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Algo(rhy)thms

ABSTRACT This essay examines Blackness and its colonial appropriation through the case of FN Meka, a robot rapper, along with other holographic, digitized representations of Black musical production. What does it mean to technically simulate Blackness? And what can be done to resist this simulation? We attempt to answer this question through a critical making project in which DJ and audience interact in a way that does not only rely on the simulation of racial signifiers.

KEYWORDS Blackness, algorithm, machine learning, mix, scratch, groove, race

I've given up a lot of years nurturing personal relationships—tryna build things like a family or a relationship. Like, I don't do any of that. I just kind of work (*work*) . . . *I was alone in this world, and I needed people. I know my funeral gon' be lit 'cause how I treated people.*

—Drake, part sample, part lyric, both bled into mix, dropped during kilo.wav's CTRL ROOM set for SoulCtrl

They got all this machinery, but that ain't everything; *we the machines inside the machines.*

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

A triggered drum loop reached back into time and made the past present. A real soul in the machine.

—Dan Charnas, *Dilla Time*

ROBOTS & BLACK/NESS™: THANGS IN THE GROOVE

Groove [/groov/]: a track or channel on a record where the stylus reads to produce sound vibrations; the pleasurable, temporal, and technically mediated aesthetics of being in time; an interplay of ephemeral sound and material apparatus; the politics of insiders and outsiders—folks live and die in the shadows of the groove; how race and technology construct and re-construct each other; the joy of dance; the labor of routine; the memory, fallacy, and death of history; a burial in systems and institutions—algorithmic or otherwise.

“Is being a human still a prerequisite for being an ‘artist?’”¹ In his April 2021 critique, journalist Murray Stassen presented this interrogative to frame his thoughts on the

1. Murray Stassen, “This Robot Rapper Has 9M Followers on TikTok. The Company That Created Him Thinks Traditional A&R Is ‘Inefficient and Unreliable,’” *Music Business Worldwide*, April 1, 2021, www.musicbusinessworldwide.com.

popularity and existential fact of FN Meka, the (then) popular robot rapper. That white folks invented a rapping, dancing robot programmed to mime embodied and vocal Black rhythms and sounds without paying Black people and actual Black people brought “the robot” to popular culture is an irony definitely not lost on us and should not be ignored by you. For us, though, FN Meka’s presence and Stassen’s question, while indeed an entry point for this essay, directs our thinking not to merely the perplexing what-the-fuck-ness of FN Meka’s existence but a collision of pasts and futures exposing capitalism’s unyielding effort to target Blackness as prime and original deposit for extraction. FN Meka is not just an inevitably fleeting example of aural, digitized kitsch. Its robotic and programmatic unaliveness—its “thing-power”—*matters*.² In fact, how “the logics of the middle passage and plantation slavery did and continue to roboticize black people” is the whole damn point.³ “Race is,” writes Hannah Arendt, “not the beginning of humanity but its end . . . not the natural birth of man but his unnatural death.”⁴ Both the politics of robots and race instrumentalize (pun intended) death, but—and this is our main question—could they do anything else? Arendt’s notion of beginnings and endings may read as apocalyptic; however, our desire is not to crib James Cameron’s Schwarzenegger-led power fantasy. We conceptualize humanity’s end vis-à-vis Fred Moten whose hope that “Blackness bears . . . the potential to end the(is) world” where the necessary celebratory aesthetic of Blackness, as both thought and performance, offers “de/regenerative operations” for life one two-step after the end.⁵

In *Vibrant Matters: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Jane Bennett exclaims, “Not Flower Power, or Black Power, or Girl Power, but *Thing-Power*—the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”⁶ In response, Armond Towns’s work deeply considers the racial and material consequences of Bennett’s material philosophy as well as, given Bennett’s thesis, her oddly humanist smudging of history and who was afforded the privilege of humanity:

Thing-power proposes that matter is just as vibrant as humans of all *races* [and] if thing-power is not Black Power, then her assumption is that the call for Black Power is an essentially human call that is also to be read as consistent with Western historical distinctions between humans and matter. . . . However, Black Power is a response to the historical construct of the Black body, that which has been treated in ways suggesting a consistency with dead objects: Both are things that lack self-determination. . . . How is thing-power not Black Power, if Black bodies are historically thought of as things?⁷

musicbusinessworldwide.com/this-robot-rapper-has-9-million-followers-on-tiktok-his-creator-thinks-traditional-art-is-inefficient-and-unreliable.

2. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matters: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

3. Katherine McKittrick and Alexander G. Weheliye, “808s & Heartbreak,” *Propter Nos* 2, no. 1 (2017): 18.

4. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Penguin, 2017), 157.

5. Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112, no. 4, (2013): 739, 742.

6. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 7.

7. Armond Towns, “Black ‘Matter’ Lives,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 41, no. 4 (2018): 349–50.

Specificity, here, is essential. Black Power, as articulated by Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Mukasa Dada (Willie Ricks), was a response—and in some cases, a call to arms—to what Ture and Dada (among many others) saw as the internal colonization happening to Black folks in the United States during the 1960s and '70s. It asserts the self-determination of a powerless people in “a country where [material power] is valued above all.”⁸ Black Power also describes an agenda of voter registration and political organization, popularized by the Black Panthers. Moreover, as insurgent and aporetic counterhistory, Black Power demands the material exploitation of Black people *qua* the Atlantic slave trade be read as the foundational element of American prosperity.⁹ Put otherwise, to say Black folks built this country, while true, denudes the clarity of that truth where Blackness, laboring as hands and expended as rebar, initiates the reality of American prominence and fiction of the American Dream. As Towns correctly identifies, Black Power already espouses a philosophy of material volition explicitly asserting that Black folks, for most of their history, have been locked out of the philosophical category of human. Most importantly, though, the phrase stares unflinchingly in the face of American white supremacy and racial terrorism.

In a speech given at the University of California, Berkeley, Ture asked, “Who has the power to make his or her acts legitimate?”¹⁰ His question was a critique of the then more accepted racial politics of civil rights and integration as well as, and this is essential, a Black man’s real-time coming-to-terms with the novelty and complicated consequences of the promise of integration’s newly bestowed humanity. The interrogative outlines a long history of white manipulation in the *matters* of Black volition. To which he emphatically answers, “We are not going to wait for white people to sanction Black Power. We’re tired of waiting.”¹¹ Ture saw integration as being a “one-way street” where ghettos and Black communities were “drained” of their material potential—talent, creativity, skill, and effort—for the benefit and growth of white capital.¹² Integration was always, in his mind, a white supremacist’s scheme and capitulation of Black civil rights entrenched in America’s capitalist prosperity legitimating certain Black individuals while—still and always—keeping low the political and economic potential of Black communities. Distinguishing Black Power as such reveals the difference between sounding Black and sounding Blackness. The former is imitation. The latter describes the aural and acousmatic vibrancy of diaspora: an archive of utterances spanning generations and continents—the clang of iron shackles and wails of mourning mothers, hung bodies swaying like silent wind chimes, the cheers at emancipation. All this and then some collected as jazz, soul, country, gospel, rock and roll, hip-hop, R&B, disco, and house blare as the folk sounds of a nation.

8. Kwame Ture, “Power and Racism,” in *Stokely Speaks: From Black Power to Pan-Africanism* (Lawrence Hill Books, 2007), 19.

9. Ture, “Berkeley Speech,” in *Stokely Speaks*.

10. Ture, “Berkeley Speech,” 49.

11. Ture, “Berkeley Speech,” 49.

12. Ture, “Power and Racism,” 23.



FN Meka (April 22, 2019) by Capitol Records; © Instagram.

In 1970, when describing how jazz music and its Black founding mothers and fathers fashioned the (then) novel American cultural “aesthetics of acceleration,” Ralph Ellison writes, “most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it.”¹³ Which is to say, if it were a roller coaster, that thrilling chug-a-lug of gears and chains sounds the evocative and swift abruptness indelible to American culture

13. Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 7; Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without

as the sultry “de’z and do’z” bouncing off the Negro’s tongue and the vernacular taste tuned to her ears.¹⁴ Returning to Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, quoted as an epigraph atop this essay, to claim Black folks as objects integrated within and networked to a larger political and social machine blows the dust off Black *grooves* (think: crate digging for some lost vinyl gem) as being a “survival technology” where Black “somebodiness” founds and frames, architecturally, the soaring content of American cultural identity.¹⁵ Or maybe it’s as acclaimed modernist architect Le Corbusier put it, “The jazz is more advanced than the architecture.”¹⁶ Black cultural aesthetics and performances are the symphonizing ingredient of potion stewing in the cauldron of America’s cultural melting pot. “There is a de’z and do’z of slave speech sounding beneath our most polished Harvard accents,” wrote Ellison in 1970, “and if there is such a thing as a Yale accent, there is a Negro wail in it—doubtless introduced there by Old Yalie John C. Calhoun, who probably got it from his mammy.”¹⁷ Yet, what Ellison also realizes, and what mainstream American culture is wont to forget or ignore, is that Black rhythms, the animating pulse of American culture—its life pronouncing and giving recurrence of throbs and beats—always operates in resistance of its objecthood. “*We the machines inside the machine*”¹⁸—not *lost inside* the machine. Ellison’s invocation of “the mammy” forcefully bridges the assumed far-reaching distance between an ungrounded Black cultural performance to slavery being the violent birthing (burial) grounds of Black inhumanity. The author and critic backtraces the emanative whispers of American cultural energy to its singular isotopic essence, Black “phonic matter.”¹⁹ The visual and aural spectacle of Blackness and Black performance charge our national aesthetic identity through a sparkling kinesthetic friction. As such, how the Black body’s simultaneously vibratory and vibrant existence between subjugation and subjectivity, personhood and objectivity, human and thing highlights its own iridescent “material heritage” limns an oft-ignored but always present trajectory of bodies and wails being the primal and material genesis that scores this American life.²⁰

We hear this every time Fatman Scoop, legendary DJ and hype man, yells “Mixdrop!” or “Let’s Go!” For the unfamiliar, describing Scoop’s impact is an odd endeavor. How do you schematize the importance of someone whose immense impact is only heard between the grooves of records and the record? Scoop was a man who stood between the musical ledgers of bigger, more famous acts: Faith Evans, Missy Elliot, Timbaland, and many others. On August 30, 2024, in Hamden, Connecticut, Fatman Scoop died as

Blacks,” *Time Magazine*, April 6, 1970, <https://time.com/archive/6877064/essay-what-america-would-be-like-without-blacks>.

14. Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks.”

15. Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 22, referencing Albert Murray’s *Stomping the Blues* (University of Minnesota Press, 1976/2017), 42.

16. Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 3.

17. Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks.”

18. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Random House, 1980), 217.

19. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 6.

20. Moten, *In the Break*, 6.

he lived—on stage yelling into a microphone. “If you came to party make some *noise!*” were his last words, choked out just before he collapsed from a cardiac event due to hypertensive and atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease.²¹ Noise was Scoop’s legacy. There was fuzziness in his voice, not like heathered tuft but television static. Though, unlike the white noise of television static, Scoop’s noise screamed an undaunted Blackness. As the pop before static electricity’s shock or the onomatopoeic *BOOM!* and *POW!* in the panels of comic books, the infectious urgency bolded and italicized every phrase, word, and syllable he uttered. He knew as Jacques Attali does, “The world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. . . . Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise.”²² Scoop’s life work, then, essentialized the palavering Black aesthetic tradition of doing the most. Everywhere he performed, every track he blessed—Scoop made that indisputable mystical Black *it* happen in a place somewhere between sold and *souled*.

Moten implements “phonic matter” to ask what is at stake in Black music. His answer centers how the Black propensity of doing the most “universal[izes] or social[izes] . . . the surplus,” the idea that freedom drives and animates the engine (another machine inside a machine) of Black performance.²³ The scholar employs Karl Marx’s famous counterfactual in *Capital* that the commodity’s exchange-value necessarily forms around the sociality of commerce and use-value (“riches”) only occurs in the minds of men as a way of detailing how the Black body resists its own commodified subjectivity. “So far no chemist has ever discovered the exchange-value either in a pearl or diamond,” writes Marx. “The economists who have discovered this chemical substance . . . find that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects.”²⁴ Moten argues that the Black body in eternal resistance *breaks* Marx’s counterfactual. “Break” doesn’t mean fracture, at least, not necessarily so. For us, like the DJ as well as the dance floors and dancers over which they lord, the break (think: a song’s break) is a hacked realm of possibility where humanity collides with the material. Again and at length, Moten, explains:

The words of the commodity that are spoken through the mouths of the classical economists are roughly these: riches (i.e., use-value) are independent of the materiality of objects, but value, which is to say exchange-value, is a material part of the object. . . . Marx facetiously places this discovery in an unachievable future without having considered the conditions under which such a discovery might be made. [Those conditions are precisely the fact of the commodity’s speech, which Marx dismisses in his critique of the very idea.] ‘So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either

21. Candace McDuffie, “Fatman Scoop’s Final Words Showed How Much Love He Had For The Culture,” *The Root*, September 3, 2024, www.yahoo.com/entertainment/fatman-scoops-final-words-showed-195100883.html; Associated Press, “Rapper Fatman Scoop died of heart disease, medical examiner says,” September 24, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/fatman-scoop-dead-heart-disease-d2df783c70779d9dcb955440ba56fdd>.

22. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 3.

23. Moten, *In the Break*, 12.

24. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1990), 176.

in a pearl of diamond' because pearls or diamonds have not been *heard to speak* . . . Imagine a recording of the (real) example that anticipates the (impossible) example; imagine that recording as the graphic representation of a scene of instruction, imagine what cuts and anticipates Marx, remembering that the object resists, the commodity, shrieks, the audience participates [emphasis added].²⁵

What is at stake in the music? Moten's and our unified answer asks another question: What if we could hear and record the wail of wood, for instance, as it burned? However, the thing making both questions absurd is that this counterfactual already exists in and through the slave's "material" and "maternal"—how violence births the slave as a stable, subjugated position—essence.²⁶ To say Fatman Scoop died as he lived is really to say that Scoop's phonic matter, which will energize audiences from now to forever, echoes in the material afterlife of the groove, but it also parabolizes how his ancestors toiled in "wounded kinship" of the slave's material (after)life as commodity.

Now, in this moment, we wish to not simply re-articulate Towns and Moten but extend their work to consider something they do not: instead of *if* the commodity could speak, what if the commodity was *built* to speak? What if a thing was manufactured to mimic and mime Black phonic matter wholly severed from the lives who resisted objecthood and, in this example, serve as source material? Additionally, we argue the grooves of white supremacy have advanced beyond the thinking of Towns and Moten. To be clear, this statement does not imply any wrongness on the part of these scholars. Neither they nor us could have predicted someone would *really* attempt to build a robot to stand in the Black body's place within the "scenes of subjection."²⁷ There are robots that clean and robots we can fuck. Who with any common sense would expend mental energy considering the philosophical consequence of a rapping robot—a thing that should only exist in the plots of shitty science fiction? But unfortunately, here we are (*sigh*). And so, this essay asserts that a materially fabricated and thingified Black/ness™ *powers* the material vibrancy of FN Meka's robotic essence. We too are concerned with integration—not busing and school systems or workplaces and neighborhoods, mind you, but platform integration. Integration, as it always has, portends a frictionless contact between whiteness and the Black Other where imperialism charges a fee for the privilege of accessing what has already been looted. In the case of FN Meka, difference demonstrates not the cultural production and performance of a liberated people but the cultural fabrication of digitized and corporately owned automatons. Innovation, then, which we express as the seamless transition and translation of raced data, elides the white guilt stemming from the recreational longing for cultural imperialism not with the necessary and important work of confronting privilege and power but through eliminating the source (Black People) from the signal (Black culture). That is, if I can't rap "nigga," I'll build a robot that can. FN Meka and its creators *sample* Blackness as an innovative modality of American

25. Moten, *In the Break*, 9–12.

26. Moten, *In the Break*, 16.

27. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

capitalist plunder where in the place of drum machines and break beats are digitized, vocoded *tissue samples*.

Now, it seems, would be an appropriate point as any to provide some definitional specificity to sampling, at least to how we invoke the term. To start, sampling necessarily describes scientific, quantified, and technologically gathered methods of extraction. Being a representative subset of a whole, samples approximate larger populations. Its extraction almost always feeds into the technologized apparatus and institution of scientific knowledge production. That is, being specimens, samples are taken to further scientific discovery both great and small. Here, think about everything from air samples, which reveal pollutants or mold particulates, to urine and soil samples.

Black dissection built the world as an oft-forgotten archive of samples spanning the unnamed corpses of the enslaved to the stolen HeLa gene of Henrietta Lacks—a macabre collection and curation of exhumed remains and living cadavers, skulls, bones, skin, limbs and fingers, penises, breasts, and asses (see, for example Sarah Baartman). Humanity in its pursuit of discovery has killed and maimed and raped and polluted. It has ended more worlds than we can count. Undeniably, Black *rigor mortis* orders the rigor and wonder of science. We must remember Blackness—specifically referring to darkness of complexion—was once considered humankind’s enervating poison resulting from the curse of Ham. This biblical etiology of skin color entrenches matters of Black and white within a Christian and Western schema of good and evil. During the Scientific Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment, as culture and people distanced themselves from unquestioning religiosity and looked to science and human philosophy to answer the questions of the world, the scourge and affliction of Blackness still had to be known. During the early seventeenth century and beyond, researchers across various fields were obsessed with diagnosing the Black African’s “corporeal liabilities”—its “*nègre or nègritude*.”²⁸ Invoking a climate theory of racial differentiation, some thought the cause was environmental. Abandoning the allure of its original biblical mysticism, they believed the darker complexion of Africans evinced a pervasive anatomical agent intervening and interrupting the presence of an “inner whiteness.”²⁹ Scholars of the era and beyond, quite literally, picked the bones and peeled the flesh of Black bodies, to find this “fluke” which, they thought, perverted whiteness’ presumed naturality.³⁰ In fact, melanin, the skin pigment produced in the epidermis’s basal layer, was discovered when Marcello Malpighi used a corrosive chemical agent to “putrefy” the skin of “Ethiopian cadavers.”³¹ Indeed, they looked for and found “scales [and] black bile.”³² As if any other outcome was possible. “Found,” here, shouldn’t be read as validating their discoveries but demonstrating the

28. Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science & Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 9.

29. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 3.

30. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*, 11.

31. Sidney N. Klaus, “A History of the Science of Pigmentation,” in *The Pigmentary System: Physiology and Pathophysiology*, ed. James J. Nordlund, et al. (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 6.

32. Klaus, “A History of the Science of Pigmentation,” 7.

sheer power of white supremacy to make up the world as it sees fit. The “seat of color” was *found* because white supremacy deemed its finding necessary.³³

This historical anecdote isn’t mere digression. Instead, it begins our inquiry into FN Meka, well, at the beginning. Stassen’s question finds odd FN Meka as mere technologized happening. He asks whether FN Meka is *real* fake or *fake* real, and to address his question directly, the answer is simple—FN Meka is a deepfake. The US Senate’s Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs defines a deepfake as being “an emergent type of threat falling under the greater and more pervasive umbrella of *synthetic* media, utiliz[ing] a form of artificial intelligence/machine learning (AI/ML) to create believable, realistic videos, pictures, audio, and text of events which never happened.”³⁴ However, we interpret FN Meka’s artifice as crucially being the sum of an imperial project to innovate plunder as a primary colonial *modus operandi*. As Harold Cruse writes in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), “Historically, the American psychology has been conditioned by the overriding economic motivation of plundering.”³⁵ By definition, and addressing this issue’s call, the perplexing technical specificity of that definition is woefully impotent to consider FN Meka’s digitized fabrication of Black culture and music as well as the technoscientific origins of Blackness. For us and Malpighi, et al., albeit in drastically divergent ways, the always already ersatz assumption of Black flesh or its existence as the OG “synthetic media” produces Blackness as eternal quarry where innumerable lacerations dig to find the captive body’s irresistible sensuality.³⁶ “Fake” or “synthetic” do not just synonymize fabrication but point to a centuries-long endeavor where Black birth canals manufacture decimated, partially formed—three-fifths, to be exact—Black men and women not as human beings but roasted homunculi. Linking FN Meka’s creation to a centuries-old search for “*nègr/itude*” isn’t to just answer Stassen’s provocative but rather limiting question. Instead, we advance this link as a program of white colonial and capitalist plunder where the display of Black *sampling*, regardless of whether that sample is fleshed or sonic, living or dead, as a lens for what we see as a unique innovation of capitalism where the profit potential of exploiting Blackness no longer requires the Black body.

As opposed to asking about the human prerequisite for making art, we interrogate the Western corporatized desire of spectacularizing Blackness as well as the economic viability of separating Blackness from its once-thought inseparable essence (from here on articulated as *-ness*). This technologized spectacle produces that itching you-know-it-when-you-see-it yet equally nebulous and esoteric *-ness*, which sits behind “Black.” In moving *-ness* to the fore, the wonderous spectacle of Black cultural production and aesthetics—a near endless mixtape of bodies, sounds, listening practices, and technologies—become elastic, stretched on a corporate torture rack of constant

33. Klaus, “A History of the Science of Pigmentation,” 6.

34. US Department of Homeland Security, *Increasing Threat of Deepfake Identities*, October 2022, www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/increasing_threats_of_deepfake_identities_o.pdf.

35. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York Review of Books, 1967), 13.

36. Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81.

consumption. Not for mere scientific or technical curiosity, as if that wasn't strange enough, this process isolates and then severs *-ness* through a digital alchemy of robots and algorithms, producing a stable commodity of *négre*ness or, as we are naming it, the perfectly brandable and endlessly reproducible Black/ness™. It appears capitalism, with its endless propensity to innovate, has finally figured out how to sell Blackness without the problem and liability of—you know—Black people. With this understanding, this essay interrogates the futuristic seeming thinginess of FN Meka not marveling at its novelty as Stassen and others do but considering how the original sin and anti-naturalness of Blackness has been platformed, quite literally, in our current age of algorithms and AI. As perverse irony, through white capitalism's continual search for profit, FN Meka *samples* Blackness, treating it as a necessary material cog in the production of popular music.

However, the appropriation of Black music isn't new. White folks treated jazz clubs during the Harlem Renaissance as safari adventures, and before that, the "soul" of Negro spirituals was often "delocalized and offered up" to national and global flows of capital as a way of imbricating it in mainstream popular culture.³⁷ What also isn't new is how the long history of technological mediation affords the possibility and, indeed, probability of white pleasure through and in encountering American popular music's confrontation of race. For scores of white Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, their first time seeing a Black man in a suit were jazz musicians advertising various things in music magazines.³⁸ In this case, photographic technology and, for that matter, the suit as a sartorial technology signifying not just class but civilization itself produced a new way of seeing Black bodies. In addition, the technologies of sheet music; the phonograph, records, and tape; as well as radio "dislodged" the corporeal presence of the Black singing voice, in and of itself, a technological production, from the Black body's corporeal limitations.³⁹ These sonic technologies became "harbingers of the posthuman body."⁴⁰ As such, through technologization, the Black body, as "tribal" reflection of the pre-civilized past of white America, became an early idiom and practical test case for our posthuman, cybernetic, and virtual present and future.⁴¹ The content of Black music, not just its acousmatic character but the technical production and dissemination of sound, pasteurized the modern age for white America, keeping them and Black folks too—we must add—sane and satiated amid the changing and ever-accelerating "tempo" of capitalist techno-centric progress.⁴² Jazz emulated train sounds and factory whistles while Berry Gordy sequenced the Motown sounds to assembly-line rhythms.⁴³ Michael Jackson

37. Alexander Ghedi Weheliye, *Feenin: R&B Music and the Materiality of Black Fem Voices and Technology* (Duke University Press, 2023), 52.

38. Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*.

39. Weheliye, *Feenin*, 46.

40. Weheliye, *Feenin*, 46.

41. Armond Towns, *On Black Media Philosophy* (University of California Press, 2022), 7; Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and the Posthuman," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2013).

42. Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 30.

43. Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 30; Dan Charnas, *Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of J Dilla, the Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm* (MCD Picador, 2022).

broadcast “the robot” to the American zeitgeist when he performed the dance on television to The Jackson 5 hit “Dancing Machine.” Those jerky start-and-stop movements would become the building blocks for his iconic moonwalk.⁴⁴ Black rhythms sound and *step into* the future. The rhythms of Colored Peoples’ Time (CPT) intone bebop, whicky-whicky (DJ scratching) boom bap, oontz-oontz (the pulsing rhythms of house), plus everything between and beyond as an onomatopoeic historical materialism of grooviness “tasked to brush history against the grain.”⁴⁵ Being then and forever content for white imagination, what Fanon has deemed to be a “colonial fabrication,” *négre* overloads the white sensorium as blissful, melismatic narcotic while being sure to not overriding the stakes of white supremacy.⁴⁶ Black/ness™, too, as a technoscientific invention predicated on *négre*’s sampling, produces the image and, for our purpose, the sound of Blackness satisfying the dreams and mythology of whiteness through violence as percussion and reductions as harmony.⁴⁷

To consider sampling in popular music, our definitional efforts continue with the pathbreaking and do-it-yourself, sonic experimentation of the DJ—“always on some new ish . . . bearer[s] of history, memory, and rememory . . . repurposing old technologies and new.”⁴⁸ Whirling fingers across revolving and revolutionary black vinyl digit[ize] the scratch, processing music as sonic specimens—as samples. Samples are captured with scientific specificity and technological mastery and then released onto the dance floor’s thicket of bodies. They collide past and present as phenomenal electric kinesthesia. But beyond poetics, as M. I. Franklin explains, the sample indicates

the quintessential creative practice of these times, deeply embedded in both amateur music making and the global music and entertainment industries. As a constellation of multidimensional, multimodal, and cross-generational practices, it takes place at the techno-economic nexus of culture, society, and politics.⁴⁹

Though, while correct, how Franklin sediments her interpretation of the sample in a highly technologized and platform-diverse marketplace of global music and aural entertainment industry (e.g., all those samples in *all* those TikTok videos) largely affords an opportunity for us to add a necessary corrective. The ubiquitous presence of the sample as information technology—seeming more prevalent in popular music than instruments,⁵⁰ which, we know, on its face reads odd—reifies the posthuman and

44. David Mansour, *From Abba to Zoom: A Pop Culture Encyclopedia of the Late 20th Century* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2005), 403.

45. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.

46. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, 2004), 2.

47. Ramon Amaro, *The Black Technical Object: On Machine Learning and the Aspiration of Black Being* (Sternberg Press, 2022).

48. Adam J. Banks, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 3–4.

49. M.I. Franklin, *Sampling Politics: Music and the Geocultural* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 3.

50. “Algo(rhy)thms” witnesses as never-said truth that sample flips are the guitar and drum solos of our computational, algorithmic life.

cybercultural thinking governing how we understand and interpret “the content of techno-informational flows.”⁵¹ N. Katherine Hayles explains, “[Posthumanism and cyberculture speculate about how] the ‘human’ interfaces with a plethora of informational technologies in order to shed [our natural body’s] clearly defined parameters.”⁵² Notwithstanding their electric, neon tapestry, these frames of thought aren’t at all futurist but the nostalgic pinings of Cartesian philosophy. They distill the substance of humanity to the “nonlocated and disembodied” where the human category is especially white, and corporeality, a nuisance.⁵³ Cyber-induced posthumanism “strips information of its body”; in turn, humanity disappears the body into a stream of information.⁵⁴ “Cogito, ergo sum”: the body is an idea. Hence, embodiment computes the body’s interplay of codes and signs as virtual affect and cultural pleasure. Ronald Judy names the Negro as “ha[ving] no empirical content . . . The Negro is an empty concept, a purely formal invention of the [*human*] mind . . . with no way of knowing whether it is objectively real or not.”⁵⁵ Blackness is hollow. Thus, when aligned within the grooves of humanity, it occurs at the scale of skin, but also, ones and zeroes. Since the Black was formed outside of “the human” then made to be its addendum, the sample’s technologized ubiquity cannot be understood without positioning the Black body as its material antecedent. Posthumanism’s obsession with shedding the body elides the corporeal essence running through Black music. The puffed cheeks of horn players; the calloused fingers of bass and guitar players; the crumbling vertebrae of drummers; and the lungs, throat, tongue, and lips of singers and rappers surge through the melismatic “thii-yii-ing”[ness]⁵⁶ in every sample as a material informatic of bodies.

“Thing” approximates all those *things* just beyond the tongue’s tip—this and that thing; any-, every-, some-, and no- thing. The word identifies the enigmatic liminal gap or groove between the nameable and unnameable.⁵⁷ To be a thing is to be cast as a spell and, most especially, molded in the “corporeal imagination.”⁵⁸ From our vantage, Judy’s assertion that the Negro has no content describes how white supremacy has flattened Black people to mere bodies. Emptiness represents the thing’s true character: it describes a psychic latency of metaphysics where on one side is accumulation, assembly, dispossession, and fungibility, and on the other, a tangible if not nameable character of “being-this-one (*Jediesheit*).”⁵⁹ For the purposes of its own organization and reification, white

51. Weheliye, *Feenin*, 42.

52. Weheliye, *Feenin*, 42.

53. Richard Dyer, *White*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 1999), 4.

54. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 192.

55. Ronald A.T. Judy, *(Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arab Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 128.

56. Pronounced as Lauryn Hill sings on “Doo Wop (That Thing),” released as a radio single on August 10, 1998, and as track 5 on Lauryn Hill, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Ruffhouse Records and Columbia Records, on August 19, 1998.

57. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001).

58. Brown, “Thing Theory,” 9.

59. Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?* (H. Regnery Co., 1967), 15.

supremacy packs Blackness within (think: the *Brooks* slave ship diagram⁶⁰) the thing's totalizing emptiness. The unnamable origins of Black people, which Moten, using the work of Nathaniel Mackey, describes as “wounded kinship,” express a double entendre of cells tethering microscopic and biological dissection with slave ship manifestos and auction block ledgers.⁶¹ Slavery destroyed tribal affiliation, national identity, and familial ties. And so, to *be* Black, at least as it's articulated in the US context, describes the formation of communal relatedness inside the cranks and grooves of great fracture. Moten's theorizing of wounded kinship comes from Mackey, who writes, “That claim mingles with a retreating sense of peril, as though danger itself were beaten back by the boldness, however [wounded], of its call to connection.”⁶² To *be* Black is to find life through “internal exile.”⁶³ With hung head, it admits one is *nothing* but Black—not Yoruba or Igbo or Hausa—just Black. This groove *fragments* Blackness in such a way where the enduring capitalist metric and utility of price and profit (value) abandons Black people in the indecipherable and impenetrable opacity of their own flesh. It is a life where kith can be the only light. Additionally, as Mackey laments, “Song is both a complaint and a consolation . . . Music is wounded kinship's last resort.”⁶⁴

Before continuing, we must address a semantic friction in our use of “emptiness” and “opacity.” Often, we presume emptiness to be transparent. For example, with an empty box, one may expect the ability to fully and clearly sense said box's insides. Bill Brown writes, “We look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all what they disclose about *us*).”⁶⁵ The presumed fact of emptiness also, often and at times incorrectly, is coupled with an assumption of transparency. Opaqueness, conversely, describes a density of darkness where light cannot pass. Describing a thing as opaque presumes it is *full* of darkness. While skirting the intricacies of particle physics, our point, here, is to emphasize the thing's emptiness—that which also structures the non-content of Blackness—as being not transparent but a void. In other words, emptiness when linked to transparency manifests a relational and, indeed, spatial relationship of borders. There is always something to see (a sense!) through *to*. Neither a thing nor Blackness' emptiness is transparent. Like outer space, their emptiness brims with a crushing, all-consuming opacity. There is no other side and nothing to see through—just unending, always expanding emptiness.

As object, Blackness functions as storage device for the “white imagination”—still and always an empty thing needing to be filled.⁶⁶ Blackness, though, also remembers as a thing held in time, always in the hold.⁶⁷ Its utility animates whiteness along a logical trajectory

60. The *Brooks* was a British slave ship that first sailed from Liverpool, England, in 1781 during the transatlantic slave trade. The ship became infamous less than a decade later, when prints of her design detailing how slaves should be stowed were published by abolitionists.

61. Moten, *In the Break*, 6.

62. Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook* (University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 34.

63. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 19.

64. Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook*, 34.

65. Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4.

66. Towns, *On Black Media Philosophy*, 8.

67. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016).

where “I think” and “I am not black” homologize the human being. Moreover, unlike some other objects, Blackness endures through time. The triangulation of divinity, reason, and culture target Blackness as essential and recurring foil on the existential journey from natural man to posthuman. Both, simultaneously and in sequence, illustrate an enduring, fragmented Black subjecthood. That is, Blackness is on the outside, looking in—where heretics belong—at the disciplinary boundaries of humanity and the humanities. However, to those living and dying as Black, being at once an occurrence of subject/personhood at both ends of a material polarity of objects and things, Blackness articulates the thing’s essence. Blackness is Black from the cell to single body to those bodies spanning a continent and global diaspora. In fact, its unending divisibility renders the interior—Judy’s non-content—as opaque as our exterior: “Our question has been what the interior of a physical body looks like; more exactly, the space ‘there.’ The result is: this interior is always again an exterior for the smaller and smaller particles.”⁶⁸ Brown ends his earlier quoted statement, “but we only catch a glimpse of things.”⁶⁹ Things, particularly in their brokenness, arrest us in the world, even and especially if just for a moment. Brown continues,

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us . . . when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.⁷⁰

Assumed inherently broken, as *thing* Blackness confronts the senses.⁷¹ We see it as color. We touch it as flesh. We taste it as cuisine. And yes, we hear it as music. As material confrontation, Blackness sets the contours of the world and the “worlds of our minds.” Thingification, then—especially with Blackness—conjures as *feeling*.

However, all is not lost—within opacity is also possibility. Édouard Glissant argues that transparency, particularly the Western logical formation of understanding difference, “reduces *things*.”⁷² He continues, “Agree not merely to the right to difference but . . . agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity.”⁷³ On the song “Alien Superstar,” Beyoncé expresses *Jediesheit* as her own self-assembling prophecy of opacity: “I’m one of one. I’m number one. I’m the only one.”⁷⁴ Her *Renaissance* tour thingifies herself and her music as a *séance* of robots and machines. In truth, humanity isn’t enough to

68. Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, 20.

69. Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4.

70. Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4.

71. Mark M. Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

72. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189.

73. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

74. Beyoncé, “Alien Superstar,” by Beyoncé Knowles et al., released July 29, 2022, on *Renaissance*, Parkwood Entertainment, under exclusive license to Columbia Records.

consider the scale of Beyoncé's spectacle—she is more. Is it not truer that she is a tableau of screens, scenes, and avatars arranged and consumed through our own material interactions with various media and apparatuses? Most of us will never have the pleasure of interacting with Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, the Black woman from Houston, Texas, and like most Black women, she is the one with all the answers. Before she dazzles under the *Renaissance* stage lights, she sits before the tour's film cameras with shoulders hung and neck low just like the faceless Black woman bracing for the day in Annie Lee's painting *Blue Monday* from 1985. *Renaissance*, the 2003 film, expresses Beyoncé's many pieces as uncomfortable weight and necessary ballast. The "Halo" and "hot sauce in her bag,"⁷⁵ "Uncle Johnny" who made that dress.⁷⁶ Blue, Sir and Rumi, Jay-Z. "Mechanization of any process is achieved by fragmentation"⁷⁷—"Okay, Ladies, now let's get in formation." The lemons and *Lemonade*. The fans. The expectations. All of it has a cost and measure. However, what weighs heaviest on her, even at her incomprehensible stature, is constantly having to repeat herself. Steps in duplicate and triplicate are not just choreography. For Black women, these steps choreograph the brutal labor of mere existence. The repetitive enunciation of desires, needs, tastes, preferences, and everything else produces or stages, if you will, Black women for their own consumption. "Is it ready yet?" "Why not?" "When will it be ready?" The wrangling of folks who barely listen to the needs and wants of powerful Black women can be fatal. Beyoncé suffers the same wounds that killed Dr. Antoinette Candia-Bailey⁷⁸ and Joanne Epps.⁷⁹ It seems never-ending questions and the expectation of compulsion nick the arteries of Black women. Repetition as laceration; interrogation as exsanguination.

During the *Renaissance* tour, her essence flickers and pulses against a variety of objects—wires, speakers and microphones, lighting, smoke machines, instruments, records, monitors, wardrobes as well as merchandise, cell phones, social media, the internet, film, and especially the stage. Queen Bey, the *thing* we know, love, and in some cases despise, makes its acquaintance to us as an electrified symphony of data and code. As a staging of stages, on tour, nothing is out of view—not *Renaissance*'s many crew or support performers and instrumentalists; not the stage's many cantilevers, joints, and tracks; and definitely not her. Not merely a spectacle of song and dance, the show intuits the robot's metallic sheen as the disco ball's shimmer. The illusion of *Renaissance*—its palpable marvel and fiction—makes portals out of the very seams of its construction. However, its rub—the anchor keeping its ebullient joy from floating somewhere beyond

75. Beyoncé, "Halo," by Beyoncé Knowles and Ryan Tedder, released July 12, 2008, on *I AM... SASHA FIERCE*, Sony BMG Music Entertainment; Beyoncé, "Formation," by Beyoncé Knowles et al., released February 6, 2016, on *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, under exclusive license to Columbia Records.

76. Beyoncé, "Heated," by Beyoncé Knowles et al., released July 29, 2022, on *Renaissance*, Parkwood Entertainment, under exclusive license to Columbia Records.

77. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (MIT Press, 1994), 348.

78. Chris Stephens, "State of Hopelessness: Lincoln (Mo.) president on leave after administrator dies by suicide," HBCU Sports, January 11, 2024, <https://hbcusports.com/2024/01/11/state-of-hopelessness-lincoln-mo-stakeholders-call-for-presidents-removal-after-administrators-death>.

79. Associated Press, "JoAnne A Epps, acting president of Temple University, dies aged 72," *The Guardian*, September 19, 2023, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/sep/19/joanne-epps-president-temple-university-dies.

reach—is Beyoncé is/was drowning in the ephemerality of her own thingified presence. To paraphrase Beyoncé in *Renaissance's* documentary film, the freedom she feels performing, for her, happens through an intensely programmatic, highly regimented, and mechanized performance of labor. There are endless rehearsals, planning meetings, vocal training and maintenance, physical therapy, studio sessions—rinse and repeat. “Labor,” according to Hannah Arendt, requires “a rhythmically ordered performance [and] needs a rhythmic coordination of individual movements . . . there production is just the preparation for consumption.”⁸⁰ As such, the unyielding character of labor distinguishes it from work. Labor creates nothing of permanence and its efforts are quickly consumed whereas work describes the human (read: white) endeavor “to erect a world of things.”⁸¹ Of course, Beyoncé’s music is indeed “a Black thing,” one bursting with beauty and style but still a thing, nonetheless.⁸²

The singer presents herself as drowning in a pile of impermanence. She could only feel freedom through the robot’s mechanization of rhythm. And now, her renaissance—this *Renaissance*—renders freedom not apart from her “machinic” attention to detail and work ethic but as having the machine as an integral *part* of her being.⁸³ The singer on *her* stage archives her booming personhood as a collection of parts: her voice, wardrobe, and songs but just as much her body composed as a concerto of hair, makeup, melanin, “Thique” legs and \$\$\$, and, maybe most importantly, her womb.⁸⁴ *Renaissance*, aside from being a tour and film, platforms Blue Ivy, Beyoncé’s daughter, as standing in her shoes and at her side. Then, she integrates her own partitionment within a history of Black women: “Aaliyah . . . Rosetta Tharpe, Santigold . . . Bessie Smith, Nina Simone . . . Betty Davis, Solange Knowles . . . Badu, Lizzo, Kelly Rowland . . . Lauren Hill, Roberta Flack, Toni, Janet, Tierra Whack . . . Missy, Diana, Grace Jones, Aretha, Anita, GRACE JONES . . . Helen Folasade Adu, Jilly from Philly, I love you boo.”⁸⁵ *Renaissance's* spectacular coming together and pulling apart of these parts, its dance of seams and stitches enunciates freedom, for all to witness, as the dignity and glory of atomization—how we are all a piecemeal assembly of things (race, gender, sexuality, class, body size, ability, and technology). And so, as it ever was, race is a seductive fiction. Fiction, here, does not ascribe imaginarity to the concept of race or the personal and systemic experiences of those living and dying its construct. Rather, it emphasizes race as material construct. Fiction’s made-up-ness—its fabricated truth—doesn’t prove not that race is immaterial but that *it’s just matter*. Black folks are as they ever were—things *thangin’* in the groove.

Through Moten, we have already established how Marx’s orientation toward capitalist critique, while powerful and useful, was equally short-sighted and Eurocentric. Also, as

80. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 146.

81. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 146.

82. Ewan Allinson, “It’s a black thing: Hearing how whites can’t,” *Cultural Studies* 8, no. 3 (1994).

83. *Renaissance: A Film by Beyoncé*, directed by Beyoncé, written by Beyoncé (Parkwood Entertainment, 2023).

84. Beyoncé, “Thique,” by Beyoncé Knowles et al., released July 29, 2022, on *Renaissance*, Parkwood Entertainment, under exclusive license to Columbia Records.

85. Beyoncé and Madonna, “Break My Soul (Queens Remix),” Beyoncé Knowles et al., released August 5, 2022, Parkwood Entertainment, under exclusive license to Columbia Records.

already mentioned, one of the essential functions of Blackness is to hold, as a Black box (pun intended), the psychic energies of the Western, white mind. Cedric J. Robinson explains that the addendum of a Satanic bestial representation upon the Black body remarks less upon white racial animus as opposed to the immense expenditure of Western psychic and intellectual energies to create a stable commodity—the Negro.⁸⁶ Furthermore, Robinson’s theoretical advancement also does not erode the potency of Judy’s assertion of the Negro’s non-content. We argue that together the two establish an ouroboric tension: the Negro’s non-content allows for the possibility of all content. In other words, the technical flexibility of the Negro, why it has persisted before capitalism and during its many stages of change and innovation is precisely because the Negro can be anything at any time to any system or subject with any need. Being this Black box, the Negro is immured from memory and Western historical consciousness. By this, we mean the very reason why Marx’s, at times, prophetic reading of capitalism cannot include the Negro is because capitalism’s very formation rests on a presuming fulcrum that the Negro is “organic” rather than “synthetic.”⁸⁷ This is how and why the bourgeoisie must exist as a “biological metaphor” for Man, the capitalist, and the proletariat too, the Negro represents a stable metaphor just—in this case—for Man, the laborer. During the height of the Industrial Revolution in the US, white factory workers utilized the Negro, as Black box and metaphor, to make sense of their emotional alienation as well as incessant drudgery underneath a regime of what Marx himself referred to as the machinic and mechanical “social enslavement” of capitalism.⁸⁸ That is, through the slave being known as a commodity of immense and constant labor power, white workers were able to identify how capitalism had severed them from the joys and pleasures of work and craft leaving only the version of labor Arendt describes. In the case of Beyonce and *Renaissance*, its spectacle, the reason why audiences all over the world can’t get enough, aside from the brilliant music and choreography—or actually, maybe *within the grooves* of the music and choreography—is how she adroitly performs wounded kinship with her own existence as laboring commodity. Said better, the palpable aesthetic urgency of Beyonce’s renaissance pulsates in its presentation of music being her “last resort.”

BLOOD ON THE DANCE FLOOR, BODIES IN THE MIX

Mix [/miks/]: to blend, combine, unite, or add as an element or ingredient; musical tracks arranged in sequence—sometimes rehearsed and sometimes on the fly—to appear as one continuous track; how Black folx see themselves in the digital story; the sounding and folding and continuity of Black history; CPT (IFYKYK) and alternative temporalities; nonEMPIR(E)ical space; meta B4 the lames; music about music; a living, thumping archive.

86. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 3rd ed. (The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

87. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 4.

88. Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine*, 30.

Anthony Martini, a music executive, and Brandon Le, a video game artist, led Factory New, the company behind FN Meka's creation, which dissolved in August 2022. On the creation of Meka, Martini says, "Not to get all philosophical . . . Think of the biggest stars in the world. How many of them are just vessels for commercial endeavors?"⁸⁹ Martini's comments, which I imagine were stated in that unmistakable timbre of tech bro arrogance, make no effort to hide the real innovation behind FN Meka, not as an artist but as a technology: bondage. FN Meka's deepfakery builds its artifice on the foundation of an image/memory/signal of Blackness being the singular mechanism of absented personhood. Written in the history books is how Blackness quantizes⁹⁰ *absentia*. Out of opacity's thicket emerge bodies without humanity—vessels, merely fodder amid the churning mash of capitalist machinations. Martini doesn't want a musician or even a worker. He wants a slave, a thing toiling and dying in the mix's many grooves. "[Black folks] were never meant to be workers," writes Frank Wilderson, and Martini agrees.⁹¹ Softening Martini's words is the prevailing sentiment his vile beliefs can't be racist because the Other in this particular being exploited isn't human. It assumes racist, colonial, and capitalist logics are fine (and even healthy) when shifted away from humans and applied to things. We can never forget it is not the robot's stereotypical and technological excess—it's metallic exoskeleton or advanced circuitry—providing its meaning but their human masters. Work and artistry, which, as a term, gussies up "work"—laundering its toil and exalting its product—bloom like daisies upon this living cemetery we call America.⁹² Emphatically, the racialized exploitation of labor permanently seeds the consequence inherent to the robot's innovation.

In *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (2019), Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora unpack the consequences of robotics and automation's rise through a theorization of labor where machines "displace the human chattel-turned-man."⁹³ "While the inevitable incursion of robotics . . . is commonly figured as a potential boon or threat to *all* of humanity," the authors write, "The figure of the human most threatened because it is iconically human . . . is white and male. The human-machine future thus envisions a white loss."⁹⁴ The authors' critique of technological-human convergence is one that immediately foregrounds the predicate of human progress being modernity and postmodernity's shifting conceptions of race and gender. Atanasoski and Vora present imaginaries of a techno-scientific freedom where innovation "liberates human potential (its nonalienated [and nonembodied] essence, or core) that has always been defined in relation to degraded and devalued others" and "produces [a] *better*

89. Anthony Martini, quoted in Stassen, "Robot Rapper."

90. Quantization: In digital music processing technologies and software, quantization is the process of modulating time and timings through the alignment of audio to a digital beat grid. As a result, it allows for the proliferation of novel rhythmic patterns only possible through digital manipulation.

91. Frank B. Wilderson III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003), 238.

92. Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 238.

93. Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (Duke University Press, 2019), 13.

94. Atanasoski and Vora, *Surrogate Humanity*, 2.

human life [that] tends to be limited by prior racial and gendered imaginaries of what kinds of tasks separate the human from the less-than or not-quite human other [emphasis added].”⁹⁵ Liberation even within these nouveau entanglements of humanity preserves the notion that white humanness transcends or escapes the body as if it were a prison and humanity, a jailbreak. “The surrogate human effect” frames technoliberalism as a racialized grammar where the labor logics of the tireless, efficient body that cannot feel pain is beneath a purported pure human experience and at once essential to the proliferation of humanity’s metaphysical essence.⁹⁶ Those same logics that made Black bodies ripe for theft offer the liberal human subject the ability to explore the (white) humanist aspirations of conquest, subjugation, and profit.⁹⁷

Who wants to pay workers when building them is possible? For Martini, the music industry’s future and who can access humanity’s privileges therewithin balances on race as a fulcrum. At stake, here, is undoubtedly freedom—the freedoms of corporations to extract without consequence and conscience, to innovate beyond the human, to create an always ready and docile surrogate for labor, and to push aside, maybe forever, the annoying prospect of talent acquisition and retention. FN Meka, specifically, and Factory New, Martini, and Le, as well as the music industry more generally, cast a long shadow redacting the humanity of Black people, art, and makers. They see, like other industries, the existence of Blackness as being computational, a mathematical ingredient easily targeted and imitated. In other words, generations of musical practice and art are shrunk to the infinitesimal and infinite scale of algorithms. The consequence of this is a future where Black music prospers—just, ya’ know, without Black people.

The objectivity of it all is the point. That Blackness could or should be sampled to prop up profit links it back to the dehumanizing precepts of science and mathematics. “*We are off the record.* To the data[-]generating demands of the historical axis, we present a virtual blank,” Wilderson emphatically claims [emphasis added].⁹⁸ Here, his words are partially correct. They describe how history redacts Black time, toil, and achievement. However, what they ignore is how the fact of Blackness has always been an object of record. Moreover, the record’s authority—how it presents “just the facts”—was concretized around the fiction of Blackness, and redaction, too, has always been a “matter” of records.⁹⁹ Put otherwise, the record functions as a material extension of the white imaginary, realizing the *real* world around Black death. To be, or as Wilderson claims, to “present a virtual blank,” is to live within the ledger’s cells, to be forever in the “virtuality of the past and immediacy of the present” as well as at the disposal of the whims of whiteness.¹⁰⁰ Hayles writes, “Virtuality is the cultural perception that material

95. Atanasoski and Vora, *Surrogate Humanity*, 4–5.

96. Atanasoski and Vora, *Surrogate Humanity*, 5.

97. Atanasoski and Vora, *Surrogate Humanity*, 5.

98. Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 236.

99. Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2015).

100. Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 236; Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (MIT Press, 2001), 169.



FN Meka (June 18, 2019) by Capitol Records: © Instagram.

objects are interpenetrated by informational patterns.”¹⁰¹ Within the eye of material apparatus and ethereal information, virtuality, as epiphenomenon, whirls and churns. It allows us—those in the real world—to perceive the world of information as being parallel to our own. The virtual is second to and between inputs and outputs. And being so, living as Black is to survive as bodies punctured and perforated by the ping of the record and humanity, trapped within the thin, unassailable veil between white (human)

101. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 14.

and something Other and less, something *cybernetic*. Though not quite the word's modern connotation swollen with electrified and sci-fi-inflected imagery, our usage accentuates the original Greek—*kubernētēs*—"signaling [how] . . . information, control, and communication were now operating jointly to bring about an unprecedented synthesis of the organic and the mechanical."¹⁰² To be embedded in the record's virtual blanks reads "every coin . . . each spoonful of sugar stirred into a cup of tea, each puff of a pipe, and every bite of rice" into the narrative of Black life.¹⁰³ As such, the record has always been innately carceral, and in reality, this isn't life at all—it's existing within the data of your own nonbeing.

The rhythms of Black life—Colored People's Time (CPT)—usually connotes lateness, but what if, instead, we imagined this inherent latency as the insurgent and interiorized *swing* against the groove?¹⁰⁴ The machine keeps time behind bars—rhythm under the warden of repetition. This fact roots the word *algorithm's* very meaning. "The idea may have come from late eighteenth-century musical instruments programmed to perform automatically under the control of rolls of punched paper," James Beniger details.¹⁰⁵ *Algorithm* describes the machine's ability to automatically interpret and process time and timings. Hear the ticking of its programmed clock, constant and sure. As Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker remind us, "*The processor's grammar defines the space of possibility for the algorithm's data set.*"¹⁰⁶ Each beat quantizes the future on a grid of inevitable mathematics. The drummer keeps time as a mosaic—shards laid as composition. Hear their work and effort as perfection, but, here, as humans, their own fallibility—how we strive but can never attain—conjures magic. Each beat hopes for what's possible. The machine isn't a drummer. The magic of rhythm is never mindless. Likewise, though her mind and heart are lost in time, the drummer isn't a machine.

"What good is melody? What good is music? If it ain't possessin' something sweet," sings Louis Armstrong on his and Duke Ellington's iconic "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)."¹⁰⁷ That version was recorded for the duo's 1961 jazz album *The Great Summit*; however, Ellington composed the song thirty years prior, in 1931. In a conversation with Bing Crosby, Louis Armstrong tried to define swing: "Ah, swing, well, we used to call it *syncopation*—then they called it ragtime, then blues—then jazz. Now, it's swing. Ha! Ha! White folks, y'all sho is a mess."¹⁰⁸ Benny Goodman, the so-called King of Swing, called it "free speech in music." Offering a more contemplative

102. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 8.

103. "1514–1866, The Transatlantic Slave Trade," The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture's Searchable Museum, www.searchablemuseum.com/1514-1866-the-transatlantic-slave-trade, qtd. in Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 15.

104. See Charnas's *Dilla Time* and Paul D. Miller, *Rhythm Science* (MIT Press, 2004).

105. James R. Beniger, *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Harvard University Press, 1986/1989), 247.

106. Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 113.

107. Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)," written by Duke Ellington, recorded in a session with Louis Armstrong & His All-Stars in April 1961 for Roulette Records, later reissued as track 11 on *The Great Summit: The Master Takes*, Blue Note Records, 2001.

108. Charnas, *Dilla Time*, 17.

answer, Tommy Dorsey mused, “Swing is sweet and hot at the same time and broad enough in its creative conception to meet every challenge tomorrow may present.” Intentionally unscripted and evocatively performative, swing enunciates the forbidden rhythms of Africa, those banned in the European controlled colonies. Through its ability to feel time, swing as a rhythmic performance “time-feels” its way underneath and around the grid—the machine.¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth Grosz writes, “What these disparate [musicians] share in common is little else but an understanding of th[at] *thing* [– *swing* –] as *question*, as provocation, incitement, or enigma. [But in the words of Fats Waller, ‘If you gotta ask, you’ll never know.’] The thing, matter already configured, generates invention, the assessment of means and ends, and thus enables practice.”¹¹⁰ It shapes the contours of rag, blues, jazz, funk, house, R&B, soul, hip-hop: Everything, really. Swing is the inner space of sound and thought and feeling where Black artists, immortal, find themselves amid a generation of selves along the horizon of what Black is, isn’t, and could be.¹¹¹

Swing happens in what Greg Tate, quoting Arthur Jafa, calls “Black Cognition”:

Black Cognition—the way Black people “think,” mentally, emotionally, physically, cryptically [and] how these ways of thinking and being inform our artistic choices. . . . The arenas where Black people have had the most [audible], visceral, and profound impact on the modern world have been those in which we can freely repurpose our experiences, or wagging tongues, our fun. Black Cultures and Black Cognition tend to *privilege the structuring and stylizing of the bloody improvisational moment*. . . . Black improvisational languages in music, dance, poetry, art . . . owe their charisma to their elegance . . . their invitational, democratic, come-one, come-all viral, virile, vulnerable, *vernacular engineering*. [emphasis added]¹¹²

Black Cognition describes the grace of those thought as machines, and swing, the nimbleness of in and through, among other things, MASCHINE.¹¹³ CPT, then, functions as RAM—the ability to find, express, and *sequence* joy where none should be found; not quite a freestyle but the style of being free. CPT accesses the processing speed of *Good Times*—“anytime you meet a payment; anytime you meet a friend; anytime you’re out from under.”¹¹⁴ It *records* somebodiness among all those bodies and (groove)boxes—faces and stories, culture and technology—even when, especially when, the world refuses to recognize it.

109. Charnas, *Dilla Time*, 20

110. Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside*, 169.

111. Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior: Essays* (Graywolf Press, 2004).

112. Greg Tate, “Introduction: Lust, of All Things (Black)” in *Flyboy 2: The Greg Tate Reader* (Duke University Press, 2016), 1–2.

113. MASCHINE is a collection of drum machines and music workflow products (grooveboxes and software) developed by Native Instruments. As posted on their website, MASCHINE is a cutting-edge beatmaker, drum machine, sequencer, sampler, synth, and much more. Think Texas Instruments. Anyone remember the TI-83+ from grade school? MASCHINES are essentially music calculators. See www.native-instruments.com/en/products/maschine/production-systems/maschine-plus.

114. Dave Grusin, “Good Times,” written by Alan and Marilyn Bergman, composed by Dave Grusin, sung by Jim Gilstrap and Sondra “Blinky” Williams, first aired February 8, 1974, on CBS.

“As of now, a human voice performs the vocals,” explains Martini, “but we are working towards the ability to have a computer come up with and perform its own words—and even collaborate with other computers as ‘co-writers.’”¹¹⁵ His words—again, read in that putrid Muskian lilt—speak to an always networked, never human artistry, basically if Hype Williams directed *Blade Runner*. Moreover, their reverie in a neon, pixelated future, pulsing with 808s and the menacing snares of trap music, contemplates a musical state where the ontology of Black voices *mixed* with the power of deepfake and AI technologies sequence an acousmatic reality where the voice’s inability to be truly unique yields the unlimited possibility of profit. “Speak life,” our mothers proclaimed, “there is power in the tongue.” And it is in this moment we return to *négre*. The Black voice is everything. It is God—Thank you, Morgan Freeman! If swing is the rhythm of “Black cultural memory,” the Black voice is its sound.¹¹⁶ The Black voice—not the words, but the sound itself—transitioned and transitions culture from one technological epoch to another. For instance, it was Martin Luther King Jr.’s defiant and lamenting vibrato working through an organology of tongue, lips, and lungs that captured the hearts and minds of all those in his radius. The force of his aurality authorized Black orality—it made it *matter* to millions. Wielded by King, a word wasn’t a word but a beat sequencing the tone of his voice, yes, as well as the “Black political and economic activism” of the civil rights movement.¹¹⁷ In fact, King referred to himself as “the drum major for justice.”¹¹⁸ We implement King, here, as an example demonstrating the powerful potential of the Black voice to sound the cultural moment. He wasn’t alone, though, as many others did this too: James Brown,¹¹⁹ Prince, and Michael Jackson to name a few, but also and especially the digitally assertive sounds of Roger Troutman and T-Pain.

However, naming names is not our point. Instead, for this project, our consideration of the Black voice homes in on two points in parallel as the opposite sides of a coin. (i) The Black voice, as all voices, resides in the interstitial space between bodies—that is, it comes from a body through an architecture of organs, flesh, and saliva to a body, either another person or an object. Roland Barthes, defining vocality, specifically vocal music, wrote, “vocal music (*milodie*) [is] the very precise space (genre) of *the encounter between language and a voice*” [emphasis added].¹²⁰ We can’t escape the voice’s corporeal essence. As we stated earlier, it comes from *a body*. The stubborn stickiness of a voice—“its grain”—vests its power not in the meaning or form of the words sung but in something beyond and before. “The melisma, [or in King’s case, vibrato], even the style of execution: something which is directly [from] the cantor’s body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in *the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages,*

115. Anthony Martini, qtd. in Stassen, “Robot Rapper.”

116. Maurice O. Wallace, *King’s Vibrato: Modernism, Blackness, and the Sonic Life of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Duke University Press, 2022), 1.

117. Wallace, *King’s Vibrato*, 3.

118. Wallace, *King’s Vibrato*, 3.

119. The “Sex Machine!”

120. Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (Fontana Press, 1977), 181.

and from deep down . . . as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music [they] sing” [emphasis added].¹²¹ (2) This grain becomes availed to our sensorium as the cybernetic friction of organic and technological bodies, which for the Black body and the inherent problem of its *nègre* (flesh) is especially important. Again, Barthes:

The voice is not personal: it expresses nothing of the cantor, of his soul; it is not original . . . and at the same time it is individual: it has us hear a body which has no civil identity, no “personality,” but which is nevertheless a separate body. . . . The “grain” is . . . the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue.¹²²

In addendum, voices are imbued with objects: language, meaning, subjectivity—Black Cognition. Also, technology processes the voice: melody; harmony; digital recording, storage, and amplification devices—microphones, speakers, software, autotune, the talk-box, and the vocoder—radio, the internet, and lastly, but most importantly, race. Digital technologies are essential to understanding the Black voice. They have always mitigated the essential seemingly irresolvable contradiction inherent to Blackness and the human. These technologies dislodged the Black voice from its flesh.¹²³ It allowed industries to be built around the pleasure of consuming Black sounds, and this continues with FN Meka. To hear Blackness in the essential character of a voice sounds the harmonic emptiness applied to Black flesh (a fiction and fabrication) *and* the voice’s primal, empty nature not the fact of race. As Nina Sun Eidsheim argues, “Race, as thought to be heard in vocal timbre, has no essential origin . . . that even when assembling zeroes and ones, listeners [and corporations] continue to produce and reify notions of racialized vocal timbre. The figure of sound, then, is a symbolic concept that travels with [those] who are invested in (vocal) stereotypes.”¹²⁴ Essentially, more than any singular artist, living, virtual, or something in between, Factory New’s innovation goes beyond FN Meka. Their hopes were to build and, ultimately, monetize a library of animated “vocal fonts”—inked, or in this case, rendered, emphatically in Black.¹²⁵ But as stated earlier, there is a human behind FN Meka, and that person is Houston-based rapper Kyle the Hooligan. Detailing his exploitation while working as the voice behind FN Meka, the rapper’s posts to social media took down FN Meka and its parent company Factory New.¹²⁶ Before he came forward, the company was poised for success, having inked a lucrative deal with Capitol Records and FN Meka’s two hit singles, “Moonwalkin’” and “Florida Water.”¹²⁷ The fact of Kyle the Hooligan’s presence underneath the machine exposes the perniciousness of

121. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 181–82.

122. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 182.

123. Weheliye, *Feenin*, 21.

124. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, & Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019), 116.

125. Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 116.

126. Stassen, “Robot Rapper.”

127. Kristin Corry, “We Spoke to the Actual Artist Behind FN Meka, the Controversial AI Rapper,” *Vice Magazine*, August 25, 2022, www.vice.com/en/article/qjkjzw/ai-rapper-fn-meka-kyle-the-hooligan-interview.

Black objectivity. He is what Lucius Brockway describes to the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the "machine inside the machines."¹²⁸

SCRATCHIN' AND SURVIVIN' TOWARD A FUTURE FAR FROM FN MEKA

Scratch [/skrach/]: to break or mark the surface; to dig, scrape or tear out or off; to erase, eliminate, cancel, or strike out; a DJ technique of moving a record or controller back and forth producing unique sound effects known as scratching; to interrupt; the groove forms the possibility of the scratch while the scratch unearths the impossibility of the groove; always on some new shit; always researching, always crate digging, and always networked.

FN Meka's algorithmic existence imagines a damning future for Black music's digital and virtual extraction. Now, let us turn our attention to how algo(rhy)thms, as a *scratch*, rupture this mainstream digital status quo, challenging, reversing, and, sometimes, even stopping—if only for a moment—the relation of capitalist time and power.¹²⁹ By definition, the scratch interrupts. Sometimes accidental, sometimes intentional, but always head turning. Scratching blends its ephemeral moment with a lasting materiality. What was once noise, an undecipherable mangling of operation, is now the thesis of genre, style, and expression. It is apparatus as aperture: a squint-eyed becoming linked through a peephole of sound and source, technology and technicity, impulse and tradition. "Black is sound is a way of being black," claims Katherine McKittrick, "and being black is an aurally aesthetic way of life."¹³⁰ Here, the interplay of impulse and tradition looping through the momentary and timeless is essential. When swift, agile fingers dance along jogwheels and vinyl turntables, twisting knobs and sliding levers, we hear it as vibes—an always fly, brush-the-dirt-off-ya-shoulders transgression and revolt against empire's demand for incarceration within the cells of ordered grids. Black folks were never *off the record*; they sum life and living after and between the record.

The ontological effect of the grid is mattering "the modern concept of place's" restrictions and privileges.¹³¹ Grids are an algorithmic tradition of aesthetics and order where the 2D navigational discipline of topography orders "the modern colonial governmentality" of civilized life.¹³² Civilization happens precisely on the 1 and 3, but Blackness survives and, indeed, thrives better late than never—always virtual and funk'n' around in the mix. It expresses a crossfaded, distorted, and looped interplay of records. Faces and stories, culture and technology humming and pulsing under the cover of shadows—the vibrant fullness of color seen as endless darkness and heard as forever snuggled against a downbeat. Yet, "tradition is a vital element in culture; but it has little to do with the

128. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 217.

129. See Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 2014).

130. Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Duke University Press, 2021), 65.

131. Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Fordham University Press, 2015), 97.

132. Siegert, *Cultural Techniques*, 103.

persistence of old forms.”¹³³ That is, tradition doesn’t carry the cracking of age. It hears the past with a keen appreciation of its ability to steer the present toward a never-known future. We only comprehend the future as debt—most only see it after it happens. A select and fortunate few witness it as a real-time event. An even smaller number, those dipped in the tradition of Black cultural hearing, get to build and use the future’s facsimile—the mix—as a canvas of their own making. We hear it James Brown’s drums turned break beat turned hit turned sample turned hit again turned that crazy moment when the DJ at Magic City dropped 21 Savage’s verse from “No Heart” over Blackstreet’s “No Diggity”—it was a movie, IYKYK! Waveforms slide back and forth—rhythm sheds the automated linearity of BPM, of just hitting that 1 and 3, for glorious discourse. Scratching coordinates the unpronounceable utterances of life as exhilarating beat drops, seamless and stitched blends and loops, or surprising song selections. The scratch clots nothing and *no thing* as matter. We touch machine, and, in turn, we are forever touched.

As a digression of sorts—or, better put, as a perfectly timed loop, signaling what’s to come—we would like to, if only for a moment, to directly address the “soul” of physical objects, turntables, especially, in particular how we conceptualize and romanticize object intimacy. Nicholas Taylor argues, “The material dimensions of [turntables and drum-pads] come to” make practice *matter*.”¹³⁴ For those and other physical objects, touch expresses sentimentality *qua* sensation—the senses *make* sense. Physical touch cleaves separate bodies together in ways that last far beyond any particular tactile encounter. We imprint ourselves on an object, stain it with our oils and dirt, and things do the same in return. More importantly, touch frames our desire to build an affectual relationality with an object. Being *touched* by *something* structures emotions of longing, desire, and optimism that work within a relational schema of consumption and production. “The experience of affect and emotion that attaches to those relations is as extremely varied as the contexts of life in which they emerge,” writes Lauren Berlant.”¹³⁵ She describes a relationality of bodies (things and people) where emotional encounters and physical engagements—to touch and be *touched*—narrate our continual emotional engagement with the world. In this sense, through touch, sanctuary is carved one *scratch* at a time. All those “good times, scratching and surviving.”¹³⁶

For Black folks and culture, the scratch troubles, in the face of much dehumanization the joint between technology and how humanity describes an esoteric something more. Although, and this couldn’t be stated with more fervor, the scratch does not humanize—it can’t remember, it’s just a scratch. Though honestly, humanity should never be our aspiration. We can do better . . . *be* better. What the scratch does do is gather the tales of a resilient people, not as history that fills time as empty jug but as rips and seams. “We are confronted with a sounding black history that hinges on mechanical and electric

133. Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’” [1981] in *Essential Essays Vol. 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley (Duke University Press, 2018), 357.

134. Nicholas Taylor, “Purity and the Boundaries of Belonging,” in *LEGOified: Building Blocks as Media*, ed. Nicholas Taylor and Chris Ingraham (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 137.

135. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

136. Grusin, “Good Times.”

iterability,” writes Alexander Weheliye.¹³⁷ The scratch, then, establishes a legibility of personhood—not Black/ness™ but Blackness—through a network of material technologies and digital platforms. It rings silent without turntables, crossfades, microphones, songs, wires, mixers, computers, speakers, and headphones. But also, what does it mean that the scratch, quite literally and intentionally, goes against the grain? Assuredly, there’s danger in the scratch. The danger of being seen as out of place and forever off the grid. Scratching (against the grain) exposes the sonic politics of insiders, outsiders, and being so far inside that no one cares at all. A danger heard when Tipper Gore spoke against Uncle Luke and seen in the murderous chaos of stray and intended bullets (RIP Takeoff and Young Dolph). ■

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137. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2005), 81.