

Article

# Black Noise from the Break: Ma and Pa's Black Radical Lyricism

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**Abstract:** Kendrick Lamar's 2022 track "We Cry Together" is, if nothing else, a masterful piece of wordplay and rhythm. Lamar manages to create a lyrical conversation that sounds both dialectical and diametric. Both the song and album are a definitive break from his earlier tenor that struck a mass appeal. A private conversation between two people, "We Cry Together", insofar as it captures the intimate interiority of a couple, is also a break within the album itself. Textual renderings of Black performances cut away in ways similar to Lamar's song or the soloist in a jazz ensemble, their breaks signifying sound. Invoking as aural praxis the language of jazz musicology and Black lyrical theory of Fred Moten, this article closely reads chapter four in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* as one such special representation of textual aurality. First, it identifies multiple manifestations of "the break" before probing the deeply conflicted concept of Black noise as the racialized, resistant, resilient, and resonant octave of radical Black performance. A lyrical improvisation of a Black noise defiant in its indeterminacy, Ma and Pa's duet cuts away from Castle's polyphonic ensemble, creating the break within a break, within a break. Lingering in the cut, listening as Fred Moten, Douglas Kearney, Ren Ellis Neyra, and Zadie Smith encourage, the article arrives at a euphonic reproduction as induction into a legacy of synesthetic, lyrical, radical Black noise.

**Keywords:** sound; Black studies; musicology; black noise; Caribbean literature; hip hop; George Lamming; Kendrick Lamar

## 1. Call and Response

Kendrick Lamar's recent album, *Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers* (Walker), slaps listeners with a far from subtle break from the mainstream sound and big-name pop music artists featured in *Damn* (2017). Single tracks shot, along with the album, to the top of various music charts. "We Cry Together", a visceral conversation in rhyme featuring female recording artist and poet Taylour Paige, was one such single from Lamar's album that stunned fans and critics the week the album dropped, dominating charts tracking downloads on streaming services, such as Spotify and iTunes. The lyrics, unlike the other tracks on Lamar's album, unfold through a reciprocal, emotionally heated argument between what we can assume is a couple—man and woman—on the brink of a blow-up. Each verse represents one side, the back-and-forth between the man and woman transitioning naturally, without pause, the urgent fury of an argument in which both people are invested. They roll into the chorus with the same ferocious authenticity, hurling "fuck you" in response to the litany of insults they spit at each other, without missing a beat or stepping out of sync with the end rhyme.

"We Cry Together" is, if nothing else, a masterful piece of wordplay and rhythm. Lamar manages to create a lyrical conversation that sounds both dialectical and diametric. Both the song and album are, as I mentioned above, a definitive break from his earlier tenor that struck a mass appeal. A private conversation between two people, "We Cry Together", insofar as it captures the intimate interiority of a couple, is also a break within the album itself. It, to invoke the definition of break within jazz musicology, breaks away from the ensemble into a duet that mimics improvisation through a lyricism of crafted chaos. Not only, though, do the song and album arise from the break in a strictly jazz theoretical sense, but Lamar, as a producer, rapper, and Black man, also composes from the break, from



**Citation:** Reade, Julia. 2023. Black Noise from the Break: Ma and Pa's Black Radical Lyricism. *Humanities* 12: 35. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12020035>

Received: 12 February 2023

Revised: 4 April 2023

Accepted: 11 April 2023

Published: 19 April 2023



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the rupture of the social ensemble in which he, in virtue of his race and class, has been relegated to the third string. What we have, then, is a break, within a break, within a break.

Applied more broadly and to a staple piece of Windrush literature<sup>1</sup>, Lamar's trifecta of breaks reveals strikingly similar features to those found in chapter four of George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953). Stylistically, Lamming's Black lyricism departs—or breaks—from modernist literature's predominantly white ensemble, as did rap music amidst an overwhelmingly white mainstream music culture. In virtue of his Blackness, Lamming, like Lamar, writes from the social rupture—the break—demarcated by race. Both the author and the rapper illuminate a consciousness fractured by a “Plantation Slave Society [that] conspired to smash its ancestral African culture” (Lamming 2018). They are, like Joyce Ann Joyce notes of Richard Wright and George Lamming, “Diasporic brothers” whose compositions from the break echo each other “in their attempts to improve the intellectual, political, and economic quality of Black lives” (Joyce 2009). This paper, however, will not compare and contrast these works. Nor will it critically intervene in misreadings—or, mishearings—of “We Cry Together”, despite alluding to potential misinterpretations. Rather, I start with Lamar and his music to accentuate the radical Black performance taking place in Lamming's novel as one akin to the performance of Black lyricism in “We Cry Together”. I hear in Lamar's song a call in the vein of Samuel A. Floyd's “Call-Response” (Floyd 1991) to “challenge”, vis-à-vis Fred Moten and others, “the law language lays down while taking advantage of the opportunity that language affords” (Rowell and Moten 2004). That is, Lamar's rupture prompts a re(a)ttunement of the listening ear to hear the past differently, through the optics of Black radical aesthetics.

Responding to “We Cry Together”'s call to “challenge the law language lays down”, I propose, as Floyd Jr. does in “Ring Shout”, “a mode of inquiry that is consistent with the nature of black music, that is grounded in black music” to critically ponder what I contend is an overlooked instance of musical signification within the canon of Black radical aesthetics: Ma and Pa's duet in chapter four of George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*. Engaging in a sort of “musical troping” of *Castle*'s chapter four, I “rhetorically and figuratively” tinker with Lamming's melodic prose until it breaches the boundary between one-dimensional written language and the musical Signifyin(g) Floyd located within African and African diasporic culture's “Ring Shout” (Floyd 1991). Where Floyd, Jr. would lean into Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sterling Stuckey, I invoke as aural praxis the language of jazz musicology and Black lyrical theory of Fred Moten and Douglas Kearney to closely read a conversation between the village elders, Ma and Pa, in Lamming's novel. Under such scrutiny, “the law language lays down” gives way to a Black lyricism “Signifyin(g) musical figures” (Floyd 1991). A lyrical improvisation of a Black noise defiant in its indeterminacy, Ma and Pa's duet cuts away from *Castle*'s polyphonic ensemble, creating the break within a break, within a break. Lingering in the cut, listening as Moten, Kearney, Ren Ellis Neyra, and Zadie Smith encourage, we arrive at a euphonic reproduction as induction into a legacy of synesthetic, lyrical, radical Black noise.

## 2. Black Noise in the Break

Simply put, “‘break’ is the place, cut, or interval in which the soloist departs from the jazz ensemble to take an instrumental solo that repeats the basic melody of a tune with variations” (Lindberg 2005). Kathryn Lindberg, whose ambitious article puts Moten's book in conversation with three other contributions to the body of scholarship on Black radical politics and performance, expands on this concise definition. For Moten, according to Lindberg, “the break” is a technical, sexual, and textual metaphor for a space of time, a rupture, “a cutting away [ . . . ] for improvisations that insiders who carefully listen can identify and augment”. Moten mines the ruptures in the music of Billie Holiday, poetry of Amiri Baraka, and prose of Ralph Ellison for radical Black performances—“the very essence of Blackness”—that resist objectification. As Candice Jenkins aptly summarizes in her review of *In the Break*, “Moten's assessment of Black performance as Black radicalism is shaped, in part, by his conviction that Black performance equals improvisation” (2004,

emphasis added). These breaks, as improvised ruptures in Black performances, expose a liminal space brimming with generative and ontological potential, sites of Black radicalism “not to be mourned but opened and multiplied” (Lindberg 2005).

To be, like Moten, a “student of rupture” requires a letting go of expectations in order to arrive at an attunement to the aleatory, multisensory experiences that constitute the breaks in Black performance that “must not only be seen but heard if it is to be understood” (Jenkins 2004). Textual renderings of Black performances cut away, like the soloist in a jazz ensemble, their breaks “special representations [indicating] sound” (Moten 2003). As I aim to show shortly, chapter four in Lamming’s *Castle* is one such special representation of textual aurality. First, however, I want to briefly probe the deeply conflicted concept of Black noise as the racialized, resistant, resilient, and resonant octave of radical Black performance. It is my contention that such an endeavor must necessarily begin by revisiting the scholarly discourse on the ontological implications dominant listening practices had and have on sounds, both audible and implied, produced by Black bodies.

Hardly an inert, passive act, listening, to cite Jennifer Lynn Stoever, “is an interpretative, socially constructed practice conditioned by historically contingent and culturally specific value systems riven with power relations” (Stoever 2016). To engage the role of race in the construct of listening, Stoever introduces the concepts of the “sonic color line” and the “listening ear”. “The sonic color line”, exposit Stoever, “describes the process of racializing sound [ . . . ] and its product” so as to render audible “the hierarchical division sounded between ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness.’” Promoting the sonic color line is, according to Stoever, the listening ear, an anatomically apt metaphor for those socially normed, dominant listening practices that exert “pressure on the individual listening practices to confirm to the sonic color line’s norms” (Stoever 2016). Stoever’s text traces “the long historical entanglement between white supremacy and listening”—the sonic color line’s lineage—through American culture, beginning just prior to the Civil War and adjourning at the onset of the Civil Rights Movement (Stoever 2016). The sonic color line and the listening ear that sustains it persist, however, the “[w]illful white mishearings and auditory imaginings of blackness” transforming, for example, Black high school girls’ “screams of pain, fearful prayers, and silence into ‘blackness’: dangerous noise, outsized aggression, and a threatening strength” (Stoever 2016). As was Stoever’s intent, *The Sonic Color Line* offers a hermeneutics of sound attentive to its racialized dimensions.

Turning to additional contributions to the corpus of scholarship on Black noise, we hear echoes of Stoever’s sonic color line and listening ear. Thomas Wetmore notes in the introduction to *Current Musicology’s* special issue *Sounding the Break: Music Studies and the Political*, a fine line exists “between the respectable sound of the resilient Black voice and the menacing unruliness of disresponsible Black noise” (Wetmore 2018). Stoever terms this “fine line” Black sound straddles “the sonic color line” and the respectability politics at play here an ontological and epistemological implication of the listening ear. Documenting historical instances of the sonic color line in London, Frederick J. Solinger writes of “sonic impurity”, “there is something unpredictable and untranslatable about the qualities of such noises with their lack of fixed rhythms, something startling and alarming that prevents one from domesticating them, from assimilating them in into one’s daily life—in short, they are something from which one requires protection” (Solinger 2021). They, posits Ren Ellie Neyla expounding on Moten’s work, “disturb” whitewashed sensibilities in their refusal to “mime back what mastery wants to hear from the Other” (Neyra 2020). The free-flowing, lyrical, aleatory sounds of written and vocalized radical Black performances land discordant on the listening ear attuned to—or only tuning into—the grammar of white colonialism. Anything else, especially when spoken by a racialized body, is just noise.

In *Creole Noise: Early Caribbean Dialect, Literature, and Performance*, Belinda Edmondson writes on the concept of “noise” more generally:

Noise is background sound, the disharmony that frames the Subject, the signifier of an essential incommensurability. Noise is not merely sound. A cultural and ideological concept, it is the aural representation of the enslaved, the working

class, the immigrant: the Other [ . . . ] It is what the Europeans deemed the anarchic sounds emitted by the enslaved Africans. Noise is what these uncivilized beings, not-quite-humans made. (Edmondson 2022)

It is precisely this sort of “noise” Moten has in mind when theorizing about and mining “the break” in the radical Black performances: “the convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance at the scene of abjection” (Moten 2003).

It goes without saying that Kendrick Lamar’s “We Cry Together” qualifies as Black noise<sup>2</sup>; its gritty, profane lyrics and strident tone defy any attempts at orderliness. The song’s mixed reviews and willful “white mishearings” (Stoever 2016) amplify a sonic color line that would reduce Lamar and Paige’s self-described “performance art” (Brown 2022) to a “Harrowing Song About Abusive Relationships” (Aswad 2022) rather than the lyrically improvised “reflection of global disharmony over the past half-decade” (Walker 2022). Lamming’s Caribbean characters, such as Ma and Pa, to borrow from Solinger, also “produce a kind of noise that is difficult to adapt to and protect against; their accents and dialect seems to contain an almost noxious dimension that startles and alarms”. Edmondson describes the “noise” such utterances produced as a “yin/ yang of respectability and anarchy”, a mashup of anglophone standard grammar and regional vernacular. Creole, a particular Black noise, thus “carried the features of the people: hybrid, unassimilable, lascivious. Inferior” (Edmondson 2022). As Black noise, a language that Claudia Marquis asserts began “in brutality”, Creole rolled off the tongues of dehumanized subjects as a cultural marker of resilience and “a foil for real language” (Edmondson 2022). As Solinger notes in his analysis of Lamming’s *The Emigrants*, Black Caribbean speech evokes visceral sensory properties: “Aboard The Golden Image, a crowded boat taking the emigrants to London, a steward thinks that he has been ‘infected’ by the passengers as he attempts to speak with them and describes a ‘sickness’ that gave of an ‘odour which he felt rather than smelt” (Solinger 2021). Surely, noise’s shared Latin root with “nausea” inadequately explains why these particular utterances contaminate the listener with such a virulent stench. Rather, conceived of as Black noise, the sounds Lamming’s Black Caribbeans produce across his fiction take on the racialized dimensions Stoever, Neyal, Edmondson and Solinger interrogate in their respective works.

The specific Black noise emitted in *Castle* must be understood as just that—specific. In her article “Bombarded with Words”: Language and Region in George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*”, Marquis unpacks the distinctly regional vernacular of “Lamming’s creole—a mescolect—” shaped by the island’s unique colonialist influences and history of arrival, albeit a history with a shared nexus in the slave trade, as both Edmondson and Marquis acknowledge (Marquis 2010). According to Marquis, “The Barbadian vernacular, Bajan, is distinctive because of its pronunciation”; yet with its genesis in creole, Bajan projects a “‘linguistic subversion,’ challenging the hegemony of the dominant culture by inserting within it ‘the marginalized and despised’” audible and inaudible noise emitted by the Black body. Inherently political and exemplary of the sonic color line, Bajan, the linguistic register thus framing and emerging from the breaks within the radical Black performances staged in *Castle*, is, indeed, Black noise.

Moten’s aesthetics of Black radical performance theorizes about, from within, these multisensory chasms of Black noise. Both the hyperbolic account of the processes through which “particular sounds are identified, exaggerated, and ‘matched’ to racialized bodies” (Stoever 2016) and the reclamation of these sounds for the racialized body, Douglas Kearney’s *Mess and Mess and* satirizes the complex, “untranslatable” semantics of Black noise. In a transient dance with metaphor and poetics, Kearney plays circuitously with the indeterminacy that is Black noise. Kearney writes—speaks, screams, yells, cries, laughs, and in other ways improvises—from the “massive discourse of the cut” (Moten 2003) to arrive at what he sardonically terms a “Negrotesque Praxes”, an outcome of “Mess Studies” (Kearney 2015). Kearney’s inventive language offers a lexicon for naming and describing Black bodies and the audible and signified noises they produce. His use of the prefix “din-”,

an amalgam of liberally applied Latin, Norse, and Old English suffixes and prefixes, when proceeding sensory vocabulary, spurs a racialized transformation of the words, attaching to them a “dung”-like dinginess, a modifier of “‘black’ plus ‘noise’” (Kearney 2015). Inseparable, then, in Kearney’s view, are blackness and Black noise. “*Dincognegro*”, writes Kearney, “is to be a black person disguised as *blackness*—thus rendered as noise, through signal”.

Blackness as noise as Black noise means that, as *dinconeegroes*, Ma and Pa emit Black noise by merely existing. Their vernacular, despite its attempts toward a perfected anglophone, can only ever be Black noise. “No need to dismiss the sound that emerges from the mouth as a mark of separation. It was always the whole body that emitted sound” instrument and fingers, bend. Your ass is what you sing” (Moten 2003). Considered together as complementary and contiguous modes for contending with Black noise, Moten and Kearney’s trippy, melodic musings dabble in a dialectic of lyrical Black noise at the heart of Lamming’s break within a break within a break that, through proper aural attunement, represents a sound for which ocular consumption alone will not suffice.

### 3. Cut to the Break

Edmondson claims early Caribbean literature, such as Lamming’s work, restores what was once reduced to the basest of utterance, “the sounds of a mongrel society, to sounds of sense-making and definition” (Edmondson 2022). Literature, as a transcription of the Black noise, does indeed tender a historical record of the polyphony of Barbadian voices Lamming captures in *Castle*. “Sense-making” and “definition” are perhaps overly reductive ways of attending to the Black noise of Lamming’s work. In Stoeber, Moten, Neyla, and Kearney’s view, the project of sense making and defining are fraught with white settler colonialist constructs. Rather than trying to pin down the aleatory through fictional historiographies, we cut to the break, a multisensory exposure to the improvised “dineffable”, or “extremis or intensity [that] can only be described via signal that seems noise” (Kearney 2015).

In *Castle*, one such cut happens when the narrative voice, omniscient, makes visible the private Black noise of the novel’s ancestral domestic space and a Bajan that is “the language of the home” (Marquis 2010). In a break from the disorienting dance between first-person narration and “Village as collective character” (Lamming 2018), chapter four cuts to the chapter’s chorus:

*Old Man*: Ma. *Old Woman*: Yes, Pa.

Lingering in this break, becoming, like Moten, “students of rupture”, allows for a synesthetic theorizing from the cut and one that remains, to quote Kearney, within the “Negrocious” mess (Kearney 2015). Illustrative of Kearney’s term “*dinsert*”, this natal chorus “provides a kind of ornamental phrase or gesture that creates a kind of critical interruption in the sensible proceedings; that is, the ‘noise’ of the *dinsert* calls attention to the lubrication of texture of the signal, facilitating an event of interrogation or witness” (Kearney 2015). Written like a stage script in verse poetic form, the dialogue performs spatial and textual disruptions to Lamming’s flow. The couplet’s *dinsert* demarcates new speakers, new perspectives, and a new stage, all taking place from within the break and thereby “facilitating an event of interrogation or witness”, an intimate glimpse inside Ma and Pa’s private thoughts.

The *dinsert*-ly appearance of the chorus repeats itself and thus continues to perform like radical Black noise. “The repeat”, writes Kearney in a repetitive word play of its own, “entreats, endures out a threshold in its and again and again and again” (Kearney 2015). It prods and pokes, connects and interrupts, in its “recursiveness incantatory insistence . . . repeated ritual” (Kearney 2015). With each of its seven repetitions, chapter four’s chorus carries forward Ma and Pa’s conversation as it progressively veers inward, toward expressions of vulnerability, approaching and exceeding the threshold of fear. In this way, the chorus carries a weight that “revises the repetition even without changing its components” (Kearney 2015). The chorus is, of course, marked by slight variations noting

a change in speaker and one that captures the reciprocity in Ma and Pa's exchange. Take, for instance, the repetition of the chorus that ends the chapter:

*Old Woman:* Pa.

*Old Man:* Yes, Ma.

*Old Woman:* Stop shakin's as you shakin' an' say to yuhself just for a little moment, say to yuhself you is a chil' again.

*Old Man:* Yes, Ma.

*Old Woman:* Close yuh eyes an' come closer to me, Pa.

*Old Man:* Yes, Ma.

*Old Woman:* An' say after me:

The emotive power fueled by the variances in the repeated chorus is two-fold. First, Ma, Pa, and the reader arrive, through them, at the threshold Kearney argues repetition produces within the context and mess of Black noise. Secondly, subtle revisions prevent a languid comfortableness, for "What does it mean to say the same thing twice—that they are no longer saying the same thing; they are saying the same thing again. A revision. It changes. It isn't static. Here, hear, it grows" (Kearney 2015). Chapter four's chorus repeats not once, not twice, but at least seven times as movement that embodies literal and figurative revisions of speaker, tone, breadth, depth, and meaning.

Lingering in this break just a bit longer, taking literally Kearney's phrase "they are saying", reveals within chapter four's refrain another hallmark of Black noise (Kearney 2015) and a Black musical practice with roots in African and African diasporic culture "Signifyin(s) musical figures" (Floyd 1991). They—that is, Ma and Pa—are indeed *saying*. The utterance of one is heard and met by the reciprocated utterance of the other. What results is a chorus in-verse, set apart from the rest of the text by repetition. Mirroring "the elaborate rhetorical game of rap", the chorus *moves* because of what Kearney refers to as "& Response", a mode of call-and-response that incites (re)action with or without an audible call (Kearney 2015). Kearney's & Response expands upon Floyd, Jr.'s "Call-Response", applying a performance that signifies music to the audible, visible, *and* implied.

& Response has aesthetic applications as well! Many narratives trot out "inciting action" to move the protagonist reluctantly from home. & Response is self-inciting, rather acknowledges the inaudible call to respond as act, and thus: plot. (Kearney 2015)

The oscillating dialogue that makes up chapter four's refrain conforms to traditional call-and-response. The inaudible Black noise—& Response—can be heard in what is implied in a conversational cadence that, as I argued earlier, builds, through repetition, an inward momentum toward an intimate, introspective climax. The & Response of chapter four's chorus thus drives the plot through both an audible and inaudible call-and-response.

In the practice of studious lingering in the rupture, I want to stay with the end of chapter four, listening to and for the & Response in "what they are saying" and in what is implied.

**CALL:** *Old Woman:* Pa.

**RESPONSE:** *Old Man:* Yes, Ma.

**CALL:** *Old Woman:* Stop shakin's as you shakin' an' say to yuhself just for a little moment, say to yuhself you is a chil' again.

**RESPONSE:** *Old Man:* Yes, Ma.

**CALL:** *Old Woman:* Close yuh eyes an' come closer to me, Pa.

**RESPONSE:** *Old Man:* Yes, Ma.

**CALL:** *Old Woman:* An' say after me:

Bolded font traces the overt call-and-response pattern. What noises are implied in the movements of Ma and Pa's Black bodies? The stretching of aged and weathered skin as Ma's arm reaches to comfort Pa. Pa's internal monologue, coaxing his return to a childlike calm. The rustling of fabric as he crawls, fetal-like, into Ma's embrace. The sticky mingling of sweat and silent tears. Their coming together, the enactment of & Response. Lamming, to borrow from Moten's analysis of Duke Ellington's music, is "choreographing, writing a dance with his utterance and conveying a desire for some movement that is divergent and in unison, a position that envelops and breathes" (Moten 2003). To hear the movement and musical Signifyin(g) therein requires an aural attunement to the audible and inaudible improvised Black noise that permeates these spaces of rupture.

#### 4. Aural Attunement

What I am suggesting—what Moten suggests of Amiri Baraka's poetry, for instance, and Stoever and Moten of Aunt Hester's shrieks in Fredrick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845)—is a multisensory read that renders inseparable written dialogue and the production of sound. Not any sound, but the (em)bodied, (in)audible octaves of Black noise as Black radical performance. Lingering in the break, becoming at once porous and perceptive to its "dinsert", its improvised "dineffable", its repetition and & Response, rouses a synesthetic attunement to a lyrical quality begetting of audio (re)production.<sup>3</sup>

In a cut away from the *Castle's* ensemble, Lamming fissures what never was contiguous to begin with, his transient lyricism emblematic of his modernist style. An improvised duet whose repetitive call-and-response mimics the form and function of a refrain, Signifyin(g) musical figures, chapter four of *Castle* begs to be conceived of as music orchestrated from the break. In fact, to imagine Ma and Pa's duet as audible lyrical Black noise hardly requires the leap of faith Zadie Smith in "Some Notes on Attunement" attributes to an attunement as disarmament, a "Kierkegaardian sense of defenselessness", for, as an aural close read reveals, the refrain resembles at least "the elaborate rhetorical game of rap" and at most the conventional chorus–verse–chorus of songs more generally. In this way, chapter four is, like Moten writes of poetry, "of the music" (Smith 2012). It is like

a poetry that would articulate the music's construction; a poetry that would mark and question the idiomatic difference that is the space-time of performance, ritual, and event; a poetry, finally, that becomes music in that it iconically presents those organizational principles that are the essence of music. (Moten 2003)

Juxtaposed with, say, the lyrics for Lamar's "We Cry Together", Ma and Pa's duet looks like music, or what Moten, citing Lee Taylor, refers to as "musicked speech" in virtue of "those organizational principles that are the essence of music" (Moten 2003). Chapter four's chorus possesses a "focal quality [ . . . ] and a sense of arrival", characteristics of the pop-rock chorus Benjamin K. Wadsworth and Simon Needle argue Lamar follows in his music (2022). Conforming in perpetuity to organization and principles, however, is not a quality of Black noise from the breaks within radical Black performances. Moten continues:

The thing is, these organizational principles break down; their breakdown disallows reading, improvises idiom(atic difference) and gestures toward an anarchic and generative mediation on phrasing that occurs in what has become, for reading, the occluded of language: sound. (Moten 2003)

Here, then, we invoke an aural attunement. Here "we ask: what if we let the music (no reduction to the aural, no mere addition of the visual but a radical nonexclusion of the ensemble of the senses such that music becomes a mode of organization in which principles dawn) take us?" (Moten 2003) What if we, in the lyrical spirit of Moten, Kearney, and Lamming, allow ourselves to get swept up in the rhythmic pulse of Ma and Pa's Black noise and, perhaps an exercise superfluous for textual analysis but vital for maximal aural attunement, do as Smith advises: "Simply put, you need to lower your defenses" and embrace "a certain kind of ignorance", Slip into a "pure nothingness of [ . . . ] non-knowledge [wherein] something sublime (an event?) beyond (beneath?) consciousness

[ . . . ] occurs" (Smith). Almost instinctively, we begin to tap a foot, bob our head, to Ma and Pa's call-and-response, swaying slightly to their & Response, sensing "a movement in the sentence and from sentence to sentence, a kind of rhythm to the prose that defies the logic of, say, the well-constructed paragraph" (Marquis 2010). When, to borrow from Moten, "[m]usic becomes a mode of organiz[ing]" *Castle's* chapter four, we feel the textual shift from verse to refrain anew, hearing a shift in the beat, a cut to the chorus, our body moving in sync with anticipated bends in rhythm. From this "sudden, unexpected attunement", music as audible sound emerges (Smith).

Listen.

Perhaps the cut to the break, the initial call-and-response, is marked by a rise in the speaker's octave and by a higher note, thus delivering a multisensory signal for the cut as it breaks away from the ensemble. Maybe, then, the music would linger here, in this cut, on this note, a resonant experience for the listener that invites them in and along, gliding—flooding—fluidly from Pa to Ma to verse "the way these houses walk all 'cross the water" (Lamming 2018). The next move from verse to chorus, like the natal refrain, is once again initiated not by dialogue tags but a pause in the lyrics, the introduction of new sounds, and the interjection of Ma calling for Pa's response. Perhaps a sample, maybe a discordant ticking sound, is introduced to amplify Ma's spirit, vexed by memories of "the song the children sing, One two three, the devil's after me, four five six, he got a lot of tricks, hallelujah, hallelujah" (Lamming 79). Rata-tat-tat, one two three—indeed, the tenor of their lyrical conversation has shifted.

Listen.

Chimes join Pa's reply as he moves to soothe Ma's vexed spirits, a move within a series of movements that progressively minimize the physical space between Ma and Pa while simultaneously making visible the couple's innermost thoughts. Pa beckons for Ma to come closer, to "shut the back door an' come in yuh corner soon" (Lamming 2018), the octave drops a note "cause [Pa] wants to put out the light" (Lamming 2018), the light goes out, the beat drops, Ma "had felt her way over to the side of the bed" (Lamming 2018). The sounds, the samples, the lyrics, the rhythm—it is in this way Lamming's musicked Black noise generates synesthetic movement in the break.

Listen.

The movement culminates in the entanglement of their Black bodies, their Blackness and Black noise, as it approaches and exceeds the threshold of fear. Music carries the couple and the listener into a moment both haunted and haunting, only to stop, to fall silent, creating a sense of abandonment and a hollowed space where fear manifests, for "'Tis a hell of a thing [ . . . ] to have to live with something inside you that you don't know" (Lamming 2018). But, with the gentle resurgence of the music comes Ma's call followed by Pa's audible response and inaudible movement into the safety and comfort of Ma's embrace, her prayer—spoken, sounded, musicked, felt, heard—chapter four's final performance of radical Black noise generated in the break.

## 5. A Legacy of Radical Black Noise

If, as Joyce suggests, the African "Diaspora is a crystal with different shimmers", (Joyce 2009) then those within the diaspora refract and reflect one another as they linguistically, musically, lyrically (re)create Black radical aesthetics from within this same diaspora's "global experimental field" (Rowell and Moten 2004). It is in this way that Lamar and Lamming call-and-respond to one another, invoking a process of "musical troping" and Signifyin(g) that, in Floyd Jr.'s view, expresses and communicates "more profound meanings of black music" (Floyd 1991). Lamar's call, in other words, initiates an aural praxis as response, and one that goes beyond a one-dimensional read toward a synesthetic encounter with the multivalent mess that is Black noise. It is a response that entails an aural (re)attunement in order to *hear* a lyrical flow as it cuts away from a polyphonic ensemble and breaks into improvised duet. This break, I have argued, happens within George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, Ma and Pa's reciprocal dialogue cutting



away from public discourse to an intensely intimate space and vulnerable exchange. As Black noise, chapter four renders hypervisible the interior and, to quote Moten, “opens us up to the problematics of everyday ritual, the stagedness of the violently (and sometimes amelioratively) quotidian, the essential drama of black life” (Moten 2003). For, wrapped up in Ma and Pa’s dialogue—enfolded in the folds of each other—is a multisensory testament to their racialized “strugglin’ an’ strivin’” (Lamming 2018), their unscripted tenderness also a radical critique of colonialism. Contemplating chapter four from within the break, as a break, as Black noise, defamiliarizes “the familiar, [illuminating] the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle” (Moten 2003). While Kendrick Lamar’s “We Cry Together” may, at first blush, smack of shock and spectacle, its jarring lyrics a stark contrast to the gentle tenor of Ma and Pa’s conversation, the song captures a private space, making, like *Castle’s* chapter four, hypervisible the interiority of Black noise. Lamar’s song is, after all, an argument between a couple during which they hurl insults grounded in insecurities, joint property, and jealousy. What could be more “mundane and quotidian” than that?

Lamming and Lamar, in their respective cuts to a break, contend with the “quotidian, the essential drama of black life” (Moten 2003). Diasporic brothers, their different yet similar works expand, to borrow from Joyce, “our understanding of how Black cultural differences widen and empower the position of political commitment inside a definition of aesthetics” (Joyce 2009), for, as performances of radical Black lyricism, their creative works rupture not only the overarching narrative performances within their texts but break in decisive separations from white, Eurocentric societies and linguistic registrars that would prefer—even insist—upon their silence. As noisy Blackness producing Black noise, Lamming, Lamar, Ma, Pa, and the couple in “We Cry Together” exist in the perpetual, oppressive terrain of “Yessurhrrealism”, or, according to Kearney, “a state in which someone other than ‘your’self (an elsewhere subjectivity) determines the nature of your existence” (Kearney 2015), their audible and sensed sounds defined, in part, by the Yessurhrrealism produced by the listening ear. Chapter four and “We Cry Together”, as well as the novel and album in which they are situated, are thus breaks from these racially codified axioms, their Black noise “the emergence from political, economic, and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances [and] indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout their graphic (re)production” (Moten 2003). Inherent, then, to both Lamming and Lamar’s contributions to the larger corpus of lyrical Black noise is what Moten terms a “freedom drive” (Moten 2003). Enduring, revolutionary, rebellious, the “freedom drive” propelling Lamming and Lamar’s Black noise is the “erotic of the cut, submerged in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation. Blurred, dying life; liberatory, improvisatory, damaged love; freedom drive” (Moten 2003). It is Ma and Pa’s movements, their “*dinsert*” and & Response, their audible and inaudible performances; it is Lamar and Taylour Paige’s “fuck yous” to “fuck mes;” and it is the “mess and mess and” in between.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- 1 Windrush literature is a term used to broadly describe works from writers associated with the Windrush generation. Derived from the name of the ship on which many West Indian immigrants emigrated to England, the Windrush generation and its corollary Windrush literature have, according to J. Dillon Brown and Leah Reade Rosenberg, become potent signifiers “in scholars’ understanding of both British and Anglophone Caribbean cultural history” (Brown and Rosenberg 2015). Literature from this generation and its writers captures what Timothy Weiss in “The Windrush Generation” describes as “the beginning of contemporary multiracial and multicultural Britain, and a consequent reshaping of national identity” (Weiss 2009). The intersecting tensions provoked by this reshaping provide the narrative fodder and focus for the Windrush generation’s literary productions, including George Lamming’s debut novel and the primary text under study here, *In the Castle of My Skin*.
- 2 Perhaps the most notable and oft-cited scholarship on hip-hop and rap music as Black noise, Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture* “grounds black cultural signs and codes in black culture and examines the polyvocal languages of rap as the ‘black noise’ of the late twentieth century” (Rose 1994). An analysis beyond the scope of my paper might elaborate on Black noise in Lamar’s music, perhaps drawing extensively from Rose’s text.
- 3 The prefix “re-” acknowledges the audio productions of Lamming’s work already in existence, which aired on *Caribbean Voices*, “a radio programme broadcast by the BBC World Service from Bush House London, England, between 1943 and 1958” (Wikipedia).

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