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Rhythm and Sensation: Record Digging on the MP3 Music Blog

In September 2010, DJ Chief Boima of the Internet music collective and MP3 blog *Ghetto Bassquake* posted an extensive blog report on his recent trip to Baranquilla, Colombia, which he titled, “Africa’s Lost City.” Working closely with Baranquilla-based Fabian Altahona, who runs the blog, *Africolombia*, Boima set out to learn more about the *picó* phenomenon in Afro-Colombian *champeta* music. *Picós* are elaborately equipped sound systems wherein teams of DJs battle with one another to play the songs that will most excite listeners. These tend to be rare, vintage African vinyl records, although Boima informs us that newer *picós* use digital MP3s, with “a three man team that includes the *animador* or MC, a drum machine percussionist, and a DJ.” During his visit to Baranquilla, Boima documents one of the *picó* owners with whom he met, El Dragon, revealing his collection of vinyl records, as well as his collection of paintings of *picó* art, which included “a wall of fame of classic *picós* from Cartagena and Baranquilla.”

Chief Boima’s and *Ghetto Bassquake*’s visually-grounded portrait of a sonic culture in Baranquilla represents an emergent political-ethical and aesthetic dynamic in contemporary popular music. Somewhat in conversation with the *picó* phenomenon in Colombia, the MP3 blog’s interest in the rediscovery and re-issuing of vintage music recordings suggests an important convergence in contemporary aesthetic production practices. In both aesthetic spaces, visual and sonic elements are articulated as contingent upon one another – as connective elements in the digital music sensorium. Typically concerned with tracing musical connections within the so-called “global ghetto,” whether through contemporary or “rare groove” recordings, these blogs work with sonic, visual, and textual materials in order to contextualize their discussions of history, the nation, space, and aesthetics.

My paper examines these intersections between image and sound, between “rhythmic characters and melodic landscapes” (Bogue 2009: 16) and their materialization on the

contested sensory space of MP3 blogs. By examining the ways in which sounds, images, and technologies are embodied, and how this embodiment may resonate on ideological levels, this paper will consider the particular system of resonance and rhythms on the MP3 blog. As Elizabeth Grosz writes, “such resonance creates the very means by which the arts undertake their compositional activity: to create rhythm, the ordering and structuring of resonance, the meeting of difference vibratory forces” (Grosz 2009: 88). It is this system of “rhythms interacting with one another” (Bogue 2009: 16) to shape technological infrastructures that I wish to explore.

In what follows, I will attempt to make clear some emergent political-ethical and aesthetic dynamics in contemporary popular music, as well as the various currents of experience and ideology that define music blogging as an aesthetic practice. I argue that music blogging, rooted in urban relationships and reflective of particular infrastructural arrangements and sensibilities, rethinks urban space and aesthetic experience, thus generating new tensions, desires, and potentials through which everyday experience is lived. Yet in doing so, this paper seeks to illuminate the ways in which the MP3 blog – perceived as a contested space with distinct registers of aesthetic experience – is both caught up in and, paradoxically, alienated from this everyday experience. Mediated music requires us to rethink and explore the limits of both the sensed and the intelligible. The MP3 blog form plays with these limits, collapsing the distinction between what is *heard*, what is *seen*, and what is *felt*, and pointing toward their mutually transformative potentials.

The MP3 constitutes a key artifact through which blog authors and their audiences imagine and articulate links between disparate social spaces. The blog space itself is constructed and curated according to the political economy of particular cities in which bloggers live. Race, sexuality, gender, age, ability, and class are inscribed into the blog space. Access to particular recordings, and to particular neighborhoods in which one might find these recordings, is indeed shaped by the identity and positionality of the blogger. Yet the structuring of urban space and experience according to these positionalities further shapes the range of

aesthetic choices made on music blogs. The debate surrounding “global ghattotech” – or “global bass,” “tropical,” “new world music,” and “world music 2.0,” as it is variously called – is an example of the struggles and contradictions surrounding aesthetic ideologies within contemporary digital culture. Coined by ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall, the term “global ghattotech” refers (in part, ironically) to contemporary popular street music from “global” cities – to “a certain sphere of circulation” and “a certain [...] celebration of the ghetto therein.” The irony of this “celebration” is, he notes, “a product of the glaring (material) contradictions between those who are celebrating and those who are celebrated.” Marshall’s work suggests that these complexities are materialized in the cultural artifact of the MP3, and its narrative blog space.

The archive-oriented “record digging” movement has engendered similar, and indeed, complementary problems and debates, particularly regarding the historiography and ethnography of the music being blogged about. “Record digging,” (or “crate digging”), arose in the 1980s and 1990s as part of the sampling-oriented aesthetics and culture of hip hop. The advent of the blog as a space of participatory authorship has, as DJ Chief Boima has noted, undoubtedly preserved recordings that have been in danger of disappearing, and widened the scope of listeners to these recordings. Nonetheless, it implicates DJs and MP3 bloggers in a neo-colonial system of raiding African music history and material culture (Tucker 2010). Boima’s observation alludes to Langdon Winner’s idea that the material culture of record collection, as well as the aesthetics of vinyl records, record sleeves, or other vintage ephemera, intersect to define these objects as circulating technologies with political properties (Winner 1999). As I will clarify below, this notion suggests a critical investigation of material objects and their sonic properties within the frame of particular junctures of space, time, and sensation.

Many bloggers with whom I spoke conceived of their blogs as a documentation or archival project alternative to mainstream media or inaccessible scholarly archives. Brian Shimkovitz, of *Awesome Tapes from Africa*, noted that his work initially aimed to be “anti-ethnomusicological.” Indeed, he continues to work with the hope that he provides his listeners

with accessible knowledge, as well as a more immediate musical encounter. Nick Barbery, author of *ghostcapital*, saw his blogging interests as tied to deeper fascinations with “folk art,” “untrained art,” with “alternate histories” and “ways of *looking* at the world.” Nick pointed out that a theme of “sustained fascination and interest” in his work was the concept of the “other” and the “fetishism of the exotic.” He reflected on how one might “explore otherness responsibly and respectfully,” noting his “in-process intellectual agenda with this topic, as it relates to intercultural exchange, notions of/potential toward exploitation, intended audience, and so on.”

In focusing on the organization of the objects and artifacts of technology into particular regimes of the senses, a critical look at media, infrastructure, and materialism allows us to begin to understand music blogging as part of the digital politics of music consumption. The competing tendrils of this system work in complementary ways: on the one hand, “global ghattotech” mixtape-centered blogs give special status to the MP3 and to digital music technology; on the other, archive-centered blogs give special status to the cassette tape, the LP, 78 rpm, and the 45 rpm disc from the twentieth century. Jonathan Sterne has a number of valuable insights on the materiality of MP3 music and its implications for the corporeality of techno-political spaces in “The MP3 as Cultural Artifact.” According to Sterne, the MP3 “plays its listener” by imitating the “embodied and unconscious dimensions of human perception in the noisy, mixed-media environments of everyday life.” This observation opens us up to further thoughts: does the MP3 mimic the hegemony of human perception as it mirrors hegemonic social relations? Or is this a form of antihegemonic engagement and “disruptive mimicry”? Does the MP3 engage and critique power relations through acts of “familiarization,” in Bakhtin’s sense? Significantly, several of my interlocutors emphasized MP3 music blogging as a process of de-familiarization, of disorienting listeners. Perhaps this disorientation can be linked to a certain “spatialization of time” as realized in the images and gestures of the blog, in the spatial structure of the cities wherein bloggers live, and in the mapping out and projection of temporal sensation in space. In his essay, “One Nation Under a Groove,” Paul Gilroy writes: “The

contemporary musical forms of the African diaspora work within an aesthetic and political framework which demands that they ceaselessly reconstruct their own histories, folding back on themselves time and again to celebrate and validate the simple, unassailable fact of their survival." He uses the example of quotation in jazz to illustrate this observation. Later on, in his final essay, "Wearing Your Art on Your Sleeve: Notes Toward a Diaspora History of Black Ephemera," he states that the political and cultural struggles of the African diaspora have "relied on the circulation of images and symbols" such as record sleeves, and other ephemera. Does this imply a struggle that simply contributes to the "total system" (in Adorno's sense) in that it relies on the traffic of the image/symbol and the ocularcentric domains of cultural production? We can, I think, gather that Gilroy sees "the circulation of images and symbols" as part of this "folding back" of history time and again - and indeed, as an alternate circulatory system and an alternate way of historicizing the experience of space and time. Significantly, he notes that the record sleeve "points to the fund of aesthetic and philosophical folk knowledge which the record as a commodity has been made to contain *in addition* to its reified pleasures." In Gilroy's conception, however, there is a fundamental break between image and sound in this particular aesthetic system. They are, perhaps, even assigned different values (note that record sleeves are "ephemera," while music is part of a "framework," a "form"). Can we instead understand them as contiguous elements of sensation within particular configurations of modernity?

If we consider David Harvey's notion of space in "Space as a Key Word" – of a three-by-three matrix of absolute, relative, and relational space (or space-time) placed against the LeFebvrian notion of material space, representations of space, and spaces of representation – we may begin to understand the materiality of music blogging in terms of the pleasures, tensions, and potentials they produce. The intersection between relational space and the representation of space (or conceptualized space), for instance, seems particularly relevant for examining the dialectics of mediated music. Yet we also see the articulation of music-making and blogging practices at the juncture of material space (or experienced space) and that of

absolute, relative, and relational space. This is evident in particular infrastructural arrangements, flows of information, social relations, value, sensations, and activist potentials. We must also consider the collision between spaces of representation (lived space) and absolute, relative, and relational space that stimulates fantasies, desires, excitement, tension, and senses of history and identity. Harvey's important theoretical conception reveals to us a mode of translating aesthetic and spatial experiences into one another. It is, as Jacques Rancière suggests, "a reconfiguration in the here and now of the distribution of space and time, work and leisure." We might understand this as the living-out of sensation in space-time. As Elizabeth Grosz writes, "sensation can only be generated to the extent that each art brings into being something that the other arts could also access, something they all share, the forces that make each possible and connect each to the (invisible, inaudible, intangible) forces of the universe and the sensitive mass of nerves and organs that make up a living body. It is because each of the senses – for each of the arts orients itself to the sensory filling up of at least one of the senses (there are after all arts for all the body's perceptual organs) – lays claim to forces of the universe that all of the others are drawn to as well." (Grosz 2009: 88). My aim has been to illuminate some of the mediated articulations of space, sensation, and techno-politics. I see this happening most saliently on the MP3 blog, where bloggers and DJs pose new problems for the aesthetic division of sound and image. Creating particular spaces of sonic and visual sensation, their work collides the rhythms of the sound recording with the rhythms of the image and of the material object, pointing toward new ways of inscribing social experience and of *feeling* political-ethical and aesthetic ideologies.