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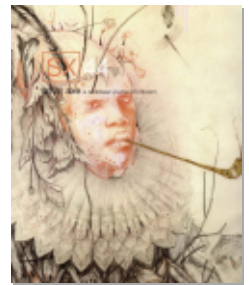
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## Engendering Phonographies: Sonic Technologies of Blackness

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# Engendering Phonographies: Sonic Technologies of Blackness

Alexander G. Weheliye

I am extremely grateful to Tavia Nyong'o for his generous and elegant engagement with the central ideas of my *Phonographies* and Julian Henriques's *Sonic Bodies* and to the editor of *Small Axe*, David Scott, for providing the forum to participate in this conversation.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps fitting that someone like me, who tends to exhibit symptoms of intellectual nomadism, would be given the opportunity to reflect on a text ten years after its writing.

Revisiting *Phonographies* on the eve of the publication of my second book, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, I find that the first text seems far removed from my current thinking, with regard to the objects of analysis, yet also proximate in terms of its conceptual underpinnings.<sup>2</sup> *Habeas Viscus* concerns the relationship between black studies, black feminist theory, political violence, and alternate conceptions of humanity, elaborating the central place of blackness in modernity from angles different from *Phonographies*. First, *Habeas Viscus* is not concerned with sound but with the visual, and, second, it focuses more squarely on the theoretical frameworks for analyzing how race shapes the very idea of what it means to be human. Although present in *Phonographies*, these ideas are not front and center in the same way as they are in *Habeas Viscus*, which is primarily about theoretical discourses and their attendant institutional politics. The two books may seem dissimilar in their

1 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

2 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

objects of study, but they proffer parallel arguments about the significance of race and blackness for the study of modernity. On the whole, *Habeas Viscus* insists on the importance of black studies and black feminist perspectives in the study of modern humanity. In what follows, I will address some of the insightful points raised by Nyong'o, using these as an occasion for a metameditation on *Phonographies*'s place in my thinking and recent developments in black studies. In particular, my comments will concentrate on the analytics of blackness as it relates to Western modernity and decolonial critiques, the absence of Africa and African cultures from *Phonographies*, and the conceptual provenances of black feminist approaches.

### Be Real Black for Me

Nyong'o accurately states that despite recent appeals for decolonial critiques, neither Henriques nor I are fearful of claiming Western modernity from an Afro-diasporic vantage point, that we do not feel "compelled to indigenize" our "thought is noteworthy at the present moment, wherein calls for a decolonial aesthetics are frequently heard (if less frequently carried through)."<sup>3</sup> For me, claiming, though not owning, the centrality of blackness and black cultures to the genesis of the West is as important as it is necessary for the particular decolonial critique developed within black studies. As C. L. R. James and Hortense Spillers, among many others, have shown, to construe blackness, black studies, and black feminism as local, ethnographic phenomena—rather than as "the history of Western Civilization" or a "vestibular moment" in the engendering of the West—feeds the very racialized coloniality we are trying to demolish.<sup>4</sup>

Given that blackness is frequently thought to reside beyond the iron grip of the West and modern technologies, despite being a product of these forces, one significant way to dismantle the coloniality of being in Western modernity is to continually insist on just how fundamental blackness, black people, and black cultures are to this territory, albeit without falling prey to a politics of recognition, which merely adds window dressing to the systemic colonial territoriality of the modern West. This, however, occurs not by removing the specificity of black life but by using the liminal yet integral spatiotemporal positioning of blackness as a way to call into question modernity as such. The central concern of my writing has been to theorize how blackness functions as an integral part of modern Western thought and life. That is, instead of imagining Afro-diasporic cultures as disconnected from the heart of modernity's whiteness, I demonstrate how black cultures have contributed to the very creation and imagination of the modern, interrogating the facticity of blackness, that is, how certain groups of humans became black through a multitude of material and discursive powers. Blackness is an effect of Western modernity, although not reducible to a colonialist imposition on black people. Following theorists such as Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, and Hortense

3 Tavia Nyong'o, "Afro-philo-sonic Fictions: Black Sound Studies after the Millennium," this issue of *Small Axe*, 174; hereafter cited in the text.

4 C. L. R. James, "Black Studies and the Contemporary Student," in Anna Grimshaw, ed., *The C. L. R. James Reader* (1969; repr., Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 397; and Hortense J. Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," *CR* 6, no. 3 (2006): 25. See also Spillers, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-date," *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (1994; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 428–70.

Spillers, my writing calls attention to blackness as an ontological formation that not only forms a part of the modern West but must be understood as constitutive of this domain; the emphasis on sound, technology, and blackness in *Phonographies* represents one particular part of that larger intellectual project.

The Middle Passage, transatlantic racial slavery, the plantation system, and the gendered racial terror erected on black people were not one-time events; they spanned almost five hundred years, from the early fifteenth century to well into nineteenth century, and their reverberations can still be felt around us not only in the Americas but also in many other places around the globe, including continental Africa. Although the “proper” colonization of continental Africa did not extend over the same period, it must be seen as part of this continuum if we consider that the “scramble for Africa” took place almost contemporaneously with the abolition of slavery in Brazil, thus extending this form of racial terror to the 1970s, when Portugal “ceded” its African colonies. The subjugation, expropriation, enslavement, rape, and killing of black life continues today under different guises in, among other places, the prison industrial complex in the United States and the economic neocolonization of many African nations by the West.

Blackness as a category of analysis does not disappear black bodies as much as it highlights how black subjects are positioned in relationship to this abstract force differently from other groups and internally differentiated depending on gender, sexuality, class, phenotype, nationality, elocution, and so on. Understanding blackness as an abstract force or assemblage also allows us to see how it can be abstracted from and appropriated by people not categorized as black (e.g., the history of US popular music or blackface minstrelsy). As a category of analysis, blackness, just as whiteness, then, is not primarily about cataloging the existence of racial groups (map) but addresses a spectrum of power along which all racial groups are unequally positioned (territory).<sup>5</sup> Put schematically, the closer the group is presumed to be to whiteness, the more power it possesses, and the closer the group is thought to be to blackness, the less power it has access to. In other words, the ontological territory of blackness actualizes the mirage of the empirical existence of racial groups, which makes possible the categorization and hierarchization of different groups so that the unequal access to resources and power remains in place.

One of the many reasons recent invocations of “diaspora” in black studies remain inadequate for understanding the complexities of blackness and black life in the modern world is that they elide the map of specific African-descended populations around the world with the territory of blackness that enables their legibility as identifiable black communities.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the idea of diaspora in black studies—in its rush to cook up a conceptual and nominal ointment to heal to constitutive ontological fracture of blackness in Western modernity—transmogrifies into a flight from the uneven territory of

5 See Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory and Re-imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre: Black Studies toward the Human Project,” in Lewis Ricardo Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, eds., *Not Only the Master’s Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006), 107–69.

6 On the limitations of diaspora discourse in black studies, see Alexander G. Weheliye, “My Volk to Come: Peoplehood in Recent Diaspora Discourse and Afro-German Popular Music,” in Trica Danielle Keaton, Stephen Small, and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *Black Europe and the African Diaspora* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009); and on black studies and the ontological sphere of blackness, see Weheliye, “Introduction: Black Studies and Black Life,” forthcoming in “States of Black Studies,” special issue, *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014).

blackness.<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall insists on this global perspective when writing about the idea of postcolonialism: “The term ‘post-colonial’ is not merely descriptive of ‘this’ society rather than ‘that,’ or of ‘then’ and ‘now.’ It re-reads ‘colonisation’ as part of an essentially transnational and transcultural ‘global’ process—and it produces a decentred, diasporic or ‘global’ rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives.”<sup>8</sup> Correspondingly, critically examining blackness facilitates the comprehensive reconfiguration of Western modernity as opposed to extending the ethnographical confinement of particular black cultures. Nonetheless, the two strategies are far from mutually exclusive, and this is not an emigration from black cultures but rather a comprehensive recalibration of their preordained place in the modern West. For accepting this destined place of primitive outsiders for those who are darker than blue would leave unspoiled the larger territory of modernity.

Through the ruptures of technology and sound, *Phonographies* offers one particular conceptual path in thinking together blackness and what it means to be human in Western modernity. Technology is construed as at once necessary to the dominance of West over the rest and antithetical to authentic Western unfettered individualism. Similarly, sound, speech, and music, while considered natural to the being of Man, threaten his self-perception as rationality and disembodiment incarnate, since these structures are sublated through the technology of writing.<sup>9</sup> It is important that although *Phonographies* includes discussions of musical artifacts in literature, film, and recorded sound it is decidedly not a book about music, which is how it has been read by some critics, but is instead concerned with the nexus of black culture, sound, and technology. If the text were a study of black musical cultures (map), then the ontological dimensions (territory) that make possible the apperception of black music as an entity putatively distinct from Western music would remain deafeningly inaudible. As Hortense Spillers notes, “Because it was set aside, black culture could, by virtue of the very act of discrimination, become culture, insofar as, historically speaking, it was forced to turn its resources of spirit toward negation and critique.”<sup>10</sup> Ergo, before exploring the specificities of black culture, we would do well to interrogate how it became black and under which conditions certain acts carried out by black people transmuted into culture. Not a text about black music per se, *Phonographies* unearths the historical, conceptual, cultural, and technological grounds that sanction black music’s functioning as a foundation for modern consumer culture and as a hub of identification for black populations across the globe.

While several works have been published that analyze the intersections of sound, race, and technology—by Julian Henriques, Kara Keeling, Andreana Clay, Louis Chude-Sokei, Edwin Hill, Francesca Royster, Adam Banks, Guthrie Ramsey, and Tavia Nyong’o, among others—I would be

7 As Hortense Spillers remarks, “They simply redescribe some prior hegemonic sense of priority that I find troubling.” Hortense Spillers et al., “‘Whatcha Gonna Do?’: Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’; A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 35, nos. 1–2 (2007): 306.

8 Stuart Hall, “When Was ‘the Post-colonial’? Thinking at the Limit,” in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 247.

9 Following Sylvia Wynter, I use *Man* to designate the modern, secular, white, heteromasculine, and Western version of the human that differentiates full humans from not-quite-humans and nonhumans on the basis of biology and economics. See, for instance, Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

10 Spillers, “Idea of Black Culture,” 26.

hesitant to say that a field such as “black sound studies” exists.<sup>11</sup> For, what unites these texts and those that Nyong’o mentions as laying the groundwork—“Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, Fred Moten’s *In the Break*, Kodwo Eshun’s *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, and Lindon Barrett’s *Blackness and Value* (alongside now classic references such as W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* and Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People*)” (174), is their absence from most genealogies and anthologies in the burgeoning subfield of sound studies. I can also say with certainty that the vast majority of responses and reviews of *Phonographies* have been from scholars of black studies rather than sound studies, which is partially because of the racialized institutional structures that we labor under, but also because I did not write the book with a sound studies audience in mind. Granted, this would have been impossible, because sound studies was barely a nascent idea during the writing of the book. As a result of my training and politico-intellectual investments in black studies, I situated my particular intervention within this context. Put more simply, I was not trying to understand modern sound via the detour of black music; instead I sought to magnify some of the ways blackness—and thus modernity—is constituted by sound and technology.

The most extended critical conversation in *Phonographies* is with Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, which provided me with a template for thinking together black music and literature as well as for exploring how black sounds from the United States and the Caribbean circulate among black diasporas in Western Europe.<sup>12</sup> Despite my criticism in *Phonographies* of some of Gilroy’s ideas, it cannot be understated just how much of a space Gilroy’s text provided for the articulation of my own work. That is, I endeavored to expand the terrain diagrammed by Gilroy, especially those parts pertaining to technological embodiment of black musics, which remained marginal to *The Black Atlantic*. *Phonographies* also chronicles my search for writing styles that take on the technical specificity of academic English and mix it with other vernaculars, sounds, and sensations so as to amplify the objects of study and ideas under discussion from perspectives not possible in

11 See Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*; Kara Keeling, “Electric Feel.” *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2014): 49–83; Kara Keeling and Josh Kun, eds., “Listening to American Studies,” special issue, *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011); Andrea Clay, “Like an Old Soul Record: Black Feminism, Queer Sexuality, and the Hip-Hop Generation,” *Meridians* 8, no. 1 (2007): 53–73; Louis Chude-Sokei, “When Echoes Return: Roots, Diaspora, and Possible Africas (A Eulogy),” *Transition* 104 (2011): 76–92; Edwin C. Hill, *Black Soundscapes, White Stages: The Meaning of Francophone Sound in the Black Atlantic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Francesca T. Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-soul Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Adam J. Banks, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011); Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Tavia Nyong’o, “I’ve Got You under My Skin’: Queer Assemblages, Lyrical Nostalgia, and the African Diaspora,” *Performance Research* 12, no. 3 (2007): 42–54; and Tavia Nyong’o, “I Feel Love: Disco and Its Discontents,” *Criticism* 50, no. 1 (2008): 101–12. See also Daphne A. Brooks, “‘All That You Can’t Leave Behind’: Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe,” *Meridians* 8, no. 1 (2007): 180–204; Daphne A. Brooks, *Jeff Buckley’s Grace* (New York: Continuum, 2006); Daphne A. Brooks, “‘Sister, Can You Line It Out?’: Zora Neale Hurston and the Sound of Angular Black Womanhood,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 55, no. 4 (2010): 617–27; Jayna Brown, “Buzz and Rumble: Global Pop Music and Utopian Impulse,” *Social Text* 28, no. 1 (2010): 125–46; Michael Hanson, “I’m a Brotha’ but Sometimes I Don’t Feel Black,” in Anna Everett and Amber Wallace, eds., *Afrogeeks: Beyond the Digital Divide* (Santa Barbara, CA: Center for Black Studies Research, 2007), 13–27; Tsitsi Ella Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Meta DuEwa Jones, *The Muse Is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa! Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Gustavus Stadler, ed., “The Politics of Recorded Sound,” special issue, *Social Text* 28, no. 1 (2010); and Michael E. Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

12 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

straight-up “academese.”” Given that Standard American English was the third language in which I acquired verbal fluency, *Phonographies* records my process of creatively grappling with a particular variant of written English so that—since the book shows speech and text cannot be opposed—the prose could approximate the different idiomatic tongues that inspired me and that I had inhabited, if uneasily so. It helped that the struggle with and creative utilization of major languages, whether spoken, screamed, sung, written, ululated, whispered, danced, or rapped, has been a hallmark of black cultural production in and beyond the academy. Rest assured, though, I still shudder when reading some of those Germanic sentences. (#ItIsWhatItIs)

In some quarters, the response to *Phonographies* has progressed through an emphasis on the black musical cultures I discussed—and some that I did not, it must be said—and a concomitant oversight of its technological dimension, which, for me, is just as, if not more, important to the conceptual architecture of the book. Although it is impossible and undesirable to regulate how one’s ideas are taken up once they circulate in the intellectual commons (I conceive of scholarly inquiry as a collective effort, and it has been gratifying to see what other scholars have done with the ideas in the book), this mode of reception simultaneously neglects and replicates precisely *Phonographies*’s principal critique: we cannot conceive of blackness and technology as opposed. If anything, the disavowal of technology proves my point that blackness and technology are often still considered antithetical opponents in the ongoing war that is Western modernity. Or, to put it in more quotidian terms, after writing *Phonographies* it has become incredibly exhausting to be repeatedly asked whether I explore jazz music as a genre or what I have to say about the blues. (#Don’tStartNoneWon’tBeNone)

### Africa Is My Descent, and Here I’m Not at Home

Since I am a first-generation African and black European in the US academy (having spent equal parts of my life in Somalia and Germany before moving to the United States), the relationship between the African continent and its multifarious diasporas, especially as it routed through musical cultures, is never far from my mind. In fact, early in the writing process, I carried with me a memory of a television news story that crystallized perfectly some of the concerns animating *Phonographies*. The report about the beginning stages of the civil war in Somalia (1991–2006) aired the summer of 1992 on the German television program *Weltspiegel*. It featured a Somali woman—adorned with a colorful hijab and a Kalashnikov draped over her shoulder—seated in the passenger seat of an army jeep driving through war-torn Mogadishu as she nodded her head to the beat of Salt-n-Pepa’s then globe-conquering safe-sex anthem “Let’s Talk about Sex,” which was emanating from a small boom box.

This brief news report poignantly underscored the global circulation of different technologies: the jeep, the Kalashnikov, the boom box, and, in particular, the recorded planetary reverberations of African American music in the late twentieth century. I was also struck by the seemingly incongruent juxtaposition, which I am sure contributed to why this particular scene was chosen by the producers of the television show, of the now ubiquitous “veiled Muslim woman” in need of rescue

by the armed forces of postmodern empire and Salt-n-Pepa's sexually explicit lyrics. Yet the Somali woman's and Salt-n-Pepa's diverging positions vis-à-vis blackness complicate this scene, since the Muslim world is usually not perceived as black, and vice versa. In fact, most US news reports about Somalia around the time of the 1992 US "humanitarian" military intervention Operation Restore Hope conspicuously omitted that the country was predominantly Islamic. Conversely, Salt-n-Pepa, even if functioning here as the embodiment of Western sexual libertarianism and imagined as the ultimate counterpart to the piety and chasteness of the "veiled Muslim woman," also unmistakably bears the burden of the hypersexualization of black women in slavery and after.

Likewise, the scene echoed my own initial encounters with the sounds of black America in 1970s Mogadishu, as Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Charles streamed from my parents' light-brown, faux-leather-encased portable turntable and as worn-out, imported Carl Douglas and Millie Jackson tapes emanated from my friends' mobile cassette players. Since my friends and I could hardly be accused of commanding the English language, we frequently "indigenized" the English lyrics by phonetically sounding out what we heard in Somali. So, besides sketching the broader historical and philosophical contours of how black music in its various technological guises came to define Western modernity, I tried to conjure this moment of creative catachresis in *Phonographies: What structures of feeling do technologized black sounds encode beyond lyrical content? In what ways have recording and reproduction devices, when not understood as inert conduits that immaterial sounds can transcend but as constituent forces of their affective materiality, shaped the politico-sonic lower frequencies of black music?* Nyong'o writes,

Music is so central to traditional and modern African societies, African music is so inexhaustible . . . , that Africa could easily be nominated (although perhaps not without contention) as the sonic grounding not only of modern black music but of modern music as such. But such a nomination of Africa as the origin for (black) music would have to contend with the terms by which Western epistemology calls itself to order by consigning to Africa all that is "disordered" in the sonic, aural, oral, embodied, and ecstatic excesses of music. (175)

I consciously bracketed Africa, insofar as such a thing is possible, because I was interested in examining the global reach and technological dimensions of black American music, especially within black cultures in the Americas and Europe. On this front, Jemima Pierre offers a salient diagnosis of the absence of Africa in diaspora discourse and certain variants of black studies: "The varied critiques of Afrocentrism, black cultural nationalism, and the idea of cultural retentions within diaspora studies are what led to more than a decade of scholarship explicitly distancing itself from continental Africa."<sup>13</sup> Despite being in wholehearted agreement with Pierre's statement, I cannot help but wonder whether there is not more at work in this estrangement than the missing conceptual frameworks for making "Africa" a part of black diasporic critical conversations. First, is this continental rift partially a result of the different institutional histories of black studies and African studies in the mainstream US academy given their respective roots in, on the one hand, third

13 Jemima Pierre, *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 211.



world internationalism and the late 1960s student movement, and, on the other, in initially colonial anthropology and later in the Cold War creation of area studies? Second, how do we account for disciplinary training and expertise in an era of increased specialization? In other words, how do we integrate Africa as an idea and a reality into black studies responsibly without the necessary scholarly immersion that would allow us to understand the specificity on different national contexts, cultures, languages, colonial histories, and so on? To be clear, I am not advocating buying into the corporate silozation of knowledge production in the mainstream US academy, which black studies does not sit well with, as much as highlighting the institutional constraints that contribute to this rift. However, if recent texts such as Pierre's *The Predicament of Blackness* and Tsitsi Jaji's study *Africa in Stereo* are any indication, there is also a change afoot with regard to productively thinking together "diaspora" and "Africa."

Besides Louise Meintjes's book about the high-tech process of producing a musical studio recording in early 1990s South Africa, mentioned by Nyong'o, Jaji's *Africa in Stereo* accomplishes some of the theoretical labor required to bridge the conceptual, temporal, and spatial gaps between "Africa" and "the diaspora" in black studies. Jaji's dazzling book centers on how African American musics have been received and remixed in three African countries—Ghana, Senegal, and South Africa—since the late nineteenth century in order to offer "a perspective on diaspora that includes and inscribes Africa as a constitutive locus rather than viewing it as a 'source' for diasporic populations and practices but not an active participant." Instead of imagining Africa as a prelapsarian "natural resource" to be mined by diaspora black folk at their neocolonial will in order to claim the continent as a homeland, Jaji pursues a different path: "When considering the cultural productions of the diaspora, Africa should be understood as a constitutive component of that diaspora, rather than as a point of origin now removed from the contemporary diaspora."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, African cultures become players in the construction of modern blackness and black cultures, ceasing to act as premodern fountains of authentic and antitechnological black life.

I also appreciate that Jaji describes the centrality of African American culture to modern blackness in Africa without acceding to the now commonplace assertion in diaspora discourse that this position constitutes a hegemonic formation or an instance of cultural imperialism. Curiously, the critique of the predominance of African American culture within black communities around the world often occurs through the centering of black US culture. In other words, when critics consider black populations outside the United States, these scholars often show how these groupings articulate themselves as diasporic via conduits of interactions with African American politics, culture, and people, which they, in turn, identify as a hindrance and use as an occasion to reject the US variant of blackness. This also presumes that established black US populations are somehow not diasporic and that US blackness is unitary, while using it as a raw interpretive resource in the scholarly codification of other black diasporas. However, this rejection can only occur if the analytics of blackness

<sup>14</sup> Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 6, 7. For a different take on how the sonic conundrum that of the diaspora versioning of Africa "would forever be threatened by not only the messy presence of an actual Africa, but even more so by literal Africans," see Louis Chude-Sokei's incisive and exacting discussion of South African roots reggae singer Lucky Dubé in "When Echoes Return," 79.

remains ensconced in the realm of the empirical (map) as opposed attempting to understand how Western supremacy resolutely maintains black subjects in the prison quarters of the not-quite-human or nonhuman.<sup>15</sup> (#BlackIsAn'BlackAin't)

## Look at Y'all Boys

While I am thankful to Nyong'o for discerning the presence of gender and sexuality analyses in the book, and for his critical amplification of these ideas, *Phonographies* also exhibits some deficiencies on this front. Daphne Brooks has rightfully observed,

Weheliye considers the ways that past critics have often “abandon[ed] the phone or the graph in phonograph” rather than “taking into account how sound suffuses New World black writing.” I am suggesting here that we explore the ways that Hurston’s use of sound in relation to her discursive ethnography demands that we theorize other forms of phonography, ones in which, for instance, embodied sonic performances directly engage with and complicate written texts. Likewise, we might think more about the ways that Zora’s angular voice interrupts the phonographic projects of the literary “race men” (Du Bois and Ellison) who sit at the forefront of Weheliye’s cogent study.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, in addition to not including any written texts by black female, queer, or gender nonconforming writers, *Phonographies* seriously lacks gendered analyses at the conceptual level, which, from my current perspective, appears as a greater methodological glitch. Even though I could attempt to retroactively market my readings of Du Bois’s and Ellison’s texts as genderqueering the African American literary canon, I will, instead, say yes, Brooks is correct in that *Phonographies*’s textual gallery does feature an inordinate number of great men, albeit a bit more melanated (#NoShade) than usual. Let me give you one example: gender is absent as an analytical category in my recounting of the history of Afro-German organizing in the final chapter of *Phonographies*. Why is this a problem, you may ask? Well, because not only does the narrative omit the integral role of black German women, both queer and straight, in this history, but also, and more significantly, my consideration fails to take into account how many women of color feminisms have not understood gender as an isolatable—or even primary—category of analysis but have grappled with the complex relationality between different forms of subjugation and offered alternatives to these.<sup>17</sup> Because I was determined to render Afro-German history legible within the confines of a story about the maturing of *race consciousness*, I was unable to reflect on how taking gender into account would

15 See Weheliye, “My Volk to Come.” This is to say not that we should not investigate differences between diasporic groups, on the one hand, in North America, and, on the other hand, in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean, but that it need not and should not be performed through the abjection of African American culture and politics.

16 Brooks, “‘Sister, Can You Line It Out?,”” 623n13. Brooks quotes Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 39.

17 See, for instance, May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz, eds., *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (1986; repr., Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory, eds., *Out of the Kumbula: Caribbean Women and Literature* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1990); Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99; Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color, 1983); and Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color, 1983).

have allowed me to tell a different and more interesting story about how black feminism stood at the point of origin in the context of the Afro-German political movement, that feminism was not added to a race-first undertaking.

*Habeas Viscus* addresses this issue head-on by centering black feminism as a conceptual apparatus, Hortense Spillers's and Sylvia Wynter's work in particular, in the investigation of what it means to be human in the modern world. Black feminism differs from white/black masculinist discourses and white feminism because the latter often aspire to abstraction from gendered or raced particularities—for example, white, straight men speak for all humanity, while black, straight men speak all black folks, and white, straight women speak for all women. Black feminist inquiry, however, articulates its intervention from vantage points that accent the impossibility of transcending these particularities, instead enunciating its critique from perspectives that are constitutively racialized, gendered, and marked by sexualities.

Take, for instance, Nicole Waligora-Davis's recent monograph *Sanctuary: African Americans and Empire*, which beautifully charts how African Americans have inhabited a juridicopolitical no-man's-land situated at the juncture of native/foreigner, insider/outsider, and friend/enemy, and which has allowed the US state apparatus to violently subjugate or completely abandon its black citizens in a number of significant ways since the abolition of slavery.<sup>18</sup> Waligora-Davis begins her study with the case of Rosa Lee Ingram, rather than Emmett Till or the Scottsboro Boys, for example, which brings to the fore the centrality of the sexual violence perpetrated against black women such as Ingram and others to the subjugation of all black people and the creation of blackness—it is not simply an exceptional occurrence but an integral part of the whole system—and also how racial violence and racial difference are always gendered/sexualized for all black subjects of a variety of genders and sexualities. In other words, although the lynching of Till was clearly gendered and sexualized, it is usually presented as primarily—and even exclusively—an act of racial violence.

So, Waligora-Davis's strategic situating of the Ingram case at the beginning of her book—and the fact that she does not introduce the sexual harassment and threats of rape Ingram faced until after she has described the case in detail—does not displace the specificity of the sexual violence experienced by black women in slavery and well after but rather shows how in “the cotton field and in the courtroom, race took center stage. The racially gendered asymmetries of power governing segregation did more than sanction the sexual harassment she endured: it permitted her injuries to be dismissed, her act of self-defense to be viewed as murder, and it diminished the weight of her testimony.” Waligora-Davis rhetorically restages how the exclusive attention to race serves to absent the different forms of gendered sexual violence so central to the workings of Jim Crow. In the second step, Waligora-Davis highlights the interdependence—but not sameness—of the sexual violence experienced by black women and men: “For more than fifty years (1900–52) ‘[n]o Louisiana-born white man had ever been executed for rape.’ Meanwhile, black males were being killed by the courts not for an actual crime, but for the ‘intent to commit rape.’”<sup>19</sup> Bringing to light

18 Nicole Waligora-Davis, *Sanctuary: African Americans and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

19 *Ibid.*, 7, 9.

these continuities without erasing the uneven particularities therein is indicative of a specifically black feminist perspective, which is missing from parts of *Phonographies* but forms the conceptual crux of *Habeas Viscus*.

Similarly, Beth Richie's *Arrested Justice* convincingly and devastatingly demonstrates that we cannot understand the scope and depth of the prison industrial complex without considering how its tentacles ensnare poor black women, even though they do not represent the majority of those in cages.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, Richie's and Waligora-Davis's recent books stand as resplendent examples of a feminist *and* black perspective because they enact how these categories cannot be understood in isolation from one another and show that studies of blackness need not be incompatible with analyses of gender and sexuality. Or, in Hortense Spillers's inimitable phrasing,

Though you can't talk about the era of sound in the US without talking about blues and black women. You can't talk about the eras of slavery in the Americas without talking about black women, or black men without black women and how that changes the community—there is not a subject that you can speak about in the modern world where you will not have to talk about African women and new world African women. But no one wants to address them. . . . And I am saying, I am here now, and I am doing it now, and you are not going to ignore me. . . . I am here now, “Whatcha gonna do?”<sup>21</sup>

(#IfYouDon'tKnowNowYouKnow)

## Acknowledgments

In light of Stuart Hall's recent passing, I was reminded that in *Phonographies*'s acknowledgements I thanked him along with a few others for being a teacher from afar. I want to reiterate that sentiment here, since Hall's thinking and presence in the world have left indelible traces on everything I have written, and I dedicate my part of this conversation to Hall, who made the ideal of the rigorous yet generous debate of ideas seem both necessary and effortless.

20 Beth Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

21 Spillers, in Spillers et al., “Whatcha Gonna Do?,” 308.