

## BIFURCATED LISTENING

## The Inimitable, Imitated Billie Holiday

I cued the slideshow for my presentation and clicked “play.” The projection displayed a classic image of Billie Holiday, cigarette in hand (see figure 5.1). To the right of the image quotes described Holiday’s unique and inimitable voice. I played a few verses and choruses of “Gloomy Sunday” and saw the symposium’s participants sink into the experience of listening to the luscious, rich, and profound vocal sound. Before the song ended, I peeled away the archival image of Holiday and showed them an image of the person behind the voice we had savored together. It was seven-year-old Angelina Jordan from Norway, singing on the television variety show *Norske Talenter* (Norway’s Got Talent) (see figure 5.2). The segment was excerpted from her first appearance on the show, the first time she sang for the judges and the national audience.<sup>1</sup> During the four-and-a-half-minute segment, the television camera moved from the girl’s deeply concentrated, calm, and unfazed demeanor to the judges’ surprised looks and gestures of disbelief. Here was a combination of a child’s body and the sound of an iconic singer, whose mythologized life story is imbricated with, and is used to explain, the sound of her voice. The television judges’ and audience’s facial and verbal expressions of disbelief (see figure 5.3), the symposium participants’ reactions, and my own sense of surprise when I first saw and heard this clip were all produced under the condition of listening within the figure of sound, outlined in the introductory chapter and chapter 1 and discussed throughout the book.

Holiday’s imitators show a mélange of admiration and appropriation, entertainment, and artistic agency. Imitators’ performances are the explicit result of



FIGURE 5.1 Billie Holiday, New York City, 1957. Reproduced with the permission of Don Hunstein / Sony Music Entertainment. Hunstein Artist Services.



FIGURE 5.2 Angelina Jordan's first performance on *Norske Talenter*, 2014.



FIGURE 5.3 *Norske Talenter* judge Lisa Tønne, 2014.

the conceptual and perceptual work undertaken in order to uphold the concept of vocal essence and, by extension, racial essence. Up to this point in the book I have tracked the ways in which voice is entrained through formal and informal pedagogies and is integrated when the expected racialized framework is present or artificially projected onto it; I have witnessed audiences' projection of various categories onto Jimmy Scott, an artist who defied categorization; and I have examined listeners' creation of racialized singers in the digital realm through the Vocaloid engine. In this chapter I further map the ways in which audiences project not only racialized and gendered identities but also age-related markers. And, finally, I will show that autobiography and collective identity can be

causes of both voluntary and involuntary entrainment, and at the same time can be a source from which artistic expression is drawn. That is, building on the argument forwarded by examining Jimmy Scott in chapter 3, I wish to clarify that entrainment and artistic agency are not necessarily at odds with each other.

I would like to preface the following discussion by returning to the overarching thesis of *The Race of Sound*: not only is the timbral identification of race not a direct result of racist views, but, if we work under such an assumption, we will ultimately fail to address and deconstruct racialized vocal timbre. The perpetuation of racialized timbre goes much deeper and is based on fundamental beliefs about sound. As long as we believe in knowable, stable sound, we are compelled to identify sound and to believe that identification to constitute essence. And whatever we believe to be a person's essence—from despairing or ecstatic to white or black—is employed in the interpretation and assessment of the voice.

Therefore, in the case of Angelina Jordan and other Billie Holiday impersonators, I will not discuss the complex politics arising from her impersonators' various racialized dynamics.<sup>2</sup> Instead, in considering these impersonations, I take a different analytical approach. While I fully acknowledge the importance of the detailed work involved in enumerating the specifics of performances of blackface, cultural imperialism, and exploitation in these impersonations, here I concentrate on the more general performative and perceptual moves that take place.

When voice is essentialized, any interpretive story about it—for instance, hearing a vocal timbre as though it summarizes a person's life story—always already follows a naturalized storyline. That is, the interpretive story is understood as the a priori nature of that voice (and that person) rather than as an interpretation that is dependent on a given context. That is how interpretive categories such as race can remain unexamined for centuries. I posit that the practice of essentializing vocal timbre is the unexamined foundation upon which racialized vocal timbre is maintained. Therefore, if we wish to correct this situation, we must direct our attention to the essentialized voice and must enumerate the errors that occur during the process of its formation. If the myth of essential vocal timbre is debunked, voices become immune to racialization. In contrast, if we limit ourselves to pointing out the inconsistencies in situations involving the racialized voice, but persist in essentializing timbre, we continue to naturalize all related aspects of voice. In other words, as long as we understand voice as essence, our propensity to naturalize any descriptions of and stories about it remains. By examining the naturalization of Billie Holiday's voice and considering its imitations, this chapter seeks to acknowledge Holi-

day's artistry as critical performance practice and, via that route, to denaturalize voice as essence.

### "Billie Holiday's Burned Voice"

The classic story about Billie Holiday is summarized succinctly by John M. Carvalho: "Raped as a child and institutionalized as a consequence of it, Holiday turned to prostitution as a teenager, profiting others (and to a lesser extent herself) from an obsessive and ultimately futile search for a man who would love and protect her. She also suffered from the use and abuse of alcohol and drugs, from the questionable company she kept, and from the special attention, from the police and other authorities, her notoriety brought her."<sup>3</sup> While Holiday was admired as a singer, she failed to produce a significant hit recording. Her adult life presented a variety of challenges that may have prevented some of her development and productivity as a musician. The portions of her story that received much media attention were her struggle with drug addiction and related run-ins with the law. Capped by a premature death at forty-four, these tragedies clustered around themes of turbulent romantic life and loss, substance abuse, and hypersexuality. These stories make up the filters and guiding principles through which listeners hear her voice and through which reporters, writers, and audiences have sought to make sense of it.

For example, Matthew Sutton writes, "The cracks in Holiday's weathered voice, magnified by her band's deliberate, if not sluggish, tempos, speak of a life marked by abandonment, drug abuse, and romantic turmoil."<sup>4</sup> This description is echoed in a *Time* report that depicts Holiday's voice as "a petulant, sex-edged moan."<sup>5</sup> Along the same lines, the musicologist Mervyn Cooke describes her voice as "a unique blend of vulnerability, innocence and sexuality, attributes which won her a popular following."<sup>6</sup> In an especially dramatic interpretation, Sutton, in a discussion of Holiday's particular rendition of "Please Don't Talk about Me When I'm Gone," pins his explanation to these themes: "Even normally up-tempo songs . . . are essayed with a sense of sorrow and resignation, as if the lyric's sentiment is already being expressed from beyond the grave."<sup>7</sup>

In examining much of the vast amount of printed material describing Holiday, I have found that ideas about the genesis of her particular vocal sound fall into three dominant patterns. Two of these are closely related, and all three often overlap. Further, all of these patterns overlap with and act in the same way as the phantom genealogy did for Marian Anderson's audiences. In fact I see them as subcategories of the broader phantom genealogy framework, the name

of which highlights its fictional character. The first pattern, which I call *autobiographical voice*, relates to the notion that timbral meaning is stable and possible to know. Under this interpretation the specific meaning derived from the voice depends on alignment between autobiography and timbre. While there is no doubt that the physical voice is affected by material and emotional life circumstances, the stance I identify is a direct projection of particular kinds of circumstances—“abandonment, drug abuse, and romantic turmoil,” for example—onto vocal timbre. The second pattern, which I call *channeling the ancestors*, returns all explanations of the timbre of a voice to an ancestral narrative and explanation. Clearly singers and artists may feel called upon, and choose to heed the call, to enact a metaphorical voice that they feel expresses their ancestors’ history. However, the pattern I wish to point out is one in which no artistic license is perceived and any artistic merit is understood as a projection of the ancestral spirit. The third pattern, which I call *biological determinism*, rests on the assumption that, independent of a given vocalist’s artistry, voice is an unmediated expression of the essence of a person. This aligns with the voice-as-essence fallacy, and the foundational ontological orientation toward Holiday’s voice sits atop this assumption. For example, both voice as an unmediated expression of a singer’s autobiography and voice as *involuntarily* channeling the ancestors depend on a basic understanding of voice as essence.

The perceptual framework that gives rise to Holiday’s perceived *autobiographical* rendition is crystallized in this assessment: “When she was introduced to the song, she had already lived a hard life.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, any vocal turn is reduced to her autobiography. Multiple writers have remarked on the way Holiday’s autobiography illuminates the content and message of a given song lyric. For example, in discussing the poetry of “Strange Fruit,” Janell Hobson describes the capacity of Holiday’s “embodied knowledge to bring alive the poem’s ironic edge by invoking the cynicism and despair that elevated the song from sentimentality to poignancy.”<sup>9</sup> Along these lines, Sara Ramshaw writes that, in Holiday’s case, “lyrical content had become fused with the singer’s personality and her much-publicized personal life.” In these observations the common explanatory thread is that the artist’s skill is reduced to an expression of biographical circumstances.

This continued in the broader cause-and-effect explanation of channeling the ancestors. As Farah Jasmine Griffin observes, Holiday’s “is a voice capable of casting spells. It is certainly a voice concerned with its connection to the world of the spirit, its ability to evoke the presence of the divine. So the sound heard as ‘other,’ as in ‘foreign,’ is also a sound that is ‘other’ like the mystery that is God.”<sup>10</sup> Here Griffin echoes Eileen Southern, who describes the “strange

effect that [the] sound [of black singing] had on listeners.” Southern writes, “American literature contains numerous references to female slaves of colonial times who kept young audiences spellbound, and adults too with their ancient tales.”<sup>11</sup> Along the same lines, Carvalho notes that audiences came to Café Society “in part, at least, to hear Holiday sing [‘Strange Fruit’]. They were largely hip and cool or imagined themselves to be enlightened enough to hear the pain and suffering inflicted on black people by those they thought less noble (or gallant) than themselves.”<sup>12</sup> Angela Davis offers a reading of the universal communicative power of Holiday’s voice and evokes the sentiments of those who felt that Holiday’s particular gift to audiences was her capacity to infuse sometimes sub-par lyrics with autobiographical meaning: “In the timbre of her voice,” Davis writes, “the social roots of pain and despair in women’s emotional lives are given a lyrical legibility.”<sup>13</sup>

The commonality between the patterns of autobiography and channeling the ancestors, then, is the assumption of a heavy sense of inevitability and lack of choice and of seemingly no technical or artistic skill on the part of the singer—that is, the assumption of voice as essence, which in turn is rooted in a sense of biological determinism that is audible in vocal timbre. The quotes above express sentiments connected to the assumption that it is possible to know sound and voice, and thus that they have stable meanings. Combined with a belief in indisputable personal essence, the meaning thus conceived is then aligned with whatever is believed or emphasized about a given person. For example, a sonorous quality that Sutton identifies as “cracks” is, through such assumptions, interpreted uncritically as a “weathered voice”—a voice whose blemishes were caused by “a life marked by abandonment, drug abuse, and romantic turmoil.”<sup>14</sup>

“She didn’t sing anything unless she had lived it,” Tony Bennett observes. “When you listen to her, it’s almost like an audio tape of her autobiography.”<sup>15</sup> Holiday’s voice is understood by many as a “metaphor for her entire life”; and this practice of reading into her voice burgeoned after her public trial and incarceration.<sup>16</sup> Her biographer Stuart Nicholson notes, “Now it was *what* she sang, the *authenticity* of her voice and the way her audience attributed special significance to it, that mattered. Billie’s real-life story had become the source of meaningfulness in her voice.”<sup>17</sup> “She really was happy only when she sang,” Ralph J. Gleason once wrote. “The rest of the time she was a sort of living lyric to the song ‘Strange Fruit,’ hanging, not on a poplar tree, but on the limbs of life itself.”<sup>18</sup> However, Gleason simply exemplifies one of the prominent trends in describing Holiday’s voice and life through her repertoire. Nicholson’s observations about *Lady in Satin* also follow this trend: “As a bona fide jazz classic, an

understanding of Holiday's real-life history helps give this album context and adds both meaning and depth. As one half of the mind struggles and reacts to the boozy huskiness in her voice and shaky intonation, the other half listens, searching for meaning in both voice and lyrics. This disjunction produces an uncomfortable listening experience. Yet here is the unification of the singer's history and art, unified as a single self that is infinite and total, a bonding that enables *Lady in Satin* to realise its full meaning."<sup>19</sup>

In the same vein, audiences who were affected by Holiday interpreted their own reactions to her as projections of her qualities. For example, Ray Ellis shared, "I was in love with Billie. Not necessarily Billie, but . . . I heard her voice, I dug it. It turned me on, and maybe I was in love with that voice and I was picturing a very evil, sensuous, sultry, very evil . . . probably one of the most evil voices I've heard in my life." "Let me tell you something," he pontificates, "music relates to sex. It always did and it always will. Anything she sang that meant anything had to do with sex."<sup>20</sup>

This is not to say that Holiday was not a savvy businesswoman; she knew how to play into branding for her own benefit, and took direct and immediate advantage of audiences' tendency to listen acousmatically for essence. Robert O'Meally, for example, suggests that Holiday well understood audiences' "powerful urge to treat performance as a form of autobiography." "Since most love songs, in particular, are part of a long chain of melancholy," he muses, "they are often interpreted as expressions of pain by the singer in question. Even when the same song is sung by dozens of different performers, one of them is usually singled out as the most authentic, often the one who is believed to have lived the song most fully." "Holiday," he asserts, "understood this inclination better than others, and as she grew older, she seemed consciously to choose songs that underlined what she had become for many: 'Our Lady of Sorrows.'"<sup>21</sup>

Not only is Holiday's voice understood as channeling the ancestors, but it has also been imbued with a collective ethos. Through this process her voice becomes a type of cultural property, made to stand in for any collective experience for which black female voices are typically invoked, including motherhood, sorrow, grief, and limitless and selfless love of people and nations.<sup>22</sup> As Griffin says of the well-known stories from Holiday's private life, "The stories of her arrests and drug addiction joined with her stage persona of the torch singer to create a new image, that of the tragic, ever-suffering black woman singer who simply stands center stage and naturally sings her words."<sup>23</sup> The figure of the "black woman vocalist" is both "hypervisible and hyperaudible." The black woman's voice, Griffin concludes, is a "quintessential American voice . . . It is one of its founding sounds, and the singing black woman is one of its founding spectacles."<sup>24</sup>



Interpretations that on the surface seem to be polar opposites—reduction to autobiography and generalization to “the founding spectacles”—take on the same type of cultural and social work. Both interpretations ignore internal heterogeneities and contradictions in order to utilize voice as a vehicle for archetypes. These repeated reductions naturalize Holiday’s voice. And, rather than acknowledge her multifaceted and complex life and rich, carefully assembled sonic archive, these interpretations link her person to stereotypes about the tragic lives of black women.<sup>25</sup> Reducing Holiday’s voice to an a priori—that is, limiting perspectives on her voice to the projection of an idea of her life—reduces her subjectivity and artistic agency to the oft-narrated arc of her biography. In turn, this narrative both naturalizes and obscures the active work—on the part of listeners—involved in subsequent interpretations of her voice.

### Lady Day Impersonations

We also see the collective projection of the naturalized idea of Holiday and her voice in numerous vocal imitations and impersonations. The many and different renditions range from deeply sincere to parodic to pyrotechnic. The seven-year-old Norwegian girl defies age expectations. The author and radio personality David Sedaris and the drag artist Joey Arias cross gender lines. Peggy Lee’s well-known Holiday medley, the Quebecois singer Véronique’s “Voices” Las Vegas show, and amateur singers such as Nikki Yanofsky, who garner applause for caricatured signature phrasings and pronunciations, transport Holiday’s repertoire and signature style into different venues and to audiences that may not be susceptible to Holiday herself.<sup>26</sup> The sincere performances seem to stem from a wish to profit from Holiday’s artistic position and recognizability or from a desire to celebrate her. The parody receives its fuel, and its reward, from the gap between the person who is impersonating and the person being impersonated.

Joey Arias not only vocally imitates Holiday; he echoes her fashion and uses items that once belonged to her as props. In Arias’s act there are obvious differences between imitator and imitated in terms of general appearance (Arias is taller and slimmer than Holiday), age (Arias was sixty-five at the centennial tribute; Holiday passed away at forty-four), gender identification (Holiday identified as a woman and Arias performs in drag), and life story. Despite these differences, Arias’s centennial tribute concert to Holiday was lauded by the *New York Times* as “incarnating” her.<sup>27</sup> This term follows Arias’s own descriptions of the process involved in singing Holiday’s repertoire, which he describes as a type of incarnation (see figure 5.4). The review goes on to explain that Arias “has long been admired for his ability to ‘channel’ Holiday—there is no other ap-



FIGURE 5.4 Joey Arias as Billie Holiday in the Lincoln Center’s American Songbook series, February 25, 2015. Photo by Kevin Yatarola.

propriate word.” The *San Francisco Gate* also makes use of the word “channels,” reporting, “The language that drag performer Joey Arias uses is less musical and more supernatural. Words like ‘summon,’ ‘channel’ and discussion of Holiday’s ‘vibrations’ permeate the conversation like ectoplasm hanging over a seance.” While discussing his San Francisco Centennial concert at the Great American Music Hall with a reporter, Arias proudly recalls that audiences who had actually heard Holiday during her lifetime tell him, “If I closed my eyes . . .” Recalling the memory, Arias muses, “What a compliment.”<sup>28</sup>

Another cross-gender performance was shared on an episode of the radio program *This American Life*.<sup>29</sup> On the episode with the theme “Music Lessons,” David Sedaris, who was forced by his jazz-loving nonmusician father to take guitar lessons as a child, muses about his childhood fantasy of singing commercial jingles in Billie Holiday’s voice. In a public taping of the show, Sedaris sings the Oscar Mayer theme song à la Billie Holiday. As one commentator put it, “Did you know that David Sedaris . . . does a wicked impression of Billie Holi-

day?” The question was followed by the suggestion that “Sedaris has added ‘potential jazz legend’ to his usual repertoire of wry observations from his painfully funny diaries.”<sup>30</sup> In an earlier music episode, Sedaris offers the first few phrases of the Christmas carol “Away in a Manger” in Holiday’s voice. As Sedaris notes, “I sang it the way Billie Holiday might have sang if she’d put out a Christmas album.” Again there are a number of differences between Sedaris and Holiday that make this imitation interesting as a form of entertainment: first, there is surprise that the writer can sing, and sings publicly; second, his speaking voice is distinctive and could not be mistaken for Holiday’s; and third, in terms of life story, Sedaris frequently draws anecdotes from his more than twenty-year relationship with his partner, Hugh Hamrick, while Holiday was married twice and had a number of other relationships with both men and women.

The Holiday imitation performed by Audra McDonald contrasts with those of Arias and Sedaris. Embraced by the musical and cultural establishments, McDonald is an award-winning singer with a huge platform, frequenting Broadway stages and the Metropolitan Opera and working as a soloist with all of the major American orchestras. The recent centennial celebration, which ushered in entire plays dedicated to retelling the story of Holiday’s life, gave McDonald yet another performance opportunity (see figure 5.5). Part of the awe around her rendition of Holiday, as part of the revived evening-long play *Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill*, is the difference between McDonald’s voice and Holiday’s.

The *New York Times* asserts that McDonald “scaled down” her “plush, classically trained soprano” to jazz-soloist size. And although she “tamped down the lush bloom” of her highly educated voice “to suggest the withered state of Holiday’s instrument during the last years of her career . . . the sound remains tangy, expressive and rich.” The review further notes disjunctions between Holiday and McDonald, such as McDonald’s “five Tonys at just 43, when Holiday was nearing her end,” and attests that McDonald presented a “ghostly image of an artist.”<sup>31</sup>

Seasoned artists such as McDonald are not the only singers who have impressed with their Holiday impersonations. While Angelina Jordan won the *Norske Talenter* competition with George Gershwin’s “Summertime,”<sup>32</sup> it was her first performance on the show that was shared globally and made headlines across Europe, the United States, and Australia. We see the language in headlines—such as Gawker’s “Norwegian Seven-Year-Old Has the Voice and Soul of Billie Holiday”<sup>33</sup>—reproducing assumptions about voice as essence. While Gawker is not considered a respectable news source, here it channels traditional language about voice, to the effect that to have a voice is to have a soul, and to



FIGURE 5.5 Audra McDonald as Billie Holiday in the play *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill*, 2014. Photo by Sara Krulwich for *The New York Times*/Redux.

hear a voice is to access the soul. According to the reporter, Jordan's "uncanny ability to sound like the tragic jazz singer brought tears to at least one judge's eyes."<sup>34</sup> Another writer observes that Jordan's rendition of "Billy Holiday's I'm a Fool to Love You is incredible." The same writer continues, "She's a little bit spooky. . . . She appears to be channelling the dead as I have no other explanation as to how an eight year old can sing this song, unaccompanied, with such expression of the emotions within the song. I mean, she's eight! It would be impressive if she simply remembered all the words but Angelina is breathtaking."<sup>35</sup> *Time* magazine online uses the same language in its headline: "This 7-Year Old's Incredible Voice Will Give You Chills as She Channels Billie Holiday."<sup>36</sup>

While these examples are quite different, the main impetus that drives interest in such vocal imitations is the friction between what is experienced phenomenologically as two disparate voices emitted by one person: the imitated and imitating voice. Fueling this friction are the many turns of disbelief about the degree of similarity between impersonated and impersonator, the effectiveness of the deception, and the moment when the gap between the impersonator's own voice and the voice he or she assumes is conceptually marked. These differences between the imitator's body and identity and the body and identity associated with the imitated voice can include aspects such as gender, age, and race. And there is disbelief about what *is* expressed (the expressive range of the impersonated voice) during the impersonation and whether or not it is commensurate with what the impersonator, as a singer, should be able to express emotionally. For example, after Angelina Jordan's first performance on *Norske Talenter* one of the judges responded:

JUDGE: You are singing in a way one believes you have to be an adult to sing. Do you know what the song is about?

ANGELINA: Yes. It is about a sad Sunday.

JUDGE: [Quiet, nodding] . . . Yes, it is. It was fantastic to hear you sing.<sup>37</sup>

The surprise expressed here is not merely a response to the biological differences between bodies of two different ages. It is also prompted by the assumption that life experience leaves physical and emotional traces and thus offers artists access to emotional depth. Underlying the judge's reaction is a question: "What could a seven-year-old have possibly experienced that could give rise to such a deep delivery?" Angelina "sounds less like a 7-year-old and more like a jaded, middle-aged woman at a bar, blowing smoke in your face while telling you about all the rotten men in her life," the writer E. J. Dickinson muses about Angelina's

performance. Attempting to make sense of it, she adds, “I’d be more inclined to call it a *séance*” before giving up on trying to account for Jordan’s performance with a rational explanation.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to concrete biographical differences, Holiday and Jordan differ in terms of racial dynamics with regard to their respective audiences. Holiday sang as a black woman against the backdrop of the mid-twentieth-century United States, while Jordan sings as a European immigrant with a Middle Eastern background in the context of twenty-first-century Norway and a global audience.<sup>39</sup> The contrasting racial dynamic between Holiday and many of her impersonators is an obvious and interesting dimension. As scholars such as Eric Lott, Lisa Woolfork, and W. T. Lhamon have noted, impersonation across racial boundaries—in the form of blackface and misdirected and complex fantasy—has been discussed productively and importantly as a form of cultural misappropriation and vampirism.<sup>40</sup> Lott succinctly summarizes this phenomenon: while minstrelsy was “an established 19th-century theatrical practice, principally of the urban North, in which white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit” and its practitioners assumed racial superiority, imitation also implies some type of admiration.<sup>41</sup> Although scholarship along these lines is crucial, I address the naturalization of racial difference by explaining how general reductions of vocal timbre form the foundation upon which specific reductions, such as timbral racial differences, hinge.

Whether based on a perception of racial difference or on other aspects, as noted in my descriptions of impersonators, the impersonator’s entertainment value lies in the perceived gap between the original performer and the imitator. Judgments about this gap hinge on the assumption that sound and vocal timbre are stable and knowable. The comparison takes place between the a priori idea of the original voice, the a priori idea of the imitator’s real voice, and the imitated voice as it is heard by the listener. This comparison depends on stable categories.

What is the significance of that specific moment of *listener disbelief*—the pivot of imitation’s entertainment value? The moment of disbelief simultaneously strengthens and erodes the cult of fidelity that depends on assumptions about stable and knowable sounds and voices. On one hand, the cult of fidelity is strengthened because it is comparison that constitutes the listening moment. In this comparison the listener holds an image of an original voice in his or her mind, comparing it with the evidence available as a more or less favorable reproduction with a greater or lesser degree of fidelity. The listener does not consider the vocal timbre at hand on its own merits; instead he or she engages with it in terms of an idea of another voice. On the other hand, the cult of fidelity is

enfeebled. Simultaneously hearing both the voice of the singer at hand and that voice inflecting the idea of the imitated voice (with varying degrees of success) should, in principle, cause us to question the very foundation upon which the assumption of vocal essence rests.

Let's think about the situation in the form of the acousmatic question *Who is this?* Listeners who detect an impersonator or an impersonated voice conjure a multi-identified voice. This voice is simultaneously heard as unary (one person singing) and split, or layered (the separation between the "original" voice, the "original" voice of the imitator, and the sound of the first voice in the second). Such perceptual work requires a high degree of abstraction combined with compartmentalization—and depends on assumptions about stable, knowable voice.

### Imitation Is in the Ear of the Beholder

"It takes two to tango," as the song goes. To imitate takes three. The most fitting description of the listener's role in this equation is not as a judge of relative fidelity but as the key protagonist. This is because listeners pull out their mental tape measures in order to precisely determine the gap between imitated and imitating voices, with this gap constituting the focal point of the imitative act. Listeners also form the third and determining party in the triangulation between "original" and "copy." There is a kind of pyrotechnic thrill in the joining of the two. (On the other hand, as Steven Connor notes, one cannot imitate oneself. It is only within this gap between two entities where the vocalizer has the choice to *not* imitate that the choice of imitation can exist.)

It is not enough that the so-called original and copy are present. Recognition is the key component: the third party recognizes the original, the current source, and the gap between the two. Given the issues discussed earlier, this seems self-evident. However, I mean to address another layer of the listener's role as protagonist. To return to a previous question in a different form, if a person sounds exactly like Billie Holiday, but nobody hears his or her voice, can that vocal act constitute an imitation?<sup>42</sup>

There is no essential or unified voice. Instead repeatable patterns where divergences are ignored create the sense of one. From a voice and sonority perspective, what is repeated in what may be perceived as vocal imitation is a degree of vocal pattern that is sufficient for recognition to take place. In the same way that we ignore anomalies in order to form ideas about unique voices, we ignore them when we identify vocal imitation. In other words, we first create an image of a unified voice. Next, we keep this idea in mind in order to recognize it

elsewhere. Then we must recognize the unique voice of the imitator so that we can hear that the imitation diverges from the unique voice.

In summary, the ingredients necessary for recognition of a vocal imitation to take place are:

- 1 Knowledge of the original voice
- 2 A memory of the original voice
- 3 The ability to hear the imitator's original voice
- 4 Recognition of the imitation voice as superimposed on the imitator's original voice

While these four criteria are necessary for imitation to take place, we can also begin to get a sense that imitation is not grounded in an a priori voice in sonorous terms alone. Instead imitation is fully dependent on the scaffolding that props up the necessary reference to the a priori. Within a situation where a voice sounds very similar to another voice—where an auditory pattern seems identical to another auditory pattern—a number of conditions in addition to these four points must be in place for imitation to be perceived. In other words, if the four core components are present but the listener does not judge the overall vocal act to be an imitation, no imitation has taken place.

In short, a given vocal moment may be identical to another, but this sameness does not ensure that the listener judges the vocal moment to be an imitation. If the sound is identical, but all or some of our four points are not fulfilled, the vocal moment is not assumed to be an imitation. The level of imitation does not hinge on sonorous similarity; extrasonorous factors determine whether or not a given vocal act is considered an imitation.

How is it, then, that we recognize a vocal act as imitation? Paradoxically, unlike what appears on the sound-centered list of criteria, imitation is not bound to sonic similarity. Rather it is called forth through a nexus of nonsonorous comparisons and criteria, and it is believable because of the underlying naturalization of identification—an act of naming that is based solely on *interpretation*. At the base of the assessment of whether the vocal act is an imitation lies the question of the vocalizer's intention. If the vocalizer's intention is not to imitate, the equation then shifts: if the singer who is believed to be an imitator sounds like the original without consciously intending to do so, no imitation takes place—even if person B sounds so similar to person A that he or she may be mistaken for person A. If somebody accidentally sounds similar to another person, the genesis of that vocal sound was not grounded in the a priori. At the core of the mechanism that allows us to recognize a vocal act as imitation lies



the cult of fidelity, the assumption that produces listening that hinges on comparison with a priori and knowable sounds.

When the acousmatic question is answered with *identification* of a voice in the negative—or as an imitation of an original—the response is politically energized. The fact that the singer is the actual producer of the sound we hear is evident. Regardless of the listener’s reaction, in producing sound that is heard as imitation, the singer possesses the technical ability to create a particular pattern of sounds in a practiced way. This is the same idea that we generally use to credit a singer with creating an “authentic” work of art and to begin to assign an identity to the singer. But when the listener judges this creation an imitation, the person singing is erased; the singer is understood to act merely as an empty conduit for the “original” voice. The listener erases the vocalizer through the perception of imitation. In place of the singer as artist, the listener positions an imaginary proxy of his or her own creation and attributes to that proxy a number of characteristics (e.g., age, emotion, culture, race). Treating the singer as a proxy transfers these characteristics to him or her, effectively creating an identity that is a shadow of the listener’s own mind. This process, which replaces a unique interpersonal experience with a proxy that carries our own prejudices, offers a micro-example of the work that racism, sexism, and other derogatory judgments perform. The process constitutes an overriding or erasing of an authentic experience with an imagined idea, a proxy for what we believe the authentic to be.

However, there is an additional, and deeper, layer to the process. When the acousmatic question is answered with identification of a voice in the positive—or as the original—this response is equally politically energized. The listener erases the vocalizer through a projected perception of him or her as iconic—in the case of Billie Holiday, as reduced to selected elements of her biography, viewed through the lens of the stereotypical tragic, sexualized, and wasted black female figure who lacks agency.

These two responses to the acousmatic question—Angelina sounds like Billie Holiday; Billie Holiday’s voice oozes with her tragic biography—are equally reductive. Both are produced by a listening pedagogy formed within the cult of fidelity. Within the discursive-analytical space of the cult of fidelity, where voice is reduced to iconic identification, there is no voice for Holiday. Janell Hobson claims that, while Holiday’s marginality is celebrated and made “hyperaudib[le],” “black women’s voicelessness in cultural discourses on American music heritage and, ironically, in political narratives” is reinforced. She continues, “Black women—including [Marian] Anderson and Holiday—are

often presented singing in the service of someone else rather than for themselves.<sup>43</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin also astutely observes that black women's voices are called upon to carry out the labor of "heal[ing] a crisis in national unity as well as provok[ing] one."<sup>44</sup> Hence, because the listening pedagogy formed within the cult of fidelity is politically charged by reducing voices to iconic identifications, this type of listening extends its reductive effects to people and relationships.

But what can be done to address this problem? Are there alternative ways to frame these voices besides naming and identification? Such a reframing would allow us to practice a different kind of politics of listening: a return to hearing an artist, even in imitation.

The voice artist Eliza Jane Schneider details the process by which she learns voices from a sonorous and kinesthetic imitative perspective.<sup>45</sup> She has traveled across the United States, Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia, as well as to seven Caribbean islands, the Philippines, South Korea, and Hong Kong, recording examples of dialects, meeting individuals, and observing speech patterns and geographical idiosyncrasies.<sup>46</sup> With a sound database of seven thousand interviews with native speakers of variant forms of English, Schneider approaches each voice as a technical puzzle waiting to be solved. For example, as she prepared to audition for eight characters on Comedy Central's animated show *South Park*, she loaded sound bites from VHS and online resources onto her Roland SP808 groove sampler.<sup>47</sup> Each of its sixteen pads with sixty-four sound banks was filled with the characters' audio files, and Schneider listened and deconstructed the voices incessantly. Her listening and practice helped her to win the roles.<sup>48</sup> Schneider, who also serves as a dialect and accent coach for actors, has broken vocal performance into the following parameters: pitch, tempo (speed), tone, timbre, resonance/vocal placement, rhythm, meter, volume, lilt, emotion, dynamics, timing, breaths, laughs, pauses.<sup>49</sup>

Schneider's practice-based approach aligns with my own performative-analytical framework, outlined in the introductory chapter, which focuses on sound, style, and technique. If we strip away our projections about a vocal sound's *meaning* and the vocalizer's *intention*, we no longer hear a voice or a vocalizer as "channeling" another voice. Without these projections what remains is consideration of an artist who has control over his or her vocal technique and communication style.<sup>50</sup> Whether this artist is Holiday, a Holiday imitator, or all people who use their voices to express themselves and communicate with others, a careful listener can deconstruct the vocal act into stylistic choices and technical prowess. This listening practice debunks vocal timbre as autobiography, gender,

race, and expression of the deepest essence, allowing listeners to understand vocal timbre as skill, artistry, and communicative intention. Ears turned away from a detailed and practical knowledge of vocal production perpetuate the micropolitics of timbre. Building self-knowledge and educating others about vocal style and technique offers a path to denaturalizing voice.

### Considering Holiday from a Performative-Analytical Approach: The Stylist and Technician

Applying this alternative framework to Holiday's work highlights her technical and creative abilities (as, indeed, it does for Angelina Jordan).<sup>51</sup> By highlighting Holiday's technical and creative abilities, we no longer approach her within the limitations of the three dominant imitation patterns mapped earlier. My approach dovetails with Daphne A. Brooks's reading of Zora Neale Hurston's long overlooked vocal recordings as "archival and ethnographic endeavors" and is a refreshing antidote to both the overdetermined literary and feminist icons of the past few decades and the "perpetually romanticized figure of the melisma-driven, black female singing diva."<sup>52</sup> As Emily Lordi notes, while acknowledging that some individuals have "artistic talents," "it is imperative to analyze the practices that years of training allow singers to effect."<sup>53</sup> For example, in terms of style, Kate Daubney compares Holiday's singing to instrumental vocalization technique and finds that Holiday's timbre is comparable to that of the saxophone family. The context of Daubney's comparison is a discussion of Holiday's "lack of professional voice training"; the comparison may not ring true for listeners, but it does operate on a nonautobiographical level. While Holiday may have lacked formal education, the musicians she learned from were of the top echelon. For example, Daubney notes that "the imitative reference" of Holiday's timbral style "is found most prominently in her stylistic dialogues with tenor saxophonist Lester Young, with whom Holiday had a close personal and musical relationship. On the recordings where they performed together, there is a mutual imitation in the shaping of phrases, the use of timbre and the quality of tone which not only shows Holiday to have drawn from Young's style, but also that Young could evoke Holiday's voice."<sup>54</sup>

Discussions of style can also take place in terms of music to which Holiday had access. Examining the challenges for women to enter the spaces where musicians exchanged knowledge, Katherine Baber notes, "The exceptions were black singers like Ivie Anderson, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, and Helen Humes, who were widely considered to be the peers of male musicians as they did have access to the blues and jazz culturally."<sup>55</sup> Daubney's descriptions of

Holiday's contrasting improvising strategies also describe her voice: Holiday "sought an extremely effective contrast with the piano, her voice standing out against the percussive, bright sound. . . . [Teddy] Wilson would improvise melodically with great rhythmic fluidity and across an enormous pitch compass, and his use of chords surpassed anything her voice could do; Holiday rose to the challenge by apparently singing within herself, yet it is the simplicity and smoothness of her delivery which creates the most effective contrast."<sup>56</sup>

Vibrato is a vocal stylistic trait that is closely associated with genre and the individual singer; many singers have a signature vibration that runs through every vocal line. In contrast, Daubney finds that Holiday is very economical and intentional with her vibrato: "In every line of the lyrics of this song however, she uses the oscillation of tone, or a small modulation of pitch to accentuate the sound of her voice and the use of this effect in conjunction with the rhyming lyrics is particularly striking: 'storm' and 'warm,' 'remember' and 'December,' 'gloves' and 'love,' 'fire' and 'higher.'"<sup>57</sup> In these analyses Holiday's interpretive powers are highlighted and her communicative genius accounted for; in "the subtleties of her phrasing and her flawless sense of swing, she offers us a glimpse into the human emotion of despair," Sara Ramshaw suggests.<sup>58</sup> Other stylistic traits offered include "a preponderance of sliding or 'kinetic' pitches; a drop of pitch on the voiced consonants L, M, N and Y; and soft or 'blurred' diction." Mostly focusing on the mechanics of speech and song, Hao Huang and Rachel Huang note that there are "melodic and rhythmic consequences of these mannerisms; we will then recontextualize them in terms of linguistic analysis of spoken English." Huang and Huang assert, "The range and placement of slides, abetted by soft, equivocal diction, are some of the important carriers of emotional meaning in Billie's performances."<sup>59</sup>

Considering Holiday from the point of view of vocal technical details can help map the range of her expression, detailed in over forty books written about her.<sup>60</sup> Drawing on the traditional chronological charting of composers' careers into three stylistic periods, in his 2015 biography John Szwed divides Holiday's oeuvre into early, middle, and late career.<sup>61</sup> Szwed identifies these periods as jazz musician, sophisticated international singer, and "a saucy miss and a broken drunk, a perp in a mug shot and a smiling matron posing with a pet," respectively. He identifies variety in these interpretations of Holiday and offers a long list of names she went by. In the same swoop, he critiques previous authors and justifies yet another biography by explaining that "much of what we think we know about Holiday . . . is questionable, and over time accounts of her life have been bent to serve some other purpose than telling her story." Szwed, on the

contrary, shares that he intended to write a book about her music and to offer “a meditation on her art and its relation to her life.”<sup>62</sup>

“Racism, drugs and alcohol abuse, and the brutality of some of the men in her life were sufficient to justify her mournful repertoire and a style that reinforced it,” Szwed says, echoing earlier Holiday biographers. “But suffering and pain are neither necessary nor sufficient to produce a great artist.” Such a perspective, peering above essentialized and naturalized notions of voice, is possible when considering singers in terms of style and technique. Whether acquired at a very early age or late in life, Szwed concludes, it was style and technique that allowed Holiday “to bring dignity, depth, and grandeur to her performances that went far beyond simply displaying the bruises she suffered.”<sup>63</sup>

In response to the acousmatic question, we can choose what to listen for and decide how to respond. So if I hear Holiday’s voice as a musician’s instrument rather than as the materialization of an autobiography, what is the difference? Doesn’t such listening also rely on a priori categories by, for example, comparing her voice to instrumental sounds? It does. But it does not assume that her timbre and performance style are essential. These comparisons are not self-referential, and Holiday’s skill and commitment as a musician are acknowledged. Here she performs a presence with which the listener can interact, rather than standing in as a conduit, an echo of predetermined ideas. *The singer is elevated to the status of agent over his or her own voice.*

Picking up on the threads that run through the criticism and popular press on Holiday during her life and thereafter, and at the same time acknowledging her as an artist and jazz singer, Cassandra Wilson contextualizes her own impetus for the anniversary album *Coming Forth by Day*. In a radio interview Wilson reflects, “There is this great sensationalism around the icon Billie Holiday.” She explains the impetus behind her drastic rearrangements and interpretations of the Holiday songbook: “I want to set this record straight in terms of giving her recognition in terms of her [musical] contribution more than focusing on the negative aspect.” Wilson explicitly does not imitate Holiday. As she explains, this would be “rude,” almost “insulting.”<sup>64</sup>

According to Wilson, “imitating” Holiday would not acknowledge Holiday’s contribution as a musician with a lasting legacy. Straightforward imitation, in this view, constitutes neither honest nor deep engagement. However, from our performative-analytical approach, we can appreciate imitators’ technical skill. We can approach their performances with appreciation for their analyses of Holiday’s technique and style in order to produce them as she did. Within such a perspective, we can appreciate imitative performers for their

technical virtuosity, as stylists and technicians in their own right. And if, instead of admiring these singers for “channeling” Holiday, we appreciate them for studying her and showing us the results of their studies, we acknowledge rather than erase them.<sup>65</sup>

### Summary

When presented with the acousmatic question, wherein we assume that voice is the distillation or essence of immediate emotions, life experience, ancestral destiny, or biological determinism, a listener will hear a given voice within the context of the cult of fidelity, with every vocal utterance framed as either original or copy. As a result, when a listener encounters an imitative voice and hears it as unaligned with the immediate emotions, life experience, ancestral destiny, or biological determinism expressed by the sound of the voice, the listener may experience tension. At this point the listener has two options for responses to the acousmatic question. Rejecting the idea of essential voice, the listener may continue to consider the “imitated voice” as evidence that voice is style and technique rather than essence. If we develop this path, we may realize that there is no imitation. Both inconsistencies in the singer’s performed identity and similarities to other voices can be explained in terms of style and technique. On the other hand, and this is the phenomenon discussed in this chapter, when we refuse to give up the idea that voice is essence, we perceive the imitative performance as false, making sense of that reality by assigning an identity to the voice (say, “Billie Holiday”) and separating that vocal identity from the identity of the actual singer. Thus the activity of assigning the identity “Angelina Jordan” to a 2014 singer of “Gloomy Sunday,” and of hearing Jordan’s voice as a Holiday imitation, can take place. Jordan as Holiday imitator is an essential Jordan and a secondary (false or copied) Holiday.<sup>66</sup>

If we apply listening practice within the cult of fidelity to a nexus around Holiday, we may see that there are at least three layers of imitation taking place. In the first and most obvious layer, Jordan and the other singers discussed here are heard as Holiday. In the second layer, Holiday is reduced to a few points in her biography and heard as the figure of the archetypal tragic black woman. In the third layer, Holiday is heard as a stand-in for the tragic black woman and, by extension, for a monolithic group of African Americans and racialized voices. None of these vocal events is heard in its unrepeatable and unpredictable co-unfoldings between vocalizer and listeners. Instead listeners perform a micropolitics of timbre wherein vocal events are heard with a constant comparison to preestablished categories focused on the relative relation to the a priori.

The broader point I seek to communicate within this chapter is, of course, that the case of Holiday is not unique; it exemplifies a broad, pervasive pattern. The kinds of reductions and naturalizations I have enumerated take place in any naming of a voice, and its social and cultural legitimacy is supplied from multiple sources. For every singer who is heard as an imitation of Holiday, his or her voice and persona are reduced to essence. For every time that Holiday is heard as and reduced to the archetypal tragic black woman, people are turned away from jobs or housing opportunities based on reductions of their voices to assumed nonwhite identities.<sup>67</sup> For every time a person is heard as gendered and racialized, a vocal timbre is believed to have revealed his or her essence.

The nexus of reductions around Holiday is not limited to the singers who try to imitate her, and audiences have the capacity to consider another voice as an imitation. Moreover the nexus of reductions around gender and race are also not limited to people who hold sexist or racist views and values. If, as John Powell puts it, “we realize that race is neither objectively real nor purely imagined, we must define it in a manner that accounts for its socially constructed, mutable nature.”<sup>68</sup> We may consider Powell together with Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who posit that race signifies and symbolizes “social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.”<sup>69</sup> Such thinking has set the stage for my thinking about the human body’s transmutability and, directly connected, the transmutability of the voice produced from within that body. Equally, “social conflicts and interests” are tied to and codify vocal performances.

While skin color functions as a permanent and indisputable racial signifier, voice is cast as an even stronger marker of race. Strict codification and enforcement of visual readings of the body arise directly from its encultured meaning. Listening practices around vocal timbre—a parameter equally malleable and unstable as skin color or, arguably, more so—have not even, at least to date, been subjected to thorough critical inquiry.

Voice is not innate; it is culture. It might seem as though the imitations I have discussed prove that we can know voice. Otherwise, the argument might go, how can we recognize an imitation? And how can we differentiate the imitation from the original, recognize the original, and distinguish the differences? This argument arises because the “social conflicts and interests” that Omi and Winant discuss are signified and symbolized through references to the human body, and also include vocal timbre’s use in explaining the human body as difference. In this way, voice is not innate because we hear it according to the differences assigned by a given culture. Whatever markers we may recognize, we also recognize the codification. Indeed, vocal timbre has been and continues to

be crucial to the process of “racial formation,” which Omi and Winant define as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed.”<sup>70</sup> And, thanks to the efforts of critics and activists, work that has been carried out around the benefits and rights that are denied and extended based on race, today, perhaps even more so than in earlier times, and the processes of racial construction and maintenance thereof are subconscious.<sup>71</sup>

Listeners’ assigning identity to singers in order to preserve the idea of essential voice is one of the ways in which the micropolitics of timbre play out. Based on this book’s definition of voice as encultured and collective, this dynamic describes racial attitudes played out, not internally on an individual level, but rather through broader, group-based social and cultural factors. My shift of focus from the behavior of individual racists to collective forces does not mean I vacate listeners from responsibility. Instead it means that with deeper insight into the process of racialization, we can better address it: if the micropolitics of race is carried out through listening informed by the collective, that is the very level on which we have to operate in order to bring about change.

Such a micropolitics of listening represents the desire to name and deal with the voice through preformed categories rather than accepting performance as bona fide, as style and technique. This type of collective political listening functions to uphold assumptions about voice as essence. The irony is that by deconstructing concepts and listening skills that seek out instances of imitation, the logic of an a priori original is also de-energized. Letting go of such assumptions regarding imitation would open a space for completely new interactions. Because we would no longer have the scaffolding of certainty that identification brings, this positioning would necessitate a point of vulnerability and uncertainty on our part, as well as create further vulnerability and uncertainty. This relationship to voice can come about only if we give up the right to be certain, to know, and to sit in judgment. This is an uncomfortable spot. Choosing to hear a voice as imitation rather than unknown territory maintains righteousness and certainty, and the affect is not limited to the pigeonholed, imitated person. That is, such a reduction thwarts both listeners’ ability to relate to Holiday as well as their relation to the self and to their own position in the world.

Putting Jordan and Holiday together offers an overt demonstration of voice as style and technique and exposes the moments in which listeners oscillate between aligning the performer with style and technique and aligning him or her with essence. It is within that unsettled space that a singer’s agency is highlighted. In that moment of disruption, listeners’ assessments split. Listeners cast Jordan as an old soul, but also understand that her vocal apparatus is that of a



young girl. The congruence between these two possible responses to the acousmatic question is stitched together by telling stories about Jordan that put her into the *aficionado* category, highlighting dedicated practice from a young age. By employing critical performance practice as an analytical framework, we can recognize Jordan's deliberate practice of the vocal sound. Jordan's study of Holiday's recordings can be understood as a kind of self-entrainment or self-imposed formal pedagogy. In that recognition there is space to put to rest the notion of essence—or even inevitable autobiographical entrainment—acknowledging Jordan's style and technique. “Analysing singers’ creative choices,” Lordi writes, “allows us to see that these artists are sources, not objects, of knowledge.”<sup>72</sup> Thus we can witness how various forms of entrainment are funneled into artistry and agency through style and technique.

Because listening is so deeply naturalized, I have built my case arguing for Holiday's artistic agency in a rather roundabout way. We need singers who theorize voice through practice, through critical performance practice, to expose what I conceive as *limit cases*, or what J. Martin Daughtry has termed “productively defamiliariz[ing] the voice,” in order to cast naturalized listening into doubt and, from a space of unfamiliarity, build self-reflexive listening.<sup>73</sup>

To me, and to some of the listeners I witnessed, Jordan is just such a limit case. Her performance offers a disruptive moment for the routine acousmatic question. By listening to Jordan, the idea that her voice cannot be only essence or biographical entrainment is introduced. The recognition that Jordan's sound is not pure essence opens the possibility for considering that other singers making such sounds are also not pure essence. Thus, by defamiliarizing Holiday via Jordan, we may apply our critical performance practice lens to understand Holiday's voice as both funneled through various forms of entrainment and exerting her artistic agency by intentionally shaping her voice and performance.