

In Amiri Baraka's short-short story "Rhythm Travel" ([1995] 2009), an African American man uses timing to time travel—specifically, he seizes musical meter as a way to simultaneously move from historical scene to historical scene and to join with groups of people who preceded him and will succeed him. After manifesting himself before the story's narrator as Theolonius Monk's "Misterioso" (1958), the unnamed traveler declares, "Dis visibility, be unseen. But now I can be around anyway, perceived, felt, heard. I can be the music" (Baraka [1995] 2009, 148). Through this technology—which he names, in its various developmental stages in rapid succession, "Molecular Anyscape. The Resoulocator . . . T-Disappear" (148)—the man has solved the problem of visibility that plagues the spectacularized African American male, creating an "unseen" visibility, a sense-method for evincing himself into historically specific scenes of sociability. His latest improvements, he tells

the narrator, have “pushed the Anyscape into Rhythm Spectroscopic Transformation” (149). While the science here is shaky, the idea encoded in this name is that sound can be parsed into discrete units on a spectrum, rhythmic items which become exchangeable for one another across time. This allows the traveler to enter other historical moments by becoming a piece of period music and then reappearing “anywhere and anytime” (149) that particular music plays—much as *Of One Blood*’s Dianthe Lusk seems to have traveled across time from ancient Ethiopia by way of singing, except that here the emphasis is not on lyrics or melody but on the beat. As Baraka (1994 [2009], 123) puts it elsewhere, “Rhythm is the most basic, the shortest of all stories, the Be & At.” In other words, rhythm, “beat,” is both manifestation (be) and location (at), which makes some sense of why it allows Baraka’s rhythm traveler to go places.

While “Rhythm Travel” is a late twentieth-century work of Afrofuturist science fiction, it is worth pausing to note the way it gathers together the themes I have been pursuing in this book. First, it develops the idea that being together with others is a matter of keeping in time with them. Baraka recognizes that timing is crucial not only to how responsive flesh becomes constituted into bodiliness and subjectivity but also to engroupment—to how bodies come together, and how subjectivities are constituted and modified in that coming together. As he writes in an essay, rhythm is sociability in a nutshell, for it is “the splitting of the one into two” (Baraka [1994] 2009, 122). In other words, there is no rhythm without more than one sonic or kinesthetic event, and rhythm is what conjoins them; similarly, the body becomes ex-tensive, stretching outward in rhythmic response, becoming more than itself. Timing, then, is a constitutive aspect of how bodies become oriented toward one another both synchronically and diachronically, how they come to feel temporally coincident or connected across historical eras.

“Rhythm Travel” links this process to the two outer historical edges of this book, an admittedly somewhat underspecified period of enslavement and an early twentieth century specified by the date 1920. As to the first, Baraka’s unnamed traveler describes becoming the slave song “Take This Hammer” and being “sung” into the scene, as he echoes slaves digging a well to the musical accompaniment of their own voices: “They were singing this and I begin to echo. A big hollow echo, a sorta blue shattering echo” (Baraka [1995] 2009, 150). “Shattered” out of their mis-

ery by this transhistorical call-and-response, the slaves “got to smilin because it made them feel good,” while the owners and overseers take on a rhythm of their own, “turn[ing] their heads sharply back and forth, looking behind them and at the slaves” (150). Here, timing has momentarily united the slaves to one another and to their freeborn descendants, while deindividualizing their white captors into a head-bobbing, paranoid mass. In a second historical allusion, Baraka’s traveler finances the improvements on his technology by robbing banks, a nod to W. E. B. Du Bois’s science fiction short story “The Comet” ([1920] 1999), whose protagonist is a messenger serving a bank. Yet another moment of homage to Du Bois appears when the traveler remarks, “You probably heard of the Scatting Comet” (Baraka [1995] 2009, 150), turning the comet away from the doom it portends in Du Bois’s story and toward another rhythmic act in which the body, including the human voice, is an instrument for sociability rather than a signifier of it. Whereas Du Bois’s comet emits toxic gases that kill off almost the entirety of New York City, Baraka’s Scatting Comet invites the traveler and the narrator into a scene of possibility. As the traveler assures the narrator in the story’s last lines, “Ain’t no danger. Just don’t pick a corny tune” (150).

“Rhythm Travel” also nicely condenses the themes of this book because it implicitly endorses the idea of biopolitics as a merger of two developments in the organization of time: discipline, which oriented living bodies toward one another through inculcating synchrony between their movements, and historical time, which oriented living bodies toward the dead and the unborn through inculcating a sense of temporal sequence, consequence, and succession. Thought in terms of time, biopolitics consists of managing populations first via individual disciplinary techniques, then through large-scale coordination of their activities, and finally by their ideological situation on a timeline of those consigned either to ahistoricity/obsolescence or modernity/futurity—the timeline of race. In his trip to the plantation, Baraka’s time traveler uses the foundation of discipline, the rhythmic activity of keeping together in time, to enter the era of slavery in which he, his compatriots, and his predecessors count as ahistorical waste, and to bring them some momentary pleasure. In his trip to the Scatting Comet, he also enters the scientific future, claiming, “I turned into some Sun Ra and hung out inside gravity” (Baraka [1995] 2009, 150). Becoming the music of Sun Ra, the traveler can unmake a law

that is both physiological and political: the downward pull of gravity has special purchase for a population terrorized by the mob hangings that emerged after the Civil War, and hanging “out” rather than “down,” being “inside” of a force rather than the object of it, suggests an ability to bend it other ways.

These kinds of acts are exactly what I have been tracking in this book: I have been interested in small-scale temporal coincidences between bodies, achieved through corporeal praxes opening out from face-to-face community toward the larger population and toward other moments on the historical timeline. Through representations of the Shakers, I have demonstrated how dance was used for face-to-face recruitment away from the norms of Protestant-secular, heterogendered whiteness. Through nineteenth-century African American literature, I have shown how miming death was used as a wedge against social death. Through Twain’s and Hopkins’s early science fiction novels, I have tracked how amateur historiography, for which time travel is a figure, worked against dominant historicisms and their racial implications. Through Melville’s and Stein’s tales of debility, I have suggested a queer and crip chronicity that countered the rhythms of racial uplift and human resource management. And through Djuna Barnes’s modernist novel shot through with Catholic sensibilities, I have laid out how the sacramental contested the Protestant secularity of the regime of sexuality itself.

Taken together, these chapters remind us that the nineteenth century was not just a drama of national space and scale, inflected by imperialism, capitalism, and Manifest Destiny (even as these too are temporal constructs). It was also a drama of temporality, in which bodies were timed into official and minor forms of belonging, and arranged in historical relation to one another—a drama whose opening and closing curtains do not neatly correspond with the turn of centuries but tangle with one another as regimes of secularity, race, and health, among other forms of power, rise and consolidate. My hope is that this book also matters for the present, insofar as it allows us to conceptualize social formation beyond and beside the linguistic, as an embodied and affective process. Sense-methods are not just for the past. They are for now, for being around otherwise: perceived, felt, heard.