Who Breathes Life into Mountain Music and Dance: Recording, Landscape and Brahmanism in the Western Himalayas

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Abstract

While the sites of rituals in the Western Himalayas, such as weddings and festivals, still present what are considered more 'folkic' ways of *musicking*, there is also an erasure of the same, often found in the same places. One of the things shared by the categories of belief, ritual, and music is the concept of landscape, expressed in different orders and capacities. Owing to the large ambit of Western Himalayan folk performance, which exceeds its formalization, it would be reductive to develop a definitively exhaustive syntagmatic structure that 'aptly' grasps its workings. One could, however, identify a paradigmatic structure to understand alterities and oppositions through which music attains function and becomes an interface through which topographies become landscapes. The biggest paradigm that watches over the consensus of the locale, which generates and presents traditions as living traditions, is that of the state, particularly in Himachal Pradesh. The formation of Himachal as a particular entity of India has been peculiar. In that, it has been an event, not to reorder the pre-existing thrust of Brahmanism, but to buy into and regenerate it. The idea of secularism associated with modernity has brought the Brahmanical to the modern project that is Himachal Pradesh. The effects of Brahmanism, in connection with the state, can be seen in the putting-to-use of, and regulations on the *cultural labour* of the folk musician and the landscapes generated by extension. This also urges one to think beyond a singular category of 'Pahari music', which almost becomes an empty signifier, incapable of containing the multitude of working traditions, ranging from different strands of recorded music, to both ritualistic and unexceptional instances of music performance, brought to life by the same paradigm that distinguishes them. The themes of landscape, ritual, memory and tradition must then be seen as being presented by and to the workings of this paradigm in the pre-recorded, the recorded and the un-recordable.

Keywords: Brahmanism, Folk Performance, Landscape, Western Himalayas, Recorded Music.

Introduction: Landscape and *Cultural Labour*

There is something uncanny, something beyond mere coincidence, in how the touristic gaze that is embedded in the landscape of Kullu and Mandi is also reproduced in many ways in the folk aesthetics of this landscape, most conspicuously in apparel and performance. The history of the touristic in Himachal Pradesh can be located in the binary creation, undertaken by the modern state, to establish Pahari people as the radical other of mainland India, also invoking other binaries, stemming from the same political motivation, including the likes of nature-culture, urban-rural, developed-backward and so on, only to accelerate towards the cultural, the urban, the 'developed' and so on[1] (Elmore 53-57). There is no doubt that this reads like a perfect representation of the dialectical process of the appropriation of the particular by the state. However, these binaries often run the risk of being taken to be true on an *a priori* basis – it almost becomes a thing of some kind of axiomatic natural law that the. This is where G. Aloysius's intervention in 'Conceptualising the Region' becomes important, wherein he situates these cultural alterities, not only as modes of appropriation, but also as creations of stately bodies (3-5). Most importantly, he looks at these processes, not only in ideal/metaphysical/meta-national categories, such as modernity, but in their dialectical opposite – the real/physical/sub-national region.

Throughout the essay, Aloysius explains the different significations that the idea of the 'regional' can take, and

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under what paradigms. The region is a site of mapping, familiarity, othering, coercion and appropriation, among other political actions and effects; all at the same time. It is fundamentally, altogether "concrete and conceptual". It carries a certain legitimacy of immediacy that the state lacks, thus becoming the site of appropriation (10-13). The very idea of the region being both "concrete and conceptual" is that aspect of the region that becomes the landscape. One is immediately taken to William Sax's idea of the landscape in his essay, 'Landscape, Memory and Ritual'. He looks at the ideas of rituals, landscapes and places, not as representative/symptomatic of other political developments, but as constitutive of them. He disavows the idea of space as something that is radically antithetical to that of place. Instead, he looks at it as a dialectical opposition, a way of incorporating new meanings of land, emerging from spaces as sites of emergence and concretising them in an idea of placeness (51-54). This is where the idea of the landscape becomes pertinent, insofar as it becomes the site where meanings of land are created and concretised. The "concrete and the conceptual" can take place in many ways – the concreteness of stately total history and the play of the conceptual in writing new meanings on land; the concreteness of the exteriority of land and its conceptual appropriation by universalising forces, and so on. This is to say that the idea of landscape also enables a view of the land as a site of transformations, because of which it must not be delinked from liminal cultural practices, such as ritual. Brahma Prakash, in *Cultural Labour*, explains:

> While performances are inseparable from a local understanding of the land and spatial practices, they transform space into place, land into landscape, and nature into culture. Landscape marks the movements of ancestors and animistic figures. The entity that appeared as a hole or a cave obtains a face and character in its animated form during the performance. Space, which could be identified as a wild forest through a colonial or mainstream gaze, acquires a new meaning through this subaltern performance. The space and place, the hole or the cave, become potent with values and symbols. Cultural labour, in this case, is the production of place and mobilisation of symbols in the landscape. (Prakash 96-97)

This, along with Sax's explication of ritual as a practice that generates landscapes, should lead one towards a conception of the landscape as being rooted in not just culture, but *cultural labour*. This intervention is critical, since it invokes the nature of hierarchies, caste and oppression, which go hand-in-hand with the idea of labour. This becomes even more exigent when one thinks of how the inroads of Brahmanism into the Western Himalayas have been one of establishing a hegemony over the folk practices and beliefs of the locale (Singh 40, 50-52; Alam xxi; Handa 90-92). In the realm of performance, instead of foregrounding the abstractions/syntagms of the performance, one is then compelled to look at the more immediate movements and motivations taking place through the formal systems of music, dance and ritual; how the text invades the oral; how the Brahmanical invades the pre-Vedic, and so on, do not just remain questions of the abstracted relics of culture, like *naati*, *laaman*, etc. (which are, all said and done, artefacts of the state), but of their radical other – the real, the bodily and the regional.

Performance, Region and Orality

The distinctions that could underlie more commonplace understandings, of the performative traditions of the Mandi-Kullu valley, between dance, ritual, music and dramatisation, need to be reworked, much like the very mechanism of how paradigms of modernity are installed to appropriate a construction of what it would wrongly deem pre-modern, something 'authentically' Pahari, as fashioned, for example, by the former Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, YS Parmar[2]. The fact that the question of authenticity is thrust upon these traditions, immuring them in a uniformity, a capacity for anticipation, which can also be called *form*, is bound to be incumbent on these forms as distinct entities (Schechner, pg. 37). This feature of (mainland) modernity is represented in the recorded music to be analysed later in this essay. However, one can also look at the idea of the form as a familiar language to tie together the splintered categories of dance, music, ritual and finally, landscape. For it is the anticipation of one that becomes the anticipation of the other, so much so that the distinctions remain untenable; a song is not simply a song, but also something that anticipates other forms of performance like dance, ritual, and so on. The *musicking* of the traditional *naati* cannot be separated from the movement of the body; the throat dances, just the way the feet sing, inscribing every step, every word and every blaring note, uttered with the community into the landscape; the site of memory, both in terms of inscription and access. In his essay, 'But We Will Not Give Up the Categories! (De)valuing the Categories in South Asian Performance Tradition, Brahma Prakash talks about how epistemic violence is also perpetrated against indigenous practices by confining them into categories. This violence, according to him, is colonial. More remarkably, this also becomes one of the symptoms of 'internal colonialism'. The idea of 'internal colonialism' as a collusive politics, which is consent-generative, becomes one of the more exigent works of Brahmanism, and is all the more important here (Aloysius, 2010, pp. 44-48). The consent-generative practices of modernity

to inscribe dominant ideologies in the body politic are something that one also sees in Elmore's understanding of contemporary Himachal Pradesh, in terms of how the pre-Vedic gets Brahmanised.

One can now work with a deeper understanding and an even deeper suspicion of the idea of distinctions within the performative. But, at the same time, one cannot discount the possibility of these distinctions, supplied by state paradigms, making themselves true in oral folk traditions. It is, at the end of the day, the *palace paradigm* that makes the oral present [3]. One cannot, then, look at the folk as an insular category that only responds to or speaks back to power, but as something that is also within the power of the state. The Brahmanical hegemony of the state (especially the modern state, Himachal Pradesh), is then bound to impose its categorical conceptualisation on the folk as a colonising mechanism. This is very evident in many spheres of the folk at various levels (as discussed earlier, nature/culture, urban/rural, etc.). This also gives one a good reason to recall other binaries that exist therewith, most importantly, the binary that frames the folk itself as its other – the binary of orality and text. There has been a problematization of this binary in a deconstructive fashion by Gyan Prakash in 'Bonded Histories', to the point that distinctions between these become "untenable" (2003, pg. 39). This is addressed by Brahma Prakash, who envisions a new way of thinking about this binary as something that holds in performative and historical terms (2019, pg. 75). In that, it informs the effective forces that have brought and continue to bring it into existence, in the realm of the folk. Despite the contaminations of text by orality and vice versa, textuality, a thing of the *palace paradigm*, continues to exist in a kind of dominance over the oral (Handoo, 2004, pp. 58-59).

Writing and Recording as Power

The two positions delineated so far – that of the state being incapable of assimilating the local and that of the local being subsumed by the state- might seem irreconcilable, but they are not. To go back to Aloysius's definition of the region as a 'sub-national' entity, one has to reaffirm the position of the particular as something that can never be entirely appropriated by the state; the nation is never complete. At the same time, one has a sense of the particular only through the Universal, the national. Thus, one needs to look at the act of categorisation of performance forms as being responsive/reactive to the hegemony, in some ways, from within; but also look at the 'within' as an insufficiently enclosed category. The point of looking at the binary of writing and orality is not of further binarification of absolute difference or dialectic syntheticity, but of an eternal deferral of the textual by the oral. No matter how strongly or even violently the Brahmanical makes incursions into the local, the latter will defer incorporation by the former, even though it is still inscribed in the body politic, which is most immediately local. The idea of performativity has to be located in this deferral[4]. It is also liminal. It cannot be circumscribed by categorisation. Yet, it also becomes the site of (re)creation and reproduction of aesthetic and performance categories. Something or the other in the realm of performance will always escape the categorical determination it seems to necessitate. For instance, when talking about folk forms, such as *naati* and *laaman*, one immediately thinks of certain conventions – groove, lyrics, movement, structure, etc. – through which, the form gets identified and imagined at the same time. Yet, there is always something indeterminable, something truly particular in every performance, as it takes on a new context, threatening the familiarity one associates with its form. This is seen quite conspicuously in the (non) performance of the musician at the wedding, analysed later in this essay.

The idea of writing should also be seen in the recording of music, since it makes itself present at multiple places and multiple times, as in a text (Cobussen, pg. 4). This connection is important, since it gives one an idea of how the categorisation of forms as an imposition, a splintering, yet stratification of the fluidity and more profound multiplicity of performance and its history, takes place. Alan Lomax, in his book *The Land Where the Blues Began*, talks about the emergence of the blues artist as a product of recorded technology (2002, pg. 357). By extension, one can safely look at the distinction between the artist and the non-artist in the Pahari context as a work of recording. One cannot deny that the heroic vocal artist of contemporary Pahari music has enjoyed recognition beyond the confines of the immediate locale, in a more pan-Himachal setting, as a result of recording. This must be seen in contrast with the *bajantri* (instrumentalist), whose occupation, in contrast with the vocalist (singing being a common activity, not relegated to specific castes in most of Himachal Pradesh), is traditionally supposed to be a caste-based occupation. The *bajantri* becomes a *cultural labourer*, while the vocalist stands a chance to enjoy artistry. In most of my interactions, as a part of (auto)ethnographic projects over 2021 and 2022, with *bajantris*, there was an overwhelming consensus on how recorded music restricted their avenues of employment and performance in various contexts and on several occasions. What remained intact, however, was their role in specific ritual settings, often observed for the sake of a certain posterity. On the other hand, the idea of a

secularised enjoyment, otherwise than prosperity, came to be associated with recorded music.

This has opened up entirely new possibilities of *musicking* altogether. However, the very fact that the idea of *musicking* comes to mind before anything speaks of how the folk performance has been splintered into the categories of music, dance, ritual and so on. The context-specific music, which was no different from dance and ritual, has made itself more infinite in its contextual application, but in constant distinction and deviation, from buses to weddings to the hostel rooms of homesick Pahari youngsters studying in Delhi. Thus, Pahari music is coming to find itself structured around a culture and practice of recording; more specifically, a recording of paradigms, forms and so on. Effectively, this becomes a work of *dissemination* – the indeterminability of the written/recorded form is exactly that which ossifies it[5]. This is the work of writing about reality – it is effective and regulative. Thus, the work of writing, when speaking of the kinds of folk/popular cultures discussed in this essay, becomes that of the *palace paradigm*.

The Appropriation of Land and Aesthetics

When the forum, *Tharah Kardu* made some recordings of Kulluvi folk songs, from the early 80s, available to the public domain, it was almost shocking. Two of the *laamans*, *Laadi Shauni* and *Shobhli Beeriye*, had the same melody as that of *Mhaare Parashara*, which is a lot more commonplace than the others. The apostrophe/dialogue 12/8 song form, called *laaman*, is often supposed to be a love song, connected to the landscape (CCRT). While the common notion of the *laaman* being a love song is erroneous, since one can think of many songs which are not (for instance, *Budhua Mama*), the idea of the landscape has to be seen as operative, not only in performance, but also in the lyrics. One cannot find an old *laaman* that is not bodily or landscape-related. The two songs in question – *Laadi Shauni* and *Shobhli Beeriye* have very bodily (and in the case of the former, bawdy) concerns. They also do the work of landscaping by locating romance, sex, intimacy and even shame in familiar places, such as Naggar. The song, *Laadi Shauni* is addressed to a woman named *Shauni* and how she toils to reach the village of her *Khosam* (her extra-marital affair). This certainly has a bodily and bawdy pull, be it in the form of ridicule or humour. The verses describe her journey to the village through Naggar, demarcating her trail between the town and the king's fort:

Bune Dhire bolo Naggar Naggar
Ujhe Raaje ra thawa

(Below you, the town of Naggar
Above lies the fort of the king)

It also describes things of the weather – strong winds and cold water of the ravines; *Shauni's* journey is not an easy one:

Thandi Bagar na jotdu lagdi
Thanda jayru paani

(Cold is the wind that jolted you
Cold is the water of the river)

The connections of the body with the land are at the heart of this song, much like its performance. Similarly, in *Shobhli Beeriye*, the narrator invites a woman named *Beeri* to a field belonging to someone named Kanshi Ram. The song takes a dialogue form between the narrator and *Beeri*. Just like the previous *laaman*, this one also brings about concerns of the body in terms of climate and locomotion, when the narrator advises her to be sufficiently covered to brave the cold:

Dhodu buni rakhna
Shobhliye, Shila naale ra shela

(Keep your *dhodu* knitted
O pretty one, for the *Shila* valley is cold)

The tension that takes place in this negotiation becomes flirtatious and subsequently, libidinal. There is also humour involved in how there is a hesitation to visit the in-laws' house since the mother-in-law is annoyed:

Shaure naiyo janida
Shobhliye, Shashu Jhikki ri buri

(I won't go to my in-laws'
O pretty one, for my Mother-in-law is pissed)

These songs avow a certain back-and-forth structure, either through dialogue or its anticipation in the apostrophe. This exchange can, and does, become libidinal, at least in these particular songs, if not as a paradigm governing the *laaman* as a form entirely.

To circle back to the song, *Mhaare Parashara*, one can notice how it takes the same melody arc as the other two. It is important to note that the melody has metonymically become associated with this song. On any given occasion, when the *peepni* or the *hesni* player plays this melody, the people, almost in a covert, unanimous agreement, sing this song instead of the other two. The other two have almost been made extinct, except for *Laadi Shauniye*, a version of which was recorded by Inder Jeet. His recording will also be discussed subsequently. The song has been proposed for *Parashar Rishi*, one of the more important deities of the Mandi district. It is important to note that the introduction of this deity has been fairly recent. The extent of his entrenchment in the deific cosmology in Mandi and Kullu in such a short period denotes the aggression with which Brahmanism has pervaded throughout the landscapes

of Kullu and Mandi. One of the more common ways of introducing Brahmanism to the Western Himalayas has been through the identification of pre-Vedic deities as *Rishi* or *Narayan* forms (Handa, pp. 10; 116-126).

The song is an effort to establish the temple of *Parashar Rishi* as a centre – the land of a deity, inducted into the Brahmanical fold. This also engages with the idea of landscape, but in a manner thoroughly informed by Brahmanism. In that, it obscures the vulgar, as though this melody itself is too sacred to contain references to the libidinal. The back-and-forth exchange that is otherwise also very characteristic of the traces of the non-Vedic is also erased in this song. The apostrophe does not present the deity, but abstracts and alienates him from the locale. The deity becomes 'transcendent', as opposed to 'pragmatic'. This is an important distinction in studying the binaries Brahmanism creates in establishing itself as the former, as a hierarchical superior to the latter (Mandelbaum, pg. 11; Singh, pg. 57). The body of the vernacular becomes vulgar, and Brahmanism becomes a *disgust-producing* machinery. More importantly, this truly becomes an act of hegemony in terms of how its consent-generative mechanism conceals its motives in plain sight. Most of the performers/participants, honouring the deity, by the *raths* (palanquins, representative of deities, carried by devotees on their shoulders) of other deities or by devotees, almost in a silent agreement, end up singing/dancing to *Mhaare Parashara*, when the *bajantris* start playing its melody on their instruments, instead of *Shobhli Beeriye* and *Laadi Shauni*. While this is understandable, given that the performances are dedicated to *Parashar Rishi*, one has seen this song being performed even when the occasion does not call for it. In some ways, the melody has come to represent this song exclusively, metonymically.

This is commensurate with the very nature of recorded music itself. The way a melody metonymically signifies one song, trimming out other songs with the same melody, is symptomatic of the politics of appropriation of *cultural labour*; a pre-recorded sample of the drums metonymically appropriates the function of all the musicians who are relegated to their profession by caste. A single folk singer becomes exceptional, heroic, a sex symbol; more importantly, a symbol, a sublation, a transcendence, as opposed to the pragmatic anonymity and the agency that comes from performing these songs as a community, dancing to these songs with the (originally, pragmatic) deities[6]. Even in the recording of *Laadi Shauni* by Inder Jeet, one of the most famous singers of Kullu, the lyrics have been violently sanitised. The obvious sexual innuendo has been erased, along with the landscape. There is a lost sense of *placeness*, through which a collective act of landscaping can take place (Bisht, *Naati & lilt of the land: How folk dance and music shape landscape*). The particular references to places like Naggar, for instance, have been supplanted by more common Universal idioms of intimacy:

> *Laadi Shauniye, assa dila re bhole*
> *Gala dhun Hrize ri*
>
> (O, lady Shauni, I'm too simple
> Tell me what you hold in your heart)

There is secularisation and concretisation of Brahmanism at the same time. There is an infinite in determinability of place, time and context, yet a stronger establishment of the commanding voice of the singer and through him, the state.

The Threshold of Performance

Both the ideas of the folk and performance are transformed in these processes – their infinitive multiplicity does not remain multiplicity as such, but becomes and comes from the discourse of the state. The surplus of labour cannot entirely be sublated – it has to remain residually excessive to be effective. When the *cultural labour* of Pahari musicians is enclosed within a coercive economy, such as that of Brahmanism, it also defers its enclosure. It can often emerge as a reminder of how the idea of performance is fundamentally excessive. In that, it can potentially, through the excess and the surplus, interrupt its appropriation. There is a part of it that will always, by nature, resist appropriation. It can never be determined by hegemony. At an elite wedding in February 2024, near Manali, I encountered a *bajantri* (folk musician) playing on top of a remix of *Falling in Love with You.* His purpose there is solely for the sake of a traditional proprietary welcome of the wedding guests, who do not make much of his performance, but are affected by disgust. The form of the song was alien to him, yet he played through the changes, improvising some of the most original lines one could think of, adapting to a new environment. Needless to say, he was simply ignored. Yet, he commanded a significant sonic force that could not be ignored. This was seen in a certain level of discomfort in the reactions of the people at the wedding. This was an interruption of the musician, who was paid to play for the proprietary function of ritual, at a place where no one was there to listen. This contradiction of place was what the musician asserted over, commanding the attention of the unsuspecting, reluctant listener. He created a space for performance from the imposition of place. This is not to fetishise the performance; it was, after all, a humiliating situation for the musician to be in. Rather, this is to look at the way his performance interrupted the false binary of tradition and modernity with something entirely different, new and adaptive. More importantly, he made

visible the violence that these categories and binaries carry (Bisht).

I must remark that the performance of the *bajantri* was hardly agentive, almost like a non-performance, a teeming place sans space[7]. The 'performance of the *bajantri*', then, becomes a category that flirts with an impossibility, a conflict without the resolve of appropriation. Furthermore, this is also not just an example of how the politics of form can become a sight of contestation and, more importantly, emergence, but also how the very idea of such folk performances as being plural and indeterminable can necessitate affect and affectual solidarity. It locates violent binaries that are abstract and need intellectual intervention in the material, the body and the landscape. Performance, especially in terms of tradition and history, can become a work of the state, but it still retains a certain degree of indeterminability, from which a transformative politics, away from the command of the form, can emerge. While being intensely affective, it is worth examining what produces disgust without reconciliation, as seen in the responses of those present at the wedding. While their casteism, which is typically understood through the idea of tactility and sometimes sight, is often made absent through their avowal of modernity, it is a vulgar aesthetics that visibilises their innate casteism that their performative modernity attempts to disavow. Their discomfort essentially stems from being touched by the *bajantri's* breath, traversing through the immersion of sound. Perhaps the only performativity that he has in his non-performance is that of not serving the *brahmanical* sensibility as they desire, but to serve it beyond their horizon of tolerance, like a ghost of the indeterminable, yet ever-present pre-Brahmanical past, refusing to die once they have killed it. If the effects produced by the *bajantri* cannot move them towards him, they will certainly move them away; but movement becomes inevitable – this, the *bajantri* knows best – to move bodies together in *naati* and altogether, away in disgust. More so, this performative aesthetics, stemming from a non-performance of the *bajantri*, defy recording.

Conclusion

To think of performances exemplified by the example discussed above, in terms of local resistance, would be a stretch. After all, the paradigms that solicit the *cultural labour* of the *bajantri* succeeded in doing so, even in this instance. What is remarkable, however, is how the paradigm becomes a little too unachievable, so much so that it haunts the ones who possess the desire to appropriate and patronise this labour, unto their sensibilities and desires. The fact that they desired much more than posterity or the likes of Elvis Presley, but a forced union of the two, which came to bite their ears, eventually, is what bears testament to their failure, a non-performance in making the *bajantri* perform. While cultural production, which necessitates discourses of cultural preservation, is often structured by familiar dispositions of form, paradigm, etc., such performances then become challenges to the paradigms that make cultures present to themselves, stately and folk alike. They are interruptive and discontinuous, affirming certain thresholds beyond which, casteist aesthetics will be met with an anti-aesthetics, productive performativity will become non-performance, and recordability will fail and become unrecordable. While these phenomena are certainly brought forth by cultural accidents, they cannot be reintegrated with the grammar of the performance they stem. Most importantly, they bear testament to the possibility of a dissonance without resolve, immanent to every iteration of the paradigm.

Fig. 1: Bajantri, after a Toilsome Night of Drum Playing. Image Credit: Bisht, Adhiraj Singh. 2021.

Fig. 2. Gayatri Laadi ki Nati. Image Credit: Himachali, R., & Backpack Studio. (2021). Gayatri Laadi ki Nati [Video]. GAYATRI LADI KI NATI - Raj Himachali || BackPack Studio™ (Season 3) || Indian Folk Music - Himachal. Anahad Foundation. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUMFuMtId2I. Accessed 2025.

Notes

1. See Handoo's discussion, following Regina Bendix's ideas, on the touristic as being guided by the state/palace paradigm, discussed later in the text (2004, p. 61)
2. Elmore analyses Parmar's idea of Himachal Pradesh as the 'other' of the mainland; almost constructing Himachal as a fantastical pre-modernity, which ironically becomes the reason to bring modern statehood to the region (2016, pp. 53-54).
3. Handoo discusses the idea of the *palace paradigm*, a stately within the folk, which becomes the condition for the folk to exist and persists as that which the folk exists about (2004).
4. Derrida, responding to Austin, develops an idea of the performative that always defers the stability of the voice (1988, pp. 18-21).
5. See Derrida's idea of the *pharmakon* in *Dissemination* (1981).
6. *Aufheben*, often translated as 'sublation', means negating and elevating/raising. both at the same time (Hegel, 2019).
7. Moten's idea of non-performance as a kind of incapacity to become, create or transform something other to oneself has been invoked here. This idea is brought up in the context of Black experience and is powerful in looking at the extent to which performance is effective, what lies beyond its horizon of effect and the conditions that underlie its making (2015).

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