

Music and Queered Temporality in *Slave Play*

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“...bodily existence is endurance, the prolongation of the present into the future.”

Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time* (2004, 14)

The lights slowly rise on the stage of the John Golden Theatre. Surrounded by mirrors, Kaneisha, a black woman in her late twenties, sweeps the floor, draped in a dirty dress and apron. The audience can see themselves in these mirrors, as well as a reflection of the image printed on the front of the mezzanine overhang: a large, white plantation building, surrounded by dense woodland. The mirrored images around the stage conjure a timeless, remote country location, never letting the audience forget the impact of slavery on the characters. The mirrors remain visible for the entire two-hour performance of Jeremy O. Harris’ *Slave Play*, an important and provocative exploration on the impact of inherited trauma from slavery in contemporary America, demonstrated by interrogating the sexual power imbalances within three interracial couples.

As Kaneisha enters, “Work” by Rihanna (2016) plays loudly in the background. Swerving from side to side, she begins to hum, then sing along to the repetitive verse, a mixture of Barbadian Patois and English, as displayed below.

Work, work, work, work, work, work
He said me haffi
Work, work, work, work, work, work
He see me do mi
Dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt
So me put in
Work, work, work, work, work, work
When you ah gon’
Learn, learn, learn, learn, learn?
Me nuh care if him
Hurt, hurt, hurt, hurt, hurting ¹

By the time the chorus enters, the music runs through her as she unapologetically dances with her broom and exaggeratedly twerks on the ground in her domestic uniform. The song, which was once wildly popular in

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dance clubs and on the radio, stands at odds with the antebellum setting. There is a spattering of laughter amongst the patches of palpable silence as the predominantly white audience squirms in their seats. The song stops abruptly when Kaneisha is interrupted by her white ‘master,’ who we later discover is her husband Jim. He is bearing a whip and with the threat of violence, has come to put her to work.

The blend of deep discomfort and humor continues as we watch the three couples engage in their role plays in turn. In an alarming, gasp-inducing twist, the audience discovers that the interaction between Kaneisha and Jim was set around a new type of exposure treatment, “Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy” (Harris 2019, 75). In the group therapy session that takes place in “Process,” the second act, we learn that Kaneisha, Gary and Phillip, the three black characters, live with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). The two therapist characters, Tea and Patricia, are using the couples as guinea pigs in their sexual therapy and attempt to guide the couples through a discussion of their sexual traumas during the second act. The way in which the OCD is presented varies from character to character, but one symptom that they all share is that they exhibit various kinds of musical hallucinations.

Musical hallucinations are a real, relatively common phenomenon. In an article in *Psychiatric News*, it is claimed that a surprising forty-one percent of patients with OCD can expect to experience musical hallucinations (Arehart-Treichal 2004). The variations in their condition is expressed through the characters’ individual musical examples. For Kaneisha, “Work” is a niggling ear worm. In our first encounter with the song, the audience assumes it is non-diegetic accompaniment to the action, and we watch Kaneisha unreservedly *revel* in the song, as if she is dancing in her bedroom. The realization of the characters’ OCD diagnosis comes with it a crucial revelation: the audience sees and hears the musical hallucinations of Kaneisha and Gary while their white partners are unaware. Phillip’s OCD raises slightly different musical issues. He plays his violin obsessively, but this occurs diegetically in the scenes, in front of his white partner *and* the audience. I will not discuss this in the paper as I am principally concerned with the metadiegetic, hallucinatory musical moments as a channel of communication directly between certain characters and the audience.

One of the psychiatric terms that is used in the play is “alexithymia”, which describes an inability to put emotions into words (Muller 2000). The therapists explain to Kaneisha that even though she can often articulate feelings and thoughts in her general life, that the race-based trauma of the sexual performance therapy leads to an inability to “articulate or locate articulation for [her] state in the aftermath of the fantasy play” (Harris

2019, 106-7). I propose that the music in *Slave Play* bypasses this blockage, and the songs give the characters the ability to communicate a nuanced psychological perspective of their temporal experience to the audience without requiring verbalization.

This article will explore how this is achieved through the two popular music examples, “Work” by Rihanna and “Multi-Love” by Unknown Mortal Orchestra. These songs are embodied in the characters of Kaneisha and Gary, respectively. “Work” is integral to Kaneisha’s character, an undercurrent to the play which surges to the fore multiple times. Troublingly, we discover as the drama unfolds that the song appears not only in moments of pleasure, but also in moments of fear and pain. To mimic the occurrences of the song, my analysis of “Work” will be interspersed in small pockets as the paper goes on, contextualized within discussions of Harris’ authorial approach, “lived” and “queer” time in relation to *Slave Play*, and the function of music in theatre. Gary’s song is “Multi-Love,” a psychedelic dream pop track. In a self-contained series of tableaux, the hallucination is presented using an explosive and explorative “dream ballet,” a trope of the classic Broadway musical popularized in the 1930s and 40s. The song “suspends” time, punctuating the structure of the play, and thus will be analyzed in its own section.

Slave Play and the Problematic “Lived Time”

Time is elusive, and whilst many have tried, it remains quite literally impossible to grasp. It is inarguable that the measuring of time can only go so far as to encapsulate human experience, or, “subjectivity.” An individual’s experience of time transcends the basic chronology and confinements of the clock, by privileging feelings of intense emotion, strong memories, ideas of the future and even the feeling of whether time is moving quickly or slowly. It is not the main purpose of this paper to theorize comprehensively on what time “is.” However, it is important for the sake of my argument to establish with the reader that historically, theorists conceptualize time by turning to oppositional forces, and presenting a pair of terms.

Often, this “pair” is a variation of “objective” and “subjective.” The dichotomy is perhaps most famously associated with Sir Isaac Newton, and his distinction between ‘absolute’ time, which continues at a steady pace and occurs outside of the body, and its colleague, “relative time.” As Susanne K. Langer famously reports, music is an art which “makes time audible, its form and continuity sensible” (1953, 110). It is therefore a popular platform through which to conceptualize this oppositional relationship. For example, in Adorno’s *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (1998), he establishes his own contrasting pair, between “extensive” and “intensive”

time in Beethoven's music. He characterizes extensive time as comprising the wider structural elements, such as form, texture and ornamentation. Conversely, intensive time concerns the journeys of the melodies, and tonal shifts that grip the listener, one example of which is the affronting opening of Beethoven's fifth symphony. Adorno was writing only in terms of specific, singular pieces of music. However, the terms objective and subjective, and extensive and intensive, also work on a wider dialectic scale when considering the entirety of *Slave Play*. One could argue that objective time in this case refers to the chronological, two-hour performance that paves the way for the complex, overlapping subjective experiences of temporality for the characters.

Harris writes in the performance directions of the script that the events of the play happen in "real time" (2019, 6). This suggests that the scenes predominantly adhere to a measured, objective 'clock time', and occur in chronological order. However, the music in the play alters this supposedly straightforward chronology of events, furthering, halting and disrupting the narrative. This is because the music is closely tied with particular characters and their feelings, allowing the audience to engage with the more individualized and "lived" temporal experience of Kaneisha, Gary and Philip.

As we watch Rihanna's song move Kaneisha in the early moments of the play, the audience is confronted with the jarring combination of the plantation setting and the contemporary pop song—a juxtaposition of old and new which underpins the entire production. As Darol Olu Kae suggests in his 2019 *Slave Play* profile, it ignites conversations about race and sexuality that consider "the *lingering* presence of history" and the pervasion of the past within the present (Olu Kae 2019, my emphasis).

This "lingering" of racialized trauma and its representation on the stage through music is a key component of my argument. Addressing it requires a meander down several overlapping theoretical avenues. The main purpose of this paper is to consider the representational role of music in theatre, and how music can help to display individualized temporal experience. Therefore, drawing from theatre and musical theatre scholarship such as Baston (2015) and McMillin (2006), I will explore the perceived function of music on the stage. This paper is founded on the phenomenological premise that everyone "lives" time differently—that "consciousness unfolds or constitutes time" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.414). There is a well-established field of study surrounding music, time and the body. However, these texts largely fail to account for issues related to intersectional feminism, postcolonialism and gender, which must be addressed if we are to understand a breadth of temporal experience. Simply put:

If the body is to be placed at the center of political theory and struggle, then we need to rethink the terms in which the body is understood. We need to understand its open-ended connections with space and time, its place in dynamic natural and cultural systems, and its mutating, self-changing relations within natural and social networks (Grosz 2004, 4)

Music, if utilized prudently, can help us to grapple with these abstract notions through examining intersectional identity. Following Philosopher Robin James, “music, race, and gender are experientially coincident and theoretically conjectural categories” (James 2006, 13). This way of thinking sees music in terms of signification, of *expressing* race and gender, and treats race, music and gender as one interlocked discourse (James 2006, xiv). Concurrent with James’ work, these issues are interwoven in this paper—race, gender, sexuality and music all determine the relationship between bodies and the social forces which operate through them. This is the case for those behind the scenes of the play, the characters on the stage and the audience alike. The meaning of the play relies heavily on inter-subjectivity, from the interplay between individual characters to the larger formation of identities such as black, white, or queer. Therefore, ‘lived time’ is a more appropriate term than “subjective time.”

One further note on terminology: to represent the experience of the “other,” or any voice that is not white, heterosexual, cisgender or male, as the case may be, “queer” and “queered temporality” act as umbrella terms. In line with Patrick E. Johnson, I wish to maintain the “inclusivity and playful spirit” of the word “queer,” while jettisoning its homogenizing tendencies (Johnson 2010, 127). For this reason, I examine intersection of blackness and queerness within both the homosexual and heterosexual couples such as Kaneisha and Jim, to examine how sexuality and race interact within lived experience.

Jeremy O. Harris is a black queer writer who draws on his own experience to decolonize desire, processing through his writing “what it [means] to be a black, male body in a white gays’ world” (Harris 2016). He is also a Rihanna fan. When I interviewed Amauta Marston-Firmino, the play’s dramaturg, he stated that “Work” had been there from the earliest iterations of the play. In a sense, the play came into being through the lens of the song. “Work” is a pop-reggae song with dancehall roots, reminiscent of the 1990s and early 2000s music of artists such as Shaggy and Sean Paul. It is fueled by bouncing dotted rhythms atop a minimalistic bassline, and synthesized sounds which replicate steel drums. The subject matter is fitting—the drawling vocals express exasperation as Rihanna describes having to work on her fragile relationship. Her frustration with her partner’s emotional unavailability is evident in lines such as “You took my heart

and my keys and my patience,” and her commitment to the relationship in “When I see potential I just gotta see it through” (Rihanna 2016).

Marston-Firmino explained that Harris was particularly interested in the “on the nose” analogy in the song, with the relentlessness of the word “work” in each verse representing labor, slavery, and even the emotional work in relationships. According to the dramaturg, Harris listened obsessively to music as he wrote, especially to “Work” and the rest of the accompanying album, *Anti* (2016), as well as the Unknown Mortal Orchestra album (*Multi-Love* 2015), from which he extracts a song for the part of Gary. The dramaturg described watching Harris furiously type the script almost to the rhythm of the music, a situation which is pleasing to imagine when perusing the script’s rapidly-paced lyrical lines.

Harris’s repeated listening contributed to his artistic output—turning the themes of the song into a play which works through those themes. Citing Edmund Husserl, Sara Ahmed highlights repetitive actions formative role in consciousness, writing that phenomenology as the study of embodied action “can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness... and the role of *repeated and habitual actions* in shaping bodies and worlds” (Ahmed 2006, 2, my emphasis).

Building on the Husserlian ideas surrounding repetition, Maurice Merleau-Ponty also discusses motor and perceptual habit-forming, stating that “every perceptual habit is still a motor habit and here equally the process of grasping a meaning is performed by the body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 177). In grasping the meaning of “Work” through repeated listening, Harris’ body was able to produce *Slave Play*.

Below, in an interview for *Pitchfork* (2019), Harris discusses the influence of Julius Eastman, another important black, queer artist.

Much like the characters in *Slave Play*, sometimes a song gets stuck in my head for a long time, inside some nerve ending. I can’t get it out of me until I listen to the song a bunch of times. When I first listened to *Unjust Malaise*, the first song, “Stay on It,” was with me for probably three months. Full films came to me from this seven-minute composition; images flooded my brain of little kids running through a field and finding each other. I was coming to an understanding about who [American minimalist composer] Julius Eastman was and how his music functioned inside of my body while I was moving through a very hallowed New England academic institution—where I felt like my black, gay body was at odds with its white, straight, patriarchal history’ (Harris in *Pitchfork* 2019).

By afflicting his characters with musical obsessions and hallucinations,

Harris uses an autofictional approach to further interrogate the intensity and temporal significance of getting “stuck” on a song. The quotation is taken from an interview in which Harris discusses his experience of writing a show about blackness at the Yale School of Drama. With *Slave Play*, he also tackles another white, straight, patriarchal institution: Broadway. Harris’ profound engagement with music during the writing process, as well as his commitment to expressing black and queer perspectives in a prevalently white, heteronormative space, helps to situate my argument that music is a valuable component in communicating these issues of identity.

In his article “Lived Time and Psychopathology,” Martin Wyllie describes lived time as unfolding “through the processes of bodily activity, [implying] that our sense of lived time is aligned with the intentional and teleological processes of life” (2005, 174). These teleological processes are distorted in “queer time,” my definition of which I draw primarily from Jack Halberstam’s *In A Queer Time and Place* (2005). For Halberstam, “queer time” stands at odds with the linear progression of temporality in a heteronormative existence. This a slightly counterintuitive concept, as *all* bodies have “lived” experience, conceived through bodily processes. However, I believe Halberstam means to suggest that in more “normative” arenas of society, lived experience tends to function more closely to the relentless passing of days, months and years. For example, a more normative outlook would pay special attention to marriage and having children and thus having significant life events tie in with biological restrictions, such as the crude emphasis on a woman’s “biological clock.” Once one leaves the “temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance,” new models of temporality emerge (Halberstam 2005, 20). The distorted temporal elements of inheritance are of particular importance in *Slave Play*. As Halberstam puts it:

The time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next. It also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability. (2005, 20)

Carrying the weight of their societal baggage, the characters in *Slave Play* attempt to move forward from the sexual barriers in their relationships through therapy, looking to build familial stability. However, congregating at the plantation, as a site of “the historical past [and trauma] of the nation” (Halberstam 2005, 20), brings the temporal dissonance between the black and white characters to the fore. For example, during the second act,

Current Musicology

Kaneisha describes a vivid childhood memory of visiting a plantation on a school trip, and the accompanying “tingle” in her neck:

Whenever we were there
I'd always feel
the little tingle
in the back of my neck
that bit of electricity
telling me [the elders] wanted to hold my hand
and protect me from the demons
in the walls and in the ground (Harris 2019, 219).

Kaneisha’s “tingle” expresses her hesitancy in proceeding, as if her body is giving her a protective warning signal which naturally her partner Jim does not feel or understand. This social force of uncertainty is theorized by Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology*:

If Merleau-Ponty’s model of the body in *Phenomenology of Perception* is about “motility,” expressed in the hopefulness of the utterance, “I can,” Fanon’s phenomenology of the black body could be described in terms of the bodily and social experience of restriction, uncertainty, and blockage, or perhaps even in terms of the despair of the utterance “I cannot” (2006, p.139).

Over the course of my analyses, I assess the hallucinatory attempts at overcoming temporal restriction and blockage through music.

Perceived Functionalities of Music in Theatre

I would like to preface this section by acknowledging that this article seeks to bridge over an unusual theoretical cross-section. *Slave Play* stands at the vanguard of a budding genre of theatre, one which largely does away with traditional theatrical convention by blending the distinction between musical and traditional theatre. The role and function of music is curiously under-theorized in theatre studies despite its ubiquity on the stage. One contemporary attempting to address this is Kim Baston, who proposes an analytic framework for “what music does” in plays (2015, 5). Baston found in her review of fifty-two text driven plays that just three did not use music at all during the performance, suggesting music is as an essential narrative component.

Baston’s work builds upon the earlier research of structuralist performance theorist Patrice Pavis (1992). Pavis identifies music as a temporal

and spatial art form that may contribute to “framing and defining both onstage and offstage worlds” (1992, 95-6). He also provides a useful, if limited, list of functions that music may perform in theatre, which is listed in Baston’s article as follows:

1. As a musical theme (leitmotiv) illustrating and characterizing the atmosphere
2. As acoustic setting to locate action
3. As sound effects to ‘make recognizable’ a situation
4. To cover scene changes and to punctuate action
5. To create a ‘counterpoint’ (such as the ironic use of song in Brechtian theatre)
6. To create atmospheres in a way similar to film music
7. To sometimes be the center of attention, producing the action, as in musical theatre (2015, 7).

Several of these items are relevant in situating basic functional elements of *Slave Play*’s musical moments. To cite one instance, at first glance, Kaneisha’s “Work” partially adheres to the fifth item. Initially, the upbeat contemporary pop song creates a counterpoint with the plantation scene at the start, using irony to situate *Slave Play* as a comedy that exists in an uncomfortable setting.

However, the wording of the list makes it clear that Pavis has little regard for the more complex narrative roles that music may *perform*, dismissing music as a simple tool to aid the flow of the existing narrative, such as by covering clunky scene changes, or creating vague “atmosphere.” Despite the lists’ shortcomings in an intertextual, poststructuralist discussion, there is one vital, malleable concept from Pavis’ list which can be carried forward: that music *makes recognizable* a situation; that the personal and cultural associations that each audience member has with “Work” which exists outside of the ‘immediate’ narrative arc of the play will contribute to their comprehension of the overall performance (Baston 2015, 19).

Glancing back to the earlier discussion of “lived time,” I urge once more the importance of considering temporal perspectives from every angle possible. In the example of “Work,” there are many composite intertextual elements to consider. Firstly, it is a memorable, well-known song. Therefore, when it is concurrently revealed to Kaneisha and the audience that the initial presentation of “Work” was a hallucination, a connection between the viewer and Kaneisha is established. Familiarity with the song means that we can easily recall what was happening in the scene, and feel as if we are reflecting on its diegetic positioning *with* Kaneisha. Secondly,

some of the audience will immediately be able to situate the song as a site of cultural conflict if they had read about the waves of criticism that Rihanna received for the “gibberish” lyrics, which were in fact an integration of English words with her Bajan dialect (George 2016). Finally, large swathes of the crowds will likely associate the song with dancing with their friends, having heard it in clubs and bars, which will create tension in their wholesome relationship to the song as it takes on darker relevance later in the play.

As I suggested in the introduction, I consider much of the music in *Slave Play* to have a metadiegetic function. This develops structuralist theorist Gérard Genette’s definition of metadiegetic, as “pertaining to narration by a secondary character” (Genette in Baston 2015, 7). However, in my interpretation, the secondary narration, comprised of queer lived time of certain characters, is represented through the musical examples—the songs acting as an indirect emotional and temporal byproduct of the struggles of Kaneisha and Gary.

It is insufficient to situate *Slave Play* within theatre scholarship alone. Clearly, *Slave Play* lives and breathes with its musical elements, and whilst the theories of function of Genette, Pavis and Baston are a helpful starting point, they do not go far enough in addressing the complex issues of temporality raised in my discussion of music and “lived time.” Additionally, the intricate and graphic sex scenes behave as tightly choreographed “numbers” similarly to those one would expect in a musical theatre production, so it is also fitting to consult with scholars of the musical theatre genre.

Naturally, we can expect that the narrative potential of music will be exploited more creatively in musicals than in traditional theatre. Musical theatre scholars therefore understandably have a more developed framework for discussing music and temporality. One of the key contemporary scholars in the field, Scott McMillin, theorizes these issues in his 2006 book, *The Musical as Drama*. McMillin follows the established conceptual pattern of presenting two orders of time—broadly allowing for one, more predictable element (such as objective, Newtonian or extensive) and one which is more flowing, flexible and unpredictable (such as lived, subjective, or intensive). Contextualizing his distinction with specific reference to the dominant structure in musical theatre since the 1940s, McMillin delineates between the progressive “book time” of the non-musical parts of the production comprised primarily by dialogue, and the “lyric time” associated with the musical portions.

McMillin admits that these binary separations of musical and non-musical moments reflect a dated approach to the genre, and that it is increasingly common for music to be more “integrated” into the book or

story. I find the persistent dilution of temporality into binary categories to be outdated and reductive, *especially* in the context of *Slave Play*, which outwardly challenges numerous normative structures. In a rare and vital cross section of queer theory and musical theatre, Sarah Taylor Ellis (2014) explores “queer temporality” in Jonathan Larson’s rock opera, *Rent* (1996). For Ellis, elements of queerness are represented by songs in *Rent* that celebrate the present, such as the anthem “No Day but Today.” This dwelling on the present stems from uncertainty surrounding queer life, especially during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. As Halberstam eloquently writes, the diminishing of the horizons of possibility for entire communities “creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment” (2005, 2).

Ellis is intent on working both with and against McMillin’s notion of book and lyric time, describing them as merely providing “a binary from which to explore the space in between” (2014, 197). By exploring the intricacies of ‘the space in between,’ this approach allows the characters’ lived experiences to be not only positioned against the “objective” passing of time, but crucially, *in conflict with each other*. Embracing these temporal conflicts, between characters, is the first step in exploring how music can take the audience on a journey through a multiplicity of character experience—a feat which this article also hopes to achieve. Discussing some of the manifestations of these temporal conflicts, Ellis writes:

Production numbers are sites of variable and sometimes *conflicting* temporalities: speeding and slowing time, dipping into memory and projecting into the future, foregrounding *repetition and circularity*. The temporality of a production number occupies a space of formal alterity, differing and often diverging from the linear, progressive temporality of the book (Ellis 2011, 197, my emphases).

This description still uses oppositional pairs of terms, such as speeding and slowing, and memory and the future. But, by presenting them all at once like this, it allows us to comprehend the undercurrent of mismatched conflicts that characterizes so much of queered temporality. As Elizabeth Grosz says in *The Nick of Time*, even though time has no being or presence, “we can think of it only in passing moments, through ruptures, nicks, cuts, in instances of dislocation” (2005, 5). This is why the tension and discomfort that emerges in *Slave Play*’s musical moments are so powerful—the music represents two or more temporal angles bristling against one other, and trying to move forwards, in the context of a normative temporal landscape that overtly hinders otherness. This struggle is alluded to in the epigraphical

Current Musicology

cal quotation: time will not just pass by harmlessly, the prolongation of the past into the future requires bodily *endurance* in traversing the perceived ruptures (Grosz 2004, my emphasis).

To present one example, figure 2 below reveals the tail end of Kaneisha's second act closing monologue. Kaneisha, having been quiet for much of the group therapy, approaches a significant revelation about her pleasure issues with Jim, realizing that she sees him, and parts of his whiteness, as a virus. Yet, before she can discuss this painful truth in depth, "Suddenly, from above" (Harris 2019, p.144), she hears "Work." It consumes her, managing to in a single moment both accentuate and dismantle her emotional energy, regressing from an articulate, accelerating, future-oriented vision of the truth, to an abeyant place of chaotic, unfocused rage.

KANEISHA

(To Jim) There's no way

now

I can unknow

as you wipe your

dick

across my lips

that when your people landed on this land

a third of the indigenous population of the entire continent
died of disease.

Not disease you actively gave them.

Your mere presence was biological warfare.

VIRUS.

You're a virus.

You're the virus

That's why I look at you as though

you are infected.

That's why

I—...

It's not a pathogen,

a disorder with some new name

an anagram, an acronym

some UNDIAGNOSED

UNDIAGNOSABLE thing in ME.

It's an undiagnosed, undiagnosable thing in you

and you...and

And

And

And

And—

Suddenly, from above, Rihanna’s “Work” begins to play.

Kaneisha puts her hands over her ears.

AHHHHHHH!!!!

(*Everyone moves toward Kaneisha as:*)

END OF ACT 2

-The end of Act 2 in *Slave Play* (Harris 2019, 143-4)

In this moment, the song foregrounds the perilous experience of being trapped in an unrelenting repetitive cycle. For both Kaneisha and Gary, their musical hallucinations render them suspended in time while the others carry unawares. Again, I return to Ahmed’s reworking of Fanon in *Queer Phenomenology* because with each song in *Slave Play*, we see that music is an expression of the characters’ attempts to overcome “restriction, uncertainty, and blockage” (Ahmed 2006, 139).

A Multi-Love Dream Ballet

The representation of Gary’s dream ballet provides us with many opportunities through which to explore his range of temporal ailments, which will be addressed shortly. However, it is important to also note the its practical positioning in the structure of the play. “Multi-Love” punctuates the “objective” structure of the production. It breaks up the two-hour performance, acting as a temporal anchor which eases the transition from the first to the second act. It is an intermission of sorts—interrupting the “momentum” of the scenes by removing dialogue. Without dialogue, the effect is that of “speeding and slowing time” (Ellis 2014, 197), as the audience are forced to focus on more subtle signifiers to make sense of the narrative direction, such as intricate and minute physical moments of characters, and take in a rapidly changing and developing spectacle all at once.

Gary’s dream ballet is initiated in a moment similar to Kaneisha’s overwhelming hallucination in the preceding section. In their role play, Gary is asserting his superior position over Dustin, his self-righteous partner, in a heated monologue. He stops speaking mid-sentence, as if the music violently invades his body. The dream ballet lasts the full length of “Multi-Love,” a psychedelic song of just over four minutes. The choice of song is significant. It tells the story of heartbreak within the polyamorous relationship of Unknown Mortal Orchestra’s front man Ruban Nielson, his wife, and their girlfriend. At the end of each verse, Neilson sings “She don’t want to be your man or woman/She wants to be your love” (Unknown Mortal Orchestra 2015). Here, the subject of the song attempts to transcend heteronormative structures, believing that their love is powerful

enough to conquer the obstacles of a nontraditional relationship. However, the relationship is already over in the song. Gary's attachment to this song is poignant, as it suggests that at least subconsciously he suspects his partnership is doomed to fail. This prospect is lost on Dustin who repeatedly undermines and erases Gary's identity by questioning the importance of their racial difference, and even claiming not to see himself as white.

The song is structured into clear sections, in accordance with which the dream sequence is intricately choreographed. During the introduction and first verse, Gary and Dustin stare intensely at one another, the frisson of sexual attraction travelling back and forth between them, carried by the electric keyboard's jaunty, arpeggio melodic line. Their fraught conversation from just moments before is forgotten in favor of tracking each other's body movements.

Layers of reverberation are built gradually onto the electric keyboard melody, with a small wave of echo lingering each time the melody reaches the highest note of its broken chord pattern. The reverberance contributes to the formation of a dreamscape. As Baston writes in her discussion of music and spatial framing, "culturally and historically, the highly reverberant suggests large spaces, often linked to power, both secular (the loud echoing courtroom) and the spiritual or magical (the cathedral)" (2015, p.15).

The song is elegantly panned using multi tracks to accentuate these moments of reverb—when listening with headphones there is a subtle shift from left to right as it feels like the music moves through your head from ear to ear, and this feeling is only amplified in a theatrical setting. In the theatre, I felt the wave of reverb move from stage left to right, from Gary to Dustin, as if Gary was urging himself to make the first move. The sexual tension builds for almost a minute until Gary and Dustin are overcome with desire, launching at each other and wrestling to the ground. This is perfectly timed with an abrupt musical shift in the song: the delicate panning and textural layering in the echoed vocals and keyboard is halted, and the rapid drums enter eagerly as the two bodies collide, falling as one to the floor.

A Dream Ballet is an historic device popularized by the original Broadway production of Rogers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943). The sequences need not feature actual ballet dancing, although they often do, and are generally characterized as an extended musical feature with little dialogue (Lodge 2014). The *Oklahoma!* ballet is perhaps surprisingly relevant when considering the equivalent *Slave Play* sequence. Laurey, the heroine in *Oklahoma!*, explores her sexual desire in her dream, ultimately deciding between the two male leads. The sequence also served to make

the sexual desire of a young woman more palatable to a 1940s audience by attaching it to an unconscious dream.

Aspirations of sexual liberation is also central to Gary's dream ballet. As Mary Jo Lodge notes in her chapter on liminality and dream ballets, one of the important aspects of the *Oklahoma!* scene is that Laurey uses her body in ways previously unseen in the show (Lodge 2014, 75). The static, charged opening twenty seconds allows for a gradual period of "liminality," a term which describes the transition from dialogue to song or dance (Victor Turner in Lodge 2014). At this point in the play, the audience do not yet know that this is a hallucination. In the powerful introductory moment between Gary and Dustin, it appears as if they are momentarily coming together on a collaborative temporal terrain, mechanized by desire. On reflection, it is clear that their emotional alliance is a projection of Gary's desire in his "dream."

The couples' organization into three side-by-side bedrooms poetically aligns with the lyrics of chorus: "Multi Love got you on my knee/ We are one/ Then become three." The couples all *appear* to be the most sexually liberated during this sequence than in any other part of the show, but the cartoonish and maniacal way in which they engage in sexual acts seems more like a projection of Gary's anxiety about the sex therapy, an attempt to conjure positive scenes in the hope that the therapy will prove successful in "real life."

A review in *Rolling Stone* states that in "Multi-Love" Unknown Mortal Orchestra are "coloring outside the lines for a vibrant vision of connection" (Exposito 2015). The visual expansions in the vibrant dream ballet illustrate proponents of the characters' interconnected 'lived times' versus the constantly progressing objective time of the production. For example, we watch the three couples fully immersed in their sexual encounters. Standing *above* them, the audience sees the therapists for the first time. As they peer down, voyeuristically collecting thoughts ready for the group processing session, their bodies are static and confined to a small box. Their separation from the group is accentuated by the discordant lighting design. Adorned with long white coats, they are lit in cold, clinical and "realistic" lights, whereas the couples exist in the emotionally charged colors of the dream ballet, in rich purples and pinks.

Gary and Dustin sought out the sexual therapy as it had become impossible for Gary to climax during sex. After Gary's extended escape in his hallucination, he finally manages to orgasm after the music comes to a close—contrasting the slow, liminal process which leads into the hallucination with its jarring departure. Swiftly after this, he falls to the floor in tears. The dream ballet allows Gary to temporarily leave behind the physical and

emotional barriers in his relationship, in favor of somewhere more visceral and care-free. However, this repression of emotion in “real time” has consequences—upon his return from his hallucination, his perceived temporal dissonance with reality results in a rapid flooding of emotion which leads to a ferocious panic attack. This *rush* of restriction is violent to behold as we watch Gary cry and struggle to breathe. Dustin attempts to calm him down, but his glaring lack of oppressive obstruction, and consequently, empathy, only accentuates the expanding temporal chasm between them.

Conclusion

Ordinarily affectivity is conceived as a mosaic of affective states, of pleasures and pains each sealed within itself, mutually incomprehensible, and explicable only in terms of the bodily system (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 178).

The hallucinations featured in *Slave Play* emerge as an unsolicited compulsion, and one which is inextricably tethered to Kaneisha and Gary’s most vulnerable pleasures and emotional turmoil. With each example in the play, I have stressed the characters’ reliance on their musical hallucination to bypass “restriction” and “blockage” (Ahmed 2006, 139). However, this is not a healthy long-term way of addressing temporal disjuncture, as we see especially in Gary’s crushing panic attack. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman presents an important distinction between the overcoming of restriction and effective ‘collective enunciation’ that illustrates why the hallucinations are an ineffective method of processing trauma:

Pain must be recognized in its historicity and as the articulation of a social condition of brutal constraint, extreme need, and constant violence; in other words, it is the perpetual condition of ravishment...the significance of the performative lies not in the ability to overcome this condition or provide remedy but in creating a context for the *collective enunciation of this pain* (Hartman 1997, 51).

Despite the nominally therapeutic setting, the characters are hardly forming a context for the “collective enunciation” of their pain. The therapy all happens within a very “white” space, even though the therapists are an interracial, lesbian couple. In the session, the therapists and the white partners are controlling and speak over Kaneisha, Gary and Phillip. As I mention in the introduction, Kaneisha is told that she suffers from “alexithymia” which results in her inability to recount and articulate her traumatic experiences. Symptoms of alexithymia pose a problem to the traditional model of Freudian talking therapy, as this method relies upon

verbal testimony for people to emancipate themselves from their issues and feelings. The diagnosis of alexithymia is in itself an act of silencing—it diminishes one’s voice to be told in front of a group that they are “unable” to communicate appropriately. The “Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy” ends in chaos, failing at its original goal of working through the couples’ sexual issues. However, as the black characters become aware of each other’s musical hallucinations, and better understand their own, an alternative ‘collective enunciation’ of pain is formed that skirts over the therapeutic weight on verbal testimony.

The ending to the play is bittersweet. “Work” plays on repeat from the commencement of the third act in its final iteration. Having been empowered by knowledge of her hallucination, she now seems in control of it—instead of appearing in a moment of joy and pleasure, as it does at the start, or in a flurry of overwhelm, as it does at the end of Act 2, it now chaperones Kaneisha softly, with care, as she mourns the breakdown of her relationship. She harnesses the song as a supportive mechanism to anchor herself in the present, as she finally articulates the difficult racial barriers that plague her and Jim. Kaneisha’s emotional growth here is striking. However, in one final blow which re-emphasizes the unpredictability of her distorted temporal journey, her growth is completely undermined. As the couple start to have sex and it escalates into a contentious, consensually ambiguous scene, “Work” stops for the last time, as “Jim rips Kaneisha’s shirt and stuffs her mouth closed” (Harris 2019, 158). In this violent act of silencing, the song is ripped away from her at the exact moment that she physically loses her hard-won ability to enunciate her pain.

In this paper, I have demonstrated several ways in which the songs of *Slave Play* are decidedly interconnected with emotional nuances of the black characters. Upon leaving the theatre, the musical moments are concretely embedded in the audience’s impression of the production, representing moments that are some of the most highly engaging, comical, disturbing, and complex. Additionally, the use of recognizable, contemporary popular songs makes them even more likely to *retain* memorability—leaving the opportunity for the memory to be reignited upon hearing the song again, out in the world. These factors push the temporal experience of Kaneisha and Gary to the forefront of the audience’s memory, ahead of their white partners, in a satisfying act of resistance against the white, hegemonic Broadway scene.

I end with two suggestions for further research. My arguments naturally ebbed towards the hallucinations of Kaneisha and Gary. However, musical compulsions of the third black character, Phillip, also raise compelling questions over music’s diegetic role on the stage. He obsessively plays

a Beethoven melody on his violin, which could perhaps be incorporated into a body of work centered on music and slave ownership, working with research such as Ronald Radano's "Black Music Labor and the Animated Properties of Slave Sound" (2016).

Secondly, early in the paper I discuss Harris' autofictional relationship with music and the text. By allowing songs to shape the choreography of his writing, and then teaching the audience how the music affects the brains of Kaneisha and Gary, he leaves behind a layered signature of embodied cognition. My work celebrates the amplification of queered and racialized temporalities from the stage and urges the inclusion of 'diverse' perspectives within music theory and theatre studies. The thrilling musical connection between Harris and his characters suggests that an exploration of the listening practices of theatrical creators may provide a poignant intertextual lens in the theoretical consolidation of queered temporalities.

Notes

1. Brathwaite, Jahron, Matthew Samuels, Allen Ritter, Rupert Thomas, Jr., Aubrey Graham, Robyn Fenty and Monte Moir. "Work" from *Anti*. Robyn Fenty. Roc Nation, 2016.

² Nielson, Roban and Kody Nielson. "Multi-Love" from *Multi-Love*. Unknown Mortal Orchestra. Jagjaguwar, 2015.

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