e-flux Journal

issue#132
12/2022

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madison moore and McKenzie Wark

Editorial: Black Rave

McKenzie: What should we call our issue? Our working title was "Black Techno | Queer Rave." I think we got an interesting mix of responses to that, which maybe changes the focus a little. We've found some interesting extensions of Black sound studies towards techno and towards queerness. I think we got some interesting voices on techno, transness, queerness, and Blackness. And I think we have some connections also to ballroom, and how one can't really think about these things without it. I'm so happy with how this collection of texts, images, and mixes pushes the culture forward, but what shall we call it?

madison: Yes, I have been thinking about this, playing with titles that captured the essence and breadth of the submissions. I was thinking about "Black Dance Floors," but what do you think? What's the best way to capture all these directions? What about "Black Raving"?

McKenzie: I love "Black Raving" or "Black Rave." Back when the Black Lives Matter insurrection was happening in New York, I asked a friend who was going out after the police curfew how it was going. The answer: "It's a Black rave."

madison: "Black Rave"—that's a great way to think about the sonics of insurgency, a phrase that brings politics back into dance music and culture. Electronic dance music comes from a place of politics, as much as musical purists and Twitter trolls love to insist that "race doesn't matter" or that "it's just about the music," never mind who gets booked to play that music. In the issue, Blair Black and Alexander Weheliye do a wonderful job reminding us of the strategic ways that Blackness and queerness have been removed from electronic music. Which is why the word "rave" is such a racialized one, even as Black people have been raving from the jump.

McKenzie: In his book *Energy Flash,* Simon Reynolds thinks the term "rave" was probably introduced into the UK by West Indian immigrants of the Windrush generation. "Rave" meaning one-off, all night party. Might be a start to rethinking the Blackness that permeates that term too.

madison: This is fascinating because at the time, Black folks were often unwelcome in London clubs and so took to the long-standing Black tradition of the rent/house party or shabeen to come together. Steve McQueen portrays this underground world of Black partying beautifully in his film *Lover's Rock*, in his *Small Axe* film series, which traces a single night at a house party in a Caribbean household in West London. The party is full of food, a powerful sound system, lots of fashion, singing. The most interesting part about the film is that it takes place almost

entirely inside the world of the house party. The characters rarely go outside at all, and when they do, the implication is that the threat of white violence awaits them—literally as in police surveilling the neighborhood and a pack of menacing white boys who look like they are ready to cause trouble. It's not to say there's no danger inside the house party, or that the house party is a perfect space or even a utopia—it isn't. But the tender feeling of togetherness you sense in that film beautifully captures the poetry of Black dance floors.

McKenzie: I think that's connected to the recoding of "rave" we want here.

madison: I'm glad to have this space to think about dance floors from many different perspectives—techno of course, but also ballroom, and how ballroom is also techno. When I'm DJing, I love when the children start voguing. Julian came to one of my sets in DC way back in 2019, I think, and I will never forget the way she got possessed by the beat and vogued *down*. Like, all the way down. Caused a scene, and it was a wrap after that. Other Black queers and femmes started voguing to these ferocious techno beats and I was living. That's when Julian told me, "If you can *really* vogue, you can vogue to anything." I've never forgotten that.

In Alex Weheliye's piece, he talks about how the very forms of Black music that Black queers enjoy dancing to—Jersey club, house, ballroom, etc.—get excluded from this purist notion of "techno," which is also part of the project of racializing musical genre.

McKenzie: Yes, I think we have some perspectives that unpick how both race and sexuality are in different ways elided by genre, with techno as the example of that genre, but which resonates with how we see that with other genres. On the other hand, TYGAPAW wants their music to be heard through techno as a genre but is sometimes denied that, on their account—because they are a Black artist.

madison: Yes, exactly!

McKenzie: And coming up in TYGA, Jasmine, and Julian for example is how ballroom is the other adjacency to techno, one that brings in transness and queerness in different ways to the adjacency to house music cultures, a story that's maybe better known.

madison: Such exciting work. Maybe we will have "techno studies" after all! But you're also a raver, and most of the writing on rave culture privileges youth. There's this idea that once you reach a certain age, job, responsibility, status, etc., you're supposed to kick off your techno boots and stop going out. I love the idea of one day being the older queen in the club—fifty, sixty, seventy years old—getting my life and maybe also shading the new children with a cocktail in hand, lol. With that, I wanted to ask how and why this topic of Black Rave feels urgent for you to address?

McKenzie: One answer is already in my thinking the Black Lives Matter insurrection in New York as a "Black rave." On a personal level, I came back to raves when I transitioned, as it's the only thing that works on my low-level ambient gender dysphoria. Techno works best on that. Eva is so right about transsexuality as an experience of noise. But then, this being America, one can't not feel that at the heart of anything to do with culture is race. Techno is Black music and I feel like I am an uninvited guest in that sonic space. How can I be a good guest under the circumstances? How to be conscious also of the dangers Leo picks up about the white romance with Blackness.

I felt like doing some work, putting my editing skills to work, making a space for reflection. I wanted to center Blackness in thinking about queer and trans rave culture, and to then necessarily pose as a question and problem what the place of white queers and transsexuals such as myself is in relation to that. But without of course centering us! Keeping that open at the periphery and passing the mic. For me it was a way to learn. What I love in our issue is the crosscurrents among different kinds of Black knowledge and creativity that's the center of the discussion. Which reminds me of the Steve McQueen *Lover's Rock* film you mentioned. The different moods and styles on the Black dance floor in the film are a whole essay in themselves.

madison: It's such a great film. To piggyback off what you said, this project is incredibly galvanizing for me because imagining a Black Rave poetics addresses the critical lack of conversation on Black people raving. There's so much literature on raving and rave culture, but there isn't much of it focused on questions of Blackness, transness, queerness, which only perpetuates the narrative that rave, raving, and rave music is a white male thing. *Oontz oontz oontz.* I loved the Make Techno Black Again campaign, such a simple twist on a phrase with an annoying origin, and I love the idea that the people making techno Black again are Black femmes, queers, and trans people.

Thinking about Black Rave is also important for me because in a moment when Black death is normalized by the state, as Christina Sharpe has so beautifully shown, raving points to a politics of ALIVENESS, what Kevin Quashie has recently called "Black aliveness" as a retort to a pessimistic impulse which asserts that Black lives have no meaning. That's the thing I love about techno, its immediacy, its urgency, a music of living and getting life in. I loved the synergy between the ways TYGAPAW, Eva Pensis, BAE BAE, and Jasmine Infiniti all variously wrote about Black queer and trans poetics of literally just living—like living and l-i-v-i-n-g. Julian's piece on the interpolation and Black queer frequency of the beat comes in here too.

McKenzie: Yes! Yes! Tavia and TYGA both write about being cut off from the continuum of Blackness in techno and I think also in complimentary ways about seeking out and making that aliveness. If you center Blackness as among other things a rave, it changes the ambient qualities of all these other things: queer, trans, techno, all jostling each other in the mix.

madison: Yes, absolutely! And for me, curating in a crew of scholars and DJs of multiple generations is really exciting. DJing and writing are not unrelated practices.

McKenzie: I'm always here for heterogeneous conversation, different kinds of knowledge, media expression, generations, all of it. So glad we went with your idea of including mixes, from MORENXXX and Femanyst. How are DJing and writing related for you?

madison: Because they are both all about storytelling, communicating a message, sharing a world, shaping an idea. I think about writing the same way I think about mixing—using the flow of the text to drive the narrative forward. I often get "DJ block" the same way I get writer's block, where you have an idea of what you want to say but don't know where to start, don't know how to get started, so the loop keeps playing and playing while you figure out what to do with it. The difference between writer's block and DJ block is that when you have a gig, you can't just start over. The freeing thing for me about playing music for people live in a DJ set is that once your set starts, you're on. You don't get to stop and start over the same way you might delete/agonize over a sentence on a page. You've started the narrative and people are dancing and you're juggling sounds, and mixing, and cuing, and sampling (citing), and the whole time you've got to push the narrative forward.

McKenzie: That's interesting to me because I think of writing as time-based improvisation, like dancing or singing, although I'm terrible at both.

madison: Wow that's brilliant, I love that. Writing as time-based improvisation. That is the most helpful thing I've heard about writing in a long time. I think that'll really help me think even more closely about the interplay between DJing and writing. In a DJ set, you've got two, three hours to improv. If you make a mistake or make a choice you don't like, you keep going, can't start over. I think it's incredibly helpful to think about approaching writing the same way.

As such a sound person and raver yourself, have you ever thought about picking up DJing?

McKenzie: It's funny because before I transitioned, I was a music obsessive. About blues and jazz, but also various kinds of dance music, from so-called "Northern" soul to funk and reggae. A deep interest in the continuum of what Lester Bowie, the jazz trumpeter, called "The Great Black Music." A taste shaped also by Paul Gilroy and the late and much missed Greg Tate. (The book I brought with me on the plane to New York when I emigrated was by him.) I was trying to understand America through Black music. That version of me might have thought about DJing but it wouldn't have been techno.

After I transitioned, I got back into dancing, and reconnected with house and particularly techno. I'd been to clubs like Tresor back in the nineties and to the Sydney version of raves, Bush Doofs, usually outdoors. These days I'm much more of a rave bimbo. I just want to dance. There's DJs I show up for—including you!— but I don't care about track IDs. I like putting my trust in a DJ's curation. In a world run by algorithms, having a human choose sounds seems important. But I don't want to DJ. I want to dance.

madison: That's gorgeous. I have to say, my favorite thing about DJing is watching you rave bimbos go off. I played a gig in San Francisco a few weeks ago and the image of the dancers in front of me going off is one I won't soon forget. The other femmes and queerdos were in front, right by the speaker towers, and I loved watching them sweat, dance, work. I don't remember the track, but there was one moment when one of the taller femmes in the room had their eyes closed and I saw them mouth an ecstatic, sensual "*yes*." It seemed like that single, silent utterance might have been the most important moment they had all day.

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Blair Black

Dark Banjee Aesthetic: Hearing a Queer-of-Color Archive within Club Music

10,000 Screaming Faggots

"10,000 Screaming Faggots (Hood By Air FW14)" was the title of the musical score for the fall/winter 2014 Hood By Air (HBA) fashion show, with contributious from DJ Total Freedom, Tim DeWitt, and Juliana Huxtable.[1]

The theme for this show was trans as the future-forward prefix to the raw creative adaptability of streetwear fashion.[2] HBA cofounder and CEO Leilah Weintraub explained that one of the show's goals was to elicit emotional responses to the fashion line's incubation of ideas rather than one particular theme.[3] And true to his description, much of the show's designs were androgynous, as models of all genders were adorned with halos of hair extensions, loose-fitting silhouettes, skirts, and heeled boots. The collection featured many staples of streetwear fashion such as graphic T-shirts, jackets, and sweatpants punctuated with metallic adornments and decorative zippers, and accompanied by strappy platform boots often seen in underground cyberpunk/goth music scenes. The show itself was minimalist, almost mimicking showboating walks down hallways into dark clubs, with flashing white lights complimenting the rhythmic bass of the soundtrack.

Shayne Oliver, HBA cofounder and designer, insists on a multi-sensorial experience on the runway, which draws from his experience as a DJ at New York City's influential GHE20G0TH1K party, which was established by longtime friend Venus X. The party sought to unite the Black, queer, and goth party scenes she frequented. In an article titled "Court Catharsis Through Chaos," Nico Amarca describes this influential party in these terms:

> Face tattoos, Buffalo platforms, chokers, bondage trousers, Marilyn Manson T-shirts, lime green braids, blinged-out gold name chains and head-to-toe Hood By Air. You walk inside to a scene reigned by chaos and mutability. Dark rap, Jersey club, ballroom, industrial, nu-metal, dancehall, grime, reggaeton, baile funk and Aaliyah all rammed into each other at frenetic cadence. Vogueing, shuffling, dabbing, twerking. Welcome to GHE20G0TH1K.[4]

In the formative years of GHE20G0TH1K, Oliver was resident DJ, which allowed both HBA and GHE20G0TH1K to grow alongside one another.[5] As a result of their shared "dark banjee aesthetic," Oliver and Venus X collaborated on several projects.[6] GHE20G0TH1K became one of the most electrifying creative centers for queer people of color in the US. Venus X often collaborated with underground queer electronic dance music artists, DJs, and labels, such as DJ Total Freedom and LA-based label Fade to Mind.[7]

Although DJ Total Freedom met Oliver through the

The Moonwalkers Featuring Ultra Naté, "10,000 Screamin' Faggots (A Poem)," Vinyl (Strictly Rythym, 1995).

GHE20G0TH1K network, he developed his career through LA-based parties. Formerly and briefly (mis)named the "worst" DJ, Total Freedom found his groove two years before connecting with Venus X, by playing at Ignacio "Nacho" Nava's Mustache Monday party and at the Wildness party he cofounded with friends Wu Tsang, Asma Maroof, and Daniel Pineda.[8] Total Freedom says his method of music-making is heavily influenced by Venus X and Oliver's "disruptive" and "uncomfortable" style.[9] Venus X's dynamic GHE20G0TH1K sets were considered "deconstructed" or "post-"club music.[10] As a DJ, Venus X juxtaposes, blends, and remixes her queer, Afrodiasporic, and women/femme identities, explaining in interviews that the deconstructed music coming out of Ghe20 G0th1k was influenced, in part, by the recession that began in 2008, the cultural obsession with the apocalypse leading up to 2012, and young adults' resulting feelings of anxiety and helplessness.[11] Sonically, "post-"club music is a genre characterized by a "post-modern" blend that

> breaks away from dance music tropes like four-on-the-floor beats, stable tempo, and constant mix with gleeful anarchy, proposing a sonic locus where ballroom breaks, field recordings, rap *a capellas*, and heavy metal are reconfigured into dancefloor fodder … It's vision is high- and low-brow cultural signifiers in order to reclaim the club floor co-opted by mainstream electro-pop and EDM.[12]

The "post-"club music style became a disruptive force in electronic dance music by breaking away from the conventions of Top 40 club remixes made popular in the 1980s and '90s. In the "post-"club music ethos, difference is incorporated into the mix to seemingly address how nightlife became splintered across music genre, race, ethnicity, and sexualities in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

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I'll return to HBA's use of "10,000 Screaming Faggots (Hood By Air FW14)" shortly, but first, some considerations on Black sound and the DJ set. Kodwo Eshun's *More Brilliant Than the Sun* illustrates how writers can study contemporary Black music and its electronic afterlives after soul without the identity politics of "the street." Such a call tantalizes scholars of alternative Black music who contend with genre redlining by music industries and the

Shayne Oliver with model Unia Pakhomova in 2021. License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

artists this marginalizes.

Black feminist traditions of both humanist and post-humanist camps highlight how white supremacy undergirds the (post-)Enlightenment concepts of human and post-human,[13] which allow mainstream music industries, festival/event planners, and enthusiasts to adopt race-blind attitudes—such as PLUR (Peace Love Unity Respect)—that maintain the status quo of this nearly seven-billion-dollar global music industry economy.

and brown communities from which it emerged.[15]

DJ sets are sonic journeys, fictions—or as DJ scholar Paul Miller (DJ Spooky) explains, "mood sculptures … generated by the assembly process of DJing and sequencing etc. the social construction of memory."[16] Through mixsets, queer-of-color DJs reconstruct minoritarian life through the sonic archive by sampling and remixing. Here, Lynnée Denise's notion of "DJ scholarship" connects the DJ as song selector to DJ as archivist.[17] Queer DJs of color use sets to signify their connection to contemporary

The Make Techno Black Again hat was released in 2018 and 2020 by HECHA/做, Grit Creative, and Speaker Music.

Artists of color in electronic dance music—especially queer artists of color—have developed a musical epistemology that references the sonic archives of Black queer life to prioritize coming together in difference within DJ mixsets. How can these "Afro-philo-sonic fictions" help us work through the tensions of our lived material realities to relate to one another and even achieve unity?[14] This is especially urgent given how decades of marketing by the mainstream music industry has decentered the racial/sexual minority liberatory politics of EDM culture while adopting almost all of its production styles. These (re)discoveries are timely given the recent calls to democratize and even return the rave to the queer Black

sociocultural identities through sampling the sonic archive of their communities. What is at stake for the inclusion of mixset analysis is paying attention to the lower frequencies of Black and Black queer memory and, by extension, archival practice, which operates "independently … in popular culture and academic historiography."[18] Mixsets of queer-of-color dance music scenes may help to address the limitations of grand narratives and even expand how we archive minoritarian communities.[19]

The flow of mixsets often mirrors literary form. For DJ,

teacher, and theorist Brent Silby, a mixset typically follows a structure similar to fictional storytelling in that it includes (1) an introduction, (2) development, and (3) a resolution.[20] We can refer to these as Act I, Act II, and Act III. Act II is the midpoint where DJs find their groove or "main argument" through tracks fitting a chosen theme or mood. During this section, DJs typically introduce conflict characterized by "a slightly different (perhaps harder) sound," creating the tension necessary to propel the set to the next sound.[21] This movement is accomplished through sampling aspects from the introductory section (Act I). The resolution section (Act III) returns to the music style found at the end of the introduction and the beginning of the development section. DJs across minority communities, such as DJs Venus X and Total Freedom, use sets to force listeners into an "active participation" that prevents a "cool and distant acceptance of data."[22] The object is not necessarily to escape reality but to confront pressing social issues by sampling current events.[23]

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"10,000 Screaming Faggots (Hood By Air FW14)" borrowed its name from the nineties dance track "10,000 Screamin' Faggots (In the Life Extended Mix)" by The Moonwalkers, a duo consisting of dance music singer-songwriter Ultra Naté and dance music producer Maurice Fulton. According to the liner notes to the Moonwalkers track, it was inspired by a night out in Miami and was (controversially) dedicated to the duo's gay fan base for their "endless support."[24] There are two main voices in the song. The first is from the perspective of a figure who proclaims his disgust with the exuberant queer clientele in a dance club, and whose own orientation is undiscernible: "They were laughing and dancing / I mean screaming all over the place / Writhing their bodies in total abandon / I mean it was disguting!"

The other voice, which is more prominent, is a female narrator who recounts a dream about performing for an adoring gay crowd:

> I had a dream last night
> That I was adored beyond imagine
> Carried on the shoulders of 10,000 screaming faggots
> [...]
> 10,000 screaming faggots in unison and chaos as they sang
> Songs of love and sadness
> Songs of honesty and pain
> [...]
> They were my friends
> For to them, I am real
> Enjoying the beauty of womanhood
> For me allowing them to feel

The female speaker's call and response with the adoring crowd reifies her gender as she connects with them through emotions of "love and sadness ... honesty and pain." The song is essential to the canon of "bitch tracks" from the queer Afro-Latinx ballroom dance culture of the nineties.[25]

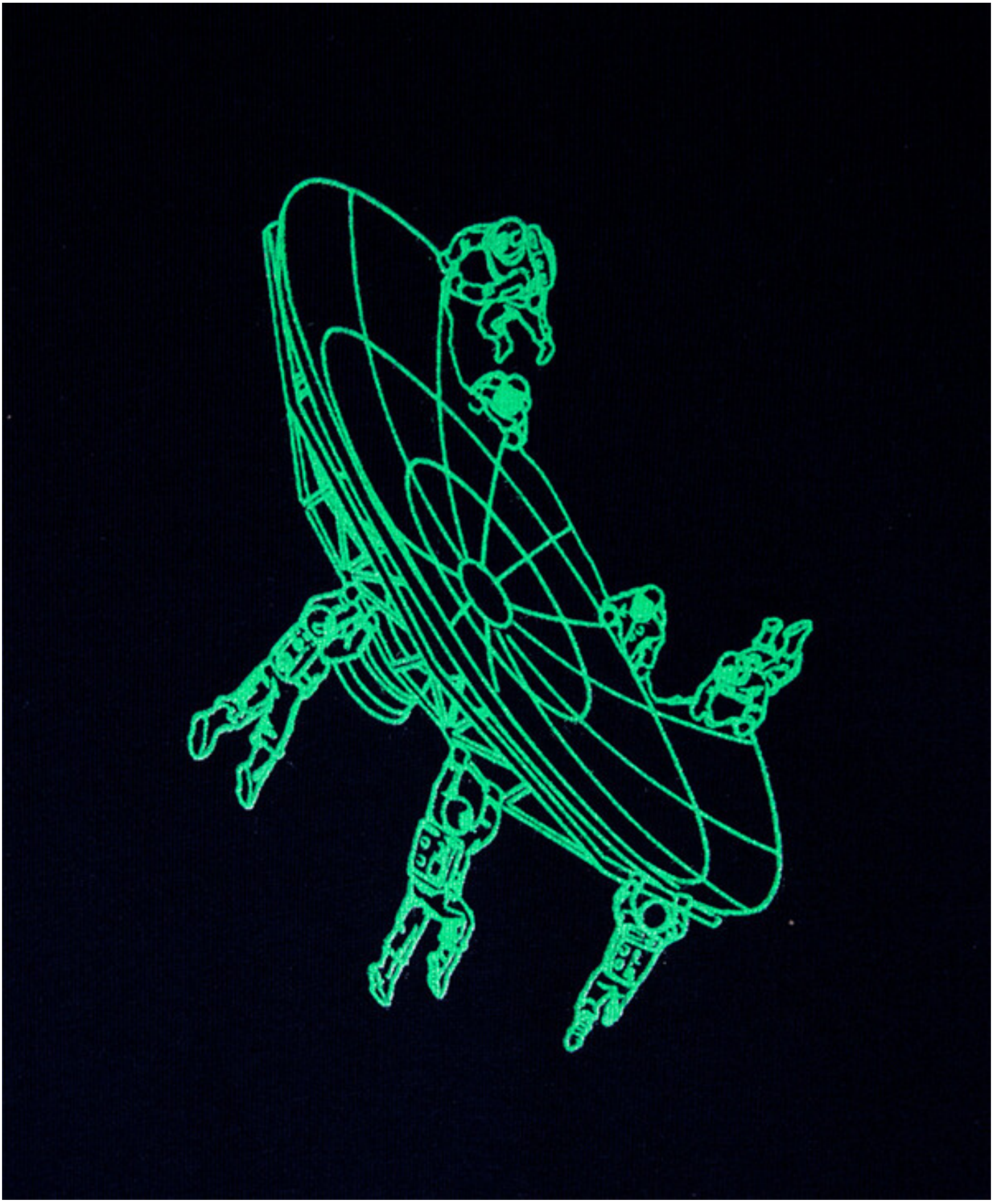
Total Freedom and Shayne Oliver align themselves with the queer-of-color archival practice of using music to document their history, culture, and aesthetics.[26] The musical score to the HBA fashion show mirrors the relationship between the two voices in the Moonwalkers track—the disgusted down-low figure and the woman who is reified by the adoring gay crowd. The mix fabulates how the down-low figure might have met the narrating woman, who, as we will see, is more than the man bargains for.

Act I: "Let Me Take You Away From Here"

Given the trans theme of the 2014 HBA fashion show, it's no surprise that introductory section of its musical score deals with disclosure, visibility, and utopia/dystopia. As if mirroring the awe-inspiring night that led to the Moonwalkers dance track, the set starts with a simple but chilling interpellation, or hailing, of the down-low figure: "Do I know you from somewhere?" Does the narrating woman recognize the down-low figure from a night of "laughing, dancing, and screaming all over the place," with queer bodies "ripping in total abandon"?[27]

Total Freedom turns the down-low figure on its head by placing the onus back on this figure—for why would he be in a club with a community that disgusts him? The repeating question ("Do I know you from somewhere?") builds the down-low figure's anxiety about being misidentified as queer—an anxiety commonly found within Black music and musical critique, such as in Gil Scott Heron's "The Subject Was Faggots" and the work of Amiri Baraka. Here, the ominous exchange between the "down-low" and the "out" woman who recognizes him points to the strategies of negotiating multiple forms of stigmatized sexual identifications.[28] The unease of this interrogation is furthered as the set fades into a sample of a snarling chihuahua over the background of dark industrial otherworldly sounds—as if triggering the return of a repressed memory.

The music, though still ominous, becomes lighter, as if the repressed memory grows more apparent. The listener is placed back into the present moment. Here, the looped a capella of Beyoncé's "End of Time" fades in. The female narrator beckons to the figure: "Come take my hand / I won't let you go / I'll be your friend / I'll love you so deeply / [...] I will love you 'til the end of time." The reverbed a capella juxtaposed with the sweetness of the lyrics and the expansiveness of the background music make the narrator seem like a siren calling the listener to a forbidden fantasy just beyond reach. "Come take my hand" repeats as dissonant strings and space sounds fade in and



T-shirt design for Make Techno Black Again by Detroit artist Abdul Qadim Haqq.

eventually crescendo over the vocal sample. The chorus continues: "Let me take you away from here / There's nothing between us but space and time / [...] Let me shine in your world / [...] Make me your girl." The phrase "Make me your girl" repeats as if signaling the completion of a spell entrancing the figure. Here the sampled lyrics have a foreboding tone that overloads surface, or first impression, in order to obscure an esoteric meaning that is available only to those who are knowledgeable of alternative networks and systems of meaning.

Act II: "No I'm Not the Girl You Thought You Wanted"

The mix then changes moods to introduce the conflict. This begins with the fading-in of a spoken word piece by DJ, visual artist, and writer Juliana Huxtable: "When small boobs are championed by the defeat of the social impulse to make them bigger and more supple by the same sleazy dudes in the Upper West Side with pec implants whose parents secretly orchestrated the creation of distinct gender dysmorphia from the ... "

The placement of this piece introduces the down-low figure to the alternative epistemes hinted at by the vocoded Beyoncé sample. As if calling for a new world order, Huxtable's renouncing of antiquated beauty standards and gender norms juxtaposed with the space sound effects and lyrics discloses the woman speaking as alien to the world of the down-low figure. The woman is "eccentric"[29] because she satirizes and critiques the heteronormative regimes in which they both live. She positions herself as not an alien, but someone who transcends these regimes. The lyrics "space and time" simultaneously evoke the "tensed" and "tenseless"-ness of the Black performance aesthetic found between Beyoncé's lyrics and Huxtable's spoken word piece. As Huxtable's piece trails off, her words are garbled, as if suggesting that her words and perspectives are inhuman or illegible to the systems that seek to "code out" the lower frequencies of alternative epistemologies.[30]

That the woman is more than she appears is highlighted by a sample from the horrorcore classic "Load My Clip" (1995) by Lil Noid. While the chopped and screwed sample is brief, it fits the generally dark apocalyptic (read: beginning-of-a-new-era) theme and genre of the set.[31] The lyrics further reveal that the speaking woman has a strong sense of self:

> Talking shit I'll load my clip and shoot you in your fucking face
> Bring that shit up to the door you wanna try me, Noid hoe
> [...]
> Bitch my nuts you best not ever test
> Blackout is my nigga so Lil Stabby got his fucking back
>
> Get yo' hands up we're the ones so damn near we gon have to scrap.

This passage suggests that the narrating woman is not only willing and ready to defend herself but also has the support of her family. This is punctuated by a chorus of barking chihuahuas, a longstanding effeminate signifier for gay men.[32] Interestingly, the sample placement can be read as both an affirmation of ethnic identity and as self-defense. The African-American Vernacular English within this sample, as a means to iterate a strong sense of Black identity, is reminiscent of the saying "My gender is Black."[33]

This saying attends to how the traumatic events of the transatlantic slave trade excluded African descendants from the binaries of public/domestic gender roles.[34] The violent imagery of the lyrics is reminiscent of the "by any means" self-determination helpful to women, femmes, and nonbinary people of color living in defense of themselves, as outlined by the Black Panther Party and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR).[35] Such a call for self-defense is especially poignant given the simultaneous under- and over-enforcement in Black transgender and queer femme communities. The sample of "Load My Clip," appearing in the "conflict" section of the mix, serves as a recognition of the phantom of violence (state or interpersonal) that haunts transwomen and queer femmes.

Act II continues into an industrial interlude featuring a chopped and screwed remix of Beyoncé's "No Angel." This is not only a nod to Houston's Black music scene; by slowing down Beyoncé's voice and lowering its pitch, the sample also troubles notions of gender classification and humanity: "Baby put your arms around me / Tell me I'm the problem / No I'm not the girl you thought you wanted." The song nods to the politics of gender disclosure, passing, and visibility within the transgender community.

The vocoded vocals and the lyrics also touch upon how Black performers use technology to invent what it means to be human. As the Beyoncé sample continues, the narrator reveals herself to the figure: "Underneath the pretty face is something complicated / I come with a side of trouble / But I know that's why you're staying / Because you're no angel either baby." If the previous section and the beginning of Act II set up the antagonistic relationship between the down-low figure and the female narrator, whose trans dispositions are gradually revealed throughout the set, then this section, with its exaggerated vocoded vocals and lyrics, is the climax or resolution. It signifies a leveling of the field, which is needed for the down-low or closeted figure to open himself up to the world and worldview in which the narrating woman exists.

Act III: Cunty

Now that the world has opened for the down-low figure, the mix's dénouement explores themes of liberation, belonging, and self-affirmation. This is accomplished by

the quick fade-in and loop of Disco Lucy Lips, the narrating woman in the original Moonwalkers song, shrilly yelling "10,000 Screaming Faggots." At the same time, Total Freedom stacks the sample of snarling chihuahuas in the foreground. The narrating woman of the set interpolates her community and summons her family.

This is especially poignant as the mix moves into ballroom culture's sound, aesthetic, and history. As the Moonwalkers track fades in, a sample from Kevin Aviance's "Cunty" enters the sonic landscape, bouncing from left to right in the stereo field. The inclusion of ballroom music acts as a sonic claim to space, moving ballroom from the margins to the center. It also signals an expansion of gender aesthetics. In his analysis of gender in the ballroom scene, Marlon Bailey explains that "cunt," "pussy," "feminine," etc. serve as a criteria for gender performance in competitions and for passing as "authentic femininity" in the real world.[36] As the mix continues, trilling and commentating by Kevin Movado Prodigy fills all parts of the stereo field until it crescendos with a double bass drum solo.

The solo fades out into white noise, exaggerating the abruptness of the instrumentalized "ha crash" sound that is characteristic of ballroom dance music. The set then goes into a commentary-vs.-commentator ballroom track, visually marked in the fashion show with a vogue femme performance. What I find poignant in the inclusion of this vogue femme performance by actual dancers is that it visually positions the narrator as a part of a family (house) and the larger community. Whereas queer aesthetics were implicit earlier in the mix, the dancers' presence in the fashion show makes an explicit claim to Black queer culture and identity. Musically, this is significant given that the "ha crash," and the Jersey club music rhythmic motif in contemporary iterations of ballroom music, are popular in "deconstructed/post-"club music.

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Using DJ scholarship, I've attempted to excavate the sonic archives within "10,000 Screaming Faggots (Hood By Air FW14)" to illustrate the way electronic dance music DJs aurally represent the culture, issues, and experiences of Black queer communities. Mixsets can be viewed as archival objects that contain culturally specific histories, epistemologies, and ontologies important to underrepresented communities. Harking back to Tricia Rose's discussion of electronic dance music, I hope future scholars and critics place electronic dance music back in the Black radical tradition.[37]

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Los Angeles Oral History Project, and the Herb Alpert Music Library's "My Life in the Sunshine: Sampling the Soundscape of Black Los Angeles" exhibit, aimed to continue dialogue with communities outside academia. An aspiring archivist, she's worked closely with Southern California repositories (UCLA's Ethnomusicology Archive & The ONE Archives at USC), processing collections to bolster the presence of under-documented communities in archives.

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Alexander Ghedi Weheliye

Don't Take It Away: BlackFem Voices in Electronic Dance Music

Given the whitening and cishetero masculinization of techno since the 1990s, what might it mean to reimagine techno—both in the limited and general sense—with not only Blackness, but also Black queerness and transness at its center? Is this reinvention even possible, let alone desirable in 2022? Why aren't the electronic dance music genres most important to Black queer and trans folks included in the category of techno?

Despite some recent community work of groups like Black Techno Matters (Washington, DC), Rave Reparations (Los Angeles), Dweller (New York City), and Mamba Negra (Brazil), as well as short films such as Jenn Nkiru's *Black to Techno* and Wu Tsang's *Into a Space of Love*, techno remains removed from Blackness and queerness in ways not true of house music, kuduro, ballroom, amapiano, Jersey/Baltimore club, UK garage (which is having an interesting renaissance among young Black producers in NYC), jungle, etc. Despite being appropriated and exploited by outsiders, all these dance music genres have maintained strong connections with Black communities in ways that techno not always has.

Maybe the problem is techno itself—perhaps not necessarily all the music that falls under this banner, but the designation and the ways it has been historicized as both resolutely cishetero and doggedly disconnected from both antecedent and concurrent types of Black music. House, by contrast, has not only consistently remained tied to its queer and trans roots but has also maintained connections to other Black musical genres such as disco, gospel, and R&B. Thus, it is not only essential to halt and reverse the whitening of techno and other forms of electronic dance music, but also to work against the relentless and tiring centering of cishet masculinity, as evident in the almost exclusive focus on and intense veneration of Detroit techno and the Belleville Three (Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson) at the cost of Black queer and trans DJs and producers (Larry Levan, Frankie Knuckles, Honey Dijon, and Ron Hardy, to name only the most glaringly obvious examples).

Part of the reason for this situation stems from the relentless ways techno has been understood as something entirely new and its creators as genius auteurish innovators, in ways that most other electronic music genres have eschewed. Take, for instance, the localization qua making white and cishetero—a *reracination* rather than a deracination—of techno in Berlin and many other places in Europe in the early nineties. I say "reracination" here to highlight how the whitening of techno in Berlin—but, of course, also as a general rule—is not simply the erasure of Blackness but a violent imposition of different racial and national orders, with their attendant modalities of gender and sexuality. This has consisted of numerous active processes, rather than a mere sleight of hand. It happened alongside the extreme violence that Black and other non-white communities experienced after of the fall of the Berlin Wall

Sez Party,Berlin, 1996. from the series Zeitmaschine, 1991— 1997. Copyright: Tilman Brembs | zeitmaschine.org

in 1989 and German reunification a year later. These public forms of violence against Black and other non-white people in the years around reunification are now vigorously expunged from the celebratory historiographies of techno in Berlin and the founding of the "Berliner Republik."

My own experiences as a teenager with the clubbing scene in West Berlin as well as the fundamental anti-Blackness of German society in the 1980s and early nineties provides the spark here, since the retrospective considerations of techno in Berlin through recent oral histories and documentary films, which started appearing around 2010, have rarely addressed the presence of Black music in the city before the advent of techno and have seldom mentioned the violence against non-white people during the time of reunification, when techno exploded in popularity in the city. Both the violence and the presence of Black music in Berlin disrupt the celebratory narrative that techno music offered a common musical ground for the frictionless coming together of young (white and straight) Germans in the East and West after reunification.[1] This fervent whitening of techno has worked so well that any form of *oontz oontz* music (an onomatopoetic rendering of four-on-the-floor dance music) is now thoroughly associated with (cishetero and European) whiteness in the US, just as occurred previously with rock music. To take one obvious example, it was not until 2020 that Haitian Canadian producer and DJ Kaytranada became the first Black artist to win a Grammy award in the Best Dance/Electronic Album category.

In early-nineties Berlin, the segregation between house and techno didn't initially happen sonically. There weren't that many techno productions from Berlin itself, and among those that existed, a lot sounded much more house-y, pop-like, and soulful than one would now think (for instance, Cosmic Baby's "The Space Track" or Kid Paul's "Take Me Higher"). Only around 1992 and later did Berlin productions emerge that had a lot less swing, a lot less funk, that had a steady, metronomic beat and aspired to create very stereotypically Teutonic or Germanic sounds (records such as 3 Phase featuring Dr. Motte, "Der Klang der Familie" or Tanith's "T2"). Also, Berlin's early nineties reverence for Underground Resistance—who are, in contrast to earlier Detroit techno producers, explicitly

political and put themselves in a lineage of Black nationalism and Black freedom struggles—was based on the group's politicization of primarily instrumental music. UR's sound also fed into an independent punk rock ethos that was prevalent in Berlin at the time. The reception of UR in Berlin also suggested that Blackness and Black music could be enthusiastically celebrated, so long as it didn't involve Black Germans. It took place under the assumption that Blackness was foreign to Germany. The UR records that were successful in Berlin were not vocal recordings. The UR discography, however, is evenly split between the tracky, industrial recordings, and vocal, oftentimes Gospel-inspired house tracks (such as the label's very first release, "Your Time Is Up" feat. Yolanda, or the massively successful "Transition," to name a few). For UR, these things existed side-by-side, but that wasn't where the folks in Berlin took their inspiration from. In Berlin, the popular UR releases (*Riot EP*, "Sonic Destroyer," "Panic," and so on) emphasized the former at the expense of the latter, since vocal and house were perceived as both "Blacker" and more "feminine."

feminine, queer, and Black sounds associated with techno and electronic dance music went instead into the genre of Eurodance, which is very clearly delineated from Berlin techno because the latter was an underground, independent, hardcore phenomenon and the former associated with the feminized inauthenticity of the mainstream.

It's important to link these two formations because they are so similar—perhaps not culturally similar, as Eurodance numbers by Snap! or Real McCoy were produced for the pop charts and not necessarily for clubs, but nevertheless they used a lot of the same production techniques as the early techno. Originally there was a lot more overlap between techno, house, and Eurodance. It is important to me to bring these two strands together, given that in Eurodance you see a lot of Black German and Black queer performers. They were acceptable and even necessary for the success of that genre, but not in Berlin techno, which distanced itself from both Blackness and queerness. The whitening of techno in Berlin and other spaces went hand in hand with expunging the genre's ties

Tresor club, Berlin, founded in March 1991

There was a tendency early on in Berlin, as well as in Cologne and other places in Germany, to say that techno might have been "invented" in Detroit but "we've made our own and no longer need to look to other places." In the early nineties, some major players in the Berlin techno scene even used a different spelling, Tekkno, to clearly distinguish themselves from Detroit. The more melodic,

to any vestiges of queerness and femness. Moreover, veering from "benign" neglect to downright denigration of singing and vocality in electronic dance music, especially when performed by BlackFems across gender and sexuality spectrums, contributes significantly to both the whitening and cisheterosexualization of techno and other

forms of Black music.

I want to counteract these tendencies and imagine electronic music with BlackFemness at its center. I want to acknowledge and pay tribute to the often-nameless BlackFem voices that sound across so many forms of popular music, but especially electronic dance music, where we find a long history of integrally using BlackFem singing voices without crediting them, whether it's through session work or sampling.[2] This centrality of the disembodied BlackFem singing voice also amplifies the deep connections between R&B music and electronic dance music, especially house and techno. Frequently the sampled BlackFem singing voice, especially when disembodied and decontextualized, remains the only vestige of Black queerness in many forms electronic dance music. For white cishet electronic music producers and DJs, the BlackFem voice remains ready to hand, an infinite "natural" resource, always available for exploitation without any acknowledgement, credit, or renumeration.[3]

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Sometimes I fantasize about the existence of alternate dimensions which consist only of different dance clubs with each milieu playing one track over and over and over.....

I imagine slipping into one of these parallel universes through a portal of sound à la Sun Ra in *Space Is the Place*, where the sound system is flawlessly calibrated to channel the warmth and complexity of great basslines. The interplay between the lights and sound takes on synesthetic qualities, the crowd is relaxed and there to dance rather than stand and gawk, and the dancefloor is packed just enough to give the impression of losing myself in the crowd but not so much as to require subtly fighting for my spot on the floor (IYKYK). This story explores one of the tracks I hear playing in that imaginary perfect club geography over and over and over.....

Though DJ Pierre (Nathaniel Pierre Jones) is credited with and celebrated for giving the world the genre of acid house, which completely changed the UK club and youth culture landscape in the late eighties, his work from the nineties has received far less attention. These recordings, released under his name or more often under pseudonyms (Photon Inc, Joint Venture, Darkman, etc.) are subsumed under the micro-genre of the "Wild Pitch" sound, in turn a subcategory of NYC house, which itself is a sibling of Chicago house.

The integral components of the sample-heavy Wild Pitch house sound consist of long extended mixes that gradually introduce distinctive sonic elements to create intense euphoric effects. Different sounds coalesce at certain points only to then be stripped away so that the stacking can begin anew. To call these mixes hypnotic would be simultaneously true and an arrant understatement.[4] Here's how Pierre describes his work: "In the beginning, it might not seem like anything. You don't know what it is. But as you're layering stuff on the track, it starts to tell you a story, it starts to build into something that you can really nod your head to and dance to. By the time you have them all in there, it sounds BIG, like an incredible energy."[5]

The DJ Pierre–produced track "Don't Take It Away" was first released in 1991 under one of his aliases, Audio Clash, as part of the 12'' single *Don't Take It Away / Electro Rhythm*, on prominent NYC house music label Strictly Rhythm. The second track on the A side, "Don't Take It Away (Concept Mix)," made it onto a 1994 CD compilation of DJ Pierre's ten best Wild Pitch recordings.[6] That same year, I purchased a used copy of the CD for $7.99 at Princeton Record Exchange. I listened to the whole CD countless times but would often press the "RPT" button when "Don't Take It Away (Concept Mix)," the last track, came on.

When I began to digitize all my CDs around 2001 or 2002, I hadn't listened to the DJ Pierre record in a while and was enormously thrilled about the prospect of being able to hear "Don't Take It Away (Concept Mix)" on my then newly acquired iPod—insert annoying and extremely loud record scratch sound effect here and a very loud *aht aht* followed by boisterous laughter. The computer played and encoded all the tracks from the CD except the last, which was, of course, my most beloved. I tried everything: cleaning the CD, using different computers to rip the CD, legal and extralegal download options to acquire the track, all to no avail, which meant that "Don't Take It Away (Concept Mix)" as a musical object was in many ways lost to me at that point. I rediscovered the track in 2012, in the early days of Spotify in the US, which is ironic because so much dance music history of the eighties and nineties still cannot be found on the big streaming services in 2022. But after I found "Don't Take It Away (Concept Mix)" on Spotify, I spent weeks consuming the song on repeat. This process of reacquaintance happens every few years, and I'm still in awe of the track's deep spiritual and physical healing powers.

So far, I've offered you details about everything but the music itself, so let me attempt to give you *some* idea of what makes all seven minutes and thirty-two seconds of "Don't Take It Away (Concept Mix)" perfect. The recording commences with what sounds like steam being released from an engine, or the launching of a small rocket ship. The sound gets slightly louder as the sample progresses. (The sample weaves in and out of the track for the first three minutes, and then reemerges intermittently towards the end.) Next, the all-important resonant kick drum enters, accompanied almost instantaneously by congas and snares, creating a dialogue between the three distinct drum sounds. After this we encounter handclaps and a beautifully rubbery bassline, followed by a brief synth line and a sample of what sounds like a bird, but which could

Dj Pierre - 1981 in the mix

very well be a pitched-up recording of a human voice. (This sample disappears at 2:50, only to rematerialize at the end of the track.) Then we hear piano stabs and drum rolls—so fundamental to house music—and very goth-sounding strings that are taken (I think) from the house music group Ten City. At the 3:54 mark, a sample of a BlackFem voice sings the following lines:

> don't take it
> don't take it
> don't take it awaaaaayyyyyyyyy
> awaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyy
> awaaaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyyyyy

After being first introduced, the vocal sample and the strings alternate to create tension. Later, DJ Pierre will modulate the vocals so that sometimes the "don't" repeats, while at other times "take it" assumes center stage rather than "awaaaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyyyyy." A few other notable shifts: Around 5:30, the beat drops and comes back in very soon after. At 6:13, a breakbeat that sounds like the beat from Lyn Collins's 1972 funk song "Think (About It)"—a beat that was popularized by eighties hip-hop and was later indispensable to Baltimore club music—enters the scene. Although the sampled vocal snippet, when it first appears in the track, lasts only thirty seconds, it exerts an immense influence on the second half of the track in the different ways it flickeringly recurs and transmogrifies, creating a relational tension between opacity and transparency.[7] Of course, once one is familiar with the track, the vocal sample also shadows the first half through the listener's anticipation of what is to come. In this way, the vocal snippet and its varying (re)iterations haunt the Now of the track's seven minutes and thirty-two seconds in toto. I'm not even sure that I've scratched the surface of what happens on this track, given that its alchemy depends so much of the interaction between the song's distinctive sounds and frequencies.

If DJ Pierre's track is a semi-anonymous, workman-like recording, like so many dance music releases now lost in the debris of former micro-presents from the past, at least we know that he was the one who produced it, thanks to databases like Discogs and WhoSampled. The same can't be said for the unspecified BlackFem voice that is so central to "Don't Take It Away (Concept Mix)." As hard as I've tried over the years, I haven't been able to identify whose voice we hear in the sample, or what previous recording it was taken from. Given how much cishetero

masculinity has been projected onto the history of electronic dance music, practically erasing the fact that R&B and BlackFem voices have been central to the genres that comprise this category, it is imperative to amplify the Black queerness and BlackFemness of electronic dance music, so they aren't completely lost in the debris of history.

The vocal snippet on "Don't Take It Away (Concept Mix)" stands in for all the other BlackFem vocalists, unnamed or named (and even if named, usually undervalued), who have sung lead or background vocals, who were sampled, or who sang reference tracks that were used on techno, disco, house, rock, Eurodance, pop, hip-hop, reggae, and R&B records.[8] As a pushback against the violent ways this creative and affective labor continues to be exploited and disavowed, here is a very partial list of indispensable BlackFem voices that continue to carry so many genres of popular music: Carol Kenyon, Melanie Thornton, Adeva, Norma Jean Wright, Cynthia Johnson, Veda Simpson, Ashanti Shequoiya Douglas, Lori Glori, Chelonis R. Jones, Jewel, Ultra Naté, Kelly Price, Penny Ford, Jocelyn Brown, Alfa Anderson, Yolanda Reynolds, Loleatta Holloway, Paula Brion, Shatasha Williams, Byron Stingily, Paris Grey, Dajae, Kym Mazelle, Eric D. Clark, India, Caron Wheeler, Wondress Hutchinson, Kevin Aviance, Shara Nelson, Gaelle Adisson, Christa Robinson, Sabrina Johnston, Tania Evans, Michellé, Blue Raspberry, Luci Martin, Luther Vandross, Kym Sims, Claudia Fontaine, Joi Cardwell, Daryl Pandy, Martha Wash, Vernell "Vee" Sales, Barbara Tucker, Victoria Wilson-James.....

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The idea of BlackFem rather than Black woman or even Black femme results from desiring an alternative to other, limiting gendered and sexuated categories. As such BlackFem is capacious enough to include a wide variety of femininities that traverse gender, sex, and sexuality. For an instructive elaboration of BlackFem, see Chelsea M. Frazier, "Thinking Red, Wounds, and Fungi in Wangechi Mutu's EcoArt," in *Ecologies, Agents, Terrains* , ed C hristopher P. Heuer and Rebecca Zorach (Yale University Press, 2018).

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Dion McKenzie aka TYGAPAW

Do You Remember When We Just Lived?

I started on guitar rather than keyboard because it made sense to me as a way to approach music theory. Maybe because of my dyslexia, I learned in patterns, always grouping things; I would never latch on to the letters or numbers. The visual layout of the fretboard made sense. It was a good place to start. I enjoyed playing guitar.

I was in bands. I think there's still a Myspace page for one song. The music is horrible, but you've got to start somewhere. Testing out the waters of my songwriting abilities. Even though we might be the harshest about the beginning stages of development of our own craft, at the time I was really excited that I recorded a song and I put it online. I shared it with Jesse Boykins. Jesse's sweet and always gave me words of encouragement. From there, I had another band. And it was like we were making worlds. Felt like I unlocked my purpose in those early years.

During that journey, I was undocumented. Music saved me. Being in bands saved my life. I cannot express how difficult it is to live in America without proper working papers, and without being able to get a job. I worked in Caribbean bars. The pay was forty dollars for a shift from 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. And then you work for tips. They'll take advantage if they can, even your own people. When I defaulted into that, that was one of the greatest challenges in my life.

Right before that, I graduated from Parsons School of Design. I couldn't get the graphic design jobs for which I was qualified because of my status at the time. I didn't quite have an understanding of how bad it would be when my student visa ended. In my naiveté, I was confident in my abilities. I really did everything I could to get the H1 visa. I would be on a job and ask them to sponsor me and they'd say they wouldn't be able to at this time, or that they already sponsored someone else.

If I'd gone home to Jamaica, at that time, there just weren't any opportunities. I was twenty-one, still a baby. And straight, mentally, in the sense of conformity. I made a very hard decision to stay. But at least I was in New York City, a place where I could express myself. I was starting to take steps—playing in bands and enjoying all that freedom. I was living day by day, taking the punches as they came, figuring out where to go from there.

I had met queer people when I was a student at Parsons. But when measuring queerness, you have to factor in the intersections of Blackness. A lot of the queerness I saw was through a white lens. When I met gay Black men, things started to open up for me. When I met my dear friend André Singleton, he *saw* me. He saw me before I saw myself.

Just by talking to me, he helped me, because otherwise I wasn't comfortable speaking about my sexuality. He would invite me to house parties, little gatherings, kikis. They were doing little runway walks. Ballroom practice. I didn't

Still from the music video for "W8WTF" by Zebra Katz x Boyfriend.

know what it was, at the time. He told me to watch *Paris Is Burning*. I know that film has its issues, but it was still an introduction for people like me that were outside of the culture.

André introduced me to the writings of bell hooks, which changed my course. All about love. It started my process of rethinking the Black family under colonialism, within the framework of Blackness, of existing and overcoming and reclaiming, and loving yourself. The revolutionary practice of self-love.

I was trying to unlearn what had happened in my life back in Jamaica. I was trying to unlearn self-hate. I even looked back at my old journals. I had certain crushes back then, but I could only write them down in code. I'd just give a little compliment. I was so fearful, but the community I was invited into encouraged me not to worry about that. This was new to me, to not have to worry about expressing myself. And then the other books I was introduced to—by Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Alice Walker—those are the books that helped me open up and see myself.

I was reading American books. I felt like I had to learn about America now that it's the country I live in. In Jamaica, I grew up thinking that Black people didn't write books because I was only exposed to white writers. The literature I was asked to read in high school were books like *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Scarlet Letter*. But I had the desire to read the books about us. I found books about us in America.

My education really started in this moment in the US. I had received a colonized education in Jamaica, where I felt that teachers picked on the students who were not the strongest and called them out, like a hazing. It was done to me over and over. One time, one of my high school teachers called me out for talking during a lesson, but in doing so called me one of the dumbest kids in the class. From moments like this one, I have trauma about learning. I felt that colonized academia was violent.

The beautiful thing is that throughout my life I've had people who believed in me. Otherwise, I would not have gotten to where I am. No matter whether you want to see it, the universe conspires to help us along our journey, to soften the blows whenever they come.

I always had my art. I began to draw when I was five. I didn't paint before now though. I started painting during the pandemic. It's unlike music for me in that I don't even have to think. Music is a different beast. I have to really apply myself because of how technical music production is. People try to glamorize music-making, but it's hard work. We musicians have natural instincts, sure, but to apply them is a craft that takes constant work, practice, and we are always learning.

I have a strong desire to play in a band again. Some day. The songs I wrote for my next album, coming out next year, will be really fun to perform live. I'll be able to play guitar on them. I'm not too bad. It's like muscle memory once you have the foundation.

I learned to produce through working with bands, which informed how I wanted to build musical worlds. Some won't remember, but production software from the late '90s and early 2000s was intimidating. I learned ProTools while at Parsons in a sound production class, and I never wanted to touch it again.

Around 2006 a friend showed me Ableton, but being broke, I lived hand to mouth, and it was difficult to make work. It was becoming difficult to subsist. One thing I promised myself was to remain housed at all costs. Everything I earned from my shitty bar job I put towards rent, which was about six hundred a month. I often got by on one meal a day. My mode of transport was my bike. I couldn't afford the subway. I was navigating a system that was working against me. But with the belief I had for life, I just thought I would figure things out eventually.

When I got my Greencard, I was trying to get back into my field, into graphic design, but firms wouldn't hire me as I had this gap in my resume from when I was undocumented. It just broke my heart. It was like I was being penalized for something that worked against me. There are always these things in life, these rules, like if you can't account for discontinuous labor.

I love to dance in vibrant spaces. That's why I'm drawn to nightlife. I thought it possible to move into DJing only because my bandmate Erica was spinning. I really respect DJing as an artform. First of all, it's a technical skill. It implements musical theory. You have to learn rhythm. People think it's intuitive, but it's not. I come across a lot of people who can't land on the first beat. At first, I still wasn't quite sure if I could follow that interest because it was so male dominated. I was around all these male DJs. Music studios were similar. I'm just gagged that it took until the twenty-first century to have these conversations. Women have always been here, always, but without getting recognized or getting paid adequately.

Just seeing Erica was encouraging. It looked fun. I respected the craft of it. I'm interested in learning. Sometimes if I see the craft of something I'm interested in learning it, but if I don't see the diversity of its makeup maybe I'm not so interested. But with DJing I ultimately was. It suits me, maybe. I'd trained my ear for a long time, but I didn't have the money to get started on turntables. Even with CDJs, its expensive. I got started with a cheap Numark Serato DJ controller. I could have done that in my bedroom forever. It just felt liberating.

To start, I was playing whatever was popular at the time, which wasn't anything good. I was trying to build the party I'd started, called Fake Accent. That was my start at building a space for queer, trans, nonbinary Black and brown people. From there I found my way to ballroom, Jersey club, Bmore club, etc.

Let me backtrack a little here: I found ballroom first. That was through André Singleton and some others. When I heard "Ima Read" by Zebra Katz, I was like: What is this? I'd listened to a lot of music. I don't restrict myself to genres when it comes to learning. But this was a genre I'd never heard before. It leapt out at me. I'd never had such a visceral response to a track.

It has two musical elements: the voice and a sub kick. And I thought: How are you making a song? From what we learn in Western music, that's not a song at all. Is ballroom the music of my ancestors? It is music outside the framework of Western influence. I wanted to hear more of that. It was not something you could get from the radio. How do I get access to that?

My friends told me to come with them to a ball. Going to certain kiki spaces. I went to Eric Johnson's house whenever I had the privilege of being invited. Just this realization that there is this whole entire world. That we must never stop seeking those worlds. Never be complacent with what one is fed. That there's always more. That is my realization in life. I've been able to find myself in this position in life because of my curiosity to find truth.

Ballroom is a truth that I found. A community that helped affirm me. That being Black is an incredible. Ballroom is a response to being on the fringes of society. It's a response that says "no, I'm here, I'm human, I exist, and I have my brothers and my sisters, and we will celebrate us." The only other place I saw that was in dancehall sessions in Jamaica. In dancehall, when you are at a session, it's just good energy. The place where I grew up, at the parties and sessions that I would go to, everything was very community centered.

There was one street dance I went to, in a town close to Mandeville where I grew up, in a more rural area. The sound system was set up on the street and the whole community came. Somebody starts cooking food. To me ballroom is connected with those experiences. It made me so happy to find ballroom in New York. It really connected the dots for me. I was so interested in the sounds. I met Mike Q, Byrell The Great, LSDXOXO, and others who were influenced by ballroom.

I had very limited understanding of Black queer culture until I saw *Paris Is Burning* and started learning about Pepper LaBeija, and then later on, Marsha P. Johnson and other activists. It was a lot. It was a long journey just to get to feeling empowered. That's what I struggled with. I

Voguing ball, 2018. License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

struggled with feeling like I didn't have a voice. Feeling that I was invisible, because of colonized conditioning. Invisible in the sense of not even existing. It wasn't until I found community that I felt like I could exist, that I was worthy of life.

I love and respect ballroom but still feel outside of it. So, I had to create another space that centered Black queer, trans, and nonbinary Caribbeans. I didn't know what I was getting myself into. I'm interested in bringing people together. It's not a capitalist pursuit. But now I'm having to learn about capitalism. Capitalism isn't quite practiced in the Caribbean. It's too small. We grow our own produce. We live off our land. We have means to survive outside consumerism.

I had to find a venue first and build from there. The challenge of finding a venue was just riddled with misogynoir. I knew men who could easily get a night. I kept pushing and the place that opened up for me was Branded Saloon. Gerard Butler gave me the opportunity. Every Friday I would play, and it just started to build up. I was using Instagram to promote the night, to attract queer Caribbeans. I had straight Jamaican friends, from a former life who came to support it. And then new people. I would see the queer and trans people come through. It was actually building! It ran at Branded for two years, then I moved it to Friends and Lovers to get a bigger space. Then I got a residency at Trans Pecos.

Papi Juice were doing amazing work. iBomba was also an amazing party. I created Fake Accent to specifically center Black queer, trans, and nonbinary people. I was the only one who looked like me, running parties at that time. I was the only queer Black AFAB person for a while who was creating these spaces. Whenever I'm asked how I did it, I say I just never allowed the rejection to keep me down. I always tried to find a way to make things happen. To grow.

I want to see more people like me in my life. We deserve space. That spark really started to catch in the most beautiful way. I had a little stint at Red Bull Music Academy working on one of the festivals and curated one of the events. For the event I curated, I invited Papi Juice, Juliana Huxtable, many Brooklyn qtpoc collectives for the lineup.

They gave me a meager budget to work with. They had no faith. They thought the tickets wouldn't sell. It sold out. Red Bull took that model and have used it since—because it worked. This has been a challenge. How to communicate about Black queer, trans, and nonbinary spaces? How do we navigate capitalism and what it extracts from us? Because what they do is extraction, not support. I must keep blocking the extraction to protect myself. That's why the build in my life is gradual, unlike those who've just catapulted. There's always compromises, but I see how dangerous that can get. Where are we now? With all of that fighting that we did.

There's inclusion now, to a certain extent, in theory, but I'm trying to come to terms with the club no longer being that revolutionary space that we wanted it to be. It's still not nothing.

The club helped create someone like me. The club helped create someone like Juliana Huxtable. It's a school. We taught each other. Like a science experiment. It works because there could be that one night when we really got to live. Every single bit of those little times that we had we can recall like "oh girl remember when we just lived?" That's where I do believe the revolution is still there.

This is controversial, but I'm a little critical of the hedonistic aspects, the escapism. They can be beautiful and elevating, but it can also be disruptive. A lot of people don't last in it. Now that I'm ten years in, I'm saying to myself that some aspects are not sustainable. I've had to make adjustments on my rider not to include alcohol, but rather natural, healthy foods.

Now I'm shifting into: How can I advocate for care? How can I advocate for taking care of our bodies? Because I know what we all want. I know we all want to be free. And I know why my previous album, *Get Free* (2020), was successful. It's not because it's a techno album. It's because of what I was expressing within the genre of techno. And that's my whole universe, my whole life's work. My whole journey. That's what I've decided to do with my life, to share in acts of liberation. That everyone has the power, but that collectively, we can *all* have the power.

The dismantling of patriarchal views in music is something I'm deeply interested in doing. I'm interested in techno, but from the standpoint of its history, with what I discovered from my own research and curiosity. I call my music techno, because it is TECHNO. I like ballroom because it has the energy and attitude of techno. I'm not as deeply drawn to house music, as it is sweeter. I'll implement certain elements of house, but I'm drawn to techno for its ferocity, its aggression.

Music making is art, but its devalued. Could you imagine a world without hearing music? The brain and body need it. I'm deeply drawn to the mysticism of music. But with every single step of research, what am I seeing? Who gets to make the music? It makes me sad that there are systematic things in place to block someone who's assigned a certain gender. Who might have all of the tools and the curiosity, but they're not encouraged, not supported. For me, when it came to being a producer, only a few people have supported me. What is this thing where people don't see if for you? What is that projection?

I'm trying to figure out: What is gender? How does that work here? Its why, besides Blackness, I also like to focus on gender because when it comes to a creative form like music, gender has a lot to do with who gets to make it. Cisgendered men are not discouraged by default. Particularly to produce, you need encouragement. When you start in a field of study, you have your teacher, and they're supposed to help you build confidence. There's a lot of technical aspects to producing and it helps significantly when those skills are passed down. Those skills from what I've observed are mostly passed from "bro to bro."

Most of what I've learned about production I taught myself. It was hard. At the time, with Ableton you got a handful of YouTube videos maybe. They didn't tell me the advanced things. If your homies aren't there to teach you then you could take a class, but I didn't have the means. I just had to figure it out. I was not good in the beginning. Making stuff, throwing it into Ableton. Man, I can listen to some of my early stuff and my highs are so hot, taking out all of the mids so it's just really crunchy. It was raw. Not sure if I like any of my early stuff cause I can hear all my inexperience.

But what I learned down the line is that in music-making there are no rules. Sound is a really tough thing to control. Certain frequencies don't work well together on the same bandwidth. I know my shit but I'm no sound engineer. You have to really study that. I have the creative, I have the musical ideas, but in order to make my music I had to learn everything. I engineered a lot of my early work. I'm glad I did it, because it got me to where I am and gave me confidence. With each release I got a little better. I'd learn a little bit more about how to balance my sound.

My album *Get Free* came from a place of absolute urgency. I was fed up. I'd already made *Ode to Black Trans Lives* (2020) featuring D-L Stewart. That was my soft coming out. I have a voice and I wanted to use it, even if it's not me on the mic.

Actually, I wasn't going to make *Get Free*. I had plans for a more experimental album. But then I was researching Underground Resistance and the Bellevue Three, the whole story of the origins of techno. And I thought this is fucking amazing. When you're queer, an immigrant, Black, a lot about the genre of techno as it is today was saying no to me. I wasn't interested in the colonized version.

I just wanted to learn the way home. I had always heard this Eurocentric version, lacking a certain soul or a certain life, monotonous. I get that the genre is about repetition. I get the abstractness of that approach. We're all trying to play adjacent techniques. We're all playing club music that's a four-four beat around 140 BPM. You can find a techno track and mix it in, maybe with a different syncopation. Or that extra kick between the three and the four, like ballroom usually does. Or finding Baltimore or Jersey tracks, the more subby-low end sounds. But then I thought: what do all these families have in common? They're all subgenres of one another. I wanted to go deeper. Deconstruct it. Trace it back.

Then I found the *New Dance Show* (1988-–94), heard the music that was being played back then, saw Black people dancing to it. What is going on!? This is exactly what I'm trying to get at. There's no clear path to finding this. It takes a lot of finding your own way. I'm drawn to techno because of its intensity. I'm drawn to a lot of music that has intensity. I'm drawn to jazz, I'm drawn to nu metal. If there's a heaviness, that's my tea.

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I was apprehensive with techno because of how it is presented. *New Dance Show* opened the door for me. Black techno in Detroit had such a natural, organic development. Pioneering a genre. New genres often come from a place of oppression. Fighting it by rising above it. It reminded me of reggae starting in Jamaica. How Lee Scratch Perry started messing around to create dub. And then how dancehall, as a subgenre of reggae, started as a counterculture when reggae became too commercial, too coopted.

The same fucking thing happened with techno. Club music is a derivative of techno. Club music lives within Black and queer spaces, but we get separated from our ancestral genres, that we're naturally drawn to, but erased from. I found it suspicious not to have the Black people who made the music on the cover of their techno records. I had questions. Was it intentional erasure? If there's no cover art, you assume the music is faceless. Then anyone can latch on and treat it like their own thing. It's very important for me that I'm on every single cover of my releases. Björk did it. We don't have the space; we don't have the luxury to be invisible. It's a practice of aligning image and sound. Aligning your legacy.

We have these limitations around genre where people in my West Indian community say things like "techno is white." You'd become something of an outcast for being into it. I was listening to all this dance music growing up, like Crystal Waters. But then later on I was told that I'm not supposed to like techno? That you're white if you listen to that. But I'm just a person whose curiosity won't accept what it's given. I need to investigate, especially when I really love something. Its really that moment, with techno, of reclaiming our history. I have as much right as anyone else to make techno, and for my music to be labeled as I want it to be labeled.

Like with rock and roll: there was Little Richard, a Black, queer artist, right at the start. But with techno it's getting to the point where I can't even engage with the discourse on Twitter about the origins of techno. There's so many forms of institutionalized racism in music. The prime example is payment. I want to talk about these things to help the children. Even if I'm one of the ones shifting from the underground to a wider audience, my pay is still lagging. They always say you have to break the market first, but in Berlin where I've played for several years, venues that didn't book me before, that are booking me now will say, "Oh but you haven't played *this* club." Well I haven't played your clubs cause, GATEKEEPING. If you watch the biopics about James Brown or Ray Charles—it was the same thing. How can we change these practices?

You can't pay rent with visibility. And there are other issues still happening now that make me wonder how anyone think it's ethical, like an exclusivity clause within your own city for example. I don't knock artists who are taking it because these clubs have the power. But of course, then we could talk about the deep institutionalized racism expressed through how DJ bookings are done.

The only club owner who's been supportive of me this year is John Barclay of Paragon and Bossa Nova Civic Club. He doesn't put clauses on me. He doesn't tell me how to promote the night. He supports the artists within the community.

It's hard to talk about some of these things without getting real about some of the violence around nightlife. Sometimes I feel like giving up. It really has not been a cute situation. But I believe in the power of music. But it's in a place right now where its very mixed. The coming together in the clubs as a revolutionary act—they found a way to commodify and extract it. And remove us from it.

X

Dion McKenzie, known as **TYGAPAW**, is a producer, DJ, and artist, originally from Mandeville, Jamaica, and based in Brooklyn, New York. A polymathic artist injecting their Jamaican heritage into techno, TYGAPAW operates at the intersections of their musical and cultural roots. Released via influential Mexico City imprint N.A.A.F.I., debut album *GET FREE* is an eleven-track collection of hard-hitting, cathartic energy exploring Black joy, the active dismantling of imagined limitations, and the eradication of self-doubt using techno landscapes. Live highlights include MoMA PS1, The Hydra (London), Boiler Room (Toronto, LA), RBMA Weekender (Montreal, LA), AFROPUNK, Toronto Pride, Moonshine (Montreal), and Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston, Miami), alongside NYC institutions Webster Hall, Knockdown Center, Brooklyn Museum, Bossa Nova Civic Club, Elsewhere, Nowadays and more. TYGAPAW has also embarked on tours in Asia, Australia, and Europe, playing shows in London, Paris, Basel, Vienna, Berlin, Oslo, Seoul, Shanghai, Melbourne, Chippendale, and Leipzig. TYGAPAW's second album is scheduled for release in spring 2023.

Jasmine Infiniti

I Didn't Have Any Choice But to Become an Artist

I love to dance and have ever since I was little. Growing up in the Bronx, I was on step teams and in different Boys and Girls Club events, always involved in dancing. I was even a choreographer. All kinds of dancing, but mostly hip-hop. As far back as high school.

High school was in the Bronx. I went to a school that doesn't exist anymore: Foreign Language Academy of Global Studies in the South Bronx. It was just a small magnet school of six hundred students. I knew everyone and everyone knew me, and it was kind of awesome. Talk about safe spaces. It was a great experience. Actually, my high school experience was really exceptional, as a queer person, because that's not common. Not so common in the Bronx, either.

I was one of four or five out people. And we ran that school. As a teenager, I was a gay boy, but always hyper feminine. Probably even more so back then. I was able to really be myself in school. The staff at school was really cool. My first altercation was when some kid bullied me. I put him in his place—publicly. After that, everyone had respect for me, and that made me feel really confident.

I was a singer, too. I sang a lot. I was always in chorus in school and at Boys and Girls Club. I took drum. I know how to play the drums. I took violin in high school, but none of that really stuck. Not really a church music person. I was a tenor. Since I was a little kid, I had singing groups. We did R&B, wrote our own songs, too. I always had this this kind of ringleader vibe. Always getting everyone involved in stuff.

In high school I didn't really go out. We were such nerds, honestly. I would play hooky to go to the queer section at Barnes and Noble to read books and talk about them, and then go to the piers. I never had a fake ID. It wasn't until I was in college that I started going out. There was so much nightlife in New York back then. I would go to Splash and Krash and these big clubs that don't exist anymore—Limelight and Avalon, those kinds of places. That was my real introduction to techno and queerness.

That was before I found the ballroom scene. Even though I became very intrigued by ballroom music, I didn't consider that techno then. It was more house music and disco. There were obviously techno aspects to it, but I didn't make the connection back then. It wasn't until the clubs that I really found techno and danced for hours to it. Krash was a mix of house and techno, or anything Junior Vasquez was playing. The nightlife scene was richer back then, I feel. It seemed that way. There would be drag performances but by trans women. All of this stuff would be put all into one big, jam-packed night.

I went to St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. That was crazy. It was definitely culture shock to come from the city—an inner-city kid—where I was mostly surrounded by people of color, to then go really far

Basement NY, club in Queens

upstate. It was this affluent school. Sorority girls, that kind of world. I arrived as this queer, black person. Of course, everyone loved me.

I was really lucky in my educational experiences to have such welcoming places. I initially studied Psychology. But I ended up graduating some ten years later in Creative Writing with a Gender Studies minor. I started Gender Studies freshman year, and that's when I dropped out and started transitioning. So that helped me then.

I started transitioning the summer I became twenty-one. I came back to the city. My family wasn't happy. I was kicked out, and stayed with different friends. That went on for years, actually. I ended up discovering my cousin. She was queer. We met randomly in the Village. I ended up living with her sometime later. And so that was kind of cool for a while. Then it was just the dark, dark side of being trans, having to do survival sex work. Survival took over my life. I didn't have time to worry about aspirations or goals even though I still had them.

What I wanted to do was a magazine of my own, called *Gag Mag.* I wanted it to be a queer entertainment magazine. I interviewed Nome Ruiz from Jessica Six. I was a big fan of hers. There was just so much talent back then, but there was not as much coverage or notoriety that came with queer artists. I was always trying to bring attention to that. I didn't know that I would become an artist.

Then there was another kind of party in Brooklyn: GHE20GOTH1K and Cherry Bomb and Juliana Huxtable's parties, like Windows. There just wasn't as much grassroots queerness to it. Coming from the big club scene, I didn't even know about those parties. Those were two totally different worlds even though they're both queer and definitely had techno-related music. The big club scene had bouncers. All very corporate, white gay, although Krash and Splash were Latinx.

I think my prime going out period started around 2010. The Brooklyn queer of color scene was really going off. That's when I was interning for Venus X, who hosted GHE20GOTH1K. That was kind of a weird position. She needed someone to help her do music research on Facebook. I love music, I love techno, and I love the ballroom scene. What was really special about

GHE20GOTH1K was the blending of those worlds. Whereas at the clubs there would be the queens in the back voguing to techno, but they weren't necessarily bringing in that ballroom music of Mike Q or LSDXOXO. All those DJs that started merging techno, house, and ballroom sounds were really getting their start from GHE20GOTH1K. I found that amazing. That was something that I had always wanted to marry in this way.

New York was a center for that, although ballroom music itself comes from so many places—Baltimore club music, for example. Bounce music is in there. That's just a cultural thing with people of color: booty, booty, booty! Ballroom music developed in the tristate area and then spread out: that marrying of bitch beats, house music, and artists like Kevin Aviance just saying cunty things over tracks.

Those things merged, at least for me, in the New York scene. I love playing bitch beats and I love playing vogue tracks and I love playing techno. It's all of that merging, and I'm from New York, so I guess I guess it's a New York thing. But it's all over the place now. Lots of awesome tracks that I love are produced by people from all over and not necessarily even involved in the ballroom scene or anything. But they still make great music, right?

So I had dropped out of college and gone back to New York to transition. And there's that survival period there. But then I went back and finished college. Before even starting to do sex work I was arrested and accused of being a prostitute. I eventually ended up winning all this money in a lawsuit. So that was a new beginning for me, financially. I didn't have to do sex work anymore. It made sense to go back to school, because I had a free ride.

I made a new generation of friends at St. Lawrence. There were more queer people, and also other trans people at school. That was a new experience for me. As a queer person at St. Lawrence, I had already left a mark that paved the way for other people who were going to school there, who had even heard of me from when I'd been there before. So that was cool. It's so weird being this trailblazer. Everyone kind of looks up to you in this particular way. They expect this strong, confident, headstrong person. It's exhausting. Being ahead of the curve can break you down over time. Even though you're paving the way for other people, you're losing pieces of yourself. You're being ravaged by the world. It's always been this weird thing. The people who have felt that I made space possible for them end up being people who care for me the most because they have the strength now.

After I graduated, I moved to California, and that opened up a whole world. I went to California for someone who's now an ex. I knew him here in New York when I was in a dark spiral. We were basically just stuck together in some weird way. Then I went to school to get myself together and he went to rehab in California because he's from there. He supposedly got his shit together; I got my shit together. And then, together in California, neither of us had our shit together. And it just wasn't what it was supposed to be. But I ended up making awesome friends and having an amazing life there. I was working for nonprofits with trans people and queer people, and became kind of iconic in my own right, just being a light and whatnot for people. I loved my job. I loved working with the trans community. I had so much freedom and it afforded me the money and interactions with people to start throwing parties.

That was the start of the New World Dysorder party . Before we started that were throwing parties with a friend who had access to a warehouse. This was with Burning Man type people out there. Moving to California introduced me to a whole other kind of world revolving around techno, around drum and bass and house music and raves, actual raves. Coming from New York, raves weren't really happening then. New York was about clubs.

New World Dysorder started around 2015 or 2016. One of my roommates would just hear me listening to beats and stuff and said, "Oh my God, you would love my friend Mitch, aka K'hole Kardashian. He loves that kind of music." Finding someone who knew ballroom music so far away from New York was a big deal for me, especially being out there and being from New York and not really knowing anyone. It was very underground.

I was just a host, you know, a face for the party, but I really wanted to learn to DJ and produce. One of my friends and cofounders of New World Dysorder, Erica Mar, was a DJ and producer. She gave me my start. She was producing witch house music back then, which I loved. I still love it, honestly. I love all kinds of music. You'd be surprised. Bored Lord was friends with Mitch and she would give me pointers. I was already a fan of Bored Lord as well. Before she was DJing as she is now, she was doing vocal music and performing.

New World Dysorder and Club Chai started developing at the same time. Both were about genre-bending music. Club Chai was started by two Bay Area natives who also thought it was important to center queer and trans people. To me, and to us, it was just queer music. Taking club sounds back. Prior to Juliana Huxtable, Venus X, and the Brooklyn scene, there were not many trans people, femmes, women at the forefront of these spaces in nightlife. Especially as trans people, we were supposed to stay in the bubble of being an "attraction." I wanted to change that. Even though trans women were a big part of San Francisco nightlife, they were often performers, or working the door, or hosts. Similarly in New York, trans women were just these sexualized dolls used for decoration.

There was this one place called Asia SF. They had bachelor and bachelorette parties there. I tried out to

dance on stage there—a buck's a buck. They said I was too tall. It was just unfortunate to me that we had to allow these places to reduce us to being an attraction, like, "you wouldn't believe it, but this is a man!" or whatever.

Those places were basically chaser clubs. There was another one called Divas. I would go there since I had friends who worked there. It was just a place where trans people could make money, whether they were bartending, coming in and doing outreach, doing sex work, or working as dancers. I remember I was drunk one time and just ran through that place, yelling at all the chasers.

California was where I started DJing. We even had parties at Divas. I'd always wanted to do one at Asia SF, actually. San Francisco was in love with us. It was a magical coming together of friends. You see that in lots of different places, but I never had that in New York, with friends coming together and being creative and making something, and then actually doing it. Trans people coming together. We had the time, we had the energy, the resources, the connections, and we made something amazing happen. It was inspired by GHE20GOTH1K and everything that was happening in New York, but it had its own California flair. I think we created something new that also inspired other scenes.

And then I ended up back in New York. Nothing's ever completely my choice. I'm just rolling with the punches, literally. We were visiting New York—me, Cali Rose, and Bella Bags, formerly known as London Jade. We had just thrown a party at the House of Yes in Bushwick. That party was chill, but the bouncers were rude to many of the guests. The bill ended up with so many big names on it. They made us feel like we weren't enough. They wanted us to have another big name and another, all this kind of stuff. And I thought, "we're all big names in our own right, you know?" We would draw, especially back then. Their attitude was a slap in the face.

I got attacked after that party. We on our way to go to *unter* or something. We were walking past Happyfun Hideaway [a local queer bar] and I tried to go into this liquor store around the corner. I guess it was after the Puerto Rican Day Parade, so people were just drunk and messy, and these guys attacked us. I was in the hospital, and the doctor said that after the surgery, I'd need to come in for checkups. I stayed in New York rather than going back to California. I was supposed to continue on a tour, but that got cut short. I ended up here for six months, recovering. I could not afford to pay for my rent in California. I was back in New York, and I've been back ever since.

That was 2017 or 2018. Then we started doing New World Dysorder here at Bossa Nova Civic Club, but it wasn't the same. It was still great, but the parties in California that we had in the beginning were amazing. It was the start of something. I feel it never quite got to the level that it should have in New York, but I do feel it made a difference. And I feel, more importantly than anything, that there was community formed around it and friendships made. And it inspired other people to create other parties. But it's hard being a queer, black, trans person and doing this stuff. Especially in New York. It is so competitive here. It's just hard. It's hard to keep going.

I started producing around the same time as New World Dysorder was taking off. I would mess around with Traktor, just looping tracks and making different kinds of patterns. Friends would say, "that's a remix!" I would think to myself, oh, okay, that's a remix. Then it was a matter of having that confidence and going from there. I learned Ableton. Bored Lord, Cali Rose, Mitch, and I would have these workshop days that were just us hanging out, smoking weed, messing around on CDJs—while one of us is on a CD JSR Versa, the other would be messing around on a computer with Ableton.

The Bay Area scene was psychedelic. That was the context where I was first learning Ableton, also with this guy 23 Odd Cats. He's a DJ that I know from California. He's more Burning Man and psytrance, drum and bass style. I was on ketamine, and he showed me Ableton and I'm like "wow, I get it." And even to this day, there are things I know that I don't necessarily remember learning.

Particularly in California, the rave scene was psychedelic. Ketamine and Molly and hippy-flipping (Molly and mushrooms). Mushrooms are a huge part of the culture of raves and music there. In New York, back in my day, in the gay clubs it was just cocaine and alcohol, over and over. Maybe ecstasy, sometimes. In California, there was definitely a more accountable approach with drugs. The DanceSafe people, for instance, making sure people drink water. Especially because of Burning Man and the desert, a lot revolved around keeping people safe while they're having fun. I feel that in New York, it's harder to do that.

In New York, we're in a more oppressive environment. There's not the freedom to be sloppy off in in the hills somewhere, rolling around on Molly. But I do feel with more substances being legalized, or available as treatments, attitudes change. It's so great that you can smoke weed now in New York. I've been arrested for doing that here. It's changing the perception of drug use, its role in the scene. With ketamine, there are studies of its uses, like for depression, that are maybe making it a little more acceptable for people to use.

I don't necessarily condone that either, you know, people just willy-nilly doing stuff. It can be dangerous, but I do think that drugs have influenced techno music. There's a connection between minimal techno and ketamine. Once I was in Pittsburgh with some folks from the Honcho party, and we were listening to a woman who does this amazing minimal techno. You could hear every little detail. Music is very mathematical, right? With ketamine, you really tune in

to this mathematical side. You can feel the physics. A certain precision.

There's always been stoner music. I love The Doors and stuff like that. I'm down for a trippy stoner vibe. Growing up, a blunt and voguing went well together, too. We smoked a lot. And then we'd vogue and we'd listen to Kevin Jay Z Prodigy, and even in the song he says, "pass the blunt Miss Thing, girl!" It's definitely in the music, and the culture, but that's a whole other conversation.

BXTCH SLÄP (2020) was not my first project. I released *SiS* (2018) and *Art and Performance* (2019) and some other things. *BXTCH SLÄP* was my first really well received one. Over that period, I had a lot of notoriety. We were doing New World Dysorder all over the world. I was traveling a lot for the first time. That was very much a new experience and a very hard experience. Everyone is like, "you're traveling and oh my god, so lucky!" I am lucky and it is amazing, but it's hard as a black trans person. Many people's understanding of traveling is just the most glamorous aspects of it. As a black trans person, I've been detained, I've been denied entry into places. Going to countries can be like going to clubs. The bouncers of the country are like, "It's a private event."

Being in the airport so much with my computer, I would just work and work on my music using Ableton. I start making things while traveling—working on most of *BXTCH SLÄP* at the same time I put out the *Sis* ep with Club Chai. *Art and Performance* was kind of a test run of me publishing my own tracks. *BXTCH SLÄP* was made the year before the pandemic. I wasn't going to release it just yet, but then pandemic hit. People were talking about Covid, but I was just focused on working on my album. I didn't know what was going on in the world.

I was planning on going to Mexico. Then I got really sick, but apparently not with Covid. I couldn't go to Mexico, so I just put my album out and then it blew up. There was so much love and so much support for it. A lot of people have told me that it helped get them through the lockdown, and I'm always touched by that. It's also been surreal because even now, I can't believe people have actually listened to it. Since it came out during the early isolation of the pandemic, it never really hit me.

It seemed to resonate with people's mood during the lockdown even though I made it before the pandemic. There was this vibe I felt even before. I've always wanted to express these darker vibes. I look at music as a sculptor might. I get the materials and just have this lump of sounds sitting there, and then I chisel away at it until it starts to sound like something. I say it's techno, but I'm not sure that it's actually techno. What *is* techno? That's a question. But maybe what my music does is define what it could be, or what else it could be. Genres can be limiting. Maybe it wasn't a "dark" album so much as a realist one. That's just the mood, right? Here I am in my demon hole again. There's a track called "Demonhole." That was some movie my roommate and I were watching while I was working on this track in my headphones. That whole album is melancholic. But also, there's some driving, angry kind of loudness to it—this repetition. Plus, a certain amount of pure rage, but shaped into something.

I've never played piano or anything. I learned drums and the violin, but that was random. I do have these melodic moments, but I'm obviously not classically trained. I don't really know how to execute proper chord progressions. I'm continuing to learn. I think it's important as a queer, black person to not be so bound by the rules that are set, because even just as queer people, the rules weren't made for us. We have to find our own way.

I feel I've just been finding my own way in the music. I love these ethereal feelings, like you're in cave or somewhere where there are magical sounds going on. Or in a graveyard or something. It's funny, I had never actually been to some of the places I imagined the tracks could be the soundtrack for. I have ended up visiting some of them since, once things opened up and I was touring again. Glasgow Necropolis, for instance.

In my next projects, I hope that I get to have some visuals to go along with some of the tracks that reflect the mood and vibe, because I do consider myself an artist in that way. Everything up until now, including *BXTCH SLÄP,* has been me testing the waters and just taking a chance, but I feel it has been building up to something bigger and better. I just need to be in a good place to be able to work.

Everything that I've done, or every choice that I've made, has been in the thick of it. Nothing has ever actually been a plan. It all works out, but how can queer, black, trans people make plans in this world? Everything can just be taken away at a moment's notice. Look at the pandemic, look at how that affected everyone's plans. But especially when you're queer and black and trans, sometimes it's just about making it through the day.

I've gone through all these weird phases where I'm free, and I'm happy, and I don't care. But then, being popular and well known—everyone has an opinion. Everyone wants to let you know their opinion. It's okay, but being a black, queer, trans person and being notable is a weird position to straddle. For example, I need to access queer services and stuff, too. And then when I do, they'll know who I am. You don't get to be incognito in the waiting room. I used to be punk and not care about what I might be wearing or how I look in certain pictures and stuff. That comes back to haunt me.

There's pressure when you're iconic. But where's my hair stylist? For public appearances, I'm having to rely on me and my limited wardrobe, but then also have to respond to

BXTCH SLAP by Jasmine Infiniti, cover

this demand for even just pictures of me. There was even a time during the pandemic, there were a lot of people asking to photograph me and I don't even have my lashes done.

The pressure around how you look effects how you get treated. If bouncers don't know that I'm the DJ, and I just come in a hoodie and a sweatshirt, they ask, "why aren't you dressed up?" How people perceive me obviously has something to do with not being the stereotypical ideal of what a trans woman in nightlife is supposed to be. You're supposed to be this glammed up thing. There's nothing wrong with that. It's just not me.

The dolls set incredibly high standards for each other. And then I'm just coming in my Docs and whatever. I have a

different purpose. I feel it's good in a lot of ways because it's pushing this idea that not everyone has to come glammed up all the time. That makes space for other people to feel comfortable. And I've been told that.

Pressure is still a hard thing deal with, though. Especially being a black, trans woman. Sometimes I'll go to these venues and the bouncers may not necessarily know who I am. They'll treat me how they are used to treating someone like me. They'll be rude as hell. It can be black masculinity versus queer, trans, black femininity, just that kind of bumping heads that was always being talked about even in the Black Lives Matter movement. How unaccepting the black community can be of its own people if they're queer, especially if they're trans, and especially if they are queer *and* trans, *and* in ways that aren't cis normative. When you don't pass for what is acceptable, you really get a lot of shit for it.

I've been thinking, as we all have, about the shooting that happened recently at Club Q in Colorado Springs. Before that, there was the shooting at Pulse nightclub. An arsonist burned down Rash in New York when it was just building up to be something. Queer spaces are under attack in this way. I don't know how to word this, but we party despite all the signals from society. We're still out here, making space, having fun, being creative. Doing what we need for our sanity, our freedom.

Trans visibility was important and a lot of good came from it, but even while it was happening, there were a lot of weird authenticity issues. It was definitely an important to kind of shift just in the ideologies revolving around clubs, and around trans people in the club. People joke that if you're trans, you're either a DJ, a sex worker, or a hairdresser. Three options only. Visibility was about just expanding upon what our capabilities are perceived as being. But there were a lot of unforeseen and weird problems and appropriations that came from it, and of course the tokenizing of people.

Alongside expanding the culture is expanding the music. I always think it's so funny how exclusive people are. I love genre bending. That was what I loved about Club Chai. I love almost all kinds of music. It really just depends on my mood and my vibe, even in my DJ sets. I'll bring in stuff that doesn't necessarily always work, but at least I take the plunge.

I love hip-hop, obviously, from growing up in the Bronx, even Cam'ron and real hood stuff. But I also love jazz. The other night I went to Blue Note with some old friends. I listened to jazz with my grandpa. Almost any black music I was exposed to growing up. It's always going to be a part of me. But then, especially as I got older, especially in college, I wasn't trying to study while listening to R&B or hip-hop.

Me and my friend Candy would listen to Siouxsie and the Banshees. I love old-school punk stuff. Back in the day, when I was really getting into music, I started with earmilk.com and some Tumblr site called *post-punk.* That was me discovering new music outside of my norms, which were ballroom, hip-hop, and R&B. A lot of this other stuff was exotic to me. Especially stuff coming from the UK.

Here's a random story from when I was in college the first time, being this queer, black boy on campus. There was this black guy, who was probably gay, and he was a DJ who said, "oh, hey, next time I see you, I got something for you." He gave me a CD. And it was all these old-school house tracks and bitch beats, close to techno but definitely more house-y, from the same time that techno was being developed by the big names, by the boys, the cis straight men. That's why the bitch beats and stuff were happening, I feel, because it was the same vibe that the bros were doing with this added queer layer, and with Kevin Aviance or Harmonica Sunbeam doing something over it. Usually it was chanting, which was also in the ballrooms. Queer people, specifically queer people of color, were taking this music and putting their own touch on it.

That's been the motif, especially with New World Dysorder, that was the combination that started it. Now the power is in my hands to form something. To add to this great fabric of queer nightlife. We can throw a party here and there and make a couple of bucks, but moving forward, I want there to be a good foundation for a business that someone can take over that employs trans people. Give people a break from doing sex work or whatever. Just give people different or additional avenues to make money.

The ballroom scene was so separate from nightlife, but Venus X and her party really started to bring it together more intentionally. That was the start of a new genre for me. One of my big faves, LSDXOXO, came out of that. I saw it happening, saw it before it happened. I was just this weirdo from the Bronx that never really fit in, even, you know, to the Bronx stereotype, didn't always fit into the ballroom stereotype, either, or even the nightlife stereotype. I didn't have any choice but to become an artist.

X

Jasmine Infiniti is a nonbinary trans person-of-color artist and DJ who was born and raised in the Bronx. They are an integral part of House of Infiniti, the New York vogue house.

Julian Kevon Glover

A Whale Unbothered: Theorizing the Ecosystem of the Ballroom Scene

Introduction

"Wake up, big head!" a woman shouts at me after turning on the lights in the room where I was fast asleep. It's 1:30 in the morning, and I let out a groan to express my annoyance with being woken up and reminded of the size of my head—a longstanding source of insecurity. "Get up and put on these shoes," Giana tells me with a smile. I look at the shoes and discover that they're the newly released Air Jordan Retros in red and white with black patent leather. I leap up with juvenile excitement from the couch where I sleep, and hug Giana before starting to get ready.

Although I did not yet know where we were going, I was ecstatic to wear the shoes I'd always wanted but was prohibited from having up to that point. I did not care how they were acquired.

I was fourteen years old and staying with Giana, Breah, and Sydney—a Latinx transgender woman and two Black transwomen respectively—in the two-bedroom apartment they shared in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood. My parents had recently demanded that I leave their residence following my admission of my queer (gay at the time) sexuality and nonnormative gender embodiment. They remained incredulous that I would "choose" to walk down an abominable path of "rebellion and destruction" despite my Pentecostal upbringing. I gathered all the money I had to purchase a one-way ticket from my hometown (Bloomington, Illinois) to Chicago, where I met the aforementioned transwomen—an encounter that would save and change my life forever.

I asked all three women where exactly we were going while en route, but they were too busy talking to each other in what sounded like a foreign language to me. I heard them say words like "banjy," "realness," and even the word "cunt," at which I gasped—I never thought these women would use such a slur. "Oh chile, you 'bout to learn a lot tonight," Sydney told me with a chuckle as she rubbed the top of my (big) head.

We soon arrived at the venue, which at first glance appeared to be a high school. We walked around the school to a building with an oversized front door, and suddenly I felt the bass pulsating. The next thing I knew, I was surrounded by Black and brown people who dressed better than I did—a new experience for me—and who were clearly unafraid to be themselves. Several of the women were beyond beautiful and wore dresses that looked like those I'd only seen in fashion magazines. Some people appeared to be practicing a dance that I'd seen on YouTube when I typed in "Black gay people." Some chatted and hugged friends, but I stayed close to Breah for most of the night. I was shy despite my excitement to be in the same space as so many other Black and brown people who also appeared to be just as queer as I was.

Paris Is Burning, directed by Jennie Livingston, 1990.

This was to be my first ball. As it started, people began chanting things that didn't make sense to me. I asked Breah, who said, "This is what's called LSS, boo. You're a virgin at your first ball, so just try to take in as much as you can; you'll soon come to appreciate and love all that you see here tonight." At the time, I did not know just how right she was.

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The ballroom scene is a cultural formation comprised of (mostly) urban Black and brown lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people who join "houses" and compete against members of other houses in myriad competitive categories—including runway, fashion, realness, face, and performance—for prizes ranging from trophies to $100,000. Beyond the competitive floor, the scene provides its members with transformative opportunities and experiences of kinship structures and gender systems that defy normative assumptions and formations. Ballroom provides a family and community for many people in the scene who are otherwise routinely denied such relationships and experiences due to family rejection, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia. Many scene members regularly experience transience, poverty, and violence (sexual, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual). The ballroom scene is a space for community members to momentarily set aside the issues they face and celebrate themselves and each other while present at the ball.

Ballroom's contributions to global popular culture are innumerable. Entertainers, celebrities, and musicians (e.g., Madonna, Beyoncé, Rihanna) continually seek inspiration, collaborative opportunities, and guidance from those in the scene. The recent proliferation of award-winning television shows including *Pose* and *Legendary* provide further evidence of the scene's influence. Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* remains one of the most well-known and highly contested depictions of the scene, and is even considered to be a quintessential piece of queer cinema.[1]

RuPaul's Drag Race, a hit since it first aired in 2009, includes a "reading" challenge in a purported homage to ballroom. While many within the scene welcome the ensuing influx of new people and media, others are more reluctant to receive newcomers without the proper vetting processes.

Given the barrage of media representation and rising popularity across social media, how might the ballroom scene continue to honor and hold space for the foundational contributions of its progenitors—Black and brown LGBTQ+ people—who've long comprised the majority of the scene's membership? How might the flood of new people (from a wide array of cultural backgrounds) complicate or challenge the ritual performances and traditions which anchor the scene? I wonder how the ballroom scene might continue centering its Black and brown members—whose input remains integral to the scene as we know it today—while also making room for the beloved cultural formation to grow in unanticipated and potentially generative ways.

The stakes are high; the influx of newcomers risks diluting the standards for what constitutes a bona fide performance. In recent years, the slippage between cultural appreciation and appropriation prompted Leiomy Maldonado, a ballroom icon, model, choreographer, and judge on *Legendary*, to caution against the rise of what she calls "No-guing." This term refers to "any choreographer or dancer who attempts to display voguing with no knowledge of Vogue nor training which often comes off like a mockery."[2] Maldonado's rebuke constitutes a form of gatekeeping to shield the meaning and significance of voguing—one of the ballroom scene's quintessential and most revered cultural contributions—from appropriation.

Gatekeeping is not the only tactic that the ballroom scene deploys to stave off appropriation. Despite newcomers, the scene maintains an insularity that buffers it from such exposure. This insularity manifests through specific aspects associated with the scene's ritual performance which, I argue, create a transformative ecosystem through its generative engagement across sonic, vocal, and kinesthetic registers. This ecosystem provides affirming, sustaining, and meaningful embodied experiences for the scene's Black and brown LGBTQ+ members who are bombarded by societal messages suggesting that our lives are wholly devoid of purpose or significance. Further, this ecosystem remains inextricably linked to the lived experiences that shape ballroom's ritual performances.

In ballroom, the beat, the voice, and the floor each cultivate sonic, vocal, and kinesthetic forms of refusal, resistance, and resilience, which together conjure an embodied knowledge that cannot be taught or copied by those who do not share similar experiences—shielding the scene and its contributions from being wholly consumed by trends within popular culture.

The Beat

Of the elements that comprise the ballroom scene, its relationship to sound is one of the most recognizable. The beat in ballroom creates a Black queer frequency, remixing existing sounds to conjure new sounds that disrupt normative musical expectations (in terms of form) and provide the basis for a sonic experience which directly connects its progenitors with their community to cocreate new possibilities. By refusing to conform to normative expectations of musical form, the beat in ballroom presents a mode of refusal which centers the desires and interests of the scene's membership. This form of sonic refusal holds space for ballroom members to imagine new ways of knowing and create unique sonic and kinesthetic relationships that facilitate the exploration of previously foreclosed possibilities to determine the significance and meaning of a range of experiences for themselves.

Perhaps the most famous beat emerging from the ballroom scene is " **The Ha Dance The Ha Dance**" by Masters at Work, a 1991 collaboration between producers "Little" Louie Vega and Kenny "Dope" Gonzalez. The beat features a repeated vocal triplet and a subsequent percussive crash/clap that lands on the fourth beat of each measure. A syncopated rhythm layers on top of the opening. The combination provides the basis for the rest of the song, which notably features no lyrics. Gonzalez, speaking in 2016 about how he and Vega created the beat, says, "At the time Louie was playing in predominantly Latin clubs so everything was harder … That joint, we did it for that crowd. But it became a voguing classic, which is crazy because it wasn't made for that but they embraced it."[3] In the same conversation, legendary ballroom DJ MikeQ references the late Vjuan Allure—another legend who made his name playing house tracks during balls in the 1990s—who told MikeQ that despite bringing an array of records to each ball, scene members wanted "only" to hear "The Ha Dance" "all night," which ultimately prompted Allure to remix the Ha into different tracks. Vega remembers how members of the scene began attending the Latin clubs he played; the Ha had become their anthem and remains so to this day.

The Ha's creation and sound offer important lessons about ballroom's relationship to sonic register. The creation of the Ha—the quintessential ballroom beat—reveals that the scene's signature sound is a cultural production characterized by sonic hybridity—that is, the strategic mixing and remixing of culturally significant artifacts to create new soundscapes for specific audiences. For example, the vocal crash/clap that animates the Ha, according to Vega and Gonzalez, emerges from a short segment in the 1983 film *Trading Places* starring Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd.[4] Originally intended to provide comic relief, Vega and Gonzalez remix the *Trading Places* sound bite and in so doing, alter its meaning, function, and purpose so that it takes on a whole new life in the contexts of Latin clubs and the ballroom scene. It is no surprise that the progenitors of the Ha themselves emerge from urban Black and brown communities which also practice various forms of cultural hybridity. Such practice is central to the cultivation of Black and brown life.

The Ha's sound underscores how the ballroom scene harnesses the sonic realm to conjure a Black queer frequency which disrupts normative musical expectations. The Ha features no vocals and adopts a repetitive form, which distinguishes it from the expectations that rule most Western music. It refuses an easily distinguishable sonic arc—which works akin to a narrative arc with a clear beginning, middle, and end—that contains an exposition, development, and recapitulation (sonata form). The beat in ballroom provides the basis for members to shape and tell their own stories by getting in tune with a distinct Black queer frequency. The ballroom scene's rebuke of hegemonic musical forms has implications for its relationship to another highly contested subject among

Black studies scholars: time.[5]

The ballroom scene's Black queer frequency sonically creates opportunities for its members to refuse understanding themselves and their journeys in accordance with linear notions of time (past, present, and future) and hegemonic conceptions of "progress." Ballroom's Black queer frequency enables its Black and brown members to create, cocreate, mix, and remix their own stories and the meanings derived from their embodied knowledge in ways that measure "progress" as a process of continual transformation rather than a final product.

One example of this comes from Vjuan Allure's 2017 *ThundaKats* EP, on a song called " **Reclaiming My Time Reclaiming My Time**." The track uses vocal samples from a famous 2017 US House of Representatives meeting during which Congresswoman Maxine Waters, upon receiving unsatisfactory responses to her questions from then US Secretary of the Treasury Steve Mnuchin, repeatedly used the phrase "reclaiming my time." The song begins with a simple drumbeat, animated by cowbell and Allure's vocal tag (used by DJs and producers to identify themselves on a track), before listeners hear the first vocal sample of Waters's phrase "reclaiming my time." That is soon followed by Congresswoman Waters saying, "What he failed to tell you was that when you're on my time, I can reclaim it." The next portion of the song develops the beat by remixing and shortening various words in both samples in a way that accents the track's overall message and even uses a brief vocal sample from Mnuchin, who repeats: "I was gonna answer that."

The accumulated sonic effect of the repeated phrases "reclaiming my time" and "I can reclaim it" drive home how the scene's Black queer frequency expresses its conception of time and its ongoing commitment to doing so. The scene's sonic refusal to acquiesce to externally defined expectations and standards related to time puts its members in charge of what time means as a basis for exploring new communal possibilities of relationships between time and space. The scene's sonic refusal also opens an opportunity to make, remake, and play with time in generative ways that bolster agency. Allure's track also demonstrates how—similar to space as theorized by gender, sexuality, and performance theorist Marlon Bailey—time within the ballroom scene is a cultural production defined and redefined indefinitely by its membership, thus allowing members to tell new stories, remix existing ones, and cocreate culture.[6]

The Voice

Ballroom's ritual performance also invokes the voice—another constitutive element of its ecosystem—and requires that an emcee, usually called a "commentator," be present throughout the ball.[7] The commentator's job is multifaceted: they serve as master of ceremony, preside over LSS (legends, statements, and stars), announce the order of categories, tally votes, and chant during battles.[8] As one might imagine, being a commentator in the ballroom scene can be exhausting given the sheer number of balls that happen and how long each ball lasts (anywhere between six and eight hours). Commentators also provide an abundance of energy to competitors and audiences alike. This energy can be potent enough that it empowers competitors to give electrifying performances and prompts the audience, usually called "spectators," to share in the excitement of the moment. A handful of commentators, including icons Jack Gucci (Overall Father of the House of Gorgeous Gucci) and Selvin/MC Debra Alain Mikli, are renowned as pioneers of the practice. Other well-known commentators include legendary Snookie West, Princess Precious, and Kevin JZ Prodigy, whose style caught the ear of an international superstar this year.

Commentators in the ballroom scene play a critical role in shaping what resistance to the myriad material and discursive manifestations of anti-Black, transphobic, and homophobic violence sounds like. Commentators use their voices to acknowledge the ubiquity of quotidian violence that they experience daily. They refuse both the terms of and continuation of their subjection, and articulate self-determined understandings of themselves and each other. Commentators demonstrate resistance as an active and ongoing process that requires a fervent commitment to personal and social transformation. Repetition characterizes this sonic process and represents the struggle to overcome dominant discursive narratives, which too often tether our lives to gratuitous violence and dispossession in an attempt to limit, constrain, and annihilate the possibility of a meaningful life.

Reappropriating language remains one of the primary tactics that commentators use to express various feelings and highlight important aspects of themselves and the larger ballroom community. Consider the scene's usage of the word "cunt." While the term retains an overwhelmingly pejorative connotation in America, ballroom's invocation of the term hails it for an entirely different reason. Within the scene, "cunt" means ultra-feminine and is the highest compliment a person who embodies femininity can receive. There is an entire style of vogue femme—the ballroom scene's hallmark dance form—called "soft 'n cunt," where voguers strive to exude a performance defined by slow, graceful, delicate, and highly controlled movements associated with femininity. This is just one example of how the ballroom scene reappropriates language to enable generative, restorative, and complex conceptions which cannot be easily reduced or deciphered by those who do not share similar life experiences.

The song " **Feels Like Feels Like**" by DJ MikeQ, featuring Kevin JZ Prodigy, offers an example of what is generative about ballroom's reliance on the voice to deploy its sonic refusal. Throughout the first part of the song, Prodigy repeats the words "feminine," "pussy," and "cunt" atop a beat which includes the scene's signature crash/clap every four beats. Prodigy mixes the words in alongside vocalizations where the icon meows like a cat, performs a series of tongue rolls, and scats akin to jazz singers. Lyrics do not emerge until the latter half, where Prodigy repeats "feels like" again, differently each time, like a theme with endless variations. Then, expressing frustration, he adds the phrase "feels like I'm going in circles, feels like a maze, I can't get through." Prodigy continues asking himself, "Should I go, should I go, should I go left? Should I go, should I go, should I go right?" Nearing the end, Prodigy resists providing a response with words; rather, he uses a series of rapid percussive vocalizations which resemble the sound of a machine gun before ending the song with a recapitulation of the "feels like" lyrical phrase.

Prodigy's voice in "Feels Like" constitutes a form of sonic resistance to the various forms of oppression to which his Black queer body render him subject. At the start of the track, Prodigy utters the word "feminine" in a highly distorted tone with an abundance of reverberation, which I read as a sonic manifestation of the fungibility of Black gender and its lack of "symbolic integrity." Through this, the term remains open to myriad meanings.[9] I read Prodigy's articulation of "going in circles" which feel "like a maze" as a type of existential disorientation derived from his experiences as a Black queer person living in Philadelphia. His questions about which direction he should go offer more evidence of confusion, as any path he treads will likely be as full of danger and risk as it is opportunity. The rapid and percussive nature of Prodigy's response provides evidence of his will to break down the walls of the maze by any means necessary. It is as if he took a sonic jackhammer to the discursive maze, to emerge from it and dispel the bewilderment that once trapped him.

Kevin JZ Prodigy's sonic resistance continually reverberates throughout and beyond the ballroom scene. Beyoncé acknowledges this power by sampling Prodigy's voice (specifically a snippet from "Feels Like") on the track "PURE/HONEY" on her 2022 album *Renaissance*—yet another example of ballroom's influence on popular culture across the globe.

Prodigy's repeated sonic attacks against the convergence of racial, gender, sexual, and class subjugation conjure an effective tactic that members of the ballroom scene use to combat this discursive inheritance. In redeploying language rife with pejorative connotations for their own purposes, especially "pussy" and "cunt," they choose to embody all that heteronormative society abhors. The cultural complexities of Black life render it physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally risky for Black people assigned male at birth to embody femininity. The sonic strategies of folks in ballroom respond to the charge that Hortense Spillers, in her seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," invites Black men to consider: "It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within."[10] Spillers's call suggests that Black people, especially all those who embody masculinity (irrespective of sex assigned at birth), are most whole when *both* femininity and masculinity coexist.

The Floor

The floor in ballroom enables community members to leverage kinesthetic knowledge to tell idiosyncratic stories of resilience that showcase thriving despite relentless exposure to myriad manifestations of violence. In the scene, the floor serves multiple purposes and takes on multiple forms, with the most recognizable ones emanating from runway and vogue. Runway categories in ballroom encourage members to model their outfit, usually called an "effect," by strutting up and down the catwalk for the judges and spectators to see while also "throwing shade" at their competitors. Shade, in this context, includes nonverbal insults like taking gigantic steps in front/to the side of their competition on the runway or using an aspect of their effect to block a competitor from being visible.

Vogue, the other form of ballroom movement, is an improvisatory form of dance with multiple styles including old-way vogue (with its focus on symmetry, lines, and precision and influenced by poses in fashion magazines and martial arts), new-way vogue (with limb contortions at the joints, called "clicks," and hand/wrist illusions called "arms control"), and vogue femme (heavily influenced by jazz, ballet, and modern dance, with an emphasis on fluidity, the expression of movements considered "feminine," and the five elements—spins/dips, catwalk, duckwalk, hands, and floor performance).

All these styles of vogue emphasize telling one's own story through movement. The most well-respected voguers are those whose kinesthetic expression of their stories are unique to them and immediately recognizable to competitors and knowledgeable spectators. The performance of a true master of vogue will be distinguishable to viewers even if their entire body was to be concealed. As one might expect, few within the ballroom scene achieve such a level of mastery. Those who do provide compelling evidence of the significance and meaning of their lives.

The kinesthetic expression of the late ballroom icon Yolanda Jourdan provides a salient example of how scene members uniquely express themselves through

Sinia Alaia vogues

movement on the floor. Yolanda became known within the ballroom scene as "the 90s It Girl" through her innovative approach to voguing.[11] Yolanda's chosen style was vogue femme dramatics—characterized by stunts, tricks, and speed while executing the five elements. She was the first to introduce stunts including painting her nails and crossing herself (as in some Christian traditions) before a dip. Yolanda's confrontational style distinguished her from the other femme queens—ballroom terminology describing a transgender woman undergoing medical transition. Prior femme queens usually emphasized their femininity by being as demure and sexy as possible. Yolanda's kinesthetic expression strategically deployed signifiers of aggressiveness, which are associated with

masculinity, in tandem with those associated with femininity, such as painting one's nails. She demonstrated being confrontational while retaining her femininity, thus bringing together parts of her own complex story.

Over time, Yolanda's performance cemented her story and status as an official icon within the ballroom scene. Everyone knew who she was whenever she entered the room. Consider a clip from a regular vogue night in New York City during which Kevin JZ Prodigy, the evening's commentator, called Yolanda out to the floor, proclaiming her performance to be "o-ri-gin-al!" and Yolanda to be the scene's sole "bitch who paints her muthafuckin' nails!"[12] With Major Lazer's "Pon De Floor" playing, the video shows spectators progressively clapping their hands in anticipation of Yolanda before she graces the floor—a warm reception given only to a handful of other people within the scene. Yolanda enters and begins her performance with hands while a spectator holds her drink and handbag. She then directly faces Kevin, who immediately begins chanting. Yolanda's performance captivates the audience within the span of two eight-count beats. The icon serves hands before tossing her hair and reaching up with both arms, as if she were bracing to catch something high above her head, only to subsequently ease into a dip. The audience's excitement reaches a fever pitch as the video reveals how seemingly everyone in the building followed Yolanda to the ground, marking her dip with a bellowing "HA!"—the ultimate demonstration of her compelling tale. The dip punctuates her kinesthetic story like an exclamation point at the end of a sentence.

Yolanda is part of a select group of people within the ballroom scene whose kinesthetic brilliance continually sets the bar for subsequent generations. Two more recent short clips of icon Leiomy Maldonado voguing and imitating a handful of legendary femme queens show the unparalleled corporeal contributions of transwomen to ballroom.[13] In the clips, Leiomy imitates women including Alyssa LaPerla, Roxy Prodigy, Yolanda Jourdan, Daesja LaPerla, Alloura Jourdan Zion, Meeka AlphaOmega, Sinia Alaıa, and Ashley Icon. I include these pioneers of vogue femme as their specific contributions illuminate how transgender women remain central to the ballroom scene. The power of such a genealogy cannot be erased or overlooked, and the ballroom scene would not be what it is without transgender women continually shaping the scene.

Leiomy's example demonstrates the transformative potential of the floor in ballroom as it enables her to preserve the memory of the scene's icons and their respective contributions through a loving kinesthetic tribute. The floor becomes a space of possibility through which Black LGBTQ+ people rejuvenate, inoculate, and celebrate ourselves and each other for attributes and accomplishments we imbue with significance. These conjurings reveal a truly diasporic Black practice as our traditions find strength in oral, sonic, and embodied—rather than solely written—modes of expression. The ingenuity of this rich lineage suggests that its vitality will live far beyond the current moment, thus keeping alive the memories and practices of the scene's progenitors and offering salient connections to other manifestations of Black raves, nightlife, party, and dance cultures.

Conclusion

The ballroom scene harnesses the power of the beat, the voice, and the floor to create spaces of refusal, resistance, and resilience. Black and brown LGBTQ+ members craft and cultivate their own stories that honor the depth, breadth, and meaning of their contributions. Their stories reveal the importance of speaking truth to power, determining the meaning of one's life on one's own terms, and what doing so looks like along sonic, vocal, and kinesthetic registers.

The legends and icons of the scene conjure memorable moments too numerous to name. The ephemeral nature of their contributions does not present a weakness. Instead, it demonstrates how space for these moments remains a cultural production undergirded by preserving the scene's emphasis on ritual performance. The knowledge and practice of its traditions are passed to subsequent generations through oral, sonic, and kinesthetic modes. The dissemination of knowledge through such arich ritual performance traditions places the ballroom scene beyond those privileged within Western societies, which prioritize written forms of knowledge. It also insulates the scene's traditions from being wholly colonized by those whose remain (self-)interested in the glamor of the scene, but are not invested in its membership.

I concur with the late Vjuan Allure's unbothered demeanor and lack of concern about the widespread appropriation of the ballroom scene, which he shared during a 2016 panel at the Smithsonian Museum of African Art. The complex and capacious nature of ballroom, according to Allure, provides evidence of how it cannot be appropriated: by the time the masses learn something "new" from ballroom, the scene has long moved on. In this way, the ballroom scene is like a whale that mostly dwells underwater, tending to itself, until it briefly emerges and makes a splash that captures the attention of everything and everyone around it. While those above still feel the impact of the whale's ripples, it quietly returns underwater, wholly unbothered, to care for itself once again.

X

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1
Lucas Hildebrand, *Paris Is Burning: A Queer Film Classic* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013).

2
Leiomy Maldonado (@leiomy), Twitter, August 22, 2020, 8:20 p.m. https://twitter.com/leiomy/status/1297337009539821568?lang=en .

3
Red Bull Music Academy, "Masters at Work and MikeQ on the Strange Life of 'The Ha Dance,'" YouTube video, February 27, 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tSQ0pemd1M .

4
Red Bull Music Academy, "Masters at Work and MikeQ."

5
Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (Verso, 2018); Alexnder G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in sonic Afro-modernity* (Duke University Press, 2005).

6
Marlon M. Bailey, "Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit," *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 4 (2014).

7
Bailey, "Engendering Space."

8
A "legend" is the scene's terminology to describe a category of individuals whose contributions to the scene categories are unique in their execution, numerous, and inspire/influence subsequent competitors. An individual must actively compete for roughly five to seven years before they can be considered a legend. Further, an individual only becomes a legend following a "deeming ceremony," during which previously confirmed legends deliberate and welcome the new legend. An "icon" refers to an individual whose contributions undeniably influenced subsequent generations of ballroom competitors; individuals included in this category are understood to be part of the ballroom scene's hall of fame. Both designations are part of LSS (legends, statements, and stars)—the ritualized performance system that Marlon Bailey delineates in *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* .

9
Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987).

10
Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," emphasis in original.

11
The following video highlights Yolanda Jourdan's contributions to the ballroom scene during the height of her storied career: FQ Power Redux, "The 90s IT GIRL: Yolanda Jourdan," YouTube video, April 7, 2009 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yidXkgId5wY .

12
Ballroom Throwbacks Television-Brtbtv, "THE LEGENDARY PERFORMANCE DIVA YOLANDA JOURDAN," YouTube video, April 7, 2009 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rp7wEBxMdQ .

13
Ballroom Throwbacks Television-Brtbtv, "LEGENDARY LEIOMY IMITATING THE LEGENDARY LADIES PART I," YouTube video, October 19, 2013 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36mspsD7VUM ; Ballroom Throwbacks Television-Brtbtv, "LEGENDARY LEIOMY IMITATING THE LEGENDARY LADIES PART II," YouTube video, October 19, 2013 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bK7j2w1RLpE .

Leo Felipe

A Universal History of the Afterparty

Leo Felipe's A História Universal do After *(A universal history of the afterparty) can be read in different ways. The book, published in Portuguese (nunc, 2019) and Spanish (Caja Negra, 2022), might be an autoethnographic record of a scientist who loses his sanity as his research progresses. Also, it's a narcotic chronicle written in the heat of the underground electronic music scene in Porto Alegre, São Paulo, and Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Or it can be read as a compendium of art criticism texts which, instead of analyzing paintings or installations, analyzes parties in demolished warehouses and blocked streets, and the prolonged effects of ketamine or DJ sessions. Through various first-person textualities (letters, newspaper clippings, poetic notes on the threshold of death by overdose), Felipe examines a recent moment in the Latin American conjuncture: the reconquest of urban space by political identity groups seeking not a promise of happiness, but at least a (dis)organized backwater from the violence of capitalism in the Brazil of the 2010s. Taking a distance from utopian readings of white electronic music, the book proposes a South American materialism of the party in which the universal is reached through the particular stories of those who left everything on the dance floor: Black bodies, trans bodies, and drugged bodies dancing in the ruins of the modern imagination, waiting to be reborn in whatever comes after the end of the party. What follows below is the book's last chapter.*

—Caja Negra Editora

***

X for Bronx

I used to say that even the worst O Bronx party would always be better than the best Base party. Self-criticism is warranted here: more than anyone, I was aware of the formal fascination that the Black body exerts and of the ideological nature of this fascination. Beauty is a political fact, and it is important never to forget that the object of desire is itself a subject. Sue accused me of using the new "cast"—her friends—as part of my scenography. It was a harsh accusation that challenged the party's politicization discourse.

My high had always been to pay attention to what the new kids were proposing. Why should I act any differently with the most interesting thing that had emerged on the Porto Alegre party scene in the last quarter of a century?[1] O Bronx brought Black people to the heart of a scene dominated by whites wishing to be Black. The hipster—the "white negro," in Norman Mailer's expression—is the greatest of appropriators.

In a famous 1957 essay, Mailer (a stereotype of the heterosexual white man: a drunkard, a womanizer, quarrelsome, and a sports fanatic) describes a group of

They came from the underground. Photo: Ivi Maiga Bugrimenko. Detail.

young people in the United States who, despising the materialistic values of the American way of life, turn towards African American culture in search of a reference for their refusal. The hipster is the American existentialist. He rejects Protestant morals underpinned by work and sexual repression and launches into a childish adoration of the present. This is how he manages to live under the shadow of death that was projecting itself over postwar Western society, be it the instant death that could come at any minute with the atomic bomb or the slow death of conformism.

"Hip" means the hip that moves freely to the sound of jazz and also designates what's new in the scene: that which the most progressive want to know about, the avant-garde, the hype. The meaning of hip is opposed to that of square: uptight. In another essay on the same topic published two years later, Mailer compiled a list (not by chance, the hipster's favorite literary genre) distinguishing the characteristics of one group from another. While the hip would be wild, romantic, instinctive, spontaneous, nihilistic, perverse, Catholic, a question, endowed with free will, and Black (among other attributes), the square would have the "opposite" qualities: practical, classic, logical, orderly, authoritarian, pious, Protestant, an answer, determinist, and white. Mailer's list ends up reinforcing some of the racial stereotypes that infect our imagination today. I assume he made it with reference to the generation of young writers that would later be known as the Beat Generation.

Hip also has to do with another concept: cool, detached from the world of passions, the elegant and imperturbable coolness of the nonchalant, of those who couldn't care less about the opinions of others. Miles Davis is the avatar of cool, blowing sparse notes on his trumpet, facing away from the white audience. What therefore fascinates Mailer's "white negro," the high that makes him long for the secret novelty, the hottest thing on the block, is that all this exists in the first place so that he cannot have access. He's not on the guest list. But that won't stop him, and he'll do anything to find out the secret.

Mailer highlights some important elements for the existence of the hipster, signs of marginality appropriated from African American culture: marijuana, jazz, and above all, language full of slang and expressions unintelligible to straight people. The hipster is a practitioner of blackface whose mask is not made of paint, but of words, gestures, and ways of presenting himself, for example through haircuts or clothing.

More than half a century after his birth, the hipster is still fascinated by novelty. The old commodity has been expanded/exploded into what we call lifestyle. To live well, the hipster is not supposed to feel any guilt, and that always requires the best intentions. O Bronx wasn't about intentions. O Bronx was action. Empowerment from

There is love in São Paulo. Photo: Ivi Maiga Bugrimenko.

material achievement within the capitalist system, as taught by Beyoncé. O Bronx neither deserved nor needed my condescension. Attention was actually needed, because there were differences—the chasm—of age, race, and class. I had to walk a tightrope, aware of my own steps (read: privileges), the little steps[2] (more than being affectionate, the diminutive here is referential), and the GIANT STEPS of everyone involved it making it happen, like Clara, Rhuan, Laura, Golden Girl, Camila, Robson, Lana, Jean, Endriew, Carlinhos, Andrius, Micha, Lua, the Yrenes.

Unlike the hip-hop scene that often reproduced gender phobias, hatreds, and prejudices, O Bronx was an LGBTQ+ party, open to whoever else needed to be included in the acronym. Clara and Rhuan were in their early twenties (or not even there yet) and were learning to produce it by sheer force. Their families were from Restinga, one of the most populous neighborhoods in Porto Alegre, where a large part of the city's Black population was relocated in the 1960s after being evicted from the region that is now Cidade Baixa. Clara told me that her mother produced Black dances in the 1990s. She, therefore, belonged to a lineage of partygoers. Clara worked as a model and Rhuan had dropped out of architecture school because he hadn't gotten a scholarship.

By one of those weird coincidences, the owner of the garage where we had parties mistakenly scheduled Base and O Bronx on the same date. We ended up moving to the outdoor parking lot at the other end of the same block. It was a good location, between the bus terminal and a Universal church, with the road network of bridges and overpasses and lampposts and high-voltage wires and billboards announcing the new policed Brazil, meshing with the dark-blue sky and pink clouds of a night of concrete, light, and absurdity. During preparations, Rhuan came over to our location. He asked a few questions about the sound and light equipment. We exchanged phone numbers. A gentle and engaged guy. He was wearing a t-shirt three sizes too big and a pair of basketball shoes that were as white as his t-shirt. I said I would stop by his party later and he replied that I would be on the list.

When I entered the crowded garage, I noticed there were few white people in the place. Everybody danced as if the world would end before the party did. The looks were great, and the crowd, uninhibited, was doing the funk moves known as *sarrada*. At Base, things still hadn't picked up—only a few technocrats were moving on the dance floor as if they were still warming up for the big race. Meanwhile, O Bronx was already on fire! The party had started earlier and also ended earlier, and afterward, their whole entourage came to Base. Lively and stylish people who knew how to have fun.

From that day on I started inviting them to our parties. Then I got Sue's comment. The electronic music scene is generally a mostly white, elitist space. It would not be easy to break with this logic of selectivity. First, there was the issue of infrastructure. Access needed to be facilitated. I thought that part of the public who could afford a more expensive ticket at the door should finance those who couldn't. The bar also had to operate at affordable prices, but above all, the movement had to come from within, in an organic way, that is: with the presence of Black DJs and performers. Electronic dance floor music (the term was coined by post-structuralist ninja DJ Dr. Malhão to distinguish it from the academic electronic music of concert halls) should be reappropriated by those who had created it. For now, this seemed like a utopia.

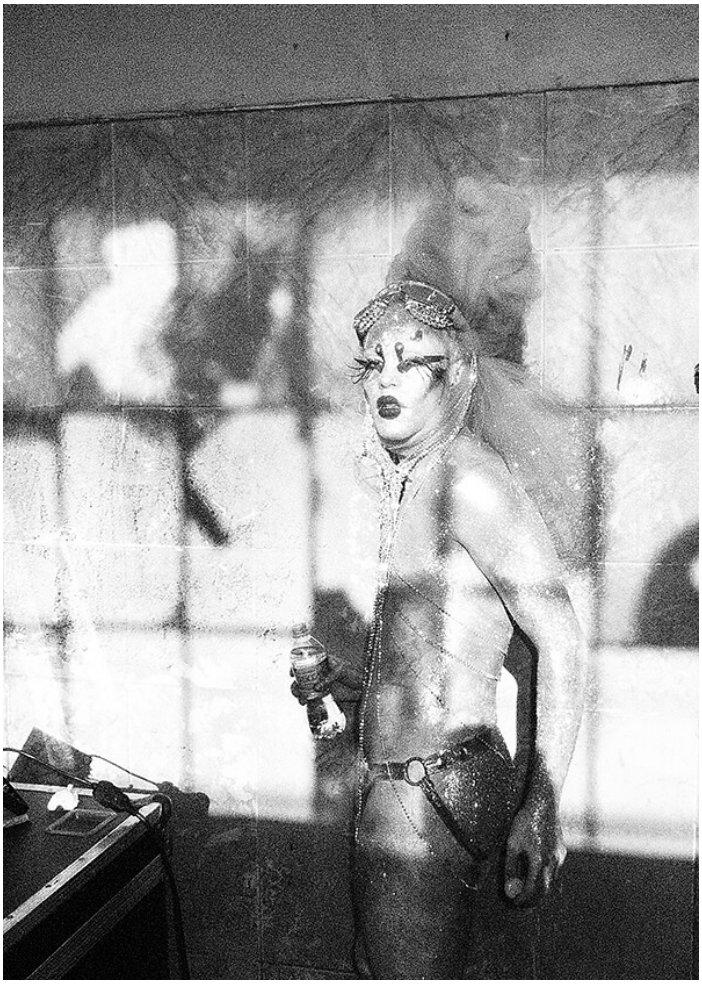
I started to advocate for the establishment of something called the *techno sarrada* as a way of subverting the technocracic zombies' rigid dance moves. But one night, talking to Duda, I realized that the *techno sarrada* was also a cultural appropriation on my part. The contradictions we were experiencing manifested themselves in many ways and in many places, including in the hips. We threw an epic afterparty on the one-year anniversary of O Bronx, maybe the last big one in the apartment. Two dozen people huddled on the living room couches talking and dancing, and people were having sex in the bedroom and doing drugs in the bathroom. My funky flat.

Sue ran the whole show. She was a lioness who faked it so completely that she arrived at sincerity. At fifteen she'd gotten a tattoo on the back of her neck with the name of an emo band that consisted of a letter of the alphabet and a number. Sue had other tattoos all over her body: a mermaid on her forearm, an oyster (or was it a vagina?) on her ring finger (she later tattooed a tourmaline stone on top), and the word *livre* on her belly, which means "free." When I met her, she lived in a communal feminist house in Cidade Baixa and sold *brizadeiros* at street parties.[3] Then she moved in with her grandparents at a housing project on the other side of town, but went back to Restinga almost every week to visit her mother and two little sisters. She ended up dropping out of college to dedicate herself to DJing and managing Casa Frasca, which she transformed into a space with a more pronounced political character (for example: no-men nights).

I used to hear her tell friends that she was in an open relationship. I found it amusing until I realized that I was the open part, not the relationship. My other half is an open book. My party is a broken heart. My sex and drugs don't have any rock 'n' roll. In Rio, I stayed with Lígia and Marília (my wonderful hippie aunt), in Glória. When I read in the news that the PCC had arrived in Favela da Rocinha, days after the military intervention began, I remembered a question that someone had asked at the seminar on drugs I attended at the university.[4] What would be the consequence of the war between criminal factions over control of drug trafficking in Brazil? Militarization, the expert had replied. When a faction decides to control the entire drug trade, it will act directly at the borders. The product comes into the country through its geographic

Louic Koutana a.k.a. L'Homme Statue, Photo: Ivi Maiga Bugrimenko.

Army of the night. Photo: Ivi Maiga Bugrimenko.



The great Alma Negrot. Photo: Ivi Maiga Bugrimenko.

borders, which are guarded by the army. I wondered if the two facts—military intervention and PCC's arrival—had a connection.

It was a Friday morning and I had been struggling to finish the book, and hadn't left the apartment in a week (I only went out to eat and buy something to drink, except for the time when I walked to Urca with Amanda, after Bruna went back to Porto Alegre). My cell phone buzzed with an incoming message. It was Sue, saying that she had written me a letter. I had nudged the lioness hours earlier with a like on a photo where she looked really beautiful. I was moved. It was the first letter I got, after so many messages. Reading it, I noticed that it looked more like a prose poem than a letter exactly. Sometimes she referred to herself in the third person and this pronominal change also happened in reference to the addressee, which in this case was me. I asked her if I could publish an excerpt in my book. "Feel free." Then she wanted to know which part I would use. I said all of it, and I immediately worried if that wouldn't also constitute appropriation. Or was it praise? The letter-poem had the enigmatic tone of Ana C., some vignettes with excerpts from the lyrics of "Ashes to Ashes," a refrain from Soul II Soul, among other references.[5]

Once again in the vampire's alcove

Little fruit bat

After all,

As if you spent too many lines on me

Purple drank don't make me high anymore

I'm grateful, something easy to digest (poem)

I am happy hope you're happy too

Our love is crush revival, not at all romantic

It was the first time I felt afraid of you. I was happy, something new in the middle of a lot of nothings reminded me.

—Where are you? —afterafter

So pretty it's a waste

Her getting ready is like a bride, just cooler and nonmonogamous

—I don't think so

He wasn't him, she wanted romance

—Pure disguise. It was more like debauchery, but I didn't know how to show it.

And there goes my cheap cognac.

There was another time (and another) that I painted a monster in the features of your face.

It was a sketch. I threw the sheet away and found you so sweet.

I didn't mean to cause any trouble, I swear. My mother always told me that I am all over the place. Daughter of Iansã, a whirlwind, lucky.[6]

I was sure I knew how to hide—but he read me. What she thought he should read, he didn't. Between discourse, long texts, and theory, he wrote me what he thought it was.

Not even she knew.

There was another time when I was scared too. I ran off like a skittish kitten. And the dance floor was hot tin. On purpose. I was hurt and wanted to make a noise, the little lion that she was.

Kontronatura at Obra, São Paulo, Brazil, 2022. Photo: Ivi Maiga Bugrimenko.

My momma said to get things done

A time on the other side of the abyss (back 2 life, back to reality). She comes back running with her tail between her legs, asking for a cuddle. This time more daring. Pretending not to be, but excited by the timbre of your ego and the little precious stones. If only I had the assurance of a well-established whiteman. At least what he appears to have.

A few minutes later, another message arrived:

> It's not supposed to be a story, or a joke, or a hey there, long time no see, or an apology. It's more like a collection of those vague phrases that would only be understood between us. I could include other moments, but you know how my head is always full, I forget.

X

Translated from the Portuguese by Patricia Davanzzo.

This excerpt appears courtesy of the author as well as nunc edicões de artista and Caja Negra Editora.

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1
Porto Alegre is the capital city of the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. According to the 2010 census, nearly 80 percent of the city's population identified as white. —Eds.

2
In Portuguese, " *passinhos*." *Passinho* is an urban dance style that emerged in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro.

3
Brizadeiro is a candy made of chocolate, condensed milk, and weed.

4
The PCC (Primeiro Comando da Capital, or Capital's First Commando) is one of the largest criminal organizations in Brazil. With operations mainly in the state of São Paulo, the faction is also present in almost all Brazilian states, in addition to neighboring countries. The military intervention refers to the federal intervention in Rio de Janeiro in 2018, imposed by the then-president of Brazil, Michel Temer, who ordered the national army to assume the role of the police forces in that state.

5
"Ana C." refers to the late Brazilian poet Ana Cristina Cesar.

6
Iansã is an orisha, or deity, worshiped in Afro-Brazilian religions.

Eva Pensis

Dissonance: A Suite on Trans Femme Noise

I. "in shrill, teary, falsetto voices unlike any woman's or any man's"[1]

I am tired of writing about music that rarifies music and sound, as if they are separable from the people that make music or contribute to its experience. I am tired of the often-implicit assumption that to talk about the conditions of sound's production is besides its critical aesthetic value or import. It must be possible to make space within music criticism to advance something other than the audiophile's perspective—the practices of close reading or close listening that are installed as proper aesthetic judgment. Can you hear it?

I am tired of journal issues *on* music that cannot or will not address issues *in* music. As if that's beside the point. As though where criticism takes place is completely separate from where music is produced, recorded, performed, rehearsed, expressed, remixed, and commercialized. Can you hear it now? Maybe it's the sound of the spitfire Black queer rapper Cakes da Killa, shouting out to the audience at the start of her concert one warm summer evening in Paris in 2018: "Who was on the guest list? Raise your hands if you paid to get in!"

I am a lifelong musician, a pianist, an artist, a survivor, a dancer, and a nightlife performer. The "I" in this sentence is not just me, the author, but it stands collectively for a whole host of trans women and trans femmes who, if not centerstage for the revue, wait in the wings, stand in the DJ booth, or powder their necks backstage, waiting for the cue. Maybe it's the sound of famed Canadian trans woman and drag entertainer Michelle De Ville uttering, several decades ago:

> The drag queen inside the gay world is meant to be on the stage, or "walking" the streets. Don't get off the stage baby! It's like the bird in the gilded cage … All those guys I told you about before, the gay guys that feel me, or grab me by the waist in bars. Do you think that I've seen any of their houses? That I've ever been invited over for a coffee, or a meal? Forget it! To them, I'm a party animal. A drag queen.

This kind of thing is so pervasive that it makes some TS entertainers give up the gig. Noise, like screaming at the top of your lungs but no one listens. Noise, like sharing your account of being harassed by esteemed cis male producers only to have it stripped of its context and twisted, such that you must relocate to another city to exist beyond its distortions. What did you expect would happen? Did you expect someone to hear you on your own terms?

Noise is most often defined by what it is not—organized

Cake da Killa performing in 2017, License: CC BY-SA 4.0

sound. "Noise" and "noisiness" refer to sounds that have not been ordered according to respectable notions of music, song, and composition. Noise is difficult to analyze; it resists comprehension in the theoretical sense. Perhaps this is why noise is also a go-to metaphor and index for those considered socially undesirable. As ethnomusicologist David Novak writes, noise is "a powerful antisubject of culture." The negative cultural construction of noise carries overtones of nineteenth and twentieth century Western music chauvinism, but can be traced back as far as the transatlantic slave trade, where accounts of European colonizers describe the music and speech indigenous to enslaved people as "noise" in order to domesticate, authenticate, and subjugate those expressive practices as part of the colonial project.[2]

According to communication studies and information theory, noise is defined as the "byproduct of technological reproduction that interfere[s] with reception of a message (i.e., static in a radio transmission, distortion over a loudspeaker, or hiss on magnetic tape."[3] Noise is sound that is not produced *correctly*. Where songs sing, noise swarms, buzzes, rattles, and distorts. Noise's incomprehensibility is precisely what makes it potent.

Noise not only disturbs, it interferes in hearing. While noise can express outcry or protest, there's a general sense that noise is meaningless, indirect, and distracting. There's a certain stigma to noise—it's something *unwanted*.

II. "They were neither here nor there, neither female nor male, but lost and dithering somewhere in between"[4]

Writing on trans feminine people and nightlife by trans women at the turn of the twenty-first century shares a considerable emphasis on reframing how we commonly think about identity and power in the US. This writing urges a shift from an identification-based model to one that centers the shared experiences of disenfranchisement and dehumanization that also coincide with the racializing and racist visual schema of perception. Whereas public acceptance of homosexuality in the US has framed sexual difference as a matter of object choice rather than ontology, transsexual activists and writers have for nearly just as long advanced the notion that the state *produces* trans (and gender

still from SOPHIE — It's Okay To Cry

nonconforming) people through uneven procedures of power, including racialization, criminalization, feminization, and sexualization.[5]

I find this distinction in how power operates critical in considering or referring to this thing called *trans femme noise*, in part because it renders anti-trans violence as a systemic issue rather than an individual instance of powerlessness. While not all trans feminine people will encounter the same experiences of violence, we are all by virtue of our embodiment subjected to the threat of social disposability, navigating a shared proximity to violence. What happens in this routine exposure to quotidian violence and lack of care? What do you do with that? Where do you go? Who do you turn to?

From artists like Ariel Zetina and SOPHIE, to Ayesha Erotica and Honey Dijon, electronic and digital soundscapes have provided trans femme cultural producers with spaces that can function simultaneously as archive, fabulation, memorial, and truth-telling for self- and collective articulation. In a roundtable artist talk one Chicago afternoon in June 2021, digital artists Cae Monāe, Zolita Makeda, and Him Hun affirmed that noise is a fact of life. "Everybody is making noise, producing sound … So when everyone is creating noise but one instance of noise is pissing you off … why should we stop?" All three artists use noise in their music to encode cultural archives, citing Black transsexual foremothers like Octavia St. Laurent, while also twisting, distorting, and playing with sonic qualities to make music out of noise—a process of fragmenting sound and telling multiple stories with the fragments.

Monāe further spoke to her experience of living as a Black trans woman artist and waking up, every day, with this immense pressure surrounding her. As a shorthand for anti-Black, anti-trans, and anti-femme violence, this pressure has a ceaseless quality, said Monāe, such that expressing it musically "is the only way people are going to understand." Citing trans performance artist Nina Arsenault's work on screaming and penetration, Monāe underscored the value of repetition: "Why did white people hate repetition? Because repetition is central to Black and brown musical practices. Like, let me repeat it till it hurts, until your stomach turns and you think, 'When is it going to stop?' You either get it or you don't! If you aren't going to scream, who else is going to scream?" Noise, for Monāe, indexes some of her own experiences of ordinary life and acts as a sonic valve to let out some of the pressure of navigating a phobic world.

Trans historian and critic Leah Tigers arrives at a related observation in her essay "A Sex Close to Noise." Sampling an array of trans artists, from Kim Petras to Backxwash, Tigers conceives of noise as a way of existing and learning to exist with alienation. Trans femme artists "design permutations, built out of the contradiction: sounds to

move you, sounds to alienate you, sounds to be with you in your alienation, sounds which loan you recognition and recognition's power."[6]

This line of thinking is not without its caveats: the linkage between one's proximity to social disposability and one's creative cultural production should be conditional rather than essential. Mobilizing experiences of trauma within an artistic practice risks limiting artistic production—in this case the soundscapes of trans femme sonic artists—to something that *only* possesses meaning in relation to trauma.

Still—there's something about trans femmes' perpetual presence at the threshold of social disposability that makes the boundary between sound and noise especially potent. As one of drum & bass's leading innovators, Jordana LeSesne wrote in 2021 that her music and her trauma are completely intertwined. In a devastating column in *The Brooklyn Rail*, LeSesne details her reality as a Black trans woman in drum & bass, stating, "Music itself turned from being a refuge from trauma to being the source of it."[7]

LeSesne recounts a litany of harrowing events: She was brutalized in a hate crime after a concert near her hometown (the perpetrator has still not been brought to justice). Her studio equipment was pawned by a "fan/stalker" when she fled to the UK after the assault. She was coerced by her label into publishing her music under a deadname. In 2011, LeSesne discovered that Lorin Ashton (Bassnectar) had stolen a significant portion of her track " **5 A.M. Rinse 5 A.M. Rinse**" for his single " **Here We Go Here We Go**" (click the links to compare the two tracks). "So while I was living in poverty in 2010," writes LeSesne, "he was making money off of my work and in subsequent years of me trying to contact him about it only responded when an attorney got involved in 2014. As of today [2021], I still have not been properly compensated for what he did." LeSesne was also deported from the UK, returning to the US to try and make it as a drum & bass artist.[8]

LeSesne's most recent project, *Resistencia E.P.*, is a testament to the fact that she is "still fighting erasure." Regarding the third track on the EP, "Rainbows Not Enough (It All Goes Dark)," she writes: "I wrote it in deep depression after I learned Bassnectar had stole a large part of my song '5 A.M. Rinse' for his song 'Here We Go' hence the lyric "Because of you, this world's gone dark."[9] It's a horrifying barrage of stress and violence that LeSesne has been made to bear, and her piece in the *Brooklyn Rail* stresses that despite her wins—which include being named one of *Mixmag*'s "20 Women Who Shaped the History of Dance Music," and scoring the documentary *Free CeCe!*, produced by Laverne Cox and Jacqueline Gares—she still struggles to make ends meet, find support, and continue to make music. It makes one wonder how or even if a music scene full of so much injustice could be transformed. What would justice mean within a sonic terrain that is simultaneously commercial, cultural, and material?

III. "Isn't there a way for people to awaken their senses, to transcend their humdrum lives, without rupturing their eardrums, scorching their retinas and turning their vocal chords into vestigial organs?"[10]

In an admittedly dated workbook on vicarious traumatization, there is a list of recommended techniques to help survivors living with PTSD to self-sooth and tolerate distress. The techniques include taking a long shower and rocking oneself gently, but my eyes were drawn to the one associated with sound: "Listen to your favorite music and play it over and over again." I remember feeling surprised, wondering when I last listened to my "favorite" music and how it made me feel.

Was I taken aback because I couldn't immediately come up with a "favorite" song that would carry me back to a desired feeling? Maybe I was surprised because I couldn't even recall this desired feeling, as though I'd been existing at a distance from my own emotions, dissociating somewhere between the input and the output of my own senses. Does that ever happen to you, reader? Do you sometimes forget to sense how you are feeling? Maybe even now, reading this?

If noise and trauma have something in common, it's likely that—to paraphrase sound art scholar Salomé Voegelin—they both "ingest" us: both noise and trauma work on our entire body.[11] To approach the prevalence of noise among trans femme artists and musicians is to sketch multiple contours of living as trans, as femme, and as artists in a world shaped by white supremacist, capitalist, and patriarchal systems of subjugation.

This is where noise could provide a template, especially if we understand it according to the information theory model—as an interruption within a process. If feeling is itself a process of regulation, noise occasions an interruption in that process of regulation. That's what the "favorite music" exercise aims to address; it helps to re-regulate your body and emotions. What happens, then, for those of us who must live in or live with various states of dys-regulation or dissociation? Where dissociation is one of many negative affects that enable us to live within a hostile, phobic environment? Perhaps this is why some trans writers prefer the sonic term "dissonance" to the medicalized term "dysphoria," taking the idea of a disharmony or harshness between sounds to express the disconnect between embodiment and public perception.[12]

Trans femme noise then might offer us a provisional theory of noise, where the dysphoric or the dissociative constitutes its own kind of noise.[13] This noise interrupts and compartmentalizes mundane and spectacular reminders that for some of us, our capacity to feel is not valued or cared for in everyday life. Whether in the

noisified pop of SOPHIE or the ethereal, otherworldly architectures of noise and pulse in Him Hun's mixes, noise lends its listeners the potential for feeling—being *with* and *in* feeling—and not feeling solely one thing. For those of who have no choice but to navigate a social order that also renders us into noise itself, noise offers not so much a way out of that order but an abstraction, a place to be and feel with our whole body, if only for the duration of the track, the set, the sample, or our favorite songs.

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Eva Pensis is a multidisciplinary artist-scholar whose work explores the contours and legacies of trans femme life within popular culture, nightlife economies, and entertainment/music industries. Her writing has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books, The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies,* and *Journal of Popular Music Studies*.

1
Karen Durbin, "Female Impersonators: The Great Escape," *Village Voice*, February 24, 1975.

2
David Novak, "Noise," in *Keywords in Sound* , ed. Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Duke University Press, 2015), 133. On the cultural construction of noise in the US context, see Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 93; Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton University Press, 1999); and Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan University Press, 1994). Countering the view of noise as disorderly to civic formation, social theorists have attributed noise positively to the subaltern, the minoritarian, and the masses, with noise standing in as a "prophetic" form of difference, and often as a metaphor for some sort of harmonic totality. See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* , trans. by Brian Massumi (1985; University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

3
Novak, "Noise," 128.

4
Durbin, "Female Impersonators."

5
Critical to the concept of feminization is that it is in "intimate relation to the category of woman but is not reducible in its effects to people assigned female," as Emma Heaney writes. Heaney describes the historical process of feminization as encompassing a range of institutional discriminations, including those that early women's suffrage sought to overcome, such as "rights to freedom of dress, ownership of property and wages, child custody, and the vote." Heaney continues: "This modern gender reshuffling provided women with escape from the material bases of feminization, just as the emergence of the homosexual threatened men with a distinctively male feminization." *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and Transfeminine Allegory* (Northwestern University Press), 49–50. Earlier inquiries can also be found in Vivian Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 29.

6
Leah Tigers, "A Sex Close to Noise: An Essay about Transgender Women and Music," trickymothernature.com http://www.trickymothernature.com/asexclosetonoise.html .

7
Jordana LeSesne, "Let Us Live," *The Brooklyn Rail* , May 2021 https://brooklynrail.org/2021/05/criticspage/Let-Us-Live .

8
LeSesne, "Let Us Live."

9
See Jordana LeSesne's Bandcamp page https://jordanaofficial.bandcamp.com/track/rainbows-not-enough-it-all-goes-dark .

10
Robert Vare, "Discophobia," *New York Times* , July 10, 1979.

11
Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (Bloomsbury, 2010), 48.

12
Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and Scapegoating of Femininity* (Seal Press, 2007), 85.

13
I am indebted to Anson Koch-Rein's research on dysphoria, as it is used and contested by transsexual people to describe the dissonances between their own sense of gender and their experiences of perceived-gender enforcement. Rather than a medical or psychological concept, Koch-Rein offers a reading of dysphoria as a form of knowledge that names the specific "position of a gender not being universally considered valid." "Mirrors, Monsters, Metaphors: Transgender Rhetorics and Dysphoric Knowledge," (PhD diss. Emory University, 2014), 19.

Hegemony, which can be thought of as either "common sense" or the dominant way of thinking in a particular time and place, can never be total, Williams argued, there must always be an inner dynamic by means of which new formations of thought emerge. Structure of feeling refers to the different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history.
—Alan O' Connor, *Raymond Williams: Writing, Culture, Politics*

The only good system is a sound system.
—Jamaican Proverb

Turn this bitch into gay pride the first one was a riot. Stonewall 2022, fuck it homophobes dyin.
—Dualité

Kumi James aka BAE BAE

Hood Rave LA: Framing The Black Femme Underground

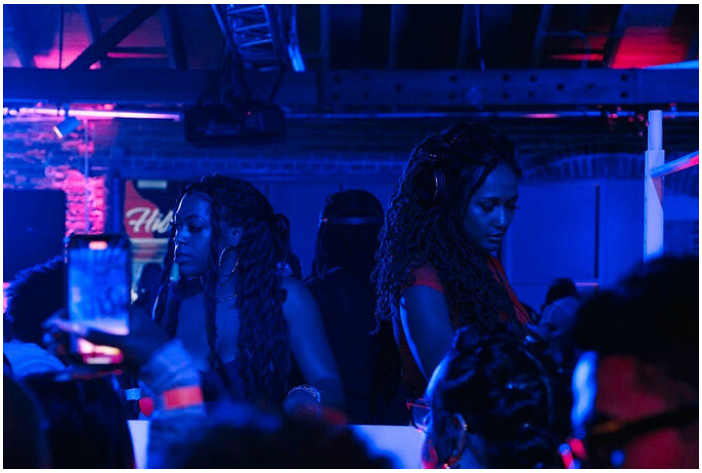
Photo: Sam Lee

I'm in Jamaica reflecting on what the hell Hood Rave is about and wrestling with how to put my ideas about structuring a femme space onto paper. I am hesitant to write some kind of manifesto where I present an idyllic vision of what Hood Rave is, as if it's a perfect space. It is not that at all. But it *is* a vital and necessary space. Hood Rave is an experiment in creating a Black femme and Black queer underground community. Note that the terms "Black femme" and "Black queer" are not mutually exclusive, and I'm wrestling with language. This writing is an attempt at writing alongside a live, unfolding experience of underground Black culture. The live space will always exceed the bounds of this writing. Hood Rave is a collective conjuring of ecstatic energy. It is a ritual for togetherness, actively making and reshaping what it means to be in Black community. Culture happens in real time, consciously and unconsciously performing and expanding the social repertoires of the past. This writing is meant to be an accompaniment to the live event.

Photo: Sam Lee

The event takes place at the margins of institutions in Los Angeles: after closing time, extralegal, in back alleys. I used my time and funding as a doctoral student to learn how to DJ and started throwing parties back in 2016. Academia was a scaffold to do what I wanted to do outside of its walls, the rave's condition of possibility. As a Black femme and queer person, I found most institutions stifling, whether the university or the nightclub. In LA, Black folks were excluded from many nightclubs via veiled racially coded entry policies ("No baggy attire," "No sportswear," "No sneakers"). Within Black spaces, a heteronormative gaze made it impossible to dance freely with my girls without having a man grab me inappropriately or try and force me to engage with him. Just by being in their bodies, the Black femme queer bumps up against hegemony, often experiencing harm in the process. We become stultified by sexual harassment, anti-Black microaggressions, and the expectation to emotionally labor for others. What would it be like to create an intramural space for us where we were at the center, maintaining our energy to nurture ourselves?

At the initial above-ground parties I threw at conventional bars and clubs, I had to deal with stifling restrictions. Just last week my best friend and collaborator DJ Kita and I threw a party at a club in LA as a trial for taking our events back above ground. We experienced racial microaggressions from the security staff, who prevented our crew from setting up before our event opened to the public. They threatened to shut down our party if the caterer dared to play "loud music" (read: rap music) while loading in the food. Venue security in LA has been known to be particularly aggressive against Black femmes, with pointed hostility towards Black trans and nonbinary folks. Heteronormative standards are imposed, such as the security team physically patting down folks they perceive as "males," but not those they identify as "women." Unfortunately, most clubs and bars in LA are currently owned by wealthy straight white men.[1] The privatization and white ownership of gathering places, along with racist gang injunctions and the de facto prohibition of large groups of Black folks gathering together, have eroded Black community. To get the force of white heteronormativity off our necks, we came to the conclusion that we have to return to the underground.



DJ Kita and BAE BAE DJing. Photo: Dennis Eliott.

Defining the Space

Hood Rave is an attempt by two Black femmes, myself (BAE BAE) and DJ Kita, to create space for our overlapping communities to share physical space. I think a lot about the assertion I heard from Saidiya Hartman during a talk at UCLA that Blackness has always been queer.

I identify as queer, but Kita does not. Kita and I are both from South Central LA, but our paths are distinct. I'm thirty-seven, ten years older than her, so I feel like her big sis (also because tbh I'm a nag). We both come from working-class families. I went the route of pursuing grad school to get out of my family's socioeconomic prison and ended up with mountains of debt thanks to the price tag on my BFA in film from UCLA and MFA in film from Columbia University. Kita didn't finish her undergraduate studies at UC Irvine and eventually found her passions in DJing. She is one of my favorite DJs and has an encyclopedic knowledge of a wide range of rap and hip-hop music.

Becoming a DJ was a line of flight for me away from filmmaking—a place where I had the possibility to invent my own path. White and Black male gatekeepers in the film industry and academia could not stifle me. As a DJ I learned about all sorts of dance music genres and created an eclectic approach to mixing many kinds of Black diasporic music, including house, jungle, techno, footwork, baile funk, batida, and a lot more. Hood Rave was the perfect combination of Kita's and my approach to music: mixing popular and independent "hood" music with Black rave music to create an open-format dance party. The name "Hood Rave" is a major draw because people get the sonic and fashion aesthetic instantly. Black and brown people have been raving in the hood for generations, from the warehouse parties in Chicago to Freaknik in the nineties. Hood Rave is about living out our Black queer collective fantasies.

Hood Rave is an ephemeral architecture, a structure of feeling that emerges in the gaps of institutional space, after hours, in darkened space. It plays off certain physical structures and technologies, including the sound system, colored lights, warehouse architecture, and open outdoor space, and uses them to create something that actively pivots away from white patriarchal hegemony. It is a space for Black queer people and femmes to play. As much as afro-pessimism might negate it, Black intramurality is real, salient, and productive of new realities. Collective Black culture saves lives. Strangely, the dominant culture that exists is a culture of individualization, separation, and confinement. How do we go back to the collective cultures of our ancestors and renew it through a queer, feminized interpretation of life?

Friendsgiving. Photo: Alex Free.

There is no road map, but that is our purpose.

The Hood Rave project is *not* about being reactive to heteronormative culture, or becoming its inverse. It is instead about centering Black femmes and affirming their right to exist. I think about Sylvia Wynter writing on the centering of the white liberal man in modern notions of what it means to be "human." She urges us to instead think of what it might mean to center the person on the margins. For us, this means centering the Black femme and the Black queer especially. What makes her feel safe? How does she want to dress? How does she want to *act*?

Hood Rave Halloween. Photo: Taylor Washington.

What is her musical taste? This is a kind of praxis where folks who attend the party actively answer these guiding questions. I am constantly learning about their needs and attempting to reorganize a space to attend to them.

Hood Rave Halloween. Photo: Taylor Washington.

Having Kita and me at the helm and on the microphone hosting makes a big difference in how Black femmes feel when they attend. We state the rules on the mic at the height of each party: "This is a Black femme–led space. This is a consent-centered space. Transphobia and homophobia are not acceptable here." We explain to people that you cannot touch anyone without their expressed consent. At every event we have a harm-reduction table run by the collective Rave Safe, which distributes Narcan kits and fentanyl strips for folks to party safely. Along with this we hire safety monitors who help to observe the partiers throughout the night. They are points of contact if people experience harm or need support. I know from past experiences in aboveground clubs and bars what it feels like to not know if someone is going to touch me without my consent, and how unsafe it feels to let loose while being gawked at. At Hood Rave, Black femmes are the actors, not passive objects. It is not surprising to find that most of our DJ and performer lineups are composed of Black femmes and queers. It's our normal.

In Hortense Spillers's essay "The Idea of Black Culture" she writes: "It is striking that precisely because black cultures arose in the world of normative violence, coercive labor, and the virtually absolute crush of the everyday struggle for existence, its subjects could imagine, could *dare* to imagine, a world beyond the coercive technologies of their daily bread."[2] Hood Rave is about forcefully taking up physical and sonic space with *our* imaginations. It is an act of collectively refusing the world and making new realities. Our space argues that we can constitute new material and imaginative realities, even if it's for six hours in the middle of the night.

Hood Rave Halloween. Photo: Taylor Washington.

But Spillers warns at the end of her essay that Black culture can be co-opted when it becomes taken up by "Americanization" and hegemonic culture. She writes: "Perhaps black culture—as the reclamation of the critical edge, as one of those vantages from which it might be spied, and no longer predicated on 'race'—has yet to come."[3] What I propose is that this "critical edge" can be found at the margins of Blackness that Black femme, Black queer, Black poor, and Black working-class folks inhabit. These are the actors that make Hood Rave what it is. As Dualité, a recent Hood Rave femme queen performer, raps: "Stonewall 2022, fuck it homophobes dyin." We seek to embrace the power for the imaginations

that exist at the margins of the so-called human, and magnetize each other to the point of creating community in a world that wants us dead. Fuck the world, Hood Rave is *our* shit.

I have undoubtedly by now fallen into the kind of idealized manifesto-writing I warned against early on in this essay. A girl can dream …

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Kumi James, aka **BAE BAE**, is a multidisciplinary artist who works with sound, music, and video. She is an organizer of innovative spaces for collaboration and community. James engages in creative practices to ask critical questions about Blackness, gender, sexuality, and their representation. As the artist "BAE BAE" she has risen to prominence within LA's underground music scene as a DJ and event curator, organizing innovative communal spaces, including the notorious underground party Hood Rave.

1
Sadly, this includes the club Jewel's Catch One, the formerly Black-lesbian-owned gay and lesbian staple in Mid-City, LA.

2
Hortense Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (Winter 2006): 25.

3
Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," 26.

Tavia Nyong'o

Don't Techno For an Answer

Growing up in the predominantly white suburbs of Detroit, Michigan in the 1980s, the soundtrack of my daily life was rock, and the face of rock was always a white dude. As a brown, proto-queer teen with nerd tendencies, it was natural then that I would gravitate towards techno instead. Rock was the triumphant voice of my parents' generation, and therefore deeply embedded in the human, all-too-human dynamics of oedipal rebellion. Rock was an ear worm that followed me everywhere; it was the row of preening dude faces on the covers of new albums in the display window of Schoolkids Records.

Techno, on the other hand, was a faceless, wordless music that seemed to emerge directly out of the inhuman void. Techno was hard to find in the record store and had no household names associated with it. It emanated from DJ booths staffed by introverted guys in sunglasses and baseball hats, hunched over knobs and platters. They weren't making the music in any traditional sense; they didn't even seem to be controlling it. It seemed like they were being controlled *by* it. And so were we in those places where I found it, on the dance floor, late at night, in some illegal rave or club I was too young to be at. We were its ecstatic recipients. We were the robots.

Joy in depersonalization is sweet amongst the teenage, who have just discovered the terrible burden of being an individual and are quick to shirk it. But there are different ways of merging into the masses, and I did not fit into the most common ones. I held as active a fantasy life as books could take me: which was anywhere in the known universe and beyond. I was almost a complete nerd except for one grace: an eye for the horizon that had me always wandering off looking for trouble.

Dancing into the ecstatic was to be another fortune of mine from an early age, when my older brother helped me sneak off to Bubbles discotheque at thirteen or fourteen, in Nairobi, Kenya. It was at Bubbles that I first heard Chaka Khan and Black Box, Madonna and Rick Astley. I tasted lager, decided I was wholly uninterested in "tuning chilays" (flirting with girls), and turned instead to the dance floor to find the true love of my life: getting lost in music.

Bubbles was a proper disco, part of a casino no less. There was no enforced drinking age (nor driving age it seemed) at that time and place, so the children of privilege got to pull up in daddy's Benz and swagger through Kenya's best approximation of Casablanca on the way to a round dancefloor, rimmed with booths and spinning lights. I recall some half-hearted tension between us and the "tyutes"—aka the South Asian kids who all excelled in school, we grumbled, because they hired tutors. Who was truly Kenyan, and who just an outsider? Don't ask me the answer to these questions since I don't ever want to know. This was too brief a flash of time for me to remember anything gay about it other than me. But chatting with age mates about it now surfaces a more indelible memory of partying two, three times a weekend for the better part of a

The Roland TR-909 Rhythm Composer, a drum machine released in 1983, was used by early house and techno producers.

decade before the casino finally closed it down.

Back in Michigan a few years later, I took my little sister to see Bruce Springsteen in a stadium. I was impressed but unmoved. I too had been born in the USA, but I didn't identify with going to kill "the yellow man." (Springsteen, I later learned, was being ironic, something tricky to pull off in the 1980s.) Mainstream, Midwestern, white America was an embarrassment to my teenage self. And its dialectical negation, gangsta rap, valorized a form of black masculinity to which I could not aspire. So it was techno (and later house) that provided my escape into a shared dreamscape of complex synchronicity. Instead of studs with guitars on giant stages, or lyricists freestyling in studios and clubs, we had ravers in dank warehouses in sketchy neighborhoods. You did not watch this music (in those years before the DJ booth itself became a stage). The music surrounded you. Luis Manuel Garcia-Mispireta's work captures these surrounds perfectly in their ethnography of the contemporary techno scene, pointing out that the "dancefloor" can be everywhere.[1]

The placement of the DJ booth in most of the places I danced at in the late 1980s and early 1990s was elevated, but in shadow. This offered the DJ a secluded view of the club. From that vantage point, as I would come to appreciate, the DJ was interacting continuously with the activity of the crowd. These crowds—who were mostly white working-class, punk, and/or queer in my estimation, wilder by far than my sheltered middle-class family of origin—were gathering in spontaneous rejection of "cock rock" culture. In those early years of self-discovery, techno was everything rock wasn't and never could be. Except for one detail: it was also largely white.

That I understood techno to be white (and house and disco to be black) was an understandable mistake. To my later chagrin, I was not quite in the right time or place for the early 1980s Detroit party scene lovingly detailed by Dan Sicko in *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk*.[2] Those parties that he details were the Afro-American matrix out of which techno as we know it today emerged. My family had spent those years bouncing back and forth between the US and Kenya, and trips to Detroit were largely limited to visits with my grandmother. Through a cruel twist of fate, I, a Michigan native and budding techno fanatic, did not really know the social origins of the music were just a half hour away.

Sicko recounts the subcultural rivalry in those years between "preps" and "jits" (terms I myself never actually heard, but that resonate uncannily with the distinction at Bubbles between "us" and the "tyutes"). At these parties Sicko describes, you were either college-bound (a "preppie") or you were a cool cat (a "jit" dancing—yes, the

This image spread appears in Dan Sicko, Techno Rebels: The Renegades Of Electronic Funk (Billboard Books, 1999).

jitterbug). When my parents moved us to Ann Arbor, home of the University of Michigan, in the 1970s, they made that choice for me. I was so preppie I hardly knew there was another way to be. (I even had a brief brush with the notoriously boogie Jack & Jill Society, but that is a story for another time.)

1970s Ann Arbor ("Detroit's nerdier younger brother" as Sicko waggishly calls it) was a weird mixture of aging hippies and white flighters from post-industrial Detroit. The social geography of the greater Detroit area was and remains so rife with American contradiction. An imploded "inner city," that we were trained to avoid for fear for our lives, surrounded by a half-abandoned suburban wasteland dotted by telephone poles and liquor stores. When I read Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* years later, it all made sense: Detroit was a post-apocalyptic dystopia that only a work of science fiction could make sense of.

Delany's protagonist, an "Indian without ancestry" out of a Deleuzian fever dream, adds a layer of significance in placing **Dhalgren** **Dhalgren** in palimpsest over Detroit (even though Delany himself assures me he was not thinking *specifically* of Detroit when he invented Bellona). Known as *Waawiiyaataanong* in Anishinaabe, this region "where the water turns around" has been a meeting point for first nations peoples for millennia. Delany's "Kid" wanders a landscape from which he has been dispossessed of everything except the bare fact of his stolen indigeneity.

And then, beyond the city, tucked away in the hills, accessible only by car, were the McMansions of the auto company executives. When you got past these gate-kept fortresses of whiteness, you landed in Ann Arbor. Ann Arbor disrupted the gradient of poor to ultra-rich somewhat, firstly by being a college town built around a prestigious state school with a popular football team. And, relatedly, for being one of the places the members of 1960s counterculture went to raise their children.

A white middle-class utopia, Ann Arbor had food and housing co-ops, a lesbian feminist bookshop, environmental justice warriors, and annual public pot smoking bashes. The first community activity I remember taking part in was a bike-a-thon for the environment. I loved grapes as much as any kid, but we never ate them because we observed the United Farm Workers grape

boycott. We were "woke" back when it was called being "crunchy granola."

As a child I couldn't imagine living anywhere else; as a teen I couldn't wait to get out.

Techno was a passport. I didn't know what a rave was, but I knew that I wanted to go to there. Ecstasy, the hug drug, gave us Gen X children of hippies a psychedelic of our own. This drug was not cheesy and moldy like LSD or magic mushrooms, nor was it tie-dye and hacky sack like marijuana. It was futuristic, quasi-medical, and love-oriented. Fashions followed suit.

While techno heads today prefer "minimal athletic gear in all black," as McKenzie Wark notes, the Gen X look was bright colors, baggy clothes, and creative regression (in retrospect, some of us were proto-furries). It was aviator sunglasses at night and drug dealers dressed as school crossing guards. It was barrettes for boys and glitter for everyone. And it was dancing for hours, dancing to depletion and beyond.

To this day, and despite all its manifest limitations, rave culture will remain special to me as the first scene I embraced that was consciously and directly organized around collective, physical love. Raving came with a political utopianism that is worth noting: even as we disidentified with 60s flower power, we had our own aspirations to combine sex, drugs, and music into a new reality. Unlike the dissociative party drugs that were favored later in the 1990s (like G and K), E was an empathy-enhancing drug. On E, we became a body without organs, joyously relinquishing our fears and inhibitions to playfully touch, hug, and dance with each other. It is very embarrassing in retrospect. Today, I cannot look at raver pants or glo sticks without wincing. But when I get into it, that old time religion comes back. And then I wonder why I ever deviated from the good doctrine of PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect).

The PLUR rave scene was, as I said, very white in the Midwest. Its aspirations to define a generation through music came to grief over the failure of a planned Rave on Washington—the imagined counterpart to the Love Parade then rising up in Germany. Corporate music in the US quickly turned rave into "EDM," propped up a few acts they aimed to slot into the same rock star, stadium selling slot, and basically ruined everything.

By the time I was out East for college, I was already dancing into a more blended, multiracial, and finally queer set of spaces. The first kids wearing raver pants on my college campus in Connecticut, by the way, were Black and Queer. Now in the orbit of New York City, the beat of salsa, disco, and house was powerful. Yet techno kept a niche in the club scene with crossover acts like Dee-lite. Techno and house were the main music played in gay clubs (this being the golden age of the dancefloor remix).

That techno had started in Detroit was something I never remember discussing. In those pre-internet years, music came at you from nowhere. And when you found the music, you could not "Shazam" it to find it again later. You had to get "lost in music." You had to find some way of keeping in touch with it, to keep in step, or you would forever lose track of it. I spent years of my adolescence pining after songs I had heard once, been transported by, and then despaired to never hear again. These songs were as vivid in my memory as the memory of another person, more real in some way.

I picked up Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* in my college bookstore. It was my gateway drug to the land of Theory (a copy is still never far from my writing desk).[3] Reading Hebdige, I produced an imagined and remote intimacy[4] between my life and the "mods," "rockers," and "punks," whose revolt through style, Hebdige argued, became the means through which they contested cultural hegemony. Already a bit Anglophilic by way of my postcolonial heritage, I latched onto punk as an object lesson in negative dialectics: a damaged sound for a broken world. Reggae apocalypticism was an immediate connection between my world and the world of the British punks. Bob Marley was our universal icon, the demigod before whom all races and tribes bowed.

But, just as Hebdige paid little attention to punk's Detroit origins in Iggy Pop, The Motor City Five, and the White Panthers, his history of subculture failed to tune me into the fact that, just thirty minutes away from Ann Arbor, a whole competitive dance and dress formation amongst young Black teenagers was doing much the same thing as their British imitators. Dance music only made it into his brief tome in a single dismissive reference to "vacuous disco-bounce," but that minor lapse was more than made up for by the major theoretical breakthrough of the book, which seems durable and largely true to me today: "It is on the plane of aesthetics; in dress, dance, music; in the whole rhetoric of style, that we find the dialogue between black and white most subtly and comprehensively recorded, albeit in code."[5]

Being a black kid of bi-racial parentage, I lived Hebdige's "dialogue" as a cacophonous sound clash of the mind, body, and spirit. What is weird about reading that sentence again in 2022 is how much the idea of a dialogue sticks in my craw. The white/black dynamic in dance, dress, and music has been much more "love and *theft*," as Eric Lott put it, than a *dialogue*. Having said that, techno is indeed one musical form where a true dialogue might be said to have occurred. I am tempted even to venture the claim that—speaking purely from the perspective of advancement in musical form—that techno is the primary site for this coded dialogue amongst the new musics of the late twentieth century. But I will leave that provocation with you.

A CD compilation released in 1992 inspired the title of

these reflections: *Don't Techno For An Answer*.[6] It's a brilliant title: memorable, commercial, tetchy. It places the genre right in the center of a title which is a sentence (and a performative at that). The irony of this title was layered in all the ways Springsteen's "gonna kill the yellow man" wasn't: don't take no for an answer when you ask for techno. Don't take techno for an answer when you are searching for any permanent name for the groove that is always in movement from one genre to the next, always morphing and transforming.

Still, as I boot it up on my twenty first century speakers—via the YouTube music archive with every song from anytime—I am thrown back on another question about culture I only really learned in graduate school. It was in a seminar taught by Michael Denning, a second-generation cultural studies scholar, that I first read C.L.R. James masterpiece *Beyond a Boundary*.[7] In that book on sport, James asks a question that is as profound as a Zen koan: what do they know of cricket, that only cricket know? Knowing nothing of cricket but what I learned from reading James's book, I nevertheless have always felt gripped by this chiasmic question. Because it was not rhetorical, but profound, it lacked an obvious, ideological answer like "nothing!" Over the years, I have tried to apply this question to my own communities of affinity and participation, like comic books and, later, dance music.

What do they know of techno, that only techno knows? This is a good question to ponder, I suggest, even though or perhaps because it has no answer. The very act of asking it, without the capacity of a satisfactory answer, delivers us to that paradoxical space of *affirmative negation*. This is the space, I think, that is in turn necessary for "unlocking the groove" wherein the difference that techno is and still might yet be lies.[8] I am thinking of course about the utopian margin of a music that so insistently and improbably raises our expectations of an oceanic feeling of oneness with humanity, all life, and the joyous rhythm of the cosmos.

What did I know of techno, who only techno knew? I knew the names of artists and labels, the microgenres and synthesizers, and the competitive circle jerk of tastemaking, trendhunting, and other sordid nastiness. I knew about burnout and freak out, about getting sorted and distorted. I knew the sad men of the left would never take our joyous dancing as seriously, which is to say as lightly, as we did. Unlike us, they *could* techno for an answer. We couldn't, and we also couldn't take the gendered division of intellectual labor on the left.[9] Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, I even hoped that Techno Studies was about to launch itself alongside Jazz Studies, Hip Hop Studies, and Rock-centered music writing. Anytime now, we would declare ourselves, name our commitments, and enter the terrain of intellectual debate.

It was not to be. But perhaps it may yet be.

X

Tavia Nyong'o is a professor at Yale and the author of multiple works: *The Amalgamation Waltz* (2008); *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (2019); *Black Apocalypse* (forthcoming); and *Make-up Tips from Little Richard* (in process).

1
See https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/music/garcia-luis-manuel.aspx . This essay was completed before the author had the opportunity to read DeForrest Brown Jr.'s comprehensive new work *Assembling a Black Counterculture* (Primary Information, 2022).

2
Dan Sicko, *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk* (Wayne State University Press, 2010).

3
Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Routledge, 1979).

4
See Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (NYU Press, 2011).

5
Hebdige, *Subculture*, 44–45.

6
See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nP_DQgz_8FA .

7
C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Pantheon, 1983).

8
See https://archive.org/details/unlockinggroover00butl .

9
Lisa Duggan, "He Does Class and Race, She Does Gender and Sexuality (and Class and Race): Heteronormativity in the Left Academy," *Bully Bloggers*, April 4, 2015 https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/04/04/he-does-class-and-race-she-does-gender-and-sexuality-and-class-and-race-heteronormativity-in-the-left-academy/ .

Jesús Hilario-Reyes aka MORENXXX

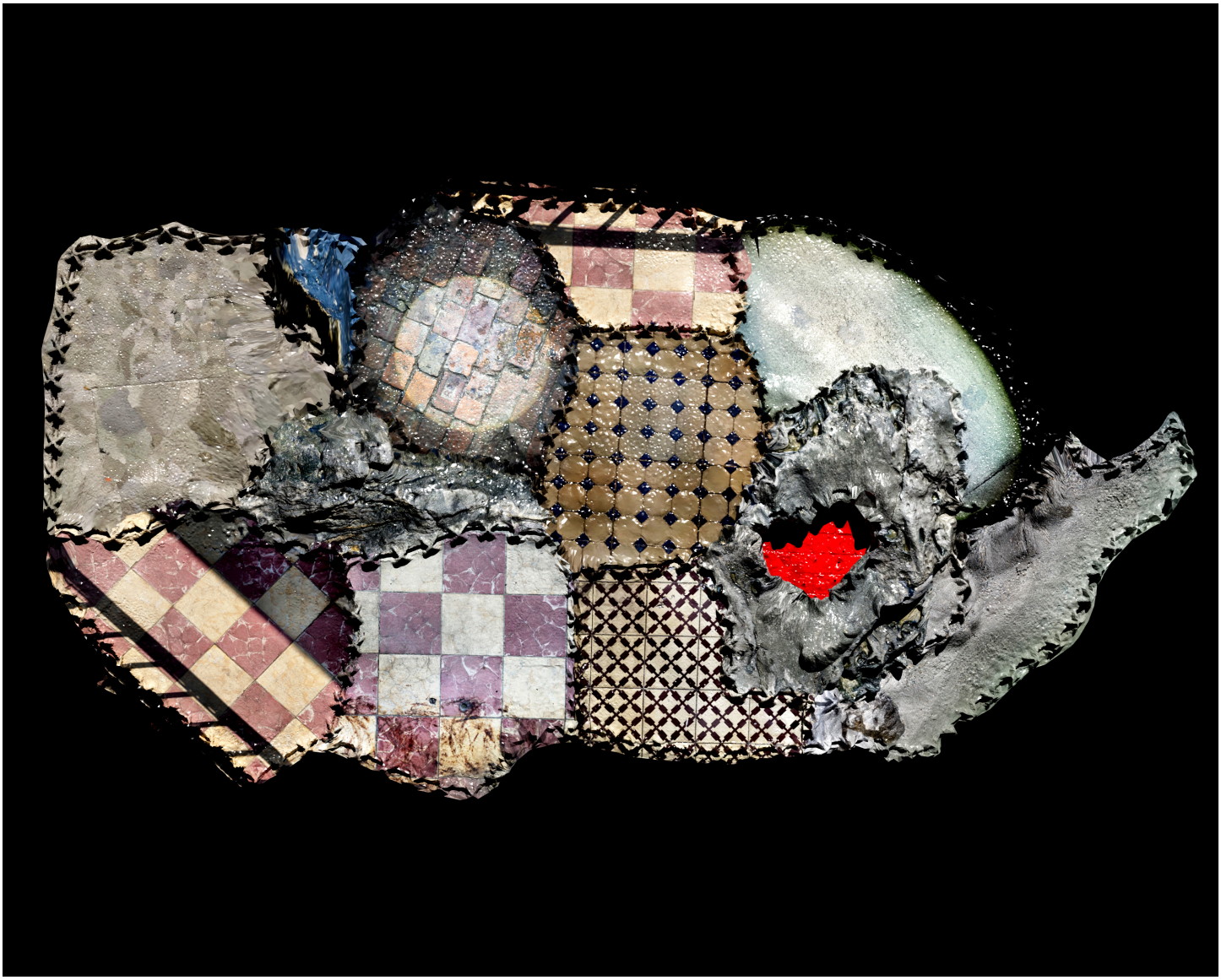
Mix: Black Techno | Queer Rave

AUDIOAUDIO

Techno is and always has been a site for the experimental. There is a certain catharsis that comes with its inert funk and drive that exquisitely blends the machine with the corporeal. As a selector and a participant in rave and nightlife, the ways in which we can manipulate and bend time, or even make time, are quite clear to me. There's something intertwined with how we perceive the passage of time, in relation to how quickly/slowly things are moving around and through us. I believe this is in part what Kodwo Eshun describes as "techno as an operating system for overriding the present."[1] Much of what makes up how we experience techno are the communities and spaces it inhabits, the legacy and stories it upholds. Given that many of my experiences have been in the company of groups like Rave Reparations, Dweller, Black Techno Matters, Futurehood, Seltzer, New World Disorder (the list goes on), the intersection of "Black techno" and "queer rave" has always been tenderly entangled. Reimagining these connections seems futile when my nightly excursions involve dancing with both entities.

This may seem novel, but I'm quite aware that this is not everyone's reality (or even the majority), that much of what is celebrated and upheld in this genre does not align with Blackness, queerness, and transness. I do believe that in this "power of overriding the present" we find our ability to recontextualize music to our liking, to bend it, and make it CUNT! Far from designating any sort of self-identification with queerness, we have spaces that set the tone for this sort of play. A quality of queer rave spaces that feels quite emblematic to the scene here in New York is a fogged-out dance floor made to feel limitless; in these spaces that centralize techno, house, trance, and dance music at large we are not only able to be embodied through the music, but simultaneously disembodied. To tiptoe in disappearance, and kiss each "other." Legacy Russell famously states in *Glitch Feminism* that "our blur is a dance-floor at 4 a.m., that moment where in the crush of all bodies lit up under strobes like firecrackers, we become nobody, and in the gorgeous crush of nobody we become everybody."[2] This practice of becoming and unbecoming is so intimately queer that these elements become unavoidable. That is to say that not all spaces foster this innately. To be clear, I am not stating that these entities are always harmonious. Oftentimes they rupture one another, are messy, and unresolved. In all honesty, I'm critical of sounding utopic or even romantic here; there is so much failure in the promise that these spaces and this music will provide us with a "saving grace." I think it's more truthful to identify Black techno and queer rave culture as gestural or incomplete; this is much more capacious, and is arguably its saving power. These notions are further contextualized in José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*:

> In my analysis that does not mean that queers become



Jesús Hilario-Reyes, Untitled #05, 2022, still.

> one nation under a groove once we hit the dance floor. I am in fact interested in the persistent variables of difference and inequity that follow us from queer communities to the dance floor, but I am nonetheless interested in the ways in which a certain queer communal logic overwhelms practices of individual identity. I am also interested in the way in which the state responds to the communal becoming.[3]

When organizing my mixes, I spend a lot of time developing a visual language to accompany my selections. Keeping in mind the visuality of these spaces, in the mix above I felt that it was important to include tracks that carry these theoretical/cultural components effortlessly. From sampling Jenn Nkiru's short film *Rebirth Is Necessary*, to Fred Moten's book *Black and Blur*, and my own and my contemporaries' poetic interventions, this mix not only explores the ability to bend time, but also to recontextualize music. While staying committed to a climactic narrative, the mix elaborates on the fluidity between legacy, gender, and race. Throughout my practice as an artist as well as a DJ, I often think about remedy, and how the work I am a part of can be utilized in that sense. In *Black to Techno*, written and directed by Jenn Nkiru, Elijah Maja voices on Arthur Jafa's theory of the dropout:

> The dropout within techno and all other forms of Black musical composition speaks to the idea of the missing … On a deeper, deeper psychoanalytical level, what you're essentially hearing is Black people creating a universe within which that rupture, that loss that we are missing is fixed. Forcing an awareness upon us of

> what has been removed then taken from us. The missing, that thing we'll never find, never get back, never recover, it's speaking to that. The dropout is essentially a pulling away, an acknowledgment of a presence, an energy that has been removed from itself.[4]

I argue that this gestural practice and intersection of Blackness, queerness, and transness works in tandem with what Eshun mentions: the conscientious notion of filling a rapture.

Ultimately, staying true to the elements that have established MORENXXX, I wanted to meddle in the harder side of techno (and trance), and centralize artists who are Black, queer, and/or trans—for example BEARCAT, TYGAPAW, Him Hun, Quest?nmarc, and DJ Hyperdrive—and blend them with legends like Robert Hood and Claude Young. All the while I'm incorporating tracks from WTCHCRFT, Xiorro, Estoc, and Ariel Zetina, who have been carrying on these legacies with enigmatic force.

X

Jesús Hilario-Reyes (aka **MORENXXX**) is an interdisciplinary artist currently based in New York. While situating their practice at the crossroads of sonic performance, land installation, and expanded cinema, their iterative works examine carnival and rave culture throughout the West, to take on a remedial approach to the effects of " *destierro*," an untranslatable Spanish term that is most akin to being "torn from the land." They've contextualized the term to traverse towards ideas of Black and queer fugitivy. Interwoven in the midst of these notions is a concern for the im/possibility of the Black body and the failure of mechanical optics. Hilario-Reyes has developed a tender entanglement with their practice as a DJ to stimulate and conflict their artistic endeavors. They are a recipient of the Drawing a Blank artist grant, the Leslie-Lohman Museum Artist Fellowship, the Lighthouse Works Fellowship, and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts residency. Hilario-Reyes has shown work at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Black Star Film Festival, Mana Contemporary, Real Art Ways, Rudimento, Parasol Unit, and Gladstone Gallery.

1
Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (Quartet Books, 1998), 124.

2
Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism* (Verso, 2020), 116.

3
José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (NYU Press, 2009), 66.

4
From *Black to Techno*, directed by Jenn Nkiru (2019).

Femanyst

Mix: Aural Battle Armor

AUDIOAUDIO

One thing, especially about house music, is that there's no female representation, no feminine representation—ever. Anywhere. I've only seen one documentary that mentioned women being in house music. If I didn't make the switch from house to techno—from Lady Blacktronika to Femanyst—and especially hard techno, I think I'd be doing the same three hundred Euro gigs for the rest of my life, never getting anywhere. When people ask, "Who are the top names in house music?," no women are ever mentioned. It's a total lack of representation, and it's like they say: the good old boys' network. It just keeps particular men in power, and they don't give that power away to anybody. Or at least not to anybody who's not a man from Detroit.

When I was doing house music, I had no love from Detroit. In the 2000s I was really into beatdown. On Myspace—before I even had a record out—I wrote that I was the first lady of beatdown because there *were* no women. And then this particular producer/DJ sent out an email to all kinds of producers and labels, telling them, "She's not the first lady of beatdown"—basically telling them not to support me. All I was doing was being a fan. To get this vehement hate before I even got established in the industry at all was terrible. But I kept on persevering.

Early on in my career in house music, people were like, "Oh, we want to book her," but then they would book some famous guy. Or maybe not famous, but they would just book a guy instead of booking me. Nothing ever got invested in me, so it was just harder to feel invested in it. In techno, after just a year or two of even just dabbling—I didn't even know what my sound was—I was already playing in France, Nuits Sonores, places I would never have been asked to play as Lady Blacktronika. I guess my voice in techno seemed so rebellious. Suddenly, I was going places I never imagined I could go.

I made house music because I loved it. But when I listen back to that music, a lot of it is very sad—that was how I was working through my emotions. I felt like I needed to be on a different journey, sonically and emotionally.

Techno was of part of this healing effort I needed to make. I didn't want to be singing the same sad songs for the rest of my life. Berghain also played a big part in this because I liked the intense energy in the club more than going upstairs to Panorama Bar. For me, it has to do with the freedom to be topless—being a big woman and being topless in a very masculine-centered space. That allowed me to be free because I was able to force myself to say, *I belong here, too*. Nobody cared downstairs [in Berghain]. But I noticed that when I would go upstairs to Panorama Bar, it was like I needed to cover myself up because people are looking at you like, *what are you doing*?

Techno coincided with my own personal journey towards

Shayol: Science Fiction Fantasy, no. 4 (1980). Cover detail.

freedom. [At Berghain] we used to talk about being upstairs or downstairs. When you go up upstairs, it's a totally different vibe. Downstairs feels much more loose and free. I have always loved house music and I probably always will, but it doesn't give me the cathartic relief anymore, not as much as techno does. It's the aggressiveness, the abrasiveness, the hardness. I don't know. But then, not all techno is equal. Some techno is much more aggressive and in your face.

I like noises. I like weird noises. Techno of an aggressive and abrasive nature has long been a source of aural battle armor against a world that's unaccepting of queerness or otherness. Since my teens, I have embraced that aspect and found safety and an ability to live free and authentically myself through this music. I remember making a post on Facebook about why we like wiggly noises. I love "wakka wakka wakka" sounds—it just tickles my soul when I hear something like that! But I also think a lot about the horror film genre. I don't really like horror, but in music, I like horror! It's the darkest elements: rebelling against society and norms, the constrictive norms, or prescriptive norms. [Techno] allows me to rebel against society, and I definitely irritate my neighbors!

As a trans woman, what I also love—what I've noticed—is that trans women of color are finding DJing and techno as an avenue of survival as opposed to sex work. That's been really important for me to see. I've been really happy to see that *the girls* don't have to rely on sex work anymore—or

not as much. I started out in my early twenties with sex work and being homeless—everything that would be the story of Black trans women in the '90s and the 2000s was my story. And then I got into music, and I found another avenue. I'm glad that so many of *the girls* are finding this. That's an amazing thing for me to see—that this industry is taking *the girls* up.

There are a few things the industry never addresses. We're always saying, "include women," but then we don't say, "Well, which women?" That question never gets asked or answered. Then there's the issue of classism. The industry loves wealth consolidation, and they like to pay people who don't need money. But if you need money, then you have a stamp that says you're greedy and not just hungry or in need of financial support. And a lot of [the gatekeepers in the industry] don't get that because they haven't come from where *we* come from. For me to see *the girls* making it makes me happy.

X

Femanyst is the techo alias of Lady Blacktronika. Her mission is to make techno exciting again by focusing on it's forgotten history.

madison moore

Contents Under Pressure: A (Queer) Techno Manifesto

Prompt: Listen to the mix while you read.

AUDIOAUDIO

I.

October 2014. It's 1:30 a.m. and I'm walking through London Fields on my way to this rave in an abandoned World War II bunker in nearby Dalston. Plug the postcode into Google Maps and realize the spot is behind the Kingsland Road McDonald's where I have consumed a thousand post-rave bacon roll sandwiches at 6, 7, 8 a.m. before wobbling home from the party, tired but feeling accomplished, sometimes opening Grindr to see who's up.

Tonight I've already been to Savage, a fabulous, glitzy, East London queer party sensation in a multilevel strip club at the corner of Hackney Road, right where the 55 bus turns left onto Cambridge Heath Road. I love Savage because right now, it's the queer nodal point of East London. It's bright, it's queer, it's high glam. The point of going to Savage isn't really the music, which is never risky. You go to be seen, maybe get photographed, maybe kiss a cute boy or girl, maybe rub elbows with the queer who's who of East London, maybe hear your favorite pop song. Nothing wrong with that—it's exciting—but I was craving something a little more intense, so I bounced.

I get to the postcode—E8 3DL—but it's not clear where I'm supposed to go. No lines anywhere. No obvious signs of ravers gathering, but I do see lots of party people shuffling around; Kingsland Road/Shoreditch High Street is a central nightlife artery. I pace back and forth, confused and on the verge of giving up. Then a bouncer emerges from a pair of doors I hadn't noticed. "No loitering," he scolds, but I tell him I'm looking for the party—can't he tell?—and he ushers me down the stairs.

The venue hides in plain sight.

A dark, cavernous tunnel pointed at a 45-degree angle spits me into a booming, concrete techno underworld. It's all a bit different than the high-octane, jam-packed, mirror-ball glamor of Savage. For one thing, there's not nearly as much light in here. It feels like we're all trespassing. People dance, separated and spaced out, alone but together. Low ceilings, uneven concrete stairs—definitely a bunker. Red is the lighting color of choice. The music, mostly bass frequencies without words, strikes you in the chest.

I leave my things in the "coat check," which is always improvised at the rave. There's not much in here but a couple of people—maybe thirty? fifty?—and a few battery-powered up-lights tucked away in the corners. In Room One, a live act is doing modular techno. I love

madison moore, there's always room for dancing: Performance Lecture, as part of Nightlife-in-Residence, March 3, 2022. Performance view, The Kitchen. Photo by Walter Wlodarczyk. Takes place within: Sadie Barnette, The New Eagle Creek Saloon, The Kitchen, New York, January 18, 2022–March 6, 2022.

modular techno, but honestly, I'm not really feeling this. No groove, no sauce, so I move down the long, red, smoky corridor. That drops me off in Room Two, where DJs are pumping thunderous techno. I stay here for most of the night, the beats feeling urgent and overwhelming and galvanizing.

At some point in my queer nightlife journey, I became a techno queen. I craved it, needed it. Wherever my favorite DJs were, wherever techno was, no matter what time of day, I was there too. The ethnomusicologist Luis-Manuel Garcia calls this act of ravenously chasing electronic music "techno tourism," pointing to music fans who return to cities "repeatedly to take in—and participate in—the city's electronic dance music (EDM) scenes."[1] Discovering techno was eye-opening for me. Before techno, I never organized my club nights around genres of music, sounds, or even specific DJs. I never thought about the music at all. I never once woke up at 5 a.m., 7 a.m. to go to the club, let alone stayed there for more than two hours. I just went to the clubs and bars where the gay guys were, even though gay male spaces gave me a lot of anxiety.

When I lived in Brooklyn, I didn't know anything about the New York queer underground or dance music (though in the early 2000s I was a MisShapes girlie, and Sugar Land and Metropolitan were Brooklyn staples). But I *loved* nightlife and going out—the ritual and spectacle of getting all dressed up, the performances of the self, the sense of not knowing what's going to happen next, weighing whether I was only going to stay out until the last train (usually around 1 a.m.) or the first train (usually around 5 a.m.) back to New Haven, the gossip shared over pancakes at Odessa at 6 a.m., 7 a.m. As much as I loved nightlife, I hated going to big-box, marquee gay venues because I always felt outside of, even unwelcome, in the gay male sexual economy. I'm not white, I'm not particularly masculine, so I was basically invisible to the majority of those girls.

It wasn't until I moved to London, which was a coming of age for me, and got absorbed by the warehouse techno and queer dance music scene that I understood

Savage, a club in East London

dancing— *really* dancing, sweating, WORKing—to unfamiliar music for hours on end. In the gay bars and clubs I was used to going to, cruising and Grindr chats came first, and music seemed a distant second. But in London, queer parties at Savage, or Dalston Superstore, or KAOS, or Inferno, or Adonis, or Shutdown, or Chapter 10, or BBZ, or Pussy Palace, or Dance Tunnel, or Vogue Fabrics had fashion and fabulousness, but they also had great music.

As an expat and techno tourist in London, I spent years going to warehouse techno parties throughout the UK, Europe, and London at venues stretching from Elephant and Castle to Hackney Wick, often savoring the kooky night bus journeys I took to get home. I've trekked to Manchester and Glasgow on a moment's notice for a club night, and I used to love waking up at 7 a.m. on Sunday mornings to go to Jaded, the techno after hours at Corsica Studios that ran from 5 a.m. to 2 p.m.

My favorite, though, was stumbling out of that venue right on the Thames—what's that place called again?—in the wee hours of the morning, the city empty and the smell of coffee from Caffè Nero starting to brew, then walking to Liverpool Street to get the 242 bus home.

I loved the way techno made me feel, the bass and the beats taking me by the bussy—a sonic pressure, urgency, and awareness of my body I wasn't used to. The music was hot, but I wasn't sure how to dance, how to move, what the choreography was. I watched people and copied them. I learned that this wasn't necessarily a style of dance that mimicked sex, fucking, or being in a couple, although you could if you wanted. People mostly stood alone together as their own little pods, taking up the space around them, however small, kicking, swaying, punching, shuffling.

I can still see the blonde-haired French girl who always danced alone on a box. Her Instagram bio said, "I am techno." She danced as if techno was an erotic release, her hair flying at least a million directions at once. She inspired me to get hair extensions so that I, too, could bring some hair choreography to the rave.

Eventually, I figured out my own style of dance. I tried to imagine that each new beat—and there are at least 130 of them per minute!—offered a new opportunity to pose.

As much as I loved techno and going to these warehouse parties, out of the dozens I went to in the four years I lived in London—except for BBZ and Pussy Palace, which were decidedly BIPOC and femme spaces—I can count on two hands the number of times the techno DJs were Black, brown, femme, or just not cis white dudes.

In a galvanizing 2014 essay on "An Alternate History of Sexuality in Club Culture," electronic music scholar and practitioner Luis-Manuel Garcia outlines the rich connections between club culture, dance music, and marginalized communities, signaling the erasure of queer and trans people of color from the dance floor and the DJ booth.[2] The crux of the essay is that it shows that marginalized communities have played central roles in virtually all dance music. Garcia points to the now well-rehearsed narrative of techno's Detroit origins in the Belleville Three, a story that always situates the birth of techno in the hands of three straight Black dudes: Kevin Saunderson, Juan Atkins, and Derrick May. "But was Detroit such a straight scene?" he asks.[3] Where are the women, the queers, and the femmes in this story? And what would it mean to theorize techno from the perspective of Black queerness?

"An Alternate History of Sexuality in Club Culture" should be required reading for anyone engaged with nightlife

A rave in London

because it teases out the often-erased connections and histories between queerness, race, sexuality, and dance music.[4] In another important essay, ethnomusicologist Blair Black calls the vibrant wavelengths between queerness, race, sexuality, and dance music the "queer of color sound economies" of electronic dance music. In the piece, Black outlines the surgical ways that dance music, with roots in queer-of-color liberationist politics, "departed from its queer and African American sensibilities" as it made its way to Europe, resulting in a so-called "musical purism," where dance music, politics, and race are no longer linked as they once were:

> For example, *DJ Mag* posted a video of racially diverse demonstrators dancing to house music in solidarity with the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests against the extrajudicial killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. However, some fans focused their anger towards a sign that read "House Music is Black Music." In the comments, people expressed that "music doesn't have a race" and called for the *DJ Mag* page to stop "political sh****t." Despite others stepping in to explain how the sign serves as a reminder of house music's history, those who were angered defaulted to the universalist rhetoric to justify their responses.[5]

Today, straight white men overwhelmingly call the shots in techno, as they sit in positions as executives, editors, journalists, and label heads, a structure media theorist and sound artist DeForrest Brown, Jr. tackles in an important *Mixmag* feature.[6] "In turn," Blair Black tells us, "straight, cis-gendered white DJs are disproportionally hired and praised compared to their queer and non-white counterparts."[7] Here's DJ Derrick Carter from Chicago adding his piece: "Something that started as gay black/Latino club music is now sold, shuffled and packaged as having very little to do with either."[8]

There has long been something of an anxiety or battle to recognize techno as Black—even to see it as music. "They don't know it's black music," Carl Craig told the *New York Times* in May 2000 on the occasion of the first Detroit Electronic Music Festival (DEMF), now known as the Movement. "[Techno] was created by young black men in the same way hip-hop was."[9] In many ways, the goal of DEMF was to attract young Black folks to techno music because at the time, electronic music was broadly associated with white suburban youth, illegal raves, and club drugs. Black teenagers scoffed at techno as suburban noise.[10]

The problem for techno was—and to some extent still is now—its enormous popularity and commercialization in Europe, but lack of interest, sales, and radio play in the US. "Carl Craig is an international music star," the *Times* wrote.

> Every weekend he is somewhere in the world performing before sold-out crowds of swooning teenagers and twenty-somethings. In Belgium and Australia, fans clamor for his autograph and a glimpse of his hazel eyes. In London and Paris, they wait hours to tell him how his music has changed their lives. But here in his hometown, the place that spawned the sound known as Detroit techno, the thirty-year-old Mr. Craig remains an unknown.[11]

Even within contemporary writing about Black popular music, little attention is paid to Black electronic dance music.[12] Paul Gilroy has famously lamented the "deskilling" of Black music, where "dehumanized technologies … along with indifference, laziness, and disregard" have "reduced" the genius of the Black musical tradition, which he calls the Marsalis or Lincoln Center option, to "a tame lexicon of preconstituted fragments."[13] DJ culture, and dance music for that matter, are all about these preconfigured fragments of loops and samples.

A rave staircase

Adding to the lack of critical attention paid to Black electronic dance music, there's also no "techno studies" or "house music studies" in the same way there is a rich intellectual tradition of "jazz studies" or "hip-hop studies" within Black studies, echoing Alexander G. Weheliye's early critique on the paucity of attention paid to R&B music.[14] This is not to valorize the "studies-ification" or institutionalization of subcultural practices, sounds, and communities, but it is to point out the gap, and serve as a call to think capaciously about what the Black frequencies of dance music might teach us about togetherness, queerness, and practices of refusal.

There's a new energy in contemporary techno and dance music that's zeroed in on snatching the music back from the fist-pumping, black t-shirt–wearing "business techno" bros. A crucial piece of this new focus is *Black to Techno,* a film by Jenn Nkiru that offers a gorgeous portrait of the Detroit techno scene and its legacy.[15] This new techno and dance music universe includes efforts by NON Worldwide and parties like Black Techno Matters in DC as well as Rave Reparations and Hood Rave, two LA parties with specific aims to center Black and brown people on the dance floor.[16] It includes DISCWOMAN and the galvanizing work of Frankie Decaiza Hutchinson, a major voice in creating another dynamic in dance music. The new face of techno includes festivals like Dweller, dedicated wholly to celebrating Black electronic artists. And that's to say nothing of parties like Mamba Negra in Brazil, Noxeema Jackson in Washington, DC, GHE20G0TH1K, Dick Appointment, New World Dysorder, GUSH, and Papi Juice in New York, Legendary in Chicago—all parties led by queer people of color telling a different story about dance music.

The late vogue and ballroom legend Vjuan Allure used to talk about bringing " *the beats!*" to the ball. That's the way he used to say it: " *the beats!*" The beats as a kind of Black queer frequency: the star of the show, the life of the ball, the energy on any dance floor. They compel you out of your seat, to the dance floor, get you to move, tap your foot, vogue. The beats wash over you, WORK you, possess you, fuck you. If you vogued and somehow you weren't on beat, it's never the beat: it's *you*. That's what Vjuan used to say—even had it printed on a red wrist band.

It's never the beat: it's you!

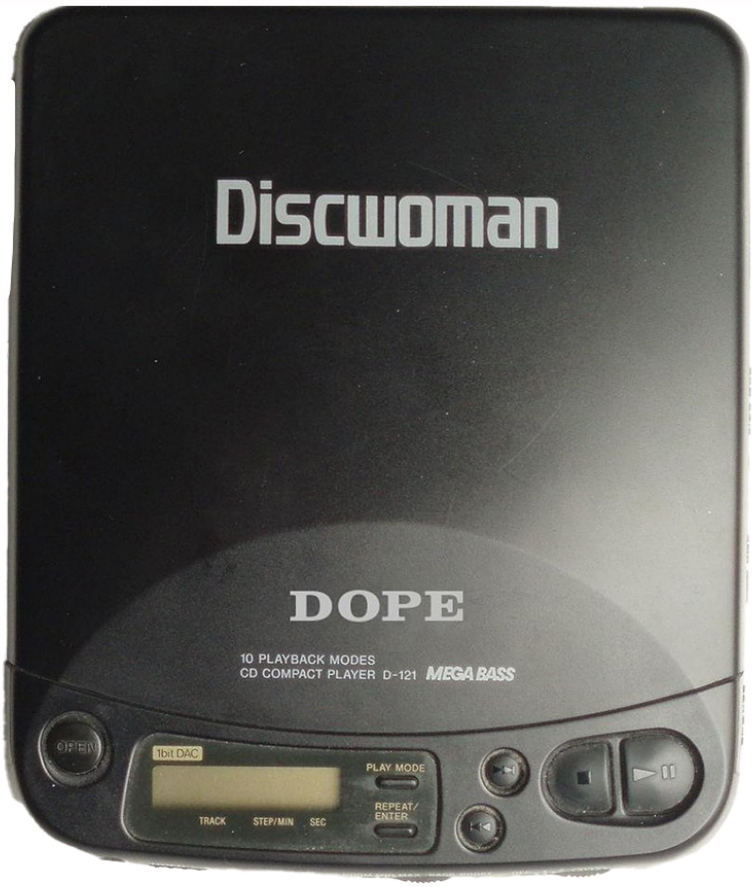
When I think about my love of techno, I'm cueing up the juicy vibrations of techno as Black queer frequency—"the beats!" as conjured by folks like TYGAPAW, Juliana Huxtable, NKISI, Lotic, DJ Holographic, DJ Delish, Authentically Plastic, LSDXOXO, Jasmine Infiniti, Juana, Rroxymore, br0nz3_g0dd3ss, Honey Dijon, Femanyst, MORENXXX, AKUA, Goth Jafar, Yazzus, Daiyah, Shyboi, and Shaun J. Wright, just to name these few. These are the Black, queer, femme, and trans girls who are at the forefront of contemporary techno and dance music.

In 2018, DeForrest Brown, Jr., in collaboration with HECHA / , launched a simple black hat with white lettering: "Make Techno Black Again." The hat's aim was to celebrate "the origins of Techno and its roots in cities like Detroit and the African-American working-class experience."[17] Out in the wild, I can tell you the hat causes quite the stir. When I wear it, people smile, or give me the thumbs up, or say "right on!" or they'll be like, "Hey, I like your hat!"

Make Techno Black Again: a dynamic call to action, if not a clarion call. But it also makes me wonder this: Once we've proved techno is Black, and once we've repaired the narrative, and once we know about the clubs and the parties and the DJs, and once we've made techno Black again, what happens next?

II.

There's nothing like the thrill of walking up to a dark, foggy



Discwoman is a New York–based talent agency that showcases and represents artists in electronic music.

techno dance floor as an anonymous flow of beats surrounds you at 133, 135, 140 beats per minute. The same beats, over and over, hypnotizing. The slightest change in melody, tempo.

Worrrk.

A new sample; a new loop. *Intensity*. The music wraps itself around you, takes you, and constantly brings you to the edge, a reminder of our capacity for feeling, as Audre Lorde says of the erotic.[18] The philosopher Robin James describes techno as music that "intensifies repetition to the limit of aural perception; the climax or musical 'money shot' comes when this limit is reached or crossed"—that is, the money shot or relief comes when the beat drops.[19]

But techno is much kinkier than that. This is a music of endurance, of going and going and going. That's why I've always thought that techno was sort of like edge play. *Edging*—"getting seconds away from climax and stopping, waiting for a few more seconds then start[ing] again."[20] Sonic edge play: dance music that takes you to a peak, puts you on the edge, and holds you captive in the pleasure over and over for extended periods of time. The final release occurs when the night ends.

Vision is the first sense that goes on the techno dance floor. Most nightlife spaces are dark on purpose, both to expand the room, make it feel limitless, and then to hide the imperfections. *Shadows, impressions, glimpses.*

Redaction.

Techno spaces take darkness to a new level: with vision removed, and lighting that doesn't really help you see, and fog that obfuscates your vision even further, all you're left with are the sounds and impressions of what's around you. The room is filtered, the sound is not.

Intensity, redaction, sonic edge play, impressions—this is the galvanizing allure of techno.

"Frequencies of Blackness: A Listening Session," led by Tina Campt in November 2020, featured Zara Julius, Jenn Nkiru, and Alexander Weheliye, who all responded to the question "What does frequency offer us as a framework for understanding Black life?" No other question has shaped my thinking about queer nightlife as much as this one, and since tuning into this listening session I have loved thinking through Black frequency—and Black queer frequency specifically—as it relates to the allure,

dynamics, and textures of techno, dance music, and foggy queer dance floors.

For Campt, "Black frequency," this practice of refusal, is

> a sonic space [that] ranges from silence to deafening, dissonant noise; as a register of rapture and spirituality; as a temporal feedback loop of memory, repetition, and renewal; as a dynamic relation of call and response or chorus and verse; as a haptic and kinetic space of contact and connection across the African continent and its various diasporas."[21]

The logics of frequency as a practice of refusal can be traced to and across a range of Black cultural productions, from music and noise, to memory and repetition, as well as through performances of call and response.

The thrill of techno and beat-driven dance music is its Black frequency, a frequency of intensity, of rupture and refusal, of rapture and rage. Beat-driven dance music is uniquely able to situate you right here, *right now*, with an urgency, potency, and intensity that powerful sound systems make possible. Bass-driven music, cultural critic Paul C. Jasen writes, relies "on felt vibration. [It has] a more explicitly material aim, being designed to modulate flesh and space."[22] For Jasen, the reason bass-driven music makes us feel good is because "when bass permeates and modulates, it binds bodies together (putting them literally *on the same wavelength.*"[23] Frequency, in other words, binds bodies together.

Techno has been variously theorized as cold, futuristic music that alienates itself from the human—"synthesizers generating a parallel universe in sound," as Kodwo Eshun said.[24] In 1992, Jon Pareles of the *New York Times* described techno as a kind of Morse code, a music with minimal lyrics that ignores familiar song structures like verses, choruses, and bridges in favor of rhythm, repetition, and the endless configuration of loops, all clocking in at 130 beats per minute or faster. But techno is also a music of endurance, of going and going and going; tracks don't necessarily have an end because they are always unfinished. They are produced not necessarily for the radio but specifically to be mixed and combined into one another by DJs, creating infinite, endless combinations and opportunities to expand for as long as the DJ can last.

The kind of techno I like to play uses vocals to sass up the mix, taking the waveform and making it bitchier. Think of it as sprinkling the beats with charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent. Techno is often disconnected from human voices, from singing and melodies. When there are vocals, these are typically used to punctuate or add another sonic texture to the mix. Importantly, Pareles notes that techno is a "music that thrives on its anonymity"; this refers to the stealth methods techno producers use to release tracks under a range of aliases, sometimes changing names between releases or releasing tracks as a white label, with no artist name whatsoever.

Kodwo Eshun, an early theorist of Black electronic music, points out in *More Brilliant Than the Sun* that because of its reliance on machines, as well as its quantized, gridded repetition, techno suggests a kind of sonic brutalism, a "music to riot with." It's this brutalism I find really fascinating for thinking through the queer demands of techno. For Eshun, listening to techno is "like being sprayed full in the face with CS gas," the high-octane Black frequencies of techno becoming an "immersion in insurrection"—frequencies that inflict "an insurrectionary voltage."[25]

But an insurrection of what?

III.

Deep in the 2020 lockdown of the pandemic, OPULENCE, a queer techno party crew I was a part of in London, launched a series of virtual dance parties on Zoom. *Ah, the era of the Zoom party.* Instead of all of us being based in London as we were before, we now found ourselves distributed in Richmond, Virginia, Berlin, Switzerland, and London. But we still had a desire to create queer space, even across multiple time zones and internet connections. For the July 2020 virtual party, we worked with Byron Edge, a Black queer femme graphic designer, to make a three-hour movie with visuals set to three different, hour long prerecorded DJ mixes featuring Karen Wilkins (RIP), myself, and the headliner: Femanyst, a Black trans DJ based in Berlin by way of Oakland, California. When Femanyst first started making music in the mid-2000s, she performed under the alias Lady Blacktronika and focused more on house music because that felt more cathartic, even as she initially intended to release hardcore music as The Transexual Terrorist.

The second track in Femanyst's mix for this virtual OPULENCE was "The Marching Beast," an intense, forward-moving industrial track produced by Vishscale, a London-based techno producer who releases on the harder edge of dance music. I found the track striking in its severity. This was music at high intensity, as an urgent demand for something else. Coming in hot at nearly seven minutes long and 148 beats per minute, "The Marching Beast" grabs your attention immediately as the fog of an ominous, cinematic bass synthesizer floats in lightly underneath a voice-over by Gia ExMachina. There's no kick drum, but the tension and feelings of danger and suspense warn you that it's coming, and when it does, it's going to be severe. After nearly a minute of teasing moans

and percussive rifts—sonic edge play—the seismic kick drum drops and the track explodes into an intensity of queer sound, raising heart rates, and calling bodies into action.

I've wondered how and why these harsh, aggressive sounds, these *contents under pressure,* speak to queer-of-color DJs and dance floors. On the release of her 2020 album *BXTCH SLÄP*, a gorgeous, writhing sonic exploration of rave culture, DJ and producer Jasmine Infiniti theorized the hellscape of existing in this world as a Black trans woman, *contents under pressure*, telling *i-D* magazine:

> As a Black trans woman, often just existing in this world feels hellish. The things that I have personally had to go through and that many other black trans women endure, it's almost as if we are existing in hell already. It's kind of like, well I'm already here, I might as well live it up and find the best parts of this existence that I can. It's about embracing that hell vibe. If I'm already here then I'm gonna be debaucherous and party to all hours of the morning. I want it to reflect that.[26]

Infiniti's description of moving through the demonic grounds of the here and now points to the lasting urgency of techno, as well as its queerness. Techno is the sound of queer insurrection. A queer insurrectionist sonic; a sonic refusal, following Tina Campt, "of the status quo as livable … a refusal to recognize a social order that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible."[27]

The beats, *weaponry*, the disused warehouse spaces, *seized*, even if only for a little while.[28]

Outside: noise, disorder. *Inside*: sweat, erotic release, other beginnings. *Refusal*. For queer-of-color life, these practices of refusal work as a fire alarm system that signals the state of emergency of Black and brown people, a sonic resistance to life as *contents under pressure*.

In an essay on the queerness of industrial music, cultural critic Yetta Howard brilliantly uses the metaphor of an aerosol can to tease out "queerness's disruptive force."[29] The phrase "do not puncture or incinerate," Howard writes, "generally appears as a warning on aerosol cans or other items that have 'contents under pressure,'" a telling phrase I'm sampling to illustrate the five-alarm fire of queer-of-color life.[30] In her view, this hazardous threat of incineration, disruption, and puncture is the queerness of industrial music. Call it an antagonism rooted largely in the danger of volume, of pushing the mixer seriously into the red—"the literal dangers associated with puncturing the eardrum or damaging the levels of hearing, but also the exhilarating, prurient dangers that exceed the impositions of amplified volume."[31]

The rave *is* loud. Earplugs anyone? Techno, the sound of queer insurrection, this dramaturgy of discontent, needs to be loud to make sense because it is music that *happens* to you, mediated by speaker towers and subwoofers. But techno is perhaps less about puncture or discomfort and more about immediacy—the immediacy of sweating, feeling, vibrating, touching, dancing. Fast, energetic, joyous techno at 148 beats per minute is still unruly and carries an insurrectionary voltage. Here's DJ and producer Yazzus describing her 2022 track "Mythrill": "It's giving hypnotic, crystallised, 90s ibiza [*heart-eyes emoji*] (2090s though)."[32]

Punk music has a direct throughline to contemporary techno culture. José Esteban Munõz describes "punk" as a "potentially insurrectionist mode of being in the world"—a space where "matter, sound and people collide."[33] The location-TBA warehouse rave is the temporary autonomous zone where we create spaces of release—*not* utopia, *not* freedom, *not* safety. Release. The soundtrack of this insurrectionist refusal highlights the discontent, or disgust, with the here and now, using sound to usher in a demand for something, *anything* "that is not the holding pattern of a devastated present."[34]

Insurrection: a charged word to use in the wake of the right-wing attack on the US Capitol in January 2021. In 2010, another group of insurrectionists called The WhoreDykeBlackTransFeminist Network published "A Manifesto for the Trans-Feminist Insurrection," where they made an urgent call to action:

> We are the dykes, the whores, the trans, the immigrants, the blacks, the hetero dissidents … We are the rage of the feminist revolution and we want to bear our teeth … We call for insurrection, for the occupation of the streets, to the blogs, to disobedience, to not ask for permission, to generate alliances and structures of our own: let's not defend ourselves, make them fear us![35]

They said what they said.

As right-wing attacks on LGBTQ life grow, and as "gay rights" leaves the most marginalized in the dust, and as Republicans shrug away gun violence, and as the heath system fails to protect, and as police killings of Black people become a state norm, and as "No Fats, No Femmes, and No Blacks or Asians" still rules the day, and as the guy who currently owns Grindr voted for Trump, and as drag queens are weaponized, and as queer nightlife venues are literally shot up, techno as queer

insurrectionist sonic, made Black again by Black, queer, trans, and femme DJs and party crews, is the soundtrack to our emergency demand for something else.

X

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