

Sonic Afrofuturism: Blackness, electronic music production and visions of the future.

By

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A mini-thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Magister
Artium in the Department of History, University of the Western Cape.

Date of submission: 31 July 2018

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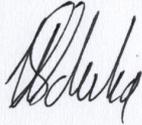
DECLARATION

I declare that *Sonic Afrofuturism: Blackness, electronic music production and visions of the future* is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

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Keywords:

Afrofuturism, Blackness, Aurality, Techno, Electronic, Music
Synthesizer, Science Fiction, Sonic, Phonograph

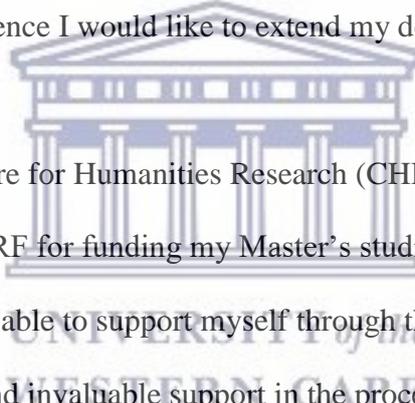
Abstract

This thesis is an exploration and analysis of the ways in which we might use varying forms of Black thought, theory, and art to think Blackness anew. For this purpose I work with electronic music from Nigeria and Detroit between 1976 and 1993, as well as with works of science fiction by W.E.B. Du Bois, Samuel Delany, Ralph Ellison, and Octavia Butler. Through a conceptual framework provided by theorists such as Fred Moten and Kodwo Eshun and the philosophical work of Afrofuturists like Delany, Ellison, Butler, and Du Bois, I explore the outer limits of what is possible when doing away with a canon of philosophy that predetermines our thinking of Blackness. This exploration also takes me to the possible depths of what this disavowal of a canon might mean and how we work with sound, the aural, and the sonic in rethinking the figuring of Blackness. This thesis is also woven together by the theory of the Black Radical Tradition – following Cedric Robinson and Fred Moten specifically. At the centre of this thesis, and radiating outwards, is the assertion that a set of texts developed for a University of the West – Occidental philosophy as I refer to it in the thesis – is wholly insufficient in attempting to become attuned to the possibilities of Blackness. The thesis, finally, is a critique of ethnomusicology and its necessity for a native object, as well as sound studies, which fails to conceptualise any semblance of Black noise.

Acknowledgements

Before anything else, I need to thank my parents for contending with, and supporting me through, a difficult and taxing process. This thesis is, in large part, a dedication to them and Ouma and Mama; this was an exercise in sacrifice and an attempt to make you proud.

Thank you to Professor Patricia Hayes and Dr Maurits Van Bever Donker for being wonderful supervisors. They have both supported me in the inevitable ups and downs of writing a thesis. They have both been tough and kind in equal measure, always concerned with how I can make the best possible thesis, but also balance that with what is right for me. For this and their extreme patience I would like to extend my deepest gratitude.

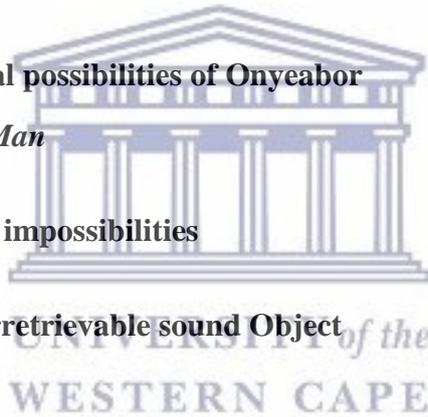
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I would like to thank the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) of the University of the Western Cape and the DST-NRF for funding my Master's studies. Without this financial support I would not have been able to support myself through the rigours of study. The CHR has also provided additional and invaluable support in the process of reading and interacting with exceptional scholars. In particular I would like to thank Ross Truscott, Michelle Smith, Natasha Vally, Thozama April, Rutendo Hadebe, Lee Walters, Pam Sykes, and Caili Forrest for both intellectual and emotional support at various points in this process. I would like to say a special thank you to Lameez Lalkhen for being the most supportive member of staff at the CHR. Finally, Associate Professor Heidi Grunebaum deserves praise for her unending work in making the academy do work outside of its walls. She has been an example and a motivation every step of the way.

Most importantly for me, I want to thank my friends and my partner for their continued encouragement. To my partner, Desiree Bailey, for your resilient support when my own resilience was waning, and for your probing questions that pushed the limits of what I thought I was capable of, for your strength in growing with me in a time I was in the middle of multiple stressors; thank you for your astounding strength. You have been, and continue to be, nothing short of immense and powerful. To Julie Nxadi, Buntu Sixaba, Robert La Vita, Lauren Van De Rede, Tazneem Wentzel, Samuel Longford, Medina Moosa, and Emma Minkley for being there whenever I needed to complain or needed assistance, thank you. Botha Kruger, for your help in getting me notebooks and for getting me a year-long subscription to the wire magazine, thank you so much for your years of support. Massive shout out to William Ellis for introducing me to the sounds of William Onyeabor. To Liezl Gevers who emerged as one of my greatest friends and support when mental health was at its worst, I can never thank you enough. Leigh Bester, Melissa Bester, Andriques Petersen, and Thandeka Xaba who have been there for me through everything in the last ten years, I do not know if any of this would be possible without the multitude of times you have saved me by giving me a home, a place of solace, or respite from mental health. Lastly, Aidan Erasmus: without you there would be no thesis. I borrowed all of your books, and before that I borrowed all of your time, and before that you pushed me to do this. Without your constant support I would not have been able to do this. Thank you for your time, your couch, your food, your books, and most importantly to me, your opinion.

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Intro(duction)

The objective through which I have set out to work in writing this thesis is based on the following formulation: ethnomusicology and sound studies are both mediated through sound in varying ways and for different purposes. Ethnomusicology needs to always make the ethnic in order to survive as a discipline, inevitably recreating the native object. Sound studies, in its desire to abstract sound and sometimes introduce it as script(ure) – an example would be the grooves of a phonograph – often ends up also producing an object, outside of the sound object which I will come to later. In my reading of the term object, I am more concerned with the reduction enforced when making a person a thing to be viewed through the particular lens of ethno studies, in this case ethnomusicology. As such, my engagement with the idea of the object is both theoretical as well as descriptive insofar as it draws attention to those being forced into a position of being studied, something I spend time with in chapter three through William Onyeabor and his discography, as well as the conceptual work of making an object of study for sound studies which unfortunately has resulted in the melding of an object of sound and the thing which produces it, and for this I spend time in chapter one and two thinking through. I will also be reading Black speculative fiction and science fiction, specifically *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, and *Dhalgren* by Samuel Delany. To support my argument around how sound can be used to rethink what Blackness constitutes, I turn to the Black radical tradition.

In thinking through this problem with the production of people as objects, I will engage with the work of Black electronic music producers. In this regard I will work with the music of William

Onyeabor in Enugu, Nigeria. In addition to Onyeabor I will also engage the music of Detroit techno musicians Drexciya, Jeff Mills, Underground Resistance, as well as the Belleville three: Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson, and Derrick May. The period in which I will be focusing my musical work spans from the mid-1970s to the early-1990s. Onyeabor was most active from 1976 until about 1985. Techno's peak was during the late 80s and early 90s, before it traveled to Western Europe.

I interlace the argument around electronic music production, as well as grounding it within the theoretical framework provided by Afrofuturism. This term, coined by Mark Dery to speak about science fiction and speculative fiction written by Black authors, is characterized by its centralizing of questions about race, ethnicity, belonging, and most importantly for my project, alienation. With this in mind, it is important to also read the work of other scholars working within a broader framework of Black radical thought. This breadth of reading enables me to argue for working harder, so as not to be content with sitting comfortably with one set of readings of one set of texts. And so, as much as this thesis is about thinking about Afrofuturism, Blackness, Black science fiction, and Black noise, it is also a way to think about modes of complicating disciplinary formations in the humanities. I am working with these musicians and authors as ways to work through the questions raised above, not resisting, but disavowing canonical texts and must-read philosophers and theorists from the occident.

This thesis constitutes a call to arms as well, concerning itself with the work of revolting, of working in the undercommons as Moten and Harney have urged us to do.¹ By the end of it this thesis will have opened the possibility of thinking of Blackness outside of the normative models we have learnt and accepted; that jazz, blues, and hip hop are somehow the only forms of Black musical expression, or that thought cannot reside in other forms of expression.

In order to dismember and leave exposed the literary landscape made by white philosophy, I will fortify my thesis with the following texts and put them alongside and against each other: *In the Break: The aesthetics of the black radical tradition* by Fred Moten, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* by Alexander G. Weheliye, and *More Brilliant than the Sun* by Kodwo Eshun. These texts will be referenced throughout my thesis, allowing me to remain attuned to the work without being captivated by it. In addition to these texts, the film *The Last Angel of History* by John Akomfrah has also lodged itself centrally throughout my argument. In fact, this film is the one that set off this thesis project before it even started. When time travel was introduced to me as a mode of historical philosophy through *The Last Angel of History* it made sense that this would be what would emerge. Through these texts a few questions have been produced and rigorously fought and thought with: How do we deal with the lingering echo of colonialism in working with ethnomusicology? Is there a way to pry it from its disciplinary formation? Does sound studies provide adequate room to think Blackness, and if not, how do we knead it out of its comforts? And finally, how does Afrofuturism as a theoretical framework of sound and literature unlock the possibility for thinking Blackness anew?

¹ Moten, Fred, and Stefano Harney. "The university and the undercommons: Seven theses." *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 101-115.

My three chapters, ‘Sound Work – A Black Chapter’, ‘Between Rhythm and Interruption’, and ‘(De)Composing an Archive – Tracking William Onyeabor’ all deal with a grounding force that allows me to expound on the work of the thesis. In chapter one I posit that disciplines are formed and maintained to exclude ways of thinking and writing that do not commit themselves to the canons congealed around its formation. More specifically, I remind myself of my initial desire in writing this thesis, the desire to write against. Instead what has erupted was the more important work of writing away. And so I delve into a workshop as well as a talk at UWC by John Mowitt² in order to unpack what these moments and slippages mean. I put his own text, *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities* against itself and himself in order to show what would have been possible if there were further considerations made. Following on from this I continue into thinking about techno. I work here with techno as a sounding board, as a means to show up the failings of sound studies and ethnomusicology in thinking adequately with Black noise. This chapter is a serious study in the ways techno music produced by Black musicians in Detroit constitute anew what philosophy and critical thought mean; something that the west has yet to catch up with. Finally, I move on to William Onyeabor and simply here, I show why ethnomusicology can only ever fall short. I highlight this by showing why he is undesirable to study from the west but is an ideal wall mount for DJs from the west. I also endeavor throughout the thesis to show what the possibilities are once Black noise and Black science fiction are taken seriously.

² Mowitt is the Leadership Chair in Critical Humanities at the University of Leeds in the faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Cultures. He is also the author of *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities*, as well as *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking*.

Beyond anything else, this thesis is an attempt to show what the practice of revolt can produce when uncurbed by institutional, departmental, and disciplinary restrictions.



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Chapter one: Sound Work – A Black Chapter

And when the dark tightens
around my neck I think
of vultures casting a shadow
before the flesh breaks

of the omen of crows
nailed into the sky
of gaping earth-home
for black girl, for black boy³

This chapter, and perhaps the whole thesis, was born out of an anxiety with disciplines and their origins. For this thesis the disciplines that unsettled are ethnomusicology and history. And so, in embarking on this thesis project I initially set out to write against a canon of occidental philosophy, and more importantly, the whiteness that it produces as both alibi and foundational to its reason(ing). In the process – and most probably for the last years without placing significant importance on it – I encountered, more times than I can count, that Black (radical) philosophy does not exist because it stands in opposition to whiteness. There is no causal relationship between the two, and as Souleymanne Bachir Diagne highlights, art and philosophy have existed before the advent and interference of the colonial philosophy that enabled theories of racial superiority. Of course this is not all Bachir Diagne does, especially through the ways in which he interrupts the procession of time as both a critique of Hegel and one that opens up a new concept of the ways in which rhythm operates. Diagne also does this by demonstrating,

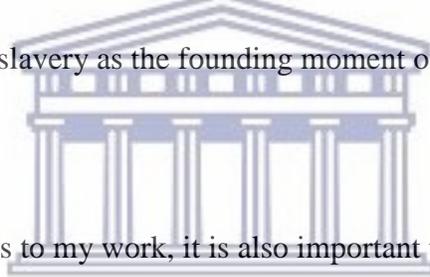
³ Bailey, Desiree C. “It’s Risky to Love in the Season of Hunters” in Stafford, Tim. *Learn Then Burn 2: This Time Its Personal*. Austin, TX: Write Bloody Publishing, 2014.

through Senghor, what the separation of art from philosophy did for the colonial project. In building this distinction retroactively, western philosophers asserted that once the two function separately, dislocating each from the other, the only determination would be that the only thinking Man is the one with the capacity to structure His philosophies in a way audible to whiteness. This is why there is no room at all for hearing sound outside of sounds that do not offend a white tympanum: for Adorno, Jazz, for slave owners, joy.

There is also a willful and purposeful writing against the extreme white nature of the discourse and discipline of history, as evidenced by any panel discussion Black folk find ourselves on. There is little room for Black scholars to exist apart from a frustrated and disarmed academic, or as a vociferous but exhausted interrupter of spaces. Either way, these frustrations do not only emerge out of the university as institution, but university as invasive force in thinking through and with Blackness. To clarify and refrain from pulling punches, I assert that through practices of philosophy as it converges with history and ethnomusicology, the university intervenes in the domains of Black science fiction, art, and musical expression, to preoccupy these eminent philosophies with the work of standing in opposition to (whiteness), instead of making anew an understanding of the subjects of Black modernity (which I will unpack with the help of Toni Morrison), Black radical philosophy (with Fred Moten and W.E.B. DuBois), and philosophies of sound and recall (with Samuel Delany and Kodwo Eshun). I will also, here, work to show some of the shortcomings of John Mowitt's concepts of *sounds*, and how sounds in his reading can

only fall short in understanding utterances and language at the moment of creating otherworlds,⁴ not as escape but as a navigation.⁵

In our time, the USAF archaeologists surmise, imperial racism has denied black subjects the right to belong to the enlightenment project, thus creating an urgent need to demonstrate a substantive historical presence. This desire has overdetermined Black Atlantic intellectual culture for several centuries. To establish the historical character of black culture, to bring Africa and its subjects into history denied by Hegel et al., it has been necessary to assemble counter-memories that contest the colonial archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity.⁶



As important as Kodwo Eshun is to my work, it is also important that I consider what he imagines both the radical tradition and Afrofuturism functioning as. To him, and I think in general, these two productions are seen as opposition to whiteness, to the “colonial archive” as he calls it. This was, after all, my first instinct as well, but in reading for and reading against, it

⁴ Other-worlds is a concept that W.E.B. DuBois works with in *The Souls of Black Folk*; similarly, themes of otherworldliness are present in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and simultaneously present in every exploration of Blackness present in the science fiction and technologies I work with here. For me, then, otherworlds serve here in two ways: first, literal other worlds forced by dislocation through colonization, slavery, and forced migration through capitalism. Second, the other worlds of science fiction, of Afrofuturism, of Black technology, and of sound.

⁵ Here I am thinking of navigation as both a way of navigating space – outer and social – as well as that of navigating between Africa as continent and Africa as diaspora. Both of these ideas are being read through Black science fiction and philosophy in this chapter, but is expanded on in the chapters on music, technology, and sound. Further, I think inserting the new Donald Glover tv show, *Atlanta*, here is invaluable. For someone outside of Blackness it could possibly be entertaining, funny, scary, but for those of us occupying Blackness even in the blackest of spaces, these seemingly surreal plotlines and imageries are grounded in experiences we have all had. The point is that these things should be out of the ordinary, ridiculous, incomprehensible, but it makes absolute sense to us.

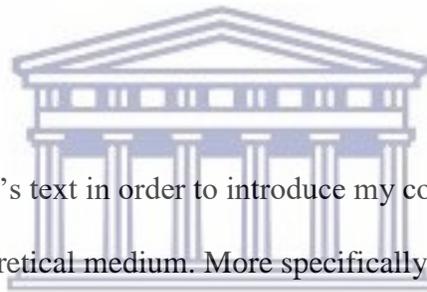
⁶ Eshun, Kodwo "Further considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003), pg 287-288

seems to me that working in this way can only make one eventuality possible: reproducing the tropes that determine Blackness (in the university and elsewhere). I am hesitant and tentative about doing the work of assembling “countermemories” as they only exist within the framework of memories already in existence. What I am suggesting is that we need to consider our memories as existing on their own terms. But(!), all this said, I think that Eshun undermines my reading of this quote through his work in *The Last Angel of History* as well as in his theoretical grappling with melody and rhythm as opposed to lyrics in *More Brilliant than the Sun*. In both of these instances, through his work with ideas of memory and recall in both the book and the film, I am struck by the use of time travel as a means to destabilize canonical literature and historical certainties produced by tropes of history as progress. As I move between hesitance, confidence, and self-rebuttal through Eshun, I am also reminded of a repeated phrase: to undo Western Philosophy you must first learn its tricks, or if you want to play the game you must first learn the rules. These are phrases I can never understand nor abide by: I cannot undo something like whiteness in the academy and its dominance on thinking sound by residing within the confines of its drudgery and banal violence. The only way I see myself doing this is by working on what is important, and not reworking what is repressive.

It is important that I pause at certain phrases, terms, and their intersections with each other. What is meant by Blackness, sound, the Black radical tradition, Black science fiction, and how do they all enmesh and emerge anew? In my reading, though these may function as distinct categories, modes of thinking, and ways of engaging with what it means to be Black - not only on the continent of Africa, but in Africa’s Diasporas – these also work together as a necessary tool to reimagine Blackness. “That Black radicalism cannot be understood within the particular context

of its genesis is true; it cannot be understood outside that context either. In this sense, Black radicalism is (like) Black music. The broken circle demands a new analytic (way of listening to the music).”⁷

Without *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* it is difficult to imagine what would emerge between Marx before Robinson, and Moten’s Marx and Freud. And so to think about how Robinson and Moten put Marx to work⁸ is to consider the radical as a practice, the two agitating each other to produce an insistence on necessitating considered and slow scholarship.



I turn, then, back to Fred Moten’s text in order to introduce my conception of sound and how I choose to work with it as a theoretical medium. More specifically, I gesture toward the chapter titled “Aunt Hester’s scream”, in which Moten explores the work of Fredrick Douglass and the ways in which he amplifies the sounds of his aunt’s screams, the deciphering of these sounds, and who these sounds are audibly definable to: Black people. Most importantly, for Douglass, the screams are the only part he can understand, he cannot commit anything to paper because he is unable to grapple with the brutality of that whipping, but somehow the scream is legible. I think that this is also the moment to note the fact that John Mowitt, in his 2015 text *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities*, does not reference Fred Moten’s 2003 text. I will elucidate why this is a significant and glaring omission soon, not because I want to show Mowitt up, but because I want

⁷ Moten, Fred. *In the break: The aesthetics of the black radical tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. Pg 24

⁸ Moten through the “commodity who speaks” and Robinson through the implications of Marxism in reading Black philosophical traditions.

to show the potential of his text. More so, it is important to identify the fact that without spending time with, at the very least, “Aunt Hester’s scream”, Mowitt fails to address the establishment of the languages he tries to talk through; the squawk, whistle, echo, whistle, whisper, gasp, and silence. All that is present is more of the same, Nancy, Lacan, Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida, all of whom are important in their own right, but stand unopposed (insofar as they remain permanently present) and without scrutiny in texts like Mowitt’s.

Here, then, I would call Mowitt out in a few ways: come and do the (specialised) work you want to provoke me to do, even if at an unusual hour. Come and think on the sonic references that occupy *sounds*. Furthermore, the question, as Ross Truscott pointed out to me,⁹ is what would have happened had Mowitt been more considered in his reading and his thinking for *Sounds*? What could possibly have emerged had he paid attention to Glissant, DuBois, Moten, Butler, Eshun, Weheliye, Morrison, May, Robinson, Saunderson, Mills, Atkins, Gilroy, Akomfrah, Ellison, Chandler, or Bachir Diagne? And what is possible in turning down the volume on dead white men for the duration of one book? Perhaps, had he paid attention to Moten, there would have been an opportunity for what Moten calls “invagination”, both signifying the cut that makes the break possible, but also of turning something in on itself. In Moten’s case, he turns Marx and Freud in on themselves, exploring the possibilities of their work had there not been the limitations of whiteness, the canons they were working through, and the certainty of the object they were writing against. Again, I must refer to a conversation with Ross Truscott here, where

⁹ Ross Truscott is a next generation researcher at the Centre for Humanities research at the University of the Western Cape. This conversation occurred during a dinner among friends, after much prodding of the limits of the work of Mowitt in *Sounds*, his disagreement with my critique, but the possibilities that emerge between his reading and mine. Given his considered and deconstructive work through Freud, Lacan, and that ilk, it would have been imprudent of me to disregard his point of view on this.

he pointed out to me that what Moten does with Freud is show how the death drive and the freedom drive move together, converge, overlap, and represent the same possibility. Put more clearly, there is freedom only in death, but Freud could not see that possibility. So here, then, is why Mowitt's omission is glaring: without Moten's scholarship being present, the archetypes of Mowitt's explorations seem to spring from nowhere, that he is the one to sound out the theory, that there is no prior reverberation. It is by no means fraud, but it must be a willful disregard. And to think about this a bit more, I turn to Mowitt's presentation at the Centre for Humanities Research Winter School of 2017, in which he used Bob Marley's "Jammin'".

In this talk, he uses the wrong lyrics.¹⁰



He speaks about groove and melody without talking about two authors (Weheliye and Eshun) who have produced major important works in the field yet spends an inordinate amount of time on Lacan and his jammed machine. I understand the insistence on Lacan's jammed machine; the human, but this fails to think about what that iteration of human has produced. The jammed machine of Mowitt and Lacan is the same human as that of Kant albeit for different and varying reasons. Both of these are reliant on a deaf white man, one whose aural faculty only manages a slim frequency, one which only registers white noise. This iteration of human is only always white: for Kant the cognitive and civil superior to any subspecies, to Mowitt and Lacan a failure to recognise that human for what it is, the failed thing that produced colonialism i.e. Kant,

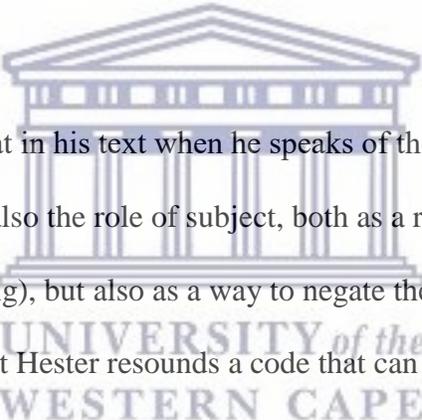
¹⁰ Mowitt has since revised this and has made time to honour the actual lyrics as this presentation/paper/chapter will eventually form part of a larger project. The probability is that it was a mishearing and so it should be considered a slippage, but one that I think requires serious attention.

Heidegger, and Hegel. It is through his own fault that Mowitt fails here, and he fails because of what is central to this entire thesis, he cannot recognise the work of a Black tradition exactly because he is bound in the works of white men who have similarly disregarded and fallen short of thinking with Blackness. Then, in a workshop on his book *Sounds: the Ambient Humanities*¹¹ with Mowitt, he also said about the piece he wrote for the winter school at UWC that he is going to “let a dead black guy teach us something.”¹² This was followed by conversation only about dead white guys, and again, Mowitt continues to collapse in on himself through an inadequate response to a serious question, delegitimizing his own arguments in the presentation “*Jammin*”, but also exposing the limits of his work in *Sounds*. The unwillingness to name the object/subject in his text, or, at the very least, to tease out the (im)possibilities of these categories is a prudent, measured, tedious, and ultimately undermining move. It undermines his work, and it undermines the work of a Black radical tradition as thought by Robinson and Moten. To be clear here, I do not want another Mowitt to name another subject or object, but what has occurred between Mowitt and Marley is the tentative side step that shows up the nervousness of engaging with Marley seriously and not only as a thing to get to the next step. What unsettles here, then, is that though the purpose of *Sounds* is to grapple with and investigate what it means to try and find an object for sound studies it stumbles and we are left with a series of queries: is it the same object as that of ethno/musicology, is it the abstraction and phonic languages of his own work, or is it the potential that sonic metaphors present in thinking through seemingly discordant moments (slavery, modernity, and the underwater Atlantis of Drexciya, or Black science fiction and the

¹¹ This workshop took place in the Hogsback mountain and The Edge resort from the 15th to the 19th of August 2017.

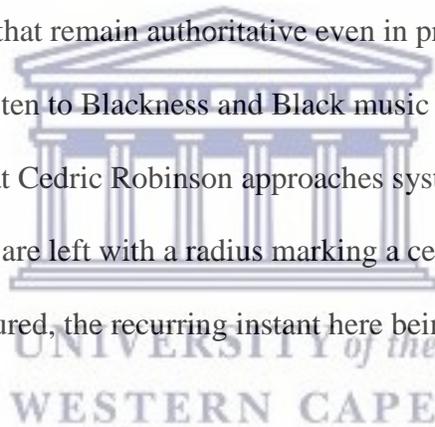
¹² I have requested permission from John Mowitt to include this in the thesis. The quote comes from a workshop following the Centre for Humanities Research (UWC) Winter School 2017 and was put into conversation and is in relation to his presentation at the Winter School titled “*Jammin*”, based on the song by Bob Marley. In the workshop, that was grounded in his text “*Sounds: The Ambient Humanities*”, we were given the chance to interrogate Mowitt’s presentation, but also an opportunity to explore our work through his book.

realities of living while black)? Mowitt, I am sure, would argue that his work is not in naming the object but opening the possibility, but this is an instance when wordplay and etymology cannot function well enough. To clarify more, the entirety of *Sounds* is hinged upon the line of argument that critiques the ways in which sound studies as a new field thinks about and with sound. As such, it is not necessarily a musing about sounds, but is meant to grapple with what can come in the process of taking audit, which in my terms would constitute an attunement. So, to return to the start of my critique of his text, by ignoring the work of sonic work in thinking Blackness, and anxiously circling theory of sound from serious Black scholars and returning to his staples, *Sounds* becomes the thing it wants to critique – an unaudited study in sound.

The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a classical building facade with columns and a pediment, with the text "UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE" below it.

In contrast, Moten obliterates that in his text when he speaks of the “Resistance of the object”. The object, in resisting, refuses also the role of subject, both as a result of subjugation (being whipped to the point of screaming), but also as a way to negate the possibility of reproducing the self as slave. In her screams, aunt Hester resounds a code that can only be understood by those who have learnt this code. It is this same Black folk Du Bois asks us to listen for, and it is the same Black folk who represent the first modern people that Morrison refers to. This is a phonetic production, to the degree that it delineates a language that is inaudible to those who do not understand it. And so, I can only conclude that Mowitt cannot understand his own sounds, because they are inaudible to him. And they are inaudible to whiteness. Again, the trap here is that it would mean that this language is only audible on base instinct, but here, once again, I move between Moten and Bachir Diagne: these are thought through, taught, and studiously engaged with languages and indeed philosophies through sound. They are the result of an intellectual project precisely because they were made in an effort to make sense of a world where

the attempted dismembering (through slavery, colonisation, the academy, and its resultant ethnographic project) of an individual from a line of culture, thought, and philosophy was predominant and pervasive. At least, Bachir Diagne through art and sculptures, Weheliye through literature and sound, and Moten, through sound and theory, have deconstructed the idea that these philosophical positions are merely a reaction to the colonial project, and a knowledge not learnt but instinctively knowable. Of course, there are codes that are embodied, that are learnt to the point where they seem like a gut instinct, but that would be a rudimentary and reductive reading. And here, by putting Mowitt against himself through *Sounds* and “Jammin”, and exposing the failures through Moten, I am also asserting the promise and potential in thinking beyond just the canonical texts that remain authoritative even in progressive spaces. Moten, through Robinson, asks us to listen to Blackness and Black music again, to be attentive again, and to approach it anew. In what Cedric Robinson approaches systematically, moment for moment, in *Black Marxism*, we are left with a radius marking a centre from which every recurring instance will be measured, the recurring instant here being *In the Break*.



When thinking about Du Bois, then (which should chronologically and probably theoretically sound first), we need to hold onto three things that become muddled by readers firmly rooted within an episteme of whiteness. First, Du Bois asks us to be attuned to *the Souls of Black Folk*. Second, at no point does he add lyrics to the musical motif running throughout *Souls*, effectively removing the possibility of essentialising the music but also allaying the capacity to pick up a tune instantly: without an immediate sonic signifier it would be impossible for an untrained musician to pick up the cues as laid out in the notation. Lastly, the problem for the “negro”, as Nahum Dmitri Chandler’s book is aptly titled, is (*The Problem of the Negro as*) a Problem for

Thought. Without knowing about Du Bois I already knew I was a problem, and for Du Bois, he knew I was a problem too. An inconvenience, a nuisance, a pestilence, but at the core a problem. There are the problems that seem solvable, or with an ending: colonialism, apartheid, slavery. But, what Du Bois amplifies is that the problem he is thinking about and working through is that “[H]e simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American.”¹³ My work here is merely an extension and response to that; the problem is that it is (still) impossible to be Black and Man. My inclination is to immediately refute Man as category as it is entirely predicated on whiteness. What stands in the place of that initial inclination is *this* work: to be Black is not to exist solely as a counter to something, but that which constitutes its own beings outside of epistemological occidental and colonial philosophy. When Moten names Aunt Hester’s scream and follows it with the resistance of the object, we need to take the time to sit with what he means. And here the movement between Du Bois and Moten becomes important: both Moten and Du Bois move toward not naming resistance as resisting the whipping that brings forth the screams, nor does Du Bois’ question of the Negro problem seek to name the Negro object as a figment of colonial imagination; both are *resisting* the naming, not any other action here. It is the naming that is the violence, the thing which needs to be resisted. But, the marking is not only the lines drawn by the lashing which of course is a breaking and tearing violence, but the marking is also the branding and naming of the Black as object.

White people,¹⁴ colonial and post-colonial, have and are struggling to come to terms with what brutality means, or in the ways Nahum Dmitri Chandler sets out in *The Problem of the Negro as*

¹³ Du Bois, W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2005 Pg. 9

¹⁴ Please note that while I understand whiteness as a function of power and white people as being separate, there is no separation in this instance and requires naming it exactly what it is.

a Problem for Thought, the question posed by Du Bois is directed at whiteness, and asks how it feels to not be a problem. Chants, vocal protest, techno music, dub poetry all present threats because of its deep and rich Blackness, with their own (white people's) dominance in every space not being considered a viable or reasonable threat needing to be addressed. What Cedric Robinson outlines in the extract below, between the potential for violence and the extreme restraint, thought, and philosophical engagement with the limits of apocalyptic violence, is that reason does not reside in whiteness, that it is impossible to produce modernity (read as that which comes out of the "enlightenment") through a colonial project, and through a post-colonial liberalism. Further, this goes to emphasise Toni Morrison's assertion that slaves were the first true modern subjects. It is important to be attuned to the particular modernity Morrison and Eshun are referring to, with an eye firmly on a transatlantic history and one with dislocation at its centre. In addition, this is a clear warning to those of us wrapped up in student politics and the project of decolonisation of the curriculum that we do not pause at Fanon, Pan-Africanism, post-colonial theory, and Negritude when determining what a struggle and violence entails. This is the crux for me, this is the potential of Black science fiction, of Sonic Afrofuturity, of a Black radical tradition: that the possibilities of maintaining a Black intellectual and philosophical hinterland lie within the bounds of the canon, and the way out is through permitting an imagining of Blackness in space, through machines, through sound, body, and ultimately through a literature and art free of the bounds of convention. It lies in Detroit, in Drexciya's underwater

Atlantis,¹⁵ in Sun Ra's Arkestra,¹⁶ in the Human Computer – Lee Scratch Perry,¹⁷ in the blue notes of jazz and the devil notes of the blues, in Bellona.¹⁸

Western observers, often candid in their amazement, have repeatedly remarked that in the vast series of encounters between Blacks and their oppressors, only some of which have been recounted above, Blacks have seldom employed the level of violence that they (the Westerners) understood the situation required. When we recall that in the New World of the nineteenth century the approximately 60 whites killed in the Nat Turner insurrection was one of the largest totals for that century; when we recall that in the massive uprisings of slaves in 1831 in Jamaica-where 300000 slaves lived under the domination of 30000 whites, only 14 white casualties were reported, when in revolt after revolt we compare the massive and often indiscriminate reprisals of the civilized master class (the employment of terror) to the scale of violence of the slaves (and at present their descendants), at least one impression is that a very different and shared order of things existed among these brutally violated people.¹⁹

And so, as much as this chapter is about thinking about sound, technology and Blackness, I also need to pause to think through the limits and possibilities of thinking Blackness outside of a

¹⁵ The techno group Drexciya, from Detroit, created a mythology around their sound and music in which they are descended from a race of slaves who were thrown overboard and created their own underwater Atlantis where they have lived since.

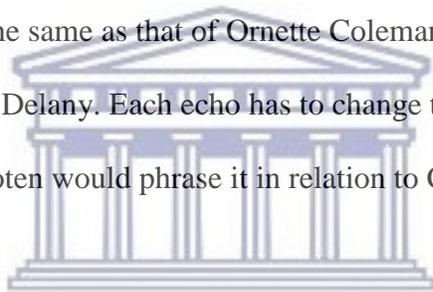
¹⁶ Sun Ra's Arkestra was an ever changing and rotating ensemble that composed and worked with Sun Ra.

¹⁷ Perry refers to himself as the Human Computer in a brief interjection in the film *The Last Angel of History*.

¹⁸ The fictional post-apocalyptic city and which most of the novel *Dhalgren* by Samuel Delany takes place.

¹⁹ Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983. Pg 209

canon and what that would mean. I work here to show and assert that Blackness and Black thought and philosophy does not have to emerge only as an opposition, that, for example, Mowitt's slow slippages undo themselves and do not need us to think with them. I do not advocate the abandoning of western scholarly work, but I am certainly showing that it is no longer the harbinger of thought. So, I propose this: we consider seriously Black electronic music production and science fiction as part of the Black radical tradition and that instead of it emerging as a genealogy, it moves to illuminate and bolster theories of living while Black. These modes of representing Blackness, and thinking alongside it, also reflect that it is not one sole concept, bound together inextricably by trauma or torment, nor is it universal or singular. The sounds of Aunt Hester are not the same as that of Ornette Coleman, Juan Atkins, Derrick May, Drexciya, Jeff Mills, or Samuel Delany. Each echo has to change tone, it cannot carry the same timbre at every return. Or as Moten would phrase it in relation to Caribbean diasporic thought,



To insist, along with James, on this kind of fullness, on this Caribbeanness that exists only as a function of a return not to authenticity but to Africa, is to recognize, along with Wilson Harris or Edouard Glissant, that black radicalism is done necessarily in relation to or underwater, something occurring in sound, as sounding, in depth, like a Dolphic-Mackeyan depth charge. This implies that the black radical tradition is not, though it is nothing other than, grounded in African foundations; that it is sounded in the impossible return to Africa that is not antifoundationalist but improvisatory of foundations; that it is a turn toward a specific exteriority; that it is not only an insistent previousness in evasion of each and every

natal occasion but the trace and forecast of a future in the present and in the past here and there, old-new, the revolutionary noise left and brought and met, not in between.²⁰

The impossible return is a resonant sonic force, and by living their story underwater, Drexciya continued the tradition of that impossible return. They worked with the knowledge that they need to make foundations where a foundational Africanness is not yet possible: what Moten here calls “improvisatory”. It is not coincidence that Drexciya were born underwater in a Black Atlantis and then went on to make techno music – sound travels up to four times further in water than air because of the density of the water, allowing vibrations to travel faster and further, but this is contingent on the initial sound creating a pulse loud enough to start this resonance – Drexciya.

The only way to think Blackness is to recognise that it is, despite the desire of History, unbound by any one type of philosophy. The Black radical tradition is exactly what it sounds out here: radical is both the root of in terms of music and mathematics, as well as a departure from that same tradition. The radical operates as a negation of itself, leaving open multiple possibilities, inlets, and outlets. If all you take from this chapter, then, is one thing, I demand that it be this: Black science fiction, afrofuturism, and electronic music production have been, and will be read as discordant to Blackness and thinking Blackness, but these technologies have been in the employ of Black folk as a means of thinking ourselves in the world before Kant’s vision of Man was forcibly and violently cemented by the canon centred around the precise work of Western philosophy, work that is often required reading as foundational to courses within disciplines in

²⁰ Moten, Fred. *Black and Blur*. Vol. 1. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. pg 13

the humanities. Black technologies like these do not contradict or stand outside of the technologies of the blues or jazz or spirituals or soul food or the direct link between everything black and hip hop. These genealogies and inclinations towards the hereditary and the origin, though helpful in thinking between Africa and the Afro-Diaspora,²¹ do nothing for us when we need to move toward a critique of the perceived homogeneity of Blackness. So, what I assert here is that we need to gesture toward the idea of not only reading against homogeneity but to allow for the space within which we can drop a blue note: the sound which should not make sense within the confines of the standard musical form but moves to jar your attention back towards the possibility of the composition. In that sense, I hope this thesis does not make sense.



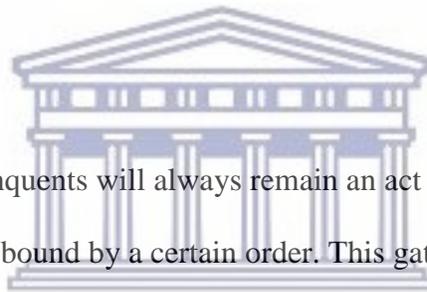
²¹ Only insofar as it provides a baseline for conversations around what it means to be stripped of something. This is a concept I work with in this thesis when thinking about alienation, other-worlds, otherworldliness, dismemberment, and tropes of space and space travel.

Chapter Two: Between Rhythm and Interruption

think my brothers, my lover
will writhe into horned creatures
to be gunned down
or strung up

that they walk with the promise
of carrion splayed
for the flies.²²

“Planets and stars and futurism and time travel – these types of visions aren’t supposed to come from Black guys from Detroit.”²³



The gathering of the social delinquents will always remain an act of political will and a direct affront on the ideas of a society bound by a certain order. This gathering and direct action,²⁴ through raves, warehouse parties, or occupying production spaces, made real the idea that political action does not have to be bound up in the convention of either protest or marches. As witnessed recently at Yale²⁵ where a Black woman fell asleep and woke up to police, at Starbucks²⁶ where two Black men were arrested on account of being Black in public, and a Black

²²Desiree C. Bailey, “It’s Risky to Love in the Season of Hunters” in Stafford, Tim. *Learn Then Burn 2: This Time Its Personal*. Austin, TX: Write Bloody Publishing, 2014.

²³Zlatopolsky, Ashley. "Jeff Mills: 'These Visions Aren't Supposed to Come from Black Guys from Detroit'." *The Guardian*. September 22, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/sep/22/jeff-mills-these-visions-arent-supposed-to-come-from-black-guys-from-detroit>.

²⁴ Contrary to the idea that electronic music is apolitical, gathering while Black is always seen as an affront and is thus always political.

²⁵ Sharman, Jon. "Black Student Fell Asleep in Yale Common Area - so White Student Called the Police." *The Independent*. May 10, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/yale-student-black-police-white-sleep-common-room-lolade-siyonbola-a8344536.html>.

²⁶ Held, Amy. "Men Arrested At Philadelphia Starbucks Speak Out; Police Commissioner Apologizes." *NPR*. April 19, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/19/603917872/they-can-t-be-here-for-us-men-arrested-at-philadelphia-starbucks-speak-out>.

family's barbecue,²⁷ where a white woman decided they were having too much fun, nowhere and no amount of silence or stillness is enough for whiteness to sit at ease. So, with house music laying the foundation for the gathering of the queerest of our society, the unseen and unseeable, and the leftovers of a society convinced of its own virtues, what was left for techno to accomplish? This is in a scenario which has hip hop securely cemented in the public mind as the next phase in the evolution of *the* Black voice (following on from blues and jazz), with its detractors claiming it as a call to violence, and its supporters claiming it as the call to arm your mind. The hip hop world in the 80s and early 90s was populated densely with the East Coast musicians claiming superiority based on a lyrical content akin to a type of preacherly knowledge, deriding the West Coast rappers for focusing too much on material possessions, and every other form of musical expression being seen from both coasts as being at best unimportant. Baz Lurhmann's recent foray into the history of hip hop, a show called 'The Get Down' through the lens of angst-ridden teenagers, would be an example of this disregard, with the premise of the rise of hip hop based on its superiority to disco. The implications of content like Lurhmann's is that disco was for the queer community,²⁸ after all, and hip hop was for youth moving away from what was elitist, but also towards the kind of street knowledge it prides itself on. With hip hop's foot firmly in the realm of 'the real', and techno, dub and disco concerned with the other-

²⁷ Reporter, Independent. "Video of White Woman Calling Police on Black Family's BBQ Goes Viral." The Independent. May 13, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/black-family-bbq-lake-merritt-oakland-white-woman-police-lake-a8349821.html>.

²⁸ The following articles show a nuanced reading of the rise of disco and the questions of sexuality related to it: Frank, Gillian. "Discophobia: Antigay prejudice and the 1979 backlash against disco." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (2007): 276-306.

McLeod, Ken. "A Fifth of Beethoven": Disco, classical music, and the politics of inclusion." *American Music* (2006): 347-363.

Hubbs, Nadine. "'I Will Survive': musical mappings of queer social space in a disco anthem." *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 231-244.

Nyong'o, Tavia. "I feel love: Disco and its discontents." *Criticism* 50, no. 1 (2008): 101-112.

This shout out, as it were, to the queer influence on electronic music was a necessary move to honour those who pioneered electronic music at its outset. This thesis is concerned with Blackness, and so to do that without this acknowledgement would be a fantasy.

worldliness of otherness through sexuality, slavery, racism and alienation, the draw to the authentic was to supersede the philosophical concerns put forward by the techno musicians stemming from Detroit. In my estimation, it should not come as a surprise that ‘the streets’ – through hip hop - became the space to find the real, with the turntable, the 303 and 909, remaining alien.

With this all said, I have been cautioned by Kodwo Eshun to remain wary of the argument from genealogy, and thus this chapter would serve to track the merits of reading techno music rising out of Detroit on its own terms, allowing for the confluence of bodies in abandoned city spaces and the deliberate tempo and rhythm to render itself in its own frequency.



Disruption: The work of the 4/4 in disrupting history’s groove

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It’s sad. In the 20th century, in the 1990s, we have to still go the same bullshit route other artists had to go to get acceptance, black artists. Because we’re not entertaining buffoon idiots, we have to go someplace else to be accepted. And that’s absolute bullshit. If it wasn’t for the independents, if it wasn’t for the small little dinky little cities and the few little ghetto black guys trying to make music it woulda never happened, as quiet as it’s kept. Some of these guys will never make a dime. Some of these guys will be poor and

die alone, but in the process, they've been the true renegades, and the true rebels walk alone anyway.²⁹

That history is oppressive, depressing, repressive and bureaucratic is made evident in De Certeau's contention that we cannot escape the discipline of the discipline.³⁰ Conceptually then, this bureaucratic autocracy is what drives me to find Benjaminian polyrhythms that can help me escape the bounds of this very thing which both ingests and animates my endeavours. In thinking with polyrhythms, it is important for me to pause because there are two possibilities that can emerge out of this word: First, the language of ethnomusicology would listen to music outside of a standard rhythmic structure especially with Adorno in mind, and produce polyrhythm as an exotic practice, akin to phrases like call and response. Alternatively, by returning polyrhythm to the Frankfurt school, placing an emerging scholarship between Benjamin and Adorno without naming Adorno as culpable, I am allowing Benjamin to simultaneously occupy multiple sounds. By invoking Benjamin's echo³¹ here, I am attempting to show that apart from the narrative value of history, he opens up and generates multivalent discussions around what a history is: he is polyrhythmic. His is the echo that was sounded out, and returned in a variety of forms, my most important of course being *The Last Angel of History*. When I think of Souleymanne Bachir

²⁹ Derrick May. I found this interview on youtube, and I am still searching for the original source. The snippet can be view here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecc-vQd3bEc>

³⁰ The two texts I am referring to are the following; Michel De Certeau, "The Historiographical Operation", *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) and Hayden White, "Introduction: The Poetics of History", *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1973). We looked at these texts as a way into the debates around questions of narrative and history.

³¹ I was initially inclined toward aura, but it fell short in thinking what his return to me meant. The aura needs a living entity from which to emanate, and by definition it carries with it the certainty of it belonging to an individual. From the Greek and Latin, translating to a breeze or a breath, it fails where echo succeeds: echo is derived from a sound.

Diagne's chapter, 'Rhythm', my reading is that rhythm in history functions as an interruption, a disruption of the teleological ideal set out by western philosophers who believed firmly in the idea of history as progress.³²

What is unfortunate about the foundations of the academy as it stands, is that the quality of creativity and narrativity are inextricably bound to one discourse while being unavailable to another. The sciences (both social and natural), rely on the ability to stick to a point, argue it to completion, and provide a sound evidentiary basis for such an argument. Without this, your work is only polemic, hearsay, anecdotal, or worse, entirely ordinary.

Techno, with its four the floor (boom boom boom boom) beats, then comes to stand in as a strange type of disruption between history and sound. What is rendered audible through what I will call the philosophy of techno, is the ability of this straight beat to come to constitute an idea, both about music and history, which is at once regular and multiple.³³ But what is audible is simultaneously only available through the ability to read the sound as a philosophy of being - a philosophy with its grounding in the idea of being attuned to, and finding the tune of, Blackness, not as a phonic resonance, but as a sonic pulse meant with implications for understandings of the work of Du Bois, Moten, Robinson, Butler, and every other author, musician, and theorist I think with here. This philosophy of being is founded on Black noise. Audibility and legibility move together in this chapter, rendering an understanding of the re-transatlantic thievery of the travel

³² Bachir Diagne, Souleymane. *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson, and the Idea of Negritude*. 2011. See in particular the chapter called 'Rhythms'.

³³ To my mind there is only one techno: Detroit Techno. As soon as it left Detroit and took on a new philosophy in Europe it became detached from what was initially its driving force; its poesis.

of techno from the USA to Western Europe. This is not to say that I want to equate this exchange to slavery, nor that I want to locate techno spatially in relation to Africa, on the contrary this is exactly the type of nonsensical reductionism I want to avoid. That Africa has an inherent beat, a rhythm of its own, is probably one of the most resounding and consistent echoes (not used in the psychoanalytic mode) left behind by writers in the global north trying to essentialise Africa, and in the process creating a new type of racial discourse around a desirable 'Africanness'.³⁴

The inner city, Detroit, with all of its detritus, derelict buildings, its dystopian present, managed to produce a defining sound. Richie Hawtin, and others like Derrick May, believe that the sound could not have come into existence without the city. As Pope points out, according to the people of Detroit, despite the riots of 1967 receiving most attention, people felt that the city did not reach its demise from only one cataclysmic event.³⁵ "With the ongoing implosion of the global economy it has become increasingly evident that Detroit's fate marks the future of all cities and countries in (what has passed from the 'developed' to) the undeveloping world".³⁶ In this regard techno is a future sound, and Detroit is a future city. One can look at both Samuel Delaney's *Dhalgren* and John Akomfrah's *The Last Angel of History* to see this vision of the future city, the dystopian dissatisfaction, and the continued alienation of its Blackest of citizens or subjects. Both Delaney and Akomfrah map out a terrain that is at once presentist, lodged in a past and reminiscent of a future. This is the crux of Afrofuturism. Even Octavia Butler in *Kindred* has her lead character travel back in time from a present moment. The futuristic element, then, is only a

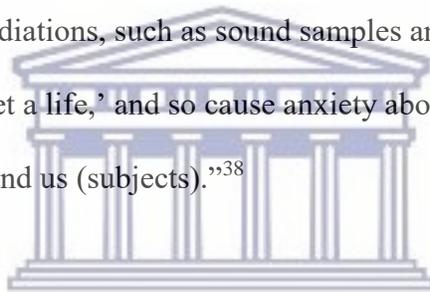
³⁴ In thinking with negritude in my first chapter I am well aware that its implication, though unintentional, also produced this essential African subject.

³⁵ Richard Pope. Hooked on an Affect: Detroit Techno and Dystopian Digital Culture. *Dancecult DC 2*, no. 1 (2011): pg. 26.

³⁶ Pope. Pg. 25

phonic clue. It bears no real meaning on what is to come, rather it concerns itself with what was and what is in an imagined space now, elsewhere.

What Pope goes on to point at is “If the ontological oblivion of late capitalism is typically forgotten through praxis... Detroit techno... confronts this oblivion.” Detroit techno confronts the “ontological oblivion”.³⁷ It does so by reproducing an imaginary future and by acting like a sounding board, bouncing back what the city presents it. It presents it with the mechanics and robotics of the future, but the drudgery and destruction bound up in this technological ‘advancement’. This is also further reflected in the following quote from a piece by Nabeel Zuberi: “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).”³⁸



According to Pope, Detroit techno imagines a future by “looking back” to “prior imaginings”: what he calls a “retrofuturist logic”. I would think of it more like a Delaneyen Afrofuturism. What I mean by this is a dystopian Afrofuturism which can be present at any moment in any space (whether outer or urban).

Kodwo Eshun, on the second page of his text “Further considerations of Afrofuturism”, opens up with a firm assertion, one that resonates and echoes down the walls and halls of history and what is historical. Moreover, he cuts into occidental philosophy, isolated by its own grandeur, by re-

³⁷ Pope. Pg. 26

³⁸ Zuberi, Nabeel. "Is this the future? Black music and technology discourse.", *Science Fiction Studies* (2007): pg. 283

appropriating an idea of modernity and making it Black and slave. To establish the historical character of black culture, to bring Africa and its subjects into history denied by Hegel et al., it has been necessary to assemble counter-memories that contest the colonial archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity.”³⁹

Eshun outlines an argument that he expands on at various points, whether it be in John Akomfrah’s film, *The Last Angel of History* or in his own essay which I reference here, “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism”, which boils down to the central point that the experience of the transatlantic slave trade created the first truly modern subject. In the film it is the break in time, with the data thief travelling across time and space, in the essay it is the forced and violent break of slavery. But, what does any of this have to do with a group of middle class teenagers from Detroit (who in all fairness are not only that, but rightfully regarded as pioneers) making a music at the end of the 20th century? Hopefully I will be able to expand on that matter once Eshun is sufficiently dealt with. It will become especially clear when I expand on the film, *Universal Techno*, which is particularly interesting for the ways in which Derrick May (especially) speaks about the relationship between Afrofuturism, history and techno music. But first, let me delve into Eshun a bit more, after all he is a constant reference point for anyone who wants to speak about sound and Afrofuturism. Eshun seeks to bring out the thing which has confounded historians coming after Hegel’s insistence of the temporal nature of progress and history, indeed he seems to echo some of my sentiments (in relation to Benjamin), locating him outside of a temporally regular rhythm, instead calling him an “avant-gardist”.⁴⁰

³⁹ Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 288

⁴⁰ Eshun pg 289

In the colonial era of the early to middle twentieth century, avant-gardists from Walter Benjamin to Frantz Fanon revolted in the name of the future against a power structure that relied on control and representation of the historical archive. Today, the situation is reversed. The powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past. The present moment is stretching, slipping for some into yesterday, reaching for others into tomorrow.⁴¹

Further, this backs and bolsters my argument regarding the polyrhythmic nature of history. What he also points to is the economy at play, arguing that futurists now provide the powerful with the ammunition to banish the “disempowered to live in the past.”⁴² What the musicians did, then, in creating a future sound, was to re-appropriate the power in this relationship. It can be argued that because of their status in and around Bellville, Detroit, a reasonably well-off suburb, they are detached from the experience of urban America. The assertion by Eshun and myself remains, though, they are the remains of the first truly modern subjects, marked by their Blackness.

He goes on to argue that Afrofuturism is not about predicting what is to come, rather it is a rewriting of what is already present. His rhythm is one that can intervene and interrupt, much like the rhythm of Benjamin’s disavowal of Hegel, in so being it is also one that can cause disruption. This disruption is important to me in the process of writing history, especially when analysis goes out the window to be replaced by the well-articulated polemic statement. These

⁴¹ Eshun pg. 289

⁴² Eshun, pg 289

disruptions, of course, reverberate across the academy, but especially within the social sciences, which is often self-centred in its concerns and paranoia about state funding and institutional respect. What Eshun opens up with his argument about this presentist dystopianism at play in Afrofuturism is exactly the type of lingering disruption it will take for us to become cognisant of the lasting impact of racial discourse and identifying signifiers. As Eshun argues more eloquently than I can:

If racial identification became intermittent and obscure to the listener, for the musician, a dimension of heteronomy became available. The human-machine interface became both the condition and the subject of Afrofuturism. The cyborg fantasies of the Detroit techno producers, such as Juan Atkins and Derrick May, were used both to alienate themselves from sonic identity and to feel at home in alienation.⁴³

It is evident, then, that being Black, making techno in a dead Detroit and embodying (musically) Afrofuturism, that this trans-Atlantic⁴⁴ theft is not an innocent dislocation or an act of flattery through copying: to me it reads like an act of violence. Furthermore, there is the Detroit techno group, Drexciya, who created a myth about an underwater Atlantis coming into existence because of slaves being thrown overboard during the middle passage. You see, this Afrofuturism is not about the future, it is about a future past.⁴⁵

⁴³ Eshun pg. 296

⁴⁴ Here I am referring to Western Europe's capacity to repeat its colonial practices through acts of cultural appropriation. In this instance I am speaking about the implications of European nations, especially Germany and later the UK in taking techno and turning it into an expression of euphoria and freedom. In and of itself these sentiments are not destructive, but removing it from its context what is lost is the difficulty of dealing with a city and its complex history with Black folk and industry.

⁴⁵ "In the late twentieth century, Detroit techno outfit Drexciya conjured an imagined underwater sonic universe. Their homage to Kraftwerk's 'Autobahn,' 'Aquabon,' guides German electronica into a disturbing fantasy of a black

I admit and am aware that I am attempting to separate the ‘pure’ techno from anything else. It is a contention that I do not make lightly. If one searches for the term ‘techno’ on jstor, the first search page is littered with a techno located in Europe, as a cultural experience of the west, and as an alternative ontology to the dominant communist/free dichotomy that had its hold after the fall of the Berlin wall. All three films I am looking at are deeply entrenched in a search for the same ‘pure’ techno I am looking to, even though *Universal Techno* takes a different route to get there. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that I do not know German nor understand French subtitles, perhaps it is best I do not know what they are saying. Of course, at the same time, it would also be foolish of me to deny the European influence on proto-techno, most notably Giorgio Moroder and Kraftwerk, a fact that never goes understated by the so-called “Bellville three”.⁴⁶

Indeed, the opening scene of the film *Universal Techno* is at the Love Parade in Berlin, Germany.⁴⁷ The most popular image you will ever see about techno is a meme that emerged recently: that of the ‘techno Viking’. This image of techno is as far removed from the dystopian futurism of the Detroit musicians as one can get. The utopian nature of the people in the streets, jamming out to hard, industrial techno, so indicative of the 90s German style, is a bastard version and an ugly appropriation of the Black technology essential to the search for an identity outside of a mundane genealogy. Regardless, nine minutes into *Universal Techno* and the conversation around techno is still located in Germany and still narrated in German. It is notable that the first

Atlantis founded by Africans thrown overboard during the Middle Passage.” Pinch, Trevor, and Karin Bijsterveld. *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

⁴⁶ Kevin Saunderson, Juan Atkins and Derrick May all went to the same school. Juan Atkins taught May and Saunderson how to compose music.

⁴⁷ *Universal Techno*. Directed by Dominique Deluze. Performed by Aphex Twin, Juan Atkins, Mike Banks. Les Films a Lou. France. 1996.

instance of the audibility is immediately taken away from the very Black experience. Blake Baxter calls out this theft as the first Black voice in the film, arguing that the musicians who are influenced by techno often have more money and can thus copy sounds freely because of studio equipment. This trans-Atlantic theft, once again instituted at the hands of a European superpower with superior financial resources, dislodges and dislocates an already alienating experience: being Black in America. Of course he admits that sampling is an integral part of any electronic music, but he points out a particular racialized, class-based sampling, one which I will not hesitate to call theft because of the economies involved. Around the 14th minute he says Juan Atkins made him realise he can be himself when he makes music: that is fundamental to understanding the trajectory of my argument, because within this sound, techno, is a deeply lodged politics of identity without which the sound could not be manifested.

Derrick May embodies the idea of dystopia central to Afrofuturism. We see him, in *Universal Techno*, in a theatre which has been turned into a parking lot in Michigan. To him, this is the “techno city”.⁴⁸ He is amazed by the fact that this theatre was torn down in order to make a parking lot, but at the same time he seems fascinated by the fact that you are parking your car in a theatre. By the look of it, most of the facades and decorative elements of the theatre are still present, though decaying. This is a metaphor for Detroit, but also for the creation of techno. May, Atkins and Saunderson all bought their equipment from second hand stores, sourcing it from white Europe a lot of the time.⁴⁹ Previously I have thought of this in terms of a positive

⁴⁸ *Universal Techno*. Directed by Dominique Deluze. Performed by Aphex Twin, Juan Atkins, and Mike Banks. Les Films a Lou. France. 1996

⁴⁹ *High Tech Soul: The Creation of Techno Music*. Directed by Gary Bredow. Performed by Juan Atkins, Derrick May, Kevin Saunderson. Plexi in association with Glu Studios. 2006.

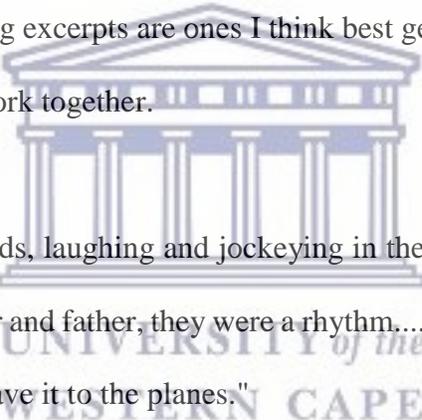
appropriation (akin to an act of reclaiming), but increasingly I find myself firmly in the position that, although ownership of such a technology - beyond technology as machinery and into technology as that which produces potential – is not within ownership, it is within the reach of (what it means) *to belong*. This belonging is a verb here, functioning as a return much in the same way that an echo returns with many parts missing, but multiple utterances in its place.

May says he feels “angry at stupid people, because in America nobody cares about these kind of things. People tend to let this kind of shit just die.” He also goes on to say he believes in the future, as a techno musician, but he also believes in history and memory.⁵⁰ Often the most philosophically inclined of the three techno pioneers, May speaks about the music as an extension of spirit.⁵¹ But Juan Atkins makes a statement regarding the detritus of Detroit and the way the climate has come to affect the musicians, arguing that the sound could not have developed without the atmosphere of the city, and he puts it down to this that he has never moved out of the city. Saunderson, when we first encounter him in *Universal Techno* speaks about the real darkness in the music he makes. Indeed, he plays one of his tracks which has a deep intro bassline that would shake your chest if you were in a club. The point of all of this is that the dystopian nature of Afrofuturism, and the dystopian origins of Detroit techno both speak to each other in a kind of disjointed harmony: both are multiple, both are similar.

⁵⁰ *Universal Techno*. Directed by Dominique Deluze. Performed by Aphex Twin, Juan Atkins, and Mike Banks. Les Films a Lou. France. 1996

⁵¹ *High Tech Soul: The Creation of Techno Music*. Directed by Gary Bredow. Performed by Juan Atkins, Derrick May, Kevin Saunderson. Plexi in association with Glu Studios. 2006.

In this regard I would turn to Delaney's *Dhalgren* and his use of rhythm when speaking about matters of memory and narrativity, but also in finding one's place within a space that is not generally yours to inhabit. His character is half native-American, half white, he can't remember his name or the names of his parents. He has no notion of past, the story often lapsing between times and spaces. When we encounter him, though, we see him most often in what to us is his present moment, in a burnt down shell of a city, making love, or just fucking his way through people he encounters. The looseness of sexual boundaries, the recognition of racial discourse while still writing through it, is to me what makes *Dhalgren* a philosophically and historically important Afrofuturist text. It is this dislodging of our temporal plane that renders a new type of narrative plausible. The following excerpts are ones I think best get to his description of the ways in which memory and rhythm work together.



"Mom and dad were words, laughing and jockeying in the small, sunny yard. He listened and did not listen. Mother and father, they were a rhythm.... He began to sing, annnnnnnnn... He made his noise and gave it to the planes."

"A woman sat between two oaks. She saw him, cocked her head curiously, smiled - so he sang for her."

"No wind and warm; the street was loud with voices and machinery, so loud he could hardly catch rhythm for his song."⁵²

Here we see the nameless character move through the spaces of his town, singing and humming his way through. He is unable to narrate his story without sound. But he is not giving testimony

⁵² Delany, Samuel R. *Dhalgren*. Toronto: Bantam, 1975. pg. 61-62

here. He is clearly the only one who can understand his audibilities. This is a question that keeps emerging for me, is orality only ever testimonial? This is a difficulty I find with lyrical analysis in sound studies. The words are not the only way in which to communicate affect. Saunderson's deep bassline, devoid of any lyrical value, renders an affective tone that can only be accomplished through hearing and feeling, not through listening and transcribing⁵³. The aim should be to completely destroy words, to sound them out completely, to rid ourselves of purposeful mis/readings.

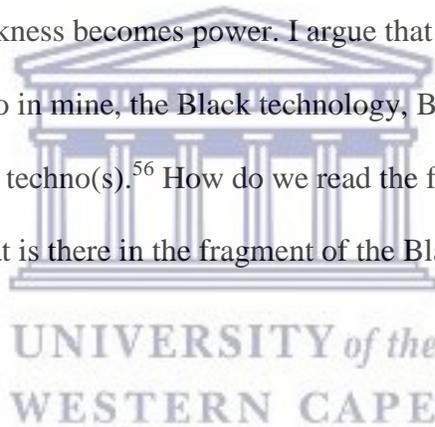
Albiez basically argues that techno comes to stand in as a sort of intermediary between white European dance music and Black urban expression that in his estimation escapes the bounds of what is the Black musical expression of the time; in other words post-funk music and post-disco and also hip hop. I take a liking to this argument because I want to avoid the trappings of creating a genealogy of Black music in the United States. My entire thesis stands upon the notion that one should remove the causal nature of the ways in which Black musical expression has been written about. In other words, do not assume that the narrator in Akomfrah's film, *The Last Angel of History* is correct when he goes on his explanation of the evolution of music.⁵⁴

In considering the film by Akomfrah, I want to pose a series of questions at what I consider to be crucial moments in the film. I do not want to propose any answers to these questions, I think that work is yet to be dealt with.

⁵³ The distinction I am making here is in reference to the work that each practice is being put to, with listening for connoting a type of work that is fundamentally that of producing evidence of something, while hearing embodies a kind of empathy before anything else can occur.

⁵⁴ *The Last Angel of History*. Directed by John Akomfrah. Black Audio Film Collective. London, United Kingdom. 1996.

At its inception, the film is about mythology. The story of Robert Johnson is neither true nor false. That is not the point. How do we work with this kind of seeming disjuncture in history? What is wrong in history that it tries to justify itself with the language of sources and evidence? What does time mean in history? Do we read time as having a beginning and an end? The data thief, the driving force of the film, I would argue, bases his whole travel on the myth of the crossroads where Robert Johnson sold his soul for what the narrator calls a “black technology”, the blues.⁵⁵ This data thief dislodges what is the foundation of history, the primary source, and begins his travels through time and space on the notion that he will find perhaps not the, but a crossroads. A place where Blackness becomes power. I argue that through the technology of the blues in this instance, but techno in mine, the Black technology, Blackness comes to define itself not as non-white, but as its own techno(s).⁵⁶ How do we read the fragment, whether image, film, recording or performance? What is there in the fragment of the Black aesthetic that can constitute a new philosophy?



In closing this section off I would like to think of the fragment not as metaphor, but as function. I want to put it to work, just like Akomfrah’s data thief. The data thief is asked to put the fragments together, because it will unlock the future. George Clinton then comes into frame, placing Black people where Blackness was never present: Occupying space (to be read both as cosmological space, and the spaces of whiteness, i.e. everywhere).⁵⁷ Of course, without Sun Ra,

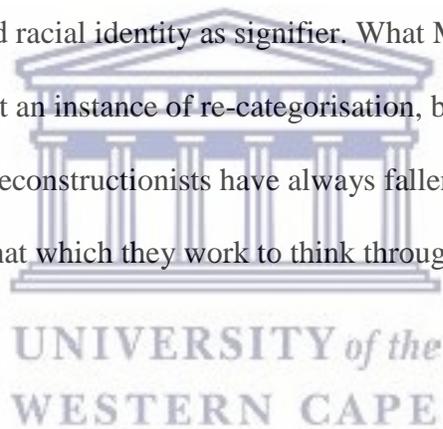
⁵⁵ *The Last Angel of History*. Directed by John Akomfrah. Black Audio Film Collective. London, United Kingdom. 1996.

⁵⁶ Here I call on the Greek *techne* and but also the root for technique, invoking both art and production.

⁵⁷ *The Last Angel of History*. Directed by John Akomfrah. Black Audio Film Collective. London, United Kingdom. 1996.

there would be no George Clinton. I want us to pay attention, especially, to the aesthetic of Sun Ra, the harking back to ancient Egypt, with an extra-terrestrial vision of the future. Is space the only place Blackness can be present without becoming object, both of desire and repulsion? What can fantasy and imagination do for history and our writing of history? How does techno music as fashioned in Detroit manifest a new philosophy of the Black experience in the USA, but also in Africa and its Diasporas?

Without descending into the guessing games of venture capitalism, marked by its imaginary projections, I would put forward that once techno comes into being, it begins to force a break with 'known' tropes on race and racial identity as signifier. What May, Saunderson, Atkins, Mills and others created was not an instance of re-categorisation, but of complete disruption. They have done the work that deconstructionists have always fallen short of doing: they did not function within the bounds of that which they work to think through and move away from.



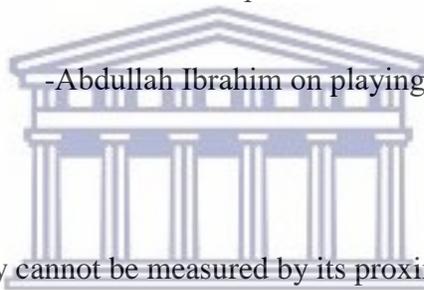
Chapter Three - (De)Composing an archive - Tracking William Onyeabor

And when the dark trickles
down my throat I know
that home is but a fading horizon
that here, I will always be
out of body, I will always fall

outside the lines, that if I dare
go missing, my name
will crawl beyond
the reach of memory⁵⁸

“But to sit inside that orchestra, it was like a starship of sound.”

-Abdullah Ibrahim on playing in Duke Ellington’s orchestra⁵⁹



The capacity for Black humanity cannot be measured by its proximity to whiteness. To search for the human in Blackness is to already succumb to a descending scale ending in a note so low it is once again inaudible: the invention of the human is contingent on the premise of its eternal whiteness. I do not want a New Man like Senghor, neither do I argue for imagining a human beyond whiteness. Perhaps, if given the chance, science fiction and time travel will remap the terrain of epistemologies of what constitutes the human. My contention is simply this, move with the speculation and resist the urge to name.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Desiree C. Bailey, “It’s Risky to Love in the Season of Hunters” in Stafford, Tim. *Learn Then Burn 2: This Time Its Personal*. Austin, TX: Write Bloody Publishing, 2014.

⁵⁹ The interview can be found on a cassette tape at the District six museum, reference number AT 561 M.

⁶⁰ This is something that some would insist should reside in a footnote or embedded within a paragraph as part of a broader argument. But, this is at the basis of a large part of what I aim to produce with this thesis. I want it to stand alone. It does work before any other work needs to be done. It deserves its own space, and it deserves to not be relegated to the footnotes or to an afterthought or aside.

If we think of laying down tracks, both in the sense of recording music, as well as beating out a path or direction, it is easy to locate William Onyeabor. In this chapter, I will attempt to find these tracks, to listen (and hear) for, and to remain attuned to the frequency of his particular aural signature. In order to arrive at what I call the de-composing archive I will work to amplify key points in the significance of working with the sound and composition of Onyeabor. These points include the practical silences⁶¹ I encounter when attempting to write this chapter, and how these silences have both hindered and opened a new space for me in working with him. Onyeabor's life was not recorded in a way that would lend itself to a conventional project; one that would rely on biographical certainties. Because of this, turning to his catalogue of music has become central in thinking through and with his sound and the potential it holds for thinking about the practice and study of history. I will follow this by analyzing his groove, rhythm, melody, and sound. In this regard I will work closely with Kodwo Eshun's *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, Alexander Weheliye's "The Grooves of Temporality", and Souleymanne Bachir Diagne's *African Art as Philosophy*, which will provide theoretical tracks on which I can continue to assemble a composition for Onyeabor. I will also briefly look at the film *Fantastic Man* - which is an attempt to physically locate Onyeabor in his home province of Enugu in Eastern Nigeria - in conjunction with John Mowitt's text *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities* as another way to dislodge the certainty within which ethnomusicology seeks to operate but also as a way to continue to demonstrate how he (and most sound study writers, even Wolfgang Ernst who attempts to disavow the emergence of any object at all) falls into the same trap he tries to expose and proposes we escape from. Mowitt's failure is something I spend a considerable amount of time on in my first chapter, and this instrumentalising of Mowitt is not a refutation of that

⁶¹ By practical silences I mean the gaps in the story of William Onyeabor. The gaps that, if filled, would satisfy the need for the evidence based work I refer to at multiple points in this chapter.

argument, but a way of showing the potential that *Sounds: the Ambient Humanities* had, but fell short of realising. The work of this chapter is to make unsound the attempts that ‘evidence’ brings in making history certain and its object(s) grounded within it. The intervention here is to stop short of certainty.

In an article titled “Groove Theory: A Vamp on the Epistemology of Funk”, Tony Bolden argues for resituating the idea of an attempt at reason to the body of black folk, and to my mind this is symptomatic of the desire of (even Black) ethnomusicologists: they need a native subject that can fit neatly within their groove, that can align gyratingly with their funk. It is unsettling to see a whole discrete discipline predetermining that Black folk can only ever think with their bodies, and even then, it is never real thinking, it is instinct, feeling, improvisation. In their minds, it seems, none of these require learning, thought, and a philosophical care that can also be located in mind, in the practice of thinking through. This is one of the more glaring examples of the ways in which ethnomusicology functions as a discipline of separating.⁶²

Following on from Bolden, then, I turned to Timothy Rice to outline some of the issues with the practice of the discipline of ethnomusicology: in simpler terms, what do they do, and what do they do wrong? In Rice’s article “Disciplining ethnomusicology: A call for a new approach”, he argues that academics within the field have neglected to read each other’s work, with little to no

⁶² Here I am referring to the work that Timothy Rice does in showing why ethnomusicology suffers as a discipline – The paragraph that follows will discuss this more in depth. Further, I make this statement based on the work of both Bachir Diagne and Mowitt where both highlight in their own ways that the work of disciplinary conventions born out of a colonial imaginary can only result in producing the work it was preceded by. Therefore, ethnomusicology can only produce the work of separating. In its name, distinguishing the ethno from musicology proper, it is already always a discipline of making a native, making separate, making an other.

cross referencing going on between colleagues within the field. He comes to this conclusion by reading scholarship within ethnomusicology spanning a ten-year period – between 1999 and 2009. In his own words, here is how Rice proposes five possibilities:

Those who work on the theme of music and identity after this 1999 article have five choices: (1) embrace it and use it to moisten their particular ethnography; (2) reject this theory as unsound; (3) modify it to suit better their particular study; (4) declare it irrelevant, for some reason, to their particular study; or (5) ignore it. Sadly, in my view, we have ignored it. We do this, I believe, at the peril of building our discipline. I want to be clear that I am not arguing that Turino's approach, his theory if you will, is correct and true and therefore must be taken seriously. I am agnostic on this point. But to build our discipline we need to respond to and engage with it until we have a better sense of its explanatory potential. Reading other theories, Turino has written a theory about music. To build our discipline, we need to take the theory we write as seriously as we take the theory we read.⁶³

I am not trying to vilify ethnomusicology here, there are deep problems in all of the disciplines we hold dear. These things (and they are just things; nonsense throwaway words to hold place until we figure out what the hell we are doing) only serve to make vapid distinctions between our

⁶³ Rice, Timothy. "Disciplining ethnomusicology: A call for a new approach." *Ethnomusicology* 54, no. 2 (2010): pg. 318-325.

work. And so, the questions Rice poses here in relation to ethnomusicology face me while I am registered in and work within the field of history.

A preamble on the theoretical possibilities of Onyeabor and the failure of *Fantastic Man*

In their article “Raiders of the Lost Archive,” Abigail Gardner and Gerard Moorey look at two recently released films on fringe, but relatively well-known musicians: Sixto Rodriguez in the film *Searching for Sugarman* and William Onyeabor in *Fantastic Man*. They argue that these films are a way to satiate an appetite for discovery as well as the idea of a quest for these musicians. These ideas will be elaborated on in the section discussing ethnomusicology more explicitly, but I want to pause with this text in order to open my discussion on ideas of sound, the object of a study of sound, and the immediate refutability of a claim to locating that William Onyeabor presents. In “Raiders of the Lost Archive”, Moorey and Gardner argue that “*Fantastic Man* is a 31-minute documentary streamed on Vice’s *Noisey* site as well as on YouTube,⁶⁴ which is geared toward a youth audience well versed in music and subcultures.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, they state “*Fantastic Man* is a filmic document of obsession and collecting, where the authorial voice is driven by a compulsion to return an object (Onyeabor) to a collection (the *Luaka Bop* roster).”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Sumner, Jake. *Fantastic Man*. You Need To Hear This. 2014.. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiaRp0M2fxE>

⁶⁵ Gardner, Abigail, and Gerard Moorey. "Raiders of the lost archives." *Popular Communication* 14, no. 3 (2016): pg. 169

⁶⁶ Gardner, Abigail, and Gerard Moorey. "Raiders of the lost archives." *Popular Communication* 14, no. 3 (2016): pg.172

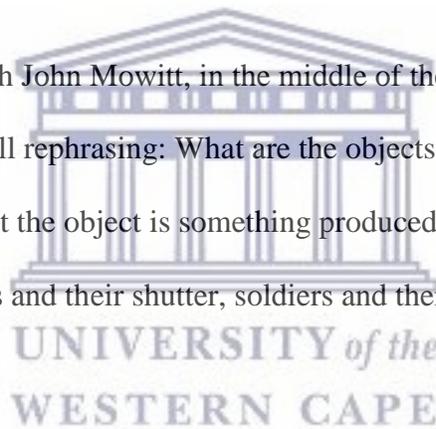
While Gardner and Moorey are kind with their turn of phrase, I cannot help but think of the “well versed” audiences as young, white, liberal woodchippers with an insatiable appetite for necessarily fringe artists (*Noisey* feeds this appetite with features including what they consider fringe genres like gqom and grime). This is not a value judgement on these audiences, but it is a necessary step in calling out what happens between eavesdropping and retelling in an instance like this. Creating and naming the irrefutable object is precisely the purpose of this kind of outlet: William Onyeabor is... (without doubt or question). So, this quest to find William Onyeabor, though possibly well intentioned, goes directly against his will.⁶⁷ What he left behind in his recordings could not be recovered, they were produced and reproduced, and with the change of technology, his master tapes would become available until the death of the internet, and this idea of (re)discovery of William Onyeabor is more of an invasion than a permissible trip to find an old friend or relative. He is written into the code of the digital through sites like noisey and streaming services like itunes, and though he gave his permission for his work to be reissued, I wonder what this permanence would mean to him, especially in light of him having decided to leave that part of his life behind him.

Finding William Onyeabor is more than a violation, invasion, or transgression: it represents the foundation of a disappointment. Onyeabor cannot be located in (most of) the film *Fantastic Man*. Onyeabor also cannot be located in his music, and this is where the disappointment lies: he does not make himself available to be named or made an object. Sonically, then, Onyeabor is not traceable to a location or sonic delineation (the tribal/native/cultural music) that would satiate a

⁶⁷ This idea is elaborated on further into the chapter; briefly though, Onyeabor disavowed his music after his short career, choosing to remain within Enugu as a church leader and businessman.

western playlist looking for an authentic sound from the colonies. He is, though, interesting to those who want to make novel samples for their techno tracks, where the entirety of their work is travelling and trying to find the most ‘obscure’ sounds to stumble upon, another feather in their hat. It is often with this attitude in mind that we are meant to express gratitude to producers who claim finding, who claim *discovery*. I toyed with leaving this open to being read in multiple ways, but it is important to state explicitly what I am saying here: there is an attitude of conquering in *discovering* something adequately interesting and then making it into an object to name, a mantelpiece, and a novelty item.

As prompted in a workshop with John Mowitt, in the middle of the snowy Hogsback Mountains, I repeat his question with a small rephrasing: What are the objects of ethnomusicology?⁶⁸ Of course, the simple answer is that the object is something produced by the subject to produce an aural experience: photographers and their shutter, soldiers and their war machines, police and their stun grenades.



But this is not what Mowitt was trying to point us towards in that room. What he was asking was what is produced in the moment of encounter between a discipline and the thing, person, archive, sound, it wants to study? Unfortunately, this is where he becomes ensnared, but regardless of that, it is still a noteworthy proposal and one that requires serious attention and work. In his text *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities*, Mowitt tricks us with his chapter titles. He names his chapters

⁶⁸ I will continue to refer to Mowitt’s prompts, though they are more directed at the emerging discipline of sound studies I have found a common link between the uncertainties of sound studies with that of ethnomusicology. And though I am not using the two interchangeably, there are certain links to be made beyond the fact that the two have aurality as a central premise.

(including the subtitle to the introduction) with a different aural object: “Introduction: Squawking”, “Echo”, “Whistle”, “Whisper”, “Gasp”, “Silence”, “Tercer Sonido”. In the opening paragraph in “Echo” he already points out the difficulties of making a sound studies (and in my case an ethnomusicology), its context, and causally, its object. He writes:

[T]he accent I have placed on the problem of how sound challenges our thinking about context calls for elaboration and development. Although concerned here to trace the catachrestic loop between the contextualization of sound and the pressure of sound on the work of contextualization, my attention to echo is meant to tease out of the emergent field of sound studies not just another phenomenon of scholarly or aesthetic attention - the echo - but a supplemental concept for thinking the work of contextualization in the humanities as a whole. The value of the audit will be put to the test, quietly (that is, on the expository periphery), in helping fix (on) the constraints brought to this problem by the gaze and the logic of specular reflection.⁶⁹

Notwithstanding the spectacular turn of phrase ever present in Mowitt’s writing, it is clear in his, and my, estimation that in his work on thinking about sound studies, and in mine on destabilizing ethnomusicology - in the work of placing a sound or person within a context when working to make an object, the encounter is predetermined to fail. This failure comes out of the desire to make something *of* a time and a place, without consideration for its ubiquitous nature. In

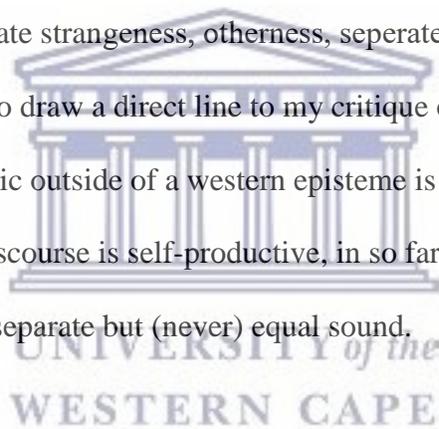
⁶⁹ Mowitt, John. *Sounds: The Ambient Humanities*. Univ of California Press, 2015. Pg. 21

Mowitt's case these untraceable sounds are the whistles, squawks, echoes, whispers, and gasps. For me, they are William Onyeabor.

It is obvious that ethnomusicology has a race problem. In its desire to name an object or to consider naming the all-important search is what I have demonstrated thus far: the simple formulation follows – whiteness cannot attune itself to Black noise. In its desire to name, or even to pursue the act of naming Black noise (polyrhythms, call and response, negro spirituals) as a result of the inaudibility of Blackness to colonial thought, it is my assertion that this constitutes a founding articulation of the colonial project of constructing race as difference. Race as difference is not a problem of legibility, or rather of only sighted legibility. Without the aural interference of Blackness as well as race theory as only visual, there would be a difficulty in articulating what this difference means. Again, think of what Aunt Hester's scream represents, but also why Moten moves from the screams of Aunt Hester to the 'unintelligible' (and 'inaudible') compositions of Cecil Taylor. These are sounds difficult to come to terms with; not gentle nor mystical, not fragmented but they absolutely produce fragments (for Akomfrah's data thief to steal and think with). What is explained as a practice of making Black folk "radically other"⁷⁰ (I expand on this a few lines down) in Bachir Diagne is often an invocation of the visual as a first measure. This is not to say that the visual is overtly emphasised or valued to a greater degree – I actually find this line a little lazy – but what I am saying is that there is a failure to recognise the extreme nature of ignorance that takes place in the act of (mis)hearing Blackness. Even though I have not named silence, silence is everywhere in this thesis, and this is an instance where a

⁷⁰ Bachir Diagne, Souleymane. *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson, and the Idea of Negritude*. (2011). Pg. 48

manufactured type of silence on the part of the occident has forced not a voicelessness, but a purposeful mishearing. This mishearing makes inaudibility possible, it gives rise to difference as much as language, history, or the visual. In this particular instance, Black folk can only remain one type of entity to the ears of the ethnographer: the dancing body, the spiritually overcome, the unthinking, and the instinctive. Even the black scholars writing within this discrete discipline have fallen for this, for writing black folk into nothing more than unthinking, instinctual, and ‘traditional’ natives. To substantiate this stance I turn to Souleyman Bachir Diagne’s text, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson, and the Idea of Negritude*, in which he argues that “[B]ecause ethnography is constituted, at its colonial origins, as a science of what is radically other, it is in its nature to fabricate strangeness, otherness, separateness.”⁷¹ In his critique of ethnography it is also possible to draw a direct line to my critique of ethnomusicology, that to create a discourse around a music outside of a western episteme is to manufacture a necessary otherness. This distinction in discourse is self-productive, in so far as it generates itself out of an already established notion of a separate but (never) equal sound.



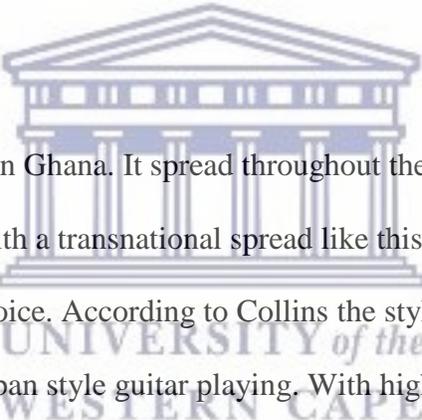
Interlude On Highlife and its impossibilities

I will attempt, in the following few lines, to outline the origins and migrations of highlife, after all, it is a music that travelled and returned to the West Coast of Africa. On the surface highlife music is the consequence of a confluence of various musical traditions. It is taken as fact that

⁷¹ Bachir Diagne, Souleymane. *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson, and the Idea of Negritude*. (2011). Pg. 48

these influences are Islamic, Western and African. highlife is characterised by its polyrhythmic musical phrases and its call and response style of singing. It was epitomised by three distinct styles, and I quote here from the John Collins text on the early history of highlife:

Highlife emerged as three distinct streams, each dependent on which particular western musical influence was assimilated and utilised by the African musicians who fused it with their own tradition. First there was the imported influences of foreign sailors that became 'palm-wine' highlife; second, that of the colonial military brass-bands that became adaha highlife; and third, that of the christianised black elite which became dance-band highlife.⁷²



Highlife originated, apparently, in Ghana. It spread throughout the region to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gambia and Nigeria. With a transnational spread like this, it is clear that highlife, per region, would develop its own voice. According to Collins the style was influenced by the big military brass bands and afro-cuban style guitar playing. With highlife clearly being an amalgam of a variety of forms, practices, theories, styles and genres, how does ethnomusicology deal with musical production of this nature, where what constitutes the 'ethno' is so evasive? Does it have the language and theory to deal with anything other than an idealised native? Are the military brass bands who brought one part of the music as much a part of the ethnic as the musicians bound to musical subjectivity in the moment? How do we read this form of cultural amalgamation from a historical vantage point, without descending into a politics of ethnography? How does one avoid observation, for instance, and open up a theoretical field with which to

⁷² Collins, John. "The early history of West African highlife music." *Popular Music* 8, no. 03 (1989): pg. 221-230.

eventually conceptualise a new idea? The pitfall, easily disguised (and equally easily unveiled), is to work to reclaim the language that manages to create the ethno(graphy/musicology). As I have argued in both chapters before this, there is no space for reinvention if we are to remain obsessed with reanimating – we are only bound to reproduce with that method. What is left is the work of disregard and refusal, of taking the chance to be coherent in something other than the language of the canon in which we are determined to operate.

William Onyeabor and his irretrievable sound Object

What stands out about William Onyeabor is his ability to have remained unseen for this long a period. By this I mean both physically and conceptually. He is someone not yet thought through or with. Onyeabor was born in Enugu in Nigeria in the mid-1940s, just seven years after Kuti. Not very much else is known about him during this early period of his life.⁷³ All sources found on him reveal very little by way of evidence. It is vitally important to note that in the way he produces music, Onyeabor is as much a space man, an alien, as Sun Ra or George Clinton. Or as the quote at the start of this chapter points to, he was “in a star ship of sound.”⁷⁴ He had the capacity to surround himself with the most synthesizers I have ever seen surround one person, and he had the sensibility to make them work for him. He is outside of what is considered a conventional form springing out of highlife music in West Africa, which certainly encompassed

⁷³ I am referring to articles like the following:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/17/arts/music/an-elusive-mystery-man-of-music.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/jan/18/william-onyeabor-cult-nigerian-musician-has-died-aged-70>

<https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/1414-william-onyeabor-was-truly-one-of-a-kind/>

<https://luakabop.com/photobio/williamonyeabor/who-is-william-onyeabor.html>

⁷⁴ District six museum, reference number AT 561 M

his primary influence, along with gospel.⁷⁵ Between his apparent foray into the world of Soviet Russian science fiction film studios, to importing synthesizers and drum machines en masse, he moved between worlds much like the man who calls himself the human computer that is Lee Scratch Perry. His desire to reinsert himself into a world where he is considerably more acceptable, the world of Christian Enugu, meant to him a disavowal of his life during his sojourn as the funkiest Nigerian of his time, and probably for years to come. His sense of groove, which I will unpack in this chapter, is unmatched even at the hands of a groove master like Fela Kuti. This is not to say Fela meant nothing in the worlds of Onyeabor, rather that Onyeabor was not interested in being a preacher (yet). He wanted to be a cowboy space-farer who brought the alien sounds of science fiction sets and moog synthesizers to an unsuspecting post colony on the west coast of Africa. If there was ever a post human, his name was William Onyeabor. There are a series of nudges and questions I want to get at here. If DuBois asks us to listen to the souls of Black folk through the sonic references at the beginning of each chapter of his seminal text *The Souls of Black folk*,⁷⁶ where do I locate Onyeabor's sound? Is he asking us to listen to music like his that might be considered apolitical⁷⁷ with the thought in mind that refusing to start from the point in which a (stereo) typical Nigerian musician is required to be, or is he breaking from the tradition of musical testimony maintained for so long by near messianic prophets like Fela Kuti and allowing us to think sound outside of music, and outside of place – outer space?

⁷⁵ Gospel as influence is an inference I am making based on his later return to pious Christianity.

⁷⁶ In the opening notes of Alexander Weheliye's "The Grooves of Temporality", he opens up what I use to pose my question: mainly, that DuBois asks us to listen to blackness first. That is the first action we must take. Similarly, in the introduction of his book *In the break: The aesthetics of the black radical tradition* titled "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream", Moten's thoughts coincide with those of DuBois and Weheliye's, pointing to the importance of listening for and to blackness.

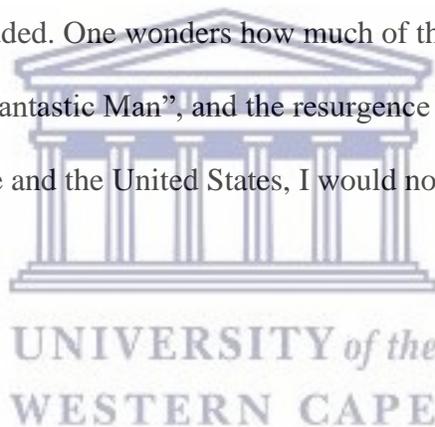
⁷⁷ A striking kinship with the techno musicians from Detroit.

Does Onyeabor's own musical progression relay a movement from the overt political to the personal/political, the post-colonial period of possibility, or upheaval, of passion, of movement towards the politics of enjoyment/pleasure? Black people were no longer bound as subject of a colonial rule, so what now? WILLIAM ONYEABOR!

There are rumours that William Onyeabor was sent to Russia on a scholarship and worked on science fiction film sets in the 70s. There is, once again, no proof of this. There are other rumours that he once pulled a revolver on a fellow musician who demanded royalties. Once again, there is no proof of this besides hearsay in the film "Fantastic Man". He is an extremely difficult figure to pin down. My own experience with this is through a man who claims to be his eldest son: I spent some time corresponding with him via email, trying to set up some type of conversation with his father, though this eventually proved fruitless with the man disappearing after a few emails. Whether or not this is because he realised there was nothing to gain from speaking to a MA student, or that his father caught wind of the correspondence and nipped it in the bud I will most probably never know. It all adds to the mystery of William Onyeabor, and even more, adds to the appeal of the exploratory journey it will take to even find a starting point when speaking about him.

Unlike Fela, Onyeabor was never seen performing live. Similarly, his message was never overtly political in the way that Fela's music was. But this makes him so much more interesting to me. He weaved together disco, funk and the coming wave of electronic synthesizers and drum machines to make a type of music that escaped the bounds of a definitive sound. In a

presentation on Nigerian music presented earlier this year, upon which parts of this chapter is based, I made the claim that ethnomusicologists would not be interested in William Onyeabor because he was not native enough, there was no attempt at anything seemingly authentically Nigerian or African about him. He wore a cowboy hat, sang in English, employed instruments which had not taken a firm footing in popular music production yet, and his music seemed out of place, and more than that, it was out of time. I am sure this is the reason he is now the focus of many dance music producers in the West, which eventually resulted in the collective Luaka Bop republishing his music in formats most narrowly consumed, but simultaneously very lucrative: the LP box set. The cheapest William Onyeabor box set I have found online thus far is over R600 before import costs are added. One wonders how much of this reached him. That being said, were it not for the film, “Fantastic Man”, and the resurgence of interest in him by these producers from Western Europe and the United States, I would not have become so readily lost in his echo.



Though Onyeabor emulated the call and response style so typical of highlife at the time, he was nothing short of unconventional. I have come to understand the problematic nature of the language we apply to music reverberating from the African continent; “call and response” and “polyrhythmic” among other terms, coming to stand in as markers of a type of tribalism, primitiveness, and indigeneity. This is entirely bound up in the language as constructed by musical anthropologists and ethnomusicologists in search of an ideal native that is both the desire of the colonial figure, and the post-colonial liberal who needs something to write back to. Because of this, it is incumbent on me to write against this trajectory in order to adequately amplify the possibilities that Onyeabor provides us with, both in his own muddled reverberation

when there are attempts to find him, as well as in his musical composition. It is exactly this that compels me to write about this musician who was completely out of sync with place and time. It is hard to resist comparisons with Fela Kuti, precisely because they were temporal contemporaries. What is difficult is comparing their musics. Fela with his 25-piece band, Onyeabor alone in a studio, Fela shouting politics, Onyeabor crooning pop, disco, funk melodies, it seems an impossible crevice to traverse. With that said, though, it is important to remember that Fela often spent his time at live shows improvising political phrases. Onyeabor, though, seemingly never performed live, and apparently was never political. One of Onyeabor's few political moments comes in the song "Better Change Your Mind". The lyrics go as follows:

America, You ever think this world is your, eh?

And you Russia, You ever think this world is yours?

You China, You ever think this world is yours, eh?

And you Cuba, You ever think this world is yours?

Canada, You ever think this world is yours, eh? heh?

And you Britain, You ever think this world is yours?

If you are thinking so, my friends

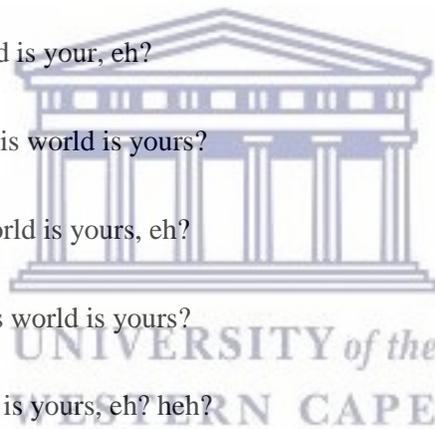
Better change your mind

If you are thinking so, my friends

Better change your mind

Because there is no other one, except God, who owns

this world



And you France, You ever think this world is yours, eh?

eh??

And you rich man, hey ya, you ever think this world is yours?

You white man, you ever think this world is yours, eh?

eh??

You black man, yeah yeah, you ever think this world is

yours?

Leaders, you ever think this world is your, eh?

President, yeah yeah, you ever think this world is

yours?

If you are thinking so, my friends

Better change your mind

If you are thinking so, my friends

Better change your mind

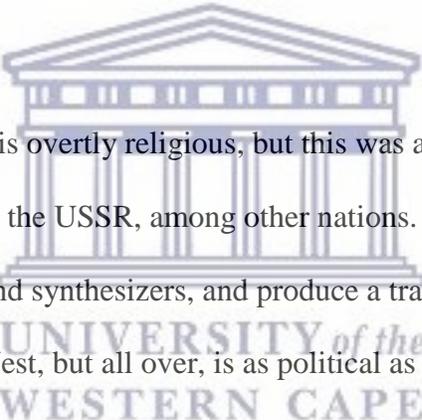
Because there is no other one, except God, who owns

this world⁷⁸

The track begins with a high-pitched synthesizer, a standard 4/4 drum beat with an opened hi hat to accent between the first and second stroke of the tambourine. When the drums sound right at the start, it feels like there was a mis-take that happened in the studio, a quick count before

⁷⁸ <http://luakabop.com/photobio/williamonyeabor/lyrics.pdf>

falling into the groove. What resulted in the mis-take is a musical split-second that sounds like the pattern of a military marching band. In this track, the tambourine is the constant timepiece, with everything else - bass, drums, synth leads – seemingly dancing around it. Onyeabor’s voice is pitched high, near to the main synth lead pattern laying beneath the louder one. The harmonies are central, and when the pre-chorus comes in, Onyeabor drops his voice down, allowing the female vocalists to carry the higher tones. Onyeabor’s long, loping tracks leave enough space for the music to sit, for a groove to become an entrenched pattern. In this sense, in this repeated scripture, in the grooving, perhaps the foundations of Onyeabor’s betrayal of his own compositions to return to God in a way meaningful to him were a constant presence in his music.



Of course, the point in this song is overtly religious, but this was also around the time of the cold war between the USA, Cuba and the USSR, among other nations. To go out on a pop record, heavily laden with drum loops and synthesizers, and produce a track oozing contempt for the hubris of Man, not only in the West, but all over, is as political as Public Enemy calling on listeners to “Fight the Power”. William Onyeabor, in his brief, self-funded and self-directed musical venture, managed to create an enigma as lasting and lingering as the sustained synth loop in “Atomic Bomb”. Unfortunately, he completely rejected his music in the end, refusing to speak about it. This can be read in many ways. The simple answer is, of course, that he found religion again in a new way and so decided that the life he lived was not what he wanted anymore.

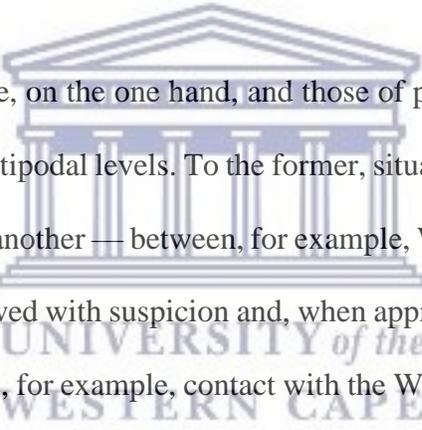
Strikingly akin, these lyrics were pre-empted by a speech that Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe gave in April of 1959, 20 years before Onyeabor made his song. In this speech Sobukwe rebukes exactly this hubris I mention below and Onyeabor chastises above. In his own words, Sobukwe notes

However, in spite of all these rapid advances in the material and physical world, man appears to be either unwilling or unable to solve the problem of social relations between man and man. Because of this failure on the part of man, we see the world split today into two large hostile blocks, the so-called Capitalist and Socialist blocks represented by the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union respectively. These two blocks are engaged in terrible competition, use tough language and tactics, employ brinkmanship stunts which have the whole world heading for a nervous breakdown. They each are armed with terrible weapons of destruction and continue to spend millions of pounds in the production of more and more of these weapons. In spite of all the diplomatic talk of co-existence, these blocks each behave as though they did not believe that co-existence was possible.⁷⁹

Here, between Sobukwe's direct political purpose, and Onyeabor's seeming light touch, with a 20-year time distance, we see the movement between a tradition; not one towards the other, but certainly thinking together in strong ties but disparate ways.

⁷⁹ Sobukwe, Robert. "Robert Sobukwe Inaugural Speech, April 1959." South African History Online. April 06, 2016. Accessed June 03, 2018. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/robert-sobukwe-inaugural-speech-april-1959>.

Nigerian popular music was bound by and tied to the legend of Fela Kuti. Nigerian popular music was also bound and tied up in the desire of western listenership for an authentic experience. Our desires dictated what was to remain a lasting testament to music in the West African nation. Post-colonial Nigerian music was solely Fela Kuti. Before that it was solely highlife. Little exists after Fela, though his son(s) have tried to take the throne in his wake. Indeed, in the opening pages of the Article “Popular Culture and Popular Music: The Nigerian Experience”, Dele Jegede states that



Advocates of high culture, on the one hand, and those of popular culture, on the other, appear to operate from antipodal levels. To the former, situations that encourage contact between one culture and another — between, for example, Western and African cultures — have always been viewed with suspicion and, when appropriate, with condemnation. In the realm of visual arts, for example, contact with the West has been identified as the singular, most devastating reason for the demise of traditional art. It would be necessary, from this premise, to protect primordial art forms from being abused and debased.

And goes on to argue

In Nigeria, this concept of a return to the origins appears to have found willing apostles in government and academia where the dilettante as well as the connoisseur are overly enthusiastic to demonstrate, at the least provocation, their endearment to the notion of cultural revival. We have argued elsewhere that the notion of cultural revival does not

recommend itself very strongly because it is based on the easily faulted premise that the culture in need of revival is dead, as well as on a reluctance to accept that culture is polymorphic. Indeed, cultural revival as a concept cannot but be a gratuitous concept because the conditions within which the culture in need of revival thrived are not always easily reproducible.⁸⁰

And to me this is exactly the argument we must take to ethnomusicology. This discrete discipline operates on the basis that there is an origin so pure that it must be preserved, that all cultural expression is not a willful self-deceit in practice, that ethnicity is somehow traceable and tangible. It is this founding notion which must be dislodged, I have come to realise, not only in the easily vilified sub-genres of anthropology, but in the feigned nobility that is history, or area studies, the social sciences, and the humanities as a whole. As pointed out here by Jegele, earlier by Bachir Diagne, and in different terms by Weheliye and Moten: the work of the prefix ethno is to manufacture difference so that the work of separateness can be justified. Once the ethnic subject, the native, is realised, it is a term that is irretrievable, and an object to be instrumentalised. There is no complicating it, and there is little by way of reading the term out of its hole, while disciplines predicated on the ethnic continue to allow themselves to be bound by tropes of genealogy and inheritance.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Jegede, Dele. "Popular Culture and Popular Music: The Nigerian Experience." *Présence africaine* 4 (1987): 59-72.

⁸¹ If we do not read Heidegger, then we are cursed! Or, if Kant is absent, how can one think colonialism?

Herein lies the labour of this chapter in working to dislodge and violently dislocate sound studies from clinging to ethnicity, and of disciplinary formations relying on ethnicity, inheritance, and delineation: delineation and tradition operate in separate ways in practices of theory and philosophy. To delineate here would mean to trace exact lines outside, bordering, and in between. The value of a tradition is to show up this outline by learning purposefully, rebelliously, and ultimately revoltingly. What we need to remain attuned to, as well, is that a tradition, *tradere* is predicated on delivery, bringing something forward, but simultaneously to betray. And this is where my work lies, in the betrayal, not of Onyeabor, but of the discourse that would have him become a new native subject.



that I am only a problem, a pest
a damned spot, a gamebird
a bullseye, a neck
for a hook
a haunted, hunted thing.⁸²

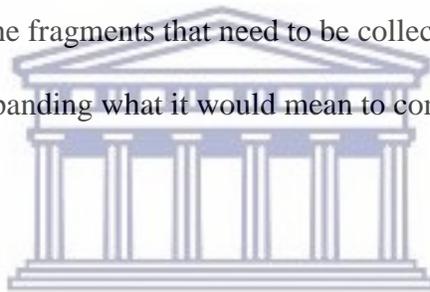
⁸² Desiree C. Bailey, "It's Risky to Love in the Season of Hunters" in Stafford, Tim. *Learn Then Burn 2: This Time Its Personal*. Austin, TX: Write Bloody Publishing, 2014.

Conclusion: Outro

I want to begin this final stanza with the end of the previous chapter, a betrayal and a delivery. This thesis began as a practice of writing against a grain, against a tradition, and against a teaching I regard as malignant. I began two years ago with the idea that this would be subversive writing and a necessarily belligerent engagement with everything I hate about the academy and its discourses. To get to this concluding moment of the thesis I had to betray myself; I had to work - not against anything else - but against my ideas of what it meant to work toward a disregard.

In thinking through Afrofuturism, Blackness, and electronic music, I also worked toward reminding folk that Black radical production was not only lodged in the philosophical work in the academy as well as in spaces of revolt and revolution. Like Moten and Eshun and Hartman and Weheliye and Butler and Delany and Ellison and Morrison before me, I work toward a thinking of Blackness and its arpeggiated articulations outside of the desire of an occidental philosophy. Furthermore, I turned toward the music of William Onyeabor who, although not the only one, represented an audible break from a tradition of music that overshadowed (on the international scene) his music. As a result of his use of electronic instruments, including looping drum beats and moog synthesizers (of which he had a wide array), I have argued that his work and thinking would not fit within the realms of what a popular audience would consider 'authentic'.

This is the point at which I have tied in the work of Black science fiction, and techno music. So, to take Onyeabor even further with me here, I have worked to show that the techno musicians of Detroit – and here I pay specific attention to Derrick May, Juan Atkins, and Kevin Saunderson – also embody a type of irregular Blackness. They produced a set of music that was complicating further the ways in which Blackness is thought both in the Black diasporas, but also on the African continent: it cannot be contingent on the notion of a unified Black existence, that experiences are shared, but that there is also an array of ways that Black thought is practiced. Through the works of Delany, Butler, and Akomfrah – I chose to think about the ways in which time travel can dislodge claims to a teleology of history. Implicit in thinking through *The Last Angel of History* in particular, the fragments that need to be collected to make a story span centuries and vast distances, expanding what it would mean to condense Blackness to a singular(ity).



Our work is to make a tradition: to betray ourselves in order to open the space to work on problems in a way that will not remake them, to deliver something revolting.

And so, this is my call to arms for blerds and blackedemics⁸³ alike: we do not *have* to acknowledge anything that has functioned as a measure of exclusion and dehumanization to the extent that it is a predetermination to our work. Kant and Hegel and Adorno may burn.⁸⁴

⁸³ These terms are used to refer to black academics and black nerds, both of whom are often marginalised within their own communities and the circles they seek to operate in. This, I hope, is a chance for us to stake a claim outside being solely a voice of opposition.

⁸⁴ Don't get deep in your feelings, this is not literal.

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