

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

# Why I Read What I Read: On the Exigencies of Sonic Reading Practices

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A little over a decade ago and during the time when I served on the faculty of Princeton's Department of English and (what was then) the Center for African American Studies, I was invited by the department's undergraduate student body to participate in the inaugural English majors' colloquium, an annual spring affair in which faculty members deliver remarks in response to a single question posed by the majors. The question that year was this: "Why do we read what we read?" The assignment was both intriguing and wholly frustrating, since I had, at that point, witnessed chronic exclusionary practices from the top down in Princeton's English department, a unit in which I taught for a total of thirteen years, beginning in my post as an assistant faculty member and concluding as a tenured full professor. The "we" rang hollow to me since I often found myself reading with and alongside a set of students who, while drawn to African American literature (one of my primary areas of specialization), were nonetheless rarely based in the Department of English as majors. They expressed little interest in pursuing a degree in English and often articulated a discomfort with what they perceived to be the history of anti-Blackness in the discipline—as both a field of inquiry and a site of unreconstructed university sociality.

My own experiences as a Black feminist studies professor at Princeton confirmed as much. Throughout my entire time at Princeton and through what amounted to over half-a-dozen times in which I taught some portion of the multicourse survey in African American literature that my former colleague Valerie Smith and I designed back in 2002, the "we" in my African American literature courses amounted to Black and brown students who largely rejected English as a path of study. This was a sentiment that surfaced in each iteration of the class when I taught it (and I once taught the survey across an entire academic year). Their reasons were varied—

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ranging from the familiar professional concerns regarding the viability of a humanities degree to an equally recognizable skepticism and resistance toward earning a degree in a discipline steeped in European hegemony. One issue that remained constant was that, before enrolling in the African American literature survey, many of them had trouble imagining the English majors' classroom as a site for interdisciplinary experimentation, robust political debate, and transformative worlding. And even though I can still recount the number of times when, in those early years of the twenty-first century, our explorations of texts took on an electrifying, comparativist tenor (when, say, the classic "man into thing . . . thing into man" passage in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* became an occasion to draw extensive analogies to *The Matrix*), the bigger battle for me was always convincing more undergraduates of color to approach critical humanist reading (of many forms, of many kinds of texts across space and time) as an urgent process capable of yielding enlivening scenes of self-discovery—revelations and revolutions, as I liked to think of it, in vision and taste as well as in ethical passions. I was not naive (or arrogant) enough to believe that I was starring in some sort of halcyon conversion narrative in which I could somehow reach recalcitrant students who had never once imagined the riveting and expansive power of literary analysis as a means to radical and galvanizing social and political practice and would now ultimately find salvation in English, go on to declare the major, and storm the barricades of Spenser studies. But what I did hope for in speaking at the colloquium was a way to perhaps question, by way of example and suggestion, why and how literary experience resonates with our vibrant, whole cultural and social selves. In my case, the music that shaped my ideas, desires, and worldviews both complemented and worked in tension with the literature that set my world afire. The point in making these remarks was, then, to encourage our students who felt alienated from the discipline to not sacrifice or repress any part of themselves in their reading experiences, to take seriously the weight and importance of their own historicity and of all the moving parts

that inform how they encounter a text, what they extrapolate from it. It goes without saying that the BIPOC studies, feminist, LGBTQ, and Marxist movements in our field over the past fifty years have long inspired sea changes of this nature in our scholarship. My narrative for the majors represented an effort to render, in the form of a love letter declaration, a brief meditation on cultural and intellectual intimacy with textuality from the standpoint of a reader who found in literary and sonic immersion a polyvalent mode of knowledge production.

I offered my abbreviated salvo all those years ago at the colloquium as a short oral memoir, a quick and compressed coming-into-intellectual-consciousness vignette that cross-faded my tales of adolescent literary obsessions with pop culture fluencies that constituted my affective lifeworld. That high-voltage cross-pollination of readerly pleasure and particularly sonic passions amounted to a conjoining of sensibilities, critical desires, and sense making, a story of heterogeneous, thrillingly messy and mischievous knowledge acquisition and a way of reading that refused the presumptive demarcations between my teenage AP English classes and the music that I devoured like Ms. Pac-Man in the Tower Records stores of my youth. The hope was that it might serve as an invitation to engage in mindful social and cultural reading as a means to self-making and self-fulfilling survival for the ones who, like me, have always tarried in the margins trying to take stock, like my beloved Ralph Ellison's ultimately wise hero, of the center, the ruin it hath wrought for the rest of us and how to claim all of what we are in spite of this.

These were remarks aimed at encouraging ways of asking how we might better reach out to potential literature and culture students, students who loved and felt drawn to narrative as an aesthetic, social, and political imperative. There were students out there who recognized the history of literature in communities of color as one concerning life and death, the means through which to assert one's personhood or risk total annihilation. But the story of how art and politics were and are tools of actualization for marginalized communities was not one that held much sway in the English department community, and many of our Black and brown students

knew it. They rejected the department as a home for their multifaceted intellectual experimentation (and when an interdisciplinary humanities studies program launched with nary a faculty member of color in its ranks, they continued to read the writing on the wall). The scholarship and pedagogy of several of us (my colleagues from that era working in, for instance, performance studies and Latinx studies) were—we hoped and imagined—deeply interdisciplinary endeavors, exercises in multisensorial engagement with a wide range of cultural texts. We encouraged a rigorous attention to language, a careful dissection of literary form alongside that of other expressive forms, and we often leaned into pedagogical activities that placed these other forms dialectically in play with some of our most demanding literary works. This is not rocket science. Indeed, it is now clear that a generational shift in literary studies has led increasing numbers of English department faculty members to “cut ’n’ mix” juxtapositions of multicultural novels and poetry and (to a lesser extent) plays with a rich array of albums and cinema and a broad terrain of visual art, as well as online and print media. In the early years of the twenty-first century, however, and in a departmental community that prided itself on championing, above all else, the preciousness of the canonical literary text as a guiding force and ethos, it often felt like an uphill battle, a weird, solitary, and, nonetheless, rewarding project to spend an entire class session limning, for instance, a critical analysis of Black feminist interiority in *Sula* by starting with a dissection of the verve and adventure of Nina Simone’s album *Little Girl Blue*.

What I wanted to encourage our students to consider, by way of a brief autobiographical exegesis at the majors’ colloquium was, then, the power of tracing our own multifaceted bildungsromans as readers and the revelations to be had in recognizing and building on the omnivorous cultural appetites forged in our youth that, at least in my case, frame the conditions of my present-day teaching and research. What follows are my remarks as I originally delivered them to a group of about fifty undergraduate English students, most of whom—with the exception of roughly five to seven students—were

not people of color and rarely took classes offered by the Center for African American Studies.

It started in a bedroom in Menlo Park, California, with a hand-me-down Zenith stereo and too much free time on my hands. The Ramones and the Sex Pistols and Dostoevsky; Tina Turner, Grace Jones, Chaka Khan, and Toni Morrison; my father’s old Dizzy, Duke Ellington, and Cannonball Adderley records and a dog-eared first edition of James Baldwin; Parliament-Funkadelic pulsating “underground” alongside Louis and Ellison’s invisible man; Joan Jett, Patti Smith, Debbie Harry, and the Brontë sisters, the original punk rock women storming out of NYC’s CBGB and the English hillsides.

The vinyl was always stacked as high as the library books and the experience of *how* I read was almost always couched in, framed by, conjoined with a sonic universe. I wanted Johnny Rotten to screech the ballad of Raskolnikov to me as I agonized over his torment. I wanted Chakha and Rufus to bear the vocal burden of Sula’s transgressions. I thought that Horace Silver’s *Songs for My Father* might help me hear “Sonny’s Blues,” and that the ache, rage, and longing of the Pretenders’ first album could bring out Bertha Mason’s opaque interiors (although I think that the experimental jazz phenom Cécile McLorin Salvant would do a better job of that now).

At the time, in the angsty throes of junior high and high school, rarely did I think much about the road that I was paving for myself—one in which I was reading sound and literary text in vibrant conversation with one another, one in which I savored the musicality of my favorite fiction and the narrativity of my favorite punk, new wave, and soul albums (what is now, sadly and perhaps, a nearly obsolete form—the album!).

More still, unbeknownst to little ol’ me, my “high fidelity” literary pursuits were pushing me farther and farther out onto planes where what I was “reading” strayed far and away from the form of the “book” or even the long-playing record. It wasn’t that I stopped loving and devouring novels, but it *was* the case that the high-voltage relationship between music and literature that I valued so deeply was driving me into the realm of reading other kinds of “living” texts. I wanted to write about the carnal

tales I witnessed in the audience during Prince's 1999 (the album—not the year!) performances (because yes, I am that old). I was gamely searching for the critical language to analyze the postcolonial implications of the Police's *Ghost in the Machine* reggae rock (Sting as Mr. Kurtz? Why not?!) as I experienced it live in concert.

Likewise, in my teen years, I was beginning to read writing about pop music, and I began taking the local bus down to Tower Records on El Camino Real and reading rock magazines in the racks of the book section—rags like *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*, and yes, even *Hit Parade*. I was “just waitin’ on a friend,” as the *Shine a Light* Rolling Stones might say. Someone who could help me make sense out of the music of my youth that *wasn't* Count Basie, the Spinners, or the Jackson 5 (just some of our household favorites—and mine as well, by the way).

In those early years of reading writing about music—what I later would come to understand as “rock music criticism”—I discovered, through reading popular arts journalism, ways to articulate the pleasures and wonders of listening to the Smith's *Meat Is Murder* in high school, Terence Trent D'Arby's *The Hard Line* in college, and anything and everything by PJ Harvey from graduate school forward. This body of criticism provided me with the language to extol the virtues of Chrissie Hynde's songwriting talents to groups of bored and mystified schoolyard companions. It introduced me to rock's cultural history, and it gave me the tools to begin piecing together the complex tales of popular music culture embedded in the songs that I played at maximum volume again and again and again in my teens (much to my parents' loving annoyance).

I read what I read now because the Clash led me to the literature of the French Revolution in my undergraduate years at Berkeley, because Alice Walker's *Meridian* led me to Curtis Mayfield and her *Purple* phenomenon got me to Bessie Smith and August Wilson. I read what I read because understanding the aesthetic dimensions of Nina Simone's musical genius—from her radically revisionist Bob Dylan covers to her civil rights protest anthem “Mississippi Goddam” helps me hear the political cadences of

Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* (and NOT the Puffy version of that classic). I read the jazz great Abbey Lincoln's brilliantly dissonant scream on *We Insist*, her classic collaboration with Max Roach, to widen and deepen the ways that I process the poetics of Sethe, and Denver and Beloved's sound-ed subjectivity in Morrison's masterpiece.

I read vertically, but I also read horizontally across canons with the hopes that we might do away with them altogether, so that the English majors in this room might delight in the value of taking African American studies courses (and I would add here too Latino studies, Asian American studies, and queer theory courses)—so as to see, for instance, what Dickens and the pan-Africanist fantasy writer Pauline Hopkins have to say to each other, what kinds of dangerous jokes Mark Twain and Charles Chesnutt are telling one another, what Gish Jen is whispering back to Philip Roth, what Jonathan Swift might have in common with Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, and Dave Chappelle, what Afro-Latin music can do to our understanding of being “on the road” with Kerouac (as my colleague Alexandra Vazquez has shown us). I read to find the intersections between Virginia Woolf's and Marita Bonner's feminist formalistic revolutions. And I read to trace the ways that punk couldn't survive without disco.

I read what I read to challenge the arbitrary distinctions between “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” Blackness, whiteness, and everything in between. And above all else, at all times, I read with an abiding faith in what Fred Moten describes as “the capacity for exchange and the capacity for a literary, performative, phonographic disruption of the protocols of exchange” (10). So long live the age of “freestyle” reading practices, and I encourage you all as you fan out beyond McCosh Hall and the confines of Princeton English to break the sound barrier and to rage against any machine that tells you what or how you can or cannot read.

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## WORK CITED

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. U of Minnesota P, 2003.