

Article

Sounding Grief in Henry Dumas's "Echo Tree"

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Abstract: "Sounding Grief in Henry Dumas's 'Echo Tree'" engages Dumas's experimental short story about two youths discussing how to speak to the dead while on a Southern hillside at dusk. This article studies how this short story meditates on how grief affects our engagement with and reliance upon voiced languages to express a desire for communion that persists beyond death. "Echo Tree", the article argues, reveals how openness to grief, and the subsequent desire for communication with the dead, improves the imaginative capacity needed for empathetic alignment among the living. In its presentation of the psychological and imaginative difficulties of performing a call-and-response with the dead, "Echo Tree" also analogizes how a reader engages in an act of call-and-response with a muted acousmatic voice from the printed page.

Keywords: grief; apostrophe; echoes; empathy; voice; desire; call-and-response

I

"Echo Tree" (1961) by Henry Dumas is a hidden wellspring for reflecting on how grief can animate bonds amongst the living. The experimental short story exemplifies what writer John Keene calls Dumas's "visionary fiction", in which "vernacular cultures, folk spiritual and religious practices" herald "alternative epistemologies and necessary guides and tools for understanding and processing the complex and contradictory reality around us" (Keene 2021b) "Echo Tree" portrays two young men talking about the possibility of communicating with a deceased relative named Leo on a Southern hillside at dusk. One is Leo's brother, who left the area for New York City and who doubts that such communion and communication is possible; the other has remained in the Southern region and knows how to do "spirit talk." "Spirit talk" is a ritual practice of call-and-response that involves shouting the name of the dead and listening for the sound of their voice within the resounding echoes. With its portrayal of call-and-response with the dead, the story renders grief to be the persistence of a desire for communion. This tale narrativizes the psychological conditions that generate apostrophe, the desire that pushes out prayer, and the loss that shapes elegy. "Echo Tree", I argue, reveals how openness to grief, and the subsequent desire for communication with the dead, improves the imaginative capacity needed for empathetic alignment among the living.

An almost legendary figure from the Black Arts Movement, Dumas wrote poems and short stories that blend the supernatural with the ordinary while portraying characters that engage in, teach, and rely upon various forms of Black cultural expression and Africana religious practices. Amiri Baraka located the power of Dumas's stories as deriving from how they render "an entirely different world connected to this one" ("Afro-Surrealist Expressionist") (Baraka 1988). Scholar Carter Mathes, moreover, illuminates how Dumas's writing translates "the experimental energy of sound into literary form" to reveal how sound is an active force within musical and environmental contexts that can transform social consciousness (Mathes 2015, pp. 62–64). Building on these insights, I argue that Dumas uses formal experimentation with sound and surrealist imagery to portray grievance, which Anne Anlin Cheng locates in the "realm of accountability", and grief, which belongs to the "realm of thinking and living with loss" (Cheng 2001, p. 195).



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Dumas's short story "Riot or Revolt?" frames rioting as a mode of public grievance—an expressive act of revolt rather than a chaotic resignation to "despair, pessimism, and slow death" as Casarae Lavada Abdul-Ghani puts it in *Start a Riot!* (Abdul-Ghani 2022, p. 25). Primarily from the perspective of Micheal LeMoor, the owner of a Harlem bookstore, the story depicts the responses to a riot in 1960s' Harlem that occurs after a white police officer fatally shoots a Black teenager. "The people", LeMoor tells the Mayor of New York, "get tired of dying" (Dumas 2021c, p. 377). LeMoor critiques integration (what he calls a "brainwashing powder") and various civic, educational, and non-profit institutions, whose "investigations" and "interviews" to understand Black suffering are a "smokescreen" that obscure the necessity of ending the violent conditions that create it (377). Much of the dialogue of "Riot or Revolt?" reckons with how the Civil Rights Act not only failed to adequately produce legal and civic inclusion but also failed to protect Black people from violence by officers of the state.¹

Whereas "Riot or Revolt?" highlights the aftermath of a riot, Dumas's story "Ark of Bones" focuses on the spiritual and cultural task of recovering the dead from erasure. A surreal tale of historical retrieval, "Ark of Bones" portrays two young men named Fishhound and Headeye encountering an enormous ark—a "soulboat"—on the Mississippi River (Dumas 2021a, p. 17). The tale is told from the perspective of Fishhound, who is called to witness his friend Headeye's initiation into the vocation of recovering the bones of the dead that he is tasked to perform by an ancestral figure.² In a climactic moment, Fishhound sees how bones are lifted from the Mississippi to be arranged and collected within the ark, whose walls carry the bones (and souls) of every African who has lived in America (20). Headeye's spiritual vocation represents what Karla Holloway describes as "a relentless cycle of cultural memory and black mourning" that she sees rehearsed in the twentieth century and that persists into the twentieth-first century (Holloway 2002, p. 7).

"Ark of Bones" speaks to the anxieties of erasure that characterize the Black Arts Movement and the political activism of the Black Lives Matter movement alike. For instance, #sayhername is an "activist" campaign launched in December 2014 by the African American Policy Forum that produces "channels of ritual, research, and remembrance that aim to recover the stories of Black women's experiences of racist police violence and to address the multiple forces that enable that violence and the various silences that follow it" (Crenshaw and The African American Policy Forum 2023, p. 39). "If you say the name, you're prompted to learn the story, and if you know the story", Kimberlé Crenshaw writes, "then you have a broader sense of all the ways Black bodies are made vulnerable to police violence" (Crenshaw 2018). To vocalize their names is to break the silence that represents their erasure and to open up space for life stories to be told about the dead.

"Echo Tree", however, dramatizes the palpable difference between talking about the dead and talking to them. The narrative fixates on the psychological pain of saying the name of the dead not for the purpose of telling stories about them but for the purpose of invoking their presence and divining their response. The story focuses on sounding the hidden, illegible aspects of grief that "speak in a different tongue", as Anne Cheng phrases it (Cheng 2001, p. x). Poet and intellectual Nathaniel Mackey notes how Black elegiac traditions use language to invest in loss in ways that are not easily recuperated by political projects (Mackey 2005, p. 275). The story's investment in loss does not so much delay political mobilization as guard against the unintended violence of forgetting that the slain are not just evidence of racial violence but individuals to mourn.³ It opens up space to consider how the bereaved would experience calls to "say the name" of the deceased that continue to appear as a mode of public grievance. For those without personal ties to the deceased, there may, in fact, be little emotional difference between vocalizing (and overhearing) the phrase "say her name" and actually saying (and overhearing) the names: "Rekia Boyd, Sandra Bland, India Krager. . ." For those who have personal ties to the deceased in these events, saying the name of the dead may sound an emotional experience that desires a response from the departed. As Gina Best says in her reflection of persisting with an "amputated heart" while enduring the killing of her daughter India

Krager, “I envision that, when we say her name and we remember. . . I like to imagine India answering back. I like to imagine every last one of our babies, our loved ones, answering back” (Crenshaw and The African American Policy Forum 2023, p. 100).

First published in 1961 in *Anthologist*, a literary magazine at Rutgers University, Dumas wrote “Echo Tree” while dealing with the loss of his brother and a shift in his religious beliefs. As his biographer Jeffrey Leak puts it, “His questioning of previously held religious beliefs along with political and cultural ideas emerging occurred while he underwent a deep personal loss of his brother, Billy Mack Collins” (Leak 2014, p. 51). “Echo Tree” also reflects Dumas’s usage of poetic techniques to “translate” experiences of performing, hearing, and photographing scenes of call-and-response that occur in Black religious, musical, and environmental settings onto the page. In the introduction to Dumas’s book *Poetry for My People* (1970), Poet Jay Wright recalls how Dumas “haunted gospel concerts, photographing, when he could, the singers and the action” when they were classmates at Rutgers around the time that Dumas wrote “Echo Tree” (Wright 1970, p. xxi). By photographing “the singers and the action”, Dumas sought to capture the visible effects sound has on the faces, gestures, and posture of performers and responsive audience members. In addition to attending performances while he was composing “Echo Tree”, Dumas was also writing about the “effects” Walt Whitman’s poetry had on him as a reader (Leak 2014, p. 56). Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is not only influential for the poet’s exclamations of a complex individuality, but also in terms of producing a call-and-response effect with the reader: “Listener up there! What have you to confide in me. . . / (Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute/longer)” (Whitman 2004b, p. 51, Lines 3, 5–6). What emerges, I argue, from the confluence of Dumas’s artistic, religious, and literary experiences is a story invested in inculcating a reader’s co-constructive participation primarily by building upon poetic techniques to portray echoes and repetitions to evoke call-and-response with an absent, dead figure.

“Echo Tree” dramatizes how grief conditions and complicates these kinds of poetic addresses. The brilliance of the story centers on how it frames call-and-response from the echoes of apostrophe, an address made to a dead, inanimate, or absent figure. Apostrophes are viewed as a mode of address in poems to produce what Helen Vendler calls an “intimacy effect” by evoking an “invisible listener” (Vendler 2005, p. 5). For Barbara Johnson, apostrophes are not meant to banish silence but transform “silence into mute responsiveness” (Johnson 2014, p. 218). Ann Keniston notes how this mute responsiveness reveals apostrophe’s ambivalence as a trope of doomed desire, at once expressing want for the absent one while knowingly aware of the inadequacy of language to substitute for their lost presence (Keniston 2001, p. 301). Attuned to these dynamics, “Echo Tree” renders apostrophes to the dead as what enables embodied, imaginative, and sensory experiences of language that can possibly unearth desires to commune with the dead and bond with the living.

II

“Echo Tree” opens with an exclamation of discovery: “Right there! That’s the place!” The tale is formally experimental: their dialogue appears in quotations without any attribution as to who is speaking, which requires the reader to establish the boys’ identities from their utterances. We begin to overhear their conversation about finding the echo tree while being guided by the “spirits”. “Don’t you know that spirits talk”, says one of them, “’n they takes you places.” “I don’t believe about. . .” says the other before being cut off, “Careful what you say. Better to say nothin than talk too loud” (Dumas 2021b, p. 23). The story quickly establishes that its core tension is about the possibility of communication with the “spirits”. The friend’s warning about talking loudly is followed by the narrator’s personified description of the environment as expressive and responsive. Set off in italics, the narrator paints the scene:

The wind fans up a shape in the dust: around and around and over the hill. Out of the cavity of an uprooted tree, it blows up fingers that ride the wind off the hill down the

valley and up toward the sun, a red tongue rolling down a blue-black throat. And the ear of the mountains listens. . . (Dumas 2021b, p. 23)

“Echo Tree” portrays the environment not as a backdrop for living human activity but as an active agent of expression and response. The land and sky are personified as having an ear, a throat, a tongue, and fingers; the wind is portrayed as a creative force: “*The wind fans up a shape in the dust*” and “*blows up fingers*” from “the cavity of an uprooted tree.” This is the eponymous “echo tree”, a threshold where the youths can purportedly speak to the spirits. The narrator continues to depict the environment as responsive by describing the sunlight as a red tongue and the dark blue-black of the emerging night sky as a throat. The wind moves in a breath-like fashion—“*The wind comes. Goes. Comes again*”—animating the scene of their conversation. As the sky breathes, the “ear of the mountain listens”, framing the natural setting to be responsive.

The image of an uprooted tree foreshadows the youths’ conversation around dispossession and death. They begin to discuss the disconnection between them that is caused by the brother moving to New York City.

“Did Leo used to want to come up to New York?”

“He ain’t thinking about you whilst you way up yonder.”

“How come you say that? What’s wrong with up there?”

“Leo’s grandpa, *your’n too*, well he say up in the city messes you up.”

“Aw, he’s old.”

“Makes no difference. He know. That’s how come Leo know too.”

“Leo is dead.”

“So, I bet he never teach *you* bout this here echo tree”. (Dumas 2021b, p. 23)

The conversation sounds both playful and pained. The brother’s initial question of Leo’s *desire* suggests feelings of disconnection, perhaps loneliness, and not mere curiosity. He asks if Leo ever *wanted* to come up to New York to connect with him, foreshadowing the story’s reflections on grief’s relation to desire. The friend replies that Leo did not even think about the brother when he was “way up yonder.” When the friend mentions Leo’s grandfather’s criticism of New York City’s corrupting influence, he also says, “Leo know too”—grammatically insinuating that Leo is alive. The tense of the friend’s phrase makes room for ambiguity. The brother’s cold retort, “Leo is dead”, is met with the friend’s mention of the echo tree, which causes the brother to defensively assert his familial tie to Leo.

The friend’s knowledge of the echo tree and of spirit talk becomes evidence of his connection to Leo that persists even in death, while the brother’s ignorance of the tree proves his disconnection from Leo, the friend, and his potential dispossession from the spiritual practices of this Southern hillside. The friend then explains that Leo taught him about the “echo tree” and “. . .how to use callin words for spirit-talk. . .”

“What?”

“. . .*Swish-ka abas wish-ka. Saa saa aba saa saa.*”

“What’s that?”

“Be quiet. I’m getting ready. . .” (Dumas 2021b, p. 24)

The “callin words” are in a foreign language for the brother; his question suggests that he does not consider the evocation to be *in* language, since he does not ask, “What are you saying?” but “What’s that?” These words are in glossolalia, which Giorgio Agamben considers to be a foreign language—not nonsense—whose sound represents “language’s departure from its semantic dimension and its return to the original sphere of the pure intention to signify. . .” (Agamben 1996, p. 67). When one speaks in glossolalia, one (over)hears one’s own voice as sounded desire. The friend’s lesson aligns with this understanding of

glossolalia in that he attempts to teach the brother that “spirit talk” and “callin words” are meant to evoke a desire for communion.

The story frames glossolalia as a way of voicing desire with the spelling in the second part of the chant, “*abas wish-ka*”, that makes apparent the word “wish.” This visible “wish” at the center of the chant, and as part of “swish”, suggests a form of evoked desire at the center of this utterance. Moreover, when one sounds out the next part of the chant, one hears “say” four times (depending on one’s pronunciation), as if to highlight that the important aspect of this utterance is the sounded act of vocalization and not knowledge of its semantic meaning. In the phrase “. . . *Swish ka abas wish-ka*. . .” is the word “swish”, an onomatopoeic word that denotes the rustling sound of the wind, establishing a sonic link between this chant and the wind as a creative, resuscitating, and conjuring agent. Onomatopoeia, according to Agamben, is a phonetic inscription of a natural sound that signifies the “inarticulate voice” of nature, creating the desire to know its meaning on account of its “sound” (Agamben 1996, p. 69). By linguistically linking the glossolalic speech of spirit talk with the onomatopoeic sound of the wind’s rustling against the leaves and the valley, “Echo Tree” portrays how human and natural sounds can be framed as voices expressing and eliciting desire. Toward the climax of the story, there is an onomatopoeic description of the sound of the wind—“*Shhwsssssss!*”—that phonetically resembles the “Swish-ka” of the friend’s spirit talk, tapping into a rich theoretical linkage between the two tropes as figures of desire (Dumas 2021b, pp. 24, 26, 29). The onomatopoeia of the wind’s howl and the echoic soundscape of a valley are ambiguously linked with human expressions, thus resituating the value of the environment to be based on its responsiveness and expressiveness.

The spiritual lesson the friend teaches the brother about speaking with the dead is that their response does not require the exchange of knowable content. These “callin words” that produce a vocal experience between mere sound and signification present voice as unbound from meaning. In “African Signs and Spirit Writing” (1996), Harryette Mullen considers how African Americans received and used writing as “techniques of spiritual power and spirit possession” and not as instruments of human communication (Mullen 1996, p. 672). Mullen cites art historian Robert Farris Thompson’s insight that glossolalia enables “voice” to be “unshackled” from meaningful words or from the pragmatic function of language as a conveyor of cognitive information.” The unshackled voice calling forth in spirit talk resonates with the responsive sound of the wind passing through the natural environment as a way of inciting a desire to commune with the spirits that may be moving about. These “dead” words, therefore, prioritize the performative and vocative function of language over its capacity to transmit semantic content.⁴ This lesson on spirit talk highlights what John Keene calls Dumas’s “counter-epistemology”, where call-and-response is not the exchange of information or knowledge content but the performance of a relationship in terms of responsive listening (Keene 2021a, p. xiii). By highlighting vocality and sonority amongst various forms of human speech and environmental sounds, the story draws attention to acts of voicing and listening that are crucial to communing with others.

The friend teaches the brother that “spirit talk” does not require him to know the meaning of the “callin words” to pronounce them correctly in terms of intonation and rhythm. The friend opens with “*Swish-ka aba swish-ka*” and commands the brother to repeat them. When the brother fails to do so: “Er. . . *swish*. . .”, the friend cuts him off and rebuffs him, “You started to slow and you cursed.” This is a familiar experience for anyone learning how to pronounce words, syllables, and vowels in a new, unfamiliar language. Though the friend appears to know the meaning of the words (“you cursed”), this is more a comment on how the brother mispronounced the words tonally and rhythmically. The glossolalia of spirit talk is meant to teach the brother what Kamau Brathwaite calls “the body work of a language” which draws attention to its “very rhythm and the syllables” for their effects (Brathwaite 1993, p. 264)

“Echo Tree” reflects Dumas’s investment in rhythm’s power to elicit participatory responses from a listener that resist the effects of dispossession and alienation. “What, to

his mind, makes the dispossession of Black people so acute”, poet and friend Jay Wright says of Dumas, “is that ‘the spirits are displeased,’ cowardly men have severed the vital connection with the very rhythm and processes that Dumas felt were their particular and unique possession” (Wright 1970, p. xviii). To perform “spirit talk” is to participate in this “very rhythm and processes” that enables re-connections to people and places. Though spirit talk is tied to the American South, the brother later realizes how they sound like the “tongues” he hears in churches in New York City.⁵

The story then shifts attention from the call the youths make to the challenge of listening to its echoes. It is in this scene of call-and-response with the dead via the creation of echoes that “Echo Tree” theorizes voice as an inter-subjective medium that does not fully belong either to the human body or to the environment. At this point in the friend’s lesson, he shouts Leo’s name into the valley while instructing the brother on how to listen for Leo’s voice within the echoes:

“Shhhhhhhh. Now I have to make the call. Watch the sun yonder.”

(He stands behind the other boy and dances a strange dance. He stops, but continues with his arms, and jerks his body toward the valley and the sky.)

“Laeaeaeaeaeaeae!”

The sound pierces the wind. It rides down into the valley, rolls up

LaeLaeLaeaeaeae! toward the sun. It resounds like notes of thunder made by children instead of gods. It comes back LaeLae-eee-ooo!

“What is...?”

“Shhhhhhhh. He’s still talkin.” (Dumas 2021b, p. 26)

The friend’s shout is represented as traveling and returning through the air and valley, reflecting how the ear of the speaker “is immersed in an acoustic universe that transmits to him its tones, its cadences and rhythms”, as Adriana Cavarero theorizes (Cavarero 2005, p. 148). The friend’s voice is described as a “sound” that “pierces the wind...rides down into the valley” and “rolls up LaeLaeLaeaeaeae”, all reflecting how his articulation relates and responds to the “contextual sonority” of the various shapes, forces, and contours of the land and air. In his article “The Second Sight of Henry Dumas”, Carter Mathes mentions what Minnie Rose Hayes, Dumas’s cousin, identifies as the probable natural site the story is referring to as Echo Valley, which is blocks away from Sweet Home, Arkansas, Dumas’s childhood home, where one “could make sounds, call out names and it actually would echo over and over again” (Mathes 2021). By highlighting the rhythm of the hill’s echoic acoustics, Dumas offers another frame for appreciating how spirit talk relates to the southern land as much as to the ethereal spirits of ancestors.

Because spirit talk limits what content can be discerned, the friend must teach the brother how to listen and be affected by the tones, cadences, and rhythms of the echoes as if they were responses from Leo and other spirits. To do this, the friend makes his voice acousmatic. The friend instructs the brother to face the direction of the setting sun, and then proceeds to move behind the brother and, thus, out of his visual field. The narrator paints a stunning image of the evening sky that the brother is meant to look at:

And the blue-red-blue, green-blue, white-blue—all ink the sky.

Shadows become fingers of wind in the night.

Shadows take on shapes. They come to breathe.

And the blue-blue prevails across the heavens, and the weight of the mood is as black as night. ... (Dumas 2021b, p. 26)

The friend dances a “strange dance” out of the brother’s sight, then jerks his body forward and shouts, “Laeaeaeaeaeaeae!” By removing himself from the brother’s sight, the friend produces an “acousmatic voice”, which psychoanalytic thinker Mladen Dolar describes as a voice whose origin is unidentifiable and whose source is not visually locatable

(Dolar 2006, p. 60).⁶ “The acousmatic voice is so powerful”, Dolar writes, “because it cannot be neutralized within the framework of the visible, and it makes the visible redoubled and enigmatic” (79). The brother’s perception of the friend’s voice as acousmatic is strengthened by the narrator’s de-personalized description of his cry as “a sound [that] pierces the wind” (Dumas 2021b, p. 26). This “sound” is phonetically inscribed as rhythmically disjointed (“LaeLaeLaeooooo!”) to evoke its reverberation through the valley. Dumas’s usage of the echoes’ capacity to be perceived as “alternating speech” improvises upon the poet Ovid’s usage of repetition as a response in his telling of the myth of Narcissus and Echo in Book 3 of the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid capitalizes on how hearing the repetition of one’s words by another can be perceived as a response to portray how Echo’s curse of only being able to repeat what another says still produces a sense of “alternating speech” for those who hear.⁷ A key instance of how Ovid replicates these echoic effects occurs when Narcissus, Echo’s paramour, rejects her embrace and utters, “I’d die before you can possess my body!” and Echo—limited to repeating the vocal sounds she hears—responds, “You can possess my body!” (Ovid 2022, p. 81).⁸ The spoken repetition takes on a different meaning for the hearer as it returns. The story, likewise, capitalizes on echoes’ capacity to serve as an “agent of relation with otherness by means of othering sameness”, as Amit Pinchevski phrases it (Pinchevski 2022, p. 10).

The refracted echo differs so much from the friend’s initial cry that when the brother becomes confused and asks, “What is...?”, the friend responds, “Shhhhhhhhh. He’s still talkin.” Only after the echo becomes distinct is the friend able to convincingly suggest that Leo is “still talking” to them. The friend creates a theatrical effect for the pedagogical purpose of improving the brother’s capacity to hear the aural texture of the cry and to listen attentively for an alternate voice therein, while the visible is neutralized. Since an acousmatic voice cannot be visibly located and identified, the experience of hearing it can produce the uncanny perception of engaging a spirit without a body. This splitting effect also creates the perception of a disembodied speaking subject, making the production of an acousmatic voice an effective technique for evoking the dead speaking to the living (Dolar 2006, p. 65).

The narrator focuses attention on the friend’s lungs and throat as he begins to shout into the valley again, “There is silence. . .the silence of an empty lung about to breathe in. Again the sounds vibrate and answer from the boy’s throat. Again they travel and return as though wet, as though spoken. . .” The narrator further de-personalizes and mystifies vocal enunciation by describing the friend’s cry as sounds vibrating in his throat. The “call” to Leo is described as sounds that “vibrate and answer from the boy’s throat.” The call is already a response—an “answer” from his throat. The narrator refuses to name the sound that emits from the friend’s throat as vocal or even spoken. Voice, then, becomes distinguished from the physical sound that emits from the mouth of a living embodied speaking subject. The narrator’s description also does not provide the exact moment when those sounded vibrations produce or transform into voice. Yet, the sound of the echoes as they return from the valley are described “as though wet, as though spoken.” Voice shifts from being a direct product of a speaking mouth to become a sonic effect of a listening ear.

The friend now exhorts the brother to become psychologically attentive and imaginatively receptive enough to discern Leo’s voice speaking through the echoes. The brother, however, still struggles to perceive it. Though he says he wants to leave, once he hears the “Echoes come. Again and again and again”, he is led to ask, “Is it talking to me too?” The friend responds, “You’re the tree. Be still and listen” (Dumas 2021b, p. 27). The friend teaches the brother to move from hearing as a “physiological phenomenon” to listening as a “psychological act”—to borrow Roland Barthes’s formulation (Barthes 1991, p. 245). For the brother to become the “echo tree”, the threshold where the dead speak to the living, he must engage in an act of listening that does not presuppose fixed and separate roles, where the dead is an external speaker and the living is a passive listener. The friend teaches the brother that listening to the voice of the dead requires one to first enunciate and then actively and psychologically listen for an alternate voice from *within* the sound of one’s

invocation and its echoes. What listening to the voice of the dead does not entail is a communicative response from a separate, autonomous entity *to* that initial invocation. “Echo Tree” portrays call-and-response with the dead to primarily involve an act of listening that both produces an apostrophic cry and attends to a potential alternate voice from within the echoic return *of* that cry.

The uncanny effect of the friend’s acousmatic voice strikes at the core of the brother’s skepticism that the echoes he may hear as another’s voice may just be in his own mind. Since all voices are heard within one’s head, as Dolar suggests, there is no clear, definitive way to determine if the acousmatic voice one hears is from an external or internal source (Dolar 2006, p. 79). The brother remains unconvinced afterward that the echoes he hears are Leo’s voice addressing him:

“Do you think you really talked to somebody?”

“Hush. We gotta be quiet from now till we gets home.”

“Huh? Did you?”

Silence. (Dumas 2021b, pp. 26–27)

The brother’s doubts and questions center on whether the echoes he hears are Leo’s voice (or anybody’s for that matter). Each time an echo appears, reverberating the sound of their conversation or the sound of the natural environment, the brother becomes curious enough to ask what it is that he hears. This allows the friend to continue to suggest that the echoes he hears in the valley are Leo and the spirits, but the brother remains unconvinced.

III

“Echo Tree” is a significant story in Black literature, particularly as it became absorbed in the Black Arts Movement, for how it reflects upon doubt within Black religious and ritualistic performances. While the story portrays the friend’s message about spirit talk to be the necessary lesson to learn, Dumas nonetheless makes space and place for the brother’s articulations of skepticism regarding the efficacy of diasporic practices to speak to one’s loss. The brother’s disbelief is discernible in his confusion and embarrassment over this act of invocation with strange words to the dead:

“Leo never talked that stuff.”

“And he’s dead now anyway, laughing at us.”

“He *did* talk. He ain’t all dead either. You get in trouble talkin like that.” (Dumas 2021b, p. 24)

Through the brother’s skepticism, the story pressures the plausibility of communing with the dead while also warning about the danger of disbelief. “If you don’t believe in the echo tree and believe in what it hears from the spirits and tells you in your ear, then you’re in trouble”, the friend cautions (24). “Trouble” means that the brother will turn into a “bino” (not to be confused with albino), which is when “you don’t eat, you don’t sleep, you can’t feel nothing, you can’t talk or nothing. You be like a dead dog with a belly full’ o maggots, and you thinks you livin” (25). The cost of the brother’s disbelief is that he becomes so affectively numb that he forfeits the capacity to commune with others and to connect with the cultural practices that sustain bonds between people. This inability to feel, eat, and sleep reflects a kind of depression that is tied to what Anne Cheng calls racial melancholia’s refusal to want the “lost other to return (or demand its right of way)” (Cheng 2001, p. 16).

Despite how intense the friend’s warning sounds (even as a youthful jest), these deleterious effects on bodily function resonate with accounts of those who experienced stress, hypertension, and other physical ailments in the aftermath of a loved one’s death, specifically when that death was due to sudden violence. The concluding pages of #SAYH-ERNAME detail the physical ailments suffered by people who endured the killings of their loved ones. Jennifer Johnson describes how her mother, Cassie, died young from heart complications despite having a “clean bill of health” before the killing of her daughter,

Tanisha Anderson. “It starts to affect different things as far as in your body”, Jennifer says, “Stress, blood pressure. . . all the other things that could go on with you. Because you don’t know how to release what’s going on in you, and you holding this” (Crenshaw and The African American Policy Forum 2023, pp. 282–83). The friend’s warning about being tainted and becoming a bino could speak to the dangers of not releasing “what’s going on” in the brother. Spirit talk would become a way to release, however momentarily, the injurious effects of the stress and pressure one carries.

The friend rebuffs the brother for still laughing on the “inside”, which suggests that the friend knows that the brother still finds spirit talk to be ridiculous and embarrassing. When the friend exposes the brother’s muted mockery, the brother defensively reasserts his blood ties to Leo. “He was my brother”, the brother says at one point in the story. “Makes no difference”, the friend responds, “He was my friend more’n your brother” (Dumas 2021b, p. 23). The friend also negates the brother’s claim to intimacy by pointing out, “You never stayed down here with us. You always lived up there” (28). With this statement, the friend unveils the pain: abandonment. By leaving and staying in New York City, the brother appeared to no longer think about Leo, even while he was alive. The brother responds with a joke, “I don’t care about it anyway. . . *Swisher Baba!*” (28), explicitly mocking the entire ritual as a way of dodging the friend’s accusation. The brother uses humor to hide his potential hurt and avoid possible feelings of guilt, regret, and loss.

The brother’s doubt, then, becomes less about cognitive disbelief in the possibility of hearing from the dead and more about the absence of a *desire* to hear from the dead. Despite its semantic meaning, the title “brother” does not entail relational intimacy if the desire for communion is absent; the status “dead”, likewise, does not foreclose connection if the desire for communion is present. What I see as a lack of desire, reflected in the brother’s discomfort in doing spirit talk and his doubt in believing that Leo can respond to their calls, is his apprehension toward facing his grief. Why would the brother expose a desire to hear from Leo if he is aware of the pain that will intensify when there is no response to any calls made to him? By showing the difficulty the brother experiences when invoking the dead, “Echo Tree” highlights the emotional challenges of naming and addressing the dead when the desire for a response collides with the awareness of its impossibility.

Fittingly, in a climactic moment, the brother becomes startled after hearing the wind suddenly sweep over them. As an invisible animating force, the wind generates sounds that can be perceived as expressive from its contact with the environment. In a jolted state of precarity, he finally begins to express a desire to contact with Leo:

The wind, the wind. All of a sudden it sweeps across the top of the hill like an invisible hand swirling off into the darkening sky. Whispers echo from the valley throat, and all motion becomes sound, words, forces.

“I hear something.”

“*Shhhhhhhh*. Spirits done broke through. They comin.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

“I. . . don’t”

“*Swish-ka aba swish-ka*. Let the seals bust open!”

A moanful resonance, a bluish sound, a wail off the lips of a wet night, sweeps over them. . . Shhwsssssss! (Dumas 2021b, p. 29)

The valley exhales. The setting sun shimmers on the horizon as the wind swishes by. The narrator mentions both boys hearing the sound “*Shhwsssssss!*” as voices “remade, impregnated.” The brother also hears the wind’s “wail” of “*Shhwsssssss!*” to be sonically similar to the friend’s “callin words” of “*Swish-ka. . .*” The onomatopoeia of the wind’s sound resonates with the friend’s glossolalic expression that is unbound from meaning but attached to a desire to conjure. By showing the similarity of the sounds, the brother

becomes willing to hear the wind's whistle as another unbound, desiring voice. Finally perceiving sounds as voices and motions as words, the cynical brother becomes aphasic, "*Wide-mouthed, one boy cannot speak now. He stands near the spot of the tree. He seems ready to run*" (Dumas 2021b, p. 30). His mouth, both open and mute, visually echoes the opening image of the uprooted tree with a cavity, while his appearance of seeming "ready to run" projects an image of his limbs as bent in potential energy.

Previously, the wind blew shapes from the tree's interior; now, the wind's sound emotionally exhumes and resuscitates the mute and wide-mouthed brother. The brother now begins to lose his disbelief and begins to express his discovered grief for Leo:

"Where is my brother? Lee!"

"Spirit got you now."

"Leeeeee!"

"*Swish-ka aba*, take the tainter,

"*Swish-ka aba*, count to three,

"*Swish-ka aba*, take the hainter,

"*Saash-ka Lae*, don't take me.

"Stop! Don't say it! I'm not cursing anymore!"

Silence.

"Please. . ."

"One. . ."

"Please. . ."

"Two. . ."

"I want to hear it too, please."

"Then Seal'em out. Seal'em out!"

"I. . .er."

"Two' n half"

"Saaa. . ."

"Saa saa aba saa saa."

"Saa saa aba saa saa."

Two shapes on a hill. The sun has fallen down.

Two forms running the slope. And in the wind it is whispered

To the ear of the hearer. . .The sun will rise tomorrow. (Dumas 2021b, p. 30)

The brother's subjective breakthrough is painfully intense. His cry—"Where is my brother? Lee!"—is ambiguous as to whether he is beginning to cry out *for* Leo or *to* Leo. As his emotional experience intensifies, his cry focuses into a direct address to Leo: "Leeeeee!" Prodded by the friend's jests, the brother shifts from making an apostrophic address to expressing a desire to hear a response from Leo: "I want to hear it too, please." This emerging desire to hear from the dead enables him to say the words he was earlier unable to utter. "I. . .er" soon becomes "Saaa. . .", which then becomes "Saa saa aba saa saa." The "voice" evoked and heard belongs to the brother himself (not to Leo); he finally performs the "callin words", a vocalized sound of his discovered grief.

In this climactic scene, when "saa saa aba saa saa" is repeated twice, the reader is unable to definitively discern whether the friend or the brother speaks. Is this another instance where the friend speaks first and the brother echoes? Or does the brother speak first, and the friend repeats the phrase? The uncertainty about the speaking subject presents

the two living boys as aligned, linguistically indiscernible from one another. While the brother's glossolalic call may be to the deceased Leo, it is heard and repeated by the friend, allowing this mutual expression of desire and grief to momentarily unite them. This verbatim repetition at the site of the uprooted tree establishes a renewed bond between the two youths. By echoing the cry of spirit talk, they sound grief; by echoing their chants of desire for Leo, they became the echo tree.

This bond, earned through the brother's difficult confrontation with his hidden grief, enables him to discover a desire for the dead. Through openness to a grief that produces a desire for an impossible response, the brother performs a shouted apostrophe in a language whose meaning he still does not know. This invocation of the dead enables embodied, imaginative, and sensory experiences that reopens a bond with the living friend. There is no mention of inter-personal understanding, nor evidence of substituted or shared feeling per se. What resounds are the sounds of their voiced cries in a language whose phrasal meanings remain unknown. The fate of the two boys is left open: "*Two shapes on a hill. The Sun has fallen down. Two forms running the slope.*" The narrator allows us to leave the two by letting us imagine another lasting sound, "*And in the wind it is whispered to the ear of the hearer. . . The sun will rise tomorrow*" (Dumas 2021b, p. 30).

"Echo Tree" shows how performed and overheard language can evoke a desire for connection. The story explores how apostrophe can emotionally open living individuals to discover hidden grief for the dead by producing a cry that knowingly desires an impossible response. In the story, this personal cry is not an escape from sociality but rather an affectively charged opportunity for relational connection. "Our bonds are forged from echoes, translation, and resonances, rhythms, and repetitions", Judith Butler writes, "as if the musicality of mourning makes its way past borders by virtue of its acoustic powers" (Butler 2022, p. 96). Dumas's story offers a perspective on death that focuses on the unexpected and difficult aspects of private grief's manifestation in language. "Echo Tree" theorizes grief to be an experience whose affective force causes one to desire communion and communication with the deceased despite the painful realization of that impossibility. The call-and-response this story coaxes out is not based on communication. Instead, these unique occasions for a call-and-response with the dead produces a willingness to listen actively, sounding the gestures and utterances that make palpable the interior: experiences of loss, grief, and desire that can never be fully communicated, yet still can be expressed and overheard, if only in echoes.

IV

"Everyone dies", Farah Jasmine Griffin writes, "But Black death in America is too often premature, violent, spectacular. The particular nature of Black death haunts Black writing, as it haunts the nation" (Griffin 2021, p. 131). In 1968, a New York City transit officer fatally shot the thirty-three-year-old Dumas at the 125th Street station in Harlem. His writings were posthumously published through the efforts of his literary executor, the poet Eugene Redmond; Toni Morrison, then an editor at Random House; and his widow, Loretta Dumas. In addition to ensuring that his writing would find a wider readership, Morrison also paid homage to Dumas in her own fiction and criticism.⁹ At the end of Morrison's second novel *Sula* (1973), a remarkable story that follows the decades-long friendship of Nel Wright and Sula Peace, there is a shout of grief that echoes the climax of "Echo Tree." Nel and Sula are friends throughout their youth into adulthood; Nel eventually marries and remains at "The Bottom", a town in Ohio, while Sula maintains her independence, travels to college, and engages in various affairs. Their friendship ends when Nel catches Sula sleeping with Nel's husband, Jude. Nel undergoes loss but is unable to howl in grief. We have to wait until the end of the novel to witness Nel finding her grief decades after Sula has passed away. Nel suddenly stops after leaving the "colored part" of a cemetery and hears tree leaves swish as the wind passes by. "'Sula?' she whispered, gazing at the tops of trees, 'Sula?' Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze" (Morrison 1973, p. 174). And then, after hearing the wind passing over the leaves and seeing what it

carries in its movement, she feels how the “loss pressed down on her chest and came up in her throat. ‘We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something. ‘O Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl!’” (174). I cannot help but see this as a nod to Dumas’s “Echo Tree.” Morrison, it seems, turned to Dumas’s portrayal of overhearing an apostrophe to evoke discovered grief and to unveil lingering intimacy.

In 1974, a year after *Sula* was published, Morrison organized a book party for the posthumous publication of Dumas’s books of poems, *Play Ebony*, *Play Ivory*, and short stories, *Ark of Bones*. Held at the Inter-Cultural Center in New York City, this event was one of many attempts by Morrison and the poet Eugene Redmond to introduce Dumas’s writing to a larger community of Black artists and readers. In her invitation entitled “On Behalf of Henry Dumas”, Morrison describes Dumas’s writing as “some of the most beautiful, moving, and profound poetry and fiction that I have ever in my life read” (Morrison 2008a, p. 83). For this book party, Morrison deliberately sought to create a live and communal scene of call-and-response by explicitly asking invitees to become participants by reading Dumas’s writing aloud. “I don’t just mean an invitation but actually your participation”, Morrison clarified (84). She told the invitees that she would send them copies of Dumas’s work so that they could choose passages they “feel moved by” to then be read aloud to those gathered (84). As in a worship service and musical performance, the audience of this book party was able to respond with their voices, breaths, and gestures to Dumas’s words as they were declaimed by powerful orators, such as writer and activist Angela Davis, actor Melvin Van Peebles, and poet Jayne Cortez.

The call-and-response between the speakers and audience became the sound of a co-creation that indicates what Morrison calls “an affective and participatory relationship” transpiring between the (dead) author and those listening to his words (Morrison 2008b, p. 59). For Morrison, a work of Black literature must use “punctuation” and the “letters of the alphabet” to “provide spaces and places” for a reader to participate in and to “work with the author in the construction of the book.” This particular call for readerly participation is not unique to Black literature. In *Democratic Vistas* (1871), Walt Whitman describes the process of reading to be “an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle”, where the reader is “to do something for himself, must. . .himself or herself construct indeed the poem. . .the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start of the framework” (Whitman 2004a, p. 460).¹⁰ Black literature, however, becomes distinctive in terms of how this readerly act of co-construction is meant to approximate the call-and-response dynamics of the Black church or Black musical performance (Morrison 2008b, p. 59).

But how would a writer replicate these live communal dynamics of call-and-response for a reader engaging with the words on a page in solitude? As poet and scholar Joshua Bennett discloses in *Spoken Word: A Cultural History*, “Call-and-response does not live a full life on the printed page” (Bennett 2023, p. 101). What if Black literature’s power to elicit a reader’s participation is precisely because it does not require call-and-response to live a full life on the printed page? Or to ask this another way, does Black literature’s power to make room for a reader’s participation reside in a writer’s awareness that the response to the call of their writing must occur without their presence?

In its presentation of the psychological and imaginative difficulties of performing call-and-response with the dead, “Echo Tree” analogizes how a reader engages in an act of call-and-response with a muted, acousmatic voice from the printed page. Consider again the sound of the friend’s invocation of Leo and its echoes. When the friend shouts Leo’s name, the sound is phonetically inscribed as “Laeeeeeeeooooo!”, which is a different phonetic spelling than another shout at the end of story, “Leeeee!” (Dumas 2021b, pp. 26, 30) This minute alphabetical difference in spelling (the presence or absence of an “a”) suggests a difference in how one pronounces the vocalized name. Moreover, the first syllable in the phonetic spelling of the echoes is like the friend’s initial shout, “LaeLaeLaeeeooo!” and “LaeLae-eee-ooo!”, which affirms that the inclusion of the letter “a” in the first syllable of “Laeeeeeeeooooo!” is not a typographical error. While there may be no discernable

intention for this slight alphabetical difference, it becomes a visual cue for the reader to deliberately subvocalize the friend's shout so as become more aurally aware of its sound.

According to Garrett Stewart in his book *The Deed of Reading* (2015), the subvocal enunciation of the inscribed words can help us simultaneously attend to what the words visibly say on the page while also listening to any potentially audible utterances that diverge from what is written according to the eyes (Stewart 2015, p. 61). Reading as listening (whether by reading aloud or sub-vocally enunciating) enables an aural awareness to the alternate sounds, latent sense, and potential meaning that accrue in the movement from word to word, even letter to letter as we read (61). If one pronounces "Laeeeeeeeeooooo!" as |lā-ō|, then the sound of the Spanish word for "I read" becomes audible, making palpable the perception of an alternate utterance within the same phonetic cry.¹¹ However, much of this may be accidental or contingent; what becomes discernable within this subvocal reading event is the sensed potential (and felt contingency) of words to not only mean other than what they say but also for words to not entirely or exclusively "say what they say" (Stewart 2015, pp. 97–98). In this instance, the friend enunciates Leo's name in a particular way, and "I read" is simultaneously uttered and eventually perceived within the scene of the call-and-response with the dead. Leo is not just the name of a spiritual ancestor that the two attempt to communicate with but also a practice of reading as listening that "unmutes print", as Nicole Brittingham Furlonge phrases it (Furlonge 2018, p. 10).

Dumas's story not only provides Morrison with a way of dramatizing apostrophe to evoke an intimacy effect, as in the conclusion of *Sula*, but it also shows how a text's muteness (and the author's absence) is not a limit to call-and-response for the reader but a launching point. For Morrison, Black literature should generate sounds of response from a reader engaging with the words, choices, and labor of another that is held in a book's pages. Morrison's portrayal of call-and-response with a book which "closes, after all" relates to the noises and sounds, breaths, and facial expressions a reader makes that they are unaware of when holding the book and looking at its pages. In the conclusion of her novel, *Jazz* (1992), the book itself addresses the reader after relaying a haunting tale of love, grief, trauma, and migration. The book calls to the reader and confesses to loving the feel of the reader's fingers "lifting, turning" while "watching" the reader's face for a "long time now" and longing for the reader's eyes to return when the reading is paused (Morrison 1992, p. 229). Morrison's understanding of the sound and noises of call-and-response that occurs between the reader and the muted book is made simple: "Talking to you and hearing you answer—that's the kick." Here is an imaginative framing of a solitary scene of reading, where a reader's expressed responses are not just chronicled but cherished. The sound of call-and-response is not just the riveting noise of public performance and communal response; it is also the quiet evocations of being moved by the address of another. The "kick" of hearing a reader's response recasts the scene of solitary reading as an event of intimacy with the traces of the absent that is driven by love, loss, and longing.

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Notes

- ¹ Gershun Avilez writes in his chapter, "Black Arts Movement", "Although the 1964 iteration and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 promised social change for African Americans in particular, this legislation was met with continued injustice and violence against black bodies. Activists found that local governments failed to enforce the Voting Rights Act and that neither Civil Rights Act nor the Voting Rights Act did much to impede the social abuse of black American citizens, as the 1966 shooting of James Meredith in Mississippi illustrated. In addition, the 1965 social uprising that occurred in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, stands as a testament not only to police mistreatment but also to the inevitable outcome of the stifling practices of segregation in U.S. society and the ongoing neglect and constriction of inner-city communities in the face of so-called legislative advances" (Avilez 2015, p. 50).

- ² The story uses what Toni Morrison views as a major characteristic of Black literature in her essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”: the narrative presence of an ancestor (or representation of an ancestor) who serves as a “timeless, benevolent” elder that shapes the characters’ experience (Morrison 2008b, p. 62). In *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature*, Karla Holloway argues that the ancestor figure “serves as a recursive touchstone” and that “the ancestral presence constitutes a posture of remembrance” (Holloway 1992, p. 115).
- ³ In her op-ed, “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning” (2015), Claudia Rankine considers how public mourning’s insistence on keeping the slain at the forefront of public consciousness can uplift a deceased person more as evidence of racial violence than as a person to be grieved. How must it feel to a family member for the deceased to be more important as “evidence”, Rankine muses, “than as an individual to be buried and laid to rest?” (Rankine 2015).
- ⁴ In “Pascoli and the Thought of the Voice”, Giorgio Agamben considers glossolalia and onomatopoeia as an inscription of “dead words” that produce an experience of voice that resounds between mere sound and semantic signification (Agamben 1996, p. 63).
- ⁵ “Tongues”, according to Ashon Crawley, “are sonic acts that stop short of being speech. . .” This refusal to become speech manifests through “enunciating and elaborating vocables, aspirating sounded out breath without the need for grammatical structure or rule” (Crawley 2017, p. 222).
- ⁶ Dolar traces the origins of the “acousmatic voice” to an ancient philosophical scene of pedagogy. The “Acousmatics” were the students of Pythagoras who taught them while physically veiled behind a curtain so as to quicken the students’ attention to the sound and sense of his instruction (61). Like Pythagoras, the friend’s pedagogical strategy to increase the brother’s attentiveness involves making his voice acousmatic so that the brother’s sight becomes divested of its power to locate, and therefore contain, the friend’s voice.
- ⁷ As Adriana Cavarero observes, “If these sounds, separated from the context of the sentence, come together to form words that still signify something (or something else), then this is a matter for the listener, not the nymph” (Cavarero 2005, p. 167).
- ⁸ Echoing as alternate responses also appear in the genre of “Echo poems” which can render call-and-response on the page as in George Herbert’s poem, “Heaven” (1633), where the poem evokes friendship through reciprocal responses:

O who will show me those delights on high?

Echo. I.

Thou Echo, thou art mortall, all men know.

Echo. No. (Herbert 2015, p. 180)

- ⁹ During the Black Lives Matter movement, several articles appeared to resuscitate the relevancy of his work, primarily by referring to the persistent precarity that menaces Black lives. In an article entitled “Dry Bones Breathe” (2015), scholar Lavelle Porter comments that almost every article about Henry Dumas starts with 23 May 1968, the day a police officer in a Harlem train station fatally shot him. In the spring of 2015, *Ebony* published an article written by Victoria Bond entitled “Why this Author Murdered By the Police in 1968 Matters Right Now.” The article opens with “On 23 May 1968. . .” and states, “Henry Dumas is a writer for these times. For how he died, and the work he made while he lived.” Beenish Ahmed wrote an article for *NPR* in October 2015 entitled “Henry Dumas Wrote About Black People Killed By Cops. Then He was Killed By a Cop.” In the article, he remarks upon Redmond’s hope that the Black Lives Matter movement will galvanize interest in Dumas’ writing. Also, writer Drew Johnson wrote an article in *Literary Hub* entitled “Reading Henry Dumas After Trayvon Martin: On the Genius of a Black Writer Killed by Police in 1968” (2015).
- ¹⁰ I learned of Whitman’s discussion of the reader in “Democratic Vistas” in Santiago Juan Navarro’s essay, “Beyond the Myth of Narcissus: The Role of the Reader in Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’” (1990).
- ¹¹ According to Jeffrey Leak’s biography, *Visible Man: The Life of Henry Dumas*, by the time “Echo Tree” was first published in *The Anthologist* (1961), Rutgers University’s literary magazine, he was able to speak Spanish due to his time spent in Mexico and Texas as a member of the Air Force (Leak 2014, p. 36). Moreover, while writing for *The Anthologist* as a student at Rutgers, Dumas became close friends with Jake Bair, a graduate student in Spanish whose translations from Spanish were published in the literary magazine (48).

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