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Seeing, Hearing, Breathing, and Witnessing from the Africana Center at Cornell

An Afterword

PIERRE-PHILIPPE FRAITURE

Anniversaries are useful for they help us return to a specific moment, such as the creation of the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University in 1969. The temporal framing offered by anniversaries is often a pretext to take stock of a particular sequence of events; anniversaries are subterfuges to remember, commemorate, and pay tribute but also disinter cumbersome corpses. Anniversaries test our vigilance and ability to submit these corpses to renewed autopsies. The term “Africana” reflects the worlding of Africa and the re- and translocation of its objects, subjects, and discourses within a diasporic network of relations (Hallen 2009, 8n2). From African to Africana studies, one can therefore identify a definitional and heuristic shift: like their postcolonial and decolonial counterparts, Africana scholars are engaged in the dismantling of (neo)colonial cartographies and in the creation of what Pheng Cheah calls “*a world*”—that is, a creative and discursive entity and realm of possibilities that are not reducible to the “epistemic violence” of “canonical literature” and the other “processes” shaping “how colonized subjects see themselves” and continue to see themselves “after decolonization” (2016, 19). Africana studies are concerned with Africa but also with the many cultural entanglements generated by African displacements and reterritorializations before and, above all, *after* the Middle Passage. Africana studies, then, provide the basis for analyzing African pasts and presents in Africa and beyond and anticipating future possibilities.

This volume contributes to this world-making endeavor. Its sheer diversity is a sure sign of its authors' belief that the world is "not governed by a single unifying principle but is instead the effect of overlapping and frequently conflictual processes of world-making that issue from different local, national and regional sites" (Cheah 2016, 59). The Africana scholars summoned here by Grant Farred invite us to participate in a transatlantic, transgenerational, and intermedial debate. This debate takes place in Africa (Kenya, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo), in the Caribbean (Cuba and Martinique), but also in the United States. Among others, it includes literary pioneers (Phillis Wheatley), African American key thinkers (W.E.B. Du Bois), civil rights movement activists (Zora Neale Hurston, Sandra Smith), anti-racism figures (Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Carlos Moore), proponents (and critics) of African philosophy (Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, Paulin Hountondji), poets (Édouard Glissant, Maya Angelou, Paul Laurence Dunbar), novelists (Patrick Chamoiseau, Ralph Ellison, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, Sinzo Aanza), musicians (Félé Kuti, Janelle Monáe), filmmakers (Jean-Marie Teno), political meteorites (Patrice Lumumba, Ernest Ouandié, Ruben Um Nyobé, Félix Moumié), and religious leaders (Simon Kimbangu, Kimpa Vita). But also—and this brings us to the core of this volume, race—the biblical characters Noah and Ham.

Seeing

When did the *invention* of blackness take place? To this question, only conjectural answers can be provided. In their premodern and modern iterations, racial constructions were suffused with scopic annotations. The ancients drew on their imagination to fill the unknown parts of the world with vivid images of teratological Others as famously exemplified by Herodotus's *History* and medieval anthropology (Eze 2008, 163–164). The Renaissance inaugurated a new age of discovery and exploration. Interestingly, it has been argued that the noun "exploration" might originate from a verb first coined in 1546 and used among hunters who, while engaged in their reconnaissance activities, had to "observe" and "examine" hitherto untrodden spaces (Rey 1998, 1:1371). Renaissance explorers *saw* Africa with their own eyes. Their undertakings significantly contributed to the anointment of one of the most ubiquitous figures of our modernity: the eyewitness qua data gatherer. Scientific racialism, as is well known, slowly emerged from their predatory observations and fed the taxonomies later developed by Johann F. Blumenbach, Georges L. Cuvier, Arthur de Gobineau, George Combe, Carl von Linné, and many others (Eze 1997; Hall 2019). Despite their re-

peated refutations in the court chambers of Nurnberg, The Hague, and Kigali, these taxonomies have continued to hold sway:

Archaic as some of the ancient and classical categories may sound, it is . . . the Hippocratic-Galenic and Linnean taxonomy that, residually, informs today's most influential biological thinking in the areas of racial science. . . . In the United States today, citizens are every day asked to choose self-identification by racial classificatory systems whose biological outlines are so obviously Linnaean. (Eze 2008, 166)

Slavery and colonialism also established the era of an eyewitness of a particular kind—the eyewitness qua overseer—who would, through the power of seeing, recast the very notion of human freedom and lock up black bodies in a system premised on the distinction between those “worthy of self-rule” and those expected “to be ruled” (James 2003, 250). This distinction has continued to haunt modern democracies like the United States—particularly there and where state terror and tyranny still operate. Of course, the paradox is that tyranny is the opposite of democracy. However, the residual power of “classical and ancient” taxonomies has maintained tyranny in place: “The tyranny of a racialized democracy resides in its ability to use violence and domination much more freely against marginalized sectors, whether Native Americans on reservations . . . [or] Palestinians in occupied territories” (James 2003, 257) or African Americans or Afro descendants in, say, France, the United Kingdom, or the Netherlands. This goes a long way to explain why the African transplantation of the “Westphalian nation-state model” failed after the demise of colonialism, for at its core, this model has always been a vehicle to promote the sacrosanct legitimacy of the national “imagined political community” (see Radwa Saad’s Chapter 3). And this legitimacy—whether in Algeria, Burundi, Cameroon, Nigeria, or Rwanda—has invariably been implemented at the expense of ethnic, and sometimes *visible*, minorities.

Colonial systems and the plantocracies established in the wake of the Middle Passage relied on the visibility of the colonized (see Gregory Pardlo’s Chapter 5) and on the rise of the “Beobachtende Vernunft” (observing reason; Fabian 2002, 122). Hitherto representations of the American and African Others had remained under-racialized, perhaps in the name of the Christian monogenesis, as suggested by Hans-Joachim Kunst (1967, 8–10). On American (French, British, Spanish, and Dutch) plantations, however, economic efficiency crucially depended on the overseer’s ability to radicalize visibility and call on external—racial—markers to exercise his authority

and contribute to the development of usable taxonomies as illustrated by Jean-Baptiste Labat's "remarkable" (Toczyski 2007, 1) but chilling eighteenth-century classic *Nouveau Voyage aux isles de l'Amérique*. Plantations were tabularized and "visualist" (Fabian 2002, 118–123) spaces, and to function each member of their workforce had to be allocated an identifiable and readily visible slot. This point, and the utter visibility of the slave, seen and used as a mere instrument, is aptly captured by Patrick Chamoiseau's historical novella *The Old Slave and the Mastiff*. In the following extract, the slave reassuringly remains in his master's field of vision:

In the gleam of the boilers, [the slave's] skin takes on the texture of the cast-iron buckets or rusty pipes, and at times even the coppery yellow of crystallizing sugar. His sweat dots him with the varnish of old windmill beams. . . . Sometimes, even, the Master's attentive gaze does not distinguish him from the mass of machines; they seem to keep going on their own, but the Master goes off again with the feeling that he is there. (Chamoiseau 2018, 8)¹

The emergence of "visualism"—which Léopold Senghor dismissed as "reason-eye" (see Diagne 2019, 27)—coincided with the development of ethnographic, colonial, and literary modernity. Albert Camus's remarkable (and chilling) *L'Étranger* offers an intriguing manifestation of visualism. First, it allows the French novelist to rely on his readers' visual memory and their internalization of centuries of anthropological ocularcentrism. One of the most noteworthy aspects of this book is that Camus's first-person narrator, Meursault, provides very little information about the physical appearance of "the Arab," his faceless victim. As widely discussed, particularly at the time of the publication of Kamel Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête* (Schatz 2015), Meursault seemed to assume that the Arab—being *the Arab*—physically, ethnically, visually, *and* ontologically—does not need any introduction. Interestingly, the unnamed Algerian victim is said to be wearing work overalls ("bleu de chauffe"), and this visual annotation serves to confirm the distance between the Frenchman and the colonized because, like Chamoiseau's slave, he is reduced to his subservient position within the colonizer's field of vision. This classical dialectic between the seer and the seen is a clear sign that Camus remained tethered to the visualist imaginary underpinning French colonialism. This point—the underlying coloniality of the novel—escaped early commentators, Jean-Paul Sartre (1947), famously. During the Algerian war, however, it was argued "that the scene of homicide in the novel gave expression to the unconscious desire of the settler to be rid of the colonized" (Hughes 2015, 72).² This murder also signals Meursault's inability to exercise his authority and contain the colonized within the epis-

temological parameters of an imperial field of vision. The Arab's assassination occurs when Meursault loses sight of him, and thus, Meursault's temporary blindness marks the end of a certain mode of knowing. Suddenly, he realizes that the colonized is no longer knowable and that his act has irretrievably ruined "l'équilibre du jour" (the balance of the day) (Camus 1962, 1166).

Hearing

The wide-ranging phenomenology-inspired discussions conducted in the immediate post-World War II era on the (white) gaze—by Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty but also Richard Wright and, of course, Frantz Fanon—was accompanied by a reflection on language (see John Drabinski's Chapter 1). Seen and trapped in the purported ontological fixity of their race, the colonized were also dependent on the colonizers' languages. In his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Césaire (1947) famously deplored the silence and inertia of Fort-de-France, in the age of the craniometer. Although this poem inventively reterritorializes the French language, there is no doubt that this period continued to be subjected to a process of imperial glottophagy (Calvet 1974). Despite some genuine attempts on the part of thinkers like Cheikh Anta Diop (see *Nations nègres et culture*, 1955) to decolonize knowledge through non-Western languages, part of the twentieth century was still residually characterized by pseudoscientific linguistic classifications (Ricard 2004), and in this context, it remained arduous for local intellectuals to be published and *heard* in their vernaculars. This attempt on part of the colonizers to impose Europhone languages, however, was not entirely successful. Indeed, colonial language policies remained "heterogeneous, uneven, and often self-contradictory" (Barber 1995, 13), and the colonial process of linguistic homogenization did not prevent Indian Ocean and Caribbean Creoles and African languages—Yoruba, Shona, Kiswahili, Lingala, Wolof, and many others—from becoming powerful vectors of ethnic and cultural identities (Barber 2007, 160–161).

Eye- and earwitnesses from the peripheries must rely on audible languages because, however crucial their message might be, they will need audiences and a stage where they will be expected to connect and relate (Glissant 1990)—the "petit contexte" to the "grand contexte" (Chamoiseau and Larcher 2007, 125–126). National languages are often ill equipped to achieve this transcending objective because they invariably are the vehicles of atavistic mythologies. Patrick Chamoiseau and Silyane Larcher argue nonetheless that literature's ultimate "mission" is the exploration of literature itself (123). Like Jean-Luc Nancy, then, they contend that literature, unlike myth, does not serve the immanent community. If "myth is the opening of the

mouth immediately adequate to the closure of a universe” (Nancy 1991, 50), literature or writing has the ability to interrupt the communion of the immanent community.

Building on the tension between these terms, “myth” and “literature” or “writing,” it would be interesting—as some of the contributors to this volume have done (see Akin Adeşokan’s Chapter 7 and Sarah Then Bergh’s Chapter 6)—to ascertain the role of music in the long decolonial process to which Africana scholars at Cornell, and beyond, have borne witness. Does African, African American, and Afro-Caribbean music have a mission, and if so, how does it manifest itself and how can we *hear* it? Does it contribute to the mythical wholeness (to the organic homogeneity) of *the* black community, or is it a more diffuse entity (“being in common”) whose plurality of meanings is shared and perpetually deferred (Nancy 1991)? The type of communication produced by this sharing is no longer communion—indeed, Nancy contends that it “does not commune” (78)—but is what he calls “literary communism”: “something that would be the sharing of community in and by its writing, its literature” (26).

Music could play here a compensatory function because it permits bypassing national languages and their inherent atavistic trappings and classificatory parameters. It has been argued that the “enhanced mode of communication” generated by music occurs “beyond the petty power of words—spoken or written” (Gilroy 1993, 76). Daniel Maximin, the Guadeloupean poet, Césaire scholar, and novelist, seems to endorse this conception of music seen as a language that, while transcending national boundaries, reveals intellectual achievements from another viewpoint. Maximin’s novelistic trilogy *L’Isolé soleil*, *Soufrières*, and *L’Île et une nuit*, constitutes one of the most accomplished (and opaque in Glissant’s understanding of this adjective) depictions of French Caribbean history over several generations. Maximin’s novels are also concerned with the exploration of literature itself. His complex and at times elliptical narrative detours, and syncopated annotations are strategic—and *poetic*—ploys to engage with Caribbean “non-histoire” (Glissant 1981, 222–231). His focus on music—from Guadeloupe, Cuba, and the American continents (north, central, and south)—provides a more temporally diffuse and less spatially rooted type of cultural excavation (Britton 2008, 111–130). There is here no attempt to identify a strict point of origin, a biblical sin, and a mythical premise. Music, however, is shown to have triggered (and have been triggered by) a deep sentiment of transatlantic deracination. Alongside a rich network of intertextual references to painting (Wilfredo Lam) and poetry (Saint-John Perse and Césaire), music is summoned to resurrect what was obfuscated by centuries of bondage. Like Glissant, Maximin seems to favor “a remembrance evoked from the senses and the imagination over the memories contained in facts,

dates and incontrovertible truths” (Munro 2007, 396). The fifth chapter of *L'Île et une nuit* is characterized by a shift from seeing to hearing. One of the narrators announces a “trêve de l'œil” (truce of the eye) and invites another narrator to make use of her “oreilles” (ears) (Maximin 1995, 97). It is an invitation to listen to the intercontinental connections—and the “étranges fruits” (strange fruit) (103)—generated by musical encounters and displacement in the black diaspora. If facts fail to render the Afro-Caribbean past, Maximin seems to suggest that the traces of this past are everywhere to be seen and *heard*: in the *biguine* and *léwoz* from Martinique, the performances by Guadeloupean *Ka* drummers, salsa musicians from Cuba, gospels from New Orleans, jazz and blues from Chicago and New York City, popular music from Haiti, and Afro-jazz from South Africa. The “brotherhoods” and “sisterhoods” (97–125) elicited by this process of musical dissemination are postnational. This process indicates the existence of a community of sorts, and it also suggests that this community does not quite fall into the immanent category. The musical genres evoked in these texts “unwork” the myth underpinning the “immanent community” (Nancy 1991) and conjure an “open-ended, mobile, [and] ‘spaced-out’ community” (Britton 2008, 126).

Breathing

This idea of the community is also the focus of Fiston Mwanza Mujila’s *Tram 83* (see Kasereka Kavwahirehi’s Chapter 4). *Tram 83* is a bar, a jazz club, and a brothel in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo. In this dystopian tale, the Congolese city has become a dictatorial city-state and has fallen prey to international entrepreneurs (from Europe, the United States, China, and Africa) interested in appropriating Katangese mining resources. These industrialists cum gangsters regularly visit *Tram 83*, where they interact—argue, converse, fight, and pay for sex—with a wide range of characters including locals, petty criminals, prostitutes, journalists, publishers, and artists. *Tram 83* is a place where deals are struck, ideas are exchanged, and where, crucially, jazz is listened to by transient and interloping characters. It is a community but it “does not commune” and jazz—free, improvised, and subjected to procedures of perpetual reinvention (Herbeck 2005)—interrupts the coming of *the* community while also being the very symptom of a globalized cultural commodification process in which jazz has “become a mere product like any other” (Higginson 2017, 155). Thus, *Tram 83* presents itself as the interrupted community—what Nancy (1991, 71) also calls “community without community.” For Nancy, however, this interruption offers a model of resistance: “It is to *come*, in the sense that it is always *coming*, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity [and] it cease-

lessly resists collectivity itself” (71). Interestingly, the interruption elicited by jazz in Fiston Mwanza Mujila’s novel delivers only partial resistance because it remains torn between “the forces of neocolonial exploitation and abuse” and those of “*marronage* and liberation” (Higginson 2017, 155).

Jazz, blues, and the other musical genres alluded to by Maximin and Fiston Mwanza Mujila, precisely because they are the “jewels brought from bondage,” can be (and have been) used to enact “politics of authenticity” (Gilroy 1993, 72–110) and assert “metaphysics of difference” (see Zeyad el Nabolsy’s Chapter 2).

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon argues that African rhythm, as this notion had been understood, romanticized by Senghor (1939) but also by Césaire (1947) in *Cahier*, was yet another tool to maintain blacks from the diaspora in a fixed ontology and in “the materialized Tower of the Past” (Fanon 2008, 176). His appraisal of jazz and other (then) black musical expressions is equally critical and aimed at those, Senghor among others, who had “promoted jazz as a kind of antidote to machine-age modernity” (Lane 2013, 94). Fanon’s examination of endogenous culture—the same applies to his quick dismissal of Creole in *Black Skin*—is paradoxical because he deplores the annihilating effects of slavery and colonialism on black cultures while remaining convinced that these cultures will be superseded by the universal. Adopting Sartre’s Hegelian model in “Black Orpheus,” Fanon also contends that the examination of African cultures should not be an end in itself but remain a transitory stage of the dialectic. The black Martinicans on whom Fanon focuses in *Black Skin* find themselves in an impossible predicament: they are bereft of their original cultures but advised not to indulge (for too long) in the resurrection of these cultures; at the same time, they are warned of the alienating effects of French assimilation.

In her ascent, (a presumably black) Eurydice dies—stops breathing—after being gazed at by a black Orpheus. Similarly, Fanon argues that, as a result of having to assimilate an objectively constraining language—“To speak means . . . to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (Fanon 2008, 8)—alienated Martinicans “literally cannot breathe” (Fanon 2008, 17). This cultural suffocation is constitutive of French educational practices in the Antilles, and Fanon provides the telling example of Martinican schoolchildren being asked to write a composition on “My Feelings before I Went on Vacation.” The outcome, Fanon argues, is worryingly mimetic: “They reacted like real little Parisians and produced such things as, ‘I like vacation because then I can run through the fields, breathe fresh air, and come home with *rosy* cheeks’” (Fanon 2008, 125). This imaginary breath of “fresh air” is but an effect of the epistemic conditions generated by the imposed adoption of the white mask, and thus, it does not engender any homecoming. It stands in stark contrast to Césaire’s own miasmatic home-

sickness when depicting the island's "stagnant air undisturbed by the bright flight of a bird" and its "sun that keeps coughing and spitting out its lungs" (Césaire 1995, 82, 95). Like Césaire in his *Cahier*, Fanon, then, recurrently equates colonial violence and occupation with breathlessness. In this context, fighting colonialism is the only *vital* (and existential) option, and the exploited black Martinican "will embark on this struggle . . . not as the result of a Marxist or idealistic analysis but quite simply because he cannot conceive of *life* otherwise than in the form of a battle against exploitation, misery, and hunger" (Fanon 2008, 174; my emphasis). By means of a quick reference to Indochina, he explains that fighting colonialism is a matter of life and death: the Vietminh goes into war "because 'quite simply' it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe" (176). In "Algeria Unveiled," Fanon returned to this breathing metaphor:

There is not occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction. Under these conditions, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing. (Fanon 1965, 65)

This metaphor is powerful, and it suggests that by converting "observed" and "occupied breathing" into "combat breathing," the colonized will contribute to the emergence of this new decolonized human dreamed of by Fanon, Sartre, Amílcar Cabral, Che Guevara, and (as already mentioned) Césaire himself:

And suddenly, strength and life charge me like a bull and the tide of life surrounds the taste bud of the morne, and all the veins and veinlets busy themselves with new blood, and the enormous lung of the cyclones breathes and the hoarded fire of volcanoes and the gigantic seismic pulse now beats the measure of a body alive in my firm blazing. (Césaire 1995, 125)

Fanon did not always agree with Césaire and, as is well known, gently lampooned in *Black Skin* the essentializing aspects of *Cahier d'un retour*, a poem that nonetheless greatly influenced his own "seismic" posture as an essayist. Indeed, this passage foreshadows Fanon's focus on the body as a site of colonialism (tabularized by Blumenbach, Linné, and Francis Galton) and decolonization. The accumulation of biological details anticipates Fanon's own approach as a psychiatrist (and hence physician). For Fanon, who in Martinique and Algeria realized that medicine had been "an integral

part of an oppressive system” (Macey 2012, 215), this focus on health, hygiene, and “life” is the premise of a decolonial future. The assassination of George Floyd in May 2020 has shown that breathing cannot be metaphorized and that, indeed, it would be ethically irresponsible to metaphorize it. But Fanon’s own take on breathing was far more than a poetic stance. It was, as argued by Pheng Cheah, the product of Fanon’s organicist approach:

Fanon figures the temporal project of decolonization as the creation of a world in which one can “breathe” in a metaphorical sense. But one can very easily conflate this with the literal breathing of air as basic necessity of animal life for two reasons. First, temporalization, which is the ground of human existence, is generally apprehended as biological life because our loss of life and loss of time coincide. As individuals, we run out of time when we die. Second, there is an entire Western philosophical tradition that uses the vitality of organic life as a metaphorical template for understanding freedom. (Cheah 2016, 195)

In its fifty years of existence, the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University has borne witness to decolonization and has registered the many manifestations of this process in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa and where African diasporas, in the West and beyond, have engaged with the world and displayed their commitment for the emergence of a more equitable world. The contributors to this volume demonstrate that this task is all-encompassing and all-consuming. And still ongoing. Once burned down by white supremacists, the Africana Center has recovered and has continued to see, hear, and breathe. The context in which this fiftieth anniversary took place is, however, strangely reminiscent of the climate of racial violence that led to the criminal “pre-dawn fire” at 320 Wait Avenue in April 1970 (*Cornell Chronicle* 1970a). In an interview for the *Cornell Chronicle*, the then Africana Center director James E. Turner commented on this tragic incident and linked it to “the systematic cultural and political response of the white nation toward those black people oppressed in this country” (*Cornell Chronicle* 1970b). The depressing point is that these words could have been uttered today. Now rehoused at its former address, the center’s task is gigantic. But where to start? “Start what? The only thing in the world worth starting: The End of the world, for Heaven’s sake.” (Césaire 1995, 99).

NOTES

1. I thank Maeve McCusker for providing me, at a time (January 2021) when access to libraries was very limited, with the page reference of this quote from the English-

language version of Chamoiseau's novella. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

2. Hughes shows here that Jacques Derrida developed this argument in a letter addressed to Pierre Nora in 1961.

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