



**“Hear Me Talking to You”:  
Improvisation and the Auricular Imperative in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom***

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*But Ma’s music would endure as well, simply because it is the wellspring of it all, and because it “connects,” as per Wilson, despite the fact that it rarely features flights of improvisation.*

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**Keywords**

*jazz; blues; improvisation; film*

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At the height of the so-called jazz wars, saxophonist Joshua Redman released his fourth studio album in 1996. Programmatically titled *Freedom in the Groove*, Redman’s liner notes are really more a manifesto comprising a thinly veiled broadside against the neo-traditionalist faction in the music: “I didn’t recognize ‘jazz’ as being categorically separate or substantially different from ‘blues,’ ‘rock,’ ‘funk,’ ‘soul,’ ‘classical,’ ‘Indian,’ ‘African,’ ‘Indonesian,’ or any other of the countless musical genres I heard piping over the public airwaves or crackling out my mom’s old reel-to-reel tape recorder,” Redman wrote as he reminisced about his childhood. “Put it in the pocket, but keep it on the edge. Give me a naked soul and a mature mind. You can be grounded yet still be free. With a swing. In the groove” (Redman).<sup>1</sup> The jazz wars of the 1990s and the saxophonist’s involvement in them sound an instructive postlude to the musical conflicts orchestrated in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Redman ascribes the direction of his artistic pursuits to catholic if conscientious listening. As if in counterpoint, August Wilson’s play chronicling a day in a Chicago recording studio is ultimately propelled by a failure to listen, by a failure to hear in the music of the other an ally rather than an adversary, much more so than by the racial exigencies of America’s Jazz Age. Students of the play have heretofore focused almost exclusively on the title song—when they have paid attention to the music at all—and have thus missed that the plot actually revolves around the auricular imperative articulated by another tune recorded at the session, “Hear

<sup>1</sup> The jazz wars pitted the conservationist forces commanded by trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and supported by ideological barrages from Albert Murray as well as the combative Stanley Crouch, against innovators like Crouch’s erstwhile protégé David Murray or iconoclast John Zorn (Broecking, “Blackness” 127-29; Chinen 23-25; Coates). The Marsalis family’s grip on the music and how it was defined was so firm that free jazzer Hartmut Geerken derisively if helplessly dubbed them “the Marsalis clan” (qtd. in Solothurnmann 32). Redman continues to be affected by the acerbic criticism he received from the neo-traditionalist camp, as evidenced in song titles like “Tribalism” or “Jazz Crimes,” tunes that he still revisits regularly in concert (Redman and WDR).

Me Talking to You.” Ironically, George C. Wolfe’s cinematographic transposition of the play mutes the auricular imperative, returning the characters to the same old spiraling groove of the American race record.

As it turns out, literary critics have been listening to the soundtrack of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* with only one ear. None of the contributors to the *Cambridge Companion to August Wilson* even once references “Hear Me Talking to You,” nor does Patrick Maley in his more recent monograph, which, surprisingly, has next to nothing to say about the music (Bigsby; Maley). Astonishingly, Doris Davis mishears “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” as a “blues tune” when, harmonically, it is decidedly *not* a blues, nor do the lyrics conform to the classic blues stanza, crucial details that render Levee’s constant dismissal of blues even more tragically ironic (D. Davis 175). Emily Rutter’s gloss on the play is equally puzzling as it completely silences the musical discords, hearing only “ideological conflicts” instead, conflicts that somehow dramatize “still lingering debates about the efficacy of a civil rights integrationist agenda versus a black power cultural nationalist one” (Rutter 8).

For his part, Wilson delineates the blues in the prologue of his play as “music that breathes and touches. That connects” (xvi). Unlike the solitary act of writing, collective music-making depends crucially on aural connectivity, just as actors on stage must also listen to each other. This auricular imperative, then, is also an ethical one, as it demands an openness and receptiveness to the story of the other. In music, especially in improvised music, self-actualization is subject to an ethics of responsible listening: yes, unscripted music-making gives me the freedom to tell my own, individual story, in my own, individual way—but at the same time, this freedom is, to borrow Redman’s terminology, a “freedom in the groove,” and the groove is laid down by a collective. Albert Murray emphasizes that “as is also the case with the best of the so-called unaltered found objects on exhibition in some of the better avant-garde art galleries, the invention of creative process lies not in the originality of the phrase as such, but in the way that it is used in a frame of reference!” (96). Successful music-making therefore comes with an auricular imperative, an interpersonal accountability to the



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sonorities of the others’ stories. Improvised music “displays an ethical valence,” argues Daniel Martin Feige, and its successful performance “exemplifies what it means to recognize and bear responsibility for each other” (118). As such, this sonic dialectic is a direct extension of the call-and-response of African American vernacular traditions (both musical and discursive); making improvised music thus “provides opportunities for negotiating difference through creative collaboration,” Raymond MacDonald and Graeme Wilson point out—yet these opportunities vanish unless we also listen, and listen carefully, to the possible connective nodes in the stories of the other (104). In this way, too, “the blues are relentlessly dialectical,” seconds Adam Gussow (*Whose Blues* 46-49). Wilson’s play dramatizes listening as a profoundly ethical act, a paramount act whose obviation can bring tragic consequences.

“Listening” to the characters and their music-making also reveals that it isn’t the title song that sounds the auricular imperative, but another Rainey composition, “Hear Me Talking to You.”<sup>2</sup> The Mother of the Blues recorded it in June of 1928, the twilight of her career—she would enter a studio only thrice more—with an outfit billed as “Ma Rainey and Her Tub Jug Washboard Band.” The leader’s voice is as powerful as ever, but Herman Brown’s kazoo in particular brings the song perilously close to novelty territory, an impression not even Georgia Tom Dorsey’s expert piano accompaniment can dispel. In the play, Levee Green, the young, brash trumpet player Ma recently hired, has been denigrating Ma’s blues as “tent-show nonsense” at virtually every turn (65). Even if Ma’s combo features neither a kazoo nor a jug,

<sup>2</sup> In the following, I shall refer to the historical Ma Rainey as “Rainey,” to the play’s and movie’s fictionalized character as “Ma.”

irritable Levee cannot help but dismiss "Hear Me Talking to You" as "old jug-band shit" (26). Consequently, the final take of the session is less than perfect:

MA RAINEY: Levee ... what is that you doing? Why you playing all them notes? You play ten notes for every one you supposed to play. It don't call for that.

LEVEE: You supposed to improvise on the theme. That's what I was doing.

MA RAINEY: You supposed to play the song the way I sing it. The way everybody else play it. You ain't supposed to go off by yourself and play what you want.

LEVEE: I was playing the song. I was playing it the way I felt it.

MA RAINEY: I couldn't keep up with what was going on. I'm trying to sing the song and you up there messing up my ear. That's what you was doing. Call yourself playing music. (101)

And yet, just as the trumpeter's improvised runs are "messing up" Ma's ear, so does her ostensible "old circus bullshit" mess up Levee's ear (64). From the beginning after all, the play aligns Ma with the proto-blues of the vaudeville and minstrel shows where Rainey got her start as an entertainer, while Levee is hell-bent on pursuing the new, faster, danceable sounds of improvised, modern(ist) jazz (Abbot and Seroff 127-50, 261-2).<sup>3</sup> Even the ears of Sturdyvant, the racist producer of the recording session whose overriding concern is profit, not art, discern that "Times are changing. This is a tricky business now. *We've got to jazz it up ...* put in something different. You know, something wild ... with a lot of rhythm" (19; emphasis added). Complaining bitterly that Ma's sides aren't selling anymore, not even in Harlem, Sturdyvant hopes that Levee's participation in the proceedings is going to result in a product that is at least somewhat marketable.

The producer accurately diagnoses the fickle public's tastes shifting decisively from blues to jazz in the second half of the 1920s; Paramount dropped the *Mother of the Blues* the same year she recorded "Hear Me Talking to You" because, as one label executive declared flatly, "her down-home material had gone out of fashion" (qtd. in Lieb 41; Harrison 33-43). And yet, the border between the two genres was much more porous than the fictional conflict between the singer and the trumpeter dramatizes; Wilson himself did not subscribe to a sharp taxonomic distinction, either.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the outfit Paramount actually promoted as "Ma Rainey and Her Georgia Jazz Band" was comprised of members of Fletcher Henderson's orchestra—including "The Master of Modernism" himself, Louis Armstrong, with whom Rainey's erstwhile protégée, Bessie Smith, who would eclipse her musical mother as "the Empress of the Blues," also recorded (qtd. in Rasula 201-2). Moreover, Georgia Tom Dorsey would soon drop his geographical moniker when he reinvented himself as Thomas A. Dorsey, the Godfather of Gospel (Harris 87-101; Turner 154). Also highlighting the *mélange* of blues and jazz, Gunther Schuller pinpoints what plagues some of Rainey's later discs:

Often Ma Rainey received brilliant support on her recordings, as, for example, the superb teamwork of her Georgia Jazz Band, featuring Howard Scott (trumpet), Buster Bailey (clarinet), and Charlie Green (trombone) from the Fletcher Henderson band on *Jealous Hearted Blues*. But at other times, the deadly repetitions of phrases by the unknown saxophone player on *Rough and Tumble Blues* and other Ma Rainey 1926 records point up how much the blues depends not merely on having a good singer but on a sensitive, imaginative ensemble conception. When that fails, even the best singer will sound, and in fact be, boxed in by the instrumental background. (228)

<sup>3</sup> Even though we cannot know exactly what Levee's new arrangement of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" sounds like—Wilson's stage directions have its rehearsals either interrupted after just a few measures or in the background—the trumpeter's vision for it falls squarely in line with the modernist mantra to "make it new" (Rasula 163-200). The nexus between jazz and modernism has been investigated extensively. For a recent discussion from a literary-critical perspective, see for instance Rasula (201-57); see also Schleifer (14-20, 145-54).

<sup>4</sup> See Abbotson 101-2; Gussow, *Beyond* 74-5; DeVaux and Giddins 47-50.

Scott, Green, and especially Bailey were all accomplished improvisers, though they normally were accorded more room to stretch on Henderson's recordings than on Rainey's. In terms of his artistic abilities, Levee, too, is "boxed in" by the inflexible, conservative arrangement of "Hear Me Talking to You," "the deadly repetitions" of Ma's musical intransigence. What is lacking in Wilson's fictionalized session is the same ingredient missing from the subpar records Schuller cites: the auricular imperative germane to "a sensitive, imaginative ensemble conception," even when there are no improvised solos.

And so, tragically, neither Ma nor Levee responds to the call "Hear Me Talking to You" issues. As with the title song, Wilson faithfully replicates the lyrics in act I when the band rehearses "Hear Me Talking to You" while they are waiting for the star to arrive in the studio, with bassist Sow Drag handling the vocal duties:

Rambling man makes no change in me  
 I'm gonna ramble back to my used-to-be  
 Ah, you hear me talking to you  
 I don't bite my tongue  
 You wants to be my man  
 You got to fetch it with you when you come. (Wilson 35)

Combining the two defining blues tropes of travel and of love gone wrong, the auricular imperative issued by "Hear Me Talking to You" applies to the Mother of the Blues as much as to the young, upstart jazz trumpeter (A. Davis 20-7, 66-75). If Ma were to make a foray from her comfort zone of "used-to-be" and listen, really *listen*, to Levee's improvisations, she would hear that his sound is not nearly as "rambling" as she believes, that her down-home blues contain the seeds of Levee's modernist jazz. Far from "messing up" her blues ear, "Hear Me Talking to You" actually sounds what Amiri Baraka famously called "the blues continuum"—otherwise, Ella Fitzgerald, the improvising jazz voice *par excellence*, would not have recorded it (Baraka 166; Fitzgerald).<sup>5</sup> And if Levee were to "fetch" the auricular imperative, he would hear that, far from being "old jug-band music," Ma's blues in fact provide the source material on which his ambitions "to play *real* music" are based (Wilson 25, 26; emphasis in the original). Levee, like Redman, wants to put the music "on the edge," but the trumpeter fails to hear that it's the edge of a foundation laid by Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and the other classic blues women of the decade. Because of the jazz experimentalist's selective hearing, only exacerbated by his traditionalist boss's inflexibility, and because both resist the auricular imperative, "Tradition and Innovation are reduced to imaginary and impotent adversaries, bickering fruitlessly over territory to which neither can lay rightful claim," as Redman would note almost seven decades on amidst yet another sonic skirmish (liner notes).

The tragedy of this artistic conflict is amplified by the fact that music serves the same purpose to Ma as to her youngest band member. For Levee, his jazz innovations are an instrument of self-actualization. The conniving Sturdyvant tells him that his compositions "just didn't sound like the kind of songs I'm looking for right now" when he brought in another combo to play them—a blatant lie, of course—eliciting from Levee the plea, "You got to hear *me* play them, Mr. Sturdyvant! You ain't heard *me* play them. That's what's gonna make them sound right" (108; emphases in the original). Similarly, to Ma, blues "fills things up" and is "life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life" (82). This, then, is what motivates Ma's histrionics, why she rejects Levee's up-tempo arrangement of the title song as well as his improvised embellishments, why she insists that her nephew, stuttering Sylvester, speak the intro to "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom": the song, after all, is less about a dance, less even about sex, than it is about power and property. In the song, Ma reconfigures her black female sexuality as an instrument that she, and she alone, *owns*,

<sup>5</sup> On Fitzgerald's album, "Hear Me Talking to Ya" is erroneously credited to Louis Armstrong. Satch recorded his original "Heah Me Talkin' to Ya?" with his Savoy Ballroom Five in December of 1928. "Heah" is an instrumental—save for Armstrong's brief vocalization of the title at the beginning—and the Okeh label promoted it as a "Fox Trot": unlike Rainey's "Hear Me Talking to You," "Heah" is harmonically not a blues, either (Fitzgerald; Armstrong).

something that everybody wants a piece of, but something that, as exclusively her property, she is *free* to distribute as she sees fit. Ma's music may be outdated, but her understanding of the distribution of power in apartheid America, and how music is subject to it, is as keen as ever: "Wanna take my voice and trap it in them fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials," she complains to Cutler, her musical director; "As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then" (79). Her astute perception and long experience allow her to maximize what little power she has, and her diva tantrums—over Sylvester, the bottle of Coca Cola, or Levee's rearrangement of her song—are strategically deployed to remind Sturdyvant and Irvin, her white manager, that she, too, knows how the game is played. If Levee heeded the auricular imperative, he would also hear in Ma's repeated insistence that "Levee ain't messing up my song" less a musical rebuff and more a statement about retaining self-determination while navigating the treacherous waters of the business, and perhaps, just perhaps, he would be able to see through Sturdyvant's deception (62). His unwillingness to hear in the seasoned veteran's blues anything other than sonic excrement also makes him deaf to all the warnings about the white producer's real aim. Conversely, if Ma lent an ear to Levee's experimentations, she might be able to hear that his improvisations are as much about self-actualization as her rote blues. Yet precisely because "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" is, after all, about somatic property, she is unwilling to yield to the auricular imperative, does not notice Levee "talking" to her, and thus hears in his improvisational jazz innovations only a threat "messing up" her ears as well as her bottom.

Instead, the play riffs on the ostensible binary of blues versus jazz in the metonymy of footwear. Levee, the improvising jazz innovator, is linked from the very beginning to mobility: he proudly brandishes a brand-new pair of pricey Florsheim shoes as he arrives in the studio, and it is certainly no coincidence that the "ramblin' man" of "Hear Me Talking to You" triggers Levee's extemporized forays later. They also figure prominently in the play's only instance where the auricular imperative leads to the kind of "connective" music-making Wilson highlights in the prologue. During rehearsal, Slow Drag breaks a string on his bass; as he retunes his instrument, Levee exhorts him to "Play something for me, Slow Drag," which in turn inspires the trumpeter: "A man got to have some shoes to dance like this! You can't dance like this with them clodhoppers Toledo got." Levee has been mocking the pianist's "farming boots" all along, but now, Slow Drag's playing prompts Levee to extemporize a duet over King Oliver's "Doctor Jazz" (40):

Hello Central give me Doctor Jazz  
He's got just what I need I'll say he has  
When the world goes wrong and I have got the blues  
He's the man who makes me get on my dancing shoes. (Wilson 40; Oliver)<sup>6</sup>

On one hand, the lyrics articulate Levee's artistic ambitions: to him, the blues resonate with suffering, but jazz is the healer who shall redeem a world gone wrong. On the other hand, the duet is the most intimate of musical settings, one that requires a heightened level of

<sup>6</sup> In fact, none of Rainey's sides feature a bass due to the limitations of 1920s recording technology. Generally, the low frequencies emitted by the string bass presented a formidable challenge to even state-of-the-art equipment, and many early string bass players doubled on tuba in the studio. This applied across musical genres, of course: for the acoustic 1924 recording of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto no. 2 for the Victor label, for example, the string basses were replaced with one bass saxophone (Rachmaninoff; Cottrell 180). Quite often, the bass simply wasn't utilized at all. Paramount had made the switch from acoustic to electric recording some time that same year (and "Hear Me Talking to You" was definitely recorded electrically), but the label was notorious for its lo-fi output, and musicians joked that Paramount's idea of electric recording was to hang a light bulb from the studio's ceiling (Lieb 7, 12, 21-22; van der Tuuk 57-60). However, the presence of Slow Drag's instrument reveals, quite literally, the blues as the base/bass line of everything that follows, including Levee's modernist jazz improvisations. For an extensive discussion of Wilson's historical "overdubs," see Grandt, "Freedom in the Groove."

responsiveness. Here, Levee, the improvising jazz modernist, is able to connect meaningfully with Slow Drag the blues traditionalist because he listens, and carefully so.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Ma later on calls the same switchboard as her trumpet player when she is recording “Hear Me Talking to You”—“Hello Central, give me 609”—but neither can hear the blues continuum connecting both performances (Rainey). Tellingly, that stanza is missing from the curtailed performance in act I when Irvin interrupts the rehearsal (Wilson 35). Even so, Levee’s improvisation on the recorded take is his effort to push the music forward, to the edge, and his character is recurrently associated with kinesis, “the celebration of velocity” as Albert Murray would put it (165-78). Ironically, Levee’s own biography mirrors the standard narrative of jazz historiography: he is a native of the Mississippi Delta, the mythical cradle of the blues; he has spent some time in New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz, as he haughtily informs Slow Drag; and now he finds himself in Chicago, the city that made Louis Armstrong into a jazz star (Wilson 54). Improvisation, declares trombonist George Lewis, “is about the necessity to reinvent yourself in any given moment. It’s about mobility. If you don’t move, you’re dead,” contrapuntally bringing to mind Schuller’s “deadly repetitions” again (qtd. in Broecking, “Don’t” 24). Not coincidentally, Ma’s ambitious young trumpeter intends to christen his own band that is to bring dance music to the people “Levee Green and his Footstompers” (81). And no wonder, then, that Levee’s Florsheims become the catalyst for the deadly violence at the end of the play.

Ma’s character, on the other hand, is consistently linked to stasis, or at least a drastically diminished radius of mobility. Suffering from corns, “Ma know something about bad feet,” she counsels Dussie Mae, her paramour, before she changes into a pair of slippers for the recording session, but eventually ditches even those and walks around the studio barefoot—no dancing shoes for the Mother of the Blues (60, 73). In stark contrast, Levee’s warm-up rite consists of slipping into his new Florsheims: “Yeah! Now I’m ready! I can play some good music now!” (24). These accoutrements, therefore, symbolize the musical counterpoint between stubbornly conservative Ma and impatiently modernist Levee. For Levee, jazz music is kinesis; for Ma, blues music is stability. To be sure, Ma, too, recently made a purchase even more kinetic than Levee’s—a new automobile. However, she doesn’t know how to drive, and the car is now stationary in the shop after Sylvester, her chauffeur-nephew, managed to get into a fender-bender on the way to the recording session. Sonically immobile, Ma remains impervious to the auricular imperative, roundly rejecting all pleas to try out Levee’s jazzed-up arrangement of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom”: “I’m doing it the old way,” she declares flatly, and when Irvin gently persists, she threatens, “Now, if that don’t set right with you and Sturdyvant . . . then I can carry my black bottom on back down South to my tour, ‘cause I don’t like it up here no ways” (62, 63). Ma will issue the same ultimatum again later in the play, that she much prefers the stasis of her Georgia “used-to-be.” She is in a position where whatever freedom she has laid claim to in her groove must be defended; Levee, on the other hand, is yet to find a (collective) groove. Echoing Schuller as well as Lewis, MacDonald and Graeme Wilson observe that “improvisation is a defining feature of our humanity: if you do not improvise you are not alive” (105). This is precisely what motivates Levee, not just as an artist, but as a human being. Ma, on the other hand, will soon discover that her curtailment of any improvisatory efforts results in a career that has dead-ended. What both ignore, with tragic consequences, is the auricular imperative—that “Individual musicians do not fully know who they are, or become who they are, outside of their interactions with others,” as Charles Hersch puts it (371). To be sure, the artistic conflict in the play is exacerbated by the

<sup>7</sup> The only duet recording of “Doctor Jazz” with a vocalist and a string player I have been able to unearth is on Petra van Nuis and Andy Brown’s album *Lessons Lyrical*. Like Levee and Slow Drag’s performance, their version was played ‘live’ in the studio without any overdubs or multi-tracking, showcasing guitarist Brown’s staggering pyrotechnics (email from Petra van Nuis, June 15, 2018). Significantly, in the liner notes van Nuis writes that “Playing jazz music requires [. . .] embracing the moment with openness and acceptance of whatever presents itself.” In a duo setting in particular, there is no room to hide behind one’s musical partner, and the “principles of surrender, humility, intuition, [and] mindfulness” are comparatively amplified (van Nuis).

racial exigencies of apartheid America, specifically Sturdyvant's devious machinations, but it is not triggered by them. Because neither Ma nor Levee defers to the auricular imperative in their interactions with the other, both of their careers come to a close.

The music, however, doesn't. Wilson's stage directions at the very end have us hear "*The sound of a trumpet [. . .], Levee's trumpet, a muted trumpet struggling for the highest of possibilities and blowing pain and warning*" (111). This stage direction follows Levee's impulsive murder of Toledo after the pianist accidentally scuffed the precious Florsheims, symbolically arresting the trumpeter's improvisational pursuits and "celebration of velocity." The disembodied sound of Levee's instrument finally no longer neglects the auricular imperative: in "*struggling for the highest of possibilities*" of improvised jazz, it also hearkens back to the "*pain and warning*" of the blues, sounding the blues continuum, articulating the connectivity of blues as the bedrock of all popular American music Wilson highlights in the prologue. In fact, music history proves Levee right: in the decade after Rainey's retirement, the swing big bands would draw Depression-weary Americans to the dance halls in droves, and the decade after that would resound with the muted bebop trumpets of Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis blowing harmonically expanded possibilities. But Ma's music would endure as well, simply because it is the wellspring of it all, and because it "connects," as per Wilson, despite the fact that it rarely features flights of improvisation. Kelis's global mega-hit of 2003, "Milkshake," is after all as much about dairy products as "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" is about dancing: "My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard // Damn right / It's better than yours; I could teach you / But I'd have to charge" (Kelis). And Rainey, if perhaps not August Wilson, would surely recognize in Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's "WAP" Baraka's blues continuum writ large, nothing other than a raunchier, bolder version of "Come on and show the dance you call your big black bottom / It puts you in a trance" (Cardi; Wilson 86).

Quite literally, George C. Wolfe's movie adaptation closes on a different note. Its script, written by Ruben Santiago-Hudson, follows Wilson's play very closely, including Levee cradling the dying Toledo in his arms toward the end. But instead of the disembodied sound of Levee's trumpet, we hear the mournful strains of Toledo's orphaned piano, soon joined by an equally lugubrious cello. The film ends with an entirely new scene, where a clean-cut, young, all-white swing big band is recording Levee's song for a gleeful Sturdyvant, showing but one instance of what the Barakas accurately termed "The Great Music Robbery" (Baraka and Baraka 328-32). The beginning of the film is very different as well: it commences with two shadowy figures running through ominously dark woods to the sound of barking dogs—yet the figures are revealed to be not fugitive slaves, but two teenaged boys on their way to a Ma Rainey tent show outside Barnesville, Georgia.

These new bookends of the plot also contribute to the auricular imperative being almost completely muted. The conflict between Ma and Levee is less musical and more personal: even though Levee has his eyes on Dussie Mae in Barnesville already, his obligatos behind Ma are musically astute, making for an engaging and sensitive call-and-response. Clearly, there is *some* auricular attentiveness with Levee. His brief solo, too, fits snugly into the musical context of Ma's blues, visually amplified by the fact that in the film, Levee plays not the trumpet, but the cornet, an instrument that soon fell out of favor with jazzers (Berendt 208-10). His boss, though, is resentful of his invasion of the spotlight and of his energetic performance garnering at least as much applause as her own; his solo, fiery as it is, does not herald the harmonic inventions of the jazz to come. Missing, therefore, is most of the opening dialog between Sturdyvant and Irvin in Wilson's play, including the producer's realization that Ma's downhome country blues needs "jazz[ing] it up." Also cut is Sturdyvant's diatribe about the waning profitability of Ma's records, with the exception of one line radically transposed—the only such reallocation in Santiago-Hudson's script. In the film, Levee is trying to convince Slow Drag of his superior musical talents with the exact same observation

that, in the play, is part of Sturdyvant's opening harangue: "You know how many records she sold in New York? And you know what's in New York? Harlem. *Harlem's* in New York!" Moreover, the filmic version of Cutler plays obligato fills that almost drown out Levee's extemporizations on the title song, and he also solos more on "Hear Me Talking to You" than the cornetist does all day in the studio.

The protagonist's instrument, too, becomes a kind of synecdoche for the demotion of the auricular imperative in the film. Jazz saxophonist Branford Marsalis—older brother of trumpet-playing Wynton—composed the soundtrack and coached the actors; historical accuracy demanded that he put a cornet in Levee's hands (even though the other characters still refer to him as a trumpeter), since this is what is on Rainey's original recording of the title song. He modeled Levee's music on that of Joe "King" Oliver, a contemporary of Rainey, mentor of Louis Armstrong, and composer of "Doctor Jazz," who would make the switch from cornet to trumpet only late in his career. Oliver, too, was an innovator, like Wilson's Levee, but "Louis Armstrong is King Oliver 2.0," adjudges Marsalis (qtd. in Hoffman). Accordingly, "In the Shadow of Joe Oliver" contains no jazz improvisation at all, and "Levee's Song" doesn't even feature a brass instrument. Chadwick Boseman's Levee is thus musically closer to Shirley Clay, the cornetist on "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," and a name only the most erudite of jazz cognoscenti recognize today. Deemphasizing the radical, experimental modernism of Levee's music for the film also results in the auricular imperative ceasing to be central to the recording process.

With the auricular imperative diminished decisively, the dynamic between Levee and his employer instead morphs into a conflict over star power and the limelight.<sup>8</sup> Director Wolfe explains in the accompanying Netflix documentary that he understands Levee's character as the personification of the rising popularity of Bessie Smith, another talent a generation younger than the Mother of the Blues, who Ma sees as a threat to her own career (even if the real Bessie Smith was already an established star in her own right by 1927). To put it differently, Wilson's Ma feels threatened by Levee's musical innovations, while Wolfe's Ma feels threatened by Levee's allure and pizzazz, a shift that obviates the auricular imperative and foregrounds instead the social dynamics in a racist America. This is accentuated by the interpolation of scenes taking place outside the studio—the vaguely threatening throng of white onlookers gathering around Ma's car accident, or the disapproving looks of the white patrons of the grocery store down the street where Slow Drag and Sylvester attempt to purchase a Coca Cola for Ma.

A similar reversal occurs in terms of the dramatization of kinesis and stasis. In the film, too, Levee proudly brandishes his costly Florsheims, and Ma is also plagued by foot pain. But the filmic Levee notices an ostensibly new door in the studio when he first arrives, not the relocation of the band room (Wilson 24). Toward the end, he manages to break open the bolted door, only to emerge into an unused shaft—from one trap into an even more claustrophobic one. The last time we see the Mother of the Blues, on the other hand, she is back in her brand new automobile alongside Dussie Mae and Sylvester en route to her next gig in Memphis, the erstwhile home base of W. C. Handy, the Father of the Blues (Handy 89-171). The auricular imperative does not even appear in the duet between Levee and Slow Drag. "Doctor Jazz," shorn of its lyrics, is demoted to the ironic soundtrack to Toledo's lecture about racial uplift, with Levee's cornet only hurling a string of mocking, aleatory bleats at the pontificating pianist instead of interacting with the walking bass—the very instrument that,

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<sup>8</sup> A related issue is the tricky question of how to transpose a script about music that is partly improvised in the moment onto the stage. Marsalis put the challenge rather bluntly, if somewhat hyperbolically: "George [Wolfe] doesn't know anything about music. I don't know anything about theater" (qtd. in Johnson). Theatrical productions have featured actor-musicians, or actors mimicking playing their instruments to Rainey's actual recordings (Teague 564-68). Marsalis pre-recorded the music of Ma's combo with his own band, and then coached the actors to imitate the recorded sounds convincingly on their instruments (Hoffman). Clearly, this asks the actors to respond to the auricular imperative, but it is a studied response, not an improvised one.



in the absence of any percussion, is most responsible for generating that complex propulsion called "swing" (DeVeaux and Giddins 220-1; Grandt 63-8).

And yet, the auricular imperative reemerges in a very different scene, in a slightly different way. In the play, a petty squabble about sandwiches launches Toledo into his soliloquy about "the leftovers" of history, his pontificating disrupted frequently by the interjections of not only Levee, but Cutler and Slow Drag as well (56-9). In the film, though, the trigger is Levee's harrowing account of his childhood trauma. A clearly unsettled Toledo is carefully fingering a few slow, bluesy notes before he delivers his ruminations over minor chords, and no one dares to interrupt him:

[Sings:] Everybody—[speaks:] everybody come from different places in Africa, right? Different tribes and things? Soonawhile they began to make one big stew. You had your, uh, your carrots and your peas, and your potatoes over here and over there you had the meat and nuts, uh, okra, corn, and you mix it up, cook it real good to where the flavors flow through. And then you got one thing: you got—a stew. Now you take and you eat that stew. You, you take, and you make your history, with that stew. But you look around and you see some carrots, over there, and some peas over here. And—that stew is still there. You done made your history, and it's still there. You can't eat it all [laughs]. So what you got. You got some leftovers, that's what it is. See: we's the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. What's the colored man gon' do with himself [sighs]. That's what we're going to find out. [Sings:] But first he's got to know that he's a leftover.

Shots of working-class African Americans gazing pensively into the distance are interpolated into Toledo's recitatif, underscoring the communal significance of Levee's childhood trauma, before the film abruptly cuts to the bustling Chicago street outside of the studio. While the characters in the play are "waiting to find out" what will happen to the "leftovers," in the film Toledo's voice become truly oracular, endowed with certainty over what shall come to pass (Wilson 57; emphasis added). Clearly, the pianist has listened to Levee's pain and suffering, has understood and is empathizing with it, and as a consequence creates the most bluesy moment of the entire film—at one point, Glynn Turman's Toledo even laughs to keep from crying—and one that is only possible because of the auricular imperative being heeded. This drastic recontextualization lends Toledo's monologue a new and profound gravitas lacking in the original, where the pianist's excursions point more toward his penchant to "*misappl[y] his knowledge*," as per Wilson (20).

Here, then, is the meeting of Levee's "naked soul" and Toledo's "mature mind" that Redman calls for in his liner notes. What this scene also demonstrates is that what is ultimately at stake isn't even how Wolfe's film diminishes and recontextualizes the auricular imperative from the sonorities emanating from Wilson's play. The real issue this scene reminds us of is that we need not only to look, or read, attentively—but we also need to *listen*. The auricular imperative applies to literary-critical practice as much as to fictive characters in a play or movie, perhaps even more so. For unless we listen, really listen, to what happens on the page or screen, we are liable to miss what emerges from the deeper grooves of America's race record(s).

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