

Resonating Histories. A Lecture with Matana Roberts*

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DOI: 10.54103/milanoup.232.c668

Abstract

This chapter delves into themes and practices that have structured Matana Roberts' album and mix-media series *Coin Coin* (2011–today) over the years, especially in relation to the topics of history and memory, archiving, composing, and texturing. Starting from exploring *Coin Coin Chapter Three: River Run Tbee* (2015) as a key case study, it focusses on: how the project has developed since the beginning and how the artist has approached each chapter; the compositional processes connected to collecting and working with archival materials, as well as to what they define as “panoramic sound quilting”; the practices of writing the visual sheet music conceived as specific medium; the conceptions and use of visual contents for the multimedia performances.

Keywords: Sonic Memory; Archival Practices; Visual Score; African American Genealogy; Multimedia Performance

* This research was funded under the Project PRIN 2022 PNRR (Code G53D23007070001) awarded by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) and was developed within EXT – Coordinated Research Center “Extended Realities” of the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” of the University of Milan in the frame of the project “Department of Excellence 2023-2027.” The PRIN 2022 PNRR is titled *ARTCHAE. Rediscovering video and installation art as an archaeology of telepresence* and is conducted in collaboration with the archive *Le Radici del Nuovo* (MEET | Digital Culture Center, Milan).

Abstract

Il capitolo approfondisce i temi e le pratiche che hanno articolato la serie di album e mix-media *Coin Coin* (2011–) di Matana Roberts, in particolare in relazione ai temi della storia e della memoria, dell'archiviazione, della composizione e della tessitura. A partire dall'esplorazione di *Coin Coin Chapter Three: River Run Thee* (2015) come caso paradigmatico, il capitolo si concentra su: come il progetto si è sviluppato dall'inizio e come l'artista ha affrontato ogni capitolo; i processi compositivi legati alla raccolta e al lavoro con i materiali d'archivio, nonché a ciò che l'artista definisce “panoramic sound quilting”; le pratiche di scrittura degli spartiti visivi concepiti come media specifici; l'ideazione e l'uso dei contenuti visivi per le performance multimediali.

Parole chiave: Memoria sonora; Pratiche d'archivio; Partitura visiva; Genealogia afro-americana; Performance Multimediale

1. An Introduction by Maria Teresa Soldani

This chapter presents the transcription of a lecture by African American artist Matana Roberts, a response by Maurizio Corbella, and a further reply by the artist. Roberts is an internationally celebrated composer, performer, band leader, saxophonist, sound experimentalist, and mixed-media practitioner, working across many contexts and media, including improvisation, music composition, visual art, dance, poetry, and theatre. Their mixed-media artworks have been shown across a variety of solo and group contexts including a major residency and solo exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum, and works shown at Akademie der Künste, daadgalerie and Savvy Contemporary in Berlin, Bergen Kunsthall, and New York's Fridman Gallery.

Resonating Histories was conceived for the conference *ARTCHAE #1: Inside and Outside the Circuit* (University of Milan, March 14, 2025) and explores the topics of history and memory, archiving, composing, and texturing in relation to *Coin Coin* (2011–today), a twelve-chapter multimedia oeuvre conceived by Roberts and published by Montreal's independent label Constellation Records. The project was named after a woman freed from slavery and deals with the diaspora of African descendants in America, as well as the mystical roots and intuitive traditions of American creative expression. Each chapter is composed around specific topics, stories, and genres, and is written by mixing old and new materials that come from different subjects. In particular, *Coin Coin* relies on two key practices activated by Roberts through the arts of recording and performing: digging archives in search of traces and documents, especially photographs, diaries, and any evidence of the hidden history of African American people; and panoramic sound quilting, which is an activity rooted in African descendants' families that here has been transformed in a compositional tool. *Coin Coin Chapter Three: River Run Thee* (2015) will be investigated as a key case study since it was played and recorded by Roberts in solo with a

varied instrumentation and compositional materials, which included the use of electronic equipment, sound samples, quoted songs and texts.



Figure 1. *Coin Coin Chapter Three: River Run Thee* (Matana Roberts, 2015). Imagery from the archives of Matana Roberts. Courtesy of Constellation.

2. A Lecture by Matana Roberts

Hello, thank you so much for having me. My name is Matana Roberts. I am a sound experimentalist, composer and improviser, sound conceptualist. My work lies at the intersection of sound, memory, culture and identity, and specifically American history. And that is something I want to make sure that I put across. Though many people speak of the *Coin Coin* work underneath the area of African American history, I wanted to make sure it is clear that the rubric for the work is about American history, which encompasses not just the African diaspora experience, but also the complexities, cognitive dissonances, and problematic structures of being American, regardless of background, color, or original place of origin. Today I will be discussing mostly the third chapter of my *Coin Coin* project, which is a multi-chapter sonic excavation, part of my own personal lineage as an American ovary person through sound and narrative and historical collage. *Coin Coin Chapter Three* was released in 2015 on Constellation Records—the entire project is published with them, a post-rock Canadian record label that I feel very lucky to be an artist on their roster. *Chapter Three* really represents a pivotal moment in the twelve-part series. It is the only chapter in the series that is a one-person sound work, solo endeavor using my voice, using the saxophone in various setups, sampling, overdubbing, and a great deal of field recordings where I am trying to construct a soundscape I refer to as “panoramic sound quilting.” I look at a lot of my work through this idea of the “sound quilt” and I really lean in hard there.

This chapter departs from the ensemble-based storytelling and moves into what I would describe as a “sonic travelogue” or a “fever dream”. It documents an imagined and actualized journey not only through the American South, a site of both historical trauma and ancestral inheritance, but it is also based on a book, an old diary called *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters and on the Eastern Coast of Africa* (1873) written by a gentleman by the name of Captain G. L. Sullivan (1832–1904), who was a part of the abolitionist movement in the United Kingdom. Slavery in the United Kingdom had been deemed illegal much earlier than it had been in the United States and Captain G. L. Sullivan was in charge of a ship that was tasked with intercepting illegal slave ships in the Atlantic, returning their cargo back to Africa, and destroying the ships. So, throughout the work, I am weaving in some of my archival research that I have done around the transatlantic slave trade, but also reading from some segments from Captain Sullivan’s book. The title *River Run Thee* partly also references the Mississippi River, an enduring symbol of movement, transformation, and survival in many African American narratives. Here the river really becomes a metaphor for memory, for loss, and for an ongoing struggle towards liberation. While it may sound abstract or nonlinear, this structure is quite intentional, since it reflects what I consider a more honest engagement with fragmented

memory. The work resists the archival impulse to organize history into these neat timelines and, instead, leans into rupture, repetition, and dissonance as methodologies.

My compositional method relies heavily on real-time decision-making on this specific chapter. Here in particular there is a lot of improvisation. But for me improvisation is not merely just a musical form. It is a survival strategy, a social-historical act. I am very fascinated with the word “endurance”, or “endure.” What does it mean “to endure”? What is “endurance” in history? Panoramic sound quilting is a term I used to describe the layering of sonic fragments, vocal loops, saxophone, and horn loops, spoken text, a kind of morse-code layering of field recordings to try to create a landscape that operates somewhat like a quilt. Pieces may appear unfinished or frayed at the edges, and that is intentional. It reflects the lived experience of people whose stories were never fully recorded. During the creation of the work, I had traveled alone through parts of the American South, collecting sounds, birds songs, footsteps, church bells, the subtle hum of landscapes with long histories. I have also done a great deal of travel through Western Europe, tracing some of my lineage back to a fifteenth/sixteenth-century United Kingdom, and also a touch of France. And there is Austria in there, there is a little bit of Germany. There is some of everything. My bloodline really represents strata of so many different places to create a whole, and that is how I like to think about my compositional practice as well. The sounds are not simply ambient, they are data. They hold frequencies of place, and of trauma, and of presence, and of perseverance.

I would like to talk a little bit about the voice and the narrative structure. The voice in this work is used as a sonic tool, not always as a lyrical conveyor of meaning. Originally, when I recorded the work, there were no lyrical moments, no actual structured lyric moments. I originally was going to release it just as the instrumental. And I decided at the last moment in the studio to look through the archive that I used for the *Coin Coin* work, and I found poetry that I believe my grandfather wrote, and I placed the poetry, I improvised the poetry in studio in real time. There was no rehearsal nor practice. I placed it right on top in real time, improvising with the sounds that I had already laid down, and I very much liked what it turned into, so I kept it. I like to think a lot about meditative fragments. I really appreciated the texture of my grandfather’s poetry, how it spoke of a longing and a sort of woefulness that I have also experienced myself during some of my research. For part of this record for a time, I was living on boats in Brooklyn—mostly Brooklyn—not living technically on a river, I was on a bay, but I was using a lot of my experiences from living on those boats to create this work. And much later—though it did not make it on this record—I did take a cargo ship trip from Liverpool, England to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to again get another feeling of what it feels like to endure something, to get a feeling of what does it feel like to cross large bodies of water. The central

character in this piece, which I would call sort of my alter ego that I use often in performance, is an ovary person who wanders through history and geography, listening for traces of themselves. I am informed by my own family history, particularly the ovary people who survived under systems of great systematic oppression. The voice in this is fractured, but it is strong. The voice of this alter ego is not voiceless, but it is the systems that surround them that distort and resist the fullness of the narrative, which is why it is so fragmented.

One of my guiding questions is, you know: what does resistance sound like? In *River Run Thee*, the resistance is nonlinear. It does not present in crescendos or anthems, but in the refusal to resolve. It manifests in sonic rupture and what Fred Moten calls the “break”, this generative space of disruption. From the African diasporic aesthetic standpoint, I am interested in the ways that historical trauma lives in sound, how enslaved peoples created coded musical languages, how field hollers and embedded maps into melody, how freedom songs masked instruction with praise. I incorporate codes in all of my chapters as a subtle nod to the legacy of encrypted communication, sonic survival strategies that extend from plantation songs to modern protest music. As artists, we are often asked to interpret history, but if our role is not to translate the archive, I think our role is to complicate it. I see this specific chapter as a kind of speculative historiography and imagined improvised archive made audible. It is rooted in Americanness but aims to resonate beyond its borders, more into diasporic memory, collective grief, and radical hope. I lean on hope so much, even today. As I navigate these personal and collective histories, I really resist closure. I reject resolution. I want listeners to confront the noise and perhaps find themselves within it.

To close, I would like to emphasize that *River Run Thee* is not a traditional narrative. It is instead a sound work that asks to be set with and not solved. It invites active listening, the kind that engages not just the ears but also the spirit. In this work, I am not just composing sound. I am mapping memory. I am listening to ghosts. I am commuting with ghosts. My interest in creating the *Coin Coin* work as a whole had a lot to do with my interest of being in connection with the spirit world, something I have been interested in since I was a very small child. I have had many different experiences with it. I am stitching fragments of the past into the present, not so much to romanticize history, but to really reckon with it. And it is just, it has been a privilege, this entire project, it is turned into almost its own person and it has just been an amazing journey so far. Thank you so much for listening. If you have any questions, just let me know.



Figure 2. *Coin Coin Chapter Three: River Run Thee* (Matana Roberts, 2015). Imagery from the archives of Matana Roberts. Courtesy of Constellation.

3. A Response by Maurizio Corbella

Hi Matana, my name is Maurizio. I am a music and media historian, and I am deeply honored to act as respondent to your very inspiring talk. I have listened closely to all five chapters of your *Coin Coin* project, and particularly to *Chapter Three*, to which your presentation most directly refers.

If you don't mind, I would like to explore the concept of "panoramic sound quilting" and the ways it intersects with various facets of your artistic practice and expressive language.

First, I assume it is intentional that the term quilt evokes fabric—a medium assembled by sewing together disparate pieces of textile. This image suggests a tactile, material sensibility, and a metaphor for your compositional method, as you explained: crafting and stitching together sonic elements in both your recordings and performances. I also wonder whether there is a specifically feminist dimension to the choice of this term, particularly considering that quilting has historically been associated with women's labor, especially within African American communities. In this sense, might quilting become a way of honoring

and channeling ancestral practices—linking the domestic and the artistic, the personal and the political—as you do throughout the *Coin Coin* project?

Second, a quilt is not only a flat, multi-directional surface; it also has thickness and softness, owing to the padding within. I imagine a sonic equivalent in the depth and density of your layering—looped, rerecorded fragments in *Chapter Three*, the interplay of different instrumental ensembles throughout the series, or the integration of mixed media such as video and visual scores in your live performances. With this in mind, how do you perceive the relationship between electronic and acoustic sound in your work? What draws you to the potential of electronic sound, and what types of electronics do you gravitate toward? How do you integrate improvisation with looping, sampling, editing and the other studio-driven techniques you embrace in *Chapter Three*?

Third, a quilt also serves a practical function: it covers, protects, shelters, and provides warmth. Might this function be metaphorically extended to the sonic environments you create? Do your soundscapes aim to offer spaces of healing or solace—a way of processing, through sound, the fractures and traumas of American, and more broadly diasporic, histories?

Finally, I am intrigued by how the idea of quilting extends into your treatment of memory and the archive. In your talk, you referenced the notion of “historical collage” and described your work as an “imagined journey,” a “sonic travelogue or fever dream.” The river, in particular, emerges as a potent “metaphor for memory, loss, and the struggle for liberation.” You powerfully state that your role as an artist “is not to translate the archive, but to complicate it.” I find this approach both radical and deeply resonant. Your work invites listeners, regardless of background, into an experience that transcends musical boundaries and engages with history, identity, and imagination in profound ways.

In this sense, panoramic sound quilting is an existential methodology—one that fuses sonic texture, historical depth, emotional resonance, and formal experimentation. Your practice resists simplification or closure; instead, it embraces fragmentation, layering, and multiplicity as a means of honoring complexity.

This may sound like a simple question, but as a music historian I am deeply curious about your personal musical archive—the sounds, recordings, voices, and moments that have shaped your ear over time. How do these influences—whether iconic or obscure, inherited or discovered—reside within your practice and your philosophy of “complicating” the archive? While listening to your work, I find myself drawn to echoes of foundational jazz storytelling—from Charles Mingus’s *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* (1963) to Max Roach’s *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* (1960), and of course, John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* (1963). These works feel like spiritual and structural cousins to your own. And yet, I sense that your archive extends far beyond these canonical landmarks. I would love to hear more about the full breadth of your sonic memory—genre-crossing, familial, affective—that you carry with you as you compose, perform, and imagine. Thank you for your precious time.



Figure 3. *Coin Coin Chapter Three: River Run Thee* (Matana Roberts, 2015). Imagery from the archives of Matana Roberts. Courtesy of Constellation.

4. A Reply by Matana Roberts

Hi Maurizio, thank you for asking. So, I use the term “quilt” not to evoke a particular sort of feminist point of view. I am actually not deeply interested in that, I am more interested in this idea of a particular kind of familial history. The way quilting was explained to me in ancestors’ stories that I was personally given by family is that the quilting was a family experience. It wasn’t just the women and the family who were working on the quilting. The men were also—and this comes from a very Southern American perspective. I know that there is the history of women quilters in the American South, but that is not what I am referencing completely. I am talking a bit about this familial community connection. I also am really fascinated by the quilts of the Underground Railroad, I think that had a little bit to do with it also. Again, I guess it is seen to some as women’s work, but to me it is community. The idea of thinking about my great-great-grandparents quilting together and other members of the family taking part in that, I find really fascinating. And so that is the dimension that I am pointing to. I am thinking about community, I am thinking about family, I am thinking about ancestral practices as defiance. And I am thinking about not

so much the domestic to the artistic, but this utilitarian value that sits in many different cultures around artistic objects that also had a different sort of role or status in a home or a community. I am really fascinated by that, and so that is the direction that I was heading in *Chapter Three*.

You are also asking what draws me to electronic and acoustic sounds in my work. I like going back and forth between them. I like the revolutionary potential of electronic sound, its reach and its possibility and its malleability. I like the instant gratification that comes from working with acoustic instruments. So, I go back and forth between them. I like analog synths. I like samplers. I use a lot of different samplers. I like some pedals. I don't like pedals as much as I like objects that can create unusual sound that maybe I am not even thinking about in that moment. It just happens. I also like thinking about analog and digital sound combined with image. And so, I work a lot with moving image and projection within my studio space of also working with sound. Improvisation is a big part of how humans move through the world. And so, I don't mean to pat myself on the back, but I am a pretty good improviser. So, it feels really natural to work with these other tools. I am not a big editor. *Chapter Three* is not heavily edited. I am actually sort of looking for the mistakes and the happenstance things that might feel dis-pleasurable at the time, but then sound really interesting. I use the same sort of collage aesthetic that I use in visual art to deal with sound. I like working with small fragments and piecing them together.

Your third question about quilts covering sheltering, providing warmth. I am not really interested in using the work to offer space or healing or solace. The work to me sits as a testament to the human experience. My mother used to call it "a musical monument to the human experience," and that is what I think I am most interested in. I love these stories regardless of where you come from about human perseverance and the ways in which we persevere and the ways in which that can be celebrated and bring us a lot of joy. So, I am really trying to root around that area in terms of thinking about a history. I am trying to take the history out of the trauma and think more about the possibility that was inherent in choices that people had to make in order to survive something.

And then you ask me about the archive. You are talking about "historical collage" and this idea of a "fever dream"—which is a term that I use often—and "water". Water is a big part of my artistic practice, whether it is dealing with rivers or lakes or oceans or bays. I spent a lot of time in and on water, so that comes in the work in some really interesting ways, allows me to remember a certain sort of somatic experiencing that can happen when engaging with the natural world. And I try to bring that into the work, though I don't talk about it as much. I mean, it sits in the title of *Chapter Three*, for instance, *River Run Thee*. At the time that I recorded that work, I was living on a boat on a bay in Brooklyn, New York, and I was spending a lot of time on the waterways of that city. But I have spent a lot of time on waterways of other places also, and

it informs a great deal of my practice. It is something I am still trying to figure out, but it allows me to think very differently about things. Another water thing I did is I took a cargo ship trip from England to Nova Scotia. There are these cargo ships where they will take on a few extra people. They are not cruise ships, they are just regular cargo ships. And I did that over a twelve-day period, twelve to thirteen days I think it was. Again, to have this somatic experiencing of what it feels like to be in this particular kind of motion. And I try to take those experiences and put them in the work. I feel like those things allow me to keep my imagination open and flowing in a different kind of way. Even though I don't always talk about it, it just is sort of there and it is something that I am still exploring. I am interested very much in textures and sonic textures, but I am deeply interested in abstraction because abstraction allows multiple different types of people, multiple different types of entry into a work. That is one of the most important things to me. That is what the work can really service. Different ways of entering, different ways of exiting, different ways of thinking about a history, even if it is not your direct history, it still sits on this realm of human possibility that everyone experiences in some way or another.

And then your last question here—and sorry if I am rushing through this, I hope this gives you some things to think about—but in your last question asking about the archive. I love archival work. I love work that has deep research. I love work that has a deep archive in which to work with. So, my archive is a series of many things, travelogues and photographs and field recordings and interviews and artwork and fragments and sound work that fragments, and one day I will organize it all in a way that I can really share with people. But I have to finish the *Coin Coin* project first. The *Coin Coin* project has taken way too long to finish. I wish it wasn't that way but what's been so interesting about the project is that has opened other doors for me to explore things in other directions that I would have never thought about. I would have never imagined that some of my work would be displayed in museums and galleries and exhibitions, or that I would be asked to do installation work, or that I would be asked to create work for other people, which I have done. So, it is kind of taken up an interesting space. And the one thing that I have learned about the work is I have to listen to it and spend time with it. And it tells me the directions that it wants to go. It is not really me telling it at this point. The work is definitely its own person and is moving in its own direction. And so, the archive that I dig through for myself in this work really reflects that.

And then you said something else here at the end. You know, it is so nice to see my name next to Mingus or Roach or Coltrane, but I am not really interested in that specificity of genre, and I have had to fight that actually, and I have sort of given up. If people want to think of the music as jazz because of the instrumentation, it is fine, I have bigger fights I need to deal with just trying to survive, as an ovary person of color in the world. And so, it is an honor to see

my name next to those folks, but also I am trying to move beyond this idea of genre, and I hope by the time the project is finished people will have a better understanding of that. I have made a lot of decisions to try to get the work done. It has been harder than I would like it to be. The records are just not, they are not cheap to make, and I don't like being put in a position to have to get people to play them to participate in them if I don't have the right kind of funding. So that is something that I am working on now. I really appreciate your interest in the work and wishing you all the best. Take care.