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Is This The Future? Black Music and Technology Discourse

Introduction. For musical Afrofuturists, the rupture of the Middle Passage and slavery’s destruction of African culture are a “dematerialization” (Eshun 192). In diaspora, culture is rematerialized through a variety of techniques, including sound recording. Since the slave is property, she is alienated from the category of the human (Judy 5). This provides the conceptual space in which to argue about the very idea of the human subject and to imagine posthuman manifestations of blackness from figures like brothers (and sisters) from other planets and cyborgs from earth to more diffuse energies such as Ishmael Reed’s “Jes Grew” in Mumbo Jumbo (1972) (Williams 154-76). With technological mediations such as sound samples and computer viruses, even apparently inanimate objects “get a life,” and so cause anxiety about the boundaries between them (objects or non-subjects) and us (subjects).

The transnational culture around beats and bass-heavy music fixates on the physicality of music media such as computers, amplifiers, speakers, and turntables. Like sf, this commodity fetishism sometimes animates these technological objects in spectacular fashion. For example, a graffito by the artist Component on the studio wall of Auckland’s Base FM radio station shows the gigantic woofers and tweeters of a sound system stacked in such a way that they construct a huge robotic figure. In many R&B and hip-hop music videos, the image jumps forward in time with the bump of the music’s low frequencies as if it is the skin of a woofer or subwoofer. In flyers and record covers for drum’n’bass events and releases, designers exaggerate the pixilation of a sound pattern’s graphic on a computer screen. In posters, animated videos, websites, stencils, and murals, the turntable and the stylus cartridge are reproduced as objects of identification and desire. The scratch DJ Q-Bert, for example, uses the biotech hybrid logo of a stylus cartridge-insect figure as one of his signatures.

This attention to the corporeality of music equipment and gadgets extends to thinking about the sound itself as material, particularly since the hip-hop era liberated the fragment in the form of the scratch, the break, and the sample from the record’s surface. Cutting and splicing audiotape and mixing two sound sources spurred this development earlier in phonographic history. But digital technologies intensify “schizophonia,” the term the composer and sound theorist Murray Schafer uses to describe the splitting of music from its sources. Once we begin to think of sound as matter that can be broken up into pliable material for new contexts, the notion of “music” can be ripped from the constraints of traditional music theory. The tone and timbre of the sonic moment become the focus for analysis, rather than harmony, melody, and the totality of the work. This forces us to think about the affective power of
relatively short pieces of music. It encourages a micrological attention to sound
game. But we must also consider both the accumulated and distributed
economic value of hypermobile music that is networked and widely distributed
on many media platforms in even more locations. Sounds are routinely cloned
like viruses. They mutate as they travel and take up residence in different sites.

Work on cinema’s visual effects, emanating from sf film theory in the last
decade, suggests an analogous move in the study of music and recorded sound.
Brooks Landon has argued that study of cinema’s special effects might produce
“a model for what science-fiction film criticism might discover if it can draw
back from its preoccupation with narratives in science-fiction films and
consider the science-fictional story that science-fiction film production has itself
become” (40). How might the close listening to “effects” in music change its
study, particularly when we are dealing with digitally produced music that has
become its own kind of “science-fictional story”? It might return us to the
medium, the phonic substance and texture of recordings; but while this critical
move is valuable, such techno-centric analysis risks becoming deaf to the social
and cultural forces that give these sounds meaning.

Ghosts in the machine. In 2005-06, I was struck by the currency of the word
hauntology in a number of music blogs, discussion threads, and reviews.
Writers had sampled and recontextualized the neologism from Jacques
Derrida’s Specters of Marx (1994) and via some of Derrida’s interpreters (Buse
and Scott). For Derrida, hauntology is meant to frustrate ontology. Specters are
neither dead nor alive. Ghosts are elusive, hard to pin down. Yet their material
presence confounds the desire to separate the past and the present. The ghost
exists now, a shadow or trace of a body that once existed. But it is not the same
thing as that once live body or its dead remains. Because its uncanny
interruption complicates a linear sense of time and therefore historicism, the
ghost is a suggestive figure for sf. Derrida writes that fundamentally “the
specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which
could come, or come back” (39). In other words, the revenant can appear at
any time to occupy our homes and our favorite haunts.

Music aficionados did not grapple with the Derridean implications of
hauntology in much depth, but applied the term quite liberally to a wide range
of music productions, and not only from the field of “black” or “urban” music.
Typically bloggers generated lists, reciting from the present and recalling from
the past (see Dissensus). New exemplars of hauntology included US pop-rock
tunesmith Ariel Pink, the female folk-blues duo CocoRosie, producers of
ambient electronica at the UK’s Ghost Box label, and dubstep artist Burial,
whose echoing slo-mo drum patterns conjured up a noir soundtrack for
London. The BBC Radiophonic Workshop’s theme for Dr Who and Roxy
Music’s first two albums from the early 1970s have been among the many
sounds exhumed from the archive. But quite often simply the inclusion of the
words “haunted” and “ghost,” and their various permutations in the titles of
songs, tracks, and albums, has been sufficient grounds for an artist’s inclusion
in the pantheon of hauntology.
What seems to unite these diverse pieces of music is their attempt to capture the grain of earlier playback technologies and recording methods. Simon Reynolds and others have compared Ariel Pink's music to 1980s MTV pop as heard through poor AM radio reception ("Web of Ghosts"). Pink's work reminds me of listening to Radio Luxembourg in northern England a decade earlier. Songs would become muffled in radio space. They would try to call back to the listener in bursts as the music dissolved into the overlapping tones of inter-station disturbance. The song might suddenly return with greater contour and clarity for an indeterminate time. Sometimes the Luxembourg signal would disappear entirely and not resurface from the noise until the next day. CocoRosie, on the other hand, make many of their songs sound like they were recorded in the jazz age through the "vintage" microphone effect that makes the voice sound as if it has been transmitted through a long tube or tunnel. Other examples of this fairly common effect include Beth Gibbons's vocals for the 1990s group Portishead and most famously Trevor Horn's voice on The Buggles' hit that tried to capture an earlier moment of media transformation, "Video Killed The Radio Star" (1979). The artists on Ghost Box, such as The Advisory Circle, The Focus Group, and Belbury Poly, work in a retrofuturist mode that resurrects fragments of earlier analog synthesizer tones through digital sampling. Like the Scottish duo Boards of Canada, their names also suggest the cultural institutions of a bygone state of modernism. The technostalgia of their recordings also evokes the past through the indecipherable voices of children. These recordings are ghostly because their sound is deliberately muddied; it disavows the pristine duplication of the digital in preference for the noise of old media. The hiss of pre-Dolby tapes and cassettes leaks from tracks by German techno artists Rhythm & Sound. The static of the stylus on vinyl can be heard throughout the Burial album (2006) and many pieces of music on CD and MP3.

Blogger k-punk contends that hauntology is "the zeitgeist," but asks "Why hauntology now?" He answers: "Well, has there ever been a time when finding gaps in the seamless surfaces of 'reality' has ever felt more pressing? Excessive presence leaves no traces. Hauntology's absent present, meanwhile, is nothing but traces" ("Hauntology Now"). This comment echoes new media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's statement that "our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them" (5). Their book Remediation (1999) argues, however, that periods of media transformation involve the integration of "old" media into "new" media. The invocation of hauntology seems to respond to the shifting musical techno- and mediascape. Music producers meditate on the relationship between past and present through the presence of previous sounds or their simulacra in newly fashioned digital recordings. This music may articulate a feeling of loss for old sounds and technologies that have been superseded. But it may also pastiche, parody, or revive them as integral elements of new works and genres. New music's "special effects" demonstrate many modalities of attachment to the sonic past. Simon Reynolds—who claims to have first used "hauntology" as a term to
describe not quite “a genre, a scene or a network”—later ditched the term for the more general “haunted audio” to describe “a genre-without-name: more of a flavour or atmosphere than a style with boundaries” (“Society of the Spectral” 28). Rather than focus on the outlines of this musical current or its particular representatives, I want to pursue and develop the implications of Reynolds’s notion of haunted audio to think about black music and its mediations.

**Diaspora ghosts.** The African diaspora has a deep and troubled history of “ghostly matters,” hauntings that have been central to western modernity (Gordon 2). Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Michael Jackson’s zombie in the “Thriller” video (1983) are just two apparitions that immediately spring to life from the popular archive. Black music culture seems an appropriate portal through which to examine the emerging media architecture of remembrance and to investigate perceptions of (technological) change. Musicians have been at the forefront of the interface between the analog and digital in the last twenty years, excavating the audio rubble of the past as they sound the future into being. For example, hip hop adopted samplers to keep soul and funk sounds alive. Chicago house musicians resurrected the disco strings and secular erotic gospel voices on records that were burnt in a pyre in their city. They used traded-in synthesizers, sequencers, and drum machines. Jamaicans went back to old colonial and African drum patterns in their computerized riddims. The ghosts have always been in the house, even if their appearances have been intermittent.

Caribbean poet and theorist Edouard Glissant has argued that black Atlantic history is “characterized by ruptures … that begin with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade” (62). He contends that “historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continually like a sediment” (62). Instead of a linear conception of history, what Walter Benjamin calls “homogenous empty time,” black historical materialism is produced in circumstances of “shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces” (62). Riffing on Glissant, Black British critic Barnor Hesse argues that this rupture “facilitates focus on a system of organizing experiences, space, which is the project of another temporality, not only a different history, but in effect the history of different spaces: the African diaspora” (169). One of the goals for the descendants of displaced Africans has been the construction of future pasts that link them to others in diasporic time and space.

Fred Moten argues that the phonic substance and syntax of black performances is often disguised or deemed as “noise” (7). The scream and song of the slave embody a drive towards freedom and subjectivity that is not encapsulated by verbal meaning or standard musical form. A history of black aesthetic criticism has described how these utterances express a yearning for an African origin that is impossible to satisfy. The practices and structures of black music continue to manifest this diasporic response to time and space. Improvisation, call and response, the break and cut are symptomatic of that unfulfilled desire. James Snead uses the funk of James Brown to illustrate this
different temporality: “if there is a goal in such a culture, it is always deferred; it continually ‘cuts’ back to the start, in the musical meaning of the ‘cut’ as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break (an accidental da capo) with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series” (220). Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s notion of the “changing same” is an oxymoron that might have emerged from sf literature. It has been an influential concept for working through the novel transformations of past iterations of blackness. Diasporic theory makes sense of the play between repetition and difference. It navigates re-articulations and dialogical conversations in the phonographic practices associated with ebonics, the MC and DJ battle, the version, the dub, the break, the scratch, the mix, and the remix. In the visual field, graffiti bombing and methods such as “wild style” analogously modify the word. Out on the floor, breakdancers, dancehall queens, and others respond to the spaces and directions of the groove with an ever-expanding repertoire of postures and machinations that riff off each other.

Waxing Lyrical. In the beginning was the sound of the needle on the record. Be it shellac or 180-gram vinyl, the crackling of the stylus on the gramophone disc’s surface is a familiar noise in today’s music. It is so common in hip hop that it is hard to single out one representative track that reproduces its resonance. But Jeru the Damaja’s “Statik,” the last track from his debut album The Sun Rises in the East (Payday 1994), pushes the idea harder than most. An instrumental loop that fries like bacon helps to bed down DJ Premier’s beat. In fact, Jeru concludes the album with the dare, “Step into my realm and be fried by the static,” after which he disappears and the track runs out to the insistent rhythm of the needle in the groove. The crackle of old records is a ubiquitous but multi-accented sample type in the toolkit of every producer making “urban” music in the last twenty years. This loop is part and parcel of the resuscitation of voices and instruments buried in the vinyl archive. Other times it reminds us of the anticipation of the first notes of a piece of music on vinyl. The crackle effect is generated by the crunchy abrasiveness of the stylus on wax, the sound of the machine itself, never mind the music. The digital technologies of CD and MP3 pay homage to vinyl as their older sibling, retaining a register of the materiality of records through their scratchiness even as they are digitized. Listeners boast of vinyl’s sonic qualities as a medium—the analog warmth and the phatness of beats—and they cite the audiophile’s statistics that apparently prove it. This is before one even gets to the commodity fetishism around the record as a material object. Audiobloggers post photographs of the label of the record and/or the picture sleeve alongside the MP3 file. That scratchiness of needle on record is the Ground Zero for DJs who will release an array of sharper tones from the surface of the record with the mechanical gestures of their palms and forearms. They will also create new soundscapes through their two- and three-turntable mixes. Even musicians such as DJ Shadow, who craft beats using the latest portable and digital MPC MIDI Production Center manufactured by Akai and mix music on their laptop computers, also play DJ sessions exclusively with seven-inch vinyl singles. The
archive of vinyl maintains a significant market presence in both new and secondhand form.

Black historical materialism in relation to music has involved a rich wax poetics. Scholars have dug deep in the grooves of the record in order to conceptualize an African diasporic aesthetics of phonography. Time and time again they return to the ur-figure of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. He is the ideal listener, as he plays Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do To Be So Black And Blue” and smokes reefer in his basement. Invisibility gives him “a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead, sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around” (7).

Put the needle on the record and the theorists just do not stop. Jazz historiography has acknowledged that the music’s history has been constituted in large part by its recorded legacy. That insight extends to other musical forms and styles in the age of recording. One of the pleasures in reading Paul Gilroy, for example, is the revelation of his discophilia. Gilroy has written about the importance of records as material objects for which “consumption” is a weak term to describe the processes involved in their circulation and enlivening presence for subjects and spaces at various nodes in the diaspora (Black Atlantic 105-106). He has also repeatedly focused on the “ephemera” of record sleeves as important media spaces for representations of blackness. In his book acknowledgments he even gives props to record stores.

But Gilroy has always checked the techniques of phonography and sought to open up the record’s surface. Even back in the day as a graduate student at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, his essay on discourses of race and nation in the anthology The Empire Strikes Back (1981) was sensitive to the technologies of music reproduction and to the materiality of sound. He quotes another scholar of the curves of the needle and the phonographic record, Theodor Adorno, when he describes “the political efficacy of ‘atelic, hermetic works of art’ in capitalist relations of cultural production” (“Steppin’ Out” 300). Gilroy describes the shock of special effects such as gunfire, explosions, sirens, animals, scratches, and tape sounds in Jamaican dub records that “expose the musical anatomy of the piece, showing how each layer of instrumentation complements the others to form a complex whole” (300). He describes in detail Black Uhuru’s dub of “General Penitentiary” (1979) in which “the syndrum becomes a cell door repeatedly slamming shut,” and notes that in the Wailing Souls’ “Kingdom Rise & Kingdom Fall” (1980) the word “economy” is transformed into the word “army” through the use of an analog delay device (300). From this close listening he speculates that “It is tempting to view the process which lays bare the structure beneath the unified exterior of the whole unmodified version as an expressive homology for the Rasta view of the world” (300).

Not quite a generation later, through the prisms of electric jazz, hip hop, house, techno, jungle, and drum’n’bass, another Black British critic, Kodwo Eshun, writes about DJs who scratch and producers who sample vinyl as
releasing the “entelechy” of the record, liberating and realizing its potential as an object. He suggests that the music opens up through “a microperception of the actual material vinyl” (179). Here Eshun rejects the academic emphasis on the archaeology of concepts. Instead he borrows from Marshall McLuhan the idea of the probe, which is adapted for speculative thought from the titles of tracks and song titles or from science fiction. The production of neologisms, “concept manufacture” (178), and a micro-formalism hostile to sociological and political understandings of black music mark Eshun’s work; he mobilizes a new jargon to replace academic vocabulary. Like other postgraduate students at Warwick University’s peripheral Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, which was headed by Sadie Plant and Nick Land in the mid-1990s, Eshun put his record collection to work for theory with a database of sampled networked sources, including Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic theory, Norbert Wiener’s cybernetics, Manuel De Landa’s philosophy of science, J.G. Ballard’s sf, journalist Erik Davis’s techno-mysticism, and the poststructuralism for musical trainspotters exemplified by Simon Reynolds’s work. K-Punk and the dubstep producer Kode9 are also graduates of CCRU, part of that generation of young scholars and artists inspired by the accelerated technological and sonic imagination of jungle and drum’n’bass music in the early 1990s. Their music, blogs, and intermittent journalism today are themselves haunted by the aesthetic, theoretical, and political possibilities of that musical moment.

Eshun shares several affinities with New York academic Paul D. Miller, who mixes and records as DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid. Miller’s Rhythm Science (2004) is a stateside version of Eshun’s More Brilliant Than the Sun (1998), though it lacks the precise shape and follow-through of particular concept probes applied to specific musical tracks. Part creative treatise, part autobiography, Miller’s rhetoric aims to mimic DJ culture but ends up embodying the particularly frenetic and chaotic sampling and mixing aesthetic of his own so-called “illbient” music (as opposed to more glacial ambient music). Rhythm Science is eager to explore cyberspace and Miller’s claims for the book are even more techno-utopian than More Brilliant Than The Sun:

Think of it as a mirror held up to a culture that has learned to fly again, that has released itself from the constraints of the ground to drift through dataspace continuously morphing its form in response to diverse streams of information…. This is a world where all meaning has been untethered from the grounds of its origins and all signposts point to a road that you make up as you travel through the text. (5)

As a discophile, Miller confesses that when he looks at his collection of “something between 20,000 to 30,000 records,” he gets “dizzy with all the voices and potential mixes” he could make because it is “infinite and heady” (36). Ecstasy is a powerful dimension of such Afrofuturist rhetoric. In a 1998 story about CCRU’s cyberfuturism, Simon Reynolds acknowledges that “the mania of CCRU’s texts—with their mood-blend of euphoric anticipation and dystopian dread—is contagious. Much of the time they’re trying to create a
'theory-rush' that matches the buzz they get from contemporary sampladelic dance music" ("Rogue Unit").

And the buzz from drugs. Reviewing *More Brilliant than the Sun*, Angela McRobbie comments that the “narcotic effect intersects with a philosophical ambition, both of which are intensified by the further seductions of computer and the internet" (152). Eshun’s hyperbole—or cyberbole—is sometimes articulated through a Nietzschean language of bravery and heroism in response to the “delibidinizers” of academic institutions and cultural studies’ banal critique of capitalism (qtd. in Lovink). Though Reynolds is ambivalent about some of CCRU’s ideological currents, he describes it romantically as a “rogue unit” of the poststructuralist Department of Philosophy at Warwick University, personified by the figure of Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* ("Rogue Unit"). The boundary between posthuman and Nietzschean superman seems unclear in these fantasies of power and therefore all the more troubling.

More mundanely, the male connoisseurship involved in collecting the “right” records and its relationship to high theory, sf narrative, and spectacle offer, in McRobbie’s words, “no opening at all for prosaic questions about the politics of music in general and more specifically the sexual politics of dance music” (145). As Jason King remarked at an Experience Music Project conference in 2004, the Afrofuturist canon of techno and hip hop is also selectively male and heterosexist. It prefers music without vocals and ignores recording artists such as Earth Wind & Fire, The Undisputed Truth, Missy Elliot, Labelle, and Sylvester. R & B, soul, disco, and house music with female and transgender voices have also drawn on the tropes of sf in their work. Alexander S. Weheliye rightly suggests that in their desire to reject the human for the posthuman, some Afrofuturist critics often fail to examine the various technological mediations of black women’s voices as signifiers of “humanity” or “soul.” Weheliye’s own work on sound effects such as the vocoder and the presence of the bleeps and audio quality of gadgets like beepers and mobile telephones in late 1990s R & B hits by female vocalists complicates the human/posthuman distinction (“Feenin’” 40). It also takes debates about blackness and technology into the broader terrain of popular taste, beyond an analysis limited to the pursuit of male cultural capital. Weheliye’s *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (2004) develops his concern with the materiality of sound to begin to consider the ways in which girls and women use audio technologies such as personal stereos to fashion their environment sonically as they move through it. This is still a rare scholarly insight. Maybe now we will have more studies of the uses to which black girls and women have put records and turntables. While sympathetic to much Afrofuturist discourse, Herman Gray has tempered its technophilia with analysis of the everyday ways in which musicians conceptualize, integrate, and talk about the use of digital technologies in their musical production, as well as in its consumption (148-84; see also Zuberi).

**Black bodies swinging.** The body is also curiously absent from some prominent Afrofuturist discourse. While Eshun and Miller describe the virtualization of the
human body in musical and audiovisual media such as records and videos, they are less interested in the feedback loop as dancers, male and female, move to the music. They also seem remarkably silent about how black bodies continue to be fetishized according to tired tropes of racial otherness. David Crane has argued convincingly that hip black figures in many sf films serve to authenticate and "naturalize" new technologies for white heroes. They "intermediate" between cyberspace and old technologies with their hip, urban and subcultural "realness" (Crane 88).

In a great deal of popular commentary, the people who move on the dancefloor are described as an amorphous singular body manipulated by the DJ’s control of the record decks. This may be due to masculine desires for mastery and cultural associations of dance with the feminine. It could also be an instance of the male fear of ceding any differential agency to women’s experience and pleasure on the dancefloor. Celebration of the communal moment and religious trance vibe might have colored how we understand what happens on the dancefloor. It might be the effect of a more prosaic pharmaceutical determinism that believes that Ecstasy makes everyone look the same. To be more charitable, this disavowal of the embodied body is probably an effect of a hegemonic phonographic (and media) history that emphasizes the disembodiment that has accompanied recording and mediation of music performances ever since the late nineteenth century.

In contrast, writing about that key musical institution in the Black Atlantic, the reggae sound system, Julian Henriques reminds us that sound is also embodying (461). He describes the "sonic dominance" crucial to both the aesthetics and experience of the sound-system dance or session (452-53). The amplifiers and speakers have to facilitate loudness with the low frequencies resonating powerfully through the body. The lower abdomen should be shuddering to the bass line. The power of "a sound" is also one element that is decisive in the competition or sound clash of two sound systems in a dancehall session. Henriques links the matter of sound in records, through amplifiers and speakers, to the matter of human bodies on the dancefloor by using the term "transduction" (468). Literally meaning "to lead or carry across," the word is applied to electromagnetic, sonic, and cultural forces that operate in a chain and yet feed back and thus affect each other. Henriques describes one dance, the Drive By, in which men lean back and have one arm extended in front of them as if driving a car (469). Such automations suggest that the technocultural gestures of dancing bodies offer a ripe area of study where Afrofuturism might intersect with dance studies.

Carolyn Cooper’s research on the class and gender dynamics of the Jamaican dancehall, Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture At Large (2004), has not as yet substantially intersected with technologically-inflected studies of the sound-system session. She argues that the elaborate dancing that animates the buttocks of dancehall queens is empowering female display. Cooper makes this point during her appearance in Isaac Julien’s 1994 documentary The Darker Side of Black, which examines homophobia, misogyny, and gun culture in Jamaican dancehall music and US hip hop. In contrast, Paul Gilroy’s voice-over for the
Gilroy’s pessimism about the black public sphere resonates a few years later in a commentary by one of the inspirational figures of contemporary Afrofuturism, American writer Greg Tate. In a January 2005 Village Voice article, Tate reflects on thirty years of hip hop, concluding with a futuristic scenario:

Twenty years from now we’ll be able to tell our grandchildren and great-grandchildren how we witnessed cultural genocide: the systematic destruction of a people’s folkways…. We’ll tell them how fools thought they were celebrating the 30th anniversary of hiphop the year Bush came back with a gangbang, when they were really presiding over a funeral. We’ll tell them how once upon a time there was this marvelous art form where the Negro could finally say in public whatever was on his or her mind in rhyme and how the Negro hiphop artist, staring down minimum wage slavery, Iraq, or the freedom of the incarcerated chose to take his emancipated motor mouth and stuck it up a stripper’s ass because it turned out there really was gold in them thar hills. (“Hip Hop Turns 30”)

This indictment of black popular culture seen from an imagined future seems particularly prescient, given that it was written before Hurricane Katrina. Jay-Z and Beyoncé are still strutting their stuff for transnational corporations Reebok and L’Oreal. Tate has always been a critical advocate for hip hop, and has always argued that hip hop was both folk culture and late capitalist dream machine. But the flurry of online debate in blogs within a few days of his article’s publication was as remarkable as his pessimistic vision of the future. Most of the argument centered on whether his pronouncements marked a
generation gap between the “old school,” who believed in hip hop as a force for social change and lamented its tight handshake with the corporate devil, and the “new school,” who realized hip hop’s limited capacity to provide black leadership in the new millennium and who emphasized the broad church of hip hop with its many views—progressive, regressive, and status quo. The talk on blogs and in the threads of discussion groups ironically testified to the vibrancy of a digital black public sphere. Hip hop was not, in fact, dead, despite periodic jeremiads stating so from many of its participants.

A year later, in a February 2006 review of three books addressing hip hop’s mixed accomplishments, Tate seems to have registered the key terms of the online debate and admits to a feeling of nostalgia and loss for the early hopes of hip-hop culture. Though he mourns the passing of its social and political aspirations, he differs from Gilroy in an important respect. Gilroy mourns the passing of the analog and the funkiness of live antiphony “killed by the deskilling process instituted by digital technologies” (qtd. in Green and Guillory, 253-54). Though Tate is also mournful, he hints at the prophetic power of hip hop for a society increasingly shaped by information:

The paradox comes from feeling that hip-hop was sooo twentieth century, so prefigurative and definitive of the late century, and yet just as full of portent for our twenty-first-century nervous systems. Our current vision of the millennium—that of a world rocked by organized terror, cybernetic capitalism and creativity, and a growing antidemocratic apparatus of policing and surveillance—is the world hip-hop has been reporting on since the early 1980s. (“The Color of Money”)

Tate continues to show a commitment to the possibilities of digital exchange in his work with the British Council’s Black Atlantic Project, an initiative that maintains a dialogue between US and UK musicians and writers across the wires and wireless. The organization uses the metaphor of the “chain-letter” as its carrier for music and words and other media content backwards and forwards across the ocean, while Tate still stresses the need to bring “the bloody Middle Passage into the room” so that its “clanking chains resonate across the whole body of this digitized, disembodied message mechanism” (“Unchained Melodies”).

A few years ago a friend gave me an MP3 of a live Greg Tate performance backed with the sparsest of beats from DJ Premier. From some time in the 1990s, “What is Hip Hop?” described what was and was not hip hop—it offered a kind of ontology of the game. I was struck by one line in particular: “Hip Hop is James Brown’s pelvis digitally grinded into techno morphine.” This seems such an apposite way of describing the inextricable link between Brown’s dancing and his music. It also captures the way hundreds of producers have sampled his screams, as well as various other utterances and musical iterations by the musicians in his band, the JBs. These been distilled into sonic and fluid essences with powerful effects.

I want to use that line by Tate as a “thought probe” (to follow Eshun) or a speculative experiment on the conceptual power of “the sample.” I hope that I have already demonstrated that a clear border between old and new media does
not exist. Vinyl as a ghostly presence in many digital recordings is still alive and kicking, providing a source for theorizing the materiality of audio culture (and even the humble cassette has had something of a revival with mixtape nostalgia and bloggers eagerly uploading their hissing tracks). Can we turn that micrological attention to the groove toward the bits and bytes of digitized sound matter? I want finally to consider the writing on sampling to sketch out some important emerging considerations for Afrofuturism, if we interpret Afrofuturism loosely as a critical engagement with technology and the African diaspora. What might the dissemination of the copy through digital networks suggest about the shifting contours of diaspora?

Lawrence Grossberg argued several years ago that the current popular music formation was dominated by a “neo-eclectic mainstream” that operated with the “logic of sampling as a production technique and habit of listening” (48). His view of sampling as both technological enterprise and everyday consumption has even greater critical purchase today in the post-Napster age of downloading, ripping, and burning, although I would argue that the logic of sampling is also accompanied by the logic of accumulation and the miniaturized database. Sampling blurs the division between consumption and production. Recording artists dig through the archive on vinyl, CD, MP3, and even cassette for sections of music with attractive timbres and/or cultural associations. A producer can fracture this musical event into minute shards of noise or reproduce it in “loops.” Samples are processed and integrated into new compositions. Embedded in this new site, a sample is sometimes familiar to listeners, but often reworked beyond recognition.

The digital work of art is potentially an open and fluid text. Listeners with access to rudimentary sound editing software can manipulate these recordings and in turn distribute their own compositions on the Internet. So samples have idiosyncratic half-lives as they take multiple routes and mutate during their travels. For example, a few seconds of strings from a recorded performance of Igor Stravinsky’s Firebird is sampled for a synthesizer setting and then appears in an influential South Bronx hip-hop record by Afrika Bambaata and a Detroit techno classic by Derrick May (Fink), or the voice of Lata Mangeshkar from a Hindi film song echoes ten years later in several Kingston dancehall hits and a New York hip-hop track. Since a particular sample may materialize in different pieces of music, its possible meanings multiply across various sites. Samples therefore generate their own added commercial and/or cultural value when severed from the fabric of the original and absorbed into a new host composition. They may, if identified, increase the exchange value of their source composition. Guitar riffs, drum patterns, horn blasts, and vocal utterances scatter in officially released, perfectly legal new singles and album tracks on CD, vinyl, and MP3. But they also appear in bootleg “mash-ups” on vinyl or MP3s that combine elements of two or more tracks. In a soundscape marked by potentially endless recombination, samples reproduce in a plethora of forms and media formats in both legally sanctioned and pirate economies. James Brown’s screams and yelps, for example, have multiplied across thousands of tracks. As Simon Reynolds puts it, sampling involves the creation
of a zombie, taking the once “embodied energy of drummers, horn players or singers,” looping and thus “transform[ing] these vivisected portions of human passion into treadmills of posthumous productivity” (“Society of the Spectral” 31). He compares, for example, the “Amen” break—a five-second drum riff played by Gregory Coleman and recorded by The Winstons in 1969—which has been used, abused, chopped, and rearranged in hundreds of hip hop, electronic, jungle, and drum’n’bass tracks—to the “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” segment of Disney’s Fantasia (1940), in which we see “the broomstick chopped into 1000 pieces, proliferating in ungodly swarms” (“Society of the Spectral” 32).

A song or track is just a node (though a powerful node) in the network for a minor piece of audio-time that moves and occupies many spaces in a web of sound. The Deleuzian critic Drew Hemment terms these musical processes decomposition, “in which the museum or sound object becomes not just a question of looping or repeating indivisible units, but of reworking them in a nomadism where the nature of the musical fragment changes along with the territory it traverses” (89). Digital technologies are not completely novel in this respect, but develop and intensify the schizophonia ushered in by recording and playback technologies in the nineteenth century. Ethnomusicologist Steven Feld argues that the recent period of “schizophrenic mimesis” has involved an acceleration of “sonic copies, echoes, resonances, traces, memories, resemblances, imitations and duplications [that] all proliferate histories and possibilities” (263). Digital technologies have, therefore, understandably heightened anxieties about musical authorship, intellectual property, and copyright.

Many academics, journalists, musicians, and fans have welcomed the challenge of sampling to an oligarchy of music corporations determined to lock down copyright and narrow the public domain through digital rights management technologies, legislative lobbying, and litigation against children and senior citizens. Popular discourse in journalism and amongst fans tends to express a libertarian or anarchistic attitude to sampling. As an aspect of musicianship, sampling has also highlighted the inadequacy of individualistic notions of creativity and authorship inherited from Romantic discourses about art. Musicians are always embedded in histories of musical convention, so all creativity occurs in dialogic encounters with previous practices and texts. As Jason Toynbee suggests, sound media have engendered a “phonographic orality” through which musicians learn to sing, play, and compose new works. Though they acknowledge that language and music have their differences as systems of meaning, a number of scholars have broadly applied Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism to African diasporic cultural practice. Sampling is often celebrated as a digital manifestation of black music’s “changing same.”

These largely positive attitudes towards sampling have been accompanied by more ambivalent responses. David Hesmondhalgh, for example, focuses on electronic pop musician Moby’s highly successful 1999 album Play to discuss the cultural inequalities in sampling. Several tracks on Play incorporate the voices of blues musicians recorded by ethnomusicologist and folk-music archivist Alan Lomax. Hesmondhalgh argues that Moby has failed to give adequate credit or compensation for these contributions to his record. The new
context for these ghostly voices replays many of the racial clichés with which white Americans have represented blackness. Hesmondhalgh’s critique taps into a long established discourse about white musicians “ripping off” African Americans and/or projecting their own fantasies of racial difference upon them. But he is also influenced by recent work in ethnomusicology that focuses on the power imbalances in music’s globalized traffic.

Ethnomusicologists have been attuned to cultural anthropology’s broader reflection on its own colonial history as a social science designed to “capture the other” through the technologies of the camera and the phonograph (see Taussig). Most significantly for the study of sampling, Steven Feld has traced song lines in a digital age and described the political economies of indigenous and non-western soundings as they are reproduced in chains of successful recordings in the wealthier markets. One prompt for this research has been ethnomusicology’s own culpability in these economies. Ironically, field recordings by ethnomusicologists—motivated by the desire to protect, preserve, and maintain threatened or marginalized cultural forms and practices, not to mention peoples—have been the ones sampled by popular musicians in the wealthier nations. Feld neatly summarizes what is at stake in contemporary schizophrenia:

Sound recordings, split from their source through the chain of audio production, circulation, and consumption, stimulate and license renegotiations of identity. The recordings of course retain a certain indexical relationship to the place and people they both contain and circulate. At the same time, their material and commodity conditions create new possibilities whereby a place and people can be recontextualized, rematerialized and thus thoroughly reinvented. (263)

Feld captures the migratory momentum of samples and the mutability of their identities. He also reminds us that these bits and bytes of sound materialize in particular forms and media that make sense through the activities of participants in specific places. The dislocation and relocation of digital music are intimately bound.

Those traveling bits of sound do not move across cyberspace without any anchors. They stick to particular bodies, even if only for a short time. The arguments and negotiations that occur when this music is listened to and danced to, talked and written about, in and across particular sites reveal the stakes of musical territories and musical identities, their borders and their transgressions. The legal discourses of music are tested. Taken cumulatively, digital music productions or “copyright violations” involve love and theft on a two-way street, though in most cases they are lopsided articulations that favor some musicians and copyright holders over others. As Steven Shaviro points out, we need to be attuned to specific cases, since digital dialogics are neither necessarily exploitative nor inherently equitable (42-43, 66-69). For example, some copyright holders may not object to the free sampling of their work. Nate Harrison’s documentary about a few seconds of music—the Amen break—describes how The Winstons took no legal action against the multitude of “copyright violators” of their work. But a company that manufactured an electronic keyboard copyrighted that instrument’s samples of the very same
piece of music. So a third party copyrighted an audio fragment that circulated and mutated in a kind of unregulated public domain. Although copyright battles, technological practices, and ethics will regulate this traffic of sounds, “by following circulations we can get more than by defining entities, essence or provinces” (Latour 20).

Conclusion. The mobility of sound might give us critical purchase on the changing modes of sonic blackness in the digital future. In the early 1990s, Gilroy wrote that “calls and responses no longer converge in the tidy patterns of secret ethnically coded dialogue” (Black Atlantic 110). Over a decade later with the logic of sampling more widespread and accelerated, black sounds can be decontextualized and resituated. But global African-American music culture itself now samples an archive of wider global sources. Gilroy may not have fully seized upon the implications of his own statement. In fact, music historian Ronald Radano suggests that Gilroy’s reformulation of Leroi Jones’s “changing same” as the Black Atlantic retains an ahistorical kernel that is “committed to a politics of center, to a transcendent, purely musical force that ‘gets beyond’ the instabilities of discursive contest” (40). Radano correctly points out that “we simply cannot isolate a stable musical phenomenon from the historical matrix, as one might extract precious metals from ore or separate wheat from chaff” (41).

This does not mean that “black music” necessarily becomes more diffuse, hegemonic, or imperial in the future of transnational popular music. Blackness will continue to operate as a matrix of competing discourses and strategic essentialisms. But Afrofuturism will have to engage in greater dialogue with those looking at Atlantic or African-American experience from Asia and the South. Africa as a structuring absence in much of this discourse is the biggest ghost in the house. But it will continue to contribute its own sounds. Black Atlantic critics will need to speak and listen to an even broader network of voices, many of them digitally inscribed.

Early in this article I mentioned a graffito by the artist Component on the wall of the Auckland studio of radio station Base FM. By the time I finished writing this article, the giant robot-figure made of the speakers, turntables, and amplifiers of a sound system had lost its head. The new head of a reptilian cyborg figure with two tongues had taken its place. Above this image, the Maori artist and musician Manaia Toa had painted the words: “Ka Nui Te Manaaki Ki Ngaa Atua Katoa O Te Ao Marama/Respect to all the gods of the world of understanding.” This multi-vocal partial palimpsest in the South Pacific, made in the old medium of paint on a gib-board wall, represents the unpredictable possibilities in local and transnational transformations of Black music cultures.

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WORKS CITED


*Fantasia.* Dir. James Algar et al. Walt Disney Pictures, 1940.


ABSTRACT

As a dispersed assemblage of ideas and aesthetics, sonic Afrofuturism operates across the porous borders between and among music, sf, the academy, journalism, and the blogosphere. In this article I am interested in the value of these rhetorics for media studies. In particular, how can writing that focuses on the materiality of music inform our understanding of the technological changes associated with digitization? I will argue that music forms, commodities, and practices provide ample evidence of the continuities as well as discontinuities in the mediascape. Today’s popular music culture is marked by the mediations of the past, even as recorded sounds take on more informational characteristics. I also seek to ground the technological sublime of Afrofuturist poetics in the widespread social practices associated with records, sound-system dances, and music networks. Underpinning the sonic imagination in techno-centric writing and music-making are the quotidian practices of music cultures, the more “worldly” fictions behind “sonic fictions,” to borrow Kodwo Eshun’s suggestive adaptation of literary and visual sf for music recordings. This paper examines the material possibilities of technodiscourse for transnational media studies through a discussion of digital sampling, and points to the limitations of technological utopianism in relation to writing about music and black bodies.