

Black Liveness Matters: Karel Čapek meets Blind Tom

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In 1920 the Czech writer Karel Čapek experienced an early success with the play R.U.R., which posed interaction and conflict between human capitalists and a new source of labor, the “robota,” which has come down to us in various languages as “robot.” Most English-language critics have been content with a translation of the Czech word as “forced labor,” but parallels to the condition of slaves under the US chattel system stand out at various points in the play. Thus, juxtaposing the famous slave composer-pianist Blind Tom with Rossum’s Universal Robots provides the basis for a complex critical assemblage comprising technology, blackness, liveness, and the sounding/listening subject.