

**Ima Read : A meditation on reading and listening in Black poetry and music**  
by Harmony Holiday

**1 Start with Ima Read 5 video**

**2** Reading is beleaguered listening, silent listening for the sake of acquisitions that are too subtle or too concrete for song or vocalization upon arrival. There are things I cannot confess except whispered first on the page, etched like bodies there, caressed in paperback caskets, floating gardens, books, that carry our immortal knowing as disavowal and bloom. I have something to tell you, some substance to convey, that interrupts known daily rhythms, that cannot hear itself without changing them. Reading is underground listening, we do not yet have the word for the kind of false echo memory is but reading echoes without being identical to what it repeats, and therefore it resurrects the unsayable, brings back to life sensations that disappear the moment they occur.

**3 Ima Read 6 from Paris is Burning**

**4** Listening is a fugitive form of reading. The conditions by which you listen and the listening you demand are descriptive, ritualistic, even if the ritual is not listening or being impervious to certain tones and speech as a form of resistance or incompetence. Griot speech, Black poet, healer speech, is both reading and listening projected through an improviser's voice. Reading as the experience of being told about yourself by a ruthlessly honest force, listening as that force being exempt from resentment and cherished and approached as oracle because it is a sound mirror, yourself projected onto all that you call forth.

**5 Ima Read 4 Sun Ra Sound Mirror**

**6** Does genocide begin with theft of language, and poetry with its reclamation by any means necessary? Put another way, does genocide begin when reading ends? Does poetry begin with reading, with beleaguered languid relentless listening? Is the first evidence of an ongoing genocide found in the sinews of poetic impulse and how do we excavate it as evidence?

**7 Ima read 7 To the Black Male Children**

**8** When reading was criminalized for Black slaves, as it will be again and again in time for victims of genocide— sound, music, symbolic language, tonal language, and magical listening helped us excavate evidence of the ongoing crisis. The idea that writing and storytelling must be confined to the page was not a luxury Black life or Black song and poem could afford as the wages of reading were often murder. That forbiddenness taught us how to listen and develop ideas and stories as tones first, each thought a tone, a color, a gesture, and a habit of being and breathing attached to each thought. The first literacy, the literacy indigenous to the spirit, is found in the ability to decipher those coded tones. In tongues, licking the ink off pages, monitoring the 8 chambers of the sea-swarmed heart and lungs as our written, silenced, language.

## **9 Ima Read 8 One PM footage**

**10** My father was a sharecropper in Mississippi and a songwriter who was never taught to read and write, but he could read and write. Griot life is a life of demonstrating the impossible, debunking the validity of western approaches to record keeping and understanding. If they burn down every library and archive tomorrow, could your father sing your history in code and tone and tongues or would it disappear in the next genocide— in stride with those flames, or locked in your father’s song forever?

## **11 June Jordan footage**

**12** That readiness, that form of extemporaneous reading that song and chant and poetics are, is why Amiri Baraka called poetry *speech running into music*. The fugitive appears again, haunting our sound mirror, the endlessly shape-shifting witness. Every Black form in the west begins with running, momentum, stagger, blur, hurry, chase, hunt, haint. To explore the space where reading, writing, and song meet we need autonomous forms, a network of them. The blues, which begat jazz, which begat rock and roll and r & b and hip hop, each of these so-called genres defined by the market, how and where and to whom they sell. We must not lose track of the function of shifting and runaway forms beyond their commodification. Their most important function is to ensure that we read one another, listen to one another, on our own terms, even as the dominant language aims to make our terms impossible. Poetry transmutes limits of oppressive languages by deciding that meaning is a feeling derived by use, that part of reading is redefining the value of every word and tone and gesture and silence.

## **13 Ima Read 9 Dolphy Footage on Playing what you can hear**

**14** Poetry reads the world. To reach the world the poet reads the world, discerns it, distills it, makes it strange— to rebuild the world the poet reads the world. To read the world the poet listens, intensely, deeply, knowing that we cannot tell what we cannot hear. The improvising musician listens this way too. You can only play what you can hear, he says. You can only write what you can hear. You can only read what you can hear. You can only hear what you’re willing to believe exists, what you have the capacity to feel coexisting with you, what you can handle knowing lurks on the margins of you and your constructed world. Poetry reads the world for filth and glory and every acutely poetic gesture is overheard, slurred celestial gossip turned oracular by awe and care.

## **15 Ima Read 10, Ra, Ultimate in Things**

**16** To animate reading with or without spectators, which is to be alive with discernment, is writing, and it demands the whole body’s participation, embodied participation, the kind of presence that feels like song. Writing can be singing, crying, giggle, sigh, any subtle recountment of a feeling that inscribes it in a form. When I write I want to feel like I am singing. The writing process at its most gratifying is private singing, signing to and for oneself. Sharing that private song as reading. When I read I want to feel like I am singing and being sung. When I listen I want to feel like I am singing and being sung a script transcribed onto my memory whether I like it or not. Listening and reading demand vulnerability, willingness to be changed to be heard, to be read, where being read is being understood and

permeated, and the red of the blood drawn of that understanding, the wound of all hearing. Poetry is a wound that won't heal like a fountain or abyss of discoveries that must be organized into music to survive. Poetry sutures the wounds that won't heal with music and they mend in a skin of words.

### **17 Ima Read 11 Martin reading Langston**

**18** When we say reading we mean organizing ourselves into music. Read these poems and become their music is what we mean. Think in these rhythms and become a music. Molecular revolution or a simple mode of letting the body be the book. In case the book is burned, the voice is there, in case the voice is demonized, the song proves its tenderness, in case that tenderness is threatened, the song runs away toward new cadences and beats. The poem is how the song runs and its road. The feet and the earth kicked up to star pattern.

### **19 Beauty is What I love Watts Prophets reading poem for John Coltrane**

### **20 Jimmy on Reading**

#### **Links:**

<https://mythscience.bandcamp.com/album/black-and-beautiful-soul-and-madness>

<https://mythscience.bandcamp.com/album/an-essential-sanity-black-and-electric>

<https://afrosonics.tumblr.com/>