

**Sounding Elsewhere, Sounding Everywhere: Listening to the Background from
Motown and Beyond**

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Signed.....

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Abstract:

The concern of this project is the relationship between voice, space, and the position of Black women in popular music. The project questions the sonic marking of the background vocal along racial and gendered categories arguing how the Black female voice as background, backing, and back-up is a construction produced in order to maintain hierarchical structures. The project seeks to reconfigure the status of the background from one of support to one of (re)production based on the Black female voice as phonic technology.

This relationship is addressed through two case studies. These cases centre on the emergence of the girl group era in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. It argues that the image and identity of back/ing/ground groups and girl groups during this period are inextricably entangled. The project draws on the role of The Andantes and their work with Motown between 1961 and 1970 and The Blossoms and their work with Philles and tenure on *Shingdig!*. The project uses a range of archival material in various formats including vinyl recordings, audio recordings of live performances, televised performances, discussions on fan forums, and interviews.

Indexed across race and gender the background vocalist as (re)productive phonic technology makes links to wider debates relating to race and sonic technologies, invisibility, and the acousmatic voice. Through reconfiguring the relationship between background and foreground it considers how the background produces the foreground rather than simply existing as a supportive framework.

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Recommended Listening

Chapter One	Marvin Gaye “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” (Extended Mix by John Perrone)
Chapter Three	Lou Reed “Walk on the Wild Side” (RCA, 1972) The Dreamers with Richard Berry “Bye Bye” (Flair records, 1954)
Chapter Four	Eddie Holland “Jamie” Motown, 1964). The Four Tops “Ask the Lonely” *Tamla Motown, 1964) The Supremes “Stop! In the Name of Love” (Motown, 1965) Mary Wells “My Guy” (Motown, 1964) Marvin Gaye “Ain’t That Peculiar” (Tamla Motown, 1965) The Andantes “Like a Nightmare” (V.I.P., 1964)
Chapter Five	Kim Weston “Just Loving You” (Live at the Motortown Revue, 1964) Jackie Wilson “(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher and Higher” (Brunswick, 1967) Bobby Blue Bland “I’m Too Far Gone to Turn Around” (Duke, 1965) Edwin Starr “Stop Her on Sight (S.O.S.)” (Ric-Tic, 1968)

Stevie Wonder “Uptight (Everything’s Alright)” (Tamla Motown, 1965)
Marvin Gaye “One More Heartache” (Tamla Motown, 1966)
The Playgirls “Gee, But I’m Lonesome” (RCA, 1960)
The Rollettes “Sad Fool” (Class, 1956)
The Crystals “He’s a Rebel” (Philles, 1962)

Coda

Marvin Gaye “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” (Tamla Motown, 1971)

Chapter One: Introduction

Listening to the Background

[Chapter Tracklist \(listen here\):](#)

Marvin Gaye, “I Heard It Through The Grapevine” (Extended Mix, 2014)

Ooh doo ooh

oooh

oooh

Ooh doo ooh

oooh

oooh

Took me by surprised I must say,
When I found out yesterday,
Heard it through the Grapevine,

ooh

ooh

oooh

oooooh

Baby, baby

I heard it through the grapevine

ooh

ooh

oooh

oooooh

- The Andantes, “I Heard It Through the Grapevine”

The first track accompanying this thesis is a remix of Marvin Gaye’s “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” released October 1968 on Tamla records. On this remixing of Gaye’s recording, we hear the track emerge and unfold from the background and the vocals of Marlene Barrow, Louvain Demps, and Jackie Hicks, known as The Andantes. Where the original arrangement begins with James Jamerson’s familiar bass line, here, it is the harmonic vocals of The Andantes that create the space for Jamerson’s bass and later, Marvin Gaye’s lead vocal. In this reconfiguration we can hear the song, and Motown more broadly from the background, and the three voices that dominated and indeed, as I shall seek to argue, in-part produced Motown’s sound.

The central questions in which this research unfolds is: *Who and what can be heard when we listen to the back-up, backing, background vocal?* Notably, this question includes ‘what’ as

well as 'who'. The inclusion of 'what' is important as it is suggestive of the potential of hearing more than a subject and more than the human singing voice. The concern, then, of this project are those voices organised as back-up and backing that sing, utter and sound in and from the background, but also important to this project is how these voices sing *of* the background. When listening to these voices what can we hear beyond their own sounding? What can we attend to beyond their tone, timbre, and arrangement? By asking who and what can be heard when we listening to the back-up, backing, and background vocal the project expands from simply retracing musical history, but asks our ears to pay more attention to what is going on in this space marked as behind, or perhaps more usefully beyond, the lead singer. The inclusion of 'what can be heard' allows for a series of questions to unfold that begin with the vocalicity of the back-up, backing, and background as its starting point.

Significantly, the project is neither musicological nor historical although it is rooted in musical activity such as recordings, televised performances, as well as personal accounts from women who occupied the role. It is interested in the back-up, backing, and background voice not simply related to music and song structure, but as an aural site where we are able to encounter, through its vocalicity and musicality, socio-cultural-political work particularly as it relates to and emerges from the Black female singing voice. The back-up, backing, and background is considered here as having a particular role in the contexts of both the recording studio and performance, particular vocal parts within a song structure, as well as a space whereby this activity occurs and is organised.

Notably, there is no definitive history of the back-up, backing, or background vocalist within popular music histories, yet their presence, or omnipresence as musicologists Susan Fast and Jacqueline Warwick point out, within popular music is unmistakable¹. Nor is there a

¹ Susan Fast, 'Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek B. Scott (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 171–89; Jacqueline Warwick,

stable category in which we describe the role. Up until now I have used the three most common terms often used to describe the role; back-up, backing and background. However, it should be noted that going forward I refer to the backing, background, and back-up group simultaneously using the term back/ing/ground. The use of the two oblique strokes is due to the use of the oblique stroke or forward slash in connecting alternatives while acknowledging the different ways that back/ing/ground group is described. The use of the oblique stroke also emphasises the instability of the back/ing/ground group even at the level language where there remains no definitive, or singular way in which we consider this role. Significantly, the most common terms used such as background, back-up, and backing are not suggestive of the same meaning. Where back-up and backing are both suggestive of some form of support (e.g ‘back me up’, financial backing, or a backing board), the use of background is suggestive of both a space and place as well as unseen or unnoticed activity.² The use of oblique strokes in writing back/ing/ground is done to acknowledge these different terms, but also collapse them in on themselves. Unlike in computing where the use of a forward slash is often used to determine a file path, or in mathematics where it can be used to denote a fraction or ratio as well as division, the use of ‘/’ here is to indicate how the back/ing/ground group or vocalist inhabits all of these different meanings, often at once, while also acknowledging the different meanings each of these terms suggest.

“‘And the Colored Girls Sing...’ Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’, in *Musicological Identities: Essays in Honour of Susan McClary*, ed. Steve Baur, Raymond Knapp, and Jacqueline Warwick (Oxford: Routledge, 2016).
² Considering the process of distinguishing between background and foreground in a visual scene the Gestalt principle of the figure-ground relationship refers to the visual process of organising a “visual scene into figures and their backgrounds” where “figures appear to have a definite shape” and grounds appear “shapeless” so as to appear “behind the figures.” Notably the aural process of listening to the back/ing/ground symbolically generates similar distinctions. Yet where the Gestalt principle is rooted in visual perception at a psychological level the segmentation regarding the back/ing/ground as it is discussed throughout this project occurs differently. Rather than rooted in psychology or phenomenological experience the segmentation between figure and ground, here, emerges via socio-political-cultural systems that render back/ing/ground vocals behind those of the lead vocalist who is rendered figure. Ruth Kimchi and Mary Peterson, ‘Figure-Ground Segmentation Can Occur Without Attention’, *Psychological Science* 19, no. 7 (2008): 660–68.

Not only is the back/ing/ground vocal commonplace within popular music but the sound of the back/ing/ground has found itself both “sonically marked” and “indexed” across race and gender notably being read as Black and female³. I am interested in exploring not only how such indexing has come about, but the implications of such indexing in considering the ways in which the back/ing/ground has been constructed.

Musicologist, Susan Fast, determines that the back/ing/ground vocal is not only “sonically marked” as Black and female but so commonplace with popular music “as to be rendered invisible.”⁴ A point echoed by back/ing/ground vocalist Evette Benton of The Sweeties who describes the background as being “heard yet not listened to.”⁵ It is this uncomfortable tension between the sonic marking of the back/ing/ground vocalist as Black and female, the commonality of the back/ing/ground vocal with popular music, and its supposed invisibility from which this project unfolds. How, if so commonplace, does this invisibility or this hearing rather than listening come about? And, as outlined above, what can be heard when we *listen* to rather than simply hear the back/ing/ground?

Part of the project of this research has been to unpack and interrogate such indexing and argue how the back/ing/ground is a construction rooted in racist and reductive stereotypes that seek to render the back-up, backing, background vocal obscure, subsidiary, and ultimately invisible. It is perhaps because of this construction of invisibility that there is, as of yet, no definitive history of the back/ing/ground vocalist within popular music histories. It should be noted that the project does not seek to attest that all back/ing/ground vocals belong to Black women, nor that the Black female singing voice can be known or identifiable as some essential category. But rather that within popular music this indexing has taken place and as such it is

³ Fast, ‘Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music’; John Corbett, ‘Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist’, in *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822379430-005>.

⁴ Fast, ‘Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music’, 172.

⁵ Benton cited from Jan Hoffman, “Backing Up is Hard to Do” in *Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop, and Rap* ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (London: Plexus Publishing Limited, 1995) 306

important to not only unpack this, but also attend to the implications of such a construction. The project aims to interrogate this racial and gendered indexing in relation to the invisibility that is evoked regarding the role and ask; how has the sonic marking of this voice been indexed across race and gender? In what ways has the Black female singing voice been used as back/ing/ground, and what are the implications of these uses? In what ways might we rethink the back/ing/ground vocal as a site of significant cultural production? In what ways might the back/ing/ground provide opportunity for performing resistance and redress?

The thesis considers what can be heard when we attune to the back/ing/ground beyond its relationship to musical structure or the internal narrative of a song. It considers the implications of the back/ing/ground as a phonic space where those voices that have sounded as such are considered not simply as part of a musical composition, but as a site of important cultural work that has been largely overlooked within popular music. It seeks to reconfigure the space occupied by the back/ing/ground group as being both musically and symbolically interlocked in a relationship with the foreground but to also consider the vocalisations of the back/ing/ground as instances where the movement(s) of bodies and voices indicate not only the significant anonymous phonic labour but also significant instances of refusal and redress. The project contends that the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is a construct, and that this construction is based upon perceived hierarchical divisions between foreground and background that posit the foreground as visible and the background and invisible.

This research into the back/ing/ground is organised around the idea that mid-twentieth century US based popular music saw an increased use of the Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground. The use of the Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground becomes particularly prominent from the late 1950's and throughout the 1960's, where by the 1970's it had become a popular music, and at times rock music trope. What I am interested in is how this trope came to be, but also the implications of the framing of the back/ing/ground in this

way. As has been noted already discussions regarding the back/ing/ground vocalist and group remains a largely omitted history within popular music histories. Yet, as I will seek to argue, when we listen and attend to the back/ing/ground we are able to attend to, through listening, a complex space of problematic labour practices, denied cultural production, as well as instances of resistance and refusal.

To do this the thesis is organised to consider the ways in which the back/ing/ground can be thought to be constructed, and how this construction is both used by the music industry in which the back/ing/ground is situated, as well as those in possession of the role.

The project is informed and guided by work laid out in Black studies, sounds studies, and popular music cultures and histories, yet resides in-between these fields. Rather these fields act as theoretical and conceptual coordinates to help attend to what we hear when listening to the back/ing/ground. Working with popular music cultures and histories the project attempts to address the ways in which the back/ing/ground has been constructed to be heard but not listened to, and how this construction problematically indexes the back/ing/ground across race and gender. From Black studies it is guided by work laid out by Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Devonya Havis to consider the ways in which we might attend to the phonic materiality of the back/ing/ground vocal, and to consider how the sounding of the back/ground registers as instances of resistance and redress. From sound studies it works with thinking laid out with regard to listening as a process of attunement to consider how we might attend and listen *for* the back/ing/ground.

My interest in the back/ing/ground is grounded upon exploring my personal record collection. For several years, I have collected 45's related to the girl groups of the 1960s. Although not exclusively associated with the girl group genre the Motown label, during the same periods, produced several female-based groups. At first, I became interested in how the term 'girl group' came to be associated with such a range of performers and music.

Upon listening to “Ask the Lonely” (Motown, 1965) by the Four Tops I was struck by the opening line being sung by a chorus of female voices. As these voices expanded across the opening section, I awaited their return. After the first verse they began to weave and waft around Levi Stubbs rich singing. My ear was thankful for these voices and tuned into them at their every utterance. Yet I was also aware that these voices did not belong to the Four Tops. My ear sought out these voices in the rest of my collection. My ear queried and wondered as it listened to “I Heard it Through the Grapevine” (Tamla, 1968) by Marvin Gaye, as it could attune to similar sounding female vocals responded and echoed some of Gaye’s lyrics. On tracks such as “Ask the Lonely” and “I Heard it Through the Grapevine” these voices are prominent, functioning as a clear set of backing or background vocals for each song. Yet when searching for televised or live performances these voices remained out of reach and out of sight. As my ear attuned to these voices, it actively sought them out again and again; “Bernadette” (Motown, 1967) and “Baby, I Need Your Loving” (Motown, 1964) by the Four Tops, “Love Child” (Motown, 1968) from Diana Ross and the Supremes, “Ain’t That Peculiar” (Tamla, 1965) from Marvin Gaye, “My Guy” (Motown, 1964) from Mary Wells, “Money” (Tamla, 1959) from Barrett Strong. Yet as my ear obsessed over these voices it also began to hear these voices not simply as straightforward backing, back-up, or background, but merged and mixed with other voices in tracks such as “I’m Ready for Love” (Gordy, 1968) from Martha and the Vandella’s, and “The Composer” (Motown, 1967) from Diana Ross and The Supremes amongst others. In listening to the remix of “I Heard it Through the Grapevine” at the beginning of the introduction we can hear these very voices, clear and crisp and for a large portion of the track independent of Gaye’s lead vocal.

These very voices reminded me of a different seven-inch single that I had filed under girl groups as this was the genre that seemed to correspond with the recording. The record was “Like a Nightmare” (VIP, 1954) by The Andantes, a group that appears first in John Clementes

Girl Group index. Before my mind had caught up my ear had recategorized these voices, allowing them to expand across a vast range of recordings, so much more than the single 45 release bearing their name.

The Andantes were made up of Louvain Demps, Marlene Barrow, and Jackie Hicks. Motown had released “Like A Nightmare” as their only single as a primary act. Yet even on this recording, as will be discussed in a later chapter, neither Louvain Demps, Marlene Barrow, nor Jackie Hicks sang lead, rather it was Ann Bogan from another Motown act The Marvelettes. My ear had recognised The Andantes before my mind could make the connections between the incredible number of recordings The Andantes have featured on. The identification of The Andantes came via my ear, occurring aurally and through listening rather than evidenced visually via artefacts. What I was soon to learn was that The Andantes performed as in-house backing group for Motown singing on an almost unknown quantity of recordings.

A similar occurrence was encountered as I dived deeper into my girl group collection. Listening to single releases from the Philles label I could hear the recognisable voices of Darlene Love, Fanita James, Jean King largely known as The Blossoms on releases that not only did not bear their name but were listed as an already existing group. Releases such as “He’s a Rebel” (Philles, 1962) and “Da Doo Ron Ron” (Philles, 1963) use the name The Crystals yet recorded are the vocals of The Blossoms. Not only this but as my ears attuned to the voices of The Blossoms, I began to recognise their voices on many other records, many also not affiliated with the girl group genre of the 1960s. Furthermore, whilst exploring televised performances from Motown acts during the 1960s it was The Blossoms that were encountered on music programmes such as *Shindig!* where they were the shows in-house back/ing/group between 1964 and 1966. In 1965 The Blossoms visibly performed back/ing/ground with Marvin Gaye during “Hitchhike,” a song where The Andantes originally recorded back/ing/ground. As I encountered The Blossoms replace the vocals of The

Andantes, I became aware of the inherent invisibility that the back/ing/ground fosters. This is a space not of clarity, or definition, but a blurred terrain where the voices that are encountered there remain somehow out of reach.

The Andantes, as with The Blossoms and other examples discussed throughout this project are not simply situated in the background, nor do they simply provide back-up or backing vocals. The Andantes tenure with Motown has been one of sonic production where their status as back/ing/ground has meant that they have remained largely out of sight and to some extent on the edge of our ears. Yet, as is my argument here, when we attune to the back/ing/ground it can be understood as a far more complex space and site of production than simply being behind the foreground. Although, as I will discuss in my first chapter, the back/ing/ground has been problematically constructed as a space for the Black female voice, when considered phonographically is not simply behind the foreground, but beyond it. My project aims to consider the back/ing/ground as a site of production and reproduction; as a space where, as will be discussed in the case of The Andantes, sounds emanate rather than simply echo. The thesis seeks to research the sound and sounding of the back/ing/ground and to consider the implications of such sounding. I am interested in the space that separates the sound of the back/ing/ground from the music of the back/ing/ground vocals.

Ultimately the research is guided through listening. But not simply a listening *to*, but in the spirit of listening *for*. In listening *for* the work is guided by Fred Moten who in his work in *In the Break* is interested in music and aurality not as some replacement of the ocular, but to consider what is carried by the noise, or sound, beyond music. It is in this spirit that my central questions emerge and expand; what can we hear when we listen to the back-up, backing, background? What is carried in these voices?

It is not my intention to address a complete history of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist. Rather I want to focus on two specific groups, The Andantes and The Blossoms, who worked

across different labels yet within the same period. The period of activity I am largely focused on in this project is their work during the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. This period is where, arguably, we see a more direct use of the black female backing group as a core part of popular music made at this time⁶. Although the groups work for different labels, I have selected them as they provide insight into the role and use of back/ing/ground group/vocalist s during this time. There are of course other groups and figures who worked as back/ing/ground vocalists during this period, however The Andantes and The Blossoms have been selected due to the extent of their work during this period as well working predominantly as back/ing/ground⁷.

It is important to acknowledge how The Andantes and The Blossoms also intersect with the emergence and popularity of the girl group genre between 1959 And 1964. Although recognised as a genre of popular music performed by largely adolescent female singers, and a studio created sound there remain many groups, The Andantes and The Blossoms included, who have been cited under the girl group genre. It is perhaps due to the girl group genre of the 1960s being considered the sound of the studio, or producer (see Phil Spector ‘wall of sound’ and the Brill Building writers of whom the music is associated with) that groups such as The Andantes and The Blossoms find their association. In their role as back/ing/ground group/vocalists they were largely contained within the studio, unseen from the public arena, therefore enabling producers and labels to use the group as both backing and a primary act with little to no challenge from label executives or potential fan base. The invisibility of these groups

⁶ Fast, ‘Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music’; Warwick, “And the Colored Girls Sing...” Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’.

⁷ During this period there are of course further examples of figures and groups performing back/ing/ground. For example, many musicians and singers associated with the Philles label, such as Cher and Ronnie Spector occasionally provided back/ing/ground vocals for recordings. Additionally, throughout this period figures such as Mickie Harris, Jean Thomas, Ellie Greenwich, Valerie Simpson, Toni Wine, and Lesley Miller worked together providing back/ing/ground vocals for numerous labels and producers. However, these figures did not identify as a primary or contracted group, rather worked on a session-by-session basis. Notably, The Andantes and The Blossom’s worked predominantly as back/ing/ground where figures such as Mikie Harris, Ellii Greenwich, and Valerie Simpson also worked as producers and songwriters.

meant that they could be used again and again on numerous recordings as both backing group or primary act and nobody took notice, although The Blossoms took on a much more visible role as in-house backing group for the television programme *Shindig!*.

The identification of both The Andantes and The Blossoms as part of the girl group genre makes their archives more challenging to trace and organise via genre alone. For they were not really of this genre but have been framed as such with little no reference of the other roles or work contributed to. Although The Blossoms recorded and performed as a primary group as well as a back/ing/ground group, The Andantes tenure with Motown restricted them from recording and performing outside of their back/ing/ground role.

The focus of this project is to work with material produced with The Andantes at Motown between 1961 and 1970 as well as other local labels. The discussion of The Andantes explores how their role as back/ing/ground was largely contained with the studio, hidden from the public, and to discuss how through listening to their work as back/ing/ground we hear the role reconfigured from one of support, to production. The discussion of The Blossoms focuses on both their work with the Philles label and their tenure on the televised musical variety programme *Shindig!*.

The Andantes tenure at Motown saw them become situated beyond the back/ing/ground, performing both backing vocals and ghost vocals for numerous Motown acts. One of the issues of thinking about back/ing/ground group through the lens of the archive is that their voices have been used in such a way that identifying the depth and breadth of what might be the archives of The Andantes is so vast that it is more than that can be undertaken here. This difficulty in tracing an archive through identifiable records is also challenged due to back/ing/ground group/vocalist being rarely acknowledged on publishing or recording details, or even noted by name on time sheets, or official documents detailing work undertaken. Moreover, The Andantes tenure at Motown was based upon a verbal contract that implied they

were not permitted to perform for other labels, or artists. Rather than being paid per recording session, or track The Andantes were paid per week meaning that they could be used for numerous recordings within that seven-day period.

To identify the archive of The Andantes, then, we must be led by the ear rather than the eye. Tracing their archive becomes about listening for their voices and attuning to their voices to identify their presence on recordings. The archive of the back/ing/ground is one predicated upon listening. The archive of The Andantes requires us to listen for voices that we don't know are there. It becomes an aural rather than oral archive emphasising listening.

As The Andantes were present on such a vast number of recordings from Motown it is not possible to attend or even list all of them in this thesis. Rather, a small selection of recordings as well as interviews with group member Louvain Demps, and forum discussions from Motown fan forums. This material is selected to draw out and draw on how the group can be considered to perform as a phonic technology of the studio that produces the Motown sound as well as exploring how the back/ing/ground was used to redress and resist the very conditions of the back/ing/ground.

Throughout the thesis I work with several recordings emphasising Motown's use of The Andantes. This includes recordings where their vocals are used in the call and response arrangement typical of back/ing/ground as well as more complex recordings where The Andantes vocals are used to enhance and supplement the vocals of others. I also draw on the 1964 live recording of the Motown revue where The Andantes were placed behind a curtain and made to perform along with the primary acts on stage. The Andantes role here from behind the curtain was to ensure that the live performance sounded as close to the recording as possible, and that the Motown sound was transmitted as accurately as possible. I also discuss instances where The Andantes as back/ing/ground can be heard outside of Motown's studios via their work with other local Detroit labels. Considered here as 'sounding elsewhere' these

recordings offer insights as to the ways in which The Andantes refused the conditions that they found themselves in as back/ing/ground. In sounding elsewhere, the group found a way to redress these conditions without risk of losing access to work at Motown. These instances are encountered through active listening to recordings identified by group member Louvain Demps.

The Blossoms archive is equally as vast as The Andantes, yet where The Andantes worked predominantly with one studio⁸ The Blossoms worked with many artists, labels, and producers. However, the specific examples that I wish to focus on here include an early release with Richard Berry on Flair records using their former group moniker The Dreamers, as well as their work with Philles records and producer Phil Spector, and their role as in-house back/ing/ground group on the musical variety television series *Shindig!* from 1964 to 1966. In working with The Blossoms the project considered the ways in which the group moved through the studio system differently to The Andantes. Where The Andantes were in many ways restricted in working with Motown using a sounding elsewhere to redress such a restriction, The Blossoms used their immense vocal ability to sing and sound across various genres. In this sounding everywhere, The Blossoms use the construction of the back/ing/ground to move through the studio system to maintain access to work. However, similar to The Andantes in sounding everywhere The Blossoms often remain anonymised on such recordings yet again emphasising the archive of the back/ing/ground as aural

To think of the archives of these two groups it is necessary to consider the archive in constant flux. Rather than a collection of material with clear parameters the archive of the back/ing/ground has no such limit or boundary. The history of the back/ing/ground has not been considered worthy of focus nor separation from the wider histories of popular music. The

⁸ Note they did in fact record with other labels and artists- but unknown to Motown. A point discussed in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

back/ing/ground and those that have occupied this space remain in the background of the histories of popular music and as such to consider the archive of the back/ing/ground is to consider such a wealth of musical history that it seems impossible to manage. However, part of the aim of this project is to begin this impossibility, not with an aim to find the boundaries of limits of the background, but to acknowledge that such an archive exists. The archive of the back/ing/ground is one that is both fragmented and unstable. Significantly, identifying the back/ing/ground at the level of both aural and visual presence, and as mentioned above also at the level of language in relation to the ways the role is described, remains difficult. This is part due to how on many single and album releases back/ing/ground vocals are not always an identifiable component of the artefact within which they are aurally present. Individual names as well as group monikers were not always included on centre labels, or liner notes meaning that groups such as The Andantes and the Blossoms orbit a distinctly aural realm in relation to the audio-visual artefacts and objects, they are part of. The Andantes and The Blossoms work with the back/ing/ground also circumvents the visual via the way back/ing/ground vocals were arranged. Both groups describe how the arrangement of their vocals as back/ing/ground was largely undertaken through a process of or/aural arrangement. Notably, both The Andantes and The Blossoms point out how vocal parts were not written down as noted vocal compositions, but emerged and subsequently arranged via in-group improvisation, as well as oral instruction from studio producers. The Andantes and The Blossoms and their work as back/ing/ground is largely encountered via the ear, as an aural archive. Yet even at the level of listening their archive remains unstable as a common use of the back/ing/ground, particularly in the case of The Andantes, was to 'enhance' the vocals or another existing group, their vocals being merged with the voices of an/others making them even more difficult to identify on recordings. As such it is necessary to consider the ways in which we understand the archive of the back/ing/ground

as not only fragmented, and unstable, but also as ever unfolding, without edges, incomplete, and of the ear rather than the eye.

Following the introduction and frameworks chapters the thesis is organised into three further chapters to discuss the ways in which the back/ing/ground is constructed and the implications of such as construction in relation to the Black female singing voice, how this construction enables specific uses of the back/ing/ground as phonic technology of the studio, and finally how the construction of the back/ing/ground permits both a sounding elsewhere and sounding everywhere and how these different soundings can be understood as moments of refusal and redress.

Accompanying chapters one, three, four, five and the thesis's coda are a track list of recordings that seek to provide opportunity for the reader to engage in listening material while reading. The first track, which opens this introductory chapter is an extended mix of Marvin Gaye's "I Heard it Through the Grapevine." On this extended mix we hear the voices of The Andantes first. This recording provides opportunity for the reader to attune to the voices of The Andantes specifically, as well as providing opportunity to *listen* to for their voices. Following this first example the following tracks are organised by chapter, and then finally the coda. The tracks are provided to simply accompany the thesis and can be played continually throughout reading, before, or following. The tracks selected are intended to demonstrate the difference ways in which the back/ing/ground has been utilised, as well as specific examples of the work of The Andantes and The Blossoms.

To discuss the implications of the Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground it is necessary to use chapter three as a way to establish the construction of the back/ing/ground within mid-twentieth century popular music. To do this the chapter begins by unpacking Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side" to consider how by 1972 the phonic image of Black women singing back/ing/ground had become a popular music trope. The discussion expands from this

case to consider possibilities as to how this trope came to be established looking at the rise of Black women singing and performing back/ing/ground with the emergence and popularity of the girl groups of the late 1950s and 1960s. In discussing the construction of the Black female singing voice as back/ing/round during this period the chapter draws on the early recordings of The Blossoms, known then as The Dreamer's, and their recording with Richard Berry, as well as their work with Phil Spector and the Philles label. Following this, the discussion further expands the implications of the construction of the back/ing/ground and its indexing across race and gender. To do this it considers the back/ing/ground vocal as a narrative device within song structure, the back/ing/ground as a space of labour, and the construction of the back/ing/ground and/as sonic blackness.

In chapter four the discussion focuses specifically on the group The Andantes and their work with Motown during the 1960s. Through retracing the working relationship the group had with Motown, the chapter seeks to establish how The Andantes as back/ing/ground can be thought of as not only a crucial component of what is understood to be the Motown 'sound,' but as a phonic technology of the studio and studio system in which Berry Gordy Jnr. modelled Motown modes of production. To do this the chapter attends to the different ways in which The Andantes were utilised within the studio at Motown, as both back/ing/ground vocals, and as both vocal enhancements and replacements for other primary Motown acts. In listening to specific recordings upon which The Andantes sound the chapter seeks to reconfigure the construction of the back/ing/ground as uncreative to argue that not only is the role highly creative, but also a key component of Motown's modes of production. In attending to the different ways in which the group were used at Motown it emphasises how the back/ing/ground is continually made invisible and that this invisibility in fact signals the significance of the work undertaken.

Finally, chapter five brings together both *The Andantes* and *The Blossoms* to discuss the ways in which we might hear their work in the back/ing/ground as a form of resistant and redress. To do this it discusses the different ways both groups utilised the so-called obscurity of that the back//ing/ground provided to manoeuvre both against and through the very systems that constructed this obscurity. The obscurity and the largely anonymity of the back/ing/ground registers here in the ways that the back/ing/ground is rarely given label credits on record releases. The sounding of their voices on recordings yet the anonymity of their voices on label credits and liner notes is read here as a kind of ‘coding out’ in which the back/ing/ground is heard yet remains left out of formal archival data such as record labels. In this final chapter I argue that it is through sounding their voices both elsewhere and everywhere that we can attune to these modes of sounding as instances of resistance and redress. Drawing on Hartman’s work on Black performance and/as resistance this final chapter seeks to consider how sounding in and from the back/ing/ground functions as a necessary resistance yet borne out of representations of power that seek to reproduce forms of domination⁹. The final part of this chapter extends the notion as sounding as an instance of resistance and redress towards the back/ing/ground itself. In focusing on *The Blossom*’s role on the television show *Shindig!* and a specific performance of “The Shoop Shoop Song (It’s in His Kiss)” with Aretha Franklin, it discusses the performance as an instance of sounding otherwise. In sounding otherwise *The Blossoms* signal a different relationship between lead and back/ing/ground; one that is reflexive, agile and ultimately improvisatory.

⁹ Sadiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

Chapter Two: Frameworks

Literature Review

Forum Thread: *Does anyone know who Diana's background singers were at the Central Park Concert?*

3rd to 4th September 2013

Blueskies 11:27pm

Does anyone know who Diana's background singers were at the Central Park Concert?

Whitesoxx 01:44 AM

Bobby Glenn and Sharon whose last name I can't remember...

smark21 07:38 AM

Who Cares? They're just backpart singers. Weren't they hidden in a pit or behind a thick curtain to ensure no Mary Wilson like upstaging? I wish Miss Ross would go back to that sort of staging as I find it very disturbing these days she lets her significant backpart singers share the stage with her and have solo parts and be allowed to showboat and think they're important to her show. Miss Ross has mellowed far too much for my liking and she needs to get back to being the Diana Ross she used to be and if she can't, she should retire.

[...]

There seems to be a perverse fascination as to who exactly is singing background for Diana Ross over the years, whether on Supremes or solo recordings, or in concert, and such discussions usually cause pain and hurt for some fans. It's weird.¹⁰

Forum Thread: *What's your thought on The Andantes replacing vocals on groups?*

7th July 2019:

ImissFlo93 10:08 AM

What's your thought on The Andantes replacing vocals on groups?

Daviddh 5:46 PM

I did have an issue with the label reading [Diana Ross and the Supremes] but it being The Andantes. False advertising. Adding them for additional vocals is one thing but misleading the public is another. They lied to us

Philles/Motown Gary 6:19 PM

We've covered this a thousand times before. It's a heated topic that only stirs up anger. Why do we keep going there?

Marv2 6:27 PM

I have never bought a record in my life because [The Andantes] were singing on it. We didn't even know who they were when I was growing up. I look at them as accompaniment but not on the same level as the legendary Funk Brothers.

PeaceNHarmony 8:13pm PM

I don't like it. It's fraud.

¹⁰ Forum thread, "Does anyone know who Diana Ross's background singers were at the Central Park concert?" Soulful Detroit Fan Forum, 3rd September 2013 11:27pm, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?10000-Diana-Ross-Central-Park-background-singers>

*The public was led to believe they were buying records by which-so-ever group, but they weren't. [...] Motown committed fraud.*¹¹

The above forum discussions speak to many of the themes encountered through this project. Throughout these two forum threads we encounter various perspectives regarding the role of the back/ing/ground vocalist and the ways in which the role is often framed. From uncertainty as to who it is performing back/ing/ground, to dismissal as to what these figures contribute, as well as annoyance and outrage as to their use on recordings.

Throughout the forum thread from 2013 we encounter not only uncertainty as to who these singers might be, but also comments such as “who cares? They’re only backpart singers” signals the general dismissal in which the role is often encounter. Here the framing of any interest in identifying and attending to the back/ing/ground is regarded as a “perverse fascination” that is not only considered “weird” but also causing “pain and hurt” for fans. In this first thread it is suggested that in attending to the back/ing/ground, in giving these voices our attention somehow unsettles our understanding of and relationship to the primary act, or the recording itself. This point is extended in the latter forum thread that focuses specifically on The Andantes and their work with Motown as vocal replacements. Again, we encounter not only a dismissal of their work, but also anger towards the use of the back/ing/ground by Motown. Calls of “false advertising” and “fraud” suggest upset within fan communities when considering the contributions made by groups such as The Andantes. Here there is a sense that attending to the back/ing/ground will again cause our understanding of a recording to become unsettled. That in listening to and listening hard to what can be heard will reveal a more complex arrangement of vocals; one that is not so easily mapped onto the primary group or performer on the record label. In attending to the back/ing/ground the recording

¹¹ Forum thread, “*What’s your thought on The Andantes replacing vocals on groups?*” Soulful Detroit Fan Forum, 7th July, 2019 10:08AM, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?23728-What-s-your-thought-on-the-Andantes-replacing-vocals-on-groups>

simultaneously expands and fragments. No longer can it be heard as a phonic mirror of the performer or group on the label details. Rather this phonic image becomes fractured, full of the texture of voices we did not know, or in this case want to know, were there. Additionally, comments such as “I look at them as accompaniment but not on the same level as the legendary Funk Brothers,” indicate how attending to the back/ing/ground might be applied to musicianship but should not apply to the voices that sound there.

In attending to the back/ing/ground and listening to those voices that sounded in, of, and from there the aim of this thesis is to do some of the work that the above forum threads avoid. In attending to the back/ing/ground it seeks to consider the ways in which the back/ing/ground and specifically the Black female singing voices as back/ing/ground has been constructed. and how this construction knowingly indexes the back/ing/ground across race and gender to render the back/ing/ground obscure and subsidiary. In responding to these concerns, the following chapter seeks to outline the wider contexts and conceptual frameworks within which this thinking is situated. To do this it moves through the various contextual, thematic, and conceptual frameworks at play such as the status of the back/ing/ground group with popular music, listening to race in the back/ing/ground, performing blackness in the back/ing/ground, phonic materiality, sounding and otherwise possibility, race and technology.

Before the chapter continues it is important to establish that by no means do I intend to suggest that the Black female voice as back/ing/ground occurs due to any vocal essentialism regarding both race and gender. Rather I seek to question how the back/ing/ground group has been indexed along both racial and gendered lines, and how the use of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground has caused this voice to be heard in this way. In terms of thinking about the relationship between the Black female voice as back/ing/ground and blackness, the chapter seeks to consider how blackness is produced via the visual and sonic spaces that the back/ing/ground is made to inhabit, that is, to be behind or in support of the foreground. In

short to be in service to the foreground. In discussing race and technology rather than focusing on the use of technological devices or machines, I am interested in how we might understand the Black female voice as back/ing/ground as a corporal and specifically phonic technology rather than simply an engagement with technology. My intention is to consider how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground might be considered a primary technology and how it has engaged with and become entangled with additional technologies of the studio and performance practices. The additional technologies that the Black female voice as back/ing/ground has become entangled with includes but is not limited to audiotape (cutting and splicing), overdubbing, stacking, ghosting, costume and partitions. Furthermore, what I aim to explore is how as back/ing/ground, groups such as The Andantes were considered devices of the studio.

The Status of the Back/ing/ground in Popular Music:

In 'Genre, Subjectivity and Back Up Singing in Rock Music' Susan Fast describes how the back/ing/ground singer is sonically marked as black and female¹². For Fast this 'sonic marking' is rooted in the work of one specific group, The Blossoms and her observation of an increased use of black female vocalists singing in the gospel tradition during the 1960s. Similarly, "And the Colored Girls Sing..." Backup Singers and the case of The Blossoms' musicologist Jacqueline Warwick cites The Blossoms as a primary example of how we understand the back/ing/ground group/vocalist going on to remark how The Blossom's influence led to the configuration "of three black women" singing back/ing/ground as a pop "standard"¹³. The work of Warwick and Fast establish the relationship between the female voice and the back/ing/ground and invite us to consider the wider implications of these conditions. For example, although I concur that The Blossoms are indeed a notable example of the Black

¹² Fast, 'Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music', 177.

¹³ Warwick, "And the Colored Girls Sing..." Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms', 64.

female voice being used as back/ing/ground what are the implications of the black female voice being used as back/ing/ground?

Although Warwick expresses how the role of the back/ing/ground group often “coincides with reductive and controlling stereotypes of black women”¹⁴ she nevertheless goes no further than this statement. Through her analysis of back/ing/ground group/vocalists and rock music Fast notes how back/ing/ground group/vocalists are “unconsciously” understood as women noting how this unconscious understanding functions to reinforce women as cultural “supporters”¹⁵. Considering the context of white male rock music Fast remarks how the sonic marking of the background as black and female serves to provide alternative social meanings to rock’s white masculinity. She describes how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground in this context provides rock’s white masculinity with a required Other in which rock’s “white simulation of black musics”¹⁶ can authenticate itself. This authentication, for Fast, is rooted in the perception of the Black female voice as both originary and cathartic. As a mode of catharsis, the Black female voice functions here as a proxy in which the white male lead can unload emotional content. Fast notes how race is an important factor here describing how “it is common in white culture to assign the ability to emote” to black peoples¹⁷. The sonic marking of the background as Black and female, then, suggests how the construction of the background across race and gender provides a significant symbolic function. The back/ing/ground then must be considered a construction rather than a convention and attending to how this construction has been produced and the implication of this construction remains a core focus of this thesis.

¹⁴ Jacqueline Warwick, ““And the Colored Girls Sing...” Backup Singers and the Case of the Blossoms” in *Musicological Identities: Essays in Honour of Susan McClary*, ed. Steven Baur, Raymond Knapp and Jacqueline Warwick. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008) 76

¹⁵ Fast, ‘Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music’, 187.

¹⁶ Fast, 183.

¹⁷ Fast, 182.

Warwick recognises the reductive tendency to frame the “symbolic function”¹⁸ of the back/ing/ground group “as selfless sources of emotional and practical sustenance for individuals whose identities are assumed to be more psychologically complex and important”¹⁹. Her analysis attempts to establish how backup singers are not “afforded the possibility of psychological growth or complexity” and that they are “inevitably understood as entities”²⁰. However, Warwick’s argument also notes that as entities the back/ing/ground group are able to explore various forms of identity formation “as it is constructed and negotiated in popular music”²¹. Although cited as a freedom afforded to back/ing/ground groups Warwick overlooks how these identity formations are always already framed outside of the lived conditions of subjection. For example, Warwick’s analysis of The Blossoms shows how as a back/ing/ground group they were utilised on numerous recordings for various styles of music yet Darlene Wright (stage name Darlene Love) member of The Blossoms discusses often feeling alienated from some of the music they were asked to contribute too. Noting her age, marital status and motherhood Wright remarks how she was confident she could “sound like a teenager” although the songs narrative and style did not reflect her own subjecthood.²² Wright goes onto recognise how this was considered an aspect of the role itself – to perform on the jobs you were offered regardless of their connection to any personal style, taste or reflection upon lived experiences²³. Wright’s point mirrors Will Stos’s comments about how members of a girl group do not require to be the adolescent girls that the genre supposes.²⁴ Similarly for

¹⁸ Warwick, 75

¹⁹ Warwick, 75

²⁰ Warwick, “‘And the Colored Girls Sing...’ Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’, 75.

²¹ Warwick, 75.

²² Darlene Love and Rob Hoerburger, *My Name Is Love: The Darlene Love Story* (New York: William Morrow, 2013), 62.

²³ Darlene Wright’s (aka Darlene Love) attitude to session work is somewhat complex. In her autobiography Wright states how at times session work and a back/ing/group was preferred as the popularity of The Blossoms meant that their session fee rate became increasingly high. Not only this but she remarks how session work permitted her to work in line with her parental responsibilities; “Recording sessions in L.A. didn’t start until one in the afternoon, so mornings were my quality time with [my son] Marcus. I fed him, changed him, and sang lullabies and nursery rhymes to him [...] then I dropped him off at my mothers or at [my husbands] mother’s house”

²⁴ Will Stos, ‘Bouffants, Beehive’s, and Breaking Gender Norms: Rethinking “Girl Group” Music of the 1950s and 1960s’, *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 2 (2012): 120.

back/ing/ground groups there is no insistence or necessity to fully reflect the content of what you have been required to sing, rather to merely sound as if you do thus producing a phonic flexibility able to “shape shift” dependent on the session being recorded.²⁵ This is exemplified in Warwick’s example of the voices of The Blossoms being used for a recording to be released with the use of a different girl group, The Crystals. Warwick notes how label owner and producer Phil Spector’s process of using the voices of The Blossoms yet releasing the recording under the name of an existing group caused problems for both parties. Where The Blossoms’ labour remained unknown to the record buying public, the recording (and in fact further recordings as this tactic was undertaken more than once by Spector) caused issues for The Crystals too, as not only did they have a hit single of which they had no hand in creating, but it became difficult to perform these songs live due to the vocal difference between the two groups.²⁶ Although Warwick makes note of these issues I am particularly interested in considering the implications of such processes and strategies plus the ways in which the construction and status of the back/ing/ground becomes implicated because of them.

Warwick’s analysis makes clear how the group were fundamentally restricted to remaining a back/ing/ground group and where efforts were made to seek out solo careers, or to become a successful primary performing group were predominantly opposed by producers and record labels.²⁷ Rather the backing group is always in service to something or someone else; a recording; a producer; a lead performer. This point is even more troubling when we consider how the vocals of some back/ing/ground groups, including The Blossoms, were used on all vocal tracks, not simply as back/ing/ground vocals. What this shows is that the value of back/ing/ground groups is based upon an inherent opacity where their bodies remain unseen inside the studio, yet their voices remain unrecognised and attributed to the body of another or

²⁵ Warwick, “And the Colored Girls Sing...” Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’. 66

²⁶ Warwick, 66.

²⁷ Warwick, “And the Colored Girls Sing...” Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’.

the general abstraction of a group moniker. In the case of The Blossoms and The Crystals both identities remain ultimately unsettled where both voice and body cannot settle, nor are they able to be rerouted back, for The Blossoms, to their own body, and for The Crystals, their own voice. Rather the voices and bodies of both groups become fractured, unsettled entities. Both voice and body become untethered, unable to fully inhabit or grasp these new bodies or voice to which they are now made to synchronise.

Jan Hoffman describes how the back/ing/ground group is to be “seen but not noticed, heard but not listened to.”²⁸ Hoffman’s statement makes clear how the status of the backing group is one of at best partial visibility and audibility where their voices are to be sensed yet not fully perceived. Warwick recognises the role as being characterised by an ability to shape shift and to “alter sound and style to suit the material at hand”²⁹ noting how “their invisibility in the recording studio allowed them to explore musical genres that would [...] have been considered unsuitable for teenage girls (and later women) of colour”. It is unclear what Warwick means by unsuitable and what this unsuitability is grounded in. This ability to alter vocal style will be explored in chapter five as a form of resistance rather than Warwick’s suggestion, to engage with “unsuitable” subject matter.

In his discussion regarding the status of the back/ing/ground vocalist John Corbett, too, asserts that the back/ing/ground vocalist is indexed across race and gender by producing a set of bracketed terms that he deems silently precede the term background or backing. For Corbett the term backing, or background is preceded by the bracketed terms (black) and (female) stating “so strong is this construct that one need not utter its name to feel its presence.”³⁰ Corbett discusses how the background in fact functions as the *ground* upon which the lead is constituted describing the background as a “sonorous envelope” akin to a womb. For Corbett the

²⁸ Jan Hoffman, “Backing Up is Hard to Do” in *Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop, and Rap* ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (London: Plexus Publishing Limited, 1995) 306

²⁹ Warwick, “And the Colored Girls Sing...” Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’, 78.

³⁰ Corbett, *ibid*

background functions to “indulge the male lead in a fantasy of plenitude” and “to protect him from ‘going it alone’” This fantasy of back-up via the background, for Corbett, functions to mask the disembodied status of the lead’s voice, which, if to occur, would weaken the lead’s authority via association³¹. Corbett’s analysis shows how the obscurity of the back/ing/ground becomes a necessity for the foreground/lead. That the background must not be seen, nor be fully attended to for risk of unsettling the dominant status of the lead as it is mapped onto the foreground.

Framing the back/ing/ground as a womb-like space evokes images of both comfort and reproduction and as observed, by Corbett the anonymity of the back/ing/ground continually figures its function as one of support. What is to be questioned here is how we might extend this imagery to re-think how back/ing/ground group/vocalist might be considered a phonic technology, that is conditioned not only upon the inevitability of the Black female voice and/as back/ing/ground but also how the relational status between back/ing/ground group/vocalist and the numerous other forms which they are made to relate to (track, label, lead etc) is not simply one of support or comfort but also of creative production. Corbett’s description of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist “blending in with the walls of the studio”³² and thus “becoming a larger instrument of the music industry”³³ acknowledges this productive status as well as speaking to the back/ing/ground group/vocalists’ continued anonymity within the studio.

The status of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist then can be understood not simply as one of support or comfort as outlined by Corbett, but one whose relationality is more complex. As an inevitability that comes to precede a track, that becomes an expectation and in the case of The Andantes and Motown a need to produce the very sound upon which Motown has come

³¹ Corbett, ‘Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist’, 63.

³² Corbett, 63.

³³ Corbett, 63.

to sound, the status of the back/ing/ground can be considered one of (re)production in which without these voices the sound would not exist.

Both Corbett's and Warwick's emphasis and observation of the back/ing/ground voice as symbolic of emotional support is echoed by Farah Jasmine Griffin who discusses how the spectacle of the Black women's singing voice has come to signal both comfort and crisis. Where both Corbett and Warwick point to how the (symbolic) figure of the Black female back/ing/ground vocalist functions to both support and comfort the lead singer, Griffin meditates on the ways in which the spectacle of Black women singing has, on the one hand, been used to heal in moments of national crisis, "when the nation is trying to present an image of itself to itself and the world"³⁴ as well as a critique of the nation.

Asking the reader to picture various examples of Black women singing, Griffin argues how the Black woman's singing voice – "singing rather than speaking" has not only come to be a "familiar sight in America"³⁵ but that the spectacle of the Black female singing voice is a figure that serves to help reproduce an image of national unity "who heals and nurtures" while having "no rights or privileges within it." Noting examples where the visibility of the Black women singing is used to both represent "an alternative vision of a more inclusive America," as well as how it is figured to "signal a crisis in the spectacle of unity," Griffin describes the Black female singing voice as a "hinge [...] a place where things can both come together and break apart."³⁶ Griffin's work not only meditates on the meanings invested into Black women singing and the ways it has been used to serve a nation that remains "hostile to the aspirations of black people" but also seeks to discuss the ways the Black female singing voice has been used to construct myths of origin. Discussing the black female singing voice within jazz, Griffin

³⁴ Farah Jasmine Griffin, 'When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality', in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 103, <https://doi.org/10.7312/omea12350-005>.

³⁵ Griffin, 103.

³⁶ Griffin, 104.

discusses how the “originary voice is rendered female” it remains “represented by males.”³⁷ In both instances the Black female singing voice is continually backgrounded and pushed beyond itself; heard yet is always standing in for something (national unity) or someone (male) else. Griffin’s meditations on Black women’s vocality and Corbett’s discussion regarding the status of the background singer point to how, within popular music culture Black women, and their singing voice has been depended upon, to borrow Daphne Brooks’s term, as “static nurturers.”³⁸

Griffin’s thinking regarding vocality is useful here as they make clear the ways the Black female singing voice has been used in service to other things, be they political or cultural narratives, and how the Black woman’s singing voice is used in both these capacities. Where Griffin focuses on the visibility and spectacle of individual Black women singing this project seeks to explore the ways in which the image of Black women singing in the background is similarly invested with meaning. Not only this but it considers how in relation to the back/ing/ground group and vocalist the spectacle of the singing body is no longer necessary for the image to be provoked.

Continuing her discussion Griffin points towards early descriptions of black singing that not only Other the sonority the black singing voice, but also how this Othering has worked to render the Black singing voice as being outside of musical notation. Noting a tendency to compare the black singing voice to non-human expressive forms, such as birdsong, Griffin notes how “for the white observer black singing is birdlike because it escapes categorization” and therefore “does not attend to the rules of Western literacy or notation.”³⁹ Drawing on Nathaniel Mackey, Griffin signals how being rendered outside of musical notation has

³⁷ Griffin, 104.

³⁸ Daphne A. Brooks, “‘This Voice Which Is Not One’: Any Winehouse Sings the Ballad of Sonic Blue(s)Face Culture”, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20, no. 1 (2010): 48.

³⁹ Griffin, ‘When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women’s Vocality’, 107.

embedded within the Black singing voice a powerful “fugitive spirit” that refuses “to be mapped, captured, or notated.”⁴⁰

Griffin’s points can be extended to the back/ing/ground group/vocalist in several ways. First, at the level of vocality in that the vocables produced by back/ing/ground group/vocalists are often, although not exclusive, regarded as nonsense vocables, echoic vocalisations of the lead, and/or cautionary advice pertaining to the leads internal narrative within the lyric. The speech sounds back/ing/ground group/vocalists have been required to produce situates them in a hierarchy where their vocal agency appears reduced. Furthermore, the articulations made by back/ing/ground group/vocalists do not necessarily directly connect to language but rather are situated outside of language, such elongated “oohs” and “aahs” that provide a kind of phonic backdrop for lead vocalists lyrics. In an interview with Jan Hoffman, Evette Benton of the backing group The Sweeties describes having to sound like “monkeys. Flutes. Trumpets. Violins.”⁴¹ and goes on to describe the role of the backing group as singing “the unsingable, the undreamable, the unthinkable.”⁴² Framing the voice of back/ing/ground vocalists in this way further establishes how the role of the background vocal is to produce a voice that to follow Griffin extends beyond human speech, yet the identity of this voice is, as demonstrated by Corbett re-routed back to the Black female body. Second, the Othering the Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground remains similarly ‘unmapped’ to borrow Griffin’s reference of Nathaniel Mackey, in that the vocal parts generally emerged through oral direction from studio producers, or in-group improvisation rather than written musical notation. In this way the Black female voice as back/ing/ground becomes part of a longer legacy of how meaning is made from Black women’s vocality.

⁴⁰ Griffin, 107.

⁴¹ Jan Hoffman, “Backing Up Is Hard to Do” The Village Voice March 18, 1986’, in *Rock She Wrote: Women Write about Rock, Pop, and Rap*, ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (London: Plexus Publishing, 1995), 308.

⁴² Hoffman, *ibid.*

Listening to Race and Gender in the Back/ing/Ground:

Jennifer Stoever explains how “racism works through sound and how American listening habits are shaped by our experiences as raced subjects and by dominant ideologies of “correct, “proper” and “sensitive” listening.”⁴³ Through examining the stereotypes of what Stoever refers to as the ‘sonic colour line’ she shows how both sounding and listening are entangled within embedded racist attitudes. The sonic colour line is described as the “process of racializing sound – how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds”⁴⁴. She goes on to state that the outcome of the sonic colour line produces the “hierarchical division sounded between “whiteness” and “blackness.””⁴⁵ Significantly, for Stoever the sonic colour line is itself produced by listening. The “listening ear [...] is a figure for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic colour line’s norms. Through the listening ear’s surveillance, discipline, and interpretation, certain associations between race and sound come to seem normal natural, and “right.””⁴⁶ My claim here is that it is in part this listening ear that has determined the role of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist as both Black and female. Not only this but the practices occurring at Motown and the use of The Andantes and wider labour practices regarding Black women and the creative industries during this period have figured these voices as both raced and gendered. Stoever’s work helps us to understand how the sonic colour line enables the “auditory imaginings of blackness.”⁴⁷

By highlighting the “racialized hierarchy of speech sounds”⁴⁸ Stoever acknowledges how both language, voice and vocality are used to not only racially determine subjects but to deny

⁴³ Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line, The Sonic Color Line* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 277, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1bj4s55>.

⁴⁴ Stoever, 7

⁴⁵ Stoever, 7

⁴⁶ Stoever, 7

⁴⁷ Stoever, 7

⁴⁸ Stoever, 279.

subjects entry to certain spaces and to pre-determine subjects as aggressive⁴⁹. Furthermore, she posits how “US white supremacy has attempted to suppress, tune out, and wilfully misunderstand some sounds and their makers and histories.”⁵⁰ Stoever’s listening ear shows how race is heard not merely in the way that a voice sounds, but in the language that is heard being used by this voice. Stoever makes clear that this a racist practice whose listening only seeks to maintain racist systems of oppression.

Discussing how assumptions are made about the relationship between racial identity and voice, Nina Eidsheim argues that rather than the voice being a knowable and stable category in relation to racial identity, the voice is not singular but collective, not innate but cultural and its source is not the singer but the listener⁵¹. Eidsheim seeks to debunk myths regarding race as an essential category and argues that assumptions regarding voice as a marker of some essentialist or innate identity are largely false. Rather, she argues that voice and specifically timbre “is the result of a body’s enculturation through training.”⁵² By refocusing vocality away from embodiment Eidsheim opens up a space where we can begin to understand the Black female voice as background as related to the wider contexts of the music industry and the ways in which Black women gained or were granted limited access to this industry. Rather than the status of the Black female voice as background being related to biological essentialism or assumptions regarding the vocality of the Black female voice, Eidsheim’s argument helps to reframe the discussion towards how the Black female voice as background is perhaps rooted in the role as an economic opportunity within the competitive context of the popular music industry.

⁴⁹ Stoever, 279.

⁵⁰ Stoever, 6.

⁵¹ Nina Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019); Nina Eidsheim, ‘Marian Anderson and “Sonic Blackness” in American Opera’, *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 641–71.

⁵² Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*, 178.

Discussing the strict vocal aesthetics of opera and the persistent racialization of voice towards Black classically trained singers, Eidsheim uses the term sonic blackness to signal how the resonance of timbral blackness occurs not because of particular type of racialized body but “instead [...] *resonates in the listeners ear*.”⁵³ She observes how sonic blackness is “based on an encultured understanding of race” and that a listeners’ perception of a vocalist is “limited by his or her cultural frame of reference.” And that “an audience enacts the micro-politics of timbre when its perception of a vocalizer is limited to hearing on its own collective listening mind.”⁵⁴ Eidsheim’s concept of sonic blackness is a useful framework to think about the ways in which the Black female voice is heard and implicated in the background even when it is not present.

Throughout *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*, Eidsheim unpacks how acousmatic listening is based on a set of assumptions that imply a listener can ‘know’ the identity of the vocalizer by attending to the phonic and sonic qualities and characteristics of the speakers’ voice. She observes how the “acousmatic situation arises from the assumptions that voice and sound are of an a priori stable nature and that we can identify degrees of fidelity to and divergences from this. This position is grounded in a belief - and truth claims - about the voice as a cue to interiority, essence and unmediated identity.”⁵⁵ Eidsheim outlines how the assumptions made in acousmatic listening and the questions posed from acousmatic situations, such as ‘who is speaking?’, assume that the speakers voice is both “stable and knowable.”⁵⁶ Eidsheim’s argument seeks to unpack these assumptions further and to demonstrate that the acousmatic question, ‘who is speaking?’ is undertaken because we

⁵³ Eidsheim, ‘Marian Anderson and “Sonic Blackness” in American Opera’. Italics original

⁵⁴ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*, 179.

⁵⁵ Eidsheim, 2.

⁵⁶ Eidsheim, 3.

“cannot know the answer to this question” and that the voice is unable to “be unique and yield precise answers.”⁵⁷

Countering Adriana Cavarero’s insistence of the bodily singularity of voice,⁵⁸ Eidsheim argues that the voice is “neither essential nor singular” and as such is “neither knowable nor formulated a priori”⁵⁹. She argues that the voice is not “innate” but rather “cultural” and that the “voice’s source is not the singer”⁶⁰ but the listener. She states how, “in considering the ways in which vocal training is not immune to deep-seated assumptions about a given singer’s essential nature, we can determine that a voice’s character is not based on innate or essential biological or material qualities but that a particular vocal timbre is the result of a body’s enculturation through training.”⁶¹ Shifting voice from the singularity of unique corporeal expression and extending voice to a state of multiplicities emerging via various cultural contexts, Eidsheim’s argument signals the ways in which the construction of the Black female voice as background can be better understood.

Eidsheim’s work on ‘sonic blackness’ and questions around acousmatic vocal sonorities builds on Mendi Obadike’s observation of ‘mythic blackness’ and ‘acousmatic blackness.’ For Obadike, ‘mythic blackness’ contends with how stereotypes have been defined, largely, as a “visual problem surrounding images”⁶² arguing how conversations regarding stereotyped images open up space to consider how sound is stereotyped in similar ways. Working through Franz Fanon, Sander Gilman, and Stuart Hall she demonstrates how stereotypes in relation to race are not limited to the visual, but rather occur or emerge beyond the visual:

⁵⁷ Eidsheim, 3.

⁵⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*, 177.

⁶⁰ Eidsheim, 178.

⁶¹ Eidsheim, *ibid.*

⁶² Mendi Obadike, ‘Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound’ (Duke University, 2005), 100.

It is more than the gaze that fixes a body. It is also the set of details that give context to a particular moment of looking, the ambience. If we miss this point, we miss what eyes miss. That is, we miss whatever work is being done with other senses to indicate black presence in a scene and the sense it makes, especially when there is no visual signifier to reference⁶³

Mendi Obadike works through her discussion regarding stereotype highlighting how stereotype, particularly those associated with racial stereotypes are considered a visual issue. Through her analysis she makes clear how the non-visual is also implicated in stereotyping, at both the level of the senses, but also at the level of discourse. Through an analysis of imaged Black bodies in the film *Song of the South* and the use of white singers singing gospel influenced songs she argues how the signs of race are signified through sound even when the presence of Black voices are absent. Mythic blackness, for Obadike, does not require the “presence of black people to be referenced.”⁶⁴

Obadike’s concept of mythic blackness extends to her writing regarding acousmatic blackness. Where mythic blackness argues how blackness is encountered at the level of the sonic as well as visual, and how stereotypes regarding race are heard as well as seen, where the presence of race can be constructed sonically without the presence of black people in order to be referenced, acousmatic blackness discusses the ways “one could read race through sound differently when one does not see a sound being made (on a recording, over the phone, etc.).”⁶⁵ Through analysing the Hollywood film *Boiler Room* and its hip-hop soundtrack, Obadike argues how racial and gendered sonic stereotypes are used acousmatically acting like a “sonic skin”⁶⁶ throughout the film.

Where Mendi Obadike refers to acousmatic blackness as a way in which stereotypes are encountered and constructed sonically, Eidsheim uses acousmatic blackness to “capture the

⁶³ Obadike, 46.

⁶⁴ Obadike, 14.

⁶⁵ Obadike, 132.

⁶⁶ Obadike, 138.

perceived presence of the black body in a vocal timbre.” However, my argument widens its focus to include the arrangement of vocals and their relationship between back/ing/ground and foreground within song structure, as well as vocables. This is not to say that timbre has nothing to do with the construction of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground. Susan Fast, for example, draws a connection between the use of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground and rock music, arguing how the Black female voice serves as a necessary soulful Other to rocks white masculinity. Rather, my contention is that it is not that the voices are always thought to belong to Black female bodies only because of a perceived or supposed timbre, but also because of the organisation of the back/ing/ground more broadly via physical organisation, vocal placement, the relationship between backing and lead, and also the use of collective and nonsense vocables.

In *Modernity’s Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music*, Roshanak Khesti describes “how fantasies about race and gender are structured within the symbolic” via an “aural imaginary” that “theorizes the imaginary order sonically.”⁶⁷ For Khesti these aural imaginaries are shaped by both “recording techniques and technologies of listening to produce ‘phonographic subjectivities.’”⁶⁸ For Khesti these phonographic subjectivities are in turn informed by the “aural trace” of the listener. Khesti’s work with Kinship records and their use of a psychoanalytic lens point to how the aurality of the imagined listener, in Khesti’s analysis a white female listener, and “her listening capacity” is what “motivates the industry at the level of hardware, sound, and affect design.”⁶⁹ Working through histories of the female World music record collector, Khesti argues how the aurality of these women can be heard in the archives of Kinship records and beyond. Similar, to Stoeber and Eidsheim, Khesti’s work points to the

⁶⁷ Roshanak Khesti, *Modernity’s Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), 50.

⁶⁸ Nabeel Zuberi, ‘Racialising Music’s Past and the Media Archive’, in *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music History and Heritage*, ed. Sarah Baker et al. (Routledge, 2018), 36–45.

⁶⁹ Khesti, *Modernity’s Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music*, 3.

ways in which the phonographic subject is understood and informed by a white aurality and listening ear that projects “aural fantasies” of race and gender that in turn uphold a phallogentric symbolic order.⁷⁰ Part of my argument in chapter three is how the back/ing/ground as Black female voice is in part constructed via a white aurality that continually hears the back/ing/ground as both raced and gendered. I argue that it is not due to an essential timbre or vocality but rather that it is the way this timbre and vocality is heard via an aural imaginary that renders the back/ing/ground as necessary Other within popular music. More than this I argue how through listening to the back/ing/ground we hear not only the constructed Othering of white aurality, but we hear a wider socio-political context within which the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is situated as well as modes of resistance and redress utilised by women who sounded in and from the background. In order to do this it is necessary to decentre white auralities and to consider the back/ing/ground as an alternative genealogy of American popular music during the 1960s.

The relationship between tone, timbre, race, and gender regarding the back/ing/ground is complex. On the one hand the back/ing/ground is constructed in a way to fit a symbolic order that imagines the Black female voice as necessary authentic Other to the lead.⁷¹ The use of the Black female voices as back/ing/ground in American music increased during the 1960s and it is seemingly this use of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground that have persisted to such a degree that we project a mythic blackness onto the back/ing/ground regardless of whether a Black female voice is present.

Performing Blackness in the Background

To think about the ways in which we might consider the back/ing/ground as performing blackness the work of both Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman are key. Moten’s assessment of

⁷⁰ Khesti, *Modernity’s Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music*.

⁷¹ Fast, ‘Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music’.

Blackness is rooted in thinking laid out by Saidiya Hartman in her work *Scenes of Subjection* and as such this is where I would like to begin.

Saidiya Hartman begins *Scenes of Subjection* by laying out her decision not to reproduce the recollection by Frederick Douglas of the beating of his Aunt Hester. Noting Douglas's description of this "terrible spectacle", Hartman chooses to shift her attention away from such explicit scenes of brutality and to reorientate attention "to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian." Through this shift Hartman seeks to address "the diffusion of terror and the violence perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure paternalism, and property."⁷² To do this Hartman focuses on instances of subjection that remain entangled between "the enactment of subjugation and constitution of the subject."

Hartman addresses blackness as being both produced and performed arguing how "performances of blackness are about the spectacle of mastery and the enactment of a willed subjection"⁷³ and argues that "blackness is produced through specific means of making use of the body"⁷⁴. For Hartman blackness is bound to and emerges through the relationship between dominance and subjugation. Discussing performances of popular theatre in relation to the quotidian performances and "spectacle of the slave market"⁷⁵ Hartman discusses how blackness is produced and performed and that these performances of blackness are shaped by the dominance, spectacles of mastery, and the subjugation of the captive body. Hartman offers examples from various scenes, such as the coffle and the trading block, where slaves were required to 'perform' their capacity of enslavement⁷⁶. From having to 'step' or 'strike it up lively' where slaves were forced to sing a song when the coffle departed, headed towards their own trade, and entered the marketplace. Hartman describes how the purpose of such singing

⁷² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 4.

⁷³ Hartman, 58.

⁷⁴ Hartman, 58.

⁷⁵ Hartman, 7.

⁷⁶ Hartman, 37.

by the trader was to deny both the coffle and those whom they are being separated from expressing sorrow. Instead, this striking up of song “becomes a veiled articulation of the sorrow denied the enslaved by the demand for song”⁷⁷. Hartman goes on to describe further scenes and performances where the enslaved were forced to perform acts of gaiety, such as dancing, playing cards, and jumping. These scenes were to ensure the trade of each subject. Slaves were made to appear “cheerful and happy” for them to be sold:

The self-betrayal enacted by stepping it lively and enthusiastically assisting in one’s sale underscores the affiliations of spectacle and sufferance. And, accordingly, fun and frolic become the vehicles of the slave’s self-betrayal and survival. By stepping it up lively [...] the captive was made the agent of his or her dissolution⁷⁸

Hartman also notes how this enforced ‘merriment’ was for the enslaved to appear at “comfort with bondage”⁷⁹ and possess “a natural disposition for servitude”⁸⁰. For Hartman it is these scenes and performances that produce blackness and that blackness with its histories of pain, subjection, and subjugation cannot disentangle from.

Hartman discusses the complex entanglements between pleasure and pain that these performances bespeak and how these performances were inaccurately used as evidence for the enslaved’s indifference or even contentment with such wretched conditions. As Hartman makes clear

What was demanded by the master was simulated by the enslaved; yet the capitulation of the dominated to these demands must be considered a pragmatism rather than a resignation since

⁷⁷ Hartman, 36.

⁷⁸ Hartman, 37.

⁷⁹ Hartman, 37.

⁸⁰ Hartman, 37.

one either complied with the rules governing socially sanctioned behaviour or risked punishment⁸¹

For Hartman blackness is defined in terms of “social relationality rather than identity”⁸² and “incorporates subject normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites, and others, and practices that produce racial difference”⁸³ going on to state that the “performances of blackness are in no way the “possession” of the enslaved” but rather they are “enactments of social struggle and contending articulation of racial meaning.”⁸⁴ Hartman’s work seeks to question and dismantle the “givenness” of race and racial/ist constructs and exposes “the strategies through which it is made to appear as if it has always existed”⁸⁵. These strategies use performance in order to construct and produce race but are made to appear as if they are somehow natural. They are in order to uphold the division and wretched hierarchy between master and captive. This “staging of power and domination”⁸⁶ requires the spectacle of a “willed subjection”⁸⁷ in order to maintain itself.

Blackness, then, through Hartman is weighted with the histories of torture and oppression upon captive black bodies. She notes how the use of the word ‘black’ is “inseparable from the tortured body of the enslaved”⁸⁸ and serves to remind that the “performance of blackness is inseparable from the brute force that brands, rapes, and tears open the flesh in the racial inscription of the body.”⁸⁹ The blackness of the back/ing/ground is too presented as a convention or a ‘givenness’. That the Black female singing voice, as Griffin puts it, can function as an authentication of the Other, that it somehow is evident of an originary voice, a constant

⁸¹ Hartman, 8.

⁸² Hartman, 56.

⁸³ Hartman, 57.

⁸⁴ Hartman, 57.

⁸⁵ Hartman, 57.

⁸⁶ Hartman, 58.

⁸⁷ Hartman, 58.

⁸⁸ Hartman, 58.

⁸⁹ Hartman, 58.

witness. What are the implications of Blackness through Hartman in relation to the back/ing/ground? Following Hartman, if “blackness is produced through specific means of making use of the body”⁹⁰ how is blackness produced through specific uses of voice? If the back/ing/ground is, as described by Susan Fast, sonically marked as Black and female how might this sonic marking relate to blackness? Might we understand the back/ing/ground to be a performance of blackness? How might we understand the Black female voice as back/ing/ground as a scene of subjection? What are the implication of this ‘scene’ when the voice is present yet the body erased, or obscured?

Hartman’s work regarding the quotidian scenes of subjection is echoed and extended in Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Where Hartman moves away from Douglas’s account of the beating of his Aunt Hester, Moten attunes to the sonic and phonic matter that the scene produces. As Moten notes himself, Hartman’s decision not to reproduce Douglas’s account is nevertheless reproduced in the other instances Hartman works through. Noting Hartman’s avoidance of this scene Moten notes how Hartman nevertheless continually returns to the scene. Where Hartman attempts to redact Douglas’s account, Moten folds towards it breaking it down to phonic matter and extending it across latter articulations, improvisatory modes, as well as Douglas’s own recollections of the hearing of field and slave songs written only a few pages following his original recollection. For both Hartman and Moten, Douglas’s primal scene becomes the back/ing/ground to which they both lay out their work. Where Hartman moves away from the scene selecting to foreground other instances and examples, Moten moves towards and from it simultaneously.

At the beginning of *In the Break* Moten asserts how “the history of blackness is a testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.”⁹¹ The resistance enacted by the object is encountered,

⁹⁰ Hartman, 58.

⁹¹ Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

for Moten, via voice, and more specifically what he refers to as phonic materiality. Moten's assessment of the resistance of the object is in part undertaken through an assessment of Frederick Douglass's slave narrative, particularly Douglass's recollection of the beating of his Aunt Hester, and a critique of Marx's determination of the commodity from *Capital* Vol.1.

Moten works both with and against Marx through his insertion of the speaking, or "shrieking commodity"⁹² that is Douglass's Aunt Hester. Moten lays out Marx's assertion that the commodity has no inherent value, and such value only emerges via an external assessment of the commodity via man. To make his point, Moten notes, Marx imagines the commodity speaking. For Marx the possibility of the commodity that speaks is ludicrous and is only made to then be dismissed. For Marx the commodity does not speak, and its value is only ascribed to it via man.⁹³ Yet for Moten, Marx's assessment fails to acknowledge "the historical reality of commodities who spoke – of labourers who were commodities, before, as it were, the abstraction of labour power from their bodies"⁹⁴

In his analysis of Douglass's recollection of the beating of his Aunt Hester, Moten argues how it is through the "irruption of phonic substance" that is Aunt Hester's scream that we encounter the commodity speaking, or more precisely "shrieking." For Moten this "irruption breaks down the distinction between what is intrinsic and what is given by or of the outside."⁹⁵ Aunt Hester's scream is a material and phonic trace of her subjugation but also her resistance. The scream is both the articulation of Aunt Hester's objecthood, but also of her subject-hood. She is both brutally subjugated and made object, but the scream is also a resistance to this. It is a call and response sounding at the same time, an improvisation where both speech and writing occur concurrently.⁹⁶ Echoing Hartman's observation that "the dominant performances

⁹² Moten, 14

⁹³ Dhanveer Brar, 'Blackness, Radicalism, Sound: Black Consciousness and Black Popular Music in the USA (1955 - 1971)' (Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2012).

⁹⁴ Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 6.

⁹⁵ Moten, 14.

⁹⁶ Moten, 21.

of blackness are about the spectacle of mastery and the enactment of a willed subjection,”⁹⁷ Moten’s analysis posits Aunt Hester’s scream as a break in which, through voice, through sound, we hear “where blackness marks simultaneously both the performance of the object and the performance of humanity.”⁹⁸ As noted by Brar “blackness goes to work in this broken relation”⁹⁹ Moten calls the break, and “for those who have been deemed to be black and have claimed the category it constitutes an organisation of communal life around a break, but because it lives in this broken relation, what blackness reproduces is forms of life, communality, culture, performance, politics and thought which do not always register.”¹⁰⁰

Blackness is encountered in the back/ing/ground in the ways in which it is constructed as being indexed across race and gender and the implications of such indexing. As discussed above the sonic marking of the back/ing/ground as Black and female should not be understood as being based on essentialist grounds regarding either voice or the role itself. As this project will argue it is not, as Fast puts it, due to an incidental increase in the use of Black female singers from gospel background within popular music, nor is it, as Warwick posits simply rooted in the work and influence of The Blossoms. Rather as will be argued it is in the way that the Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground is implicated within a relationship between foreground and back/ing/ground and the communities of practice and performance that emerge due to the construction of the Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground. To consider the back/ing/ground as performing blackness, then, is to consider the relationship the role has with popular music practices as they are enacted via studio systems and record labels, as well as the phonic arrangement between back/ing/ground and lead vocal. The blackness of

⁹⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 58.

⁹⁸ Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2.

⁹⁹ Brar, ‘Blackness, Radicalism, Sound: Black Consciousness and Black Popular Music in the USA (1955 - 1971)’, 27.

¹⁰⁰ Brar, 27.

the back/ing/ground emerges via the wider contextual apparatus in which both the role and voice is situated.

Phonic Materiality and Sounding:

During *In the Break* Fred Moten demands an “aurality that disrupts and resists certain formations of identity and interpretation by challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form.”¹⁰¹ For Moten, the phonic matters and is matter and is a “material residue”¹⁰² of the legacies of Black life. For Moten, phonic matter is understood as the tone, pitch, volume of what is uttered. It is not straightforwardly attached to language, but rather to the act of speaking. For Moten “tone and sound [...] transform representation into a synesthetic substitute for vision” behaving as a “potential energy [...] and trace of the particular and powerful force of aurality in the Afro-diasporic political and aesthetic tradition.”¹⁰³

In ‘Tonality of Totality’ Moten’s analysis of voice signals how it is the phonic materiality of voice, the sensual and textural aspects of voice that come to communicate rather than simply, the “communication of language.”¹⁰⁴ Focusing on three lectures encountered in the film *Finally Got the News*, Moten begins the section with the following two sentences: “Three material lectures. Three maternal lectures.”¹⁰⁵ These opening sentences are followed by a lengthy footnote where Moten discusses aural performance in relation to Austin, Derrida, and Cavell. Moten questions what Austin’s use of repeated phrases at the beginning of his own lectures have “to do with the constellation of pitch, sound, and voice?” factors Austin, Moten

¹⁰¹ Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 6.

¹⁰² Moten, 224.

¹⁰³ Moten, 221.

¹⁰⁴ Brar, ‘Blackness, Radicalism, Sound: Black Consciousness and Black Popular Music in the USA (1955 - 1971)’, 178.

¹⁰⁵ Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 211.

points out, finds “particularly disturbing.”¹⁰⁶ Moten begins his footnote discussing the relationship between ordinary language and idiom, pointing out that the “idiomatic mark in speech” acts “as a kind of habitation within ordinary language” concluding how “ordinary language exists only in performance.”¹⁰⁷ Moten takes Austin to task for registering the phonetic and the performance within which the phonetic emerges as trifling pointing out how Austin himself is required to perform “in order to bring off his serious intentions.”¹⁰⁸ Calling upon Derrida, Moten points out how “the serious utterance is always shadowed by an internal other that is its condition of possibility. What is spoken or taken seriously can always be, must always potentially be, spoken or taken otherwise.”¹⁰⁹ This work that Moten undertakes by pointing out the problems of Austin’s reluctance to value the ““merely” phonetic act”¹¹⁰ helps lay the foundation for the ways in which Moten goes onto discuss the phonetic materiality of *Finally Got the News* and how the sonorous and sensuality that is encountered in these utterances matters.

Discussing the voices that are heard in the film it is, as noted by Dhanveer Brar, within the “sonorous activity” of the voice(s) that speak within the film where we encounter “an affirmation of resistance in a narrative of defeat where sound and tone function as elements necessary to any [...] spatial representation.”¹¹¹ For Moten the phonic materiality of voice are heard as “revolutionary tones”¹¹² carrying forth the trace of a “particular and powerful force” of “Afro-diasporic political and aesthetic tradition.”¹¹³ For Moten it is “the lectures internal space and organization” that is its audio-visual nature and “in the internal space and

¹⁰⁶ Moten, 292.

¹⁰⁷ Moten 293

¹⁰⁸ Moten, 294.

¹⁰⁹ Moten, 293

¹¹⁰ Moten, 295.

¹¹¹ Moten, 230.

¹¹² Moten, 230.

¹¹³ Moten, 221.

organization of the lectures medium,” that is the voice, where we encounter the commodity that speaks¹¹⁴.

More than this, Moten points to the asynchronicity between the audio-visual space of the film as marking “the spot of radical intervention”¹¹⁵. This asynchronicity or as Moten describes, ‘arrhythmia’ is found in Moten’s figuration of the “lectures medium” as both material, the commodity that speaks, and maternal.¹¹⁶ Here it is not simply the language which is used but the tonality that generates these words.

In terms of the examples discussed in this project it is the sound of their voices, or the sounds that their voices can produce, their sonorous quality that mark them as desirable. For a group such as The Andantes it is the sonorous quality of their voices both individual and as a group that made them so important to Motown’s output. Used as both back/ing/ground vocalists in a more usual sense, but also as vocal enhancers it was the quality of their voices that were important to Motown in achieving the Motown sound. More than this as will be discussed in chapter five, it is the recognisable phonetic materiality of The Andantes voices that signal instances of resistance and redress regarding their treatment by Berry Gordy Jnr. Similarly, it was the sounds of The Blossoms voices and their ability to sound any style, to flex the sonorous quality of their voices, that enabled them to move through the studio system in a way that benefitted them on a personal level. The sonorous quality of the back/ing/ground is here rendered essential rather than as Austin would have it “merely” phonetic.

In working with the back/ing/ground voice as phonic matter we hear the genealogies of American popular music at an alternative pitch. As phonic matter we hear how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground signals not only the ways in which their phonic substance was

¹¹⁴ Moten 216

¹¹⁵ Moten 216

¹¹⁶ Moten 216

used to create sounds associated with entire genres of music, but also how they used this phonic materiality to address systems of employment that sought to reduce and restrict their labour.

In thinking about the ways in which groups such as The Andantes and The Blossoms used the phonic materiality of their voices as a form of resistance Devonya Havis's work regarding sounding as an oblique pivot is useful.

Following Devonya Havis, 'sounding' describes an "alternative philosophical praxis"¹¹⁷ deriving from Black women's lived experience that 'does' philosophy at an alternative register. Drawing on the stories shared by her father about childhood experiences growing up in Arkansas, Havis not only repeats and extends the question proffered by her father's guardian, Mamma Ola, "Now, how you sound?" to question and interrogate the responsibility of academic philosophical inquiry as a way to "theorize a set of philosophical practices that emerge from black women's lived experiences"¹¹⁸ but to account for the doing of philosophy by Black women. Havis notes that the question would be posed to her father at times when his behaviour or attitude was considered "out of line"¹¹⁹. Havis notes that this question is not simple nor is it strictly associated with the description of a specific activity or wrongdoing. Rather it is a question that permits and allows the subject to orientate their thinking and reflection in a way "to think beyond a particular action"¹²⁰ and to consider the "framework and action from which your actions or choices issues."¹²¹ For Havis this question of personal 'sounding' reminded her father how his "positions and actions were not only personal but also relational, anchoring him within a community."¹²² Havis's analysis of Mamma Ola's question, "Now, how you sound?", makes claim to how this reflection upon 'sounding' allows for

¹¹⁷ Devonya Havis, "Now How You Sound?" Considering a Different Philosophical Practice', *Hypatia* 29, no. 1 (2014): 239.

¹¹⁸ Robin James, *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism and Biopolitics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 75.

¹¹⁹ Havis, "Now How You Sound?" Considering a Different Philosophical Practice', 240.

¹²⁰ Havis, 240.

¹²¹ Havis, 240.

¹²² Havis, 240.

reflection on and towards both the context in which actions or choices have emerged, while being able to become aware of “blind spots”¹²³ that have yet to be considered.

Sounding, also referred to as an ‘oblique pivot’ describes “a particular kind of movement”¹²⁴ in which Black women continually examine “the contexts and relationships opened and foreclosed by ongoing relations of domination”¹²⁵ This movement is akin to what Robin James describes as a “code switch”¹²⁶ whereby black women are able to redirect, “creativ[ely] negotiat[e]”, and “generat[e] possibilities that extend beyond those that have been externally imposed.”¹²⁷ This redirection, as noted by James, is what Havis determines as an ‘oblique pivot’¹²⁸. Where ‘pivot’ refers to a movement that turns or oscillates while connected to a central point, oblique describes how this movement is undertaken in a way where the pivot, the movement, remains hidden in plain sight. ¹²⁹

For Havis “feigned complicity is one strategy used to pivot into new possibilities that have not readily been presented.”¹³⁰ Describing how the possibilities are generated Havis articulates that opposition to oppressive strategies are accounted for via acts of refusal and self-reinvention and that these strategies operate to “contest and disrupt”¹³¹ external impositions. Working with Saidiya Hartman, Havis notes how “genuine compliance reproduces and secures the relations of domination,” but that “simulated compliance manipulates “appearances in order to challenge... relations of [domination] and create a space for action not generally available”¹³². As noted by Robin James feigning complicity in which one appears to conform “opens a space for living and experiencing pleasure and protects that space from policing by hiding in plain

¹²³ Havis, *ibid.*

¹²⁴ Havis, *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism and Biopolitics*, 75.

¹²⁵ James, 76.

¹²⁶ James, 76.

¹²⁷ James, *ibid.*

¹²⁸ Havis, “Now How You Sound?” Considering a Different Philosophical Practice’.

¹²⁹ Havis.

¹³⁰ Havis, 246.

¹³¹ Havis, 244.

¹³² Havis, 246; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.

sight.”¹³³ Working with Tricia Rose, James notes that the space opened via Havis’s tactic of sounding “works “in the red”” in that it is “beyond” the perceptual reach of the dominant narrative. In her work on the studio techniques of rap and hip-hop producers,’ Rose describes ‘working in the red’ as a technique in which producers’ “use machines in ways that have not been intended” and that by “pushing on established boundaries of music engineering, rap producers have developed an art out of recording with sound meters well into the distortion zone.”¹³⁴ Rose’s ‘distortion zone’ echoes McKittrick’s notion of the “ungeographic”¹³⁵ in that it is a space that is deemed not within the realms of the readable, or in this case the audible or what is considered acceptably audible at least. In relation to Havis’s sounding both Rose and McKittrick’s work is useful as it is these space that such sounding occupy. Sounding, then, and the strategy of feigned complicity works ‘in the red’ in that it is produced under the guise of distortion in terms of the message or actions that are being complied with. Rose points out how working in the red is indicative of how rap producers both used and “selected machines that allow for [a] greater range of low frequency resonance.”¹³⁶ The use of such low frequencies has, as Rose describes “forced sound engineers to revise their mixing strategies to accommodate rap’s stylistic priorities.”¹³⁷ ‘Working in the red’ then not only emphasises those resonances that have been “coded out” of the frequency range but demonstrates how working in the red remains a space of creative production and productivity.

The Andantes feign complicity with Motown and Berry Gordy by not explicitly contesting his instruction that the group do not record for any other record label or non-Motown affiliated producer or performer. The group feign complicity by not openly or explicitly refusing Gordy’s instruction. Yet they use the back/ing/ground and the ways in which it has been constructed as

¹³³ James, *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism and Biopolitics*, 77.

¹³⁴ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 75.

¹³⁵ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

¹³⁶ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 75.

¹³⁷ Tricia Rose, 76.

a space of anonymous voices to record for other labels, producers, and performers. If they were known and readily identifiable on for example, label credits, the group would be unable to deny their presence on other non-Motown recordings. Rather the group use the anonymity placed upon them as back/ing/ground at Motown to resist and refuse such conditions. In what I refer to as *sounding elsewhere* The Andantes obliquely pivot away from Gordy's restrictions as to where, when, and for whom they can labour.

Although not restricted in the same ways as The Andantes in terms of working for different record labels, producers and performers, The Blossoms again use the anonymity of the back/ing/ground to obliquely pivot away from the construction of the back/ing/ground as the necessary Black female Other. In *sounding everywhere* The Blossoms use the anonymity of the bac/ing/ground to perform not only for a variety of different labels, producers, and performers but across a variety of musical genres. By tactically shifting vocal style The Blossoms obliquely pivot away from the construction of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist as either uncreative or that the background sounds in a particular way. By *sounding everywhere*, The Blossoms show how the back/ing/ground is not only highly creative but also highly agile. This agility pivots away from the "powerful stillness" of the "mythically rendered black female body"¹³⁸ creating a phonic opacity where the speaking subject cannot be reduced.

In both *sounding elsewhere* and *sounding everywhere* both groups use the construction of the back/ing/ground (as anonymous voices, as unseen, as uncredited) to feign complicity with these conditions while also countering the restrictions these conditions evoke. As will be discussed both groups also used the anonymity of the back/ing/ground group to foster work schedules that allowed for personal and personnel flexibility without risking loss of work or group membership. The oblique pivots made in terms of group membership signal how both

¹³⁸ Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom 1850-1910* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

groups feign complicity with the ways in which the back/ing/ground is constructed to create a space of labour stability, as well as a safe space for emotional expression.

Race and Technology

In the *Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* Louis Chude-Sokei argues how “we have come to know and understand that technology has been long intertwined in how we have deployed and made sense of race, particularly in the case of blacks and Africans in a world made by slavery and colonialism”¹³⁹. He describes how “the language of one is consistently dependant or infected with the thinking of the other.”¹⁴⁰ Through examining the relationships between what he refers to as proto-science fiction literature from the nineteenth century he demonstrates that thinking concerning tensions between human and machine can be mapped onto race.

Chude-Sokei roots his discussion in literature, extending discussions pertaining to twentieth century science fiction to “proto science-fiction” literature from the nineteenth century claiming how discussions pertaining to race and technology taken up by science-fiction but how “before it was named” literature from the nineteenth century “was simultaneously engaged with a growing sense that race would provide the template for how the West frames its relationship with those nonhuman technological transformations”¹⁴¹. By shifting the historical framework Chude-Sokei not only reconnects earlier traditions to later critical reflections upon race and technology such as Afrofuturism, but also how this discussion can be related to “racial formation as well”¹⁴².

To do this Chude-Sokei talks about the role of black music stating that, “black music [...] has always been the primary space of direct black interaction with technology and informatics.

¹³⁹ Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Conneticut: Wesleyan Universtiy Press, 2016), 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7zw866.18>.

¹⁴⁰ Chude-Sokei, 3.

¹⁴¹ Chude-Sokei, 3.

¹⁴² Chude-Sokei, 3.

Musics has been the primary zone where blacks have directly functioned as innovators in technology usage”¹⁴³. Focusing his analysis on Caribbean sound system culture he demonstrates how not only has this music been influential to many subsequent genres and subcultures across the globe, but significantly how sound system cultures “foregrounds technology and specific racial interactions”¹⁴⁴. Chude-Sokei retraces “interactions with sound, race and technology” where nods are made towards significant “technology-obsessed subcultures” heralding from “Kingston, Jamaica, to Detroit, Michigan; from Martinique to Bristol, England, and Cape Town, South Africa”¹⁴⁵. Although the city of Detroit is mentioned the author is not explicit about the musics to which he is specifically referring to. Yet his focus on digital electronic music suggests he might be referring to Detroit techno rather than, say, the Motown label, studio and ‘sound’ that greatly utilised backing groups as phonic technologies. However, by reframing some of Chude-Sokei’s discussion my intention here is to consider how interactions with sound, race and technology intersect with backing vocalists at work before the digital processes preferred by Chude-Sokei. Rather than simply interacting *with* sound, race and technology, backing groups function as a sound that is racialised and utilised *as* technology.

In his analysis Chude-Sokei establishes how “necessary theorizing and politicizing” of technology, “artificial life and computer intelligence”¹⁴⁶ has come from the Africa diaspora and considerations of African enslaved peoples as an “automaton”¹⁴⁷. He describes the characteristic of being automaton as “a creature either less or other to life”¹⁴⁸. My claim here is that the (black) (female) back/ing/ground group is used in ways similar to automata and they have become a key characteristic of both the Motown sound (The Andantes) and *Shindig!* (The

¹⁴³ Chude-Sokei, 5.

¹⁴⁴ Chude-Sokei, 7.

¹⁴⁵ Chude-Sokei, 6.

¹⁴⁶ Chude-Sokei, 8.

¹⁴⁷ Chude-Sokei, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Chude-Sokei, *ibid.*

Blossoms). Chude-Sokei discusses how sound, or the focusing on broader sonic elements of music (as opposed to more musicological concerns such as lyrical association, or rhythmic analysis) is a way to understand the material as a sign of “technical reproduction in which blacks function with some degree of primacy.”¹⁴⁹ My intention here is similar in that rather than focusing on material as music per se the focus is on how the role of the Black female voice as background, through *The Andantes* and *The Blossoms*, is a way to consider how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is a part of this technological reproduction.

Used on almost every recording between the years 1961 and 1970 *The Andantes* were not only a core characteristic of what was to become the ‘sound’ associated with Motown but were also a significant part of the production line that enabled the label to produce and release singles at a high and consistent rate. In this way *The Andantes* become a core part of the economy of Motown in that without their voices the characteristic Motown sound would not be heard on the recording. Moreover, to maintain control of this sound it was necessary the group remained largely out of sight of both Motown audiences and other labels. Knowing the role the group had within Motown would have been a way for other labels to mimic this elusive sound Motown had created. In this way *The Andantes* become confined within the borders of the Motown label yet not seen beyond these borders. Their identity remains hidden and their voices obscured not only by the very status of the back/ing/ground group but by Motown itself. Not only this but their use as a means of enhancing or replacing the vocals of other primary acts further skews their voice from their own bodies.

In *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro Modernity* Alexander Weheliye¹⁵⁰ notes distinctions made between technologies and sound technologies that are, erroneously, considered as not being technologies at all. By considering sound technologies of recording

¹⁴⁹ Chude-Sokei, *ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

and reproduction, such as the Walkman and the phonograph he makes a claim for their Afro-diasporic provenance and notes how the “bifurcation” causing this division “locates black cultural production beyond the pale of what counts as technological in contemporary critical discourse”¹⁵¹. He states:

Recent debates about the “digital divide,” while surely drawing much needed attention to certain politicoeconomic inequities, cannot but reinforce the idea that Afro-diasporic populations are inherently Luddite and therefore situated outside of the bounds of Western modernity. Samuel R Delany, for instance, distinguishes “the white boxes of computer technology” and the black boxes of modern street technology.” The former, particularly in the form of the Internet and the World Wide Web, are deemed central to the techno-vanguard of a continually progressing machine, while the latter – sound technologies for instance – are not regarded as technological at all.¹⁵²

He notes how “most academic considerations of technology” particularly those rooted in cyberculture “remain deaf to the sonic topographies of popular music” and attributes this deafness as being related to what he calls the “general hegemony of vision” permeating Western modernity¹⁵³. Yet as observed by Weheliye popular music offers “fertile” ground regarding the “dissemination and enculturation of digital and analog technologies and has done so at least since the invention of the phonograph at the close of the nineteenth century”¹⁵⁴. This being so, by reframing discussions concerning technologies, popular music and the Black female voice in relation to backing groups we are permitted to understand the role of backing groups via a different lens, or perhaps more accurately, a different ear. The mode of listening that backing groups, particularly those discussed within in this project, invites the ear to attune

¹⁵¹ Weheliye, 2.

¹⁵² Weheliye, 2

¹⁵³ Weheliye, 2.

¹⁵⁴ Weheliye, 3.

to a different frequency. Not simply to attune to the “lower” frequencies outlined by Weheliye but to attune to voices entangled with voices of others, to listen to bodies that have been positioned to the ‘back’ with such effort that they are no longer visible, to listen to voices you do not know are present, an ear that attends to what I call opaque sounds.

Furthermore, Weheliye describes how “pop music also represents the arena in which black subjects have culturally engaged with these technoinformational flows”¹⁵⁵ and although concentrating on the “different modalities of digitalness”¹⁵⁶ that his own reframing provides the task for this project is to reframe yet again onto the analog processes of live performance and the studio during the 1960s in relation to the role of female backing groups as a way to rethink the female Black singing voice as a phonic technology and opaque sound.

When discussing the technological developments of the phonograph and later gramophone it is recognised how these technologies “made it possible to split sound from the sources that (re)produced them, creating differently pitched technological oralities and musicalities in twentieth century black culture.”¹⁵⁷ Both the phonograph and its latter incarnations the gramophone and record player allowed for disembodied voices to float through the homes of the listener. The subject whose voice could be heard could no longer be seen:

In other words, oralities and musicalities were no longer tied to immediate presence of human subjects, a situation that occasions not so much a complete disappearance of the human as much as a resounding through new styles of technological folding¹⁵⁸

Where might we locate the voices of backing groups within this technological fold? As mentioned previously the voices of backing groups can be thought of as being both conditioned

¹⁵⁵ Weheliye, 3.

¹⁵⁶ Weheliye, *ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Weheliye, 7.

¹⁵⁸ Weheliye, 7.

by expectation and invisibility, or as described by Janet Hoffman “heard but not listened to”. They precede the track and are expected to be heard (“And the colored girls go...”), yet they also often remain unseen, embedded within the recording and not beyond it. The space in which they inhabit is a purely sonic one. In order to think about this more clearly it is necessary to move beyond Weheliye’s and Chude-Sokei’s attention to exterior machines such as the phonograph or the sound system but to attend to the sounds themselves. One of the difficulties with this is how to attend to voices who, one, we do not know are there, and two, whose corporeal identity has been re-routed to the bodies of others?

When discussing recordings Weheliye describes how:

When the props disappear, the ghostlike ruminations of the voice stand as the last and only vestiges of the corporeal, sonically folding the body into the voice and vice versa. In the process of this folding, the ear is directed toward the sound process itself, that is, the ways in which a black voice performs and constructs its corporeality¹⁵⁹

However, regarding the voices of groups such as The Andantes and The Blossoms mentioned above, the performance and construction of this corporeality is further troubled. On the one hand the construction of corporeality is denied via the continued invisibility of them as participants of the very sounds that can be heard. Rather their voices become sensations, sensed but not perceived.

In *Further Considerations on Afrofuturism* Kodwo Eshun designates the digital technologies of the 1980s such as “sequencers, samplers, synthesizers, and software applications”¹⁶⁰ as beginning to “scramble the ability to assign identity and thereby racialize music”¹⁶¹. Eshun’s writing focuses on the relationship’s performers have with technologies

¹⁵⁹ Weheliye, 54.

¹⁶⁰ Kodwo Eshun, ‘Further Considerations of Afrofuturism’, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2007): 287–302, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0021>. 296

¹⁶¹ Eshun, *ibid.*

and how this relationship provided the means to explore alienation. When discussing electronic music Eshun states how “cyborg fantasies [...] were used both to alienate themselves from sonic identity and to feel at home in alienation”¹⁶². Yet if we collapse the parameters of this discussion from electronic-based musics and reframe the discussion towards backing groups of the 1960s the themes of alienation and technology remain but are played out in a different key.

If we focus on the studio practices of the Motown label during 1962 and 1969 a core aspect of what was to be known as the ‘Motown sound’ can be attributed to the use of the voices of Marlene Barrow, Louvain Demps, and Jackie Hicks. Barrow, Demps and Hick’s were collectively known as The Andantes.

The Andantes were employed by label owner Berry Gordy Jnr. to record the in-house back/ing/ground vocals for Gordy’s Motown and Motown affiliated labels. Although also regarded part of the girl group genre of the late 1950s and 1960s¹⁶³ the group never released material that positioned them as a primary girl group. Rather, the group were considered and indeed utilized by Gordy and the label as a component of the studio and have said to have featured in approximately twenty thousand recording sessions¹⁶⁴. This staggering contribution makes clear that The Andantes were a core part of the Motown means of production, yet considerations concerning their role have been largely overlooked or within the specific context of the girl group genre of the period. Yet although The Andantes share features with the girl groups of the time they were never permitted to record or perform as such. Instead, the group functioned as invisible bodies whose voices are woven into the very sound that Motown is known for.

¹⁶² Eshun, 296.

¹⁶³ John Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World* (Iola: Krause Publications, 2000).

¹⁶⁴ Andrew Hamilton, ‘The Andantes - Artists Biography’, All Music, 2019.

Rather than the digital technologies mentioned by Eshun the voices of The Andantes interface with both live and analogue technologies of curtains, audio tape, dubbing, stacking and blending. Rather than being at home in their alienation like Eshun's Detroit-based techno producers The Andantes are split between body and voice; their voices permeating each recording and moving through the city of Detroit and beyond. Yet their bodies remain out of sight and their voices embedded and opaque within the sonic density of the recording and the visual spectacle of visible Motown artists.

Berry Gordy Jr.'s narrative of Motown makes clear how the 'sound' for which the label became known was constructed within the studio. Citing the city and its infrastructure as a core inspiration Gordy describes the Motown process as being akin to the production lines of the motor building factories for which the city is so well-known. The Andantes, then, remain a hidden part of this process and their invisibility is cited as being part of the sound itself. By being hidden within the studio the processes of recording remained out of sight to competing labels who may seek to mimic the labels 'sound'. Without The Andantes the sound does not exist yet to maintain control of this 'sound' the group must remain out of sight to a wider public.

Approaching and Attending to the Back/ing/ground:

Having set out the research questions and conceptual framing of this project I would like to set out my approach in attending to the back/ing/ground. As has been stated already there is no distinct history of the back/ing/ground in popular music histories. Rather, the histories of the back/ing/ground is embedded within the histories of other artists, organisations, performances, record labels and producers. As such I have organised my research through listening to selected material, reviewing liner notes, record sleeves and centre labels, interviews, examining fan forums, personal accounts, and video footage of televised performances.

Although rooted in my own record collection the listening material drawn on throughout the project has expanded far beyond my own collection to include digital recordings. Expanding beyond my own collection has been a process rooted in listening and listening deeply. To listen deeply it has been necessary to attune my ears to the voices of both The Andantes and The Blossoms. This process of deep listening, of which I will discuss further later in this chapter, is framed by a listening *for* that attempts to engage with the uncertainty of the presence of the back/ing/ground. As such the thesis is accompanied by a track listing that engages the reader with a selection of listening material. The tracks provided are by no means exhaustive, rather they simply seek to offer potential aural coordinates for the back/ing/ground as it relates to this project.

In 2020 I was fortunate enough to speak with Andantes member Louvain Demps over the telephone. Over the course of three conversations Louvain has been kind enough to share her experiences of performing in the Andantes with me, reflecting on specific recordings as well as rare performances.

Fan forums have been a useful way to engage with current debates regarding the ways in which the back/ing/ground is valued and considered. Many of these debates and discussions

highlight the ways in which the back/ing/ground is regarded, as well as providing specific responses to particular recordings.

As well as listening material I also cite the absence of the back/ing/ground on liner notes and centre labels. The absence of accreditation is considered here a significant aspect of the back/ing/ground signalling that it is a largely aural archive rooted in listening rather than visual.

The following sections seek to expand upon some of these points offering a more extensive consideration as to the approaches undertaken. It moves from the role of listening and aurality offering a mode of listening rooted in deep listening practices, approaching the back/ing/ground as acousmatic sonorities, and finally a discussion as to the back/ing/ground as aural archive and the modelling of a listening *for*.

Listening and Attunement:

To think about the back/ing/ground, requires us to listen to it and as mentioned earlier, listen for it. Listening for the back/ing/ground is to engage with the back/ing/ground in a manner that is in opposition to how the back/ing/ground has been made to function. The back/ing/ground is meant to remain as such, behind or beyond what is visible and identifiable in the foreground, as well as a phonic support within the song itself. Those voices that sing in, of and from the back/ing/ground are not considered to function in the same way the vocal of the lead singer does. The voices in the back/ing/ground are thought to remain there, beyond the focus of the foreground and the lead. But what if we do listen to the back/ing/ground and listen to it not always in relation to the foreground but independent of its relationship to the lead? What if we choose not to simply hear the back/ing/ground, but to listen to the back/ing/ground? And what mode of listening might the back/ing/ground demand of us?

Within sound studies listening is a subject of study that questions and proposes practices of listening that “can operate to reveal a parallel reality – one that lies below, beyond, behind, or

inside that which is immediately accessible.”¹⁶⁵ What parallel realities exist when we listen to the back/ing/ground? As a practice listening requires us to give our attention towards something that we might not readily identify or determine. Listening is suggestive of an act, where hearing implies merely the detection of sound¹⁶⁶. When listening we are choosing to attend to something. This ‘attending to’ requires us to symbolically move or direct our attention towards that which we are listening to.

My experience of listening to groups such as The Andantes and The Blossoms has been to work with the depth in which their voices have been embedded into a recording. It requires a listening closely and deeply to those voices that might be heard. This embeddedness both describes the quantity of recordings in which they feature and the sounding of their voices across genres. But it also describes the ways in which their voices were used and mixed on recordings. For example, used as vocal enhancements to refine or boost the vocals of others, The Andantes voices are often embedded deep into recordings, enveloping the voices of others to produce the sound that label owner Berry Gordy desired. The Andantes are also used as replacements for group members who were unable to record due to touring schedules, or in-group issues. For example, The Andantes were at times used to provide the back/ing/ground vocals for recordings by The Supremes. A role that increased due to in-group and label conflict between Diana Ross, Florence Ballard, and Berry Gordy. On recordings such as “Love Child” it is The Andantes vocals serving as ‘The Supremes’. To listen to the back/ing/ground, then, we must attune our ears to the back/ing/ground and listen into the depth in which the voices sound.

In *Deep Listening: A Composers Sound Practice* composer and musician Pauline Oliveros describes how the word ‘deep’ is related to “complexity and boundaries, or edges beyond

¹⁶⁵ Angus Carlyle, *On Listening*, ed. Angus Carlyle and Cathy Lane (Devon: Uniform Books, 2013), 9.

¹⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, ‘Listening’, in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

ordinary or habitual understandings – i.e. “the subject is too deep for me” or “she is a deep one”. A subject that is “too deep” surpasses one’s present understanding or has too many unknown parts to grasp easily.”¹⁶⁷ The archive of the back/ing/ground is a deep one. The individual archives of The Andantes and The Blossoms are deep. As previously stated, the boundaries of both archives remain unclear where it is difficult to determinedly outline the exact number of recordings on which they feature, yet it is through listening that their archives can begin to be understood. Whilst speaking with Andantes member Louvain Demps via telephone interviews and recording her communication within online fan forums it remains unclear yet also exciting to discover more and more recordings within which The Andantes have featured. Within online fan forums such as The Andantes fan page on Facebook Louvain Demps features frequently often requested by fans to confirm the groups presence on endless recordings. Confirmation is often sought by uploading a clip of the recording and asking Louvain to listen and confirm whether the group is featured. The process of providing a recording and asking a group member to confirm whether it is their voices that can be heard speaks to the role of listening when attuning to the back/ing/ground. In this case group member Louvain Demps is being asked to attune to her own voice and make the confirmation. Listing the title of recording or track is not enough, it must be listened to in order to know the group, and in this case Louvain Demps, own voice is present.

To conceptualize the archive of the back/ing/ground, then, we must consider it a deep archive, both complex and boundless. To consider the boundlessness of the back/ing/ground is to acknowledge the vast and unfolding ways in which the voice as, in, and of the back/ing/ground has been used. Although as I argue in this project the construction of the back/ing/ground as Black, and female can be thought to have crystalized during the American

¹⁶⁷ Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composers Sound Practice* (New York, Lincoln, and Shanghai: iUniverse inc, 2005), 14.

popular music of the 1960s the role of the back/ing/ground as a collection of a group of voices responding to the voice of another exists far beyond this limited period and genre.

The archive of The Andantes and The Blossoms are incomplete. Used as session vocalists neither group always knew on what recordings their voices might be used. As such their archive is fragmented. At times their voices only sound on certain parts of a song or are mixed with the voices of others. Other times they have been used to replace the vocals of known figures leading to confusion, and debate as to a determinable archive. The fragmentary nature of the background is echoed throughout each chapter where rather than attempting to define an archive I offer fragments; moments of articulation where their voices sound only to seemingly disappear. To write in this way is challenging as my thinking has been tempted to frame and point towards something definite. Yet as I spent more time with the material it became clear that I could only write about the back/ing/ground in a fragmentary way; as upon getting close to that which is situated in the back/ing/ground, the background inherently moves beyond you. Always slightly out of reach. Yet this project attempts to offer moments where we might encounter the background only for the background to move beyond our proximity to it.

In attending to the back/ing/ground through deep listening, the voices of The Andantes and The Blossoms become a constellation of vocalisations that sound beyond the foreground signalling an alternative terrain of pop muso-cultural production. In attending to these voices and the ways in which they both emanate from the studio as well as through the studio system we are able to hear the back/ing/ground not as simply 'behind' or 'backing up' the lead, but as both productive and agile.

To think about the back/ing/ground it is necessary to unpack the ways in which it has been constructed and how the background is problematically indexed across race and gender. By doing so not only may we begin to understand the back/ing/ground as a construct but also understand how it is a space of more complexity than it is perhaps recognised at present. Within

musicological studies there exists little writing regarding the role of the background singer or backing group. This lack of attention echoes the ways in which the back/ing/ground is made to function as something that slips past our attention, that it is to follow Evette Benton again, something that we merely hear yet are not meant to listen to. In order, then, to consider and attend to the background it is necessary to approach the back/ing/ground in a way that observes its problematic construction and to listen gently to the ways in which it has been a complex and dynamic space for those whose voices have occupied it. I am aware of the problem I pose within my own project and would like to take a moment to try and address this.

As a British white woman, I am writing about the work of Black women. My intention here is not to crash into the background, search it out making myself the foreground. I am aware that my relation and proximity to the back/ing/ground puts it at risk. It is not my intention to forcefully bring the back/ing/ground to the fore either, but rather to listen to the back/ing/ground as it exists in, of, and from this space and position.

My own listening ear poses a problem as it is an ear situated in a white Anglo-context reaching out to a context that it does not, nor should it belong to. My experience of the back/ing/ground is not the same, and I acknowledge that the back/ing/ground shifts upon my entry into it. It needs to move beyond me to maintain itself. This I acknowledge. To listen and to use sound as a way to theorize it is important to use models of thought that do not seek to uphold the oppressive systems within which the background has been constructed. To do this I work with the thinking laid out within Black studies from authors such as Alexander Weheliye that observe those spaces that are thought to exist beyond or below oppressive models.

When listening to the back/ing/ground there is a necessary process of attunement. As the back/ing/ground is made to perpetually exist in a state of being “heard yet not listened to” it is necessary to consider practices of close and deep listening as a way to attune our ears to these voices. Following Tina M. Campt’s attention to the quiet and quotidian sounds in photography

the back/ing/ground also commands “a different kind of attention and a different kind of listening.”¹⁶⁸ Although the back/ing/ground has been constructed and framed to be under-heard what might we encounter when we listen attentively to the background? How does our understanding of it change when we listen attentively to it? And what frequency does the back/ing/ground register? To consider these questions I draw on the work of Paul Gilroy’s ‘lower frequencies’, Alexander Weheliye and phonographies, Tina M. Camppt’s quiet listening, Tricia Rose’s ‘in the red’, and Devonya Havis’s ‘oblique pivot’ and Robin James’s work on bandwidth compression to think about how the back/ing/ground also exists as a frequency that is ‘coded out’¹⁶⁹ of popular music histories.

To consider the back/ing/ground as or at a lower frequency is to acknowledge how it exists and sounds in a way that is meant to be only ever on the edge of our attention. Returning to Pauline Oliveros’s work with the practice of deep listening we might consider the back/ing/ground as not simply existing at a lower frequency, but also as a deep frequency. I am interested in listening to this deep frequency that the back/ing/ground produces and occupies. Considered a deep frequency the Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground counters its construction as mere support and instead is considered deep, complex, unknowable. However, the back/ing/ground might be considered a doubled space in that it is used or constructed to support the foreground but also is a space of its own where moments of refusal, resistance, production, and movement occur. In these ways the back/ing/ground is considered to exist within these lower frequencies where moments of resistance and refusal occur, as Gilroy observes under “the very nose of the overseers”¹⁷⁰. The back/ing/ground is a deep frequency, not in that it exists as an infra or ultra-sonic sound. But rather that it is un-

¹⁶⁸ Tina M. Camppt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 24.

¹⁶⁹ Robin James, ‘Sonic Cyberfeminisms, Perceptual Coding and Phonographic Compression’, *Feminist Review*, no. 127 (2021): 20–34.

¹⁷⁰ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 37.

heard and made to exist on the edge and around attention. In this way the word deep and low, here, do not necessarily relate to volume in relation to loudness and quietness. But rather that it is made to exist beyond, behind and around the sonics of that which is posited as lead, and thus foreground. Even when voluminous – as in Merry Claytons role in the Rolling Stones “Gimme Shelter,” or the unnamed back/ing/ground vocals in Lou Reed’s “Walk on the Wild Side,” the frequency of the back/ing/ground is made to exist beyond and behind even if only symbolically. The deep frequency of the back/ing/ground speaks to voices that are heard yet never attended to.

In terms of song structure, the back/ing/ground often carries the chorus, it is at times echoic, often moving with the narrative of the song, ultimately accompanying the lead vocalist who occupies the foreground. Even when contradicting the lead vocalist, the back/ing/ground moves along with the narrative of the song, rarely considered to move away from the internal logic produced by the lead or the overarching framework of the song as a whole. In this way the back/ing/ground is rarely considered independent but rather dependent upon the foreground. But what if we listen to the back/ing/ground as dependant from the foreground? What if we give space to the back/ing/ground and attune to what can be heard in this space? In echoic repetitions we may here refusal, in attuning to these voices we may begin to hear them outside of the studios they are most associated. In these instances, we become aware of how the back/ing/ground moves. How might we consider these movements? Necessity? Resistance? The ever presence of the back/ing/ground may suggest an independence beyond a relationship with the lead/foreground. We hear voices buried beneath the voices of others, enveloping them in their own voice to assure a certain sound. As we attune to these voices, we begin to hear them across recordings, sounding from recordings we may not have realised, we begin to understand that back/ing/ground a movable, and unfixed. A space that can move and emerge in different ways and across different sonic spaces. As we attune to these voices, our ears begin

to listen to them in places we may not had realised or expected. Although in this way they remain invisible, our ears attune to them, like picking up on a frequency we didn't know was previously there. Like an ever-moving radio frequency that requires a constant tuning of the dial, the back/ing/ground too requires constant attunement. It is a practice of listening that stays within an active mode. It is not simply attuning the lower but moving around the depths and breadth of these sonic spaces.

I would also like to extend Tricia Rose's use of working 'in the red' to the back/ing/ground. Where Tricia Rose discusses rap producers as working beyond the limits of so-called accepted production methods, she talks of how machines such as samplers are used "not in the ways they were intended" in order to "push the boundaries of music engineering". Working 'in the red' refers to recording meters that depict a red section to show engineers when a sound or frequency has reached beyond the accepted parameters. By working 'in the red' rap producers explore those spaces that exists beyond the limits of accepted (white) aesthetic values. Rose speaks to how rap producers were met with refusal from studio engineers when wanting to work with sounds and frequencies that reached beyond these accepted boundaries.¹⁷¹ To work 'in the red' then becomes a space that exists beyond these limits and boundaries. The back/ing/ground can be thought to exist both within and beyond boundaries. Equally Alexander Weheliye's conception of phonographies is used to attend to those sounds that not only occupy the lower frequencies but those sounds, and in this case voices, that are often discarded overlooked and underheard.

Acousmatic Sonorities:

The construction of the back/ing/ground often renders the back/ing/ground voice as an unseen sound. The way that unseen sound and particularly voices have been written about sits largely

¹⁷¹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 74.

within the realms of acousmatics¹⁷². Acousmatic sound refers to a sound of which its source cannot be seen. It is rooted within the narrative of Greek thinker Pythagoras who spoke to his disciples from behind a veil.

Composer Pierre Schaeffer along with film theorist Michel Chion emphasise how acousmatic sounds afford a particular mode of listening referred to as “pure listening”¹⁷³ or “reduced listening.”¹⁷⁴ However, this mode of listening does not seem to take place when considering the back/ing/ground voice. Rather, as noted by Evette Benton, the back/ing/ground voice remains only hear yet not listened to.¹⁷⁵ Schaeffer and Chion’s description of acousmatic sounds emphasizes the separation of sound from source is “in order to orient attention toward aesthetically appreciated sonic effects alone”¹⁷⁶. Brian Kane, however, observes how there remain cases “where such sounds are neither heard primarily for their aesthetic objects, nor capable of being made intelligible in aesthetic terms.”¹⁷⁷ He outlines how the acousmatic experience as a mode of reduced or pure listening does not take into account or address the “central role” acousmatic sounds have played within the “production and performance of music” as well as Mendi Obadike’s acousmatic blackness as previously mentioned.¹⁷⁸. Instead, Kane invites us to listen anew:

As an alternative to the aesthetic approach to acousmatic sound, I take the position that acousmatic listening is a shared, intersubjective practice of attending to musical and non-

¹⁷² Nina, Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*, (Durham and London: Dukes University Press, 2019) Brandon Labelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2018); Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199347841.001.0001>; Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More, A Voice and Nothing More* (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7137.001.0001>; Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Pierre Schaeffer, “Acousmatics,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner (New York and London: Continuum, 2005).

¹⁷³ Schaeffer, ‘Acousmatics’.

¹⁷⁴ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*.

¹⁷⁵ Hoffman, “Backing Up Is Hard to Do” *The Village Voice* March 18, 1986’.

¹⁷⁶ Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*, 6.

¹⁷⁷ Kane, *ibid*.

¹⁷⁸ Kane, *ibid*.

musical sounds, a way of listening to the soundscape that is cultivated by when the source of sounds is beyond the horizon of visibility, uncertain, underdetermined, bracketed, or wilfully and imaginatively suspended. The term “acousmatic listening” should be understood as a rubric intended to capture a set of historically situated strategies and techniques for listening to sounds unseen¹⁷⁹

Rather than attempting to make clear distinctions that attempt to categorise sounds as either acousmatic or not Kane proffers the term ‘acousmaticity’ to open up an understanding of how we might consider acousmatic sound and acousmatic experiences. For Kane acousmaticity becomes “a judgement of the listener” rather than any “intrinsic quality of the sound itself.”¹⁸⁰

There is a level of acousmaticity experienced when attending to the back/ing/ground in that are often experienced acousmatically yet it differs from Kane’s formulation. Rather than simply being sounds, or specifically voices, whose sources cannot be seen their voices are also often obscured due to their blending or entanglement with the voices of others. Moreover, attempts made by the listener “to use the knowledge he or she has garnered from fellow senses to make sense of his or her auditory experience”¹⁸¹ is problematized by the conditions that the back/ing/ground group has been made to exist within, an expectation, an inevitability, and a technology. Furthermore, even when we know the means of production of how these voices have become acousmatic it remains difficult to adequately reroute their voices back to their bodies as they have been severed from their source and distributed onto other forms be it bodies, recordings, performances. Not only this but the ways in which the back/ing/ground group/vocalist has been constructed and indexed across race and gender to some extent renders their acousmaticity already to some degree, to borrow from Michel Chion, de-

¹⁷⁹ Kane, 7.

¹⁸⁰ Kane, 225.

¹⁸¹ Kane, 224.

acousmaticized¹⁸² in that, to return to Mendi Obadike, a constructed “mythic blackness” of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist persists regardless of the actual presence of Black women.¹⁸³

In *The Voice in Cinema* Michel Chion coins the neologism ‘acousmètre’ to refer to “when the acousmatic presence is a voice” and this voice cannot be connected to a face.¹⁸⁴ Chion leaves the definition of acousmètre open allowing the term to describe, “[a] person you talk to on the phone, whom you’ve never seen”¹⁸⁵ and a voice whose origin may slip in and out of the visual field. By leaving the definition ajar Chion allows potential subdivisions and, although a tendency he seeks to avoid, he does outline at least five (complete, visualised, radio, filmic, and theatre). Chion discusses how the power of the acousmètre relies on the potential of revelation, and the tension between the visible and the invisible and the possibility of “de-acousmatization” noting how “everything hangs on whether or not the acousmètre has been seen” and that “the not- yet-seen voice [...] possesses a sort of virginity, derived from the simple fact that the body that’s supposed to emit it has not yet been inscribed in the visual field. Its *de-acousmatization*, which results from finally showing the person speaking, is always like a de-flowering. For at that point the voice loses its virginal-acousmatic powers and re-enters the realm of human beings.”¹⁸⁶ However, the acousmaticity back/ing/ground groups such as The Andantes inhabit does not permit this same process of de-acousmatization where the resolution of a voice without a body is made when the voice is returned to the body form which it emitted. According to Chion the acousmatic of cinema is based on the principle that at “any moment” a face or body “might appear”. Yet this is not the case here. Rather, the making acousmatic of groups such as The Andantes is based on the principle that they will never appear. Furthermore, when they do ‘appear’ the release of deacousmatization expressed by

¹⁸² Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*.

¹⁸³ Obadike, ‘Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound’.

¹⁸⁴ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 21.

¹⁸⁵ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*.

¹⁸⁶ Chion, 23.

Chion does not occur, or at least does not occur in the same way. Chion's formulation that the "not-yet-seen" be understood as possessing a "sort of virginity" due to being situated outside of the visual field supposes that entering the visual field not only "loses its virginal powers" but "re-enters the realm of human beings."¹⁸⁷ Chion's metaphor not only clumsily frames the relationship between the 'not-yet-seen' and the visible but suggests that when entering the visual field it is no longer possible to return to this 'virginal' mode. Chion's notion suggests that once in the visual field it is impossible to return to the unseen in the same way. Framing the visual field as the "realm of human-beings" suggests that to be outside of this realm is to be non-human.

For Chion the acousmètre is all-seeing and able to orbit the filmic scene from all temporal perspectives. However, the all-seeing acousmètre is not the case regarding the acousmatic condition of the back/ing/ground. Rather than all-seeing, the acousmatic condition of the back/in/ground is that it is not all-seeing. For example, when undertaking recording session where several tracks would be recorded during one session both The Andantes and The Blossoms often did not know the recordings upon which their vocals might feature.

Returning to Fred Moten. When discussing the phonic materiality found in *Finally Got the News* Moten points to the asynchronicity between the audio-visual space of the film as marking "the spot of radical intervention". This asynchronicity or "arrhythmia" is found in Moten's figuration of the "lectures medium" as both material and maternal as well as the acousmatic condition of the voices we encounter. For Moten, the acousmatic voice of subjects encountered in the film go against the grain of Chion's all-seeing acousmètre in that it is not all-seeing. The acousmatic condition of the back/ing/ground, then, also goes against the grain of Chion's analysis in that it is not all-seeing.¹⁸⁸ Not only this but with groups such as The Andantes and their use as vocal supplements to enhance the vocal tracks of other primary acts means that

¹⁸⁷ Chion, 23.

¹⁸⁸ Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*.

attuning to their acousmatic sonorities demands a different kind of listening. A listening *for* rather than a listening *to*.

In *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* Brandon Labelle uses the concept of the acousmatic to address thinking on the disappeared and the invisible¹⁸⁹. Part of Labelle's project is to explore how "the unseen quality of sound is mobilized to consider how invisibility may be utilized as the basis for a set of emancipatory practices"¹⁹⁰ and to question what kind of "formations of subjectivity and social empowerment might the disappeared [...], or the hidden take?"¹⁹¹. For Labelle invisibility provides recourse to reconditioning "the space of appearance by introducing a phantasmic element (*whose voice is that I hear?*), while providing a means or vocabulary of agency by enabling one to skirt the logic of visual capture"¹⁹².

Similar to Kane, Labelle's argument relies on an understanding of acousmatic sounds as being clearly audible. Neither discussion focuses on sounds that are not only acousmatic but are not always intended to be listened to but merely heard. However, Labelle's emphasis on how invisibility "may extend precisely what or who counts, within the space of appearance"¹⁹³ and his observation that regarding acousmatic sound there is "no particular body or space to which the acousmatic sonic object is contextually bound"¹⁹⁴ but rather "it circulates to incite a sonic imaginary – a form of listening which accentuates sound's capacity to extend away from bodies and things, and to request from use another view onto the worlds, one imbued with ambiguity"¹⁹⁵ thus providing useful insight into how we might listen to the invisibility of the back/ing/ground.

¹⁸⁹ Labelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*.

¹⁹⁰ Labelle, 17.

¹⁹¹ Labelle, *ibid.*

¹⁹² Labelle, *ibid.*

¹⁹³ Labelle, 33.

¹⁹⁴ Labelle, *ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Labelle, *ibid.*

By understanding the potential that the sonic, the acousmatic and invisibility provide in relation to challenging the politics of visibility, which have kept groups such as The Andantes and The Blossoms largely hidden from the historical and cultural narrative of which they are part of, Labelle provides potential strategies to rethink the insistent correlation between visibility and existence and invisibility and non-existence. As he states:

[P]ractices of acousmatic listening and invisibilities [...] give challenge to the often insistent ways in which political acts and public life are understood by way of appearance. Such an insistence amounts to an obligation to be seen which places the possibilities of action and agency, forms of practice and thinking, firmly within a rubric of exposure and illumination – that whatever does not appear does not exist¹⁹⁶

For Labelle visibility is considered a limit to be confronted and to do so requires “additional thinking and acting, gestures that, in aligning themselves with the blindspots and the occluded, with the blacked-out and the underground, may nurture practices and positions of critical attention and creative attunement.”¹⁹⁷ As a way of enacting this creative attunement Labelle notes how another form of listening is demanded, “a strained, horizontal listening by which to collaborate with the unseen.”¹⁹⁸ For Labelle, a listening that collaborates with the unseen and the acousmatic asks us “to listen again to the absence that refuses to be silenced and yet which cannot truly resound in the open.”¹⁹⁹ He proffers it is via the acousmatic that we encounter a reorientation of the senses where one is able to “contend with the silences of the withdrawn,”²⁰⁰ positing how such a status of being provides not only new emergent forms of resistance, but also are evidence of an “unlikely publics” that “wield a social and political force by shadowing

¹⁹⁶ Labelle, 54.

¹⁹⁷ Labelle, 54.

¹⁹⁸ Labelle, 57

¹⁹⁹ Labelle

²⁰⁰ Labelle, 43.

the open space with obscure meanings [...] producing and anguished and persistent discourse that captures the lived experience of oppression.”²⁰¹ For Labelle, “listening into the dark” requires a process of reading “into the black” whereby “the act of such reading is not so much based on a forensic analysis aimed at a reconstruction of truth, but rather a poetical transformation, one that relocates the missing into a logic defined by absence and the phantasmic, and one that may shift analysis toward speculation, illumination, toward compounded obscurity.”²⁰² Labelle’s project articulates the necessity for the disappeared, the withdrawn, and the invisible to linger “upon the threshold of communication”²⁰³ in such a way that they only “come to appear”²⁰⁴ by the fact that they remain obscured, and out of sight. In this way the unseen remains out of reach from the politics of visibility, yet demand our attention, and that we attend to them in a way that does not disrupt their invisibility.

Approaching the Archive:

When considering the back/ing/ground groups The Andantes and The Blossoms it is important to acknowledge that the ways in which their voices are encountered throughout this project is via vinyl recordings, digital recordings, interviews, fan forum discussions, and recorded television performances.

Regarding vinyl recordings, it is important to point out how their voices are rarely identified on centre labels. Rather, the physical vinyl object must be listened to discover whether their voices are present. Not only this, but both groups often had their group moniker changed to a different name, if written at all. When dealing with physical artefacts such as vinyl recordings we might look to the physical traits of the object such as the sleeve, centre-label, liner notes, and matrix numbers etched into the run out groove as well as pressing plant details to

²⁰¹ Labelle, 57.

²⁰² Labelle, 45.

²⁰³ Labelle, 45.

²⁰⁴ Labelle, 45.

understand “the history of the musical material and the history of the physical disc’s creation.”²⁰⁵ Yet as with the cases discussed in this project they are largely absent or unidentifiable from these elements. The absence of stable accreditation means that they must be encountered through listening, registering as a distinctly aural archive. Yet even as an aural archive their identity remains unstable.

In a general sense an archive can be understood as “a place or collection containing records, documents, or other materials of historical interest, for public consultation.”²⁰⁶ In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida unpacks the word archive from its Greek etymology noting how the word ‘archive’ comes from the Greek work ‘arkhē’ meaning, as Derrida explains, commencement and commandment²⁰⁷. Derrida explains how ‘arkhē’ “coordinates two principles in one”²⁰⁸. First, “the principle according to nature or history, there where things commence -physical, historical, or ontological principle.”²⁰⁹ And second “the principle according to the law, there where men and gods command, there where authority, social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given – nomologic.”²¹⁰ For Derrida the etymology of the word archive is significant as it ties it with both a particular moment of occurrence, but also with “government, power, and law.”²¹¹

Derrida also relates the word archive to the Greek word ‘arkheion’ which he describes as, “initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded.”²¹² Derrida’s referencing to arkheion indicates how not only does the archive have a place and is locatable within this place and space, but also that those, named by

²⁰⁵ Liam Maloney and John Schofield, ‘Records as Records: Excavating the DJ’s Sonic Archive’, *Archives and Records: The Journal of Archives and Records Association* 42, no. 2 (2021): 1–24.

²⁰⁶ Julie Bacon, ‘Archive, Archive, Archive!’, *Circa*, no. 119 (2007): 50–59.

²⁰⁷ Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, ‘Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression’, *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9.

²⁰⁸ Derrida and Prenowitz, 9.

²⁰⁹ Derrida and Prenowitz, 9.

²¹⁰ Derrida and Prenowitz, 9.

²¹¹ Nasrullah Mambrol, ‘Analysis of Derrida’s Archive Fever’, *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2018, <https://literariness.org/2018/02/19/analysis-of-derridas-archive-fever/>.

²¹² Derrida and Prenowitz, 9.

Derrida as ‘archons,’ that organise and order the contents of what becomes the archive are interconnected to governance, law, and political power. Derrida goes on to describe how the not only do the archons function as guardians of the archive’s documents who “not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate.”²¹³ Derrida’s reference to substrate indicates how the relationship between the arkheion and archons is one which is rooted in hidden poetic and political ambitions²¹⁴. Derrida points out how the archons possess “the power to interpret the archives”²¹⁵ meaning that the contents of the archive are never neutral but invested with a kind of spectral residue of those that organise the archival content. As Bacon points out “archives are invested with a spirit, a form of ordering is imposed once material is brought together, and meaning and use value constructed through it”²¹⁶

Seeing as both the archives of The Andantes and The Blossoms are unstable due to their identities being absent or obscured from the recordings on which they feature, the archive of the back/ing/ground must be considered differently. The archives of both groups are hidden within other archives where their voices, their phonic labor is encountered via the ear. The archive of The Andantes is not only rooted within the archives of Motown, but other local recording companies. When following their voices and hearing them on recordings outside of Motown the archives of Motown are collapsed and reconfigured. Similarly, when following the voices of The Blossoms and encountering their voices on numerous recordings with various labels, as well as television performances, the notion of the archive as stable, localisable, and accessible must be rethought. The back/ing/ground forces us to rethink the archive as neither stable nor easily accessible, rather the archive of the back/ing/ground is a fragmented network that can only be encountered through listening for those voices sounding in, of, and from the back/ing/ground.

²¹³ Derrida and Prenowitz, 9.

²¹⁴ Bacon, ‘Archive, Archive, Archive!’

²¹⁵ Derrida and Prenowitz, 9.

²¹⁶ Bacon.

The absence of visible accreditation on centre labels renders the back/ing/ground as invisible. Their voices sound, yet their identities remain anonymous. They are both present and absent at the same time, heard yet unseen and invisible. How then might we attend to these archives that have been obscured and made invisible?

In *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, Daphne A. Brooks considers “Black women musicians’ absence, disappearance and invisibility in the cultural imaginary”²¹⁷ as an archival loss, noting how the marginalization of “African American women’s role in popular music history” has resulted “in a grossly skewed understanding of their place at the centre of modern music innovation.”²¹⁸ Brooks project points to how histories of Black women’s musicianship have been ultimately obscured, misread, and rendered on the whole of lesser significance noting this tendency as “nothing short of a crisis in our collective memory.”²¹⁹

Brooks’s work points to the different ways “Black women have labored in and through sonic culture, from its margins to its white-hot center”²²⁰ but also to the ways in which this work, this labor of cultural production, have been rendered invisible.

For Brooks the archive of Black women’s musicianship is not so much located as or at a precise point, but rather that it exists and is encountered in different ways. Brooks opens the archive to not only include such documentation “preserved by institutional powerbrokers”²²¹ such as the archives of record labels, libraries, and universities, but to also include personal record collections, belongings, writing, and ephemera as significant archival material. Brooks also signals the ways in which Black women artists are considered “as archives”²²², noting the

²¹⁷ Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 48.

²¹⁸ Daphne A. Brooks, 5.

²¹⁹ Daphne A. Brooks, 5.

²²⁰ Daphne A. Brooks, 5.

²²¹ Daphne A. Brooks, 5.

²²² Daphne A. Brooks, 4.

“crucial role”²²³ they have played “as the innovators of performances and recordings that stood in for and as the memory of a people.”²²⁴ In Brooks’ work the archive not only becomes unfixed, and expanded, to include that and those which have been left outside of it, but also it disrupts what has been considered the archive previously through attending to those “absences, blind spots, and silences”²²⁵ that have been ignored.

It is important to note that Brooks’s work is not merely concerned with discovering and making visible those that have been forgotten, but also about a returning to existing archives to attend to that which has been rendered silent. This emphasis on returning is echoed in the work of Ashely Farmer who argues that through “foregrounding and interrogating conspicuous archival absences [...] can help us develop biographies and collective studies that move us closer to “fully legible” histories of the twentieth century.”²²⁶ Farmer outlines and describes approaches to working with and attending to archives by various Black women’s history scholars. Farmer’s summaries highlights how a lack of source material “is no longer an adequate justification to marginalize black women—or race and gender analyses—in historical accounts,”²²⁷ but rather signals both the inherent violence, power structures and biases that have constructed the archive to begin with and the need for methodological adjustment “in order to better account for the power imbalances embedded in document collection.”²²⁸ Echoing Brooks, Farmer argues for a resistance to simply searching “for more evidence,”²²⁹ but argues how the lack of evidentiary documents signals something in and of itself. By attending to the “absences, blind spots, and silences”²³⁰ around existing source material, to

²²³ Daphne A. Brooks, 4.

²²⁴ Daphne A. Brooks, 4.

²²⁵ Daphne A. Brooks, 8.

²²⁶ Ashley D. Farmer, ‘Into the Stacks: In Search of the Black Women’s Archive’, *Modern American History*, no. 1 (2018): 292.

²²⁷ Farmer, 292

²²⁸ Farmer, ‘Into the Stacks: In Search of the Black Women’s Archive’.

²²⁹ Farmer, 293.

²³⁰ Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 8.

‘listen out for’ that which has been rendered absent or silent highlight “the ways in which erasures in historical documents are not absences but presences that can be examined.”²³¹

Similarly, returning to Labelle’s discussion as to reading the disappeared via their absence he argues that attending to the disappeared is not to necessarily make visible what has been made invisible, but to read “*into the black*”²³² and attend to that which cannot be grasped “but which I know exists in its inexistence.”²³³ For Labelle, “the act of [black] readings is not so much based on a forensic analysis aimed at the reconstitution of a truth, but rather a poetical transformation, one that relocates the missing into a logic defined by absence and the phantasmic, and one that may shift analysis toward speculation.”²³⁴

Both Brooks and Farmer seek to challenge the singularity of ‘the’ archive echoing Derrida’s assessment of who gets to construct the archive, where it exists and how it is encountered. Brooks notes the continual precarity faced by Black women musicians. Noting how that even when “embraced” and “temporarily canonized” always remain on the verge of disappearance.²³⁵ By being always on the verge of disappearing indicates how the archives of Black women’s musicianship within the histories of popular music cultures is currently only ever partial and subject to staggering omissions. By being in a state of possible disappearance the archive is thus rendered always unstable and cannot be rooted in that which is always visibly present. There can be no singular archive.

For Brooks, Black women artists have “crafted an alternative archive of modernity”²³⁶ one that is both “shaped by and accounts for the violence of their presumed invisibility in and dispossession from the body politic and yet exceeds that violence by evermore attempting to rehearse and record a “new set of social arrangements.””²³⁷ Through her work Brooks seeks to

²³¹ Farmer, 293.

²³² Labelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*, 45.

²³³ Labelle, 46.

²³⁴ Labelle, 45.

²³⁵ Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 322.

²³⁶ Daphne A. Brooks, 32.

²³⁷ Daphne A. Brooks, 32.

not only address the ways in which Black women have been crucial to the development of popular music cultures and practices, but also how they have been denied access to and stability within these histories. Yet what Brooks observes and what is important regarding this project is that it is not simply about expanding the archive to include those that have been rendered absent and silent, but to consider these archives as counter knowledges, parallel to that of which they have been omitted. It is not about making visible that which has been made to disappear, but about listening to and attending to the implications of such disappearance and the new conditions for making and being that they generate.²³⁸ Through her analysis Brooks recognises how Black women musicians moved through popular music cultures differently, often in a state of invisibility and dispossession, yet at the same time these movements and the music they made, registered beyond the dominative narratives of “white mythical sound practices”²³⁹ and in turn created “electrifying networks for Black women to move through and use as a means to self-making, self-reinvention, and correlational insurgency.”²⁴⁰

In attending to those which have been ignored and made invisible, both Daphne Brooks and Brandon Labelle lay out their method through modes of listening. I use the word ‘attending’ here, as Brooks lays out her approach in a way that signals a moving towards the material, a getting close not only to the detail of the material, but the detail as to what we consider the material of the archive to be. For Brooks, to attend to the archival loss of Black womens’ shaping of popular music cultures she asserts the need to attune to what is already ‘out there’. To do this requires a “listening out for”²⁴¹ and a paying attention to what has been ignored.²⁴² Brooks offers the strategy of “listening out for”²⁴³ and “listening hard”²⁴⁴ to the

²³⁸ Daphne A. Brooks, 32.

²³⁹ Daphne A. Brooks, 32.

²⁴⁰ Daphne A. Brooks, 33.

²⁴¹ Daphne A. Brooks, 322.

²⁴² Daphne A. Brooks, 322.

²⁴³ Daphne A. Brooks, 322.

²⁴⁴ Daphne A. Brooks, 5.

lower frequencies on which these archives resonate. Similarly, Labelle points to a mode of acousmatic listening to address the disappeared. Similar to Brooks's method of 'listening hard' and 'listening out for', Labelle's use of the acousmatic signals a listening beyond what is visible. For Labelle the acousmatic provides a way of "reading through" the limits of visibility as a way to "contend with the silences of the withdrawn"²⁴⁵

Brooks emphasis on the role of listening within archival work is valuable to this project as it signals a way of listening and of a mode of attention that does not necessarily seek to make visible those that have been rendered absent, invisible, or erased, but to question and consider the implications of these conditions.

One of the ways in which *The Andantes* and *The Blossoms* and their role as back/ing/ground are also rendered acousmatic is in the way that their archives remain encountered via the ear and not the eye. Often, and certainly with the cases laid out in this project the names and specific identities of those whose voices who are heard in, of, and from the background remain unlisted on recordings and centre labels. They are as Brian Kane would have it sounds unseen.

The archive of the back/ing/ground unfolds on another frequency where those that labour there, in this space behind the lead, or offstage, or heard on a record yet not named, are, as Brooks points out are "culture makers, who often labour right in front of our [...] ears without our recognition of the magnitude of their import."²⁴⁶ More than this the voices that are encountered in this project have been symbolically tuned to a lower frequency, made to be thought of as subsidiary and inconsequential, obscure, and incidental yet as will be discussed, here, they are none of these things. Rather, they are a prominent part of the popular music that emerged during the 1960s producing a crucial part of the sounds that were to become associated with record labels such as Motown, Philles and the television programme *Shindig!*. Yet, they

²⁴⁵ Labelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*, 43.

²⁴⁶ Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*, 1

have been largely left out of discussions regarding these histories, heard across numerous recordings of the period yet unnamed and largely unknown.

When reviewing recordings upon which both *The Andantes* and *The Blossoms* feature they are not always named on recordings. They sound yet remain largely anonymous. These instances of anonymity visually “code out” the back/ing/ground from existing archival material.

In their work on sonic cyber feminism Robin James uses the engineering practice of ‘perceptual coding’ to consider the modes of domination and subjugation that emerge via white supremacist structures. Working with Jonathon Sterne, James describes how perceptual coding was used to “facilitate the enclosure of audio bandwidth.”²⁴⁷ Such enclosure refers to how mathematical modelling is used to account for human hearing in relation to “what counts as sound, and what counts as noise.”²⁴⁸ This sound/noise dichotomy is further mapped onto what is considered “essential and inessential sounds”²⁴⁹. James emphasises how the processes involved in determining the limits of sound/noise, essential and inessential sounds are rooted in “white supremacist, Eurocentric norms of hearing and vocality”²⁵⁰ that are biased towards “the most important features of human speech.”²⁵¹ Working with Jonathon Sterne’s description of the techniques developed by AT&T that compressed phone signals to eliminate what was deemed “unnecessary frequencies”, James notes how this process functions to increase profitability and efficiency by squeezing “more phone calls on the same bandwidth, thus allowing [AT&T] “to squeeze more profit out of its infrastructure.””²⁵² James notes how this squeezing out of frequencies corresponds to how “neoliberalism and biopolitics use

²⁴⁷ James, ‘Sonic Cyberfeminisms, Perceptual Coding and Phonographic Compression’, 22.

²⁴⁸ James, 23.

²⁴⁹ James, 23.

²⁵⁰ James, 24.

²⁵¹ James, 24.

²⁵² James, 24.

mathematical models of human life [...] to actively remove people from eligibility for moral and political personhood on the assumption that they will not be missed.”²⁵³

This coding out further renders those that laboured as back/ing/ground singers as unimportant in terms of official archival data. Being able to attend to their archive then occurs via the ear rather than through label credits. The coding out of the background on centre labels means that engaging with their work happens aurally. The archive is encountered, although unstable, through listening. Organising or mapping an archive of the background cannot be achieved in the usual means of a record collector; the use of names, catalogue numbers and so on. The archive of the back/ing/ground exists in the grooves of each record, in it, not on its surfaces, labels or covers.

This coding out of the back/ing/ground on artefacts such as vinyl recordings and their centre labels can also be extended to the processes of vocal arrangement as discussed earlier in this chapter. Generally, the Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground that, as Darlene Love of The Blossoms observes, did not emerge through notation or written compositions, but rather the vocality of the back/ing/ground emerged through oral direction and in-group improvisation. Recollections from figures such as Love, members of The Andantes as well as other notable back/ing/ground vocalists describe how vocal arrangements were directed to them through descriptive language rather than strictly musical notation as indicated by Evette Benton’s recollection remarked upon earlier in this chapter as being asked to sound like “monkeys. Flutes. Trumpets. Violins.”²⁵⁴

As noted by Farah Jasmine Griffin discusses examples within white American discourse that argue about the supposed impossibility of notating the Black singing voice. For Griffin, this supposed impossibility is rooted in the racist Othering of the Black body which therefore

²⁵³ James, 24.

²⁵⁴ Hoffman, “Backing Up Is Hard to Do” *The Village Voice* March 18, 1986’, 308.

renders the Black voice as Other also.²⁵⁵ Griffin points out how this Othering of the Black singing voice caused the Black singing voice to be rendered outside of human vocality. Working through examples of music criticism during the American Civil War Griffin observes how the Black singing voice is described in relation to sounds from the natural world such as birds furthering Othering the Black singing voice. The Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground is considered here an extension of similar forms of Othering in that it is made to exist outside of notation. Benton's recollection of being asked to 'sound like' musical instruments as well as other animal species suggest how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is part of this earlier woeful characterisations regarding the Black singing voice.

The ways in which the back/ing/ground is coded out of artefacts such as centre labels on vinyl recordings and described as outside of musical notation renders the archive of Black female singing voice as background as or/aural diverting from the eye but orbiting the ear.

There is, as of yet, no distinct archive that addresses the back/ing/ground. Unlike Daphne Brooks's subjects whose work, although absent, or made silent, is by and large accessible as material such as recordings, images, and additional ephemera, what we might consider archival material of the back/ing/ground remains at times difficult to identify. The issue, or perhaps interest, when thinking about the back/ing/ground group, especially The Andantes and The Blossoms is that identifying their presence on recordings is at times difficult, as they are largely unnamed, or experience a name change. Not only this, but in the case of The Andantes, their voices are not clearly heard, in that they were not only used as back/ing/ground in singing 'back up' vocals, but their voices were recorded, layered, and dubbed onto existing vocal recording to 'enhance' the sound of those vocals. In this way their voices become embedded and entangled within the voices of another. Here it is not that they have simply been made to

²⁵⁵ Griffin, 'When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality', 106.

disappear, but their disappearance is replaced by the appearance of another, who in turn is made to disappear. Their erasure via the additional presence of another's voice, or the presence of another's identity named on the recording is a "process of erasure that redoubles and marks the erasure"²⁵⁶ of Black women musicianship and work within popular music histories more broadly.²⁵⁷ This doubling of disappearance, for both The Andantes and The Blossoms, means that their presence is only recoverable through a mode of listening that cannot fully grasp their presence. Listening, then, becomes not about certainty, but a form of "spectral witnessing"²⁵⁸ whereby the back/ing/ground remains sensed rather than perceived.

²⁵⁶ José Muñoz, 'Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 6.

²⁵⁷ José Muñoz, 10.

²⁵⁸ Labelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*, 43.

Chapter Three:

“Seen yet not noticed, heard but not listened to”: Constructing the Black Female Singing Voice as Back/ing/ground

[Chapter Tracklist \(listen here\):](#)

Lou Reed, “Walk on the Wild Side” (1972)

The Dreamers and Richard Berry, “Bye Bye” (1954)

*She says, "Hey, babe
Take a walk on the wild side"
Said, "Hey, babe
Take a walk on the wild side"
And the colored girls go
"Doo do doo do doo do do doo..."*

- Lou Reed, “Walk on the Wild Side”

Bridging between verse and chorus in his 1972 recording, “Walk on the Wild Side” Lou Reed utters the infamous lyric “and the colored girls go doo do-do, doo do-do...” with this lyric Reed invokes the problematic construction that is the focus of this chapter. One of the queries that has preoccupied me when thinking about Reed’s lyric is how and why have we come to accept it, and what are the implications of such an acceptance? Upon hearing the lyric, we are provided with a known, recognisable, and familiar trope within popular music, that is, as noted by musicologist Jacqueline Warwick an image of “a trio of non-white, female backing vocalists.” However, how is it that this “standard feature in contemporary music” has been established? The following chapter seeks to consider some of the ways in which this standard feature of Black women singing back/ing/ground vocals has been constructed and to discuss the implications of such as construction. My contention is that the construction of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground occurs due to several factors including; access to industry, the racialization of space as it is mapped onto the background and foreground, and a listening ear that determines the back/ing/ground as Black and female.

The aim of this chapter is to further interrogate the status of the back/ing/ground vocalist as it is indexed across race and gender and to assert that the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is a construction linked to problematic ideologies of racial difference as they are linked to the labouring body and constructed divisions of space. The chapter explores the relationship early antecedents of how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground link to the emergence of the girl groups of the 1950s and 1960s; the background as a space related to and independent of the foreground; the spatialization of race; the back/ing/ground group as minor character and productive space; and hearing race in the back/ing/ground.

The chapter begins by further unpacking Reed's evocation of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground in "Walk on the Wild Side" as an attempt to further interrogate the implications of his evocation and to discuss the implications of how the Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground had, by 1972, been established as a pop music trope.

The second part of this chapter seeks to consider how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is rooted in post-war developments of popular music within the United States and specifically the emergence and increasing popularity of the girl group era of the late 1950s and 1960s. This section aims to highlight how many girl groups also performed and were used by record labels as back/ing/ground groups. Highlighting this relationship aims to shed light on how the formation, organisation and identity of girl groups is similar to back/ing/ground groups working during this period and that in order to understand how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground has been constructed it is necessary to observe the influence and involvement of the girl group era. It aims to show how the girl group identity is blurred with the formation of back/ing/ground groups of this period and that it is this formation that persists regarding the role of back/ing/ground group/vocalist more broadly. In attending to the status of the back/ing/ground as being indexed across the social categories of race and gender. It aims

to interrogate how the construction of the back/ing/ground came to be indexed in this way and to point towards the problems of such a construction.

Following this the chapter shifts focus from early historical antecedents to consider the implications of such a construction. First, working with both Toni Morrison and Alexander Woloch it considers how the back/ing/ground is constructed as minor character and the implications of this. Second, it discusses the back/ing/ground as a distinct spatial category as a way to both demonstrate and unsettle the relationship between back/ing/ground and foreground. To do this it draws on John Barrell's work with landscape and the pictorial plane to consider how the back/ing/ground as a space has been used to both construct and maintain social hierarchies. The final section of this chapter explores the construction of the back/ing/ground in relation to race and voice. Drawing on the work of Jennifer Stoeber and Nina Eidsheim it demonstrates how the construction of the back/ing/ground is linked to the racialisation of voice and vocality more broadly.

In summary this chapter seeks to both outline and question the status of the back/ing/ground to reconfigure its status as always supportive. To do this it works with examples that span from the late 1950s to the early 1970's. Although the following chapters in this thesis focus on groups active during the 1960s the years that bookend this decade offer insight as to how the background has been constructed, the implications of this construction and its prevalence and use beyond construction. The chapter deliberately and continuously moves from specific examples to wider genres to acknowledge the unstable status of the role more broadly. The chapter both notes and discusses several examples. It draws on groups that occupy the status of both primary act and back/ing/ground group such as The Raeletts and The Dreamers, as well as briefly focusing on individual members of such groups such as Merry Clayton who performed as part of a specific back/ing/ground group, The Raeletts, as a solo performer and individual backing vocalist for other primary groups such as the Rolling Stones. When

discussing the relationship between back/ing/ground groups and girl groups the chapter introduces The Blossoms, their work with Phil Spector, and their relationship with The Crystals. Although The Blossoms serve as a focus of chapter five it is important to mention them in this first chapter as their occupation as back/ing/ground group and primary group in relation to the girl group era of the 1960s is significant.

Constructing the Black Female Voice as Back/ing/ground in Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side":

Released as a single in 1973 from Reed's *Transformer* (1972) album the lyrics of "Walk on the Wild Side" not only traverse the New York subcultural art and music scene of which Reed is most famed but include the well-known lyric "and the colored girls go...". Such lyrical content not only provides an example as to how the back/ing/ground vocal and group has been indexed across race and gender²⁵⁹ but also demonstrates how by 1972 the notion of Black women singing back/ing/ground had become a common feature within Western popular and rock musics. Following its second and fifth chorus Reed utters the lyric "and the colored girls go" followed by the repetition of the non-symbolic vocable "doo do-do do-do...". With the articulation of these lyrics Reed neatly articulates the ways in which the back/ing/ground vocal within pop and rock musics has been constructed and indexed across race and gender, and how this construction is rooted within the popular music practices of the previous decade. Notably, the figures that Reed invokes are not simply a "trio of backing singers"²⁶⁰ but also by default a reference to the girl groups of the 1950s and 1960s that many back/ing/ground groups and vocalists were also part of. As will be discussed later in this chapter the distinction between primary all-female vocal acts, known during the 1950s and 1960s as 'girl groups,' and

²⁵⁹ Warwick, "And the Colored Girls Sing..." Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms'; Corbett, 'Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist'; Fast, 'Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music'.

²⁶⁰ Warwick, "And the Colored Girls Sing..." Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms'.

back/ing/ground groups is continuously blurred as many groups occupied both roles. One of the features of both back/ing/ground vocals and girl group repertoire was the use of what is referred to as nonsense vocables of which Reed evokes with his use of the “doo do-do do-do” lyric.

The track begins with a sliding bass line and rhythmic guitar. The bass line and guitar continue throughout the entire recording. As the percussion begins Reed's first verse shortly follows. The song contains four verses each focused on a different figure ('Holly', 'Candy', 'Little Joe', 'Jackie'). Reed's use of the line “and the coloured girls...” occurs twice throughout the song after the second and fifth chorus. Chorus's one and three are not followed by this lyric but rather the continuation of the bass line and guitar rhythm introduced at the beginning of the song. Sounding after the second and fifth chorus the line “and the colored girls go” is introduced following the lyric:

Lou Reed: *She says 'hey babe, take a walk on the wild side,*

Said 'hey, babe take a walk on the wild side,

And the coloured girls go doo do-do do-do doo do-do doo do-do do-do doo do-do doo do-do do-do

doo do-do doo do-do do-do doo do-do

Following Reed's twentieth articulation a chorus of three female voices fade in to continue the “doo do-do” phrase a further twenty-one times. On the final articulation the voices stretch the final “doo” for a minimum of four beats. Reed's lyric draws on the now existing trope, constructed in the previous decade, of the Black female voice being used as back/ing/ground vocals.

When the lyric occurs for its second and final time Reed alters the lyric from “And the coloured girls *go...*” to “And the coloured girls *say...*”. In its final articulation Reed's voice repeats the pattern as before articulating a series of the “doo do-do” phrase twenty times to

become finally overtaken by three female voices repeating the same phrase. However, during this final occurrence the female voices continue the phrase a further forty-one times, doubling the vocalisations heard in the first instance. The final vocalisation is again extended for a minimum of four beats. In both instances the female voices increase in volume in the middle of the overall phrase only to rapidly decrease.

There is a sense that these voices seek to break-out from this phrasal loop they have been contained to, yet at the moment where they are loudest the volume reduces and the phrase continues. Although the lyric only occurs after the second and fifth chorus the rhythmic structure of the phrase can be heard in the rhythm guitar from the songs very beginning. From having heard the lyric and phrase after the second chorus it is as if you can still hear the rhythm of the female vocals in the rhythm of the guitar. As if the phrase is underlying the entirety of the track.

Notably, Reed's first announcement states that the girls are 'going' but the second states that the girls are 'saying'. The use of 'going' suggests an impression of some sort. It suggests how the figuration can predict what will already be uttered indicating a kind of 'of course they will do this'. It suggests a kind of mimicry and an acknowledgment that the phrase is predicated on something prior to its presence on this recording. It also suggests that these figures are unable to state, utter or speak anything other than these predicted/ive vocables. Reed hints that not only will these voices be 'going like this' but also these voices will be female and identifiable via a racial construct.

Reed's second and final announcement of these figures and their voices shifts from 'going' to 'saying'. In this moment Reed shifts the articulation from vocal mimicry to speech more clearly. In this moment their voices become speech not simply voice or vocable. However, this shift to speech still limits what they will say to nonsense vocables. This hints that what

these racialised figures will 'say' will be this. This is obviously a problematic construction yet Reed taps into it.

The announcement of these figures 'going' and 'saying' occur at the end of the second and fifth chorus. Following the first and third chorus the bass and guitar continue yet Reed does not make his announcement and the voices do not sound. The occurrence of this lyric happens in the songs most 'central' parts. Neither at the edge of the track nor strictly after each verse but rather at two distinct points after the second and fifth chorus. Yet although the second occurrence of these lyrics occurs after the fifth chorus there remains a continued instrumental phrase that follows the final articulation. Additionally, the rhythmic structure of the guitar from the very beginning of the track and its consistency throughout mirrors the rhythmic structure of the vocables. In this sense the rhythmic framework in which the voice will sound is present on the track throughout from its very initial sounding. Yet it is only at two specific moments that the voices of the three women emerge. And they do emerge – they don't simply appear or sound but in both instances, they are faded in. The use of 'going' and 'saying' combined with the fading in of their voices suggests that Reed is not getting them to say something – or instructing them to sound but rather they have already been sounding and Reed conjures them into audibility or permits them their audibility. The first utterance provides the same number of articulations as Reed – performing akin to a phonic mirror. Yet the final articulation extends the syllable elongating the 'doo' across several beats. The second utterance doubles Reed's own articulation. In both instances at approximately the halfway point of the entire phrase the volume of the voices increases. This increase in volume seems to be only contained, limited or impeded by the final syllable as it extends across several beats functioning like a much-needed exhalation. The vocals submerge yet again within the recording. Yet the rhythm of the syllables continues via the continual guitar rhythm.

Reed both introduces what the girls will sing but also performs what they will sing. His introduction and performance of these lines emphasises how what the girls will sing somehow already precedes the track. By performing the line himself Reed prefigures what the 'girls' will sing because their voices are already assumed. There is no surprise about what will be uttered from these anonymous, gendered and racialised voices; they are set up by Reed as both an expectation and an inevitability. Reed's recognition of the presence of these voices via the use of 'go' frame these voices as already being present, as if they are already part of the track, and the mere acknowledgement of what they will articulate and how they will sound is enough for their voices to appear, or rather sound. By considering the Black female back/ing/ground voice as an inevitability Reed's lyrics situate the Black female voice as both in and outside of time. Furthermore, attending to Reed's lyric more closely we can begin to understand the Black female voice as back/ing/ground not only as an inevitability as well as gendered and racial expectation but also how the lyric allows for the relational nature between back/ing/ground and foreground can be rethought.

As outlined above Reed's use of the lyrics "And the coloured girls go..." both genders and racializes the voices to be heard next. As stated previously Reed's use of "go" temporally situates the voices in the present. That in the singles release in 1973 these lyrics appeared not to noticeably cause confusion among listeners suggests that this notion of 'coloured girls going' had become to some extent an accepted and even expected musical trope. Notably, Reed does not sing 'and the people go' or 'and the backing singers go' or 'and the women go' but rather he chooses to specifically categorise these voices across race and gender. Furthermore, Reed's lyric and his own articulation of what these voices will sing is significant as it not only mirrors the type of linguistic behavioural techniques used when teaching young babies in early stages of language development, thus somewhat infantilising these voices, but his own articulation of the "doo do-do" lyric might be considered as Reed ushering in the voices of these anonymous

“coloured girls”. However, rethinking the role of back/ing/ground groups in relation to inevitability provides an alternative interpretation.

Considering these back/ing/ground vocals as both an expectation and inevitability disrupts an understanding of them as lacking productive agency – that Reed is giving them permission to speak. As an inevitability the voices of back/ing/ground groups are already present on the track, they are simply silent. In this sense it is not simply that Reed is ushering them in but rather he is asking them if they will permit him to usher them in. By beginning their lyric for them Reed attempts to mimic their articulations to coax them out of their own silence. In this sense Reed’s lyric is not merely an invitation to speak but a pleading with the Black female voice, now considered an inevitability and expectation in his own song, to speak for Reed’s own narrative to continue. Reed’s lyric not only sets up the inevitability of what is to be heard next but his own utterance of these vocables is here not considered an invitation for these voices to speak but rather a desperate call for these voices to sound in order for his own lyrical position to continue. In this sense not only are the voices of the back/ing/ground group an inevitability and expectation but they are also, crucially, what enables Reed to move forward within his own narrative.

Significantly, the voices that performed on the recording were in fact white yet Reed’s racialisation of these voices remains largely overlooked. Reed’s announcement of the racial and gendered identities of these voices not only causes the listener to hear them as such but also exposes how the construction of the back/ing/ground as Black and female is made a convention. Yet even with the knowledge that these voices in fact belong to three white women his lyric remains largely unchallenged due to the gendering and racialisation of the back/ing/ground more broadly, emphasising Jennifer Stoeber’s point that “aural and visual signifiers of race are thoroughly enmeshed; sounds never really lost their referent to different

types of bodies.”²⁶¹ It also signals how the gendered and racial status of the back/ing/ground relates to mythic blackness in that it is not “necessary to use an actual black person to get the effect of the index.”²⁶²

By attending to Reed’s lyric, it becomes increasingly clear how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground exists as a construct. And how this construct functions to maintain division between back/ing/ground and lead vocalist as they are mapped onto socially constructed racial and gendered categories. As mentioned by the 1973 single release of “Walk on the Wild Side” the construction of the back/ing/ground and its indexing across race and gender had fully formed, and it is this construct, this trope that Reed evokes albeit mythically. In what follows I set out to discuss how this construction came to be and its relationship with the formation and popularity of the girl groups of the late 1950s and 1960s.

The Construction of the Black Female Voice as Back/ing/ground in Popular Music:

What is understood to be a back/ing/ground group/vocalist is at once both easy and difficult to define. Within the contexts of popular and rock music practices the back/ing/ground vocalist is thought to provide ‘backing’ vocals of a recording or live performance. Backing vocals are understood to be vocal phrases or utterances that are often characterised by non-symbolic vocables, such as ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’, nonsense vocables, echoic responses that repeat a lead singers’ phrase, or the chorus or hook of a song. The sound of the back/ing/ground vocalist has been described by Evette Benton of The Sweeties as an extension of the overall instrumental sound of a song or recording. She describes being requested to sound like “monkeys. Flutes, Trumpets. Violins”²⁶³ suggesting that the back/ing/ground is often required to sound like anything other than a human voice. Benton goes onto to describe how the role of the

²⁶¹ Stoeber, *Sonic Color Line*, 12.

²⁶² Obadike, ‘Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound’. 43

²⁶³ Hoffman, “Backing Up Is Hard to Do” *The Village Voice* March 18, 1986’.

back/ing/ground is to “sing the unsingable, the undreamable, the unthinkable”²⁶⁴ situating the back/ing/ground within the realms of fantasy.

Susan Fast contends that the back/ing/ground vocalist is a “ubiquitous presence”²⁶⁵ in many popular music genres and as such is “one of those musical conventions”²⁶⁶ that are “so common as to be rendered invisible.”²⁶⁷ However, the supposed ubiquitous nature of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist makes describing any kind of history regarding the role difficult. The very status of the role seems to resist traceability as back/ing/ground vocalists or groups remain for the most part unknown and anonymous not always given credit of recordings or during live performances. This in part is due to the unstable status of the role and the place and space it is made to occupy. Distinctions can be made between the “anonymous backing vocalist who is an outsider”²⁶⁸, in that they are not formally identified as being part of the band, group or individual performer whom they may be performing or recording with and the backing vocals performed by identifiable ‘insiders’ of a band or group.

During live performances the back/ing/ground group/vocalist can be present both sonically and physically, at the side or behind a lead performer(s), or remain out of sight to the audience²⁶⁹. They are often sonically present on recorded media but typically remain unnamed on the recording or only detailed in liner notes. Yet in both live and recorded instances their presence is one that is not intended to be fully recognised or attended to: “seen but not noticed, heard but not listened to; the best background singers are those who repel starlight”²⁷⁰. The role of the back/ing/ground is continually framed as one that should not encroach on the space of the lead performer but rather remain a phonic support, always subsidiary so as not to disrupt

²⁶⁴ Hoffman.

²⁶⁵ Susan Fast, “Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek B. Scott (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 171.

²⁶⁶ Fast, 171.

²⁶⁷ Fast, *ibid.*

²⁶⁸ Fast, ‘Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music’.

²⁶⁹ See Diana Ross at Caesar’s Palace. 1979 see <https://youtu.be/BNO2vwNwzoE>

²⁷⁰ Hoffman, “Backing Up Is Hard to Do” *The Village Voice* March 18, 1986’, 306.

the visibility or audibility of the lead. To be “seen but not noticed, heard but not listened to” suggests how the back/ing/ground is not situated as a central figure or sound but rather to exist beyond, or at a distance

Fast contends that the back/ing/ground group/vocalist is an outsider to the band or performer with whom they may be recording or performing²⁷¹. They are on the one hand a significant part of a live performance or recording yet also remain insignificant, heard but not fully attended to. Their voices can be thought to exist on the edges of attention; present yet never completely able to move from the background to the foreground. They (quite literally) occupy the very edges of a performance.

The role of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist has been described as providing “a song with its hook, the most recognizable and appealing musical phrase of the piece.”²⁷² Clementes describes how background singers “turn [...] listeners onto songs without them even realizing it.”²⁷³ Such groups occupy a seemingly contradictory space – to provide the most recognisable lyrical phrase of a song yet remain at the same time unnoticed.

There are different ways that the back/ing/ground vocalist/group are presented during live performances. Most commonly they are organised as a group and situated to the back of the stage, behind the primary performer; they can be situated as a group to the side of a primary performer; or they can be situated with the band; they can be situated with or as dancers (see the Ikettes); situated in front of the primary performer (see the Raeletts); or situated offstage out of sight to the audience. Yet in most positions, whether front, back or off stage my claim here is that the presence of back/ing/ground vocalist/groups is continually framed as one of

²⁷¹ Fast, “Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music,” 176.

²⁷² Warwick, “‘And the Colored Girls Sing...’ Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’, 65.

²⁷³ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 24.

non-presence or what Fred Moten refers to as (in)visibility that is to be made invisible via your visibility.²⁷⁴

There is no one consistent term used when discussing the role. Rather when referring to backing groups there are several phrases that are used; backing group; backing vocals; background vocals; background singers, back-up singers, back-part singers and so on. Although perhaps a minor detail the inconsistency in terminology could be thought to further mirror the role as an unstable category. The various ways in which we might refer to the role reflects how it is considered so insignificant as to not be worthy of a fixed term.

Although pertaining to the same role the interchangeable use of 'backing', 'background' and 'back-up' offer some small insights into how this role is considered to function. We might consider the word 'backing' as situating the role as one of support. To 'back up' is to suggest a supportive role in relation to another figure (in this case a lead vocalist). It suggests that 'backing' is to perform as a vocal support structure within or in front of which a lead vocalist can exist. Yet the use of 'background' spatially situates the role more clearly. When using 'background' the role is always situated behind some other action whether visual or sonic. The 'background' is that within which the foreground emerges; it is "not so much extra-diegetic" but rather "constitutes the diegesis"²⁷⁵. The background is required yet it remains locked in a spatial relation with the foreground that always positions it as behind. Furthermore, the use of *background* not only suggests the space in which the lead vocal is constituted via performance but also extends backwards, "blending in with the walls of the studio, becoming part of that larger instrument of the music industry"²⁷⁶. The use of both 'backing' and 'background' set up a dynamic whereby the back/ing/ground group or vocalist are always both spatially and symbolically positioned as being constantly in relation to something or someone else.

²⁷⁴ Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 68.

²⁷⁵ Corbett, 'Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist', 63. italics original

²⁷⁶ Corbett, 63.

Moreover, the use of *-ground* reveals how the role functions as the terrain or space in which the foreground or lead is situated.²⁷⁷ Yet this relationship is not equally balanced as it is based upon notions of foreground and background as they are mapped onto dominance (visibility) and subordinate (invisibility). Furthermore, during the 1950s and 1960s at least, the labouring back/ing/ground remained largely invisible in that they remained uncredited on recordings. Also, back/ing/ground group/vocalists remain invisible, or at least obscured in relation to union representation in that it remains unclear to what extent union representation was permitted to backing vocalists during this time²⁷⁸.

Although considered to exist in a state of invisibility the back/ing/ground vocalist is persistently marked as Black and female²⁷⁹. The ways in which this marking occurs are twofold. First, the background is sonically marked as black. Second, it is this sonic 'marking' that is then used to figure the black female voice as background.

Fast remarks how those who occupy this role are "either African-American women, or white women but are *sonically marked as black*."²⁸⁰ Fast roots this sonic marking to the use of gospel singers in the 1961 Broadway musical *Nativity* and groups such as The Blossoms and their work during the 1960s.²⁸¹ Fast points to the use of Black female singers, often gospel trained, as being "a primary musical marker of black authenticity"²⁸² suggesting how this 'sonic marking' serves to frame a song or performance via its use or closeness to black cultural expression. Fast highlights the use of Black female background vocals in rock music suggesting

²⁷⁷ Corbett, 63.

²⁷⁸ It is unclear what relationship session singers and back/ing/ground groups, especially those who also identified as a primary performing or recording act, had with the unions. Ribowsky describes the role of Unions and session musicians working with Phil Spector during the 1960s yet union issues appear to only extend to musicians rather than vocalists, or specifically those working as backing vocalists. Darlene Wright notes how the group joined the musicians union later in their career following their success as freelance session vocalists, and not earlier in their career.

²⁷⁹ Fast, "Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music"; Corbett, "Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist"; Jacqueline Warwick, "'And the Colored Girls Sing...': Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms," in *Musicological Identities: Essays in Honour of Susan McClary*, ed. Steve Baur, Raymond Knapp, and Jacqueline Warwick (Oxford: Routledge, 2016).

²⁸⁰ Fast, 'Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music', 176. Italics mine

²⁸¹ Fast, 176.

²⁸² Fast, 176.

how their role is to “reference a social world different to the other band members” and that “we must be able to hear their otherness.”²⁸³ This aural demand for otherness further highlights how the back/ing/ground is problematically required to be sonically constructed as Black and female in order to serve the (dominant) space of the foreground. Considering this construction, we can see how the background is only understood as such when it is sonically marked as Black and female. This ‘sonic marking’ uses the visual ‘marks’ of racial/ist difference to construct itself. To be sonically marked as Black applies a visual referent to a sound. The sound becomes locked to the visual. It is unable to escape the visual ‘mark’. To be ‘marked’ in this way maintains the hierarchical relationship between background and foreground. By sonically marking the back/ing/ground vocalist and group in this way seems to be an attempt to control or uphold the hierarchical dynamic. If the back/ing/ground is Black and female then it can never overpower the foreground as it is presumably (un)marked as white and male. This uncritical acceptance of the back/ing/ground as Black and female maintains the black/white binary regarding constructions of race more broadly. It is a “deliberately reductionist racial project constructing white power and privilege against the alterity and abjection of the imagined polarity of “blackness””²⁸⁴. The construction that the back/ing/ground is sonically marked Black, and female can be read as an attempt to match the ‘sound’ of the back/ing/ground to the “cultural meanings” of a visible Black female body.²⁸⁵ The sonic is marked as black and then it is marked as back/ing/ground producing the sonic as black, to the sonic as black as back/ing/ground.

The designation of the back/ing/ground voice as Black and female is not due to the role simply being taken up by Black female figures²⁸⁶, but related to the ways in which the background as a space has been constructed in relation to the foreground. The Black female

²⁸³ Fast, 178.

²⁸⁴ Stoever, *Sonic Color Line*, 21.

²⁸⁵ Stoever, 79.

²⁸⁶ There are examples of male back/ing/ground group/vocalists such as The Jordinaires, and the Pips. However, following John Corbett these counter examples “gather much of their signifying power from a kind of aural and visual cross-dressing” through the temporary occupation of a “position normally reserved for women”.

voice as back/ing/ground functions as an imaginary presence regardless of the actual presence of the Black female body or voice. The blackness of the sound must not be considered related to some notion of vocal essentialism as it is mapped onto and racialized body but rather is constructed to be perceived as such in order to maintain a hierarchical relationship between background and foreground.

Saidiya Hartman addresses blackness as being both produced and performed arguing how “performances of blackness are about the spectacle of mastery and the enactment of a willed subjection” and argues that “blackness is produced through specific means of making use of the body”²⁸⁷. As noted by Hartman “blackness is defined here in terms of social relationality rather than identity; thus, blackness incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, whites, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference. Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance.”²⁸⁸ In terms of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground blackness, here, is produced via the visual and sonic spaces that the role is made to inhabit, that is, to be behind or in support of the foreground. In short to be in service to the foreground. Yet as will be discussed in the following chapters the back/ing/ground can be considered a site of production beyond the supposed dominance of the foreground.

The indexing of race and gender onto the back/ing/ground group/vocalist can be thought to be related to an understanding of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist as it formed/was used during post-war developments in popular music: “the style of [back up singing] today is the black sound [...] The influence of three-voice black trios is pervasive.”²⁸⁹ Although perceived as having become a “pervasive” facet of popular and later rock musics the construction of the how the Black female voice came to be synonymous with back/ing/ground vocals remains unclear. Although both Fast and Warwick make minor attempts to trace the emergence of the

²⁸⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 58.

²⁸⁸ Hartman, 57.

²⁸⁹ Heckman cited from Fast, “Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music.”

Black female voice as back/ing/ground to the vocal group The Blossoms neither author fully attends to why even the Blossoms might be regarded as an exemplar of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground²⁹⁰. The Blossoms are indeed an example of a black female back/ing/ground group but acknowledging this point does little to attend to the construction and risks producing an origin myth that reproduces the stereotypes their very projects aim to dissect.

In Morgan Neville's documentary *Twenty Feet from Stardom* participants speak of a shift from recording companies using largely white backing vocalists (referred to in the documentary as 'readers') to an increased use of Black female vocalists for back/ing/ground vocal parts. Although it remains unclear as to what occurred that generated this shift notable vocalists featured in the documentary describe this shift in terms of sound. Referring to the white female 'readers' currently working as studio-based backing vocalists at the time, Darlene Love describes how "they couldn't do nothing without that [sheet] music sitting right in their face"²⁹¹. Stevie Wonder remarks how the readers "were committed to what they saw on the paper"²⁹². Back/ing/ground vocalist Edna Wright describes the phonic difference between the (white) readers and (Black) background: "the sound that was coming from them was so raw [...] and so real."²⁹³ The distinction that emerges problematically frames the (Black) back/ing/ground as a point of corporeal excess whereby the Black female body is considered rhythmic, excessive and natural.²⁹⁴ This is not to denigrate the vocal ability of figures such as Love et al. but rather to caution an understanding of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground upon essentialist grounds. This is a questionable formulation as it reinforces essentialist forms of racial difference relating to Radano's thinking about 'hot rhythm' and Stoevers sonic colour

²⁹⁰ Fast; Warwick, "And the Colored Girls Sing..." Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms'.

²⁹¹ Morgan Neville, *Twenty Feet from Stardom* (Altitude Film Distribution, 2014).

²⁹² Neville.

²⁹³ Neville.

²⁹⁴ Fast, 'Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music'; Ronald Radano, 'Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rhythm', in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman Ronald Radano (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

line. This construction then begins to produce formations of how the Black female voice sounds and what it utters. The notion that the Black female voice sounds 'raw' and 'real' connects the Black female voice with previous racist conceptions of the Black body and Black being as excessive, uncontrollable and that singing is in some way natural to Black being.²⁹⁵ It overlooks how many singers working as session vocalist actually undertook vocal training via their involvement in choirs – yet this is somehow overlooked and not considered a form of 'proper' training. I am not saying this to undermine specific figures skill or talent but to address how the Black female voice as 'natural' back/ing/ground can be considered a problematic construct produced "as part of an overarching development of modern American ideologies of race"²⁹⁶. This is also not to insinuate that white voices could have provided the same function but rather to further consider how and why the Black female voice as back/ing/ground has been constructed. The back/ing/ground is not Black and female by virtue of a (natural) increased use of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground during post-war developments within popular music. The construction (and it is a construction) of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is due to conditions of invisibility as they relate to Black women and systems of oppression as they relate to labour and economic stability within the context of popular (music) cultures. The back/ing/ground is made Black and female due to the sonic color line and listening practices that forge the back/ing/ground upon notions of racial difference as they are produced with white masculine elitism. A discussion regarding the race, voice and listening is forthcoming in this chapter but before I would like to discuss the relationship between the formation of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground and the girl groups of 1950s and 1960s.

²⁹⁵ Radano, 'Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rhythm'.

²⁹⁶ Ronald Radano, "Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rhythm," in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman Ronald Radano (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 460.

The Construction of the Black Female Voice as Back/ing/ground and the emergence of the Girl Groups:

The construction of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is produced due to intersecting modes of oppression as they relate to race, gender and class. In order to trace what might be understood as the emergence of this construction it is important to consider the role as it relates to labour and not simply forms of creative expression and genre. It must be noted that to do this there is a need to retrace the construction of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground to Black female figures. This is not in order to conceptualize the role of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist to some essentialist origin on the basis of the Black body and the Black voice but rather to address that the construction of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is related to industry access and labour. This retracing to specific figures and groups is also undertaken to not only address the construction but also to recognise how the use of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground in the middle of the twentieth century generated the construction as it then persisted in the following decades. It should be noted that although attempts to extend the status of the back/ing/ground group and vocalist to other vocal practices²⁹⁷ are useful their refusal to address the construction as it emerged in the late 1950s ignores the oppressive systems that functioned to produce the construction at the time.

With the emergence of the girl-groups in the 1950s and 1960s the distinctions between how back/ing/ground vocalist/groups are thought to be situated becomes increasingly blurred. Furthermore, the relationship between the back/ing/ground vocalist/group and the studio is intensified during this period and in relation to music associated with the girl group genre at this time. During this period the distinction between a back/ing/ground group and a girl group can be understood as becoming increasingly hard to make. This is in part due to the similar

²⁹⁷ Corbett, 'Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist'; Warwick, "And the Colored Girls Sing..." Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms'.

means of organisation, costume, use of call and response and nonsense vocables that both roles shared but also because back/ing/ground groups/vocalists were used to record as girl groups.

As part of the history of popular music what we understand and consider to be 'girl groups' emerges during the 1950s with the recordings of The Bobbettes, "Mr Lee" (June 1957, Atlantic records) and The Chantels "He's Gone" (August 1957, End records)^{298 299}. There is a marked difference between girl groups emerging in the late 1950s and existing female-based vocal acts. Girl groups are often characterised by the presence of adolescent vocals and their lyrical content being of adolescent concerns, where female based vocal acts not identified as girl group do not possess these characteristics³⁰⁰. What is significant about The Bobbettes and The Chantels is that they are early examples of young Black female adolescents speaking within a popular culture context. Although my task here is not focused on discussions regarding girl groups, girl culture, and race it is important to note that the emergence of girl groups in the 1950s and their continuation during the following decade can largely be attributed to the work of Black female performers. Furthermore, although not focusing on discussions between girl groups, girl culture and race my discussion does focus on race, gender, and voice in relation to back/ing/ground groups working during this period. The difference here is that where discussion regarding girl groups have focused on their relation to girl culture, my focus is to attend to the relationship girl groups have with back/ing/ing groups of this time as a way to discuss how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground has been constructed.

What is understood to be girl group music is based on several elements including music that emphasises "the concerns and interests of teenage girls in its lyrics"³⁰¹. The audibility of an

²⁹⁸ Charlotte Grieg, *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow: Girl Groups from the 50s on...* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p11

²⁹⁹ Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007) p13-19

³⁰⁰ For more information regarding the distinction between girl groups and female-based vocal acts during the 1950s and 1960s see Warwick 2007 and Stras 2011

³⁰¹ Warwick, 2007;ix

undisciplined adolescent vocal³⁰²³⁰³, both lyrical and instrumental material is largely prepared by “professional songwriters”³⁰⁴; the instrumental sound of girl group music can be characterised by “orchestral instruments rather than the minimal rock’n’roll line up of guitar, bass guitar and drum kit”; girl group music originates in the studio and is as dependent on session musicians and producers as it is the groups themselves^{305 306}; that the lyrical compositions of girl group music are characterised by an interactive dialogue “between lead and backing vocals”³⁰⁷; and that a girl group is comprised of three to five members. It is the final three characteristics that are of most concern here.

The emphasis on how the vocal and lyrical associations in girl group music of this time demonstrates an inherent relationship between lead and back/ing/ground vocals. Rather than a primary lead vocalist performing or recording with an unknown or differently named back/ing/ground group, girl groups of this period inherently contain their own back/ing/ground group. They can perhaps be considered a back/ing/ground group that have been brought to the front. Similar to girl groups performing during the 1960s back/ing/ground groups working with popular music acts shared a similar visual identity to girl groups. They were often made up of a three to five vocalists, wore matching costumes when performing live; and were characterised by leaderlessness.

Not only this but groups such as The Blossoms and The Raeletts possessed a dual identity whereby they performed and recorded using the same and different group monikers as both a back/ing/ground group and primary girl group. For example, The Raeletts were not only the in-house back/ing/ground group for Ray Charles, but they also recorded as a primary girl group

³⁰² Warwick, 2007

³⁰³ Laurie Stras, 'Voice of the Beehive: Vocal Technique at the Turn of the 1960s', in *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315087986-3>.

³⁰⁴ Warwick, 2007;ix

³⁰⁵ I Warwick, 2007;ix and Bob Stanley *Yeah Yeah Yeah: The Story of Modern Pop* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013)

³⁰⁶ Bob Stanley, “Walk with Me in Paradise Garden: Phil Spector and Joe Meek” and “The Trouble with Boys: The Brill Building and Girl Groups”, in *Yeah Yeah Yeah: The Story of Modern Pop* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2014).

³⁰⁷ Warwick, 2007; ix

using that name and recorded and performed using the group moniker The Cookies. Furthermore, as The Raeletts their name remains an unstable category as recordings released on their label *Tangerine*³⁰⁸ (1962 - 1973) changed their name on nearly every recording. The same group have been released as The Raeletts, The Raelets, The Raelettes and simply Raeletts. Although this might appear as minor semantic issues the various different versions of their name indicate how not only did it not appear necessary to individually identify each vocalist but that their group name could remain unstable and it did not seem to matter. The membership of The Raeletts has never been stable. Performing with and for Ray Charles since 1955 up until his final performances in 2003 the group has had approximately seventy different members.

As noted above The Raeletts also recorded and performed as The Cookies and in both roles they were both back/ing/ground group and a girl group. Similarly, The Blossoms also recorded as several other groups, such as, The Rebellettes and Bob B Soxx and the Blue Jeans, The 4 Blossoms, The Girlfriends, The Playgirls, The Wildcats, and The Rollettes.³⁰⁹ Not only this but The Blossoms were used by record label Philles to record singles that were then released not only under a different name but a pre-existing group. In 1962 The Blossoms attended a studio session where they recorded a track called "He's A Rebel", yet the single was released under the name of an existing Philles label girl group, The Crystals (a case that will be discussed later in the thesis). Label partner and record producer Phil Spector requested The Blossoms record the track as he was keen to release the single as soon as possible. At this time Spector and The Blossoms were both based in Los Angeles. The Crystals were based in New York. Spector had received knowledge that the song "He's A Rebel", written by Gene Pitney, had already been recorded by soloist, Vicki Carr in New York³¹⁰ In order to releases his version as soon as possible Spector used The Blossoms as they were geographically closer to the studio

³⁰⁸ Tangerine records was founded by Ray Charles whom The Raeletts performed with.

³⁰⁹ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 31.

³¹⁰ Darlene Love, *My Name is Love* (New York: William Morrow Publishing, 1998), p62-64

and available. This event demonstrates not only how the identity between backing groups and girl groups are inherently fluid during this time, but that this fluidity occurs due to the inherent obscurity and instability of both roles. The insistence of group identity, and the inherent dialogue between lead and back/ing/ground vocals characteristic of girl group music meant that the switching of voices, of bodies remains largely unnoticed³¹¹.

One of the unifying elements between the girl groups and back/ing/ground groups of this period is the insistence of a group identity. This group identity is enhanced via the use of a group moniker that does not signify any individual participant but rather refers to all group members under a single term. The language of both girl group and back/ing/ground groups names are often highly feminized terms that mirror constructed forms of femininity based upon patriarchal conceptions of femininity. Common names are drawn from gemstones or jewels (The Emeralds, The Crystals), food-names (The Cookies, The Jelly Beans, The Cookies), associated with clothing or hair, or make up (The Chiffons, The Bracelets, The Ribbons) or were suffixed with 'ette' (The Bobbettes, The Marvelettes).³¹² The names continually resist any acknowledgement of individuals, rather groups are named as objects, not individual objects but pluralised objects. The use of these group monikers makes it harder to determine members of each group as individuals, rather they are simply known as the object that their group moniker describes. Even when in 1967 the then Supremes became Diana Ross and the Supremes, it merely emphasised the already emerged division between Ross, Ballard and Wilson. The shift from The Supremes to Diana Ross and the Supremes make the division between lead and supposed backing much clearer. It suggests that Ross was able to move away from the background within which she previously existed yet her (explicit) occupation of the

³¹¹ Warwick, 2007; p.78

³¹² For an extensive list of girl group names see John Clementes, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females that Rocked the World*, (Wisconsin: Krause Publications, 2000) and www.girl-groups.com

foreground (via name) shows how the group moniker of The Supremes was considered a form of obfuscation veiling Ross from the spotlight.

The group monikers of both back/ing/ground and primary girl groups of this period also function, as stated by Cyrus above, as a way for the movement, exchange, and replacement of personnel to remain unnoticed. As Cyrus explains “the ‘same act’ could be put on with a new cast of characters with little fanfare.”³¹³ The group name stands in for the individual subjects that make up that group. Attempting to trace changes in personnel becomes difficult as it is the movement that occurs ‘behind’ the group name. The movement and exchange of bodies and voices occur in a state of willed invisibility by the listener or spectator whose eye and ear are wilfully obscured by the groups’ name.

Historical accounts regarding the girl groups of the 1960s often emphasise the role of producers, such as Phil Spector, or songwriters (specifically those working at the Brill Building) when describing girl groups of the 1960s. By focusing on label executives, producers and songwriters’ actual groups and the individual figures who make up those groups become the background of their own genre. Girl groups from this period are considered a sound rather than a singer where the artist becomes “a mere part of the overall arrangement of a song.”³¹⁴ The emphasis on girl groups as sound further impedes access to individual group members. Rather their voices simply become part of an overall sound. Their voices are simply an extension of the sound of the recording more generally, and the recording is an extension of what is considered the sound of the genre.

Cynthia Cyrus observes how images accompanying girl group material also emphasise the genre rather than the performers. Through an analysis of girl group imagery, she notes that “the focus of the girl-group album cover is typically not on the known and identifiable performer

³¹³ Cynthia J. Cyrus, ‘Selling an Image: Girl Groups of the 1960s’, *Popular Music* 22, no. 2 (2003): 173–93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143003003118>.

³¹⁴ Charlotte Grieg, *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow: Girl Groups from the 50s On* (London: Virago Press, 1989).

but rather on the group as a whole"³¹⁵. Cyrus highlights how girl group publicity emphasises an image of leaderlessness and conformity via the use of matching costumes, similar hairstyles and being positioned in the same pose. Cyrus observes how "an overwhelming majority of these visual images depict members of an ensemble as equal and visually interchangeable"³¹⁶. Backing groups of this period were subject to the same forms of visual conformity through clothing, physical positioning and choreography. Yet, not only were groups made to conform to this image of leaderlessness and conformity, but to an image that was being utilised by an existing musical genre.

As noted by both Cynthia Cyrus and Will Stos³¹⁷ the insistence of the group image and inherent leaderlessness found in girl groups from this period allows for the interchangeability of group members to go largely unnoticed. Cyrus notes how "personnel changes were common" and notes how "some acts rotated artists and back-up singers"³¹⁸. Cyrus's point further emphasises an inherent blurring between back/ing/ground groups and girl groups of this period and how the replacement of one member for another remained largely unnoticed. Albeit a fleeting comment from Cyrus it is these unnoticed, invisible movements of bodies and voices that are of interest here. Speaking of girl groups performing and recording during the 1960s Stos remarks how "the medium could serve as a camouflage"³¹⁹ and outlines how "girl group history is replete with instances in which performers' identities were concealed to make their product more appealing to a wide audience or easier for studio producers to make."³²⁰ He notes how "The Marvelettes and The Chantels' early albums did not contain photos of the group in order to hide their blackness". In fact, The Chantels' first album "We Are The Chantels"

³¹⁵ Cynthia Cyrus, 'Selling and Image: Girl Groups of the 1960s,' *Popular Music* 22, no.2 (2003): 176 August 2, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3877609>

³¹⁶ Cyrus, 2003; p176

³¹⁷ Will Stos, "Bouffants, Beehives, and Breaking Gender Norms: Rethinking "Girl Group" Music of the 1950s and 1960s" *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 2 (2012) 121

³¹⁸ *ibid*

³¹⁹ Stos, 'Bouffants, Beehive's, and Breaking Gender Norms: Rethinking "Girl Group" Music of the 1950s and 1960s', 121.

³²⁰ *ibid*

released on End records in 1958 had a double release in which the album cover image was changed. The initial release of the album has a LP cover that features all members of the group. Dressed in matching pink dresses group members Arlene Smith, Lois Harris, Sonia Goring, Jackie Landry Jackson, and Rene Minus stand together in the centre of the cover with 'We Are The Chantels' written above.. Later that same year a second version of the album was released with an alternative cover. Replacing the image of the group is two white teenagers, a girl and a boy, standing at a juke box. As the girl leans against the jukebox the boy can be seen selecting a track using the juke box buttons. Above the juke box and encircled in a white frame is written 'The Chantels.' Notably the white margin framing the text swoops downwards to form an arrow meeting up with the boys button selection. In this cover change we see the erasure of The Chantels as a group of young women, rather they are made object, made machine, a juke box for the consumption of white teenagers. No longer is it 'We Are The Chantels' but simply 'The Chantels.'

Stos makes clear the very category of girl group is always highly unstable as what is thought be a girl group might not be the group indicated but also that the very characteristics upon which girl groups are determined are wholly unstable. As Stos points out "we might not always know a girl group when we see or hear it, or at the very least, we might be surprised by some of what we see or hear"³²¹. Although Stos focuses his discussion upon the content of girl group songs this instability includes not only lyrical associations but the very bodies that produce the voices heard. The removal, erasure and invisibility of Black female bodies at work here demand further attention. By not attending to the entanglement of girl groups and back/ing/ground groups of this period the significance of the contributions made by Black women remains ignored. Although the focus of this project is to attend to back/ing/ground groups, this cannot be achieved if understanding how these groups intersect with the wider context of the girl group

³²¹ Stos, 2012; p120

genre is overlooked, especially considering the use of back/ing/ground groups such as The Blossoms and The Andantes who possessed as dual identity of being both girl group and back/ing/ground group.

The way in which primary groups have been used as back/ing/ground groups during this period and the ways in which they are continuously camouflaged via group identity made it possible for groups to have a fluid identity. Not only where they could work as back/ing/ground vocal groups as well as primary performing or recording acts but also regarding the changing of personnel and employment as an individual backing/ground vocalist. As mentioned above regarding girl groups of this period, changes in personnel often went undetected due to the only ever partial identity of the girl group more generally. The movement from back/ing/ground group/vocalist to primary performing and the changes of group membership remain largely unacknowledged and unnoticed. In this way the Black female voice as back/ing/ground speaks to how the Black female voice as back/ing/ground has been considered a fungible object, easily replaced without recourse to the subject of that body or voice.

The Dreamers and Richard Berry as early antecedent

One of the earliest examples of an existing primary group being used as back/ing/ground group/vocalists can be found with the group The Dreamers and male vocalist Richard Berry and the single "Bye Bye" released on Flair records in 1954.

The Dreamers later evolved to become The Blossoms via shifting personnel and a name change orchestrated by Capitol records upon signing to the label in 1955³²². However, the work undertaken as The Dreamers provides insight into the kind of movements that a back/ing/ground group/vocalist was able to make within the recording industry. Although

³²² Upon signing to Capitol records the group were required to change their name. The Blossoms was selected by an A&R employee at Capitol records "after noticing their different skin tones. He said they look like "a blossom in bloom"

chapter five of this thesis provides further discussion regarding The Blossoms, I would like to introduce the group in their earlier formation here as their history provides a useful base for understanding the status and role of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist more broadly and the different ways in which the background re-forms itself due to different kinds of work and recording opportunities. The Dreamers also demonstrate how the emerging identity of the girl group remains connected to the identity of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist.

The group began as a sextet made up of Fanita James (nee Barrett), Gloria Jones, sisters Anette and Nanette Williams, Pat Howard, and Jewel Cobb. Although Barrett and Cobb had met at Edison Junior High The Dreamers were not formed until later when all group members attended Fremont High School in Los Angeles³²³. Jewel Cobb and Pat Howard left the group in 1955 and the group remained a quartet until 1958 when Nanette Williams left the group and was replaced by Darlene Wright (later to be known as Darlene Love). By the time Wright took up membership in the group the group moniker had become The Blossoms. The groups' first released recording was with Richard Berry in 1954 for a song entitled "Bye Bye" for Flair records. The 45rpm single introduces the record as 'The Dreamers featuring Richard Berry'. This is the first and only time that The Dreamers name comes before Berry's. The following releases that feature The Dreamers either reverse this order to 'Richard Berry and the Dreamers' or do not name the group at all.³²⁴ In addition to their work with Berry, The Dreamers provided back/ing/ground vocals to other solo performers such as Etta James and Eloise Brooks³²⁵, although it remains unclear as to exactly which recordings they featured. As The Dreamers they released one single "Do Not Forget" in 1956 for Flip records. However, the lead singer on their only single release as the primary group The Dreamers was in fact

³²³ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 24.

³²⁴ There are a further two 45rpm releases that explicitly name the Dreamers. "Daddy Daddy" and "Together" both released in 1955 under Richard Berry and The Dreamers for Flair records. The Dreamers also recorded two other singles with Berry but are not named on either release. "Wait for Me" released in 1956 for *RPM* and "Besame Mucho" released in 1958 for *Flip*. Visit <http://www.45cat.com/artist/richard-berry>

³²⁵ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 25.

recorded by non-group member Jenell Hawkins. The Dreamers member Nanette Williams was unable to perform lead for this session a Hawkins replaced her.³²⁶ With Hawkins taking the lead vocal The Dreamers then become the background to their own primary single.

In 1956 group members Gloria Jones, Annette Williams, and Fanita Barrett released two singles for Class records, "Sad Fool" and "More Than You Realise" under the name of The Rollettes. So as early as 1956 there is evidence of movements and changes where primary groups not only perform back/ing/ground for other acts, but also perform under the guise of other group monikers. While interviewing various group members for his work on girl groups John Clemente notes how The Dreamers member Gloria Jones describes how the background offered a form of "creative freedom"³²⁷. Clementes's remark about creative freedom appears to be in relation to harmonic forms that the group were permitted to have agency over, rather than lyrics, melody, or production. Clementes also remarks how the group "weren't interested in making a name for themselves as a primary group"³²⁸ and that they were "happy being backing vocalists."³²⁹ Although Clementes remark remains unverified it does speak to the potential opportunities associated with the back/ing/ground, a point that will be discussed further in later chapters. As noted above being in the background permits movements to remain largely undetected. Unlike a primary group where each member is made be highly visible and identifiable as an individual the back/ing/ground and their relationship with the formation of girl groups from the same period offers a different kind of being where a group, or group member is able to shift and flex becoming momentarily another group, or part of another act largely undetected. However, as will be discussed occupation of the background and the kind of being it permits or promotes remains highly unstable. However, the following section

³²⁶ Clemente, 25.

³²⁷ Clemente, 25.

³²⁸ Clemente, 25.

³²⁹ Clemente, 25.

focuses on the first recorded release from The Dreamers as a way to further question the status of the back/ing/ground as supportive and always in service to the lead.

On the recording of "Bye Bye" The Dreamers sing continuously as one group with no one member taken any lyric or song part individually. The vocals are organised in a call and response motif throughout most of the song with The Dreamers echoing the line "bye bye baby" or "bye bye" after each of Berry's lines. The narrative presents the male vocal explaining to his female counterpart(s) that he is leaving her (them):

RB: Bye bye baby
TD: Bye bye baby
RB: I'm leaving You
TD: Bye bye baby
RB: Don't care what you do
TD: Bye bye baby
RB: Bye Bye
TD: Bye bye
RB: Bye bye
TD: Bye bye

RB: You just fuss and abuse me
TD: Bye bye baby
RB: Cuss and misuse me
TD: Bye bye baby
RB: But there's one thing for me
TD: Bye bye baby
RB: That's Bye
TD: Bye bye
RB: Bye bye
TD: Bye bye

The first vocal bridge has both the Dreamers and Berry singing the same lyric apart from the very last line:

ALL: I've been walking
ALL: 'round in circles
ALL: So mad that I could
ALL: Really scream
ALL: So the best thing for me
ALL: Pretty baby is
RB: Just to split the scene

Up until this point in the song it appears as if Berry is driving the narrative in that the male subject of the story is leaving his female lover due to poor treatment. However, by the third verse there is a distinct shift:

RB: Bye bye baby
TD: Bye bye baby
RB: I forgot to go
TD: Bye bye baby
RB: Hate to leave you so
TD: Bye bye baby
RB: But Bye
TD: Bye bye
RB: Bye bye
TD: Bye bye

By the third verse Berry appears to have second thoughts about leaving, however the Dreamers insistent 'bye bye's' make clear that Berry is to (be) move(d) on. Rather than simply providing vocal support to Berry's lyric The Dreamers articulations can be thought to have an active part in the song's trajectory. They are not simply 'backing up' or echoing Berry's articulations but resisting them too. By the second bridge and the final verse The Dreamers are in complete control of the narrative insisting that Berry do what he initially stated and leave. The track ends with both Berry and The Dreamers echoing each other's 'bye bye' and 'so long', but with every repetition it becomes clear that it is not The Dreamers who are echoing Berry but the other way around.

The release of The Dreamers featuring Richard Berry and the recording of "Bye Bye" is significant as it not only offers an early example of an existing female vocal group being used as 'back/ing/ground' but also how this understanding of what background vocals do is highly constructed and offers opportunity to reconsider the limitations ascribed to the role of the background. Furthermore, The Dreamers reconfigure the back/ing/ground so that it produces the narrative rather than simply responding to, or within it. The Dreamers also offer further insight into untraced and invisible movement of voices and bodies that the role both demands and permits. These themes of invisibility and vocal flex will be discussed in a later chapter regarding The Blossoms of which The Dreamers were the original formation. However, what I have aimed to at least introduce here is how primary groups such as The Dreamers were

subsumed into the popular music industry of the twentieth century and constructed as back/ing/ground vocalists.

The Back/in/ground as Minor Character

Contending with Susan Fast's description that the back/ing/ground group/vocalist is "sonically marked as Black and female"³³⁰ leads to the questions of how space can be thought to be racialised and gendered and to what extent does always considering the background in relation to the foreground maintain divisionist discourse as it pertains to race and gender.

The back/ing/ground is considered secondary or marginal to the foreground/lead voice only within a framework that seeks to value the foreground/lead voice over the back/ing/ground. If we map the back/ing/ground onto race and gender and contend its indexing across race and gender then within a heteronormative-patriarchal-white supremacist system the foreground is (always) white, male visible. However, this dynamic between background and foreground only seeks to maintain the existing social hierarchies as they function within white supremacist-patriarchy. Although it is not my intention here to simply reverse the status of foreground and background but rather to attend to background as a space unrelated to the foreground, or at least destabilize this relationship echoing Toni Morrison when she said "I do not want to alter one hierarchy to institute another"³³¹ to "exchange dominations"³³² but to consider the background as a space not dependent on the foreground. It is not that I can cut or fully separate these spaces, but rather to temporarily ignore the foreground and to listen to the background. To think about the background as a space that can and does exist outside of its relationship to the foreground.

³³⁰ Fast, 'Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music'.

³³¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1993), 8.

³³² Morrison, 8.

It is perhaps not that the back/ing/ground is Black and female but rather the foreground demands it to be to determine itself as visible. The construction of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is akin to what Morrison calls a “fabricated presence”³³³ required by and always in service to the lead, or in Morrison’s case the protagonist. Throughout *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison questions how “canonical American literature” considers itself “unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first Africans and the African Americans in the United States.” Morrison questions how the “presence of black people in the United States” has been overwhelmingly ignored or erased within white literary imagination.³³⁴ She notes that the use of, what Morrison calls “Africanist presence” within American literature has been “carefully invented” as a way to serve White literary imagination. In her analysis of Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Morrison shows how the Africanist presence within the narrative merely serves to function for the white protagonist (this is perhaps even reflected in the very title of the work, where the ‘slave girl’ Nancy’s name is omitted). In describing this relationship Morrison states: “This novel is not a story of a mean, vindictive mistress; it is the story of a desperate one [...] whose social pedestal rests on the sturdy spine of racial degradation.”³³⁵ Morrison notes how the character, ‘Sapphira’, constructs herself via her relationships with “surrogate black bodies” who “become her hands and feet, her fantasies of sexual ravish and intimacy with her husband [...] and her sole source of love.”³³⁶ These minor characters whose experience of the world is continually framed via their relationship to the central (white) character become the basis for the central characters very existence and as noted if their presence and “condition are removed from the text [...] we have nothing: no process of deranged self-construction [...] no drama of limitless power.”³³⁷ Morrison’s work is useful,

³³³ Throughout *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* Morrison discusses the literary uses of fabricated “Africanist presence”.

³³⁴ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 5.

³³⁵ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and The Literary Imagination*, 25.

³³⁶ Morrison, 26.

³³⁷ Morrison, 26.

here, as it permits us to question the construction of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground as a requirement in order for a central figure to emerge and exist.

The ways in which the back/ing/ground group or vocalist is figured often assumes that the role is associated with support. That it is a role that is in service to something or someone else, whether it be the overall structure of a song or lead singer or performer. The back/ing/ground constructs, in part, the world in which a lead singer or performer exists. The role of the back/ing/ground has been regarded as a stopping point on the way to 'stardom'. For example, the documentary *Twenty Feet from Stardom* insists that those who have occupied the back/ing/ground have sought the attention of the foreground. It continually frames the role in relation to the foreground, attempting to both highlight the work, skill and talent of specific figures while discussing the means in which access to the foreground has been denied. Even the title suggests that the back/ing/ground is merely on the periphery of stardom and that all that is required is access to this space. However, this line of inquiry denies the back/ing/ground to be thought of as an active and productive space in and of itself. Rather it maintains a relationship between back/ing/ground and lead where the latter and those that occupy this space are always on the periphery of a place that is visible, produces a secure image, knowable and of focus. Although Neville's documentary attempts to decenter the focus away from musical 'stars' and to show the work contributed by the background, it does little to "reclaim the periphery" but rather preserves the existing divisions of labour.³³⁸

Whether backing up the lead singer or narrative of the track, or sonically to be the background to another's foreground, the back/ing/ground then might be considered the minor characters of a performance or recording.

³³⁸ David Scott Diffrient, 'Backup Singers, Celebrity Culture, and Civil Rights, Racializing Space and Spatializing Race in *20 Feet from Stardom*', *Black Camera* 8, no. 2 (2017): 44.

Alex Woloch describes two kinds of minoriness as “the *worker* and the *eccentric*, the flat character who is reduced to a single functional use within the narrative, and the fragmentary character who plays a disruptive, oppositional role with the plot.”³³⁹ These two types of minoriness can be thought to characterise the Black female voice as background in that they become an expected trope within a recording or performance yet should not seek to dominate the voice of the lead and also to provide a vocal otherness.

As discussed by Susan Fast within the context of rock music the role of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground can be thought to provide authentication to rock's white masculinist heteronormativity in that “they are meant to reference a social world different from that of the band members and, for this we are meant to hear their otherness. It is often crucial that the black gospel sound come through and, of course that we recognize the voices as women's voices.”³⁴⁰ As noted by Diffrient the use of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground within rock (marked as white, male and heteronormative) makes explicit relationships between race and space. The relationship between space and race where the Black female body and voice is positioned ‘behind’ the voices and bodies of others (white and male within the context of rock) is a stark example of how racist ideologies of difference have been quite “literally *staged* for millions of music fans over the past half century.”³⁴¹ Acknowledging the role the Black female voice as back/ing/ground has been made to occupy within the context of rock exposes, at least, two opposing statuses that the construction is made to occupy; to be invisible and to sound indistinct so as not “overpower a lead singer”³⁴² but to also to present the sound of the Other. In rock, the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is used to authenticate, to produce authentic ‘blackness’ on behalf of the white male who cannot fully inhabit the context he so wishes. He

³³⁹ Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many, The One vs. the Many* “Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel” (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 25, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400825752>.

³⁴⁰ Fast, ‘Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music’, 178.

³⁴¹ Diffrient, ‘Backup Singers, Celebrity Culture, and Civil Rights, Racializing Space and Spatializing Race in 20 Feet from Stardom’, 26.

³⁴² Fast, ‘Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music’, 177.

uses the Black female voice to authenticate his place within the context of black sound, cultures and music as well as providing a “cathartic emotional release” that the lead is unable to undertake.³⁴³ Fast discusses how this use of the Black female voice as background can be heard in Merry Clayton’s role on the Rolling Stone’s recording of ‘Gimme Shelter’.

Although Clayton sings individually and not as a group on The Rolling Stones recording of ‘Gimme Shelter,’ (Clayton was a member of Ray Charles’ backing group, The Raeletts, from 1966 to 1968) Fast describes Clayton’s role on ‘Gimme Shelter’ as “substantial” as she does not only perform on the chorus (as is common when singing back/ing/ground) but also following the first verse Clayton “joins Jagger for the second half of each line of subsequent verses and is also featured in a brief solo.”³⁴⁴

The minorness of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground, here, grates against the position of the lead singer yet are not permitted to enter or exit the narrative of the song in the same way as the lead singer. Rather her voice is imprisoned within the narrative structure of the song sounding only in fragments. Although as noted by Fast, Clayton has an increased presence on the recording than most back/ing/ground group/vocalists have³⁴⁵, Clayton is nevertheless contained to the narrative structure. And although Clayton’s voice may be thought to “break out of the constricted form”³⁴⁶ she remains a minor character to Jagger’s lead. Clayton remains unnamed and anonymous on the recording, used because of her race and gender in addition to her own tremendous vocal skill. Clayton’s voice cannot shift from the construction that has positioned her voice as, in and of back/ing/ground.

As the “worker” the Black female voice as back/ing/ground is “smoothly absorbed as a gear within the narrative machine”³⁴⁷ performing echoic repetitions or phonic 'oohs' and 'ahhs' that

³⁴³ Fast, ‘Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music’. 182

³⁴⁴ Fast, 182.

³⁴⁵ Fast, 183.

³⁴⁶ Fast, 183.

³⁴⁷ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 25.

do not seek to disrupt the narrative structure of the song. Where Woloch describes this kind of minoriness as flat, it still possesses a texture or an ability to produce a type of phonic space even if not an overtly disruptive one. Repeating Corbett's observation that the background is not necessarily extra-diegetic but rather constitutes the diegesis in which the foreground exists.

The Black female voice as back/ing/ground occupies both these minor modes presenting equally the "outbreaks of eccentricity" found in Clayton's role on 'Gimme Shelter' and the "monotony of functionality" found in the back/ing/ground vocalists' role to provide echoic utterances of the lead singers vocals, or sporadic 'oohs' and 'ahhs' throughout a recording or performance. Woloch notes how both types of minoriness subordinate the interiority of these characters and "catalyse two different modes of inadequate speech."³⁴⁸ In a similar way the back/ing/ground group/vocalist's interiority is subordinated through the interlocking of the background to the foreground so that the back/ing/ground group/vocalist is always seemingly in service to the voice in the foreground, or the narrative of the song. Woloch's inadequate speech can be heard via the fragmentary sounding of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist's voice and also the very words or utterances they are often made to perform.

The back/ing/ground group/vocalist can be thought to exist on the edge of sonic attention in that their voices are heard but not listened to,³⁴⁹ their bodies marked yet invisible. For Woloch, "narrative meaning takes in the dynamic flux of attention and neglect toward the various characters who are locked within the same story but have radically different positions with the narrative [...] [a]s with so many narratives, this arrangement of characters is structured around the relationship between one central individual who dominates the story and a host of subordinate figures who jostle for, and within, the limited space that remains"³⁵⁰ Although back/ing/ground group/vocalist's don't necessarily 'jostle' to occupy the narrative space of a

³⁴⁸ Woloch, 26.

³⁴⁹ Evette Benton cited from Hoffman, "'Backing Up Is Hard to Do" The Village Voice March 18, 1986'.

³⁵⁰ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 2.

song in the same way Woloch describes here, they can be considered to characterise a similar relationship between a lead singer/performer as Woloch's central figure and minor characters. Minor characters are configured as "exterior, social, and *delimited* agents"³⁵¹. As asserted by Fast back/ing/ground group/vocalists are often considered exterior in the sense that as a role and as individuals they are valued as inconsequential to the track or performance. Yet at the same time as an inevitable part of a song they exist as interior to the track or performance, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter with Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side" they precede it in some way – as anonymous yet racialised and gendered bodies. In this sense then they both create and exceed the edges of the track or performance. On the one hand they are what foregrounds the voice of the lead singer yet to do so they remain largely unknown, denied visibility unable to become a fixed image³⁵². Rather they remain a quantifiable unit, a trio or quartet, named via a group moniker and largely anonymised.

Woloch's work in literary theory helps us to re-think the relationship between foreground/lead vocals and the background/back/ing/ground vocals. Regarding the significance of minor characters, he describes that significance "resides [...] in the way that the character disappears, and in the tension or relief that results in this vanishing."³⁵³ Woloch asserts how minor characters can call attention to the character-space describing them as, resting "in the shadow-space between narrative position and human personality."³⁵⁴ This occupation of a 'shadow-space' speaks to both the spatial and symbolic status the back/ing/ground group/vocalist is made to occupy in that their existence stems from the track or performance of which they are part, yet they are made to bring the weight of Black cultural expression by being indexed across race and gender. Woloch continues:

³⁵¹ Woloch, 3. Original emphasis

³⁵² This denial of an ability to secure their own image is both an advantage and disadvantage. To be denied a fixed visual referent on the one hand means one can manoeuvre unseen, outside the politics of visibility. Yet to be denied this visibility meant that many groups were unable to secure themselves a space within the recording industry.

³⁵³ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 38.

³⁵⁴ Woloch, 40.

an implied human being who gets constricted into a delimited role, but who has enough resonance *with* a human being to make us aware of this constricted position *as* delimited. The strange resonance of minor characters – the way we so often come away from a novel, a drama, or a film remembering a marginal player [...] stems from the intricacy of this narrative process; from the character who is not directly or fully represented in the narrative, and who comes to command a peculiar kind of attention in the partial occlusion of his fullness.”³⁵⁵

This “peculiar kind of attention,” as Woloch puts it, speaks to the requirement of back/ing/ground group/vocalist s to be seen yet not noticed, heard but not listened to. It is as if their very status is to resist being fully acknowledged. As implied in the forum exchange at the opening of this chapter, full acknowledgement would disrupt focus upon a lead performer, shifting attention towards background. This shift is considered negative as it may unsettle the status of the lead performer. Moreover, shifting attention towards the background may unsettle the very status of the background altogether. To offer the background attention risks foregrounding it. The role, it seems of the back/ing/ground vocal is to remain on the periphery. However, as highlighted by Diffrient attempts to simply bring the back/ing/ground forward does little in addressing the back/ing/ground foreground dichotomy but rather simply moves characters around within the same framework. What interests me is how we might resist this temptation to bring the background to the fore, by attempting to attend the back/ing/ground from a position of proximity that allows the background to maintain itself as such.

The Back/ing/ground as Space

³⁵⁵ Woloch, 40. Original emphasis

The back/ing/ground vocalist not only speaks to musical and lyrical content but also speaks to spatial forms of organisation in terms of both the visual and the aural. When visually spatialized, the role is to occupy the space behind the subject who is placed in the foreground. Even when this isn't literal (when back/ing/ground vocalists are physically positioned to the side or even in front of the primary performer) they are symbolically situated 'behind'³⁵⁶ the lead performer who is positioned, whether literally or symbolically, in the foreground. However, the spatializing of the back/ing/ground in sonic terms seems to function slightly differently. Sonically the back/ing/ground is not necessarily 'behind' the foreground in terms of volume. It can occupy the sonic space differently in that the background is not necessarily sonically 'behind' the foreground but rather is rendered 'behind' symbolically.

However, when thinking spatially the back/ing/ground speaks to wider socio-political structures. Discussing European 18th and 19th century landscape painting featuring the rural class John Barrell describes how within the pictorial plane the background describes the "place the poor are shown as occupying in the society"³⁵⁷. For Barrell, the relationship between what or who is pictorially foregrounded and backgrounded speaks to the wider social structures of class of the period. He understands the background as a "constraint"³⁵⁸ determining "how the poor could, or rather could not be represented."³⁵⁹

Barrell describes how the background serves as the space of which the labouring class may occupy. Not only this but there is a certain way that the background and the labourers placed within the background must appear. The constraints placed upon the labouring figures for Barrell's discussion of landscapes can be thought to occur elsewhere. As shown in the forum

³⁵⁶ I say symbolically as in terms of the aural conditions of the back/ing/ground it is not that the vocals are mixed to sound behind the foreground, and as has been mentioned the physical organisation of the back/ing/ground at the level of performance does not always situate the back/ing/ground as physically 'behind,' the foreground yet it remains read and heard in these ways.

³⁵⁷ John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1.

³⁵⁸ Barrell, 1.

³⁵⁹ Barrell, 1.

discussion presented at the beginning of chapter two the phonic space that the background occupies cannot or should not dominate the phonic space of the foreground. Furthermore, the background as a phonic space should maintain a level of proximity to the foreground. Furthermore, the voices of the background are not so much individualised people, but figures of the background. As figures in the background, they are not to be looked at, or listened to, but rather simply seen.

Barrell notes the aesthetic concerns regarding labourers figured within the background describing how actions depicted along with aesthetic qualities hint at the constraints regarding what could and could not be shown of the labouring class. Although Barrell observes changes regarding how the labouring class was depicted within the pastoral scene he nevertheless notes how the rural class have been continually figured as contented, and continually framed via the artifice of unity regarding the landscape and ergo their societal 'place' of which they were depicted working with and in. This was to present a sense of unity regarding the working class and the land, and the gentry of which they worked the land for. Not only this but the background or in Barrell's case, the landscape functions as a site of unity that speaks to social issues more broadly. The working class could not be depicted grimacing as they are overwhelmed by physical labour as this would perhaps expose the realities of the conditions of such a life. Nor were they depicted idling as this too threatened the state of unity between background and foreground. Regarding his selected material Barrell argues that landscape painting featuring the rural class speaks to what either or both the painter or patron "wish to believe was true about the rural poor and their relations with nature and with the rest of society."³⁶⁰ Considering the physical and symbolic means of organisation as they relate to the back/ing/ground group/vocalist there is a similar sense of unity, or unification regarding the backgrounds relationship to or with the foreground.

³⁶⁰ Barrell, 18.

One of the roles of the back/ing/ground group is to not disrupt the lead by means of vocal style, or volume that may dominate the phonic space of the lead singer in the foreground. This is achieved in various ways. For example, the back/ing/ground is denied individuality through use of group names, matching or similar costume and simply being known as the background or backing. Little to no acknowledgement is given to the individual subjects that make up a group. Also, those place in the background do not so much speak or relate to each other, but rather speak to the foreground or with the song more broadly. Their utterances do not relate between each other – their attention must be towards the foreground or the background within which they are situated but never between each other. They are often presented in a state of unity with both each other, amongst the group, and the foreground continuously echoing or supporting the foreground regardless of actual tension outside of the songs narrative. Yet, to echo Barrell this unity is artifice “made out of the actuality of division.”³⁶¹ Barrell discusses how the labouring class is also depicted in the shadows of the landscape where the lit aspect is thought to be where upper class may be figured or placed, noting the labouring class as being “absorbed” by the very “landscapes they cultivate”³⁶². A similar process can be said for the back/ing/ground vocalist and group; that figures are absorbed by the very back/ing/ground that they produce. This division between shadow and light, dark and lit aspects of a landscape as they are mapped onto social hierarchies can perhaps be brought to the space of the background and the lead. The lead is framed as the ‘star’ or main focus of a song and performance, where the background is considered a labouring role where groups or individual session vocalists perform and record with (often) many artists, studios and labels. The role, as described by Hoffman, has been thought to repel stardom and *star-light* that it is a role that can only exist in the shadow of this ‘light’. Yet this continual framing of the role as one of support repelling

³⁶¹ Barrell, 5.

³⁶² Barrell, 133.

focus neglects how the role has been constructed to do so and how this is further problematized when considering how the role has been constructed as Black and female. As noted by Barrell the occupation of the background by labouring figures is not so much a natural scene but rather constructed as such in order to simultaneously produce and maintain the division of social structures. Furthermore, this repelling of visibility suggests that the background requires invisibility rather than a state that has been hoisted upon it. Returning yet again the Benton's comment regarding the back/ing/ground as 'being seen yet not noticed, heard but not listened to' questions the spectacle and spectatorship of the back/ing/ground. It is not that the back/ing/ground is invisible and simply 'not seen' or undetected. But rather that it is un-seen. Its invisibility lies in it being seen yet ignored, or at least not brought into focus. Yet at the same time being sonically and visually 'marked' as Black and female makes the back/ing/ground also hypervisible. Significantly, however, although the back/ing/ground remains un-seen, it should be acknowledged that the background 'sees', that it looks out and looks at. From this position the back/ing/ground exists elsewhere.

Hearing Sonic Blackness in the Back/ing/ground

The notion that the back/ing/ground is sonically marked as Black and female due to an inherent quality of singing as it relates to the Black female voice merely maintains racist stereotypes as they pertain to race and voice. Susan Fast suggests that the back/ing/ground is sonically marked as Black and female due to the occupation of back/ing/ground vocalist being African American women or white women and the increasing popularity of gospel style singing within musical performance in during the 1960s³⁶³. Yet Fast's analysis merely maintains the construction allowing it to pass as a convention forcing an association with the Black female voice as a 'natural' or inherent sound. Not only does this maintain that the Black female voice sounds a

³⁶³ Fast, 'Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music'.

certain way that is always identifiable in terms of race and gender but also that this vocality/voice somehow naturally belongs to/in the background. Furthermore, the notion that the back/ing/ground is socially marked across race and gender due to an increasing popularity of the gospel singing style neglects to consider the use of the Black female voices as back/ing/ground prior to the 1960s and unrelated to the gospel style.

Eidsheim's work on voice, timbre and race asserts that "when social categories associated with vocal timbre, such as gender and race, are identified as inherent characteristics of individuals, they function as subtle gatekeeping practices which control access to social positions and their attendant social benefits."³⁶⁴ The insistence that the back/ing/ground is Black and female work to control and gatekeep the status of the back/ing/ground. Eidsheim asserts how "the embodied nature of the voice causes timbre to seem immanent to individual bodies, rather than encultured"³⁶⁵. She goes onto to describe that:

"[W]hile there are many and close connections between the sounds of soul singing and black community and culture, the assumption that (a) the sound itself is essentially black and (b) these connections indicate that African American express an essential blackness through their vocal timbre result primarily from the way in which race, as an organising principle of American society has given rise to a category which bundles together a particular body and particular vocal timbre without real conceptual coherence."³⁶⁶

Eidsheim asserts how the correlation:

³⁶⁴ Nina Eidsheim, 'Synthesizing Race : Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre', *Trans Revista, Transcultural De Música*, 2009. Np.

³⁶⁵ Eidsheim, 'Synthesizing Race : Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre', np.

³⁶⁶ Eidsheim, 'Synthesizing Race : Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre', np.

[B]etween a vocal timbre and the singer's so-called race is a symptom of the "standardization" of the concept of race in a given society – and [...] the reification of the body and voice which takes place during this process. When a person is identified by the sound of her voice as African American, the sound of that voice represents the vocal community to which that singer belongs, or in which she desires to mark herself as a participant, rather than the essential sound of her body. That is, the correlation of such vocal communities with race, ethnicity or class is not inherent; instead it is a symptom of the divisions that are important in the society – and it is the *performance* of these divisions”³⁶⁷

Eidsheim's work clearly outlines that vocal timbre and connections to 'race' are both highly constructed and related to both standardized conceptions of race and an enculturation of voice born out of these conceptions.

Fast contends that the role of the background vocalist/group is often occupied by African American women *and* white women yet is continually *sonically marked* as Black and female.³⁶⁸ However, further exploration as to what is meant by sonically marked as Black remain unattended to. My contention is that the back/in/ground remains sonically marked as Black and female due to a mode of listening that maintains the relationship between back/ing/ground and foreground/lead vocalist as hierarchical, and problematic listening that frames the Black female voice in a particular way based on what Stoeber refers to as the sonic colour line. My claim here is that the back/ing/ground is sonically marked as Black because of a listening ear that perceives this space as producing voice(s) that are intended to be heard yet not listened to. Unlike the highly visible and dominant space of the foreground that is perceived as always listened to. The constructed relationship between back/ing/ground and lead that proposes the lead as dominant and the back/ing/ground as dominated speaks to what Stoeber

³⁶⁷ Eidsheim, 'Synthesizing Race: Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre', np.

³⁶⁸ Fast, 'Genre, Subjectivity and Back-up Singing in Rock Music', 176.

calls the 'sonic color line'³⁶⁹ and the 'listening ear'³⁷⁰. Furthermore, I contend that the indexing of the back/ing/ground across race and gender has less to do with an inherent sound or vocal style as it is (problematically) associated with the Black female voice but attributed to labour and existing and problematic ideologies of difference as they are mapped onto race, class and gender.

In her work on voice, timbre and race Eidsheim discusses how vocal timbre is formed performatively and via enculturation rather than the materialisation of some essential or inherent sound relating to a speakers identity.³⁷¹ She asserts that "when social categories associated with vocal timbre, such as gender and race, are identified as inherent characteristics of individuals, they function as subtle gatekeeping practices which control access to social positions and their attendant social benefits."³⁷² The construction of the background as Black and female exposes these "subtle gatekeeping practices"³⁷³ inserting the background as always in service to the foreground.

Jennifer Stoever introduces two concepts regarding how sound connects with race "showing how listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance in the shadow of visions alleged cultural dominance"³⁷⁴. Stoever's concepts of the 'sonic colour line' and the 'listening ear' discuss the relationship between "sound, race, and American life"³⁷⁵ where "the sonic color line describes the process of racializing sound – how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds – and its product

³⁶⁹ Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line, The Sonic Color Line* (New York: New York University Press, 2017)

³⁷⁰ Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line, The Sonic Color Line* (New York: New York University Press, 2017)

³⁷¹ Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound : Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*; Revista, Música, and Eidsheim, 'Synthesizing Race : Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre'.

³⁷² Revista, Música, and Eidsheim, 'Synthesizing Race : Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre'.np.

³⁷³ Eidsheim, 'Synthesizing Race : Towards an Analysis of the Performativity of Vocal Timbre', np.

³⁷⁴ Stoever, *Sonic Color Line*, 4.

³⁷⁵ Stoever, 7.

the hierarchical division sounded between “whiteness” and “blackness”³⁷⁶. The sonic colour line, then, emerges between the background and foreground determining the two spaces as associated or essential to the social categories of race and gender. Stoever continues describing how:

[T]he listening ear drives the sonic color line; it is a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue – and change – over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to confirm to the sonic color line’s norms. Through the listening ear’s surveillance, discipline, and interpretation, certain associations between race and sound come to seem normal, natural, and “right”³⁷⁷

She goes on to describe how the sonic color line “is both a hermeneutics of race and a marker of its im/material presence” enabling “listeners to construct and discern racial identities based on voices, sounds, and particular soundscapes [...] and in turn, to mobilize racially coded batteries of sounds as discrimination by assigning them differential cultural, social, and political value,”³⁷⁸ what Obadike refers to as “mythic blackness”³⁷⁹. For Stoever “sound” is a “critical modality through which subjects (re)produce, apprehend, and resist imposed racial identities and structures of racist violence”³⁸⁰ Sound is “visuality’s doppelganger [...] unacknowledged but ever present in the construction of race and the performance of racial oppression.”³⁸¹ Stoever’s project “connects sound with race [...] showing how listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance in the shadow of visions alleged cultural dominance.”³⁸² Considering the Black female voice as back/ing/ground

³⁷⁶ Stoever, 8.

³⁷⁷ Stoever, 8.

³⁷⁸ Stoever, 11.

³⁷⁹ Obadike, ‘Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound’.

³⁸⁰ Stoever, *Sonic Color Line*, 4.

³⁸¹ Stoever, 4.

³⁸² Stoever, 4.

Stoever's listening ear can be thought to be a driving force in its construction. As the listening ear "normalizes the aural tastes and standards of white elite masculinity as the singular way to interpret sonic information"³⁸³ the back/ing/ground is contended as Black and female against the visibility and logocentrism of the (white) (male) foreground. The contention that the back/ing/ground is sonically marked as Black and female demonstrates how "listening is an interpretative socially constructed practice conditioned by historically contingent and culturally specific value systems riven with power relations"³⁸⁴ and that "through multiple simultaneous processes of dominant representation [...] particular sounds are identified, exaggerated, and "matched" to racialized bodies"³⁸⁵ That the back/ing/ground is 'heard' via race and gender demonstrates this process. Acceptance of the back/ing/ground as Black and female maintains the black/white binary regarding constructions of race more broadly. It is a "deliberately reductionist racial project constructing white power and privilege against the alterity and abjection of the imagined polarity of "blackness."³⁸⁶ In relation to thinking about the construction of the back/ing/ground as Black and female Stoever's work addresses how the sonic marking of the back/ing/ground across race and gender has been constructed as a way to determine the background in a hierarchical relationship with the foreground as it is problematically mapped onto construction of racial difference. Stoever's conception of the listening ear demonstrates how the background is not simply 'heard' across the social constructions of race and gender, but 'heard as' regardless of the actual presence of a Black female voice, demonstrating how the sonic marking of the back/ing/ground occurs in the listener rather than the sound itself. Furthermore, by highlighting the "racialized hierarchy of speech sounds"³⁸⁷ Stoever acknowledges how both language, voice and vocality are used to

³⁸³ Stoever, 13.

³⁸⁴ Stoever, 14.

³⁸⁵ Stoever, 11.

³⁸⁶ Stoever, 21.

³⁸⁷ Stoever, 279.

not only racially determine subjects but to deny subjects entry to certain spaces. The vocality of the back/ing/ground is unable to enter or occupy the foreground in the same way as the lead. It is perpetually 'marked' as back/ing/ground regardless of the space it actually occupies or produces on a recording or during a performance.

The vocables produced by back/ing/ground groups are, although not exclusive, often regarded as nonsense vocables, echoic vocalisations of the lead, cautionary advice pertaining to the leads internal narrative within the lyric. The speech sounds groups and vocalists have been required to produce situations that situate them in a hierarchy where their vocal agency is reduced. Furthermore, the articulations made by back/ing/ground groups do not necessarily directly connect to language but rather are situated outside of language, such as elongated 'oohs' and 'aahs' that provide a kind of phonic backdrop for lead vocalists lyrics. Returning to Evette Benton's comments that describe the back/ing/ground as an extension of the orchestration or instrumentation of the recording or performance and singing "the unsingable, the undreamable, the unthinkable"³⁸⁸ frame the voice of back/ing/ground vocalists in a way that further establishes how the role of the back/ing/ground vocal is to produce a voice that extends beyond human speech, yet the identity of this voice is, as discussed above is re-routed back to the Black female body.

The staging of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground seems to determinedly limit vocality so that its creativity appears limited. This point is what allows for further denigration of the role and downplays any vocal skill or training a vocalist may possess. The limited vocables that the back/ing/ground group/vocalist is permitted to perform also feeds into the construction of the role across race and gender in that it restricts the very language of the performing bodies. The construction of the back/ing/ground as Black and female and its indexing across these limited vocalities function to further limit the role and those bodies who

³⁸⁸ Hoffman, "Backing Up Is Hard to Do" *The Village Voice* March 18, 1986', 308.

have been made to perform in this role. Continually hearing the back/ing/ground as Black and female without attending to its construction becomes an attempt to consider the role upon essentialist ideas of 'black' sounds and voice specifically. Stoever argues how "essentialist ideas about "black" sounds and listening offered white elites a new method of grounding racial abjection in the body while cultivating white listening practices as critical, discerning, and delicate and, above all, as the standard of citizenship and personhood."³⁸⁹ Stoever's argument echoes the constraints put upon the back/in/ground in that its indexing across race and gender is due to its supposed relationship to and with the foreground/lead. As Stoever observes, "representations have a profound role in shaping thoughts, bodies, even notions of reality itself. Racial ideologies are (re)produced through the representational structures of discourse, aural imagery, and performance."³⁹⁰ The back/ing/ground as Black and female becomes, then, a literal staging of problematic ideologies of racial difference.

It is my contention that the ways in which the back/ing/ground is constructed promote a way of listening that seeks to maintain the hierarchical relationship between back/ing/ground and lead as mentioned above. Returning to Benton's description of the role of the back/ing/ground as being *heard yet not listened to* offers useful insight into the mode of listening that the construction of the back/ing/ground promotes.

Roland Barthes makes the distinction between hearing and listening by describing hearing as a "physiological phenomenon"³⁹¹ and listening as a "psychological act."³⁹² This distinction frames hearing as a passive action related to the mechanisms of the body more generally and the ear specifically and listening as a "practical-social construct."³⁹³ Listening, here, is framed as active where the listener actively attends to the sounds produced and extracts meaning from

³⁸⁹ Stoever, *Sonic Color Line*, 5.

³⁹⁰ Stoever, 11.

³⁹¹ Barthes, 'Listening', 245.

³⁹² Barthes, 245.

³⁹³ Jonathon Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 100.

them. Yet hearing is considered absent of these actions as if sounds that are 'heard' simply pass through or even by the ear, sensed perhaps yet not fully perceived: "hearing implies simply the detection of sound, listening implies one's active attention to that sound."³⁹⁴

Contending that the back/ing/ground is merely heard but not listened to makes clear how the voices that produce the back/ing/ground always remain at the edges of attention. To be listened to would mean that the listener attends to these voices therefore momentarily shifting the aural focus away from the foreground/lead. Yet insisting that the back/ing/ground is simply only 'heard' allows for the relationship between back/ing/ground and foreground/lead to remain intact. My contention here is that the construction of the back/ing/ground and its indexing across race and gender is what supports this mode of listening, or hearing, that wilfully and problematically maintains this binary relationship. If we are only meant to hear the back/ing/ground and not listen to it, it suggests that the back/ing/ground is framed as being absent of meaning, that as a phonic space it lacks meaning. This in turn is reinforced by the continuous framing of the back/ing/ground as subsidiary and supportive and always in relation to the foreground/lead. Moreover, it is not simply that the back/ing/ground is heard but rather that it is heard *as*. The back/ing/ground is heard *as* Black and female due to the conditions in which it is made to function in relation to the lead vocal. Crucially, however, the construction of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground denies or at least ignores how this space also perceives; that one can see from the back/ing/ground and indeed when situated in this space do not necessarily perceive yourself to be in or of the back/ing/ground, rather the perceptual framework shifts. The construction of the Black female voice as back/ing/ground forgets that through this construction the foreground is too produced that "one does not have perspective

³⁹⁴ Tina Rigby Hanssen, "Please, Do Not Turn up the Volume": Quiet Microsound and the Displacement of Auditory Perspective in Works by Miki Yui', *Sound Effects: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Sound and Sound Experience* 2, no. 2 (2012): 60.

but is (re)produced through perspective.”³⁹⁵ The insistence that the back/ing/ground is sonically marked as Black and female without attending to its very construction is perhaps symptomatic of what Thomson refers to as *white aurality* where the foreground is amplified³⁹⁶.

To summarise, the core points outlined in this chapter indicate how the Black female singing voice as back/ing/ground is a construction. It is a construction rooted in not simply an increase in Black female singers singing back/ing/ground, but rather systems of labour as they relate to the production of post-war popular music in the US, and particularly the emergence of the girl groups of the late 1950s and 1960s. The status of the back/ing/ground group and vocalist, then, can be understood not simply as one of support, but one whose relation to lead, song, performance, and the recording industry is more complex. As an inevitability that comes to precede a track, that becomes an expectation and indeed, as will be discussed in the following chapter a demand, the status of the back/ing/ground can be considered as highly productive. Where this chapter has sought to establish the ways in which the back/ing/ground has been constructed as Black and female the following chapter seeks to discuss how the conditions of this productive mode situate the back/ing/ground within the realms of invisibility. As outlined with Reed's recording the voices of the black female back/ing/ground group/vocalist must only exist in a state of invisibility or their visibility would determine them as white. For the lyric to function the invisibility of these actual bodies must remain for the symbolic body of the Black female to be invoked via the lyric.

As will be discussed in the following chapter it is this status invisibility and their containment within the mechanisms of the recording studio that allows them to become or be used as a phonic technology. As a phonic technology of the studio the role of the

³⁹⁵ Marie Thompson, 'Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies', *Parallax* 23, no. 3 (2017): 274, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2017.1339967%0A>.

³⁹⁶ Marie Thompson, 'Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies'.

back/ing/ground shifts away from simply a subsidiary feature, a support act, always in echoic relations to a lead vocal but rather acknowledges them as (re)productive.

Aurally the back/ing/ground voice is neither inside nor outside of the sonic space. This continual tension between foreground and back/ing/ground does not permit the back/ing/ground to fully enter the space of the song or performance. Yet the back/ing/ground is neither outside of this space either. It is as if the back/ing/ground is perpetually stuck on the edges neither permitted to fully enter the space of the foreground nor to leave it either. It remains amorphous, phonically weaving around the foreground yet continually on the edges of attention.

The back/ing/ground becomes a category that both obscures and stands in for those bodies and voices who have been made to occupy it. As indicated in "Walk on the Wild Side" the back/ing/ground is announced as a category denoting the race and gender of those who are meant to occupy this space regardless of the identity of the actual singers. As a category the back/ing/ground functions as both image and veil simultaneously. The back/ing/ground then becomes a space of both erasure and hypervisibility, in that the people who figure in the back/ing/ground are obscured by the constructed sonic image how we are meant to understand and hear these voices.

Chapter Four:

'We Were Everybody's Voices': Listening to Motown from the Back/ing/ground

[Chapter Tracklist \(listen here\):](#)

Eddie Holland, "Jamie" (1962)

The Four Tops, "Ask the Lonley" (1965)

The Supremes, "Stop! In the Name of Love" (1965)

Mary Wells, "My Guy" (1964)

Marvin Gaye, "Ain't That Peculiar" (1965)

The Andantes, "Like a Nightmare" (1964)

The Darnells, "(Too Hurt to Cry) Too In Love To Say Goodbye)" (1964)

What do we hear when we listen to the back/ing/ground? In attempting to answer this question it is important to discuss the use of 'what' instead of 'who'. By focusing on what we hear allows our ears to attune to the conditions of the back/ing/ground and how it has been used. When asking the question of *what* do we hear when we listen to the back/ing/ground the use of what as a determiner requires that we consider the back/ing/ground not simply as a set of individual voices we seek to identify to reveal a who. But rather that when we listen to the back/ing/ground we are able to encounter a set of conditions. These conditions characterise those voices situated in the background as backing and backup as always obscured, as studio devices, as always already deracinated from those actual bodies that produced them and to who they belong. The back/ing/ground, then, becomes both a tool and technique of the studio used and called upon in order to 'fix' and replace existing vocals, as well as a reproductive device used to uphold production as well as produce the sound(s) associated with specific labels and producers. When asking what can be heard when listening to the back/ing/ground we can begin to attune to how those voices situated within the back/ing/ground have been used and the conditions of these uses. The back/ing/ground in these instances produces what Amy Herzog

calls “new intensities” and “new temporal spaces”³⁹⁷. The back/ing/ground is used in different ways from providing call and response vocals that speak to a dialogue between back/ing/ground and foreground/lead; to creating new rhythmic spaces within a song structure; to being used to enhance the overall sound of a recording. One of the driving forces of this project is to reconsider the back/ing/ground as incidental or insignificant but to consider it a complex space, productive and highly constructed. As discussed in chapter three the construction of the back/ing/ground has been to index it as a role across both racial and gendered lines and as such there have been attempts to continually model the back/ing/ground as subsidiary and supportive. In what follows I want to discuss how the back/ing/ground has been used to produce the very sound associated with specific labels, to discipline the voices of primary performers, and to replace the vocals of primary performers when necessary. All of this is undertaken on the basis that the back/ing/ground remain always slightly out of sight or out of focus. That it is always situated behind or beyond both the visual and sonic focus of the foreground. However, in what follows I hope to rethink this modelling and to insist how the back/ing/ground and those voices situated there are highly productive.

Within the context of Motown encountering the back/ing/ground results in unexpected voices, hidden voices, invisibility, mimicry, and resistance. The voices of The Andantes, who during their tenure with Motown were made up of Marlene Barrow, Louvain Demps, and Jackie Hicks, were contained within the studio, hidden within the myriad mechanisms of Motown. As back/ing/ground vocalists their voices are present yet their identity either obscured and at times hidden and even denied. Not only this but The Andantes were not only used as back/ing/ground in the atypical call-and-response manner. Their vocals were also used to augment the voices of others. This process of augmentation, sometimes referred to as ‘enhancement,’ was used to improve the existing vocal recordings of a primary act or group.

³⁹⁷ Amy Herzog, *Dreams of Difference Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 36

The method of supplementation happened in different ways and at different times of the recording process. At times the voices of The Andantes were merged with the voices of others at the time of recording. To do this a microphone was placed in the middle of the studio capturing a balance of both groups vocals at the same time. Other times The Andantes were asked to sing along into a separate microphone with a group while they were recording. The vocals of The Andantes would then be merged with the primary acts vocals during the mixing process where at times it was the vocals of The Andantes that were “put in the forefront of a lot of songs”³⁹⁸. Other times it was only The Andantes microphone that would be switched on during the session meaning only their vocals would in fact be on the recording³⁹⁹. As well as augmentation The Andantes were also used to replace vocals altogether. The Andantes were used to replace others’ vocals for various reasons including; when the original vocal performance was not accepted by the label, when acts were unable to record due to touring and performance schedules, and as a way for the label to manage personnel issues and negotiate personnel changes within groups. As vocal replacements The Andantes not only functioned to produce the sound demanded by the label but were used to maintain recording and record distribution levels, as their voices, always within the walls of the studio, meant that the label could continue to record and release material using The Andantes voices while primary acts and performers were on tour, unable to record, or when managing personnel issues. As well as replacements Barrow, Demps, and Hicks were used by Motown to “experiment with sounds made popular by other companies”⁴⁰⁰. For example, in an attempt to mimic producer Phil Spector’s wall of sound method The Andantes were paired with The Marvelettes for the recording of “Too Hurt to Cry, Too Much in Love to Say Goodbye”. Released in 1963 as the popularity of the girl group genre was peaking the recording was billed under the name The

³⁹⁸ Marlene Barrow-Tate and Jackie Hicks Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes* (New Romney: Bank House Books, 2007), 78.

³⁹⁹ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 108.

⁴⁰⁰ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 9.

Darnells with no reference to either The Andantes or The Marvelettes whom feature on it. In what follows I discuss how these cases model the back/ing/ground as a phonic technology of the studio that reproduces the sound of Motown. I will discuss how the Motown depended on the obscurity of the back/ing/ground and that the maintained invisibility of The Andantes speaks to their significance within the Motown system.

The Andantes are both an oral and aural map; an ever-reforming constellation of vocalisations set both behind and beyond those that are permitted to be visible. Although this will be discussed in the following chapter it is important to lay some of the groundwork here. The ever-unfolding archive of The Andantes is an aural one that is dependent on the ear rather than the eye. Yet even at their most *unheard* when we listen to The Andantes as back/ing/ground our ear moves through the construction of the back/ing/ground as Black and female towards the back/ing/ground as a space of work and of reproduction. We hear the Black female voice under duress, we hear it denied, we hear it hidden and submerged within a studio system, and we hear it alienated.

To attend to the voices of The Andantes we must listen and listen deeply. This deep listening requires a process of attunement not ordinarily offered to the back/ing/ground, whose function is to be merely heard but not listened to. In this chapter the back/ing/ground is a phonic space made up of voices whose bodies are often hidden, or obscured. In the case of The Andantes even their voices become hidden, buried deep within the grooves of a tracks making them difficult to trace. These voices are often detached and deracinated from their bodies. At times made to sound as if emitting from another's body, or so merged with the voice of another that it becomes almost impossible for the ear to capture. Other times their voices, always dependent on the invisibility of their bodies, function to produce mythical groups who only exist on records. To attune to the voices of The Andantes we must acknowledge the fragmentary nature in which their archive exists. As overlooked and underheard a definitive record of their

contributions remains difficult to identify. This difficulty is made even more so due to the deliberate ways the group have been unacknowledged on recordings. Rather we must depend on our ears to find those moments where their voices are heard, however minor. In what follows I do not offer a definitive record of The Andantes work, but rather focus on material that speaks to the different ways their voices have been used, hidden, and embedded.

As will be argued in the following chapter the voices of The Andantes offer a different way to consider the back/ing/ground. As occupying what might be thought to be beyond the back/ing/ground The Andantes further extend the space of the back/ing/ground where their voices exist in a highly flexible space, one that envelopes the majority of Motown's output during this period. Unlike those who inhabit the foreground, they serve as disembodied vocal arrangements that do not always demand the visual referent of a determinable body. In this way the back/ing/ground exists outside of visibility, where visibility of the back/ing/ground is rarely demanded. As such the back/ing/ground is able to move beyond the foreground's limits of visual capture. The invisibility that characterises The Andantes has caused them to function as a phonic technology of the studio, essential to not only the Motown sound, but also the assembly line model favoured by label boss Berry Gordy.

To encounter the back/ing/ground we must listen to those voices that speak from the back/ing/ground, as speaking from this space, this position, this perspective, they speak of the back/ing/ground. As we listen to the back/ing/ground we are able hear how the voices of The Andantes were used not simply as in-house back/ing/up/ground, but as vocal enhancers for less vocally adept performers. We hear how their voices were used as vocal replacements for primary acts to generate the 'sound' demanded by the label. We hear how the voices of The Andantes contribute an important yet overlooked (or underheard) part of the Motown sound. We hear their voices used to maintain production and release deadlines while primary acts were unable to record due to touring commitments. We hear their voices as mythical groups who

exist merely for label releases or production experimentation. We hear their voices beyond the back/ing/ground as they are used to augment and replace the voices of others.

To speak of The Andantes and Motown it is necessary to speak from the back/ing/ground. To do so discussion regarding the role of The Andantes will be from the perspective of members of the groups and their point of entry into working with Motown. This not only seeks to honour the role of the group and its members, but also shifting the contextual perspective demonstrates how The Andantes and its members figure in the history of Motown from its very inception. My argument here is that the voices of The Andantes are embedded deeply into Motown and that Motown might be considered to have been formed from the back/ing/ground. By acknowledging the formation of the *Rayber Music Writing Company* founded by Berry Gordy and his business partner Raynoma Lilles (later Gordy-Singleton) it can be understood how The Andantes are a core part of what is considered to be the Motown sound. Not only this but the ways in which The Andantes were used at Motown during this period indicates how the back/ing/ground can be considered a reproductive space, reproducing the Motown sound. By breaking down the role of The Andantes I argue how the back/ing/ground becomes a technological device used to reproduce the Motown sound.

The construction of the black female voice as back/ing/ground frames the back/ing/ground as a sonic space that is heard and socially charged by the presence of the Black female voices. It is a territory with ever changing edges and boundaries. Yet as will be discussed in this chapter the construction of the back/ing/ground as Black and female occurred via the use of the Black female voice as a kind of phonic technology, emphasising my argument in chapter three that the back/ing/ground becomes a sonic space that is unthinkable without the Black female voice.

Before the chapter continues, I ask the reader to listen to the playlist shared with the thesis (See beginning of chapter for link and track list). The tracks included in the playlist have been selected in order for the reader and listener to attune to the voices of The Andantes and to

become familiar with the different ways that their voices feature and have been used on Motown recordings. The songs selected aim to demonstrate The Andantes in a call and response mode of backing and back/ing/ground, as well as vocal replacements.

Motown from the Back/ing/ground:

Discussions regarding the role of Louvain Demps, Marlene Barrow, and Jackie Hicks known as The Andantes at Motown range from indignation to admiration. Where Vickie Wright sheds light onto the work of The Andantes as a way to highlight the significant role they figured at Motown, other perspectives restrict the groups contribution to nothing more than incidental, or simply fail to mention the group altogether. Comments regarding the work of The Andantes appear at their most belittling within Motown fandom forums where questions regarding the presence of The Andantes on specific recordings often appear to generate tension from fans whom connect the voices singing to those figures who are part of the primary group. As will be shown later in this chapter examples that demonstrate, or highlight the presence of The Andantes voices have, within fan-based forum discussions at least, at times been met with resistance, frustration, and dismissal. Although not my primary focus here it should be noted that the work of The Andantes not only remains largely unrecognised, but recognition of their work and role is at times difficult to accept. My argument here is that part of this difficulty is due to how the back/ing/ground is constructed as a space that should not enter or affect those who occupy the foreground. The resistance and dismissal of the ways The Andantes have contributed to Motown and what is referred to as the Motown 'sound' speaks to the ways the back/ing/ground is constructed as subsidiary to the foreground. As discussed in the previous chapter rather than subsidiary of the foreground the back/ing/ground in fact can be considered a highly productive space shaping or giving space to the foreground. The observations in what follows are that rather than accepting the convention of the back/ing/ground as nameless

support⁴⁰¹ rather I argue that the back/ing/ground is made nameless due to its role as producing space for the foreground, and in the case of The Andantes as a core component of what is figured as the Motown sound. I argue that the invisibility of the back/ing/ground is due to its significance in producing the Motown sound and the labels unwillingness to risk sharing this sound with other labels and producers. At Motown the back/ing/ground, then, is a highly productive space, necessary to the genre of which the label is associated.

Louvain Demps, Marlene Barrow, and Jackie Hicks's tenure at Motown between the late 1950s to 1970 when Motown left their base in Detroit to Los Angeles has been considered simultaneously essential and insignificant. Figured as the 'in-house' backing group for Motown during their tenure their role has been described as both "obscure" and essential. In what follows I attempt to provide a contextual framework of Motown from the perspective of the back/ing/ground.

In 1958 Berry Gordy and his colleague singer and songwriter Raynoma Lilles founded the Rayber Music Writing Company. Having worked together writing and arranging songs in an ad hoc manner for a number of months previous Gordy and Lilles founded the company to offer a music writing and recording service for budding musician, singers, and lyricists in the local Detroit area. Raynoma Gordy-Singleton (nee Lilles), describes the Rayber Music Writing Company to reduce or remove the obstacles that budding musicians or singers faced when trying to make connections with more established recording labels:

My idea was to start a service that would eliminate those immense obstacles. Anyone could bring us any song and pay us to record it. We'd go into a local studio and cut an actual record.

⁴⁰¹ Corbett, 'Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist'. 63

With that, the client would have something to show, to take to the major New York labels and maybe – who knows? – get a deal for themselves.⁴⁰²

To provide this service the Rayber Music Writing Company would offer clients access to producers, songwriters, and singers to fulfil whatever aspect of the recording process the client lacked.

Having scheduled a twice daily radio announcement for the company and its services on the local station WCHB Gordy and Lilles received their first client, singer Louvain Demps. Approaching the company to demo her friend's song-writing Demps impressed both Gordy and Lilles who request she join their in-house backing group known as the Rayber Voices. In her own account of events Louvain describes how her initial meeting with Raynoma and Berry was in order to demo songs written by her friend Rhoda Collins who was attempting to get them recorded and published⁴⁰³. Demps recalls that this initial meeting led to a second audition where, impressed with her vocal ability the Rayber Music Writing Company invited Demps to become part of their own in-house backing group named the Rayber Voices. The Rayber Voices were made up of Raynoma Lilles, Brian Holland, Robert Bateman, Sonny Sanders, and Eugene Remus. At this time the Rayber Voices performed most back/ing/ground vocals for recording undertaken by the company. Louvain Demps recalls that some of the earliest recordings she is featured on as part of the Rayber Voices include Eddie Holland's "Because I love Her" (United Artists, 1959) and "Money (That's What I Want)" (Tamla, 1959) from Barrett Strong. Reaching number two on the rhythm and blues charts and number twenty-three on the popular chart "Money (That's What I Want)" was the first chart hit for what was becoming the Motown enterprise having been released nationally on the proto-Motown label

⁴⁰² Raynoma Gordy Singleton, *The Untold Story: Berry, Me and Motown* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1990), 49.

⁴⁰³ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 42.

Tamla and internationally on subsidiary label Anna records. At its earliest incarnation the emerging sound of Motown not only included back/ing/ground group/vocalists, but the voice of later Andantes member Louvain Demps.

Marlene Barrow and Jackie Hicks met as young children having both attended the same church, Hartford Baptist, where they both sang in choir. Having formed a singing group with friend Edith Phillips they selected their group name, The Andantes, from musical terms optioned to them by their piano teacher Mildred Dobey⁴⁰⁴. Hicks and Barrow describe how their journey to Motown was due to their friendship with songwriter and musician Richard 'Popcorn' Wylie whom they attended high school with. Having scheduled a recording session at the newly found Motown Recording Corporation at the headquarters and studio at 2648 West Grand Boulevard (later referred to as Hitsville) Wylie invited The Andantes to perform as back/ing/ground vocalists for his recording. Impressed by their vocals The Andantes were invited to "sing on other things."⁴⁰⁵ Jackie Hicks describes how at this point Edith Philips left the group due to her upcoming marriage and as such the remaining Andantes were introduced to Louvain Demps as their third member. In his radio special on The Andantes Mike Boone describes how Marlene and Jackie were also not particularly interested in continuing at Motown and that the company suggested Demps join the group as a way to persuade them to continue working with the company, although speculation the desire to have The Andantes involved with the recording process is clear. I mention this history as an attempt to ground The Andantes within the wider histories of Motown and to counter arguments that the group were somehow incidental to the company and their burgeoning sound. Rather the group are deeply embedded within Motown from its earliest moments. Acknowledging this allows us to understand how The Andantes can be considered a significant mechanism of Motown's assembly line and the Motown sound. From this point onwards up until Motown's departure

⁴⁰⁴ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 30.

⁴⁰⁵ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 31.

from Detroit The Andantes are used by Motown on numerous recordings as back/ing/ground vocals, as vocal supplements, augmentation, vocal replacements, and vocals for non-existent acts where only single releases and no live performances were demanded. The group were also used at local Motown showcases where they were made to accompany primary acts by singing along with primary performers from behind a stage curtain (to be discussed in the next chapter). The Andantes provide a case for how the back/ing/ground is not simply a subsidiary, incidental, or insignificant aspect, but rather that it is a highly productive space. Yet the productiveness of The Andantes by Motown is dependent on their continued invisibility and obscurity. Yet this invisibility, echoing Fred Moten, "has visibility at its heart"⁴⁰⁶. The invisibility of the back/ing/ground is a necessity based on its visibility. As if it were to be visible it would unsettle the visibility of the foreground, it would extend it and this extension would mean movement could occur a movement that might disrupt the fixity of that which is foregrounded. The invisibility of the back/ing/ground, and The Andantes, then, is based upon the back/ing/grounds ability to disrupt and unsettle.

During their tenure with Motown The Andantes did not receive a formal contract, but rather were consistently framed as session singers. As session singers they were paid per session, had no recourse to royalties, and little to no control over how their voices were used. Furthermore, as session vocalists the label could continually defer to the group to undertake a range of vocal recordings without needing to divulge how their voices would be used.

The Back/ing/ground as Motown Sound

We're on albums, we were with everybody. We're everybody's voices

- Louvain Demps⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁶ Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 68.

⁴⁰⁷ Bill Dahl, *Motown: The Golden Years* (Iola: Krause Publications, 2001), 210.

The ways in which The Andantes as back/ing/ground were used at Motown speak to how the back/ing/ground functions as a supplement that both “supplants” and “compensates for” the Motown sound. As previously discussed the back/ing/ground as supplement speaks to how the back/ing/ground is often overlooked as a space at all, or a space that is inhabited; that it is a space of obscurity, of objects or figures in the distance rather than subjects that move or produce. The verticality that insists between the back/ing/ground and foreground is further unsettled when considering the role of The Andantes and their work with Motown. The Andantes work shows how the back/ing/ground is never simply behind the foreground, or the lead, but rather that those that are situated in the back/ing/ground can be used in highly productive ways and without which there would be no articulation of what is considered the Motown sound.

The ways in which The Andantes were used at Motown unsettle notions that the back/ing/ground is a space of insignificance, or subsidiary, but rather that it is a highly productive space. However, the productivity of the back/ing/ground is dependent on the obscurity and at times invisibility that characterises it.

In her authorised biography of The Andantes author Vickie Wright remarks how “The Andantes were so valuable to Motown that they were repeatedly denied the opportunity to record their own records or [perform] their own shows.”⁴⁰⁸ Wrights comments highlights how the necessity of the back/ing/ground is related to how it hides, and obscures those who inhabit it. As outlined in chapter three the back/ing/ground is thought to be situated behind the foreground and as such those that are situated in the back/ing/ground remain always out of focus. The back/ing/grounds ability to blur those who inhabit it becomes twofold at Motown where the blurring of the back/ing/ground then blurs those voices in the foreground. In this section I discuss how the back/ing/ground functions to supplement the Motown sound.

⁴⁰⁸ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 99.

Motown is one of the few record labels that is considered a genre as well as a record label.⁴⁰⁹ Although there exist debates around how to define the 'sound' of Motown, rarely is the work and role of The Andantes cited as part of this 'sound'.⁴¹⁰ The only definition that comes close to referencing The Andantes, in fact defers from explicitly naming the group but instead describes the "overriding quality" of the Motown sound as "the elegance of a gospel choir soaring on the wings of rich female voices." Here The Andantes are elevated and multiplied to that of a choir acting to further deny and obscure their role.⁴¹¹ The ways in which The Andantes produce what is considered the Motown sound occurs in different ways. One, as the in-house back/ing/ground group they are thought to feature of up to twenty thousand recordings. As has been discussed the use of distinct back/ing/ground vocals increased within popular music during the 1950s and 1960s. During their tenure with Motown it was often the case that if a female background vocal was required it was The Andantes that would be asked to provide it. As in-house back/ing/ground the group feature on more releases than any primary group or performer. The Andantes' vocals thread through a large proportion of Motown recordings, providing the anonymous, unnamed, and unseen backing to many Motown chart successes. The Andantes' vocals were used to supplement recordings in order to ensure they sounded the way the label intended. Here, their vocals were used to enhance the vocals of other performers, their vocals blended into the overall mix of the primary performers vocal recording becoming a barely detectable phonic envelope. Other times The Andantes vocals were used to replace others' vocals altogether. This was often undertaken with no acknowledgement to the primary group on the recording, creating moments of vocals misplacement where primary groups heard The Andantes vocals as their own. Before I go into further detail regarding the implications of

⁴⁰⁹ Alex Mackenzie, *The Motown Stars* (Wondsor: Together Publications, 2009), 3.

⁴¹⁰ Many accounts of the history of Motown scarcely mention The Andantes. A point observed in the following forum post on Soulful Detroit <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?7965-Girl-Groups-The-Grit-The-Glamour-and-the-Glory-The-Andantes>

⁴¹¹ The choir effect achieved by Motown was not in fact the use of a choir but by 'stacking' the voices of The Andantes. Stacking is a production technique where vocals are recorded "singing in different ranges so the after effect sounds like six or nine voices" (Vickie Wright, Marlene Barrow, 64).

these uses the following section aims to situate the role of The Andantes and the back/ing/ground within wider conversations regarding what makes or is the Motown sound.

When describing the Motown 'sound' answers range from production style such as "heavy bass and a lot of treble"⁴¹², instrumentation and musical arrangement "'drumsticks pounded every beat, a beat that was accentuated by tambourine, guitar, and vibes, while the bass rolled forward like a speeding locomotive. Guitars and pianos and organs all squeezed into a cluttered mid-range while blustery horn charts and weirdly arranged strings lingered in the background"⁴¹³ to emotional and environmental factors "rats, roaches, love, and guts"⁴¹⁴. However, The Andantes tenure with Motown saw them featured on approximately "three quarters of all Motown releases"⁴¹⁵ and up to twenty thousand recordings⁴¹⁶. Yet within discussions regarding the Motown sound, or Motown more generally The Andantes are rarely mentioned. For example, in his discussion regarding the creative process at Motown Jon Fitzgerald counters narratives that insist on the controlling nature of producers and the assembly line model associated with Motown asserting that "to deny the individual contributions of Motown artists is to overvalue this notion of control" going on to argue how "formulas had to be flexible enough to accommodate the natural styles of different performers."⁴¹⁷ Yet Fitzgerald fails to extend the creative process to those voices situated in and used as back/ing/ground. The omission of the work that The Andantes undertook for Motown is rooted in their role as back/ing/ground; a role that is often made to resist legibility. However, considering Motown 'from the background' we can begin to understand how the back/ing/ground and its inherent obscurity becomes a tool for the label.

⁴¹² Hal Davis cited in J. Randy Taraborelli, *Motown: Hot Wax, City Cool and Solid Gold* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1986).

⁴¹³ Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fallof the Motown Sound* (New York: St Martin Press, 1985), 117.

⁴¹⁴ Berry Gordy cited in J. Randy Taraborelli, *Motown: Hot Wax, City Cool and Solid Gold*.

⁴¹⁵ Mary Wilson, *Dreamgirl: My Life as a Supreme* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson Ltd, 1987), 134.

⁴¹⁶ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*.

⁴¹⁷ Jon Fitzgerald, 'Motown Crossovers Hits 1963-1966 and the Creative Process', *Popular Music* 14, no. 1 (1995): 3.

Motown's artist and repertoire director, William "Mickey" Stevenson describes how The Andantes "were part of the sound we were creating [...] To not have them on the product was out of the question. If you wanted your records to be great you had them singing on them."⁴¹⁸ Stevenson's comment signals how the role of The Andantes was in part to improve the quality of releases and that their voices were considered a core part of the Motown sound being produced. Stevenson goes on to describe how the voices of The Andantes were used in order to give a record a "richer and fuller" sound, describing how The Andantes provided "that 'on the note' sound" that the Motown label demanded.⁴¹⁹ Stevenson's comments not only unsettle an understanding of the back/ing/ground as simply providing part of the call-and-response singing expected of a backing group but also that their vocals were cited as being associated with the sound that Motown wanted to create. The extent and ways in which The Andantes vocals were used at Motown develops views that the Motown sound emerges from the leadership of Berry Gordy, primary artists or acts, or the in-house band the Funk Brothers⁴²⁰ but can be extended to include the role The Andantes occupied in and as back/ing/ground. The role of The Andantes as back/ing/ground refocus narratives signalling another space in which the Motown sound was produced while also countering narratives that favour individual artists and acts as producing this sound.

One of the earliest recordings featuring The Andantes that my ear can identify is "Jamie" by Eddie Holland, released on Motown in 1961. The voices of The Andantes do not sound until after Eddie Holland sings the second line of the first verse. The arrangement between Eddie Holland and The Andantes fits within a call-and-response format where the voices of The Andantes are largely limited to responding to a line sung by the lead. The voices of The

⁴¹⁸ Mickey Stevenson cited in Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 70.

⁴¹⁹ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 70.

⁴²⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the role of the Funk brothers in relation to producing the Motown sound see Dhanveer Brar's *Blackness, Radicalism, Sound: Black Consciousness and Black Popular Music in the USA (1955 - 1971)* PhD Thesis

Andantes swoop behind Hollands, enveloping his voice in three-part harmonies, and echoing Holland's utterances of 'Jamie' in the pre-chorus and chorus sections. This early recording introduces our ears to the voices of The Andantes as a chorus of voices and although rarely named or even acknowledged on the various recordings that followed it provides our ear with an opportunity for *attunement*. During the song there is a clear distinction between back/ing/ground and lead not only in terms of lyrical arrangement, but also vocal arrangement. The voices of The Andantes sound *behind* that of Holland's. Holland's voice is foregrounded so that when the vocal arrangements of The Andantes occur at the same moment as Holland's it is his voice that is loudest. This arrangement makes clear what voice occupies the foreground and which voices occupy the back/ing/ground.

It is difficult to definitively quantify how many recordings feature The Andantes, and as I have outlined previously it is not my intention to write that history through a chronological description of recordings. By leaving the archive of The Andantes open emphasises how listening to the back/ing/ground must acknowledge its ever-shifting edges. The way the back/ing/ground function on Eddie Hollands "Jamie" speak to the back/ing/ground as a vocal mirror reflecting and returning Eddie Hollands articulations. In this mode the back/ing/ground is tightly bound to the lead, permitted only to echoic responses and kept within a chorus formation. Eddie Holland's "Jamie" provides a template for how The Andantes were used as in-house backing group. In this example they stick to the call-and-response formation popularised by both doo-wop and rhythm and blues. Here the female voice as back/ing/ground functions to simply mirror that of the lead.

However, The Andantes role of "Ask the Lonely" by The Four Tops demonstrates how the back/ing/ground functions differently. On the recording of "Ask the Lonely" by The Four Tops released on Motown in 1965 the first voices you encounter are The Andantes. Following seventeen seconds of instrumental introduction the voices of The Andantes sound, rupturing

the now established rhythm of guitar, bass, drums from Motown's Funk Brothers and strings played by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the group sing the lyric "just ask the lonely". Their voices are loud and clear swelling into the track assured of the space they occupy. The phrasing of this first articulation stretches each word almost equally across a 4/4 beat. The first three words hit the same note with a higher note being reached on the first syllable of 'lonely' only shifting to a lower note on the second syllable. As The Andantes sing 'ask' the voices of the Four Tops can be heard singing the same line but using an alternative rhythmic phrasing. Rather than stretching the phrase across a 4/4 beat and ending on a lower note, the voices of The Four Tops sing the first two words at half beat and reverse the pitch of the last two syllable of lonely to end on a higher note. Yet it is The Andantes that our ear encounters first and introduces us to the theme of the song and it's very title. Following these opening moments the voice of lead vocalist Levi Stubbs begins the first verse. As Stubbs sings we can hear the low tones of the remaining members of the Four Tops articulating long and rhythmic "oohs". Yet at the end of the first chorus we hear the voices of The Andantes again. Soaring above both Stubbs and The Four Tops's voices The Andantes sing a crisp and clear "Just ask the lonely" echoing their first utterance. Unlike the first verse the voices of The Andantes can now be heard clearly singing the rhythmic 'oohs' the rest of the Four Tops sing. The Andantes voices flex confidently with each modulation, their voices expanding as one and encircling Levi Stubbs's powerful vocalisation of the second chorus with harmonic "aahs". The second wave of these "ahhs" begin before Stubbs's lyric having found their own rhythm, providing the space for Stubbs's own vocals. Maintaining their rhythm, The Andantes voice rise to sing "just ask the lonely", again beginning before Stubbs their voices swell around the lyric before Stubbs restates his own rendering. The low tones of The Four Tops return yet by the second line of the final verse The Andantes voices return dominating over the lower tones. Repeating the same pattern as before their "aahs" swell around Stubbs's voice to sing "just ask the lonely." As Stubbs begins

his closing utterances we hear The Andantes continue singing the chorus. As the recording begins its fade out and Stubbs begins to soften his vocals we hear the last audible articulation from The Andantes as they sing the chorus line again. However, this final, audible articulation, although mixed into the beginning of the fade out shifts its rhythmic pattern to echo The Four Tops' own rhythm of the lyric. Rather than each just word being measured across a 4/4 beat like the opening lyric, the rhythm of the lyric changes. In this final moment the first two words are sounded to fit a half beat. The final two words 'the lonely' switch pitch where the final 'lonely' lands on the higher note. In this final moment The Andantes reform and alter the pattern that has been established throughout the rest of the song creating a new direction for the song in its final moments. As the song fades out we are left to wonder where The Andantes might take the song. Having begun the song with their own voices and ended the song with this rhythmic and tonal shift it seems that The Andantes, although used as backing provide the direction of the song. Their voices are a clear feature, even dominating over the remaining members of The Four Tops own voices. Yet they remain unacknowledged on the record in terms of naming their feature. The Andantes were not permitted to go on tour with groups meaning that any live rendition of the recording would mean their voices would be absent. The absence of their voices during live performance caused other groups such as The Temptations to request that The Andantes no longer be used on recordings as they were unable to "duplicate [the recording] on stage."⁴²¹

Unlike their role on "Jamie", the voices of The Andantes on "Ask the Lonely" unsettle the distinction between back/ing/ground and foreground/lead singer. Their voices do not sit behind those of Stubbs or the Four Tops, but match and at times overtake the volume of the others. Not only this but on "Ask the Lonely" it is the voices of The Andantes that switch rhythmic direction. Although barely audible at the moment of the fade out there is a distinct rhythmic

⁴²¹ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 85.

shift in their voices. As it fades out The Andantes continue to take the song in a direction that we simply cannot hear countering Corbett's contention that the back/ing/ground is always simply a site of comfort and support⁴²². As here the back/ing/ground becomes more complex shifting both towards, away and with the lead singer.

The use of The Andantes, even in what might be considered a more atypical role suggest how significant they were to helping produce the Motown sound. Not only this but their role was to provide back/ing/ground to whichever recording it was deemed necessary. Where on "Jamie" they fulfil their role within a call-and-response model, yet on "Ask the Lonely" the nature of the back/ing/ground shifts, producing different rhythmic patterns and phonic spaces throughout the song. In both examples the back/ing/ground vocals are significant. On "Jamie" they fulfil the call-and-response model popular at the time, where on "Ask the Lonely" the back/ing/ground can be understood as a much more complex space, able to shift rhythmic direction independently of the lead vocal.

In his discussion of Motown performers Dhanveer Brar emphasises the voices of primary performers as the "cumulative point of a process involving writers, producers, and musicians"⁴²³ citing primary performers as possessing a "unique status"⁴²⁴ at Motown. For Brar this unique status registers as highly valued in that it is the performers in which the label invests and that it is their voice that forms "the central part of the final product – the record"⁴²⁵.

Brar goes on:

If the vocal did not hit the mark, the record failed. There was a requirement for the vocalist to be productive, yet they needed to produce certain types of performance when prompted. Their labour was scored into the final product. In fact with recording, touring and media appearances,

⁴²² Corbett, 'Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist', 62.

⁴²³ Brar, 'Blackness, Radicalism, Sound: Black Consciousness and Black Popular Music in the USA (1955 - 1971)', 205.

⁴²⁴ Brar, 205.

⁴²⁵ Brar, 205.

at times there was little difference between performer and product, Thus the artists were extensively disciplined because their bodies and voices became the concern of the company.⁴²⁶

Brar's description of vocals hitting the mark echoes Stevenson's description of Motown as characterised as 'that on the note sound'. Yet the notion of accuracy in Brar's description overlooks the labour of The Andantes in producing or fulfilling the outlined demand. Although as Brar observes the bodies and voices of performers were the concern of the company so too were the voices and bodies of the back/ing/ground. Yet occupying the back/ing/ground meant that the label could not only do as they wished with the voices of The Andantes, they could use their voices in order to discipline the voices of others without recourse to either party. The Andantes, and the back/ing/ground then becomes another way in which Motown was able to control and model their output. If the vocal did not 'hit the mark' The Andantes were brought in to hit the mark on their behalf:

[The Andantes] were added to any record to enhance it and make it sound fuller and richer [...] If I didn't like how a production sounded, I would bring [The Andantes] in to fix it. When you produce records you want them to get airplay, sell, and sound the best. [...] it has to sound right to get airplay, and it has to be good to get people to buy it.⁴²⁷

Stevenson's emphasis on how the group were brought into to 'fix' a recording reframes the role of the back/ing/ground from simply being those voices 'behind' the lead, but that the v and those who are made to occupy this space function as simultaneously as device and technique in order to produce, or to borrow from Brar, to *discipline* the recording in order for it to pass as a Motown release. Furthermore, the back/ing/ground is linked to the popularity of

⁴²⁶ Brar, 205.

⁴²⁷ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 70.

releases as they relate to 'airplay' and the viability of releases as they relate to a buying public, indicating how the back/ing/ground is an important part of the product. Product here can be thought to be both the record itself and Motown the brand. The back/ing/ground produces that which cannot be adequately reproduced without it. The artifice that the back/ing/ground produces became a problem from some groups at Motown who requested they no longer be used on recordings as it was impossible to recreate a proximate during live performances.

One example of how The Andantes were used to 'fix' a recording can be found on The Supremes "Stop! In the Name of Love" released in 1965. The role The Andantes played on this recording remains contentious among many fans where the thought on non-Supremes members singing on the recording appears difficult to accept. In the 50th Anniversary Singles Collection compilation of Diana Ross and The Supremes Andrew Solomon and George Skurow describe how the original back/ing/ground vocals recorded by Florence Ballard and Mary Wilson on the 7th and 11th January 1965 were "re-cut with the Andantes" four days later.⁴²⁸ The phrasing of this point appears to have led to much debate within fan communities regarding the presence of the Andantes, and their role at Motown more widely. Throughout online fan forums such as *Soulful Detroit* there exist numerous forum logs that debate the studio practices of Motown, and the role of the Andantes⁴²⁹. Never are these debates more aggressive than when conversation regarding The Andantes intersect with the work of the Supremes⁴³⁰.

One forum thread from November 2011 discusses The Andantes in relation to "Stop! In the Name of Love". The thread presents numerous differing opinions regarding who is

⁴²⁸ Andrew Skurow and George Solomon, 'Diana Ross and The Supremes: The Singles Collection 1961-1969 50th Anniversary' (New York: Motown Records and Hip-o-Select, 2011), 20.

⁴²⁹ There continues to be debate amongst Motown's fanbase as to how much attention The Andantes and the back/ing/ground deserves. However, there remain some discussions as to the significance that the group and provided Motown. For a summary of such debates see the following forum logs: <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?7965-Girl-Groups-The-Grit-The-Glamour-and-the-Glory-The-Andantes>, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?22597-The-Andantes-Mystique>, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?23728-What-s-your-thought-on-the-Andantes-replacing-vocals-on-groups>

Notably one forum member notes the anger that discussions regarding The Andantes seem to prompt among member stating, "It's a heated topic that only stirs up anger. Why do we keep going there?"

⁴³⁰ A point observed and noted by some forum members in posts.

performing backing. Posts range from acceptance to total refusal regarding The Andantes presence. However, even those responses that accept The Andantes presence often underplay their role compared to group members Florence Ballard and Mary Wilson describing The Andantes as a “small group of obscure session singers hired and paid by Motown and used as instrumentation on some records.”⁴³¹ Other posts insinuate how the revelation that The Andantes feature on the single release of “Stop! In the Name of Love”, among other recordings⁴³² is part of some other plan to hoodwink the fan base⁴³³ describing the role of The Andantes as being “blown out of proportion.”⁴³⁴

Solomon and Skurow’s description of the vocals being re-cut with The Andantes four days following Ballard and Wilson recorded their own vocals is debated on the thread for a total of three months. Each post countering the last. The process used to counter Solomon and Skurow’s remark is one of listening. Forum members refute studio log book entries as unreliable preferring to use their ears as evidence:

I have a sneaking suspicion that someone is using recording logs, (which may or may not be accurate instead of their EARS...⁴³⁵

I don’t know if someone has been smoking or whatever, but I hear Flo, Mary and Diane clearly on this record. They sound good. They sound like angels.⁴³⁶

⁴³¹ Marv2, post to “No Supremes on Stop! In the Name of Love Etc.” Soulful Detroit Fan Forum, 24 December 2011 8.50pm, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?4537-No-Supremes-On-Stop-in-the-Name-of-Love-etc>

⁴³³Forum member Monotony posts “I say BS and that someone has been in those “vaults” and mislabelled stuff to either boost the case for the lead singer or to screw with the real fans...This whole Andante thing has been blown out of proportion” No Supremes on Stop! In the Name of Love Etc.” Soulful Detroit Fan Forum, 23 December 2011 <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?4537-No-Supremes-On-Stop-in-the-Name-of-Love-etc>

⁴³⁴ Monotony, post to “No Supremes on Stop! In the Name of Love Etc.” Soulful Detroit Fan Forum, 23 December 2011 2.55pm, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?4537-No-Supremes-On-Stop-in-the-Name-of-Love-etc>

⁴³⁵ Jilfoster, post to “No Supremes on Stop! In the Name of Love Etc.” Soulful Detroit Fan Forum, 24 December 2011 1.51pm, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?4537-No-Supremes-On-Stop-in-the-Name-of-Love-etc>

⁴³⁶ Marv2, post to “No Supremes on Stop! In the Name of Love Etc.” Soulful Detroit Fan Forum, 23 December 2011 2.55pm, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?4537-No-Supremes-On-Stop-in-the-Name-of-Love-etc>

I don't care what the books says [...] I hear Flo and I also hear two altos one must be Mary the other possibly an Andante⁴³⁷

The forum comments not only make clear the resistance to considering The Andantes as contributing to the recording, but also highlight the role of listening as key to identifying whose voices are present. Yet when we attune our ears to those voices in and of the back/ing/ground we can hear those same voices on this recording. However, the debate among fans speaks to important aspects of the back/ing/ground and the role of listening. On the one hand the debate emphasises the role of the ear, situating the aural rather than the oral as evidence of who is present on the recording. Emphasising the aural situates the ear as the primary focus in identifying who is on the recording, yet in this debate the ear is used to challenge other evidence such as log books. My argument here is that the visual evidence, in the state of session logs, is denied due to the invisibility and anonymity of The Andantes more broadly, and the construction of the back/ing/ground as always subsidiary and a space of lesser significance. It is not The Andantes name that is featured on the record, it is the Supremes. This omission perhaps allows the ear to attempt to attune to what the eye encounters. However, if we attune our ears to the voices of The Andantes our ear is able to recognise the presence of at least one voice.

The recording begins with the whirl of organ immediately met with a chorus of voices singing:

Stop! In the name of love, before you break my heart

As the line is sang in chorus it is admittedly difficult to ascertain whose voices are present. However, it is upon hearing the word 'break' that the distinct timbre of Jackie Hick's voice can

⁴³⁷ Franjoy56, post to to "No Supremes on Stop! In the Name of Love Etc." Soulful Detroit Fan Forum, 24 December 2011 1.32am, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?4537-No-Supremes-On-Stop-in-the-Name-of-Love-etc>

be heard. Hick's distinct timbre can also be heard on "My Guy" released in 1964 by Mary Wells. On Mary Wells 1964 recording of "My Guy" The Andantes perform the back/ing/ground vocals as both a group and individual voices. At the end of the first verse we hear The Andantes response to Mary Wells fifth utterance of 'my guy'. Following the sixth utterance the voices of The Andantes sound individually each uttering their own line of 'my guy':

Mary Wells: Nothing you could buy

 Could make me tell as lie to *my guy*

 Jackie Hicks: My guy

 Marlene Barrow: My guy

 Louvain Demps: My guy

In this moment the three-part harmony is split where we hear Jackie Hick's voice as the lower note, Marlene Barrow the second, and Louvain Demps taking the highest note. In this moment the voices of The Andantes are heard as three individual voices, rather than as a group. The recording of "My Guy" allows our ear to attune to the individual voices that make up the back/ing/ground, allowing us to attune or sense their presence on other recordings. At this moment the back/ing/ground d as a stable space is irrevocably unsettled. With one word the back/ing/ground, and The Andantes expand and envelope so many Motown recordings, including the 1965 single release of "Stop! In the Name of Love" from The Supremes.

Returning to the remark made by one forum member regarding The Andantes as "a small group of obscure session singers". The use of obscure, here, is insightful as it indicates the role that the Andantes and the back/ing/ground is meant to occupy. As an adjective obscure refers to something that is unknown, and unclear and difficult to see as a verb obscure means to prevent something from being seen or heard and to make something difficult to discover. Although, perhaps not stated with the same intentions, the role of the Andantes and of the back/ing/ground more broadly fulfil this being obscure. The role of the Andantes even when

their presence is at its most explicit remains one of obscurity. The back/ing/ground exists in this state of obscurity absent of the intent to be fully discovered or known. The debate regarding 'who' can be heard on the single release of "Stop! In the Name of Love" shows this obscurity at its most functioning.

Being back/ing/ground meant that the group were not given label credits. As such they had no recourse to be paid royalties. Framing the group as back/ing/ground allowed the label to use their voices on any recording they wish without having to pay them any more than their agreed session fee. Furthermore, the group were used to undertake recordings when other performers were on tour or unable to meaning they continued the labour of producing the Motown sound even when primary performers were absent. The back/ing/ground then becomes a reproductive device able to continue producing the Motown sound even in the absence of primary performers.

One of the defining features of Motown, as mentioned above, is that it is considered both a genre and label simultaneously. The label was not simply interested in recording and releasing records or making stars out of its roster of performers. Rather it was interested in producing records that were heard as Motown. To pass through the assembly line of the Motown company potential recordings would be evaluated in company meetings to decide whether they would be released. Releases were not evaluated on the necessary basis of creativity, or style, but rather whether they would enter the top forty chart system of the period. Known as "product evaluation meetings"⁴³⁸ participants were expected to offer their honest responses to each song. Gordy also invited non-creative members of staff as these reactions were considered closer to those of the "average record buyer"⁴³⁹. As a way to 'fix' and improve recordings The Andantes, then, become a crucial component of what passed as the Motown sound as they were used in order to fulfil the Motown sound when primary performers did not.

⁴³⁸ Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: An Autobiography* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 1994), 151.

⁴³⁹ Gordy, 151.

Extending Brar's discussion regarding Motown performers, labour, and vocal discipline it is not only the primary performers whose labour are scored into the recording, but those of The Andantes. Attending and attuning to the back/ing/ground and The Andantes specifically indicate that the scoring of The Andantes labour is so deep that it has remained embedded within recordings, within the grooves of a record, with the studio. Moreover, this not only reframes Motown from the perspective of the back/ing/ground but makes clear how the group were neither incidental nor insignificant regarding what is understood as the Motown 'sound,' but also complicates the relationship between the back/ing/ground and other Motown performers. These complications are most acute between The Andantes and Motown's girl groups. Marlene Barrow describes how the use of The Andantes as vocal supplementation on recordings for girl groups led to "hard feelings"⁴⁴⁰ towards The Andantes.

Those voices that are placed in the back/ing/ground become so embedded within the grooves of a recording, within the walls of a studio that they are uprooted from the bodies that produced them, allowed and encouraged to resurface as the voice of another, to inhabit a body that is not its own, or to remain so merged and entangled with another's voice or another's identity that listening to it as a separate voice becomes almost impossible.

Back/ing/ground and estranged labour:

The ways in which the back/ing/ground is used to maintain production levels speak to the back/ing/ground as an estranged form of labour echoing Marx's comments that "the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever-cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates."⁴⁴¹ The ways in which those voices singing from the back/ing/ground are used as

⁴⁴⁰ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 111.

⁴⁴¹ Karl Marx, 'Estranged Labour', in *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*, ed. Charles Lemert, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 33.

phonic material for any recording deemed necessary by the producer or label further speaks to this estrangement. As their vocals sound on recordings via supplementation, augmentation or replacement The Andantes are estranged from their labour. Moreover, the groups relationship with the object of their labour is one of alienation. This alienation is twofold. First, exemplifying Marx's comments that "the product of labour is labour congealed in an object, which has become material"⁴⁴². The voices of The Andantes are always embedded deep within the grooves of the record. Their vocals are situated behind almost everything and everyone else involved with the product. In the case of The Andantes they are essential to the sound of Motown yet are never permitted to be considered a core part of that sound. They exist in a continual state of deferral where their voices are either deferred onto the body/image of another, or as disembodied voices without attachment to their own group moniker. This is perhaps at its most pertinent during televised performances of songs that feature the voices of The Andantes yet are notably absent. For example, during a performance of "Ain't That Peculiar" on Hullabaloo in 1965, by Marvin Gaye the voice of The Andantes are clearly heard, yet they remain physical absent. Instead, Marvin Gaye performs to a backing track. And although this is not an unusual practice the disembodied voices of The Andantes remain unquestioned, and the presence of their bodies not demanded. It is this unquestioning that interests me. Why is it that the absence of the back/ing/ground is largely unquestioned? During the performance Gaye is surrounded by a group of dancers dressed in light coloured trouser and sweater ensembles. Throughout the performances the dancers can be seen clicking their fingers in time with the handclaps on the recording. The finger clicking could be read as an attempt to link the backing track with what performance, a moment where the sound of the body is made to connect with the image of the bodies on the screen echoing what Amy Herzog describes as "a fabricated

⁴⁴² Marx, 33.

marriage of sound and body”⁴⁴³. Yet this is not extended to the voices heard in and as the back/ing/ground. Rather the dancers function as silent figures moving around Gaye as he performs. Why is the absence of the background necessary?

The premise of the song is that Gaye is in love with a person who treats him poorly, yet this poor treatment appears to only increase Gaye's love. Perplexed by this Gaye continually poses the question 'Ain't that peculiar?' to which the female voices in the back/ing/ground repeat the question back. Throughout the song the back/ing/ground functions largely as echoic, repeating the single words or the question that Gaye poses. The voices of The Andantes as back/ing/ground do not sound until the last line of the first verse, repeating the final word of the verse four times; once each and then the fourth time in chorus:

Gaye: Honey, you do me wrong but still I'm crazy about you

Stay away too long and I can't do without you

Every chance you get you seem to hurt me more and more

But each hurt makes my love stronger than before

I know flowers go through rain

But how can love go through pain?

TA: Pain, pain, pain, **pain** (final one all together)

Chorus

Gaye: Ain't that peculiar?

TA: Ain't that peculiar?

Gaye: A peculiar-arity

TA: Ain't that peculiar?

Gaye: Ain't that peculiar, baby?

TA: Ain't that peculiar?

Gaye: Peculiar as can be

TA: Ain't that peculiar?

⁴⁴³ Amy Herzog, *Dreams of Difference Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 36.

During the second and third verses the back/ing/ground can be heard sounding rhythmic “oohs” along with each of Gaye’s lines. Here the back/ing/ground carries the central rhythm of the song, echoing the pattern introduced by the bass during the songs beginning:

Gaye: Oh, you tell me lies that should be obvious to me

TA: ooh-oooh, ooh-ooh-ooh-oooh, ooh-ooh-ooh-oooh

Gaye: But I'm so much in love with you, baby, 'till I don't want to see

TA: oooh, ooh-ooh-ooh-oooooooooooh, ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh

Gaye: That things you do and say are designed to make me blue

Gaye: It's a doggone shame my love for you makes all your lies seem true

TA: ooh-oooh, ooh-ooh-ooh-oooooooooooooooooooh, ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh

Gaye: But if the truth makes love last longer

Gaye: Why do lies make my love stronger?

TA: Stronger, stronger, stronger, **stronger** (final together)

During the televised performance as the track begins the camera swoops to the right refocusing from the studio audience towards a rectangular archway. In the middle of the archway Marvin Gaye is stood with two figures behind him. A change in camera angle shows the archway from straight on with two further figures in the foreground. As the song begins with bass line and handclaps the two figures in the foreground can be seen clicking their fingers along to the beat. As the drums come in the figures stop clicking their fingers and begin to alternate a backwards and forwards movement with their entire bodies along to the same beat. As Gaye begins the first verse the foregrounded figures exit the screen. As the camera moves towards Gaye he simultaneously moves towards the camera. As the verse continues more figures appear and exit the frame. As the chorus begins Gaye is seen standing centrally in front of the archway, alone. Yet as the voices of The Andantes sound Gaye begins to be surrounded by seven dancers circling him while continuously clicking their fingers.

As the performance continues the dancers can be seen entering and exiting the frame at different moments. The continual orbiting of Gaye by the dancers make clear that Gaye is the centre of attention here. As the dancers move around, and behind Gaye he is continually framed as the central figure. Yet as the voices of The Andantes sound, they are unable to fix upon the visible bodies on stage. Rather the disembodied voice(s) of the back/ing/ground float throughout the performance, unanchored.

Following the second verse Gaye and the back/ing/ground perform a call and response breakdown where the back/ing/ground echoes Gaye's utterances, following both his rhythm and intonation. This moment creates an interesting tension within the performance as it shows those voices of the back/ing/ground as surrounding Gaye rather than being behind him, or *in* the back/ing/ground. At the instance of the vocal breakdown Gaye turns his head away from the dancers, who have now moved behind him. As the camera's angle shifts to show Gaye and the dancers from the left it is as if Gaye is speaking to someone now in front of him, yet out of the camera's frame. With each of his utterances Gaye turns his head towards the left, only turning it back to the centre each time The Andantes sound. With each movement it is as if Gaye is speaking with the Andantes, whom are not physically present.

During the breakdown the back/ing/ground can be thought to surround the space in which both Gaye and the dancers are situated. The back/ing/ground exists as a sonic space only present during the performance as disembodied voices, unlocalizable within the visual space of the performance, rather the voices of the back/ing/ground surround the performance yet are unable to be anchored to the site of the performance. Here the back/ing/ground as disembodied voice is akin to a "blanket of sound, extending on all sides"⁴⁴⁴ of the performance. As disembodied voices The Andantes are simultaneously exterior and interior to the performance, sounding around the performance, yet unable to be localised within the performance, "neither

⁴⁴⁴ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 72.

fully set loose nor fully grounded”⁴⁴⁵ instead they seem to exist as both inside and outside of the performance.

The visibility of Gaye's body and the disembodiment of the voices of the Andantes appears to reverse what within film studies Kaja Silverman has noted as the dominant “specular regime”⁴⁴⁶ where the authority of the male voice is rooted in his voice as omnipresent and not attached to his body and where the female voice is rooted to the body. Yet in this instance we experience a disruption of this where we have the voice of Gaye rooted to his body, yet the voices of The Andantes disembodied. Speaking of the possibilities of such a disruption Silverman remarks the disembodied female voice places “her beyond the reach of the male gaze” releasing “her voice from the signifying obligations which that gaze enforces. It would liberate the female subject from the interrogation about her place, her time, and her desires which constantly resecures her”⁴⁴⁷. Yet the disembodied voices of the back/ing/ground do not seem to cause this liberation because so strong has the image of the back/ing/ground been constructed that its natural state is to sound and not be seen. As to be seen, to be identifiable at an individual level would be to enter to the foreground, would be to become visible in a way that threatens the foreground.

The reasoning behind the absence of The Andantes during this performance is linked to both the practicality of featuring them on the performance and their significance to Motown. As the in-house backing group it was perhaps never a question that they would be available for televised or live performances as doing so would make them “unavailable for studio work.”⁴⁴⁸ A feat that would be challenging considering the quantity of recording in which they feature. However, their absence also signals their significance within the Motown ‘machine’ in that their visibility would unsettle and threaten the place of the primary performer or group. In the

⁴⁴⁵ Herzog, *Dreams of Difference Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film*, 106.

⁴⁴⁶ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, 72.

⁴⁴⁷ Silverman, 164.

⁴⁴⁸ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 99.

case of Marvin Gaye's performance on Hullabaloo the back/ing/ground can only exist in a disembodied state in order to not threaten or unsettle the performance. The presence of The Andantes as recorded track in which Gaye performs to and with signals how the back/ing/ground and specifically The Andantes are demanded as sonic or phonic presence. The process of disembodiment that occurs during televised performances such as this speak to how the back/ing/ground becomes further distanced from the texts in which their voices are used, creating experiences of alienation and trauma. Speaking of this Louvain Demps describes the alienation felt when hearing The Andantes voice "coming through the TV set."⁴⁴⁹ Here the group are distanced and estranged from performances becoming merely part of the wider mechanisations of television shows and the technology used to engage with them. Here their voices become tethered to the TV rather than their own bodies.

Processes of vocal supplementation exemplify and amplify Marx's consideration that "the worker is related to the product of his labour as to an alien object"⁴⁵⁰ in that the voices of and in the back/ing/ground are neither recognised as belonging to a nameable subject. Furthermore, the alienation experienced here not only exists between worker and product, but between additional workers and additional products. The alienation experienced by The Andantes is one of trauma and emotional pain where their voices are heard emitting as if from the body of another. Here their labour is both embedded within the labour product of the material recording i.e. vinyl record and the Motown brand and its associated groups further distancing it from the labour produced by The Andantes. The estrangement and alienation experienced by The Andantes was at times instantaneous. Recollecting a recording session with an unnamed girl group Marlene Barrow describes how although the girl groups microphone had been switched off the group did not recognise the absence of their own voices instead believing the voices of The Andantes to be their own. Barrow recalls how "after the playback, the girls said, 'We

⁴⁴⁹ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 107.

⁴⁵⁰ Marx, 'Estranged Labour', 33.

sound good!' Louvain, Jackie, and I looked at each other and wondered how they could've thought it was them singing"⁴⁵¹. This incident suggests how the labour of, in, and from the back/ing/ground had already undertaken a process of estrangement where the vocals of The Andantes are instantaneously alienated from their own bodies and heard as if emitting from another. Noting the work they contributed to Motown Louvain Demps describes the alienation experienced in stark terms: "Marlene, Jackie, and I had to stand tall at times. Those were our voices coming through the TV set. We experienced what felt like alienation sometimes when it came to the girl groups."⁴⁵²

The role of the back/ing/ground amplify Marx's observations regarding estranged labour in that the back/ing/ground is always already framed as insignificant or obscure. At Motown it is the Motown 'sound' that is the product. This abstraction to a genre or 'sound' allows for the wider machinations of the Motown company to take precedence as the key aspects of said 'sound'. This is further evidenced by the numerous accounts of Motown that foreground management styles, specific groups, or the city of Detroit itself as constituting the Motown sound. It is not intention to dismiss these factors, but to extend a mode of listening that seeks to reach those voices often unacknowledged within these histories.

The necessity that the status of the back/ing/ground exist as "nameless support" speaks to the back/ing/grounds ability to disrupt or unsettle⁴⁵³. As noted by John Corbett it is both the absence and the presence of the back/ing/ground that potentially threaten the tight harmonic relationship between lead and backing, foreground and back/ing/ground. As Corbett remarks where the absence of the background threatens to reveal the conditions of disembodiment in which the lead singer in fact exists, the presence of the back/ing/ground threatens to disrupt this relationship in that the presence of the background might 'dislodge' the position occupied

⁴⁵¹ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 111.

⁴⁵² Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 107.

⁴⁵³ Corbett, 'Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist', 64.

by the lead, uprooting the status of the lead as focus, and disrupting the foreground as a settled, permanent, and unmoving space. The estrangement of the back/ing/ground, and The Andantes specifically, becomes a necessity in that their presence is required to produce the Motown sound, yet remain nameless so as not to disrupt or threaten the Motown sound as something unspeakable, unknown.

Back/ing/ground as (Re)Production

The relationship that The Andantes had with The Supremes is an interesting one, as there exist a number of examples in which The Andantes feature in place of The Supremes, especially during moments of inter-personnel conflict and the latter extraction of Diana Ross from the group in order for Ross to become a solo artist. During these moments The Andantes were used to ensure the image of The Supremes remained intact. For example, during in-group conflicts which subsequently saw group member Florence Ballard leave The Supremes, Andantes member Marlene Barrow was requested to participate in live performances on Ballard's behalf. The group remained billed as The Supremes and no public reference towards Barrow as a replacement was made. Here Barrow enters the foreground but under the guise of another figure; Florence Ballard who at this point occupies the back/ing/ground of the group along with Mary Wilson to Diana Ross's continuation as the groups lead. Barrow remarks how her selection was due to the fact that she already "knew the songs, so [Motown] didn't have to teach me. I also fit [Florence Ballard's] gowns."⁴⁵⁴ Performing as Ballard, Barrow becomes backgrounded beyond the back/ing/ground that Ballard already occupies, with costume and choreography as hazily shaped cyphers.

Following the groups' name change in 1967 and the permanent replacement of Florence Ballard with Cindy Birdsong, The Andantes "were used on all singles"⁴⁵⁵ by the group

⁴⁵⁴ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 10.

⁴⁵⁵ Clemente, 10.

“replacing Wilson and Birdsong until Diana’s departure” in 1970. Singles such as “Love Child” (1968), and the groups final single before Diana Ross’s departure “Someday We’ll be Together” (1970) feature the voices of The Andantes rather than group members Mary Wilson and Cindy Birdsong. John Clementes remarks that this was done to “prepare the record buying public for Diana as a separate entity.”⁴⁵⁶ As such The Andantes become a back/ing/ground machine reproducing a convincing (sonic) image of The Supremes in preparation for Ross’s departure. The use of The Andantes on single releases allows space on albums for the voices of group members to feature, yet leaves those recordings intended for chart success dependent on the voices of The Andantes. My argument here is that The Andantes are not used due to convenience, but rather their role as back/ing/ground permits the label to use them in a myriad of ways with little to no recourse regarding their contributions. Here The Andantes become a site or space of and for what Marie Thomson calls “the ‘arcane’ of reproductive labour.”⁴⁵⁷

Drawing of on the work of Fortunati, Thomson argues that “contemporary music is sustained”⁴⁵⁸ by the inherently “arcane” nature of musical reproduction. Thomson describes the arcane as consisting of “naturalised, and often unwaged labour necessary to the (re)production of artists, their musical activities, and life under capitalism.”⁴⁵⁹ The role of the back/ing/ground and The Andantes sound this arcane at a different pitch. Although not unpaid labour the role of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist is often framed as somehow incidental or insignificant. Returning to the comments made above from forum debates regarding the role of The Andantes and their work with The Supremes, they are consistently figured as obscure, incidental and unimportant. In this way the back/ing/ground is considered reproductive as it relates to non-value within a capitalist framework that models production with value.

⁴⁵⁶ Clemente, 212.

⁴⁵⁷ Marie Thomson, ‘Sounding the Arcane: Contemporary Music, Gender and Reproduction’, *Contemporary Music Review*, 2020, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2020.1806630>.

⁴⁵⁸ Thomson, 1.

⁴⁵⁹ Thomson, 7.

Considering the differences between production and reproduction Leopoldina Fortunati describes the following:

Under capitalism, reproduction is separated off from production; the former unity that existed between the production of use value and the production of individuals within precapitalist modes of production has disappeared, and now the general process of commodity production appears as being separate from, and even in direct opposition to, the process of reproduction. While the first appears as the creation of value, the second appears as the creation of non-value. Commodity production is thus posited as the fundamental point of capitalist production, and the laws that govern it as the laws that characterize capitalism itself. Reproduction now becomes posited as “natural” production⁴⁶⁰

Thinking the back/ing/ground as reproductive is echoed in John Corbett's description of the back/ing/ground singer as sonic envelop akin to a womb within which the lead, foreground exists. The use of such maternal imagery along with the indexing of the background along both gender and race continually frame the back/ing/ground as reproductive. Yet as Fortunati describes, “within production, work is wage labor, which is carried out in “the factory” and whose structure give rise to a specific type of cooperation and division of labor [...] Within reproduction work is non-waged, it is carried out in “the home,” its organisation requires neither such cooperation nor the division of labor and technology”⁴⁶¹. Yet within the context of Motown the background inhabits both these modes.

The back/ing/ground and The Andantes specifically as has been discussed earlier in this chapter are situated, indeed embedded, within the productive modes of Motown, while simultaneously considered as reproductive. The (re)production of the back/ing/ground exists

⁴⁶⁰ Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995), 8.

⁴⁶¹ Fortunati, 8.

at the intersection between production and reproduction in that the back/ing/ground produces the commodity that is understood as the Motown sound while simultaneously denied to fully inhabit or be recognised within this productive mode. Rather the construction of the back/ing/ground as discussed in the previous chapter enables the role as registering as incidental and lacking the means of production, “not by way of some rigorous accounting but rather as a function of not hearing, of overlooking.”⁴⁶² The (re)productive power of the back/ing/ground occurs both via and because of this reproductive mode: “it is the positing of reproduction as non-value that enables both production and reproduction to function as the producing of value.”⁴⁶³

With Motown the back/ing/ground takes on this (re)productive mode in that The Andantes both produce and reproduce the Motown sound. The characterisation of the back/ing/ground as reproductive rather than productive resonate within the fan debates above which regard the role of The Andantes and the back/ing/ground more specifically as “blown out of proportion,”⁴⁶⁴ and incidental. These remarks frame the back/ing/ground as separate from the recording, the record, the commodity. Rather the back/ing/ground is considered outside of this productive space. Yet when reconsidering the how the back/ing/ground was utilised at Motown it becomes clear that it is highly productive, serving to produce the very sound for which Motown is known. Yet the back/ing/ground, always, obscured, hidden, and at times invisible is only permitted to reproduce itself as “labor power”⁴⁶⁵.

Considering Motown as an assembly line whose aim was to produce chart success via its commodities the back/ing/ground is a significant part of this process. And although this significance was never formally or explicitly related back to those occupying this role

⁴⁶² Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 17.

⁴⁶³ Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, 9.

⁴⁶⁴ Marv2, post to “No Supremes on Stop! In the Name of Love Etc.” Soulful Detroit Fan Forum, 23 December 2011 2.55pm, <https://soulfuldetroit.com/showthread.php?4537-No-Supremes-On-Stop-in-the-Name-of-Love-etc>

⁴⁶⁵ Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital*, 11.

(particularly in the form of royalties or explicit acknowledgments) it is perhaps realised via the continued deferral of the back/ing/ground as productive itself. For example, whilst working with Motown The Andantes were not formally permitted to work with other labels or artists not associated with the Motown recording company. Nor were the group permitted the same artist development treatment as other performers and groups. Rather the group were kept *in* and *as* the back/ing/ground. Vickie Wright's suggestion that "The Andantes were so valuable to Motown that they were continually denied the opportunity the own records and do their own shows,"⁴⁶⁶ signals how significant the group were to Motown. The restrictions applied to the group included not giving permission for the group to work with other labels. And although this latter restriction was difficult to apply, as there were no formal contract in place stating that they could not, it speaks to how valuable they were to the label. Moreover, even when the group were permitted a single release under their own group moniker their role remained in the back/ing/ground.

The 1964 release of "Like a Nightmare" is the only single that names The Andantes as a primary group. Released on Motown's VIP label "(Like A) Nightmare" continues to feature The Andantes only as back/ing/ground, instead using Anne Bogan on lead. Louvain Demps remarks how "[Motown] didn't even ask us to sing lead"⁴⁶⁷ signalling how when the group were permitted to have a single released under their own group name, they were still to remain in the back/ing/ground. The VIP records discography spans from 1963 to 1965 and is said to have been founded in order to promote "West-coast artists and California related material."⁴⁶⁸ Why Motown decided to release their record under VIP roster is unclear yet is suggestive of the fact that there was little intention to provide the record with the same amount of marketing as the Motown and Tamla labels. During a telephone interview with Louvain Demps she recalls

⁴⁶⁶ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 99.

⁴⁶⁷ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 99.

⁴⁶⁸ Motown Junkie <https://motownjunkies.co.uk/labels/vip/>

the lack of promotion around the record as well as the unceremonious way it was released stating, “they offered us a record but they it didn’t really do too much, because they didn’t promote it. We didn’t even know when it was out.”⁴⁶⁹

As with their other efforts The Andantes, here, even in what is meant to be there most explicit remain “unlocalizable”⁴⁷⁰. The inability to localize The Andantes further demonstrates how the back/ing/ground is an unfixed space and unable to fix those that occupy or inhabit it. Although in the examples that have discussed here this un-fixed nature functions to destabilize the work and the role of The Andantes I will go on to discuss this destabilization as a possible resistance (see chapter five).

The construction of the back/ing/ground as it is indexed along gender and race continually and problematically figures the back/ing/ground as un-productive. This is further amplified by the continued obfuscation of the background as a set of individuals. The back/ing/ground is always figured as a group, further distancing it as individual labouring people. As discussed in the previous chapter the back/ing/ground is constructed in such a way as to become an expectation (as demonstrated by Lou Reed’s “Walk on the Wild Side” discussed in the previous chapter). As an expectation the back/ing/ground group/vocalist becomes a site of labour that is considered natural to those that occupy the role and falling within the category of reproduction.

The definitions of reproductive work as it is associated with domestic labour, home life, and the family are further echoed in remarks regarding Motown as a “family environment”. The application of a familial model to Motown alters an understanding of Motown as assembly line. The two-sides to Motown: family and assembly line sit at odds with each other with The Andantes at the centre of these two folds. On the one hand they are a significant part of the assembly line production process at Motown where their voices are used to ‘fix’ and enhance recordings where necessary. Yet the notion of Motown as family also allowed for a culture of

⁴⁶⁹ Louvain Demps, telephone interview with Rachael Finney, February 2nd, 2020

⁴⁷⁰ Corbett, ‘Siren Song to Banshee Wail: On the Status of the Background Vocalist’, 60.

favours where The Andantes 'help out' on recordings as favours to Motown groups relinquishing pay for the good of the label.

The Andantes as Motown Technology

The ways in which The Andantes were used at Motown speak to how the back/ing/ground becomes a corporeal phonic technology. As has been described above The Andantes role as in-house background and backing vocalists show how the back/ing/ground is not only 'backing up' in the call-and-response model traditionally associated with the role of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist. But that the back/ing/ground and its inherent obscurity is used to produce and (re)produce the Motown sound. In his description of the status of the backing singer John Corbett acknowledges how the back/ing/ground group/vocalist provides the very diegesis in which the lead singer is grounded, so much so that the back/ing/ground blends "in with the walls of the studio, becoming that larger part of the music industry."⁴⁷¹

The work that The Andantes undertook at Motown show how the back/ing/ground becomes a technology of the studio, used to enhance recordings, replace vocals, or merge with the vocals of others to ensure it possessed the desired sound, the Motown sound. In these ways their voices become techniques or phonic devices applied to recordings in order to ensure the recordings sounded the desired way. Moreover, as the in-house back/ing/ground group The Andantes sound on numerous recordings providing call-and-response vocals to numerous Motown acts. In both ways the back/ing/ground becomes a device in which the Motown sound is produced. Moreover, the use of the group as vocal replacements while primary acts were on tour and unable to record signal how the back/ing/ground can be considered what Beth Coleman describes as a "levered mechanism". Coleman describes a levered mechanism as "a thing that is not the main engine of the system but rather an internal part that keeps all running

⁴⁷¹ Corbett, 63.

smoothly”⁴⁷². The back/ing/ground then becomes this levered mechanism; a device that enables the running of the machine or mechanism.

The ways that we encounter the voices of The Andantes are mostly in fragments and via recorded media rather than live performances. Their voices sound via vinyl recordings, audio tape, through radio speakers or as disembodied voices through television screens signalling that the ways we encounter the back/ing/ground, here, are via forms of sound and media technologies. The voices of the group, then, exist and sound via these technologies rather than their own bodies, rather their bodies are replaced via some form of media technology. And although this splitting between sound and source can be applied to vocalists in the back/ing/ground or otherwise with “the invention of the phonograph at the end of the nineteenth century”⁴⁷³, unlike voices situated in the foreground, The Andantes never recover this splitting. Instead Their voices remain divided from their bodies, even, as has been discussed in the case of the Supremes and the recording of “Stop! In the Name of Love”, when their presence is evidenced. Instead they remain untethered, inhabiting the bodies of others, or remaining disembodied.

The erasure or obfuscation of those constructed as back/ing/ground and the subsequent disembodiment of their voices occurs both within and prior to the studio. As discussed in the previous chapter the construction of the back/ing/ground as Black and female causes the image of the Black female body to register at the level of back/ing/ground regardless of whether it is the case. In this way the identity of those in or as the back/ing/ground become replaced with a pre-existing image of a racialised and gendered body. This construction produces the back/ing/ground as both racialised and gendered image, or what Alexander Weheliye refers to as “spectral residue”⁴⁷⁴. It is this spectral residue that comes to enact the first level of

⁴⁷² Beth Coleman, ‘Race as Technology’, *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24, no. 1 (2009): 178.

⁴⁷³ Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, 19.

⁴⁷⁴ Weheliye, 36.

obfuscation that the back/ing/ground encounters. For The Andantes a second level of obfuscation is encountered as they become a technology of the studio. Here the studio acts as a veil obscuring The Andantes from their own voices. The studio functions as its own tool extracting and uprooting the voices of the group from their bodies, reproducing their voices as sonic matter to be cut and pasted via audio tape and embedded within the grooves of a record. It is via these sound technologies that we encounter The Andantes as back/ing/ground. Here the back/ing/ground becomes mechanized and experienced as a machinic voice.

The process of fragmentation also occurs via the very ways that the group performed on recording sessions, especially when used for recordings for girl groups. Marlene Barrow recalls how “our singing on others’ records made for hard feelings towards us. It was apparent some didn’t want us there [...] eventually they recorded us separately because ladies would ask why we had to be there to sing on their records”⁴⁷⁵. Barrow’s comments speak to how the group and the back/ing/ground become s further fragmented and obscured within the recording process.

As back/ing/ground The Andantes become both tool and technique to fulfil the desired sound and maintain a steady production of releases. The irregularity of scheduling also speaks to the denaturing of the back/ing/ground as a set of voices, of a set of labouring women, as work, but frames the back/ing/ground as a corporeal device of the studio to be used and called upon at the whim of the label. Moreover, the anonymity of who the track was meant for further confines the group to the studio, only hearing how their voices had been used upon hearing their voices via the sound technologies of radio, vinyl recording, audio tape, and the television screen. When used as vocal replacements or enhancements their identity is further obfuscated via these instances of playback as the visibility of the primary groups name on the record label, or radio disc jockey’s announcement works to further distance and make unclear the presence of their voices. Where Kodwo Eshun speaks to the possibilities of similar forms of obfuscation

⁴⁷⁵ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 111.

for electronic music and the use of digital technologies such as sequencers and synthesisers, the same possibilities do not necessarily occur for The Andantes. Rather than feeling “at home”⁴⁷⁶ in their alienation like Eshun’s figures, the “scrambling of identity”⁴⁷⁷ that occurs here is experienced as painful and traumatic. Rather being able to use technologies to “alienate themselves from sonic identity”⁴⁷⁸ and explore this alienation in productive ways, The Andantes are utilised as phonic technologies of the studio that function to alienate them from their voices in order to produce a sound that will sell records. Rather than being situated behind technologies The Andantes become a phonic technology that is then supplanted into additional sonic technologies such as those mentioned above. Here they are restricted, or banished even to exist and sound from within the grooves of a vinyl record, or to invisibly orbit a televised performance. In the studio their voices are picked up by the magnetic tape of reel-to-reel machines. The flexibility of the tape allows for their voices to be cut and moved to other recordings. The process of stacking their voices occurred to generate a choir-like sound. In these moments The Andantes and the back/ing/ground shape shift, their limits either multiplied to become a choir, or dubbed onto the voice of another, disciplining the original voice to sound as Motown demands.

As Motown grew as a recording establishment the ways in which Motown recorded tracks had changed. Rather than recording live with vocalists and musicians in the same room, each part such as, instrument, lead vocal, backing vocals were recorded separately meaning that neither recording session need directly interact with another. This method also permitted Berry Gordy and producers more control over how they edited a track. Having their vocals recorded separately meant that The Andantes did not necessarily know how their vocals would be used,

⁴⁷⁶ Eshun, 'Further Considerations of Afrofuturism', 89.

⁴⁷⁷ Eshun, 89.

⁴⁷⁸ Eshun, 89.

on what recording and for or with whom. The back/ing/ground then becomes a space that can be cut and dubbed infinitely.

The back/ing/ground, then, becomes a site of supplementation, a means by which a recording possesses the necessary elements to be recognised as Motown. As the back/ing/ground (re)produces the Motown sound its method registers at the level of the machine, or machinic. We are only permitted to hear The Andantes as recorded fragmented phonic material. Their voices sound only through recordings, yet as has been discussed above the ways in which their voices have been used means we can only attend to their voices in a fragmentary way.

Chapter Five:

Sounding Elsewhere, Everywhere, and Otherwise: Listening to the Back/ing/ground Move

[Chapter Tracklist \(listen here\):](#)

Kim Weston, “Just Loving You” (Live at the Motortown revue, 1964)

Jackie Wilson, “(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher and Higher” (1967)

Bobby ‘Blue’ Bland, “I’m Too Far Gone To Turn Around” (1955)

Edwin Starr, “Stop Her On Sight (S.O.S)” (1968)

Stevie Wonder, “Uptight (Everything’s Alright)” (1965)

Marvin Gaye, “One More Heartache” (1966)

The Playgirls, “Gee, But I’m Lonesome” (1960)

The Rolettes, “Sad Fool” (1956)

The Crystals, “He’s a Rebel” (1962)

One of things that has struck me during my research is that I will always be surprised as to where my ear might encounter the voices of The Andantes and The Blossoms. It is through these unexpected encounters that this project initially emerged. Having repeatedly listened to The Four Tops’ “Ask the Lonely” on which The Andantes feature, over the course of a few years I began to hear the voices of The Andantes on further and further recordings. To begin with my ear stayed within Motown’s back catalogues where I would increasingly hear their voices on numerous singles, yet they remained anonymous to me as they were not listed on the records centre label. Although phonically present on a wealth of recordings, these voices remained unnamed. Present yet denied accreditation their voices sounded and signalled an elsewhere space at Motown. A space simultaneously present yet denied. There, yet also somehow elsewhere. Similarly, it was hearing the voices of The Blossoms sing on recordings in various vocal styles, as well as on recordings bearing different group monikers that my ear

began to attune to hearing these voices sound everywhere. In following the back/ing/ground I was led by ear rather than eye, dependent on attunement and a listening *for* these voices, like a listening in the dark, rather than finding access via archival data laid out on centre labels and liner notes. In the following chapter I discuss how the lack of label credits codes out the back/ing/ground from usual archival sources such as centre labels and liner notes. This coding out of the back/ing/ground from record labels causes which the back/ing/ground is made to sound both elsewhere and everywhere.

To do this I discuss examples of The Andantes sounding elsewhere and The Blossoms sounding everywhere. In sounding elsewhere, I attend to the ways in which The Andantes have been made to sound elsewhere whilst working with Motown, and also how they used this sounding elsewhere to redress and refuse some of the limitations placed upon them at Motown by working covertly with other recording labels both in and outside of Detroit. In sounding everywhere, I discuss how The Blossoms used the inherent anonymity of the back/ing/ground to move through the studio system in which they were situated. The final part of this chapter extends The Blossoms sounding everywhere to a sounding otherwise where through both physical and vocal gesture during a televised performance the group signal an alternative relationship between lead singer and back/ing/ground.

Using thinking laid out by Daphne Brooks, Devonya Havis, and Katherine McKittrick the chapter discusses the ways in which in sounding elsewhere and sounding everywhere the back/ing/ground signals an alternative history of popular music. One that can only be accessed via the ear. Thinking with Saidiya Hartman's work on refusal and redress the chapter considers how in this sounding the back/ing/ground performs instances of resistance through voice. Working with Ashon Crawley's notion of otherwise possibility the final part of this chapter considers the ways in which the construction of the back/ing/ground is destabilised through instances of phonic and physical gesture.

My argument here is in sounding elsewhere, everywhere, and otherwise we are able to listen to the archive of the back/ing/ground but also how the back/ing/ground creates movement in different ways, and how these movements can be considered instances of redress as to the back/ing/ground as static, unmoving, and unproductive. The movements that The Andantes undertake and the sounding of their voices elsewhere both at Motown and beyond Motown speak to movement that further signals their role in producing the Motown sound. In sounding elsewhere the sound of Motown moves with them. The Blossoms movement signals a moving through the studio system and in this moving through they sound everywhere signalling how the archive of the back/ing/ground is one accessed via the ear.

The Back/ing/ground as Phonic Archive

During the 1960's both The Andantes and The Blossoms work as back/ing/ground vocalists was extensive. However, there does not yet exist a clear record of exactly how many recordings either group was part of. This is due to a number of issues. First, both groups were paid as session vocalists and paid by the session rather than a specific song or recording. Within one session numerous recordings may take place without the groups knowing where or on what specific recordings their voices may be heard with Marlene Barrow of The Andantes remarking that when recording "we didn't always know who the songs were for."⁴⁷⁹ Second, as back/ing/ground group/vocalists their moniker is rarely credited on centre labels. A record label, also known as a centre-label is the circular label in the centre of a vinyl record. The record label or centre label includes information about the release, such as the name of the recording artist, record company, catalogue number, publisher, song writer and lyricist, title of the record, as well as indicating side number or letter. Even the run-out section contains

⁴⁷⁹ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 66.

information such as the press number, pressing plant used, engineers involved and so on.⁴⁸⁰ Among record collectors this information is useful as it is used to understand the specific details regarding individual records as well as a means to valuing individual records. Centre-labels provide a portal to the specific recording, production, and dissemination of a record. Information such as year of release, record company, place of pressing is used to understand the wider historical context of the record as object, as well as providing collectors the means to value individual records.

Both The Andantes and The Blossoms, whilst performing back/ing/ground vocals are rarely credited on centre-labels. For example, out of the numerous recordings The Andantes worked on with Motown the groups moniker 'The Andantes' appears on very few singles⁴⁸¹. Similarly, when performing back/ing/ground vocals The Blossoms are rarely credited or credited under the use of alternative monikers on single releases.

Unlike The Andantes, The Blossoms were not restricted to working with one studio or label. Rather the group worked as both a session group providing back/ing/ground vocals for various studios and recording artists as well as performing as a primary act. As primary performers The Blossoms are credited on twenty-six, seven-inch single releases across twelve different record labels, yet they remain largely uncredited when performing back/ing/ground.

The absence of visual accreditation signals how the back/ing/ground is, to follow Robin James, "coded out" of such documentation⁴⁸². Their vocals are (mostly) heard on the recording, yet access to who these voices belong to remains largely absent. The absence of their names on centre-labels means that to consider their archive yet again requires that we listen for it and

⁴⁸⁰ Further information regarding centre labels as archival identifiers see <https://magazine.vinylmeplease.com/magazine/guide-deciphering-dead-wax/> and https://www.reddit.com/r/vinyl/comments/4e1e84/a_beginners_guide_to_dating_and_identifying/

⁴⁸¹ It is difficult to fully ascertain how many single centre-labels include The Andantes name. Current research indicates that only two singles from Motown labels include The Andantes group moniker, one being the one single released with the name The Andantes used a primary group, "(Like a) Nightmare" and Mary Wells "Laughing Boy" (1963) that identifies The Andantes as well as The Love Tones as 'vocal accompaniment.' Outside of Motown there is one single centre-label that identifies The Andantes, Billy Kent's single, "Take All of Me/Your Love" released on the Detroit label MAH in 1960.

⁴⁸² James, 'Sonic Cyberfeminisms, Perceptual Coding and Phonographic Compression'.

listen hard.⁴⁸³ The absence of naming back/ing/ground vocalists on centre-labels speaks to how the histories of popular music and associated media often code out the back/ing/ground rendering it audibly present on the recording yet visibly absent on centre labels. In the absence of naming who is performing back/ing/ground vocals, the back/ing/ground is rendered as both unknown and unknowable. From the perspective of centre-labels details such as who is singing back/ing/ground are deemed inessential information. In this sense The Andantes and The Blossoms, then, are coded out of what is considered essential becoming unknown and unknowable voices that exist only within the grooves of each record. Here they held within the depths of each groove, forever sounding yet unable to gain recognition.

Considering the extensive number of recordings of which both groups feature and the construction of the back/ing/ground more broadly, the absence of accreditation echoes Daphne Brooks observation of “the centuries old tradition of turning Black cultural labor into forms of capital for which [Black women] are systematically denied the returns.”⁴⁸⁴ The absence of accreditation highlights Brooks’s point in that both The Andantes and The Blossoms are needed by record companies, producers, and as shall discuss later, television companies, yet returns on this labour are minimised. The minimisation of their value is achieved by maintaining the construction of the back/ing/ground as obscure, incidental and ultimately uncreative. However, as has been demonstrated throughout this thesis the role of the back/ing/ground is more complex and creative than the construction permits. Marlene Barrow of The Andantes speaks to the creativity required for the role describing both how producers would request their input or even require them to arrange the back/ing/round vocals from scratch.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸³ Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*.

⁴⁸⁴ Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 3.

⁴⁸⁵ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 63,99.

The coding out of back/ing/ground vocalists on centre-labels speaks to how the construction of the back/ing/ground already erases and devalues those that labour there. The absence of their names on centre-labels can be thought to continually deny the recognition of the back/ing/ground as both a space of creative labour, role of value within the recording industry, and musical component. In the absence of being named on centre-labels⁴⁸⁶, the labour of The Andantes and The Blossoms remains largely untraced where it is archived via the ear rather than the eye. It is catalogued by the body, through engaged listening that seeks to recognise those who have been coded out of accepted frequencies⁴⁸⁷.

In attempting to identify and map the archive of the back/ing/ground and the work and output of both The Andantes and The Blossoms it becomes apparent that visual referents such as label credits are not suitable as there remain several recordings upon which reference to these groups remain absent. In attempting to map their histories and their archives I begin to rely on my ear rather than my eye and in doing so listen to their voices expand across popular music histories. What is realised when attempting to map out the back/ing/ground visually through released recordings is that it is not mappable in this way. The terrain which the back/ing/ground produces and moves through is only accessed via the ear. Not only this but what becomes evident is how the coding out of the back/ing/ground through visual accreditation renders it as untraced. Yet when listening for the back/ing/ground the trace is apparent, but it is a phonic trace to be mapped and moved through aurally. The back/ing/ground demands that I listen not just *to* it, but *for* it. It demands that I listen in a way that anticipates the unexpected or as yet unacknowledged presence of their voices.

While listening *for* the background an alternative history of popular music is signalled; a history of invisible and erased identities, of forgotten labour, and unacknowledged creativity

⁴⁸⁶ Not only are the Andantes and The Blossoms rarely named on centre-labels accounts of their labour disputed even when evidenced (see forum discussion from chapter two) or, as will be discussed later in this chapter, their group names altered or changed completely.

⁴⁸⁷ James, 'Sonic Cyberfeminisms, Perceptual Coding and Phonographic Compression'.

that exists beside visible archival referents such as label credits. Without these visual referents we can consider the back/ing/ground as being characterised by both obscurity and unknowability. We can hear these vocals, yet we are unable to locate them to a set of specific identities, a point also echoed in the spatial placement of the back/ing/ground during live performances where back/ing/ground group/vocalists are often placed behind the lead performer(s) at the back, or side of the stage, or as discussed in the previous chapter at times off stage and completely out of sight. Both these visual and spatial placements, or lack thereof, of the back/ing/ground group/vocalist demarcates it as not occupying the same place as those performing lead. This placement as previously discussed functions to further uphold the spatial hierarchy between background and foreground. As noted by Katherine McKittrick “we produce space; we produce its meanings”⁴⁸⁸ and as such, the meanings that are produced via the construction of the background as it is indexed across race and gender accentuate “racist paradigms of the past and their ongoing hierarchical patterns”⁴⁸⁹ while also perpetually displacing the creative and cultural work that the back/ing/ground produces. The continual absence of acknowledgement towards the work that these groups produced is read here as a process of “profitable erasure”⁴⁹⁰ in which their absence is necessary to hold attention towards the foreground.

However, when attuning to the back/ing/ground we can understand popular music histories at a different register. Without such accreditation the back/ing/ground becomes displaced; audible on recordings yet rendered unlocalizable in terms of who is singing. Not only this but the absence of label credits signals how the labour of the back/ing/ground is located at the margins of creative and cultural production. Yet as discussed in previous chapters it is the construction of the background that *imagines* the Black female voice as back/ing/ground as

⁴⁸⁸ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, xii.

⁴⁸⁹ Katherine McKittrick, xii.

⁴⁹⁰ Katherine McKittrick, x.

outside the production of creativity. The continual marginalisation of this role occurs due to the indexing and mapping of race and gender across the role and it is the “process of marginalization”⁴⁹¹ that imagines the role as located at the margins.

This lack of visual accreditation means that mapping the archive of the back/ing/ground through media objects such as released recordings must be undertaken aurally. It cannot be mapped out visually. It is not mapped out via record information lists and catalogue entries, nor is it listed or locatable via label credits. Rather the back/ing/ground can only be located via the ear. The absence or lack of visual referents to map the archive of the back/ing/ground renders it invisible and to follow Katherine McKittrick “ungeographic.” The ungeographic nature of the back/ing/ground is rooted not in any inherent untraceability, but rather the ways in which it is rendered untraceable due to the absence of accredited labour. Without the usual referents regarding *who* is singing the back/ing/ground exists outside of the tangible stability of what is ordinarily archivable or mappable. Rather, the back/ing/ground must be understood as an ever-unfolding aural archive.

Due to the back/ing/ground as being continually overlooked and underheard it registers as a distinctly phonic and aural archive or map that “does not easily follow cartographic rules, borders and lines,”⁴⁹² rather it is fragmented, contestable, and uncertain. To map the back/ing/ground, then, requires listening, it demands the ear rather than the eye. The archive(s) of the back/ing/ground are aural, ever unfolding and producing an “outcome of uncertainty”⁴⁹³, without a “determined, or knowable, outcome.”⁴⁹⁴ It is an archive that exists without edges, and includes instances where voices overlap and are entangled with others. When listening to the back/ing/ground we are uncertain whose voice or voices we are hearing as well as being unsure of the extent of material and recordings in which these voices are present.

⁴⁹¹ Katherine McKittrick, 55.

⁴⁹² Katherine McKittrick, ix.

⁴⁹³ Katherine McKittrick, *ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ Katherine McKittrick, xxiv.

As will be established in what follows the archives of both The Andantes and The Blossoms remain difficult to ascertain if mapped visually as they are rarely credited on recordings, rather they demand our ear follow the back/ing/ground and be open to encountering their voices in unexpected, uncertain, and potentially endless ways. The aurality of the back/ing/ground is also emphasised by not only the absence of visual referents such as label credits or spatial visibility during live or televised performances, but also the unreliability of such referents. For example, in 1963 The Andantes along with Marvelettes member Gladys Horton recorded the single “Too Hurt to Cry (Too in Love to Say Goodbye)” for Motown’s Gordy label. The recording, considered to be both a response to and experimentation with Philles records producer Phil Spector’s emergent ‘wall of sound’ technique, was released under the group moniker The Darnells. Neither The Andantes or Gladys Horton received acknowledgement or credit for the recording, rather The Darnells were left to exist as an imaginary act with no reference towards a specific set of singers. Although released in the U.S as a single the records U.K release saw the recording on a four-track EP for Statesides ‘R&B Chartmakers’ series along with Marvin Gaye’s “Ain’t that Peculiar” and “Can I Get a Witness,” and Martha and the Vandellas “Quicksand” all three recordings featuring the vocals of The Andantes, as well as Eddie Hollands “Leaving Home.” Notably, the picture sleeve for the UK release feature photographs of every other artist featured apart from The Darnells who are referenced only in name.

In later years, the single has been attributed to Gladys Horton and the rest of The Marvelettes although it is only Horton’s voice who is present. The Andantes role remains largely unacknowledged. Similarly, in 1964 The Andantes recorded and released “Like a Nightmare” the only single for Motown that positions their moniker as a primary group. However, even with the only single that bears their name as a primary group no member was permitted to perform lead vocals, rather Ann Bogan, again of The Marvelettes was used to sing lead with The Andantes remaining in the background.

Comparably, The Blossoms experienced similar instances where their name has been changed for single releases. One of the most notable examples is while working with Phil Spector and Philles records where in 1962 the group recorded the single “He’s A Rebel” with group member Darlene Wright (later Darlene Love) singing lead vocals. The group were paid as session singers for the recording and offered triple scale (approximately \$3000) for the session.⁴⁹⁵ Wright describes how the group were informed by Spector at the time how the single would be released under the moniker of an existing Philles group, The Crystals. The changing of name on this recording indicates how figures working in and associated with the background possess an archive of material that is not strictly associated with their group name and that mapping the background requires attuning to those voices who have performed there. Upon listening to “He’s A Rebel” in relation to previous and subsequent recordings by The Crystals it is evident that the voices heard here do not belong to any member of the group. Significantly, the single release of “He’s a Rebel” reached number two on the billboard charts in November 1962 leading The Crystals to include the song amongst their live repertoire. In order to approximate Darlene Wrights vocals, the group needed to change the usual lead vocalist Barbara Alston to Lala Brooks as Brooks’ Gospel background was thought better able to accommodate Wrights original vocals.⁴⁹⁶ Wright recalls being unbothered by the record being released under The Crystals name saying, “at the time I didn’t even mind that Phil [Spector] was going to release the record under the Crystals name [...] I just wanted to take the money and run”⁴⁹⁷. This decision by Wright indicates how remaining in the background was not only lucrative in terms of the fee that could be earned but permitted movement that the spotlight could not provide. The Blossom’s voices, with Wright’s voice taking lead vocals could be on the record yet the use of the name The Crystals, an existing group signed with Philles, meant that

⁴⁹⁵ Love and Hoerburger, *My Name Is Love: The Darlene Love Story*.

⁴⁹⁶ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 76.

⁴⁹⁷ Love and Hoerburger, *My Name Is Love: The Darlene Love Story*, 64.

Wright, James, and Jones remain in the background and invisible to the consuming public. “He’s A Rebel” was released in August 1962 and by November it had reached number one on the national music chart, replacing the current number one, “Monster Mash” by Bobby ‘Boris’ Pickett and the Crypt Kickers. Significantly the ‘Crypt Kickers’ who provided the back/ing/ground vocals on “Monster Mash” were in fact The Blossoms.

Remaining either uncredited or credited under continuously shifting group names speaks to how the back/ing/ground as a knowable and traceable role remains difficult. The movements that both groups have made need to be listened to rather than seen. Yet the inability to fix them to a recording using recording credits means that even through listening their presence remains invisible, unfixed, and unsettled. In this way to consider the background as a map means to listen to the background and consider it an “alternative pattern” that sits or works alongside that which has been archived and made archivable. The back/ing/ground, then, makes way for an “interpretive alterable world” as opposed to a “transparent and knowable world.”⁴⁹⁸

The different recordings upon which The Andantes and The Blossoms sound signal movements made from within the back/ing/ground. The sounding of their voices elsewhere suggests how these groups used the construction of the back/ing/ground to move unseen, yet the sounding of such movements, when listened to, create a shift in the histories and archives upon which the back/ing/ground sits alongside.

Sounding Elsewhere: The Andantes and The Motortown Revue

While working with Motown The Andantes were not usually permitted to perform at live events, nor were they permitted to perform or record for other labels. In the section that follows I discuss an instance where The Andantes were permitted to perform live, and instances where the group recorded and performed back/ing/ground away from Motown. In both these

⁴⁹⁸ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, xiii.

instances I discuss how The Andantes sound elsewhere, and how this sounding elsewhere can be understood as instances of refusal and redress.

The first Motown Revue was launched in October 1962⁴⁹⁹. Known as the ‘Motortown Revue’ performances were organised as ten-week touring programmes that took Motown artists across the country to perform past and current hits while also promoting forthcoming singles⁵⁰⁰. The aim of the revues was to publicize Motown more generally as well as market latest releases⁵⁰¹ as well as providing opportunity to promote new acts⁵⁰². These tours were a part of the companies wider marketing and mass distribution strategy along with the use of talent shows and radio airplay⁵⁰³. The revues were independently sponsored meaning that Berry Gordy Jr. was able to manage every detail of the tour including venues played, songs performed, the line-up of performers as well as musicians performing with the primary acts.⁵⁰⁴ Suzanne Smith describes that in order “to ensure a degree of consistency between the recorded songs and the live performance musical performance, Gordy sent Motown studio musicians on tour to back up the singers at every gig”⁵⁰⁵ rather than rely of local bands.

Although, it remains unclear whether The Andantes were permitted to join the Motortown Revue on tour they were permitted to be a part of the Detroit based revues held at the Graystone Ballroom and Fox Theatre in 1963 and 1964. Seemingly it was the only Detroit-based revue performances that The Andantes were permitted to perform at. The use of the group at local performances is perhaps due to their significant role in the studio where, as discussed earlier previously, they were often used to maintain the production line of releases while primary acts were on tour. Discussion of The Andantes involvement in revue performances describe how

⁴⁹⁹ Gordy, *To Be Loved: An Autobiography*; George, *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fallof the Motown Sound*, 52.

⁵⁰⁰ Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard Univeristy Press, 2003), 49.

⁵⁰¹ Smith, *ibid.*

⁵⁰² Gordy, *To Be Loved: An Autobiography*.

⁵⁰³ Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*, 17.

⁵⁰⁴ Smith, 49.

⁵⁰⁵ Smith, *ibid.*

the group largely performed not on-stage as a visible back/ing/ground group, but rather off-stage from behind a theatrical curtain. Group member Louvain Demps recalls performing at the Detroit-based performances at The Fox Theatre and The Gray Stone Ballroom describing how “[T]he Motown groups sang and danced onstage, and we would be behind the curtain singing as well”⁵⁰⁶. The use of the group offstage mirrors their role at the Motown studios in that they remain largely invisible within the process of production. Needed, required, and as will be discussed momentarily demanded, yet invisible.

Motown’s artist and repertoire director William “Mickey” Stevenson describes how part of the aim of the revue performances were to “sound just like the record” and that to achieve this The Andantes were needed:

When I would take the Motown Revue’s out, they would sound the best and sound just like the record. Our revues were hotter than the other [revues] because we sounded like our records. I would take The Andantes and put them off stage with microphones, behind a curtain. I intentionally did that so we sounded great as the Motortown Revue [...] I would use The Andantes [...] to make the record sound great.

Stevenson’s comment indicates how The Andantes were a core component in ensuring that not only the live performance ‘sounded great’ but also that the live performance sound as close the recording as possible.

Using The Andantes to sing out of sight along with the visible acts on stage also speaks to the control in which Berry Gordy Jr. sought to have over revue performances. These were a significant part of Motown’s overall business strategy that not only promoted releases, but also provided significant and “immediate cash flow into Motown’s back accounts”⁵⁰⁷ as they “offset

⁵⁰⁶ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 69.

⁵⁰⁷ George, *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fallof the Motown Sound*, 52.

slow payment from record distributors” and provided part of the “weekly payroll back in Detroit.”⁵⁰⁸ The revues then are a core part of how the business maintained itself with The Andantes remaining a significant component within its business strategy.

Recalling a revue performance at The Fox Theatre in Detroit, Motown employee Rita Lumpkin describes how the audience reacted when the microphone The Andantes were using cut out leaving only the voices of the act on stage heard through the theatres sound system:

I was at the Fox Theatre during the Motown revue and Marlene, Jackie and Louvain, were behind the curtain singing. The girl-group that was on stage ended up getting boo-d because the microphone for The Andantes went out. The girls on stage didn't sound so great so the audience let them know it. Back then you wanted them to sound like the record. The audience got restless because the girls on stage weren't sounding like the record [...] The girl group onstage was surprised at the audience's reaction, but we knew what had happened because we knew The Andantes were behind the curtain.”⁵⁰⁹

Although The Andantes remained out of sight the audience reaction indicates how the groups presence still registered, echoing Mladen Dolar's contention that “the silent listener has the power to decide over the fate of the voices and the sender; the listener can rule over its meaning or turn a deaf ear”⁵¹⁰. The deaf ear of the audience stops when the “fiction of synthesis”⁵¹¹ of both sets of vocals no longer occur. In the moment of the microphone cutting out the sonic image shifts where the sudden absence of The Andantes voices exposes their presence offstage. Before this moment the audience suspend their belief that what they are hearing is coming from

⁵⁰⁸ George, *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁹ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 74.

⁵¹⁰ Dolar, *A Voice Nothing More*, 80.

⁵¹¹ Amy Herzog, *Dreams of Difference Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 37

what they are seeing. In a reversal of the acousmatic illusion, it is in the absence of voice that reveals the voices offstage.

In this moment *The Andantes* orbit notions of the acousmatic, playback and dubbing, yet their relationship with these forms are enacted differently. In film studies playback refers to the process whereby actors synchronize their performance to a pre-recorded track. They move their mouths to fit to what is being played back to them creating a ‘fiction of synthesis.’ Dubbing refers to the process whereby sound or voice is dubbed onto a performance that has already occurred. Michel Chion describes how “in dubbing, someone is hiding in order to stick his voice onto body that has already acted for the camera. In playback there is someone before us whose entire effort is to attach his face and body to the voice we hear.”⁵¹² In placing *The Andantes* behind the curtain the revue performance performs dubbing and playback simultaneously. Unlike in cinema the liveness of the *Motown Revue* demands that dubbing and playback occur in the same moment. Furthermore, unlike the substitution of voice onto body that happens within cinema, the voices, here, are required to merge with each other chorusing the visible bodies on stage as multi-vocal. The *Andantes* voices are not being used to animate a silent body, but are joining the speaking body on stage and being used to enhance that singing voice. By joining this voice they become further erased from the scene, unable to be (easily) identified in either a sonic or visual capacity. The bodies onstage act like a second curtain veiling the voices of *The Andantes* with their own. This double acousmatic further positions *The Andantes* into the realm of the unseen. The sounding of their voices remain at the edge of recognition but never reach it due to their voices being enveloped within the voices of others and the *Motown* sound more broadly. The invisibility of their bodies is how this sonic entanglement occurs and how it remains largely (or at least wilfully) unnoticed. They are not simply invisible or unseen bodies but also obscured voices. It is not that their voices are

⁵¹² Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 156.

completely out of range of the ear, but rather, it is as if their voices are entangled with the voices on-stage and vice versa. This phonic entanglement creates a layer of opacity where their voices become blurred with those other voices. During the revue performances it is less that the audience is listening to individual acts, but rather they are listening to Motown. As has been discussed in the previous chapter the Motown sound is made up of a combination of different elements including musicians, labour practice, creative processes, as well as the sound of the back/ing/ground. In this way the Motown sound is inherently opaque unable to be reduced to one particular element. Part of this opacity are the voices of The Andantes who remain hidden within the mechanisms of Motown's processes; hidden behind curtains and within studios where their bodies and breath, as phonic labour, are used to shape the sound of Motown. Yet they are left to register only at the level of the phonic, always sounding elsewhere.

From both behind the curtain of the revue and within the studio The Andantes occupation of the back/ing/ground is characterised by a sounding elsewhere. From behind the curtain, they remain unseen, with their own view obstructed by the curtain. The obstruction the curtain acts like a cut blocking both The Andantes from the audience and vice-versa. In this way the group are made to exist and sound elsewhere within the space of the performance. Similarly, this sounding elsewhere can be thought to occur on recordings in that the absence of label accreditation causes the voices of The Andantes to exist outside of or beyond the recording. As has been discussed previously The Andantes were rarely given recording credits, nor did they always know the recordings for which their vocals were being used. In this way the experience of the back/ing/ground in the case of The Andantes becomes a purely phonic one. Where they remain unseen and at times unseeing, yet able to hear the how and where their vocals have been used. Both the revue curtain and the studio create an acoustic trick mirror where The Andantes remain hidden, unable to see beyond the back/ing/ground, yet able to hear beyond the back/ing/ground. In this way back/ing/ground becomes both opaque and spectral.

Opaque in that it is a space of density, hidden within the wider mechanisms of Motown and its production line. Yet spectral in that their presence persists, sensed, or felt through the ear rather than perceived. Similar to how the ear experiences the voice of Marlene Barrow on the recording of “Stop! In the Name of Love” their presence is sensed via an eruption of vocals where the ear attunes to the particular tonality of their voices. It is not that the ear hears them as separate and distinct, here, but rather that their tonality is felt as part of those other voices.

In this way the voices of The Andantes are like theatrical dark matter invisible and often escaping detection even though their “effects are felt everywhere.”⁵¹³ As theatrical dark matter, which is comprised of “whatever is materially absent on stage yet unignorable,”⁵¹⁴ the voices of The Andantes are a “structural component”⁵¹⁵ of the performance that functions to focus the audience’s experience. The focus here being Motown.

Not only are the bodies of The Andantes out of sight but their voices are also hidden in some way. Their role as vocal enhancers determinedly blends and blurs their voices with the voices of others making it difficult to fully attend to them. How then might we listen for these voices? Before I discuss this question further, I want to continue to discuss the acousmatic sonority of The Andantes as it provides a possible way to read through both the opacity and spectrality of the revue performance.

The Andantes acousmaticity does not neatly adhere to the same forms laid out by Michel Chion. Unlike those acousmatic voices attended to by Chion the voices of The Andantes during the revue are not all-seeing. Rather, their own vision is blocked by the curtain meaning they are neither able to see who they are performing with, or who they are performing to. This can also be extended to recording practices within the studio where the group often were not made aware of the precise recordings in which their vocals might feature.

⁵¹³ Andrew Sofer, ‘Spectral Readings’, *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 3 (2012): 331.

⁵¹⁴ Sofer, *ibid*

⁵¹⁵ Sofer, *ibid*

The acousmaticity of *The Andantes* then, to follow Fred Moten, is “revolutionary here precisely in that it is not all-seeing.”⁵¹⁶ The not-all seeing acousmaticity of *The Andantes* reorganizes the theatrical space of the performance where the cutting out of the microphone draws attention to the elsewhere space that is behind the curtain. Not only this but, as will be discussed shortly, the not-all seeing nature of their acousmatic condition reveals opportunities to move within the hidden space of the back/ing/ground. This movement, within the unseen and not-all-seeing space of the back/ing/ground, as will be discussed further in this chapter, creates a space of safety where their movements against the conditions placed upon them at Motown remain for the most part undetected, but also crucially deniable.

When the microphone behind the curtain cuts out the synthesis between what is seen and what is heard is rendered fiction.⁵¹⁷ By momentarily not being audibly present *The Andantes* physical presence elsewhere offstage is noted and as such the wider mechanism of Motown more broadly and the implications of the back/in/ground with this system. Notably, it is only the groups sonority that is demanded rather than their visibility; as long as their voices are present the performance can continue. When performing simultaneously with the primary group on stage their voices become subsumed by those bodies visible on stage, however, when their voices fall silent their presence within the theatrical scene is noted yet only their voices demanded by the audience.

The revue performances involving *The Andantes*, then, might be considered a kind of sonic phantasmagoria where the voices of Demps, Barrow and Hicks act as phantoms or spectres haunting the revue performance, and signalling an elsewhere space related to the Motown sound. However, the notion of the phantasmagoric, here, can be extended to the revue in a more general sense in that the visible bodies on stage to some extent obfuscate not only the presence

⁵¹⁶ Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 221.

⁵¹⁷ Amy Herzog, *Dreams of Difference Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

of The Andantes, but their role as labour-producers within the context of Motown. The obfuscation of the bodies of The Andantes occurs via the visibility of those on stage. Those bodies on stage, then, conceal and consume the labour produced by the bodies behind the curtain. Extending Demps's description of The Andantes being confined to the studio⁵¹⁸ this confinement can be reconsidered as a more general 'screening' or 'veiling' of their role more broadly. The Andantes whether inside or outside of the studio remain 'confined' in some way. They are always positioned behind something, or someone obfuscated and largely unseen. Although the position of 'behind' is arguably part of the role of a backing group, it is important to remember that the role of The Andantes is never simply this. The continuous 'making invisible' of the group positions them beyond 'backing' or 'background' and their role here does not sit within the usual roles of a back/ing/ground group. Rather their position is not one of separation but one of covert conflation.

Furthermore, the acousmatic sonority of The Andantes does not allow for the Schaefferian concept of 'reduced listening' as the presence of their voices and the voices of the performers on stage continuously disrupt and infect each other. Unlike an acousmatic voice whose source is unseen, yet its sonority clearly heard, the visible sounding bodies on stage further challenge the presence of The Andantes. The curtain stops the audience from seeing them and the singing bodies on stage disrupt our ability to hear them clearly. It is as if the group are made to disappear twice, where they can only be heard via a mode of listening that works to listen not to but *through* the multiple screens (curtains, visible primary groups, records) within which they are positioned either behind or within. Brandon Labelle points to a method of listening to the disappeared as a "listening into the dark" that demands a "deep and experimental listening" for those we "may not see"⁵¹⁹. In what follows I discuss the possibilities of this "listening into the dark" to listen to the sounding elsewhere of The Andantes during the revue performance.

⁵¹⁸ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*.

⁵¹⁹ Labelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*, 19.

To do this the discussion explores the listening experience of a recording of the Motortown Revue performance, held at The Fox Theatre in Detroit in 1964.

The Motortown Revue, Detroit, 1964 Live Album

It would be nice if one day we could walk across the stage and we could hear the applause. And they'll say

'Jackie, Marlene, Louvain – The Andantes!' I would just be a happy woman.

- Louvain Demps⁵²⁰

In 1964 Motown recorded and released the second volume of live revue recordings,⁵²¹ released on LP as *The Motortown Revue Vol.2*. Recorded live from The Fox Theatre on Woodward Avenue Detroit, the record features a selection of live recordings from participating acts including Marvin Gaye, Kim Weston, The Marvelettes, The Temptations, Stevie Wonder, Mary Wells and Martha and the Vandellas. The cover of the sleeve includes publicity portraits of each act printed in black and pale blue. Portraits are equal in size each encompassed by a thick black frame to make a four by two rectangular grid. The words 'Recorded Live' title the top of the front cover and are repeated on the back cover on the left margin of the liner notes.

On the back cover the liner notes give credit to each primary act, as well as band leader Choker Campbell and the distinctive Motown 'beat' played by his sixteen-piece band. The liner notes, written by Motown songwriter and producer Ronald Miller, also emphasise the behaviour of the audience that day noting how they had queued outside the venue from 9am that morning and "went wild with enthusiasm"⁵²² during the performance. Miller makes a

⁵²⁰ Dahl, *Motown: The Golden Years*, 213.

⁵²¹ The first live recording, *Motortown Revue Vol.1* took place in 1963 and was recorded live from The Apollo Theatre, New York.

⁵²² Ronald Miller, 'The Motortown Revue,' *The Motortown Revue Vol. 2*, (Detroit: Motown), Long Player Liner Notes

point of highlighting the added excitement and enthusiasm this specific audience has over other audiences on the basis that “this was home [...] this was Detroit and the audience that day had come to see “their own”” going on to describe this particular performance as a “homecoming”. Miller highlights how the album is “an actual on the spot “live” recording of not only one of the greatest shows ever assembled, but a recording of the greatest audience response of our time.”⁵²³ Miller also notes a special message from Detroit’s mayor, Jerome Cavanaugh, to Berry Gordy Jr. which said:

The cast and sponsors of THE MOTOTORTOWN REVUE are to be congratulated for their part in the revitalisation of ‘live’ musical revues ... it is particularly pleasing that one of the most popular revues to cross the country in the past few years is completely composed of native-born Detroiters...the fine work these artists have done to make Detroit the national center of the single record business has done much to enhance the national reputation of our town.⁵²⁴

The liner notes focus and highlight the audience and success of the Motown corporation over performers and their performances suggesting that the album exists less as an archival document but as a way to further revue attendance and amplify Motown’s cultural, social as well as economic impact. Rather than merely the recording of live performances it becomes a way to listen to the ways in which Motown has impacted Detroit at this time as both a Black owned company and cultural producer.

When held in Detroit the Motortown Revue seems to have a different significance than the rest of the tour dates and were part of a broader strategy by Berry Gordy Jr. to alter and enhance Detroit’s then troubled entertainment scene. For example, in June 1963 Berry Gordy Jr.

⁵²³ Ronald Miller, ‘The Motortown Revue’

⁵²⁴ Ronald Miller, ‘The Motortown Revue’

purchased The Gray Stone Ballroom to host revue performances⁵²⁵. The ballroom had a complicated history where the “artistry of African Americans undeniably contributed to the ballroom’s legendary status,” yet, “the popular establishment continued to discriminate against black patrons”⁵²⁶. Gordy Jr.’s purchase of the ballroom has been considered by Smith as a reclamation of the dance hall for African American entertainers and audiences noting how “Motown’s acquisition of the Graystone not only provided one venue to replace the many lost, but also reinvented the image of black entertainment establishments.”⁵²⁷ In addition to the Graystone serving as a replacement for historically lost venues Smith points out how the purchase by Berry Gordy served to both promote the Motown label specifically and black cultural identity more generally noting how one of the goals of Gordy in relation to the purchase and use of the Graystone was to assert the “respectability of black entertainment”⁵²⁸.

The aim to present performances that sound like the record then not only serves to, as described by Stevenson, sound the “best” but to control how the production of black culture and black entertainment is framed. In Smith’s text Stevenson recalls the relationship the Graystone has with black youth describing how the Motown performances held at the Graystone helped “to get youngsters off the streets and see what our image is about [...] inspiring them a little to live up to that imagery”⁵²⁹. Stevenson’s emphasis of Motown performances as ‘image’ further reveal the constructed nature of these performances. From the offset they were to be considered images; images of black culture, images of economic progress; images of black entertainment. The role of these performances as aspirational imagery extends to their acoustic component. To ensure the live sound functioned as a conceivable double of the recording there seems little space for error or difference, thereby

⁵²⁵ Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*; Dahl, *Motown: The Golden Years*, 25.

⁵²⁶ Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*, 46.

⁵²⁷ Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*.

⁵²⁸ Smith, 48.

⁵²⁹ Smith, 48.

denying any divergence between recording and performance. The revues, then, are part of a strategy that not only supports the marketing of records and promotion of the label but also promoting black entertainment more generally where The Andantes as back/ing/ground register as vital components.

Considering artist and repertoire director William “Mickey” Stevenson’s comments regarding the revue performances needing to sound as close to the recording as possible, *The Motortown Revue Vol.2* is a recording of a live performance that is trying to sound like a recording. And as such requires the same tools it used to create the studio recording. This is where the album differs from other revue performances; it is not simply trying to sound like a record, it is itself a record. A copy of a copy whose original (if it can be called that) is made of already fragmented parts and un-noted voices. It is a record of a record, recording not only the performances, but also the enthusiasm of the audience which, via Miller’s liner notes, is evidence of the success of the Motown corporation as well as the changes occurring in Detroit at the time via the company’s impact. Yet as pointed about by Alexander Weheliye “sound recordings do not secure evidence of pre-existing information but “merely” disseminate recorded sounds”⁵³⁰ and as such although the description of the recording seeks to establish that this is “actual on-the-spot “live” recording” the extent as to what and who is being recorded remains underrepresented in the liner notes. Although the liner notes attempt to provide transparency as to what you are listening to it is merely another construction within which The Andantes remain, for the most part, a hidden mechanism. The revue performance at The Fox Theatre Detroit in 1964 was organized as a recording and as such required The Andantes to fulfil the sound that the performance sought to reproduce. Yet similar to those recordings with which the live performance seeks to sound, The Andantes remain, on the most part, unseen, yet sounding, sensed rather than perceived, spectral.

⁵³⁰ Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, 24.

During a telephone interview with group member Louvain Demps, she described how the group would resist altering the texture and tone of their own voices to mimic the voice of the group performing on stage, stating how “we didn’t mimic anyone...[the primary artists] had to duplicate [us].”⁵³¹ Rather they would sing in the tone and texture of their own voices so that if any shifts in singing were required it would need to be done by the group on stage. Demps also describes how primary groups would practice and copy the recordings (on which The Andantes vocals featured) in preparation for live performances stating, “when something is laid down and you are able to copy it, you’re able to learn the [sound] so on stage they pulled it off well.”⁵³² Demps comments indicates how rather than altering their own voices, the recordings on which their vocals feature become a blueprint for primary artists to duplicate for live performances. This refusal to alter tone in turn alters the sensuous experience of what can be heard. Reconfiguring this experience to emerge from beyond what can be seen on stage. What is seen on stage must in turn phonically reconfigure itself in order to synchronise accordingly with those vocals from off stage. The revue performance and its subsequent recording, then, attunes itself to the elsewhere space that The Andantes are made to occupy.

Considering the live albums track listing, The Andantes in fact feature on many of the original recordings including, Mary Wells “What’s Easy for Two is So Hard for One” (side one, track eight), as well as Martha and the Vandellas “Quicksand” (side two, track three). And throughout the albums sixteen tracks there are moments when the ear attunes to what might be The Andantes voices. I say ‘might,’ as to attune to The Andantes and the elsewhere space of behind the curtain means to attune to a level of uncertainty. They are not noted in the liner notes, yet there are moments upon listening to the performances where voices beyond the primary act can be heard. For example, when listening to the live recording of the revue at The Fox Theatre I became aware that it is less about a ‘listening *to*’, but a ‘listening *for*’. Shifting

⁵³¹ Louvain Demps, telephone interview with Rachael Finney, February 2nd, 2020

⁵³² Louvain Demps, telephone interview with Rachael Finney, February 2nd, 2020

to a ‘listening for’, rather than ‘listening to’ requires a straining of the ear. It requires the ear to “listen hard”⁵³³ for those voices whose bodies have been made to withdraw and remain out of sight. This straining becomes a “horizontal listening”⁵³⁴ that seeks to listen through what can be heard to attune to those voices whose source has been made to withdraw from the visual field. Echoing Brandon Labelle’s point that to listen to the unseen requires a process of creative attunement” whereby “acousmatic sonorities demand another form of listening.”⁵³⁵ The recording potentially allows us this necessary attunement. During the recording there are moments where the voices of The Andantes can clearly be heard, but also moments where the presence of the vocals becomes more opaque and harder to attune to.

For example, tracks three to five are performed by Motown singer, Kim Weston. Weston’s first two performances of “Love Me All the Way” and “He’s Alright” feature very clear back/ing/ground vocals. On the single release of “Love Me All the Way” the style of the back/ing/ground is akin to a gospel choir. The voices are amplified with reverb creating space around Weston’s own vocals. Marlene Barrow recalls how the choir-like sound was achieved in the studio through a process of stacking The Andantes vocals on top of each other in order to create impression of a multi-vocal choir. During the live performances of “Love Me All the Way” the back/ing/ground vocals are smooth and crisp enveloping Weston’s powerful and at times gritty vocals with powerful yet smooth ‘oohs’, ahhs’, and echoes.

Similarly, during the following performance of “He’s Alright,” a cover of “All Right” by The Grandison’s released on RCA/Victor in 1963, the back/ing/ground vocals are clearly heard matching Weston’s energy throughout locked in an echoic call and response to almost all of Weston’s utterances.

⁵³³ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*.

⁵³⁴ Labelle, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*, 57.

⁵³⁵ Labelle, 57.

Throughout the performances audible handclaps punctuate every second beat. In the second half of the performance Weston addresses the audience directly. First Weston addresses the “young ladies in the house” instructing them to clap their hands along with the music. Weston repeats her request to the “young men in the house” asking that “if you’ve got somebody that’s alright or you if you would like to have somebody that’s alright I’d like you to show a sign by clapping your hands with the music”⁵³⁶. Weston’s final requests goes out to everybody “I want everybody, when I say ‘yeah’ I want you to say yeah just like I say, will you do that?”⁵³⁷ Weston then proceeds sing ‘yeah’ eight times. Each time the voices of the audience increase in both volume and excitement until almost eclipsing those back/ing/ground vocals coming through the sound system. In this moment the back/ing/ground and audience become blurred where the spatial arrangement of background and foreground collapses around Weston leaving her voice surrounded by back/ing/ground.

Significantly, while introducing her final song and forthcoming single release, “Just Loving You” Kim Weston does something unexpected by addressing the audience and introducing The Andantes and bringing them on stage saying:

Thank you. At this time The Andantes are going to help me sing my latest recording. One that I hope you will enjoy.⁵³⁸

As Weston utters the word ‘enjoy’ the voices of The Andantes sound beginning the song with a soft, stretched “ooh.” This moment is striking for several reasons. First, it confirms The Andantes presence during this particular revue. Second, it signals that the group were available as off-stage supplements to those performing on-stage. Third, it poses the question that if The Andantes were already off-stage, why did Weston feel compelled to bring them on stage at this

⁵³⁶ Motown, ‘The Motortown Revue Vol.2 LP’, 1964.

⁵³⁷ Motown, ‘The Motortown Revue Vol.2 LP’, 1964.

⁵³⁸ Motown, ‘The Motortown Revue Vol.2 LP’, 1964.

particular moment? Recalling this instance Louvain Demps connects being brought on stage to the quality of their singing saying, “it was so good, our voices and everything was so good that they brought us from behind the curtain from behind the stage with Kim Weston.”⁵³⁹ Demps comment suggests how the quality of the group’s performance from behind the curtain is what permitted them to be brought on stage at this moment.

The song and performance are notably more understated than Weston’s previous performances. The performance is a close rendition of the single release where The Andantes also feature. On both recordings The Andantes vocals include stretched announcements of, “just loving you” as well as the now commonplace “ooohs” and “aaaahs”. Their vocals are woven through the song, enveloping Weston’s voice, appearing under, around and between her articulations. The Andantes performance matches their use on the release itself, where their vocals emit powerful choral articulations.

However, the moment when Weston announces The Andantes and brings them onto the stage with her the group enter the visual field of the audience. It is unclear exactly why Weston does this, or perhaps more accurate a question is why the label permitted The Andantes to break free, momentarily, from their invisibility? As they feature so clearly on the recording to not have them on stage for this moment would have perhaps highlighted and made ‘visible’ their role from behind the curtain. Yet by bringing the group to the stage for this song the invisible identities remain intact for when they return to behind the curtain their visible presence is again no longer demanded.

Returning to the acousmatic condition The Andantes inhabit here, unlike Chion’s acousmètre which “hangs on whether or not the acousmètre has been seen,”⁵⁴⁰ the process of dis-acousmaticization which, for Chion, releases the acousmatic subject from its invisibility

⁵³⁹ Louvain Demps, telephone interview with Rachael Finney, February 2nd, 2020

⁵⁴⁰ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 23

thus causing it to re-enter “the realm of human beings”⁵⁴¹ does not occur. For Chion once the visual field is entered the subject is unable to return to the unseen space of the acousmatic. Yet The Andantes seem to break this one-way movement as when they enter the visual field on-stage during Kim Weston’s performance of “Just Loving You” they re-enter the unseen elsewhere space of off-stage afterwards. Their visible presence on-stage does not appear to disrupt them from been heard yet unseen off-stage. It is as if their return to the unseen space of behind the curtain is because as back/ing/ground it is only their voices that are ever demanded.

Motown’s placement of The Andantes behind a theatrical curtain during the revue performance creates an extension of the studio mechanisms in which The Andantes are situated. They remain hidden within the studio, and they remain hidden behind the curtain, yet in both instances their voices are demanded. With the demand of their voices and the erasure of their bodies, the group find a way to redress their invisibility and anonymity through voice. By refusing to alter their vocal style, and tone, during the revue performance their presence becomes felt and sensed. In sensing the presence of The Andantes aurally we can attune to the elsewhere space that the group inhabit and from which their voices sound. Although they remain largely hidden and unseen within this elsewhere space in what follows I discuss how the invisibility of this elsewhere space provides a means for the group to record for other labels and producers covertly, producing further instances of resistance and redress.

Sounding Elsewhere, Elsewhere

Many sessions we sang on were not related to Motown. There is more out there that what we know. Our name is not attached to our work because they didn’t add us on the record sleeve.

- Marlene Barrow⁵⁴²

⁵⁴¹ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 23.

⁵⁴² Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 66.

We had our own sound [...] We were ourselves at all times.

- Louvain Demps⁵⁴³

Motown's label boss Berry Gordy did not want The Andantes singing on recordings produced by other labels and non-Motown affiliated artists so much so that "all Motown musicians and vocalists were forbidden to record for any other record company."⁵⁴⁴ Marlene Barrow describes how "Motown saw our voices as 'their sound' and Berry Gordy didn't like his sound out there unless it was on his products."⁵⁴⁵ However, during their time working with Motown The Andantes moved against this instruction to record back/ing/ground vocals for other labels including the Detroit-based Correc-Tone and New York-based Brunswick as well as Chicago-based groups such as The Dells ("Stay in My Corner"), John Lee Hooker, Tennessee-based Bobby "Blue Bland" ("Too Far Gone (To Turn Around))", and Jerry Butler⁵⁴⁶.

Commenting on the restrictions placed upon them with regard to being forbidden to record for to other labels, Marlene Barrow says, "Berry did not want anybody to have his sound, but if you want anything exclusively, you have to pay for it."⁵⁴⁷ Barrow's comment indicates that any restrictions that Motown sought to place on the group in terms of working for other labels and non-Motown artists would need to be reflected in the groups fee status and without an increase in pay the group did not feel compelled to honour such conditions. Barrow's comment indicates how the group moved to other labels, albeit temporarily, to confront and resist the conditions placed upon them at Motown.

Recordings undertaken outside of Motown can be heard as instances of resistance and refusal towards Berry Gordy's limitations as well as levels of pay. Although these instances

⁵⁴³ Louvain Demps, telephone interview with Rachael Finney, February 2nd, 2020

⁵⁴⁴ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 9.

⁵⁴⁵ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 100.

⁵⁴⁶ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 66.

⁵⁴⁷ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 9.

did not result in changes in pay or a greater level of compensation for their contributions from either Motown or other labels, the sounding of their voices elsewhere function here as a moment of confrontation towards the conditions of the back/ing/ground. In this way the back/ing/ground becomes a space of safety where the group are able to express how they feel about different situations and struggles faced by the group:

Everything that was inside of me, that I was unable to express, came out in me through the music. I was able to feel the emotions and they came out when I sang. Sometimes the lyrics turned to fit my own life [...] I said things I wished I was able to say to people out loud and I sang it loud⁵⁴⁸

The back/ing/ground, then, functions as a space of safety in which group members are able to express and resist through various different forms. Whether via lyrical association or the ability to sound where and when you wish to resist and refuse the limitations placed upon you by others. Within the concealment of the back/ing/ground Demps describes experiencing a “verbal and emotional release”⁵⁴⁹ suggesting how the background provided a space in which to make difficult or painful experiences easier to express noting how singing was an “escape from heartache [...] I said things I wished I was able to say to people out loud and I sang it loud [...] it was a tool for me”⁵⁵⁰. For Demps singing functions as a way to express that which feels inexpressible. The back/ing/ground for Demps provides a space in which to utter and feel in ways that do not seem otherwise possible.

The Andantes also used the construction of the back/ing/ground when undertaking session work when not all members of the group were available. When a particular member of the group was unavailable vocalist, Pat Lewis, was often used as a stand-in. Having Pat Lewis on

⁵⁴⁸ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 187.

⁵⁴⁹ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 187.

⁵⁵⁰ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 187.

hand meant that any session work that occurred either outside, or sometimes inside of Motown was able to be undertaken even if a group member was unavailable thus providing means to secure continuous session work.

Much like The Andantes Pat Lewis has a substantial body of work as both a back/ing/ground vocalist as well as solo artist, and girl group member (The Adorables). Lewis has performed back/ing/ground for Aretha Franklin, George Clinton, and Isaac Hayes as well as working extensively with Stax records. During the 1960s Lewis along with her sister Diane Lewis and a second set of sisters Betty and Jackie Wilson were in a group called The Adorables. As The Adorables they recorded as a primary group, as well as a back/ing/ground group for the record label Golden World. Golden World was a Detroit-based rival label.⁵⁵¹ As such when Motown released “Heat Wave” with Martha and the Vandellas, Golden World released “Deep Freeze” with The Adorables as a retort.

Marlene Barrow describes how Lewis’s voice blended well with the group and how she was able to “sing any vocal part” and was able to sound “similar to Louvain [Demps].”⁵⁵² In 1965 when Demps was unavailable to record a session for Stevie Wonder’s “Uptight” Pat Lewis filled in as her replacement. Pat Lewis joined The Andantes when they went to Chicago to record with Jackie Wilson on his album *Higher and Higher* released on Brunswick in 1967. Suspicious that The Andantes were working with other labels outside of Motown, Berry Gordy apparently “employed people to investigate if they were moonlighting”⁵⁵³, however The Andantes remained unnamed on recordings, even with other labels, making it difficult for Gordy to evidence his suspicions. Pat Cosby describes how the group would deny any work undertaken outside of Motown recalling Jackie Hicks’ response to any suggestion of sounding elsewhere “I don’t know what you are talking about.”⁵⁵⁴ The combination of sounding

⁵⁵¹ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 94; Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*.

⁵⁵² Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 93.

⁵⁵³ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 168.

⁵⁵⁴ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 168.

elsewhere, elsewhere and subsequent denial of doing so serves here as a tactic the group used to simultaneously refuse, resist and redress the limitations placed upon them by Berry Gordy at Motown. In both sounding elsewhere, elsewhere and the denial of such sounding the group simulate compliance “under the cover of non-sense, indirection, and seeming acquiescence”⁵⁵⁵. The cover in which instances of resistance emerge and are performed is, as noted by Hartman, a necessity as seeming compliance with rules is needed to avoid punishment.

As The Andantes continued to work with Berry Gordy and Motown they also continued to work with other labels, studios and producers. The sounding of their voices on non-Motown recordings serves to challenge the conditions they faced at Motown, without risking their access to work with Motown. The denial of sounding elsewhere was a strategy used by the group to maintain work both inside and outside of Motown. By remaining concealed within the back/ing/ground, the group were able to undertake work elsewhere. The inherent obscurity of the back/ing/ground, then, provided a way for these women to “obliquely pivot”⁵⁵⁶ from Motown and generate “possibilities that extend beyond those that have been externally imposed”⁵⁵⁷ such as seeking work elsewhere, defying the captivity imposed on them, while also providing them with a way to deny such movements. In this denial and the continuation of their work with Motown a simulation of compliance occurs, yet the sounding of their voices elsewhere inherently manipulates the appearance of such compliance “to challenge these relations and create a space for action not generally available.”⁵⁵⁸

Working with Pat Lewis also meant that those members available for a session would not miss out on work when opportunities arose. This round robin system was also utilised by The Blossoms (to be discussed later in this chapter) who also employed a similar strategy with a revolving member system when group members were unavailable.

⁵⁵⁵ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 8.

⁵⁵⁶ Havis, “‘Now How You Sound?’ Considering a Different Philosophical Practice’.

⁵⁵⁷ Havis, 250.

⁵⁵⁸ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 8.

The back/ing/ground, then, can be understood as a space that provided women with strategies and tactics to maintain both flexible and frequent work. This point is further emphasised with the use of Pat Lewis's sister Diane, being used as a replacement when Pat Lewis herself was unavailable. The back/ing/ground allows for the movement of bodies to occur in a way that suits and supports those working in this role. Being paid by the session meant that regular work was necessary for economic stability and that a means to such stability utilised the obscurity of the back/ing/ground to do so. Not only this but Pat Lewis remarks on the creativity of The Andantes in the studio stating the significance of their creative input when producers "would often have no idea of what they wanted."⁵⁵⁹ Lewis describes how the group would "put the background together"⁵⁶⁰ on behalf of producers as well as training Lewis herself how to arrange back/ing/ground vocals. In the section that follows I discuss specific instances of The Andantes sounding elsewhere, elsewhere.

Upon listening to Bobby "Blue" Bland's "Too Far Gone (To Turn Around)" released on Duke in 1965 it is the voices of The Andantes that are heard first. Their voices sound momentarily before the instruments, singing a clear and crisp:

TA: I'm too far gone to turn around

Their voices are unmistakable, and the crispness of how they sound is akin to the opening lines from "Ask the Lonely" recorded with the Four Tops for Motown the same year. Bobby "Blue" Bland's "Too Far Gone (Too Turn Around) is echoic of "Ask the lonely" in terms of how the background is structured throughout the song. The Andantes sing the opening line and title track of the song followed by singing harmonic "oohs" surrounding Bobby "Blue" Bland's lyrics and the echoing the title lyric. The clarity of The Andantes vocals makes very clear that

⁵⁵⁹ Pat Lewis cited in Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 99.

⁵⁶⁰ Pat Lewis cited in Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 99.

it is them singing. And although for an ear unfamiliar with their vocals there may be some level of uncertainty regarding who is singing here. But for someone such as Berry Gordy who was highly familiar with their voices it is unmistakably The Andantes. On 5th March 1966 “Too Far Gone (To Turn Around)” had its chart peak at number 8. That same week had six other chart entries featuring The Andantes. Five from the Motown label: “Up-Tight” by Stevie Wonder at number two in the Billboard chart; “My Baby Loves Me” from Martha and the Vandellas at number four; “Don’t Mess with Bill” from the Marvellettes; “Love (Makes Me Do Foolish Things)” from Martha and the Vandellas at number twenty two; “One more Heartache” from Marvin Gaye at number twenty four. The other chart entry at number fifteen was “Stop Her On Sight (SOS)” from Edwin Starr from the Detroit-based Golden World records on their subsidiary label Ric-Tic.⁵⁶¹ Listening to the chart entries that featured The Andantes during this week in 1966 demonstrates the significance and breadth of The Andantes labour as back/ing/ground group/vocalist s while emphasising the unknowability of their presence on these recordings. Hearing the voices of the group on Bobby “Blue” Bland’s “Too Far Gone” and Edwin Starr’s “Stop Her On Sight (SOS)” situated amongst the Motown chart entries permits our ear to hear how The Andantes moved beyond the limitations Motown attempted to restrict them to.

In order to pivot away from Motown’s instructions, the group used the already existing condition of obscurity that characterises the back/ing/ground. The very same conditions that Motown used to maintain The Andantes as unknowable phonic entities on so many of their own recordings. Listening to The Andantes sounding from the grooves of these other

⁵⁶¹ Following Ric-Tic’s success with Edwin Starr’s “Agent Double-O Soul” and “Stop Her On Sight (S.O.S.),” on which The Andantes feature, in 1966 Berry Gordy Jr. bought Golden World records. The purchase included both the company, label artists, including Edwin Starr, and company buildings, such as Golden Worlds recording studio in Detroit which Gordy renamed ‘Studio B’. With this purchase the work that The Andantes undertook elsewhere is in fact folded back into the Motown corporation. Yet the purchase of Golden World perhaps signals the threat that the company posed to Motown, especially with the use of Motown’s own studio technology, The Andantes. Not only did The Andantes ‘moonlight’ for Golden World’s Ric-Tic, but members of the Funk Brother’s, such as bassist James Jamerson also undertook work with the label.

recordings unsettle the Motown sound as being confined to Motown. Listening to The Andantes on Bobby “Blue” Bland’s “Too Far Gone”, the walls of the Motown studio become unstable and respatialized via the back/ing/ground and the voices of The Andantes. Our ear moves through Detroit as well as Chicago via their voices, reterritorializing Motown’s infamous ‘studio A’ at 2648 West grand Boulevard Detroit elsewhere. In this instance The Andantes unsettle an expand the Motown archive as it indexes across their voices.

Undertaking work outside of Motown studios was done covertly. As has been stated above label boss Berry Gordy did not want other labels having access to The Andantes, as it was their voices that provided an important component of the Motown signature sound. Motown used The Andantes to enhance the vocals of other groups to try and ensure that the Motown sound could not be duplicated.⁵⁶² They became a hidden component of what Gordy referred to as ‘the sound of young America’. However, it was these very conditions of obscurity and invisibility that The Andantes used to undertake session work elsewhere. This sounding elsewhere, elsewhere on other non-Motown labels functions to redress the proposed limitations they found themselves in working with Berry Gordy. Upon listening to these recordings undertaken with other labels we begin to hear the voices of The Andantes as a provocation to Motown and to Gordy Jnr. himself. As with Marlene Barrow’s comment above, exclusivity to their voices would need to be paid for accordingly. Berry Gordy Jnr. and Motown are subsequently placed in a position where to admit it is The Andantes would mean that the Motown sound is made visible and that to have exclusive access to these voices, to this back/ing/ground he would be required to pay for such rights.⁵⁶³ In the recordings made outside of Motown the group exploit

⁵⁶² Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 9.

⁵⁶³ Although discouraged from recording elsewhere The Andantes were did not have a contract with Motown, Rather Louvain Demps describes the group had a “verbal agreement” (See Wright p.72). The group were paid by the session meaning that although Gordy wanted exclusive access he would have had to have put them on a contract. Although there is some dispute as to how Gordy customized the details concerning royalties and net totals, a contract for The Andantes would mean paying royalties (albeit at a small percentage). Wanting to keep The Andantes in the back/ing/ground meant that paying the group per session would relinquish rights to royalties.

“the limits of the permissible”⁵⁶⁴ in that they push against what Gordy Jnr. permits them to do by using the very tactic of invisibility and obscurity used by Gordy Jnr. to keep the group a Motown secret. Although the identity of The Andantes remains hidden on these ‘elsewhere elsewhere’ recordings, as their presence on these recordings were no more acknowledged than they were at Motown, they nevertheless operate as moments of refusal, resistance and redress. Considering these instances through Saidiya Hartman’s work on redressing the captive body we might hear these recordings as acts of “stealing away”, as “unlicensed movements” that defy captivity through “subversively appropriating” modes of control and captivity.⁵⁶⁵

Retu(r)ning to the multiple Billboard chart entries on 5th March 1966 we can listen to The Andantes both inside and outside of Motown. This simultaneity of an internal/external sounding respatializes the back/ing/ground in a way where we hear it as both fixed and agile. Juxtaposing these recordings and listening to them in tandem to each other we can hear and attune to the different spaces that The Andantes as back/ing/ground occupy. With Bobby “Blue” Bland their voices sound and soar from the very first beat of the recording. Here their voices produce the space within which Bobby “Blue” Bland situates his own voice. As with “Ask the Lonely” the groups vocals swoop around the lead, moving with his voice with comforting harmonic phrases. With Stevie Wonders “Up-Tight” their voices stick to Wonders like a phonic shadow punctuating specific words through both verse and chorus as well as shadowing portions of the verse and instrumental break with shifting low to high harmonic ‘ooohs’:

All: **Baby**

SW: everything is all right

All: **uptight**

SW: out of sight

All: **Baby**

⁵⁶⁴ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 50.

⁵⁶⁵ Hartman, 68.

SW: everything is all right

All: **uptight**

SW: out of sight

SW: I'm a poor man's son, from across the railroad tracks

All: **Only**

SW: shirt I own is hanging on my back

SW: But

All: **I'm**

SW: the envy of every single guy

SW: Since

All: **I'm**

SW: the apple of my girl's eye

SW: When we go out stepping on the town for a while

TA: **oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oh-oh**

SW: My money's low and my suit's out of style

TA: **oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oh-oh**

SW: But it's

All: **all right**

SW: if my clothes aren't new

All: **Out of sight**

SW: because my heart is true

SW: She says

All: **baby**

SW: everything is alright

All: **uptight**

SW: out of sight

All: **Baby**

SW: everything is alright

All: **uptight**

SW: clean out of sight

TA: **Woo**

Instrumental break

TA: **oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oh-oh** (x4)

SW: She's a pearl of a girl, I guess that's what you might say

SW: I guess her folks brought her up that way

SW: The right side of the tracks, she was born and raised

TA: **oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oh-oh**

SW: In a great big old house, full of butlers and maids

TA: **oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oh-oh**

SW: She says

All: **no one**

SW: is better than I

All: **I know**

AW: I'm just an average guy

SW: No football hero or smooth Don Juan

TA: **oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oh-oh**

SW: Got empty pockets, you see I'm a poor man's son

TA: **oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oh-oh**

SW: Can't give her the things that money can't buy

TA: **oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oh-oh**

SW: But I'll never, never make my baby cry

TA: **oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oooh-oh-oh**

SW: And it's

All: **all right**

SW: what I can't do

All: **Out of sight**

SW: because my heart is true

SW: She says

All: **baby**

SW: everything is alright

All: **uptight**

SW: clean out of sight

TA: **Woooo**

All: **Baby**

SW: everything is all right

All: **uptight**

SW: clean out of sight

TA: **Woooo**

All: **Baby**

SW: everything is all right

All: **uptight**

SW: hahahahaha, yeah

All: **Woooo**
All: **Baby**
SW: everything is all right
All: **uptight**
SW: way out of sight
All: **Woooo**
All: **Baby**
SW: everything is all right
All: **uptight**
SW: clean out of sight
All: **Woooo**

- Fade Out -

On “One More Heartache” from Marvin Gaye the structure of the back/ing/ground is akin to “Ain’t That Peculiar” released a year earlier. Marvin Gaye begins singing the first verse, The Andantes then sound to echo Gaye’s pre-chorus ‘aahs’ via a three-part harmony. Like “Ain’t That Peculiar” The Andantes then continue to sing the title of the track ‘one more heartache’ in response to Gaye’s contestations about experiencing a broken hear once again:

Verse 1

Gaye: Oh, one more heartache, I can't take it
My heart is carrying such a heavy load
One more ache would break it
Just like a camel with a heavy pack
One last straw was added
Said it broke the camel's back

Pre-chorus

Gaye: Aaah,
TA: Aaah, aah, aah (three-part harmony going up in scale)
Gaye: Aaah-ah-aaah
TA: Aaah, aah, aah (three-part harmony going up in scale)

Chorus

Gaye: I can't take it
TA: **One more heartache**
Gaye: I can't stand it
TA: **One more heartache**

Verse 2

Gaye: One more heartache

It would turn me right around
First you build my hopes up high
And then let me down
Like the house you built with toothpicks
Stacked upon the kitchen table
One last toothpick tore it down
The foundation was not able

Gaye: Aaah,

TA: Aaah, aah, aah (three-part harmony going up in scale)

Gaye: Aaah-ah-aaah

TA: Aaah, aah, aah (three-part harmony going up in scale)

Gaye: I can't stand it

TA: **One more heartache**

Gaye: 'N I can't take it

TA: **One more heartache**

Gaye: Nah, nah, nah baby

-Saxophone break-

Xylophone: 'bing'

TA: Aaah, aah, aah (three-part harmony going up in scale)

Xylophone: 'bing'

TA: Aaah, aah, aah (three-part harmony going up in scale)

TA: **One more heartache**

TA: **One more heartache**

Verse 3

Gaye: ooh baby

One more heartache
Is too much load
I'm fed up with the heartache
One more and I'll explode
Like a toy balloon that's filled
With as much air as it can take
One more puff of air and that balloon has got to break

Pre chorus

Gaye: Aaah,

TA: Aaah, aah, aah (three-part harmony going up in scale)

Gaye: Aaah-ah-aaah

TA: Aaah, aah, aah (three-part harmony going up in scale)

Chorus

Gaye: I can't take it

TA: **One more heartache**

Gaye: I can't stand it

TA: **One more heartache**

Gaye: No, honey
 TA: **One more heartache**
 Gaye: Outta love
 TA: **One more heartache**
 Gaye: Get outta love
 TA: **One more heartache**
 Gaye: ooooooh
 TA: **One more heartache**
 Gaye: Oh baby
 TA: **One more heartache**
 Gaye: Cant take another one
 TA: **One more heartache**
 Gaye: Not another heartache honey
 TA: **One more heartache**

- Fade Out -

The recordings with Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye show The Andantes placed in a position of response, echoing the lead. With the recordings “Don’t Mess with Bill” from The Marvelettes and “My Baby Loves Me” and “Love (Makes Me Do Foolish Things)” from Martha and the Vandellas the voices of The Andantes are mixed and blended with the voices of both groups in order to enhance the groups sound. As discussed in chapter four it was commonplace at Motown to use The Andantes to enhance recordings made by other primary groups and performers. The 5th March 1965 Billboard chart comprises many of the different ways the group was used as back/ing/ground but crucially also how the group used the back/ing/ground as a way to resist the ways they were treated as background, as well as strategies of stability with the use of temporary members.

Listening to their voices sound across these chart entries and considering their refusal to alter their vocal style and tone, we can hear their resistance against the limits placed upon them by Berry Gordy Jnr. in relation to recording with other labels and producers, and a redressing of their value with regard to what Gordy Jnr. would officially permit The Andantes to do. Although not acted upon in terms of a change of status at Motown their sounding on these other recordings confronts Berry Gordy’s treatment of the group and their work with Motown.

Moving beyond Detroit allowed the group to perform more covertly. Suspicious of The Andantes work outside of Motown Berry Gordy “employed people to investigate if [The Andantes] were moonlighting”⁵⁶⁶ at other labels. Yet this was harder to undertake when work was undertaken out of state. For example, working in Chicago meant that The Andantes did not have to move covertly in public spaces, as sending out Motown employees to check whether They Andantes were working for other labels was more difficult when out of state. Using the same modes of obscurity experienced with Motown the group could sound on a non-Motown affiliated record in a state of ambiguity. The Andantes were not listed on the recordings meaning any recourse regarding their involvement could be denied; turning the very tactics used by Motown to keep the group unknown to sound elsewhere, elsewhere. Relying on visual evidence to determine whether the group were working with other labels worked in The Andantes favour, as with their anonymity intact at the level of label credits it was difficult for Gordy Jnr. to evidence any suspicions he had. The invisibility that being in the back/ing/ground provided allowed the group to undertake work in a covert manner, where their involvement is characterised by a level of uncertainty.

The involvement of Pat Lewis on Jackie Wilson’s *Higher and Higher* add to the ambiguity of their presence. With Pat Lewis the vocal blend shifts meaning that determining the background via voice maintains a level of uncertainty and ambiguity. The flexibility within which The Andantes undertook work outside of Motown, working with additional members, or replacing a permanent member on a session meant that they were not restricted to sessions dependent on the group’s availability, and also that this flexibility of personnel when working outside of Motown made it more difficult to identify their presence on recordings. These covert movements both within and outside of Detroit as well as the movements and shifts made with

⁵⁶⁶ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 168.

temporary members functions as moments of resistance towards the limits placed upon the group at Motown. The Andantes use the anonymity placed upon them at Motown in order to move beyond the confines of the labels studio to work with other labels and producers in a covert way. This level of uncertainty extends to the groups own relationship and understanding of their output where they describe being unaware of the extent of recordings on which they feature.⁵⁶⁷ Not only this but there remain unconfirmed cases of The Andantes recording with other labels, singers, and producers. During the 1960s approximately four hundred recording companies “mushroomed” in Detroit during the 1960s⁵⁶⁸. The Andantes have been thought to record for the Detroit-based Correc-Tone Recording Company on numerous occasions yet it remains unclear how many and exactly what recordings and releases they feature. Although these cases remain unconfirmed attuning to the background on Laura Johnson’s 1962 release of “I Know How it Feels” recorded at Correc-Tone and released on Brent records extends the space that the background, and The Andantes specifically, have occupied.

Here our ears attune to the possibility of the back/ing/ground without recourse to certainty or transparency. The possibility of where The Andantes might sound is important as it respatializes the back/ing/ground as a continuously “alterable terrain”⁵⁶⁹. Hearing their voices sound elsewhere we hear the back/ing/ground begin to map itself out phonographically. In this way it is no longer simply subsidiary, or behind the dominant space of the foreground, but possesses and navigates its own phonic geography. The sounding elsewhere, elsewhere of The Andantes signal an “alternative pattern”⁵⁷⁰ and an “alternative dimension”⁵⁷¹ that works alongside and counter to the histories of Motown. As they sound elsewhere their voices

⁵⁶⁷ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*.

⁵⁶⁸ Graham Finch, ‘Correc-Tone Story: Introduction’, Soulfuldetroit.com, n.d., <https://soulfuldetroit.com/web16-correctone/01/01-introduction.htm>.

⁵⁶⁹ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*.

⁵⁷⁰ Katherine McKittrick, xiv.

⁵⁷¹ James, *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism and Biopolitics*, 82.

confront the histories of Motown as they are thought to be, unsettling recordings and splintering material into a bricolage of voices.

The sounding elsewhere of The Andantes reconfigures the back/ing/ground yet operates both “in and against the demands of the system” that seeks to maintain the background and those that sing in, as and from the background as obscure⁵⁷². This reconfiguration does not move the background from a supposed margin to a supposed centre but indicates the possibilities that the margin provides.

The movements that the group undertook and the examples of sounding elsewhere did little to alter their original working arrangement with Berry Gordy and Motown indicating how “the tactics that comprise the everyday practices of the dominated have neither the means to secure territory outside space of domination nor the power to keep or maintain what it is won in fleeting, surreptitious, and necessarily incomplete victories.”⁵⁷³ Yet although necessarily “incomplete victories”⁵⁷⁴ as Hartman puts it, these movements are significant as they indicate how the construction of the back/ing/ground was utilised by The Andantes to locate forms of agency and control over their own careers. Their refusal to adhere to Berry Gordy and Motown’s instruction not to record for non-Motown acts or recording labels is achieved without risking, or at least reducing the risk of losing their working relationship with Motown. In this way the back/ing/ground becomes a site and space of possibility for The Andantes, where they can use the very strategies used to keep them hidden to redress and resist the very same conditions.

Although The Andantes feigned complicity with Berry Gordy’s instruction not to record elsewhere by using the conditions that Gordy himself applied to the group; namely that they remain unnamed on recordings and largely unknown to the listening public. Louvain Demps

⁵⁷² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 51.

⁵⁷³ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America*.

⁵⁷⁴ Hartman.

of the group describes that although they refused Gordy's request by sounding elsewhere, they, again, did not alter their vocal style to appear or sound complicit. As indicated in Demps quote at the beginning of this section, "we had our own sound [...] We were ourselves at all times."⁵⁷⁵ This refusal to alter their vocal style and sound as other than themselves was undertaken, when used to vocally enhance live performances such discussed earlier, as well as Motown recordings and recordings for non-Motown labels, artists, and groups. This refusal meant that the final mix of the recording would mean that the balance between The Andantes enhancements and the primary act would need to be reconsidered where Demps points out The Andantes version would often be left higher in the mix.⁵⁷⁶

The Andantes refusal to alter their voices when being used to enhance the vocal track of other performers is here considered a resistance to the continual dissolution of their presence on recordings and an attempt to in some way redress their anonymity as back/ing/ground. By refusing to alter their vocals it becomes the decision of the producer and engineer to alter the phonic character of the recording, rather than the group altering their own phonic space. In such instances the group feign complicity by singing the parts required yet resist shifting their vocals to sound closer to the primary act they are being used to enhance. Louvain Demps description of not altering their vocal sound signals what Hartman calls a "harnessing of the body,"⁵⁷⁷ but here we extend such harnessing to voice, that counterinvests "in the body as a site of possibility."⁵⁷⁸ Where Hartman discusses such counterinvestment as "work slowdowns, feigned illness" and "self-mutilation"⁵⁷⁹ here resistance and redress occurs through voice and the refusal to alter its character to sound as another. Furthermore, refusing to sound other than while *sounding elsewhere* is where we can hear the oblique pivot of feigned complicity in a

⁵⁷⁵ Louvain Demps, telephone interview with Rachael Finney, February 2nd, 2020

⁵⁷⁶ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*.

⁵⁷⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 51.

⁵⁷⁸ Hartman, 51.

⁵⁷⁹ Hartman, 51.

phonic and textural way. In refusing to alter their vocals, every recording where our ears can attune to the voices of The Andantes is an instance of phonic redress wherein, we hear “clandestine forms of resistance” that exploit “the limits of the permissible” creating “transient zones of freedom” for The Andantes to move beyond the constraints of Motown.⁵⁸⁰

Sounding elsewhere and the refusal to sound other than, as mentioned above, were not tactics that secured accreditation of the group in official or public capacities, nor did it change the conditions of the back/ing/ground. However, they remain significant practices of resistance and refusal that emerge through and from the back/ing/ground.

The Blossoms: Sounding Everywhere

We didn't sound white, but we didn't sound black either. The magic of The Blossoms is that we could sound whatever way we wanted

- Darlene Wright⁵⁸¹

Where The Andantes sound elsewhere to obliquely pivot away from Motown, The Blossoms navigate in and with the back/ing/ground differently. Unlike The Andantes, following the end of their twelve-month contract with Capitol records The Blossoms were not limited to working with one label, rather they worked as session vocalists for numerous labels, producers, and television programmes, providing back/ing/ground vocals for numerous performers working across a wide range of musical genres. Where The Andantes demonstrate strategies of resistance and redress through sounding elsewhere and their refusal to sound other than themselves, The Blossoms use a different set of tactics. Known for their ability to vocally shape shift the group performed and recorded with a range of performers across various musical styles

⁵⁸⁰ Hartman, 50.

⁵⁸¹ Love and Hoerburger, *My Name Is Love: The Darlene Love Story*, 42.

and genres.⁵⁸² The vocal ability of The Blossoms meant that they use the back/ing/ground to *sound everywhere*, across different genres, and similar to The Andantes often on releases entering the popular music charts at the same time. Where The Andantes use the back/ing/ground to move simultaneously with and against Motown, The Blossoms use the back/ing/ground to move through the studio system. In sounding everywhere the group imbue the back/ing/ground with mobility and agility.

To discuss The Blossoms, it is important to attend to the many changes that have occurred regarding different names, and personnel. Jacqueline Warwick smooths over the history of The Blossoms stating how members “changed from time to time”⁵⁸³. Yet an omission of these changes fails to recognise one of the core tenets of groups and figures who have occupied the background. This being that the background is a space that is highly changeable in terms of personnel. This changeability is in part due to the constructed anonymity within which the back/ing/ground is perceived. Not only this but attempts to crystalize groups such as The Blossoms who saw several changes in terms of both group name and personnel throughout the years, erases the significance that change has among groups who performed and worked as back/ing/ground group/vocalists. Furthermore, the ‘time to time’ changes that The Blossoms made can be understood as a strategy to secure session work when one, or more members of the group were unavailable. Although it is not my aim to outline a historical account of The Blossoms here, it is important to recognise that this changeability is part of what the back/ing/ground is. The ability or opportunity for group members to change is due to the invisibility and anonymity that characterises the back/ing/ground.

The Blossoms formed in 1954, however, at this time the group were a sextet named The Dreamers made up of high school friends Gloria Jones, Fanita Barrett, sisters Annette and

⁵⁸² Warwick, “And the Colored Girls Sing...” Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’.

⁵⁸³ Warwick, 63.

Nanette Williams, Pat Howard, and Jewel Cobbs⁵⁸⁴. As The Dreamers the group sang with Richard Berry, Eloise Brooks, and Etta James, as well as performing as part of other back/ing/ground groups such as The Pharaohs as well as recording in different configurations under assumed names. For example, members Gloria Jones, Fanita Barrett, and Annette Williams “recorded two singles for Class records under the pseudonym The Rollettes.”⁵⁸⁵ Recording under assumed names was to become a common occurrence for the group who are known to have recorded under at least fifteen separate monikers. The shifts in group name are perhaps a double-edged sword in that on the one hand they permitted the group and its members to find work without the pressure of needing to produce a hit single. The use of different pseudonyms allows the group, in numerous configurations to continue to release recordings and receive payment from sessions outside of the star-making system. Here the assignment of numerous monikers allows for the group to resist the star system that seeks to focus on one act or lead singer. Here the group remain ‘out of sight’ able to mutate their sound to become numerous acts with little to no recourse.

In 1957 the group signed to Capitol records for a twelve-month contract. The proviso of the record deal was that the group change their original group name, The Dreamers, to The Blossoms. During this time Nanette Williams was seeking to focus time on her family and the group sought a replacement. Darlene Wright was invited to join as Williams’ replacement after witnessing Wright sing at an acquaintances wedding.

While at Capitol records The Blossoms recorded three singles, “Move On/He Promised Me” (1957), “Little Louie/Have Faith in Me” (1958), and “Not Other Love/Baby Daddy-O” (1958). Each of these singles are sung in a rhythm and blues four-part harmony. Tet much of their work at Capitol saw them performing back/ing/ground vocals for other Capitol acts. As John Clementes notes their most successful chart entry is Ed Townsends “For You Love”. On “For

⁵⁸⁴ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 24.

⁵⁸⁵ Clemente, 25.

You Love” The Blossoms sound throughout the track singing gentle and choral sounding “ohh-oh-ahh-ahhs”. Only during the final verse do they sing the lyric “anything, anything, anything”, to then return to ta final “ohh-oh-ahh-ahh” at the close of the track. This recording from Townsend signals how the group were not simply considered a primary act at Capitol but as a source of back/ing/ground for the label more broadly. Not only this but the style in which the group sing is akin to a choral sound and markedly different to singing on their own singles. The ability to shift and alter vocal style to perform any genre necessary is a core characteristic of how The Blossoms worked with Darlene Wright noting how the group were able to “sound whatever way we wanted”^{586 587} and “any way they wanted us to sound.”⁵⁸⁸ This ability to *sound* both any way ‘we’ wanted and any way ‘they’ wanted indicates how the group used sound and sounding to navigate the terrain of the music industry and the studio system. The infinite sounding of The Blossoms voices and vocals obliquely pivot away from the construction of the background as being racially overdetermined via voice, while revealing the creativity and skill involved in performing background and the necessary pivoting that was required to maintain both access to work and a space for self-expression.

In 1959 the group were hired as back/ing/ground vocalists on Jimmy Darren’s “There’s No Such Thing” (Colpix, 1959). Reflecting on the recording Wright describes how the performance required the group to “echo the lead: with “prim wahs and proper whoah-whoahs”⁵⁸⁹. Wright remarks how this style of singing was not “anything like what we sang in church”⁵⁹⁰ signalling the need to alter their vocal style from the style in which they were trained.

⁵⁸⁶ Love and Hoerburger, *My Name Is Love: The Darlene Love Story*, 42.

⁵⁸⁷ Warwick, “And the Colored Girls Sing...” Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’.

⁵⁸⁸ Darlene Wright from Mick Brown, ‘Unsung Heros: The Voices That Launched A Thousand Hits’, *Telegraph Magazine* (London, March 2014), 27.

⁵⁸⁹ Love and Hoerburger, *My Name Is Love: The Darlene Love Story*, 108.

⁵⁹⁰ Love and Hoerburger, *My Name Is Love: The Darlene Love Story*, 108.

Following their tenure with Capitol the group worked briefly with RCA under the name The Playgirls releasing two singles “Hey Sport/Young Love Swings the World” (RCA Victor, 1959), and “Gee, But I’m Lonesome/Sugarbeat” (RCA Victor, 1960). Both singles characterised by the emerging girl group sound, sung largely in group style with no distinction between lead and back/ing/ground. Between 1954 and 1964 the group release singles under at least fifteen pseudonyms.

When listening to the group as a primary act the group’s ability to shape-shift is apparent ranging from four-part rhythm and blues harmony, choral sound, girl group (The Playgirls), to doo wop (The Rollettes “Sad Fool”). The reasons I mention these different instances is because they signal how the group moved, almost covertly, throughout the music industry where a buying public consumed these releases unaware, or perhaps apathetic to the fact that they are from the same group. My point here is not that name changes or reconfigurations of group members was unusual but that groups such as The Blossoms were able to occupy the role of both a primary group or groups as well as performing as back/ing/ground group/vocalists and that this was achieved or permitted due to the inherent invisibility and anonymity applied to the back/ing/ground. Although it is important to note that the use of assumed monikers was also a way for labels to exploit and squeeze all they could out of groups without having to invest in them as primary acts, as they could simply release another single using a different group name, it is also important to note how The Blossoms used this to their advantage. For example, between 1959 and 1960, having started families of their own group members favoured session work where they sang under different pseudonyms, or as back/ing/ground group/vocalists for other primary acts as it gave them the freedom to spend time with their families rather than being required to tour to promote a single.⁵⁹¹ Where The Andantes remained hidden either within the studio, or behind theatrical curtains, The Blossoms remain

⁵⁹¹ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 26.

hidden within the guise of the group itself and the constructed obscurity of the back/ing/ground within the music industry. For The Blossoms the back/ing/ground functions similarly but is used differently to The Andantes. It is a space to be invisible in their visibility, to flex vocal style, to remain unnoticed, to move through the studio system to achieve further economic stability. This is not to deny the groups or its members ambitions to have a hit single, but rather that they used the system to work in their favour in relation to familial responsibilities. Here the back/ing/ground permits those who occupy it to enter and move within the system differently. They may remain hidden, or largely unknown yet this permits them to access further work.

One of The Blossoms most notable working relationships has been with producer Phil Spector and his label Philles records. However, only Darlene Wright and Fanita James signed with the label in the latter half of 1962, the group having performed as session vocalists prior to this, and Gloria Jones permanently leaving the group. However, prior to signing with Philles The Blossoms vocals were used on behalf of existing signed groups, such as The Crystals, as well as newly formed groups, such as Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans. Similar to Motown who named themselves the hit factory, Spector considered Philles and his emerging wall of sound style of production the West-coast hit factory⁵⁹². Although first based in New York Spector began to move the label to Los Angeles in 1961.

In 1962 Darlene Wright was invited to a meeting with producer Phil Spector by his label partner Lester Sill. The record label co-founded by Spector and Sill, Philles, had found chart success with Spector's emerging production style known as the 'wall of sound'. The signature group at the Philles label at this time was the New York based quintet, The Crystals. The Crystals had previous success on the Philles label with "There's No Other (Like My Baby)" (Philles, 1961), "Uptown" (Philles, 1961), and "He Hit Me (And It Felt Like A Kiss)" (Philles,

⁵⁹² Love and Hoerburger, *My Name Is Love: The Darlene Love Story*, 70.

1962). You can hear the girl group sound Spector became known for crystallise over the course of these singles. From the doo wop sound of “There’s No Other (Like My Baby)” to the orchestral arrangement and call and response motifs in the later recordings.

During the meeting with Spector and Sill, Darlene Wright was asked to record the song “He’s A Rebel” for the Philles label with Gloria Jones and Fanita James the remaining Blossoms providing back/ing/ground vocals. Wright was offered triple scale for the session (approximately \$3000) and was told that the recording was in fact going to be released under the moniker of The Crystals. Wright recalls being unbothered by the record being released under The Crystals name saying, “at the time I didn’t even mind that Phil [Spector] was going to release the record under the Crystals name [...] I just wanted to take the money and run”⁵⁹³. This decision by Wright indicates how remaining in the background was not only lucrative in terms of the fee that could be earned but permitted movement that the spotlight could not provide. The Blossom’s voices, with Wright’s voice taking lead vocals could be on the record yet the use of the name The Crystals, an existing group signed with Philles, meant that Wright, James, and Jones remain in the back/ing/ground and invisible to the consuming public.

“He’s A Rebel” was released in August 1962 and by November it had reached number one on the national music chart, replacing the current number one, “Monster Mash” by Bobby ‘Boris’ Pickett and the Crypt Kickers⁵⁹⁴. Significantly the ‘Crypt Kickers’ providing back/ing/ground vocals on “Monster Mash” were in fact The Blossoms.

There are conflicting accounts regarding why The Crystals were unable to record “He’s A Rebel”. Mick Brown notes the ambiguity around the issue stating that it remains unclear whether it was due to touring conflicts, or The Crystals unwillingness to fly to Los Angeles to record. However, Crystals member Barbara Alston describes that the decision not to record the

⁵⁹³ Love and Hoerburger, 64.

⁵⁹⁴ Billboard.com, ‘Billboard Hot 100, November 1962’, 2022, <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/1962-11-09/>.

session was due to the growing frustrations the group had with the way Spector had treated the group regarding previous releases and the accounts owed regarding their prior hits: Our show of strength was to not fly out for the session. We certainly weren't afraid to fly because we were already touring [...] we were trying to make a stand against [Phil Spector]."⁵⁹⁵

Spector recorded "He's A Rebel" with Darlene Wright taking lead and Fanita James and Gloria Jones the remaining member of The Blossoms providing the back/ing/ground vocals. The Crystals discovered that Spector had recorded using different vocalists but using The Crystals moniker upon hearing the song on the radio while on tour.⁵⁹⁶ When listening to "He's A rebel" we hear both resistance via the presence of The Blossoms voices and the absence of The Crystals, who refused to record the session.

The movement of the back/ing/ground in terms of both working for numerous producers, labels, and studios as well as the phonic movements they make "break with logics of enclosure"⁵⁹⁷ that are placed upon them as back/ing/ground. As Jacqueline Warwick points out the movements that the group were able to undertake within and through the studio system as well as musical genres was because they were "unseen."⁵⁹⁸ Rather than static, behind, or unmoving their physical movements across geographic space (Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York), the space(s) of popular music in terms of vocally performing different genres or styles of music perform a pivoting that refuses to be centred. This refusal to be centred echoes Ashon Crawley's notion of "centrifugitivity" where centripetal force and centrifugal acceleration occur simultaneously, creating multiple movements that refuse positionality.⁵⁹⁹ The centrifugitivity of the movements made by The Blossoms, in and with the back/ing/ground

⁵⁹⁵ Barbara Alston cite in Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 76.

⁵⁹⁶ Clemente, 76.

⁵⁹⁷ James, *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism and Biopolitics*, 123.

⁵⁹⁸ Warwick, "And the Colored Girls Sing..." Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms', 72.

⁵⁹⁹ Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentacostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 106.

“destabilizes, and decenters”⁶⁰⁰ the controlling and limiting conditions placed upon them by pivoting the back/ing/ground beyond its proposed limits.

This sounding everywhere, then, occurs due to the group’s ability to, as Warwick points out, shape-shift to “alter their sound and style to suit the material at hand.”⁶⁰¹ Warwick goes on to state how the groups “invisibility in the recording studio allowed them to explore musical genres that would, in other circumstances, have been considered unsuitable for teenage girls and later, women of color.”⁶⁰² Warwick’s observation of the groups ability to shape shift and sound different genres highlights two important points. One, that the notion that the back/ing/ground sounds a particular way is a construction mapped onto the Black female voice as background. Two, that groups such as The Blossoms use sounding and the shifting of their sound in order to move through the studio system in a way that better suited the groups own careers. Not only this but Warwick’s assertion that this sounding creates a movement into musical genres that would be considered unsuitable for the group due to their racial identity merely doubles down on the construction of sonic blackness via the back/ing/ground. To suggest that certain genres over others are not suitable for the group problematically signals forms of racial essentialism as they pertain to both Black female vocals and the back/ing/ground and is indicative of what Jennifer Stoeber refers to a practice of “white constructed racialised listening” that attempts “to construct an alternate value system and aesthetics for sounds”⁶⁰³ that Warwick deems ‘black’. In sounding everywhere, the identity of the group is continually decentred, and the construction of the back/ing/ground as sounding a particular way destabilized. As Warwick points out listeners would be unaware of the identity

⁶⁰⁰ Crawley, *Blackpentacostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*.

⁶⁰¹ Warwick, “And the Colored Girls Sing...” Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’, 67.

⁶⁰² Warwick, 67.

⁶⁰³ Stoeber, *Sonic Color Line*.

of the back/ing/ground singers performing on the recording and that The Blossoms “were understood [...] as belonging to various different ethnicities and age groups.”⁶⁰⁴

The sounding everywhere of The Blossoms and their refusal to sound one way signals the complexities of sounding as a tactic and strategy. Where The Andantes refuse to alter their vocal sound and style, The Blossoms embrace these shifts. Both practices of sounding function to refuse conditions placed upon both groups. For The Andantes it is the loss or disappearance of their identity at Motown. For The Blossoms it is the refusal to sound only one style thus risking loss of work. By sounding themselves The Andantes assert their refusal and a mode of redress that causes the mix and the production process to change rather than their own voices. In sounding everywhere, The Blossoms signal the ways in which the back/ing/ground is constructed yet destabilize it.

In the final section of this chapter, I discuss the role The Blossoms had as in-house back/ing/ground group for the music variety television programme *Shindig!*. In discussing their role on the programme and a particular performance with Aretha Franklin this final section considers the ways in which the vocal and physical gestures of Wright during the performance signal an alternative relationship between the lead and back/ing/ground.

Sounding Otherwise Possibility

In 1964 The Blossoms were invited to join the television programme *Shindig!* (ABC, 1964-1966). Devised by producer Jack Good *Shindig!* sought to mirror the UK-based popular music programme *Ready, Steady, Go* (ITV, 1933-1966) which featured popular music acts aimed at the youth market.

The role The Blossoms were offered was as in-house back/ing/ground group for featured acts. However, there were stipulations regarding the group’s involvement. By 1964 the

⁶⁰⁴ Warwick, “And the Colored Girls Sing...” Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’, 67.

permanent line-up of the group had shifted. Group member Gloria Jones leaving the group in 1963 saw occasional group member Gracia Nitzche take her place. However, this new line up featuring Darlene Wright, Fanita James, and Gracia Nitzche was considered problematic by the television network on the grounds that Nitzche was white⁶⁰⁵. In her autobiography Darlene Wright recalls how producer Jack Good insisted on an all-Black group stating how “having an all-black group would be radical enough; a mixed group, he felt, would never fly”⁶⁰⁶. The insistence of an all-Black group signals again how the construction of the back/ing/ground is continually indexed across race and gender, indicating how Nitzche’s involvement would thus disrupt the back/ing/ground as being such. Nitzche’s membership to the group was replaced by session signer and former Raeletts member, Jean King.

However, following the pilot episode of *Shindig!* there was yet further issues regarding the group’s involvement. The *ABC* television network picked up the pilot offering the show a two-year run, yet noted The Blossoms as an issue as show regulars:

ABC picked up the pilot and put the series on its fall 1964 schedule, but with one condition: Lose the Blossoms. You can have blacks as guest performers, but the primetime audience [...] just wasn’t ready to see blacks as regulars every week⁶⁰⁷

Shindig! producer Jack Good challenged the television network and scheduled The Blossoms to perform twice a week as show regulars and the in-house back/ing/ground group for the entirety of the programmes run. The resistance towards the visible presence of The Blossoms on *Shindig!* speaks to the (in)visibility of the back/ing/ground as it is indexed along race and gender echoing Fred Moten’s point that “the mark of invisibility is a visible, racial mark; invisibility has visibility at its heart. To be invisible is to be seen, instantly and fascinatingly

⁶⁰⁵ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 28.

⁶⁰⁶ Love and Hoerburger, *My Name Is Love: The Darlene Love Story*, 109.

⁶⁰⁷ Love and Hoerburger, 110.

recognised as the unrecognizable”⁶⁰⁸The blind spot that the back/ing/ground signifies is again revealed here as constructed. It is not that the back/ing/ground is not visible, rather it is that it is visible and needs to be made invisible to not unsettle the back/ing/ground/foreground relationship. ABC’s challenge to include The Blossoms plus the insistence that the group should not be show regulars speaks to the very visibility of the back/ing/ground, upending it as a site of obscurity or insignificance. The relationship between The Blossoms and *Shindig!* speaks to a wider history of American film and television that seeks to reinforce White American values and perspectives.⁶⁰⁹ Within the context of *Shindig!* and The Blossoms this point is suggested in the initial challenging of the back/ing/ground as a multi-racial group, and then the consequent challenge that the group be permitted to occupy the position as show ‘regulars.’

The Blossoms tenure at *Shindig!* saw the group perform with numerous acts as well as being offered occasional opportunities to perform as a primary group rather than back/ing/ground. When performing as a primary act the group did not perform original recordings but were limited to covering current releases and popular ‘hits’ already in the popular music chart of that week.

In contrast to the ways in which The Blossoms could ‘sound everywhere’ whilst working unseen within the recording studio, regular televised performances meant that the nature of the groups involvement and participation in music became limited⁶¹⁰. Not only this but the conditions of the group’s visibility was based upon particular notions of presentability in that “their seen presence on the show meant that they had to conform to acceptable standards of prettiness and youthfulness in a culture that insisted on an ideal of female beauty based on

⁶⁰⁸ Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, 68.

⁶⁰⁹ Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in Teh White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000); Marquita Gammage, ‘Pop Without Culture: Examining the Public Backlash to Beyoncé’s Super Bowl 50 Performance’, *Journal of Black Studies* 48, no. 8 (2017): 715–31.

⁶¹⁰ Warwick, “And the Colored Girls Sing...” Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms’, 72.

whiteness, and so more care had to be taken with dress, hair, and make up than was necessary for recording sessions.”⁶¹¹ This is evidenced in numerous performances in which the group are dressed in matching outfits, as well as wearing similarly styled hair and makeup.

The presence of The Blossoms on *Shindig!* did not appear to alter the racist attitudes that challenged their presence on the show. Darlene Wright speaks of how the group were warned by show producer Jack Good “that people behind every microphone and camera [...] would be [...] looking for an excuse to have us fired. As ridiculous and racist as it seemed – watch yourself, girl, you’re black – it became a point of pride for us not to give anyone the opportunity.”⁶¹² The very presence of The Blossoms on *Shindig!*, then, becomes an instance of resistance through feigned complicity. Each performance becomes a moment where the group pivot from these racist attitudes via continual performance. Wright’s comments about ‘not giving people opportunity’ signals the awareness the group had regarding their role, and the white lens through which they were being viewed via the show itself. As regulars the group had the opportunity to become knowable and it is this knowability, as I have argued in my discussions regarding The Andantes, that becomes threatening to the wider mechanisms in which the back/ing/ground is situated. To know, to recognise the back/ing/ground transforms it from the obscure, the unknown to a more secure position.

The role of The Blossoms on *Shindig!* speaks to how the back/ing/ground as Black and female has become constructed through whiteness. Overall, performances made by the group during their tenure on the show see them following the construction such as wearing matching outfits, performing matching and synchronised choreography, and so on.

However, during a performance with Aretha Franklin The Blossoms pivot from the construction of the back/ing/ground. On the 2nd of December 1964 Aretha Franklin makes a guest appearance on *Shindig!* performing “The Shoop Shoop Song (It’s in His Kiss)” a song

⁶¹¹ Warwick, 14.

⁶¹² Love and Hoerburger, *My Name Is Love: The Darlene Love Story*, 110.

featured on Franklin's sixth studio album *Runnin' Out of Fools* (1964, Columbia records). "The Shoop Shoop Song (It's in His Kiss)" was originally recorded by known back/ing/ground vocalist and solo performer Merry Clayton⁶¹³ in 1963 and released on Capitol records. Although Clayton's version did not chart the original back/ing/ground vocals for Clayton's release were in fact performed by The Blossoms⁶¹⁴.

The performance begins with the camera focused on Franklin. The camera stays on Franklin as they sing the opening lyrics:

AF: Does he love me? I wanna know
How can I tell if he loves me so?

The camera then stays of Franklin as The Blossoms sing the first line of the verse:

TB: **Is it in his eyes?**

The camera stays fixed on Franklin only switching to show closeups on Franklin's face as she responds to each question proffered by the back/ing/ground:

AF: No, girls don't be deceived

TB: **Is it in his sighs?**

AF: No, girls he'll make believe

AF: If you wanna know if he loves you so, it's in his kiss

TB: **Shoop, shoop, shoop, shoop, shoop, shoop, shoop that's where it is. Oh yeah**

AF: Oh yeah

As we hear both Franklin and The Blossoms sing "oh yeah" in unison the camera shifts to show Franklin at the left side of the frame with an as yet unlit space to the right of her. As The

⁶¹³ Merry Clayton, as mentioned in chapter three, worked as both a solo back/ing/ground vocalist as well as part of Ray Charles's back/ing/ground group The Raeletts. Clayton also recorded and performed as a solo artist.

⁶¹⁴ Clayton's release featuring The Blossoms failed to enter the charts. The following year in 1964 Betty Everett released a single version on Veejay with back/ing/ground from The Opals and Ramona King (back/ing/ground unknown) released her version on Warner Brothers in 1964.

Blossoms begin the second verse the space to the right of Franklin becomes lit and The Blossoms are finally made visible both within the camera frame and to the studio audience. The reveal of The Blossoms via lighting is an example of Good's overall production style where "dancers, back-up singers, and the house band and other musicians, were on dark and dimmed sets at all times, with choregraphed light and movement revealing them to the audience at strategic moments."⁶¹⁵ The Blossoms stand on three separate podiums to the right of Franklin. As the group perform, they continuously move their arms from left to right repeating a two-step dance that as Warwick points out "does not require much from them."⁶¹⁶ The Blossoms wear matching outfits of cream skirts and sleeveless cream tops, resembling Franklins own dress. The Blossoms perform the repetitive choreography with ease, almost boredom. The call and response between Franklin and The Blossoms continue in the same manner throughout the second verse and the first bridge. Following a short instrumental in the middle of the performance Franklin repeats the bridge with The Blossoms singing a separate three-part harmony. At the end of the bridge on the last line Franklin alters her singing style to incorporate "some gospel-styled improvisation"⁶¹⁷:

AF: Whoa, hold him and squeeze him tight

TB: Bom

TB: Bom

TB: Bom

AF: Find out what you wanna know

TB: Bom

TB: Bom

TB: Bom

AF: Promise love, if it really is

TB: Bom

TB: Bom

⁶¹⁵ Norma Coates, 'Excitement Is Made, Not Born: Jack Good, Television, and Rock and Roll', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25, no. 3 (2013): 310.

⁶¹⁶ Warwick, "And the Colored Girls Sing..." Backup Singers and the Case of The Blossoms', 15.

⁶¹⁷ Warwick, 15.

TB: Bom

AF: It's there in his kiss

As *The Blossoms* begin with the last set of questions that frame the verse, Franklin extends the expressive quality she has just performed at the end of the bridge, bringing it to her responses. Franklin's expressive performance at the end of the song causes Darlene Wright who is situated on the middle podium to both physically and vocally respond to Franklin's performance. The power of her voice causes Wright to subtly break with the repetitive choreography. As Franklin sings Wright waves her hand towards Franklin as an acknowledgement of this moment. For Warwick this instance shows the group "interacting with the guest performer" and "inspiring her with their enthusiasm."⁶¹⁸

However, I would go further to describe how Franklin and Wright's actions function here as breaks, that redirect the performance towards the shared experiences of gospel and both Baptist and Pentecostal practices of both Franklin and Wright. The sounding of Franklin and her gospel improvisation circuit bends the performance in a way so as to create space for Wright to respond in as equally an improvised manner. In this moment Wright breaks the repetitive two and four rhythm between lead and back/in/ground. In this moment the back/ing/ground becomes connected to the foreground in a different way, responding to Franklin in a way that is noticeably different to the performance thus far.

Although less audible we can see and faintly hear Wright 'whoop' following Franklin's performance in this moment. Darlene Wright's 'whoops' and improvised hand gesture momentarily interrupt the choreography, changing the nature of the call and response vocal that has been mapped out via the song structure. Franklin delivers the lyric "No, no that's not the way" elongating the second 'no' and changing the rhythm and style of delivery. Where in earlier parts of the performance Franklin delivers the lyric or similar phrase meeting and

⁶¹⁸ Warwick, 15.

marking the 4/4 beat structure with each word, here as the song reaches its end Franklin pushes the lyric in a different direction. Rather than being contained within the rhythm and beat pattern mapped out by the band Franklin wraps the phrase around the beat stretching the second ‘no’ around two beats rather than one. That Franklin does this near the end of the performance signals that she demands a different response to her call.

Wright’s praise of Franklin’s performance registers in her own improvised, unchoreographed hand gestures and audible whoops. In this moment the antiphonal character of the performance changes. The steady pedestrian call and response between Aretha Franklin and The Blossoms is dislocated and ultimately destabilized from *Shindig!* and the lens of mainstream television. In this moment, as this physical and vocal break occurs between Franklin and Wright the relationship between the back/ing/ground as a constructed space, a construction of the back/ing/ground as in service to the foreground, or simply behind the foreground is unsettled.

Here Franklin’s performance opens up what Crawley refers to as a “sonic space” that was “open to the other voices that preceded”⁶¹⁹ it. In this moment Franklin needs a response that is as improvised as her own articulation. It is a need for a “speaking back [...] in order for the moment to constitute itself”⁶²⁰. In this moment Franklin alters the relationship between herself and the back/ing/ground creating the space for “otherwise possibility”⁶²¹. For Ashon Crawley “otherwise possibility” refers to “infinite possibilities to what *is*.”⁶²² Crawley describes the making of otherwise possibility via “sonic events,” such as whooping, shouting, and dancing within Black Pentecostal practice, that produce vibrations of “ongoing movement” that “exists alongside that which we can detect with our finite sensual capacities.”⁶²³ The ‘otherwise

⁶¹⁹ Crawley, *Blackpentacostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, 45. Italics original

⁶²⁰ Crawley, 137.

⁶²¹ Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentacostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

⁶²² Crawley, 2.

⁶²³ Crawley, 2.

possibility' that Franklin and Wright sound disrupts the framework of *Shindig!* as simply the regular programming of popular music acts but opens the performance space to an encounter between foreground and back/ing/ground that is improvisational.

With the irruption of Franklin's voice, Wright reflexively responds both physically and phonically and it is in this moment that a different relationship between back/ing/ground and foreground that is also produced. In these improvised utterances an otherwise possibility between back/ing/ground and foreground is sounded. Here the relationship between that which is deemed the centre and that which is deemed outside of the centre, or behind it, is ruptured, in this moment. Between Franklins singing and Wright's body and utterances, the relationship between these two spaces is changed. Describing the role of whooping and the antiphony between preacher and congregation Crawley describes how, "the point of it all is to excite the congregation into a moment of intense reflection and raucous praise, to excite the congregation to shout, to move their flesh in the space in order to think otherwise possibilities."⁶²⁴ The antiphony that Franklin demands and receives from Wright is rooted in an improvised practice. Wright's 'whoop' and hand gesture is also read here as what Hartman calls a "veiled articulation"⁶²⁵ in that it signals the lack of creative of expressivity the group were ordinarily permitted on the programme, as well as revealing the feigned complicity of the rest of the performance. In these physical and phonic gestures, we encounter an otherwise possibility between the back/ing/ground and lead. In this moment Wright's gestures are not simply supportive or echoic, but are reciprocal and in relation to and with Franklin's vocal performance. Here, the back/ing/ground is not simply supportive or subsidiary but improvisatory, agile, and unfixed, demonstrating, again, that an understanding of the back/ing/ground as simply echoic, and uncreative is due to the ways in which it has been constructed. Here in, of, and from the back/ing/ground Wright's phonic and physical gestures

⁶²⁴ Crawley, 46.

⁶²⁵ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 36.

do not simply support Franklin's vocals nor do they simply respond to them, rather they are improvisational, reflexive, and unstructured.

In tuning our ears to the back/ing/ground we are able to attend to how The Andantes and The Blossoms sound both elsewhere and everywhere. In sounding elsewhere, The Andantes redress the very same conditions of displacement experienced at Motown. In sounding elsewhere beyond Motown, the group pull away from the limitations placed upon them at Motown. The resistance and refusal to alter their tonality is heard here as an instance of refusal and redress to the sounding elsewhere in which they are originally placed. Here they use the elsewhere space of the back/ing/ground to refuse Gordy's insistence they only work for Motown.

Through constantly altering their voices to sound any genre and style The Blossoms sound everywhere. In this sounding everywhere we encounter the redressing of the back/ing/ground as a static construct, fixed and unmoving. In sounding everywhere, The Blossoms continually collapse the back/ing/grounds fixity making it agile and able to move through the studio system on its own terms.

In both sounding elsewhere and sounding everywhere we encounter a back/ing/ground that moves, albeit obliquely, away or against the conditions that seek to limit, erase, and continually obscure. The movements that these groups made register here as instances of resistance and refusal, redressing the construction of the back/in/ground as incidental, uncreative. Movement here registers in two ways. One, via the movement of their labour to subsequent labels and producers. Two, in the case of The Blossoms via the alteration of vocal style. The work and subsequently the movements that The Andantes and The Blossoms made do not register in the same ways of primary acts via identifiable archival signifiers such as recording credits. Rather they register aurally requiring we listen for such movements.

Without the usual visual and visible signs of presence the back/ing/ground becomes mappable aurally via the ear circumventing the eye, signalling “alternative patterns”⁶²⁶ that exist beside visible archival referents such as label credits. The absence of label credits signals how the labour of the back/ing/ground is located at the margins of creative and cultural production. Yet as discussed previously it is the construction of the back/ing/ground that *imagines* the Black female voice as back/ing/ground as outside the mechanisms of creativity. The continual marginalisation of the back/ing/ground occurs due to the indexing and mapping of race and gender across the role, and it is the “process of marginalization”⁶²⁷ that imagines the role as located at the margins. To reiterate Katherine McKittrick’s observation “we make concealment happen; it is not natural but rather names and organizes where racial-sexual differentiation occurs”⁶²⁸. The absence of accreditation, then, renders the back/ing/ground invisible, and continually on the margins of cultural production. The invisible nature of the back/ing/ground is rooted not in any inherent untraceability, but rather the ways in which it is rendered untraceable due to the absence of accredited labour. The absence of crediting the back/ing/ground is considered here a form of “profitable erasure”⁶²⁹ in that the absence of groups such as The Andantes on label credits is read as a necessary means of displacement, as to honour their contributions and labour would risk decentering attention from primary acts, or the company itself to the back/ing/ground. When listening to the back/ing/ground, and the recordings on which both The Andantes and The Blossoms feature our understanding of the ways in which popular music histories have been mapped becomes altered and the lack of acknowledgement of the back/ing/ground through official accreditation is due to the construction of the back/ing/ground as Black and female, and that this construction renders it

⁶²⁶ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, xiv.

⁶²⁷ Katherine McKittrick, 55.

⁶²⁸ Katherine McKittrick, xii.

⁶²⁹ Katherine McKittrick, x.

as being located on the margins of popular music rather than figuring it as a central component of these creative and cultural outputs.

Coda:

‘When You Move You Lose’

[Tracklist \(listen here\):](#)

Marvin Gaye, “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” (1971)

What do we hear when we listen to the background? In asking this question this project has sought to consider and discuss what can be heard in, of, and from the back/ing/ground and what is carried in those voices that sound as and in the back/ing/ground. In discussing the ways in which the Black female singing voices has been utilised as back/ing/ground it has sought to establish how such indexing is a construction that seeks to render the back/ing/ground obscure and subsidiary and ultimately sounds that we should merely hear rather than listen to. Throughout its chapters the project has attempted to listen to the back/ing/ground and attend to the ways in which not only this constructed has come about and its implications, but also how the back/ing/ground provided significant access to regular work within a system that continually refuted the significant work of those sounding as such. Although generally overlooked and underheard the back/ing/ground provides access to rich and important cultural activity that signals parallel histories of popular music, its cultures, and its making.

By the early 1970s Marlene, Jackie, and Louvain had noticed the beginnings of a reduction in working hours at Motown. The group recall that the last sessions recorded with Motown were for both Diana Ross’s solo career and The Supremes recordings now without Diana Ross. Notably, the final single billed under Diana Ross and the Supremes, “Someday We’ll Be Together” released in 1969 was initially intended to be the first single for Diana Ross as she embarked on her solo career. As such neither Mary Wilson nor Cindy Birdsong (who replaced Florence Ballard) is featured on the recording. Rather, it was yet again The Andantes providing back/ing/ground vocals on the final single.

By 1973 Motown closed its studio doors in Detroit to relocate to the Los Angeles. Having been connected to Motown since its earliest moments The Andantes were disappointed to discover that not only had they not been asked to move with the organisation but had not been informed of the relocation at all. Sensing something was changing Marlene Barrow recalls how when they if Motown was leaving Detroit that any relocation or change in the company was denied where the group were told that “everything was okay, not to worry.”⁶³⁰ When Motown left Detroit, they left The Andantes there too. With no official announcement made to the group as well as many others not invited to relocate it was The Andantes who organised a meeting at Belle Isle Park to inform others of Motown’s move.⁶³¹

Motown’s move to Los Angeles has been regarded by some as the beginning of the decline of what is recognised as the Motown sound. Funk Brother member and Motown arranger, Paul Riser describes that “Motown moving to L.A. was the breakdown” noting that “the reason it fell apart was [Gordy] didn’t take to L.A. what had made the company string. He took the boat but didn’t take the people.”⁶³² Following Motown’s departure from Detroit Marlene, Jackie, and Louvain lost their access to regular work as vocalists. By July 1973 Louvain had moved to Atlanta, Both Marlene and Jackie describe the challenges of finding access to different forms of labour and by the mid-1970s The Andantes were no longer singing together.

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s The Blossoms continued to work as both back/ing/ground and primary group for numerous artists and labels. However, in 1969 the group made the decision to tour with Tom Jones. Fanita James of the group remarks how this decision impacted the group as both back/ing/ground and primary group stating “when you move you lose. When we went on the road, we lost the studio work.”⁶³³ Harnessing the back/ing/ground to Jones meant that the movement they possessed as back/ing/ground

⁶³⁰ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, *Motown from the Background: The Authorized Biography of The Andantes*, 192.

⁶³¹ Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 192.

⁶³² Vickie Wright, Louvain Demps, 194.

⁶³³ Clemente, *Girl Groups: Fabulous Females That Rocked the World*, 29.

beforehand ceased. While on tour the group was no longer able to move through the studio system. Notably the movements that the group made as back/ing/ground while on tour with Jones can be understood differently to the movements the group made in and with the back/ing/ground. With Jones the groups movements are directed by the primary act and the tour. The group move geographically yet their movement remained harnessed to Jones, only able to move within the framework of the tour. Yet before this they moved independently, using the ways in which the back/ing/ground had been constructed to move in and through the industry continuously reconstructing a new framework with each movement. By 1975 Darlene Wright left the group and was replaced with former Raelett member, Alex Brown. The Blossoms continued to work throughout both the 1980s with various personnel changes with original member Fanita James retiring in 1990.

One of the many things that has interested me about the back/ing/ground is the ways in which we are able to attune to how these different groups move and create space in and with the back/ing/ground. With The Andantes we hear them produce from the back/ing/ground. It emerges as if from the centre of them, from the centre of their voice's outwards. It is through their voices that we hear Motown unfold. With The Blossoms the back/ing/ground continually shifts creating pockets of ever moving space unable to be held or made static. Again, rather than simply being behind, the back/ing/ground, here, is agile, producing new spaces each time. It is as if there is a dissimulation of the back/ing/ground as fixed. With The Blossoms it continually moves and is moved, shifting shape via the shifting, and flexing of their voices.

I would like to close in a similar way to how the thesis began – by listening. Throughout Marvin Gaye's "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)" from the album *What's Going On* (Motown, 1971) we hear the voices of The Andantes as well as Gaye's own voice expand across the track articulating ever increasing harmonic "oohs." At times their voices sound low providing a constant bass like hum, only to soar from these depths to sound a choral harmonic chorus. Near

the close of the track at two minutes forty-five seconds these harmonic sounds begin to alter, being stretched, and reformed hitting minor tones not encountered until this point. The choral sounding harmonies of The Andantes become merged with a sample voice from the electro-mechanical keyboard known as The Chamberlin. Although low in the mix the voices of The Andantes still register yet it is the sample voice from the Chamberlin keyboard, known simply as 'Female Solo Voice' that envelopes their sound with minor tones sounding without breath. My ear has always been intrigued by this arrangement on the recording. The anonymity of two sets of voices one machine, one made machinic. In the blending of the Chamberlin with The Andantes we meet with the anonymity of the back/ing/ground once again as well as the anonymity of the machine.

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