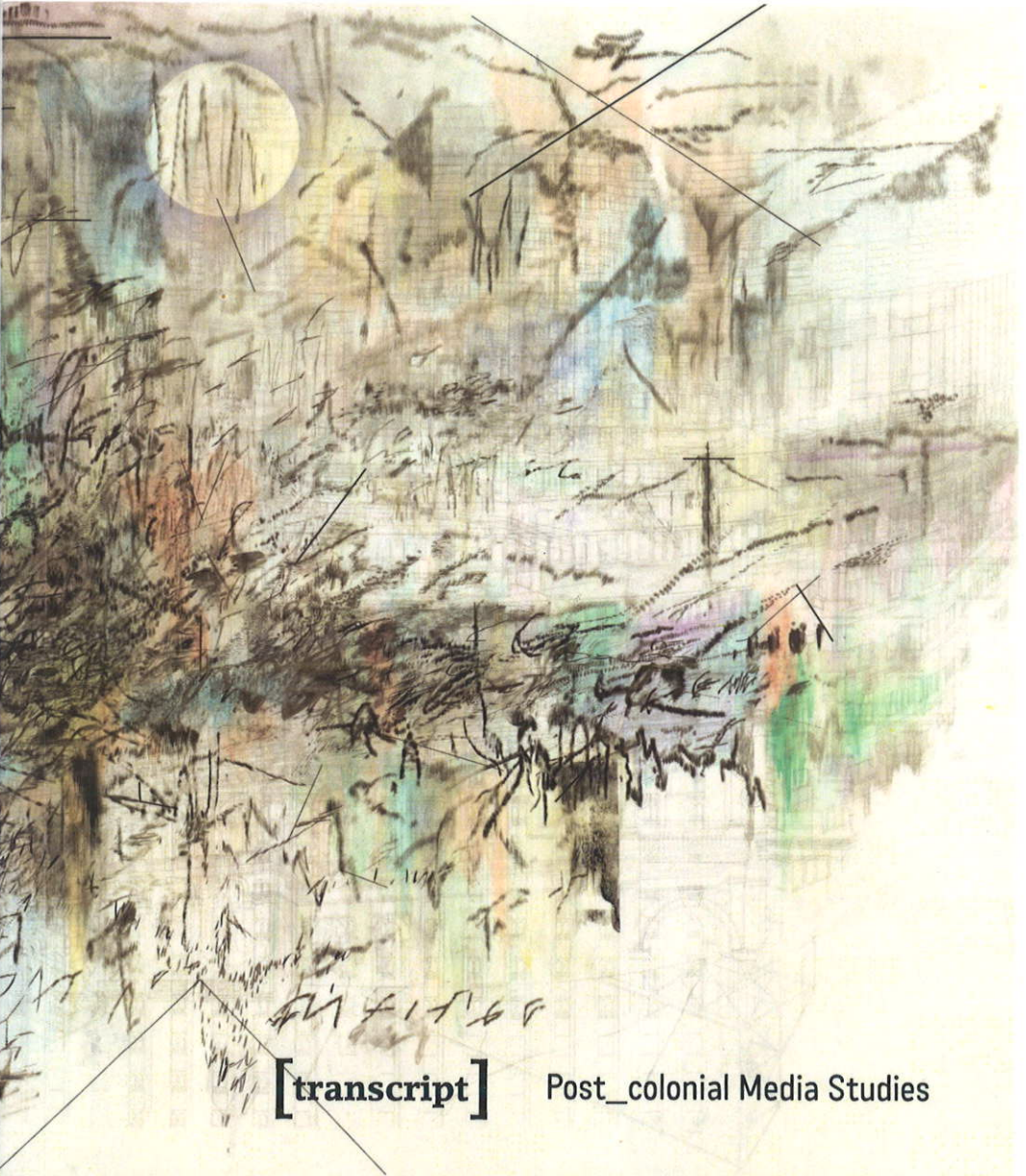


Henriette Gunkel, kara lynch (eds.)

We Travel the Space Ways

Black Imagination, Fragments,
and Diffractions



[transcript]

Post_colonial Media Studies

HENRIETTE GUNKEL, KARA LYNCH (EDS.)

We Travel the Space Ways

Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions

[transcript]

Funded by



GEFÖRDERT VOM



Bundesministerium
für Bildung
und Forschung

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

© 2019 transcript Verlag, Bielefeld

Cover concept: Kordula Röckenhaus, Bielefeld

Cover illustration: Julie Mehretu: Fever graph (algorithm for serendipity), 2013.

Graphite, Ink and Acrylic on Canvas, 96x120 inches (JM 0590.13)

Printed by Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar

Print-ISBN 978-3-8376-4601-6

PDF-ISBN 978-3-8394-4601-0

<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446010>

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement | 9

0. Constellation

Black Astrophysics: A Homemade Field of Love

Alexis Pauline Gumbs | 15

Lift Off... an Introduction

kara lynch and Henriette Gunkel | 21

I.

City of Mirage

Kiluanji Kia Henda | 47

Reach, Robot: AfroFuturist Technologies

Grisha Coleman and Thomas F. DeFrantz | 53

Glitches Running Trains Out In Negrizonia, A Gynocidal Western

Greg Tate | 69

To Win the War, You Fought It Sideways:

Kojo Laing's *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*

Kodwo Eshun | 83

Black Atlantis

Ayesha Hameed | 107

II.

The Palace of the Quilombos

Frohawk Two Feathers | 129

The Sound of Afrofuturism

Stefanie Alisch and Carla J. Maier | 133

The Revolutionist

Milumbe Haimbe | 151

The Crypt of Blackness: or Assotto Saint with Gilles Deleuze

Tavia Nyong'o | 175

Rise of the Astro Blacks

Greg Tate | 199

III.

The Archivist's Vault :: Door Of No Return

kara lynch | 205

**An Afrofuturist Time Capsule – One Point in Space-Time
in the Collective Consciousness of Black Speculation**

M. Asli Dukan with Wildseeds, sorryyoufeeluncomfortable,
and AfroFuturist Affair | 211

***Organize Your Own* Temporality: Notes on Self-Determined
Temporalities and Radical Futurities**

Rasheedah Phillips | 237

**"I Feel Love": Race, Gender, Technē,
and the (Im)Proper Sonic Habitus**

Kara Keeling | 245

**Afrofuturism On My Mind:
Imagining Black Lives in a Post-Obama World**

Anna Everett | 251

IV.

Brother Kyot

Daniel Kojo Schrade | 281

**Intervening into the Future Script: A Conversation about Fiction,
Magic, and the Speculative Power of Images**

Kiluanji Kia Henda and Nadine Siegert | 287

Dismantle Imperia

Robyn Smith | 303

**Textures of Time – Abstraction, Afronauts,
and the Archive in the Artwork of Daniel Kojo Schrade**

Tobias Nagl | 321

There Are Storytellers Everywhere

Raimi Gbadamosi | 343

V.

Prophetika

Abigail DeVille | 357

The Secessionist Manifestos of Certain Received Wisdoms

John Akomfrah and Kodwo Eshun | 363

They Sent You?

Jim Chuchu | 371

Alienation and Queer Discontent

Henriette Gunkel | 387

FAR SPACE-WISE – Without Edges a Center Cannot Exist in Stasis

Jamika Ajalon | 405

VI. FINAL ORBIT

Future

Rasheedah Phillips | 433

Authors | 441

The Sound of Afrofuturism

STEFANIE ALISCH AND CARLA J. MAIER

If there is an Afrofuturism, it must be though in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points.
DERY 1994: 182

Afrofuturism, we use the term and at the same time it remains evasive. It comes to life in connection with specific examples — may they be sonic, visual, or verbal. The *Afro* and the *futuristic* in conjuncture invite us to think in two modes simultaneously, to ask how they relate to each other. There is a tension in this that is alluring and productive. Following Mark Dery, an Afrofuturist approach is neither obvious nor clear-cut. Rather, the epigraph suggests, Afrofuturism compels us to look in “unlikely places” and to connect disparate perspectives.

In this essay, we are interested in open-endedness. Rather than taking up explicitly Afrofuturist ventures such as DJ King Britt’s Fhloston Paradigm we test Afrofuturism as an analytical tool for a critical study of Black Atlantic sounds across genres, media, and locations. Considering more recent Black Atlantic sound practices¹ and sonic materialities like Broken Beat, Grime, Crunk, and Kuduro expands and refines notions of Afrofuturism. At the same time, applying the lens of Afro-

1 How can we investigate sounds as an activity, as something we create, use, and transform — as a sound practice? As a concept, sound practices means putting sound on the agenda of the field of cultural studies and asking how sound becomes meaningful as an artistic and intellectual activity and a discursive practice in and of itself [...] Sound is here something that is molded and invested with meaning by a whole conglomeration of corporeal, physical, technological, and architectonical attributes. These attributes do not carry any inherent meaning, but they are part of a sonic and cultural practice [...] thinking about how sound is related to and intervenes in discourses of race, class, and gender and how specific sound practices generate and transform these discourses (Maier 2016).

(1) *The Cosmology of Colonialism (Codex Cortez)*, 2016 Acrylic on Elk Hide (roughly) 3.5' × 5.5'.

(2) *The Palace of the Quilombos*, 2016 Acrylic on Canvas 6' × 7'.

futurism to the work of artists as diverse and geographically ‘far-flung’ as Dizzee Rascal, Afronaught, Yo! Majesty, and Os Namayer, we investigate how they combine technology, futurities, and science fiction to expand Black Atlantic sounds.

We ask: Which recent sound practices and sonic materialities correspond with the thought figures of Afrofuturism? Which discursive and performative strategies within and around sonic materialities render these Afrofuturist? Which specific sound practices and sonic materialities are put in relation to these discourses? What are the semantic, aesthetic, and political effects of these constellations? What can the visual combination of black and brown bodies with futuristic technology and scenery afford? Rather than assigning musicians or genres to an alleged Afrofuturist canon, we propose to listen to Dizzee Rascal, Afronaught, Yo! Majesty, and Os Namayer as part of the “alien discontinuum” that Kodwo Eshun purports in *More Brilliant Than The Sun*:

“Rejecting today’s ubiquitous emphasis on black sound’s necessary ethical allegiance to the street, this project opens up the new plane of Sonic Fiction [...] From Sun Ra to 4 Hero, today’s alien discontinuum therefore operates not through continuities, retentions, genealogies or inheritances, but rather through intervals, gaps, breaks.” (1998: 003)

How do these gaps and breaks become productive as critical strategies and a tool for both refractions and reinventions of identities in specific contexts - not only in relation to race, but also regarding gender, sexuality, and religion?

“THE FUTURE’S WHAT IT’S ALL ABOUT” – BROKEN BEAT IN WEST LONDON

Counting down to the year 2000 producers forged a sound in West London that became known under the monikers of Broken Beat or West London sound (Alisch 2009). Despite its pivotal role in amalgamating “all kinds of progressive black music” (Irwin 2001: 92) into a sophisticated sound system culture, Broken Beat remains grossly understudied academically. This may be due to the fact that Broken Beat lacks musically unifying characteristics such as tempo, beat patterns, or sound structures that would allow the listener to allocate a track to the genre. “There isn’t a Broken Beat specific sound, it’s not like house music or drum and bass, instantly recognizable by ‘bom-pt-tche-ke’”, expounds Broken Beat MC Motet (Alisch 2009: 3).

Broken Beat stands for at least three phenomena that overlap with and characterize Afrofuturist sound practices: 1.) a filter to select a DJ set spanning funk, Brazilian jazz, house, reggae, hip hop, and beyond; 2.) a newly coined sound that in-

corporates yet transcends these inspirations; and 3.) the social and economic configurations that emerged around the celebration of these sonic materialities.

A futuristic theme runs through Broken Beat – visually, lyrically, sonically, and discursively. The work trajectory of Broken Beat don Afronaught (Orin Walters) exemplifies this.² Walters “began his musical career back in the 80s making speakers for rave sound systems and hopes to end it as the first DJ in space” (Irwin 2001: 92). He applied to NASA to pursue this ambition, alas, this route has yet to work out. But on the cover of his 2001 album “Shapin’ Fluid” Afronaught poses in a spacesuit. Helmet in one hand, beat forging tool Akai MPC sampler tucked under the other arm he looks straight into the eyes of the camera-audience-spectator sporting a puffed up afro hairstyle. The three-disc album opens with the funky mid-tempo number “Take U there”, in its chorus vocalist Don Ricardo croons:

“I wanna paint the picture really loud.
The future’s what it’s all about.
Wanna take a trip.
I wanna take you there.”

Track titles like “Outta Range (3 billion lightyears from home)”, “Cosmic Birth”, or “Life on Venus” affirm a space-travel theme. Sonically, the album points to the work of fusion jazz synthesizer virtuosos like George Duke or Herbie Hancock. The latter theorized by Eshun as a futurist who “build[s] conceptual soundcrafts, new arks for exploring unheard soundworlds” (1999: 160).

Keyboardist Kaidi Tatham teases out complex chords, bleeps, and atmospheric swooshes from machines like Rhodes, Profit 600, Korg polysix, Arp soloist, Yamaha CS1, and an electric piano.³ These soundscapes and chord progressions are held together by looped asymmetric two-bar beat patterns reminiscent of the rhythmic imperatives of Dancehall Reggae or Afrobeat, while tracks are programmed following the structure of House Music tunes (Alisch 2009: 57). The alluring tension between Black Atlantic cultural expressions and futuristic impetus that make Afrofuturism such a productive term is hence also present within Broken Beat.

During a Broken Beat night like *Co-op*⁴ DJs would play a selection ranging from reggae, dub, and funk to Brazilian, Latin, Fusion jazz, jungle/drum’n’bass,

2 Painter and performance artist Daniel Kojo-Schrade also developed an Afronaut figure, spelled slightly different, see <http://www.danielkojoschrade.com>.

3 Cover of Walters 2001.

4 The fortnightly *Co-op* night started in 2000 at Club “Velvet Rooms”, and two years later moved to the venue “Plastic People” in the happening Shoreditch area. *Co-op* London closed down in 2008.

house and garage to hip hop and Afrobeat. The connoisseur audience would comprise long-standing DJs, musicians, and jazz dancers – serious music aficionados who know their tunes, dance moves, and cultural codes. In parallel to the eclectic choice of vintage sounds, Broken Beat artists forged a distinctly novel sound that drew on the above-mentioned styles yet at the same time aspired to transcend them.

The tracks that were created within the tightly-knit Broken Beat circles were variegated, yet some common characteristics can be named: a ragga bounce kick drum that tumble-pounds forward the asymmetrical two-bar beat patterns, fusion jazz-inspired synthesizer chord progressions, a tempo of ca. 110-130 beats per minute [BPM]. At times, (predominantly female) jazz vocals, rap, sub bass frequencies, or jazz arrangements complete these tracks. At *Bugz in the Attic*'s live shows, e.g. at the *Co-op* night or Camp Bestival, MC, musicians, and vocalists actualize the antiphonic feedback loops and pointing gestures encoded in the computer produced tracks and conjure up the *vibes* that were central to Broken Beat.⁵

Why this thirst to engage with such sophisticated simplicity? During the mid- to late 1990s, London based DJs had fatigued of house, hip hop, jungle/ drum'n'bass – the genres that they had previously spun, produced, and pushed ahead. Former drum'n'bass child prodigy Domu details how he felt:

“1997 it was pretty much over for me. I'd been into it since 1991. From Hardcore Rave, Jungle all the way into Drum & Bass, Intelligent Drum & Bass, every sort of incarnation there was. You know Hardstep and all these things that used to be the end of what I loved about it. In a way it got a little bit too white. [...] It lost a bit of the black side, the ragga, the soul, the stuff that was being sampled from '92-'95.” (Alisch 2009: 22)

There was an urge for a musical newness beyond stagnant or watered down styles of the *hardcore continuum*,⁶ a longing for a yet unknown musical future. Producers like IG Culture, Deigo, Seji, Domu, Phil Asher, or Afronaught put to good use in this project the knowledge aggregated by 1990s breakbeat science. Domu details how breakbeat scientists operated during the 1990s:

5 *Co-op* NYE 2006 “Transcend Me” by Bugz in the attic, YouTube video, posted by Funk-Samurai, January 10, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg3mgnAagxc>. Last Access 17.08.2018.

6 Simon Reynolds coined the idea of the hardcore continuum to account for the changing same in dub, reggae, dancehall, jungle/drum'n'bass, UK garage, grime and dubstep. The very name hardcore continuum, however, implies a stability and a linearity that a younger generation of music producers and fans feels is unjustly being foisted upon their work Reynolds 2010. See <https://dj.dancecult.net/index.php/dancecult/article/view/289/268>. Last Access 17.08.2018.

“Breaks were still sped up, physically sped up, unless you spent a great amount of time chopping them into their component parts and re-pitching them. Paradox and Photek used to do this around this time. And that was the science aspect of it, they were called kind of early drum science, they would break things up. Doing exactly what ReCycle⁷ does, but they did it manually. So they would break every drumkit, every drum break into its smallest component parts and so you have the first kick, the hat after that, the first snare, the hat after the snare, the little shuffle snare, you know [...] spread them all across the keyboard.” (Alisch 2009: 23)

Eshun is another Londoner concerned with transgressing saturation and tedium by way of breakbeat science. He published his Afrofuturistic theorizing around the same time when the first Broken Beat records were released. For Eshun, space travel and rhythm science share the same impetus:

“To go out into space today means to go further into rhythm. Far from abandoning rhythm, the Futurist producer is the scientist who goes deeper into the break, who crosses the threshold of the human drummer in order to investigate the hyperdimensions of the dematerialized Breakbeat.” (1998: 68)

Broken Beat producers tapped into these skills of rhythm analysis and synthesis and took them a step further. They combined vintage synths sounds and breakbeat science using up-to-date sequencing software – at once appealing to time signatures engrained in people's collective embodied knowledge and tantalizing with rhythmic challenges.

Broken Beat boasted its own club nights (e.g. *Co-op* or *Cherry Jam*) and labels (2000Black, People Records, Bitasweet). Radio shows such as Gilles Peterson's “Worldwide”, which started off as a pirate radio station and is now hosted by the BBC, would champion the West London sound. *Straight No Chaser* magazine was a mouthpiece of Broken Beat. But the genre's circuit eventually collapsed. Main distributor and meeting place *Goya* folded in 2007 when a fragile economy based on the buying power of loyal vinyl lovers around the globe crumbled with the introduction of club compatible DJ software such as Native Instrument's *Traktor*.

Evocative of their potential futurity, tracks played at the *Co-op* club night were often stark beat skeletons that never saw that light of day in the form of an official release. These beat science experiments were often concocted on the same day that they debuted at the dance-floor of *Plastic People*. This practice of playing a fresh production at the club to test out audience reactions was a continuation of dubplate culture established in reggae, dub (Veal 2007), UK garage, and jungle/drum'n'bass. During days of analogue vinyl records, it was common practice here that only one

7 ReCycle is a groove sampling software by the company Propellerheads.

acetate disc of a tune was made exclusively for one sound system or one occasion. Playing these test pressings allowed producers to garner feedback from the dance-floor to refine a tune back at the studio. The exclusives furthered audience loyalty – you could hear the music only there and then – and became a means of negotiating pecking orders amongst DJs (Belle-Fortune 1999: 44). In Broken Beat this practice was continued, albeit in CDR format. These silver discs were jealously guarded in a closed circuit of Broken Beat dons. The way to enter in their trade was to produce the coveted tunes yourself or run a key radio show (Alisch 2009: 40). Unlike MP3, CDRs are still tangible copies, but they were far cheaper, easier, and quicker to make than an acetate dubplate, which would cost you half a day and 25£ to cut. Some time around the year 2000, the established dubplate culture continued in accelerated form in the CDR circuit. The production of musical knowledge through the carefully curated circulation of acetate test pressings converged with the speed and convenience of digital reproduction.

Verbal allusions to the future are all over Broken Beat. They echo through track titles like “Take me to tomorrow” by Da one Away feat. Bembe Segue, Neon Fusion’s “Future Ain’t the Same As it Used to Be”, or New Sector Movements’ “Futuristic Dancer”, they surface in Afronaught’s compilation series “Futuristic Dancing” or in the title of the DKD album “Future Rage”. Broken Beat MC Motet would hype up his audience at a rave by assuring them that “This is the future.”

The futuristic impetus – the pull of the new millennium – were more than a utopian projection. It engenders an avant-garde cultural production that distills and at the same time challenges the vast musical knowledge and visceral experience of earlier dance music practices. In an 1997 interview in *The Wire* magazine members of drum’n’bass duo 4hero (mentioned above by Eshun) Dego McFarlane and Marc Clair share how they used to obsess over the synthesizers named on Herbie Hancock’s album covers. The junglists discuss a void in the creative innovation at the time: “The last one was drum’n’bass, so we are just waiting for the next batch to come along.” But Clair embraces the potential of this musical future: “The thing is, that anything is possible, or should be anyway. We’re getting into the year 2000, and people used to ask: what’s music going to sound like the year 2000? And we are lucky enough to be responsible for making it” (Sharp 1997: 50-51).

In 1998, 4hero put out *2Pages*, an album that fuses the up-tempo drum’n’bass beats with live jazz and spoken word. It is widely considered one of Broken Beat’s founding records. In 1998, Dego starts releasing through his 2000Black outlet records that connoisseurs in retrospect recall as the first Broken Beat tunes (Alisch 2009: 22). 2000Black’s motto was “Think about future. Think about change” (ibid.: 17).

Broken Beat protagonist Domu muses on the openly futuristic inclinations of Broken Beat:

“It is to do with the breaking down of convention and tedium in dance music. It also refers to the nonconformist structure of the rhythm. I believe at its height, some of the music was so far ahead of its time it will take generations to come to catch up and understand what happened accelerated into those few years. The marriage of classical music knowledge and the art of programming and sampling had never been mastered and represented so solidly and creatively until that point, and wait to see if they ever are again.” (Alisch 2009: 15-16)

In this unique constellation in Broken Beat, deep and diverse musical knowledge of Black Atlantic music was compressed and catalyzed by the speed of digital production and reproduction, yet consciously limited in physical format. This prolific output was fueled at once by respect and irreverence, saturation and hunger, a drive to move and an urge to listen.

Like most DJ cultures women were largely granted roles of fans, girlfriends, feminine musicians, and promoters. Exceptions here are MC Lyric L, DJ Sisamo, music producer Uschi Classen, or the “Lady Bugz” DJ project. For all its progressive music development, space for exceptional and powerful female voices and stage performances, and furthering of a racial conviviality culture (Gilroy 2004), Broken Beat mainly failed to transcend entrenched gender roles.

To sum up, Broken Beat reverberated Afrofuturist ideas in its resistance to closure – forging an affinity to space travel and rhythm science into a futuristic vision that escapes genre categorizations and as such the commodifying capitalist and neo-colonial logic of a mainstream music industry. Broken Beat did not last long, nor did it cross over into mass popularity. Well established radio DJs further consolidated their power through Broken Beat. It was an experiment under the unique conditions at the turn of the millennium, a gesture pointing into a utopian future of musical freedom and sophistication, of multi-racial conviviality on the decks and on the dance-floor.

“WE’D BLINK AND THINK THEY HAD LASERS UP THERE” – DIZZEE RASCAL AND GRIME IN EAST LONDON

How can sound practices and sonic materialities in East London Grime music – a genre that emanated from East London in the early 2000s – be analyzed as speculative and critical strategies that might be called Afrofuturistic? A starting point for this discussion is Dan Hancox’ book *Stand Up Tall: Dizzee Rascal and the Birth of Grime* in which he states that the futuristic aura of London’s Canary Wharf was constitutive of the genre (2013: 175). Hancox cites from an interview for BBC London in which Dizzee Rascal recounts his childhood science fiction fantasies spun around Canary Wharf’s central tower, One Canada Square:

“It means the most to me, I could see it from all angles as a kid. That was the highest building I could see from my bedroom. And when I see it from south London, when I’m coming over from the Blackwall Tunnel, it always gets me excited, especially at night. It feels special. I love that and the buildings around it; you see a little mini metropolis being built up ... it’s not quite as impressive as New York or Japan, but it’s ours, innit? I remember when we were little, we had a conspiracy – we thought that thing on the top of it was like aliens, and they were about to fly off – loads of little theories like that. We’d blink and think they had lasers up there.” (2013: 173)

Vocalist and producer Dizzee Rascal a.k.a. Dylan Kwabena Mills of Nigerian and Ghanaian descent, born 1984 in Bow, London, has been one of the key figures in the East London grime music scene, where he had been part of the grime music collective Roll Deep Crew. In the logics of an Afrofuturist Black Atlantic, Hancox views Grime as an important connection between futuristic music and resistant cultural practice:

“It’s not a stretch to suggest that Canary Wharf was the source of grime’s unique incarnation of Afrofuturism – the African diasporic aesthetic that takes science fiction as a tool for discussing oppression and freedom – where spaceships might be a metaphor for slave ships, subverting the journey to make it one of escape, not damnation.” (2013: 175)

This points to an important layer of Afrofuturist critical impetus: The juxtaposition of African (or Afro-diasporic) culture and futurism implies a critique of (neo-) colonial conceptions that situate African culture in an unchanging and ‘traditional’ past, while futurism (and science fiction, or technology in general) is depicted as belonging to an hegemonic white and ‘modern’ present.⁸ If Afrofuturism is a critical strategy to transgress this dichotomy, what are the concrete sound practices and sonic materialities that produce this critique? Hancox’s description offers an interesting starting point to explore this question in listening to Dizzee Rascal’s sound as a manifestation of Afrofuturist imaginaries:

“[T]he stark, unfiltered minimalism of the kick drums, the interplanetary weight of the bassline, the sleek raygun zaps and zips of a synth, the way the whole artifice shines like a spacesuit. It’s the sound of the future city that kids always dreamed of, even while grime’s lyrics describe with molecular detail the dirt of the MCs’ vividly quotidian lives; MCs who,

with the best will in the world, were not universe-traversing spacemen, but teenagers growing up in the poorest parts of London, in the grounded world of New Labour Britain.” (2013: 175)

In this description, Dizzee Rascal’s Afrofuturist sound becomes manifest in a combination of material and symbolic markers: the materiality of the bass and the beats that is filtered through science fiction imagery of outer space, rayguns, and space-suits. This interpretation is not merely metaphorical, though, but acknowledges the technological aspects of electronic music production. The minimalism of the kick drum, the sub-bass quality of the bass line, and the pulsing synthesizer sounds are part of grime’s bass science that forges its unique sound and that, in its emerging years, was clearly ahead of its time in terms of electronic club music.

As described in the above quote, sound also reverberates an Afrofuture in very down-to-earth moments when the outer space fantasy hits social reality in the early 2000s East London, and thus conjures up the “troubling antinomy” that Mark Dery describes in “Black To The Future”:

“Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn’t the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers – white to a man – who have engineered our collective fantasies?” (1994: 180)

Following Dizzee Rascal’s “little theories” his science fiction escape plan was pursued relentlessly and gained substance. The fact of Dizzee Rascal’s successful career as a MC and producer speaks for the way in which he used his beats and lyrics as the laser guns that he dreamt of possessing as a kid. Zooming into his 2003 album *Boy In Da Corner*, Dizzee Rascal’s distinct sound becomes eminent. Grime’s recombination of elements of hip hop, jungle, and dancehall are pushed towards a unique incarnation of urban bass music by Dizzee Rascal’s voice which sounds rich and squeaky at the same time. The fast rap is characterized by his East London accent, inflected with Jamaican patois and African-accented English. Grime developed from the genealogy of jungle, drum’n’bass, and UK garage into a more minimalist version of bass music in which the verbal articulations of the MC became more prominent than was the case in the previous club music styles. An inescapable urgency is expressed in the sped-up and syncopated beats that push the verbal performance of the MC to a maximum in terms of speed and the amplified materiality of voice. This sound amplifies the dystopian contents of the lyrics which deal with crime, postcode wars, young lives without much of a perspective to escape the housing areas where they grew up, and reveal a personal story of being expelled from several schools for fighting and dealing with drugs and guns. Dizzee Rascal’s

8 This dichotomy tends to persist in pop cultural discourses although media representations of Africa have changed significantly in the last years where the continent is also depicted as having a future – a future to invest in – promoted as ‘Africa Rise’, for example, as visible in a number of economic journals.

musical socialization is firmly based in a part of London which is marginalized from the process of late capitalist growth, and modernization of the metropolis; and this process has been a highly visible one when Canary Wharf became the new business district.

To create the “little theories” that Dizze Rascal mentions in the interview thus implies reimagining oneself as having access to a world that one is not supposed to belong to. This work of reimagining oneself in the future becomes a way of reclaiming power, and to shake off the limitations imposed upon oneself by the hegemonic system in the real world. Afrofuturism is a way of creating an alternate future that aesthetically and materially challenges and critiques present forms of racial difference. Dizze Rascal’s distinct Afrofuturist sound is thus also to be set against the background of a desire to create a positive, and utopian version of the urban space and the future.

Besides the science fiction references and the bass science, Grime also incorporates and is constituted by the pirate radio practices which have been – besides the club – the central catalyst for the music’s dissemination. In its formative years, Grime was not represented in mainstream radio programs. Thus, the way in which Grime developed as a distinctive musical genre is not thinkable without the pirate channels through which it was disseminated.⁹ As MC and producer Kojo Kankam aka Novelist states:

“Pirate radio is so important ‘cause that’s where you practise. ‘Cause no one is sounding like a proper grime MC for all those years, it become like people were just rapping over grime instrumentals. It didn’t sound like the authentic, original sound. It didn’t sound like four-bar repeats, simple grime. But that’s the essence that everyone enjoyed; the jovial mess to it.” (Collins and Rose 2016: 158)

The “jovial mess” that is essential for Grime’s distinct sound practice is generated by the provisionally technological set-up, the transient physicality of the airwaves, the roughness and urgency of beats and rhymes, and the agency that lies in the temporality of transmission, of getting your voice heard out there.

The roughness of the bass and the urgency of the vocal expression that was often enhanced through the overdrive of the signal processing, further amplified its sonic materiality and “raw orality”. As Steve Goodman aptly describes: “Inside this pirate radio studio, the megalopolis is screaming through the MCs, at a rapid rate, which seems to exceed the limits of the human system of vocalization. The pressure of millions channeled via a few mouths” (2007: 49). The thick atmosphere stirred up by the MC’s vocal force is even enhanced by another effect of the pirate radio

sound practice: the background noise from the cramped pirate radio studio, the shouts and cheers of other crew members that leaked through the ether generated a feeling of liveness and immediacy. This sonic futurity is a “work of the imagination” that creates vibrant and resistant socialities.

Grime was never static. Especially in its formative years, it constantly pushed forward in new directions while being held together by tightly knit networks of crews, raves, and pirate radio. And if you wanted to be part of it, you had to be quick and confident, as Tinchy Strider, one of Dizze Rascal’s collaborators, details:

“Pirate was the only platform that we had. You needed pirate radio ‘cause that’s the only place where you can exercise, get skilled, practice, get better. If you weren’t on pirate, then you weren’t getting booked for the raves [...] You always had to be so prepared, like a boxer, ready to go.” (Collins and Rose 2016: 156)

The repetitive rhythms of the bass science were not complemented by a repeatability of getting a chance to “spit your bars”. In this way, Grime can be situated – through the transnational Afro-diasporic linkages of its practitioners and a shared affinity and knowledge of Afro-Caribbean musical styles and production culture – in the larger context of Black Atlantic music. However, Grime’s shared Afrofuturist impetus only gained substance in the physicality and temporality of its actual sound practices – in the *here and now* of sonic Afro-futures.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Reflecting on Broken Beat and Grime, we have applied Afrofuturism as a critical tool to sound out the complexities and contradictions of UK based Black Atlantic music. Broken Beat and Grime share something that resonates with what Arjun Appadurai calls “the capacity to aspire”:

“In fact, most approaches to culture do not ignore the future. But they smuggle it in indirectly, when they speak of norms, beliefs, and values as being so central to cultures, conceived as specific and multiple designs for social life. But by not elaborating the implications of norms for futurity as a cultural capacity, these definitions tend to allow the sense of culture as pastness to dominate. (2004: 61)

Following Appadurai’s claim to investigate “how collective horizons are shaped and [...] how they constitute the basis for collective aspirations” (2004: 61), both Broken Beat and Grime have developed Afrofuturist practices to shape such collective horizons. We demonstrated this discussing the distribution of Grime tracks

9 For a more detailed study on UK pirate radio practices see Maier (2016).

through pirate radio stations and how Grime MC's amplified vocal materiality became a vehicle to construct collectivities that are built on the capacity to aspire. Afrofuturist aspirations manifest themselves in Grime productions such as Dizzee Rascal's as sonic and social activities that push musical ideas into new directions.

Drawing on Black Atlantic sonic, kinetic, and antiphonic strategies, Broken Beat artists invoke an empowered and liberated future through song lyrics, space-travel images, and the synthesizer sounds of Afrofuturist luminaries. During a sweet spot at the turn of the millennium – for so long considered the epitome the future – the self-sustained Broken Beat circuit put into practice a utopian model of a music industry where radical musical decisions went hand in hand with economic independence.

But let's not overstate the productivity of Afrofuturist sound practices as subversive and collective. The artist, writer, and conceptual entrepreneur Martine Syms' critical "Mundane Futurist Manifesto" (2013) deconstructs Afrofuturism as a liberatory enterprise, reminding us that "magic interstellar travel and/or the wondrous communication grid can lead to an illusion of outer space and cyberspace as egalitarian." (ibid: n.p.) The Mundane Afrofuturist instead recognizes "[t]he chastening but hopefully enlivening effect of imagining a world without fantasy bolt-holes: no portals to the Egyptian kingdoms, no deep dives to Drexciya, no flying Africans to whisk us off to the Promised Land" and to rise up to the "imaginative challenge that awaits any Mundane Afrofuturist author who accepts that this is it: Earth is all we have. What will we do with it?" (ibid: n.p.).

While creating a musical conviviality culture through sound practices and dance, Broken Beat reified gender imbalances rather than challenging them – racial diversity and artistic boldness did not translate into gender diversity. Male dominance plays out differently in Broken Beat and Grime. Female Broken Beat contributors are largely jazz musicians like vocalists Julie Dexter, Bémbé Ségué, Sharlène Hector, and Yolanda Quartey, cellist Izzi Dunn, or keyboardist Hannah Vasanth. Mostly through vocal expertise and allusive lyrics they open up dimensions of emotional complexity as an antidote to the banter of male MCing. On the other hand, female Grime vocalists such as Lady Leshurr, MC Nadia Rose, Shystie, and Lady Fury, engage in the feisty battle culture of their male counterparts. While we insist on writing the women into the history of Grime and Broken Beat we also need to admit these genres are male dominated.

The Christian, lesbian crunk-electro rap group Yo! Majesty from Tampa (USA) draws on synth-and-beat-combinations, much like Grime and Broken Beat artists. But the rainbow-laced cover of their 2008 debut album "Futuristically Speaking... Never be afraid" (Yo! Majesty 2008) reveals the thrust of an explicitly queer-feminist project. Their curvy dread-locked black female bodies clad in super-hero garb – a "K" on the crotch bespeaks the powers of the kryptonite pussy – the self-proclaimed royalty float through space armed with YOM-branded knuckle-duster

and golden microphone. They are out to bring about "[t]he end of Captain Misogyny" while having a blast. Yo! Majesty interweaves the Afrofuturist themes of space-travel, synth-and-beat-combinations, and fearless futuristic imagination with a message of liberation and aspiration for queer black women. Their lyrics span from screaming catharsis ("Fuck that shit!") to encouragement to "Never be afraid" or "Don't let go" up to sweetly affirming that "you can find love".

Leaping from the US across the Atlantic to Africa leads us to the low-key buzz around Afrofuturism on the continent. Wanuri Kahiu, director of the post-apocalyptic short film *Pumzi* (2009), elaborates what Afrofuturism can mean for Africans:

"Afrofuturism as a genre is growing, because as Africans or as descendants of Africa we've never had a space or a voice within our own history. We've never had a chance to talk about our own history, all has been written by other people. And now because we don't have a link to our own history or we didn't have a grasp on our history, we are using Afrofuturism to stake a place in the future so we can strongly identify ourselves in the future." (Kahiu 2012: n.p.)

In her line of Afrofuturist reasoning she invokes Nairobi-based music project Just A Band in the same breath with the city's burgeoning media and entrepreneur scene. This enthusiasm for Afrofuturism seems akin to the 'Africa rising meme'. This trope emerged in the international press around 2000 and promotes the idea that African countries are finally on an economical upswing that goes hand in hand with creativity, democracy, and optimism (Jacobs 2012).

One of the countries with the highest economic growth since 2002 was Angola and its dominant electronic dance music is Kuduro. Angolan author and cultural activist Angela Barros attests Kuduro an "afro-optimistic" nature (Barros Wilper 2011: 5). And indeed, it is not hard to detect science fiction references – a capacity to aspire and upward motion – in Kuduro performances. For example, in the 'futuristic video' to their "Robocop" single the Kuduro duo Os Namayer (2014), incorporate science fiction inspired technology into their visual language and dance moves.

Examining how Kuduristas position themselves in the Angolan system leads to the limits of Afrofuturism with an inherent liberating capacity to aspire. It would be so comforting to fabulate about Kuduro in light of utopia. The international press often portray kuduristas as politically apathetic or blatantly singing the ruling MPLA¹⁰ party's pean. Kuduristas are interesting to the autocratic Angolan regime because they are experts at infecting audiences with energetic euphoria. As Principe Ouro Negro of Os Namayer states "this positive charge is something that kuduro

10 Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, independence movement turned party ruling the country since independence in 1975.

has to offer to the world” (Alisch 2017: 50). The production of visibility and the building of ties with the political power networks dynamically charge each other up, thus enhancing kuduristas’ agency over time, while concomitantly consolidating the political power networks’ influence on kuduro.

In 2009, the pivotal Kuduro chorus *Estamos Sempre a Subir* (“We’re always on the up-and-up”) inspired the name of a weekly kuduro show on national TV; since 2011 Os Namayer act as its anchor men. The phrase ‘sempre a subir’ is taken from Virgilio Fire’s early kuduro hit *Kazukuta Dance* (Virgilio Fire 2012). Its emblematic four-note upward bass line repeats throughout the track, always hanging in the air, never arriving on a root note. Two synthesizer riffs repeat without leading to any resolution – ‘dynamism in the maw of constraint’ (Moorman 2014) marks many Kuduro performances. Angolans say ‘sempre a subir’ to laud achievements, e.g. in social media comments praising someone who poses with a musical award. Yet at other times, the expression has a more desperate ring. In TV coverage of desolate areas where struggling residents are polled about their situation, the answer is “sempre a subir”, too. Here it is a euphemism for keeping the faith when stressed out, without any plan or support, making do. *Sempre a subir* thus covers the range from euphoric praise to morale-boosting slogan – at times tinged with cynicism, at times resolutely sticking to hope, yet always implying that hardship can be transformed into success through personal effort, busyness, and endurance. But the *sempre a subir* trope morphs when a state that fails its citizens on a large scale utilizes it broadly to naturalize the infusion of stress with joy. This happens when Angolan political power networks call on Kuduro in an attempt to rebrand existential stress as euphoric alertness. In the case of Kuduro the combination of beat science, aspirational mode,¹¹ and upward-pointing sonic gestures with black bodies in science fiction garb does not automatically engender an empowering utopia. In an eight million-person mega-city without reliable water, electricity, or healthcare supplies and where presidential guards in futuristic riot gear leave life in stupor as the presidential motorcade passes, the image of a Robocop is more scary than empowering.

In this essay, we zoom in on different sound system cultures of the Black Atlantic. An Afrofuturist angle critiques the alleged past-ness of culture as something stable, fixed, like a property. In this sense, futurity becomes a cultural capacity with very concrete implications for the creation of alternative identities, for claiming spaces, and gaining authority in the present for black and brown people. A capacity to aspire performatively emerges through Afrofuturist sound practices. It is at once a predisposition to producing sounds and communities and also an effect rendered

by them. Artists need to allow themselves a capacity to aspire, or rather, claim and defend it in order to evoke and reinforce it through sonic practice. We fathom how using an Afrofuturist perspective allows us to develop more detailed and comprehensive interpretations of sonic, visual, and verbal practices. Through our analyses we demonstrate the potential and limits of Afrofuturism as an analytical perspective. The sound of Afrofuturism oscillates between global and local aspects of music production and performance, between historical and contemporary sonic materialities of the Black Atlantic – at times system affirming, at others shaping new worlds.

LITERATURE

- Alisch, Stefanie (2009): “‘Tell Me, Tell Me, Can You Feel the Vibe?’ – Broken Beat in London: Ein kleines Szene-Porträt.” In: *Magister Thesis*, Musikwissenschaftliches Seminar, Magister Thesis, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin.
- Alisch, Stefanie (2017): *Angolan Kuduro: Carga, Aesthetic Duelling, and Pleasure Politics Performed through Music and Dance*, PhD diss., Universität Bayreuth.
- Appadurai, Arjun (2004): “The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition.” In: Rao, V. and Walton, M., (eds.) *Culture and Public Action*, Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, pp. 59-84.
- Barros Wilper, Agnela (2012): “Conferência Internacional sobre Kuduro: Conhecer para Valorizar.” In: *Jornal Angolano de Artes e Letras* June, 11/6, p. 22.
- Barros Wilper, Agnela (2011): *Kuduro de Angola: A exclusão de uma nova linguagem*. Paper, Salvador da Bahia: UFBA.
- Belle-Fortune, Brian (1999): *All Crew Muss Big Up: Journeys through Jungle Drum & Bass Culture*, Great Britain: B. Belle-Fortune.
- Collins, Hattie, and Olivia Rose (2016): *This is Grime*, London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- DeNora, T (2000): “Music As a Technology of Self.” In: *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, pp. 46-63.
- Dery, Mark (1994): “Black to the Future.” In: Mark Dery (ed.), *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 179-222.
- Eshun, Kodwo (1998): *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, London: Quartet.
- Gilroy, Paul (2004): *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, London: Routledge.
- Goodman, Steve (2007): “Contagious Transmission: On the Virology of Pirate Radio.” In: Brandon LaBelle (ed.), *Radio Territories*, Berlin: Publishing house, pp. 48-54.
- Hancox, Dan (2013): *Stand Up Tall: Dizzee Rascal and the Birth of Grime*, Kindle Direct Publishing.

¹¹ Schubert argues that the post-2002 economic upswing has brought with it an aspirational mode, shaped by “the idea that with the right kind of connections the fruits of this boom are within reach” (2014: 176).

- Irwin, Tim (2001): "Afronaught." In: *DJ Mag* 1/6, pp. 92.
- Jacobs, Sean (2012): "TIME Magazine and the 'Africa is Rising' Meme," In: *Africa is a Country*, <https://africasacountry.com/2012/11/time-magazine-and-the-africa-is-rising-meme>. Last Access 29.04.2015.
- Kahiu, Wanuri (2012): "Afrofuturism and the African." TEDxNairobi, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvxOLVaV2YY>. Last Access 05.05.2017.
- Kindanje, Jó (2011): "Kuduro, um Reinado Sem Rei nem Coroa: Verdades Históricas sobre a Origem de um Produto Cultural Genuinamente Angolano", Luanda: *Jornal de Negócios*.
- King Britt Creative Group (2015): Highlights from BBC Radio 1/Fondation Cartier/WORM: Newsletter, Email.
- Maier, Carla J. (2016): "Sound Cultures." In: Kai Merten and Lucia Krämer (eds.) *Postcolonial Studies Meets Media Studies, A Critical Encounter*, Heidelberg: Transcript, pp. 179-196.
- Maier, Carla J. (2015): "Sound Practices." In: Jens Gerrit Papenburg and Holger Schulze (eds.), *Sound As Popular Culture - A Research Companion*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, pp. 45-51.
- Mooman, Marissa J. (2014): "Anatomy of Kuduro: Articulating the Angolan Body Politic after the War." In: *African Studies Review* 57/03, pp. 21-40.
- Schubert, Jon (2014): "'Working the System': Affect, Amnesia and the Aesthetics of Power in the 'New Angola'." PhD Dissertation, The University of Edinburgh.
- Syms, Martine (2013): *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto*, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto>. Last Access 01.05.2017.
- Sharp, Chris (1997): "Invisible Jukebox: 4Hero." In: *The Wire* 165, pp. 50-51.
- Straw, Will (1991): "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music." In: *Cultural Studies* 5/3, pp. 368-88.
- Tsitsos, William (2012): "Racial Transparency Theory Applied to Musicians who Claim to Be Aliens." In: *Popular Music and Society* 37/1, pp. 22-32.
- Van Veen, Tobias C (2013): "'Music is a Plane of Wisdom': Transmission from the Offworlds of Afrofuturism." In: *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5/2, pp. 2.
- Veal, Michael E. (2007): *Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae Music/Culture*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Weheliye, Alexander (2003): "I Am, I Be: The Subject of Sonic Afro-Modernity." In: *Boundary 2* 30/2, pp. 97-114.
- Os Namayer (2014): "Robocop", PlatinaLine, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDlaG18kHLE>. Last Access 05.04.2017.
- Virgilio Fire (2001): "Kazukuta Dance: Estamos Sempre a Subir", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3X5WKT0tpg>. Last Access 03.06.2016.
- Walters, Orin (2001): *Afronaught: Shapin' Fluid*, Apollo / R & S Records, LP.
- Yo Majesty! (2008): *Futuristically Speaking... Never Be Afraid*, Domino Records, LP.

MUSIC

- Dizzee Rascal (2003): *Boy In Da Corner*, XL Recordings.
- King Britt (2012): *Beyond the Sun*, Fhloston Paradigm.