

## Performance Matters

# ONO Epistemologies—Resounding the “Bleeding Haints” A Noisy Conversation between P. Michael Grego, travis, and Shannon Rose Riley of ONO

Shannon Rose Riley, travis et P. Michael Grego

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Résumé de l'article

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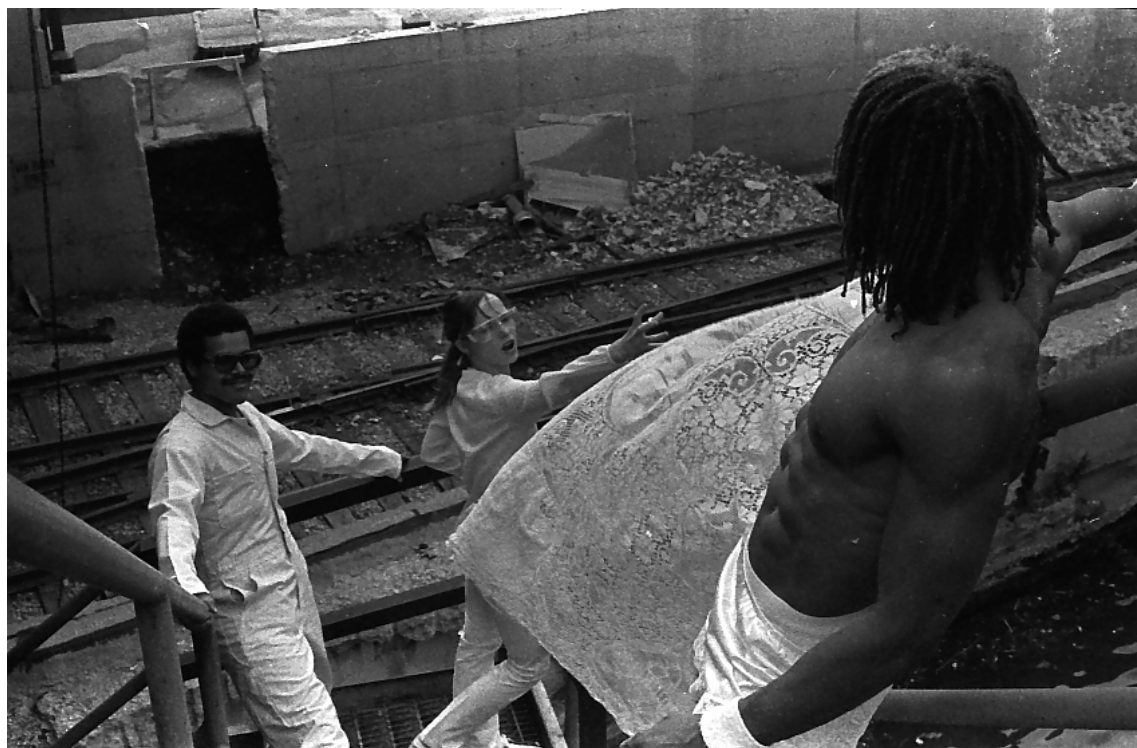
## HERMENEUTIC LOOPS

### ONO Epistemologies—Resounding the “Bleeding Haints”: A Noisy Conversation between P. Michael Grego, travis, and Shannon Rose Riley of ONO

Shannon Rose Riley, travis, and P. Michael Grego

#### Introduction

*ONO, short for Onomatopoeia, is an intergenerational, interracial performance/ noise group based in Chicago—its call to arms is “onomatopoeia before music.” Established in 1980 by P. Michael Grego and travis, ONO is an “Experimental Performance, NOISE, and Industrial Poetry Performance Band; Exploring Gospel’s Darkest Conflicts, Tragedies and Premises” (ONO, n.d.).<sup>1</sup> P. Michael, a well-known Chicago musician, aimed to provide soundscapes for travis’s poetry—a poetry haunted by his experiences as a Chickasaw-Black hu/ man growing up in “pre-integration, pre-electricity, pre-indoor plumbing” Itawamba County, Mississippi as well as his experiences of racial and anti-queer violence, especially while serving in the US Navy in the late 1960s (Alamo-Costello 2016). As a signifier, “ONO,” also refers to **Organized Noise**; travis’s “self-definition” of Onomatopoeia is “to Maximize Flexibility, to Act Out Various Punishments Derived from Verbal Inference, Cognition and Reinforcement, And To Vigorously Distinguish (ONO) Organized Noise From Music” (travis, email to Shannon, February 2020).<sup>2</sup> I joined P. Michael and travis in ONO in late 1980.<sup>3</sup>*



ONO (left to right: P. Michael, Shannon, travis), June 20, 1981. Photo by Dave Magdziarz, courtesy of the photographer.

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**Shannon Rose Riley** is professor and chair of the Humanities Department at San José State University. **travis** is retired and writing on “Moral Evil,” which includes trips to Portugal, Spain, and slave forts Ghana and Nigeria. **P. Michael Grego** is client and data services manager at AIDS Foundation of Chicago.



travis of ONO (with Steve Krakow), 2017. Photo by Sarah Jane Quillin, courtesy of the photographer.

*For each ONO performance, P. Michael creates a “clearly-defined Premise” using Travis’s poetry and selects the set list. Travis then considers the range of characters he will embody and the appropriate conflict for each. His sartorial choices come out of this pre-performance process and become embodied live as he follows the “spine” of each character as they navigate the stage space. The sources for his costumes include gospel singers, both male and female; opera and ballet costumes; military uniforms; Black folks’ burial garb; his Mother and Grandmother Stegall; and several “Scandalously and Outrageously Dressed Aunts” (Travis, email to Shannon, February 2020).*

*Through the use of poetry, noise, visual spectacle, and performance, ONO engages a sonic subaltern practice (Brooks, Kheshti, and Anderson 2011, 333). Subaltern studies theorizes “erasures in the colonial project” and is “concerned with the condition of being erased from the mainstream public spheres of civil society” (Dutta and Pal 2010, 364). While the subaltern cannot speak, perhaps they can resound (Brooks, Kheshti, and Anderson, 333); indeed, the “cultural work of the sonic subaltern” is precisely to sound out against silence and erasure (Marshall and McMahon 2017).<sup>4</sup> Noise, in particular, has useful resonances with sonic and social disruption—i.e., making noise—and can serve as a tool for what Travis calls “testifying.” Noise also expresses the utterly unsaid and unspeakable. As P. Michael suggests below, words alone fail to describe the trauma that People of Colour have experienced over time, so ONO uses a sonic vocabulary that includes found sound and noise, sound generation, and the modifying, recycling, and reclaiming of riffs, beats, and samples. These strategies resonate with Travis’s costumes, which are also reclaimed, reappropriated, fashioned, and remixed.*

*ONO does not so much speak its truths as it performs and re/sounds the intertwining of personal and national histories and the ways that racism and violence haunt the nation. What Travis calls “bleeding haints” are spectres not only from his own past but from largely untold shared pasts that haunt our present; a haint is a ghost, a haunting, and when they bleed, they seep through to reveal themselves. No words, just scream.*



Audio file 1: “Invocation” (ONO 2015b)

I bring you Greetings / Greetings from the prison plantation  
Greetings from Black Death / Brownsville slumlords; Murder Inc.  
Greetings from the arrest ride / Greetings from the morgue  
Greetings from Chicago SouthSide [*sic*] / I bring you Greetings!  
Greetings foreseen from Rimbaud’s “Nigger Queen!” (ONO 2015b)

*When travis performs “Invocation” live, dressed in a fine frock that doesn’t quite fit, that gapes in the back—that exposes traces of the punk, the vet, the sculpted, ageing Black male body (a queer Black man in his ‘70s in South Chicago, itself a kind of miracle)—then perhaps, the sonic subaltern performs. And as in most ONO pieces, the rhythm and tone shift abruptly, and a beast of a beat drives the poetics outside of language and into the body, into the sonic space of the vibrating, live ONO performance. ONO album tracks are also consistently multiple, broken, stilted, thwarting—and they are long, resisting the form and closure of music or song.*

*To resound means not only to make a loud, prolonged sound but also to send the soundings back—whether to their source(s) or to other listeners, as if in a kind of dialogical loop. In what follows, P. Michael, travis, and I engage in a resounding conversation on the performance practices of the sonic subaltern as exemplified in our work as ONO. We discuss “bleeding haints,” “ghosted tracks,” and how our work resounds/re-members erased histories. We also begin to flesh out what travis calls “the colors of Noise” regarding how the Black body is always already a kind of “Noise upon the USAmerican landscape.” These are ONO epistemologies.*

## **Soundscapes, Noise, and the Schizophrenia of the Sonic Subaltern**

**Shannon:** I used the term “soundscapes” in the Introduction to describe ONO’s work, but we have never used it—we use “noise.” Soundscape theory emerged in the late 1970s (Schafer 1994); the term was initially created to be analogous with “landscape” and referred to the sonic/acoustic environment—“noise” was considered the “enemy” of sound (Samuels et al. 2010, 331). Growing noise pollution in urban and industrialized areas constituted part of the rupture of sound and scape that Schafer called *schizophonía* (Schafer, 124; Samuels et al., 331). Given this, I imagine we would avoid the term “soundscape.” ONO is partly of the city, of the industrial parts of subcultural Chicago—we might say that we came together in that space of rupture between sound and scape. Perhaps *schizophonía* (literally, divided or split voice/sound) more closely describes our commitment to noise and many of our sonic and performative methods, which seek to point out the historical and personal spaces and places of fracture, rapture, and rupture.

**P. Michael:** Yes . . . layered sound clash and environmental poisoning . . . Noise pollution . . . our Sonics are layered and diegetic; we take the sounds already present in the environment in which we appear, build on them, enhance them, and ultimately overtake them. Like the nascent beast in darkened horror film awakened from sweet repose—violently slashing its way through a village.

**travis:** I am comfortable with silence, wherever I find it. My proposal of ONO Noise first arose from the power of internal, dialogical Noise then moved outward. My Black, male body represents Noise upon the USAmerican landscape.<sup>5</sup> Reconciling my words, as well as my vocality, with or without accompaniment, creates Noise. . . .

I use “soundscapes” to manipulate meaning and materials, to explore linguistic conflict, and to expand exploration of sonic invocation/evocation; sound qualities, sonic purpose(s) and sonic relationship(s) to Noise. In this, I invade the “colors of Noise.”<sup>6</sup> From birth, 23SEP46, throughout most of my pre-teens, I spent most of each year with my maternal grandmother, Finous Mary Magdalene Walls Stegall . . . in a shotgun house off Hwy 25, in deep country . . . Itawamba County, MS. . . . Shotgun, Dogtrot, and other vernacular house types were separated from the nearest neighbors by ½ mile and more of heavily wooded swamps, hollows (*holla's*/hollers) and deep forest. Here, day-to-day survival depends upon acute listening, hearing, and identification. No doctors. No telephones. No post-war technology. No industrial drone, whatsoever. Days pass without uttering a single word; hearing forms overlapping brush. But in the evening, old folks rocked back-and-forth on the porch. Nearby, the stars, the moon, and the sky converged where smoky rags soaked in “coal oil” fought off mosquitos and other wild life. Native squalls disguised transatlantic cries as Chickasaw voices hummed deep, mournful African drums. Each “call” answered itself and simultaneously received a pulsating “response” echoed porch-to-porch, amplified across the vibrating *holla'*, and communicated up to a mile away in any direction; transmitting unchallenged sonic images of surface contours/density, climate/weather and spatial cohesion along its many relationships and points of contact. . . . You may have heard me revisit many of the same tonal “places” in ONO performances. Somewhere around seventh grade I wrote and recited a poem about echoes escaping New Chapel Cemetery, where I spent an unhealthy amount of time alone as it was also across another *holla'* . . . and closer than our nearest neighbors. I titled the poem “Sound Escapes.” Yet, I never escaped. Within the thickets of onomatopoeia performance, my dissociated body reclaims that terrain with sustained immediacy.<sup>7</sup>

The remainder of the year, and more when Mother moved there, I spent thirty miles south, first in Quincy, and later in the Carter’s Chapel section of Amory, MS, with my paternal great-grandparents, Jennie and Neely Carter. Neely was Chickasaw and after our “great fire,” he never spoke or made eye contact with anyone but his wife.<sup>8</sup> . . . After the Quincy fires I stopped speaking, and developed respiratory ailments, including acute asthma. An emotional ritual cured my asthma for the rest of my life. The ritual was very formal. Female “Saints” only. All dressed in white cotton, color of death and transfiguration. First, a series of voice-only hums and other chanted sounds, without entreaties, during a ritualized herbal baptismal ceremony, induced a bronchial detox and dilation. Sweat, mucus and violent expectoration. A second cleanse. Next, I ingested mixtures of herbs, homemade vinegar, and eggshells (calcium). Pause, accompanied by ever-increasing chanted sounds. And then, at fever pitch, speaking in tongues. This Communion of the Pentecost was held at midnight in Carter’s Chapel Church. It remains fresh to this day, and the emotional commitments I formed there are intrinsic vocal instruments underpinning each ONO performance, which may be seen as a form of “testifying.”

### **Re-sounding Erased Histories: Bleeding Haints and Ghosted Tracks**

**Shannon:** As noted above, while the subaltern often cannot speak, perhaps they can resound against silence and erasure. The sonic subaltern also remains concerned with rewriting history from below, and this is very much in alignment with travis’s description of ONO performance as a kind of testifying. Daphne Brooks describes how “sound and corporeal gestures and aesthetics travel and transmogrify across time and haunt our present-day lives” (Brooks, Kheshti, and Anderson, 330). Can you both say a little about this theme of haunting? How is ONO invested in resounding alternate/erased histories? We’ve spoken a bit about bleeding haints and *holla's* as haunted

repetitions—but what about ghosted tracks? They seem to be a sonic technique that performs like a bleeding haint—they bleed through, making noise.

**P. Michael:** Ghosted tracks [are] counterpoint beats and sounds [produced] in the final mix-down . . . the producer and I would mix from one set of [tracks] to the other . . . there would be some bleed through of sound and also some doubling of what’s heard—a sort of ghosting of sound you could say. . . [You can hear some of this ghosting effect at points when the rhythms fall apart and regroup in **Audio File 1**.] Ghosted tracks [also refer to] the CIA or Ghosts referenced throughout the entire LP, *Spooks* (ONO 2015c).<sup>9</sup>

**Shannon:** When I first mentioned the sonic subaltern, travis’s response was, “Not only have ONO acted out the ‘Sonic Subaltern’ call from day one, years ago, we retranslated its latent festivity performatively via *Diegesis*” (ONO 2014). Please say more, travis.

**travis:** I am Chickasaw/Yoruba. I am the White Voice of the walking Dead. Black communities are Invisible to political power, Invisible to economic power, Invisible to religio-philosophical power. The bombardment of [sonic] overlays possessing *Diegesis* disconnect, disorder and disgorge the colonizer’s life in pictures. Each headline denies authenticity, denies magnanimity, denies body count. By colonizing its festivity, we address “How Does the Subaltern Learn?” . . .

**Shannon:** I can think of several pieces on *Diegesis* that tell erased histories and expose bleeding haints. Let’s take “CQCQCQ” (ONO 2014a). Of course, “tell” is the wrong word—there is minimal historical information in text or sound; we do not aim at textual or sonic “representation” of subaltern historical events. Instead, we use what we might call “onomato-poetics” and “schizophonic sonics” like P. Michael’s “ghosted tracks.” Why are these more deconstructive methods preferred?

**P. Michael:** the simple answer would be PTSD and the fallout of umpteen years of trauma on POC [People of Colour] bodies. Mere words could not emphasize the pain and horror, so we seek out differing expressions. Coded onomato-poetic expressions and the sound of terror that we feel.

**travis:** Re: CQCQCQ: Respecting the nature of my security clearance, historical documents regarding Israel’s bombing of USS Liberty are available on-line, in many pop-up missionary flavors. “CQCQCQ” exists as one of a dozen or more pieces written as *travisDjPTSD* to survive high blood pressure, which reached “white coat hypertension” levels after the week of 23SEP65, and remained so for nearly fifty years.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the day, THU 08JUN67, the following weeks, and for many years subsequent, I survived endlessly odious lies of which I am sworn to silence. Lyndon Baines Johnson, Robert Strange McNamara, and many other officials, elsewhere, deceived, disrespected and denied USAmerican servicemen, servicewomen and their families. All this perpetrated during my watch as Communications Supervisor/Traffic Checker aboard USS America (CVA66) during Israel’s murder of thirty-four communicators aboard America’s newest communications ship. (Note: All communicators forbidden to speak “Details” of the event.) Yet, ONO’s fiftieth anniversary USS Liberty performance of “CQCQCQ” astonished fans, Art History students amongst them. One, a thirty-year-old fan whose father served aboard USS America 08JUN67, spent a good thirty minutes discussing the event, as well as the run-up to it, searching for clues to his father’s unexplained (and relatively extreme) behavior at any mention of the “USS Liberty Incident.” The NSA, fifty years on, maintains an iron fist; a loaded gun; a mouthful of Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, Raytheon, Northrop, et al.



Audio file 2: “CQCQCQ” (ONO 2014a)

**Shannon:** Our latest album, *Red Summer*, also resounds (with) erased histories—from August 20, 1619, when enslaved Africans were first forcibly brought to Point Comfort, to the Tuskegee syphilis experiments and the anti-Black violence of the Red Summer of 1919 (ONO 2020).<sup>11</sup> Bleeding haints, all.

### Black Sonic Marronage

**Shannon:** In a conversation with Roshanak Kheshti on the social space of sound, Brooks speaks of “black sonic *marronage*,” a very compelling concept that joins the concept of escape or flight from enslavement with the notion of Black sonic practices in which performers engage in strategies of appropriation and inversion to make the material suit their own expression and to perform against the grain of societal conventions (Brooks, Kheshti, and Anderson, 332). Would you situate ONO’s sonic practices within this kind of legacy? I can think of travis’s strategic use of baritone vocalization in the manner of the great Negro spiritual, for example. Would you accept or reject this reading? What about through sampling and other sound-generating and manipulating strategies?

**P. Michael:** Yes, via the samples used for ONO’s many performances . . . they are a mixed bag. Some old, some new, many are truncated, tortured, and changed to fit into the clearly-defined Premise and to invoke a mood.

**travis:** Yes. But also No. I do not understand the question(s). Are you asking would I, travis, in 2020, “situate ONO’s sonic practices” within a legacy of “appropriation and inversion”? Are you also asking if I, travis, strategically use my voice in the manner of “the great Negro spiritual . . .”? Escape or flight from enslavement? If those are the questions, I need narrow definitions. Truth is, my voice is not my own. My body must live and die, monetized “for all perpetuity,” and sonically enslaved by what I call the history, the legacy, and the theory of the “false face.” Of course, there are cultural truths, relative truths, fugitive truths, et al. Truths of *marronage*, at least those respectable enough to survive the long trot from diasporic deathbeds to mastheads, appear, peripherally, to wed certain Maroon communities with the language of resistance, the strategies of resistance or the technologies of resistance advancing, for instance, the Haitian Revolution or, say, the “Red Summer” of 1919. I suggest an unbroken timeline leading to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Black impotency. The ONO Statement of Purpose clearly bridges “The Third World” as an influence. You and P. Michael may read a clearer picture than I do, as I am too close to the fallout; I tongue tie the spleen. ^^^ I am slow. I need more context for Brooks’ “black sonic *marronage*” curation. Far more than critiquing imposed physical or social structures, every Black body mercilessly critiques the nearest Black body, as if it were a foreign language. I dare ask: Who ever [*sic*] covered Black skin or Black sound with strategy, faithfully or not? Decoding *marronage* is troubling, especially (today). One result of *marronage* is long-suffering, deeply competitive hierarchies, languages, and traditions separating Afro-American descendants of rival African tribes, injected into rival indigenous tribes. Perhaps results do not matter. Perhaps agents of change matter more. Locally, for instance, there are deep, hushed and ghostly divisions between Chicago Blacks and Haitians, Jamaicans and Barbadians. Highly clannish religio-social, linguistic and color-coded rivalries, very similar to “festivities,” rule the day; always weaponized, raw and cocked. But if results do not matter, then agents of change matter more. Critical concern: Many undefined issues accompany “black sonic *marronage*” that I have not explored.

Such as explosive sub-cultural worldviews (Colonial/Guerrilla Truths?) referentially repackaged for popular consumption. Where is that, necessarily brutal, engagement of sonic freedom (emancipation from what?) and capital/ism. I have no hope. I have no belief. I have no faith strong enough to penetrate, illuminate, or reflect my Black face. Reflected: “black sonic *marronage*” >< “black sonic museum.” What must freedom sound like? How shall liberty and justice resound? And here, we take a moment to read, aloud, James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice.” Indeed, my (1980) insistence upon “Onomatopoeia Before Music,” recognizes sonic pitfalls built by slaves under new sonic slave masters. (Jamaica?) Separation does not require divorce, rejection, or liberation. An argument may also posit that (Memory of the) Moment of sever/cut, reflected at the (Moment of) reporting assumes a constancy of monolithic Black body radiation to penetrate invisible walls. Yet I also onomatopoeia ultraviolet language; performative Contour; countless transatlantic slave ship suicide rebellions. I suspect that during our Haitian missions we both experienced more uncharted haunts than black sonic *marronage* permits.<sup>12</sup> So now, forty years on, *Red Summer* invokes the spirit of Cuban, Haitian and Puerto Rican hounngans, Jamaican bounty hunters and USAmerican maroons, forced to serve alongside God’s own European rapists, heathens and heretics as we explore 1619–1919–2019.<sup>13</sup> Haint the smell of fire-branded Jack, amputated Nat, and castrated Sambo; Black bodies, still burning. Haint, the whisper in the ears of a dead horse.

**Shannon:** Our use of Dessalines’ monologue from William Edgar Easton’s 1893 play, *Dessalines, A Dramatic Tale* on the track, “Fleur de Lis,” might be considered an example of “black sonic *marronage*” (ONO 2015a)—a kind of critical reclaiming of older Black revolutionary voices:

What has made me master here? What will make ye masters here? Is his white tainted flesh invulnerable [*sic*]? Look upon us! I am as black as the shadows of night, with muscles of iron and a will that never was enslaved! What has he that I have not, save the arrogance of the accursed Caucasian blood? What hath these Franks that we are their household chattel—that we are their beasts? . . . What fetich [*sic*] have they that sustains their power to rule and ours to serve? We are ten to one their number now in Haiti—perhaps an hundred [*sic*], it may be. Then is it the strong who rules, or is it the natural sequence of our own inward weakness? (Easton 1893, 13)



Audio File 3: “Fleur de Lis” (ONO 2015a); monologue begins at 6’55”

This monologue has the final word on *Spooks* (ONO 2015c) and is a ghosted expression of resistance: the voice of Jean Jacques Dessalines, leader of the Haitian Revolution, as translated through the pen of a nineteenth-century African-American playwright and politician.<sup>14</sup> In the context of today’s ongoing police brutality, growing anti-Black racism, and the Black Lives Matter movement, that voice abruptly and provocatively has the last say on the album. Yet, I am the one who performs it; should it no longer be considered an instance of black sonic *marronage*?

**P. Michael:** Yes, you, a white woman, perform it . . . but I took your performance and worked with the sound engineer to distort and change your reading of it to make it something else . . . the lowered and slowed down voice see (Chopped and Screwed—a Black rap technique) it is no longer a pure white woman reciting words; the words are still there and clear but it is, you might say, “ghosted or tainted” by our black hands . . .



**travis:** . . . On the ONO stage, we rethink the living, release the dead. Knowing full well that in the current “Information Age,” only informed people can find information. Jim Crow II: For Everyman. White teeth grinning. Algorithms wink-wink. . . .

## Dialogue Theory—Toward a Conclusion

**Shannon:** With both ears and an open heart attuned toward the “co-optive possibilities” of dialogue as a “site of control” (Dutta and Pal, 365), I ask you, what erasures or silences have I created in framing and editing our conversation? What else do you want to say?

**P. Michael:** [silence]

**travis:**

1. Where does theory depart from Plantation Chapel hierarchies?
2. Where does “spirit possession” intersect subaltern theory?
3. . . .

## Notes

1. Capitalization in original. travis legally dropped his surname and uses a lowercase “t.” See also [travistravis.com](http://travistravis.com).
2. travis’s capitalization is critical. He capitalizes nouns, as was common in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English, but also pronouns, verbs, etc. Borrowing and exaggerating a practice from an era of bloody colonization is a critical appropriation strategy and reclamation. In refusing to capitalize his name but choosing to capitalize Noise or Premise, travis inverts the rules of a language that he describes as not his own.
3. In 2007, ONO regrouped after a long hiatus. Since then, we’ve produced five albums, two film soundtracks, and an impressive performance portfolio. In addition to P. Michael, travis, and me, current members are Rebecca Pavlatos, Dawei Wang, Ben Karas, Connor Tomaka, and Jordan Reyes.
4. The notion of the sonic subaltern builds on Gayatri Spivak’s well-known 1988 essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
5. As noted, “noise” was positioned as the enemy of “sound” in early soundscape theory, which was grounded in an analogy to landscape. Where the soundscape was whole, noise was pollution, disruption. Here, travis reframes the same analogy to make the critique that the Black male body is noise in/on the USAmerican landscape.
6. In an email correspondence to Shannon titled “Noise Defined,” travis states that his work “explores NOISE! White Noise, Blue Noise, Red Noise, and especially the *fear* of Black Noise: Silence!” The colours referenced in his response fit within the larger argument about the Black male body as noise on the white USAmerican landscape. Invading those particular “colors of Noise” is his work as an artist—when one’s life is perceived as disruption/Noise and situated within Noise, i.e., static erasure and spatial racism, one may prefer to reclaim Noise as a weapon.
7. All emphases in original.
8. When asked, travis confirms that the “Great Fire” and the Quincy fires are the same event(s). He was not more forthcoming, and I did not pry.
9. The *Chicago Reader* ranked *Spooks* (ONO 2015c) number 13 of the top Chicago albums of the 2010s. <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/music-best-albums-2010s-decade-ranked-records/Content?oid=77394291>.

10. *travisDjPTSD* is a solo sound/performance project of Travis's.
11. You can stream the album on *The Wire*: "Listen: ONO's Red Summer," *The Wire*, April 2020, <https://www.thewire.co.uk/audio/tracks/premiere-hear-ono-s-album-in-full>. See also Berlatsky (2020).
12. With "our Haitian missions," Travis refers to his time in Haiti while in the US Navy in the late 1960s and to Shannon's first trip to Haiti in 1980–81 as a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.
13. Regarding "forty years on," ONO's first performance was January 5, 1980.
14. For a discussion of Easton's play, see Riley (2016), 173–210.

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