

## PLAY WRITES BACK

### part one

#### *ah, one*

Black song knows no master. They say people used to sing themselves out of the grave, they refused to become unthinkable. I don't mean to imply that people sang themselves out of slavery. God, no. But they sang their way out of the *grave*, morphed into echoes that just won't quit, that keep coming back, that nest in negro spiritual and school hymn, peek their heads out the moment one voice starts calling and the whole black crowd responds.

#### *ah, two*

Protect the child from the world that will crush them. Children are more than just queer negation or the property of their caregivers or imbued with naivety and innocence. Their songs dispel misery. They don't know what you know, not yet. That's important. You ever wonder about the special boldness only children have? That raw desire to conquer what is not yet self-evident? That's the best kind of music, curiosity. That's why they sing without fear, so loud, with an ease that can't be conjured, that won't be replicated. That's why they never need to write out the lyrics or visualise the beats on sheet music. The musical intention courses through them and finds its expression in rhythm, arrangement, harmony. It's like they sing from that place of not knowing.

#### *ah, three*

Pay attention to how these children turn play into a point of departure. Against enclosure, against rules and regulation, against growing up, play is a mode of social relation. You have to know this before you examine the material. When you open the tomb of state documents, little sing-song voices rise from the ashes. If you listen closely you can hear the patter of black school shoes on concrete, feel the sweat that melds their hands together as they run around in circles. Play allows them to give themselves to each other, pig-tails in one hand, heart in the other.

#### *ah, four*

Rhythm is a strong, regular repeated pattern of movement or sound. Tone refers to the *quality* of a sound, (especially the sound of a musical instrument) and melody to a *tune*, (especially the main

tune in a piece of music written for several instruments or voices.) Pitch is the degree of highness or lowness of a tone. The story of sound goes on and on.

The songs of the exhumed ring crystal clear. They pierce through skin like something sharp and are absorbed into blood and mass and tissue, the stuff of constitution. Melody is no longer important: the body turns song into an event. We don't need to understand the tune or even recognise it to know that we are listening to children defying death. The sound pumps, pumps, pumps through us, going places it should not, refusing to behave, forcing us to go digging for buried wonder.

Sound is an organising principle. Any attachment to it comes with a responsibility to embrace the potential in a collection of singular noises which becomes, through imagination and the power of auditory perception, *a song.*

### ***ah, five***

The future will require some improvisation. We can't be afraid of following along despite our embarrassment: treat it like a song we al...most(?) know, allowing ourse...lves(?) to be led by the music, catching up, forming wo.....rds(?) on the tip of our tongues, hoping against hope they are the right ones.

### ***ah, six***

What if, in the songs we are listening to, we also hear the quiet shattering of prospect? What if the sound brings us to tears because it reminds us of what we lost or better yet, what was stolen from us?

### ***ah, seven***

In the absence of instruments, they make their bodies hollow and ring them, beat them, clap them, smash them, scrape them, all to create the desired auditory effects. They snap fingers in unison. These are children really dedicated to honing their craft. We, decades later, long for this kind of discipline. Their use of the body is instinctual, it makes sense to use the jacket you are

encased in for your own purposes. Why not muddy the dress, or turn shoelaces into a vehicle for invention? Listener, they made *lack* bear fruit. What else is there to do in a history determined to smudge you out?

***ah, eight***

I hope those children did not feel like animals in a zoo. Their voices have been copyrighted. Temporal regimes curtail our ability to know what they were thinking or feeling. If they were shy or excited, if they knew what would happen to their voices so many years later. Did those children grow up knowing they would become fodder for anthropological discourse? When we dig up the records, pictures, recordings carefully acquired and guarded by the national heritage institution, we kill the possibilities of play. There is nothing playful about being tasked with “response.”

**part two**

**DO NOT FORGET,**

**THE NURSERY RHYME IS ALSO A PROTEST SONG.**

*There's a brown girl in the ring*

**CHILDREN ARE UNAFRAID OF REPETITION, WE WOULD DO WELL TO LEARN FROM THEM.**

*Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, ,  
Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la  
Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la, Tra-la-la-la-la-la-la*

**THEIR SONGS ARE WISH-FULFILMENT, A HEADY SPELL THROWN FROM LIPS INTO THE AIR. LET'S WATCH THE SOUND DISSIPATE TOGETHER.**

*Show me your mo-tion*

*Hug and kiss your partner*

Play is ricochet and soft landing. It doesn't wait to be counted in, it doesn't need to be invited. Play is the domain of deep experience, the terrain of unknowability. Play has no visual markers, no obvious or exaggerated features. Play means flexibility, leaning into the fall. Play demands that we stay nibble, light on our feet, that we know when to use the many strands of our collective voice and when to go on strike. Play rejects the cynicism of prediction, forecasting, trends. Play requires us to believe. Play disrupts. Play tugs at the corner of your shirt and says, let's go explore together. *Are you coming??!?!?!?*

You can't refuse.

Any good scholar knows that the chorus is the most powerful element of Tragedy. Some argued that the Greeks invented the lament, (*kommos*). Well, I've found the antidote. Play-time means

we are in this together. Play-time proposes a different kind of chorus; a cacophony of sound with no discernable source or point of origin. Remember, the laughter of children will carry us over the edge, remind us what we stay here for, what awaits us.

### **part three,**

Socks rolling down the knee, she is deciding whether or not to run over to the big group of children on the left hand side of the playground. She doesn't know any of the words to the songs but hopes this won't matter. There is something trance-inducing about watching them run around in circles, singing the same songs until someone new breaks in. When the circle is broken, they grab the new person's hand and start again. The circle and songs seem forgiving, that is why Ama is drawn to them. When someone makes a mistake, usually the song's momentum covers it up so there is no need for embarrassment. Nobody is ever banished or told to leave the circle, it is as if everyone has a role. The sopranos are called on often and it is not only the boys who sing bass. Ama thinks this is incredible, the songs give you the space to get to know them, to mess them up, to figure out how to deliver them in your own style. Tucked behind the shrubbery, she has been watching them for months, trying to figure out how she will fit in. She's not a strong singer, and like I said before, she doesn't know any of the words. But she knows she wants to be involved. She knows that she wants to feel protected – to be a small part of the wall of sound that shrouds them from the call of teachers at the end of play-time. They sing so loudly that Ms. Alexander has to come over to remind them that it's time to go back to class. The trapse back into the classroom is always the most deflating part of the day, they enter one after the other, single file.

Each play-time, someone different starts the song and then everything else just seems to fall into place. She likes this arrangement, it feels open and always shifting, which is a good way to be in the world. She likes how Tabby sings, always with her chest high up to the sky and a wide smile. She wants to be able to sing like that, to be unafraid of looking silly. When the group is singing, it feels like nothing in the world can touch them. Outside of the school gates, there is a lot Ama does not understand. But at play-time, she feels safe, wrapped in the magic of the strong and steady beats that sometimes make the ground shake. The songs put her back in her body, they make her experience the here-and-now in bigger and brighter ways. Sometimes, if she listens close enough to the singing and trains her eyes, she can see the flowers bloom in the

small gardens that adorn the playground. She is still learning their names but her favourite are the purple carnations. Sometimes she thinks purple is the colour of the future. It is as if the power of the song tells the petals to break open. Ama thinks that children must be powerful things: they can summon, they can make the world anew with the strength of their voices. Play-time is a sanctuary, it gives them all a chance to leave behind some of the trouble inherent to growing up in this place, at this time. Sonic adventure reveals an infinite number of paths. In the worlds they craft through song, one thing remains constant: they need each other. To catch the person who falls out of rhythm or to remind someone of forgotten lyrics. The songs depend on all of them which is why the circle can only get bigger and bigger. There are always too few, never too many.

One day, Ama gets up the courage to break the circle. It has taken her a while to get to this point. She has no doubt she will be accepted but it takes courage to break what seems like an already-perfect formation. She clears her throat and makes sure she looks presentable. Her hair is in squiggly cornrows with beads dangling at the nape of her neck. If she strikes now, she will have enough time to learn their entire routine. She makes sure that her shoelaces are properly tied so she doesn't fall down. Tentatively, she makes eye contact with Tabby, to warn her that she is coming. Tabby smiles, she is glad that Ama wants to join the circle and excited to teach her the clapping sequences that accompany the songs. When they get it right (clap at the same time), they make a noise that is so crisp it makes the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Tabby wants Ama to experience this too, to be changed by the movement of sound, to take part in the beauty of call and response. What Ama does not know is that her place in the circle has always been there, waiting for her to claim it. When she joins the chorus she will discover that it is not a matter of remembering the lyrics, it is about remaining open enough to be led by the sounds. To open your mouth and trust that the right words will leave them. She takes a deep breath and begins to run toward the group, the wind is carrying their voices. First a whisper, then as she approaches, the song detaches from the circle and engulfs her; she is cocooned in sonic reverberation. *"A sailor went to sea sea to see what he could see see see / and all that he could see see see was the bottom of the ocean..."*

*PLAY WRITES BACK* is a three-part experimental sequence to be read alongside Shenece Oretha's *Possibilities*, as part of a project curated for the MA Curating Contemporary Art Programme Graduate Projects 2021 at the Royal College of Art in partnership with British Library's 'Unlocking Our Sound Heritage' (UOSH) programme. It uses keywords and phrases from Oretha's visual score to develop a textual meditation on the sonic possibilities of children's songs and the concept of Play. It contends with the echoes of nursery rhymes that have been exhumed from the archive and the histories attached to them in order to demonstrate how language can fill the space between beats, occupy sonic lulls and ultimately, enhance the affective experience of listening.