

Rebellion/Invention/Groove

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I've got the life.

—Nina Simone, “I Got Life”

We just made ourselves/invisible/underwater.

—Erykah Badu, “The Healer”

I'm devoted.

—Kanye West, “Black Skinhead”

The rhythm, the beat, was to become the central underlying principle.

—Sylvia Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis”

In her essay on jazz, Dionne Brand writes that black music “leaves you open, and up in the air and that this is the space that some of us need, an opening to another life tangled up in this one but opening.”¹ Writings on black music abound, tracking a range of social, political, economic, affective, and geographic patterns and contexts, as well as the biographical narratives that inform music, music making, and musicians. These writings also draw attention to the tensions between the materiality of black music (the racial economies and racial histories that underpin the production and distribution of black creative works), lyrical content (if the tune indeed has lyrics), and the waveforms that underpin and sonically frame

¹ See page 91 for song lyric rights and permissions.

¹ Dionne Brand, “Jazz,” in *Bread Out of Stone* (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1994), 161.

song.² Black musical aesthetics not only emerge within and against long-standing antiblack practices, they are heard and listened to across and in excess of the positivist workings of antiblack logics. Waveforms—beats, rhythms, acoustics, notational moods, and frequencies that intersect with racial economies and histories and available lyrical content—cannot be exacted yet speak to exacting racial technologies. With this, black music, what we hold on to and what we hear, moves between and across and outside ungraspable waveforms, the anticolonial politics underpinning black cultural production, and the racial economy of white supremacy that denies black personhood. In this essay I want to think about these tensions—between waveforms, anticolonial politics, the memory of slavery, and longstanding practices of antiblackness and racial violence—as they emerge in Sylvia Wynter’s “Black Metamorphosis.”³

Before turning to an analysis of “Black Metamorphosis,” it is important to briefly situate this monograph in relation to Wynter’s thinking on art, cultural production, and music. Wynter’s dramatic plays and her novel *The Hills of Hebron*, as well as her analyses of films, poetry, drama, music, and fiction, demonstrate a steady critical engagement with creative worlds. Wynter works out how creative narratives (including but not limited to the works of Ralph Ellison, William Shakespeare, Miguel de Cervantes, Toni Morrison, Edouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire, Bob Marley) simultaneously narrate and disrupt normative conceptualizations of humanism.⁴ Her work draws attention to the overlapping epistemologies fostered during and after colonialism and transatlantic slavery and uncovers the ways black worldviews are relational to overarching systems of European and Western knowledge. Indeed, overarching systems are powerfully anchored to uneven practices of accumulation and dispossession that thrive on replicating themselves through rewarding human activities that validate inequities. Wynter’s insights on creative works are therefore not simply a call to integrate “race” or “black art” into the global histories and knowledge systems of the West; rather, she argues that the perspectival economic imperialism of the planet, and attendant racial processes such as plantation slavery, produced the conditions through which the colonized would radically

2 With the exception of the short introductory Brand quotation, I am working only with Wynter’s writings in this essay. To assist with my reading of music histories, biographies, sounds, and theories, I have been engaging the following thinkers: Richard Iton, Clyde Woods, LeRoi Jones, Mark Campbell, Jacques Attali, Edouard Glissant, Paul Gilroy, Fred Moten, Sylvia Wynter, Robin D.G. Kelley, Lawrence Levine, Angela Davis, Alexander Weheliye, Oliver Sacks, Vijay Iyer, Daniel J. Levitin, Nina Simone, Betty Davis, Funkadelic, Drexciya, Kanye West, Erykah Badu, Jimmy Cliff, and Michael Jackson.

3 Sylvia Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World” (unpublished ms., n.d.); hereafter cited in the text. The quote used as an epigraph is found on 877.

4 For example, see these works by Sylvia Wynter: *The Hills of Hebron: A Jamaican Novel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962); “The Eye of the Other,” in Miriam DeCosta, ed., *Blacks in Hispanic Literature: Critical Essays* (New York: Kennikat, 1977), 8–19; “Rethinking Aesthetics,” in Mbye Cham, ed., *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1992), 238–79; “On Disenchanting Discourse: ‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond,” in Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, eds., *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 432–69; “One-Love Rhetoric or Reality? Aspects of Afro-Jamaicanism,” *Caribbean Studies* 12, no. 3 (1972): 90–97; “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* 2 (1976): 78–94; “Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process,” *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 (1970): 34–48; and *Maskarade*, in Easton Lee, Sylvia Wynter, and Enid Chevannes, *West Indian Plays for Schools*, vol. 2 (Kingston: Jamaica Publishing House, 1979), 26–55.

and creatively redefine—*reword*, to be specific—the representative terms of the human. It is suggested, therefore, that such inequitable systems of knowledge can be, and are, breached by creative human aesthetics. In “Black Metamorphosis” Wynter thinks through the ways the Middle Passage and plantation systems produced the conditions for a range of black rebellions that were initiated by figures that reinvented and affirmed black humanity and black life and engendered New World cultural inventions.⁵ These inventions were, largely, musical inventions that, in their waveform and lyrical enunciations, expressed new forms of what it means to be human.⁶

In what follows I trace Wynter’s exploration of the plantation economy, antiblackness, and the negation of black humanity. In “Black Metamorphosis” Wynter unveils how the plantation slavery system and its postslave expressions produced black nonpersons and nonbeings (through brutal acts of racist violence designed to actualize psychic and embodied alienation) just as this system generated black plantation activities that rebelled against the tenets of white supremacy. This first section is titled “Rebellion.” I then explore how black plantation activities engendered music and creative spaces that wrote, rewrote, and continue to write and rewrite black life, from the perspective of the ex-slave archipelagoes, as the “imposition of style in chaotic circumstance” (196). Steadily throughout “Black Metamorphosis” Wynter draws attention to how the creation of culture, the making and praxis of music—within the context of hateful and violent antiblack axioms—is underwritten by “the revolutionary demand for happiness” that, at the same time, demonstrates that creative acts mark the affirmation of black life (198). This second section is titled “Invention.” Finally, in the section titled “Groove,” I read Wynter’s discussion of musical beats, to think about black waveforms as rebellious enthusiasms. I argue that waveforms—the beats, rhythms, acoustics, notational moods, frequencies that undergird black music—affirm, through cognitive schemas, modes of being human that refuse antiblackness just as they restructure our existing system of knowledge. I focus on the waveforms, rather than solely on lyrical content, to draw attention to the ways an ungraspable resonance—sound—allows us to think about how loving and sharing and hearing and listening and grooving to black music is a rebellious political act that is entwined with neurological pleasure and the melodic pronouncement of black life.

5 I use the term *New World* following Sylvia Wynter, “1492: A New World View,” in Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford, eds., *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: A New World View* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 5–57.

6 To clarify my terms: *reinvention* is the process through which enslaved and postslavery black communities in the New World came to live and construct black humanity within the context of racial violence—a range of rebellious acts that affirmed black humanity and black life were and are imperative to reinvention. *Invention* is meant to signal those cultural practices and texts—marronages, mutinies, funerals, carnivals, dramas, visual arts, fictions, poems, fights, dances, music making and listening, revolts—that emerged alongside reinvented black lives. I want to point out, too, the relational workings of reinvention and invention: the reinvention of black life *and* attendant cultural inventions were engendered by the Middle Passage and plantation systems dynamically and simultaneously. One cannot reinvent the human without rebellious inventions, and rebellious inventions require reinvented lives.

Rebellion

Sylvia Wynter explores many layered and knotted plantation narratives in “Black Metamorphosis.” The monograph begins with a discussion of enslaved Africans who, following Middle Passage terrors, were forced to occupy and work violent plantation economies. The Middle Passage and plantation systems transformed—or, more specifically, converted—the enslaved into units of labor. The enslaved perceptively and conceptually became homogenous units of labor, planted in the New World not to inhabit (people, settle) the land but to mechanically produce monocrops and fuel the economic system (1–3). The plantation system, above all, sought profit. It follows that the enslaved units of labor, as owned property, were embedded in a system that benefited from, and calcified, their nonpersonhood and nonbeing; and it is precisely because they were planted in the New World not as “buyers and sellers” but as commodities that were “bought and sold” that black enslaved peoples in the New World were at once alienated from and implicated in the racial economy as nonbeings/nonconsumers/mechanized labor (232). Put differently, the plantation context required the impossibility of black humanity. At the same time, transatlantic slavery—the Middle Passage and plantation systems—totally cut off the enslaved from their former cultures and histories while normalizing a collective “mode of knowing” that sustained white supremacy and geographically codified racial differences (387). Indeed, the economic mechanization and negation of blackness was entwined with the geographic removal from the continent of Africa, geographic estrangement on arrival in the New World, and plantation geographies designed to simultaneously immobilize and mechanize black labor units. Imposed placelessness was accompanied by the negation of black humanity and an “alienated reality” (7). These same processes, we can conclude, humanized white colonial geographies as productive sites of settlement, belonging, and capital accumulation. Belonging and settlement and accumulation were thus entangled with dispossessed black labor units and entrenched, extrahumanly and not, the “nothing” of the enslaved and the “being” of the settler (146).

Later in the manuscript Wynter rethinks her initial black labor-unit model to argue that the plantation economy must, in fact, be understood alongside the widespread assault on all aspects of black life. Calling into question and reworking Karl Marx’s “factory” hypothesis, and reading a series of black intellectual texts, Wynter identifies that practices of “nigger-breaking” initiated the enslaved black population *and* the colonizing white population through acts of violence, as asymmetrically raced black nonbeings and raced white beings, through the colonization of consciousness: “Nigger-breaking reveals itself as an initiation rite in which the task of social inscription was at least as important as the task of economic extraction. . . . The plantation and the nigger-breaking model of exploitation reveals that the social order of production, in order to function, needs to establish fixed coefficients of social exchange, and that the strategy of the economic is a central means of establishing these fixed coefficients

of exchange” (590–91). In “Black Metamorphosis” Wynter shows that the unsettling workings of antiblack racism and violence grew out of and were sustained by a plantation system that geographically, economically, socially, and psychically produced the punished and punishable laboring black body (not the laboring black *person*) as necessary to antiblack socialization across racial identifications. What Wynter traces, then, are not only the historical plantocratic processes through which blackness becomes an absolute negative sign “in the mathematics of inequality” (214) but also how the interpellation of the self-as-free, in knotted slave-plantation-and-post-slave-plantation contexts, is produced within a normative bourgeois order of consciousness—propped up by a global political economy of race—that is antiblack.

Slavery was, Wynter writes, “the first large-scale intensive attempt at the *mechanization* of human existence” (107; emphasis mine). The mechanization of the black labor-unit status was anchored to a range of antiblack practices (premature and preventable deaths, lashings, segregations, bindings, lynchings, cuttings, brandings, dismemberments, malnourishments, rapes, impoverishments, incarcerations, thrashings designed to break black into absolute negation) that expertly located black nonpersonhood and nonbeing within the fabric of, and therefore necessary to, collective social consciousness. In many ways, what can also be observed is what I consider to be one of Wynter’s more provocative insights: how practices of racism and narratives of antiblackness not only permeate how we collectively understand one another but also inform negative physiological and neurobiological responses to blackness.⁷ What Wynter offers in her unraveling of the plantation in “Black Metamorphosis” is how psychic and affective negative feelings about blackness—feelings that are so often experienced as though they are truthful and bioinstinctual—are implicit to a symbolic belief system of which antiblackness is constitutive (569). Antiblackness informs neurobiological and physiological drives, desires, and emotions—and negative feelings—because it underwrites a collective and normalized, racially coded, biocentric belief system wherein narratives of natural selection, and the dysselection of blackness, are cast as, and *reflexly* experienced as, commonsense. Social consciousness, then, across racial identifications, includes physiologically and neurobiologically feeling and sensing and knowing antiblackness as a normal way of life. Feeling normal is feeling, as if bioinstinctually, black-as-worthless. It is worth repeating that Wynter also identifies racist violence, emerging from plantation logics, as initiation; rites of passage mark entrance into, and therefore replicate and normalize a European-centered bourgeois social order (423). Importantly, then, the process of coming into and being accepted into the world relies on conceptions of—or, more brutally and dismally, acts of—racist violence that reinforce the physiological and neurobiological refusal of black humanity.

7 It is worth thinking about this alongside Wynter’s “Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience,” in Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana, eds., *National Identities and Socio-political Changes in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30–66.

“Black Metamorphosis” does not, however, descriptively rehearse the refusal of black humanity. Every line of the text is sutured to black life. As one reads the monograph, the brutal and racist imperative to totally negate black peoples in slave and postslave eras is undone by Wynter’s documentation of a range of black rebellions: marronages, mutinies, funerals, carnivals, dramas, visual arts, fictions, poems, fights, dances, music making and listening, revolts, “periodic uprisings and . . . the ongoing creation of culture” (83). Every line of this text is sutured to black life as the rebellious impulse to indict and overturn the dominant values that engender and profit from black nonbeing and nonpersonhood.⁸ The total negation of blackness described above (the widespread oppression that normalized white supremacy, the calcified antiblack plantation logics, the psychic and neurological and physiological negative responses to blackness, the antiblack violence underpinned by racial capitalism) is always written as analytically relational to a series of rebellions that affirm black life. Wynter’s reading of oppression and resistance is not, therefore, dichotomous but rather a “question mark . . . a dynamic dialectic of terror and hope” (225).

Significantly, the racial order of things that emerged within and alongside Middle Passage and plantation terrors also produced the conditions to reinvent and reorder black life. The negation of black humanity within the plantation context provided new and different ways to pronounce black life. It is important to note here that the affirmation of black life includes, but is not restricted to, the repurposing of multiethnic African traces and phantasies—not as vestiges of nostalgic idealization but as adaptive social innovations.⁹ The affirmation of black life, then, requires thinking across a range of racial identifications and practices (African and non-African, black and nonblack) within a system that axiomatically situates black life *outside* plantocratic conceptions of humanity and, in so doing, reinvents black selfhood-community-life anew.

Notable here is Wynter’s concept of indigenization.¹⁰ Throughout the manuscript she tracks the different ways displacement, negation, and antiblack violence fostered radical practices of black humanization. These practices delineate a “sustained and prolonged attempt

8 I am paraphrasing and bringing together two moments in “Black Metamorphosis.” When discussing rebellions and religious ceremonies performed by the enslaved on the plantation—acts that undermined the dominant colonial ways of knowing—Wynter writes, “One central impulse was clear, the impulse to enslave the system which negated them” (82). Later in the monograph, she describes the pathologization of black communities (through official documentation and data collection on black victimhood, e.g., the Moynihan Report) as conducted and written by figures that “internalized market values” and saw the “failure of blacks as an incapacity rather than as an indictment of the dominant values to which they subscribe” (232). The postslave documentation of pathologization and dehumanization also engendered revolt and indictment (232, 242–44).

9 See 243–44, 506. It is important to underscore that the specificity of Africanness, the varying intimacies of multifarious African indigenous lives, are not replicated by the enslaved—retention in the New World is trace, and trace is repurposed in the context of the New World plantation logic.

10 In “Black Metamorphosis” Wynter’s concept of indigenization is not, it should be noted, a discussion of teleological-temporal New World arrivals and here-first-spatial-birth-claims; *indigenization* is a verb. It is, then, a thinking through of the ways Middle Passage and plantation systems produced a range of differential modes of knowing and uneven perceptions of humanness (from which the enslaved black was excluded altogether as labor unit). This analytical approach allow us to think through the heavy weight of normative ideologies and values and the brutally oppressive technologies of slavery and colonialism that, all together, produce modern relational histories and narratives *and* dynamic acts of rebellion—rebellion *is* indigenization—against the codes of unfreedom that violently marginalize *global damnés*. See her discussion of the “under-life” throughout the manuscript, too.

to reinvent the black as human” (248). What she begins to open up, then, is the perceptive and groundbreaking claim that *making black culture reinvents black humanity and life*. The affirmation of black humanness is enunciated through an “alienated reality” that is rooted in antiblack plantocratic histories, practices, and geographies. This alienated-reality status does not provide a New World cosmogony that situates the black enslaved as settlers or property holders or autochthonous; the alienated-reality status, instead, draws attention to black diaspora *activities* as geopolitical responses that unsettle antiblackness and objectification. This means the affirmation of black humanness is both relational to and in contradistinction to the dominant order of consciousness because *rebellions*—which are activities! not identities! not places!—honor black life as an ongoing struggle against what is truthfully represented as and believed to be preordained dysselected objecthood and placelessness. It is the process of creating blackness anew within the context of antiblackness that shifts our focus away from perceiving a range of New World inhabitants as differently occupying resolved knowable and distinct noun-places (settler/property holder/autochthonous/labor unit) and toward the politics of being human as praxis.

Let me explain this a little further: Sylvia Wynter writes that (mythic and real) autochthonous cultures of Africans from various locations and those indigenous to the New World were violently disrupted—in their own lands—by both transatlantic slavery and colonialism (13–14). The forced movement of Africans into the New World meant that this disruption was extended to and reworked on the Middle Passage and within the plantation. The loss of land to colonizing forces (experienced by those indigenous to Africa and those indigenous to the New World) was followed by a “change in continent” and the “total conditioning power of the plantation” for the black enslaved (17). The change in continent required—unlike those indigenous to the New World who were violently initiated into “Indian-ness” through genocidal systems and reserve systems in their own lands—black rebirth and cultural self-recreation in an entirely new geographic context. The reinvention of the human that took place in black communities, Wynter writes, was folded into the collective rebellions against plantation and colonial capitalist structures and their attendant modes of knowing (83).

As noted above, the geographic stakes of enslavement and colonialism unveil ungeographic black labor units (planted in, not intended to *people*, space) and settler geographies that are humanized through production, accumulation, and profit generation. Indeed, in this model the normative human is produced, and revered, as a geographic actor whose belonging is buttressed by consumerism and land ownership. The racial economy that designated the enslaved as nonbeings/nonconsumers/mechanized labor requires that the radical affirmation of black life be sought and claimed outside colonial—land-settling and land-claiming and land-exploiting and genocidal—paradigms. It follows that the reinvention of black life, and the challenge to our collective consciousness, must be engendered outside the logics of accumulation, land ownership, and profit generation, regardless of racial identification, while also

paying close attention to rebellious acts that indict and counterpoeticize a system of knowledge that venerates practices of antiblack racial violence as initiatory acts of humanization. This means, too, noticing that the process of black objectification implicit to the Middle Passage and plantation systems also required that the enslaved be indispensable to wider global interhuman exchanges and initiations and inventions—including, of course, African traces and black rebellions and subversive cultural texts. Indigenization, then, is not bound up in spatial claims (which are always, within our present system of knowledge, decidedly ethnically absolutist claims). Nor is indigenization held in strict and steady opposition to, say, oppressive homogenous colonizing powers. Indigenization is rebellion. Indigenizations are *ongoing* rebellions that demand we think outside our normalized order of consciousness (an order that sites the consumer-driven-accumulating-property-owning-always-wealthy-noun-place human as a finished, settled, thrived-for figure that is seemingly unmitigated by the messy consequences of interhuman exchanges that were [and are] engendered by our collective plantation histories and futures) and uncover the potentiality of rehumanized liberation and joy.

Invention

“Black Metamorphosis” traces the ways the Middle Passage and plantation systems produced the conditions to reinvent new forms of human life. Rebellions, uprisings, and cultural production, Wynter writes, disclose black intellectual strategies that “operated by a different principle of thought from that of the rational mind related to that of the plantation” (109). She continues, “Revolts were, at one and the same time, a form of praxis and an abstract theoretical activity. Neither could be separated from the other. Theory existed only in praxis; praxis was inseparable from theory” (139). Part of Wynter’s underlying claim in this text is that black rebellion is an intellectual breach. It is worth repeating that what is being breached (a dominant order of consciousness and its attendant initiation system that rests on entwining biocentric and economic antiblack practices) is heavy: it is a naturalized and normalized teleological belief system that preordains a racial economy of antiblackness and black objecthood; it is narrated as a commonsense cosmogony and “destiny” (444). Rebellious activity calls into question the preordained, profitable, and reflexly felt (as if bioinstinctually) workings of antiblackness.

Rebellious activities honor black life through expressing a model of liberation that is a “subversion of the axiomatic culture [and] the axiomatic psyche” (387). Reading across a range of creative and intellectual texts, Wynter’s discussion of black music and popular culture illuminates the interrelated praxes of inventing culture and reinventing black life through alienated realities. Her analyses of reggae, the blues, and jazz, for example, think through music as, among other things, a layered site of mythical, symbolic, and experiential histories; a secularizing ritual; tempos and beats that recode normative time; repurposed and shared

(among a range of black and nonblack artists) texts and rhythms; intertextual; citing suffering, survival, love, happiness, revolution; a kinship-making activity. With this, black music “was created in this exterior [alienated reality] social space, out of an outlier consciousness that was born from the sustained experience of social marginality. Because of this even as the record industry makes black music the ‘raw material’ of its profit production, and diffuses it globally, the bourgeois order itself creates the condition of possibility of its own subversion” (896). The creation of culture through black inventions animates liberation as praxis of rebellious subversion. Similarly, inventing black music out of our plantation pasts demonstrates that the figure that was never intended to *be*—because *being* is iconized as property-owning-settled-geographically-belonging-nonblack—in fact empirically and experientially questions the ontological terms of humanness and therefore *becomes* through subversive rebellion and as subversive rebel. The black figure that emerged from an alienated-reality status as black-human-life therefore reorients us to radical praxes of liberation that do not replicate a colonial order of knowledge. The reinvention of black life and community, and inventive rebellious practices, regardless of scale, clearly demonstrate a revolt against an entire belief system, including a sanctioned order of consciousness, that negates black humanity; these reinventions and inventions transform an impossibility—black humanity—into an imaginable and valuable and expressive form of black life.

In the early portions of the manuscript Wynter delineates how black rebellions, uprisings, and cultural production, together, were resistances and critical responses to the labor-unit status imposed on the enslaved (117). Black cultural production and inventions were, of course, seen as noncultural within the dominant order of knowledge—for the enslaved were, first and foremost, labor units bereft of humanity and therefore without cultural-intellectual acuity (467). Black culture was (is) therefore logically stigmatized because it resides outside normative, respectable, cultural codes. Wynter also outlines how black cultural practices were threats—“property that had rebelled, thereby affirming its status as human, [was] burnt (i.e., tortured) as a terror” (79), and overseers thwarted dances that “serve[d] to keep alive that military spirit” (129). In mapping out how nonpersons were punished for producing noncultural inventions that critiqued and reimagined the dominant system, “Black Metamorphosis” opens up a way to think about how the reinventions of black life were tied to “mechanisms of rebellion . . . sited in culture” that “profoundly undermine the bourgeoisie utilitarianism and the instrumental rationality of the dominant order” (411–12, 545–46). In several instances Wynter therefore shows how the plantocratic values that negated and objectified blackness were subverted and restructured by black cultural practices such as work songs, stories, dramas, dances, poems. She writes that the “subversive quality of black popular music has been primarily its assault on this [colonial] sense of time, its freeing of time from a market process, its insistence on time as a life process” (199). She continues, later, to write that the “paradox of black culture is that, stigmatized as the negation of the norm, it was left alone to develop

alternative possibilities; to provide the ground, the basis, for subversion of the dominant values of the hegemonic culture” (478). In “Black Metamorphosis,” the invention of black music is a revolutionary act that keeps heretical (nonmarket) time, negates black nonbeing by honoring and recoding black life, repurposes and interrupts linear temporalities, and is expressed in the midst of a violent and stigmatizing knowledge system. These musical practices, generated out of time and place, were also collaborative inventions because they were anchored to associative sounds, lyrics, myths, rituals, songs, and experiences—associative because they are familiar waveforms, stories, and tunes that the musician, the listener, the dancer, the audience, come to know jointly. Musical subversion is, importantly, tied to the development and legitimation of new modes of social kinship relations, reciprocal exchanges that do not replicate colonial family figurations or individualist models but, rather, establish networks that collectively rebel (844–45). Music, then, is not only an invention that subverts and undoes commonsense workings of antiblackness; music, music making, and music listening, together, demonstrate the subversive politics of shared stories, communal activities, and collaborative possibilities wherein “one *must participate* in knowing” (546; emphasis mine).

Wynter’s work on music thinks through how the affirmation of black life and practices of rebellion are intimately tied to cultural production. Making, sharing, and listening to black music are rebellious activities that evidence “a long tradition of social resistance,” and provide “a theoretical framework for social revolution” (849). What is at stake, then, are not texts and expressions and sounds that are disconnected from and oppositional to the dominant order but rather *activities* that are entangled with—because they are plantocratic—a range of racial identifications that provide clues to think outside, and change, our present order of knowledge. Musical inventions subvert—overthrow, ruin, undermine—the existing system by exposing its inequities and limits, while also engendering black joy and collaborative acts.

Groove

As noted above, musical inventions are anchored to associative sounds, lyrics, myths, rituals, songs, and experiences (185–87, 191–97). As well, musical inventions not only cushion “the shock of dispossession,” they “oppose it, by reminding, at deep psychic levels, of a potential return to humanity” (114). I conclude this essay with a discussion of sound and grooving to argue that waveforms are reparative rebellious inventions. I draw out some of the beats and grooves and feelings that Wynter writes into “Black Metamorphosis” in order to suggest that these are waveforms that undo the aforementioned negative physiological and neurobiological responses to black life. My discussion of sound, then, seeks to demonstrate that one of Wynter’s rebellious analytical moves in “Black Metamorphosis” is to provide an opening to think about how sounds, and grooving to music and beats, necessarily complement the aforementioned reinventions, inventions, subversions, collaborations. Indeed, part of my claim here

is that listening to and grooving to black music provides the conditions to intellectually engage and love ethically. Music waveforms allow us to glean that reinventing black life anew is bound up in cognitive schemas that envision, and feel, black sound outside normative structures of desire. This is to say, in order to be newly human, one does not simply rebelliously site and make black culture in a world that despises blackness; one also *engages* cultural inventions and sounds and ideas and texts, deeply and enthusiastically, to affirm humanity: one grooves *out of* the logics of antiblackness and *into* black life.

Also noted above, in this work Wynter traces how reinvented black life-forms and creative inventions emerged out of a range of violent racist acts. Throughout the text there are many instances where she identifies the profoundly human consequences of antiblack violence and what she describes as “death in life” and the “long and sustained agony of black experience” (212, 627). She writes of, for example, intolerable psychic pressures, anxieties, alienations, unsettling modes of cognition, colonized desires, among other neurobiological, physiological, and affective responses to oppression.¹¹ These responses to racism clearly delineate how the overarching extrahuman system of knowledge imposes itself on, and shapes, black and nonblack consciousness, with those cast as nonpersons neurobiologically, physiologically, and affectively occupying a world that makes humanness known through refusing black life. I draw attention to these neurobiological, physiological, and affective moments in “Black Metamorphosis” because they are, in part, within the realm of consciousness in which Wynter explores black rebellion. The brutality of racism is relational to, she notes, the *impulse* to resist, the *impulse* to produce oppositional narratives, the mind *feeling* theory, a profound *enthusiasm* for black culture, and longings *felt* in the flesh.¹² Again, these are not bioinstinctual impulses, feelings, and enthusiasms—although they may be experienced as such; they are, rather, indicators of a normalized, racially coded, biocentric belief system that shapes how we collectively feel and know and affectively negotiate the world. These specific impulses, feelings, and enthusiasms delineate the limits of the overarching system in that black *life*—neurobiological, physiological, and affective life—is enunciated as rebellious life *at the level of consciousness* and, simultaneously, through the reinventions and inventions noted above. This claim, then, totally undoes the mode of knowing that extracts livingness from blackness and black life by drawing attention to correlational (reinventions-as-inventions-as-rebellions-as-consciousness-as-being-as-praxis) human *activities* rather than unchanging biocentric *categories* of being that cosmogonically anticipate black dysselection.¹³ This alternative order of consciousness emerges from knotted and messy and awful plantocratic pasts that, I

11 For example, see 243–44, 248, 387, 403.

12 For example, see 82, 109, 412, 545–46, 817.

13 See also Wynter’s long and comprehensive discussion of bios-mythoi and human being as praxis. Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe of Our Species? or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” in Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 1–89.

suggest here, are relational creative acts that unfold as reparative possibilities rooted in black intellectual activities.

The impulse and enthusiasm to subvert indicates the powerful possibilities that music, music making, and other creative acts engender. Wynter suggests that because systems of oppression and antiblackness were and are so brutal, deep, and heavy, black cultural activities are embedded with, and thus invite, “emotional charge” (412). She also writes, “Music is strictly structured and thinks itself through the senses” (245). These insights, together, begin to frame up how the relational acts of making and engaging black music—grooving—are collaborative rebellion. In her discussion of religious and secular music and dance, for example, she documents how tempos, steps, groans, shuffles, abrupt turns, laughter, hip-sways, beats, songs, foot-stamping, arm movements, and other beats and grooves are expressions of conscious art, renewed realities, and life-forces for the dispossessed (191–97). While the music, sound, and dance archived in “Black Metamorphosis” point to a number of entwining practices and sources (African and non-African, black and nonblack), what I want to emphasize are the ways Wynter couples rebellion, critique, invention, and reinvention with rhythms and grooves. She writes, for example, that rhythm is “the aesthetic/ethic principle of the gestalt” and thus central to the reconstitution of black life (245). Indeed, the beats and grooves within the monograph shed light on an “alternate way of thought, one where the mind and senses coexist, where the mind ‘feels’ and the senses become theoreticians” (109). It follows, then, that the aforementioned alternative mode of consciousness—the impulse to innovatively subvert—is, in part, constituted through “a radicalization of desire” (817).

Wynter writes beats and grooves and waveforms as productive sites of resistance that are relational to revolution and the affirmation of black life. She writes that drums are “the enabling mechanism of consciousness reversal” and that listening to beats, grooves, and music fosters collective “cosmic unity” between the self and the social body: people “listening or dancing participate in the experience of the music [and are] linked to the physiological experience of the beat” (878–79). Indeed, in sharing and grooving to music, histories are renarrated, kinships are reimagined, and a different mode of representation is performed, heard, repeated, enjoyed: this is a very different kind of initiation into humanness than a normative model that requires racial violence. With this, Wynter writes, “Enthusiasm and exaltation are the uncolonized flow of desire that expresses liberation from societal codings” (549). Enthusiasm, I want to suggest, radically refuses the dominant order: the feeling of exaltation, emerging as a form of knowledge that is necessarily collaborative praxes, cites and sites black joy and love. For it is in the waveforms of music—beats, rhythms, acoustics, notational moods, and frequencies that intersect with racial economies and histories—that rebelliousness is enunciated as an energetic (neurological, physiological) *affection* for black culture as life. In this, “Black Metamorphosis” asks for an engagement with music that couples rebelliousness and subversion with the act of making, hearing, listening to, and moving to, song. The aesthetic waveforms call attention

to the ways the praxis of black life—which includes behaviors and brain activities that find pleasure in song—is articulated through music, music making, music listening, orchestration, beats, bass, notations, lyrics, rhymes, soul, groove. This opens up a meaningful way to think about how the politics of sound, and grooving to song, are assertions of black life that indict and subvert antiblackness and, at the same time, notice the inventive aspects of our collective and difficult plantocratic histories, traces, and memories: “The ethic is the aesthetic” (900).

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