Mumbling, Shouting, and Singing: Listening to the (Non)Human Voice in Trap

Eline Langejan, 3970078

Utrecht University

Department of Media and Culture Studies

RMA Musicology Thesis

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Michiel Kamp

Second reader: Dr. Floris Schuiling

Date of submission: 17 August 2020

Abstract

Since the 1990s, trap has increasingly influenced mainstream popular music. The Southern-American genre is notorious for its "trap-beat" as well as a vocal style that is often derogatorily referred to as *mumble-rap* or mushmouth rap. This vocal style is characterized by the murmured lyrical delivery causing a high level of unintelligibility. Different from mainstream post-race hip hop—which Justin Burton classifies as clearly pronounced, politically engaged hip hop performed by artists such as Kendrick Lamar—trap lyricism rarely involves anything other than money, promiscuity, and excessive lifestyles. Moreover, typical trap music uses a fair amount of expressive exclamations and ad libs, for instance, the "choppa" sound: brrrah!, where the rattling r's imitate the sound of an automatic firearm, adding to a violent and noisy sound experience for a mainstream audience that has become used to post-race hip hop (Burton 2017).

The perceived *sonic blackness* (Eidsheim 2011) in trap, which is the perceived black body in sound, urges questions about the way in which the voice can be rendered less-than-human, or even nonhuman. The sonic palette of trap deliberately invites a listening experience of blackness by making use of the *sonic color line*, which refers to sounds that are racialized by the *listening ear* in the historic context of segregation, slavery, and othering (Stoever 2016). The racialization of sound is rooted into socially constructed ideas about the use of the voice, which has traditionally divided vowels and consonants, sounds and noises, as well as language and gibberish into the hierarchical binary of human and nonhuman (Connor 2014, Weheliye 2002). This binary has traditionally rendered people who deviate from the white patriarchal norm as less-than-human in an intersectional way. The perceived sonic blackness in trap is thus a perception of trap's sounds as noisy, aggressive, and threatening, which are notions that are rooted in stereotypes about a specific blackness related to the American South. I argue that trap's centralization of the voice, and subsequently the (black) body creates a listening experience of that body that is both threatening and direct. This leads me to argue that trap voices create a grotesque version of the black body that is connected to the stereotypical associations about the black, hypersexual, male identity, and a parody of that. Ultimately I argue that trap vocals transgress the human/nonhuman binary, and in doing so offer a specifically southern perspective to black posthumanism.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Thank you for educating me and inspiring me to listen more critically to voices, including my own. My gratitude towards the next people is immeasurable. Without their support I would not have been able to finish this project:

My fellow students, whose brilliant minds have inspired and encouraged me to achieve more than I ever held possible. A special thanks goes out to Sonja Hamhuis, Zora van Harten, Liselotte Podda, and Marjolein Wellink, who provided a much needed routine throughout the quarantine, as well as indispensable advice, sanity checks and laughter during these isolated months.

My thesis supervisor dr. Michiel Kamp, who believed in the potency of my ideas from the beginning, and whose feedback helped me organize them into a thesis that I am proud of. Thank you for all your tips, extensive ideas, and tough questions, without which this thesis would have been a lot less rich.

All of my teachers at Utrecht University, whose enthusiasm and expertise continuously sparked my curiosity and motivation to always learn more, and whose extensive feedback, patience, and some more feedback allowed me to become a better researcher. A special thanks goes out to my former teacher, dr. Olga Panteleeva, whose inspiring bravery, intellectual capacity, academic rigour, and kindness have been essential to both my academic and personal development.

I am very grateful for dr. Floris Schuiling, who so kindly agreed to be my second reader, and dr. Jennifer Stoever, whose own research inspired a significant part of this thesis.

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends, who are the foundation of everything I do. My parents and sisters, whose encouragement was indispensable for me to finish this thesis. They inspired me to be the best version of myself and for that I am so grateful. A special thanks to my wonderful dad, who spent hours on proofreading my drafts and without whom this thesis would not have been finished. My friends, who provided perspective and inspiration throughout. And last but not least, I want to thank my girlfriend, whose love and endless support helped me through every step of the way. Thank you for making me laugh during hard times and for always believing in me.

Table of contents

Introduction

What does a nonhuman voice sound like? When thinking about this question, cartoons filled with talking animals may pop up in your mind. Or maybe robotic voices, such as the virtual assistant listing nearby restaurants from the speaker of your phone. You might even be thinking about the way musical instruments can become an extension of your voice, such as a "singing" violin.[1] However, all these examples have in common that they are all rooted in the understanding of the voice as inextricably human. The nonhuman figures are granted humanity through their imitation of vocal gestures and speech, making those sounds as much human as the voices that they are referring to. Whether we shout, cry, yell, talk, or sing: we recognize the sounds being produced by the vocal tract resulting in our perception of the sound as attached to a body. A nonhuman voice thus seems to be an oxymoron, because the two words represent two other ends of the human/nonhuman binary. However, if the question would be: Which voices sound more human than others? the human/nonhuman binary becomes a spectrum that grants some people more human rights than others.

Since the Enlightenment, when Western European thinkers came to a worldview that centralized the human, aspects such as rationality and (scientific) intelligence have been connected to the category of the human, leaving opposing aspects for categories of less-than-human, or even nonhuman. This worldview shines through in our current postcolonial patriarchal society, where people that identify and act outside of the norm are considered less-than-human in the sense that their human rights, along with their voices, are diminished. Although the voice seems a feature of universal humanity, the way it sounds is affected by the human/nonhuman binary that renders some voices more powerful, or human, than others. The history of slavery and subsequent segregation of black people in the United States has resulted in a sustained racial power-dynamic. The binary of human/nonhuman has as much to do with biological facts of being a human organism as with the social construction of our idea of humans. The tragedy of slavery shows that despite humanism, enormous groups of people could be deemed less-than-human, or even nonhuman, given that they were not granted the "universal" human rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.[2] These groups generally consist of BIPOC (black, indigenous, people of color), although gender studies have shown that the granting of human rights is intersectional. This means that considering the white patriarchy we live in, the color of your skin, your gender, your sexuality, and your able-bodiedness all weigh in on your societal place on the human/nonhuman spectrum.

Since the abolishment of slavery, the dehumanization of black people is perpetuated in the racist structures of our society, which have lead to horrific series of cases of anti-black (police) violence. One of the earliest cases of police violence against a black male that caused national outrage because it was recorded on video is the beating of Rodney King in 1991. During

---

[1] Naomi Cumming, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification,* Advances in Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

[2] "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives, accessed July 12 2020, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript.

the trial, where three of the four officers involved in the ongoing beating of King during his arrest for driving under the influence were acquitted, reports were made public in which it became clear that within the LA police the tag N.H.I. was used for cases involving "young black males of the jobless category in the inner city ghettos. N.H.I. means 'no humans involved.'"[3] The classification comes from the notion of what it means to be human and North-American, for example, being "White, of Euroamerican culture and descent, middle-class, college-educated and suburban [...]."[4] As Sylvia Wynter points out, in this logic "the jobless and usually school drop-out/push-out category of young Black males can be *perceived*, and therefore *behaved towards*, only as the *Lack* of the human, the Conceptual Other to being North American [...]."[5] This shows how the notion of what is human is a norm set in a white patriarchy, and affects people that deviate from this norm in an intersectional way.

When on May 25th 2020 the arrest of the black American man George Floyd escalated, Floyd repeatedly told the officers holding him down with force: "I can't breathe." His voice is raspy from the pressure on his throat, put there by officer Derek Chauvin's knee. The tragic footage of the deadly arrest shows how the police officers take Floyd's distress as provocation, a reason for them to continue the forceful restraining. In their ears, Floyd's voice and body transformed into a threat, some*thing* that needs excessive force to be contained. The final words of George Floyd are being reiterated at the protests because they clearly show the outrageous perpetuation of dehumanizing people of color: a man's frightful pleads for air are not taken seriously because of the perceived sonic blackness. Floyd's death falls into a series of similar cases of (police) violence against people of color. In many of these cases, the victim's bodies and voices were rendered as less-than-human, causing the attackers to react with excessive violence, which in many cases was subsequently justified as well. In the aftermath of the murders of Jordan Davis and Trayvon Martin, both 17-year old black boys who were shot by white men, the killers testified in court that they perceived their victims to have transformed into a threat. In the case of Davis, the killer took offence in the allegedly "loud" playing rap music and testified that he saw a gun barrel pointed towards him, while the killer of Martin described the teenager as "demonic."[6] In musicology, these cases have urged questions about how our perception of sound is racially transformed.

This thesis examines the relation between the voice and the human/nonhuman binary. The fact that this socially constructed binary renders some voices as nonhuman while the voice has traditionally been theorized as an inextricably human sound, urges questions about how we perceive humanness in the voice. The southern hip hop genre trap is perceived as a type of music that sounds specifically black. Through a critical consideration of the way in which

---

[3] Sylvia Wynter, "No Humans Involved—An Open Letter to My Colleagues," *Forum NHI: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1 (1994), 43.
[4] Ibid., 45.
[5] Ibid., 43. Emphasis in original.
[6] William Cheng, "Black Noise, White Ears: Resilience, Rap, and the Killing of Jordan Davis," *Current Musicology* 102 (2018), 115-16; Jennifer Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (2016), 1-3.

blackness is perceived in the voice and by extension in the voices in trap, this thesis aims to contribute to the body of research about the consequences of the racial transformation of sound.

In the first chapter I examine the relation between the way humans perceive the human voice and how their listening is influenced by the racial transformation of sound that leads them to perceive some voices as nonhuman. In order to find out how we can perceive certain voices as nonhuman, I will first establish how our listening to the voice is a matter of embodied perception. By building upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, I find that recognizing a sound as being human proves to be a process that is deeply connected to the fact that we perceive the world around us through our own bodies.[7] Simultaneously, Roland Barthes' concept of the grain of the voice shows that we perceive a human body in the sound of their voice.[8] The voice is thus inherently connected to the body, whether because we perceive sounds through our own bodies or because we perceive the body of the other in sound. The danger of this is that our perception of the world is easily affected by white patriarchal power structures without people noticing. This is precisely what Jennifer Stoever's concepts of the *sonic color line* and the *listening ear* expose: the shape of our listening ear is socially constructed and racially transforms the sounds we hear.[9] Kyra D. Gaunt's conceptualization of second nature is very valuable for the consideration of coded gestures and the sonic color line, because it acknowledges the fact that there is no essential meaning to be found in bodies.[10] Nonetheless, the learned structures do shape the embodied identity and are part of our social interaction with others. Perceiving a body that deviates from the norm set by the white patriarchy thus comes with socially constructed notions that, in an intersectional way, considers some bodies more "human" than others. Especially in the case of black bodies, the human/nonhuman binary has historically granted black people less human rights. As I show in chapter one, this makes that we perceive some voices as human, while other voices can be perceived as nonhuman.

In the second chapter I take a closer look at a music genre that is specifically thought of as sounding black: the southern hip hop genre trap. Therefore trap offers a lens to scrutinize the assumptions and power relations that make up these binaries of human and nonhuman voices. By investigating the relation between trap's perceived noisiness and the perceived sonic blackness I examine the idea expressed by Burton that trap presents a worn-out stereotypical version of hypermasculine blackness.[11] First, I provide a sociohistorical context to trap's sounds. The rattling hi-hats of the choppa sound, shouted hype ad libs, and mumble rapping are characteristic for the trap aesthetic. These musical elements signify gangster culture and hypermasculinity. This leads me to argue that the musical elements of trap are not merely a reaction to stereotypes about blackness, but rather, they are rooted in the coded gestures that are

---

[7] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. Donald A. Landes (New York, Routledge, 2012), 191.

[8] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and transl. Stephen Heath, 179–89 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977/1996), 182.

[9] Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," (*American Quarterly* 63.3 2011), 664, and Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 3.

[10] Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 60.

[11] Justin Adams Burton, *Posthuman Rap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 93.

tied to the southern black urban experience. Moreover, through a discussion of Burton's notion of trap irony, I consider what it means to place trap in a parallel to hip hop that is activist and politically engaged, such as the artist Kendrick Lamar. I find that considering trap as completely outside of the political debate both surpasses the music's roots in a very politically determined geographical history, as well as renders blackness as an expression that can only be when it is justified by a political or activist motive.

In the third chapter I take a closer look at the relation between trap voices and the human/nonhuman binary. By considering the notions of trap as parody of the perception of stereotypical blackness in sound as expressed by Burton and Matt Miller, I theorize trap's sonic blackness as an expression of a grotesque body.[12] By building upon Mikhail Bakhtin's explanation of the grotesque body, it becomes clear that trap's noisy aesthetic creates a listening experience in which the ambiguous notion of the human/nonhuman voice is foregrounded.[13] Through analyses of four trap songs that all showcase quintessential elements of trap vocals, I find that the multi-layered vocals, ad libs, and vocal effects create a listening experience of the black body that transgresses and exceeds the human ability to emotional expression. The use of both digital effects, phonographic staging and expressive vocal gestures in the songs engages the listener into a heightened embodied listening experience of the grain of the voice that surpasses both the nonhuman as the human category. Trap's transgression of the human norm is related to the posthuman concept of hypersoul, because of the central role technology plays for trap's musical elements. Hypersoul refers to a hyperexpression of the voice that is made possible through technological production, in which that same technology is still audible.[14] In the case of trap music, a similar extension takes place in its deliberate expression of sonic blackness. This leads me to consider trap voices as a posthumanist expression of the black body.

Stoever advocates for the increased awareness of sonic color lines, because like with color blindness, there is a widespread unawareness among people enjoying white privilege that racism is still very much affecting daily experiences with discrimination, micro-transgressions and actual violence for people of color. These people often make the point that the solution to racism is to render skin color invisible, and by doing so dismiss actual experiences of discrimination just because they do not experience them. As Stoever points out, the way in which dominant listening practices are grounded in antebellum slavery and shaped by segregation might be less obvious than visual racism, making it all the more powerful in rendering racism audible in our current society.[15] Similar to Stoever, this thesis aims to further investigate how sound and listening continue to enable an overlooked variant of racism that excludes certain voices from being regarded as human, but renders them as nonhuman noise, greenlighting any measures needed to silence them.

---

[12] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 93; Matt Miller, "Dirty Decade: Rap Music and the US South, 1997–2007," *Southern Spaces* (June 2008). https://southernspaces.org/2008/dirty-decade-rap-music-and-us-south-1997-2007/.

[13] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, transl. Elena Aleksandrovna Izvol'skaja (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 29.

[14] Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998).79.

[15] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 28.

Chapter 1: Human Voices and Nonhuman Noises

The voice is central to our perception of the self and the world around us.[16] It is a sound that we recognize as human. We learn to hear details in the sound of the voice that communicate nuances, emotions, and other performative expressions. As a sonic communication system, our ears highlight the sound of voices over other sounds. The voice has been theorized as the sonic proof of consciousness. For example, Aristotle describes how "only the ensouled can give voice," meaning that an un-ensouled body would merely *sound*, while the presence of a soul transcends that sound into a meaningful expression of the soul: the voice.[17] The idea that the voice provides a direct access to the soul, or at least more direct than written text would, has increased the value of the voice in Western society.[18] Aristotle's claim that the "blind are more understanding than the deaf because hearing exerts a direct influence on the formation of moral character" is telltale of the bias towards the voice over other forms of expression, as well as a bias about able-bodiedness and the presence of a soul. The voice is traditionally regarded as a higher legal binding than writing, which is why oaths, confessions, and marriage ceremonies are predominantly voice-driven.[19] Moreover, the voice is rendered as a more direct expression of the self, because it seems more intimately and directly connected to the human body than writing. However, as stated in the introduction of this thesis, despite the voice being an inextricably human feature, historically, not every person is considered to be as human as the other. For example, during the times of slavery, black people were treated as subhumans, despite them having human voices. This racially informed human/nonhuman binary is especially relevant when considering Nina Sun Eidsheim and Stoever theories on the 'racial transformation of sound.' In their theories of sonic blackness and the sonic color line, they show that sounds can be racially transformed by the listening ear. This listening ear is shaped by the sociohistorical context of segregation, slavery, and othering.[20] In the case of the voice, this means that the perception of blackness in a voice can render our perception of that voice as nonhuman.

This chapter aims to find out how a voice, being an inextricably human feature, can be perceived as less-than-human, or even nonhuman. By building upon Stoever's explanation of the sonic color line and the listening ear, I investigate how our perception of the human voice can be racially transformed. The racial transformation of the voice urges questions about which elements of the voice are perceived as less human. Ultimately, this chapter provides a theoretical

---

[16] Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 118.

[17] Steven Connor cites Aristotle, see Aristoteles, D. W Hamlyn, and Christopher John Shields, *De Anima: Books 2 and 3 (with Passages from Book 1)*, Clarendon Aristotle Series. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 33; Steven Connor, "Whisper Music," *Lecture* (2007), accessed on March 15, 2020, http://stevenconnor.com/whispermusic/.

[18] Jonathan Sterne, "Part I: Hearing, Listening, Deafness," *The Sound Studies Reader* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 20.

[19] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

[20] Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," 664; Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 3.

framework to understand the social and physical elements that play a role in the racial transformation of sound that Stoever describes.

In the first section, I further discuss Stoever and Eidsheims concepts about the racial transformation of sound in relation to the voice. In the second section, I examine how the voice is perceived as a human feature. Through a consideration of Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, it becomes clear that our perception of the body in a voice plays a vital role in our perception of the sound as human. This sounding of the body, which Barthes conceptualizes as the grain of the voice, points to the fact that we can also perceive the black body in sound. In the third section, I look into the way in which our listening ear is shaped by society. In order to explain how socially constructed binaries can transform our perception of a voice into a less-than-human one, I build upon Gaunt's conceptualization of second nature, which acknowledges the process of learned gestures to be "coded" in our bodies. In the fourth section, I explore the relation between the racial transformation of the voice and noise as being an undesired sound. Through a consideration of the role that noise plays in the human voice, I establish that the way we perceive a black body in sound is historically connected to the way in which we perceive noise. Subsequently, this leads me to argue that the perceived distinction between noise and sound is related to the racial transformation of sound. Through a consideration of the way in which percussion is connected to noise, both in an acoustic and a social definition, I point out that hip hop, which is a music genre in which percussion is central, is indeed rendered as an expression of blackness.

The Racial Transformation of the Voice in the Listening Ear

In order to fully understand the relation between racial transformation of voices and the human/nonhuman binary, this section further defines what racial transformation entails according to Eidsheim and Stoever. Generally speaking, the voice is valued by its relation to the body that carries it. This means that when you look like a woman, you must sound and behave like the version that fits the patriarchal worldview, and when you do not, you are faced with othering. Musical voices are perceived in a similar way. In her study of the reception of opera singer Marian Anderson, Eidsheim shows how the visual appearance of Anderson resulted reviewers to comment negatively on the "perceived presence of the black voice in a body," which Eidsheim conceptualizes as *sonic blackness*.[21] The reviewers that were aware of Anderson's skin color criticized her voice for having a "black timbre" and being unequipped for performing this musical work. As Eidsheim points out, these perceived faults in her voice were based upon the perceived sonic blackness. Reviewers who were not aware of the skin color of Anderson, for instance because they heard her on the radio, did not point out the racially informed faults.[22] Sonic blackness thus refers to the way in which we perceive racial quality in someone's voice when we are aware of the color of their skin. As Eidsheim points out, the perceived timbral blackness is not the resonance of a particular type of body but instead "it resonates in the *listener's*

---

[21] Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," 647.
[22] Ibid., 664.

ear."[23] This ear is shaped by the socially constructed norms we learn to listen in, and has the ability to racially transform our perception of sound. Sonic blackness shows how the human body of a black person is perceived as "marked," standing in the way of one's singing abilities, while the white body is "neutral."

The process of racially transforming sound is also described by Stoever, who builds upon Eidsheims conceptualization of the listening ear to theorize how some sounds carry a racial connotation with them, or as Stoever calls it, *the sonic color line.*[24] The sonic color line is not the racial transformation of sound on the basis of knowing the color of someone's skin, but rather, it points towards the fact that in our society some sounds have gained a racial connotation. Stoever shows that, although race has long been understood as a primarily visual phenomenon, sound is an unacknowledged but ever-present sense in the construction of race and the performance of racial oppression.[25] Stoever exposes how listening, power, and race were involved in many deadly encounters that display the white privilege of sonic authority in the public space. The danger of the sonic color line lies in the reiteration of stereotypes about black people, for instance, the perceived aggression, noisiness, and loudness that makes "white authority figures continue to expect black people to perform more visible, overt, and extreme forms of compliance—through speech, vocal tone, eye contact, and physical behavior—than they ask of white subjects."[26] In Stoever's description of the sounds and silences in several harrowing cases of deadly police violence against black people, it becomes clear that the voices of the black victims were transformed into "'blackness': dangerous noise, outsized aggression, and a threatening strength."[27] Such transformations are the sonic colorline at work, as the sounds become racialized in the listening ear that has been shaped to relate them to histories of segregation, slavery, and othering. Unfortunately, since Stoever's and William Cheng's pleadings for acknowledging that racism is still present in our eyes as well as our ears, more cases of (police) violence against people of color in the US can be added to the list of ones that resemble the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, and more. In the first five months of 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd have fallen victim to deathly violence solely because of the way their victimizers perceived their blackness as a threat. As I pointed out in the introduction, the murder of George Floyd is a significant example of how the sonic colorline played a role in how a black voice is dehumanized in white ears.

Embodied Listening to the Voice

In this section, I theorize a phenomenology of the voice in order to get a better understanding of how we perceive it. The notion of embodied perception, which refers to the fact that we perceive phenomena through our bodies, shows that our perception of the voice occurs through gesture. This means that our own body plays a central role in listening to the voice.[28] Our

---

[23] Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," 646. Emphasis in original.

[24] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line,* 3.

[25] Ibid., 4.

[26] Ibid., 2.

[27] Ibid., 3.

[28] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 190.

perception of the voice is deeply embedded in both a socially constructed sign system, as well as the materiality of the human body. This materiality is perceived as the *grain of the voice*, which refers to the way we perceive the human body when listening to a voice. However, our perception of that grain is shaped by socially constructed ideas of racialized bodies, which makes that, despite our perception of the body in sound, our listening ear can still racially transform the voice into one that is deemed less-than-human.

According to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, we can only perceive the world *through* our body. Therefore, our perception of the world is always a result of the interaction between ourselves, the "embodied subject," and the things around us.[29] Embodied phenomenology incorporates the experience of having a body as the primary means to perceive the world, but also ourselves. Therefore, our perception of other people as human stems in our embodied perception of our own humanness. The same goes for the voice: having one affects our perception of another voice, because we understand what it feels like to express certain sounds. This is why Merleau-Ponty extents his theory of embodied phenomenology with the idea that we perceive everything through gesture.[30] Gestures are movements of the body that express meaning, and the relation between the corporeal movement and meaning is socially constructed.

Merleau-Ponty gives the example of expressing anger, for instance, by shouting and stomping your feet. Shouting is a more expressive gesture than speaking, because it requires a more energetic and emotional performance of the body. According to Merleau-Ponty, the listener perceives these gestures as angry, not because they compare the gestures with past expressions of anger and come to the conclusion that the intended meaning is anger, but rather, because they experience the gestures as anger themselves.[31] Although this description of the gesture of shouting is rooted in a socially constructed meaning, the listener still perceives the gesture in an embodied way, which affects her experience of the gesture. As Merleau-Ponty points out, there is no natural relation between gestures and what they seem to signify, but, just like words, their meaning is socially constructed: "Having the same organs and the same nervous system is not sufficient for the same emotions to take on the same signs in two different conscious subjects. What matters is the manner in which they make use of their body, the simultaneous articulation of their body and their world in the emotion."[32] This means that the fact that we perceive the world through our bodies has in turn created a gestural sign system that affects our embodied perception. Caroline Wilkins argues that this is indeed the case: "The act of hearing another voice, something so akin to our own instrument, resembles a sensation of being touched as our nervous system responds accordingly."[33] Our perception of humanness in the voice is based on our embodied perception of people and things around us. This makes us

---

[29] Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 191.
[30] Ibid., 190.
[31] Ibid. The meaning of gestures is dependent on cultural context, or as Merleau-Ponty states: "When angry, the Japanese person smiles." Ibid., 195.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Caroline Wilkins, "From voice-body to sound-body: A phenomenological approach to the voice," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* 1 (2016), 119.

perceive the other not primarily by means of a rational interpretative consideration, but rather, through an embodied perception that relates the other to the self.

For his theorization of the grain of the voice, Barthes builds upon Julia Kristeva's concepts of *pheno-text* and *geno-text* to explain how we perceive a human body through the voice.[34] Pheno-text is the tissue of cultural values defining the symbolic meaning of sound, in other words, the meaning of the expressed sounds within a sign system, while geno-text adheres to the physicality of the vocal expression, or the body of the sound.[35] In Kristeva's conception of the voice, the distinction is made between the sounds of the consonants and vowels that make up the symbolic meaning, and the way one specific person sounds when articulating them. The explanation of pheno-text seems to be tied to a certain matter-of-factness of language: the word dog refers to the specific type of animal while the word hog refers to another specific type precisely because its symbols differ from the first word. On the contrary, geno-text is much more a category in the emotional field, tied to the physicality of the body. Barthes' concept of the grain of the voice is an extension of this idea, pointing out how the pheno-text, which is the conscious use of symbols to refer to a concept—you mean dog, so you do not say hog—, and geno-text, which is the (subconscious) bodily expression of emotion and identity, always operate in an entangled manner to constitute the voice. This means that the perceived grain, or body, in a voice affects the perceived meaning.

The technology of voice synthesis shows how the grain of the voice is central to our perception of humanness. Even synthesized voices cannot escape being listened to without perceiving a body and subsequent identity. For example, in the case of the older voice synthesis technology, like Window's Microsoft Bob or Apple's MacInTalk Fred, the technology was not primarily focused on simulating a convincing human voice, but rather aimed at producing an understandable text-to-speech feature for personal computers.[36] Even though Bob and Fred do not have a human body, we can still perceive a grain in their synthesized voices. Due to the fact that these synthesized voices are developed for the human listening ear, the listener will perceive both a pheno- and geno-text, which results in the perception of a body in the sound. The synthesized voices still perform a gender-identity and accent, which shape the perceived body in our perception of their voices. This shows that even in voices that are *not human*, our embodied perception and the grain of the voice still assign the sound a humanness.

The perceived body in voice is tied to the notion of the voice as inextricably human. However, due to the sustained racist power structures in our society, our perception of the perceived body is racially transformed. This lies at the root of what Eidsheim and Stoever conceptualize as the perceived sounding of a black body and the racial transformation of certain sounds. For both concepts, it seems that the sonic perception of a human body plays an

---

[34] Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 182.
[35] Julia Kristeva, *Semeiotikè* (1969), 224.
[36] Microsoft 'Bob' and MacInTalk 'Fred' are examples of the first widely used text-to-speech software on Windows Personal Computers and Apple devices, both released in 1995. These synthesized voices sounded very robotic and had only one way to pronounce a certain letter combination, resulting in synthetically sounding intonation when speaking full sentences.

important role in the understanding of the voice. The perceived body in the voice, or grain, is a result of the socially constructed meaning of the voice. The grain of the voice is thus not only a signifier for humanness, at the same time, it is also a sign that signifies racial and gender identity. Although Merleau-Ponty and Barthes point out the social constructedness of the embodied perception of sounding bodies, they do not give this aspect the attention it deserves. The racial transformation of the voice seems to happen exactly in the perception of the body in the voice. Perceiving a black body in the sound of a voice is not a matter of an essential timbre that can be found, but rather, a socially constructed expression of race that is either only perceived or also performed. In the following part I elaborate the idea that the racial transformation of sound is not connected to biological features, but rather a result of learned coded gestures ingrained in our second nature.

Hearing the Black Body

The idea that biological facts lie at the foundation of how we perceive another body is rooted in an essentialist worldview. In this worldview, a natural relation between the biological body and someone's identity is considered the norm. Essentializing people for their gender or skin color provided "scientific" arguments for treating people differently. And still, this essentialism is easily accepted as a natural science, because we experience the self so much as a natural given. However, as Paul Gilroy points out, as a reaction to the harms of such essentialism, anti-essentialism does not solve the problem either. The idea that we are all equal is harmful because it denies the fact that different people are given different opportunities on the basis of their race or gender. Moreover, this also denies the shared experiences and historical background people have to enable the creation of community and culture, something that has proven to be vital for black people in the United States to survive the trauma and repercussions of slavery.[37] Instead, Gilroy builds upon the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault to come to the concept of *anti-anti-essentialism*, which denies the idea of racial essences, but acknowledges the fact that the socially constructed meanings around the color of your skin grant you an experience that is similar to others of the same color. Although Gilroy denies that there is an essential "black identity," due to the biases and power-structures that rule our culture, according to him, black identity is "lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires."[38] Anti-anti-essentialism thus provides a way to think about how experiences shape our body and identity.

In her study of the way young black girls learn "coded gestures" through playing hand-clapping games that shape their identity, Gaunt elaborates Gilroy's notion of anti-anti-essentialism. Gaunt shows that the gestures and rhymes of the games internalize an expected behavior in the girls' bodies, and she calls this *second nature*.[39] The term is an extension

---

[37] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 80.
[38] Ibid., 102.
[39] Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play*, 60.

of the idea that all is learned, because it also acknowledges that our learned experiences can become a seemingly "natural" part of who we are. Gaunt builds upon the linguistic concept of "kinesics," which is the study of analyzing body movement and gesture, and vocal qualifiers that accompany these. As Gaunt points out, "[g]estures and motions are not thought to be instinctive human nature in this area of study, rather they are considered 'learned systems'."[40] The idea of second nature thus combines the notion that all meaning is socially constructed, as well as the fact that we feel as if our own gestures and perception of other gestures are natural. Gaunt distinguishes between an embodied phenomenology, which, similar to Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied perception, refers to the way that we perceive everything through our bodies, and a lived phenomenology, which refers to the way this embodied perception continuously shapes, filters, and ultimately transforms our perception.[41] The fact that we feel as if we are a natural result of the way we are *in essence* makes that we can easily forget that our perception is in fact socially constructed. This is precisely the danger with the sonic color line that Stoever points out: we are unaware of the way our listening ear racially transforms sound and can turn its meaning into one that we experience as noisy. The sonic color line and the listening ear are an example of this distinction that makes up second nature: the listening ear is our body, shaped through lived experiences, and because all perception is embodied, our perception of the sonic color line is a result of this lived phenomenology.

The imagined body is thus a result of the listener's own bodily experience and the fact that we not only perceive the world through our bodies, but engage with the world through our bodies as well. Similar to how all perception is through gesture, all expression is as well. Coded gestures are not naturally tied to our bodies, but through coded gestures we are able to express our bodily identity, or that of others. Eidsheim's study of black opera singer Marian Anderson is an example of how coded gestures carry an in-essentialism-rooted notion that certain expressions are exclusive to certain bodies, even though this is actually not the case. The sonic blackness, which is the perceived black body in the voice, resulted in reviewers of Anderson's performances to perceive racial elements in her voice, such as a "dark" timbre.[42] However, through her study of instances when listeners were not aware of Anderson's skin color, they perceived none of these elements and assumed a white body to be singing.[43] As Eidsheim explains: "'Sonic blackness' is *not* the unmediated sound of essential otherness or the sound of a distinct phenotype."[44] Instead, Eidsheim suggests that it is "a perceptual phantom projected by the listener; a vocal timbre that happens to match current expectations about blackness; or the shaping of vocal timbre to match current ideas about the sound of blackness."[45] An example of performed sonic whiteness can be found in the Spike Lee-directed movie *BlacKKKlansman* (2018). In this movie, which is based on a true story, black police officer Ron Stallworth performs sonic

---

[40] Gaunt borrows the concept of *kinesics* from the linguist R. L. Birdwhistell. See Ibid.*,* 60.

[41] Ibid.*,* 57.

[42] Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," 647. This perceived blackness stands in contrast with the whiteness that is often "envisioned as the normative unmarked, only drawing forward when forced to confront the other." Ibid., 664.

[43] Ibid., 647.

[44] Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," 664.

[45] Ibid.

whiteness to infiltrate the Ku Klux Klan in 1979. While being on the phone with Ku Klux Klan members and even the leader David Duke, Stallworth impersonates a white man interested in joining. He adapts his accent and tone of voice to create a perception of sonic whiteness, while also using racist slurs and mentioning white supremacist beliefs. Both the stories of Ron Stallworth and Marian Anderson show that sonic blackness and whiteness are a matter of the expression and perception of socially constructed coded gestures. This relates to Stoever's conceptualization of the sonic color line and the listening ear, because the racial transformation of sound lies not with the body of the speaker, but rather, in the ear of the beholder.

The (Non)Human Qualities of Noise

When listening to the voice, the distinction between (pleasant) sound and (unwanted) noise is connected to the way our listening ear racially transforms sounds. The human ability to produce noise is important for the notion of some voices to be perceived as less-than-human or nonhuman, because noise and the racial nonhuman have in common that they are rendered unwanted, unpleasant, or loud. This perception is crystallized in the historical connotation of noise with the black body: "Indictments of black sonic impurities ultimately hinge on the following twin assumptions: black bodies make noise; and black ears can take—embrace, withstand, shrug off—noise."[46] The racial connotation of the black body as noisy stems in a long history of dehumanizing black people. The idea that the black body and noise are related urges questions about how bodily sounds are perceived as noise.

In this section, I connect the preceding theorization of how we listen to the human voice to theory about nonhuman noises in the voice. Firstly, I will explain the cultural and acoustic definitions of noise. Secondly, I discuss these definitions in relation to the human voice. Specifically, this will be done by looking at how consonants and vowels are related to noise. This is followed by a consideration of the relation between bodily sounds and the idea of intentional and accidental sounds. Ultimately, the racial connotation to the musical quality of noise is discussed by looking at the way noise is central in the musical expression of hip hop.

The Cultural and Acoustic Definition of Noise

Noise is an important sound in our consideration of the nonhuman voice, because it is connected to the perception of sonic blackness. This means that the listening ear can transform the perceived black body into a noisy experience. Noise is an undesirable sound, or as Cambridge Dictionary describes it, noise is "a sound or sounds, especially when it is unwanted, unpleasant, or loud." Another definition shows how a distinction is made between sound as "anything you hear," while noise falls under that umbrella term for all sonic matter as a category that is "especially (an) unwanted or meaningless unmusical sound."[47] Unorganized, loud, and meaningless sounds are perceived as noise, but these qualities are always relative to what is

---

[46] Cheng, "Black Noise, White Ears," 119.
[47] Cambridge Dictionary, "Noise," accessed May 25, 2020, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/noise; J.C. Richards and R.W. Schmidt, *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics* (Routledge, 2013), 951.

perceived as desirable sounds.[48] Throughout history, the perception of sound as noise or music has changed significantly, often through innovations that sound out of tune at first, only to become a treasured dissonance later.[49] Noise is thus always a "social relationship, always socially grounded, rather than a natural fact."[50] In his dialectical approach to noise, Adorno defines it as an ideological tool that can be used to articulate criticism of the established bourgeois.[51] Jacques Attali provides a similar conceptualization of noise, defining it as what is not allowed, deemed illegal, and subject to exclusion, and therefore its definition changes with the changing of societal norms.[52] However, these descriptions are related to specific musical qualities of noise: loud and unorganized sounds can easily be imagined in an exciting song structure. John Latartara explains the acoustic quality of noise to be the fact that it is a sound wave that does not repeat: "[u]nlike tone, which is periodic and has an unambiguous perceived fundamental with respect to its harmonics, a noise contains energy across the frequency spectrum, inharmonic and broadband."[53] The acoustic definition of noise is helpful to consider the musical qualities of noise and points towards the use of spectrograms to point out the inharmonic instances in a recording.

Consonants and Vowels

The distinction between noise and sound relates to the ability of the human body to produce consonants and vowels. Historically, vowels have been conceptualized as sounds that resonate and therefore equal soul and liveliness, while consonants are the sounds that kill that resonance.[54] Steven Connor points out how the human body is involved in a different way in the production of vowels and consonants: to produce a vowel, the vocal cords are played by air like a tense string, virtuously creating a resonance that is shaped into a distinctive sound by the mouth acting as a tiny cathedral. However, to produce a consonant, the air is cut off or distorted, as if the lungs are a saggy wind instrument and the tongue, mouth, and teeth are the padded keys opening and closing to shape the raspy exhales.[55] The two different notions of the human body in relation to consonants and vowels are similar to the way in which the human/nonhuman binary is applied to the human body. Whereas both are human, one is sophisticated and behaved, while the other is dirty and uncontrolled. Moreover, in Western European languages, consonants (the

---

[48] Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan, and Paul Hegarty, "Introduction," *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise*, 1-11 (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012), 2.

[49] Josh Epstein, *Sublime Noise: Musical Culture and the Modernist Writer: Hopkins Studies in Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2.

[50] In his study of the impact of urbanization on noise, Saeed Hydaralli points out that the roaring motors of Formula 1 race cars are not perceived as noise to spectators because these are the object of their attention. See Saeed Hydaralli, "What is Noise? An Inquiry into its Formal Properties," *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012), 27.

[51] Epstein, *Sublime Noise*, 9.

[52] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music (*Manchester University Press, 1985), 5-6, 11, paraphrased in Paul Hegarty, "A Chronic Condition: Noise and Time," *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012), 17.

[53] John Latartara, "Laptop Composition at the Turn of the Millennium: Repetition and Noise in the Music of Oval, Merzbow, and Kid606," *Twentieth-Century Music* 7, no. 1 (2010), 92.

[54] Connor, "Whisper Music."

[55] Connor, "Whisper Music."

word literally translating to "co-sounders") are so-called because they need to be sounded together with vowels in order to form meaning:

> A consonant or consonantal cluster can express a feeling—tsk, ch, grr, pff—but there are few consonantal clusters that can single-handedly express a concept, or perform a specific grammatical function, as 'I', or 'a'. As John D. Peters has shown in his admirable history of the vowel (2006), the vowels have often been thought of as the soul of speech, with consonants serving for its body.[56]

In music, the vowel holds a more powerful position because it can be used to sing one or more notes without any consonants, for instance, with a melisma covering multiple bars on the sound of "aa," while consonants are rarely occupying one note solely, let alone multiple notes. Whereas vowels are able to comprise full concepts, melismatic melodies, and resonate harmonic overtones, consonants are associated with noises that come with the movements of our bodies.[57]

The physical quality of consonants and vowels on their musical function can be visually distinguished by looking at spectrograms of both sounds. The acoustic quality of vowels is the harmonic, which means that they have "at least one overtone in whole number multiples of the fundamental," which means that the vocalized tone resonates into a pattern of overtones.[58] This can be seen in a spectrogram that shows the intensity of a sound's resonance on a scale of frequencies measured in hertz. Figure 1 shows how different vowels always have a clear formant pattern in the spectrogram. The formants, which are shown by the brightness of the lines which correspond to the intensity of the sounding frequencies, show at what pitches the overtones of specific vowels or diphthong resonate.[59] For speech vowels, you can make out the different vowel sounds from a spectrogram by looking at the two lowest high-intensity resonating frequencies. When singing vowels, the musical quality adds to the number of overtones visible, however, in these overtones one can still distinguish the same formant patterns as in the spoken vowels by looking at the most intense frequencies, as shown in Figure 2.
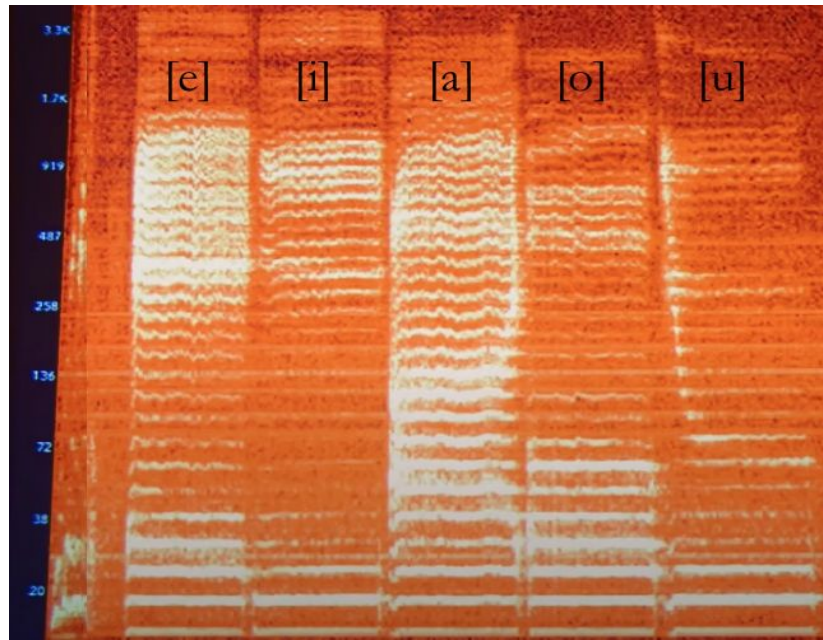
---

[56] Ibid.

[57] Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations* (Reaktion Books, 2014), 34.

[58] Latartara, "Laptop Composition at the Turn of the Millennium," 92.

[59] M. Feldman, E. Wilbourne, S. Rings, B. Kane, and J.Q. Davies, "Why Voice Now?," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* vol. 68, no. 3 (2015), 669.

Figure 1

The orange lines mark the first formant; the pink lines mark the second formants. The frequencies of these two formants determine the vowel sound in the spectrogram (x= time, y=frequency in Hertz).[60]

Figure 2
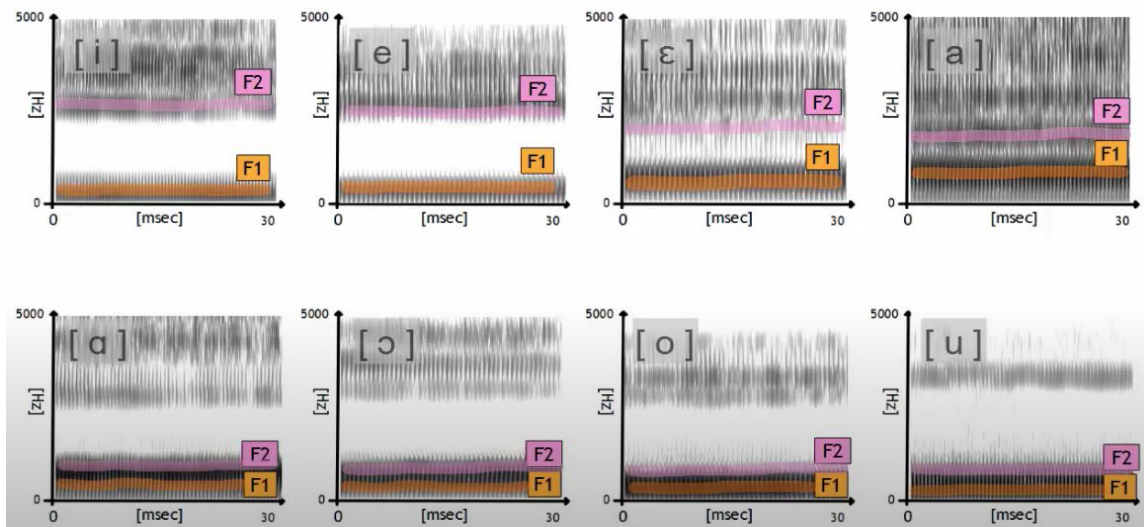
This spectrogram shows the vowels being sung. The formant patterns of the vowels are similar to the spoken vowels seen in figure 1. However, when being sung, additional overtones are being created through the resonating vocal tract.

---

[60] The Virtual Linguistics Campus, "PHO_211 – Reading Spectrograms: Vowels," *YouTube* (June 30, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWel5j-F8lE.
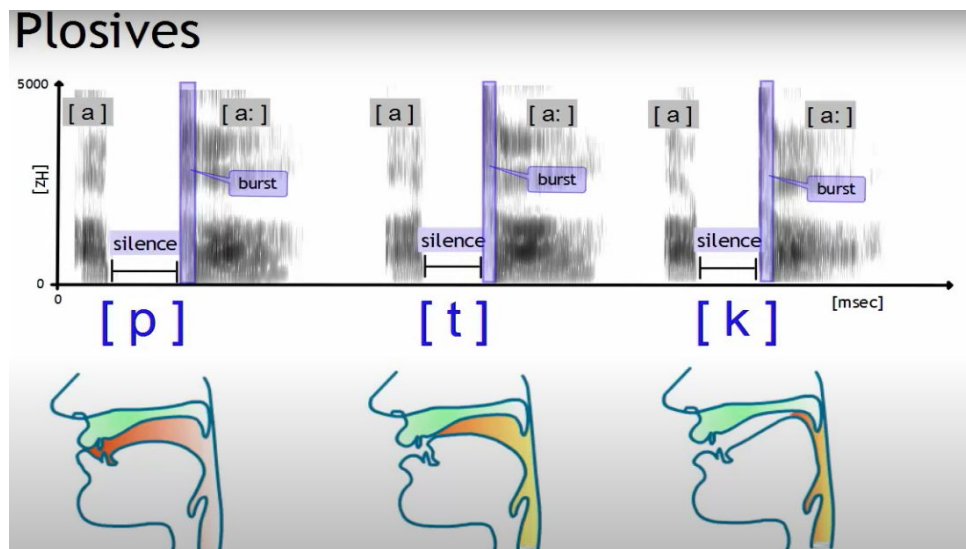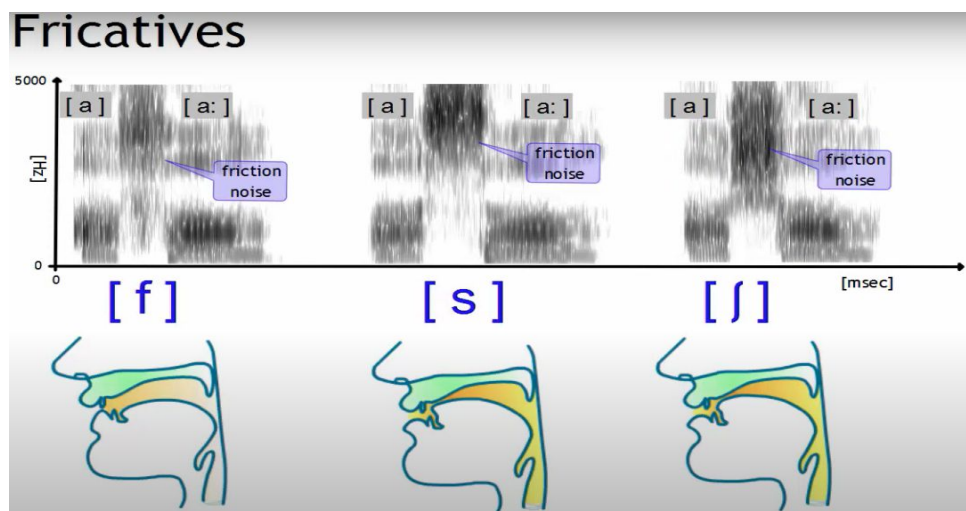
Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 3 and 4 show how the vocalization of consonants appear in spectrograms, showing how they create bursts, silences and friction noise.

Consonants, on the other hand, are detectable in between the resonating vowel sounds because of their dependence on friction noise. The friction noises can be spotted in spectrograms by looking at the way in which the soundwaves are non-repeated and not resonating into overtones.[61] This makes that friction noise appears in spectrograms as empty stripes along the y-axis above one formant at the bottom. This is because consonants are formed by a lack of vocal fold vibration, combined with the smacking of a tongue against teeth and palate (e.g. with the plosive /t/), the closing of the lips (e.g. to produce the nasal sound of /m/, or the plosive /p/), blowing air between teeth or lips and teeth (e.g. with fricatives such as the

---

[61] Latartara, "Laptop Composition at the Turn of the Millennium," 92.

/f/ or /s/), or by closing the throat slightly to produce glottal sounds (e.g. a Spanish /j/ or a Dutch /g/).[62] Moreover, plosive consonants make use of a silence followed by a burst, which can be seen in Figures 3 and 4. Although friction noise can be spotted in spectrograms, this does not mean that consonantal clusters are always perceived as noisy. Although vowels and consonants alike can be part of what is perceived as music or noise, their expressive quality is related to the idea of noisy, undesirable, uncontrolled, and unorganized sounds, opposed to musical, desirable, controlled, and organized sounds. The perception of the musical qualities of vowels and consonants is related to the distinction of what is rendered human or animal, in the sense that one manages to control their body, and the other does not. For instance, the rattling of a drum becomes music in the context of a jazz performance in the sense that the sound is then desirable, while it would be perceived as undesirable, or noise, when you hear it in the middle of a library while trying to study. However, besides context, the intention behind the sound also plays a role in whether sounds are perceived as music or noise. A similar sound to the rattling drums could be the sound of a garbage bin being pulled over bumpy concrete, but this sound is not the intended outcome of the action, but rather accessory, even accidental, to the action of emptying the bin in a garbage truck. This alludes to the notion that the intention behind the sound is integral to the distinction between noise and music.

Intentional and Accidental Sounds

Intentional and accidental sounds are part of a binary that aligns with how we view the difference between human and animal: humans are intelligent beings that are able to control their bodies, instincts, and environment, while animals are merely following their instincts and are dependent on the unpredictable occurrences of the world around them. The idea that noise is made by accident and music is made by intention makes that the latter is an exclusively human ability. Besides the fact that bird song can be perceived as musical, as can compositions made by the movements of ants used as notation, the relation to the sonic color line here lies in the fact that certain human sounds can also be perceived as noise.

The idea that music is a product of intentionality leaves noise as a sound caused by accident, and thus a lack of rationality, control and sophistication. As Janet Bicknell points out, the perception of sound as musical, or in other words, an expression of meaning, is related to the perceived intention behind the sound. Even if it is not actually there, this perceived intention is made possible by the fundamental social beings humans are.[63] A similar idea of intention and music is expressed by Aristotle, who points out that an ensouled being can still produce noise. He points out that the difference between that and meaningful sound lies in the imagination present with the expressed sound, or, in other words, the intention behind the sound.[64] With no intention behind the sound, it becomes accidental noise, as is the case for all nonhuman animals, who have no imagination, as well as for the animalistic sounds that come along with the human

---

[62] A.C.M. Rietveld and V.J. van Heuven, *Algemene Fonetiek*, 3rd edition (Bussum: Uitgeverij Coutinho, 2013), 156-161.

[63] Janet Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 90.

[64] Connor, *Beyond Words,* 8.

body. Aristotle takes the cough as an example of a sound that has no intended meaning behind it and merely serves a physical function of clearing one's throat, therefore, the cough sound cannot be labelled as voice. The underlying binary of human animals and nonhuman animals in this distinction tells us that the rational ability of a human to intent meaning is what Aristotle perceives as voice, while our animal side comes through in our (unintended) noises. However, the fallacy of Aristotle's distinction lies in the impossibility to know if there is intention behind sound or not, as Connor argues: "Aren't all the sounds of the voice in fact just noises?" adding that nothing that forms part of speech can be said to be truly meaningless noise.[65] This implies that the "noises" that could come out through our speech unintentionally can carry meaning, just like how we can use noises intentionally as communicative expressions as well.[66] Therefore, noise, sound, and music are all products of our perception. Similar to the sonic color line, this perception is culturally shaped, and therefore it is important to be critical of what we deem noisy and what we deem musical.

The Racial Connotation with Musical Noise

Historically, the musical use of friction noises is associated with non-Western music. Percussion has traditionally been used in baroque and romantic music to signify exoticism, for example in the Turkish music style that was full of oriental signifiers portraying a Western constructed version of the middle east.[67] The vocalization of percussion, for example beatboxing, shows how consonantal clusters are related to this specific musical expression. This is opposed by the way in which vowels are related to harmonic sound. The physical association with percussion and harmony can therefore be related with the way in which we perceive race in sound. The Western Classical tradition of using percussion to signify the other is therefore an extension of the human/nonhuman binary, in which the human is related to the musical, heavenly harmony, and the nonhuman is related to the noisy, earthly, body. The Cartesian dualism that lies at the root of this division thus renders the mind as the feature that lets us transgress our animal bodies to be human.[68] The racial transformation of the voice is thus embedded in a wider racial transformation of musical sounds, such as percussion, however, they are all connected to the perceived black body in sound.

Hip hop, a black music genre in which percussion is central, is an example of how the perceived sonic blackness in sound results in negative connotations. The perception of hip hop as noisy seems not to be rooted in the actual sounds but in the perception of blackness in the sound. Critics of the genre hold the artists accountable for creating loud, aggressive noise. Although musical taste is subjective, the amount of opposition to this particular African American style of popular music is fueled by the way the genre's aesthetic is racially transformed into sonic color lines signifying blackness. Aside from the lyrical content, which is often called out for the use of the n-word and derogatory language towards women, which John McWhorter

---

[65] Connor, *Beyond Words*, 10.
[66] Goddard, Halligan, and Hegarty, "Introduction," 1.
[67] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).
[68] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 191.

calls harmful for the youth as it reinforces a "thuggish" stereotype that "retards black success,"[69] the central role of rhythm and beats, both in the percussion as the vocal style of rapping, are assoc iated with noise. For example, Bill Cosby and Alvin Poussaint describe rapping as "spewing angry," referring to the fast, rhythmic, spoken style of delivering the lyrics.[70] The critique that hip hop plays on the worst stereotypes of black people is thus an extension of their perception of the musical elements in hip hop as noisy.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the voice is central to our perception of humanness. We recognize a human voice predominantly through our perception of what Barthes calls the grain of the voice, which is the sounding of a body. As Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied perception shows, our body is central in our perception of things around us. In the case of our perception of the voice, it seems that the grain of the voice, which is the perception of a human body in the sound, is a way of relating our own humanness to the voice we hear. The hierarchical binary of human/nonhuman is perpetuated in our perception of race in sound, in which noise plays an important role. This binary renders aspects such as civilization, art, and complex language as human, whereas uncivilized behavior, noise, and chaos are rendered as aspects that are animalistic. Noise, therefore, is precisely what is perceived when the listening ear racially transforms sound into blackness. This process renders some voices to be perceived as more human, and others as less-than-human, even nonhuman.

The contradicting result is that noise is essential to the sound of a human voice, while it is also rendered a factor of nonhumanness. It seems that the perceived body in the sound of the voice plays an important role in this contradiction, because the sounds that acoustically create friction noise are precisely the sounds that foreground the human body. For example, the tradition of Western music is predominantly focused on resonating and harmonizing, for which vowels are more effective. Consonants are therefore associated with the friction noises of percussion, a musical element that is used to signify non-Western cultures in music. Consonants are, after all, the sounds of smacking lips, clattering teeth and glottal bursts. The central role that noise plays in hip hop thus seems to foreground the black body in its sonic landscape. This leads me to argue that the perception of noise is related to the racial perception of a human body in sound.

In the following chapter, I go deeper into this phenomenon by considering the southern-American hip hop subgenre trap, which seems to deliberately express sonic blackness in its sound. Especially the centralization of the voice in trap allows for a further consideration of how on the one hand, we recognize the voice as coming from a human, while on the other hand, sonic blackness renders it as nonhuman. The examples of the opera singer Marian Anderson's voice being perceived as black only when the listener was visually informed and Ron Stallworth in *BlacKkKlansman* being perceived as white by using a specific accent and several

---

[69] John McWhorter, "How Hip Hop Holds Blacks Back," *City Journal,* vol. 13, no. 3 (2003): 66-75.

[70] Bill Cosby, and Alvin F. Poussaint. *Come on people: On the path from victims to victors* (Thomas Nelson Inc, 2009).

characteristic phrases, show that the perceived black body in a voice is a result of performativity. Therefore, the idea that a music genre such as trap can elaborately perform sonic blackness is not so strange: music can indeed perform gestures to communicate a specific body to the listener. Specifically, the perceived sonic blackness in trap deserves a closer look, because the musical elements that are used to create sonic blackness tell us more about the relation between noise and racially nonhuman voices.

Chapter 2: Trap's Southern Blackness

In the previous chapter I discussed how the racial transformation of sounds can lead to the perception of the voice as nonhuman. The concepts of sonic blackness and the sonic color line by Eidsheim and Stoever show that the listening ear is shaped by the Western society in such a way that sounds are racially transformed.[71] The racial transformation of sounds is related to the perceived black body in the voice. As was shown in the previous chapter, the perception of the black body is related to noise. Hip hop is specifically a genre in which noise is central to the sonic landscape, because of the use of percussion and rap. As the examples of criticism of hip hop in the previous chapter show, this genre is often described negatively with descriptions of its loudness, noisiness, and aggressive sound, which exposes the racial connotation between perceived noise and perceived sonic blackness. Trap is a subgenre of hip hop in which noise is particularly used by artists and in turn thus creates a perceived sonic blackness. This also links to the fact that trap is generally seen as specifically black musical genre.

The southern hip hop genre trap is seen as a style of music that breathes sonic blackness.[72] The musical elements in trap, such as the use of rattling sounds, shouts, and illegible mumbling create a musical expression that is perceived as noisy and aggressive by a mainstream audience. Burton points out noise as one of the important elements for the perceived sonic blackness in trap, which he finds in the rattling sounds in the beat and vocals, the shouted ad libs, and the illegible mushmouth rapping. As shown in chapter 1, noise is also an essential element in creating perceived blackness in the human voice and can in turn make the human voice be perceived as nonhuman. Combining these two ideas raises questions about what part the use of voice plays in creating the noisy aesthetic of trap music and how this relates to the perceived sonic blackness in trap.

To be able to properly analyze the use of the voice in trap in relation to its perceived sonic blackness, it is important to first define trap as a genre from a sociohistorical perspective and examine why trap music sounds black. This chapter does that in the following way. The first section zooms in on the social and historical context of trap, specifically on its foundation in the South of the United States, and how this context influenced the use of sounds in early hip hop genres that subsequently influenced trap's noisy aesthetic. The second section highlights the distinction between post-race blackness and trap's blackness. This provides us with the necessary framework to be able to further examine the relation between the use of the voice in trap and its relation to the perceived sonic blackness of trap, which I will use in chapter 3 for an analysis of the use of voice in trap music.

---

[71] Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," 664; and Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line,* 3.
[72] Burton, *Posthuman Rap,* 93. See also Dimitri Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

The Geographics of Trap's Southernness

In this section I consider the cultural geography that lies at the foundation of the genre. In hip hop, geography has always been an important way of expressing identity and sense of place.[73] I argue that trap's geographical context is important because the connotations between trap and black stereotypes are not rooted in general blackness, but rather, in specific expectations of and connotations with the southern black identity. By considering what it means to be black in the South, I shed light on the way in which the collective southern identity played a role in the formation of the southern subgenres of hip hop that were the precursors to trap. As I show in the first part of this section, the racial demarcation of the South shows a location-specific history of systemic racial oppression that resulted in continued treatment of southern black people as nonhuman, even after the abolishing of slavery.[74] In the second part of this section I describe the way in which the early hip hop artists in the southern metropoles claimed the South as a collective identity to become a player in the nationwide hip hop culture. Lastly, in the third part of this section, I connect the historical context of trap to its sounds. By looking at the influences of the early southern hip hop genres on trap, I show how the musical style of trap is inherently connected to the southern black identity. This section thus connects the racial connotations with trap's sounds to its sociohistorical context. This will be used in the second part of this chapter to consider the perceived sonic blackness in trap in relation to what Burton theorizes as post-race blackness.

The Sociohistorical Demarcation of the South

Trap is an expression of black urban living in the American South. Trap music is notorious for its lyrical subject matter bragging about the monetary merits of drug dealing and gang violence. The genre is, after all, named after a drug dealing location: the trap house. These are houses in predominantly Atlanta where crack cocaine is cooked and dealt. The trap refers to the single entry/exit point that makes entering or leaving only possible by the grace of the security at the door.[75] The literal trap house is not the only geographical root that demarcates the genre. When hip hop artists from New York City and Los Angeles gained nationwide popularity throughout the 80s and early 90s, southern DJs and MCs reacted to the music by remixing records from coastal artists at block parties. In their remixes of popular hip hop songs, they were able to express their "southernness." The emphasis on their geography was meant as a bold statement against New York- and Los Angeles-dominated hip hop industry that looked down upon the southern music.[76] The uprise of southern hip hop was quickly marketed as new sounds coming from "the Dirty South," grouping together all southern artists under one demeanor. The

---

[73] Kenneth French. "Geography of American Rap: Rap Diffusion and Rap Centers," *GeoJournal* 82 (2015), 261.

[74] Gregory Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class, and Violence in a New South City* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 27. See also Melanie J. Springer, "Where Is 'the South'? Assessing the Meaning of Geography in Politics," *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (2019).

[75] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 82.

[76] Darren E. Grem, "'The South Got Something to Say:' Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America," *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2006), 56.

collective southern identity adverts to a shared experience of what it means to be black in states that have a long history of anti-black politics and anti-black violence.

In order to understand the cultural connotations with the South, I will provide a brief history of the formative role that anti-black politics and segregation played in this specific region in the United States. First, it is important to take a closer look at which area is considered to be part of the South. The most concise demarcation of the South is also called "the Deep South," which refers to the seven most southern states in the Eastern half of the US: Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida. This demarcation, as is shown in Figure 5, is based on the presence of rich soil, which resulted in a large number of cotton plantations, making this area one of the major slavery industries in the United States. Nonetheless, Melanie Springer points out that while the Deep South is more warranted for studies focused on the pre-war nineteenth century, slavery, and plantation life, the broader definitions of the South are suitable when studying black life under Jim Crow laws.[77]

Figure 5
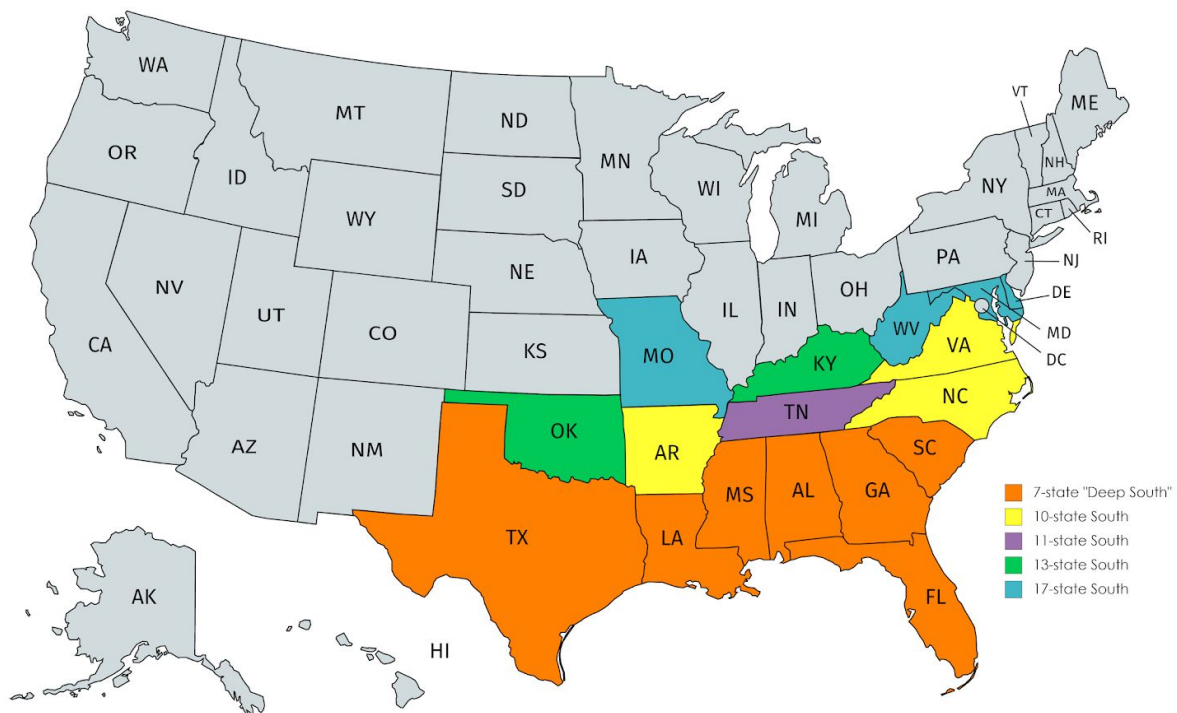
The different colors show the additions to the different demarcations of "the South," so every color is added upon the states of the previous demarcation, starting from the 7-state "Deep South" which are Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas, from there adding Arkansas, North Carolina, and Virginia for the 10-state South, adding Tennessee for the 11-state South, then Kentucky and Oklahoma for a 13-state demarcation, and lastly adding Missouri, Maryland, West-Virginia and Delaware for the 17-state South.[78]

---

[77] Springer, "Where Is 'the South'?," 1126.
[78] Springer, "Where Is 'the South'?," 1104-5 and 1108-9.

The 11-state South is used most often because this includes all the states that were under official Confederate control during the Civil War, which lasted from 1861 until 1865. However, an alternative 10-state demarcation excluding Tennessee is also used because this was the only previously Confederate state that did not oppose the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment—which abolished slavery—just after the Civil War ended.[79] This shows how much the state politics are involved in the demarcations of the South, as Tennessee stood out from the Confederate states by giving in to the Union. The shared political history might also involve Kentucky and Oklahoma in a 13-state South, because of the way the Ku Klux Klan dominated the state politics in this wider South in the decades after the Civil War. For example, in Oklahoma the Ku Klux Klan domination resulted in the passing of at least 18 discriminatory Jim Crow laws between 1890 and 1957.[80] These local politics often overruled governmental policies, which led to 142 documented anti-black lynching happening in Kentucky between 1882 and 1968 without anyone being charged, even though a nationwide anti-lynching law was passed in 1897.[81]

Racist crimes were far longer enacted and tolerated by the white population in the southern states than in the American North. On June 19th, 1865, Texas was the last state to abolish slavery in the country, after the American Civil War which was generally fought between the northern states and the southern states over the unlawfulness of enslaving African Americans. However, even after the abolishment of slavery, freed African Americans still faced segregation, disfranchisement, and violence, especially in the newly urbanized areas in the South. Black people that found autonomy in newly urbanized lifestyles were faced with anti-black violence, spurred by white press and white elite power structures seeking to remain in control over the white working class by giving them a shared enemy that was not the government, but the freed slaves. Xenophobic narratives about black people taking away jobs from the white working class fueled anti-black violence. For example, the Atlanta Riot/Massacre of 1906 was ignited by the framing of black people as the likely suspects of sexual violence against white women by the white press. After several reports of black men allegedly attacking white women, the white working class men saw an opportunity to become "protectors of their women."[82] The massacre that followed caused between twenty six and forty seven black people to be slaughtered by an armed mob.[83] During the aftermath, the mob was praised as victorious, making the "white opposition to every aspect of black freedom and autonomy" even stronger, enabling the white elite to control the white working class and oppress African Americans who had found autonomy in their freedom.[84] Moreover, the riot led to the disenfranchisement of black people, and the continuation of the legitimization of antiblack violence. Similar anti-black riots followed in cities all over the United States, for example in Springfield, Illinois in 1908, East St. Louis and

---

[79] Ibid., 1106.
[80] Ibid., 1113.
[81] Ibid., 1111.
[82] Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot,* 27.
[83] Ibid., 110.
[84] Ibid., 130.

Houston in 1917, Chicago in 1919, and Tulsa 1921.[85] When in 1954 the tide started turning and segregation of schools was declared unconstitutional, it took another ten years for the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act to be installed in 1965, ending the Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation.

Throughout the twentieth century, local politics in the South were dominated by anti-black sentiments, creating a social-political situation where black people were dehumanized, criminalized, and their opportunities were actively obstructed through segregation.[86] This caused the black population in southern states to further decline over the course of the twentieth century.[87] When looking at the decline of black citizen population from 1860 to 1960, the pattern extends to the 17-state demarcation of the South, showing how widespread the effects of the social-political situation for black people were.[88] According to Springer, the decline in the percentage of black population of the total state population, "combined with the history of discriminatory provisions in these states, reveals that a prominent racist culture was not only prevalent, but was also potentially impactful to a sizable number of people in these states."[89] Although the traced decline of black population in the southern states in the Jim Crow era is rooted in a complex entanglement of social, economic and political situations, however, the general idea about the South being more racist and thus having less opportunities for black people has stuck with its image. The social-political climate was, at the least, dispiriting for black people in the South, who sought better opportunities in northern cities, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City. These northern cities would gain an opposite reputation, also fueled by them becoming important birthplaces for influential genres of black music, such as bebop, disco, and hip hop.

The South Got Something to Say!

The construction of the South is shaped by a political history that has repercussions for the experiences of black people in these states. However, the cultural demarcation of "southern blackness," as expressed in southern hip hop, proves to be more fragmented throughout the states, gravitating mostly to the larger cities and metropoles, such as Atlanta in Georgia, Houston in Texas, Miami in Florida, and New Orleans in Louisiana. Throughout the 1990s,

> [r]ap scenes, styles, and local industries coalesced in Atlanta, Houston, Memphis, New Orleans, Miami, and Virginia Beach. While these urban centers were often discursively subsumed under the rubric of "the South," in reality, the development of rap as a genre in various southern states was a highly uneven process in which

---

[85] Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot,* ix.

[86] William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1935), 170.

[87] Springer, "Where Is 'the South'?," 1119.

[88] See Figure 5 on page 27 for the 17-state demarcation of the South. Ibid., 1101-3.

[89] Ibid., 1118.

certain places became hubs of the emergent industry and style, while others languished in the hinterlands of these cities.[90]

After the Civil War, these quickly growing urbanized areas provided new opportunities for black people, resulting in black communities and neighborhoods in which black arts and culture could thrive. It is in this context that southern DJs and MCs witnessed the birth of hip hop in the Bronx, and started reacting to it by remixing their own versions of popular songs into danceable versions aimed at the dance scene in the southern black neighborhoods. Block parties and black-owned local radio stations provided the early stage for southern hip hop. In the 80s and beginning of the 90s, successful southern artists, such as The Geto Boys, Goodie Mob, and OutKast, were branded as the new and fresh sounds coming from the "Dirty South," even though they originated in different cities and states.[91] Hip hop from the large southern cities was grouped as one collective southern identity as an effective marketing strategy inspired by the infamous rap feuds of the 1990s, which showed that there was much commercial gain in expressing territorialism in hip hop music.[92] However, as Darren Grem points out:

> [w]hat the South had to say reveals much about the making and marketing of regional and racial identity in modern America. Most explicitly, the rise of Atlanta's 'Dirty South' rap music industry shows the readiness of some African Americans in the post-civil rights era not only to embrace their southernness but to sell it as well.[93]

The emotional investment of the rappers and fans who identified with the referenced geography in hip hop shows that taking pride in locality is valued beyond the marketing ploys.[94] The collective identity of all coming from "the Dirty South" allowed southern hip hop artists to reflect on shared experiences of the southern socio-political situation. An illustrative event is when Atlanta-based OutKast won the Source Music award for "best new rap group of the year" in 1995, at the height of the infamous rap feud between East coast and West coast labels Bad Boy and Death Row Records, which led to the murders of two influential rappers Notorious BIG and Tupac. During the award ceremony at Madison Square Garden, the largely East Coast crowd "booed the group, crystalizing the anti-South sentiment common on both coasts."[95] When accepting the award, OutKast member Andre 3000 famously proclaimed "The South got

---

[90] Miller, "Dirty Decade."

[91] Grem, "'The South Got Something to Say'," 56.

[92] French, *Geography of American rap,* 263 and 268.

[93] Grem, "'The South Got Something to Say'," 56.

[94] As Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson point out "[o]ther scholars caution against a naturalized or taken-for-granted understanding of 'organic' relationships between music and the cultural history of [a] locale and argue that participants appropriate 'music via global flows and networks to construct particular narratives of the local." However, they argue that there are actually many reasons why the regional collective identity is about shared experiences as black people in the place where slavery was born, Jim Crow laws were abolished the latest, and antiblack violence has been tolerated throughout. See Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 7-8.

[95] Greg Dimitriadis, "Hip hop and Humanism," in *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US*, edited by Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, Bernard 'Bun B' Freeman (Suny: University at Buffalo, 2015), 145.

something to say!" to the audience, marking a moment of taking pride in their southern black identity. As Miller notices, "[t]he defensive framing of southern qualities suggests that artists in this period were unable to express 'southernness' without referencing, and ultimately reinscribing, to some extent, persistent negative stereotypes."[96] The Dirty South initially functioned as a collective stance against negative stereotypes about southern blackness. These stereotypes, such as the idea that there was not much opportunity for southern black people to escape the ghetto and become anything other than a drug dealer or part of a violent gang, were based on the historical context of the South being a hostile environment towards African Americans. Hip hop's aesthetic and values, such as locality and authenticity, granted southern artists the ability to reflect on their cultural-geographical context and adapt the stylistic parameters of hip hop to express their experiences.

During the late 90s the expression of this collective southern identity transitioned into more specific articulations of local identities, expressed through shouting out the specific ward, neighborhood, or region. This marketing strategy let southern artists abandon the negative connotations still lingering on about southernness, and instead let them express a more focused localized authenticity of the specific black urban center they were affiliated with.[97] Kenneth French points out the many instances where rappers shout out their regions in pride, roughly divided into East Coast, West Coast, Dirty South, and Midwest, as well as mentioning the area code (such as Atlanta rapper Ludacris), or nickname for their city (Kanye West using the South-side Chicago slang "Chi-Town").[98] The sense of place French describes is connected to the highly valued authenticity and street credibility in hip hop.[99]

The Southern Origins of Trap Sounds

Southern hip hop music reflects the local experiences of inner city street life, both in its lyrics as well as in its musical elements.[100] An example of this is the bounce culture in New Orleans, where DJs such as DJ Jubilee remixed popular hip hop beats from the coasts to match the similar-named, highly sexual dance style. Call-and-response motives were used by rappers Big Freedia and Magnolia Shorty to hype up the crowd. The fast-paced rap of Tommy Wright iii put the Memphis rap scene on the map. In Miami and Atlanta, the more up-tempo style of crunk provided a danceable take on hip hop, with DJs remixing popular songs and beats into records that suited the club scene. Besides the fast-paced drum machine claps and heavy basslines, crunk is notable for its use of energetic shouts to *crank-up* the energy.[101]

---

[96] Miller, "Dirty Decade."
[97] Ibid.
[98] French, *Geography of American rap,* 262. See also Miller, "Dirty Decade."
[99] French, *Geography of American rap,* 262.
[100] Ibid.
[101] The name of the high energy genre is allegedly a combination between the words "crazy" or "chronic," which is a type of marihuana, and "drunk."

The characteristic crunk shouts became popular under a wider audience through Lil Jon's typical shouted ad libs of "yeah," "what" and "skeet."[102] These ad libs are reminiscent of ceremonial chants, because of their call-and-response interaction with the primary vocals and the fact that they are easy to sing, or shout, along to. The term ad lib is short for the Latin term *ad-libitum*, which translates to "at one's pleasure." In music, the term is used to describe improvised moments, for example someone that plays an unprepared melody or sings a melodic embellishment. The ad libs in trap are vocalized improvisations that often occur at the end of a rapped line. Similar to the use of ad libs in crunk, the shouted exclamations are used to hype up the energy. As Lil Jon explains it himself, the aim of crunk is not to display virtuosic rap flow and rhymes, but rather to stir up the excitement at a dance party and "get the club crunk."[103] In several critiques of crunk, the artistry of artists such as Lil Jon, the Ying Yang Twins, and 2 Live Crew is compared to preceding acts such as OutKast and Goodie Mob, who in the eyes of reviewers were able to show creative lyrical content and still move a crowd, whereas Lil Jon only does the latter.[104] The (strip)club aesthetic of crunk is perpetuated in trap's hypersexual lyrics and use of hype ad libs.

As was mentioned earlier, trap music is connected to the drug scene of Atlanta. Rapping about the dire circumstances of widespread drug abuse and related gang violence sets a dark premise for the music, calling for dark beats. As Burton points out, "[the] connection to the production side of the drug game is integral to the spirit of trap [...]."[105] He points out several musical elements that define the trap beat, such as a low bpm and dark minor droning. The Houston-based DJ Screw popularized this sound and influenced trap with his "chopped and screwed" style throughout the 1990s. He introduced a remixing style that was highly related to the drug scene of Southern cities. By slowing down and scratching records on his turntable, he "chopped and screwed" the sounds into slower, blurry vocals and instrumentation and a fragmented beat. This sound resembled the experience of listening to music while drinking *lean*, or *sizzurp*, which is codeine laced soda or coughing syrup. DJ Screw's remix of "Inside Looking Out," originally by 20-2-Life, is exemplary of this style because the original song is sampled in its entirety, although significantly slowed down from a bpm of 154 to 118. This causes the vocals and instrumentals to drop their pitch, creating a morphed, deepened, and dark voice and a very slow beat.[106] The centrality of drugs in southern hip hop came at a time when the "war on drugs," reinforced under Reagan's presidency throughout the 1980s, had aggravated the ghettoization of the black neighborhoods in many big cities. The targeting of crack cocaine, which was a specific black-used drug as it was cheaper than the popularized white-people party drug cocaine, caused a massive incarceration of black people. The criminalization of crack

---

[102] Miller, "Dirty Decade."

[103] Lil Jon in "The Southern Lab," *Hip Hop Evolution* season 4, episode 2, directed by Darby Wheeler and Rodrigo Bascunan, Netflix, 2020.

[104] Miller enlists several critiques of crunk, such as Murray, "Lil Jon, Crew Crank Up Chant with A-List Assist;" "CD Reviews: Hip-Hop," *The Irish Times*, 15; and Trish Davis, "New on Disc," *Hartford Courant*, sec. CAL, (January 9, 2003). See also Miller, "Dirty Decade."

[105] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 81.

[106] "Inside Looking Out," DJ Screw feat. 20-2-Life, Spotify, track 8 on *All Screwed Up, Vol. II*, Bigtyme Recordz, 1995.

affected many black neighborhoods because people were not treated for their drug addiction, but instead locked up.

The DJ Screw-inspired musical elements of downtuning and distorting of the voice, having a low bpm, and setting a gloomy musical background have become part of trap's characteristic sound. Moreover, trap's lyrics are full of references to being buzzed out from lean or making money from dealing drugs. Examples of the musical and lyrical references to drugs can be found throughout the catalogue of many trap artists, a few of them being Gucci Mane's "Trap House," "Tony Montana" by Future and Drake, and "Do Not Disturb" by Smokepurpp, Lil Yachty and Offset.[107] These songs all are in a minor key and make use of minor second chromaticism. For example, the title track of Gucci Mane's 2005 debut album *Trap House* starts off with a vocalized descending glissando from the tonic, D flat, and from there on the song pivots on the D flat minor chord and an added minor second chord, the E minor. For the hook of the chorus he incorporates a melodic line that moves up from the tonic to the third for the first part, followed by the same movement but in reverse. The high-pitched synths produce a squeaky sound that contrasts the low-pitched voice of Gucci Mane. Similar to "Trap House," the song "Do Not Disturb" is also filled with second minor chromatism. Throughout the song, a sliding synthesizer glissando is repeated, creating a constantly repeated resolution of dissonance. The downbeat musical background creates a contrast to the celebration of making a lot of money through dealing drugs. The mushmouth rapping that trap is known also signifies drug use. In "Tony Montana," from the 2012 album *Pluto*, Future's uses a "geeked up" voice, which means being very high on drugs, that sounds as if he is clenching his teeth while rapping. As Future explains himself, the mumbled vocal effect signifies that "when you're high, you can barely talk."[108] The mumbled, agitated vocals, together with the minor second chromatism are widely used in trap and create a threatening vibe that matches the setting of drug dealing and using.

Finally, Burton points out that a typical trap song is filled with rattling sounds, whether in the synthetic thirty-second or sixty-fourth note hi-hat rattles, a triplet rhythm also called "Migos flow," ad libs filled with rolling r's, or all of these combined.[109] The rattling sound signifies a "choppa," which is an automatic firearm, to express hypermasculinity and gangster culture.[110] As Miles White argues, the performance of gender and masculinity in hip hop is derived from a certain cultural and musical context that "reifies historical representations of black males through various modes of performance practices that play upon the body."[111] These historical representations of black males in popular culture were profoundly affected by minstrelsy, which

---

[107] "Trap House," Gucci Mane, Spotify, track 2 on *Trap House*, Big Cat Records and Tommy Boy Records, 2005; "Tony Montana," Future feat. Drake, Spotify, track 9 on *Pluto*, A1, Freebandz, Epic, 2012; "Do Not Disturb," Smokepurpp and Murda Beatz feat. Lil Yachty and Offset, Spotify, track 3 on *Bless Yo Trap*, Alamo, Interscope, 2018.

[108] *Thisis50*, "Future Says Rappers Have To Dumb Their Lyrics Down Nowadays," *YouTube* (November 6, 2011), 2'04". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pSnj0VK7RQ.

[109] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 91, 79, 97.

[110] Ibid., 98.

[111] Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, rap, and the performance of masculinity* (University of Illinois Press, 2011), 3.

"reinscribes the black male as brute or the folkloric bad [n-word] figure, a lawless man feared by blacks and whites alike [...]."[112] This relates the expressed hypermasculinity in hip hop, and more specifically trap, to the way in which Gaunt describes the way in which we learn to connect coded gestures to our identity expression. The perceived black male body in trap is therefore historically rooted in socially constructed notions of hypermasculinity, immorality and aggression. The association with the black male body and the dehumanizing stereotypes of that body thus affect the way the listening ear racially transforms of trap's musical expression of being a black male.

Post-Race Blackness and Trap's Worn-Out Stereotypes of Blackness

In the first section of this chapter, I argue that trap's expression of sonic blackness is specifically one of southern blackness. The perception of sonic blackness in trap music demands a closer look, because the genre's deliberate use of sonic color lines seems to reiterate worn-out stereotypes of southern blackness. In this section I look at the position of trap's sonic blackness in relation to post-race blackness. As Burton points out, trap is disengaged from the post-race political debates and as such can be seen as an expression of ironic blackness that exists outside of the racial politics of our society. Although I agree with Burton to some extent, I argue that explaining trap as a non-political expression even so involves the genre in racial politics. Moreover, as the first section of this chapter shows, trap music is a creative expression of southern black urban experiences, and therefore it is not right to dismiss the genre for its ironic expression of a noisy blackness.

Trap's noisy aesthetic is racially transformed into a type of blackness that seems to match negative stereotypes about a hypermasculine, and scary blackness.[113] The relation between noise and the racial transformation of sound that was discussed in the previous chapter indeed seems to be deliberately present in the musical elements of trap. The sonic references to gang violence, drugs, and hypermasculinity seem to reiterate worn-out stereotypes about black people. Burton describes this phenomenon in relation to the mainstream perception of trap's sonic blackness:

> Trap seems to trap blackness right where the mainstream, where the black parallel public [...] wants it: in a compromised position, disengaged from political action, waking up from a lean-induced slumber in the driver's seat of a Bugatti paid for with ill-gotten gains, surrounded by police.[114]

This description refers to the image trap music evokes in the mainstream listening ear. This mainstream is dominated by a conception of post-race blackness, which refers to the idea that society has surpassed the repercussions of its history of slavery and segregation. The sonic blackness expressed by trap thus confronts the mainstream with an old-fashioned stereotypical form of blackness that they believe is not present in our current society. As Stoever points out,

---

[112] White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z*, 3.
[113] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 90.
[114] Ibid., 99-100.

"both race and racism persist, even as 'color-blind' formations of race infuse federal law and political pundits insist America is a 'post-racial' nation in the wake of Barack Obama's presidency."[115] With a black man obtaining the highest power, it is argued that racism is officially eradicated. However, the ongoing (police) violence towards people of color, as described in the introduction of this thesis, as well as the continuous operating of the sonic color line rendering some voices less human than others, prove that this is not the case. The fact that trap's sonic blackness does provoke responses of fear with the listeners is out of place with their "color-blind" ideal.

Discussing trap in light of the post-race nation is preceded by a wave of early hip hop scholarship that has been dismissive of the entire music genre being politically outspoken and culturally formative.[116] A much-cited example is the book *All About the Beat: Why Hip Hop Can't Save Black America* by McWhorter. In this book, McWhorter argues that considering hip hop for more than its ability to make people feel good and dance is futile. He tries to make a proxy-argument for all the "real" activism that does actually help black culture but denies hip hop to have anything to do with that cause.[117] It seems that the perceived sonic blackness of hip hop drives McWhorter into thinking similar to Cosby and Poussaint, which is that this particular type of music is not suitable for activism/a transition to a post-race nation because it expresses too much of what they have learned to be negative stereotypical facets of black culture.[118] McWhorter surpasses the fact that seeing these elements as negative stereotypes actually reiterates racial oppression, as he depends on a "norm" that was actually set by white people in the first place. More importantly, hip hop music apparently evokes a connotation with activism, urging McWhorter to call the music out for that. Burton identifies how such critiques would probably render the new wave of politically-engaged hip hop as tolerable. He takes the Pulitzer-prize winning rapper Kendrick Lamar as an example of an artist who expresses a post-race blackness, which is a form of blackness that is intelligible and non-threatening to the (white) listening ear. Hip hop that criticizes the idea that racism is no more. Post-race hip hop thus refers to the way in which the rappers are able to express criticism of the idea that America as a post-racial nation is a phenomenon similar to color-blind formations where people turn a "blind eye" towards the sonic and visual color lines. In many ways, post-race hip hop does mark an important shift for black arts, because the artists are able to criticize racism without being limited by their own race, because they are taken seriously.

Burton shows how trap stands in stark contrast with the mainstream reception of post-race blackness:

> Trap doesn't work like Kendrick. It doesn't engage in a direct politics that is legible
> to the mainstream, a respectable black parallel public made in the image of neoliberal

---

[115] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 27.
[116] John Lewis, "Shock of the New," *The Guardian* (March 2, 2007), accessed on May 20th, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/mar/02/jazz.
[117] John McWhorter, *All About the Beat: Why hip-hop can't save Black America* (Penguin, 2008), 9.
[118] McWhorter, "How Hip Hop Holds Blacks Back." See also Cosby and Poussaint, *Come on people.*

market logic. Instead, trap taps a variety of performative and sonic elements that register as scary or apolitical blackness to the mainstream so that its main work vibrates outside the proper channels of political discourse.[119]

Trap artists indeed rarely speak out on political debates about race, dissimilar to the Atlanta hip hop artists Big Boi and Andre3000 from OutKast, as well as Killer Mike and El-P from Run the Jewels. Different from this more mainstream post-race hip hop, trap lyricism rarely involves anything other than bragging about extreme wealth, sexual promiscuity, gang violence, and excessive drug use. This is one of the reasons why Burton argues that trap sounds ironically black, meaning that they confirm old-fashioned stereotypes of sounding black that fall out of step with the post-race ideology. According to Burton, trap's sonic blackness is "provoking responses of fear or dismissal from listeners, and it's at the core of what I term trap irony."[120] The term trap irony refers to the way in which trap asserts blackness in a "post-racial milieu," meaning that trap reaffirms the fact that we do in fact perceive blackness, both visually as in sound. As Burton states, "[...] trap generally reads as apolitical, but in its ironic performance of blackness in a post-race society, it digs into blackness in a way that undermines post-race ideology without directly addressing it."[121] This leads him to argue that trap has created its own apolitical space outside of the political discourse, and even outside of the "present conception of what it is to be human."[122] While I agree that trap operates in its own space outside of the mainstream racial politics debate, I think that calling trap an ironic expression of blackness conversely involves the music in politics still, which reiterates the notion that black culture is always a political movement.

As was shown in the first chapter, the relation between noise and the racial transformation of sound is that both are transformed in the listening ear. Trap sounds are therefore rendered as noisy because they do not match expectations of the post-race ideology that currently shapes the listening ear. Trap's noisy aesthetic deviates from the norm, rendering its sounds subversive, which is Burton's take on trap. However, similar to how the music is rendered noisy in the post-racial mainstream listening ear, it can also be rendered activist in that same ear, regardless of the intentions of the artists. This is why I argue that we have to be careful to label trap as specifically non-political, because by doing so we still involve the genre in politics for the way its subversive outsidenes reflects upon the inside.

The first section of this chapter showed that trap's sounds are not as outside of society as all, but rather, they are an expression of southern black urban culture. The fact that trap's expression of experiences of gangster culture, sexual promiscuity and drugs are deemed as an ironic blackness goes by the fact that these elements are also tied to notions about classist differences. Miller points out a similar point when discussing the expressed hypersexuality in

---

[119] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 97.

[120] Ibid., 71.

[121] Ibid., 72.

[122] Ibid., 99. Burton partly quotes Sylvia Wynter, see David Scott, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 4, no. 2 (September 2000): 118–208. 136.

crunk, saying that "it is difficult to separate the critique of sexism in crunk from the association of the music with 'lower social orders.'"[123] Being heavily influenced by crunk, trap music continues to face similar critiques for the music's association with (strip)club music, poverty, low-intelligence, street life, and drugs, in a criminalizing and dehumanizing way. However, it should not be forgotten that it is a white privilege to signify any of those themes without it being seen as an inherent feature of their race.

Although I agree with Burton that trap is not made for a mainstream, white listening ear, I think there is more to be said about the way in which trap artists play with the white perspective on their music. For example, the protest song "This is America" by Childish Gambino has a fragmented structure where contrasting parts alternate between aggressive rap and upbeat gospel singing. It starts off with a gospel-like choir singing about just wanting to party, which is haphazardly cut off by a dark beat and a low-pitched rap, in which Childish Gambino warns the listener to not be "caught slipping" and making references to instances of police violence towards black people. The accompanying music video invigorates the contrasts by incorporating gun shots between the fragments and showing Gambino perform dance moves reminiscent of the Jim Crow figure that was highly popular in the minstrel tradition, trying to get all the attention from the viewer while in the background references to police violence against black people, school shootings, and Black Lives Matter protests are made. The aggressive part is filled with trap elements, such as shouted ad libs and rattling hi-hats to signify a threatening sonic blackness.[124] The song was co-written by Young Thug, who, together with other trap artists such as 21 Savage and Quavo, also provided their voices for the hype ad libs.

The song and video stress the way in which white people prefer a version of blackness that fits their privilege, one where black people make soulful music and perform silly dances, while not wanting to look at the consequences of institutional racism, mass incarceration and police violence that happen on a daily basis. By using elements that are frowned upon for being an exaggeration of blackness, the trap artists that worked on this protest song use their expertise to signify a specific form of sonic blackness that contributes to the meaning of the song. The song and music video won several awards, sparked a chain reaction of parodies in which people from all over the world used the format to raise awareness for social injustice in their country, and has served as a protest song during Black Lives Matter protests. This example shows the activist potential of trap sounds. However, despite the use of many trap elements, "This is America" does not sound like a trap song. The exaggerated sonic blackness that is used to communicate the activist message turns the listening experience political right away. This urges questions about Burton's theory of trap irony as a way to provoke responses of fear and dismissal with a mainstream audience. Apparently, trap's noisy aesthetic can indeed be used to communicate a political message. In calling trap ironic, Burton bypasses the musical expression of southern black culture. The genre should also be considered as a music style that people engage with for other reasons than it being subversive. Trap seems to have the potential of

---

[123] Miller, "Dirty Decade."

[124] "This is America," Childish Gambino, Spotify, single, RCA Records, Wolf + Rothstein, mcDJ Recording, 2018.

confronting the subconscious racial transformation of sound in the white listening ear by presenting engaging music that also is perceived as sonic blackness. In the next chapter I take a closer look at how trap vocals surpass the human/nonhuman voice binary into the black posthuman.

Conclusion

In this chapter I investigated the way in which the hip hop genre trap is perceived as a genre that deliberately expresses sonic blackness in its sound. By looking at the relation between the sociohistoric context of the music's noisy aesthetic and the specific stereotypes about a black, southern, hypermasculine identity, I found that trap's expression of sonic blackness is one that is tied to stereotypes about the southern black identity that long predate hip hop. Trap sounds are associated with a stereotypical hypermasculine, aggressive blackness. The musical elements signify gang violence, drug use, and sexual promiscuity. The trap beat consists of a deep bass and rattling hi-hats that imitate firearms, associating its sound with gang violence. Moreover, trap vocals are characterized by a style that is often derogatorily referred to as mumble-rap, mushmouth rapping, or warble rap is characterized by the murmured lyrical delivery causing a high level of unintelligibility, as if the rappers are too high on drugs to talk.[125] Together with the use of hype ad libs that are derived from crunk, and the minor second chromatism and slow bpm that were inspired by DJ Screw's chopped and screwed sound, the musical elements in trap signify elements of the southern black urban experience.

Furthermore, I connected the notion of southern blackness to Burton's distinction between post-race blackness and the blackness expressed in trap music. This distinction is based predominantly on the fact that trap artists do not express political engagement in their music, and therefore seem to exist outside of race politics. However, I found that trap's expression of the southern black experience is actually more involved in society than Burton states, and therefore I argue that his conceptualization of trap as ironically outside of the political realm does not encompass the musical expressiveness of the genre. Moreover, we have to be careful not to frame trap's deliberate disengagement with politics as a subversive form of activism, especially when we do so from a white point of view. This would reiterate the notion that black entertainment has to explain itself in one way or another in order for it to be, which lies at the root of the criticism of hip hop expressed by McWhorther. If hip hop wants to be activist, it seems that it cannot do so without having to justify its use of derogatory language, and if it wants to be just entertainment, it also cannot do so without having to justify its use of in-group lexicon. Moreover, when comparing trap to coastal hip hop genres, it is important to be aware of the way this locational racial divide predates hip hop all the way back to the Civil War era.

It is important to listen past the sounds that appear as aggressive and subversive and take a closer look at what the noisy aesthetic of trap communicates beyond stereotypical associations of the black male. By considering the use of the voice in trap beyond the perceived stereotypical

---

[125] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 78-9.

sonic blackness, I aim to show that trap vocals express meaning through gesture in such a way that they transgress the human/nonhuman binary. In the next chapter I provide analyses of the use of the voice in trap to show how it transgresses the black body into a form that fits in the discourse of black posthumanism.

Chapter 3: Analyzing The Centralized Grotesque Body in Trap's Voices

In the first chapter, I showed how we listen to the voice, and how this listening can racially transform the sound of the voice to the extent of rendering it as nonhuman. The racial transformation is connected to the perception of the (black) body in sound, as was shown in the concepts of sonic blackness and the grain of the voice, as theorized by Eidsheim and Barthes. In the second chapter I discussed the way in which trap is seen as a specific music genre in which sonic blackness is perceived. This third chapter will combine the ideas from the first two chapters by analyzing the role of voice in the way the perceived noisiness of trap leads to the perceived black body in trap music in the listener's ear.

The perceived noisiness of trap sounds demands a closer look, because it seems that the trap aesthetic matches specific expectations about a stereotypical southern black identity. Trap seems to wield a noisy aesthetic to push the non-political aesthetic further. The centralized voice also centralizes the black body in a way that transgresses what is deemed humanly possible. The gestural expressiveness of trap vocals, together with the use of technological effects create a hyperexpression of sonic blackness that falls in line with what Burton theorizes as trap irony. However, I argue that calling the trap ironic does not encompass its ability to transgress what is deemed as the norm. My subsequent question is, what kind of black body can be perceived in trap? Burton alludes to a subversive, posthuman body, I elaborate this point by considering Bakhtin's explanation of the grotesque body as a way to transgress the human/nonhuman binary. Furthermore, I consider the use of technology in trap to create hypersoul, which refers to the way in which technology is used to create a hyperexpression of human emotions.

This chapter is structured in the following way. The first section further elaborates the idea of trap irony posed by Burton, by looking at similar conceptions of trap as a parodying and even grotesque music genre. I theorize the notion of the grotesque body in trap and connect this to the concept hypersoul. In the second section, I give an explanation of hypersoul as a black posthumanist concept and elaborate its relation to the racially informed human/nonhuman binary. In the third section I take a closer look at the technological production of trap vocals. This is used to establish how the fusion of technology and the voice is used to create trap's characteristic vocals. Finally, in the fourth section I analyze different trap songs to draw conclusions about how the use of voice relates to the perceived sonic blackness, and in particular the black male body, in trap. It becomes clear that the noisy aspects of trap serve as contrast to the voice, which makes that the voice, and subsequently the black body, are perceived in a more proximate and direct way by the listener. This perceived directness collides with the perceived sonic blackness, because directness lies at the foundation of why it is that we render the voice as inextricably human, while the racial transformation of sound would render that same voice as distant, threatening, and nonhuman. Ultimately, this leads me to argue that trap's vocal style can be seen as a form of hypersoul because it transgresses the human boundaries to create a posthuman expression of the black body in music.

From Grotesque to Hypersoul

As was shown in the previous chapter, stereotypes about black masculinity, illiteracy, and hypersexuality far predate crunk and trap music. The hypersexual and hyper masculine connotation with the stylistic elements of crunk and trap, such as the shouted ad libs, fast, danceable beat, and lyrics about parties and drugs reiterate an old-fashioned parody of blackness. The reiteration of those stereotypes in trap's aesthetic thus should be considered in relation to the sociohistorical context of the South and the way this area is traditionally related to race-politics. As was shown in the previous chapter, the musical elements of trap are perceived as noisy reiterations of worn-out stereotypes of a threatening blackness.[126] This leads Burton to argue that trap is an ironic outsider to the racial society we live in. This notion is similar to the way in which Miller considers trap and its forerunner crunk as music styles that parody a black hypermasculinity.[127] As Miller points out, these stereotypes are part of a stereotypical southern blackness that is related to an earlier generation's version of the archetypal southern, African American musical bogeymen, which are nonhuman creatures that present a version of blackness that is scary, hypersexual and nonsensical. Miller indeed finds a relation between the grotesque bogeymen and the musical and lyrical expressions of "extreme psychic states—anger, pain, aggressive rage, emotional release—with a visual and physical aesthetic that merges the traditional 'fly' stylishness of rap culture with freakish, uncanny, fractured bodies by drawing upon the expressive power of the grotesque."[128] The use of the notion grotesque stands out, because this concept has been theorized by Bakhtin as part of the carnivalesque, in that it relates the out-of-shape political situation to human anatomy. Bakhtin theorizes the grotesque as one that is "unfinished, outgrow[ing] itself, [and] trangress[ing] its own limits."[129] Bakhtin connects this concept to the carnivalesque, which he explains as the lived experience of a "reversed world" that parodies the hierarchical structures and norms of normal life.[130] These normative structures and power relations are suspended, even reversed, during carnavalesque life:

> The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate. *Eccentricity* is a special category of the carnival sense of the world, organically connected with the category of familiar contact; it permits—in concretely sensuous form—the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves.[131]

For Miller to identify elements of crunk and trap as grotesque makes sense, because the music presents many hyperextensions of the human body and the grotesque is, above all, a

---

[126] Eidsheim, "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera," 647.

[127] Miller, "*Dirty Decade.*"

[128] Ibid.

[129] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 29.

[130] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Theory and History of Literature vol. 8, edited by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122.

[131] Ibid., 123.

physical phenomenon. Trap voices are performed and produced in such a way that their physicality is emphasized as well. Moreover, the grotesque is a shape that is inextricably linked to the "normal;" it is a deformed version of the norm that confronts witnesses with the way they think in terms of a normative binary, which they would otherwise not notice because their perception feels like second nature to them. Miller points out how the New York-based rap group Gravediggaz introduced "images of rap monstrosity" to the national audiences. Their "vampire-fanged gold teeth and macabre lyrics evoking the paranormal or demonic [...] [influenced] [a]rtists from the South such as Three Six Mafia, Lil Jon, David Banner, the Ying Yang Twins, and Pastor Troy." He identifies this monstrous expression in rap imagery, such as "faces twisted into grimaces, bodies contorted or distorted, teeth fashioned into over-the-top 'grills'," as the "embodied rap grotesque." However, he does not go into the sonic expression of the grotesque in trap, even though this music genre specifically expresses a black body, perceived in the noisy aesthetic, that is shaped in an extreme way. The fact that we perceive the grain of the voice to be telltale for the bodily identity of someone makes the multi-layered vocal texture of trap a transgressional expression of the human body.

Trap thus presents a grotesque expression of blackness that parodies the real-world hierarchies that determine a white norm. The aggressive, unintelligent, and sexualized sounds of trap therefore present the listening ear with a grotesque black body that is stooled on the real life dehumanization of black people, and in doing so confront the listener with the way their perception of this body is racially transformed.

Through a consideration of the central role of the voice in trap songs, I find that trap is filled with voices. This seems to be connected to the deliberate sonic blackness that is perceived. The primary vocals, additional ad libs and vocalized samples occupy almost every beat of a typical trap song. These multiple voices, each with different added effects, such as autotune, reverb, and distortion, create a multi-layered texture in which the voice is centralized. The multilayered vocal texture of trap, as well as the excessive use of vocal effects makes the perceived body in trap transgress boundaries and norms set by society.[132] The elaborate way in which the hypermasculine black body is centralized in trap's sonic landscape creates a listening experience of a hyperexpression of the black body, into a grotesque body.[133] Following Bakhtin's theorization of the carnivalesque and the grotesque body, the way in which trap amplifies stereotypical signs of southern blackness can be seen as a parody of the way in which trap's noisy aesthetic is perceived as threatening in the white listening ear.

This grotesque expression relies heavily on production techniques and technologies that make the expression transgress the human ability. In order to understand how we can relate in an embodied way with voices that have been produced and edited heavily by technology, I move towards the concept of hypersoul. This concept was coined by Kodwo Eshun and elaborated by Alexander Weheliye in their studies of black posthumanity and Afrofuturism. Hypersoul is the

---

[132] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 29.
[133] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 122-3.

transgression of expressing human emotions beyond human ability through the use of technology. This leads me to argue that the grotesque body in trap also is a way of expressing a body that transgresses the human/nonhuman binary. This is why I argue that trap's vocal style is not only the presentation of a grotesque body in music, but this grotesque body can be seen as a posthuman expression because it transgresses the human/nonhuman binary.

Hypersoul and Black Posthumanism

In the following section, I elaborate the concept of hypersoul in order to theorize the position of trap in the black posthuman discourse. As I will show, hypersoul is a concept that is related to the process of black culture to reclaim their own position in a society where their bodies and voices are often diminished to racial stereotypes. By considering the way in which black culture

Soul music is a genre that emerged halfway through the 20th century in black communities. It is characterized by a centralized voice that sounds emotional, expressive, and acoustic. In soul music, the voice is typically unedited and unpolished to emphasize the "natural" quality of the singer. It is no coincidence that this "natural aesthetic" was deemed so suitable for black musicians by a white audience. Since the 1970s, black popular music has increasingly antagonized the racist stereotype that frames black people as being closer to nature, and thus being farther away from "civilization." The stereotypical perception of black voices as more "soulful" thus reiterates a power structure that is ultimately based on the human/nonhuman binary, in which the nonhuman signifies the idea of black people being less evolutionarily developed and thus closer to an animalistic state. The association of black voices and soul stems in the Enlightenment construction of whiteness as the norm, the literate subject, and anything deviating from this norm as other, or illiterate objects. Lindon Barrett theorized this singing voice/signing voice binary as the distinction between the black voice that is musical but meaningless, and the white voice that is rational and shows literacy through speech.[134]

The singing/signing voice binary thus is related to the human/nonhuman binary, because they are both about the relation between the sound of the voice and the human body. As Weheliye points out, besides humanity and whiteness, the signing voice also signals disembodiment: speech is so connected to the written word that it becomes neutral, ubiquitous truth, not dependent on any subjective positioning.[135] This lies opposite of the singing voice, which, besides subhumanity and blackness, signals embodiment: the singing voice *is* the body, whereas the signing voice *owns* the body. This clarifies how it can be that bodily noises that seem an inextricable part of the voice are considered less human in our society. The humanist ideal is about surpassing the animal nature of humanity and in doing so owning the body with the rational mind. Weheliye points out the moment in time when the black voice became disembodied, namely, through the first sound recording technologies.[136] The new possibility to

---

[134] Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 57.
[135] Alexander G. Weheliye, "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002), 27.
[136] Ibid., 28.

record and playback the voice indeed instigated a shift in cultural ideas about humanness and presence indeed had to be reconsidered. The ability to capture the voice in recording transformed the traditionally considered interior and embodied nature of speech, which was always sounding at the same moment it was spoken, to what Jonathan Sterne calls a "striking figure of exteriority."[137] In my analysis of trap vocals, I point out how the instances of sing-rapping is used to centralize the black body in the sound. I take a closer look at the way in which recording technology and specifically the use of vocal effects in black music are used to create a hyper expression of soul, and how this relates to the grotesque body that is perceived in trap music.

When music technologies, such as the turntable, synthesizer, and sound processors became widely available, black music scenes embraced the new sonic opportunities to distance themselves from the soul label. In many black popular music genres, such as disco, R&B, and hip hop, the use of technologies is emphasized, for example through techniques such as scratching, sampling, remixing, but also the use of vocoder and talk boxes.[138] These technologies became central to R&B and defined the sound of the mechanized yet soulful voice. The contrasting juxtaposition of soulful elements and technological effects plays a central role in R&B. As Weheliye points out, the genre antagonizes soul by using effects that mechanize the voice, as well as through the excessive flaunting of hi-tech material possessions, such as mobile phones, but also futuristic technology like holograms and spaceships in lyrics and music videos.[139] The combination of technological and human sound in R&B surpasses the soulful expression of emotion and instead created a hyper-expression, which Eshun conceptualized as *hypersoul*. As Eshun points out, technology enables the production of musical elements that are humanly impossible to make, such as a rhythm synthesizer/drum machine: "This 'humanly impossible' time, this automatization of rhythm which is rhythmatics, opens up the posthuman multiplication of rhythm: the rhythm synthesizer's spastic pulses seize the body, rewiring the sensorium in a kinaesthetic of schockcuts and stutters, a voluptuous epilepsy."[140] R&B presents a next level of soulfulness that is not natural, yet it does achieve a hyper-expression of human emotions. Weheliye takes the R&B song "Feenin'" by Jodeci as an example of how hypersoul is achieved through the use of a vocoder, which extends the vocal exclamation in the hook of the song to express desire.[141] The fact that technology allows for a more intense expression of such a human feeling shows how technology can work as an extension of the human.

Recording technologies made it possible for vocal expression to exceed the limits of human embodiment, and in doing so provided opportunities to also exceed the limits of the body. With the ubiquity of sound technologies in our everyday life, we have gotten used to hearing recorded voices, and also have become more used to distinguishing acoustic qualities

---

[137] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 293-4.
[138] Weheliye 2002, 28
[139] The flaunting with technology can both be found in the lyrics, music videos and several sound effects. Weheliye, "'Feenin'," 32.
[140] Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, 79.
[141] Weheliye, "'Feenin'," 32.

that tell us whether a voice is coming from an electronic speaker or a human body. Moreover, we have grown used to distinguish production effects in recorded voices, for example autotune or other alterations. This does not mean that we have necessarily naturalized recorded voices, but rather, that our understanding of sonic signifiers has been expanded: recording technologies and production techniques added to the sign system of vocal expression and meaning. As Eshun points out: "Sonically speaking, the posthuman era is not one of disembodiment but the exact reverse: it's one of hyper embodiment [...]."[142] The use of technology as extension of soulfulness creates a hyper-expressivity that relates to the way that black people surpassed the categories of subhuman and human, into posthuman. This relation lies at the foundation of black posthumanism. As Eshun points out, black people were never human in the sense of the White Enlightenment thinking, because during the conception of humanism, the Atlantic slave trade was peaking, resulting in millions of black people being abducted from their homelands and losing their human status.[143]

Black posthumanism is a way of moving beyond the subhumanity that black people for so long have had to endure, but also beyond the human status of the white imperialists, ending up at the posthuman. An art movement that pursues this idea of black posthumanity further is Afrofuturism. This science-fiction genre extends into music, film, and novels, and is specifically known for its criticism of the power status quo that has diminished people of color to subhumans for so long. The genre emerged in the 1970s when the multidisciplinary artist Sun Ra gained popularity with his experimental and psychedelic art that presented black science-fiction narratives. At this time, the space age inspired many to fantasize about the possibilities that space travel presented. However, Afrofuturism actually combines the past with futurism in its narratives, in order to criticize the repercussions of slavery, segregation, and institutionalized racism. Through science-fiction, afrofuturist novels, films, and music, it creates alternative spaces that put black people in an empowering position. The Afrofuturistic universes cosmically relate to the real world, by presenting narratives that provide criticism of the white patriarchy. This means that in Afrofuturistic universes, real-world problems such as racism, classism, and sexism are acknowledged, criticized, and not perpetuated.[144]

The Afrofuturistic narratives often include androids and aliens to represent the subhuman category that black people have been put in by Western society, as well as the existence of a technologically advanced black civilization. In the past ten years the genre increasingly resurfaced in mainstream popular media through the music of pop artist Janelle Monáe and the Marvel blockbuster film *Black Panther* (2018). In these works, the human identity is extended through the use of technology, for instance in the narrative of an android being capable of love as a way to tackle interracial and queer relationships in Monáe's album *The ArchAndroid* (2010). In the superhero universe of *Black Panther* the hidden country of Wakanda is added to the African continent. Wakanda is in possession of the very powerful alien element

---

[142] Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, -2.

[143] Ibid., -6 - -5.

[144] Robin James, "'Robo‑Diva R&B': Aesthetics, Politics, and Black Female Robots in Contemporary Popular Music," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 20, no. 4 (2008), 419.

vibranium, which led to the country becoming the most technologically advanced nation in the world. Afrofuturism thus allows for the reconsideration of history to be less linear and more rhizomorphic. The alternative universes create spaces to imagine different kinds of blackness, freedom, and opportunity. Weheliye identifies that this is used as a form of posthumanism in black popular music to surpass the stereotypes of blacks being closer to nature and soulful, and to claim a position that derives from "human," related to white colonial oppression and "subhuman," meaning the status of black people in times of slavery. Weheliye builds upon Eshun's introduction of the term black posthumanism and defines it as a perspective that "provides alternative stagings for the human and the posthuman found in the crosscurrents and discontinuities marking the history of African American music and the informational technologies in which they have been embodied over the course of the twentieth century."[145]

The fundamental relation between black culture and technology is one of reclaiming the black body. The use of technology in trap is essential for the genre's noisy aesthetic. For example, the hi-hats rattle at a speed that is not physically possible to produce on an acoustic drum kit, the detuned and down-pitched vocals are created through "chopping and screwing" the recording, and the hype ad libs and multitracked voiced are a result of endless layers of recordings stacked on top of each other. Yet, the noisy aesthetic is still rendered not as a posthuman evolution of music, but rather, as a reiteration of outdated stereotypes. I argue that this connotation is caused primarily because of the way trap centralizes and foregrounds the voice in its sound, which I will show in the following analyses of trap voices. As Burton points out, the racial transformation of that voice and subsequent perceived black body confronts the (white) listener with their own fearful reaction to blackness. However, I would like to extend Burton's theory and consider the way in which the centralized vocals invite a heightened embodied listening experience that renders the perceived black body not more distant, but rather, closer to the listener.

The Production of Trap Vocals

Trap is filled to the brim with voices. Besides the primary vocals that are often mulitracked, the hype ad libs, sampled vocals, and other vocalized sound effects fill almost every beat of a typical trap song. Trap, more than any other genre of hip hop, seems to centralize the voice by adding layers of vocal special effects, such as the ad libs, but also many melodic samples, such as the down-pitched sample of the song's title repeated throughout "A Milli" by Lil Wayne, or the disorientating multitracked vocals of "Rubber Band Man." I will go deeper into how these and more trap songs centralize the human voice, and what this implicates for the listening experience.

Before I go into an analysis of the voice in trap, it is important to consider the way in which trap's recording technologies affect the vocals in trap. Trap music is especially a genre where the sound is heavily influenced by production effects, adding harmonizing vocals and ad

---

[145] Weheliye, "'Feenin'," 22.

libs, and editing the musical elements to create the desired sonic texture. Moreover, the production effects used are often rendered audible, making the use of technology part of trap's aesthetic. Besides leaving effects such as autotune audible, the use of producer tags is also typical for trap music. These tags are vocal shout-outs to the producer(s) of the recording that function as a sonic watermark, often incorporated in the first few seconds of a trap song.[146]

The following three elements are central to my analysis of the voice in trap; the first being technological effects on the voice such as autotune (and distortion), the second is the freestyle vocal style and use of improvised ad libs and how these come about, and the third is the phonographic staging of the voice. Ultimately, I connect these three elements to a perceived heightened directness.

The first element is the description of vocal effects created by pitch-correcting and vocal processing software as Auto Tune. As Burton points out, this name is "a specific brand of pitch-correcting and vocal processing software [...] that has become synonymous with a range of vocal processing techniques [...]."[147] Although such pitch-correcting software can be used as a subtle and hidden technology, in trap the digital shifting of vocal pitches is usually audible, which makes the autotune-sound a recognizable effect on the voice. Examples of the audible use of Auto Tune can for instance be found in the ad libs by Travis Scott in "Sicko Mode," in which you can hear a heavily autotuned "yeah!" and "it's lit!" Another example can be found in the sing rapping of Lil Uzi Vert in "XO Tour Llif3," especially during the choruses and verses where the vocals are raised by an octave compared to the first chorus.[148]

The second element is having a broader understanding of the way in which the vocals in trap come about. Freestyling is a common rap style in trap. In an interview with Red Bull, sound engineer Alex Tumay, who works with many trap artists, such as Young Thug, Future, and Rich Gang, he explains the recording process of a typical trap song. According to him, the production of the instrumentals and the repetitive beat create a setting in which the rappers can vocalize more freely, and any special effects, harmonizings, and other sounds are added alongside the freestyling of the rappers. The beat determines a lot of the lyrical outcome, because the lyrics have to fit the stresses, melodic lines, and rhythmic flow. Tumay describes how he mixes vocal effects on the go, which suggests that the digital effects on the rappers' voices, such as reverb, distortion, and autotune, are already taken into consideration during the recording of the vocals. This means that we can consider the vocal effects as an extension of their expression, rather than a production touch-up. As Tumay illustrates, he has to put in harmonies, delays, or other effects during the recording, otherwise, as he paraphrases Young Thug, "you mess with the essence of

---

[146] One of the famous producer tags is Metro Boomin's "If Young Metro don't trust you I'm gonna shoot you" rapped by Future used in "Panda" by Desiigner among other songs, or the female computerized voice saying "Billboard Hitmakers" as heard in Young Thug's "Harambe." Desiigner, "Panda," Spotify, track 14 on *New English*, GOOD, Def Jam, 2015; Young Thug, "Harambe," Spotify, track 7 on *Jeffery*, 300, Atlantic, 2016.
[147] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 75.
[148] Travis Scott, "SICKO MODE," Spotify, track 3 on *Astroworld*, Cactus Jack, Grand Hustle, Epic, 2018; Lil Uzi Vert, "XO Tour Llif3," Spotify, track 16 on *Luv is Rage 2*, Generation Now, Atlantic, 2017.

the song."[149] The instrumentals and beat of trap are produced in such a way that the rapper can freestyle without being limited by rhythm changes or highly varying harmonies. The use of droning synth harmonies as musical background allows for the filling of the entire space of a song with a deep bass and some harmonic movements that are not too determinative of the song's structure. The beat is often repetitive throughout, and the harmony often consists of two alternating chords.

Tumay describes the recording of the freestyle rap as follows: the beat is run for as long as the rapper needs to compile a desired amount of suitable verses, in which the bars, which are rapped phrases and sentences, are connected to each other by the associative style. These bars are not prewritten and the verses are not prestructured or pre-written, rather, the rapper freestyles on premeditated concepts and ideas.[150] Freestyling is an improvisational style in which the rapper raps whatever is on his or her mind, making use of an internalized vocabulary and prepared rhyme patterns and lyrics that they implement in their improvisation. In trap, this results in the characteristic repetition of lyrical concepts and phrases, as well as the use of mumbled patterns as a more associative vocalizing to the beat. As is shown in my analysis of the freestyle rap of Lil Wayne in "A Milli" later in this chapter, this results in a vibrant feeling of every line being thought of on the spot translates through the production of the primary voice, where noises like vocal cracks, laughter, mumbling, and other instances of not delivering "neat" bars, are not concealed.

Moreover, the associative rap style also can be observed in the way in which the lyrics are a continuous flow of bars that are conceptually connected to the previous bar, which shows how the lyrics come about in on-the-spot associations. Trap ad libs are an extension of this freestyle, because although they are recorded only after the primary vocals have been set, they are responding to the lyrics. Typical for trap music is the use of many shouted exclamations at the end of every bar, which is always loosely connected to the lyric, for example in the Young Thug song "RiRi," where he raps: "Drop top in a hotbox with a big tall demon (cough cough cough)" The bracketed ad lib is the rhythmical coughing of Young Thug, which responds to the lyrics that refer to smoking weed in a convertible.[151] Moreover, in the chorus of this song Young Thug's wailing cries seem to sonically reference Rihanna's song "Work" by which Young Thug was inspired.[152] Moreover, trap ad libs are filled with consonantal clusters signifying coughing, the reloading of a gun, or the shooting of a gun, such as the choppa sound "brrrrrrah!," where the rattling r's imitate the sound of an automatic firearm.[153] These consonantal clusters signify a sonic blackness that adds to a violent, even noisy, listening experience for a mainstream (white)

---

[149] Red Bull Music Academy, "Alex Tumay on Young Thug, Travis Scott and Kanye West | Red Bull Music Academy," *YouTube* (October 5, 2016). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-IfbpJF11Y, 35'.

[150] Ibid., 33'.

[151] The term hot boxing refers to smoking weed in a small space with no ventilation, such as a car. Young Thug thus jokingly associates the convertible in relation to the practice of hot boxing. Young Thug, "RiRi," Spotify, track 5 on *Jeffery*, 300, Atlantic, 2016.

[152] Rihanna featuring Drake, "Work," Spotify, track 4 on *Anti*, Roc Nation, Westbury Road, 2016.

[153] For an example of the ridiculing of trap's excessive use of ad libs, see Saturday Night Live, "Friendos (featuring A$AP Rocky) – SNL," *YouTube* (May 5, 2017).

audience.[154] These musical elements deliberately exaggerate sonic blackness, by making use of stereotypical sonic color lines for gang culture and violence.[155]

The third element is a consideration of the way the phonographic staging of trap voices affects the perceived directness of the black body. Listening to vocal gestures that we have experienced ourselves creates a sense of having a more direct experience of the expressed meaning. This experiential directness is similar to how the voice is culturally thought of as the most direct expression of someone's consciousness. Jacques Derrida has offered important criticism to the notion of directness, because he argues that all perception is mediated through a socially constructed sign system.[156] However, embodied perception points towards the fact that we do experience a sense of directness when we are able to corporeally articulate specific gestures ourselves. This directness is part of our *lived phenomenology* and affects the way we perceive certain phenomena. In the case of the voice, the historical connotation with it as a more direct expression than, for instance, writing, affects how we experience its sound. Although it is not possible to perceive anything in a more direct way than something else, the idea of directness can still be perceived as such. Marc Leman's study of the phenomenology of empathy is an example of this perceived directness.[157] Leman conducted experiments where people had to either attune to musical elements such as pitch and melody through gesture, or describe the perceived musical elements in writing. The study shows that the group that gave a corporeal articulation of the musical elements, such as attuning one's voice to a perceived pitch, or drawing the "movement" of a melody, provided a more accurate and efficient record of the musical elements. This shows how gestural perception leads to a higher valued interpretative output. Our perception of phenomena thus seems to be "stronger" when we are able to empathically engage with them through physical mirroring more than through observative description. This is not limited to people, because the process is not so much dependent on the perceived phenomenon, but rather on the way in which we experience that phenomenon as a gesture that we recognize. Leman interprets the outcome of his experiments to show that "[o]bservation would involve the memory of the force and acceleration, while corporeal articulation would make that aspect physical, and thus stronger."[158] It seems that our embodied perception allows us to experience some phenomena more similar to our own gestures than others, creating a higher degree of empathy.

This naturalness is caused by the way we learn meaning in a cultural context from the moment we live, a process that ingrains certain notions and tendencies to such an extent that they feel like second nature. This socially constructed feeling of naturalness is consolidated by the fact that all our perception is embodied. It seems that having a voice ourselves lies at the root

---

[154] Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 89. For an example of the "choppa" sound, listen to "Panda" by Desiigner where every 8 to 10 seconds you the ad lib is sung along with other shouts that are typical for trap.

[155] Ibid. 90.

[156] One of the most important criticisms of the notion of a more "direct" way of perception is Derrida's "there is no outside-text," in which he refers to the fact that all meaning is embedded in a system of symbols, meaning that we cannot perceive anything outside of this system. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

[157] Marc Leman, *Embodied Music Cognition and Mediation Technology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008), 122.

[158] Ibid., 123.

of the experience of another voice as human, because we perceive their humanness through our own body. Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology and Gaunt's elaboration of Gilroy's anti-anti-essentialism into the concept of second nature show that although there is no such thing as a more or less direct perception of the voice, the fact that our embodied perception feels like second nature to us also makes that our perception of voices feels more natural and direct. In this chapter, I show that trap vocals emphasize the body through a very gestural performance of the voice. The voice is central to its sound: the multi-layered vocals and the many different pitches, autotune effects, and varying expressions, such as mumbling, screaming and shouting, create a sonic texture that engages the listener's full body. Trap vocals are filled with expressive gestures, such as the shouting ad libs, mumbling, and singing. As Merleau-Pont points out in his embodied phenomenology, we perceive the world around us through gesture, which means that we perceive meaning through an embodied understanding of gestures.[159] The typical trap vocals, which are filled with expressive gestural vocalization such as mumbling, shouting, singing, and screaming seems to engage us in a more direct way, because we perceive those sounds in an embodied way. The fact that we have a voice ourselves makes our experience of this particular sound central to our perception of another human body. The embodied perception of the black body urges questions about the perceived directness of the voice. While on the one hand we learned to perceive the voice as a direct expression of the human soul, it is also in the grain of the voice that a white listener perceives a black body, which is a process of othering, or in other words, perceiving a certain distance between the self and the other. This leads me to argue that, on the one hand, noises in the voice play an important role for our perception of the human body in its sound, which renders the sound "closer" to us, while on the other, too much noise, for example when a perceived black body makes that we render the voice more noisy through the racial transformation, distances us from that body and renders it more nonhuman.

These three technologically enabled elements are central to trap's hyperexpression of the voice, which leads me to argue that trap can be seen as a form of hypersoul. Hypersoul is a stylistic device used by black people to criticize the racist stereotype that they would be "naturally" more soulful and closer to nature. The antagonism of soul came along with an antagonism of "recording realism" which is the attempt to erase technological mediation and embodiment in popular music.[160] This recording realism is dependent on technological effects to create a listening experience of a voice as natural. Although any perception of a voice is mediated through a sign system, recording realism relates to the experienced directness of some sounds over others. For example, in the case of the voice recording, technology can be used to create expressive parameters that emphasize elements that contribute to a perceived naturalness and "real" voice.[161] Nicola Dibben theorizes this phenomenon by building upon Serge Lacasse's conceptualization of "phonographic staging," which refers to the way choices in recording and production shape a sonic spatiality that affects the listener's perception of a recording.[162] This

---

[159] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 190.
[160] Weheliye, "'Feenin'," 32.
[161] Nicola Dibben, "Understanding Performance Expression in Popular Music Recordings," *Expressiveness in Music*, ed. Dorottya Fabian, Renee Timmers, and Emery Schubert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.
[162] Ibid., 3.

means that electronic music equipment can be used to stage a non-electronic-sounding version of a voice by imitating sonic elements that the listener associates with such a specific listening experience. For example, in the song "Someone Like You" by Adele, the production of the recorded vocals and instruments are staged to sound as if the listener is in the room with the singer.[163] This phonographic staging adds to the emotional feeling of the ballad, which creates an intimate listening experience. The proximity of the voice and the piano in the sonic space are not a result of recording them in that particular setup, but rather, they are edited to sound foregrounded and close to the listener's ear. Moreover, the fact that the vocals incorporate multiple voice cracks adds to the feeling of an acoustic live performance. The listening experience of Adele's voice as if it is played live and without any electronic effects is a result of the electronic production of the recording. Therefore, the song exemplifies how electronic effects can create a phonographic staging of exactly the two rituals of pre-electronic music that Joanna Demers points out to be disturbed by electroacoustic music's inclusion of unmusical sounds and its deconstruction of liveness.[164]

Listening to Trap Voices

In the following section, I present several analyses of trap songs, all focused at pointing out specific elements that are characteristic for trap voices. Through considering multiple different trap artists and songs in a chronological way, I moreover provide an extensive overview of overarching elements to trap vocal style of which the analyzed songs are a quintessential example.

Firstly, I discuss the way in which the use of multitracked and delayed voices and ad libs creates a multilayered vocal texture through considering the chaotic vocals in T.I.'s "Rubber Band Man." Moreover, I connect the sing-rapping of T.I. to the singing/signing voice binary that is related to hypersoul. Secondly, I find a similar multilayered texture in Lil Wayne's "A Milli," which moreover presents an example of associative freestyling. In this analysis I show how his particular freestyling centralizes the sound of the voice and is expressed creatively through hooks, vocalized effects, and a gestural rap flow that would become a part of the quintessential trap style. Thirdly, I take a closer look at the flaunted use of digital vocal effects in "Savage Mode" by 21 Savage, in relation to the perceived directness of the voice. The audible distortion used in the choruses of this song are a form of hyperexpression, however, this song stands out in trap for having a very hushed vocal expression. Fourthly, I take a look at another example of hypersoul, which can be found in Young Thug's "Harambe." In this song Young Thug raps with highly expressive, gestural vocals in which there are no audible digital effects heard. Instead, we hear vocal effects that are created by Young Thug's body, even though they are so intense that they still seem to transgress the boundaries of the human body. This urges

---

[163] Adele, "Someone Like You," Spotify, track 11 on *21*, XL, Columbia, 2011.

[164] Joanna Teresa Demers, *Listening through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 42.

questions about the perception of the "natural" body and directness when that body is so expressively nonhuman, but rather, towards the animalistic posthuman.

Multi Layered Voices in "Rubber Band Man"

The central role of the voice in trap was established early on by one of the precursory artists T.I.. His breakout song "Rubber Band Man" from the 2003 album *Trap Muzik* is filled to the brim with voices.[165] T.I. raps almost incessantly from the start of the song until the end, taking no breaks between the bars longer than one beat. The chorus has a bouncing feeling because T.I. sing-raps the bars in an upwards motion, alternating his voice between a falsetto register and a lower chest voice that sounds more like his speaking voice pitch. Moreover, his voice is multitracked, which means that multiple recordings of the same line are stacked on each other. Sometimes these multiple layers differ slightly from each other, which creates a crowded effect. For example, in the fourth line of the first verse we hear T.I.'s voice pan out in different phonographic stagings, of which one voice lingers on the word "wrong" and "man" slightly longer than the rest.

Below you see how the ad libs are overlapping the primary vocals, the first line marking the primary vocals and the second one the added lyrics in the vocals that are mixed over the primary ones, their relative position marking the way in which they overlap:

1a.   Rubberband man, wild as the Taliban
2a. (Ay, Ay, who I be?)

1b. 9 in my right, 45 in my other hand   Call me Trouble Man, always in trouble, man!
2b. (9)   (45)   (Ay, Ay, Who I'm is?)   (I, I, I)

1c. Worth a couple hundred grand, Chevys all colors, man
2c.   (grand) (Chevys) (Ah, ah, ay, who I be?)

During these repeated choruses, the multi-layered vocals of T.I. are accompanied by a sampled children's choir singing the melodic hook that was already introduced by a synthesizer from the start of the song in the key of E-flat major. This melody of this hook follows a simple harmonic phrase of I - IV -V - I. Although the multilayered vocal texture of "Rubber Band Man" is typical for trap, the upbeat style is not. The major key and melodic phrases in the song create a happy background to an instrumentation that is not gloomy, especially because of the children's choir sample used for the hook. The tempo also adds to the upbeat feeling of the song, because it is, at 152 bpm, quite fast compared to most trap songs.

The excessive use of ad libs and vocal samples make that the sonic texture of "Rubber Band Man" is largely defined by the voice. The multilayered vocal texture of the lowest bass sound in the beat sounds as if it is a sample of someone beatboxing a "boom" sound in which their voice is still audible. All the elements together create a texture that is crowded with voices,

---

[165] "Rubberband Man," T.I., Spotify, track 8 on *Trap Muzik*, Grand Hustle, Atlantic, 2003.

while the instrumentals remain quite simple throughout. The fact that we hear T.I. in multiple layers at the same time creates a hyperreal effect in which the texture of the song is almost completely defined by the grain of his voice. Moreover, his expressive sing-rapping continuously draws the listener to his voice, leaving not more than a beat unoccupied. The sing-rapping that T.I. uses in the chorus would become an important vocal style in later trap music, and especially the derivatives of mumble core and emo-rap. In trap Playboi Carti, Lil Uzi Vert and Young Thug have been known to incorporate sing-rapping in their style.[166] The use of singing is notable for the perceived sonic blackness in trap, because as I pointed out earlier in this chapter blackness has historically been tied to soul and the singing voice. Ultimately, the centralized voice, and subsequently the centralized body creates a listening experience in which you can not get away from T.I.'s body. The multi-layered vocals, ad libs, melodic sing-rapped phrases and shouts thus emphasize T.I.'s physicality to literally outgrow and transgress itself, which results in a grotesque vocal performance.

Freestyling in "A Milli"

In Lil Wayne's "A Milli" from the 2008 album *Tha Carter III* a similar layering of voices creates a grotesque texture.[167] However, Lil Wayne pushes the hyperextension of his body even further by deliberately acknowledging and avoiding production techniques. The song builds upon a beat made up of a sample of A Tribe Called Quest's song "I Left My Wallet in El Segundo." The phrase "a milli, a milli" is slowed down, causing the voice to sound lower, similar to the morphed sound effect that was introduced by DJ Screw. This edited sample is repeated throughout the song, functioning as a rhythmic hook that becomes part of the beat. The repeated sample provides the beat to which Lil Wayne reportedly freestyles the entire song.[168] The primary vocals indeed seem like a never-ending stream of bars that engage the listener in their virtuosity as well as their eccentricity. As you can see in the below stated lyrics, throughout the entire song Lil Wayne seems to base the following line on a concept mentioned in the preceding line. Besides these primary vocals, there are multiple layers of vocals added afterwards that are used to enrich the primary vocals with well-timed shouts that fill any gap left between his tightly succeeding bars. The shouted high-pitched "wooh's" contrast with the low-pitched voices of the sample and the primary vocals. Throughout the second and third verses, there are multiple instances where we hear Lil Wayne chuckling at his own lyrics, adding to the freestyle feeling of the song. Moreover, Lil Wayne uses his voice expressively throughout the song, incorporating playful repetitions of words and laughter to the flow, which are highlighted in bold:

> 'Cause I don't write shit, 'cause I ain't got time
>
> 'Cause my seconds, minutes, hours go to the almighty dollar

---

[166] For example, listen to Rich Gang featuring Young Thug and Rich Homie Quan, "Lifestyle," Spotify, single, Cash Money, Republic, 2014; "XO Tour Llif3" by Lil Uzi Vert.

[167] "A Milli," Lil Wayne, Spotify, track 3 on *Tha Carter III*, Cash Money, Universal Motown, 2008.

[168] Lil Wayne refers to himself freestyling the lyrics in the first verse of "A Milli": "'Cause I don't write shit, 'cause I ain't got time."

And the almighty power of that **ch-cha-cha-chopper**

Sister, brother, son, daughter, father; mother-fuck a copper

Got the Maserati dancin' on the bridge, pussy poppin'

Tell the coppers: **"Ha-ha-ha-ha**

You can't catch him, you can't stop him"

The vocal sample that defines the beat of the song, together with the virtuosic freestyle of an endless stream of bars creates a layered vocal texture that demands attention from the listener, because of the intense texture of low-pitched, gravelly voices, with a high pitched shout filling any gap that is left between the many voices. The song centralizes the voice by incorporating vocals in almost every element: the melodic beat, the primary vocals, as well as the contrasting enhancements in the form of ad libs. Similar to "Rubber Band Man," the multilayered vocal texture and the fact that almost every beat is filled with voice, creates a hyperexpression of Lil Wayne's physicality, which creates a transgression of the black body into a grotesque version that cannot exist without the production technology. However, it seems that Lil Wayne's freestyle flow makes the perception of the voice even more engaging for the listener. The fact that Lil Wayne riffs off the concept presented in each preceding line creates an expectant feeling for the listener, who eagerly follows the virtuosic progression of Lil Wayne's flow. The fun element in listening to the freestyle is not so much about the overall meaning of all the lyrics in the song, but rather, the way the specific words and phrases connect to the preceding ones and how they are fitted to the rhythm of the beat. This type of freestyling has become a widely used vocal style in trap music and is characteristic for the way in which not the lyrical content of a trap song, but rather the gestural expression of the voice is central to the trap aesthetic. This is also why the mushmouth rap style, in which the lyrics are very unintelligible to the listener, can be found in many moments in a wide range of trap songs. Often, the mumbled lyrics serve as a hook that becomes more catchy through the gestural sounds that are not necessarily expressing real words.

Distance and Directness in "Savage Mode"

Similar to the described case of Adele's "Someone Like You," trap also makes use of phonographic staging of the voice in order to signify proximity. An example of this can be found in the distortion effect used in the vocals of the song "Savage Mode" by the rapper 21 Savage.[169] During the chorus—which consists of the repeated hook "I'm in savage mode, I'm a savage on these hoes"—his voice is distorted, first lightly, as if we hear him through a phone speaker being held nearby, but by the end of the song the distortion is increased and the pitch of his voice is lowered with an octave, rendering the voice unrecognizable. The vocals of the chorus stand in stark contrast with his voice in the verses, where we hear him more clearly, allowing us to also perceive his voice cracking. The more "natural" voice is emphasized by the contrast, adding to

---

[169] 21 Savage, "Savage Mode," Spotify, track 4 on *Savage Mode*, Independent, 2016.

the perceived intimacy of the verse-vocals. The phonographic staging of his voice significantly adds to the perceived proximity to the listener. This is caused by the hushed manner in which 21 Savage delivers the vocals, creating an effect similar to crooning, where the vocalist is so close to the microphone that the listener experiences the voice in a more intimate way, as if the vocalist is softly humming in their ear. Although he continues the same hushed manner throughout the chorus, the distortion effect seems to take away the experience of proximity and intimacy. The phone speaker effect renders the voice disembodied, taking away any feeling of proximity to the listener. In the verses, the ad libs sound more distant because of a different phonographic staging, as well as a slight distortion added to the vocals. The ad libs in the chorus, however, relate to a voice that already sounds distant and distorted. This reduces the perceived distance between the primary vocals and the ad libs, which makes the sonic texture of the chorus dynamically more intense than the verses, even though the pitch and vocal expression are mostly static throughout the song, as he raps on a pitch that lies comfortably in his chest voice.

"Savage Mode" stands out within the genre of trap, not only for expressing the typical hype ad libs of trap in a very hushed, almost whispered manner, but also for connecting the meaning of the lyrics to the overall composition of the song. Different from the excited shouts and widely varying dynamics that are inspired by crunk's party aesthetic and can be heard in aforementioned trap songs, such as the ad libs in Desiigner's "Panda" or the build-up intensity in the sing-rapping of Lil Uzi Vert in "XO Tour LLif3." The hushed voice and distortion effects in "Savage Mode" signify the distant feeling to his emotions the rapper feels in order to achieve success with his music career. The song therefore presents an alternative take on hypersoul. In this case, the use of technology as an extension of the emotional state is not to express a higher intensity than what is humanly possible, but rather, to express a distant, disembodied feeling that surpasses the human ability.

As you would expect, a musical expression of going "savage" would involve an aggressive and excited voice that uses a wide range of dynamics, for example by incorporating shouts and screams, such as the majority of trap vocals, inspired by the crunk aesthetic of Lil Jon. Although "Savage Mode" follows the trap convention of ad libs reacting to every bar, resulting in the voice occupying almost every beat of the song, the ad libs are not shouted but rather, they are as hushed as the primary vocals. An example can be found in the first verse, when 21 Savage mentions the gun he carries on his hip. In the ad libs, he mimics the sounds of reloading and shooting the gun with his voice:

I got that motherfucker on my hip (Chh-chh)

I'ma squeeze (Pow), I'ma squeeze (Pow)

Even though the the two "pows" are accompanied by a simultaneous sound effect of a gun being fired, the impact of the shots is very understated. 21 Savage whispers the "pows" while the gun sound occurs in the background of the sonic landscape. Throughout the song, more ad libs occur with 21 Savage imitating gun sounds in a similar hushed, understated manner. The ad libs

match the hushed, dispassionate sound of the primary vocals of the verses and chorus. There is one instance where 21 Savage breaks into a head voice but this also seems to be an extension of the dispassionate attitude of the song. In the third verse, when he raps: "That chopper flip a n*** like he acrobatic (Pop, pop, pop)" he imagines an aggressive thought referring to the way his enemy would stand no chance against his automatic firearm. During this line, he breaks into a higher pitch, but the low energy with which he does so causes the vowels to fall silent, leaving only a shrieky, consonantal vessel of the exclamation. This causes his exclamation to sound restrained. The ad lib right after this bar reiterates the restrained gesture, because the vowels of the "pop's" are silenced, leaving the popping sounds of the p's as whispered onomatopoeias as a stifled expression of violent intent.

The two different phonographic stagings of the voice in the verses and chorus are symbolically related to the lyrical content of the song, which is a reflection upon the path that led 21 Savage to his current success. This reflection is not completely celebratory because this path is filled with gang violence, drugs, and poverty. These things were quintessential to his becoming a successful trap artist, however, they also affect him personally, as we can hear in the verses. Going "savage mode" in the chorus is a way of coping with these trauma's by focusing on his current success, however, this is only possible when he distances himself from his emotions. His savage mode therefore is a created reality, a hyperextension of his black identity, made possible through technology. The combination of heavily edited vocals in the chorus contrasting a more natural sounding voice in the verses can be seen as a form of hypersoul, because the use of technology emphasizes the expression of the erratic state of 21 Savage. His savage mode is so distant from his natural form that it transgresses what is humanly possible, hence the use of an increasing distortion effect on his voice.

The contrasting phonographic stagings of the voice in "Savage Mode" are exemplary of how trap positions the multiple voices that are layered on top of each other in different proximities from the listener. By using reverb and distortion effects the voices are staged in different distances. Similar to the primary vocals in "Savage Mode," there is usually one foregrounded voice that sounds closest to the listener. This experiential directness is similar to how the voice is culturally thought of as the most direct expression of someone's consciousness. [170] The music thus exposes the contradicting elements within our second nature, because on the one hand, trap plays on the stereotypes that activate listening ears to racially transform the music, and thus, has a white listener *other* the sounds right away. On the other hand, the voice is centralized in the music in a highly gestural way, creating a listening experience that feels more embodied and thus closer to the self.

Transgressing the Human/Nonhuman in "Harambe"

A similar distortion effect as in "Savage Mode" can be found in Young Thug's "Harambe."[171] The song is the seventh track on the mixtape *Jeffery* that was released in 2016 and starts off with a

---

[170] Sterne, "Part I: Hearing, Listening, Deafness," 20.
[171] Young Thug, "Harambe."

grunted shout by Young Thug, followed by multiple types of voices in which he employs gravelly and noisy vocal effects. The growling and grunting rapping is upheld throughout most of the song and makes Young Thug sound aggressive, even animalistic, which ties into the song's title which is named after a western lowland gorilla from the Cincinnati Zoo in Ohio, whose death became a viral internet meme in 2016.[172] Different from the effect used by 21 Savage, the monstrous effect of Young Thug's voice in "Harambe" seems completely created within his own body. Young Thug's vocal style makes him stand out of the trap genre, because of the lack of audible digital effects on his voice. This adds to a perceived directness of his voice, and by extension, his body. However, the hyperexpressive grunting in the song does render Young Thug's voice as an expression of the grotesque body, and, as I will elaborate on later, hypersoul.

Although the recording microphone and subsequent sound engineering are indispensable to the result on the recording, the grunting effect in "Harambe" sounds so "natural" that these technological elements are actually concealed by the expressiveness of Young Thug's performance. This complicates the idea of trap using technological enhancement of the voice to create a hyperexpression of the body. Therefore, the transgressional use of the voice in "Harambe" does not follow the trajectory that Afrofuturist hypersoul takes towards hyper embodiment through technology. Rather, Young Thug seems to head towards an animalistic hyperexpression of his emotions.

"Harambe" follows the trap aesthetic conventions for most of its elements. In the song Young Thug's voice is accompanied by droning synths and a piano playing on-beat chords and some melodic variations in the G minor key. The beat is in a 4/4 measure and is played by a drum machine bass and claps. The rattling hi-hats are scattered over the bars. The musical texture of the song is uncomplicated, providing as much space to Young Thug to go "wild" on the primary vocals. However, the grunting voice is not the only vocal part in the song. The repetitive melodic hook is made up by what sounds like a sampled voice, albeit heavily autotuned (see Figure 6). This high-pitched voice sounds as if it is played on a synthesizer with a voice-sample, that was pitched much higher than its original sample recording. The sampled voice sounds highly autotuned, which creates a contrast with the primary vocals of Young Thug, rendering these more "natural."

Figure 6

---

[172] Mike McPhate, "Zoos Killing of Gorilla Holding a Boy Prompts Outrage," *New York Times*, 30 May 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/us/zoos-killing-of-gorilla-holding-a-boy-prompts-outrage.html

This Figure shows the melodic hook of the high-pitched, autotuned voice that is repeated throughout "Harambe." The chord progression is similar to the one played by the piano throughout the song as well.

The grunting effects create a lot of noise, creating a gravelly texture of Young Thugs voice throughout. However, most of the grunts are pitched despite the noisy effect, which creates a melodic movement in the grunts. Throughout the song, Young Thug employs multiple grunting effects to signify different emotional states. To create the different grunts, he thickens the vibrating of his vocal tract, causing a growling and distorted sound at a low frequency. At the start of the first verse, Young Thug breaks into a fast-paced staccato rap of one-syllable words with strong consonants and vowel sounds that rhyme internally. In this first verse he uses a breathy delivery of the emphasized words in order to create a noisy texture. In the following lyrics, I underlined the words that have are emphasized in noisy breaths:

Yeah, <u>catch</u> him down <u>bad</u>

<u>Beat</u> him with the <u>bat, hashtag</u> <u>that</u> (Yeah)

I <u>copped</u> a new <u>Jag'</u>, yeah, yeah

<u>Bitch</u>, I got a blue <u>Jag'</u>, yeah (Ha, ha)

I <u>make</u> <u>that</u> <u>cash</u> <u>talk</u>, <u>n***</u> (Bitch)

The aggressive voicing is created by him adding an out-of-breath, raspy mushmouth effect to his flow. Following the trap aesthetic, "Harambe" is filled to the brim with ad libs. These ad libs are performed by Young Thug in several vocal effects. The ad libs showcase more of the grunting voice, but also some exaggerated vocalizations of car sounds, for example the intense "skrrrrrt," repeated three times after the line "Double R at the Prom, n***" in the first verse. The ad libs seem to both amplify the aggressive expression of the primary vocals,. However, they also sometimes seem to provide a more rational comment on the violent behavior. The space created after the elongated "skrrrrrt" ad lib sounds as if the emotional train of thoughts that Young Thug voices at the moment he is thinking it, is halted only by him catching a breath. The fact that we hear him run out of breath shows how the human body with all its restrictions is centralized. This alludes further that this song is not hypersoul in the technological futuristic sense, but rather, extends what it means to be human towards the body. The body is deemed the animal side of the human.

The chorus consists of two distinctive gravelly vocal effects, the first being very violent, while the second sounds more emotional and desperate. The violent part has Young Thug grunting aggressively:

Bentley wheelin' n***, bad killer n***, back it up (Bitch, get down)

Bands kill a n*** fast, will a n*** back it up? (Tick tick tack)

> Apeshit, n***, Godzilla, n***, act up (Ha, ha, ha)
>
> Go apeshit, go Godzilla, bae, back it up (Yeah)

The ad libs in this part consist of the same grunting effect. In the second part of the chorus, the percussion fades away, leaving us with much more melodic and less gravelly vocals, both in the primary lines and in the ad libs, accompanied by the piano and synths:

> I just wanna have sex (Hey), I just wanna have a baby out you, girl (Hey)
>
> I just wanna go brazy about you, girl (Hey)
>
> Don't make a n*** act crazy, oh-ooh, girl (Ayy)
>
> 'Cause you know I will, and I'm on a Perky pill (Hey)

In this more desperate part of the chorus, Young Thug expresses his love for his partner, while acknowledging that she has the power of making him act crazy. The term 'brazy' is slang for crazy associated with the Bloods gangs of Los Angeles. Although he means well, he warns that he might be overcome by his primate feelings for his love, turning him into a dangerous and violent demon. Right after this first chorus Young Thug warns what will happen if someone crosses him. As the lines progress, he sounds like he is losing his calmness over the imagining that comes with the threats: he keeps repeating the phrase "I aim at your …" while listing more and more people of someone's family, his emotions overtaking him:

> This shit can get ugly for you (Yeah)
>
> I'll pull up and bust your mama (Brrat)
>
> I'll pull up and bust your brother (Yeah)
>
> I aim at your fuckin' family (Brrt)
>
> I aim at your whole clique (Brrt)
>
> I aim at your motherfuckin' mama
>
> I aim at your fuckin' dad (Brrt)
>
> I aim at your daughter, son, n*** (What?)
>
> I aim it at everything (Hey, pop out)
>
> I aim at the baby (Hey)

The ad libs vocalize the sounds of the firearms he uses to shoot. However, as this verse gradually proceeds, the ad libs turn into shocked reactions at his own words. He is shocked over his own

ability to threaten not only one's parents, but even one's children. These lines are followed by the confession in an anxious voice that he is possessed by the devil, asking if God would help him in a high-pitched shrieky voice that sounds like he is in a crying state. The out-of-breath sound and the mumbled articulation of these lines adds to the expression of despair and sorrow:

Figure 7.a
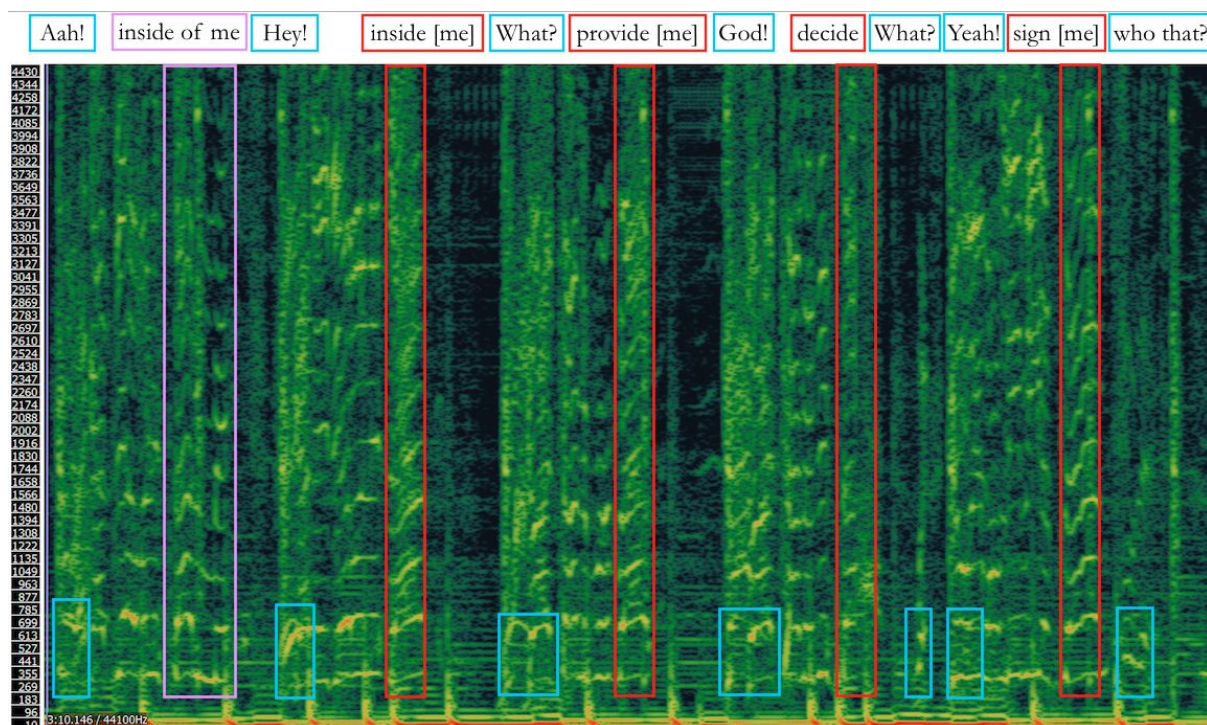
In the spectrogram, you can see how Young Thug ends every line in an intense, shouted manner, creating a distortion effect that obscures the intelligibility. The purple and red boxes in the spectrogram point out these moments of emphasis in the primary vocals, in which the red boxes follow a similar rhythmic emphasis. For the second, third and fifth line, the "me" is almost silent after the stressed preceding word. The blue boxes signify the ad libs that are placed right before the primary vocal continues, as can be seen in the slightly thinner lines next to and above the brighter ones, which signify the primary vocals.

Figure 7.b

Primary vocals:	**Ad libs:**
I got dévil insíde of me	(Aah) + (Hey)
Got the devil insíde [me]	(What?)

God tryna províde [me]	(God)
God tryna decíde	(What?)
Do he wanna leave me or sígn me?	(Who that?)

The noises created by his monstrous "gorilla" voice create a texture that consists of his lungs being out of breath, his vocal cords shrieking by the emotions. He is both violent as well as emotional. He is singing as if his life depends on it. He is both threatening as the one under threat of himself: don't make him act crazy because you know he will. This warning shows how Young Thug identifies with the story of the gorilla Harambe, which is a wild animal put in a cage, and when he was provoked by a boy that climbed into its enclosure, he was shot dead to ensure that the boy would not get hurt.

From the second part of the song, two more different voices from Young Thug enter the sonic landscape, the first sounding like a very calm and composed version in contrast to the previous aggressive out-of-breath voice, and the second sounding like a completely different voice from Young Thug enters, sounding like a composed and calm version, sounding like he composed himself entirely in the few seconds since we heard his grunting voice, only to slide back into it further in the verse (which is marked with underlinings):

Um, okay, I know He frustrated 'bout a n***

And everything I take or do, yeah (Pablo shit)

I know I did a lot of sins

And I hope you still let me make it through, ah (Hey)

Just 'cause I got me a spot in LA

That don't mean I'ma change the crew (Fuck)

My bitch trying to figure out

How she can tell me to chill without changin' you (Woo)

Throughout this verse, however, the calmer voice becomes more and more intense, with the ad lib vocals becoming more aggressive too. He then changes back to a monstrous gorilla voice, however, this time its sound is more reminiscent of Louis Armstrong's gravelly coloration.

Young Thug thickens the vibration of his vocal tract, which causes a growling and distorted sound to his voice at a low frequency:

Fuck it, I'm <u>changin'</u> up on 'em (Yeah)

But my <u>fans,</u> not changin' on 'em (Yeah)

Makin' a <u>band,</u> I'm sangin' on 'em (Hey)

Whip out that <u>bag,</u> syringin' on 'em (Hey)

Hey, hey, we locked that bitch out with no passcode (Huh)

I bought her some of those

Damn, she already had 'em though

He sings these lines on a repeated melodic hook, where he emphasizes the words by ending on -in' which you can see in the underlined parts in the above lyrics. The melodic hook is based on the inverted tonic chord of G-minor, alternating from the dominant to the third, to jump to the higher tonic, only to return to the dominant. The Louis-Armstrong effect sounds more like a parody of the gorilla voice, making the part that is rapped in this style sound more celebratory than anxious.

The different vocal effects thus reflect on the emotional meaning of the lyrics. This is similar to the way in which 21 Savage's use of a hushed voice in relation to the lyrics created a deeper layer of meaning to his claim that he is "in savage mode." In a similar way, Young Thug's different voices alter the meaning of the lyrics and in doing so create a narrative based on vocal gestures. For example, the highly aggressive listing of the people of your family he will shoot at, followed by the emotional and anxious part where he proclaims to have "the devil inside of me" loosely express the idea that he acknowledges the evil intentions in himself. In these parts, his voice is raspy from his emotional reflection on the fact that he is capable of such horrible things. As I pointed out before, the shocked ad lib after saying that he will "aim at your daughter, son," also shows the shocked reflection upon his own behavior. After this intense passage of angry and anxious emotions, the verse with a much calmer voice follows in which Young Thug again reflects upon his own sins: "I know I did a lot of sins, and I hope you still let me make it through." The calmer voice makes that the repeated lyrical concept now contains a narrative in relation to the previous intense section. Young Thug lived through the anxiety over his own sins during the intense part, and now knows how to deal with it.

The gestural performance of the voice in "Harambe" communicates a narrative through the vocal gestures more than through the lyrics. In doing so, the voice is centralized even further in the listening experience, because the listener has to engage with the vocal gestures in order to follow the narrative of the song. Moreover, there is a feeling of sincerity in the different vocal effects showcased by Young Thug. For him to exclaim the emotional gestures he must have

lived through them during the recording, which is a highly engaging feature of his style. In a way, the listener becomes complicit in the expressed gestures, and therefore might feel a closer proximity to the perceived body in the music.

Young Thug's vocal style is different from the aforementioned trap vocals, because the phonographic staging and production applied to them, make Young Thug sound "natural." The presence of auto-tune is barely noticable, and the grunts, high-pitched shrieks, and melodic lines that are characteristic for Young Thug sound as if they are completely a result of his body without any help of the production technology. The presence of technological effects are subtly hidden in the mix of the recording. Besides the phonographic staging of Young Thug's voice as "natural," the expressive vocal gestures also create a hyper expression of human emotion, similar to the aforementioned use of hypersoul. However, instead of transgressing "human" expression by incorporating androidian and robotic effects to signify a nonhuman extension to express emotion, Young Thug does so towards the animalistic. The vocals emphasize bodily noises in a way that is reminiscent of the grotesque body as theorized by Bakhtin. I argue that Young Thug's vocal style offers a new perspective to black posthumanity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I connected Burton's notion of trap irony to a consideration of trap as grotesque, in order to combine the points Burton made about the reiteration of worn-out stereotypes in trap's noisy aesthetic, as well as the fact that trap's sounds are an expression of black male southern urban experiences. By building upon Bakhtin's conceptualization of the grotesque body, I show how trap vocals indeed present a black body that confronts the listener with the way their listening ear racially transforms sound into threatening noise. By taking a closer look at the way in which trap vocals create a hyperexpression of the black body, I distinguished several expressive parameters of the voice that transgress both the notion of the nonhuman and the human voice. This leads me to the observation that on the one hand, trap centralization of the voice is an emphasis of sonic blackness which racially transforms the perceived body towards the nonhuman, while on the other, the centralized voice creates an embodied listening experience in which the expression is perceived as more direct, which is grounded in the socially constructed idea that the voice is inextricably connected to humanness.

The characteristic aspects of trap vocals, created by a combination of digital effects and the use of expressive gestural vocalizations, place the genre in the posthuman theory of hypersoul. By analyzing several songs that showcase these characteristic aspects of trap vocals, I found that the voice is formative for the genre's musical expression. Trap music emphasizes the physicality of the voice and therefore invites an embodied listening experience that lets the listener experience the expressed emotions in a gestural way. The fact that we perceive the world through our body has resulted in the notion of gestures to be a more direct way of perception. This perceived directness is heightened by the multiple voices that have contrasting effects, such as the "natural" and distorted voices in "Savage Mode," or the emotional vocal gestures in "Harambe." Trap confronts the listening ear with what you have learned about human and

nonhuman sound: on the one hand you learned to racialize sound and to perceive sonic blackness, while on the other, you learned to perceive the voice in a certain direct, embodied listening, as human. The fact that we believe to perceive the voice in a more direct way allows for us to empathize with the other to such an extent that we experience the expressed gestures and emotions as if we go through them ourselves, allowing us to orientate in spaces we normally do not inhabit. The hyperexpression through the use of a perceived "natural" voice provides a new perspective to black posthumanity, where trap seems to move away from the human towards the animal, as an extreme parody of the long history of black people being deemed subhumans.

Conclusion

This thesis exposes the contradiction of the notion of a nonhuman voice: Traditionally, the voice is considered an inextricably human sound, but in that same tradition not all humans are deemed human, which makes that there are nonhuman voices as well. Ongoing anti-black violence caused by rendering some voices less human than others, calls for more awareness about the workings of the sonic color line and the listening ear. As is shown by Stoever and Eidsheim, the racial transformation of sound is also present in music. By taking the southern hip hop genre trap as an example of a music style that is perceived as specifically black, I have formulated the relation between the voice and the human/nonhuman binary by examining the way in which specific sonic expressions provoke a perception of sonic blackness.

As was shown in the first chapter, traditionally, the voice has been theorized as being central to our perception of humanness. However, this perception is affected by the human/nonhuman binary that stems in the Western Enlightenment, which renders people that intersectionally deviate from the white, patriarchal norm, as less human. For instance, the history of slavery is an example of how black people have long been treated as subhumans. The repercussions of this period surface in the ongoing racism in our current society, which still leads to the dehumanizing of black people. As Eidsheim and Stoever point out, this racism is not only fueled by the visual perception of blackness, but also by the sonically perceived blackness. This means that the perceived sonic blackness of a voice makes that voice nonhuman. This perception of race in voice is connected to the way in which elements of the voice are rendered musical, such as vowels, or noisy, such as consonants. The social and acoustic definition of noise in relation to the racial transformation of sound comes forward in the perception of hip hop music as a specifically black-sounding genre.

In the second chapter, I built upon the notion that hip hop, and especially the southern subgenre trap, sounds black. Trap's rattling sounds, shouts, dark beat, and lyrical illegibility are racially transformed in the listening ear. Moreover, they connote a specific southern blackness that is associated with worn-out stereotypes about black people being unintelligent, violent, and hypermasculine. I elaborated Burton's observation that trap's noisy aesthetic creates a perceived sonic blackness in the music by looking at the sociohistorical context in which trap sounds are rooted. Trap seems to reiterate worn-out stereotypes of blackness by signifying a hypermasculine, aggressive, and immoral black male body in its sonic elements. I argue that this perception of trap is rooted in associations with the southern black urban identity that predates hip hop. Therefore, the perceived sonic blackness that Burton identifies in trap is not necessarily characterized by the expression of a general sonic blackness—which is the perceived black body in sound—but rather of a specific southern blackness.

As I have shown in chapter two, the impact of the geographical context on trap sounds is significant, because of the way the local culture affects the coded gestures that signify location-specific expressions. The sociohistorical demarcation of the South deserves an elaboration in further research, because although the collective southern identity was important

for the early southern hip hop artists to gain nationwide recognition, the local scenes proved to be fruitful enough to create their own lasting styles, such as bounce, crunk, and also trap.

The distinction between hip hop that expresses post-race blackness and southern blackness is interesting in itself, because as was shown in chapter two, the latter explicitly does not involve itself in politics. As Burton points out, despite its non-political aesthetic, trap is still involved in politics because it sounds black. This urges questions about the way in which black artists are always considered to be expressing a form of activism in their music, because of their skin color, while white artists do not have to explain themselves if they make non-political music. However, despite its non-political aesthetic, there is something to be said about a slight shift that can be detected in the trap scene in relation to expressing political awareness. Whether it is due to the increased mainstream popularity of the genre, or because of the political situation of the United States under Donald Trump's presidency, the amount of instances in which trap is politically involved seems to be increasing.

Young Thug is central in several of these instances. Besides his co-writing of the protest song "This is America", which I mentioned earlier in this thesis, Young Thug has openly questioned his gender-identity as well as the negative connotations with the word "thug" in his stage name. The expressed gender fluidity of Young Thug was materialized in the cover art of *Jeffery*, in which he is modeling a dress designed by Alessandro Trincone (see Figure 8). These questions surrounded the release of his seventh mixtape, originally titled *No, My Name is Jeffery*, later shortened to *Jeffery*.[173] During the listening party of the mixtape Young Thug was quoted by Pitchfork, saying: "I didn't want my kids to grow up and call me Thug because in real-life terms Thug is thug," which Pitchfork interprets as inevitably being a response to the current racial climate.[174] Indeed, the word "thug" seems to have become a euphemism for the n-word used by white people, such as president Trump. On 29 May 2020, four days after the police brutality that killed George Floyd, Trump responded to the following protests and riots with a tweet in which he refers to the protesters as "THUGS."[175] As Cheng points out in his reflection on the killing of Jordan Davis by Michael Dunn, this word has racial connotations. Dunn reportedly referred to the music coming from the other car as "thug music" before firing 10 gunshots at the four

---

[173] In the promotional trailer for the mixtape, Young Thug is interrogated about his identity, repeatedly correcting the police officers calling him Young Thug by responding with: "No, my name is Jeffery." Young Thug. "No, my name is Jeffery 8/26." *YouTube* (August 23, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSs6WnZ2830.

[174] Sheldon Pearce, "Young Thug: JEFFERY," *Pitchfork* (September 1, 2016), accessed May 30, 2020, https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/22329-jeffery/.

[175] In the tweet, Trump responds to the protests with "when the looting starts, the shooting starts." The tweet has since been hidden and flagged as 'glorifying violence' by Twitter.com. See Brianna Moné, "Twitter slapped a 'glorifying violence' label on a Trump tweet that threatened George Floyd protesters in Minneapolis with getting shot," *Business Insider* (29 May 2020), https://www.businessinsider.nl/twitter-warning-trump-tweet-george-floyd-glorifying-violence-2020-5?international=true&r=US.

teenagers, killing the 17-year old Davis.[176] Although it is not desired to force a political perspective on trap, it is interesting to follow how the genre will evolve in the coming years.

Figure 8

Album cover for Young Thug's mixtape *Jeffery* (2016). Photo by Garfield Lamond.

Trap's misogynistic lyrics make it not the easiest music genre to study in light of larger academic questions. However, as my analyses have shown, the lyrics of trap are inferior to the musical expression of vocal gestures. Trap is a place where new rap styles and musical expressions are created, and therefore deserves a closer look. The analyses of trap vocals in this thesis contribute to the body of research into the southern hip hop genres, which is still underrepresented in hip hop studies. Especially the style of mumble rapping has not been theorized extensively yet, while it would be interesting to take a closer look at the way in which this illegible rap form spreads across underground hip hop scenes, such as sound cloud rap. Yet, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the misogyny found in trap is part of the problematic gender divide that is still strong in this specific genre. Research has shown that the gender divide is upheld by the fact that the use of misogynistic lyrics is still so normalized.[177] Especially the trap vocal style of mumble rap seems to be exclusively dominated by men. Rihanna's performance in

---

[176] Cheng points out how Dunn in court denies the use of the phrase "thug music" and instead claims to have said "rap crap," which is probably a tactic advised by Dunn's attorney to steer the case away from race. See Dartmouth, "Public Lecture at Dartmouth College: His Music Was Not a Weapon," *YouTube* (May 4, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdaNPlFBsSU, 33'-35'.

[177] Margareth Hunter and Kathleen Soto, "Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze," *Race, Gender & Class* 16, no 1-2 (2009): 170-191; Mahaliah Ayana Little, "Why Don't We Love These Hoes? Black Women, Popular Culture, and the Contemporary Hoe Archetyp," *Black Female Sexualities*, ed. Trimiko Melancon, and Joanne M. Braxton, 89-99 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Marita B. Djupvik, "'Working It': Female Masculinity and Missy Elliott," *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Stan Hawkins, 117-129 (Routledge, 2017).

the song "Work," which inspired Young Thug for his whaling chorus on "RiRi," comes closest to trap's mush mouth sing-rapping.

In the third chapter, I considered the ways in which trap centralizes the voice in relation to Bakhtin's theorization of the grotesque body. By taking a closer look at the way in which trap vocals create a hyperexpression of the black body, I distinguished several expressive parameters of the voice that transgress both the notion of the nonhuman and the human voice. The characteristic aspects of trap vocals, created by a combination of digital effects and the use of expressive gestural vocalizations, place the genre in the posthuman theory of hypersoul. By analyzing several songs that showcase these characteristic aspects of trap vocals, I show how the voice is formative for the genre's musical expression of hypersoul. More specifically, I argue that the gestural expression of the voice that can be found in Young Thug's music creates a heightened embodied listening experience. In this consideration, I included the perceived directness of the voice as one of the important aspects of the ambiguous human/nonhuman voice presented in trap. This idea of perceived directness in relation to perceiving other bodies deserves further research into what it means to experience a heightened embodied listening experience of a black male body when you are not black or male yourself. Additionally, Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology would provide a useful lens to consider this form of queer orientation in musical expression and perception.[178]

The voice is the one sound through which we learn to communicate from the moment we are born. The meanings we tie to the voices we hear around us, as well as our own, are ultimately a result of learned gestures. Our perception of race in the voice is that too. This thesis has shown how we are easily misled by our own ears to render some voices as more noisy, undesirable, and even less-than-human, than others. However, by being aware of this socially constructed shape our ears we can also learn to listen past that. In some instances, this might result in hearing music in sounds where we did not expect it. The mumbling, shouting, and singing voices in trap are an example of how socially defined noises can become desirable sounds.

---

[178] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Aristoteles, D. W Hamlyn, and Christopher John Shields. *De Anima: Books 2 and 3 (with Passages from Book 1)*. Clarendon Aristotle Series. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993.

Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Vol. 16. Manchester University Press, 1985.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Theory and History of Literature vol. 8. Edited by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

———. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Elena Aleksandrovna Izvolʹskaja. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Barrett, Lindon. *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Barthes, Roland. "The Grain of the Voice." *Image, Music, Text*. Edited and translated by Stephen Heath, 179–89. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977/1996.

Bayles, Martha. "Troubled Soul: The Man Who Started It All Heads for the Finish Line." *The Weekly Standard* 10, no. 43 (August 1, 2005).

Bennett, Andy and Richard A. Peterson. *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004.

Bicknell, Janet. *Why Music Moves Us*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230233836.

Bogazianos, Dimitri. *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.

Burton, Justin Adams. *Posthuman Rap*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Cambridge Dictionary. "Noise." Accessed May 25, 2020. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/noise.

Cheng, William. "Black Noise, White Ears: Resilience, Rap, and the Killing of Jordan Davis." *Current Musicology* 102 (2018): 115-89.

Connor, Steven. "Whisper Music." *Lecture* (2007). Accessed on March 15, 2020. http://stevenconnor.com/whispermusic/.

———. *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations*. Reaktion Books, 2014.

Cosby, Bill, and Alvin F. Poussaint. *Come on people: On the path from victims to victors*. Thomas Nelson Inc, 2009.

Cumming, Naomi. *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification.* Advances in Semiotics. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

Dartmouth. "Public Lecture at Dartmouth College: His Music Was Not a Weapon." *YouTube* (May 4, 2018). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdaNPlFBsSU.

Demers, Joanna Teresa. *Listening through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Derrida, Jacques. "Of Grammatology." Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Dibben, Nicola. "Understanding Performance Expression in Popular Music Recordings." In *Expressiveness in Music.* Edited by Dorottya Fabian, Renee Timmers, and Emery Schubert. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Dimitriadis, Greg. "Hip hop and Humanism." In *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US.* Edited by Monica R. Miller, Anthony B. Pinn, Bernard 'Bun B' Freeman: 137-151. Suny: University at Buffalo, 2015.

Djupvik, Marita B. "'Working It': Female Masculinity and Missy Elliott." *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender.* Edited by Stan Hawkins, 117-129. Routledge, 2017.

Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880.* New York: Russell & Russell, 1935.

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. "Marian Anderson and 'Sonic Blackness' in American Opera." *American Quarterly* vol. 63, no. 3 (2011): 641-71.

Epstein, Josh. *Sublime Noise: Musical Culture and the Modernist Writer.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Eshun, Kodwo. *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction.* London: Quartet, 1998.

Feldman, M., E. Wilbourne, S. Rings, B. Kane, and J. Q. Davies. "Why Voice Now?" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* vol. 68, no. 3 (2015): 653-85.

French, Kenneth. "Geography of American Rap: Rap Diffusion and Rap Centers." *GeoJournal* 82 (2015): 259–272. DOI 10.1007/s10708-015-9681-z.

Gaunt, Kyra D.. *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop.* New York: New York University Press, 2006.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Goddard, Michael, Benjamin Halligan, and Paul Hegarty, eds. *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012.

Grem, Darren E.. "'The South Got Something to Say:' Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America." *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 55-73.

Hunter, Margareth and Kathleen Soto. "Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze." *Race, Gender & Class* 16, no 1-2 (2009): 170-191.

Hydaralli, Saeed. "What is Noise? An Inquiry into its Formal Properties," *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.

Ihde, Don. *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*. Second edition. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

James, Robin. "'Robo‑Diva R&B': Aesthetics, Politics, and Black Female Robots in Contemporary Popular Music." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 20, no. 4 (2008): 402-423.

Kristeva, Julia. *Semeiotikè*. 1969.

Latartara, John. "Laptop Composition at the Turn of the Millennium: Repetition and Noise in the Music of Oval, Merzbow, and Kid606." *Twentieth-Century Music* 7, no. 1 (2010): 91–115. https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1017/S1478572211000065.

Leman, Marc. *Embodied Music Cognition and Mediation Technology*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008.

Levinas, Emmanuel. "Ethics and Infinity." *CrossCurrents* 34, no. 2 (1984): 191–203.

———. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo.* Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.

Lewis, John, "Shock of the New." *The Guardian,* March 2, 2007. Accessed on May 20th. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/mar/02/jazz.

Little, Mahaliah Ayana. "Why Don't We Love These Hoes? Black Women, Popular Culture, and the Contemporary Hoe Archetyp." *Black Female Sexualities*. Edited by Trimiko Melancon, and Joanne M. Braxton, 89-99. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

McPhate, Mike. "Zoos Killing of Gorilla Holding a Boy Prompts Outrage." *New York Times*, 30 May 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/us/zoos-killing-of-gorilla-holding-a-boy-prompts-outrage.html.

McWhorter, John. "How Hip-hop Holds Blacks Back." *City Journal,* vol. 13, no. 3 (2003): 66-75.

———. *All about the beat: Why hip-hop can't save Black America*. Penguin, 2008.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception.* Translated by Donald A. Landes. New York, Routledge, 2012. Originally published as *Phénoménologie de la perception.* Éditions Gallimard, 1945.

Miller, Matt. "Dirty Decade: Rap Music and the US South, 1997–2007." *Southern Spaces* (June 2008). https://southernspaces.org/2008/dirty-decade-rap-music-and-us-south-1997-2007/.

Mixon, Gregory. *The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class, and Violence in a New South City.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005.

Moné, Brianna. "Twitter slapped a 'glorifying violence' label on a Trump tweet that threatened George Floyd protesters in Minneapolis with getting shot." *Business Insider* (29 May 2020). Accessed May 29 2020. https://www.businessinsider.nl/twitter-warning-trump-tweet-george-floyd-glorifying-violence-2020-5/.

National Archives. "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." Accessed July 12 2020. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript.

Pearce, Sheldon. "Young Thug: JEFFERY." *Pitchfork* (September 1, 2016). Accessed May 30, 2020. https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/22329-jeffery/.

Red Bull Music Academy. "Alex Tumay on Young Thug, Travis Scott and Kanye West | Red Bull Music Academy." *YouTube* (October 5, 2016). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-IfbpJF11Y.

Richards, J. C., and R. W. Schmidt. *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics.* Routledge, 2013.

Rietveld, A.C.M., and V.J. van Heuven. *Algemene Fonetiek*, 3rd edition. Bussum: Uitgeverij Coutinho, 2013.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism.* London: Penguin, 2003.

Saturday Night Live. "Friendos (featuring A$AP Rocky) – SNL." *YouTube* (May 5, 2017). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oPe80mdcZg.

Scott, David. "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 4, no. 2 (September 2000): 118–208.

Sexton, Jared. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Springer, Melanie J.. "Where Is 'the South'? Assessing the Meaning of Geography in Politics." *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (2019): 1100-1134.

Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

———. "Part I: Hearing, Listening, Deafness." *The Sound Studies Reader* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

Stoever, Jennifer Lynn. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York City University Press, 2016.

The Virtual Linguistics Campus. "PHO_211 – Reading Spectrograms: Vowels." *YouTube* (June 30, 2015). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWel5j-F8lE.

Thisis50. "Future Says Rappers Have To Dumb Their Lyrics Down Nowadays." *Youtube* (November 6, 2011). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pSnj0VK7RQ.

Weheliye, Alexander G. "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music." *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 21-47.

Wheeler, Darby, and Bascuñan, Rodrigo. "The Southern Lab." *Hip Hop Evolution* season 4, episode 2. Netflix, 2020.

White, Miles. *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity*. University of Illinois Press, 2011.

Wilkins, Caroline. "From voice-body to sound-body: A phenomenological approach to the voice." *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* 1 (2016): 117-130.

Wynter, Sylvia. "No Humans Involved—An Open Letter to My Colleagues." *Forum NHI: Knowledge for the 21ˢᵗ Century* vol. 1, no. 1 (1994): 42–73.

Young Thug. "No, my name is Jeffery 8/26." *YouTube* (August 23, 2016). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSs6WnZ2830.

Discography

Adele. "Someone Like You." Spotify. Track 11 on *21*. XL, Columbia, 2011.

Childish Gambino. "This is America." Spotify. Single. RCA Records, Wolf + Rothstein, mcDJ Recording, 2018.

Desiigner. "Panda." Spotify. Track 14 on *New English*. GOOD, Def Jam, 2015.

Future. "Tony Montana." Spotify. Track 9 on *Pluto*. A1, Freebandz, Epic, 2012.

DJ Screw featuring 20-2-Life. "Inside Looking Out." Spotify. Track 8 on *All Screwed Up, Vol. II*. Bigtyme Recordz, 1995.

Gucci Mane. "Trap House." Spotify. Track 2 on *Trap House*. Big Cat Records and Tommy Boy Records, 2005.

Lil Uzi Vert. "XO Tour Llif3." Spotify. Track 16 on *Luv is Rage 2*. Generation Now, Atlantic, 2017.

Lil Wayne. "A Milli." Spotify. Track 3 on *Tha Carter III*. Cash Money, Universal Motown, 2008.

Migos. "Versace." Spotify. Track 20 on *Y.R.N.*. Quality Control, 300, Atlantic, 2013.

Playboi Carti. "wokeuplikethis*." Spotify. Track 4 on *Playboi Carti*. AWGE, Interscope, 2017.

Rich Gang featuring Young Thug and Rich Homie Quan. "Lifestyle." Spotify. Single. Cash Money, Republic, 2014.

Rihanna featuring Drake. "Work." Spotify. Track 4 on *Anti*. Roc Nation, Westbury Road, 2016.

Smokepurpp & Murda Beatz featuring Lil Yachty and Offset. "Do Not Disturb." Spotify. Track 3 on *Bless Yo Trap*. Alamo, Interscope, 2018.

T.I.. "Rubberband Man." Spotify. Track 8 on *Trap Muzik*. Grand Hustle, Atlantic, 2003.

Travis Scott. "SICKO MODE." Spotify. Track 3 on *Astroworld*. Cactus Jack, Grand Hustle, Epic, 2018.

Young Thug. "Best Friend." Spotify. Track 5 on *Slime Season*. 300, Atlantic, 2015.

———. "Harambe." Spotify. Track 7 on *Jeffery*. 300, Atlantic, 2016.

———. "RiRi." Spotify. Track 5 on *Jeffery*. 300, Atlantic, 2016.

21 Savage. "Savage Mode." Spotify. Track 4 on *Savage Mode*. Independent, 2016.