Crossing Cinematic and Sonic Bar Lines: T-Pain's "Can't Believe It"

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Abstract: In cinematic history, black bodies have been represented as inhuman, super-human, and sub-human. T-Pain's work enacts strategic resistance to these discursive formations. T-Pain's "Can't Believe It" music video resonates with wider practices of how black bodies are represented in visual media. After an analysis of T-Pain's use of Auto-Tune as a technology that represents the human voice via machine, I articulate how T-Pain's earlier radical improvisational work with Auto-Tune and his subsequent cinematic strategies in his widely popular video represent the radical black imagination. T-Pain's "Can't Believe It" music video resonates with historical practices of how black bodies are represented in visual media. I analyze T-Pain's transformation of Auto-Tune into a subversive technology that represents the black voice via machine. I connect that sonic analysis to signifiers in the video, which are representations that deploy constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality as they relate to notions of blackness. Crossing bar lines, the semiotics of T-Pain's trademark Auto-Tune sound, raises questions about what is at stake in the music through the generative force of sonic propulsion and the simultaneously old and novel articulation of a freedom drive propelling black performance.

> Imagination is a magic carpet / Upon which we may soar
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> To distant lands and climes / And even go
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> Beyond the moon
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> To any planet in the sky / If we came from
>
> Nowhere here
>
> Why can't we go somewhere there?
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> *Sun Ra, "Imagination"*

In this essay I argue that T-Pain uses an optic-sonic insurgency in his music video "Can't Believe It" to represent the positionality of blacks in American society and to explore black potentiality in the virtual sphere.[1] Many of the televisual representations in the video appear to be a cinematic rejoinder to the long history of black stereotypes that have historically permeated all media. I contend that T-Pain's cinematic strategies can be read productively as a political backlash against the long and continuing tradition of portraying blacks negatively in film. His video emerges at a time when contemporary music video directors working in tandem with artists have started to use CGI technology to create dynamic expressions of black bodies in alternate realities. These black artists have reterritorialized virtual spaces by increasingly creating alternative representations of blacks in music videos.[2] The guiding questions of this discussion are: How are black ontological positions represented through sonic and visual semiotics found in the "Can't Believe It" video? Does T-Pain's video function as a narrative of black resistance to codified forms of black caricature and art? What are T-Pain's specific cinematic and musical strategies of resistance?

Before we discuss the work of T-Pain it may be useful to look at examples of recent depictions of blacks in two well-known films. Recent portrayals of blacks in the American film industry have continued the long historical tradition of attributing innate criminality and inhumanity to blacks. *End of Watch* (2012) depicts many instances of blacks as criminals who behave in inhumane ways. Shot in documentary style by director David Ayer, the film features two vigilante Los Angeles police officers, one, a white male ex-Marine played by Jake Gyllenhaal, and the other, his Latino partner played by Michael Peña. The opening scene features Gyllenhaal's character explaining in voiceover what it means to be a Los Angeles police officer. From the point of view of their police car's front window, we see the two officers chase at breakneck speed two black male suspects through inner-city streets. Once the inevitable confrontation occurs, a shooting match ensues, and the officers kill the blacks in perfunctory and celebratory fashion. Shot down like villains in a video game, the black males are filmed in the scene with no defining facial features. Through this technique, director Ayer emphasizes their threatening physicality as they

shoot at the police officers. Later in the film, the police officers respond to a call from a South Central Los Angeles home. A black female and male—apparently under the influence of illegal substances—complain about their missing children. The black woman, whose eyes bulge as she speaks rapidly and incoherently, states that her children are missing, while the black male, now pinned down on the couch by Gyllenhaal's character, orders her to keep her silence while stating that the children are with their grandmother. Suspicious of their nervous and frenetic claims, Gyllenhaal conducts a search of the disheveled house and finds a baby and a toddler, mouths and limbs bound with duct tape. Gyllenhaal's character heroically rescues the children from the degradation and insanity of the black adults. The cinematic narrative strategy here presents blacks as agents of inhuman acts who bind their children so that they can enjoy drugs while forgetting their children's whereabouts.

Django Unchained (2012), film director Quentin Tarantino's modern-day Western, strives to give historical agency to an enslaved black male named Django, played by actor/musician Jamie Foxx. Django's agency, however, is attenuated by his position as a pupil who is intellectually inferior to his paternalistic teacher, the infamous German-born bounty hunter Dr. King Schultz (played by Christoph Waltz). Schultz rescues Django from two white slave traders. However, this salvation is conditional. Django must help Schultz find the Brittle Brothers. Though Django is freed, he is once again enslaved by Schultz, who apologetically informs Django of his conditional freedom. Tarantino gives borrowed agency to the enslaved Django character, humanizing him, but only through the tutelage of the German bounty hunter (who, in contrast to Django, is depicted as refined, educated and articulate, though he is eventually shown to be a vengeful and violent man). Upon hearing Schultz's offer to join him in finding the Brittle Brothers and use violence against them, Django remarks, "Kill white people and get paid for it, what's not to like?" Tarantino may have been attempting to rescue the black male from historical celluloid portrayals as subservient, docile, and inarticulate. This rescue attempt, however—just like Schultz's rescue of Django—may only promote and exacerbate the perceived inhumanity of blacks by inviting the audience to enjoy Django's violence against whites.

These two cinematic cases—one that propagates the inhumanity of South Central blacks through portrayals of them as inhumane in contradistinction to the LAPD, and the other only extending partial humanity and agency to the enslaved Django through European guidance and vengeful violence—reanimate and revise tropes about blacks as inhuman in American cinematic history.[3] In response to the predominance of both historical and modern-day representations, I argue that T-Pain's video disrupts the tradition of racist representations in film by producing unconventional images and sounds that recast blackness in ways that momentarily convey—in several permutations—the fluidity and complexity of black identities.

In my critique of T-Pain's work I am not making an argument about black authenticity or claiming that he is producing protest music. Instead, I argue that his work should be placed in the category of strategic contestation. Black popular culture is not pure, has no pure forms, and cannot be a recovery of something pure. As the late Stuart Hall argued, "Always these [black popular music] forms are impure, to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base" (1998:28). Within complex structures of commercial culture, however, narratives of resistance can still be found. Popular culture relies on these narratives to perpetuate itself (Lipsitz 1988:100). The storytelling of blackness in the "Can't Believe It" music video reveals how the general demonization of black people in the imagery of popular culture drives some artists to invert, subvert, and signify on dominant sights and sounds in order to deploy them for oppositional ends.

Crossing Cinematic Bar Lines

Going beyond the common definition in music theory of a bar line as a way to separate meter into units, I use bar lines metaphorically to represent how various practices of racism and other social inequalities constrain a group's humanity. When an artist crosses bar lines he or she seeks to transcend racism and fend off despair through creative practices. Black filmmakers and musicians seek to cross cinematic bar lines in response to the perpetuation of archetypes by creating alternative images in alternative virtual spaces. Some of the signifying strategies I will analyze in "Can't Believe It" include T-Pain's conjuring of objects and events, his nonlinear traveling through space and time, and multiple representations of T-Pain's virtual black body as simultaneously large and small, as alternately silhouettes and shadows. The music video emanates from T-Pain's music production skills and sound aesthetics. This is why it is also important to analyze how the choreographed images reflect T-Pain's use of Auto-Tune technology to perform a musical fantasy. This musical performance of fantasy is represented in his use of space on the harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic levels. Following a brief biography of T-Pain, I will discuss his strategic use of Auto-Tune. I will then discuss in detail how T-Pain crosses the bar lines through cinematic strategies.

Hip-hop singer and rapper T-Pain (Faheem Najm) was born June 30th, 1985. The "T" of "T-Pain" signifies Tallahassee—the city in Florida where he was raised—and the "Pain" part of his stage moniker signifies the pain he suffered while growing up in northern Florida. Due to his imaginative use of Auto-Tune pitch correction plug-in software to improvise and create various sonic textures, T-Pain has become a music industry phenomenon. T-Pain's music video "Can't Believe It" is a text filled with iconic signs that represent black male agency through contemporary and mythological representations of virtual social life. Similar to the work of Sun Ra in *Space Is The Place* (1974), as well as several other black artists across different genres, T-Pain's work simultaneously creates and signifies on alternative realities.4 Meanings are never fixed. One cannot be certain of what T-Pain exactly intends to communicate through his manipulation of Auto-Tune timbre or the images in his videos. His cultural production does provoke questions, however, about what his sonic and visual representations suggest regarding constructions or representations of black masculinity. The sights and sounds of his video for "Can't Believe It" exemplify the work of African American artists who resist archetypical representations of black bodies. T-Pain's representations depict agency derived from an understanding of blackness that registers on the outskirts of civil society.5 Before analyzing the images, it is important to examine the pitch and rhythm scheme from which the music video images were choreographed.

The Sound of Racial Identity In Auto-Tune

T-Pain utilizes Auto-Tune pitch-correction software in ways that defy its originally intended uses.6 His innovative use of technology extends from the black music tradition of manipulating and reshaping technology to meet new musical needs that reflect different cultural priorities. For example, rap producers have challenged established mixing techniques, formulaic lyric construction, and the limits of the distortion zone by pushing the bass levels past what is considered musically appropriate by the dominant culture (Rose 1994). The manipulation of sophisticated music technology to reflect cultural priorities is connected to the black composer/improviser's long tradition of transforming European acoustical instruments on the level of sound and technique. Adolf Sax likely never imagined the reinvention of his instrument via the technical innovations and unconventional timbre in the work of saxophonist John Coltrane. Many music critics have largely misunderstood these ferocious transformations of musical technology. Such modernist music criticism has been reflected in critiques of Miles Davis's trumpet technique. Jazz critics in the modernist tradition failed to understand and appreciate that Davis did not strive to achieve European standards of trumpet performance (Walser 1993). Rather, Davis's trumpet performances—and I would include his compositions as well—were a manifestation of an aesthetic that comes from a unique understanding of music, community, and politics. This also holds true for hip-hop artists. The distinctive way in which T-Pain uses Auto-Tune software suggests how he is thinking about sound and how that sound reflects his racial imagination.

Before T-Pain's innovative use of Auto-Tune, pitch-correction software was predominantly used to correct out-of-tune vocal notes in the popular music industry. T-Pain uses Auto-Tune instead for creating desired sound effects that stem from his musical and racial imagination. For T-Pain, audio technology is not a prosthesis—it is a means for innovating a racially authentic sound. Employing the formidable technological apparati of the studio, T-Pain's goal is to sound racially "natural" or "authentic."

We can connect T-Pain's reinvention of musical tools to a growing list of musicians who continue to reinvent sound on instruments long associated with European performance traditions. These reinventions are central to the Afro-diasporic musical traditions. While acknowledging the inescapable hybridity of black musical forms (Hall 1998), I contend, as other scholars have, that African musical traits not only survived the Middle Passage but continue to play a role in the development of various types of African American music (Floyd 1995; Maultsby 1990; Stuckey 1988). The repertoire of trumpet sounds from Miles Davis or the anti-pianism of Thelonious Monk, for example, illustrate the historical and cultural practice of reinventing sound on "traditional" instruments. Instruments once used to represent pastoral scenes of a European countryside have been transformed through percussive embouchures, innovative breath control, and fingering techniques to create sounds that represent the quotidian tribulations of marginalized communities. Socially marginalized players who emerge from these communities develop different musical values, and thus have different musical priorities. This is why it is necessary for African American musicians to transform traditional European instrumental technology and modern recording studio technology into instruments that reflect their imaginations. Social marginalization of black musicians has kept their cultural production from being fully commoditized. Though black music thrives as an international commodity, black musicians have the ability to retain some level of autonomy within the commoditization because blacks continue to

exist on the outskirts of "civil society." As Amiri Baraka explains,

> Afro-American music, because of its exclusion as a social product yet ultimate exploitation as a commercial object, could influence that whole of the musical (and social and aesthetic) culture of the U.S. and even be subjected to mind-boggling dilutions and obscene distortions; yet the source, the Afro-American people, was spared the full "embrace" of commercial American absorption because of their marginalized existence as Americans. (2002:261)

Despite the wholesale commodification of black popular music on the international scale, a space for innovative music making by black musicians remains, because economic and social marginalization continues to be a catalyst for innovation. While T-Pain is one of the most commercially successful artists in the music business, and while his music and representations can appear to support sexism and racial stereotypes, his past musical innovations through Auto-Tune and the related, imaginative cinematic representations in his "Can't Believe It" video can also be recognized as important commentary on social and racial matters. T-Pain's popularity is built upon his reinvention of Auto-Tune pitch correction software for his own creative purposes and cultural priorities.

Through Auto-Tune technology, T-Pain sought to create an innovative sound based on both the "natural voice" and the saxophone. As T-Pain states, "My dad always told me that anyone's voice is just another instrument added to the music. . . . I got a lot of influence from [the '60s era] and I thought I might as well just turn my voice into a saxophone" (Sniderman 2011). Using Auto-Tune technology and various production equipment to create a sound that reflects 40-year-old production values, T-Pain has been criticized by Raphael Saadiq and by rapper/business mogul Jay-Z, who titled one of his songs "D.O.A. (Death of Auto-Tune)" (2009). These criticisms proceed from the idea that audio technology can and should capture a natural or pure black voice. Yet the idea that the recording process captures the natural (black) voice, or any natural or authentic acoustic sound, is an illusion. From the beginning, audio recordings have been technologically manipulated or enhanced. Audio recording has never recorded a pure or authentic sound, and this includes recordings of black voices. While many still believe the purpose of the recording process is to record sound as authentically and transparently as possible, "all popular music recordings could be analyzed as technologically determined artifacts, even though some might appear to be more or less the result of technological intervention and manipulation than others" (Warner 2009:135). T-Pain's work embraces technology to trouble the binary between racially authentic sound and technologically manipulated sound.

T-Pain "credits the core of his music and lyrical style to R. Kelly and Cee Lo Green, two R&B artists known for their expressive—and unfiltered—voices" (Sniderman 2011). Citing the late singer Amy Winehouse as an example of a musician who achieved a vintage sound on *Back To Black* (2006), T-Pain discusses being influenced by the musical production of older recordings from a past era:

> I'm leaning more towards old school Neve and TubeTech preamps and tube compressors. . . . I was amazed at how they made Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black* sound like it was made in the fifties, and I think a lot of that had to do with the old school hardware they used when making the album. (Guitar Center Interviews)

T-Pain bends modern technology to make his Auto-Tuned voice reflect the sound of crooners like Sam Cooke. This contrasts the sound in rap songs like Ice Cube's "Gangsta Rap Made Me Do It," which is focused on representing an ironic and aggressive representation of black masculinity. T-Pain explains:

> I feel like my sound comes from a similar place, like old crooners like Sam Cooke or even the old Stevie Wonder stuff. I want to go towards that sound, so you need the right hardware to do that. You can't just get a bunch of plug-ins and make that happen. You have to record to tape and use old tube hardware. (Guitar Center Interviews)

Tricia Rose has argued that rap producers have used sampling as a musical time machine to access and reframe present sounds produced by black artists from the 1970s (Rose 1994). In this process, black cultural priorities in sound are continually revised and expanded to adapt to modern social conditions. T-Pain's creative use of Auto-Tune fits within this tradition of sonic revision. He reaches back in order to go forward. One may argue (as a fellow musicologist once did to me) that since T-Pain's voice is mediated by Auto-Tune, T-Pain is liberated from historical constructions of the black male voice—you cannot hear racial signs in his music. Therefore, my colleague argued, we should not analyze his work within the tradition of black male singers. T-Pain, the argument goes, has achieved a post-racial musical sound through technological obscuration. My colleague's argument indicates a belief that the use of technology swallows identity and that technology renders the sound of racial identity mute. Such arguments reflect the notion that "corporate power assumes an important, even dominating role in conditioning our thinking about computers, art, image, and sound" (Lewis 2000:36). However, T-Pain's Auto-Tuned version of racial sound is deliberately highlighted at the same rate his voice is mediated. Auto-Tune for T-Pain is a means to highlight racial identity in sound, not an end. In T-Pain's desire to represent disbelief and fantasy musically, he creates a rhythmic scheme that narrates an ethereality through musical techniques of time suspension and implied beats.

Rhythmic Representation of Fantasy and Space in an Eight-Bar Phrase

One of the first things listeners may hear while listening to "Can't Believe It" is the subtlety of the rhythm track. The rubato opening acts as an ethereal prelude while the arpeggiated keyboard sound combined with guitar evokes a mystical sonic backdrop. This brief, nonmetric twenty-one-second prelude prepares the listener for the repetitive harmonic sequence, which will soon follow, forming the basis for T-Pain's Auto-Tune panegyric on love. Rhythm is not foregrounded in this song. No ostinato bass line is used to outline the meter or pulse. T-Pain's musical priorities appear to be creating a sound of fantasy and magic. The sound of fantasy is achieved through the use of subtle rhythm tracks and sparse bass lines. Rappers in the past have crossed the bar lines by pushing the bass sound far into the distortion zone, making the bass drum the loudest sound on the record, and purposely bleeding the bass sound into the other tracks (Rose 1994:77). In contrast, the relatively subdued rhythm track on "Can't Believe It" likely indicates that T-Pain wished to prioritize other musical aspects in order to reflect the lyrical message of disbelief and fantasy. The surreal atmosphere is buffeted by a high-pitched, synthesized, descending pentatonic melodic riff that occurs at the beginning of every four-bar phrase. These registral and musical aspects are prioritized in the mix to represent suspended space and fantasy. T-Pain also uses rhythm to create a feeling of suspension in time.

T-Pain samples a finger-snapping sound and bass drum in the repetitive eight-bar rhythm sequence of "Can't Believe It." A feeling of space is created through T-Pain's placement of beats in the song. In this minimalist soundscape, T-Pain creates a contrast in register and timbre through the orchestration of high-pitched finger snapping complemented by a low register bass drum. The finger snapping occurs on beats two and four in common (4/4) time. The way the rhythm is divided in this sequence is what makes the song interesting, because the rhythmic divisions simultaneously create rhythmic tension and a feeling of space.

With the exception of the last beat in bar 8, T-Pain emphasizes a feeling of space and rhythmic tension by putting a rest on the fourth beat in the seventh bar. The two sixteenth notes occurring in the middle of measures 2-3 and measures 6-7 emphasize the space left on beat four of bar 7. By deliberately leaving a rest on beat four for most of the eight-bar phrase, both the sixteenth notes on beat three and the downbeat are pronounced. The repetition of rhythms in the song remains interesting due to the unexpected inversion of the rhythms in bars 2 and 3. It is not a full inversion of the rhythm because of the variations on measure 1 in bar 4. The offbeat sixteenth note on beat four of the repetitive eight-measure phrase also keeps the repetitive rhythm interesting by emphasizing the downbeat. In bar 5—the beginning of the second half of the eight-bar phrase—the stop-time or "break" creates space in the form and allows T-Pain to emphasize the words and the descending melodic figure that occurs at the beginning of every four-bar phrase. The prominence of T-Pain's verbal text is essential here. The rhythmic scheme is designed to accompany, not dominate the text. T-Pain creates a feeling of suspension in time through a calculated instability. This feeling of chronological musical suspension not only creates harmonic interest, but is also evidence of a sonic performance of resistance to the expectation of a steady, predictable, common time beat.

How are these musical strategies connected to the video? The music I have analyzed here is important because it provides the essential backdrop of the music video. The sparse musical texture likely inspired the fantastical

imagery of black bodies effortlessly traveling through space and time, unhampered by borders. It would seem that T-Pain and the directors absorbed the musical semiotics and lyrics of fantasy in the song and used that material as the foundation for the creation of the film.

Video. T-Pain's "Can't Belive It"

> I think his music video was his vision . . . after taking a pound a meth . . .
>
> *YouTube comment from ballinpc223*

Virtual Performance of Fantasy and Social Life

The award-winning music video was created with computer-generated imagery (CGI) by the design and live-action directing company Syndrome: Design and Direction. When I contacted Syndrome to see how much artistic input T-Pain may have had in the representations of himself, I was told that the information I wanted regarding production was not available. I was also told that speaking with the design team was not a possibility (March 5, 2013). Yet Syndrome's own statements indicate that T-Pain had a significant influence on the kind of images he wanted his audience to see. Members of Syndrome wrote:

> The vibe and energy clicked very naturally between Pain and ourselves and that energy spilled all over these videos. It's one thing to have an artist stand in front of a green screen and perform, but when they interact and play off of what the treatment calls for, *that interaction takes it to another level by adding the emotion and soul* [my emphasis]. T-Pain really went hard with his performances and got what we were going for *ultimately being the key ingredient to bringing the concepts to fruition* [my emphasis]. ("Robot Film's")

Does Syndrome's description of the collaboration indicate that T-Pain realized Syndrome's artistic ideas rather than that Syndrome acted as a conduit for T-Pain's racial imagination? Without more information one cannot say specifically how the creative process worked. Yet Syndrome's design team was clearly influenced by T-Pain's presence and direction in the studio. The design team was also influenced by T-Pain's Auto-Tuned music and the lyrical content, which discusses various locations around the world.

T-Pain's agency is represented in the way he magically conjures objects and events. His magical agency is also represented in the way he transports himself and his love interest through virtual space to locations around the world. Rooted in the collective DNA of blacks spread throughout the African diaspora, the once-covert practice of conjuring continues to be openly represented in African American musical and cinematic expression. Indeed, black musicians such as T-Pain may use conjuring codes in their cultural production as a strategy of identity affirmation without understanding that in other historical periods, "conjurational performances" by enslaved Africans "ensured the practicioner's personal sur^{v}ival or vocational integrity" (Smith 1994:125).7 To be sure, T-Pain uses conjurational codes in his film as a cultural st^{r}ategy of "deformation of mastery" (Baker 1986).8

In the following eight scenes of the T-Pain video, I read various representations of black mysticism and benign black magic that represent a virtual black humanity. The function of T-Pain's allegory is not only linked to representations of impossible transformations; the scenes also work as an allegory of black social life. While many representations are problematic (representations of his love interest might be deemed highly problematic for their sexism), this video is nonetheless important in its representation of insurgency against common representations of blackness. Visual representations of blacks in films are never arbitrary or left to chance; they represent corporate decisions about what those images are supposed to portray or signify. American film history reveals many examples of how religious organizations and film industry policies have dictated which races were praised and

idolized, and which races were degraded on the silver screen (Robinson 2007:201). Degrading depictions of nonwhites, or European races that were "not white enough," were enforced and policed with institutional vigor. This is why the work of black minstrels on the stage has a direct connection to depictions of resistance in early independent black film. These cinematic strategies were manifested in such visible ways as an all-black cast. Robinson argues, "By the late nineteenth century, minstrelsy had come to contain concealed resistances, gestures of opposition smuggled in and hidden by the black minstrel performers so prominent in the form. Their impact was to be reflected in a second cinema: the independent Black film or all-black-cast film" (2007:130). Despite a clear difference in historical circumstances, a direct correlation connects these early cinematic strategies of resistance in the work of early black filmmakers and modern-day music video cinematic strategies of hip hop performers and producers. Representations in the work of T-Pain can be placed in the celluloid genealogy of black resistance film that extends back to the subversive performances of black minstrels. Black artists have also resisted the commodification of black bodies by representing black bodies in self-portraits that are disfigured. Alternative representations of blacks should not be criticized within the hegemony of western art history discourse but should be read instead as resistance to portrayals of black bodies in the western art history canon. As Nicole Fleetwood argues,

> Because idealized projection and fantasy are associated with whiteness in Western discourse, black portraiture and self-portraiture function quite differently in dominant visual representation and canonical art history. Portraits of black subjects by black artists often serve as counter-narratives to cultural and discursive meaning associated with blackness and black bodies. They also become locations for creating critical genealogies and archives that speak to very different audiences; many of these works play with vanity and excess. . . . These portraits often included aesthetic and discursive severing, cutting, and splaying that reconstitute "black bodies from crude commodities and ciphers into fashionable actors performing in displays and expositions of their own making." (2011:113)9

Such depictions of corporeal resistance by black artists, whether in film, self-portraiture or any other medium are related to what Afro-pessimist scholar Frank Wilderson calls the "grammar of suffering" (2010:10). Wilderson defines grammar of suffering as related to the social death of blacks, which "can be discerned in the cinematic strategies (lighting, camera angles, image composition, and acoustic design)" in film (2010:5). However, I argue that representations of blacks and blackness in music videos become liberated through transmogrification. The depictions of magic and agency in "Can't Believe It" are productions and representations of a virtual agency that represents social life, not social death.

Strategies of Cinematic Deformity

Does the magical world of play and travel possibilities represented in T-Pain's "Can't Believe It" video reflect a desire to represent a kind of black posthumanity that counters the historical ideas of black bodies as objects? Perhaps. The argument that black artists have a peculiar and privileged access to constructing artistic representations through informational technologies that re-conceptualize the human has been borne out in various media of black cultural production (Weheliye 2002:29). This is true because, on every level, blacks were denied human status for centuries. The practice of creating new racial constructs to combat racist representations extends all the way back to black minstrelsy, where black minstrels performed in whiteface in such shows as *A Trip to Coontown* (1898). Black minstrels had an investment in tearing down constructs that upheld stereotypes and reinforced the practice of lynching blacks (Robinson 2007:155). The act of putting on whiteface make-up was designed to challenge racialized archetypes of blacks through disrupting the practice of imitating blacks (53). These performances by blacks in whiteface were considered a bold and revolutionary act, "because they emerged without preconceived signifiers" (274). These strategies of black minstrel resistance found their way into independent black films such as Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920). More recently, we can find posthuman counter-representational strategies in the work of musicians such as Sun Ra, Rammellzee, and Mad Mike—artists who have avoided creating works that reflected "a really pointless and treacherous category" of the human (Eshun 1998:193).

While the majority of posthuman representations in popular culture have been based on white males, T-Pain's

cinematic and musical strategies are not based on white liberal conceptions of selfhood. T-Pain's art reminds us that the idea of a universal humanism—a humanism that equally applies to all subjects—is a fallacy (Wilderson 2010). It would reasonably follow that there can be no universal post-humanism (Weheliye 2002). Whether one is talking about the radical use of pitch correction software (as in the case of T-Pain's use of Auto-Tune to improvise), cutting-edge computer graphics, or any use of intelligent machines, black musical expression—in all of its hybridity—cannot be based on values of universal liberal subjecthood. Historically and in our present time, neither that particular worldview nor privileged life experience is available to the socially marginalized. As Alexander Weheliye has argued, the notion that splicing human beings together with intelligent machines maximizes human capabilities (Hayles 1999:290) changes when one understands the tension between the black subjecthood of "New World Black Subjects" and the sign of the human (Weheliye 2002:29). T-Pain, in his use of Auto-Tune and in the representations of black subjects in his video productions, joins the many contemporary black artists who have rejected the need to create representations of humanity in their work, "bypassing the modality of the human in the process of moving from subhuman to posthuman" (29).

I am interested in how cinematic strategies of racial resistance also occur in T-Pain's music videos. In music videos such as Busta Rhymes's "Gimme Some More" (1998), hip-hop artists have used the music video format to challenge black cinematic archetypes (Dickinson 2007). Artists such as Busta Rhymes and T-Pain allow themselves to be portrayed in music videos that are "deliberately antirealist as if to pour scorn on the project of realism ever being able to portray African American experience, and to rescue them from the often blunt unimaginativeness to which realism often adds up" (23). The fantastical images of Busta Rhymes as a padded muscle man juxtaposed with the blazing speed with which he "spits rhymes" directly challenges the limiting narratives of blacks in film. The interventions represented in the video promote "technological addition rather than narrative limitation" (24). Dickinson also argues, "These televisual moments are part of a surprisingly beneficial synaesthetic strategy that is catapulting African American representation off into new, and hopefully less constricted spaces—ones where more advantageous relationships between finance, music, and the moving image might possibly be achieved" (24). Representations of defying bodily limitations have also been shown in the work of rapper/actor Ludacris in "Roll Out (My Business)" (2001), a music video that critiques intrusive fans. Ludacris is shown performing boxing moves at high speed while key words of his lyrics are splashed across the screen. Additionally, his body is deformed, with a large head and smaller body parts. "Get Back" (2004) has representations of Ludacris with oversized forearms, which he uses repeatedly to punch out opportunistic black men who desire to have access to his wealth and status. In the end of the video, his head explodes into blue and white confetti that slowly falls into the streets. This grotesque caricature of Ludacris is a means to an end. Deformity in this case may be designed to present alternate black representations that both reinforce and challenge black archetypes.

"Can't Believe It" opens with representations of T-Pain in dual versions of himself. Dressed in his trademark ringleader hat and white Oakley sunglasses, T-Pain's head is slightly titled down, and his face points to the right. T-Pain conjures a miniature version of himself, appearing magically out of a swirling, amorphous white dust that rises from his right hand. This immediate representation of doubleness already indicates a complex fluidity associated with his virtual blackness. T-Pain's conjuring of himself is synchronized to a long Auto-Tune sigh–first an exhalation and then an inhalation. The coloristic texture of the scene's background is fused with shades of grey and violet. Coordinated with this vocal expression of desire, a dancing mini-T-Pain sings, "She make me feel so good / better than I would by myself or / if I was with somebody else," with accompanying expressive gestures. While mini-T-Pain is singing these words, the larger T-Pain figure appears stoic in comparison to the animated mini-version.



Image 1. *T-Pain opening conjuring scene in music video "Cant Believe It"*

In the backdrop of a faint circular light, a silhouette of a woman appears center stage when T-Pain sings, "She make the people say 'yeah'." The black woman emerging from the silhouette is his love interest and the reason he can't believe his good fortune. Changing quickly from a silhouette into an African American woman in a black miniskirt, T-Pain's love interest walks suggestively on a celestial runway toward the viewer. Her transformation, like T-Pain's, happens out of clouds of dust fragments, although less dramatically than T-Pain's earlier manifestation in smaller form. In this sequence, we first see blue swirling rings. These blue swirling rings encircle the representation of the black female subject. The trope of the rings has multiple meanings. They remind the viewing audience and consumers of T-Pain's Thr33 Ringz brand, they highlight T-Pain's love interest, and they work as a segue device between the sequences of the music video. The swirling clouds of dust fragments indicate a benign black magic and black creativity. T-Pain's act of creation in this film is a representation of black male power, but it is also a seductive bewitchment. While his black female object of desire passively looks on, T-Pain conjures out of white dust a gold antique frame, which quickly becomes a portal to the next location.

Borderless Blackness and Time Travel

In the "Can't Believe It" music video, T-Pain boasts about the various places he is able take his love interest, while he simultaneously transports her to the places. Indeed, his video reflects his lyrics. Through borderless time-travel we witness T-Pain transport his love interest to a cabin in Aspen, Colorado, a condo in Toronto, a mansion in "Wiscansin" and a beach in Costa Rica. T-Pain's notion of heterosexual black masculinity may be embedded in representations of African American women as pliant when they are offered travel and wealth, but this is not a new trope in the hip-hop world. T-Pain represents his ability to break through boundaries that blacks face in quotidian life through representations of traveling to various locations around the world. What makes "Can't Believe It" a fantasy song is that it is designed to appeal to T-Pain fans that likely have no discretionary income for travel, and in some cases, may never have traveled out of their urban environments. "Can't Believe It" is filmed to simultaneously represent two types of desire: the desire of a new romantic infatuation and the desire to break free from segregation and poverty-induced geographical limitations. In a Guitar Center interview, T-Pain indicated that

the songs he writes and the images he produces are designed to inspire factions of his audience who cannot travel: "Not everybody can travel all over the world. A lot of people never leave their state, city, or even neighborhood. I like to sing about things that get people inspired, but you can only do that if you can relate to them" (Guitar Center Interviews). This is why representations of boundless travel may appeal to audiences that desire to broaden their experiences of the world beyond their immediate surroundings. T-Pain's and Syndrome's cinematic representation of black potentiality in characters that have limitless access to travel are what make these representations vital, important, and a strategy of resistance.

Through T-Pain's white dust, the frame erupts into a shimmering gold rectangular portal, which he uses to transport his love interest to seemingly random exotic locales. The notion of transforming one's experience through physical and imaginative travel has been prominent in the collective black imagination. The black travel trope has historically been a part of black cosmology and culture, and this travel trope has been expressed in all of the African American arts. Historical African American narratives are saturated with the theme of travel away from slavery and oppression. In the enslaved black community's collective imagination, blacks envisioned flying back to Africa, taking the chariot to heaven, or escaping through the Underground Railroad (Szwed 1997:134). These ideas of flight or escape are the foundation of many blues songs that celebrate locomotion as a way to freedom (Floyd 1988). Similar to Sun Ra, who stated that "space is the place" for blacks, virtual space for T-Pain is a way "to relocate himself so as to embody all time and nature and to escape the confines and limits of life on earth" (Szwed 1997:130).

When T-Pain sings, "and you don't understand she make the people say 'yeah'," T-Pain with two open hands casts glittering smoke towards the feet of his love interest, who is encircled by blue-white light.



Image 2. *T-Pain, conjuring an urban roller coaster*

With this spell, T-Pain conjures a red and yellow contraption that quickly becomes a roller coaster. Suddenly, T-Pain and his love interest are on the roller coaster, which now proceeds through a large mouth representing a portal, with swirling eyes and burgundy top hat. This is another representation of the T-Pain circus brand, but it is also another representation of black doubleness and deformity. Entering through the portal on the conjured roller coaster, T-Pain and his love interest are immediately in the nexus of a metroplex with a composite of iconic, urban skylines. As indicated by a sign, this virtually represented city is Toronto. While they travel down the unstable and slippery slopes of the roller coaster under a full moon, T-Pain sings, "She on the main stage, she make the people say 'yeah'." As the word "yeah" is repeatedly sung, its text appears three times in different configurations, floating freely around the architecture of the roller coaster. The visual text functions as a yellow and red neon billboard that emphasizes the sung text and the color themes of the T-Pain brand. The roller coaster, which passes under the text, leads the viewer to the next scene, now in a new locale. A sign shaped as a red hat with yellow letters spelling "Thr33 Ringz Condos," is above the entrance of a skyscraper. Before the entrance, T-Pain and his love interest stand in front of a red Lamborghini Murcielago.

Following this frame, a giant-sized T-Pain smiles and glances at a globe held in his right hand. As T-Pain sings about a "beach house on the edge of Costa Rica," we see the text "Costa Rica" on the globe, further emphasizing this next "exotic" location where T-Pain will transport himself and his love interest. In this virtual Costa Rica, this virtual beach, T-Pain conjures a white, exotic flower from his left hand while singing that the flower is for his love interest to put in her hair: "Put one of them little flowers in your hair, having you look like a fly mamacita, fuego." As a transitional device and thematic connector, three large golden rings follow the exotic beach scene, traveling from the middle of the screen towards T-Pain's torso. He subsequently casts these rings about as he sings, "cause you look so good / you make me wanna spend it on all you." These three rings become a simulacrum for personal wealth; traces of golden light intersect with the golden rings that are cast upward. As the rings are cast into mid air, they also become portals for circus-themed events. The shiny golden rings frame the digitized circus characters, all returned from previous sequences. Juggling clowns, leather-clad dancers, tumblers and gymnasts, white-faced sidekicks, and black women dancing on stilts all erupt from the three rings that T-Pain has cast.

A log cabin in Aspen, Colorado is another location where T-Pain and his love interest travel. High on a snow-covered, sunny mountainside embraced by virtual clouds, a tree-lined multilevel log cabin stands in exclusive and eerie isolation. Entering through a rear window adorned by transparent white curtains, the viewer is transported across a wooden table with place settings for six. Yet it quickly becomes apparent that two face-painted members of T-Pain's entourage join him and his love interest covertly in the log cabin behind the couch. The representations do not indicate why. In this new scene, the attire has also transformed; the changing of clothes with changes of scene signals the new setting, showing a variety of forms of black style and black wealth. Both T-Pain and his nameless love interest are foregrounded with yellow translucent orbs that splash across their bodies, emanating from the sunlight hovering above.



Figure 3. T-Pain with love interest in log cabin in Aspen

While at first glance the interior of this virtual log cabin appears to be inhabited only by the virtual human forms of T-Pain and his love interest, menacing white-faced phantoms lurk and peer from behind the tan couch on the right side of the virtual room. I was only able to see these figures when I viewed the video frame by frame; with eyes trained on the central subjects, it would be easy to miss this covert symbolism. In the cabin's fireplace is a mantle adorned by a deer or antelope head. This sequence ends with the scene enclosed in a snow globe.

The next sequence opens with T-Pain's object of desire in front of a vertical knife-throwing table. More importantly, encircling both her and T-Pain, in front of the revolving, vertical knife-throwing table, is a circular stream of illuminated halos. This echoes the theme of black phantasmagoria that is prevalent throughout the video. T-Pain's love interest appears on "stage" with tinsel curtains in the background, but is quickly transported away. In the middle of the video, we are shown an array of white figures that are deformed and lack the same kind of vibrant animation given to T-Pain and other lesser prominent characters in the film.

Continuing with the circus theme, a collage of white freak-show archetypes dance in the scene. Segregated from the rest of the characters in the video, the white circus archetypes are represented as near-static objects, whereas the representations of T-Pain and the love interest are animated. The images consist of red-masked musclemen who carry chains and anchors in their teeth while holding a dumbbell, across from a scantily clad woman who also carries a cannonball in her teeth. Foregrounded in this scene is a sword-swallower in the motion of swallowing two swords, one in his right hand, another in his left. In front of this first muscleman's right leg is the misspelled word "Aluring" in red ink, with an off-color background shaped as a circle. Despite the misspelling of the word, one gets the reference, defined by Webster's online dictionary as "the quality of being powerfully and mysteriously attractive or fascinating." More representations in this sequence ensue. For example, double-headed bodies hang upside down amidst an obese caricature of a blond woman dressed in blue and violet clothing. A two-headed, seemingly

Egyptian woman stands with both hands extended in opposite directions, forearms perpendicular, flat hands perpendicular to forearms, in an archetypical pose. This Egyptian woman stands in a fire across from what appears to be a redheaded woman in a green bikini who peers at herself in a mirror, admiring her beauty. Above her to the right side is a caricature of a grey-eyed brunette woman with a half-simian face. Directly across from her on the right side is more written text. In capital letters in black font the word "ALIVE" appears in a yellow circle. The stage recedes from the viewer while the gradations of deformity increase as the frame disappears into a cloud of smoke. Why are these images ghettoized in the film, almost to the point where the images are disruptive and seemingly patched together? Other than buttressing T-Pain's circus theme, why are the images all white? Why are the white images less animated than the black images? Why did the film director choose these images to represent white deformity?



Figure 4. Representations of white otherness in circus theme

Another sequence opens up with another sartorial transformation. T-Pain is dressed in a dark blue fur coat and a charcoal-colored top hat wrapped in a band of dark blue, light blue, and silver around the brim. The clothes have particular significations: T-Pain's top hat becomes a portal for a visual cacophony of circus characters that stream upward, like smoke, in interlocking figures. Contorted, digitized Asian circus acrobats do handstands, kicks, and flips while two juggling, masked clowns in polka dot outfits follow them about. Amid this display are two female black-leather-clad African American dancers who, because they have no clear thematic connection to the circus theme, represent an anomaly in relation to the other characters. Immediately following this scene, another appearance of T-Pain finds him dressed in his original ringmaster uniform. In the backdrop of fireworks, smoke, and halos, which have combined to become a connective trope in these sequences, T-Pain sings and dances while his entourage comes out one by one to represent the end of the show.



Figure 5. T-Pain with blue top hat as portal

T-Pain uses an array of cinematic strategies in "Can't Believe It" to express agency through representations of black social life. Moreover, as an Auto-Tune improviser, T-Pain uses technology to sound natural and authentic. He strives to sound like a saxophone, similar to the way Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald imitated improvising instrumentalists to revolutionize their voices. T-Pain composes a rhythmic scheme that represents fantasy and travel to various locations. He uses a sparse, repetitive rhythm, creating tension by emphasizing the third and fourth beats. Polyrhythms are manifested in the high-pitched finger snapping and complex syncopated bass lines. T-Pain's visual fantasy serves as a spectacular representation of black social life, inviting those with limited opportunities for travel to journey with him to far-flung locales both real and imaginary. While his video was produced by Syndrome, T-Pain influenced the way his body—and the bodies of others—are represented in the music video. The black bodies in T-Pain's videos are not commodities. Rather, they represent vanity, excess, and—most importantly—freedom in a world apart from earth. T-Pain crosses bar lines through the creation of alternate depictions of black life outside of civil society. As Sun Ra once explained, "Myth permits man to situate himself in these times and to connect himself with the past and the future. What I am looking for are the myths of the future, the destiny of man. . . . I believe if one wants to act on the destiny of the world, it's necessary to treat it like a myth" (Lock 1999:61).

In the video for "Can't Believe It," T-Pain uses both pitch correction software and cinematic representations to create a semiotics of black fantasy in virtual space. T-Pain manipulates Auto-Tune to present an alternative, aural topography of fantasy. What may thrill us from watching these fluid, televisual representations is the pleasure of hearing and viewing free flight—a claiming of virtual space to represent a non-monolithic race. Yet the overarching theme of T-Pain's spectacular audiovisual travels is not the escape from harsh everyday realities to seemingly

random urban and exotic locales—though it may be tempting to reduce the motivation behind the art to that conclusion. Rather, through a circus-themed brand, T-Pain's audiovisual strategies are designed to represent an alternate reality of black play, borderless travel, and conjuring powers as a multilayered antipode to the representations of historical and contemporary black pathology that are still virulent and prominent in the mass media industry. Perhaps buried underneath the CGI shape-shifting techniques is the metaphorical train trope storied in African American folk music through the ages. After all, moving, getting away, and transcending the reality of social inequities is still a vital impulse in African American art.

For Sun Ra, outer space was explicitly the alternative destiny where African Americans were fully entitled to participate in technology and other aspects of mythical life (Lock 1999). Ra's sartorial, sonic and visual insurgency was designed to advertise boldly a black alien subjectivity that battled dehumanization while representing infinite, black potentiality.

In his way, T-Pain also represents alternate destinations with familiar names like Aspen and Toronto. Yet naming and showing animated versions of those real places is not as important as representing the idea of global citizenry and bold space travel. T-Pain represents a powerful black masculinity that conjures events through omnipotent acts to please his African American love interest, represented in the video as a silent love interest. To be sure, the politics behind T-Pain's music and visual productions are not as easily accessible or clear as the politics of Sun Ra. Guthrie P. Ramsey reminds us:

> Meaning is always contingent and extremely fluid; it is never essential to a musical figuration. Real people negotiate and eventually agree on what cultural expressions such as a musical gesture mean. They collectively decide what associations are conjured by a well-placed blue note, a familiar harmonic pattern, the soulful, virtuoso sweep of a jazz solo run, a social dancer's twist on an old dance step, or the raspy grain of a church mother's vocal declamation on Sunday morning. (2004:25-26)

Yet the absence of black pathos and the celebration of play and borderless travel is a political statement. The transformation of T-Pain's vocal diction and tonality through Auto-Tune improvisation is a political statement about black subjectivity as well.[11] T-Pain's work in "Can't Believe It" is a popular music product of mass media culture. But his work is also the continuation of cinematic African American trickster storytelling traditions of benign black magic—a representation of the crossroads where sound and picture work together to produce a counter-narrative threaded through spatial and sonic alternate realities. In this way, T-Pain crosses the cinematic and sonic bar lines to represent an alternative version of blackness. As George Lipsitz explains, "People fight with the resources at their disposal and frequently their pain leads them to quite innovative means of struggle. . . . Storytelling survives, even when the story tellers develop coded and secret ways of communicating with one another, inside and outside of commercial culture" (1988:221).

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- 1. I would like to thank George Lipsitz and Anthony Burr for their suggestions and close readings of this paper.
- 2. This claim does not argue that African American artists have total control over how they are represented in films or videos. In recent times, however, hip-hop artists and producers have had increasing autonomy in constructing their own iconography.
- 3. See Donald Bogle's Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Blacks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: Viking Press, 1973).
- 4. Too many artists fit this description for a footnote. However, artists that come immediately to mind include George Clinton, Janelle Monae, Kanye West, Busta Rhymes, Michael Jackson, Anthony Davis, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Charles Mingus.
- 5. Civil society, from the point of view of afro-pessimism, represents social institutions that are never fully accessible to blacks because of their status of social death.
- 6. Antares Auto-Tune, invented by Dr. Andy Hildebrand, is a software plug-in designed for use in both studio and live settings to correct out-of-tune or wavering pitches in a singer's performance. Using sophisticated analytical and algorithmic processing techniques, Auto-Tune compares a vocal performance in real time to a user-specified scale, in most cases corresponding to the key of the composition. If the singer is either flat or sharp in relationship to a given target note, then pitch correction is applied according to several smoothing variables in the software. If the singer is singing at the correct pitch, no automated correction occurs. T-Pain's "brand" is no longer associated with Antares Auto-Tune; since 2011 he has launched his own production style software, The T-Pain Effect, with iZotope (Brown 2011).
- 7. For more on African American conjuring practices please see also see Robert Farris Thompson, Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy (New York: Random House, 1983).
- 8. The concept of "deformation of mastery" is defined as an African American cultural strategy manifested in a metaphorical phaneric mask that is used to distinguish rather than conceal differences. The phaneric mask displays and advertises difference as a form of agency. Deformation of mastery concerns creating an indigenous performance and sound art that is used to protect territory and raise the survival possibilities of an endangered group. Deformation of mastery is intended to display strength and sound that represents a peculiar indigenousness. Following Houston Baker (1986) and Graham Lock (1999), I found the deformation of mastery concept useful in discussing T-Pain's musical and cinematic strategies.
- 9. Fleetwood quotes from Richard J. Powell, Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 11. As a way of challenging the hegemony of white posthumanity in cyber theory/ posthumanity theory in academic discourses, Alexander Weheliye has pointed out the importance of studying how posthumanity is represented in African American musical sound through information technologies (2002).

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