

Songs of Noise and Opacity

Andrew Brooks

The chorus opens the way.^[1]

To live the relation may very well be to measure its convincing fragility.^[2]

The noise in the streets builds as a polyphonic crescendo that seems to know no limit. The longest and most intense wave of riots to sweep the US since the late 1960s shows no sign of slowing. Sparked by the ongoing killing of Black people at the hands of police – by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rashad Brooks, and the brutal shooting at point-blank range of Jacob Blake – the riots sweeping the United States should not be understood as isolated incidents but rather as the latest chapter of a century-long and decade-strong uprising: take the 2010 Oakland riots in the wake of the killing of Oscar Grant; the Ferguson riots that followed the killing of Michael Brown in 2014; and the 2015 Baltimore riots that occurred in the wake of Freddie Gray’s death. Such expressions of dissent, sorrow and rage are collective responses to a society structured by a possessive investment in whiteness itself which, in turn, figures Black life as an immanent threat.

‘The black subject standing before the police officer(s) who shoot at him/her’, explains

Denise Ferreira da Silva in her articulation of the ethico-juridical framework that governs modern subjectivity, ‘has never figured in the scene of life’.^[3] The riots unfolding in the streets intuit, whether explicitly or implicitly, the ongoingness of Black death – both social and actual. The concept of social death, which was coined by Orlando Patterson, tracks the afterlives of slavery by moving beyond the legal definition of enslaved people as property and refiguring slavery as a set of social and political relations. It is not that the slave was without social relations but rather that those relations were rendered illegitimate and continually erased. Social death reduces the enslaved person to a condition of bare life, an abstraction that continues today. The condition of social death is crucial to the actual killing of Black people by police, and this negation of social lives goes some way toward explaining why Black deaths fail to produce an ethical or legal crisis for the state. The noise emanating from these improvised assemblies relentlessly searches for an escape from the logics of enclosure imposed by the nexus of the state and capital.

For Saidiya Hartman the sonic dimension of the riot is crucial to its power. She writes of a prison riot led by Black girls and women at the Bedford Hills Reformatory in New York state in December 1919:

Lowell Cottage roared with the sounds of revolt. The inmates smashed the cottage windows. Broken windows and shattered glass are the language of the riot. Furniture was destroyed. Walls defaced. Fires started. They screamed through the night. They sang. They yelled... Each voice blended with the others in a common tongue. Every utterance and shout made plain the truth: Riot was the only remedy within reach.^[4]

Hartman figures this riot as a distinctly Black noise, reclaiming the association of the riot with Black music and aesthetics from state authorities and the media who, at the time, used the parallel to dismiss the event as a primal act with no clear politics or focal point. Instead, Hartman celebrates the equation of the riot with jazz and the improvisatory forms found in the Black radical tradition; she writes:

‘Improvisation – the aesthetic possibilities that resided in the unforeseen, collaboration in the space of enclosure, the secondary rhythms of social life capable of creating an opening where there was none – exceeded the interpretive grid of the state authorities and the journalists.’^[5]
The Black noise she describes emerges as a response to the regulative force of white supremacy that attempts to constrain Black life, and yet, such noise always moves in excess of that which would constrain it – it is animated by a fugitivity that relentlessly searches for an outside or an opening.

Over a century later, the theft of Black breath has once again reignited the riot as the only form of remedy within reach. As Nathaniel Mackey tells us, ‘When breath becomes an object of attention, no longer unremarked on, no longer taken for granted, no longer an uninspected given, anxiety is also in the air.’^[6]
Much has changed since 1919, however the persisting atmosphere of anti-Blackness has produced socio-political formations that learn from the wayward resistance of past struggles and from Black femme revolutionary action too often excised from masculinist accounts of radical practice. The riots today, while Black-led, are multi-racial in their composition. These formations cannot be explained through the analytic of race alone but must contend with the decomposition of the industrial proletariat over the last fifty years, which has produced what Marx termed ‘surplus populations’.

Capital’s reluctance and incapacity to absorb labour into the capitalist cycle of production

through the period of deindustrialisation that began in the 1970s has produced populations that now exist largely outside, or adjacent to, capitalist reproduction. Untethered from both the relative safety and discipline of the wage relation, surplus populations are increasingly managed through violent and coercive armed mechanisms of the state – namely policing and incarceration. Waves of white flight from inner cities and former industrial centres accompanied the exponential growth of unemployment that followed deindustrialisation, further entrenching the logics of racial segregation established by the plantation. Add the generalised precarisation of the wage under neoliberal capitalism – which we see in the intensive casualisation of entire sectors, zero-hour contracts, gig work, and more – to an ever-expanding surplus population.

And so, while capital has a vested interest in producing difference in order to exploit labour, and while that production of surplus populations often occurs, in the first instance, along racial lines, the deindustrialisation and precarisation of neoliberal economies show that the capital relation is not determined by race alone. And yet, the experience of policing and the vulnerability to death are differentially experienced. Endnotes, the UK and US-based communist discussion group, highlights this transition from primarily market-based to primarily state-based forms of discipline: ‘In place of a regulation of social reproduction by collective bargaining around the wage relation, as that reciprocal integration of capital and labour unravels, social order is maintained increasingly by a forced subordination of society to capital’s rule, in the form of a hypertrophied repressive apparatus constantly reapplied to *those who fail*.’^[7]

The settler-colonial context, including in the US and Australia, is built on an investment in whiteness *as* property, to borrow Cheryl

Harris's influential formulation, where property is understood in metaphysical rather than physical terms – as a right rather than simply a thing. As such, the policing of surplus populations reproduces the foundational logic of the colony which manifests as such things as racial profiling and an *a priori* criminalisation of Blackness. Put another way, policing (re)produces the logic of racism, which Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines as 'the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.'^[8]

The current uprising is a refusal of state and capital, a strike against the logics of enclosure and the ongoing immiseration of surplus populations. These collective actions refuse to adhere to a logic that values property over life. They refuse the police, who are understood to be the embodiment of the entangled relation between state and capital. 'What is a policeman?' asked Guy Debord in the wake of 1965 Watts riots. His reply: 'He is the active servant of the commodity, the man in complete submission to the commodity.'^[9] The riots call for the end of a world structured by the racial capital relation and the violence this system purports.



Wendy's burning in the wake of the killing of Rayshard Brooks by Atlanta Police Department (APD) officer Garrett Rolfe on 12 June 2020.

The Song of Grief and Rage

Noise cannot be stilled or silenced, rather it involves continuous movement and constant vibration. It may build to deafening roar or whirr and thrum with a quiet intensity. It is an ineradicable, continuous, vibrational movement that accounts for possibility, difference, and novelty. For Michel Serres, noise is best understood in metaphysical terms as a relational phenomenon that cannot be

stilled, an incessant generator of change that defies categorisation and evades capture. He writes:

[Noise] settles in subjects as well as in objects, in hearing as well as in space, in the observers as well as in the observed, it moves through the means and tools of observation, whether material or logical, hardware or software, constructed channels or language; it is part of the in-itself, part of the for-itself; it cuts across the oldest and surest philosophical divisions.^[10]

To think the sound of protest and riot in these terms is to figure noise as a heterogeneous possibility. The many voices heard together in the collective expressions of rage and refusal that engulf the streets cohere not as a singular expression, but a cacophonous articulation of difference bound together by shared concern. What we hear is an endless proliferation of demands, or to borrow Fred Moten's formulation, we might conceptualise this sonicity as the 'constant organization and disorganization of the demand that takes the form-in-deformation of a single voice consenting to and calling for its multiplication and division.'^[11] We must listen for difference, for the opacity offered by collective noise if we are to forge a meaningful politics of solidarity.

Édouard Glissant argues that the preservation of that which is unknown and unknowable must form the foundations of how we conceptualise both knowledge and politics. Opacity, for Glissant, lies at the core of an understanding of being decoupled from the violence of the colonial world-making project and its ways of seeing and knowing. This is not merely a philosophical project, but one driven by a concrete desire to *make* a different world. His call for opacity is not about remaining in the shadows, but a refusal of the Eurocentric

demand that experience be made transparent. Opacity preserves irreducible difference, which for Glissant, must be at the heart of any attempt at unmaking and remaking.

Glissant is not opposed to legibility, in fact, his work shows us that certain things must become knowable in ways that facilitate collectivity and collaboration. So, while he reminds us of our right to opacity, he is interested in how opacity might also produce moments of legibility and clarity. Opacity, then, allows us to feel for, but not possess, difference and differential experience. In Glissant's words, 'that opacity is fundamental to unveiling; that opacity, the other's resistance is fundamental to his knowledge; that only in opacity (the particular) does the other find himself to be knowable.'^[12]

Glissant stages the encounter with the unknowable as a process of attunement in which one feels for the irreducible difference that animates the world without trying to hold it or illuminate it. His articulation dwells on the haptic, figuring opacity as an embodied form of understanding. He writes: 'To feel in solidarity with him or build with him or like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to "make" him in my image'.^[13] When we listen to the noise emanating from the streets we might listen in order to preserve the right to opacity and with an acknowledgement that this noise is differentially experienced and lived. This noise invites us to cultivate a politics of listening and solidarity that acknowledges that the chorus singing this song is an expression of irreducible difference that coalesces around the shared desire to make the world otherwise.

If noise is a moving proposition, fundamentally a multiplicity, then our task is to listen to it without reducing it to a transparent and coherent singular phenomenon. Rather, we must stay with its opacities and fugitive

movements. This involves listening also for that which we cannot hear but might feel: vibrational movements, resonances, and lingering echoes. As Tina Campt reminds us, 'all sounds consist of more than what we hear. [Sound] is an inherently embodied modality constituted by vibration and contact.'^[14] Such a model of listening is concerned with tapping into what Paul Gilroy terms a politics of a 'lower frequency',^[15] which we might think of in terms of organised disorganisation, anarchic movements that incessantly search for a way out of the double bind of modernity and racial capital. Perhaps to listen in this way is to attune to a possible future, one that is grounded in the preservation of the endless force of generativity that is difference itself.

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