Destination Unknown: Yvette Janine Jackson's *"Freedom"*

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> "*Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope –a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. "*- W.E.B. DuBois[1]

From 1948 to 1950, Richard Durham wrote and produced *Destination Freedom,* an original and provocative radio series focused on reinscribing into the grand American story Black contributions to freedom. In discreet 20-minute radio dramas, the program portrayed historical Black subjects–Crispus Attucks, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth–as exemplary Americans and heroic figures, whose struggles for Black liberty were also struggles for the full actualisation of America as an idea.[2] Having entered radio in the 1930s through the WPA, Durham created boldly political scripts reflecting the ambitions of many post-war Black Americans who believed that their sacrifices, both fighting fascism abroad and labouring at home, had earned them a rightful place in the country of their birth.

Yet even amidst the cultural and political flourishing of that time, African Americans continued to face fascism's ideological cousin in the Jim Crow laws of the South and the heavily policed segregation of the North. Durham seized on a mass media at a historical crossroads to articulate an alternative to disenfranchisement, subjugation and racist violence in the form of self-emancipation and collective struggle. His scripts augured an emergent black militancy and class consciousness, which in turn provoked protest, censorship, legal battles and blacklisting. Today, in a moment when renewed claims to social, cultural and political mattering are being articulated at a national level, it is appropriate that contemporary sound artists might listen back to Durham's productions to consider the limits and possibilities of narrating freedom.[3]

In January of 2021, electroacoustic composer Yvette Janine Jackson released *Freedom*, an album containing two radio operas inspired in part by Durham's work, available on vinyl record and as a digital download through the Fridman Gallery in New York.[4] Jackson is a Harvard-based electroacoustic, chamber and orchestral composer and educator who studied at Columbia University's Computer Music Center in the 1990s before migrating to the West Coast to work as an engineer and sound designer. This time in California provided inspiration for the pieces appearing on *Freedom*: an encounter with John Cage and Kenneth Patchen's *The City Wears a Slouch Hat*; a period of labor aboard boats; and a challenge from composer Anthony Davis to draw, as he had done, an opera out of the politics of Black life.[5] On this album and when performing live, Jackson combines "fixed media" with her performance ensembles, sampling and processing instruments, human voices and field recordings.[6] The result is an embodied world of improvisatory vitality immersed in electronic synthesis. Jackson regards these works as "narrative soundscape compositions", strongly influenced by the listening, recording and composing practices of

R. Murray Schafer.[7] In fact, her radio operas draw from a variety of mid-century avant-garde approaches, even while signalling older traditions of narrative musical storytelling autochthonal to Black cultures. Jackson mobilises these techniques of composing, improvising and montaging to produce a unique form of "reality-based" radiophonic art.

Freedom collects two examples of Jackson's approach, both of them older pieces from an expanding series of works exploring the Middle Passage. The album's opening side, "Destination Freedom" sonifies that centuries-long process, making its incommunicable pain and "untranslatable" nature palpably present in a dense sonic mass.[8] It is a music rich in opacity, sensationally affecting, but unlike its mid-century namesake it is unmoored from any kind of teleological narrative. Early in the piece there is a hauntological hint of Durham's bioplays in a loop of modulated organ notes, recalling that program's opening music, but the protagonist of this opera is unlocatable in the blur of suboceanic bass, radio static and magnetic slippage. There is no first-person narrative or nominal subject to be found, only a host of unnamed and unknown bodies-cum-cargo whose fungibility left little to the archive beyond an actuary's count. The Middle Passage is a problem for memory, and Jackson's attempt "to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling" exemplifies what Saidiya Hartman has called "critical fabulation". Hartman uses that phrase to describe a practice of surfacing that which is undocumented or buried in incomplete archives, telling stories that "[refuse] to fill in the gaps and provide closure" but which none-the-less "respect black noise – the shrieks, the moans, the non-sense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility […]."[9] Jackson too gathers elusive sonic materials, not as a documentary practice, but as a means to construct an speculative but "true" history of struggle.[10] Gone in effect are Durham's biographical tales of exceptional Black lives, replaced by the vibratory mattering of uncounted collective loss. *Freedom*'s arrival at a time of major protests in defence of Black life only reenforces the notion that the contemporary conditions of unfreedom and violence faced by so many Black Americans are the afterlife of slavery, a part of a continuum of Black experience, of grief and hope, rebellion and creation.

Listeners accustomed to traditional radio dramas may find *Freedom*'s verso, "Invisible People", more immediately intelligible as audio theatre. Here, Jackson mixes electroacoustic and improvised chamber music with an episodic, multivalent and polyvocal collage of found and performed speech. The work finds its instigation in President Barack Obama's equivocations around marriage equality and LGBQT+ civil rights, positions which frustrated progressives and enflamed the homophobia endemic to many American religious communities. The former President is heard accounting for himself while juxtaposed against the "anti-gay monotones homophobic monochords" of commentators whose voices were lifted from the digital debris of the YouTube archive.[11] Jackson and her collaborators in the Invisible People Ensemble provide saxophone squeals, laconic piano blues and percussion excursions as queering counterpoints to the lamentations and condemnations directed by Black community leaders against their homosexual kin.

Its mixture of jazz and vocal theatre brings to mind Freddie Hubbard and Ilhan Mimaronglu's *Sing Me a Song of Songmy*, while its cycled loops of found language evoke the wet slip of Steve

Reich's reel-to-reel concretism from the mid-1960s.[12] Similarly, its creaking, swooning bass clarinets and drowned magnetic tape recalls Gavin Bryars' simulated homage to the sinking of the Titanic, though in Jackson's work it is hidden subjects, members of communities and congregations unwilling to embrace them as they are, who are pulled beneath the surface. [13] At album's close we hear a preacher unabashedly call his members "abominations", knowing full well that the soft joy singing out from the organ behind his words may be played by hands that have held a man (who is not their father but "some other man"), and in this dissonance we feel the tugging void of hope against faith for a full liberty that was unrealised like so much else in Obama's tenure.

How do we listen to a work riven with such ambiguity and incompleteness and still make sense of it as a mode of audio narrative? Jackson says that her "radio operas are intended to be experienced with the lights out so that the listener can surrender to the theatre of the mind", but the whirring, blurring blues of *Freedom* is staged in ocean depths and darkened closets.[14] Unlike Durham's aspirational imaginary of national belonging and becoming, Jackson's picture of freedom is filled with "melancholic hope," resolved to the notion "that a better less pernicious world depends partly on our heightened capacity to remember, contemplate, and be unsettled by race-inflected violence and suffering".[15]

Yet was Durham's work not also melancholic in its affirmation, struggling to redeem the tragedy and loss endured by a people who for over 300 years had been living and dying unfree on (and off) American shores? The performances on Jackson's *Freedom* stage an anachronic history of Attucks, Tubman, Douglass and Truth, their distant stories of enslavement and fugitivity folded into the present. Unlike Durham's clarity, Jackson's black noise may be in excess of legibility, a vast watery expanse of shrieks, moans, nonsense and opacity, but Durham himself said that "somewhere in this ocean of Negro life, with its crosscurrents and undercurrents, lies the very soul of America".[16] Both artists, Jackson and Durham, are in search of that unrealised abolition of Black unfreedom and boundless justice in some fair world beyond this tumultuous present.

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[1] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books [1903] 1996), 213-214.

[2] "Destination Freedom" is available on *The Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/DestinationFreedom; Richard Durham, *Richard Durham's Destination Freedom: Scripts from Radio's Black Legacy, 1948-1950*, J. Fred Macdonald, ed. (New York: Praeger, 1989).

[3] Scholarship on Durham and *Destination Freedom* includes Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) and Sonja D. Williams, *Word Warrior: Richard Durham, Radio, and Freedom* (Urbana, Chicago & Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

[4] Yvette Janine Jackson, *Freedom*, Fridman Gallery, 2021, Digital.

[5] Yvette Janine Jackson, "Invisible People (A Radio Opera)" *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* no. 3 (2014).

[6] Manisha Aggarwal-Schifellite, "Music professor composes pieces to immerse audiences in narrative," *The Harvard Gazette* (October 7, 2019).

[7] Ibid. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiney Books, 1994), 7, 274-275. Jackson's work has strong aesthetic resonances with Schafer's fellow World Sound Project member Hildegard Westerkamp, in particular work collected on *Transformations*, empreintes DIGITALes, 1996, CD.
[8] Tara T. Green, *Reimagining the Middle Passage: Black Resistance in Literature, Television, and Song* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018).
[9] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *small axe* no. 26 (June 2008), 11-12.
[10] Joshua Minsoo Kim, "Tone Glow 063: Yvette Janine Jackson" *Tone Glow* [newsletter], April 28, 2021; https://toneglow.substack.com/p/063-yvette-janine-jackson
[11] Greg Tate, "Notes and Tones," liner notes to Jackson, *Freedom*.
[12] Freddie Hubbard and Ilhan Mimaroglu, *Sing Me a Song of Songmy (A Fantasy for Electromagnetic Tape)*, Atlantic, 1971, Vinyl; Steve Reich, recorded 1966, "Come Out" on *Early Works*, Elektra Nonesuch, 1987, CD.
[13] Gavin Bryars, *The Sinking of the Titanic*, Point Music, 1994, CD. Bryars has influenced other poetic meditations on the Middle Passage: see M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 203.
[14] "Listen: Yvette Janine Jackson's *Destination Freedom*", *The Wire Magazine* [online], November 27, 2020; https://www.thewire.co.uk/audio/tracks/listen-yvette-janine-jackson
[15] Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Age of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 17.
[16] Durham quoted in Williams, *Word Warrior*, viii.

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