5
Blackness in Present
Future Tense
Broadside Press, Motown
Records, and Detroit Techno

Wendy S. Walters

Writing about Detroit is not just writing about the past. It is also writing about the future because the issues have not yet been resolved.
—Grace Lee Boggs

Political ideology uses nostalgia in much the same way as architecture, ironically enough. It builds the unremembered.
—Norman Klein

Cities or places that don’t have so much tend to create opportunities. People tend to use their imaginations to compensate.
—Derrick May

DETROIT SUMMER 1967: THE GREAT REBELLION
In early June 1967, at Detroit’s Second Annual Black Arts Convention (dedicated to the memory of Malcolm X), H. Rap Brown spoke what turned out to be prophetic words, “Motown . . . we are going to burn you down,” in response to a climate of mistreatment of blacks by the predominantly white Detroit Police Department.1 Just a few weeks later, on July 23, 1967, an undercover police raid on the Blind Pig on Twelfth Street incited a massive rebellion. At least 7,231 people were arrested, 700 injured, and forty-three killed (thirty-three blacks and ten whites) over the next three days of fires, looting, and violence. Property damage in the city was estimated at over $50 million.2 Joe Von Battle, a longtime supporter of local black music production, was dismayed to find his record store completely looted in the ensuing uprising. Edward Vaughn’s Afrocentric Forum 66 bookstore was firebombed and vandalized by several Detroit Police officers.3 The Chit Chat Club, an after-hours retreat for many of Motown’s musicians, was scorched beyond repair, but the first home of Motown Records only a few
blocks up the street remained untouched. Another noteworthy survivor of the Detroit uprising was Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press, which at the time was the largest publisher of new voices in African American poetry. At the time, Motown and Broadside Press were easily the best-known producers of overtly black cultural products within and beyond the city proper.

Ever since that fiery summer, Detroit has been obsessed with promoting a vision of the future that elides the complicated racial history that brought about racial violence and rioting in 1967. This vision of the future focuses on the culture of industrial manufacturing that continues to dictate many of the city's political, economic, and social interests. For the next ten years, out of smoldering ash Detroit attempted to reinvent its image as a destination city with a “New Center” of industrial manufacturing at the commercial center of the city named just that. And down on the riverfront, a hotel/office complex called the Renaissance Center was erected at a cost of $350 million. Its construction was a major attempt to reshape the city’s skyline. Conceived “when the 1967 race riots were still fresh in people’s memories,” writes photographer and urban studies scholar Camilo José Vergara, “the Center stands like a fortress high above the streets, separated from the rest of downtown by a broad boulevard, East Jefferson.” The Renaissance Center’s physical separation from the rest of downtown revealed the discrepancy between the modern vision of Detroit many wanted to project and the fact that its streets were growing blacker, older, and poorer.

Twenty-four years later, the Renaissance Center still stands alone as the primary fixture of the Detroit skyline. It was renamed the GM Building in 2001 after it was purchased for the automaker’s new corporate headquarters, and has undergone a major restoration, including the addition of a public Winter-garden and the removal of the exterior shopping area and fortress-like facade. This renovation, like the initial construction of the building, has been noted as a sign of the city’s next renaissance. More recent commercial developments such as Comerica Park, Ford Field, the new Detroit Opera house, and MGM Grand and Greektown casinos create the illusion of a thriving downtown entertainment district and are slowly improving the quality of housing, shopping, and transportation in its surrounding areas, but visible gaps in the landscape, most notably abandoned houses, storefronts, and factories continue to remind residents and visitors that a deliverance from a history of racial turbulence has not yet come to Detroit. These decrepit buildings are the unrelenting historical memory of the city’s recent hardscrabble past, a lingering, phantom presence of racial turmoil, economic chaos, and domestic discord.

**ACTION AS MOVEMENT**

It is well documented that the Black Arts Movement (BAM) emphasized the need for action over contemplation, and “process” was an inherent element of the political discourse whether exercised through theatrical performance, protest, or ritual. Black art and black artists became both the means and ends to

118 Wendy S. Walters
a revolution that was rooted in movement, politically, artistically, ideologically, and physically. The central question was often around the issue of identity—what was “black,” how was it “seen” and also made invisible? While a variety of artists committed to developing a unique aesthetic that demonstrated a preference for “transformation rather than conservation, on spirit, rather than object” with regard to the representation of the self within the black community, there became a growing need to see the movement exercised in ways that could measure change.6

Antipathy for and mistrust of fixed forms such as text accounts for the performance trends of the BAM. The invisibility of black authors and their work in most major publishing houses was at the root of the BAM’s antipathy for text. There was also frustration over the inconsistency with which the way that laws were written and enforced. But the successful development of black literary publishers such as Broadside Press and independent music studios like Motown means that we must consider how the performance of identity affected the production of fixed forms such as the book or record and revaluate the ways in which the enactment of blackness in non-theatrical spaces shapes how blackness is defined.

Literary critic Biodun Jeyifo argues that drama “deals more obsessively than the other literary forms with man and his destiny” perhaps because “drama does not merely subsume conflict as its organizing structural motif; beyond this, drama also axiomatically attempts a resolution of sorts, a provisional synthesis in the conflicting pulls within its constitutive action, thereby approaching the limit of the dialectical image potentially realizable in art.”7 In retrospect, the daily drama of the BAM provided a “provisional synthesis” for black identity where the racial signification of “black” stood in contrast not only to “white” identities but also those previously acknowledged as “Negro” or “colored.” This space between black and Negro or colored indicated a split between generations of thinking about blackness and allowed for the articulation of a new vision of black identity that refuted an idea of innate inferiority. This articulation of identity engaged a revised dialectic of racial conflict, one in which being black was a privileged state. In this context, experiences associated with racial identification could be translated into assertions of African American humanity in literature and history. Because prior to the BAM much of black life represented in theater, television, film, literature, and advertising reflected practices of segregation, coercion, and dehumanization as being more effective in confining the black experience than they actually were, it is not surprising that performative practices of “blackness” enacted across a broad stage served as counterpoint.

The period of 1964–1974 was a time when “the category of blackness served as the dominant sign of African American cultural activity.”8 While the category of blackness noted a locus of cultural activity, the term “diaspora” emerged in reference to the intangible bond between black people dispersed through the non-African world. While the original use of diaspora referred specifically to
Jews exiled from Israel from the sixth century B.C. to the present time, the word also came to refer to other communities of people who had been dismissed or removed from their original homeland. The concept of diaspora is critical to the study of Black nationalism prior to and during the BAM, and it provides a framework for thinking about the self-conscious process of knowledge and/or information production as political action.

Cultural historian Brent Edwards’s discussion of the use of the word “diaspora” in Africanist discourse and the possibilities it affords force “us to consider discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference.” This means that diaspora is a site for multiple points of signification, each of which reflects on, complements, and contrasts others. Where diaspora may have once presumed essentialist physical similarities and/or an economic or geographical connection to link people of African descent, Edwards’s reevaluation of the term allows us to consider how the political ideology of the BAM becomes “an epistemological challenge explicitly stated out through a politics of diaspora that rejects Western assumptions about a link between knowledge production and the nation” when in cultural institutions. Thus, we might infer that the process of knowledge production through cultural institutions such as Broadside and Motown helped to formulate a historical connection between a people without defining them solely in a context of a particular geography or set of repressive experiences. With this, blackness becomes “not an inevitable object, but rather a motivated, constructed, corrosive and productive process” enacted within the commitment to envisioning the future. At Broadside Press and Motown Records, the broad reach the concept of diaspora provided allowed for the expression of new articulations of black identity in the future.

**BLACK CULTURAL PRODUCTION AS PERFORMANCE**

In 1960, Detroit was home to the fourth largest African American population in the United States. It was a significant site of political and religious activity and was gaining notice for the quality of life it could provide its black residents. Black Detroiter were very politically active; however, there were not yet many elected officials. But the air of change in the southern states was slowly blowing north. Rosa Parks had migrated in 1957 from Alabama to the city, the same year William Patrick was elected to the Detroit City Council. Charles Diggs had been elected to Congress in 1954 and John Conyers followed him there in 1964. The early 1960s looked to be the beginning of a long period of prosperity. A number of black-owned businesses were sprouting up throughout the city and finding support from a new and growing black middle class comprised primarily of automobile workers. By 1966, the *Michigan Chronicle*, the newspaper of the black middle class, had a distribution of 48,000. Artistic communities were also thriving. Ron Milner, Woodie King, Jr. and David Rambeau founded the Concept East Theater, one of the first black community theater projects. Poet Margaret Danner, originally from Chicago, developed the Detroit Artist’s
Workshop to support emerging jazz musicians and other artists. She also established Boone House, where local poets were able to share political writings and organize happenings. As recording technology was becoming more affordable, independent record studios became popular for producing local talent. Each week Joe Von Battle taped and sold recordings of Reverend C. L. Franklin’s (Aretha Franklin’s father) sermon from his record store. Edward Vaughn supported African American writers and small black presses from around the country through his bookstore. Traditional civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, CORE, National Urban League, SCLC, and SNCC, engaged in a variety of meetings, marches, and demonstrations around the city. Black nationalist groups such as the Nation of Islam, Republic of New Africa, the Pan-African Congress, Freedom Now Party, Detroit League of Revolutionary Workers, and Black Christian Nationalists were also gaining a prominent voice in local politics.12

While Detroit could claim a sizeable black population, it was never seen as one of the thriving centers of black American culture. Places like New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Chicago held higher profiles. Julius E. Thompson, author of *Dudley Randall, Broadside Press, and the Black Arts Movement in Detroit*, notes that these other cities were:

the nerve centers for black college and university graduates and professionals, and even writers (with older black writer’s workshops, black newspapers, magazines and publishers). Such factors served to remind Detroiter that they had to carefully nurture and cherish the black arts in Detroit—for other black artistic centers including Newark, New Orleans, Philadelphia and Cleveland, among others, stood ready to claim the honor of being a “national” center of black artistic endeavors.13

Broadside Press’s humble beginnings reflected Detroit’s lack of preeminence. From 1965 to 1966, Dudley Randall worked out of a single room in his home. He produced inexpensive, high quality broadsides, pamphlets, and cassette tapes of poetry. Randall’s first broadside was of his poem “Dressed All in Pink” and was followed shortly thereafter by other broadsides featuring the work of Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Melvin B. Tolson, Amiri Baraka, and Robert Hayden. Randall paid for the production of all of the broadsides out of his librarian’s salary. Many writers who published early with Broadside became major shapers of the cultural and intellectual movements of the BAM. Perhaps this was because, from the inception of the press, “Randall viewed Broadside Press’ role as that of an active participant in the Black Arts Movement and the ongoing struggles of the Civil Rights Movement.”14 His vision would help to make Broadside Press the major black press in America from 1965 to 1975. Eventually the press produced books of poetry in pamphlet form by Haki R. Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), Margaret Walker, Etheridge
Significant challenges faced Randall in his development of the press including the high costs of entering the field; competition from other publishers; poetry’s limited market; the lack of a good national distribution system; discrimination in breaking into the information market; a small staff; lack of ownership of a printing press; and the government surveillance of black presses. Despite these obstacles, Randall was remarkably successful in developing Broadside Press into the most significant black press in the country from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Part of the appeal may have been that the broadside form allowed for a strong visual presentation. Another way in which Broadside distinguished itself was in its connection to developing a specifically “black” discourse. In his study on Dudley Randall and Broadside Press, Julius Thompson notes: “The titles selected by Broadside authors and editors during the sixties reveal a clear linkage between the Africa [sic] past, present and future; and an emphasis on ‘Black’ issues of identity, historical consciousness, struggle and uplift.” Some of the topics addressed by Broadside Press included African heritage and Black Americans, criticism of American racism, black life in Chicago, black art, the complexity of the black experience, the struggle to maintain racial pride, the Civil Rights Movement, triumphs and setbacks for black women, war and peace, prison experiences, fostering consciousness and culture, the nature of the urban experience, the South, and Islamic faith in black life. “Broadside published a broader variety and a larger number of broadsides, anthologies, books, and tapes of poetry than did any other black publisher in the United States during the sixties,” notes Thompson. The business was built around mail orders taken in from all around the world. The cultural production of blackness at Broadside Press was, obviously, manifest through poetry. But Broadside offered more than just reproductions of text and illustration, it offered a vision of what black poetry could be.

Broadside Press exemplified how the self-conscious process of knowledge and/or information production was a kind of political action that set the stage to broaden what was perceived as the black experience. Broadside artists embellished the historical connection between African Americans without defining them solely in a context of a particular geography or against a set of repressive experiences. They also created a literary aesthetic to represent blackness, translated to the page. And it was Randall’s careful selection of the poems, less so the individual poets, that created this performance of identity, as Randall chose work that came to be regarded as the standard for the press and by association black poetry at large. Through the publications from Broadside, Randall created a performance of blackness that, ultimately, brought attention to the significance of the process of articulating identity—both speaking it and writing it down for mass consumption. In this day when works by African Americans and
other writers of color are readily available, such a feat might seem slight. But it is important to keep in mind that the general public did not have widespread access to work by black artists when Randall began publishing. And the idea of the black writer Broadside fostered was essential in asserting a perceptible connection between black art and blackness, where the performance of blackness became an achievement in the struggle between overt and implicit discourses of black inferiority/white superiority.

Perhaps much more obviously so than Broadside Press, the name of Motown is at once synonymous with and deeply distant from the reality of Detroit today. Even though Motown Industries left Detroit in 1971 for sunnier prospects in Hollywood, California, the original recording studio still stands at 2648 West Grand Boulevard. Now called the Motown Historical Museum, the original Hitsville U.S.A. studio showcases original recording and production equipment. As cultural historian Suzanne E. Smith has pointed out in her chronicle of Motown’s early days in Detroit, Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit, it is important to remember that Motown evolved out of the particular context of the city of Detroit as an effect of innovations in black art, politics, and business that were taking place there. Excising early Motown from the context that is Detroit fails to address the synergy between factory work and other modes of production. “Using the technologies of automobile manufacturing to produce and market its music and applying industrial methods to record production, Hitsville, U.S.A. was able to reach the largest audiences in the history of black cultural production in Detroit,” Smith explains. These large audiences attested to Motown founder Berry Gordy’s broad impact in reshaping performative black identities.

But unlike Broadside Press, Motown was not committed to delivering a political message through the careful design of their artists and music. Instead its songs celebrated traditional themes in popular music of the time such as: romantic love, dancing, and parties. While many of Motown’s artists were well aware of the political debates raging around the city at the time, few were eager to represent these conversations in their music. Smith writes: “Many artists and writers felt compelled to address the ‘Negro Revolt’ in their work, but some producers were cautious about such subject matter since it might have limited marketability.” One notable exception to this was Poets of the Revolution, a recording by Langston Hughes and Margaret Danner. This album was supported by Motown, but they did not produce or promote it. In October 1963, Danner flew to New York City to make a recording with Hughes of “Freedom’s Plow” and “Sweet Words from Liberals on Race” and Danner’s “To a Cold Caucasian on a Bus.” Motown did not pay for Danner’s flight and the two handled the recording session on their own. Hughes arranged for photos to be taken by his friend Louis Draper, but Motown was embarrassingly slow in paying him.

While Motown did not identify as a member of the BAM or take an overtly political stance with regard to social issues of the time, owner Berry Gordy did
have a broad vision for the company’s future audiences including politicized black youth engaged in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, as well as suburban white youth. The music was designed for mass distribution and the widest possible range of listening audience. Records were engineered to sound better over new car speakers in order to gain the favor of younger, more prosperous audiences. Even though the songs were overwhelmingly by African American artists, Motown did not position itself as a “race record” label and encouraged “crossing over” onto white radio stations play-lists and television programs as a means of asserting a more integrated vision of popular culture. As cultural historian Gerald Early has explained:

crossing over for many blacks meant a new kind of activism, a keen sense of nationalistic community embedded, in an ironic yet typically American way, in the idea of integration not through simple if noble endurance of degradation but through a persistent acknowledgement of claims—from court cases like Shelley vs. Kramer in 1948, to the Brown decisions (ruling and implementation) in 1954, to marches in the street, to the resurgence of Pan-Africanism.23

While part of the appeal of “crossing over” was obviously economic, Early’s insight into its political implications cannot be ignored. He attributes four key factors to Motown’s ability to cross over: a rise in interest in postwar Rhythm and Blues music; the growing popularity of the electric bass; the popularity of white artist’s covers of black rhythm and blues songs; and the decline of the music industry due to the influence of television and Hollywood film production companies. “Gordy’s objective was always to reconfigure what was meant by pop music, reiterate in his approach that pop was as black as it was white,” writes Early.24 Thus, if pop was black, then what was black could be pop.

While early Motown albums featured illustrations on the covers instead of photographs of the artists, to lightly veil that this music was created and performed by black artists, the popularity of Motown artists such as the Supremes and Martha and the Vandellas on programs such as the Ed Sullivan Show and American Bandstand quickly eliminated the need to disguise that fact.25 Suddenly, black artists could represent both the social rebellion and deviance of Rock and Roll without suffering the kind of physical or economic redress that typically accompanied such transgressions of race, class, and gender. Conversely, white teenage girls could dance suggestively to Marvin Gaye or the Temptations without any appearance of impropriety. The materiality of the cultural product had other long-reaching implications. It created white audiences who supported the company by purchasing a lot of records. And young Motown fans offered better prospects for a long-term relationship with the company.

As has already been mentioned, the visibility of the Motown artists also introduced a new performance of blackness into the mass media. While it is true that in some very profound ways, Gordy’s conceived ideal portrait of masculine and feminine black identity was limited by his own conceptions of marketability,
he was successful in inserting an image into mainstream media that had not, heretofore, existed. And though he may not have been able to predict the ways in which this new image of doo-wop would eventually be co-opted (Lou Reed and Little Shop of Horrors) by white artists who needed a delimited conception of “blackness” as a backdrop to their “othering” of themselves within their own race, evidence suggests that Gordy was able to foresee the power in meticulously engineering the performance of black identity—from the wigs on their heads, to choreographer Cholly Atkins’ signature dance steps, to their characterless voices.

In fact, one of the long-reaching legacies of the early Motown recordings was the perceived “automation” of the singing voice. Philosopher Roland Barthes describes “the grain of the voice” as “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.” This embodiment of corporeality is precisely what Gordy avoided in choosing his singers to allow for the most effective technological shaping of the voice by production equipment. Some accounts of production at Motown suggest that artists were not always singing their own tracks and that there was a certain degree of interchangeability amongst them. For example in 1967, the Supremes’ Florence Ballard was replaced by Cindy Birdsong, who shared a striking physical likeness to Ballard and an amazing ability to imitate her voice.

Gordy also required the standardization of the “Motown Sound.” Only a few producers were allowed into the studios and most songs were under the guise of legendary songwriters and producers Holland/Dozier/Holland. Most Motown artists, notes Alexander Weheliye, “collaborated with Dozier/Holland/Dozier [sic] [and] Norman Whitfield who shaped the sonic provenances of the Temptations’ early 1970s work . . . which ensured that the technological mediation and creation of soul became part and parcel of the musical performance.” Gordy’s vision of performative blackness at Motown, with all of its “generic” characteristics seemed to suggest that if blackness then could not be “overcome” it could, at least, represent a state of cultural interchangeability. It should be made clear that Motown’s objective was not to “pass” its artists as white, but to “pass” them as black, or, at the least, create an image that could not be refuted for its implausibility.

Motown pursued a supplanting of black “invisibility” with performed portraits suggesting possibilities for evolution, shape-shifting, and a disconnection with history. Retrospectively, we can now see where the existing narratives of history and modernity could not account for limitless possibilities for black identity, what one could make and what one could be. Thus, the vision of blackness performed by Motown’s recording artists supplanted these perceived limitations. It was not lost on all black people that Motown was fabricating a fissure in history, a disassociation with the R&B past that had, not only, predicated its own existence, but laid the foundations of its audience. However, nowhere else were Motown’s objectives so clearly in concert with the BAM than in this careful invention of cultural visibility.
Motown and Broadside Press were concerned with the production of conditions of possibility with regard to black identity; however, Motown was concerned with orchestrating its consumption as well. Of this, Gerald Early writes:

Motown as a mode of both consumption and production, indeed, as stylization—as discipline forged from both art and politics—of both, probably held blacks together better than virtually anything else in the black national community, other than the demand for equal rights. That is what the words “Hitsville” and “Motown” signify, finally: a modern black urban community built on technology, on the American bourgeois principles of consumption and production, and on the Washingtonian principles of casting down one’s buckets where one is.28

This practice of “casting down one’s buckets” would only be effective in an environment in which consumption and production were stages in a performance of identity. These buckets hit the ground hard and rooted in the terra firma of Detroit. There they remained long after the cultural institutions that had cast them down had ceased production in the city. For decades to come, there would be some intense imagining that those buckets were half-full.

DETROIT IN PRESENT FUTURE TENSE

Every January, Detroit opens the annual North American Auto Show with the hope that talk about the future of automobiles will wipe away any obvious signs of the city’s troubled past. Like a shimmering new engine orbiting on a raised stage, Detroit characterizes itself as a prototype of the city to come, the heart of a larger vehicle that will comfortably accommodate even the most particular of travelers. Detroit wants to be an international destination city, not just a pit stop for weary manufacturing executives. But the Auto Show’s cars of the future visibly outpace the city’s commitment to redesign as vestiges of the Great Rebellion of 1967 can still be found within walking distance from downtown’s Cobo Center, where the Auto Show is held.

There is a tension between the kind of future the Auto Show represents and the past of the city that surrounds it. What is remembered is what is coming next, what is soon to be made—if not in Detroit, then in the name of Detroit, down snaking assembly lines in Canada and Mexico. But this is not the only vision. Throughout the city, there are touchstones for a future of possibility that have origins outside of manufacturing. For more than seventeen years, installation artist Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Project, a public art project of found-object collage, car-hood paintings, tree and house sculptures, has provided a vision of the future of Detroit. Public art on buildings around the city also reveals a cultural history about the perception of the future and acts as a catalyst for recalling the conditions of possibility Broadside and Motown created, which once brought positive international attention to the Motor City. But Guyton’s sculptural articulations of the future also serve as reminders of the recent past, almost as if to conjure the practice of envisioning a break with
Blackness in Present Future Tense

According to the ancients and many of the moderns, the only hope for retaining short-term memory in particular (number, names, dates, nonsense syllables)—to protect against distraction—is through mnemonic systems, where cues like place, sound, or contiguity are assembled mentally in order to bring the picture back (“Where did I park that car again?”). But even here, memory is a distracted imaginary, essentially a filing system where information disappears or reforms itself whenever you touch it.

Like Klein’s picture, the Heidelberg Project works to bring back cornerstones of the BAM: “‘Black’ issues of identity, historical consciousness, struggle and uplift”; however, what constitutes “black” is not defined in an agonistic context.

Another example of a grassroots attempt to visualize the future can be found in Blacktronic Science, a mural found along a storefront wall on Mack Avenue on the city’s east side (fig. 5.1). In its vision of the future, a master scientist sits at the center of an equation where science, culture, and funk are equal and quantifiable elements of future-production. In the image, energy radiates in from an anonymous central source. In the background, planets spin and volcanoes erupt. The combination of computer technology with Egyptian icons signals that Afro-centricity is both a source and effect of this generation of energy, along with 1970s funk/soul music, namely Funkadelic and Parliament’s George Clinton and William “Bootsy” Collins. A hot orange earth is relatively tiny in the forefront and partly occluded by a skull that seems to suggest a kind of death, if not apocalypse. A Daliesque clock hangs by a noose but only one hand is visible on its face. From this we might assume that time is omni-directional and that the past, present, and future will convene on this single landscape of information, evoked as a vision. Conceptually, the future materializes as information in a mnemonic system stretched across a landscape that does not allow blindness to occlude the future or the past.

The landscape of information Blacktronic Science provides reminds us, as new media theorists Elaine Svenonius, Friedrich Kittler, and Paul Virilio have shown, that as the industrial product becomes less valuable, information gains in significance. In Svenonius’s studies of structures for organizing information, she defines the word “information” broadly: “Informing is done through the mechanisms of sending a message or communication; thus information is ‘the content of a message’ or something that is communicated,” she explains. The content of a message is inevitably shaped by its relationship to history, and our perception of a moment is deeply affected by our ability to perceive how time passes in a given space; history becomes the form through which we are able to recall information and translate experience into record. Painter Ben Shahn reminds us that “form is formulation—the turning of content into a material entity, rendering a content accessible to others, giving it permanence, willing it to the
Thus if history is form, or a shape of information, then the relationship between time and history does not necessarily have to be linear/chronological, although that is the primary way in which we experience time. If we can imagine the relationship between history and time to be manifest as layers in the way that the *Blacktronic Science* mural depicts history, then the future might also be perceived as a composite of past and present moments rather than a destination. Studies in cinema and digital media have shown that “digital compositing, in which different spaces are combined into a single seamless virtual space, is a good example of the alternative aesthetics of continuity.”

Where performances of blackness at Broadside and Motown during the BAM might be conceived of as montage, or a juxtaposition of successive events in almost a cinematic technique, a re-examination of the Detroit artists’ present relationship to the future tense allows us to consider alternative representations of *time in space*. While Broadside and Motown focused on emphasizing rifts in history, fracturing predictability with assertions of possibility, Detroit Techno artists manifest possibility by fusing history. The past, present, and future exist simultaneously as in a layered effect of a software graphics program—these layers of space and time provide the opportunity for vision again. Thus, as Peggy Phelan suggests, history affords the privilege of seeing, whereby seeing is to observe that disorder “which does not fit into a narrative—either the movement narrative or the narrative of a sentence.” In this reading of time and space, Detroit’s cultural history becomes a landscape of information and Detroit Techno is a composite resulting from a fusing of these influences. “Detroit Techno is aerial. It transmits along routes through space, is not grounded by the roots of any tree,” notes Kodwo Eshun. While Eshun offers an evocative portrait of how Techno occupies conceptual space, his argument for groundlessness elides the history of performing blackness in the city of Detroit.
It is well known that early Detroit Techno was led by the initiative of high school classmates Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson, also known as the Belleville Three. Their early compositions were strongly influenced by the Funkadelic incantations of fellow Detroiter George Clinton and the German band, Kraftwerk. In the early 1980s, FM DJ Charles Johnson, a.k.a “The Electrifying Mojo” (1977–1982), played a copy of Kraftwerk’s *Computer World* (1981) that he had discovered in a discard bin at a previous record station almost every night. The record left a distinct impression on Atkins who eventually founded the group Cybotron with May, Saunderson, and veteran Rick Davis. Eshun explains the group’s meaning: “Cyb[org] + [Elec]tron[ic] = Cybotron. The Cybotron is the electronic cyborg, the alien at home in dislocation, excentered by tradition, happily estranged in the gaps across which electronic current jumps.” In 1981, Cybotron released “Alley of Your Mind” on their own Deep Space Records. Mojo played it regularly. Their 1982 follow up, “Cosmic Cars,” sold ten to fifteen thousand copies in Detroit alone. Early Detroit Techno production was homespun, like Joe Von Battle and Berry Gordy’s early labels. In his essay, “Techno: Days of Future Past,” Mike Rubin writes: “Like a black version of punk rock, techno musicians around Detroit suddenly started their own labels—most notably, Saunderson’s KMS and May’s Transmat—and began releasing their own records, a case of brothers doing it for themselves.” Eventually, Cybotron signed a contract with California-based Fantasy Records (Berkeley) and the album “Enter” followed. “Clear” soon after became a hit on Billboard’s black singles chart.

Kodwo Eshun argues that Cybotron’s “Techno City is a futuropolis of the present, planned, sectioned and elevated from station to studio, transmitting from a Detroit in transition from the industrial to the information age.” We might consider Cybotron’s futuropolis as an aural simulation of vision,
in which materiality is delivered through the performative gesture, again in Phelan’s terms, of producing or reproducing visibility. But unlike Broadside Press or Motown, Detroit Techno exercised a vision that was not contingent on performative practices of black cultural production. This is, in part, because blackness no longer needed to be defined in the specific context of Detroit. Demographic and political changes in the past twenty years had rendered the city overwhelmingly African American. Blackness was now pervasive in a way it had not been during the BAM. For this reason or others, Detroit Techno artists did not emphasize black identity politics as part of the music. Perhaps the association seemed implicit, or insignificant.

One unfortunate result of this lack of attention to articulating and performing black identity, however, was an eventual disassociation of Detroit Techno from black audiences. Mike Rubin writes:

More disturbing to the Motor City posse is that techno has been portrayed as “white” music. As techno’s digitized signals crisscrossed Planet Rock, most of the producers and consumers who tuned in were white and the identity of the music’s forefather’s often got lost in the transmission. Meanwhile, black audiences and musicians ceased to see techno as their own art form, leaving the electronic pioneers of Detroit not only feeling spurned by indifferent white-owned record companies, but estranged from their own community as well.39

Although Dudley Randall and Berry Gordy might have predicted and warned against such break with black audiences, not all Detroit Techno lacks a connection to performances of identity that reflect either a discourse of differentiation or an epistemological challenge explicitly stated out through a politics of diaspora. Producer Mad Mike Banks continues to produce black nationalist techno through his label Underground Resistance. And James Stinson, who died suddenly at the age of 32 in 2002, led the visionary group Drexciya for nearly eleven years. Of which, Rubin claims:

Drexciya—the mysterious collective who propose a scenario in which pregnant African women thrown overboard during the Middle Passage might not have drowned but instead gave birth to a race of water-breathing Afronauts, who any day now, are coming back to the surface to deliver whitey a beatdown.40

While Drexciya extends the concept of the Black Atlantic below the surface of those sea routes that defined the Middle Passage, it also evidences a kind of composite history where, once again, the opportunity of vision is created. Through these assertions of history, the Drexciyans counter the idea of Detroit’s transformation from a space of industry to a space of information by asserting that, in the diaspora, virtuality already has been manifest in the envisioning of survivability beyond the dictates of historical teleology. In other words, where all historical evidence points to death as the ending point for
those Africans lost in the voyage across the Atlantic, death is, ultimately, unable to cease the regenerative, performative practices of black cultural production.

Although Motown relocated to Los Angeles in 1977 and Broadside Press is no longer in regular production, during the 1960s their performative practices of black cultural production challenged the ideological tensions between the racial categories of “black” and “white,” and produced a discourse of differentiation through which the cultural product of blackness became an achievement in the struggle between overt and implicit discourses of black inferiority/white superiority enacted to subvert existing social relations. As we reconsider the importance of the BAM, it is essential that we continue to investigate newer modes of cultural production that, overtly or subversively, address these residual discourses. The case of Detroit Techno provides an opportunity to reconsider the site-specific significance of performative practice and to better understand how preceding performative practices of black cultural production make possible the kind of cultural production that is not primarily based on representations of identity. There is a synergistic relationship between the performative practices of cultural production in Detroit during the 1960s and 1970s and its persistent reputation as a “city of ruins.” Retrospectively, one might argue that it was the overt demonstration of blackness, perceived metaphorically, that lit Detroit on fire in 1967; a controlled brushfire burn that, in the end, could not be contained. Thus in Detroit, one legacy of the BAM is the regenerative practice of black cultural production in electronic music. Critic Mike Rubin claims:

Detroit’s post-apocalyptic mystique is crucial to the mythology of Detroit Techno. It’s from this blighted backdrop that techno comes forth, like the city motto, “Resurget Cineribus”—it will rise from the ashes.” The contradictions in imagining a future while both the past and present sit in shambles all around you are rich indeed, as are those of having a high-tech movement hail from a burnt out urban shell or sophisticated art music flourishing amidst such a stubbornly close-minded, culturally intolerant, blue-collar town such as Detroit.41

The legacy of the BAM is a performative blackness that now manifests as possibility through a disassociation from the kind of identity politics that led practices of black cultural production during the late 1960s. Performative blackness manifests in demonstrations of technological innovation and black futurism in electronic music and extends the legacy of the BAM beyond its predictable outcome.

NOTES
2. Ibid., 188–89.
3. Ibid., 197.

4. In the riot of 1943, thirty-four people were killed, twenty-five of them black. More than 1,800 people were arrested in the 36 hours of rioting. In 1925, “The home of black physician Ossian Sweet became the site of a racial incident that resulted in a nationally publicized murder trial. Dr. Sweet, a graduate of Howard University Medical School, bought this two-story brick house in an all-white Detroit neighborhood in 1925. On July 14, the neighborhood’s residents protested his plans to move in and stated that they intended to retain what they called “the present high standards of the neighborhood.” On September 8, Dr. Sweet, his wife, and nine gun-carrying associates moved into the house under police escort. The next night a large crowd of whites began pelt-ing the house with rocks and bottles; they then rushed the house. A volley of gunshots issued forth from the second story windows, killing one man and seriously wounding another. The Detroit police arrested Dr. Sweet and his companions and charged them with first-degree murder.” http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/detroit/d4.htm.


10. Ibid.


12. Lorenzo Thomas, Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 140. The Nation of Islam was founded by W. D. Fard “a Detroit junk man and door-to-door peddler, but along with his curios he disseminated the Muslim doctrine.”


15. Ibid., 46.

16. Ibid., 38.

17. Ibid., 47.


19. Ibid., 116.

20. Ibid., 98.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 107.


24. Ibid., 84.

36. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 120.
41. Ibid., 113–14.