarchic and experimental novella is about the fitful development of the protagonist's own voice, its projection, breaking, and distancing from himself in the form of limitless black resonance.

Marechera's Stammer

In this section I consider how Marechera's own speech dysfluency is grotesquely figured in *The House of Hunger* through the autobiographical protagonist's struggle with aphasia, logorrhea, stuttering, and other patterns of broken speech. I follow disability scholars like Chris Eagle and Joshua St. Pierre in adopting the term "speech dysfluency" instead of "speech disorder" which negatively connotes the medical pathologization of different speech.[140] It is worth remembering that such medical terminology has been weaponized to exclude racial others.[141] For example, the now-derogatory word "Hottentot" came about as an onomatopoeic mockery of stuttering that early Dutch colonists in South African thought they heard in the Khoekhoe language.[142] My analysis is particularly mindful of the legacy of racist interpretation of African languages or accents as dysfluent and seeks to understand to what end Marechera casts his own stammer as grotesque in his fiction.

The House of Hunger's protagonist has a heightened awareness of his oral cavity and its phonic emissions. Early on, his teeth are knocked out in a fist fight with his brother (14) and in a later brawl his dentures crack (75). Envious of "Harry's toothpaste character" (44), he resents his

[140] Christopher Eagle, ed., *Literature, Speech Disorders, and Disability: Talking Normal* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
[141] Chris Bell, "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 275–82.
[142] Connor, *Beyond Words*, 27.

own blistered lips (15), aching gums, and "discoloured teeth" (44). Stress induces dryness in "[his] crater of a mouth" (26) when he is invited to give a public speech, and again when he has a sexual awakening (49). He loses control of his own voice and by turns suffers from aphasia and logorrhea, as in the two examples below.

> I bowed my head in a vain attempt to strangle the laughter that was roaring at the back of my throat and cackling out through my ears. (27)

> My voice grew small and remote, the way it does when impotent anger spreads and paralyses my faculty for logical thought. I talked rapidly in that small-toothed voice. […] And, outside, thousands of flies, whipped up into a frenzy by their invisible conductor, buzzed a crescendo of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus, while the thin sunlight-foil glinted and flashed with the crinkled delight of it all. (45)

Even when the protagonist fails to project his voice externally, he senses its resonance "roaring" and "cackling" within his own body. He imagines his voice not fully actualized but inwardly lingering in his own throat, spreading to his ears, to his brain where it arrests his thinking. The shame of his "small-toothed voice" contrasts sharply with the loud Baroque choir of township flies buzzing, figuring European imperialism as a pervasive sonic intrusion.

In a lengthy digression over several pages, the protagonist expounds on the worst of these sonic intrusions that he suffered in his schooldays. He describes hearing outrageous and compulsive voices in his head, tormenting him night and day:

> I never told the psychiatrist the whole truth about what the voices were *saying* […] What the voices said was something quite obscene about my mother's morals […] Mountains of argument ranged through my mind until the earthquake of those infernal voices brought them crushing down upon my toes. The absurd, the grotesque, it seemed, had come home to stay. I opened my mouth to give my defence plea but the voices had not only found me out, they had also taken over the inner chords of my own voice. I talked compulsively. My voice seemed to be contained by the refracting lattices of transparent stones. Little thrusts of swift lights, diamond sparks, spinning maddeningly, leaped through my mind until I could not bear the headache of it. (29)

> My voice was breaking and the unusual sound of it made me jump irritably. It seemed to me something was taking over my body; the images and symbols I had for so long taken

> for granted had taken upon themselves a strange hue; and I was losing my grasp of simple speech. I began to ramble, incoherently, in a disconnected manner. (30)

The mysterious arrival of the "grotesque," "infernal" voices that haunt the teenager's mind and take control of his "inner chords" coincides with the voice change that is typical among boys in puberty, brought on by the larynx's growth. These hallucinated voices and the new "unusual sound" of his own voice cause enormous emotional and psychological distress. The voices conceal more than they reveal, and their origin is never explicitly explained to the reader. There is a cumulative effect of all the bold, garish, and incongruous imagery brought together in *The House of Hunger.* It climaxes across several pages of unbroken lines illustrating the protagonist's vocal development; here, Marechera mimetically reproduces the incoherent and disconnected rambling that his narrator reports.

There are at least two possible explanations for the mental torment brought on by his voice change and vocal hallucinations. First, we might interpret this painful vocal disorientation as rooted in the experience of leaving his mother tongue—a language indigenous to Zimbabwe—for learning (in) the colonial language. Marechera, like his protagonist, grew up speaking Shona at home until he learned English at elementary school. An abiding theme in African literature, linguistic conflict has been most famously theorized by Ngũgĩ in *Decolonising the Mind*, who summarizes that "the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom."[143] Later, I discuss Sony Labou Tansi's similarly violent metaphorization of the arrival of French in his Lingala world. In *The House of Hunger*, the protagonist's mother chides him with a "stinging slap" for lapsing into English at home: "'How dare you speak in English to me,' she said crossly" (13), prompting him to destroy his schoolbooks

[143] Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*, 8.

in a fit of rage. About halfway through the novella, he laments, “I was being severed from own voice” (30), suggesting a dualism between body and self (understanding the voice as subject here). Marechera casts this identity-struggle as a verbal disagreement playing out in his head: “when I talked it was in the form of an interminable argument, one side of which was always expressed in English and the other in Shona” (30). He felt “gagged by this absurd contest,” left “completely muzzled,” and “literally robbed of words” (30). He blames his susceptibility for “rambling” on his English education (43).

In one formative high school scene, in which a self-righteous black Catholic priest visits his class for a lesson on sexual morality, the schoolboy protagonist has a nervous breakdown:

> I shouted “It's people like you who're driving us mad!” I wanted to say more, but I began to stammer and he took advantage of that to say “It's the ape in you, young man, the heart of darkness.” (35)

When the headmaster rescues the priest from his failed sermon, the schoolchildren follow the protagonist’s lead in mocking the Christian propriety he tried to broker: “the room resounded with catcalls, hoots, howls, ululations, screeches, whistles and the mind-bending agony of tables being drummed black and blue” (36). Here, Marechera pokes fun at the priest’s uncritical adoption of racist formulations in the English language, as suggested by the use of the Conradian “heart of darkness.” Elsewhere, he shares his amusement over “educated Africans [who] like the word ‘awfully,’ the word ‘actually,’ the phrase ‘Is it not?’” (44). Decrying the “conservative snobbery” (44) of this language, he embraces the undisciplined performance of animal noises in an ironic subversion of colonial hearing of African voices. Colonialism’s epistemic violence thus pervades the sonic realm of *The House of Hunger*.

The second dimension of the protagonist's obsession with voicing derives from his stutter, a phenomenon defined by Marc Shell in his book on the topic as the involuntary breakdown in the flow of speech "in the form of repetition, prolongation, or cessation of sound."[144] Marechera has explained that his experimental style of writing and use of language stems as much from the "argument" between English and Shona, as from his own speech dysfluency. In a 1983 "interview with himself" he presents a series of hackneyed questions often directed at African writers. In response to the question "Struggle with language—that's your purpose?" he states that "the obscene, the sublime, gibberish, the pontificatory, the purely narrative, the verbally threatening, the adjectivally nauseating" are all part of his own language and his artistic practice.[145] Freely admitting that he was a "keen accomplice and student in [his] own mental colonization," he explains that he "took to the English language as a duck takes to water" and never considered writing in Shona. However, it was "the shock of being suddenly struck by stuttering" that was "the undergrowth of [his] experimental use of English." Through the "agony" of stuttering, Marechera learned to "distrust language, a distrust necessary for a writer, especially one writing in a foreign language."[146] Stuttering gave Marechera the creative spark required to embark on his experimental writing career in a colonial language that actively estranged him from his Shona-speaking family.

Critic Robert Fraser upholds this view. At a formal level, Fraser identifies traces of the stutter "as a form of rupture, disturbing the flow of articulation," although it is the reader not the

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[144] Marc Shell, *Stutter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 7. Shell also notes "literary critique is useful in analyzing stuttering partly because the intellectual history of rhetorical terms … often matches the scholarly development of concomitant ideas in neurology" and he offers the examples of *palilalia* (involuntary repetition of words, phrases, or sentences) and *aposiopesis* (a form of ellipsis by which a speaker comes to an abrupt halt, seemingly overcome by passion [fear, excitement, etc.] or modesty)" (48, 245n166)

[145] Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book.*

[146] Veit-Wild.

listener who is confounded.[147] This resembles the practice that Gilles Deleuze has called "le bégaiement créateur" ("creative stuttering"), which is when a writer stutters in *language*, rather than stuttering in *speech*.[148] Deleuze distinguishes between the form of reported speech in writing (as in the formulation *bégaya-t-il* [he stuttered]) and the form of content he describes as "une qualité atmosphérique, un milieu conducteur de paroles ne recueillait pour son compte le tremblé, le murmuré, le bégayé, le trémelo, le vibrato, et ne réverbérait sur les mots l'affect indiqué" ("an atmospheric quality, a milieu that acts as the conductor of words—that brings together within itself the quiver, the murmur, the stutter, the tremolo, or the vibrato, and makes the indicated affect reverberate through the words").[149] Just as the incessantly rambling voices in the head of "House of Hunger" protagonist are captured by the meandering stream of consciousness, so too is the stilted speech mirrored in the fragmentary prose.

In his interview with himself, Marechera writes that his father's death at the age of 11 was "the beginning of [his] physical and mental insecurity" in which time he "stammered hideously for three years."[150] In *The House of Hunger*, the story "The Slow Sound of His Feet" dramatizes more extensively his parents' deaths in conjunction with the onset of the speech disorder and the

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[147] Robert Fraser, "The Slow Sound of His Tongue: Speech Impediments and Political Impediments in Marechera's Work," in *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*, ed. Flora Veit-Wild and A. J. Chennells (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999), 189.

[148] Gilles Deleuze, "Bégaya-t-Il...," in *Critique Et Clinique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1993), 140; Gilles Deleuze, "He Stuttered," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (New York: Verso, 1998), 111.

[149] Deleuze, "He Stuttered," 108; Deleuze, "Bégaya-t-Il...," 136. Deleuze makes the bold claim that only "bad novelists" resort to dialogic markers to "indicate different voice intonations" (p. 107).

[150] Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book*. Marechera contributed to his own mythologization as an author by frequently contradicting himself, inserting facts into his fiction-writing, and fictionalizing his autobiography in interviews, essays, and other recorded documents. On the subject of his stutter, he has offered several different etiologies that have confounded his critics. Although on this occasion he states that he was aged 11 when his father passed away, Marechera's editor and friend Flora Veit-Wild claims that he was in fact 13, and that he stuttered prior to his death. See Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* p. 48. Robert Fraser's article is concerned with ascertaining the truthfulness of the competing autobiographical narratives about his speech impediment. Also see Anna-Leena Toivanen, "'At the Receiving End of Severe Misunderstanding': Dambudzo Marechera's Representations of Authorship," *Research in African Literatures* 42, no. 1 (2011): 14–31.

postcolonial politics of voice in general. Like the centerpiece novella, the story is narrated in the first person by yet another author-alias. The ambiguous temporality distorts the ordering of events—the death of both his parents in quick succession and his stuttering—but it does make clear the link between violence and voicing. The story begins with a nightmare, interrupted by the news of his father's death:

> I dreamt last night that the Prussian surgeon Johann Friedrich Dieffenbach had decided that I stuttered because my tongue was too large; and he cut my large organ down to size by snipping off chunks from the tip and the sides. Mother woke me up to tell me that father had been struck down by a speeding car at the roundabout; I went to the mortuary to see him, and they had sewn back his head to the trunk and his eyes were open. (134)

Elsewhere, Marechera maintains that his stutter was an effect of the trauma of being forced against his will to view his father's body laid out at the mortuary. Here, his anxiety about the shape and function of his speech organ is preexisting. The narrator reports his dream indifferently, implying a willingness to undergo the surgeon's knife, so desperate is he for an escape from the "anguish of stuttering" (134). This image of the European doctor's oral mutilation, paired with his father's sutured cadaver, evokes the fetishization of African anatomy in colonial medical science.[151]

After the mortuary, the narrator imagines browsing his father's library which contains an improbably vast collection of material on speech disorders, including the American Oliver Bloodstein's 1969 *Handbook on Stuttering* and a prayer to cure stuttering carved on an ancient cuneiform tablet. He lists various historical figures from whom he has tried to borrow rudimentary folk cures, including Moses, Demosthenes, Aristotle, Prince Battus, Hippocrates, Celsus, Galen,

[151] Marechera refers to Dieffenbach, a nineteenth-century surgeon who condemned stuttering, called it "phonophobia," and sought to cure it with often disastrous surgical butchering methods. Connor, *Beyond Words*, 24–26.

and Francis Bacon.[152] In a series of phantasmagoric treatments, one diagnosed his tongue as "abnormally thick and hard" and another "forced [his] mouth open and stuck blistering substances to [his] tongue to drain away the dark fluid" (135). The darkly humorous and grotesque treatments have no effect.

The action cuts to the present, in which the narrator is stopped and searched by a white Rhodesian police officer. The officer harasses the narrator, muted by grief, before swinging a punch that knocks out his dentures. Despite his "overwhelming desire to move [his] jaws and force [his] tongue" he "only managed to croak out unintelligible sounds" (135). The speech impediment is manifested here as LaBelle describes it: when, on the "threshold of speech, the gap, the cavity" is "*haunted* by language."[153] The police encounter rapidly and inexplicably escalates, resulting in his mother being shot dead in gunfire, announced bluntly by the narrator: "Mother died in the ambulance. The sun was screaming soundlessly when I buried her" (136). The sun shares the muteness of the narrator and his sister—all silenced by mourning. While the sister covers her silent, open mouth with her hand, the narrator "could feel her straining her vocal muscles to scream through [his] mouth" (136). This fantastic, failed ventriloquization continues as he tries to make sense of the loss of his loved one.

> The room was so silent I could feel it trying to move its tongue and its mandibles, trying to speak to me. I was staring up at the wooden beams of the roof. I could hear my sister pacing up and down in her room which was next to mine. I could feel her strongly inside me. My room contained nothing but my iron bed, my desk, my books, and the canvases upon which I had for so long tried to paint the feeling of the silent but desperate voices inside me. (136)

[152] Fraser discusses these references at length in his article. "The Slow Sound of His Tongue: Speech Impediments and Political Impediments in Marechera's Work." Conner posits that the search for a cure for stuttering is "an attempt to bind up a wound in the idea of voice itself and thus an attempt to quarantine the freedom and life of the voice from the baseness and deathliness that can invade it." *Beyond Words*, 27.
[153] LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth*, 130.

The visions of his dead father are haunting, but it is the voices that truly drive him to distraction because they converge and vibrate in his body, rendering him effete and aphasic. He finds the "silent but desperate voices inside" overwhelming and un-representable, failing to transcribe them with ink in his books and failing to capture them in paint on his canvases.

The story does not offer a wholesome resolution. While the protagonist manages to banish the visions, his sister stays with him and he listens to her heavy breathing which mingles with his own; unlike the phantoms, "she was warm and alive and her very breath was painfully anxious in my voice" (137). As the scene and the story close, the pair is silently huddled together, listening to "the night making a muffled gibberish upon the roof" and "in the distance, the brass and distant strings of a military band" (137). This distant military band's music might be sweet-sounding, but it serves as a reminder of the presence of the colonial state. It is hardly a coincidence that the colonial agents in this short story are the only characters granted direct speech. After the dream about tongue surgery, comes the police officer's quickfire interrogation: "'Dumb, eh? … False teeth too, eh? … False identity too, eh?'" (135). At one point, the narrator hopelessly exclaims, "I had to speak!" (137) but the exclamation only draws attention to his voice's inaudibility in the face of medical pathologization and state regulation.

According to Christopher Eagle speech pathologies in modern literature are very often "'diagnosed' metaphorically as the symptom of some character flaw such as excessive nervousness or weakness, or treated as a symbol for the general tendency of language toward communicative breakdown, ambiguity, polysemy, misunderstanding."[154] For example from African literature, consider *Things Fall Apart.* Chinua Achebe begins his 1958 novel by stating that the hero

[154] Christopher Eagle, *Dysfluencies: On Speech Disorders in Modern Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 11.

Okonkwo is well known for his "solid personal achievements" and informing the reader of a tragic character flaw: "He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists."[155] Okonkwo's personality and masculinity are metaphorically compromised by the fact of his dysfluent speech, an indicator of his hot temper.[156]

The stuttering of Marechera's protagonist is not instrumentalized entirely in the aid of characterization. In *The House of Hunger*, however, Marechera tropes his stutterer less like a male protagonist overcoming his psychosexual blockage or fatal temper, but more as an embattled victim of historical circumstance (combined with his own artistic temperament). In my reading of the exemplary story "The Slow Sound of His Feet" I showed that the juxtaposition of the violent killing of the protagonist's parents with his tongue-tied affliction establishes the close association of violence, voice, and body under the sign of the grotesque. Marechera apparently recognizes that his speech is not inherently grotesque but deliberately figures screaming and stuttering as grotesque to convey the violent colonial conditions by which language and speaking is governed.

Sony Labou Tansi's Sonorous Tropicality

"Je fais éclater les mots," explains Sony Labou Tansi in an interview, "pour exprimer ma tropicalité : écrire mon livre me demandait d'inventer un lexique des noms capables par leur sonorité de rendre la situation tropicale" (I explode words to express my tropicality: writing my

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[155] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958; London: Heinemann, 1985), 1, 2.

[156] I am grateful to Ato Quayson for pointing out a significant moment later in the plot where Okonkwo's stammer determines his fatal decision making: "when he [Okonkwo] beheads the district commissioner's messenger close to the end, he does so against the background of his clan's meeting at the *ilo* (or marketplace) when various clan leaders make speeches weighing the pros and cons of taking the battle to the white man." See "Ato Quayson's Annotated Reading List: Books to Enrich Your Social Distancing," *African Studies Association Website* (blog), March 19, 2020, https://africanstudies.org/news/ato-quaysons-reading-list-books-to-enrich-your-time-social-distancing/?fbclid=IwAR3Kv3xjgDG_Pt_ZwbUtHjb4cSdQc7fgrbniGAVQCU8ZOagm5D9f3RUb2nY.

book called for the invention of a lexicon of names capable of conveying the tropical condition through their sonority).[157] Sony Labou Tansi's *tropicality* evokes a geographical attachment to the equatorial region and an aesthetic sensibility rooted in a hot and humid climate. The neologism is also reminiscent of the Brazilian cultural movement *Tropicalismo* movement that flourished in the 1960s, although the literary instantiation has a much longer legacy stretching back to *Antropofagia* of the 1920s. I would underscore Sony Labou Tansi's point that tropicality is a condition that is best captured through the sound of words—newly invented words but also the play of words through homophony, alliteration, rhyme, repetition, dissonance, and double-entendre. The word tropical and its derivatives are scattered throughout his fiction, but its meaning is intentionally left ambiguous. In *La Vie et demie* it refers simultaneously to sex acts, to genitals, to tomfoolery, and to excessive emotion (*VD*, 58, 60, 169, 182, 184). Georges Ngal defines Sony Labou Tansi's tropicality as a use of language that is "volontairement ambigü, éclaté, distendu, se référant volontiers à une polysémie (des mots détournés de leur sens habituel) et une luxuriance pour lesquelles l'univers tropical lui fournit métaphores et symboles" (deliberately ambiguous, shattered, stretched out, with deliberate polysemic referentiality [the usual meaning of words twisted] and a richness with which the tropical universe provides metaphors and symbols).[158] Ngal's interpretation gets to the heart of the playful irreverence of Sony Labou Tansi's writing without accounting for his recourse to the sonorous. In the analysis that follows I show how Sony Labou Tansi indexes sonorous tropicality with grotesque lexical and thematic invention.

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[157] Ngal, "Les tropicalités de Sony Labou Tansi," 135.

[158] Ngal, 137. Ngal also helpfully points out that some of Sony Labou Tansi's syntactical creativity is in fact just direct translation from Kikongo. This is the case of the phrase "mourir la mort" (*VD,* 13, 86) derived from the Kikong "kufwa lufwa" (to die this death) and the phase "dormir la femme" (*L'Etat honteux*, 52) derived from "kulala nkento" (to sleep with a woman).

In a testament to the richness of his novels, critics have described them variously as baroque,[159] magical realist,[160] science fiction,[161] and of course grotesque.[162] As Jean Michel Devésa's research shows, Sony Labou Tansi's commercial success with Seuil was largely determined by the Parisian publishers' initial recognition of his manuscript's resemblance of to the work of magical realist writers along the same tropical line of latitude over in Latin America. However, the generic category magical realism has also significantly narrowed the interpretive possibilities for *La Vie et demie* and his other works because, as Lydie Moudileno has argued, it tethers the novel to an anthropological conception of African cultural authenticity.[163] Magical realism partially follows the modernist tradition of primitivism in literature, which maintains expressionist ideals of immediacy and raw nature.[164] Although I am wary of the market principles that steer a category like magical realism—and in turn trap authors in an uncritical myopic framework of reading—I find it impossible to ignore the performance of the primitive in Sony Labou Tansi's fiction. But I approach Sony Labou Tansi's fiction as precisely that: *tropicality* as a primitive performance of the grotesque, an act of strategic essentialism, rather than the belief in channeling a primal feeling.

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[159] Mahougnon Kakpo, "*La vie et demie*. L'Archaïque et le Baroque dans le roman négro-africain d'expression française," in *Littératures francophones: langues et styles*, ed. Papa Samba Diop (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), 107–17; Lucy Stone McNeece, "Black Baroque: Sony Lab'ou Tansi (1941–1995)," *Sites: The Journal of Twentieth-Century/Contemporary French Studies Revue d'études Français* 3, no. 1 (1999): 127–43.
[160] Georges Ngal, *Création et Rupture en Littérature Africaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994).
[161] Lydie Moudileno, "Magical Realism: 'Arme Miraculeuse' for the African Novel?," *Research in African Literatures* 37, no. 1 (2006): 28–41.
[162] Julien, *African Novels and the Question of Orality,* 138–9.
[163] Lydie Moudileno, *Parades postcoloniales : la fabrication des identités dans le roman congolais* (Paris: Karthala, 2006), 76–9.
[164] Literary primitivism, Ben Etherington argues, "had two key preconditions: the manifestation of an anguished world-historical consciousness that perceived that the conditions of possibility for primitive experience had been eliminated, and a pervasive belief in the capacity of aesthetic practice to revive the remnants of 'primitive' social realities." While Etherington studies literature from the first half of the twentieth century, Sony Labou Tansi is located in these conditions. Through his appropriation of the French language, he sought to revive Kikongo linguistic structures and theatrical principles among other aspects. Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 162.

La Vie et demie (1979), *L'Etax honteux* (1981), and *Les Septs solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* (1985) are all set in fictitious African countries governed by outlandish despots that resemble Congo-Brazzaville.[165] They dramatize the extravagance and absurdity of authoritarianism through fantastic representations of their regimes of censorship, surveillance, torture and execution. Sony Labou Tansi insists that his aim is not so much to criticize specific African presidents and their abuses of power, but rather to expose the condition of living in proximity to death, which is so prevalent in Africa because of its colonial past; or, as he puts it quite succinctly, he exposes a world in which "le mort vit avec ses vivants" (death lives among the living).[166] Before discussing some of the pivotal scenes that consolidate his use of *tropicality* as a grotesque sound figure across his novels, I will comment on the recurrence of sonic references in Sony Labou Tansi's paratextual frames.

In the preface to his first novel *La Vie et demie*, Sony Labou Tansi stated his intention to speak in "chair-mots-de-passe" (*VD* 9; flesh-passwords 3), an image that viscerally evokes the function of the body in the phonic production of words. It also prepares the reader for the brutal first scene of the novel. Sony Labou Tansi acknowledges the inherent risks of rehearsing time-worn racist tropes about "tropical" Africa:

> Et à l'intention des amateurs de la couleur locale qui m'accuseraient d'être cruellement tropical et d'ajouter de l'eau au moulin déjà inondé des racistes, je tiens à préciser que *La Vie et demie* fait ces taches que la vie seulement fait. (*VD* 10)
>
> And for those who love local color, who will accuse me of being savagely tropical, and of adding grist to the mill already brimming with racists, I wish to make clear that *Life and a Half* leaves only the sort of stains made by life itself. (3)

[165] These novels were published successively and while the plots are not exactly sequential, they deal with the same subjects and themes. His third published novel *L'Anti-peuple* (1983) was actually written before all the others in the 1970s. Most of his plays share these thematic concerns.
[166] Bernard Magnier, "Un Citoyen de ce siècle (interview with Sony Labou Tansi)," *Équateur* 1 (1986): 14.

Sony Labou Tansi defends his depiction of the tropical by claiming to merely convey reality's own blemishes. In the *Avertissement* for his next novel *L'Etat honteux*, Sony Labou Tansi declares his intention in vocal terms: "j'écris, ou je crie, un peu pour forcer le monde à venir au monde" (*EH* n.p.; One could say that I write, or rather that I cry out, as a way of forcing the world into the world, n.p.). As with the Négritude poets before him, Sony Labou Tansi's cry is a mode of textual amplification. He further rejects the "honte d'appeler les choses par leur nom" (shame of calling things by their name). Elsewhere, Sony Labou Tansi has claimed that "en tant qu'écrivain, [son] travail consiste à nommer"[167] (as a writer, [his] work involves naming) and, as I noted earlier, in the preface to *Les Septs solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* he links naming and screaming:

> Dans ce livre, j'exige un autre centre du monde, d'autres excuses de nommer, d'autres manières de respire. . . […] Mon écriture sera plutôt criée qu'écrite simplement, ma vie elle-même sera plutôt râlée, beuglée, bougée, que vécue simplement. (*SS* n.p.)
>
> In this book, I argue that there should another centre of the world, that there should be other reasons for naming things, other ways of breathing. . . […] My writing will be shouted rather than simply written down, my life itself will consist of groans and screams and being pushed around, and never being allowed simply to live. (n.p.)

I understand Sony Labou Tansi's political and aesthetic project, as he lays it out here, as a fundamentally decolonial one. By repurposing French—that is, by turning the written language into a shouted one—he effectively forces his way into the world. For Sony Labou Tansi, guttural phonics undermine the logic and order of spoken language, reminding speakers how meaning always teeters on the edge of nonsense.

But what does a shouted version of French look like in Sony Labou Tansi's prose? If in *The House of Hunger* Marechera dramatizes the acquisition of the English language through his protagonist's struggle with speech dysfluency, then in Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et demie* the

[167] "Sony Labou Tansi face à douze mots : une sélection de Ifé Orisha," *Équateur* 1 (1986): 31.

French language is challenged through the author's own lexical and stylistic invention. In this way, screaming is grotesquely rendered in the context of its *tropicality*. "Martial, sois raisonnable. Tu deviens plus infernal que moi," the Guide implores on one occasion, "Cesse d'être tropical" (*VD,* 58; Come on, Martial! Be reasonable. […] Stop being tropical, Martial, 39). Elsewhere, *tropicality* is an affective excess that cannot otherwise be figured linguistically: another character bemoans "ce type-là est encore tropical" (VD, 169; that guy is still tropical, 118).

At the center of *Lorsa Lopez* is the question of who listens to the screamers. The novel begins with a foundational act of gendered violence when the titular anti-hero Lorsa Lopez murders his wife Estina Benta but none of the townspeople in Nsanga Norda hear he pleas for help. As one of the characters observes, only the women really hear her: "La pauvre criait à l'aide, et nous entendions, estompée par les beuglements de l'autre, sa voix à elle comme du temps où elle chantait au Conservatoire: 'A moi, à l'aide : il me tue.'" (*SS*, 28; The poor woman called for help, and we heard her voice, nearly drowned by her husband's bellowing, as in the days when she sang at the conservatoire: 'Help me! He's killing me!', 11). There is a dark irony in the fact that the town collectively ignores Estina Benta's cries because of the overshadowing noise made by the ocean's waves constantly crashing against the cliffs nearby. The earth here is personified as it enunciates "une longue série de plaintes, de gargouillements lugubres, une sorte de gargarisme convulsif à l'intérieur des rocs, que même la mer sembla écouter un moment" (*SS*, 13; a long succession of groans and mournful rumbles, a kind of convulsive gurgling form inside the rocks, to which even the sea seemed momentarily to listen, 1). A 200-strong commission of white men is set up to understand "le cri de la falaise" (*SS,* 51; the cry of the cliff face, 27) but their scientific efforts prove futile. Estina Benta's cries echo throughout the novel, but they are ineffectual compared with the expectorating cliffs and Lopez's constantly chirping parrot who tries to give

away his secrets. These cries—sometimes nonsensical, sometimes symbolic—provide the social framework of a novel that portrays a country struggling to reconcile its own *tropicality* with the position it tries to establish for itself in the global order.

Akin to Glissant's notion of *la langue criée* (screamed language), Sony Labou Tansi's *écriture criée* or (screamed writing) confronts two paradoxes. The first is epistemological. In the dedication to *Les Septs solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* Sony Labou Tansi notes that Africa is frequently understood as "la civilization de la parole" (*SS,* n.p.; the civilization of the spoken word). Yet, he makes a contrary observation: "Je constate tout le contraire : nous sommes vraiment la civilization du silence. Un silence métissé" (*SS,* n.p.; I have observed the exact opposite: we are in fact the civilization of silence. A mulatto silence). Sony Labou Tansi's abstruse provocation here refers to the way that Africa is bound to orality but simultaneously the continent's contributions to the global production of knowledge have been silenced.

The second paradox is a formal one and pertains directly to the status of Sony Labou Tansi's texts. As novels, they hopelessly attempt to inscribe sonic phenomena on the silent page. Fellow Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou recalls that Sony Labou Tansi's novels published abroad were too expensive for many Brazzaville residents in the 1980s and with library copies constantly checked out by avid readers, his books were difficult to obtain. Despite popularity, the novels did not lend themselves easily to public, oral performance. According to Mabanckou, Sony Labou Tansi's fans preferred to copy the novel out by hand in notebooks to share with friends.[168] As novels, these texts remained firmly inscribed in and circulated in the realm of textual silence—

[168] Alain Mabanckou, *Le monde est mon langage* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2016), 99–111.

a necessity perhaps for such novels that overtly parodied the Congolese government, but a poignant irony for a novel so pervasively sonorous.

Some further historical contextualization can help us understand Sony Labou Tansi's turn to *le cri* in conceptualizing his literary practice. The late 1970s and '80s saw a rise in systematic shouting by *atalaku*, sometimes called *animateurs* (emcees), in popular music performances in Kinshasa and Brazzaville. As musicologist Bob W. White explains, early *atalaku* such as Nono and Bébé Atalaku would "create and string together the seemingly random series of short percussive phrases known as 'shouts'" in order to establish a lively ambiance for dancing.[169] In Lingala "atalaku" means roughly "look at me" and, by many accounts, is derived from the work done by the performative aids who introduced and supported politicians, "bringing to life" their appearances in public. In his essay "Variations on the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds," Mbembe draws a direct link between the "renewed cycle of violence and a militarization of everyday life" in the Congo in that decade and the "willingness to blur distinctions between sound and noise and, in the process, to join art to the world of screams."[170] For Mbembe, it is no coincidence that disorder, cacophony, ugliness, and abjection became new aesthetic criteria for the popular music of this era of acute political instability:

> The spectacle of bloodshed and dismemberment that was Congo became the spectacle of the song. Such is the source of the screams, cries, moans and groans—all forms of utterance that resist language—which litter Congolese music at the close of 20th century. And so the scream, like melody, rhythm and percussion, becomes a bridge between pain and its expression as language.[171]

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[169] Bob W. White, *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 58.
[170] Achille Mbembe, "Variations on the Beautiful in the Congolese World of Sounds," *Politique Africaine*, no. 100 (June 2005): 79, 81.
[171] Mbembe, 87.

Whereas Scarry maintains that pain breaks down language, Mbembe posits that language is an eventual outcome of pain first "bridged" by the scream. Part of the success of musicians like Papa Wemba, Quartier Latin, and Koffi Olomide is that they drive over the bridge from pain (physical, political, emotional, and so on) to language (actual language and the language of music).

In the same way, Sony Labou Tansi embraces the scream as an organizing logic—or unreason—for his writing. He has described in an interview the "painful circumstances" under which he wrote *La Vie et demie*. The wrongful prosecution of innocent friends for the assassination of President Marien Ngouabi in 1977 so upset so upset Sony Labou Tansi that he set out to write a fable on the bloody game of Congolese politics.[172] This additionally confirms Nganang's suggestion that *le cri affamé* is the only adequate figure with which to follow in the wake of political and human disaster. While there is not enough evidence to suggest that Sony Labou Tansi was directly influenced by new trends in Congolese music, I submit that the same underlying social situation that solicited the transformation of Congolese rumba also shaped the novelist's style.

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La Vie et demie chronicles the misrule of the fictional Katamanalasia by successive authoritarian presidents and military generals beginning with the bloody reign of the Providential Guide. Sony Labou Tansi provides a portrait of the Guide as a megalomaniac, a rapist, a killer, a cannibal—and he performs all his vices shamelessly and extravagantly. The novel begins *in media res* with a startling scene that captures the essence of the horrible violence the Guide unleashes so casually. The Guide takes a break from his dinner to personally execute a handful of dissidents with the same knife he has been using to carve his steak—they are all the same meat to him. Among

[172] David Applefield, "Interview: Speaking with Sony Labou Tansi," trans. Tanya Leslie, *Frank: An International Journal of Contemporary Writing and Art*, no. 14 (1993): 93–4.

the dissidents referred to in dehumanizing terms is the leader's political rival Martial who refuses to die with a single stab of the knife:

> [I]l enfonçait des bouts des phrases obscènes au fond de chaque geste. La loque-père [Martial] fut bientôt coupée en deux à l'hauteur du nombril, les tripes tombèrent avec le bas du corps, le haut du corps restait là, flottant dans l'air amer, avec la bouche saccagée qui répétait la phrase. (*VD* 14)
>
> He added obscene fragments of speech to every slash of his sword. The rag-father [Martial] was quickly cut in half at the height of his navel, his guts fell down with the lower half of his body; the upper half stayed put, floating in the acrid air, its mangled mouth repeating the same phrase. (7)

The spectacular disembowelment is coupled with the executioner's "obscene" utterances and the victim's repetition of the phrase "Je ne veux pas mourir cette mort" (I do not want to die this death). Eventually, the Providential Guide resolves to kill Martial with Champagne:

> Il versa le contenu du verre dans la bouche ouverte de la loque-père, liquide traversa la gorge, sortit par le trou du couteau, coula le long du torse nu, vint se mêler aux torchons de viande déchiquetée avant de s'égoutter comme un faux sang sur le sol carrelé. Le Guide Providentiel attendit, il y eut un long silence, puis la voix sortit, moitié par la bouche, moitié par la blessure du couteau. (*VD* 15–6)
>
> He poured the contents of the glass into the open mouth of the rag-father. The liquid went down his throat, exited though the knife hole, ran down the length of his nude torso, and mixed with the mess of scraps of meat before falling in drops like fake blood on the tile floor. The Providential Guide waited. A long silence passed, then the voiced emerged, partly through the mouth and partly from the knife wound. (8)

The mouth is the locus of violence here, just as in Marechera's protagonist's nightmare about tongue mutilation in *The House of Hunger*. The Guide's successor, Jean-Cœur-de-Père, also deals with dissent from Layisho by cutting out his tongue (*VD* 84 / 57). Martial, "refuses" death by emitting a voice from his wound and ensuring he is heard even after life.

Martial's dying words "Je ne veux pas mourir cette mort" are reprinted numerous times throughout the text as a hauntingly grotesque sound figure. They *audibly* haunt his killer's ears and *textually* haunt him too as the sentence appears in black ink on bedsheets, bodies, books, and

so on. Sony Labou Tansi suggests that violent speech are indelible. Martial's mantra of refusal inspires his daughter Chaïdana to continue his revolt with songs, screams and stories (*VD* 76, 52). The novel plots these protests and the state's repressive response. Before long, "toute la production artistique de la Katamalanasie entra dans la clandestinité" (*VD* 79; all artistic creation in Katamalanasia became clandestine activity, 53) and "les mots ne disaient plus ce que disent les mots, juste ce que voulaient les hommes qui les prononçaient" (*VD* 83; words no longer said what words said—only what the men who pronounced the words wanted said, 56).

The wordplay in Sony Labou Tansi's novels points to the slipperiness of signifiers which can be destroyed, reconstructed, or replaced. When words no longer say what they *say*, language is paired down to its pre-linguistic, asemantic phonic materiality or, put differently, language is reduced to a grotesque scream. *La Vie et demie* problematizes meddling of governments in this process. Serigne Ndiaye describes this as the "emptiness" of totalitarian discourse.[173] State censorship, the novel suggests, is a bid to control which words "count." As Eileen Julien explains, "officially sanctioned speech in Katamalanasia is characterized by inclusion and exclusion, by the use of slogans and by a corollary suppression of individual speech acts of original (nonapproved) content. The language act is distorted further because the state accords to itself alone the privilege of interpreting meaning."[174]

These critics have shown that the postcolony's political contestation is played out in language *in general*. However, my concern is how this contestation occurs specifically in the realm of the sonorous. In *L'Etax honteux,* this concept is literalized when the President Martillimi

[173] Serigne Ndiaye, "Dictatorship and the Emptiness of the Rhetoric of Totalitarian Discourse in Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et Demie*," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 2 (2003): 112–26, https://doi.org/10.1353/ral.2003.0040.
[174] Julien, "Dominance and Discourse in *La Vie et Demie* or How to Do Things with Words," 373.

Lopez—outraged by his subjects' "honteuse habitude de tourner le bouton pendant que [il] parle" (the shameful habit of turning the dial when [he] speaks)—installs loudspeakers in every neighborhood to ensure that he is able "vers[er] les discours de [sa] hernie dans les oreilles de [son] people" (*EH,* 21–2; to pour [his] hernia's speeches in the ears of [his] people). Later in *L'Etat honteux*, the megalomaniac president excises the tongues of his political opponents. His farcical speeches echo in the stadium where they are delivered and further projected across the country by loudspeakers, while a parrot translates them into birdsong (*SS* 16-19, 33)

Lydie Moudileno offers some insightful analysis of the use of the third-person pronoun *on* in *La Vie et demie,* which she argues signals the collective speech of "le petit peuple" (*VD,* 57; the little people). The techniques of figuring plural voices such as this are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. Moudileno points out that "noise speaks" in the novel, often standing in for a counter-discourse to the state's official megaphone, but ultimately both "sides" of the contest counterintuitively make everything noise.[175] Sony Labou Tansi's fiction is informed by and intervenes in postcolonial language politics. For instance, he has spoken out unequivocally about the psychic violence of the former colonizers' language in his part of the world: "J'écris en français parce que c'est dans cette langue-là que le peuple dont je témoigne a été violé, c'est dans cette langue-là que moi-même j'ai été violé" (I write in French because it's the language in which the people I speak for were raped, it's the language in which I myself was raped).[176] From these violent origins, Sony Labou Tansi has manipulated the French language in what has been described as

[175] Lydie Moudileno, "Labou Tansi's *La Vie et Demie*, or the Tortuous Path of the Fable," trans. Pim Higginson, *Research in African Literatures* 29, no. 3 (1998): 30.
[176] "Sony Labou Tansi face à douze mots : une sélection de Ifé Orisha," 30.

"literary recombination" by Sylvain Bemba and "rejuvenation" by Georges Ngal.[177] Dominic Thomas, for his part, calls it "revenge against a language with which both Sony Labou Tansi and his people have enjoyed a relationship that is itself defined by violence."[178] To call Sony Labou Tansi's method "wordplay" as I have done is risky since it reinforces the notion of leisure behind the word "play," rather than the forceful nature of discipline through which he entered the language.[179] However, Jacques Derrida's claim in *Le Monolingualisme de l'autre* that all language and all mother tongues are "colonial" might be a useful counterpoint to Sony Labou Tansi here.[180]

There is a sequence in *La Vie et demie* in which Sony Labou Tansi presents the problem of language acquisition *in general*, as related to coloniality and the recognition of otherness. In the fourth chapter, Martial and Chaïdana Layisho escape to a forest where time passes in its own mystical way. Through listening, the pair gradually learns "la science de la forêt" (*VD* 93; the science of the forest, 63). At first, however, their ears are not receptive to the sounds of nature:

> Le bruit des gouttes de pluie sur les feuilles a quelque chose d'affolant. Il fatigue les nerfs. Martial Layisho et Chaïdana se bouchaient les oreilles, mais le monde du silence était aussi affolant que celui du tac tac des gouttes d'eau sur les feuilles. […] Ils essayaient parfois d'écouter la chorale des bêtes sauvages, la symphonie sans fond de mille insectes, ils essayaient d'écouter les odeurs de la forêt comme on écoute une belle musique. Mais ils apercevaient que l'existence ne devient existence que lorsqu'il y a avait présence en forme de complicité. (*VD* 88-89)
>
> The noise of raindrops on leaves was almost terrifying. It got on their nerves. Martial Layisho and Chaïdana plugged their ears, but the world of silence was just as terrifying as the drip drip sounds of water on leaves. […] Sometimes they tried to listen to the chorus of wild beasts, that endless symphony of a thousand insects. They tried to listen to the odors

[177] Sylvain Bemba, "Sony Labou Tansi et moi," *Équateur* 1 (1986): 50; Georges Ngal, "Style, sens et non-sens chez Sony Labou Tansi," in *Littératures francophones: langues et styles*, ed. Papa Samba Diop (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), 101–5.
[178] Thomas, *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa*, 88.
[179] Sony Labou Tansi recalls "a terrible practice known as the 'Symbol'" at his first French-language school, which involved hanging "a tin full of shit" around the neck of anyone who made grammatical errors in French. See Applefield, "Interview: Speaking with Sony Labou Tansi," 91.
[180] Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre : ou la prothese d'origine*.

> of the forest like one listens to beautiful music. But they realized that existence didn't exist until some form of complicity was present. (66)

The two urbanites also resist learning the apparently grotesque language from "là-bas" (back there)—the Batsoua language that they refer to as the language of the Pygmies. When they first encounter the Pygmy group, their language is described as "un ruisseau de sons fous" (*VD* 91; a river of crazy sounds, 62) flowing in their ears. One of the group assists their assimilation, although they find his name unpronounceable: "un son que les jumeaux n'arrivaient pas à saisir pour de bon : quelque chose comme Kabayahasho, ou Tabaaasheu ou Pabahayasha" (*VD* 91; a sound that the twins couldn't clearly make out: something like Kabayahasho, or Tabaaasheu or Pabahayasha, 62). They get around the problem of pronouncing "le diable de nom" (the devil of a name) by adding their own syllables. By re-naming Kapahacheu (it emerges that this is his "real" name), they re-enact a kind of settler-colonial violence.

The adventure in the forest has a strange place in the narrative of the *La Vie et demie*.[181] First, consider the way that Sony Labou Tansi subverts Western anthropological approaches to Pygmies such as Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People* (1961). Turnbull's account of the BaMbuti (pygmy people) of the Ituri forest in northeast Congo is a kind of acoustic ethnography in which he describes the soundscape as "outsiders" perceive it: "a cascade of sound that echoes among the giant trees until it seems to come at you from all sides in sheer beauty and truth and goodness, full of the joy of living."[182] In the Congolese novel, the parody of these approaches seeks to stage the hierarchies of otherness internal to Africa, with the twins from the city fetishizing the indigenous

[181] The fantastic forests in the fiction of Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola come to mind in reading such passages: "dans le cerveau de Chaïdana, la forêt se fit, la forêt et ses enchevêtrements farouches, la forêt et ses odeurs, ses musiques, ses cris, ses magies, ses brutalité, ses formes, ses ombres et ses lumières, ses torturantes ardeurs" (VD, 100; the forest took hold of Chaïdana's brain, the forest and its wild entanglements, the forest and its odors, its music, its cries, its tormenting passions, 68).

[182] Colin Turnbull, *The Forest People* (1961; London: Pimlico, 1993), 18.

group's "primitive" status and the enchantment of the unknown forest territory. What's striking here is how the space and the people are recognizable as "other" through sound. Kapahacheu introduces indigenous knowledge to them, sharing information about the medicinal properties of different tree saps, including ones that can steal and restore the powers of speech or render the consumer deaf (*VD,* 100; 68). Much later, Martial Layisho and Chaïdana discover a strange device in the same forest clearing: "la pierre qui gardait les voix et les sons depuis des milliard d'années"(*VD,* 89; the stone that preserved voices and sounds dating back millions of years, 61). The forest's organic audio recording technology in the form of a mysteriously simple rock protects the indigenous sounds against erosion but in its form as a raw material it risks extraction. Small details such as this engrain Sony Labou Tansi's sonorous *tropicality* in *La Vie et demie*.

Chaïdana stays among the Pygmies for long enough to start learning their language, a process that challenges urban tongue. She first describes the language as acoustically unintelligible and slowly discovers the muscular effort required as she senses the foreign words in her oral cavity: "Ici : comme j'ai du mal à dire ce mot. Je le trouve dur. Trop dur pour moi. On dirait qu'il va m'arracher des morceaux de gorge" (*VD* 97; Here—it's been so difficult for me to say this word. It sounds harsh to me. Too harsh for me. It feels like it will rip out pieces of my throat, 66). The passage about Chaïdana's language-learning—and more broadly the chapter set in the forest—resonate with the experience of Marechera's protagonist's obsessive concern with the guttural phonics of English that come to control his psyche. In *The House of Hunger,* I observed that the narrator's English lessons are cast as a distinctly sounded process of colonial self-alienation exacerbated by the speech dysfluency. Here in *La Vie et demie*, Chaïdana's encounter with the indigenous forest language parodies that process by projecting the new language and attendant worldview onto the so-called primitive. Ultimately, the figuring of primitive and tropical sounds

as grotesque in Sony Labou Tansi's novels satirizes the colonial ears that would hear African languages as unintelligible sonic matter and, furthermore, it challenges the aesthetic tone of African literature.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a brief history of the scream, which revealed how that emblematic grotesque sound figure has been embraced for its purchase of expressive immediacy of anguish in a range of modernist arts, including visual, musical, and literary works. I pointed out the black scream's prominence in critical thought and artistic practice both in Africa and the African diaspora, underscoring the racist legacy of colonial ears that interpret African speech as asemantic and dissonant. This perspective guided my tracing of screams alongside a host of other grotesque sound figures—including howls, cries, stutters, gibberish, roars, groans, cackles—in experimental writing by Marechera and Sony Labou Tansi. Through my examination of these figures, I responded to literary criticism that draws on Bakhtin's and Mbembe's theories of the grotesque and suggested a better critical appreciation of the way that voices are self-consciously rendered "ugly." I argued that this strategy was adopted by the Zimbabwean and Congolese author as a challenge to colonial conceptions of the African voice as illegible, disabled, or repulsive. In doing so, the two authors also mounted a challenge to the aesthetic terms of expressivity and affect by which African literature is judged.

My comparison of these two authors was warranted by a close thematic resemblance and the chronological coincidence. Both men began their writing careers in the late 1970s, and although I refer to both as "postcolonial" writers they worked in distinct national-historical cadres.

Marechera often invoked his Anglophone African predecessors and although he was eager to mention his love of European literature in translation, he had little to say about African authors writing in other languages. The same goes for Sony Labou Tansi who positioned himself as a Francophone writer. Stylistically, the pair both make extensive use of irony and dark humor, inscribing a tonal similarity between their texts. However, as my close readings reveal, they activate grotesque sound figures with distinctive textual strategies. For instance, while the form of Marechera's novella replicates the speech dysfluency that he thematizes, Sony Labou Tansi renders his voices grotesque through lexical inventiveness that includes puns, neologisms, and other wordplay.

CHAPTER 2

Resisting Echoes: Memory, Resonance, and Acoustemology in Yvonne Vera's Historical Fiction

Introduction

In the middle of her historical novel about township life in colonial Zimbabwe *Butterfly Burning,* the author Yvonne Vera imagines what it would have been like for the young protagonist Phephelaphi to hear *kwela* music for the very first time. The hybrid Southern African jazz style kwela was newly emergent in regional townships in the 1940s, and Phephelaphi's first encounter with it at a shebeen, or unlicensed tavern, late one night is typical of the period. In the pivotal scene, Phephelaphi realizes a "far-flung desire" and discovers the "solitary echo" of her late mother in the music. The memory of her mother Gertrude is embodied in kwela's "mournful tune" which "has no beginning at all, just a presence which makes Phephelaphi feel she has heard this song before, that she has lived and breathed in it."[183] Phephelaphi's act of remembering is activated by listening to this strangely familiar music while the memory itself is sonically instantiated on the page as an echo. The passage exemplifies how Vera's texts record the sounds of the past in a process best described as *historical acoustemology*—that is, the study of how and why people heard in the past and what meaning was assigned to their sounds and silences.[184] This chapter

[183] Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (1998; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 66. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

[184] The term "acoustemology" first coined by ethnomusicologist Steven Feld in the 1990s marries *acoustics* and *epistemology* to invite scholars to think about how sounds produce knowledge. More recently, historians such as Karin Bijsterveld and Mark M. Smith who study sounds of the past in order to understand history undertake what they call "historical acoustemology."

identifies the literary techniques Vera develops for merging historical sound and embodied memory in her fiction. I submit that these techniques are sound figures to be called *echoes*.

In the previous chapter, I considered writing that championed the scream as a sound figure for expressive immediacy. My analysis showed how the scream figured Marechera's and Sony Labou Tansi's frantic grasp for language, a grasp sometimes came out aphasic or excessive. By contrast, this chapter is concerned with a slower, more measured sound figure interpreted across the distance of time. Consonant with this dissertation's examination of textual figurations of embodied and material sound, the close readings in Chapter Two attend to the relevant imagery, motifs, and narrative devices Vera uses to convey echoes.

Throughout her five novels, the Zimbabwean-born author transcribes the resonance of her country's colonial and postcolonial history. This chapter evaluates two of those novels. The first is her 1993 debut *Nehanda*, a short novel about the role of the spirit medium Mbuya Nehanda in the 1896-7 rebellion by the Shona people against British colonization, an episode also known as the First *Chimurenga*.[185] The sonic and ecological imagery employed in the novel's abstract rendering of ancestral spirit possession practices amplify the ongoing cultural and political significance of the heroine in Zimbabwe—a phenomenon I refer to as *anticolonial resonance.* Vera thus replaces the dominant masculinist, visual tropes of representing Mbuya Nehanda with a feminist, acoustic representation that prizes the ability of sound to capture collective memory. Next, I analyze Vera's novelistic animation of the sound world of a different period of Zimbabwean history, the 1940s, in her fourth novel *Butterfly Burning* (1998). The novel is equally dedicated to plotting the main character Phephelaphi's fitful pursuit of self-determination and to

[185] Yvonne Vera, *Nehanda* (1993; Toronto: Tsar, 2007). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

orchestrating the city of Bulawayo's Makokoba township through the perception of migrants and musicians. In *Butterfly Burning,* Vera shifts away from the ecological imagery of *Nehanda*, adopting instead a mechanical lexicon that is better suited to the communication of the sounds of railways, manual labor, and township music. Here, as with the first novel, Vera presents her characters as privileged historical listeners and invites her readers to appreciate the mnemonic function of echoing sound.

The next section situates my argument within the existing criticism on Vera and discusses some of the methods and theories for the study of historical sound in her writing. Laying down the groundwork for my exploration of the sound figure of the echo, I put African feminist literary criticism and historiography into conversation with sounds studies, especially anthropologists' and historians' work on the human senses. The chapter proceeds with analysis of *Nehanda* and *Butterfly Burning* in turn. Close readings of the two texts are accompanied by historical contextualization of the fictionalized periods: the 1890s and the 1940s. Reading the two novels together, I illustrate how the trope of anticolonial resonance bears upon Zimbabwean history and, concordantly, how authors like Vera resist the echoing of violent colonial and patriarchal pasts. I conclude that Vera's writing pushes the auditory threshold of national history by *embodying* rather than *preserving* past sounds.

Past Sound, Present Text

Yvonne Vera (1964–2005) hails from the city of Bulawayo and is recognized as one of Zimbabwe's most prolific English-language writers, alongside Marechera.[186] She taught in high school before moving to Toronto, Canada in 1987 where she earned degrees leading to a PhD in English literature with a thesis on African prison writing. Returning to Zimbabwe in 1997, Vera served as Director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo. In her short career, during which she published five novels, a collection of short stories, a handful of other essays and short writing, Vera won numerous awards including the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and Swedish PEN's Tucholsky Prize for persecuted writers.[187] The extant criticism has demonstrated the way that Vera provides alternative versions of the official history enshrined in colonial archives, centered on male agency, or controlled by party politics. Critics such as Paul Zeleza, Kizito Z. Muchemwa and Grace A. Musila have highlighted the relationship between history, orality and women's stories in her fiction.[188] In keeping with this dissertation's larger aim to shift the critical approach from orality to sound, the present chapter builds on previous scholarship on the oral dimensions of Vera's writing in order to assess how the twin sonic concepts of echo and resonance are embedded with multiple meanings.

There is no doubt that the pages of Vera's writing ripple with voices of the past, especially those that would be muted. First, we might turn our ears to the voices of the women protagonists

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[186] Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac state that Marechera showed "passionate, complex loyalty to his nation, speaking out like Yvonne Vera after him against torture and the desecration of vulnerability." "Introduction: Writing against Blindness," in *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture*, ed. Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac (Harare: Weaver Press, 2005), xix.

[187] For more about Vera's life, see the biography and essays collected by the author's mother Ericah Gwetai, *Petal Thoughts: Yvonne Vera, a Biography* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 2008); Ranka Primorac, "Obituary: Yvonne Vera (1964-2005)," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40, no. 3 (2005): 149–52.

[188] Kizito Muchemwa, "Language, Voice, and Presence in *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*," in Muponde and Maodzwa-Taruvinga, 3–14; Grace Musila, "Embodying Experience and Agency in Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning*," *Research in African Literatures* 38, no. 2 (2007): 49–63; Paul Zeleza, "Colonial Fictions: Memory and History in Yvonne Vera's Imagination," *Research in African Literatures* 38, no. 2 (2007): 9–21.

of the two texts studied closely in this chapter. In *Nehanda*, the titular character's "tiny speech-seeking voice" is established as a consistent motif for spiritual authority over nature as it grows into a "lashing tongue" that "knocks words out of sheltering rocks" (11, 74). Similarly, in *Butterfly Burning*, the protagonist's desire for autonomy is thematized as a search for "a melody of her own" (101); the search for that elusive melody forms a central part of the plot. Striking examples are to be found in her other novels. The narrative of *Under the Tongue* (1996) takes the form of a dialogue between the protagonist Zhizha and her grandmother who must teach her to regain speech since she became mute following her rape. Both this novel and *Without a Name* (1994) resound with the 1970s Zimbabwean war of Independence. Meanwhile, *The Stone Virgins* (2004) meditates on the war alongside another horrific bout of violence in the decade after independence, the state-sponsored mass killings in the south-west of Zimbabwe in the 1980s, an event known as *Gukurahundi*.[189] In this last novel, the protagonist Nonceba's lips are mutilated by an overzealous soldier in an act of war-time gendered violence and she is literally silenced. The plainest inference from these traumatic scenes is that gendered violence is unspeakable—unspeakable in the sense that they arrest both victim and witness, making them exceedingly difficult to narrate, but also unspeakable in the sense that discussion of violence against women is taboo in a deeply patriarchal society.

Small wonder, then, that Vera's readers have focused on the interplay between history and women's speech or silence in her writing: the latter operates at both a symbolic level and a literal level. Paul Zeleza, for instance, observes that "Vera strives for a decentering of the historians'

[189] Yvonne Vera, *Without a Name; and, Under the Tongue* (1994, 1996; New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002); Yvonne Vera, *The Stone Virgins* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

archival, literary history with the enduring memories, the deep subconscious of oral tradition."[190] For her part, Sarah Kastner proposes a posthumous reading of Vera's fiction in light of the revelation of her death from AIDS-related meningitis in 2004. Kastner views Vera's preoccupation with themes of silence, absence, naming and not-naming differently in light of this new information, casting all her creative writing as an authorial project of self-representation.[191] By contrast, several of the essays in the volume *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* edited by Robert Muponde and Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga attest that Vera's representative ambit encompassed women across all Zimbabwean social strata.[192] Regardless of whether we view Vera's work as auto-fictional or as a national gendered archetype, critics generally commend the author's courageous commitment to writing the unspeakable.

Typically, such critical approaches situate the speech-and-silence thematic of Vera's fiction in the context of broader African feminist and historiographic scholarship that relies on a corresponding thematic. To reiterate briefly points made in the introduction to this dissertation, it almost goes without saying that speech and silence have a discursive function in making demands for political participation, as in the idiom "finding one's voice" and its antonym "silencing voices." Irène Assiba d'Almeida, Abena P.A. Busia, and Obioma Nnaemeka are among the pioneering critics who employed the figure of silence in making African feminist and womanist cultural critiques in the 1980s and 1890s.[193] Historians and historiographers frequently solicit the same

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[190] Zeleza, "Colonial Fictions," 16.
[191] Sarah Kastner, "'Only Words Can Bury Us, Not Silence': Reading Yvonne Vera's Difficult Silences," *Safundi* 17, no. 2 (2016): 213–230.
[192] Robert Muponde and Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga, eds., *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* (Harare and Oxford: Weaver Press and James Currey, 2002).
[193] Irène Assiba d'Almeida, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994); Abena P.A. Busia, "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female," *Cultural Critique* 14, no. Winter (1990 1989): 81–104; Mineke Schipper, *Unheard Words: Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America* (New York, NY: Allison & Busby, 1985); Obioma Nnaemeka, "From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the

figure of silence when writing about the data left out of official records, the gaps in information resulting from the bias of by earlier historical accounts, the *symbolic* silencing of voices of individuals and groups who have been excluded from annals of history writ large, as well as the very *literal* silence of traditional text- and image-based archives. Consider Caribbean historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot's thesis in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* that "silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)."[194] Accordingly, historians are charged with finding methodologies for rectifying any of these types of silence. One such effort is Saidiya Hartman's method of "critical fabulation," developed through her examination of women and U.S. slavery in the archive as a way of writing out the silences where women's voices have been excluded from the archive.[195] In a similar vein, Tina Campt's recent study of African diasporic photography has demonstrated how "listening to images" occasions the imagination of material voices from visual prompts.[196]

How, then, does Vera write the sounds of the past in spite of such silences encountered in historiographic practice? Vera does not shy away from history's silences in her fiction. Neither does her fiction present itself as a "truer version" of history than other intellectual accounts of the

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(Re)Inscription of Womanhood," *Research in African Literatures* 25, no. 4 (1994): 137–57. More recently, however, African feminist scholars have advanced the notion of silence as refusal: silence, understood in this way, is voluntary and emancipatory since it denies any recourse to the dominant methods of control through patriarchal speech. See, for example, Motsemme, Nthabiseng, "The Mute Always Speak: On Women's Silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Current Sociology* 52, no. 5 (2004): 909–32.

[194] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 26.

[195] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

[196] Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

past. The fact remains that her books are published in a milieu of fierce contestation over "versions" of Zimbabwean history. This is especially true of *Nehanda.* The novel was published in 1993 during the post-independence period when, according to Terence Ranger, the country's historiography tended strongly toward nationalist revisionism.[197] It is important to note that Ranger himself has played an influential role in the development of Zimbabwean nationalism, not least through his published research on anticolonial resistance.[198]

Ranger the historian extols the imagination of Vera the fiction writer Vera in her reconstruction of the past. While he is quick to remind unacquainted readers that *Nehanda* does not reproduce traditional religious practices with fidelity, he does pointedly endorse *Butterfly Burning*'s accurate representation of the colonial township.[199] Vera dedicated the latter novel to Ranger, citing his friendship rather than his scholarship. Ranger, for his part, has expressed astonishment that "she did no historical research [for *Butterfly Burning*] but listened to her Luveve township grandmother's stories and listened to the township music of the late 1940s and 1950s. She also drew on some of the experiences of her mother, Ericah Gwetai."[200] Ranger insinuates that Vera's consultation of maternal oral history and music did not count as a proper historical research.

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[197] Ranger has also delineated how the phase of "nationalist historiography" in the 1980s and early 1990s gave way to a new movement he calls "patriotic history," which is strongly determined by Zimbabwe's ruling party ZANU-PF. Terence Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle over the Past in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 215–34; Blessing-Miles Tendi, *Making History in Mugabe's Zimbabwe: Politics, Intellectuals, and the Media* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010).

[198] In addition to scholarly works such as *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-97: A Study in African Resistance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967) which I myself consulted in researching this chapter, also see Ranger's account of his activism in colonial Zimbabwe *Writing Revolt: An Engagement with African Nationalism, 1957-67* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2013).

[199] Ranger had this to say of *Nehanda*: "Readers outside Zimbabwe often think that Yvonne was reproducing the real tradition, of which women are the guardians. But all the symbols and rituals in Nehanda sprang from her own imagination—and they are more striking than the 'real' ones." Terence Ranger, "Reminiscences of Yvonne Vera," in *Petal Thoughts: Yvonne Vera, a Biography*, by Ericah Gwetai (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 2008), 86.

[200] Inspired by her fiction, Ranger went on to publish a scholarly account of roughly the same time period in Vera's native city, which he dedicated to Vera: *Bulawayo Burning: The Social History of a Southern African City, 1893-1960* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2010), 2.

The devaluation of Vera's method of literal listening to the past is surprising when taking into consideration the above discussion of the rhetorical importance that historians typically place on uncovering history's silences. Undoubtedly, Ranger's point was not to denounce the absence of a scholarly method, nor to guard its definition. Rather his point was to applaud her literary achievement. But would it be possible to take Vera's "mere" listening seriously? Considering the investment on the part of the author and her readers in history, her fiction merits a detailed investigation of her method of re-envisioning the past—or rather re-sounding the past.

Taking Vera's fictionalization of the 1890s and the 1940s as authentic, risks making ahistorical claims for the senses. For instance, a nineteenth-century villager's auditory perception of the beat of a drum differs incalculably from a present-day listener hearing the same tempo on that same instrument. Even the few electromagnetic recordings of kwela music that survive from the colonial era are not able to reproduce with fidelity today the experience of directly hearing the brand-new musical genre in an African township at mid-century. Using theoretical insights from sound studies, we can address these phenomenological and epistemological issues in relation to Vera's textual figuring of historical sound as a representation of the past. To that end, I propose an interpretation of Vera's literary method as *historical acoustemology*. The term was coined by anthropologist Steven Feld who explains that by acoustemology he meant to suggest "a union of acoustics and epistemology, and to investigate the primacy of sound as a modality of knowing and being in the world."[201] Historian Bruce R. Smith has further developed the concept and with an

[201] Steven Feld, "A Rainforest Acoustemology," in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. Michael Bull and Les Back (New York, NY: Berg, 2003), 226. Feld was dissatisfied with the ethnomusicological concepts and inspired by the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Pontry and Don Ihde. He developed the idea through his ethnographic study of historical relationships between hearing and speaking, listening and sounding in the Bosavi rainforest region of Papua New Guinea. His ideas have been influential in anthropology and studies of music and sound. Also see Steven Feld, "Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New

emphasis on historical knowledge. Smith, who researches Early Modern England and therefore does not have access to acoustic recordings from the time period, investigates whether people heard and remember what they heard differently in the past. He asks the challenging question: "is print capable of recording sound?"[202] This idea that knowledge could be produced through historical sound has had a significant legacy in sound studies and informs the critique in this chapter. Acknowledging Vera's process of listening as research towards historical acoustemology, therefore, enables an understanding of how she figures echoes in her fiction.

For historians studying sound, the reliance on printed records and even oral history presents a problem for ascertaining historical *perception*.[203] Intriguingly, such scholars exercise metaphors of silence less than we might expect; they instead tend to refer to echoes as "a tool which is both a historical reality and a metaphor for the archive," according to Maarten Walraven.[204] Historian Mark M. Smith has argued persuasively for the value of printed evidence in studying the history of the senses, including sound, and summarizes the utility of echoes in this respect:

> At base, thinking about echoes is a way to think about the retrievability or irretrievability of sonicity, the central importance of historical context to understanding sound as sense and as subject, and the ability of print to reliably capture what actors in the past thought about what they heard, and what they did not.[205]

Guinea," in *Senses of Place*, edited by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, 1st ed., 91–135 (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996).

[202] Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[203] CF. D. Bender, D. J. Corpis, and D. J. Walkowitz, "Editors' Introduction: Sound Politics: Critically Listening to the Past," *Radical History Review* 2015, no. 121 (2015): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2799872.

[204] Maarten Walraven, "History and Its Acoustic Context: Silence, Resonance, Echo and Where to Find Them in the Archive," *Journal of Sonic Studies*, no. 4 (2018), https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/290291/290292.

[205] Mark M. Smith, "Echo," in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 56. Also see *Hearing History: A Reader* edited by Mark M. Smith (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

For Mark M. Smith, language used to describe historical sounds heard by contemporaneous ears is just as valuable as an electromagnetic recording of the sound because it indicates a mode of perception. Emily Thompson's history of western cities focused on acoustic city planning and

Karin Bijsterveld's history of noise complaints and abatement policies make similar arguments.[206] Bijsterveld points to the inadequacy of recordings for conveying the lived experience of hearing past sound:

> Listening to a recording of museum steam machines might give you the impression that these machines were not very "loud" at all, forgetting that steam machines may not have been as well oiled when originally in use as when in use in a museum decades later.[207]

Relevant to this chapter's colonial context, scholars such as Sterne and Mhoze Chikowero have also cautioned against the fetishization of sound recording technology for preserving indigenous sounds, pointing to the often-detrimental effects of early phonograph usage in colonial ethnographic practices.[208] Describing the Native American context, Sterne explains that "the phonograph became a tool of embalming an already supposedly frozen native present for the future," rendering recorded sound as "an artifact of an event, not simply as the event itself."[209] Given corrupt and deceptive nature of sound recording in colonial Africa, we ought to be less apprehensive about the act of reading printed echoes.

These insights go some way to providing an interpretive framework for Vera's historical fiction, but they also raise further questions. For instance, can the past sounds figured in Vera's

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[206] As Bijsterveld puts it, the challenge is "to historicize the sensory experience of sound, and to listen to the sounds of technology through the ears of those people who complained about these sounds" (26). Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
[207] Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*, 25.
[208] Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 287–333; Mhoze Chikowero, *African Music, Power, and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 8–14.
[209] Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 319.

present text be understood as originals or copies? While the very idea of the echo implies repetition or replication of an original sonic event, we might imagine that the fiction writer strives to situate the reader in the front row of that event. As the following analysis demonstrates, Vera's reliance on echoes is actually a recognition of the status of those sounds as passed, *even as she writes in the present tense*. Essentially, I conceive of echoes in Vera's writing as past sounds—that is, original sounds—mediated by history. My conception follows philosopher Casey O'Callaghan who maintains that an echo is not distinct from its primary sound, although it is perceived at a later stage of its continuous career in a separate time and place.[210] Although readers of *Nehanda* and *Butterfly Burning* do not have access to the exact "historical mode of audibility," to borrow Anna Maria Ochoa Gautier's term, they enjoy the fictional text's self-conscious re-composition of the past setting in order to learn, or in some cases remember, what that moment in history sounded like.[211] As such, the motivation behind my close readings is first to identify the textual echoes, second to analyze Vera's literary techniques for creating them, and third to explain their broader resonance cultural.

A final word is necessary to distinguish between my conception of echo and resonance—two key terms that are often use interchangeably. Although both allude to the spatial experience of a sound, resonance refers specifically to the vibratory physical sensation while the echo designates the sound figure.[212] Resonance is a privileged concept in the thought of continental

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[210] Drawing on the perspectives of phenomenology and physics, O'Callaghan's argument rests on the understanding of sounds as "events." For an in-depth philosophical treatment of echoes, see pp. 110-40. Casey O'Callaghan, *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[211] Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2014) 190.

[212] For a helpful delineation of the conceptualization of echo and resonance in historical research in sound studies over the last twenty years, see Walraven, "History and Its Acoustic Context." For an in-depth philosophical treatment of echoes from the perspectives of phenomenology and physics, see O'Callaghan, *Sounds*, 110–40.

philosophers Nancy and Cavarero who both develop theories of relationality based on the bond of a shared ontological vibration between subjects.[213] Relatedly, literary critic Julie Beth Napolin has examined the idea of resonance as an "acoustic technique" employed by modernist writers such as William Faulkner and Joseph Conrad.[214] My own usage of the term resonance intentionally refers to the broader cultural and political discourse created and informed by the echo.

To help clarify the meanings of my key terms echo and resonance before turning to Vera's fiction, consider the following non-literary example of an historical sound in Zimbabwean cultural and political history. The usage of *zhii* as a war-cry was first textually recorded in the British colonial explorer and military officer Frederick Selous's account of the 1893 Second Matabele War: "The Kaffirs […] commenced to shout out encouragingly to one another and also to make a kind of hissing noise, like the word 'jee' long drawn out."[215] According to historian Mhoze Chikowero, *zhii* "never left the African anticolonial repertoire."[216] Indeed, it was revived as an acoustic apparatus of protest some sixty years later in what became known as the "Zhii Riots" of 1960. Sparked by the crackdown on the new African nationalist party, the riots began in the capital

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[213] The two philosophers have their differences. Nancy, for his part, mobilizes the idea of renvoi or return in his book about listening as a model for relational ontology. The renvoi captures to the back-and-forth vibrational relation between subjects as emitters and receptors of sounds (15-6). Cavarero, meanwhile, revises the former's ideas, cautioning against the ethical and political losses in reducing the human voice to pure resonance. However, turning away from Ovid's account of the myth of Echo to an analysis of the resonant bond formed between mother and child in the natal scene, Cavarero positively recovers resonance as the phenomenon that produces uniqueness that enables a vibrational relationality (165–72). Cavarero's privileging of motherhood in her conception of resonance is especially interesting in light of the discussion to follow about Mbuya Nehanda's national maternal role. Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*; Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007).

[214] According to Napolin, resonance is identifiable in texts such as *Heart of Darkness* by the Conradian notion of continuation. Napolin's work inspires my consideration of how Vera's texts mediate the physical impact of acoustics. See Julie Beth Napolin, "'A Sinister Resonance': Vibration, Sound, and the Birth of Conrad's Marlow," *Qui Parle* 21, no. 2 (2013): 69–100; Napolin, *The Fact of Resonance*.

[215] Frederick Courteney Selous, *Sunshine and Storm in Rhodesia; Being a Narrative of Events in Matabeleland Both Before and During the Recent Native Insurrection up to the Date of the Disbandment of the Bulawayo Field Force*, 2nd edition (London: R. Ward and Co, 1896), 161, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044062415583.

[216] Chikowero, *African Music, Power, and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe*, 250.

city's townships and soon the chanting of *zhii* resounded in townships around the country, including Bulawayo's Makokoba. Francis Nehwati explains that *zhii* originated as an onomatopoeic reference to the loud crushing sound made when a large rock falls to the ground. *Zhii* is either used in threatening phrases such as the Ndebele *Ngizakubulala Zhii* and the Shona *Ndicakuwuraya Zhii* translatable as "I will kill you and reduce your remains to powder" or the sound it is repeatedly vocalized on its own as an intimidation tactic.[217] At the time of the 1960 riots, newspapers reported that the "that ominous Zulu howl … a relic of the terrible days of Chaka's reign" has not been heard since the 1890s.[218] Heard in this way, *Zhii* can be understood as an echo with anticolonial resonance, whereby the memory of past sounds are embodied in the present—even when they are reproduced textually.

Nehanda's Anticolonial Resonance

Vera's first novel Nehanda is a fictional account of an event that happened almost exactly a century prior. It relates the eponymous nineteenth-century spirit medium Mbuya Nehanda's prophesy and leadership of the anticolonial rebellion by the Shona people against the British South Africa Company in 1896-97 known as the First Chimurenga. Through richly symbolist and densely poetic prose, Vera fabricates the details of an exceptional woman's biography—a biography that we are able to access mainly through oral history, not historical textual documents. The novel briefly alludes to this very textual/oral dichotomy in a fashion typical of early postcolonial African novels. The plot has a circular structure: the proleptic and analeptic swings support the novel's

[217] Francis Nehwati, "The Social and Communal Background to 'Zhii': The African Riots in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia in 1960," *African Affairs* 69, no. 276 (1970): 251.
[218] See Rhodesia's *Daily News*, August 8, 1960 and *Chronicle,* August 11, 1960. Cited in Ranger, *Bulawayo Burning*, 224.

metaphysical design for temporal circularity. Nehanda opens with a brief moment before the spirit medium's imminent death. Next, there is a presentation of her childhood abbreviated across several chapters, before the bulk of the novel deals with her spirit mediumship as an adult, closing with her execution by hanging. Bookended by these "historical facts" is a biographical narrative of Nehanda's spiritual vocation through a series of blended, abstract episodes including dreams, performance, and prophesy. Nehanda's fate is interspersed with the narrative of a colonial official named Mr. Browning, his African servant Mashoko who he renames Moses, and a Catholic priest who fails his attempt to convert Nehanda before execution.

Vera's sensuous account of the past convinces readers of its historical circumstance through the incorporation of movement, sound, color, feeling, and so on. However, her fiction has a far more complex relationship to History with a capital 'H'. If as the critic Abiola Irele contends "history is not simply a general reference or even a major theme of modern African expression; it represents the substance upon which the African imagination is called upon to work," then any reading of Vera's historical fiction would benefit from an examination of the events in question. Therefore, before proceeding with further textual analysis of the novel, I will delineate some of the core beliefs of the Shona people regarding spirit possession and mediumship. I will also provide some historical context to Mbuya Nehanda's involvement in the 1986-7 rebellion. This will enable a deeper understanding of the mythologization of Mbuya Nehanda before Vera wrote her novel.

In the nineteenth century, the Shona people living in the area of present-day Zimbabwe believed in four principle "kinds" of spirits: midzimu, mhondoro, ngozi and mashava. Communication with ancestral spirits or midzimu was of utmost religious importance and conducted through spirit mediums who prioritize the spirits of their senior royal ancestors known as mhondoro. Nehanda—sometimes called by the more honorific title Mbuya Nehanda—is the

name given to the most iconic mhondoro. There are at least two separate traditions of mediums for the spirit Nehanda—in the Dande and Mazoe regions, with both recognized as legitimate. The Nehanda medium from Mazoe, a woman named Charwe, came to prominence in the 1890s when she led the first anticolonial rebellion. Properly speaking, Vera's novel is about the engagement of the woman Charwe with the spirit of Nehanda. However, Vera takes creative license to conflate the spirit medium with the spirit. Indeed, guided by the contemporary popular imagination, Vera suggests that Charwe became Nehanda, although this was not quite the cosmological understanding at the time. For clarity, I refer to the spirit-turned-nationalist-icon as "Mbuya Nehanda" and I will to the refer to the titular character Vera's novel as "Nehanda."

The 1986-7 rebellion happened six years after the arrival of the Pioneer Column, a group of British settlers that founded Fort Salisbury on the site of present-day Zimbabwe's capital city. The British colonizers started governing the area by forcibly establishing property ownership and mining rights. The rebellion was the first major violent and organized Shona retaliation, consisting in rural skirmishes such as the coordinated killing of settlers and sacking of property. Mbuya Nehanda, along with the other prominent mhondoro at the end of the nineteenth century Sekuru Kaguvi (who is also mentioned in Vera's novel), are jointly credited with prophesying the arrival of the "strangers" and consequent devastation. Both were eventually captured by the British South Africa Company's armed forces, tried for the murder of colonial officials and inciting the murder of settlers, and hanged in 1897.

While the rebellion is regarded as unsuccessful in so far as it gave way to the seizure of native land and the founding of the colonial state, Mbuya Nehanda's resonance is undeniable. She has become a significant female figure in the Zimbabwean cultural nationalist and anticolonial political imagination. She is frequently dubbed the "founder" or "mother of the nation." Despite

this eminent role, her glorification is reduced almost entirely to her maternal qualities, not her individual leadership. This is a typical outcome of postcolonial narratives which, Elleke Boehmer observes, attribute women the symbolic role of "bearers of national culture," but remain stripped of agency. Although Mbuya Nehanda convinced the Shona to literally listen to her in the 1890s, she has rarely been "heard" in a figurative sense in the decades since, remaining enshrined as a silently symbolic figure of the distant past.

As critics Ranka Primorac and Grace Musila have noted, Vera's retelling of Mbuya Nehanda's story is a decidedly feminist one. While Vera has clearly rejected the romanticization of women characters, opting rather for "the intimate complexity of their mental worlds," this novel's commitment to a specifically gendered form of nationalism remains ambiguous at times. Vera reclaims Mbuya Nehanda as a feminist icon while simultaneously contributing to her ongoing mythologization as a national icon. Paul Zeleza praises the novel's "feminist nationalism" while Eleni Coundouriotis, for her part, describes it as "an attempt to rehabilitate the people's narrative from the distortions of its masculinization in the heroic narratives." I agree with these critics that Vera debunks patriarchal nationalism, replacing it with her own poetically fashioned feminist nationalism. Yet few critics have identified the literary tools with which Vera develops this feminist nationalist poetics. I argue that Vera articulates her poetics by adopting the sound figure of the echo in her descriptions of spirit mediumship. My interpretation of Nehanda distinguishes three movements in the novel: first, the novel establishes the familiar dichotomy between orality and textuality; second, the novel adopts an acoustemological stance as it presents Mbuya Nehanda as an exemplar of listening to the past; third, the novel positions readers themselves as listeners to the past. The textual analysis that follows adheres to this tripartite framework for interpreting the the sound figure of the echo within the narrative development.

The oral/textual dichotomy is established in chapter ten with the character Ibwe's account of a meeting that the village elders had with the recently arrived colonizers—a direct reference to the encounter that led to the Rudd Concession of 1888 in which King Lobengula of Matabeleland infamously and unwittingly signed away mining rights with an "X." Ibwe ventriloquizes the white man's false promise of prosperity through conversion to Christianity. The auditors of the tale confront two philosophical and legal shocks: by the claim to property rights, the colonizers disrupt their belief that "the land does not belong to the living." The auditors also treat paper with suspicion, "the stranger's own peculiar custom," a material that goes against their principle that "speech is not like a rock" and generally undermines the belief in "the power of words" (33). There is collective surprise at the question supposedly asked of Lobengula: "'Do you have your own symbol?'" The rhetorical question posed at the end of this episode, "'How can words be made still, without turning into silence?'" (36), seeks to legitimize precolonial traditional beliefs through the celebration of orality's primacy. The author is likely aware of the inherent paradox: she is championing the spoken word in a written text. Moreover, as Vambe suggests in his reading of the novel, this paradox underlines the ambiguity of representing spirit possession's vocality in a written text, thereby distancing the phenomenon from "realism."[219] In my estimation, this episode importantly buttresses the resonance of Nehanda's voice with historical precedent.

The romanticization of pre-colonial orality is consonant with the Edenic depiction of the natural world and recurrence of ecological imagery in general. The earlier chapters focus on Nehanda's bucolic childhood, with the protagonist strolling through the forest where she enjoys

[219] Vambe, *African Oral Story-Telling Tradition and the Zimbabwean Novel in English*, 85.

the gentle gush of streams and the tunes of birds and she becomes "alert to the sound of her own footsteps as she moves" (15). These passages confirm that Nehanda is in tune with nature. The child's loss of innocence comes soon with the calling to her spiritual vocation. The ancestral spirits first approach Nehanda as a "whirlwind [that] measured time in swift motions" (2), then in the form of "a voice rose [that] from beneath the earth" (3), and definitively at Nehanda's naming ceremony, she is "surrounded by murmurs" that "rise from the earth" (16).

Shortly after a dialogue in which the child learns about the kinds of spirits her people believe in (a passage that also helpfully informs the uninitiated reader), chapter nine opens without warning with Nehanda's first full experience of spirit possession:

> The beetle creeps along the dead riverbed in silence, rolling the past before it, and survives. Nehanda holds her silence all day, offering it with the palm of her hand as though it were something solid. She shouts. Though nothing can be heard from her, she wails until she brings herself to deafness, until she has closed out the earthly sounds that try to penetrate and disturb her silence. Meanwhile, the spirits perform prophetic dances on the ground before her, and send deafening echoes through the ground. (28)

This telescoping detail in this passage—from the minute beetle to the massive spirits—is typical of the novel's shifting scale. The juxtaposition of seemingly small detail of insect life alongside grand events of politico-religious importance implies an increment of reciprocity. Whereas prophets are often understood to have a divine ability to "see," Vera instead positions Nehanda as a divine listener who pays attention to "earthly sounds" and is able to interpret the "deafening echoes" channeled by the ground. The character VaTete, Nehanda's elder paternal aunt, previously implored "'Where would we find the mouth with which to tell what we had to tell?'" (20). Now, Nehanda seeks to serve as that mouth:

> No words come out of her mouth but she speaks with an ever-increasing desperation. She rocks back and forth but no one hears her invocation. She speaks with the guidance of the departed which shape her tongue into words. Words grow like grass from her tongue. (30)

Nehanda's glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is linked to her divine ear in this passage. There is also a continuation of the ecological imagery with the simile likening the development of words to the growth of grass.

The narrative climaxes in the middle of the novel during a ritual performance-cum-celebration described over ten pages as a mixture of song, music, and dance that "welcomes the spirit." The youthful Nehanda is initiated into her role as spirit medium by an "agonizing ritual" that ages her overnight into a wizened old woman. Nehanda is either still and silent with eyes closed or in a kind of trance as "her voice comes out in spurts." At first, with the earth "resound[ing] with the pounding of feet" and "people deafening themselves with song" (48) Nehanda's message is unheard. But gradually, her "trembling and troubled voice" (52) converts indecipherable phonic matter into signifying sound. This sequence involves considerable slippage between *narrative* voices. Although Nehanda's speech is often written in free indirect discourse or reported in the third person, in this section she speaks in the first person *on behalf* of the spirit she channels. Additionally, here, Nehanda's "people" or the "villagers"—who are more often referred to in the third person plural in the novel—adopt the first-person plural pronoun "we". For example, the section starts with the impersonal phrase "the people listen to the voice of their ancestors" (51) but moves towards direct speech formulations, such as: "'Voices have surrounded us all night. We have sat in vigil to the voices that sent arrows to conquer spaces on dead bark" (56). While the continual shifting in focalization may confuse the reader, it ultimately conveys the mystical transference of voice from the ancestral spirits to the medium.

The abstract, repetitive rendering of the ritual emphasizes the phonic and vibratory pervasion through the participants' bodies and over the ground where it takes place. Nehanda is literally and figuratively *moved* by the music: "She listens to the lilting sound of the *mbira* which

permeates her whole body as she moves gently back and forth" (52). As she does so "the ground echoes, echoes" (52) in a message from the ancestors. The participants report incomprehension of the "explosions rose from tongues that defied our understanding, and voices came whispering from the past" (54). The other spirit medium present Kaguvi "would rather beat the drum than shape his message into words" (59), but only Nehanda can decipher the ancestral echoes and whispers. Although Vera attributes a lesser role to Kaguvi, his dance contributes to the vibratory accumulation as "he raises dust with his pounding feet, until the earth responds with the echo of the chanting feet of his people" (60). In this passage, spiritual echoes are thus materialized sonically.

Vera continues to make extensive use of ecological imagery to illustrate sound's spiritual dimension. Nehanda's task is described as the restoration of healthy hearing for her people. They bemoan how "'[their] ears are full of sand and insects, which together make such loud and disturbing noises that [they] are completely lost'" (53). Throughout the novel, Nehanda's voice is also analogous to the wind. It is a "legend-creating wind" that "gives new tongues with which to praise it, and new languages with which to cross the boundaries of time" (93). In central ritual passage, the participants thus exclaim "we saw our future carried in the wind" (56). And at the end of the novel, Nehanda appears to evade execution by the colonial authorities as she moves restlessly through time as a beguiling gust of wind carrying memories of the past and that which is still to come.

Another striking example of ecological imagery used to illustrate echoes comes later in the novel when Nehanda, who has by this point already incited the rebellion, exiles herself safely in a hidden cave filled with bats. Nehanda and the bats mutually manage the "perpetual blindness" of the dark cave with echolocation:

> Always, they [the bats] are finding ways of seeing, and of experiencing the air. … they cannot see the horizon the future disappears from their imaginings. Forced to live in the margin of sight they devise elaborate languages to locate their young in the swarming sound-filled roof the cavern where they wait. […] Nehanda hears the sound of the pounding drums reverberate against the walls of the cave, and sees the dancing feet of her people. She calls to her presence the distant drums. […] The frenzied drums have become silent, but she continues to hear the voices of ululating women who sing and clap their hands. Their voices echo around her. (90)

For the bats, the sounds they emit help determine spatial awareness. Closely juxtaposed is Nehanda's own enhanced hearing of distant drumming and ululating. Nehanda is forced to rely on guidance from the ancestral voice, "the voice [that] comes from within them, from the cave, from below the earth, and from the roots of trees" (68). As in the earlier ritual performance in which *mbira* players "send quivering mournful sounds through the air" in order to "remind one of birth, of death, and of the serene presences of the departed" (28), Nehanda now listens out for the sound of echoing through the landscape as "the people call with one voice that circles the hills" (66). Vera thus describes the interventions of ancestral and communal voicing as resonance to be harnessed for anticolonial resistance.

Chapter 19 makes the connection between sound production and acts of resistance explicit. In one of the only descriptions of the physical violence of the 1896-7 rebellion, Vera narrates a skirmish in which the Shona kill a British group on horseback by gaining elevation and tipping boulders.

> The hills are filled with silence. The silence echoes the wisdom of the ancestors, and the presence of *Mwari* [God], who has put the strange rocks on the earth. […] The people sing as they descend from the hill […] The elders among them shape the appropriate words to the departed, asking them to continue looking after people […] The sound of their clapping fills the forest with song. (70, 74)

Even the apparent silence in the hills "echoes" and thus signifies the strategy for the skirmish. Celebrating the success with clapping also transmits the message of the outcome to other warriors

nearby and, in this way, they use sound to coordinate further attacks and movements. Incomprehensible for the colonial ear, silence establishes the grounds of resistance here. Furthermore, sound stitches together the plot by providing coherence to simultaneously unfolding action. The gunshots that close one chapter are heard at the start of the following chapter, thereby increasing spatial and narrative proximity in the text. The text suggests that all silences actually contain barely perceptible but meaningful echoes that lose volume over time and risk fading altogether. The text's task is to ensure those echoes are still remembered.

Writing beyond the Photograph

I have already demonstrated how Vera relies on ecological imagery to convey Nehanda's communication with ancestors as well as to express the sonic force of her voicing. Moreover, the adoption of the sound figure of the echo strongly suggests Mbuya Nehanda's cultural and historical resonance. Vera's new feminist nationalist poetics thus departs from dominant motifs in representations of the much-mythologized heroine over the last century. It is worth reviewing some of these motifs in visual, textual, and oral representation before advancing my discussion of the stakes of novel's claims of historicity. This review reveals the similarities and disparities between Vera's figuring of the Mbuya Nehanda and earlier versions.

In the 1950s, in stride with the burgeoning Zimbabwean nationalist movement, she figured in early literary writing in Shona such as Solomon Mutswairo's *Feso* (1957), which is often called the first Shona novel and was later banned by the Rhodesian government, and the leader of the nationalist party ZANU Herbert Chitepo's poem "Soko Risina Musoro" (1958). In the 1970s, she was openly acknowledged as the communal inspiration and divine rationalization for the use of

violence in the war for independence, with women guerilla fighters composing songs as a reminder of her exhortation to "arm yourself to liberate yourself" (*tora gidi uzvitonge*).[220] At independence in 1980, the following song by the ZANU-PF Ideological Choir was broadcast on the newly decolonized airwaves:

> Grandmother Nehanda
> You prophesied
> Nehanda's bones resurrected,
> ZANU's spear caught their fire
> Which was transformed into ZANU's gun,
> The gun which liberated our land.[221]

After independence, there were numerous tributes to her aid in the liberation war; for example, her name was given to schools and maternity hospitals. David Lan notes that by 1985 Mbuya Nehanda's image was widely circulated on printed materials, including headscarves and dresses, and most notably on a textile banner she was positioned above the postcolonial leader Robert Mugabe as a guiding, anointing figure.[222] References to Mbuya Nehanda are still ubiquitous in contemporary political culture. As anthropologist Kathryn Takabvirwa observes, she is invoked by ruling party supporters, political opponents and protestors alike as a patriotic symbol, alongside other cherished symbols like the national flag and anthem.[223]

Finally and most pertinent to the present study, Mbuya Nehanda continued to guide the Zimbabwean literary imagination after independence. In her analysis of war fiction from the

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[220] See Khatija Bibi Khan's analysis of liberation-era songs: Khatija Bibi Khan, "Girls of War and Echoes of Liberation: Engaging Female Voices through Chimurenga Songs about Zimbabwe's Armed Struggle," *Muziki* 15, no. 1 (2018): 58–67, https://doi.org/10.1080/18125980.2016.1249165.
[221] Cited in Julie Frederikse, *None but Ourselves: Masses Vs. Media in the Making of Zimbabwe* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982), 326.
[222] David Lan, *Guns & Rain: Guerrillas & Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London and Berkeley: James Currey and University of California Press, 1985), 204–5, see Plate 15.
[223] Kathryn Takabvirwa, "On the Threshing Floor: Roadblocks and the Policing of Everyday Life in Zimbabwe" (PhD dissertation, Stanford, CA, Stanford University, 2018).

postcolonial era, Eleni Coundouriotis notes that Mbuya Nehanda has been co-opted into masculinist heroic narratives, as in the novels *Mapondera: Soldier of Zimbabwe* (1978) by Solomon Mutswairo and *Death Throes: The Trial of Nehanda* (1990) by Charles Samupindi.[224] In these and other postcolonial texts, readers hear an explicit echo of Mbuya Nehanda's dying words, rendered by Samupindi as: "'These bones will rise up one day and fight!'"[225] The title of Chenjerai Hove's novel *Bones* (1988) overtly alludes to the prophesy. Hove is notable as a rare male novelist who incorporates multiple women's narrative perspectives, including Nehanda's. Set during the 1970s war of independence, *Bones* is interrupted with an analeptic prose and verse monologue by the spirit medium herself in which she promises: "My bones will rise."[226] Most recently, Panashe Chigumadzi borrows the dictum for the title of her woman-centered meditation on national history, *These Bones Will Rise Again* (2018). For her part, Vera does not repeat the bones reference in her novel *Nehanda*, although she does describe the resonance of postcolonial violence as the rising of bones in her last novel *The Stone Virgins.*[227]

A clear pattern has emerged in the last few decades: bones have become a recurring literary trope in Zimbabwe. Ranka Primorac observes that bones draw value partially from its simultaneous Biblical connotation of sacrifice and resurrection.[228] I interpret the troping of bones as a verbal echo, initiating all who read references to bones into hearing the echo of Mbuya Nehanda's prophesy in the collective cultural memory. The echo of her bones reveals how

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[224] Eleni Coundouriotis, *The People's Right to the Novel: War Fiction in the Postcolony* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014).
[225] Charles Samupindi, *Death Throes: The Trial of Mbuya Nehanda* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1990), 11.
[226] Chenjerai Hove, *Bones* (1988; London: Heinemann, 1990), 50.
[227] "The cease-fire ceases. It begins in the streets, the burying of memory. The bones rising. Rising" Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, 65.
[228] Ranka Primorac, *The Place of Tears: The Novel and Politics in Modern Zimbabwe* (London: Tauris, 2006), 5. The significance of the Biblical connotation makes sense when taking into account the fact that many writers of that generation were educated at Christian missionary schools. See Flora Veit-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature* (London: Hans Zell, 1992)

important the aesthetic resonance of anticolonial resistance is to so many Zimbabwean writers, but it also the importance of ideological resonance. The famous phrase "these bones will rise again" uttered in 1897 signaled the incompleteness of the first anticolonial war and its echo has informed the development of the *Chimurenga*, a national political teleology characterized by cyclical temporality over the long durée. If Mbuya Nehanda's prophesy declared that the First *Chimurenga* of the 1890s was incomplete, her echo was amplified in the 1970s in order to validate the resumption of the armed struggle for the war of independence—the Second *Chimurenga*. In the 21st century, the ruling political party ZANU-PF has subsequently taken near-total control of this political telos with the complex and controversial execution of the Third *Chimurenga*.[229] However, my analysis here is restricted to the pre-2000 era. In this period, for the writers Samupindi, Mutswairo, Hove and Chigumadzi, that resonance is primarily *verbal*, as indicated by the repetition of allusions to "bones." For many, intriguingly, that resonance is more *visual*, as indicated by the wide circulation of Mbuya Nehanda's image in educational and political materials. My contention is that Vera amplifies this echo with a direct emphasis on the acoustic properties of Mbuya Nehanda's prophesy—not just the lexical content or its visualization. Put differently, I am suggesting that Vera was concerned with *how* Mbuya Nehanda spoke, not *what* she spoke. The focus on the spirit (medium)'s sonic force enables Vera to imagine the connected temporalities of past, present, and future. I now attend to Vera's shift away from the verbal and visual to a more embodied and phonic resonance.

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[229] Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni explains that since 2000, Chimurenga has been "used by ZANU as an ideological thread capturing the undying spirit of African resistance to colonialism, running from primary resistance of the 1890s to the present attempts by the Harare nationalists to take the liberation and decolonization project to its logical conclusion of achieving economic empowerment of the black people through land redistribution and other initiatives aimed at indigenizing the economy" (179-80). For an overview of Chimurenga ideology from the nationalism movement of the 1960s through the twenty-first century, see pp. 179–86. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2013).

Evidently, when Vera penned her novel in 1993, she did so against a complex cultural backdrop that was already saturated with portrayals of the Zimbabwean heroine. As such, research into the life of Mbuya Nehanda might not have been absolutely prerequisite for the Zimbabwean author. Still, critics are divided in their response to the question of historical accuracy in *Nehanda*. While Eva Hunter credits Vera for developing a style that is able to "reproduce the traditional Shona worldview," Vambe cautions that in fact her "construction of the pre-colonial Shona society is infiltrated with contradictory terms, values, and modes of thinking within the ideology of cultural nationalism."[230] Regardless of facticity, critics generally agree that Vera's gendered approach to writing history is one that "discards the techniques of male historiography."[231] Although readers of the novel risk fetishizing this version of the pre-colonial past, I maintain that the author is aware of the ways in which her story is heavily mediated—by time, by the cultural medium, and by herself. Indeed, Vera explains her process of writing *Nehanda* "intuitively" as through she herself were a spirit medium or a "witness to my [her] own spiritual history" just "transferring or conveying the feelings, symbols and images."[232] This acknowledgement triply displaces the act of vocalization from the spirit, through the 1890s medium, to the 1990s novelist.

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[230] Eva Hunter, "Zimbabwean Nationalism and Motherhood in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*," *African Studies* 59, no. 2 (2000): 240, https://doi.org/10.1080/00020180020011203; Maurice Taonezvi Vambe, "Spirit Possession and the Paradox of Post-Colonial Resistance in Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*," in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Robert Muponde and Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga (Harare and Oxford: Weaver Press and James Currey, 2002), 130.
In his essay, Vambe takes issue with Vera's casting of Africans as a largely homogenous people with shared ancestral heritage in the novel. Given that Zimbabwean nationalist narratives are by and large ethnically dominated by Shona elites, this criticism is well-taken. However, Vambe belabors this point about the novel's presumption of ethnic homogeneity—what I read as Vera's poetic shorthand—in order to attack Vera's feminist credentials.
[231] Terence Ranger, "History Has Its Ceiling: The Pressures of the Past in *The Stone Virgins*," in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Robert Muponde and Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga (Harare and Oxford: Weaver Press and James Currey, 2002), 203–216.
[232] Yvonne Vera, "'Survival Is in the Mouth.' Interview by Jane Bryce (August 1, 2000, Bulawayo)," in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Robert Muponde and Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga (Harare and Oxford: Weaver Press and James Currey, 2002), 220.

In addition to spiritual mediation, Vera serves as a cultural mediator. She has described in an interview how she approached her subject based on the "historical facts" that were readily available to her:

> What I was responding to, and I can tell you the actual detail I was responding to, was that after Nehanda had led the revolution against these settlers she was put under a European court, tried and hanged. These are the historical facts I grew up with in my history text book, okay, and there was a picture of her so I knew that she had truly existed. So the actuality of history, including the year that she was hanged—the 26th April 1896 or 7—was there as facts. […] Now when I started to write *Nehanda*, I wanted to write beyond the photograph, you know, that frozen image, beyond the date, beyond the 'fact' of her dying. […] So that history as it is understood or suggested by these details I have outlined, of the photograph of the dates and so on, is negated in this other consciousness of feeling, of touching and of the body. Just how she feels within herself, even the voice, her speech, what she speaks, is something else. … So I am more interested in that entire world which Nehanda inhabited and which enabled her as a woman, as a spiritual woman, to bring people together enough that they listened to her.[233]

Vera discloses the genesis of her creative project: the interpretation of a photograph. Swerving away from short-sighted ekphrasis, Vera decides to write beyond the confines of the visual. In a sense, then, we could understand Vera's *Nehanda* as a sensuous account of a historical figure who has been mythologized in predominantly visual terms. Just as the historians Campt and Hartmann recognize the necessity for listening to images and fabulating critically, Vera also finds it necessary to think outside the bounds of the traditional archive that has left us with a handful of dates and a "frozen image." The novel, according to Vera, provides access to an "other consciousness of feeling" that takes into account the "voice," "speech," and "entire world which Nehanda inhabited." From the onset, Vera confronts an apparent paradox to do with Mbuya Nehanda: her image is everywhere, yet she remains silent. Far from forgotten, her visual likeness is etched into

[233] Yvonne Vera, "Shaping the Truth of the Struggle. Interview by Eva Hunter," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 10, no. 1 (1998): 76–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/1013929X.1998.9678033.

the collective, historical memory of the postcolonial country. However, as Vera points out, she is frozen in history and muted. How does the novel unmute her?

I argue that Vera chooses to focus her portrayal of Mbuya Nehanda on the sound of her voice in order to eschew the finality of her death date and the frozenness of the photograph. The sound figure of the echo thus activates the afterlife of Mbuya Nehanda's prophesy. I borrow the term "afterlife" from Jennifer Wenzel who theorizes anticolonial prophesy in her study of narratives of millenarian Xhosa cattle-killing. Wenzel's South African case study is similar to the Zimbabwean one, therefore it is helpful to think about persistence of Nehanda's narrative in the way proposes by Wenzel: in "a worldly, nontheological sense, to denote relationships of people to time that produce multilayered dynamics of presence and absence, anticipation and retrospection."[234] Adopting Wenzel's theoretical framework as I do here assists in the interpretation of complex temporality that Vera seeks to articulate in her novel.

Nehanda is not alone in seeking to engage the afterlife of past events and people. The contemporaneous writer Hove, in his aptly titled novel *Ancestors* (1996), similarly undertakes the task of re-animating the past through memory and spirit possession by another nineteenth-century heroine named Miriro, a deaf and mute woman who died in 1850 and speaks through a young man in the present. Spirit mediums also appear in Zimbabwean novels from the same era such as Shimmer Chinodya's *Harvest of Thorns*[235] and more recently in Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009). As Wenzel's monograph shows, there are ample examples in South African literature too, including Zakes Mda's historical fiction *Heart of Redness* (2000). Mda's earlier novel *Ways of*

[234] Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5.
[235] Shimmer Chinodya, *Harvest of Thorns* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1989), 248–49.

Dying (1995) might also be considered here as it is similarly concerned with the haunting of the past in the present, especially unmourned violent deaths which the protagonist Toloki attends to in his new career as a "professional mourner." Vera's text therefore stands amidst a broader regional corpus about spiritual and historical interconnection.

As my analysis has demonstrated, Vera's echo is particularly adept at figuring the spatio-temporal distance and historical mediation through which we perceive the echoes of a national icon. In the novel, ordinary people are left with "raspy grating" in their throats and "soundless calling into the air" as they attempt to vocally interpolate the past. By contrast, Vera enshrines the feminist hero as the primary conduit for listening to the past:

> Nehanda's trembling voice reaches them as though coming from some distance past, some sacred territory in their imaginings. It is an alluring voice, undulating, carrying the current of a roar that reminds them of who they have been in the past, but it is also the comforting voice of a woman, of their mothers whom they trust. Her voice throws them into the future, and she speaks as though they have already triumphed, as though they only looked back at their present sorrow. But again she abandons that voice and brings them back into their present sorrow. (51-2)

In this passage from the spirit possession ceremony at the center of the novel, sliding temporality is imagined easily through the voice that connects, territory, time, and people. The author also seems to position herself similarly to Nehanda: with her alluring voice she too carries the current of the roar from the past. This mystical technique of listening to the past is presented in opposition to textual historiography favored by colonialist and patriarchal agents. While many of Zimbabwe's nationalist historians of 1980s and 1990s sought to re-envision the past, Vera distinctly resounds the past in her novel.

The Sound of Modernity? Township and Trains in *Butterfly Burning*

If in *Nehanda* Vera reclaimed a nationalist heroine, then in her fourth novel she connected the biographies of "unknown women" to national history.[236] *Butterfly Burning* is set in 1940s Bulawayo, colonial Zimbabwe's second largest city in the southwestern province of Matabeleland. The novel documents African life under colonial rule, particularly the rapid urbanization at midcentury. In a sharp contrast with Marechera's personal account of growing up in a Rusape township in the 1960s that foregrounds the grotesque aspects of the soundscape, *Butterfly Burning* celebrates the musical beauty and innovation of everyday life in this social space. Vera's text sonically figures the spatial and social dynamics of the city, particularly the black township Makokoba which is the crossroads of urban migrants, their desires, their labor, and their leisure, especially music. As the following discussion demonstrates, music in *Butterfly Burning* simultaneously points toward the new and the modern while sonically tethering it to memories to the past. Critics such as Lizzy Attree and Meg Samuelson have commented on the role of music in Vera's writing.[237] They point to the innovation of the genre *kwela*—at once a local musical form and global commodity—as a signal of modernity. In this reading, *Butterfly Burning*'s "township modernism" (to borrow Ian Baucom's term) contrasts sharply with the portrayal of orality linked to tradition in her previous novels *Nehanda*, *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*.[238] I propose an alternative understanding here as I identify the function of the sound figure of the echo in *Butterfly Burning*. Eschewing the tradition/modernity dichotomy, my inquiry is more concerned with the author's attempt at listening to the past and her figuring of historical sounds. I argue that,

[236] Vera, "Survival Is in the Mouth," 223.
[237] Lizzy Attree, "Language, Kwela Music and Modernity in *Butterfly Burning*," in Muponde and Maodzwa-Taruvinga, 63–80; Meg Samuelson, "Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo: Modernity, (Im)Mobility, Music, and Memory," *Research In African Literatures* 38, no. 2 (2007): 22–35.
[238] Ian Baucom, "Township Modernism," in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, ed. Laura Doyle and Laura A. Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 227–244.

in her evocation of the colonial township's soundscape, Vera privileges music as the means by which her characters access memory—both personal and collective memory. Furthermore, sounds as diverse as bicycle bells, train engines, grass cutters and penny whistles represented in the novel all contribute to the activation of the reader's own remembrance of the past.

To sketch out the bare bones of the plot is to undermine the representation of atmosphere and cartography of colonial Bulawayo that coheres the text. Consider that the young protagonist Phephelaphi Dube is only introduced in chapter four, with access to her full interiority only granted in chapter six. Phephelaphi is around twenty years old when her mother Gertrude is shot dead by a jealous policeman with whom she had an illicit affair. Phephelaphi's narrative tracks her struggle to establish her own independence alongside her romantic relationship with an older man named Fumbatha. When Phephelaphi's pregnancy with Fumbatha's child threatens her admission to a new training program for black nurses, she performs an abortion described in a harrowing scene. After her relationship with Fumbatha breaks down and she discovers that she is pregnant a second time, Phephelaphi self-immolates as a last resort to find freedom, described in an equally harrowing final scene that evokes the title's burning butterfly.

The plotlines of several other characters merit brief mention in this preamble since they weave together the action that occurs in the novel's "present" 1946–48 with the events that occur in the past. First, there is Phephelaphi's lover Fumbatha, a manual laborer who has spent the best part of twenty years building up Bulawayo from the ground. He carries the burden of the past on top of his heavy workload, notably the memory of his father's death by hanging in 1897. The flashback to this execution early in the novel creates an historical link between *Butterfly Burning* and *Nehanda*. Second, there is the Phephelaphi's late mother's best friend Zandile and her lover Boyidi. When her mother dies, Phephelaphi moves in with Zandile, although it is later revealed

that Zandile is in fact Phephelaphi's birth mother who gave her up to Gertrude to raise as her own—a detail that replicates the refusal of motherhood. Third, to this already tightly interconnected network of characters we can add Deliwe, the owner of a shebeen who is simultaneously Phephelaphi's confidant and Fumbatha's mistress. With the nodes of the principle relationships now stated, the ensuing analysis will lay bare precisely how their overlapping desires, shared memories, and competing melodies reach a crescendo in the novel. In conjunction with the named characters is the entire Makokoba population that goes unnamed but is nevertheless animated with poetic economy through description of commuting, working, striking, music-making, and so on.

The novel's symphonic first chapter begins with "a pause" (3) before orchestrating the rhythm and movement of manual laborers cutting grass. Vera swiftly establishes the importance of sound, punctuating the second chapter with another simple declarative statement: "There is music" (9). In these opening pages, the specific spatial and sonic details of 1940s Bulawayo are written as perceived by black residents, thus underscoring the centrality of music to both their work and their play. Vera's common approach is to list whole inventories of Makokoba township's sounds, as on the very first page:

> They play a refrain on handmade guitars. […] Birds coo from slanting asbestos roofs. Butterflies break from disused Raleigh bicycle bells.
>
> In the air is the sound of a sickle cutting grass along the roadside where black men bend their backs in the sun and hum a tune, a fume, a lullaby. (3)

Here, the juxtaposition of "instruments"—the sickle and the handmade guitars—points to music's entanglement in the two domains of work and play. The idea introduced that humming a tune or a lullaby assuages the toil of labor recurs in the novel. The effect of these sonic inventories is cumulative, as they uncover the deep layers of a segregated colonial city. For example, as saloon

doors swing open white voices are briefly heard before they swing closed (7), marking the exterior from the interior. Vera reminds us that it is typical to hear contradicting notes in the city's soundscape: "…it is nothing on a single day to hear a thief leap over hedges on Sidojiwe E2 and by noon to listen to bicycle bells in the city center. There copper coins crash and jingle onto the pavement as they are swept out" (9). Sidojiwe E2 is the name of the main artery through the township where much of the action takes place.

The township soundscape is filled with police whistles that "berate the air" (40), a stark reminder that the space consists of strictly patrolled physical barriers.

> The idea is to live within the cracks. Unnoticed and unnoticeable […] S the black people learn how to move through the city with speed and due attention, to bow their heads down and slide past walls, to walk without making the shadow more pronounced than the body or the body clearer than the shadow. It means leaning against some masking reality—they lean on walls, on lies, on music. One can always be swallowed by a song. (6)

And so music props up those who have to "live within the cracks"—those interstitial spaces between being and non-being. As Sarah Nuttall has pointed out, the text carefully reconstructs the apartheid of urban planning.[239] Similarly, Samuelson has described how "the new spatial geography of the modern city actively works on the bodies and desires of its subjects."[240] Indeed, Vera draws out the irony that black people must navigate the very streets that they construct and sweep "without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned" (6). This incongruity reappears again later in the context of a burgeoning realization of outrageous injustice: "Whether they could walk on the pavements or not was still being debated. […] ...through harm and insight, they strove to be heard. After all, they were a majority. If each man was listened to, each man

[239] Sarah Nuttall, "Inside the City: Reassembling the Township in Yvonne Vera's Fiction," in *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture*, ed. Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac (Harare: Weaver Press, 2005), 179–92.
[240] Samuelson, "Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo: Modernity, (Im)Mobility, Music, and Memory," 24.

could be heard" (91). Vera reiterates the argument for racial equality as a right to being "listened to" and "heard," rather than the fact of physical presence.

Vera's textual composition of the deeply divided African city is consistent with Frantz Fanon's descriptions of Manichean colonialism in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon's description of "the colonial world" as "a world cut in two" following "the principle of reciprocal exclusivity" directly refers to the medina in the city of Algiers under French colonial rule, but it is applicable to various contexts including this Southern African colonialism.[241] Fanon laments the internment of colonized people in "un monde sans intervalles" ("a world without spaciousness")—much like Makokoba in *Butterfly Burning*.[242] It is striking that shortly after Fanon adopts a musical metaphor to convey how the violence of the colonial order "a rythmé inlassablement la destruction des formes sociales indigènes" ("ceaselessly drummed the rhythm for the destruction of native social forms").[243] In *Butterfly Burning*, therefore, we discover how that colonial rhythm was disrupted daily by resistant work-songs that made living without spaciousness tolerable.

The township of Makokoba was established in 1905, roughly a decade after the founding of Bulawayo city, and was always intended to limit spaciousness for colonized black Africans.[244] Euphemistically referred to as the Native Location, or simply the Location, Makokoba originally housed single male workers involved in the main industries of mining and the railways. Bulawayo was an important economic and industrial hub for Rhodesia, situated as it was nearby to Hwange's

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[241] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 38, 39.
[242] Fanon, 39; Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (1961; Paris: La Découverte & Syros, 2002), 42.
[243] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 40; Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre*, 44.
[244] For more on the urban and social histories of townships in colonial Zimbabwe, see Terri Barnes, *"We Women Worked so Hard": Gender, Urbanization, and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-1956*, Social History of Africa (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999); Otrude Nontobeko Moyo, *Trampled No More: Voices from Bulawayo's Townships About Families, Life, Survival, and Social Change in Zimbabwe* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007); Ranger, *Bulawayo Burning*; Maurice Taonezvi Vambe, "'Aya Mahobo': Migrant Labour and the Cultural Semiotics of Harare (Mbare) African Township, 1930–1970," *African Identities* 5, no. 3 (2007): 355–69.

coal mines and on the main railway line running north from South Africa. It was also a common stop-off point for colonial tourists and travelers visiting the Matopos National Park or the Victoria Falls. Bulawayo and Makokoba were thus mutually dependent and attracted large numbers of urban migrants—both African and European—in the first half of the twentieth century. The 1940s saw a boom in the township's African population, which tripled in the space of a decade, resulting in crowded living conditions.[245]

Butterfly Burning attests to the overcrowding of cramped space with descriptions of involuntary eavesdroppers and superimposed sounds that cannot be contained by "the barbed-wire fence" and "the patrolling police vans" (49). Radios and voices on the public street Sidojiwe E2 invade private homes, eliminating outdoor/indoor boundaries. When privacy comes at a high premium, township residents cannot afford quiet in their own homes and they are thrown into forced intimacy with neighbors. In an abject scene in which Fumbatha and Phephelaphi withdraw to their small township house, the lovers confront the proximity of listeners next door: "their suppressed voices and the room not theirs, their inhalation, their motion, their surrender" (48). With all "sighs and harmonies" shared involuntarily with fellow township residents, they are forced into the synchronicity of the township. In this context Phephelaphi contemplates the new forms of gendered intimacy that emerge in the township where men's and women's desires were often at odds with one another.

By the late 1940s, a small fraction of the Africans in Makokoba were from the surrounding province of Matabeleland, with the majority hailing from beyond Rhodesia's borders. *Butterfly Burning* dwells on the linguistic implications of the fact that the township was a veritably

[245] Ranger records that there were 18,500 African workers in Bulawayo in 1941 and 60,000 by 1948. *Bulawayo Burning*, 148.

cosmopolitan center in its own right. Zandile hums "that wonderful tune" (92) about the exploding number of township girls with English names and simultaneous drop in Ndebele names "with low and restful tones" (93). The recurring motif of naming and un-naming is developed elsewhere in the novel, as in the listing of colonial nicknames for African employees: "Sixpence, Tickey, Teaboy, and Lucky" (53). Every migrant brought a "new distant tongue," forcing him or her to adopt English as a *lingua franca*: "Whatever else remains out of synchrony, they manage to greet each other in English, saying hallo, easily, as though hallo is not an English world at all" (53). Relatedly, Vera has remarked on her own trilingualism (English, Shona and Ndebele) and how the knowledge of "the cadences and music of languages from other parts of Africa from the township where [she] grew up, among many languages and dialects" informs her writing. For Vera, writing in Shona instead of English would not be "inadequate" so much as "incongruous."[246]

Urban fiction writers often employ the character of the newcomer as a warrant to describe a city through fresh eyes. In Vera's case, scores of dispatched newcomers encounter Bulawayo with fresh ears of course:

> they describe the city in detail: the heels of black women clicking red shoes against the pavement […] the smoothness of transparent silk blouses […] images of embracing lovers crossing the screen […] They warn the newcomer about the rules of pardon, the whole notion of being here and not being here. (56)

Divulging all their sensorial responses to Makokoba, these urban migrants acknowledge the necessity of being present and absent simultaneously, which suggests an unwillingness to leave their backgrounds behind. Vera posits that urban migrants were first drawn by "fascination" and ended up staying for "survival" (52). While cities like Bulawayo promised gainful employment, *Butterfly Burning* exposes the breaking of those promises. For example, there are several explicit

[246] Vera, "Survival Is in the Mouth," 223.

references to actual political events such as the Second World War conscription drive in 1942 which resulted in the halting of several construction projects (including the construction of an ironically named "Success Stores") and the strike by railway workers in 1946 that led to a harsh government clampdown on African unions.

The novel's most prominent symbol of the migrant labor networks of Southern Africa is the train, as the following extract illustrates.

> Nothing has more music in it than trains.
>
> The ease of the movement, sweeping over the ground through the din and smoke and loud engines, the steam hissing into the sky and the fires blazing. So they get onto a train and find themselves in the city. It is not possible to move freely through the closely guarded train and into the curtained coaches, through its entire wailing sound, the whistle blazing and teaching the air like paper. (51).
>
> They curse and blame the trains, then cling even more to the city. The people have come from everywhere, and absorb and learn not only each other's secrets but each other's enigmatic languages. Accent rubs against accent, word upon word, dialect upon dialect, till the restless sound clears like smoke, the collision of words, tones, rhythms, and meanings more present than the trains beating past. They laugh when meaning collapses under the weight of words, when word shuffles against word, but they know something precious has been discovered when a new sound is freed, and soothes the gaps between them. (52-3)

The preference for synecdoche over simile in this passage is not insignificant. The trains are not *like* music, they *are* music. Vera's repetitive prose—the rotation of "word upon word" and "dialect upon dialect"— imitates the unmistakable rhythm of the locomotives. In addition to the forging of connections between geographically distant locales, the transnational transport system introduces "enigmatic languages" and their collision unleashes new sounds. In addition to carrying passengers, train carriages become vehicles for linguistic re-combination and musical invention.

Vera carefully retains a simile elsewhere when she writes that "the city is like the train" (53). This is because the city "too is churning smoke in every direction, and when looked at closely, it too is moving. […] The past is sealed off no matter how purposeful it has been, even if the past

is only yesterday" (53). This last point about the ability of the city and the train to seal off the past underlies the migrant laborers' contemplation of the overland routes they have followed. In a helpful summary, the reader learns that "the sound links them to distant and lost places" (55). The train symbolizes how modernization distances individuals from the past and therefore the descriptions of listening to loud engines and steam whistles expresses the memory of that lost past.

After Bijsterveld's research on the history of machine sounds, we know that the sound of trains are often bestowed with symbolic importance in narratives of modernization.[247] In a Latin American context, Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* describes how frightful the inhabitants of the fictional town of Macondo found the sound of the first train that ever pulled into their station.[248] For example from contemporary African literature, consider Peter Kimani's historical novel *Dance of the Jakaranda* (2017) which addresses the musicality of the back-breaking work of mixed-race crews who laid the railroads in colonial Kenya.[249] It is possible that Vera herself was inspired by the South African Hugh Masekela's song "Stimela," which decried the injustice of migrant labor systems in southern Africa through instrumental and lyrical replication of the sound of the steam trains that transported workers from across the region to South Africa's coal mines. Masekela sings that when migrant workers heard "that choo-choo train a-chugging, and a-pumping, and a-smoking, and a-pushing" it induced both melancholy and anger. "Stimela" was first released in 1974 with Zulu lyrics, but subsequent English performances and recordings of the song have turned it into a memorable international anti-Apartheid anthem.

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[247] Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound*.
[248] The author writes that "the town was shaken by a whistle with a fearful echo and a loud, panting respiration" with one woman calling it "something frightful, like a kitchen dragging a village behind it." Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 111.
[249] Peter Kimani, *Dance of the Jakaranda* (Brooklyn, NY: Akashic Books, 2017).

A reference to miners in Vera's last novel *The Stone Virgins* seems to consciously reprise Masekela: "Egoli . . . they say and sigh . . . about Johannesburg. The way they pronounce the name of that city, say it, fold it over the tongue, tells you everything" (5). One can discern the same nostalgic tone in the dialogue of workmen reported in the shebeens in *Butterfly Burning*. Deliwe who runs the shebeen bears witness to their nostalgia as they chat "long into the night about music, about gold mines across the Limpopo River where some of them has been, and this memory glittered in their minds" (79). And so the novel emphasizes repeatedly the resonance of the railways in collective memory. Here, trains are not straightforwardly the emblems of modernity and mobility. The sounds of the trains stand metonymically for the memories of far-off places. As Vera's figures those sounds as echoes, she provides an acoustemological understanding of those pasts left behind at the other end of the railroad. Furthermore, Vera's novel insists that railway memories are associated with the township's soundscape. This close association directs the reader to hear how echoes of the past facilitated the imagination of the township's future beyond the colonial present.

Muscle Memory: A Melody of Your Own

The final analysis of this chapter focuses on the embodiment of memory through musical resonance in *Butterfly Burning*. The foregoing discussion centered on Vera's figuring of township and railway echoes. Now, my reading centers on specific instances of music-making in the novel, including the playing of kwela, the choral singing of manual laborers, and music's narrative function of characterization. I identify the echo figure at work in the text here through the sonic co-constitution of mnemonics and physics as a kind of "muscle memory." My contention is that

Vera's muscle memory enacts her acoustemological method and styles the musical movement underwritten by physical labor—even when music is experienced as pleasure, or the desire for pleasure. Additionally, music has a narrative and a meta-narrative function in the novel. Music assists characters in *Butterfly Burning* in their remembrance of the past, triggering memories that are presented as flashbacks or in free indirect style in the text. In an identical fashion, Vera guides her readers in the exercise of listening to the past through descriptions of the 1940s township soundscape and the emergent popular music in that space.

One particular musical genre dominates *Butterfly Burning*, as the first chapter plainly informs us: "This is kwela". The statement is also the text's promise to simulate the genre's improvisational rhythm, such that kwela is not merely background music; it is very much in the foreground.

> The men cut and pull. Cut and pull. They bend, cut, and pull. It is necessary to sing. […] It is swinging like heavy fruit on a low and loose branch, the fruit touching ground with every movement of the wind: they call it Kwela. It is a searing musical moment, swinging in and away, loud and small, lively, living. Within this music, they soar higher than clouds; sink deeper than stones in water. When the branch finally breaks and the fruit cracks its shell, the taste of the fruit is divine. (5)

The short sentences with monosyllabic beats at the start of this passage initiate the choral singing by a group of men as they cut grass. The image of a heavy branch weighed down by fruit swinging in the wind exploits the idiomatic expression "fruits of labor" and it conjures up the idea of an impending explosion of kinetic energy. Indeed, that kinesis comes into action shortly through the repeated physical actions: "A slap and slash and more Kwela" (8). For the author, kwela contains a multitude of meanings, some of which can be named while others remain unnamed—but not unsung. Through the opening sequence's textual expression of kwela, she helpfully

introduces the reader to most if not all of the novel's main themes, some of which have already been discussed here. They come in the form of a list of single words or brief axioms:

> This word alone has been fully adapted to do marvelous things. It can carry so much more than a word should be asked to carry; rejection, distaste, surrender, envy. And full desire. […] Kwela seeks strand after strand of each illusion and makes it new. (6)
>
> This and that—fight, escape, surrender. (7)
>
> If not freedom then rhythm. […] Kwela includes the harmonies one can name, and misname. (8)

The recourse to kwela represents for these working characters a way to reach towards self-determination in the absence of real freedom. Vera's insistence of the multiplicity inherent in the genre justifies the capacious re-imagining of what Makokoba sounded like in the 1940s. At the same time, her insistence on the way kwela "makes it new" chimes with the famous Euro-American modernist mantra in the early twentieth century. This has led some critics to read Vera as deliberately inscribing the township in modernity. As Lizzy Attree puts it, "Kwela's improvisational and adaptational style means it was well-suited to book about township life."[250]

Extending these interpretations, I seek to better understand the way kwela accompanies physical labor in the novel. Why, for instance, is kwela deeply embedded with the bodily movements such as this? "Kwela. Climb on. Move. Turn or twist or . . . move. No pause is allowed, and no expectation of grace. Kwela. Cut, pull, bend. It is necessary to sing" (7). These action imperatives closely resemble instructions for learning dance steps although they actually pertain to the grass-cutting job in this passage. Twisting and turning, pulling and bending thus inspire the creation of kwela music. This once again highlights the way that cultural forms emerging from the township were influenced by the residents' labor.

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[250] Attree, "Language, Kwela Music and Modernity in *Butterfly Burning*," 71.

Some historical contextualization of kwela in Bulawayo's township can further determine the close and at times ambiguous relation between work and play for Africans under colonial rule. Although the exact origin of the word is indeterminate, Vera surreptitiously provides the etymology of the word: "Kwela means to climb into the waiting police Jeeps" (6). While the South African critic David B. Coplan similarly conjectures that the word comes from the Zulu imperative *kwela* meaning "climb on," "get up," or join in the music, Zimbabwean ethnomusicologists Mhoze Chikowero and Joyce Jenje-Makwenda maintain that the word actually stems from calls by the police to break up street parties.[251] Kwela took off in the 1940s in Makokoba at the same time as it developed in Salisbury's Harare and Johannesburg's Sophiatown, spreading quickly across the region with the help of labor networks. Drawing on earlier African jazz styles and dances like *tsaba-tsaba,* kwela was played on homemade instruments often used in popular street music, most notably the penny whistle, an inexpensive six-hole German metal flageolet, similar to existing indigenous pipes.[252] For Chikowero, kwela cannot be assessed outside the framework of the Rhodesian colonial state's attempt to control or criminalize urban Africans' cultural production and leisure.[253] Township recreation was tightly regulated through surveillance and taxation. Examples from the 1940s include initiatives by the Department of Native Social Welfare to keep music limited to municipal venues like Stanley Hall in Makokoba. These venues were funded by the "Kaffir Beer Fund" which took a cut from the brewing of an increasingly popular indigenous

[251] David B. Coplan, *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*, 1st ed. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 158; Chikowero, *African Music, Power, and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe*, 182; Joyce Jenje-Makwenda, *Zimbabwe Township Music* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Joyce Jenje Makwenda, 2005).
[252] In his book on township performance culture, Coplan explains that the penny whistle was an ideal instrument to build the foundations of an indigenous South African jazz. Owing to its low volume and tonal thinness it afforded a desirable tonal flexibility and vocal quality. It thus became a commercially successful genre in the region. *In Township Tonight!*, 160.
[253] Chikowero, *African Music, Power, and Being in Colonial Zimbabwe*, 113–30.

alcohol. Kwela music soon became part of other underground survival economies like beer brewing and street hawking.

As a genre, kwela was defined by its transnational township aesthetic, although it was successfully extracted and exported. Vera attests to this fact in her novels. In *The Stone Virgins,* she refers to the song "Skokiaan," named for the African beer brewed illegally in townships. The jazz number was first recorded by Zimbabwean saxophonist Augustine Musarurwa with his band the Bulawayo Sweet Rhythms in the early 1950s and later gained international popularity with a recording by the American Louis Armstrong.[254] Vera also invokes kwela's involvement in such "illicit" activity in *Butterfly Burning* in her descriptions of Deliwe's shebeen. Deliwe brings new dances like the fox-trot and the two-by-two from Stanley Hall, introducing them to the more intimate bar set up in her small township house (139). The shebeen is a site for uninhibited socializing of the colonized African working class and in many ways the importance of this covert meeting place is comparable to the bar *Le Client est Roi* in Nganang's novel discussed in Chapter Three where Yaoundé's share social gossip and political rumors. Vera and Nganang enshrine the bars as generators of localized artistic productions. Both authors position the reader as stealthy listeners to conversations intended only for cultural insiders.

The previous section established that, although the township was a new relatively new social space in the 1940s, memory is nevertheless is central to its sonic imagination. Kwela is similarly in sync with the ongoing process of embodying memory. The novel's sweeping descriptions of music's centrality to township life include the perspective of children who, in one early scene, enjoy homemade entertainment, taking pleasure in physicality, finding "true treasures

[254] Jenje-Makwenda, *Zimbabwe Township Music*, 103.

which provide relief" (18). They create a "tolerable melody" with the instruments they are able to recycle from trash including:

> […] a choice of guitars made out of empty, battered cases of Olivine Cooking Oil. And flutes. Of pawpaw stems. The white juice, running down the lips when the flute is held up, has to be tolerated. It dries up gradually. The taste makes the lips burn. (17)

The passage focuses on the creativity of a group of young township dwellers. Amidst the drudgery of everyday life, they "break the day with echoes of sunlight" and "weave their own ceaseless talk of imagined places" (20). The focus on the sensuous perception of color, sound, and touch here in *Butterfly Burning* closely parallels the reflections on childhood in the memoir by Binyavanga Wainaina analyzed in Chapter Four of this dissertation. Like Wainaina's child narrator, life for these children is about "floating," "vanishing" and finding out "the body is without weight […] flows translucent, absorbing color and sound" (20). There is a particularly marked moment when the children find a broken vinyl record in the rubbish:

> The delicate thin lines on it are fascinating to the children, who pick a piece of grass and take turns to trace carefully and steadily, each concentric ring round and round till the tiniest one ripples toward the middle where a large opening waits and where two whole fingers can be inserted, and the record swung over and over in suspension. It turns dutifully till the label is blurred and none of the letters shows. And a dent forms along the fingers. The record found floating in the ditch or somewhere about is a necessary diversion. (19)

The ritualistic caressing of the music technology substitutes the gramophone's needle for a child's finger. The "necessary diversion" is a poor replacement for acoustically relaying recorded sound; it epitomizes the reliance on the *memory of sound* in the absence of actual sound. The children fail to imagine echoes of the broken record's previously stored content, but the record does not fail to make a physical impression on them. The "dent" formed on their fingers can be understood as a mnemonic technique for lost sounds that are physically embodied, even when acoustic memory and recording technology fail to preserve them.

The mnemonics and physics of sound's embodiment recurs again in chapter 10 of the novel where Vera reprises the crew's song and labor using the language of mechanization. With "calloused hands" they work towards the city's construction, yet Vera proposes that their cultural production surpasses any monument since "they sing higher than anything they have built" (70, 73). The laying of bricks here is analogized as laying lyrical foundations for setting their feelings to music: "A hand swings forward and throws a heavy load. Another picks the tune and adds a word" (68). The rhythm is inspired by the passing of bricks "from hand to hand to hand" which are in turn "lifted, and raised; thrust, carried, and raised" (68). Just as they commit their physical movements to memory, so the song memorializes their labor. Furthermore, the "shared vibration" of each "wailing song" (69-70) consumes individual bodies and strengthens their communal bonds. The echoes of their work-song force them to "surrender, physical, visible, sharing the same axis of rotation as resistance" (72).

The character Fumbatha is the only named individual in the crew. He carries his personal burden of memory in addition to the collective grief. He was orphaned when his father was executed during the 1896-7 anticolonial rebellion and while his father's "resistance to the settlers has been silenced," (12) his voice still haunts Fumbatha's memory. He remains conscious of the "buried song" (25) below him. Fumbatha develops a phenomenological relationship to his work that merits a closer investigation.

> Fumbatha's body bends to pick up an instrument and his shoulders swing to throw an object; this is not submission. An anger is gathered in the most minute solitude of his mind, in the folds of history most charitable to oneself. It is simultaneous with the forced action, it precedes and follows in the familiar way in which sound follows the fall of an object on a hard surface. A relationship is build between the sound and the object. But once we have heard the same fall, the same object meet the same surface, then it is no longer necessary to witness the object fall in order to associate the sound with the object. The emotion behind the motion can be anticipated like sound; it can be retrieved in a moment when eyelids are

> closed to the light and the shape of a single incident recorded. This is the perfection of memory. (72)

This remarkable passage elucidates phenomenologically how movement manufactures sound, and how both contain memory. The repetition of Fumbatha's "forced action" helps him to perfect the memory of his father while the hammering noise of two hard surfaces colliding inscribes the intergenerational echo of historical violence. The description of the relation Fumbatha builds between sound and object best encapsulates Vera's acoustemological project. The figuring of past sounds in her text offers readers a way to finding meaning in versions of history that illegible or inaudible. This passage demonstrates how echoes are contained materialized and embodied even when they cannot be fully heard.

Like Fumbatha's reckoning with the past through work and song, his lover Phephelaphi's negotiation of sound's impact on her memory features prominently in *Butterfly Burning*. She understands this process as "the act of bringing the senses forward and discovering sound was important like holding something in the hand" (109). Phephelaphi imagines apprehending sound as a physical object. One such sound she beholds is the bicycle bell rung by the postman who delivered the letter of admission to her nursing program. She keenly remembers the bell and references it on a couple of occasions because, had she missed that vital postal delivery she might never have got her lucky break. She invests emotional value in that unassuming ring that roused her from her sleep and called her to "leave the room and enter its sweet sound and be set free, in a melody of her own" (101). Phephelaphi's entire narrative arc, her quest for self-determination, could be summarized as the development of a "melody of her own." For example, her relationship with Fumbatha is mapped onto this fitful ascent: when they first fall in love, he "moved from his own song into her astonishing melody" (35), while their eventual breakup is described as a descent

into “shimmering silence” (134). Tragically, in the last instance, Phephelaphi does not manage to establish that melody.

Phephelaphi’s most revelatory moment of musical remembering occurs in the middle of the novel when she visits Deliwe’s shebeen. On this night, she hears kwela for the first time and discovers the style’s “absolute harmony” (66). At first, she feels the “soft voices like the tip of a feather moving in circles over her arms” and the “caress from the brief notes of a guitar” (64) which “continues to pulse under her skin” (65). But the pleasant physical sensation evolves gradually over several pages. Then, “it hits her like a hammer” leaving her “stunned, wounded” (66). In the climactic sequence, she realizes some “far-flung desire” and connects deeply with the “solitary echo” of her deceased mother Gertrude. The memory of her mother is embodied in kwela’s “mournful tune” which “has no beginning at all, just a presence which makes Phephelaphi feel she has heard this song before, that she has lived and breathed in it” (66). She instantly identifies the music’s familiarity, as if her body has a pre-existing memory of it. The township music is not just a mnemonic device, her Proustian madeleine. The description of kwela physically touching Phephelaphi reveals the similarity between memory’s embodiment and sound’s embodiment. For Phephelaphi, then, listening to kwela—or rather experiencing kwela—flexes her muscle memory and she learns to control how she listens to the past.

Conclusion

My exploration of historical acoustemology in Vera’s fiction has demonstrated how the author uses historical sounds in order to figure memories of the past. Crucially, I argued that the sound figures in *Nehanda* and *Butterfly Burning* underscore the embodiment rather than the

preservation of memory. In this way, echoes are a privileged literary tool for constructing history through writing while remaining attentive to the impact of acoustics. The argument in this chapter chimes with the dissertation's overall claim for postcolonial African literature's emphasis on reading and writing sound through the *body* of the text. Vera's fiction does not lament the absence of sound recordings as artefacts from actual events and historical periods. Nor does her writing seek falsely to reproduce the grain of Mbuya Nehanda's booming voice or the pennywhistle's kwela plaintive melodies. Rather, by embodying these sounds of the past, Vera's literary imagination thrives on what has already been forgotten, or the aspects of the past that are receding into the inaudible distance. Therefore, the Zimbabwean author's contribution must also be considered as a model for an interpretation of the past through literary echoes.

The novel about colonial urban livelihood *Butterfly Burning* differs in setting to the nineteenth-century rural cadre of *Nehanda*, but both texts employ similar methods for figuring historical sound. As I have pointed out in this chapter, the author positions her readers as listeners to the past as she simultaneously portrays her exemplary characters engaged in the same activity. Yet we also encountered some key differences in this chapter. First, *Nehanda* stands apart from the other texts in this corpus since it dwells on the pre-colonial Shona soundworld and in doing so it adopts a romantic framework for nature by relying on ecological imagery. However, the novel goes beyond the orality/textuality dichotomy, as I argued above, by offering a sonically oriented model for historiography. Meanwhile, *Butterfly Burning* similarly positions the reader as a listener to the past, but it privileges the musical idiom of kwela in the process of memorialization. Ultimately, both the shared vibrations of a chorus of line workers in the 1940s and the rippling resonance of the spirit medium's voice in the 1890s fall in sync as echoes of resistance. Vera adopts this sound figure to resist colonial and patriarchal versions of History and to refuse partisan

political control over narrating the past. While on the one hand, Mbuya Nehanda's resistance echoes throughout the last century of national history as a testament to the anticolonial imagination, on the other hand, the fictional protagonist of *Butterfly Burning* resists the echoing of a destructive past as she yearns to compose her a personal melody.

Vera's principle orientation toward historicity distinguishes her from the other texts studied in this dissertation that also deal with the past. In Chapter Three, I will analyze Patrice Nganang's *Temps de chien.* Published in 2001, the novel narrates events that took place in Cameroon a decade earlier, but it is far less concerned with the story's historical status. Besides the fact that he deals with the relatively recent past and situates it within an ongoing political movement in the country, Nganang actually amplifies the present-ness of his writing through his choice of rumor as an effective sound figure. Finally, Vera's *Butterfly Burning* could be compared with Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir discussed in Chapter Four. I suggest this comparison in view of both authors' centralization of phenomenological sensory perception, rather than the fact that Wainaina writes about his autobiographical past.

CHAPTER 3

Toward a Poetics of the Crowd I: Writing Rumor with Patrice Nganang

Introduction

Rumor has been used as a conceptual or narrative device in the African novel by writers such as Sony Labou Tansi, Henri Lopes or Nuruddin Farah in the 1980s to vocalize collective denunciation of autocratic regimes. Critics tend to ascribe the oral phenomenon of rumor to the persistence of traditional orature in contemporary literature.[255] This chapter examines Patrice Nganang's novelization of rumor within the urban Cameroonian setting, interpreting rumor as a sound figure that conveys vocal plurality in the text. The inquiry concentrates on Nganang's 2001 novel *Temps de chien : chronique animale* in which rumor has multifarious meanings.[256] Rumor acts both as the single, unified voice of the crowd that dissolves individualities and as the swarming multitude of voices that accentuates pluralities (72, 248). Stylistically, rumor plays like a mellow *kwassa kwassa* beat in the background of this literary chronicle of daily life in Yaoundé (135), and at other times it is metaphorized as "une dangereuse musique" (142) (a dangerous music). Rumor sets fire to the streets and paradoxically it floods them too (131, 318). Semantically, Nganang's rumors consist of petty neighborhood gossip but they also rehearse ongoing transnational cultural forms. At the narrative apex toward end of the novel, rumors take on national political significance as the state reckons with "le pouvoir régicide de la rumeur" (142) (rumor's regicidal power) that

[255] Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (London: Hurst & Co., 2004), 131; Stephen Ellis, "Tuning In to Pavement Radio," *African Affairs* 88, no. 352 (1989): 329.
[256] Patrice Nganang, *Temps de chien : chronique animale* (2001; Paris: Le Rocher, 2007). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. English translations are my own, except where I acknowledge consultation of *Dog Days: An Animal Chronicle* translated by Amy Baram Reid (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

coordinates and amplifies citizens' demands for democratic transition in Cameroon. In all these instances, Nganang reverts to rumor's sonic materiality, affirming its composition as a sound figure.

This is the first of two chapters devoted to theorizing the poetics of the crowd. While in Chapter Four I will consider the individual sense perception of what Binyavanga Wainaina calls "group sound" in his memoir, my proposition here in Chapter Three is that Nganang's writing of Cameroonian rumor signifies the auditory experience of the crowd. In other words, rumor serves as metonymy of the crowd by referring to its plural speech, thereby providing the reader with a textual rendition of what being in a Yaoundé crowd feels and, more importantly, sounds like. I identify multilingualism and polyphony as the principle characteristics of rendering the crowd audible in both the Francophone and Anglophone texts. In doing so, I reformulate the predominant critical conception of what constitutes a polyphonic or multi-voiced novel. The Russian formalist Bakhtin credited with introducing the term polyphony uses it to refer to the diversity of speech registers and ethnonational languages assembled in a novel, without invoking the literal sound of voices.[257] My close readings of two twenty-first century African authors scrutinize the Bakhtinian model of polyphony and determine an alternative method of interpreting contemporary novelistic strategies of vocalizing the multitude.

Methodologically, this chapter draws on insights from interdisciplinary social theories of rumor in combination with cultural analysis of how the communicative phenomenon has been used in novels, popular songs, and other forms. In addition, I rely on literary criticism on the topics of polyphony and multilingualism, both of which are frequently studied as key aspects of

[257] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 262–63.

cosmopolitan urban narratives. Where necessary, I provide historical contextualization of Cameroon's postcolonial national politics, especially the political restriction on media and the press between 1990-2 in which time the novel is set. The political context of *Temps de chien* is not incidental or supplementary: the Cameroonian-born scholar, activist, poet, and novelist Nganang is a longstanding outspoken critic of President Paul Biya's government's abuse of human rights and media freedom.[258] *Temps de chien* is set in the year leading up to the Cameroonian protests in 1990 that forced Nganang into exile—first to Germany where he earned a PhD in comparative literature with a thesis on Brecht and Soyinka, and then to the United States where he now lives and works a university professor.[259] The novel is an allegory of democratic protest under Biya's regime narrated by Mboudjak, a dog who has learned human language through close listening. Mboudjak recounts the daily lives of customers who frequent his human master Massa Yo's bar *Le Client est Roi* (The Customer is King) in Madagascar, one of Yaoundé's high-density low-income neighborhoods dubbed "le lit de la rumeur" (113) (rumor's nest). Mboudjak's chronicle centers on the anecdotes, gossip, and "commentaries" of the Cameroonian capital city's residents, which culminate at the end of the novel in the utopian amplification of the masses as "la rumeur famélique … la rumeur coléreuse" (365) (the starved rumor … the enraged rumor). Nganang thus provides a literary record of what is commonly called *radio-trottoir*, or sidewalk radio, in Francophone Africa with an emphasis on the crowd's acoustic dimensions.

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[258] In addition to his journalism in a range of outlets, see the publication of two political speeches in *Le Principe dissident* (Yaoundé: Interlignes, 2005); a collection of newspaper articles in *Contre Biya : procès d'un tyran* (Münster, Germany: Edition Assemblage, 2011); and most recently his account of the violent conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone region *La révolte anglophone : essais de liberté, de prison et d'exil* (Le Plessis-Trévise, France: Teham Éditions, 2018). Nganang's reporting to an international audience has been the thorn in the side of Biya's government. In December 2017, the author was detained in Yaoundé for a number of days before being forced back into exile.

[259] For more about Nganang's biography including his creative and scholarly publications, see his Stonybrook University faculty page: https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/cscl/people/patrice%20nganang.html. Cf. Amy Baram Reid, "Reading around Nganang's Yaoundé," afterword to *Dog Days*, pp. 211–230.

The chapter begins with a presentation of the language situation in Cameroon focused on the hybrid composite language Camfranglais used in Nganang's novel, which leads to a discussion of the author's techniques of multilingualism and polyphony. Next, building on theories of rumor from anthropology and sociology, I seek to understand how the phenomenon has been cast culturally in the late twentieth century Africa. I then distinguish three modes of "chronicling by ear" in *Temps de chien* based on the characters i) Mboujack the dog's listening to the human crowd, ii) La Panthère (Panther) the rumormonger-in-residence at the bar, and iii) Le Corbeau (Crow) an activist-journalist based loosely on the author himself. Finally, I examine the (per)sonfication of rumor in *Temps de chien*—in other words, the dual process of figuring of rumor both as a sonic element and as a personified character.

Techniques of Plurality

To call *Temps de chien* a French or even a Francophone novel undermines how Cameroon's hybrid, composite language Camfranglais is embedded within so-called standard French. Even in the absence of Camfranglais, the novel enounces its multilingual objective in auditory terms. Narrated in the first-person singular from an unusual canine perspective, *Temps de chien* remains distinctly multi-voiced. The author conveys a sense of vocal multiplicity with recourse to actual, material and sonic voices—both human and dog—frequently written in the plural, in various communal spaces such as the street, the marketplace, and chiefly the bar. Much of the novel's action takes place at *Le Client est Roi*, which is described as "le tourniquet de la vie … le centre de pulsation" (270) (the roundabout of life … the pulsating hub). Setting the story here enables the incorporation of diverse voices of named and unnamed regulars at the bar, as well as

a range of stock characters such as the pushcart vendor, the market woman, the sex worker, and so on. Through reported verbal dialogue, the barflies and passersby air their opinions on Cameroonian politics and negotiate the contours of public life. They thus serve a choric function in *Temps de chien*.

Literary critics might enlist Bakhtin's companion concepts of *polyphony*, *dialogism*, or *heteroglossia* to describe this kind of multi-voiced novel. According to Bakhtin, under the condition of heteroglossia, any given word or utterance has multiple meanings—including social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will be determined by context. In this sense, the heteroglossia of a novel assembles various languages—and not just the ethno-national languages we might immediately think of. These include "social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day" and so on.[260] Polyphony is a closely related concept first defined by Bakhtin in his study of Fyodor Dostoevsky as "*a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses.*" In Dostoevsky's novels, this vocal plurality comes "*with equal rights and each with its own world.*"[261] It is easy to see how almost any novel can be championed for its heteroglossia or polyphony by virtue of including any speaking character. Polyphony has been open to the broadest of interpretations.[262]

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[260] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 262–63.
[261] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6. Original italics.
[262] As Thomas Pavel notes, "such typically Bakhtinian notions as 'polyphony,' 'dialogism,' and 'carnival,' are unreliably defined, imperfectly defended, and, as a result, can easily be challenged" or appropriated (580). Thomas G. Pavel, "Freedom, from Romance to the Novel: Three Anti-Utopian American Critics," *New Literary History* 29, no. 4 (1998): 579–98.

The Russian critic's theory has been taken up by a range of postcolonial critics, such as Robert Young and Homi Bhabha whose notion of *hybridity* draws on polyphony, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. whose articulation of *black double-voicedness* in his influential study of African American literature also invokes Bakhtin.[263] As we saw in Chapter One, Bakhtin's theorization of the grotesque has been hugely influential in African cultural and literary studies. The same could be said for polyphony and its relations. Consider, for instance, Kimani Njogu's monograph on dialogism in East African poetry or Kathryn Lachman's recent writing on polyphony in Maryse Condé's fiction.[264] Lachman's engagement with polyphony is particularly intriguing with regards to her attempt to characterize Bakhtin's theory's orientation toward vocal musicality in literature.[265] While I share her critical impulse to identify the sound of literal speaking voices, my understanding is that this was not Bakhtin's original intention. Indeed, as the translator Caryl Emerson reminds Bakhtin's English reader, the consistent recourse to spatial and physical markers in his discussion of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels are a strong indication that "Bakhtin *visualizes* voices" (original emphasis). A voice is ultimately a "semantic position" or a moral viewpoint on the world for Bakhtin. As Emerson explains, "how a voice sounds is a function of where it is and what it can 'see'; its orientation is measured by the field of responses it evokes."[266]

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[263] Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 2005), 18–21; Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 50–51.

[264] Kimani Njogu, *Reading Poetry as Dialogue: An East African Literary Tradition* (Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, 2004); Lachman, *Borrowed Forms*, 29–58.

[265] Lachman insists that, for Bakhtin, "polyphony places emphasis on sound and voice, equality and plurality, independence and interdependence." To make this point, she quotes Bakhtin's claim that "a character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is […] ; it sounds, as it were, alongside the author's word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters" (7, Lachman's emphasis). However, I am inclined to understand Bakhtin as emphasizing that characters present alternative perspectives to the author's that may be semantically inconsonant. Cf. Lachman, *Borrowed Forms*, 38.

[266] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, xxxvi.

Therefore, while Bakhtin has supplied literary critics with an immensely productive concept for reading the multi-voiced novel, it requires some recalibration in order to understand consistently how contemporary polyphonic African novels are acoustically oriented. The term polyphony is well worth retaining here. However, in a departure from Bakhtin's conception of plural voices as "semantic positions" in the novel, my aim in this chapter and the next is to identify and elaborate upon the modes of making multiple voices audible in writing.

Decentering monological narratives—especially colonial-authored narratives—has long been the ambit of postcolonial African literature. One could trace a genealogy from the Nigerian pioneer Chinua Achebe's oft-cited Igbo proverb "until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will glorify the hunter" through to the contemporary writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's viral video warning against "the dangers of the single story."[267] Here, we remain in the symbolic realm of heterogenizing narrative perspectives. But what does postcolonial polyphony *sound* like? Consider Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1974), a distinctive novel that experiments with plural focalization/vocalization through the first-person plural pronoun "we." The novel centers on a travelling caravan made up of a choric group with Gikuyu, Zulu, and Yoruba names that speaks in collective "utterances … against the loud nonsense of the destroyers."[268] In the words of critic Richard Priebe, Armah is a "craftsman of the plural voice, the communal consciousness, the racial memory."[269] While Armah does indeed summon Pan-

[267] Chinua Achebe, "The Art of Fiction" no. 139. Interview by Jerome Brookes. *The Paris Review*, no. 133 (Winter 1994). https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1720/chinua-achebe-the-art-of-fiction-no-139-chinua-achebe. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story." Filmed July 2009. TED video, 18:43. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

[268] Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973), xvii.

[269] Richard Priebe, "Popular Writing in Ghana: A Sociology and Rhetoric," *Research in African Literatures* 9, no. 3 (1978): 398.

Africanism's inner voice with his literal speaking voices, his experimentation is not concerned with the complex task of multilingual voicing.

Nganang's entire oeuvre is concerned with chronicling the collective and multilingual urban experience in Cameroon. *Temps de chien* (2001) is the second novel in his triptych of Yaoundé novels, between *La Promesse des fleurs* (1997) and *La Joie de vivre* (2003).[270] In his collection of urban fables *L'Invention du beau regard* (2005), the narrator adopts the plural pronoun "nous", following Armah. There are no definitive endings to the "contes citadins" or urban tales in *L'Invention du beau regard,* with sixty thousand endings debated in the lively streets of Yaoundé. In a similar vein, his novel *Mont Plaisant* (2011) begins with an encounter between a 90-year-old "mute" woman and a Cameroonian–American historian whose questions prompt her to start talking again; Sara's storytelling occasions the whole novel's plot.

For Nganang, any polyphonic African writing that keeps true to its social context is necessarily multilingual. As he put it in a recent blog post, his own biography is "simply the story of Cameroon, the story of a life in four languages."[271] Nganang describes how his country of birth was shaped by successive colonization by Germany, France and Great Britain. As in most parts of Africa, this particular colonial history has left its mark on the country's lingua franca(s). Nganang calls his own tongue "the place where the history of my country's battle with itself is continued."[272] He acknowledges the strangeness of using French for his fiction—not in opposition to his native language Medumba, but because the French language, "the intimate language of [his] literature,"

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[270] *Temps de chien* is the recipient of the multiple awards including the Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique Noire and the Prix Marguerite Yourcenar. It is the most widely translated of Nganang's works, with English, German, Spanish, and Italian editions.
[271] Patrice Nganang, "A Life in Four Languages and a War," *Farrar, Straus and Giroux Work in Progress* (blog), August 15, 2019, https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2019/08/15/a-life-in-four-languages-and-a-war/.
[272] Nganang, "A Life in Four Languages."

comes last in his "world lived first in German and then in English."[273] While these statements reflect Nganang's own itinerant cosmopolitanism—facilitated, in part, by his residency in the United States and his status as a university professor—the same could also be said for his compatriots at home in Cameroon. Nganang notes that "Cameroonians themselves could not imagine that one is never freed from the linguistic colonial past."[274] In a previous interview, Nganang recognizes the challenge this poses for his writing practice since, he claims, "literature is by definition monolingual."[275] This comment refers to a conservative understanding against which Nganang defines his own project. "I do not describe the language I use. I simply use it."[276] Despite this intriguing claim shunning description in favor of candid language-use, we find many instances in *Temps de chien* where the author fastidiously characterizes language through attention to the timbre, pitch, accent and dialect of speaking voices. In this way, Nganang invites readers to "comprendre la réalité ambiante" (to understand the ambient reality) both in the novel and in daily life in Cameroon.[277]

This kind of sonic-linguistic detail could be understood as the performance of multilingualism, as a number of Francophone theorists have discussed. Djebar—who as we saw in the Introduction rejects the term *francophonie* in favor of *franco-graphie*—conceives of her writing in French as a way of assembling marginalized non-Francophone voices, which she values by their intonation as their connotation. That, for Djebar, is taking ownership of polyphony.[278] For

[273] Nganang, "A Life in Four Languages."
[274] Nganang, "A Life in Four Languages."
[275] Patrice Nganang, "The Ramifications of Linguistic Innovation in African Literature.' Interview by Peter Wuteh Vakunta, *Journal of the African Literature Association* 3, no. 2 (2009): 207, https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2009.11690115.
[276] Nganang, "The Ramifications of Linguistic Innovation," 208.
[277] Nganang, "L'écrivain à l'école de la rue."
[278] "Oui, ramener les voix non francophones — les gutturales, les ensauvagées, les insoumises — jusqu'à un texte français qui devient enfin mien. Ces voix qui ont transporté en moi leur turbulence, leurs remous, davantage dans le rythme de mon écrit, dans le style de narration que je ne choisis pas vraiment, dans la non-visualisation qui serait ma

Glissant, multilingualism "n'est pas seulement la possibilité de parler plusieurs langues" (is not only the ability to speak several languages).[279] He offers the following definition in his *Discours antillais*:

> Le multilinguisme est le désir passionné d'accepter et de comprendre la langue de son voisin et d'opposer à la grande égalisation linguistique sans cesse recomposée par l'Occident, hier avec la langue française, aujourd'hui avec la langue anglo-américaine, la multiplicité des idiomes et leur intercompréhension.[280]
>
> (Multilingualism is the passionate desire to accept and understand one's neighbor's language, to counter the West's endless great restructuring of linguistic equilibrium—by the French language in the recent past, and now by American English language—with the multiplicity of dialects and their mutual comprehension.)

Glissant goes on to defend this philosophy of multilingualism not as some "vague humanisme" (vague humanism) but as something part of the greater, worldly process of Relationality of people and cultures.[281] Mukoma wa Ngugi also enlists Glissant's ideas in his interpretation of the use of languages other than English in contemporary Anglophone African novels. In *The Rise of the African Novel,* he defends the Glissantian "right to opacity" of the Zimbabwean authors Petina Gappah and NoViolet Bulawayo who include untranslated Shona and Ndebele respectively in their fiction. Mukoma dismisses charges of inaccessibility and—echoing Nganang's emphasis on *ambiance*—makes an alternative proposal: "A better question is not whether the reader is locked out of the meaning of every single word, but whether the languages coming into conversation

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tentation, dans le cadrage des corps, dans . . .
Oui, faire réaffleurer les cultures traditionnelles mises au ban, maltraitées, longtemps méprisées, les inscrire, elles, dans un texte nouveau, dans une graphie qui devient « mon » français." Djebar, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, 29.

[279] Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 462; *Caribbean Discourse*, 249.

[280] Ibid.

[281] Glissant belabors this point elsewhere: "Je répète que le multilinguisme ne suppose pas la coexistence des langues ni la connaissance de plusieurs langues mais la présence des langues du monde dans la pratique de la sienne : c'est cela que j'appelle le multilinguisme." *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 41.

weave a texture that is aesthetically pleasing."[282] How then does Nganang craft the feeling or sonic ambiance of multilingualism in his novel while making it aesthetically pleasing?

The most striking way that Nganang achieves this is through the inclusion of words, phrases, and external references to Camfranglais. Previously known as Katok, Camspeak, and Franglais, the term Camfranglais was first used in the late 1980s to refer to new linguistic practices in schools where youth combined French, English, pidgin, and a number of indigenous Beti languages.[283] It first developed as a clandestine or subversive linguistic tool, with much of the preliminary vocabulary centered on topics like dodging authorities and pursuing prohibited activities.[284] Camfranglais bridges ethno-linguistic divides in a country that is politically segregated between the minority Anglophone population in the Northwest and Southwest regions, and Francophone majority where the seat of government is located. Since the publication of *Temps de chien* and in the last few years in particular, the "Anglophone crisis" in Cameroon has significantly escalated to a violent conflict between the two political groups that fall along linguistic lines.[285] Nganang's sharply critical journalism on the government's role in the crisis resulted in his illegal detention in 2017 and his continued exile from the country since then.[286] In

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[282] Mukoma wa Ngugi, *The Rise of the African Novel*, 64.
[283] Jean-Paul Kouega, "Camfranglais: A Novel Slang in Cameroon Schools," *English Today* 19, no. 2 (April 2003): 23–29, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078403002050.
[284] Jean-Paul Kouega, *Camfranglais: A Glossary of Common Words, Phrases and Usages* (Munich: LINCOM Europa, 2013); Peter W. Vakunta, *Camfranglais: The Making of a New Language in Cameroonian Literature* (Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, 2014).
[285] While separatists have been campaigning for many years for the independence of the two English-speaking provinces Northwest Region and Southwest Region, in recent years the country has seen violence escalate been Anglophone militia and the state's armed forces. Language politics is a major factor in the current crisis which was triggered by the passing of new legislation solely in French contravening the state's official bilingual policy and making way for further shocks to Anglophone culture in Cameroon. For more on the origins of Cameroonian bilingualism, see Tata Simon Ngenge, "The Institutional Roots of the 'Anglophone Problem,'" in *Cameroon: Politics and Society in Critical Perspective*, ed. Jean-Germain Gros (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), 61–86. For more on the ongoing conflict see Cameroon's country profile on the International Crisis Group's website: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon, accessed May 22, 2020.
[286] The author describes his ordeal and the broader crisis in his book *La révolte anglophone : essais de liberté, de prison et d'exil* (Le Plessis-Trévise, France: Teham Éditions, 2018).

view of these facts, the novel's multilingual ethic may be considered as a stylistic innovation, but a more rigorous interpretation must also account for the author's political exigency. Multilingualism serves as a literary technique for figuring the crowd; it is also the author's utopian proposal as a democratic value for the actual Cameroonian crowd.

Nganang weaves Camfranglais seamlessly into his French, mostly in direct speech thereby cementing its oral status. Critics have generally applauded Nganang for achieving what he set out to do: *simply using the language*, not describing it. André Ntonfo likens Nganang's practice of "linguistic appropriation" to the earlier work of Cameroonian Mongo Beti, while Peter Vakunta calls *Temps de chien* "an indigenized French language text."[287] Charlotte Baker further points out that the motif of "borrowing language"—inaugurated by the dog-narrator Mboudjak's adoption of human language—is replicated on a more micro level through lexical borrowings.[288]

Reviewing the instances in which Camfranglais is used in the novel is instructive. Camfranglais is required to refer to local items such as food, drink and related vernacular specificities. It also appears in the form of vocal interjections such as insults ("nkaknin" [118] = imbeciles), greetings ("Nsong am nù" [42] = what's the latest?), and rhetorical questions ("Bia boya" [27, 41] = what can you do?). Linguistic borrowing occurs at a grammatical level in French. Ladislas Nzessé helpfully identifies constructions from several languages spoken in Cameroon, including Fufuldé, Duala, Beti, Ghomala, and Medùmba.[289] While Papa Samba Diop submits that

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[287] André Ntonfo, "Roman camerounais contemporain et écriture de la quotidienneté : une lecture de *Trop de soleil tu l'amour* de Mongo Beti et de *Temps de chien* de Patrice Nganang," *Neue Romania*, no. 33 (2005): 149–70; Vakunta, *Camfranglais*, 130.

[288] Charlotte Baker, "Multilingual Literature and Official Bilingualism in Cameroon: Francis Nyamnjoh's *A Nose for Money* and Patrice Nganang's *Temps de Chien*," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 68, https://doi.org/10.1386/ijfs.18.1.59_1.

[289] Ladislas Nzessé, "*Temps de chien* de Patrice Nganang: quand le texte se charge des réalités camerounaises," *French Studies in Southern Africa*, no. 33 (2004): 86–87.

Temps de chien avoids hierarchizing these Cameroonian languages, I would point out that by virtue of its status as a Francophone novel, "hexagonal French" still dominates and frames the text.[290] Consider the character Massa Yo, the hot-tempered bar owner who switches to Camfranglais in moments of distress. His dog Mboudjak, the ever-astute listener, calls this "son pidgin de crise" (64) (his crisis pidgin). Massa Yo's usage of Camfranglais is emblematic of the way that the composite language is deployed to signal strong feelings in excess of French's formality.

To what extent does vernacular language in *Temps de chien* merely provide the French with well-tuned local flourishes? Critics such as Baker and Diop agree that Nganang's treatment of multilingualism is successful, going so far as to say that it is a mark of its mimetic structure. As Diop writes: "Par sa polyphonie, *Temps de chien* signale son enracinement réaliste [… et] est conforme à la réalité camerounaise" (Through its polyphony, *Temps de chien* signals its realist roots [… and] conforms to Cameroonian reality).[291] Baker further concurs that the everyday practice of multilingualism becomes a literary activity in *Temps de chien*.[292] I agree, following Robert Young's claim that "within a single 'pidgin' utterance, the voice divides into two voices, two languages," that every Camfranglais utterance in the novel instantiates a multivoicedness.[293] Furthermore, in my reading, the novel in fact dramatizes the quotidian misrecognition and misappropriation of languages in Cameroon to a discordant effect.

Despite his effective inclusion of Camfranglais as the paradigmatic multilingual medium, Nganang recognizes the impossibility of textualizing every borrowed word and calque. The text simply needs to be readable. On occasion, the author resorts to ellipsis in lieu of transcription of

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[290] Papa Samba Diop, "Voyages entre les langues : Pratiques plurilingues chez Patrice Nganang et Boubacar Boris Diop," *Notre Librairie: Revue des Littératures du Sud* 159 (September 2005): 91.
[291] Diop, 95.
[292] Baker, "Multilingual Literature and Official Bilingualism in Cameroon," 71.
[293] Young, *Colonial Desire*, 19.

other languages as in the line: "La femme commença une tirade en sa langue" (184) (the woman launched a tirade in her language). More often, Nganang uses a sonic vocabulary in order to convey the mixing of "foreign" and "local" languages in the atmosphere of the city, as in the following extract from an episode at *Le Client est Roi* in which we are introduced to the main rumormongering barfly character known as La Panthère (the Panther):

> La cour du bar de mon maitre ne prend sa véritable vie qu'avec l'arrivée de ce petit vieux [La Panthère]. Ses mains se lèvent alors au ciel pour porter encore le loin, bien au loin du quartier sa voix cassée par son trop de parole de la veille. Il roule le medùmba* sur ses lèvres avec un plaisir infâme. Il ferme légèrement ses yeux en frappant les paupières quand il parle. Il part le plus souvent de l'évidence que tout le monde dans les rues de Madagascar comprend sa langue, qu'il ne considère certainement pas comme allogène mais authentique dans Yaoundé. Dans le mouvement de son corps traversé de sillons de vieillesse, à chacune de ses paroles, dans l'étonnement enfantin de son regard à la moindre contradiction, dans le va-et-vient vif de ses bras à chaque argument, je vois l'assurance d'un homme qui en cette cour de bar, en cette rue de sous-quartier, en cette convulsion de la ville même, se sait le Doyen. (111)
>
> (The courtyard of my master's bar only truly comes to life with the arrival of this little old man [Panther]. He raises his hands up to the sky so that his voice, hoarse from speaking too much the night before, carries far away, far from this quarter. Medumba* rolls off his lips with notorious delight. His eyes close slightly, with eyelids fluttering, when he speaks. Most of the time, he takes it for granted that everyone in the streets of Madagascar understands his language, which he certainly doesn't consider alien but authentically part of Yaoundé. In the movement of his body, covered with aged furrows, in each of his words, in the childlike surprise of his eyes at the least contradiction, in the swinging of his lively arms with every argument, I see the confidence of a man who knows himself to be Chief in this bar's courtyard, in this neighborhood's street, in the shaking city itself.)[294]

Although Nganang does not always specify the language in use, here he provides detail of Panthère's timbre—hoarse from telling stories the previous night, as well as the unabashed

[294] I am indebted to Reid for her English translation which I retain throughout for two key words: "neighborhood" for *sous-quartier* and "quarter" for *quartier*. Reid, in consultation with the author, avoided the terms "slum" or "shantytown," which would too negatively cast the division of the city of Yaoundé's low-income districts into administrative sections and sub-sections. Reid explains her rationale for capturing the relationship between the two terms as follows: "I opted for 'neighborhood' as the best way to render *sous-quartier*, because it fits with how Mboudjak understands the city's geography—as a labyrinth of courtyards and neighborhoods—and because it highlights the city's organization into a patchwork of distinct communities. For *quartier* I retained the cognate 'quarter.' While this is not common currency in American usage, it is recognizable." See the Translator's Note in *Dog Days*, pp. x-xi.

pleasure he takes in rolling the Medumba language off his lips. What is striking is how this speech in an unfamiliar language (unfamiliar both to the auditors in the novel and presumably a good number of the novel's readers) occupies a central role in the plot yet remains unrecorded or unrecordable. Still, La Panthère's Medumba livens up the bar and inscribes its authenticity in that locale through his linguistic vibrations and accompanying gestures. A further point of interest raised by the allusion to Medumba in this passage is the original French edition's gloss: "langue bantoue, du groupe bamiléké."[295] The English translation contains a similar note in the appending glossary: "A Bantu language, one of those spoken by the Bamileke."[296] In an interview shortly after the first publication of *Temps de chien* in 2001, Nganang mentioned his regret for this editorial decision taken by his publishers in France, a move that would have been unlikely in Cameroon where people live with less fear of encountering unknown words and phrases.[297] The inclusion of local linguistic and sonic detail thus furnishes the reader—especially the reader outside of Cameroon—with an idea of what the aural encounter with the multilingual crowd is like. The description in French of La Panthère's bar-stool speechifying in Medumba thus foregrounds the social conditions of multilingualism. In this way, the conjoining of sonic materiality and linguistic plurality creates the polyphonic ambiance of the novel *Temps de chien*.

Radio-Trottoir **in the African Novel**

[295] Patrice Nganang, *Temps de chien : chronique animale* (Paris: Serpent à Plumes, 2001), 91n55. Explanatory notes were removed for the subsequent edition published by Le Rocher in 2003, to which my page numbers refer.
[296] Nganang, *Dog Days,* 209.
[297] "Qui a grandi à Yaoundé, a grandi dans un univers où il ne comprendra jamais tout. Il suffit de comprendre la réalité ambiante. Il s'agit d'un processus éditorial qui est surtout français, où on a l'impression que si un mot nous échappe, on est perdu. L'écrivain africain doit encore passer par ce genre de choses. J'espère que le prochain roman ne subira pas cette maltraitance." Nganang, "L'écrivain à l'école de la rue : entretien avec Taina Tervonen."

On September 20, 1984, the President of Cameroon Paul Biya took to the airwaves to discourage Cameroonians from spreading rumors. The radio broadcast was printed on the front page of the state newspaper *Cameroon Tribune* the following day.

> La vérité, beaucoup d'entre vous la confondent avec la rumeur. Or la rumeur n'est pas la vérité. La vérité vient d'en haut, la rumeur vient d'en bas. Elle naît on ne sait où, colportée ensuite par des gens inconscients et souvent malveillants, des gens qui veulent se donner une importance qu'ils n'ont pas. Camerounais. Camerounaises, ne prêtez aucune attention aux rumeurs qui parcourent le pays.[298]
>
> (Truth is confused by many of you with rumors. But rumor is not the truth. Truth comes from above; rumors come from below. They originate in unknown places, then spread by thoughtless and often malicious people, people who think themselves more important than they really are. Cameroonians, pay no attention to the rumors spreading throughout the country.)

After just two years in office, President Biya sought to consolidate his power further by sanctioning the state's official channels of communication and denigrating unofficial sources of information. The parallelism of the remark "La vérité vient d'en haut, la rumeur vient d'en bas" establishes a vertical hierarchy of power and positions the leader in proximity to truth. Rumors pose a threat to governments like Biya's that wish to keep a tight fist on access to information because as, political scientist James C. Scott puts it, they are the "weapons of the weak."[299] The ammunition for such weapons is unassuming. It consists of stories that may or may not be true, stories shared in hushed tones and in louder conspiratorial chatter, in back streets and in public squares, and most often by word-of-mouth. The seemingly small act of sharing rumors can complicate authorship, epistemology, authenticity, and audibility. Nganang fully harnesses these qualities in his novel about the collective force of human voices. Before investigating rumor in *Temps de chien* more in

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[298] Paul Biya, "Ne pretez aucune attention aux rumeurs qui parcourent le pays !," *Cameroon Tribune*, September 21, 1984.

[299] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

more depth, this next section offers an overview of theoretical approaches to rumor from sociology, anthropology, communication, and history. I also explore the literary history of rumor into which *Temps de chien* enters.

Rumor is "improvised news" and a kind of "collective problem-solving," writes sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani in his widely-cited 1966 book on the topic.[300] Ralph L. Rosnow affirms the processual and cooperative nature of rumor, calling it a pattern of communication.[301] More recently, Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia have defined rumors as "unverified and potentially useful information statements in circulation that arise in ambiguous, threatening and potentially threatening contexts and help people make sense and manage threat."[302] They further distinguish rumor from two other terms often used interchangeably: gossip and urban legends. Whereas gossip is "evaluative social chat about individuals" intended to forge interpersonal networks, the content of a rumor is more likely to be general.[303] And while urban legends involve "a setting, plot, climax and denouement," rumors are often "shorter, non-story-like bits of information without an established plot."[304] Even though rumors do not contain the traditional elements of story, they are still what Lauren Derby, writing of the Caribbean, calls "rough drafts of what might become a genre."[305] The creative dimension of rumor—or what Shibutani calls "improvisation"—is worth pondering. The novelization of rumor certainly depends on this

[300] Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 17.
[301] Ralph L. Rosnow, "On Rumor," *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 3 (1974): 27, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00386.x.
[302] Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, "Rumor, Gossip and Urban Legends," *Diogenes* 54, no. 1 (2007): 26, https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192107073433.
[303] DiFonzo and Bordia, 27.
[304] DiFonzo and Bordia, 30, 31.
[305] Lauren Derby, "Beyond Fugitive Speech: Rumor and Affect in Caribbean History," *Small Axe* 18, no. 2 (2014): 131.

improvisational dimension, just as it warps the distinctions between adjacent categories of gossip and urban legend.

Rumors flourish under social conditions of scarce information and a lack of trust in authorities, as well as an accrual of perceived threats.[306] These factors made Cameroon fertile ground for rumormongers in the 1980s and 1990s.[307] When Biya became president in 1982 he inherited an oppressive state apparatus from his predecessor with harsh media censorship. Biya's introduction of multiparty elections for the first time in 1992 in fact saw a greater clamp down on independent media production in the country with the banning of several publications.[308] Francis B. Nyamnjoh makes the critical observation that the necessity of underground and subversive indigenous media production during *both* the colonial era *and* the post-independence era have led to the persistent value of rumor in Cameroonian public life.[309] Rumor has been particularly valuable as a rhetorical tool for Cameroonian independent outlets such as *Challenge Hebdo* and *Le Messager*. In the neighboring Republic of the Congo during the same period, tabloids often resorted to rumor to evade legal accountability. As Nicolas Martin-Granel has pointed out, editors of shamelessly titled publication *La Rumeur* based in Brazzaville deliberately framed their political reporting as rumor. They did so with conditional prefixes—for example, "il paraît que…"

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[306] Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath, eds., *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Aldine Transaction, 2005).

[307] Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg, Flavien T. Ndonko, and Song Yang, "How Rumor Begets Rumor: Collective Memory, Ethnic Conflict, and Reproductive Rumors in Cameroon," in *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend*, ed. Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent, and Chip Heath (New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2005), 141–158.

[308] Eckhard Breitinger, "'Lamentations Patriotiques': Writers, Censors and Politics in Cameroon," *African Affairs* 92, no. 369 (1993): 557–75; Charles Manga Fombad, "Freedom of Expression in the Cameroonian Democratic Transition," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 33, no. 2 (1995): 211–26.

[309] Francis B. Nyamnjoh, *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging* (New York: Zed Books, 2005), 42. Nyamnjoh provides a useful overview of media and politics in Cameroon in the early 1990s, pp. 100-59. Nyamjoh delineates a dozen prominent political rumors in Cameroon since the 1980s (212-5) and proposes that the legitimation of rumor is the result of the "government's monopoly over the official channels of mass communication and its clampdown on alternative sources of information" (216).

(apparently…)—and nonaccredited quotations—for example, "la rue dit que…" (The streets say…) and "le bruit court que…" (word has it that…).[310] Rumor remains resistant in its textual incarnation. Indeed, rumor helps to disguise more explicit forms of resistance, as James Scott and Patricia Turner has argued.[311] Closely following Scott, Achille Mbembe's study on Cameroonian political caricatures likens such cartoons to rumor: they both function as the "bombe du pauvre" (bomb of the poor).[312] The received wisdom, therefore, is that the anonymity guaranteed by rumor helps oppressed groups to say the unsayable.

For many Africanists, assessing the truth-value of rumors is of secondary importance. Luise White's monograph on "vampire stories" in colonial eastern and central Africa, for example, does not ask the question "do Africans believe such outlandish tales?" but rather argues that rumors reveal social truths and help in the collective negotiation of confusing lived experiences.[313] In a similar vein, though focused on a later period in history, Grace Musila's study of stories about the death of a British tourist circulated via "the Kenyan grapevine" considers rumors "as a critique of legal truths."[314] White's and Musila's research puts pressure on our understanding of rumor as a primarily oral phenomenon. While White makes a compelling case for orally transmitted stories

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[310] In the inaugural issue of *La Rumeur*, the editors extol the virtues of rumor, which they are merely chronicling, in a practice akin to audio-recording. In an extended conceit, they apologize if their reporting resembles the buzzing of mosquitos in ears, emphasizing the sonification of rumor. Nicolas Martin-Granel, "Rumeur Sur Brazzaville: De La Rue à l'écriture," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 33, no. 2–3 (1999): 362–409.

[311] As Patricia Turner's work on African American culture and James C. Scott's work on South East Asian culture show, the dominant theories of rumor cast it as liberatory and subversive. In his well-known account, Scott lumps rumor together with folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms, describing them as a set of practices that allow subordinates to disguise, mute, and veil their resistance. See his chapter 6 "Voice under Dominaiton." Patricia A. Turner, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

[312] Achille Mbembe, "La 'Chose' et ses doubles dans la caricature camerounaise," *Cahier d'études africaines* 36, no. 1–2 (1996): 158.

[313] Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[314] Grace A. Musila, *A Death Retold in Truth and Rumour: Kenya, Britain and the Julie Ward Murder*, African Articulations (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2015), 91.

to be used as a reliable source in colonial historiography, Musila's reliance on published accounts of the Julie Ward rumor draws attention to how African rumors also circulate *in print*. Additionally, studies such as those by Martin-Granel mentioned above and anthropologist Julian Bonhomme argue that journalistic print discourse and popular oral discourse in Francophone Africa are co-constitutive of rumor.[315]

This tension between textuality and orality looms large in scholarly attempts to define African rumor and, in particular, the phenomenon of *radio-trottoir*, or "sidewalk radio." The term refers to word-of-mouth news diffused in public spaces—like the street, the marketplace, or public transport—and has become an indispensable information source. *Radio-trottoir* directly connotes both the urban milieu where the phenomenon occurs and its semblance to wireless broadcasting.[316] According to one of the earliest commentators Kin-kiey Mulumba, *radio-trottoir* consists of a wide range of practices including but not limited to verbal dialogue, the press, posters, graffiti, and other printed artefacts.[317] Sabakinu Kivilu writes that, "nous sommes en effet sur le terrain de l'oralité, où la communication se fait de bouche à oreille" (we are in fact in the domain of orality, where communication goes from mouth to ear).[318] Semiotician Lye M. Yoka also highlights this fact, while linguist Pius Ngandu Nkashama interprets *radio-trottoir* primarily as a linguistic phenomenon and makes the case for "Frankinois" (a portmanteau of *français* and *kinois* meaning

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[315] See chapter seven "Rumeur à la une" in Julien Bonhomme, *Les voleurs de sexe : anthropologie d'une rumeur africaine* (Paris: Seuil, 2009); Martin-Granel, "Rumeur Sur Brazzaville."

[316] Larousse dictionary defines *radio-trottoir* simply as, "rumeur publique, nouvelles officieuses" (public rumor, unofficial news). Alternate terms used in the Congo like *radio-cocotier* (palm tree radio) and *radio-bambou* (bamboo radio) and the outdated Anglophone equivalents from East and Southern Africa *bush telegraph* and *bush radio* are not so firmly rooted in the city: they evoke slow, rural news transmission. In Cameroon, it is also known as *radio one-battery*, *Radio 33*, *FM Malabo*, and *radio kongossa*. Cf. Nyamnjoh, *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*, 210.

[317] Kin-kiey Mulumba, "La revanche des opprimés," *Afrique*, no. 46 (April 1981): 46.

[318] Sabakinu Kivilu, "La radio-trottoir dans l'exercice du pouvoir politique au Zaïre," in *Dialoguer avec le léopard? Pratiques, savoirs et actes du peuple face au politique en Afrique contemporaine*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Henri Moniot (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1988), 181.

"Kinshasa French") as a mode of lexical play that enables street talk.[319] Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar claim that *radio-trottoir* "is in a direct line of descent from the oral cultures of precolonial times generally referred to as oral tradition."[320] However, given that indigenous orature was very often composed in highly formalized style and varied widely across cultural groups, I do not share the view that *radio-trottoir* is simply a modern instantiation of oral tradition. Rather, I follow Duasenge Ndundu Ekambo's claim in his 1985 book on the topic that *radio-trottoir* "n'est ni l'oralité des anceetres ni un media" (neither ancestral orality nor a media channel).[321] Still other scholars have characterized *radio-trottoir* as a kind of text or palimpsest of the city.[322] For instance, Dieudonne Mbala Nkanga describes it as "a text of class struggle against political and economic oppression. As a mode of representation, it is a private transcript jettisoned to public space in direct opposition to official reporting."[323] Similarly, and drawing on Scott's concept of hidden transcripts, Alessandro Triulzi calls *radio-trottoir* "the new texts of urban orality."[324] In his essay, Triulzi conflates the phonic and the textual: "the submerged text of street buzz covers the official text and annuls it" which is why "in Africa [it] is more subversive than the street tam-tam, the *télé-guele.*" In fact, he explains that "wall drawings and the buzz of the street merge in an anti-

[319] Pius Ngandu Nkashama, "De l'image au mot : les procédés de lexicalisation dans et par la radio-trottoir," *Meta: Translators' Journal* 32, no. 3 (1987): 285–291; Lye M. Yoka, "Radio-trottoir : le discours en camouflage," *Le Mois en Afrique*, no. 225–226 (November 1984): 154–160.
[320] Ellis and Haar, *Worlds of Power*, 31.
[321] Ekambo further describes *radio-trottoir* as "un mode de communication spécificque à une société qui cherche sa voie originale et authentique entre la nouveauté venue d'autres continents et ses contingences contemporaines" (a mode of communication particular to a society searching for its own original and authentic way between novelty from other continents and its contemporary contingency) Duasenge Ndundu Ekambo, *Radio-Trottoir : une alternative de communication en Afrique contemporaine* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Cabay, France, 1985), ?
[322] Such conceptions implicitly draw on Karin Barber and Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias's capacious understanding of "text" in their influential work on African popular culture. Cf. Barber and Moraes Farias, *Discourse and Its Disguises*.
[323] Dieudonne Mbala Nkanga, "'Radio-Trottoir' in Central Africa," *Passages: A Chronicle of the African Humanities*, no. 4 (1992): 4.
[324] Alessandro Triulzi, "African Cities, Historical Memory and Street Buzz," in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (New York: Routledge, 1996), 86.

institutional stand in the degraded post-colonial capitals of the African continent."[325] We thus find that the tendency among critics to either view rumor as a continuation of orature or to recast it as a text for the purposes of interpretation. Eschewing both of these impulses, my proposal is to consult to cultural representations of African rumor in order to advance a theory of rumor that retains its fundamental auditory dimension in print.

Rumor has had substantial influence on cultural production at least since the 1970s and '80s when the Congolese rumba musicians Franco and Pepe Kalle recorded songs about *radio-trottoir* and "verbal diarrhea" respectively.[326] The novel has not been immune to *radio-trottoir*'s deep profusion either. Consider Henri Lopes's 1982 novel *Le Pleurer-rire* (*The Laughing Cry*) in which he satirizes the role of political speech, what he designates with the neologism "parlation"—roughly "talkativity."[327] One character is reproached for distrusting *radio-trottoir*:

> Toi, quand on te dit, tu ne veux pas croire pour toi. Tu dis seulement que c'est Radio-trottoir, Radio-trottoir. Mais tu ne sais pas que ce que Radio-trottoir parle, c'est la vérité même. Les crapauds ne coassent que quand il pleut, dé. [328]
>
> (As for you, whenever we tell you something, you don't want to believe it for yourself. You just say it's *radio-trottoir*, *radio-trottoir*. But what you don't know is that what *radio-trottoir* has to say is the very truth. Toads only croack when it rains, eh.).

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[325] Triulzi, 86, 89.

[326] Throughout the 1970s, the Congolese rumba star Franco regularly played the song "Radio Trottoir" with his band Le Tout Puissant Orchestre Kinshasa (a.k.a. TPOK Jazz) at the popular nightclub Un, Deux, Trois in Kinshasa. The song lent its name to a 1978 compilation album of hits from that decade. In 1988, Franco recorded the track "Les Rumeurs" in defiance of the rumors about his declining health that circulated Kinshasa and beyond. The following year, 1989, Pepe Kalle also lamented the Kinois predilection for "tuba-tuba" (gossip in Lingala) in his song "Diarrhée verbale" (verbal diarrhea). In 1994, the Congo-Cameroonian duo Alfred Mbongo and Manuel Wandji released an album titled *Radio Trottoir* with ten tracks evoking street life in their two countries.

[327] Henri Lopes, *Le pleurer-rire* (1982; Paris: Présence Africaine, 2003), 42.

[328] Lopes, 42; Lopes has declared his intention to imitate *radio-trottoir* among other oral styles. See Henri Lopes, "Entretien avec Denyse Saivre," *Recherche, Pedagogie et Culture* 59/60 (1982): 121–122.

Rumormongers are a crucial narrative device in *Le Pleurer-rire*, functioning similarly to a dramatic Greek chorus, offering anonymous commentary on the action.[329] Sony Labou Tansi is equally ironic and self-reflexive when he mocks the "roman-trottoir" in his 1988 novel *Les Yeux du volcan*:

> Ceux qui écrivent des romans devraient savoir qu'on ne sera plus romancier que par la bouche du peuple. Elle invente dans les moindres recoins de la parole, sous le moindre clin de mot. Le roman-trottoir restera imbattable à tout point de vue.[330]
>
> (Those who write novels ought to know that they will only become novelists through the mouth of the people, which invents in the darkest recesses of speech, in the slightest blink of a word. The sidewalk-novel remains utterly invincible).

Nuruddin Farah also contemplates state information control in his Somali trilogy, positing in the novel *Sweet and Sour Milk*: "The politics of mystification rendered rumours credible."[331] From the same period, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's novel *Matigari* playfully weaves together Gikuyu orature and political rumors around the eponymous Messianic dissident character, who spawned "real-life" anxieties for Daniel arap Moi's government.[332] An abiding theme for Ngũgĩ, he centralized it again his 2006 novel *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*). These "dictator novels" share an investment in rumor's ability to tackle issues surrounding anonymity, creativity, subversion, and information control—the same issues that scholarship on the topic is concerned with.[333]

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[329] Dominic Thomas calls this choral feature *radio-trottoir* in Lopes's novel "polyvocality." See *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa*, 93.
[330] Sony Labou Tansi, *Les yeux du volcan* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), 143.
[331] In General Siyaad Barre's Mogadishu, Loyaan, the tormented intellectual in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, has this to say about public rumors: "No information was released until a rumour had been published, and nothing was made official until the General's informants had reported back the mood, the feeling of the general public. If the action was unpopular, one heard an unconfirmed report that so many persons of that tribe, or that class of people, or that pressure group had been imprisoned. The papers didn't carry the news, the radio neither."
Nuruddin Farah, *Sweet and Sour Milk*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1980), 196.
[332] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Matigari* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989).
[333] Cf. Xavier Garnier, "Poétique de la rumeur : l'exemple de Tierno Monénembo," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 35, no. 140 (1995): 889–95.

This overview has helped to situate Nganang's 2001 novel in a longer literary history of the African novel's engagement with rumor as a political idiom. In reprising that idiom, Nganang asserts its contemporary relevance and, with his recourse to a sonic lexicon, he tenders his own literary innovation. Indeed, rumor is, as one character in the novel dubs it, "une dangereuse musique" (142) (a dangerous music). My theoretical overview also generates a set of interlocking questions that I will address in the remainder of this chapter: is rumor always polyphonic? Does the personification or rumor undermine the plurality of voices? How does rumor shape the genre of the novel, and *vice versa*? As the close readings in the next sections demonstrate, rumor organizes the narrative structure of *Temps de chien* but primarily, rumor is a polyphonic technique—the author's way of figuring multiple voices in his novel. Put differently, Nganang metonymizes the Cameroonian crowd as rumor.

Chronicling by Ear

This section outlines three types of listening to the crowd embodied by three characters in Nganang's novel: (i) the dog-narrator Mboudjak's scientific listening, (ii) La Panthère's fantastic storytelling, and (iii) Le Corbeau's documentarian note-taking. My contention is that these modes of listening are in fact a kind of "chronicling by ear"—a term I adapt from Marília Librandi's book on Brazilian author Clarice Lispector. Librandi defines *writing by ear* as "a text that is the result of hearing sounds that remain in writing, as silence." [334] For the purposes of analyzing *Temps de chien*, I concentrate on the text that results from the three protagonists' modes of listening to the sound of the crowd.

[334] Librandi, *Writing by Ear*, 8.

i. Mboudjak, the researcher

How seriously should the reader take the novel's subtitle *chronique animale*? The adjectival ambiguity presents the reader with a furth question: is this a chronicle *about* an animal or a chronicle *by* an animal? In the opening pages, Mboudjak presents himself as a keen listener who has "digested" sentence constructions and speech intonations in order to acquire human language.[335] As Evan Maina Mwangi points out, while animals often appear in African orature, they are usually narratees, not narrators.[336] Mboudjak's mastery of a hegemonic language calls to mind the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" by which he refers to colonized peoples' use of a colonizer's languages as a subversion.[337] The canine usurper does not ever specify which Cameroonian languages he has picked up; for Mboudjak, human speech is "pure commodité" (48) (sheer convenience). Mboudjak's habit of listening functions to his detriment later in the novel when humankind's incessant gossiping induces nausea (270). Yet, he is determined in his clearly stated mission to interpret "des incalculables mystères du quotidien […] à résoudre l'énigme de l'humanité" (48) (everyday life's incalculable mysteries […] to resolve the enigma of humanity).

In his quest for cross-species enlightenment, Mboudjak places a premium on scientific and realistic methodology. Identifying himself as "un chien scientifique : « un chercheur »" (225) (a scientific dog: "a researcher"), he outlines his multi-sensory observation technique: "Je regarde, j'écoute, je tapote, je hume, je croque, je rehume, je goûte, je guette, je prends, bref, je thèse,

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[335] "J'ai digéré les constructions de leurs phrases et les intonations de leurs paroles. J'ai appris leur langage et je flirte avec les modes de pensée." (13)
[336] Evan Maina Mwangi, *The Postcolonial Animal: African Literature and Posthuman Ethics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 53–99). Cf. Yves Clavaron, "Writing the Postcolonial Animal: Patrice Nganang's *Temps de Chien*," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 16, no. 4 (2012): 553–61.
[337] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

j'antithèse, et je synthèse, je prothèse leur quotidien" (43) (I watch, I listen, I tap, I sniff, I chew, I sniff some more, I taste, I stay on the lookout, I wrap; put short, I make a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis, and a prosthesis on their daily life). The imperative that he repeats to himself is: "'pense à la science'" (259) (think of science). Mboudjak demonstrates an ocularcentrism in the repeated invocation of truth's visual clarity and the value he places on objective eyes:

> J'écoutais une fois de plus le petit vieux fabriquer la réalité avec ses histoires. […] Je me disais têtument : Mboudjak, n'oublie pas que tu as décidé pour suivre de regarder le monde avec les yeux de l'objectivité. Oui, je ne voulais pas me laisser prendre dans les tours de passe-passe du verbe fou. (144-145)
>
> (I listened once more to the little old chap inventing reality with his stories. […] I would say obstinately: Mboudjak, don't forget that you have resolved to watch the world with objective eyes. Yes, I didn't want to get caught out by crazy word tricks).

Despite his best intentions to remain a "réaliste" (130) (realist), the dog narrator has trouble distinguishing truth with his senses, or as he puts it: "à distinguer la saveur de ce que mon jugement pourrait prendre pour vrai" (132) (to distinguish the taste of what my judgement understands as the truth). Mboudjak's synesthetic perception reveals that listening is just one instrument in his toolkit for scientific chronicling. This does not necessarily mean that he privileges any one sense over another. The human ears often solicit other senses like touch and sight in the service of apprehending a sound object, as Steven Connor and Michel Serres have noted.[338] Furthermore, true to his initial interest in understanding human nature through human speech, Mboudjak remains invested in his ability to get an epistemic grasp of Yaoundé's population through listening.

ii. La Panthère, the bigmouth

[338] Steven Connor, "Edison's Teeth: Touching Hearing," in *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 153–72; Michel Serres, *Les cinq sens* (Paris: Hachette, 1999).

If Mboudjak approaches his chronicle with a scientific realism, then La Panthère takes the opposite slant to daily life in Yaoundé, embellishing his lived experience with verbal fabulation. While Mboudjak plays the role of silent auditor, La Panthère provides the bulk of the novel's direct speech and is widely recognized as the rumormonger-in-residence at *Le Client est Roi*. He is foremost among the "ambianceurs" (mood-makers) and "bavardeurs" (chatterboxes) or the bar (248). The text devotes many lines to description of his talkative tendencies, offering background commentary and driving the plot forward:

> Sa gueule inventrice d'histoires rocambolesques ne bégayait que son silence devant les tragédies de la vie. Il racontit le superflu pour se taire sur l'essential. Un bavardeur, il était, pas plus. Un museautier comme tous les clients de Massa Yo. Un constructuer de châteaux de verbes. Au mieux l'Histoire devait se faire sans lui, ou mieux, avec la seule force de ses paroles. Un sorcier à la parole inoffensive, il était. (183)
>
> (His big mouth, inventor of incredible stories, stuttered silently solely in the face of life's tragedies. He told stories of the excessive so he could keep silent about the essential. A regular big mouth, that's all he was, nothing more. A chatterbox like most of Massa Yo's clients. He built castles in the sky with words. At best, History would be made without him or, better still, with the force of his words. A wizard with ineffectual words, that's all he was.)

Although the novel's rumors have no certain origin, La Panthère is almost invariably the purveyor. Mboudjak always approaches him with skepticism since he is the individual most closely associated with the falsity of rumors that he abhors so much. By contrast with Mboudjak's chronicle of "truth," La Panthère celebrates rumor's creativity, recognizing that truth "était aussi fluctuante que l'imagination de la rumeur" (113) (fluctuated just as much as rumor's imagination). Constantly mocked for his "web-web" (109) (chatter), La Panthère is a stock character of the *radio-trottoir* novel. He calls into question the truth-value of spoken discourse in general, and the discursive structure of Cameroonian national politics in particular. During the protests at the end

of the novel, the regular bar patrons are impressed with their friend who manages to escape arrest by the riot police by telling them one of his fabulous tales (360).

La Panthère is a central character in Nganang's overarching project of street oralization. Nganang explains that the predominance of "l'oralité des bars, des maquis" (the orality of bars and shebeens) in his first two novels was motivated by the fact that "on n'a pas assez raconté Yaoundé et ses sous-quartiers" (Yaoundé and its neighborhoods haven't been talked about enough).[339] As for his own praxis that draws on urban voices, he explains "quant à l'oralité des villes, je fais une collecte de rumeurs, d'histoires qui se racontent" (as for city orality, I collect rumors and spoken stories).[340] Elsewhere, Nganang has reiterated this commitment to centering orality of the streets—and by extension the crowd.[341] However, it is important to note that orality is not a placeholder for indigeneity in Nganang's work. Indeed, to reiterate Julien's claim in *African Novels and the Question of Orality*, the oral signifies something more complex than the "traditional." Furthermore, Nganang distances himself from any notion that orality is intrinsically and exclusively "African." He explains that he often reads his own writing out loud, calling this a European practice because "un texte s'entend" (you hear/understand a text).[342]

Nganang's rendering of street orality might appear to be at odds with his longstanding academic research on precolonial African writing. In his essay "On Writing and Book Culture," Nganang describes two major influences: first, his father's career as a librarian and, second, the

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[339] Nganang, "L'écrivain à l'école de la rue : entretien avec Taina Tervonen."
[340] Nganang.
[341] "Orality is central to my work because I started serious writing during the time of national conferences, when people were actually dying in the streets for the sake of freedom of speech. That was the time when we had a boom of private radios, and people were yearning for their stories to be heard. Thus, orality is essential to me, given that it is linked to the desire people had, and still have, I believe, to have the full range of their existential stories told." Nganang, "The Ramifications of Linguistic Innovation in African Literature," 209.
[342] Nganang, "L'écrivain à l'école de la rue : entretien avec Taina Tervonen."

Sultan of the Bamum, Njoya, 1892-1933 a Cameroonian proto-*homme-de-lettres* who invented his own alphabet and also invested heavily in his librarianship.[343] Compelled by the collective notion of authorship at the core of the practice of librarianship, Nganang foregrounds the collective orientation of rumors in *Temps de chien*. In this way, I interpret the novel's principle rumormonger, as a kind of librarian of the crowd. He receives, catalogues, and distributes rumors, acting as an individual mouthpiece of the multitude.

iii. Le Corbeau, the philosopher

While La Panthère the oral fabulist represents one kind of storytelling, we have another represented by the character Le Corbeau, a writer with a "maléfique habitude de prendre silencieusement des notes" (147) (awful habit of silently taking notes). The most striking contrast between the two men is their media: the former works with the spoken word and the latter is devoted to writing, a practice that has long been regarded with suspicion in the Madagascar neighborhood, stemming from the inhabitants' experience of the infiltration of spies in the colonial era. As the narrator explains: "La parole fixe fait peur à tous ceux qui sont habitués à jouer avec les mots. On ne sait jamais. Les yeux peureux de chacun se portèrent sur le calepin de l'homme en noir-noir, tandis que des voix sondaient en riant : « Mon frère, tu es un journaliste ? »" (148) (Fastened speech frightens those who are used to playing with words. You never know. The fearful eyes of all were locked on the notebook of the man dressed in black-black, while probing voices laughed, "My brother, are you a journalist?"). For this group well-accustomed to the dynamism of word play, written or "fixed" words are untrustworthy.

The regulars at *Le Client est Roi* welcome le Corbeau with characteristically playful banter:

[343] Patrice Nganang, "On Writing and Book Culture," *Présence Africaine*, no. 179/180 (2009): 57–61; Patrice Nganang, *L'art de l'alphabet : pour une écriture préemptive 2* (Limoges: Pulim, 2018).

> C'est le vendeur de cigarettes qui lut à haute voix pour la rue les notes qui marquèrent définitivement, pour le tout Madagascar, le bizarre personnage : « Écoutez-moi ça : 'Les sous-quartiers sont la forge inventive de l'homme. La misère de leur environnement n'est qu'illusion. Elle cache la réalité profonde de l'inconnu qu'il faut découvrir : la vérité de l'Histoire se faisant.' »
>
> Docta trouva les mots qui firent tout le monde éclater de rire : « Histoire avec grand H. Oh là là, monsieur est un philosophe ! » (149)
>
> (The cigarette vendor was the one whose loud voice read to the street the notes that defined this stranger character for the whole of Madagascar: "Just listen to this will you: 'The neighborhoods are the forge of mankind's creativity. The misery of their surroundings is but an illusion. It conceals the profound reality of the unknown which remains to be discovered: the truth of History in its creation.'"
>
> Docta came up with the words that made everyone burst out laughing: "History with a capital H. Oh, oh, oh, the gentleman is a philosopher!")

The subjects of the writer's literary ethnography initially deride the project and refuse to recognize its sincerity. History, they believe, is not writ large in these small neighborhoods. However, with time, they warm to the idea of seeing themselves in print. In fact, many end up meeting with Le Corbeau to share their personal stories, prompted by "le rêve bizarre de savoir leur vie folle publiée un jour dans un livre" (152) (the strange dream of knowing that their crazy life will be published in a book one day).

Mboudjak confesses that he sympathizes with Le Corbeau "par pure solidarité professionnelle de co-observateur" (157) (out of purely professional solidarity as a co-observer). Docta is the only character who does not warm to the reticent writer, complaining repeatedly about his watchful silence:

> « Justement, il *regarde* la rue, dit l'ingénieur scandalisé, en appuyant tragiquement sur le mot « regarde ». Il ne cesse de regarder et dit rien. Chacun vient lui raconter son histoire et il prend des notes et ne dit rien. S'il est muet, il n'a qu'à devenir aveugle et sourd aussi. Cet homme est dangereuse, je vous dis ! » (158-159)
>
> ("Exactly, he *watches* the street," says the scandalized engineer, dramatically stressing the word "watches." "He never stops watching and says nothing. Everyone comes to tell him their story and he takes notes without saying anything. If he is a mute, then he should just go blind and deaf too. This man is dangerous, I tell you.")

It is striking that Le Corbeau's gaze is what upsets Docta most, not his ear. Docta's remarks get to the core of fears of state control, but his concern focuses on visual surveillance. More generally, Docta highlights anxiety over the documentarian's fetishistic gaze and the fraught ethics of representing African crowds. Through the character of Le Corbeau, Nganang addresses explicitly the romantic filter through which the writer listens to the lives of ordinary Cameroonians. Just as Le Corbeau regards Yaoundé's poor neighborhoods as "la forge inventive de l'homme" (the forge of mankind's creativity), Nganang also mines *radio trottoir* for literary inspiration. There is another wink to the reader when the title of the book Le Corbeau is writing is revealed to be the very same one that she is reading: *Temps de chien*! Nganang appears to be making fun of his own literary idealization of the Yaoundé when describes Le Corbeau's work as "une histoire du présent, une histoire du quotidien, de saisir l'histoire se faisant, et de remettre la conduit de l'Histoire aux mains de ses véritables héros" (150) (a history of the present, a history of the everyday, to seize history in the making, and to put History back in the hands of its real heroes). In a final flourish, one anonymous voice naively exclaims, "'Pas possible ! Des gens comme nous dans un livre !'" (150) ("No way! People like us in a book!"). Although it is difficult to measure the precise degree of irony in these examples, the metafictional mirroring and self-deprecating humor absolve the writer of fetishizing the poor neighborhood.

This nifty deflection of authorship by Nganang corresponds with the novel's general concern with the question of ownership of stories—both those written down and told orally—and the identities of the voices that tell them. The "histoires rocambolesques" (fabulous tales) that La Panthère tells his captive audience in *Le Client est Roi* are never recognized as *his own*. La Panthère has no success with his plagiarism charge against Docta, hopelessly insisting "'tu dois me payer les droits d'auteur'" (145) (You owe me copyright royalties). Meanwhile, Le Corbeau wins respect

of the bar's customers with his status as a published writer. Le Corbeau, who on two pivotal occasions breaks his literal silence to symbolically speak out against injustice, plays the additional role of the novel's moral compass.

On the first occasion, Le Corbeau is arrested for a crime he did not commit. When he returns to *Le Client est Roi* after his unfair imprisonment, he confronts his companions for failing to support him (202). The second occasion is also an arrest. This time he is the certain culprit, but the criminality is debatable: Le Corbeau is charged with treason for publishing an open letter of criticism addressed to President Biya. The whole idea of writing to the president is very peculiar for the chorus of characters, but they are thrilled to learn how far their voices were carried. The palpable force of written words is a revelation for this crowd who suddenly realizes the relative inefficacy of Panther's oral stories.[344] They dismiss "ces demonstrations musculaires de la Panthère" (these muscly displays by the Panther) and call him out: "'Tu vas lui écrire [le Président] pour lui raconteur les imbécillités que tu passes ton temps à propager dans ce quartier ? Le Corbeau au moins est un écrivain. Toi tu as quoi à dire?'" (344) (Are you going to write to the President to tell him the nonsense you spend your days spreading in this quarter? At least the Crow is a writer. What have you got to say?). This apparent dialectic tensions between oral/textual stories is resolved by the end of the novel when rumor effectively traverses and conjoins both as it is characterized sonically.

In her article on *Temps de chien,* Moradewun Adejunmobi makes a helpful comment on the symbolic difference between these two characters. With reference to James C. Scott's notion

[344] They were "réconfortés qu'enfin leur voix soit portée si loin, que leur vie soit inscrite dans les pages d'un journal dont la saisie officielle disait l'importance" (342) (comforted that their voices were finally carried so far, that their lives were written in the pages of a newspaper, and an important one at that, as the official seizure indicates).

of hidden transcripts, she notes that "Le Corbeau's writing and actions instantiate a public, rather than a hidden, transcript of insurgence against the political order and an actual politics rather than an infrapolitics."[345] In other words, La Panthère enjoys unaccountability for his vocal acts because they remain "hidden" from the state. We might do well to rephrase: La Panthère is *unheard* by the state. Deferral or disguise of authorship is a safety mechanism for writers of fiction and nonfiction alike. In Nganang's case, it reinforces his belief in chronicling by ear as portraying the polyphonic and multilingual crowd.

(Per)Sonifying Rumor

Following this discussion of the three modes chronicling by ear in *Temps de chien*, I will now elaborate on the effect of rumor's personification and sonification in the text. The opening pages of the novel introduce the reader to the animated world of *radio-trottoir* with the dog Mboudjak as the primary auditor of dogs and humans alike, including "leurs chuchotements et leurs taquineries" (their whispering and their teasing), "aboiements de rire" (barking laughter), "insultes en envolées" (hurled insults) "jacassements" (chattering), and "kongossa en calomnies" (slanderous *kongossa*) (22, 26). Yaoundé's street dogs shun Mboudjak because of his status as a bourgeois pet and alleged alienation from his "canitude" (in a comic echo of Tigritude, Wole Soyinka's famous bash at Négritude). As Mboudjak turns his ears from the dog world to the human world, he encounters the same abundance of commentary:

[345] Moradewun Adejunmobi, "The Infrapolitics of Subordination in Patrice Nganang's *Dog Days*," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 32, no. 4 (2014): 448.

> Vraiment : les commentaires du quotidien sont l'ivresse qui chaque jour aide les habitants de Madagascar à noyer leur misère têtye dans la megalomania. En fait, l'ambiance des sous-quartiers n'a d'égale que leur impuissance. (347)
>
> (Seriously, commentaries on daily life are the intoxicant that day after day Madagascar residents use to drown their misery in megalomania. In fact, the ambiance of the neighborhoods is matched only by its impotence.)

Contrary to the notion of rumor as a "weapon of the weak," Mboudjak first regards it negatively as a toxic substance. However, the narrator's initial ambivalence about rumor's social power and moral value transforms toward the end of the novel, until we receive his conclusive acknowledgement: "La parole des sous-quartiers est capable de tout, vous savez !" (358) (The neighborhood's spoken words are capable of anything, you know!). In essence, the novel plots this shift from Mboudjak's narrative perspective: the canine banter and trivial *kongossa* (gossip in the Bamikele language) we find early on in the novel begin to take on more explicit political meaning and culminate in "commentaries" as they are called in the novel that overtly deal with national politics.

The author admires rumor in the form of such commentaries because they enjoy "la liberté de ton de la rue" (the street's free tone) and "une subversion terrible que les écrivains n'ont pas" (a tremendously subversive power that writers don't have).[346] Nganang goes on to explain how he strived to imitate the creative freedom of Cameroonian street life in *Temps de chien*: "La rumeur fabrique les hommes. […] L'imagination et l'oralité des rues a fabriqué ces personnages qui existent et que j'ai mis dans mon roman" (Rumor makes men. […] The imagination and orality of the street brought into existence these characters that inserted into my novel).[347] Indeed, on closer inspection, I find that on the one hand rumor embodies characters in the novel and, on the other,

[346] Nganang, "L'écrivain à l'école de la rue."
[347] Ibid.

the novel personifies rumor. As a first example of this dual process in *Temps de chien*, consider the episode in Book I Chapter 2.8 in which the police officer Étienne is interpolated by an anonymous voice. Mboudjak ponders along with the crowd, who would dare to address this particularly officious policeman with such insolence? "Peut-être était-ce vraiment la voix incontrôlable de la rumeur ? Ou alors celle perfide des mauvaises consciences ? Peut-être était-ce une voix arrachée au rêve infini de ces rues si jacassantes ?" 169) (Perhaps it was the uncontrollable voice of rumor? Or even the treacherous voice of folks with guilty consciences? Perhaps it was a voice ripped out from the unending dream of these chattering streets?). Rumor, Mboudjak supposes, is embodied in the audible form of an individual voice. This kind of personification resembles the editorial style of regional tabloids that adopt rumor as a narrative frame to avoid censorship.[348] However, rumor does not provide immunity in this case. The policeman, furious about the public insult thrown at him by the voice of rumor, arrests Le Corbeau to teach the whole crowd a lesson.

It is ironic that the newcomer Le Corbeau is wrongfully charged with articulating the voice of rumor. Consider the description a few chapters earlier of the writer's arrival in the Madagascar neighborhood: "S'il fallait parler de fictions, cet homme paraissait arraché directement d'une rumeur. Et c'est vrai, le verbe qui l'avait inventé transporta très vite son sinistre à travers les pistes, les ruelles et les marigots du quartier" (146) (Speaking of fiction, this man appeared to be ripped right out of a rumor. And it's true, the words that invented him very quickly spread their evil across the paths, alleys, and streams of the quarter). As with any person invented by rumor, Le Corbeau

[348] For example, the editors of the Congolese publication *La Rumeur* ventriloquize rumor itself when they write in the first-person: "Si je forge l'opinion, je ne livre guère d'informations. Parce que je suis la rumeur. C'est pour flatter vos oreilles que je maquille les mensonges avec un peu de vérité" (If I forge opinion, I hardly deliver information. That's because I am rumor. I doctor lies with a little truth just to stroke your ears.) Cited in Martin-Granel, "Rumeur Sur Brazzaville," 375.

has an indeterminate backstory. His status as a stranger in the neighborhood makes him the perfect topic of local conversation. Indeed, while he is in prison his physical absence from the neighborhood is marked by his echoing laughter and his continued embodiment through rumor.

As a second example of character construction via rumor, consider the following tale by La Panthère reported by Mboudjak.

> Un jour, l'animation ininterrompue des rues, l'odeur nauséabonde des ruelles serpentantes, le sinistre des chantiers fantômiques, la rumeur des tontines cahoteuses, le *kongossa* chuchoté des bars endiablés, la musique têtument forte des circuits, l'ambiance même de Madagascar fabriquèrent un homme fini, qu'elles jetèrent par le truchement de la large bouche de la Panthère, bien sûr, devant mon intelligence éperdue. (143)
>
> (One day, the continuous commotion of the streets, the nauseating odor of the serpentine alleys, the ghostly *chantiers'* evil side, the rumor circulated by rough tontines, the *kongossa* whispered in damned rowdy bars, and the obstinately loud music of the circuits—the very ambience of Madagascar itself—fabricated a complete man, mediated by Panther's big mouth, of course, just tossed out in defiance of my frantic intellect.)

Unlike the flesh-and-bones subject of rumor Le Corbeau, this man was crafted from a collection of street sounds, exemplifying the expression *radio-trottoir*. Blasted music, whispered chitchat, and the other acoustic elements of the neighborhood coalesce and animate a new character spat out of the rumormonger's mouth. Apparently, la Panthère says, this man is going around the neighborhoods making people's *bangala*, or genitals, disappear (143). Although the prefix *apparently* (*il paraît*) removes any accountability for the speaker, the story is no less believable and the *bangala* thief quickly becomes a favorite topic of conversation at *Le Client est Roi* bar.

The boundary between fact and fiction is further blurred if the reader realizes that Nganang is importing a "real-life" rumor that has been circulating in parts of West Africa for decades. "The genital theft rumor is ultimately a crystalizing point for multiple phenomena," writes anthropologist Julien Bonhomme in his book on the topic, including "the focus of witchcraft on sexuality, coupled with a fetishization of the body and sexual organs; the profound socioeconomic

crisis in the wake of structural adjustment policies; a crisis of masculinity wherein a large swath of the male population find themselves incapable of being recognized as capable men."[349] In her reading of the novel, Catherine Kroll calls attention to the ways in which the inclusion of the *bangala* thief underscores "the decidedly material effects of rumour" since "the thief is identified as a member of the opposition, his actions infect everyday reality with threat and portent, effectively paralysing the will for concerted political action against the Biya regime."[350] I agree with Kroll that the *bangala* thief is indicative of broader political discontent, however it is also important to recognize the impact of the novel's repeated rumors related to sex and sexuality.

Contrary to the popular notion that gossip is feminine, in *Temps de chien* the realm of rumor is decidedly male dominated. Most of the bar's clientele are men, giving La Panthère a clearly gendered audience for his stories. As one woman puts it, the bar is a veritable "cercle cannibal des hommes" (109) (cannibalistic circle of men). From the bar the customers watch women passing by and comment only on the neighborhood's *associées*—literally, associates, it is a slang term for sex workers—and their rumors go "knocking" on the doors of the *associées* (109-10, 140-2). They never miss the latest sex scandal. And when one comes along, "la foule réagit en une rumeur vive" (72) (the crowd would rise to life with a rumor). What these examples reveal is that despite the novel's idealization of the street's soundscape, it manages still to unduly amplify masculinity. Furthermore, I have highlighted an essential paradox in the personification of rumor. On the one hand, rumor sonically signifies the crowd in the novel and can therefore be considered

[349] Julien Bonhomme, *The Sex Thieves: The Anthropology of a Rumor*, trans. Dominic Horsfall (Chicago, IL: Hau Books, 2016), 34.
[350] Catherine Kroll, "Dogs and Dissidents at the Border: Narrative Outbreak in Patrice Nganang's *Temps de Chien*," in *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on Borders and Spaces in Contemporary African Literature and Folklore*, ed. Jennifer Wawrzinek and J. K. S. Makokha (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 101.

a polyphonic technique. On the other hand, rumor is frequently personified and is thus reduced to a singular voice.

To be sure, the paradoxical figure of rumor is endowed with expansive meaning in *Temps de chien*. Mboudjak tends to view rumor as corrosive material substance that can "enflame, liquéfie, acidifie, empoudre … réinvente le monde alentour" (131) (inflame, liquify, dissolve in acid, crush to dust … reinvent the world around it). The voices of the crowd—be it the market women or the men at the bar—physically vibrate the street and give form to the urban cartography: **"**leurs commentaires endiablaient la rue. Les hommes parlaient dans le chaos, et leurs voix faisaient le chaos" (283) (their commentaries raged upon the street. The men spoke amidst the chaos, and their voices made the chaos). At other times, rumor plays softly as the diegetic music behind the action at the bar: "cet incessant roulement de la rumeur devenait bientôt simplement ambiance kwassa kwassa de bar**"** (135) (soon the incessant rolling of rumor simply became the bar's *kwassa kwassa* background music). The vernacular genre *kwassa kwassa* localizes rumor in its sonic environment.

In *Temps de chien*, rumor is not conceived as a traditional form or an analog sound; to the contrary, it is to be understood as a technology integral to the auditory experience of urban life. The case of "Massa Million" in Book 2 Chapter 1.13-14 neatly demonstrates this facet of rumor. When a large sum of money is stolen from Massa Yo's bar, the patrons are far from sympathetic. They give the bar's owner the nickname "Massa Million," teasing him incessantly, until their commentaries appear to flood the whole neighborhood: "le myth du million […] alla grosser les rivières de la parole de tous les sous-quartiers de Yaoundé" (318) (the myth of the million […] added to the rivers of words flooding all of Yaoundé's neighborhoods). Massa Yo imagines himself immersed in the gossip's deep water. This liquid imagery evokes sound's omnidirectional

quality as well as its ability to "dissolve individualities," as Don Ihde puts it in his book on the phenomenology of sound.[351] Finding himself the subject of rumor for the first time and feeling under siege, Massa Yo resorts to sonic warfare of his own:

> Tout au plus put-il éteindre ses propres oreilles devant les jacassements de la cour de son bar en achetant une chaîne musicale Grundig, et en ouvrant les deux grands baffles noirs directement sur la rue. La cour du *Client est Roi* devint du même coup *essamba*. Dorénavant, se disait-il certainement, c'est la musique du son bar, et rien que la musique de son bar, qui secouerait le quartier. (323)
>
> (The best he could do was to deafen his own ears to the chattering of his bar's courtyard by buying a Grundig stereo and pointing the two big black speakers right out onto the street. The courtyard of *The Customer is King* turned just like that into an *essamba* [disco]. He must have told himself that from that point on, it was his bar's music, and nothing but his bar's music, that would shake up the neighbourhood.)

Massa Yo uses the stereo system to impose his own noise to silence the noise of others, thus intercepting the rumor about him.[352] As an emblem of modernity, the stereo symbolically establishes material dominance over the personified voice of rumor in particular and the soundscape of the city in general. Audio technology is often used to manage the contingent experience of everyday life in cities, as media scholar Michael Bull has argued.[353] For example, according to Brian Larkin, loudspeakers are often used at retail and religious sites to compete for the control of African urban space.[354] Massa Yo's battle against the unwanted sound of his rumor

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[351] Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 83.
[352] Jacques Attali discusses this common usage of noise in his book on the topic. It is helpful to understood how Massa Yo creates "noise" in the sense intended by information theory, as a term for a signal that interferes with the reception of a message by a receiver. Cf. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 27.
[353] Massa Yo's logic resembles that of personal stereo users as theorized by Michael Bull in his influential ethnographic study. Bull explains that users "negate the perceived contingency of the everyday." They develop a habit that "blurs any distinctions that might be made between inner and outer, the public and private areas of everyday life." Cf. Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 153.
[354] Larkin's concept of "techniques of inattention" is developed in his article on the use of loudspeakers in urban mosques in Nigeria. Brian Larkin, "Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria," *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2014): 989–1015.

in this episode fades and is surpassed by the greater war over auditory control of Yaoundé. The novel's final and most spectacular dramatization is of the crowd's victory of that war.

In the last chapters of Book 2—aptly titled "La rue mouvementée" (the turbulent street)—the crowd finds self-actualization as the hesitant voices that quietly and anonymously air their political opinions swell into "l'explosion de paroles" (250) (the explosion of words). The narrator of *Temps de chien* does not offer a clear explanation of how events transpired. Rather, the polyphonic novel relates overheard fragments of information. "« Quel État? » demanda la voix d'un homme" (287) ("What State?" asked the voice of one man), while another disembodied voice exclaims, "'Tu ne sais pas qu'il y a la crise?'" (285) (There's a crisis, don't you know?). The reader eavesdrops from the subject position of the naïve dog Mboudjak who gradually learns about the unfolding national political crisis.

> Plusieurs fois j'entendis des voix dire le mot « dictature ». J'entendis également les mots « marche » et « revendication », puis « liberté ». Un badaud qui jurait avoir une version de l'Histoire beaucoup plus vraie que celle de la Panthère dit : « Moi j'ai entendu qu'il y a eu cent morts. » […] Il regardait dans le visage de chacun des auditeurs avec insistance, comme pour les imprégner de sa rumeur. (328)
>
> (Several times over I heard voices say the word "dictatorship". I also heard the words "march" and "collective action", then "freedom". One loafer who swore he had a much truer version of The Story than Panther did said, "As far as I heard, there were a hundred deaths." […] He looked insistently at the individual faces of his listeners, as if to induce them with his rumor.)

While the elliptical transcription of single words fittingly conveys the cacophony of the bar's outbreak of chatter about the burgeoning protests, this technique also serves as a shorthand for Nganang to represent the interjections of multiple voices. Once again, the figure of rumor aids the text's simulation of immersion in the sonic ambiance of Yaoundé.

The eruption of rebellious *radio-trottoir* at the end of the novel is based on actual events that transpired in Cameroon. Just as the country was officially transitioning to a multi-party

electoral system a collection of frustrated opposition parties and their supporters embarked on *Opération Villes Mortes* (the ghost town action). The campaign lasted for the best part of 1991 and involved a range of roughly coordinated industrial strikes, protests and boycotts intended to forced president Biya to convene a national conference for all political interest groups to meet.[355] In *Temps de chien*, the customers at the bar first get wind of student-led protests in Yaoundé from La Panthère (326-8). When they are greeted with the rumor of dead protestors, Massa Yo turns up the volume of his stereo in a feeble effort to quell the unpleasant news (333). The arrest of Le Corbeau fails to catalyze a collective response in the Madagascar crowd (340-5), but upon hearing about the death of a young student named Takou at the hands of a policeman the crowd materializes quickly and loudly outside the bar: "cette rumeur de Madagascar se réveillant secouait le goudron. La foule pressait autour du cadaver de cet enfant du quartier silencié" (349–50) (this rumor shook up the asphalt as Madagascar rose up. The crowd pressed around the dead body of the neighborhood's silenced child). Nganang here dramatizes one particular tragedy of the violent chaos of *Opération Villes Mortes*, the police shooting of 16-year-old student Eric Takou in Douala in May 1991 which, according to one news report at the time, prompted the immediate assembly of a large crowd on incensed citizens.[356] In the novel, the same notorious policeman who arrested Le Corbeau shoots Takou for verbally provoking him. Takou's last words are a mocking rendition of President Biya's famously fatuous catchphrase: "« Vraiment, le Cameroun, c'est le Cameroun,

[355] Nyamnjoh explains that *Opération Villes Mortes* was marked by "opposition calls, ultimatums, tracts and marches asking the public to immobilise economic activity by staying indoors, blocking streets, refusing to pay taxes and bills, and boycotting the markets and offices." Nyamnjoh, *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*, 115.

[356] One news report of the incident describes how "une immense foule « enragée »" gathered and paraded the city with the dead body in protest. Cf. Nicolas Tejoumessie "Encore des martyrs de la liberté." *Challenge Hebdo*, no. 033 (1991): 4-5, cited in Ladislas Nzessé (p. 84). Poet Peter Wuteh Vakunta also memorializes Eric Takou in his book of verse *Gravitas: Poetic Conscienism for Cameroon* Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, 2016) pp. 30-1. Nganang dedicates the 2005 publication of two speeches in *Le principe dissident* to Eric Takou.

hein! »" (357). The text demands our pathos as it states, "c'était la parole d'un autre, c'était la parole commune de la rue, et d'ailleurs, c'était la parole d'un enfant" (357–8) (They were someone else's words, they were the communal words of the street, plus they were the words spoken by a child). Indeed, these words are repeated comically at several points in the novel in the same way that the tautological political rhetoric was repeatedly parodied on Cameroon's *radio-trottoir* at the time.[357] With Takou's death, the cruel irony of Massa Yo's prediction comes true: "c'est le *kongossa* qui tuerait les habitants de Madagascar" (321) (it would be *kongossa* [gossip] that kills the residents of Madagascar).

The death of the child catalyzes an extremely loud response from the crowd in which individual characters are no longer identifiable by Mboudjak. The dog describes how the cries of the protesting humans began to sound like and intermingle with the clucking of hens, the barking of dogs, and the meowing of cats (353). He describes the crowd's intention to make the president listen literally and symbolically: "Elle voulait obliger Biya à écouter la voix des sous-quartiers, à entendre la parole convulsive des rues" (363) (it wanted to make Biya listen to the voice of the neighborhoods, to hear the fitful speech of the streets). He describes is finest moment of chronicling by ear yet: "J'ouvrais mes oreilles aux rumeur régicides de la rue … Et la rumeur du pays mouvementé, la rumeur de Yaoundé mouvementé également le tout Madagascar, secoué par l'aboiement commun de cette phrase unique" (364-5) (I opened my ears to the regicidal rumors of the street … And the rumor of the turbulent country, the rumor of turbulent Yaoundé just all

[357] As the journalist Waffo Mongo attests, by the mid 1990s Biya's famous tautology was said and heard everywhere, used to justify irrational and arbitrary everyday politics: "cette expression passe partout sert à justifier l'arbitraire, l'irrationnel, à couvrir les magouilles et le faux, à avaliser le flou et l'irresponsibilité." Cf. Waffo Mongo, "Incroyable Cameroun," Cameroun Tribune, November 21, 1995, cited in Hubert Mono Njana, Les Proverbes de Paul Biya (Yaoundé: Edition de Carrefour, 1997) p. 60. Also cf. Célestin Monga, *The Anthropology of Anger: Civil Society and Democracy in Africa*. Translated by Célestin Monga and Linda L. Fleck. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996.

Madagascar, shaken by the collective barking of that single line). That single line, in direct response to "Cameroon is Cameroon," was "BIYA MUST GO" (365). The line is anglicized, capitalized, and indented in the text in order to extenuate it's sonic power, elsewhere called a "phrase-marteau des rues bruyantes" (365) (hammering phrase of the noisy streets). In this final episode, Mboudjak underscores the participatory nature of the protest, affirming that he is not merely, passively listening to rumor. "Que dis-je à l'écoute ?" Mboudjak corrects himself, "Chacun contribuait à sa propagation subversive. C'était le kongossa, c'était radio-trottoir, c'était les presses privées *Messager* et consort, c'était même la ciartivi radio en son journal des provinces" (365) (What am I saying listening? Each performed their own subversive dissemination. It was *kongossa,* it was *radio-trottoir,* it was the independent papers like *Messager* and company, it was CRTV [Cameroonian Radio and Televsion] and its provincial news reports). Indeed, the media are conjoined with the individual mouths of those in the crowd operating the populist *radio-trottoir*. The crowd sonically embodies rumor in the final pages of *Temps de chien,* for after all it was the whispered rumors that enabled the copresence of dissenting and shouting bodies. In the final instance, Nganang incarnates the polyphonic crowd as multilingual, intermedial and interspecies. All these dimensions are conjoined in the sound of rumors that deliver the author's political message about the inexhaustible will of plural voices.

Conclusion

This chapter situated Nganang's *Temps de chien* in the African novelistic tradition of *radio-trottoir* and offered the first systematic analysis of the literary trend. Contrary to extant conceptions of rumor as a continuation of traditional oral genres, I characterized rumor as an urban auditory

technology embedded with contemporary social meaning. My reading of the Cameroonian novel concentrated on the sonic lexicon Nganang uses to describe rumor. I found that despite the personification of rumor as an individual voice, rumor more broadly signals vocal plurality. By highlighting the national context of the novel, this chapter revealed the author's political exigency for making the novel multi-voiced. For Nganang, I argued, making the crowd audible in writing advances his goal of articulating liberal democratic values of free speech. Furthermore, this chapter intervened in literary criticism on Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic novel by theorizing how African novelists create multi-voiced texts. In a departure from the loosely defined notion of polyphony as the inclusion of multiple narrative perspectives or speaking characters, I presented analysis of Nganang's techniques of polyphony rooted in the auditory experience of the crowd. The most apposite sound figure for harnessing vocal plurality was of course rumor. Chapter Four builds upon this chapter's articulation of techniques of polyphony and further theorizes the poetics of the crowd in the Kenyan context.

CHAPTER 4

Toward a Poetics of the Crowd II: Ordinary Listening with Binyavanga Wainaina

Introduction

"Contemporary Kenyan artists are obsessed with ordinariness," Binyavanga Wainaina and Keguro Macharia explain in their introduction to a 2011 special issue of *McSweeney's* magazine. "The word comes up in news commentary, political speeches, and literary criticism. These days, it even has a name: *Wanjiku.*"[358] According to Wainaina and Macharia, in pursuing the ordinary "[Kenyan] authors inch away from the allegorical paradigm established by Ngugi wa Thiong'o" in order to valorize quotidian experiences that have been overshadowed by lofty allegories of yesteryear's postcolonial literature (emblematized by Ngugi) on the one hand and by Western media's negative stereotypes on the other.[359] In this way, contemporary Kenyan writing avoids the hackneyed *extra*-ordinary tropes of war, poverty, and famine denounced by Wainaina in his widely-cited satirical essay published five years earlier, "How to Write About Africa." In that essay, Wainaina adopts the form of a writer's style guide and, with caustic irony, he lists the forbidden topics of African writing such as "ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation."[360] This idea

[358] Keguro Macharia and Binyavanga Wainaina, "The Pursuit of Ordinariness in Kenyan Writing," *McSweeney's*, no. 37 (2011): 151.
[359] Furthermore, the authors infer a stark contrast between "ordinariness" and Frederick Jameson's proposition on the necessarily allegorical function of all Third-World literature in his controversial essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, no. 15 (1986): 65–88.
[360] Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write About Africa," *Granta* 92: The View from Africa (2006): 91–6.

of ordinariness guides my reading of Wainaina's 2011 memoir *One Day I Will Write About This Place* and provides a useful analytic for the ordinary sound figures inscribed in the text.[361] I argue that these figures constitute the crowd as an emblem of urban Kenyan ordinariness and by closely examining their placement in Wainaina's writing I reveal their sensorial, historical, and political value.

One Day is the only book-length publication by Kenyan-born writer and editor Wainaina (1971–2019) who rose to fame after winning the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2002 for his short story "Discovering Home," which became the memoir's centerpiece. Wainaina founded the literary magazine *Kwani?* in Nairobi, which quickly became an influential local and international outlet, and throughout the 2000s and 2010s he worked as a journalist, nonfiction writer, and editor, publishing numerous short stories and essays of his own and briefly serving as the Director of the Chinua Achebe Center at Bard College.[362] His memoir can be roughly divided into thirds. The first third is devoted to Wainaina's childhood in the Kenyan city of Nakuru in the 1970s and 1980s; the middle section covers his time spent studying in South Africa during the transition from Apartheid; and the final section portrays the bumpy progress of his literary career around the turn of the millennium, taking him back to Kenya and on further travels around Africa, including to Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, and Uganda. My analysis of the memoir concentrates on "*kimay*," an authorial neologism with fluid meaning that furnishes the text with an expansive conceit best interpreted with insights from sound studies. *Kimay* is a word invented in juvenile whimsy to denote a vast

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[361] Binyavanga Wainaina, *One Day I Will Write about This Place: A Memoir* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2011). Hereafter abbreviated as *One Day* and cited parenthetically in the text.

[362] For more on Wainaina's biography, see the website https://planetbinya.org established as an online repository for his published work after his death in May 2019, and the obituary by Billy Kahora, "Binya Was a Prolific Restless Spirit with a Funny Bone, Big Heart," *Daily Nation*, May 24, 2019. https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Binya-was-a-prolific-restless-spirit-with-funny-bone/1056-5129170-12kq446z/index.html. Accessed May 30, 2019.

array of sonic phenomena perceived by the individual, including but not limited to the linguistic (local languages and foreign accents), the extra-linguistic (sighs and nasal sounds) the musical (indigenous instruments and imported American pop), and other quotidian orality (the crunch of biscuits). The author retroactively projects complex meaning on to this word that captures the book's themes of anxiety and creativity, nationalism and belonging, and the boundary between individual and collective. *Kimay* epitomizes the ordinary sound figure and, as I contend in this chapter, it is one of several figures used to convey the auditory experience of the crowd in the text.

The chapter begins with an analysis of the author's account of his emerging individual sense perception in childhood and how that relates to vocal plurality. Next, extending the previous chapter's articulation of multilingualism and polyphony as key features of the literary crowd, I adopt the critical perspective of social and cultural theories of crowds. These theorists inform my interpretation of crucial crowd scenes in the memoir such as vendors in the marketplace, congregants in church, passengers on public transport, and activists in the protest. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of how Wainaina's ordinary sound figures constellate nationalism through music and the media. I concentrate on how the individual's sense of self is shaped by the entanglement of "traditional" music (the genre of *benga*), "national" music (the Kenyan anthem) and "global" music (American pop and Congolese rumba). The text locates the autobiographical self within these sonically mediated collectives—which constitute crowds. By studying the memoir's construction of individual identity through sonic multiplicity, I argue that ordinariness is a crucial trope for writing the crowd.

This chapter's examination of Wainaina closely accompanies and builds upon the theorization of the Cameroonian multi-voiced novel in Chapter Three. Previously, I established that Nganang primarily employed rumor to figure the sound of the crowd. Nganang's novel *Temps*

de chien relies on techniques of multilingualism in order to provide a postcolonial polyphony that, contra Bakhtin, takes stock of the sonic materiality of textualized spoken language. I argued that Nganang's model of writing and listening to plurality in the Francophone African novel could be called a poetics of the crowd. Now, travelling east from Yaoundé to Nairobi, I shift focus to an Anglophone East African writer's alternative practices for figuring vocal multiplicity, exposing some intriguing similarity between their development of the poetics of the crowd. Like Nganang, Wainaina adopts multilingual, polyphonic techniques such as transliteration, direct translation, and description of accent and a local composite language—in this case, Sheng. Both writers thus celebrate ethnic and linguistic diversity in the public life of the postcolonial nation state, navigating carefully the contours of national belonging. However, unlike Nganang's reliance on folkloric devices such as the animal characters and allegoric forms such as the political intrigue, Wainaina's creative nonfiction assumes a documentarian perspective, combining elements of cultural criticism, autobiography, and travel writing. Additionally, Wainaina is concerned with deeper historical formations, which underwrite the text's musical idioms used to interrogate nationalism and national identity. This difference is derived, in part, from the fact of genre: Nganang's book is a novel and Wainaina's is a memoir. My analysis begins with a consideration of this generic categorization.

Individual Sense Perception and the "Sound of Manythings"

One Day is formally reminiscent of Marechera's episodic autobiographical novella written in mid-life, however, unlike most of the primary texts considered in this dissertation, it is labeled as a work of non-fiction. I interpret this text as an example of "postcolonial life-writing" which,

according to Bart Moore-Gilbert, shares the three central characteristics that feminist critics have identified in women's life-writing, namely: the rejection of unified selfhood in western male autobiography; the validation of dialogical and relational selfhood; and finally, the emphasis of embodiment in subjectivity.[363] Through its repeated invocation of individual sense perception, Wainaina's memoir at first appears to unify the self but ultimately and paradoxically this is only achieved by emphasis on auditory (and therefore embodied) relationality with the crowd. Furthermore, as Moore-Gilbert points out, "place" can play a crucial role in constituting selfhood in postcolonial life-writing; the word recurs in the titles of many autobiographical texts, notably postcolonial theorist Edward Said's *Out of Place* (1999).[364] In this respect, readers should not be disoriented by the anticipatory promise of the title *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, which infers writing about a location not a person: in writing about himself in Kenya, Wainaina describes his located self. Furthermore, as the title's future perfect tense temporally dis-locates the author from the moment of writing in the twenty-first century back to an earlier time, the reader prepares to make the acquaintance of the narrator-as-younger-version-of-the-author. My analysis begins with the text's invitation to contemplate with auditory discernment the individual's position amidst the multitude.

Wainaina's first person narrative voice, which is typical of the memoir genre, underscores the exploration of individual sense perception in relation to multiplicity. In the opening pages, the author relates his listening habits as a child in the form of a litany of sounds:

> Random sounds fall into my ears: cars, birds, black mamba bicycle bells, distant children, dogs, crows, and afternoon national radio music. Congo rumba. People outside our

[363] Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics and Self-Representation* (London: Routledge, 2009), xvii–xx.
[364] Moore-Gilbert, 51–54.

> compound are talking, in languages I know the sounds of, but do not understand or speak, Luhya, Gikuyu. (3)

The childish simplicity of this list and its domestic lexicon expand outwardly from his suburban home to the greater world, from familiar birdcalls to familiar but equally unintelligible languages. While the mentions of Gikuyu and Luhuya (and later a host of other national and regional languages) index the multilingualism of the author's hometown Nakuru, they are also reduced to the status of pure phonic matter. As a seven-year-old he develops a fond familiarity with the *sound* but not the *sense* of non-native languages. While languages are initially just part of the juvenile imaginative practice of "inhabiting the shapes and sounds and patterns of other people" (134), they become ethnically marked as the narrative progresses.

The narrative focalization of the author's childhood self is characterized by a kind of irreverent, sensorial play that inflects his later adult self's more sophisticated narration. In these early chapters, the young Wainaina sketches a veritable phenomenology of "the large confident world of sounds and body" (53). His coming of age is measured by listening to "spongy sounds" (11), the "groan and squeak" (73) of hot corrugated iron roofs, and his siblings' piano-playing that seems to let "sound be its own truth" (53). These ordinary sound figures are accompanied by a "rising anxiety of words" and an inability to let words "surround experience, like mum's new vacuum cleaner, sucking all this up and making it real" (53). He fixates on particular vocabulary, worrying that words might not be "concrete things" but mere "suggestions of things" (5). For example, the suspiciously close sounds of "crunch" and "crutch," or "thirst" which he calls "a word full of resolution" (5). The young Wainaina also makes up his own words in order to match sound and sense, as with his modest proposal: "I invent a word. *Hughagh*: (a) a sound that is at once the belly under a fist's assault and what issues from the mouth when the chest is banged"

(73). Plurality proves especially problematic for the child's sonic imagination struggling to reconcile the auditory distinction between individuality and multiplicity: "One bee does not sound like a swarm of bees. The world is divided into the sounds of onethings and the sounds of manythings. Water from the showerhead streaming onto a shampooed head is manything splinters of falling glass, ting ting ting" (16). This proclamation heralds the memoir's narrative arc. The rest of the memoir is involved in the search for the most pertinent language to describe the sounds of "onethings" and "manythings." How does one go about elucidating the literary allusion and social signification of these descriptions of frivolous play? My contention is that these ordinary sound figures are not merely a fluffy prologue to the gritty content of the memoir; they actually give the reader access to the complexity of national cultural formations.

In an essay on late-Apartheid South African literature, Njabulo S. Ndebele notes that writing from that country has tended to follow the "brazen exhibitionist openness" of South African oppression and he laments therefore that "the habit of looking at the spectacle has forced us to gloss over the nooks and crannies." [365] Ndebele praises the "rediscovery of the ordinary" by writers at the end of Apartheid, which he defines as a turn away from the spectacular towards subtle, hidden, and interior aspects of life. He is quick to point out that this does not imply a deficit of sophisticated consciousness or political commentary. The ordinary does in fact promise just this kind of philosophical depth. The same for could be said of Wainaina who wrote in defense of the ordinary nearly three decades later.

Consider the elaboration of *kimay* as an idea of ordinariness in the context of finding onomatopoeic meaning in the early pages of the memoir:

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[365] Njabulo S. Ndebele, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa," in *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 42, 57.

> Ki-may.
>
> This is my new word, my secret. Ki. May. I let my jaw fall slack with the second syllable, like a cartoon man with a cash register jaw. Ki-maaay. It calls at the most unexpected moment. Certainty loses its spine, and starts to accordion. My jaw moves side to side, like a mouth organ. Once the word lives, kima-aay, it makes its own reality. I rub the word against the roof of my mouth, which is ridged like the ribs of a musical instrument. I swing my jaw slackly from side to side, let small marbles of yodel clamber up my throat, from my chest, let the breaking waves of yodel run on my tongue and leap into the shape of the word, kie-mae-ae-ae-y. . .eay. . .
>
> Kimay is the talking jazz trumpet: sneering skewing sounds, squeaks and strains, heavy sweat, and giant puffed-up cheeks, hot and sweating; bursting to say something, and then not saying anything at all. (25)

In this passage, Wainaina replicates his discovery of the playfulness of language in childhood. While the varied transcription of *kimay*—hyphenated, lacerated, elongated—conveys the trial and error of enunciation, the overall description stresses the embodied process of vocal production by likening the body to a musical instrument. Introduced here as a quirky artefact of excessive play with the voice's ability to replicate sounds heard in the world and thereby make its own reality, *kimay* emphasizes the fleshy contortions of the body in voicing a secret word with power to name a range of ordinary phenomena that are otherwise asemantic.

Kimay, a capacious umbrella-term taking in affect, accent, language, and music, serves several purposes in the memoir. It reveals Wainaina's concern with the linguistic signification of the individual's sensory experience of the plural. As Rachel Knighton writes in an essay on the memoir, *kimay* is "a metaphor for national unity, envisaged through the linguistic."[366] Madhu Krishnan has also pointed out how Wainaina's *kimay* is a portrayal of the nation as "myriad discourses, voices, and codes that constitute it as multiply-articulated and contingent" in a sharp contrast to the national government's view of Kenya as something "essential, immutable, and

[366] Rachel Knighton, "Refracting the Political: Binyavanga Wainaina's *One Day I Will Write About This Place*," in *African Literature Today*, vol. 32: Politics & Social Justice (Oxford: James Currey, 2014), 40.

written in a single narrative of triumph."[367] *Kimay* is thus an apposite figure for the sound of the crowd, inscribing its postcolonial polyphony without recourse to visuality.

In this way, the neologism signifies the Kenyan crowd's linguistic diversity: "*Ki-may* is any language that I cannot speak, but I hear every day in Nakuru: Ki-kuyu, Ki-Kamba, Ki-Ganda, Ki-sii, Gujarati, Ki-Nyarwanda, (Ki) Ru-fumbira. *Ki-May*. There are so many, I get dizzy. *Ki-may* is the accordion, the fiddle, the trumpet" (25-26). Just as the sonic plurality of languages confounds and nauseates the child-narrator, the adult-narrator continues to make sense of the complexity of "people talking without words, exact languages" (253). *Kimay* is thus deployed as a technique of multilingualism, describing the presence of more than one language while retaining English as the primary medium.

Echoing Nganang's frustration with assumptions about the monolingual nature of literature, Wainaina states in an interview that: "literature in English is still dominated by writers who come from a monolingual background. […] So I'm excited about the possibility of using English as it's spoken by people who move easily from one tongue to another—from one way of being to another. Put it this way, I'm more and more disinterested in writing in the kind of English that cannot cope outside its own clime."[368] The "kind of English" Wainaina is hinting at here is more obvious in *One Day*, in which he describes the way that Kenyan English is *infused* with Kiswahili, Gikuyu, Sheng, among other East African languages. While steeped in the multilingual Kenyan context, Wainaina's memoir does not employ many non-English languages. Wainaina "leaves us with no doubt that he is writing in English," as Mukoma wa Ngugi puts it. *One Day*

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[367] Madhu Krishnan, "Affiliation, Disavowal, and National Commitment in Third Generation African Literature," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 44, no. 1 (2014): 81–82.
[368] Melissa de Villiers, "Playing with Language," *Times Live (Sunday Times)*, November 13, 2011, http://www.timeslive.co.za/lifestyle/ books/2011/1 l/13/playing-with-language.

remains sensitive to Kenyan linguistic diversity, bearing aural witness to what Wainaina calls the "multilingual clash of mouth cymbals" (77). In this way, Wainaina tends to describe or perform the Kenyan soundworld of multilingualism rather than replicate multiple languages in his writing.

Sheng is another exemplary multilingual technique in the memoir. Although the language is frequently alluded to in the text, it is employed sparingly. Wainaina calls it a "sort of three-in-one language" that burst out in "angry burning songs about the struggle of life in a falling city, on new FM radio stations that have opened the previously restricted airwaves" (185). Sheng is a composite language that emerged as a Nairobi youth slang in the middle of the twentieth century and subsequently spread to other areas—both urban and rural—and populations—both young and old. Sheng draws primarily on English and Kiswahili and has been adopted widely as a popular lingua franca in urban Kenya. It consists in overlapping linguistic characteristics such as pidgin, dialect, and code-switching (in a normative and a contextual sense).[369] Sheng is an enduring medium for popular forms such as spoken word, poetry and hip-hop music, with its "literary" status increasingly recognized.[370] While some critics have been quick to assume that writing in Sheng inherently espouses social diversity by virtue of its linguistic cross-fertilization, others approach such texts more carefully. Indeed, hybridity is not the unique disposition of Sheng texts, as Mwangi notes, but Sheng authors do highlight their hybrid status more prominently than other

[369] Chege J. Githiora, *Sheng: Rise of a Kenyan Swahili Vernacular* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2018).
[370] For more on Sheng literature, see Alina N. Rinkanya, "Sheng Literature in Kenya: Socio-Linguistic Borders and Spaces in Popular Poetry," in *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on Borders and Spaces in Contemporary African Literature and Folklore*, ed. Jennifer Wawrzinek and J.K.S. Makokha (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2011), 293–312; Lillian Kaviti, "From Stigma to Status: Sheng and Engsh in Kenya's Linguistic and Literary Space," *Matatu: Journal for African Culture & Society* 46, no. 1 (2015): 223–253; Evan Maina Mwangi, *Translation in African Contexts: Postcolonial Texts, Queer Sexuality, and Cosmopolitan Fluency* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2017), 156–87.

hybrid African literatures.[371] It is also worth noting that the literary magazine *Kwani?* Wainaina founded has championed Sheng writing with special issues dedicated to pieces in Sheng.

There are a couple of pivotal Sheng dialogues in *One Day*, but they are not actually *written in Sheng*. For instance, whilst traveling in rural Maasailand, Wainaina strikes up conversation with a teenage girl and is surprised by her fluency in what was historically an urban dialect:

> We are quiet for a while. English was a mistake. Where I am fluent, she is stilted. I switch to Swahili, and she pours herself into another person, talkative, aggressive. A person who must have a Tupac T-Shirt stashed away somewhere. […] I am still stunned. How bold and animated she is, speaking Sheng, a very hip street language that mixes Swahili and English and other languages. Here, so far from road and railway Kenya.
>
> In Sheng, there is no way for me to bring it up that would be diplomatic; in Sheng she can only present this with a hard-edged bravado, because it is humiliating. I do not know of any way we can discuss this successfully in English. If there is a courtesy every Kenyan practises, it is that we don't question each other's contradictions. (150-1)

The memoir consistently navigates the precarity of code-switching and approaching a stranger linguistically. Here, the narrator does not hide his naïve disbelief at the "bold and animated" usage of Sheng in what he thought was a rural backwater. The girl's "hard-edged bravado" reveals her fluency in the global idiom of1 hip-hop; owning a t-shirt with the American star Tupac on it gives her more cultural currency than poorly-commanded English. What's also striking is the author's didactic tone in this passage: Wainaina diligently informs the unfamiliar reader about the language situation—a posture he adopts throughout the memoir.

At times, Sheng's function in the memoir resembles Nganang's performance of Camfranglais in *Temps de chien*. Indeed, these two composite languages, or "cousin languages" as Jescah Abuti Muyia and Valentine Njende Ubanako call them, transcribe the sound of African

[371] Mwangi, *Translation in African Contexts*, 158–59.

urban culture's multilingual dynamism.[372] However, there is also a key difference between the two authors. If for Nganang Camfranglais is a celebration of his country's diversity, then Wainaina is by contrast somewhat more critical of language's ability to convey the complexity of Kenyanness—no matter how inventive and heterogenous the Sheng language is. Rather, Wainaina seeks to define the "ness" of Kenyanness through instances of sonic materiality—accents, gestures, non-linguistic vocalization, and so on. Ultimately, the two produce a similar effect of a relational and ambient soundscape to underscore their texts' polyphony.

In addition to Sheng, Wainaina signals multilingualism with literal translation and transcription of accents. Wainaina defamiliarizes Kenya's national languages through sound, at once celebrating multilingualism *and* casting doubt on national unity. In particular, English, the principle medium of *One Day,* is given a liminal status as both a foreign and a local language with the help of accents. As a child, the narrator and his siblings enjoy dressing up and speaking "Americanly" (9). Their consumption of American film, television, and music inspires their games that parody the cultural forms of Anglobalization.[373] After watching the Hollywood blockbuster *The Six Million Dollar Man*, he recites movie lines: "'Gennlemen, we can rebuild him. We have the tek-nalagee. We can build the world's frrrrst bi-anic man'" (12). Transliteration here conveys the playfulness of vocal mimcry. Outside Kenya too, English takes on a culturally hegemonic status. Wainaina describes how the soundscape in South Africa changed rapidly with the official end of Apartheid in 1994: "There are black people with American accents, with white South

[372] Jescah Abuti Muyia and Valentine Njende Ubanako, "The Cousin Languages of Africa: Focus on Camfranglais (Cameroon) and Sheng (Kenya)," in *Crossing Linguistic Borders in Postcolonial Anglophone Africa*, ed. Jemima Anderson and Valentine Njende Ubanako (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 52.
[373] The term "Anglobalization" was coined by arch-defender of the British Empire, historian Niall Ferguson in his essay "British Imperialism Revisited: The Costs and Benefits of 'Anglobalization,'" *Historically Speaking* 4, no. 4 (2003): 21–27.

African accents" (112). In another passage, a friend scorns the way that young black South Africans attending previously-white-only private schools alter their speech as soon as they walk through the school gates: "'They speak, lak, white, lak South Efficen accints'" (118). Such descriptions of speaking voices are part of the memoir's catalogue of social and political change in postcolonial Africa.

In her book *Not like a Native Speaker,* Rey Chow writes about the critical function of apparently ordinary features of language like accents in postcolonial literature. Chow invites us to conceive of language, as Foucault does, as a found object. Such a conception destigmatizes the non-native speaker, since no one truly bears the traces of originality or purity. Chow argues for a linguistic, or rather accentual, plurality that produces "a creative domain of languaging…that draws its sustenance from mimicry and adaptation and bears in its accents the murmur, the passage, of diverse found speeches."[374] Chow's concept of the "xenophone" is helpful for interpreting the recurrence of accents in Wainaina's text. She defines the xenophone as "the foreign-sounding speech/tone" which can "encompass quotidian and seemingly simple but in fact ideologically loaded phenomena such as accents and intonations."[375] When Wainaina articulates his own "Americanly" speaking as a child or observes the way that black South Africans pick up "South Efficen accints," he is using the xenophone to subtly connote fractured multiplicity. The naïve child's observations on differences in pronunciation are far from arbitrary, for they map onto *One Day*'s consistent exploration of how Kenyan English is ethnically marked. For example, Wainaina recalls how his high school classmates mocked the accent of their "visibly Kalenjin" (64) headmaster. Later, he describes a Nairobi friend whose English and Sheng are both distinguishable

[374] Chow, *Not like a Native Speaker*, 66.
[375] Chow, 23.

by the "rich musical undertones of a Luo" (188). He continues to listen carefully to the voices he encounters through media, as well as in real life. His simple remark that "Television people say Keenya. We say Ke-nya" (14) indicates his burgeoning anxiety about national identity as child. The line "From the radio, we know that foreign influenzes are invecting us, secret foreign influenzes are infringing us" (84) also subtly critiques political rhetoric in postcolonial Kenya.

Wainaina consistently dwells on the accents of two women influential in particular. First, consider his descriptions of the "funny and nasal" (39) voice of his childhood babysitter:

> When Wambui speaks Luo**,** her body language changes. Her face becomes more animated, does more moving than her arms; her mouth pouts, her arms rest akimbo. Wambui is awkward in English, crude and ungrammatical in Kiswahili. […] Wambui is broken English, slangy Kiswahili, Gikuyu inflections. (43, 49)

In this careful auditory and visual observation, we learn how code-switching is a fully embodied process. Indeed, Wambui's entire personhood is perceived differently depending on which language the narrator hears her speak. Second, consider the comparison of Wainaina's mother voice to "shards of water and streams of glass" (16). Her voice is unlike any of her children's; it "tingles" and "if crystal were water made solid, her voice would be the last splash of water before it set" (128). The author describes his fascination with her alien vocality:

> She also has a […] nasal accent, but not American or English. My nose is thin, but not as thin as my mum's. Sometimes I try to hear myself, cupping my hand over my ear and twisting my mouth to the side, but I can't hear myself being nasal. (16)

In this endearing scene, the child imitates his mother's vocal behavior in an effort to understand their shared heritage. His mother is Ugandan-born and although has lived in Kenya for some time she still "sounds foreign" in her country of residence. The memoir chronicles Wainaina's first visit to the country of his mother's birth as an adult:

> Mum looks almost foreign now. Her Kinyarwanda accent is more pronounced, and her face is not as reserved as usual. Her beauty, so exotic and head-turning in Kenya, seems at home here. She does not stand out anymore; she belongs. The rest of us seem like tourists.

Mum has always described herself as a Mufumbira, one who speaks Kinyarwanda. She has always said that too much is made of the differences between Tutsi and Hutu, that they are really more alike than not. She insists that she is Bufumbira, speaks Kinyarwanda. (157-8)

If according to Chow the xenophone is identifiable in "the lingering work of language in the form of skin tones and sound effects," then it is clearly manifested in this passage in the joint allusions to the author's mother's visual appearance and vocal performance.[376] The reflections on how her identity is performed through her Kinyarwanda accent also underscore the way that the listening ear functions, as Stoever reminds us, as an organ of "surveillance, discipline, and interpretation" especially of race and gender.[377] To what effect does Wainaina evoke Wambui's and his mother's voices? Both women were influential in his childhood as he figuratively and literally learned to find his own voice and understand the aural contours of ethno-linguistic difference. With these corporeal and vocal details, Wainaina avoids the challenge of actually transcribing Gikuyu, Luo, Kiswahili, Kinyarwanda, and so on. As with Nganang, Wainaina's Anglo-reader reader enjoys the multilingual ambiance without confronting an incomprehensible language.

In addition to the extra-linguistic phonic detail provided in descriptions of accents or altered spellings of Kenya and South African English, Wainaina figures multilingualism through direct translation. Wainaina concisely glosses non-English words with internal translational devices such as parentheses as in "(repeated in Zulu)" (161) and repetition as in "'Fuata Nyayo,

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[376] Chow, 26.
[377] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7–8.

fuata Nyayo, Tawala, Moi, tawala.' Rule, Moi, rule" (45). These phonic indicators of language-in-use stand out as charitable gestures for the uninitiated reader, yet they appear infrequently enough so as not disrupt the textual flow. In this way, *One Day* is what Rebecca L. Walkowitz would call a "born translated" text.[378] For Walkowitz, twenty-first-century world literature is strongly determined by the state of translation in the publishing industry and the global context in which there are more writers using English as a second language and fewer "native" readers. These factors have influenced authors who—aiming for a global readership, like Wainaina and Nganang—adopt a style that suggests their work is *already* translated in the original.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Wainaina also employs musical idioms to describe multilingualism's sound effects. Consider, for instance, the centerpiece chapter on his maternal family reunion in Uganda. On this occasion, when his relatives see each other again after many years of restrictions on transnational mobility in the region, Wainaina describes their conversations as a Babel-like chorus: "I am filled with magic and succumb to the masses. In two days, we feel like a family. In French, Swahili, English, Gikuyu, Kinyarwanda, Kiganda, and Ndebele, we sing one song, a multitude of passports in our luggage" (163). When the multi-national family sings "one song" their linguistic differences are packed away, just like their distinct travel documents. Sound trumps sense, so to speak. Wainaina sidesteps the literary "problem" of multilingual polyphony for an Anglophone memoir by employing sonic idioms. Later in this chapter I will discuss the musical references in *One Day* in depth, but first I will consider a selection of passages from the text that employ ordinary sound figures to describe the crowd.

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[378] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

Resounding the Crowd

In Wainaina's memoir, "the sounds of manythings" importantly underlie the representation of the postcolonial African crowd. While the focus of literary studies has for some time been on the visuality of crowds in their literary depiction, more recently critics such as Brett Brehm and Yanie Fécu have pointed to the centrality of sound in perceiving and portraying the crowd.[379] While my elaboration of Nganang's and Wainaina's poetics of the crowd has been largely framed as a formal and stylistic issue, I wish to consider briefly the predominant approaches to understanding crowds from a social and political perspective. The French thinker Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* published in 1895 and translated into English the following year introduced influential ideas about the individual's loss of selfhood in a large group of people in which he or she develops a collective unconsciousness.[380] Le Bon's hugely popular book prompted many more scholars and artists to contemplate the collective behavior of humans and crowd psychology.[381] Indeed, accord to Walter Benjamin, for nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans, "no subject was more worthy of the attention" than the crowd.[382] Through his readings of Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe, Benjamin affirms the crowd's centrality to *fin-de-*

[379] Brett Brehm points out that a fascination with the new urban phenomenon of the crowd in the nineteenth century combined with new audio technologies such as the telegraph and phonograph developed in that era features in canonical European and American literature. Yanie Fécu's examination of the centrality of the figure of the crowd in Aimé Césaire's epic poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1956) highlights way anticolonial writers in the twentieth century intricately sounded the crowd in a departure from colonial conceptions of an indiscernible, racialized mass (see pp. 32–56). Brett Brehm, "Kaleidophonic Modernity: Sound, City, Technology" (PhD dissertation, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University, 2015); Yanie Fécu, "Sonorities: Decolonizing Voice in Post-1945 Caribbean Literature and Media" (PhD dissertation, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University, 2018).
[380] Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1896).
[381] Cf. Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiews, eds., *Crowds* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006). Stefan Jonsson's essay in the volume "The Invention of the Masses: The Crowd in French Culture from the Revolution to the Commune" provides a particularly helpful overview of the development of political theory on crowds since the nineteenth century.
[382] Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 166.

siècle urban life. The Italian Luigi Russolo upholds this view in his 1913 Futurist manifesto "L'arte dei rumori" (The Art of Noises) in which he scorned the past and proposed a musical aesthetic based on machinic noise and urban masses, inviting modernist artists to partake in city-listening: "Let us cross a large modern capital with our ears more sensitive than our eyes."[383] The crowd is thus a crucial but neglected site for imagining modernity's new sounds.[384]

In his essay "After the Fictions: Notes Towards a Phenomenology of the Multitude" Dilip Gaonkar makes an interesting distinction between the *crowd* and the *multitude*: whereas a crowd of people "signifies the mode of becoming and being one," the multitude "draws its strength from its plurality rather than its unity. A multitude's residual power and dynamism (bio-power, as it were) lies with its mode of being many rather than of being one." Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri make a similar point when they call the multitude a collection of "plural singularities."[385] As my discussion so far has illustrated, the rhetorical features of literature often exploit this opposition in the figuring of multiple voices, at times insisting on the homogeneity of the crowd and at other times reckoning with its heterogeneity.

Recent work by postcolonial theorists such as AbdouMaliq Simone, Ato Quayson, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall has expanded the previously European or Eurocentric framework of the bulk of political theory on the topic of crowds.[386] For Mbembe and Nuttall, African crowds

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[383] Luigi Russolo, "The Art of Noises Futurist Manifesto," in *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), 26. Originally published as *L'arte dei rumori: Manifesto futurista* (Milan: Direzione del movimento futurista, 1913). For more on the Futurists' interest in the sound of the crowd, see Gavin Williams. 2013. "A Voice of the Crowd: Futurism and the Politics of Noise." 19th-Century Music 37 (2): 113–129.

[384] Political theorist Lauri Siisiäinen's book on the auditory-sonorous in Michel Foucault's thought adopts a Foucauldian biopolitical framework for conceiving of mass gatherings of people and is unique in its critical focus on the "sound of the crowd." Cf. Lauri Siisiäinen, *Foucault and the Politics of Hearing* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 70–88, 115–25.

[385] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 99.

[386] Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, "Writing the World from an African Metropolis," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 347–72; Ato Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism* (Durham,

play an essential role in the construction of urban space while, in Simone's formulation, African inner-city neighborhoods have given rise to the conception of "people as infrastructure."[387] As far as African literature is concerned, in the middle of the twentieth century, writers tended to portray the crowd as a metonym for the nation, while socialist realist writers took a particular interest in portraying working-class crowds. The Senegalese Ousmane Sembène's 1960 novel about striking railway workers *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (*God's Bits of Wood*) and the South African Alex La Guma's 1972 novel about antiapartheid resistance *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* are classic examples of socialist realist depictions of crowds—although they are not specifically concerned with the crowd's audibility.

Returning now to Wainaina's memoir, I interrogate the text's use of ordinary figures to resound the crowd. While the author calls attention to the plural singularities of the multitude, I argue that ultimately the crowd's oneness is consolidated by the use of unity of the text. My close readings focus on four sites of crowds in the memoir: i) the street, ii) the church, iii) the *matatu*, and iv) the protest.

Wainaina describes the crowded marketplace hyperbolically, comparing Nairobi's "ten thousand languages all shouting" (75) to the industrial and commercial noise of "ten thousand specialists of ten thousand metals arranged into ten thousand loud permutations to fix cars, tractors, plows, pots, pans, woks, mills, chairs. … Screaming, shouting, ladles clashing hard onto enamel plates" (77). The metallic linguistic mix of the street suggests a machine of many parts greased by nationalist feeling. In contrast with the disdain of industrial mechanization in Poe's and

NC: Duke University Press, 2014); AbdouMaliq Simone, *For the City yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

[387] A. Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 410–11.

Baudelaire's Paris, Wainaina readily embraces the mechanical melodies of the postcolonial urban soundscape. The narrator tunes in to "the multilingual clash of mouth cymbals, lifting up and down, jaws working, eating trading, laughing. And people singing are the sound of melting metal. In that urban Congolese music that sounds like it clangs: Lingala, that jangling language of Kinshasa. But around them, electric guitars twang hard, things bang" (77). The jangling Lingala contrasts with his later description of Gikuyu (his father's native language) as "a phantom limb" (125), an image that resonates with Derrida's theorization of language as prosthesis in his book *Monolongualism*.[388] Juxtaposed with the reference to rumba music with lyrics in Lingala imported from the Congo, the reader is reminded of the transnational constitution of the urban crowd.

The crowd merges more than just national and ethno-linguistic difference, but also brings together individuals from across rural/urban divides. Consider a second description of the Nairobi soundscape after Wainaina's return from South Africa:

> Urban Kenya is a split personality: authority, trajectory, international citizen in English; national brother in Swahili; and content villager or nostalgic urbanite in our mother tongues. It seems to clear to me here and now, after south Africa, which is so different. There, there is a political battle to resolved embattled selves. Every language fights for space in politics. In this part of town, all three Kenyas live: city people who work in English making their way home; the village and its produce and languages on the streets; and the crowds and crowds of people being gentle to each other in Kiswahili. Kiswahili is where we meet each other with brotherhood. (125)

With fresh ears from a trip abroad, Wainaina describes Kenya's linguistic "split personality" not as exceptional but ordinary. He conceives of the public sphere as a linguistic battleground. Every language is instrumentalized in discrete social settings, with Kiswahili working as a gentle medium to glue together the crowd. Like Nganang, Wainaina employs types like "the content villager or nostalgic urbanite" to imagine trans-linguistic interactions *en masse*.

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[388] Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre : ou la prothese d'origine*.

Over the course of a dozen pages, Wainaina relates how, at the age of 12, his mother took his family to a new evangelical Christian church service, marking a change from the Catholic masses they used to attend up to that point. First, the liturgical music is different: "some of them have rattles and some have tambourines and they are singing loud and sweating in that gritty dusty Kenyan way—not smooth and happy like American gospel on television" (57). Wainaina's ears are next astonished by the speaking in tongues that takes place in this church: "In the Catholic Church, we all recite the same prayer and make a chorus out of it. Here, a chorus is made out of each person's received tongue. The drums in the front set the tempo, and the pastor leads his own languageless tongues, on a microphone" (58). The adolescent is impressed by the ability of a congregation to join in vocal unison since all the sonic organization he has noticed previously is along ethnic or national lines: "The whole crowd has a group sound, and the instruments make this all one sound, and this sound carries us all, but each individual lives inside his or her own sound" (58). Wainaina can only describe the meetings of the Deliverance Church in the Nakuru Town Hall in sonic terms as "three hours of guttural noises […] screams and tongues, bad microphones and bad American accents […] bad English, parallel translations of every shouted sweaty sentence, from English to Kiswahili, sometimes from Kiswahili to Gikuyu too" (65-6). The church congregation is a multilingual and multiethnic crowd linked by the phonic matter they produce and orchestrated by the pastor's voice that "comes from the belly, harsh and hoarse" (67). Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, mediates religious experience here and encapsulates the individual's auditory experience of being amidst the Kenyan crowd.[389] The author tellingly

[389] For more on Wainaina's critical perspective on Pentecostalism in Kenya, see A.S. Van Klinken, "A Kenyan Queer Prophet: Binyavanga Wainaina's Public Contestation of Pentecostalism and Homophobia," in *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa*, ed. Ezra Chitando and A.S. Van Klinken (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 65–81.

transcribes all extra-linguist vocal utterances here in order to emphasize the fact that "group sound" exceeds the sum of officially-recognized national languages.

The *matatu* or commuter bus is a popular mode of public transport which typifies the convergence of the Kenyan crowd and in his memoir Wainaina presents the associated "cultural type" of the *matatu* man as a conductor in two sense: he works as a bus conductor but also conducts the orchestra that is the crowd of passengers. This is a rather romantic view of the figure of the *matatu* man, whose "vulgar and sexist expression" literary critic Mbũgua wa Mbũngai has argued are so central to the business.[390] In her recent history of the *matatu,* Kenda Mutongi has also examined the oscillation between thug and entrepreneur of *matatu* men.[391] In Chapter 27, Wainaina recounts an experience on a *matatu*, upon his return home when he is enjoying re-immersion in the multitude. On this bus journey, he rediscovers the ordinary.

> Her shoulder slumps, and she says, 'Mpslp, ai, aliniuthii'—the *mpslp*, a sort of pulling in of saliva, a completely familiar movement, and one I haven't noticed since I left, years ago. The thing about it is, how Kenyan it is, not just the sound, but the way her neck swings, her shoulders move up the droop quickly, as she says, "Oh, that man!" He really offended me, her slack shoulders say. […] We sigh with her. For a moment we become a common personality, and she is chatting back and forth with people all over the *matatu*. […] We live by these acts, in any part of this country, where neither our anthem nor our tax base nor our language nor our view of the world is in any way universal […] Here in Kenya, where only our interactions keep us together. Now that the state is failing, we are held together by small grace, by interpersonal relationships, by trusting body language. (194-5)

Wainaina ascribes special meaning to the group of strangers squeezed into his *matatu*, suggesting that the passengers are a microcosmos of a country bound together by a "common personality." Wainaina relishes these extralinguistic features that mark Kenyan speech *as Kenyan* and conjoin a community that doesn't share one language. Such a tiny gesture and sigh outweigh macrotexts

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[390] Mbũgua wa Mũngai, *Nairobi's "matatu" Men : Portrait of a Subculture* (Nairobi: Twaweza Communications; Goethe-Institut Kenya; Native Intelligence; Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, 2013).
[391] Kenda Mutongi, *Matatu: A History of Popular Transportation in Nairobi* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

like the national anthem. The comingling of bodily noises beyond voices, as Lauri Siisiainen has noted, is integral to apprehending the biopolitics of the crowd.[392] Evoking the image of a diverse symphony Wainaina posits: "so now, somebody, the conductor maybe, and this becomes a truly appropriate word—*conductor*—his job is to speak all our languages, move his body to arrange us, persuade us, collect from us" (196). Wainaina admires the orchestration of chaos in the daily commute by the *matatu* man who dexterously switches between languages, altering his expression and character as he does so, and enshrines the *matatu* as a vehicle of polyphony.

Just as these Kenyan crowds are described primarily through sonic language, the crowds that Wainaina encounters in South Africa in the 1990s are interpreted through listening. Wainaina comments on the political mood in the last year of Apartheid during his studies at the University of Transkei, focusing on the increasing volume of the freedom struggle. In one scene, he describes the experience of listening to the "group thump" of an antiapartheid protest outside his student residence. With an animal simile, he likens the crowd to "a swarm of swallows" and "ten thousand wildebeest feet stomp[ing] in Xhosa." The sequence is introduced with a single-line paragraph—"All over south Africa is liberation talk"—and propelled by the mimetic repetition of the protestors' chants: "ANC. PAC. ANC. PAC." Most importantly, he explains that individual voices are gathered collectively with one purpose: "every voice is doing what it is supposed to do to support the strike" (101). From crowds of co-present bodies, the sound of protest spreads in print and media across the country: "Nonracist, nonsexist South Africa. This is shouted everywhere, every day, on walls, on posters. Villages. Cities. […] Liberation is coming. It is all over the radio" (103). In a later passage, he recalls riding a bus full of students in 1993, the year before Apartheid

[392] Siisiäinen, *Foucault and the Politics of Hearing*, 115–125.

ended, writing: "we were all one woven mat of bodies singing struggle songs. I found I knew the words, but not the meaning; I knew the intent" (113). The liberation music symbolically interweaves individuals as a collective, proving that the affective force of sound exceeds the content of lyrics. This affective binding of sound into nationalistic sentiment is interrogated in further detail in the final section of this chapter.

Everyday Musical Nationalism

How do the ordinary sound figures in Wainaina's memoir evoke music's feelings of belonging in general and feelings of nationalism in particular? Analysis of the author's reflections on musical genres as a varied as benga, rumba, mbaqanga, disco, and gospel reveals how social categories are transposed onto specific genres. I interrogate Wainaina's multilayered affiliation and identification with music in the text in order to demonstrate how his everyday auditory practices produce the categorization of musical genres like "traditional," "national," or "global." Listening to the radio is one kind of practice bestowed with cultural significance in the memoir. Indeed, as the editors of the volume *Radio in Africa*: *Publics, Cultures, Communities* note, "it is perhaps the combination of 'ordinariness,' the focus on the everyday, with the ability to engage with moments of high national and cultural drama that makes radio such a complex 'soundscape' and shapes it as both a powerful and—at times—a dangerous medium."[393] Once again, the imperceptible forcefulness of the ordinary can dangerously take hold of the sonic imagination. The memoir offers a great deal of insight into the way that local music and music from abroad shapes

[393] Elizabeth Gunner, Dina Ligaga, and Dumisani Moyo, eds., *Radio in Africa: Publics, Cultures, Communities* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), 4.

"this place" of the title. "Music makes whole worlds, out of unwhole lives" (52), as Wainaina puts it succinctly.

Growing up in Nakuru, Wainaina learned that musical genres are oppositional. He acknowledges that he preferred "easy pop" and "the music of noiseless elevators." He longed for "crooning and soft drumming and strumming pools of water and acoustic guitar meadows" and for those "wooden sounds of long ago" to replace the widely popular Congolese music which he describes as a "metallic sound [that] has become the sound of our times." The material difference he locates in these sounds conveys their distinct temporalities of past and present. Wainaina lists some of the books he enjoys reading as a teenager (mostly popular fiction like Mills and Boon or Wilbur Smith), but he fixes on Michael Jackson's hits "Smooth Criminal" and "Human Nature" "thumping from illegal radio cassette players" (85) at his high school. In 1983, he writes, Michael Jackson "has managed to make himself into a perpetual present tense: no lineage, no history; he is the maximum of sound and movement and nowness" (249). Despite this seemingly neutral celebration of American pop in his teenage years, music is intensely politicized and listening is linked to individual feelings of collective belonging. For instance, the author remembers how his school choir in the 1970s and '80s would regularly sing "*harambee*, which means we are pulling together, like a choir, or tug-of-war" (13). Similarly, he indicates Kenya's solidarity with the antiapartheid struggle when he mentions that his "whole school is singing South African liberation songs" (86) while a reference to Band Aid (the humanitarian project led by Irish musician Bob Geldof) reminds us how East Africa has been marginalized in the global economy of popular music.

With the hindsight of adulthood, the memoir clarifies the author's awareness of how his musical taste was determined by both his middle-class upbringing and his access to audio

technology. He outlines the two main broadcasters in his childhood: General Service and National Service. While the former English-language broadcaster played "soft music like ABBA and Boney M. and Kenny Rogers and Lionel Richie," the National Service "throb[bed] with undefined past sounds […] all those songs in so many languages that suggest some other pungent reality, songs complicated enough to suggest mess and history" (247-8). This observation draws attention to Daniel arap Moi's government's attempt to regulate music production and consumption in line with the nation-building project.[394] While the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation banned songs in languages other than Swahili or English in an effort to stem music's affective stimulation of "tribalism," this policy led to an increase in airtime for Congolese rumba.[395] With lyrics mostly in Lingala, Kinshasa's musical export was popular across the continent at the time. Furthermore, Kenyan state censorship of vernacular lyrics had the effect of relegating music categorized as "indigenous" and "traditional" to the distant past. Such nativist and protectionist policies limited any ethnically inflected styles to short, specialist radio programs like *Muziki asili wa Kenya* (Traditional Music of Kenya), suggesting that listening to so-called traditional music outside this frame is anti-nationalist. In the memoir, these broader political cleavages are represented by the struggle of the author's childhood-self to derive social meaning from soft crooning and heavy thumping, or from metallic jangling and wooden tapping that he hears on the radio.

Elsewhere in African literature, listening to the radio is consciously deployed as a politicized activity hidden in the quotidian. For example, in the Angolan writer José Eduardo Agualusa's 2013 novel *Teoria Geral do Esquecimento* (*A General Theory of Oblivion*) a

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[394] For more on the Kenyan government's radio policy, see Peter Mūhoro Mwangi, "Silencing Musical Expression in Colonial and Post-Colonial Kenya," in *Popular Music Censorship in Africa*, ed. Michael Drewett and Martin Cloonan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 157–170; Roger Wallis and Krister Malm, *Big Sounds from Small Peoples: The Music Industry in Small Countries*, Sociology of Music 2 (New York, NY: Pendragon Press, 1984).
[395] John Kamau, "Singing of Alien Tongues," *Index On Censorship* 27, no. 6 (1998): 145.

Portuguese woman Ludo shutters herself up away in her apartment for the duration of the Angolan civil war and the only way she is able to pick up news from the rapidly changing outside world is through the snippets she catches from news broadcasts with her broken antenna. History is similarly transmitted by radio in Alain Mabackou's 2018 novel *Les Cigognes sont immortelles* (*The Death of Comrade President*) in which the 13-year-old narrator Michel eagerly leans into his radio set to hear about the coup unfolding in Congo-Brazzaville after Marien Ngouabi's assassination in 1977. Like Wainaina's memoir, these texts indicate how an intermedial imagination has stirred literary strategies for writing about politics through sound and the radio in particular.

The question of shifting boundaries of cultural taste recurs in South Africa, which serves as Kenya's counterpoint in the text. In the early 1990s, Wainaina attended university in the Cape, where he notes that musical genres tend to follow Apartheid's racial cleavages with Cape Town whites listening to "rock music and the ethnic music of all places not South Africa" on the one hand, and on the other, urban black South Africans enjoying "R&B, and Kwaito, reggae, and gospel" (173). The Afropop star of the 1980s and '90s Brenda Fassie looms large in Wainaina's recollections of the end of Apartheid:

> Brenda Fassie is Langa in a summer heat wave. She is streams of sunlight on rusty township roofs. She is the cramp of life close: strands of sound twist and turn into a thick rope, in her throat—*mbaqanga*, gospel, the old musicals, the choral protest songs, gangsters and money; sex for sale; liberation politics; gumboots and grannies spilling in tens of thousands into this cramped township. It is these sounds bending and melting; it is them shouting louder to be heard; it is drunk and beaten jazz saxophonists in shebeens. Roofs start to crack and squeal in direct sun. She stands and belts—a whole township street of burning silver and rust. Whipping sounds rattle and bang in her head. (96)

Wainaina positions Brenda Fassie at the nexus of several African musical genres (*mbaqanga*, gospel, Afrojazz, liberation and choral music) and identifies her origins in the Langa township of

Cape Town. Importantly, he credits her ability to use popular music to bend and melt the ordinary sounds of life in the segregated city. Her songs filled dancefloors and her face was often splashed on the front pages of tabloid newspapers which always covered the scandals about her sexuality and her drug use. Brenda Fassie became emblematic of the tumultuous late-Apartheid period. *One Day* confirms that each track she released marked a new moment in national history: "Brenda Fassie is back on the radio. A softer, surprising Brenda, singing the gospel song 'Soon and Very Soon.' We are disarmed. And sigh" (108). This upholds the critic Njabulo S. Ndebele's view that Fassie "brought the experience of freedom very close" because she disrupted the divide between private and public with "her verbal ungovernability." [396] Fassie's Afropop musically represented the desire for freedom in late-Apartheid township life, just as kwela music, discussed in Chapter Two, represented the social moment of the mid-twentieth century in Vera's fiction.

Wainaina dedicates a page to the experience of hearing Brenda Fassie's new Xhosa song "Vul'indlela" played for the first time in postapartheid South Africa. The writer is sharing a taxi in Cape Town in 1998 with a couple of white women who insist on turning up the volume of what he calls the "first real crossover song in a new South Africa" (175). The song "Vul'indlela" captures the essence of post-Apartheid optimism and racial integration. Wainaina's musical ekphrasis is impassioned and interspersed with details from the budding writer's own path to publication. Just as the nation is "making something new," so too is Wainaina making something

[396] Ndebele goes on to say that "in the apparent futility of daily life under oppression, Brenda seems to succeed in giving meaning to the daily details of life by affirming them in song. When her audiences recognize those social facts, and sing along, imprinting them anew in their minds, and dancing to the rhythms that carry the picture or message-bearing words, they participate in a vital process of self-authentication and regeneration." Njabulo S. Ndebele, "Still Thinking of MaBrrr," in *I'm Not Your Weekend Special: Portraits on the Life + Style & Politics of Brenda Fassie*, ed. Bongani Madondo (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2014), 101–2. For more on popular music in the imagination of political liberation, see Gavin Steingo, *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2016).

new in writing: he details the process of making a successful submission to the *Sunday Times* newspaper. And just as Fassie's hit signals national flourishing—in musical spirit anyway—so Wainaina celebrates: "I am a writer. I am now a published writer" (176). If "Vul'indlela" conveniently symbolizes the individual's growth, it also takes on collective symbolic importance in South Africa, functioning like a national anthem.

While literary scholars are familiar with Benedict Anderson's account of how literature underpins nationalism in his classic book *Imagined Communities*, it is worth remembering that Anderson also proposes that nations have historically been created and ratified through sound. Writing specifically of national anthems, Anderson coins the term "unisonance" to describe the power that sound can have to seemingly erode the boundaries between self and other: "How selfless this unisonance feels! If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and as we are, we have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us all but imagined sound."[397] In this respect, we might understand songs like Fassie's "Vul'indela" as unofficial anthems of national unity. Musicologist Shana L. Redmond observes that black anthems are especially powerful in their ability to assemble listening audiences with political publics. Black anthems reach toward freedom and since they are "dialogic without requiring a literate tradition" (unlike literature) they manage to construct what Redmond calls a "sound franchise."[398] Yet, as Wainaina's reflections on the national anthem in his own Kenya indicate, linguistic, class and ethnic identities further complicate the reception of such a sound franchise in the crowd.

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[397] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 145.

[398] For Redmond, anthems such as "Lift Every Voice" or "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" inscribe song in the foreground of black freedom struggles and decolonization movements across the world. Redmond, *Anthem*, 14, 2.

For example, in a pivotal scene from his childhood, Wainaina recalls watching the televised tributes to the first president of independent Kenya Jomo Kenyatta on the occasion of his death in 1978. It is during this listening scene that he initially devises his ordinary sound figure *kimay*:

> All day today, they showed on television grainy old reels of traditional Gikuyu dancers singing for Kenyatta. A man and a woman do a Gikuyu waltz, another man plays shapeless sounds from an accordion as they dance, and Kenyatta, large and hairy, sits on a podium" (22).

He goes on to describe in turn the distinct vocal techniques used by the different groups assembled in the crowd: "ululating" and "yodeling Gikuyu women," a Scottish "accordion-playing man," "Luo men […] nyatittying," "gurgling Maasai men," "Congo men singing like women," and so on (23-6). One instrument in particular has an affective grip on the seven-year-old: the *nyatiti*, which the television voiceover informs him is a traditional Luo musical instrument. The child is amused by the instrument's name—which sounds like "titties" to his ear—and unsettled by the "shaking, shapeless sounds" it makes. There is a sharp juxtaposition here between the traditional music irreverently described as "boiling goat tripe singing on television" (23) on the one hand and, on the other, the Western pop on the British radio program *Top of the Pops* that his older brother is listening to in the next room. The scene establishes distance between the traditional music of rural Luo and Maasai people and the child's own urban subjectivity. While the Kenyatta tributes are screening on television, Binyavanga plays his harmonica. The seven-year-old cannot reconcile the *nyatiti* music played by a delegation from Nyanza Province with the sounds he makes with his "toy maize cob harmonica: fixed, English speaking, Taiwan made, safe, imported unblemished plastic" (25). The mediatized patriotic pageantry is incongruous with the lessons he takes at school, grounded in Western music theory: "we were taught that all music comes from eight sounds: do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do—but what those people are singing and playing cannot fit those sounds.

Gibberish" (25). It is striking and perhaps unsurprising that the child narrator encounters traditional music at Kenyatta's funeral since the first president of postcolonial Kenya spearheaded many cultural nation-building projects that built on colonially established aesthetic and social paradigms like "tribal" and "traditional."[399] Such paradigms—or, to borrow Terence Ranger's term, "invented traditions"—were used by the British colonial state in order to preserve African cultural practices, but ultimately to ethnically isolate them and freeze them historically in the past.[400] In the post-colonial era, state-sponsored music festivals, musical education requirements in schools, and government directives for radio broadcasting ensured that the official focus of music in Kenya remained on ethnically-inflected rural, folk music (perceived as "authentic" and "traditional") rather than on imported "foreign" music from the West and popular new genres emerging transnationally in the region.[401]

In a second, similar episode in Chapter 6, Wainaina describes how the 1984 televised celebrations of Independence Day, or Madaraka Day, shores up the boundaries between "different tribes in different nationalizing uniforms that we call traditional" (44). The National Stadium broadcast of "feathered ankle rattles, women in dyed-grass skirts, groups of men wandering around aimlessly drinking sodas, ankle bells rattling and clanking, enormous drums" (44) fails to impress the young audience in their suburban home. Along with his siblings and their babysitter, the

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[399] Cécile Feza Bushidi, "Reflections on the Fabrication of Musical Folklore in Kenya from the Early 1920s to the Late 1970s," *The East African Review*, no. 50 (2015): 8–21.

[400] In his seminal essay, Ranger argued that African traditions were—far from being timelessly traditional—in fact socially constructed and instrumentalized by colonial authorities who were also engaged in establish ethnic categories. Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Reprint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 211–62.

[401] African presidents have often sought to shore up political support through the invocation of a shared national poetic and sonic imagination. For example, Susanna L. Sacks has shown that the Malawian leader Hastings Banda undertook similar ceremonial spectacles to recast "tradition," just as Kenyatta/Moi sought to do, as documented in Wainaina's memoir. Susanna L. Sacks, "The Poetics of Dictatorship: Speech, Song, and Sound in H. K. Banda's 'Tenth Republic Anniversary Tour,'" *Research in African Literatures* 50, no. 4 (2020): 55–71.

children undermine the sincerity of the performance of a new song of national unity. The young Wainaina is more interested in the explicit performativity of wordplay and mimicry. Ciru and Wambui have applied their mother's lipstick and repeatedly smack their lips in a "mmmm-pah" sound that echoes the "mprr" sound of whistles blown on television, which in turn reminds the narrator of the sound of all his favorite "mp and mpr words" like "imprint, impress, Imp. Imprison. Implode. Implant. Impede" interspersed in the text as a continuation of mouthing games. After a short while, Wainaina can no longer tolerate the "streeeetches and bleats" of Kenya (51) and his babysitter deems the Madaraka Day parade music excessively "boring." She turns down the volume on the television and turns up the volume on family's "giant" Sanyo radio. Wambui sings along to the latest disco music broadcasted by the Voice of Kenya radio station.

> "Oh, I rove Boney M.!" she says. She starts to sing. The letter r climbs into her Gikuyu tongue, slaps against the roof of her mouth, and is broken into a thousand letter l's. only one of them can survive. It runs down her tongue, an accent jet plane, and leaps forward into the air, "By the livers of mBabylon . . ." (48).

This episode dramatizes the sonic entanglement of local and foreign culture in 1980s Kenya through the media technology available in suburban homes and, in doing so, replicates on the page the sonic plurality as it is experienced by the child narrator. Furthermore, Wambui's affinity with the song "Rivers of Babylon" reveals the transnational circuits of black popular music in the period, Wainaina points to Kenya's complex reception of black sonic plurality in particular. Although "Rivers of Babylon" was originally recorded as a soft acoustic track in 1970 in Jamaica by the Rastafari trio The Melodians, this rocksteady disco version of the track was released in 1978 by Boney M., a group based in West Germany with Caribbean roots, and topped charts on both sides of the Atlantic, including Kenya. When black diasporic music "returns" to the African continent in moments like this, it transcribes pan-African solidarity for listeners, as Tsitsi Jaji notes

in her book Africa in Stereo. While the local music on Kenyan national television is overdetermined by ethnic demarcation and restricted from international circulation, Wambui's sing-along overwrites it with a new global black melody provided by Boney M. Her accentuation with a "Gikuyu tongue" domesticates the foreign sound with the help of Sanyo radio. This underscores Weheliye's theory that blackness is made perceptible in modernity by audio technologies. In the context of the memoir, this moment is integral to the identity formation of the author's childhood as he navigates ordinary figures amidst overwhelming sonic multiplicity.

These two childhood episodes are symmetrically bookended by the final chapter's crucial listening scene in adulthood, which revisits these issues of ethnic and racial sound alongside the feeling of belonging. In 2010, shortly after an important political referendum in Kenya, Wainaina revisits the traditional folk music that he reviled so intensely in his youth. In a last-ditch attempt to cultivate some appreciation for what is now being hailed as "the true music of Kenya", he purchases a *benga* CD compiled by Ketebul Music.[402] The author transmits the history of the genre that he learns from the accompanying documentary on DVD and informational booklet. *Benga*—which means "something beautiful" in Luo—originated in Western Kenya in the 1940s with musicians who played the *nyatiti*.[403] The latter half of the twentieth century has seen the genre's transformation, incorporating other string instruments like Spanish and electric guitars (both plucked in a style that mimics the *nyatiti*) and drawing on regional influences like Congolese rumba. Ethnomusicologist Douglas B. Paterson writes that *benga* had a "strong tribal appeal" in the 1970s.[404] Indeed, as the authors of a second, more extensive history published by Ketebul

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[402] *Retracing the Benga Rhythm*, directed by Dimitri Croella. (Nairobi: Ketebul Music, 2008), DVD, 68 min.
[403] Gregory F. Barz, *Music in East Africa: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 108–17.
[404] *The Rough Guide to the Music of Kenya. Kenya: Roots Benga, Coastal Taarab, Urban Rap*, complied by Douglas Paterson and Werner Graebner (The World Music Network, 2004). CD notes by Douglas Paterson.

Music put it, in the 1970s, "the emergent African elite shunned these ethnic sounds in favor of Western music" and today *benga* still "cannot shed the rural tag."[405] In reality, Andrew J. Eisenberg explains, *benga*'s sound is "a story of intensive interaction and dialogue between ethnic communities."[406] *Benga* is therefore distinctly Kenyan *and* cosmopolitan.[407]

What is *benga*'s significance in the text? Wainaina explains his difficulty in savoring the sound on his new CD: "It sounds fine. No *Kimay*. I am not thrilled. The music is coherent and complicated" (251). Concentrating on *benga,* the narrator resolves eventually that there is some deeper social meaning located in this music, even if he remains aesthetically displeased. With the documentary's historical contextualization of the local-yet-cosmopolitan genre, he understands how the musical style sought to "recreate the sounds of home" by "mimic[ing] the architecture and musical rhythms and verbal sounds of any Kenyan language" to thus "sound like what the singer was saying" (253). *Benga* is a placeholder for one of the modes of sonic plurality that are woven throughout his autobiographical narrative of national belonging. Throughout *One Day*, self-actualization is imagined through listening to music that symbolizes the Kenyan nation's plural character. The author's discovery of *benga*'s complex and plural history forces him both to reckon with his own assumptions about class and ethnicity in the construction of "traditional" Kenyan aesthetics and to reassess his listening practices.

In this way, Wainaina coopts *benga* and his own *Kimay* as similar forms of sonic plurality that organize the nation. In the memoir's final paragraph, Wainaina confesses the "uncertainty"

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[405] Tabu Osusa et. al., *Shades of Benga: The Story of Popular Music in Kenya, 1946-2016* (Nairobi: Ketebul Music, 2017), 91, 117.
[406] Andrew J. Eisenberg, "'Afro' Music and the Resonance of Benga," in *Benga: Kaleidoscope Kenyan*, ed. Olivier Duport and Alan Marzo (Bureau Sepän, 2019), 90.
[407] Keguro Macharia, review of *One Day I Will Write About This Place*, by Binyavanga Wainaina, *Chimurenga Chronic*, April 2013, sec. Chronic Books, http://chimurengachronic.co.za/where-is-this-place/.

that *Kimay* engrained in him as a child learning to listen to the world. He comes to the significant realization that "right at the beginning, in our first popular Independence music, before the flag was up, Kenyans had already found a coherent platform to carry our diversity and complexity in sound" (OD 253). Just as Wainaina evoked the crowd's ordinariness through the "sound of manythings," he also carefully writes of *benga* music in a way that it resounds with collective national affect.

Conclusion

In his memoir, Wainaina valorizes the "ordinariness" of the crowd, which he situates within the frame of his childhood self's individual sense perception of sonic plurality, variously named "the sound of manythings," "groupsound," and "the multilingual clash of mouth cymbals." Furthermore, Wainaina relies on the affective force of ordinary sound figures and music for ratifying the feeling of belonging in Kenya. By historically contextualizing and close reading the text's allusions to the "traditional" Kenyan genre of *benga*, to the "national" songs of Afropop star Brenda Fassie, and to the "global" disco of the black European group Boney M., I have demonstrated how the author consistently identifies himself within culturally-defined collective listening publics. Put simply, Wainaina imagines the crowd through sound. The literary challenge of figuring the crowd sonically on the page is achieved through a range of figures discussed in this chapter. The most enduring figure is Wainaina's neologism *kimay*, which succinctly conveys the crowd's polyphonic and multilingual constitution beyond a collection of speaking voices. My analysis has also pointed to the usefulness of undertaking research on the history of alternative

media, such as radio broadcasting, in order to gain a complete understanding of how ordinariness is intoned by aesthetic taste, political interest, and cultural form.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has assembled a repertoire of sound figures, ranging from the grotesque and the ordinary to the plural and the historical, and through their analysis I have made an argument for the impact of sound on the African literary imagination in recent decades. While I drew on a range of interdisciplinary perspectives, my approach was principally informed by a combination of insights from sound studies and postcolonial and African literary criticism. I distinguished the sonority of the texts in my corpus from what critics have previously referred to as orality, which in turn has opened up a broader range of sonic phenomena beyond to be scrutinized in their particular cultural and political contexts. While the existing frameworks for studying the voice in African literature centered on the formal influence of indigenous orature or the performative force of vocal metaphors, the more capacious model adopted in this dissertation was able to consider sound beyond semantic speech of the human voice—sounds like accents, noise, speech dysfluency, radio broadcast, ancestral spirit possession, lip sync, and music as diverse as global pop, ideological choirs, and national anthems—all these sounds are figured in written texts with an impressive array of strategies that I identified and scrutinized in the preceding chapters. As I elaborated my concept of sound figures I paid special attention to the modes of representing, materializing and embodying sound in a text.

The general goal of this project was to offer original findings on how literature bears sound—not just in poetry but in prose too. I expanded upon existing approaches such as Charles Bernstein "close listening" to poetry (1998) or Garrett Stewart's "reading voices" in prose (1990) by closely considering the racialization of sound in particular. For instance, in Chapter One I

showed how Marechera's grotesque sonic aesthetics was prompted by colonial modes of listening that deemed black voices excessive or illegible. Meanwhile, Chapter Three's analysis of rumor as a rhetorical analogy for the auditory experience of the crowd in Nganang's novel demonstrated how Cameroonian national politics catalyzed the author's literary innovation. My contribution to literary studies more broadly has been to offer politically attuned and historically contextualized interpretations of sound in literature.

However, my focus on written literature has resulted in several shortcomings I wish to address by way of conclusion. While I did occasionally gesture at to the integration of other media and sonic arts in particular, I was unable to comprehensively account for the way that these different media share techniques or coalesce around certain themes. For example, I pointed out that Vera's *Butterfly Burning* replicated the improvisation of the township jazz *kwela* but I could not offer a more detailed discussion of how *kwela* sought to capture the soundworld of the mid-century township. Similarly, the screaming techniques of *rumba* that I suggested also converge in Sony Labou Tansi's dictator novels demand a longer analysis of the revision of grotesque aesthetics under the Congolese military state. In some cases, literature has just arrived a little late on the scene. Musicians in the Congo like Franco and his band Le TPOK had been singing about *radio-trottoir* long before writers began thematizing rumor, so Nganang's *Temps de chien* doubly falls behind, behind the earlier music innovation as well as the "first wave" of rumor novels in the 1970s and '80s. The point here is to understand when and why writers turn to sound and to situate it in a longer scholarly debate on how to write the human senses. However, I acknowledge that

this project could be enriched by a consideration of multimedia sources, as several successful monographs on the topic are able to do.[408]

My decision to limit the number of texts studied was intended to favor the method of close reading, although a more liberal survey of sound figures beyond my corpus would be fruitful. The text selection was regrettably limited to two languages in which I have proficient reading skills (English and French) although where relevant I alluded to the multilingual contexts and usage of other composite languages or dialects including Lingala, Medumba, Camfranglais, Sheng, and Shona. A shared theme between Anglophone and Francophone authors is the desire to push the threshold of audibility of their texts and the vehement rejection of any expectation from Western readerships to "sound" authentic African or black, and so on. In this respect, all the writers here might be called *xenophone*, to borrow Rey Chow's term, as an indication of how much they perpetually grapple the issue of acoustic foreignness in writing. Although the text selection was also partly determined by the national contexts I am familiar with—Cameroun, Congo-Brazzaville, Kenya, and Zimbabwe—it also reflects my comparative instinct to juxtapose trends from across the wider region. As for the writers themselves, I investigated how each of them has a complicated relationship with their national identity: Nganang writes in exile, Sony Labou Tansi sets his novels in a fictional country, and Wainaina's memoir recounts his crisscrossing travels before pivoting back to his home-country Kenya. In each chapter, I sought to complicate national and linguistic frames of reading by consistently calling attention to sound's unruly tendency to surge across boundaries.

[408] I am thinking of monographs by Jaji's *Africa in Stereo*, Solheim's *Performance of Listening in Postcolonial Francophone Culture*, or Mathes's *Imagine the Sound*.

The dissertation opened with the narrator of Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia* unearthing sounds from rockbound layers of text, which I adopted as a model for my own critical endeavor here. It seems fitting to conclude now with another literary character engaged in listening and/as reading, this time drawn from the Angolan writer José Eduardo Agualusa's 2013 novel *Teoria geral do esquecimento* (*A General Theory of Oblivion*). In the novel, a Portuguese woman Ludovica Fernandes Mano known as Ludo permanently bricks herself into her Luanda apartment on the eve of Angola's civil war in 1975 and for thirty years she stays walled away from the outside world which gradually turns into "um planeta remoto" (a distant planet) for her.[409] The narration switches between a third-person omniscient voice and the first-person point of view in the extracts from Ludo's diary, which she writes furiously when she is not scribbling the walls. The novel relies on flashbacks and digressions of the third-person narrator to offer glimpses of the country's changing sociopolitical landscape amidst decolonization. The focus remains on the inner life of the agoraphobic and traumatized Ludo and, crucially, her perception of the soundscape beyond her apartment.

The Prédio dos Invejados, the building in which the protagonist lives was abandoned by its Portuguese residents, but gradually gains new occupants. Ludo eavesdrops on her new African neighbors by sticking her ear to the wall where "uma ou outra palavra soltava-se do conjunto e ficava aos saltos, como uma bola colorida, indo e vindo no interior do seu cérebro" (now and again a word would come loose and fly about like a colorful ball circling the inside of her brain). On the other side of the wall, the neighbors are unsettled by Ludo's noises, which they determine to be residual acoustics of the Portuguese colonizers haunting their former property. On the days of

[409] José Eduardo Agualusa, *Teoria Geral do Esquecimento* (Alfragide, Portugal: Publicações Dom Quixote, 2013). Ebook. No page numbers. My translation.

political action in the streets below the enclosed balcony of her high-rise apartment block, Ludo lends an ear to the "alarido lúgubre" (macabre clamor). Ludo treasures her magnificent art deco radio set with ivory knobs—a design characterizing it as an imperial media artefact. Agualusa notes that whenever she turns it on the revolution "entered" her home ("Ludo ligava o rádio e a revolução entrava em casa"). Through these broadcasts, she encounters Angola's new popular music like Teta Lando's revolutionary songs, although Ludo reckons that "algumas melodias não coincidiam com as letras" (some melodies do not match the lyrics). Ludo tuned in "à procura de vozes" (in search of voices) to keep her company, but when her electricity is cut off, she can no longer pick up "frases soltas em francês, inglês ou nalguma obscura língua africana" (sentence fragments in French, English, or some obscure African language), which leads to the introvert's further alienation.

The image of Ludo the listener locked away in her Luanda apartment is particularly resonant as I write the last pages of this dissertation amidst a global pandemic that has forced many people to stay at home in isolation. Agualusa's protagonist figuratively and literally listens to the outside world and finds intimate connections to others through their voices and other sounds—no matter how fragmented or incognizable—but the novel's final lesson is one of physical human encounter, as it ends with the heavy-handed metaphor of the wall breaking down. Yet, as this text and the texts studied in this dissertation show, listening's power to comfort, challenge, and reinvent is not untold but constantly being written and rewritten in African literature.

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