

## The Language of The Coding: Transcript

This is a transcript of the recorded conversation between Neil Verma and Yvette Janine Jackson as part of the Sounds of Social Justice Roundtable. It is provided for increased accessibility. Return to the original article [here](#).

**Neil Verma:** Hello out there. This is Neil Verma speaking. I am a professor of sound studies in the department of Radio/TV/Film at Northwestern University. It's my pleasure to introduce my interviewee for this podcast produced especially for *Musicology Now*.

Yvette Janine Jackson is a composer of electroacoustic chamber and orchestral musics for concert, theatre and installation. She's a recipient of San Francisco's Dean Goodman choice award for sound design and Theatre Bay Area's Eric Landisman Fellowship. She was selected by the American Composers Orchestra to participate in the third Jazz Composers Orchestra Institute in conjunction with the UCLA Herb Albert School of Music and Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University.

She studied music in the R.D. Colburn School of Performing Arts [then known as The Community School (of Performing Arts)] in Los Angeles, holds a BA in Music from Columbia and a PhD in Music Integrative Studies from the University of California, San Diego. She is currently an Assistant Professor in the Music department at Harvard. Her research focuses on the history of production techniques and aesthetics, which link radio drama, and electroacoustic musics, multichannel composition and immersion.

I got to know Yvette mostly through social media, but also through the radio artist Gregory Whitehead. I think I first heard her work in a broadcast from the experimental station [Wave Farm](#) in upstate New York. And I've been taken with the way her work blends classic radio drama, field recording electroacoustic music, as well as the history of Black sound arts.

Jackson's had a busy year. In January, the Fridman Gallery released her record [Freedom](#), which contains two long pieces. The first concerns, the Middle Passage and the second draws on recordings of homophobic statements in public discourse. Here's how a [review](#) in *The Guardian* describes these compositions:

*The first is an immersive oral soundtrack that conjures up images more vivid than anything a motion picture could provide. A harrowing babel of ocean sounds, heartbeats distorted screams, Bernard Herrmann strings, and slow-motion explosions, which seem to obey an almost symphonic structure. The second is described by Jackson as a radio opera, a restless cut and clip montage of frequently shocking quotes from street preachers, politicians, TV, evangelists, and excerpts from essays by homophobic Afrocentric academics, despite the subject matter, it is a witty piece, punctuated by a musical backing that lurches from minimalist chamber jazz arrangements to gospel pastiches and free jazz freakouts. There's a shared resonance between the two pieces, certain sonically terrifying motifs appear in both and something surprising and new emerges with each listen.*

The writer and critic, Greg Tate writes this of Jackson's work [from the sleeve notes of *Freedom*]:

*Jackson's fluency in Black church piano music, and the revolution in expression which swept through the sixties jazz world via Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor and Albert Ayler provides for a suite of compositional intersectionality, which seamlessly interweaves electronically generated mood swings with those of acoustic gospel, virile modal vamps, and the more melancholic strands of the Black avant garde. Jackson uses her palette to organize a liberating movement of sororities meant to evoke the transformations of spirit that led Black folk from the slave ship to the mothership.*

As these critics note, Jackson's work is marked by wit and surprise, but it's also marked by attentiveness to historical and sonorous absences. A [review](#) of *Freedom* in Pitchfork says that her work prompts us to “listen for who gets left out when we gather as one.”

Three months ago, the Fromm Players at Harvard debuted a new work by Jackson. It's called *The Coding*, which is an audio-visual piece that you can find online at her website, [yvettejackson.com](http://yvettejackson.com). Yvette joined me to discuss the work and its relationship to, among other things, questions of social justice and sound. We'll hear a few excerpts during the conversation.

**NV:** Welcome Yvette. It's great to be able to have a chance to talk with you. I'm excited to talk about this new work, *The Coding*. Congratulations on it.

**Yvette Janine Jackson:** Thank you, Neil. I'm looking forward to this conversation.

**NV:** So I thought a good way to start would be to talk a little bit about the origins of the project. I know that you've said that part of it was rooted in Samuel R. Delany's novel *Babel-17*, but also that it was a kind of response to contemporary events, especially around the demonstrations for racial justice of the last year. So, can you tell us a little bit about the origins of the project and some of the ways it's rooted in both texts and events?

**YJJ:** Sure. I think there are two major influences for me. They may not be heard by the listener. During the summer of 2019 I read Samuel Delany's *Babel-17*, and then I kept buying copies and making people I knew read the book. Usually after hearing my work, people would make assumptions. Oh, you must be influenced by Octavia Butler or Sun Ra. People would bring up these influences. But when it comes to science fiction, there was something about *Babel-17* that connected with me. And I think that partly has to do with its focus on language and linguistics. And for example, without disclosing what the book is about, this concept of linguistic relativity comes up. So, thinking about the relationship between the structure of language and its speaker's cognition, or their ability to understand the world around them. And so, I was thinking about these things, and I was also thinking that all my previous projects have been rooted in historical events—and what would happen if I start to explore something in the realm of fiction?

I guess it was maybe May of 2020, it was a Space X launch that got canceled because there were a couple of clouds in the sky. Watching the live stream of it, I became intrigued because outside people were in the streets all across, not just the US, but pretty much all around the world in protest, while I'm watching this kind of sterile environment, these people sitting at their desks waiting for this launch to happen. And I'm like, "Wow, this is like Gil Scott Heron, 'Whitey on the Moon.'" This is literally what the piece is, is happening. And I became even more interested in focusing ... I was trying to depart from reading my work in real-world activities. It actually returned to, and to some extent influenced by this activity I've become even more interested than just ideas, but actual companies that are focused on space tourism since starting the project.

I think the question is: why is there such an investment or attention in space exploration when we can't even take care of people on the planet? And that, that actually becomes part of the premise for *The Coding*.

**NV:** Can we talk a little bit about how this fits into the longer arc of your work? What are some kind of longer-term influences in your practice that kind of manifest themselves here? I know that some of the things you've been interested in in the past had been radio history, working with historical objects, historical codes.

**YJJ:** Sure for my primary practice I've been referring to these works as radio operas and I use the term "radio" really to signal to the golden age of radio drama, of which I am a fan, and then these operas, because I'm usually working in these larger serial works. Although the first time I used this term was around 2011, I have a piece called *Incubus* that was created at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center around 1995, which uses similar types of source materials. So, using clips from the news, using recorded music, synthesizing sounds and combining all of these together in the work. Since that initial project in 1995, I also have worked doing sound design for theater and been thinking about how does one *compose* theater, as opposed to composing *for* theater—thinking about dialogue and sound effects also as composition on materials.

I think in these early works, it was important for me to use things that people had actually said and written, but I think with *The Coding*, I let go of that.

*Dialogue from The Coding:*

*The space tourism industry is booming and competition is at an all-time high. CEO Roman Powers is lobbying for new initiatives to ensure increased productivity in space development. Opponents argue that his plan will increase Powers' monopoly in the space market by only protecting his international civilian space depot and related franchises. Powers assures that the Accelerated Civilization Act will serve and protect employees and tourists residing in current and future space settlements.*

*Here is a nine-point summary of what the proposal will accomplish. Make worker settlement safe for democracy and capitalism to thrive and it will end future disputes*

*before they arise. Guarantee absolute freedom of navigation in space. Remove all barriers to economic profit and innovation. Allow corporate settlements the freest opportunity to autonomous development. Oversee that colonial claims will be freely adjusted. Evacuate and restore all governmental industrial settlements ...*

**NV:** I want to talk a little bit about the score and how the score is used to create the source material for this version of the work. I think it may be a bit opaque to listeners, but there is a kind of narrative that you worked out in the score version. Maybe you could tell me a little bit about the narrative and how you thought about structure and basically how the score was used to generate the source material?

**YJJ:** When I'm treating the score, or using storyboards, or just sketching things out in a notebook—it's primarily for me and not for the listener. It helps me to organize thematic materials and think about sounds, whether they're text or music that I've composed, or something that I've sampled ... I guess there's the dialogue that I have, between what I've written down as a score and what I'm doing in my DAW [Digital Audio Workstation], and in this particular project for *The Coding*, I knew I'd be adding visual elements, and how do I do that when my way of telling the story relies on opaque narratives that allow the listener, or I guess maybe I expect for the listener to bring his, her, their own experiences into the composition. So the composition wouldn't exist on its own, it relies on the listener to draw on their personal histories and experiences and preexisting knowledge to make sense of what they're hearing. I think I did not want to include visuals in a way that would tell a story to the listener.

**NV:** Do you want to, maybe we can talk a little bit about that visual element now that we're on it. Just, I think this is a relatively new area for you. Am I right about that?

**YJJ:** I had done some experiments with *Invisible People*, a radio opera. So I guess between 2012 and maybe 2015. In each of the performances there were some different aspects, both sonically. Sometimes I did the performance with video. There was one I did, that had visual elements, but also with me off stage playing trumpet. I did a fully stage version of it with two actors, an opera singer, a soprano saxophonist offstage supported by sound design and lights. But darkness had been an important element in these compositions, even though I've explored with lighting and images. So really it was a question of: what is the role of the images in this storytelling?

**NV:** For those people who haven't seen it, [*The Coding*] contains a certain amount of videotape, but also animated materials, and then some shots of the ensemble performing as well. They're all mixed in. So maybe you can tell us a little bit about maybe the specific detail about the performers videotaping themselves, and then more broadly what the visual language of the piece means to you and how it developed.

**YJJ:** I had envisioned this project to be an in-person debut of the Radio Opera Workshop, which is an ensemble adjustable collective that can, you know, accommodate solo performance and live ensemble. And since that could not happen and the musicians were scattered in different parts of North America and Europe, I

asked people to film themselves. Two takes of themselves, which retrospectively I would have asked just for a one-take just to get the rawness of their performance, because I also want it to still keep this idea of liveness, even though I knew this was going to be a pre-produced production. So, basically what the musicians were given, were this script, which had a textual description of the format, it had storyboards, it had charts for each of the “songs,” and then it also had some introductions for a couple of the musicians for some guided improvisations that normally would have been done in the same space. While they were working on that, I was thinking about the visuals as an element of the composition without having the visuals tell a story, because I still want there to be room for interpretation, just as I think there is with the choices of sounds and the way that I present sound. I wanted the listener to have these choices of how to interpret what they are experiencing visually while listening.

Let me just back up a second and maybe talk about the structure in relationship to everything. So, I thought about the three acts of *The Coding* from different perspectives. So act one: third person. We're voyeurs watching something. We don't know what it is. There's these establishing shots to this world. For act two, shifting to first person. Then act three—the idea of this was breaking the fourth wall and inviting the listener to action.

For each of these perspectives, there was a different form of visual storytelling. So, act one included footage from a friend's road trip across country. Act two had some animations that I had done along with manipulating some of the visual images that the musicians had given to me. And then just a different aesthetic for the third act. But I think—at least in my mind—I was thinking of these acts differently. But I think together ... maybe it's these kinds of [knee plays](#) in between, and that kind of prologue and epilogue, that hold everything together.

**NV:** Can you talk a little bit more about the ensemble and your musicians, how you came to work with them?

**YJJ:** Part of my desire to create the radio opera workshop is that my practice as an electro-acoustic composer has been pretty solitary. And I was thinking music is supposed to be this social activity. What can I do to make this electroacoustic practice more social? When I compose and work with musicians, I usually like to compose for specific people rather than instruments. I also thought this piece could be a great way to work with local musicians. The cellist Judith Hamann I had worked with since my very first radio opera, and she was located in Berlin at the time of the recording. I had talked to my colleague Esperanza Spalding, and a couple of the students: Rajna Swaminathan, who plays the *mrudangam*, Davindar Singh, who is playing bass clarinet. Taiga Ultan, who is a local musician, is on flute and voice. And I had seen her do some performances in which it's just, like, really mesmerizing to see her perform in person. Tia Fuller, who is on faculty at Berklee School of Music, is a saxophone player who had worked with Esperanza.

I think the people came before the instrumentation, but then I also question: do I like people because they play specific instruments? Which comes first? I don't know. And

that's how the group was first put together. But again, the idea is that with the radio opera workshop, depending on the venue and the resources, it could be tapered down to a duo or, you know, it could be a large orchestral piece, if, you know, the resources were available for that.

*Dialogue from The Coding:*

*Fear not. Fear not. I let my cowardice die. I am no longer a coward. I am a coward no more. I am a warrior. I am fearless. I am a warrior afraid of nothing. Stop killing us.*

**NV:** In interviews, I've read with you, there's two things that kind of stuck out at me is, one, this desire to create work that addresses trauma without reinscribing and exacerbating it through the address, which is this kind of really difficult artistic problem. And then the other thing that you've said specifically about *The Coding*, which I think connects back to the Delany book, is that it's set in a world in which language is used to colonize or language is a tool of power. And so I just wanted to ask you to say a little bit more about those two things in light of one another.

**YJJ:** There's few ways that I can respond to that. First of all, there was mass trauma that took place in 2020, and I felt in some ways this trauma was made worse, in my experience, it felt more traumatic when consuming news media or social media. I didn't find anything ... There were no positive solutions being put forth. It was just negative. And in the US, politically things were unpleasant. So I know that some of my previous work like iterations of *Invisible People* were capable of, of exacerbating trauma in some listeners, which is, has never been a point of those works, but I wanted to continue addressing issues that are real or affect people living in this world, without playing on trauma.

And I think, also, there's several things happening around this time in kind of commercial television and film— issues of historical trauma were playing out more. And I think in a, in sometimes a problematic way. And then I think the other thing that played a role in the way I was thinking about, especially language and colonial mindsets, has to do with how in the wake of George Floyd and many others who were murdered around the same time, a lot of organizations, arts organizations, and academic organizations with departments and programs were putting out these anti-racism statements. And I think, probably, I don't think "cynical" is the right word, but I wasn't necessarily believing the statements that were being made.

And so, I was thinking about the language used—and actually this didn't get into this version, but I was thinking about aggregating language used in these statements by various organizations and how the wording is such that it was going to be self-serving for organizations, either this performance thing of, "Hey, we're not racist, spend money with us," or "Join us in our activity or support us in some way," or these statements that we're essentially saying "We want to do the work, but we're not going to do the work, but we're going to put these words that sound like we're doing the work, but that's about

it.” And I was really intrigued by the language that was being put forth in these various statements.

And I guess maybe the third element, I mentioned the trauma of like mainstream news media, but just this back and forth of “what is truth?” Different groups, different populations saying “this is what's really happening” “no, *this* is what's really happening.” And so how language can be used to convince a bunch of people that something is or is not true, became an interest to me during this time.

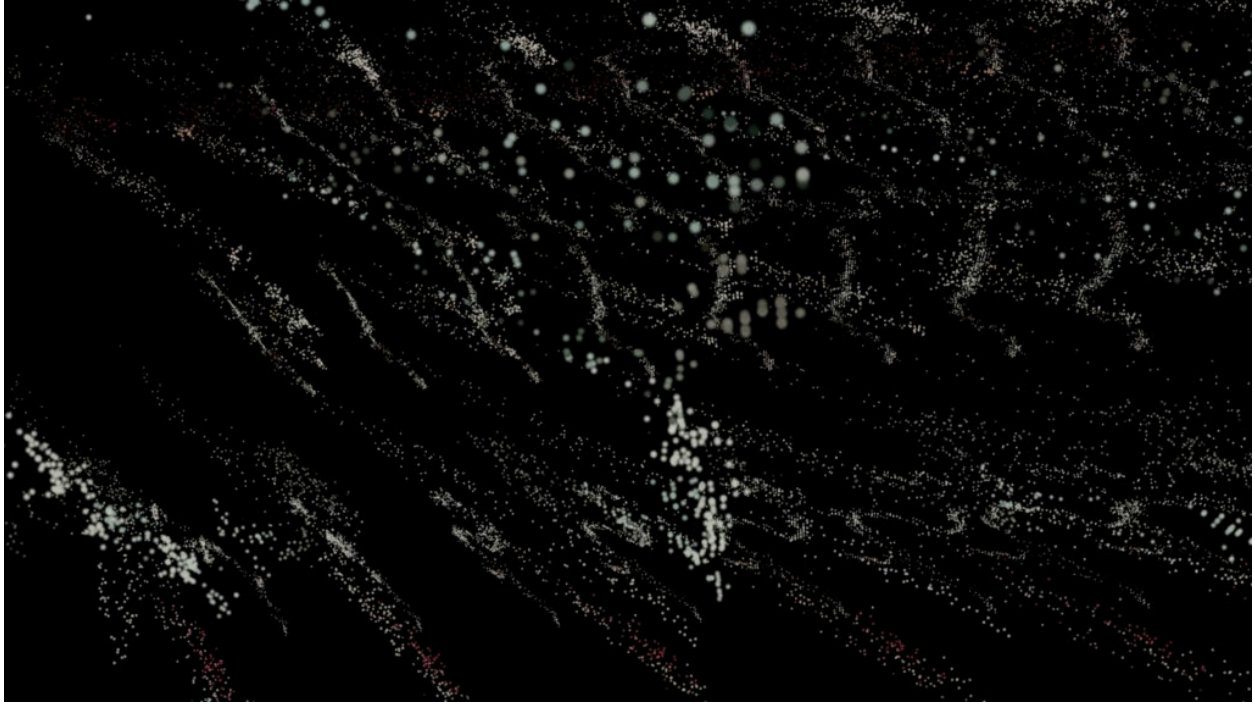
**NV:** Last question, I just wanted to know a little bit more about the future of the piece. I know that there's other kind of versions, iterations, probably you've been thinking about you might have for the future. Is there any preview you can give us or any things you want to explore with it in future versions?

**YJJ:** The fall or late winter, I am hoping that it will be possible to have a multi-channel version, which would probably change ... the source materials will be the same, but the piece itself will be different. But to have a multi-channel version that can be performed in a venue with people gathered together, I think is the next step. I am interested maybe in having the piece tour to different venues so that this act of collective listening in a shared space can happen in concert spaces, theater spaces, installation spaces. Then the next stage after that there'll be an interactive version I've been doing over the past year—learning game engines and thinking about how to use game engines for composition. And then I guess the last step would be to release *The Coding* as a video or a video package that, you know, people can have ... I want to say like a DVD, but I don't know anyone who uses a DVD player.

Just in terms of what I mentioned previously, I have been thinking more in depth about the realities of space travel. I think *Babel-17* as an influence may have shifted my thinking towards science fiction. But then I guess the realities of this past year, I was like, wait, do I really need to go to science fiction when these things are actually playing out? So I think maybe it's a return to drawing from these actual events that are taking place.

**NV:** Yvette, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today. Congratulations on the piece. It's really thought-provoking and really beautiful and gives us a lot to talk about. So I really appreciate, thank you so much.

**YJJ:** Yeah. This was a fun conversation. I'm looking forward to the next.



Screenshot from Yvette Janine Jackson's *The Coding* (2021).

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