

METRO BOOMIN WANT SOME MORE NIGGA
from Dear Angel of Death

Simone White

Most of what I have to say and think about very recent rap music, trap music in particular, is infused/fused with the thinking of Jace Clayton. I will not attempt to distinguish the exact points of our agreement and disagreement. The poetics of our collaborative thinking and friendship, which initially took the form of a challenging and generative correspondence,¹ transformed vague uneasiness, aversion, disgust with the continuing power of Black Music to determine or settle thought about how black persons who wish to change their minds (thus to de-subjectify as Judith Butler puts it) might do so through the practices discovered and demonstrated in black art, into an explosive formal search for new ways to express my thinking about emotional commitment and response to rap music. More than that, I began to look for new ways to represent the connection between sounds and words, watching/listening to (other) black people speak, speaking (to other black people), loving a person who is black, investment in the survival of black persons, belief in magic. Cosmic sparks that abstractly cause objects to affect one another is the energy of new thinking (this inconceivable action is absolute reality). We must have access to that spark to burn up old thinking. Jace is the messenger, but the message cannot be got from the commands of the messenger, who is only an expression of the receptive possibilities of the one who receives the message.

1 Which began: ["Blue Suede"] is perfect in its understanding and, therefore, of very limited use I'm saying, if what you're interested in is something like freedom. And I'm not saying this about *the lyrics*. I'm saying what is black music for?"



The statement of this objection leads me to say that I think this difficulty, wherever it is felt, to be entitled to the greatest weight. It is alone a sufficient objection to the ordinance. It is my own objection. This mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it. —Ralph Waldo Emerson

I quit, now, capitulation to the legend of the Music as a superior space for investigating, as digging, knowledge of freedom. Let the work of sociological description and literary critical “reading” continue elsewhere, and far be it from me. Professional habits of criticism and thought cannot account *at all* for elements of black music that *have no form* that has not already been constitutive of black legibility. What if we were to say, *This sound is unrecognizable to me; I don’t know what this black sound is; I don’t know what it wants; I don’t know whether it is saying what it says it is saying.* What if I gave it that much respect?

I quit the pretense of belief in the divisibility of black consciousness along the lines of high and low that accompanies orthodox black music thinking as a ruse of purity. I renounce that division and embrace the hollow affect of the R&B of my mind, the R&B I never liked, a hollow that I think, now, was the starting place of a bend or fold that would lead toward thinking the abrasive lure of black music in its whole brokenness, the abrasion that must be the beginning of thinking, whenever it begins.

Instead, I begin from Ahmir (Questlove) Thompson's statement: "hip hop has taken over black music."² There is nothing happening in contemporary black popular

2 "When the People Cheer: How Hip-Hop Failed Black America" *Vulture.com*. 22 Apr 2014. Web. 14 September 2017. He makes this claim in part one of a four-part essay featured on *Vulture* over four weeks. In the other parts Thompson claims that: a) "hip-hop mainly rearranges symbolic freight on the black starliner." Take this phrase to mean in all its possible multiplicity: hip hop does not create new symbolic information, plays no new language games; hip hop recycles images of the black past and moves them around on its own discursive field in some of the ways I try to describe in this essay; alternatively, hip hop is a sham revolutionary enterprise, a cuckoo mix of entrepreneurship and fantastical domination role-play in which masses of black people buy into a doomed transportation scheme. "Mo' Money, Mo' Problems: How Hip-Hop Failed Black America, Part II" 29 Apr 2015 b) black cool has ceased to be a locus of innovative tension in American racial discourse "Questlove's How Hip-Hop Failed Black America, Part III: What Happens When Black Loses Its Cool?" 6 May 2014 c) "Hip-hop, after beginning as a site of resistance, has become, in some sense, the new disco. The signifiers are different, of course. Hip-hop has come to know itself largely via certain notions of capitalist aspiration, braggadocio, and macho posturing, which are different notes than those struck in disco. But the aesthetic ruthlessness, the streamlining of concept, is similar. What began as a music animated mainly by a spirit of innovation now has factory specifications. Hip-hop, more product than process, means something increasingly predictable, which means that it means less and less." "Questlove: Disco and the Return of the Repressed How Hip-Hop Failed Black America Part IV" 13 May 2014.

music that doesn't have something to do with rap formally, technologically, or stylistically. Not only is rap fully integrated into the segregationist music industrial categories of "soul" and "R&B," it dominates those categories: its global and national popularity control the output and availability of all forms of black popular music. It is hard to hear (in the senses of both find and understand as black) black music that does not sound like rap music. Black music that is formally distinct from rap, such as the experimental music of Matana Roberts, sounds somewhat ineffectively into rap's vortical socio-symbolic domination of the black music space. What is the performative relation of Roberts' project, which takes a jazz-based approach to be fruitful for historical investigation of blackness as quest for freedom (how did the black inside come to pass?), to trap music's disinterest in the whole notion of cause and effect (don't matter/don't care how this happened/*nothing could shift this slide into oblivion*) in favor of a vicious yet flip insistence on the intractability of black misery (yah yah yah yah yah/push me to the edge, all my friends are dead/look at me, fuck on me³)? I find myself wanting the experimental music people to answer for this, although twenty years ago they would not have had to. Rap music is, therefore, in a contemporary-specific, hegemonic formal and mimetic position: you can't shake it off. It is exceedingly difficult to credibly develop a node of black expression that does not articulate a relation to it. Or, alternatively, we are forced to think into the silence about it when an artist is silent about it, which can be a cause for celebration but does not deny rap's power in absence.

JAZZ IS DEAD and the related assertion that (t)rap music is alive and giving us the equivalent of this:

3 Migos, "Bad and Bougee"; Lil' Uzi Vert, "XO Tour Llif3"; XXXTentacion, "Look at Me!"

In the beautiful writhe of the black spirit-energy sound the whole cellar was possessed and animated. Things flew through the air. (Baraka, *Black Music*, 138)

My students tell me that XXXTentacion is not a rapper. They say he “just does this thing in the house” and “puts it on the internet.” (Someone else says, Travis Scott is a rapper, and I am baffled: Travis Scott, *sings*.... Another thing that has happened—merger of rhetorical positions, merger of the singing position of the lover with the speaking position of the polemicist.) My students understand something about the coming situation, this nothing, as Giorgio Agamben works the question of the now through his reading of Paul, that I am not equipped to understand:

What is happening is partly machine. A rapper is part machine, part apparatus; he is not exactly nothing but a man. My students are twenty. When I am in the room with these twenty-year-old women who listen only to rap music (like me, now, taken in by it in a way that I was not when I was twenty, now that it appears to me as a code or key, a fully developed language of life, a zone of information conveyed or delivered through the body by overtaxed or exhausted masters of the machine: Metro Boomin, Sonny Digital, Mike Will-Made-It, 808 Mafia, Boi-1da). The trap music producer exhales a pervasive—diffuse and dilute—sonic/affective atmosphere through the machines. Trap beat-making is a methodology of surround; so that we find ourselves in a club that we have not chosen to enter, though we have paid. The club is everywhere and everyone is it. It is put on the internet; it flies through the air.

A cursory scroll through the discography of the producer Lex Luger⁴ bears out the extraordinary historical speed at which

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lex_Luger_production_discography

the trap surround has developed and spread, the numerosity and thickness that belong to its presence. A sub-bass drone accompanies words the rapper says (deftness, sleight of hand with the limited discursive materials of consumable black life, more about which below), this is borrowed from the beat-making repertoire of electronic dance music, which thrives on investment in the pushy invasion that occurs when sine waves deployed in vast open spaces make contact with bodies that intend to absorb thump, bodies invested in turning toward the direction of the sound, catching the wave of bass between them as intimacy/sex/euphoria. To make much or everything of a single ambient tone, to throw it about a cavernous space. Various studies in contrast/noise and synth overtake or emphasize the fundamentality of the drop. In rap music, the open space of the club is the world space of the music industry, the anti-club, *everywhere*. In trap music, bass is threatened by the interference/meddling of the machine. Trap music's busyness or tchchiness, the way in which it ticks.

I am talking about now and about the future, about the beautiful and terrible "kind of consciousness" this new black music surfaces.

Speaking of "musical togetherness" then—even and especially as it is presently trafficked by a constellation of super rappers and producers who are indisputably mighty rock stars—think about Drake and Future's "Diamonds Dancing." Think of Future's extraordinary prolificity for which trapping is example and symbolical foundation. Think black people who are "rock stars," think Hendrix chart domination supergroup, then think *producer tag*: Metro Boomin Want Some More Nigga. Think *homo economicus*. Think Jay Z and Kanye West's *Watch the Throne* as evidence of the possibility of a Drake and Future tour (think about the

roots of all these words); think a realm where there are no women who are not strippers and drug mules and things like bikes one man swaps with another man. Future's "Covered N Money," "Blasé," "I Serve the Base," "DIgital Dash" (its bassline recalls R&B troubles, ironically synchronized with the characteristic fast-twinkling high-hat synth that defines trap beats, propels the sensation of perpetual procurement), "Supertrapper." Think the ethereal contemporary presence of the words "black death" and "black lives."

nags in the back of my mind when i'm reading black nihilism on the train at 9am—this is the sound of no hope no futurity. black life as black death, drained of pleasure & presence—sexual/sensual intimacies get violently muted/displaced into lean and everybody's like of Future, the vibes, the feels, as if our appreciation of him hinges upon that sensual sonic aspect and not the fucked-up sad awfulness of it all.

What if this music, Future's *DS2*, the Drake/Future *What a Time to Be Alive*, Vince Staples' *Summertime '06*, Kanye West's *Life of Pablo*, the numerous individual points that are sounds and words that emerge from laptops, artists who live within this surround, the formation that is trap music – more, there are more coming – speak the dimension, let us displace Heidegger and call it a metaphysical zone of intent, let's call it "possibility"—let's call it *now*, cracked time of where we are and where we are going *now*. We don't have the words for how broken. And yet we are warned.

In "Diamonds Dancing," the main action takes place in the spine: a study of the male torso, draped in rocks. Think what weight sounds like, think what synth is, think sirens and explosions and gunclap and distortion, the wormy clicking

snares we cannot perceive as time-keeping sounds because the time they keep is machine time, think the pressurized squeeze of optimally lean dancer's muscle/twitch, or movement around the world of the culture of drugs and guns that becomes the performative condition upon which all representation of human activity must take place. Think, what it would mean *to allow this formation to contour my understanding of what freedom is and thus what thinking is, allowing that – not if, that – it constitutes thinking, gesture act and art.* Think, this is the formation that is the air of now feeling which we have no choice but to breathe as life and thus to celebrate, but what does it mean to be in and not of it, to *love* and refuse it: *to be in and out at the same time?*

the beat only kicks in briefly ([and] is shuddering + emphatic when it does), and the song recedes slow over that squirmy synth towards the end. the tide is way out. we see dead fish in the sand.

Shuddering. “Diamonds Dancing” is a song-space no one could stand up in; shuddering, or/and a tiny burst of air pushed out of the throat, not a sigh, a breathy grunt (uh or eh or uch yuh or yea or yay, think sublinguistic expressions of affirmation or continuity). A song that, slow to begin, *never really moves*, a song without momentum (without moment?) where human vocal presence is initiated by a typical pronouncement of profound boredom that accompanies achievement of full sexual and economic potency (I'm at a stage of my life where I feel like I can conquer anything and everything / sippin on Dom Perignon for no reason / poppin tags upper echelon for no reason). Inside this middle of the club blank space, a falling down or staggering sound space without proper structure, Drake does something verbally surprising. He takes up (for rehearsal) a cranky and specific soul/R&B narrative of romantic devastation and discord:

You know what I need from you when I get home. And yet you will not give it. Then the song space gathers again, the beat drops as a head-scratching instant of dance music entering a tiny crack in the space of Future's developing story about his inability to feel (I got so many bad bitches that I barely want em / I'm barely paying attention baby on this substance / I know you spent some time putting on your makeup and your outfit). At three minutes, when the song should properly begin to end, Drake mutters or whispers into a minute-30 second recession (nearly half a song-length), a counterpoint, and also a coda, to Future's anhedonia—a neurotic and highly specific complaint. It is “all emotion”: an encrypted, limited-character invention of rich insult. I love to hear black couples fight.

DEATH * DROP * PAIN

“TO DROP”: lose control over digital manipulation of; lose control over the musculature of one's body/to fall down or faint/to lose consciousness; to render another person unconscious, as to knock upside the head; to kill (“there were five persons taken in one house; the father the mother and the suckling child they knocked on head”). You *drop* and so it hurts to hear every time

bitches aint shit but hoes / I been known this...

...finna kill a nigga / walkin to his mom's tonight...

...death row til they put you in the Pikachu to fry...

...coulda been a felon / sellin nickles offa Linden / nigga fuck that...

all I wanted was them Jordans with the Blue Suede
on em (RPT)

Listening obsessively to Vince Staples' "Blue Suede" and the music of Vince Staples more generally caused me struggle to materialize my thoughts about rap as a force that propels my own thinking away from music as a way OUT. Listening to "Blue Suede" made me think, this music is fucked up, it's not about freedom at all, it's not collaboratively representing the concept of initiating freedom by making something out of nothing and listening and thought (this is how Mackey sees jazz, I think, this is why we cling to it, as beautiful evidence of invention), it's not a general example of how freedom might be achieved. This person's cry is profoundly isolated, speaks to an emotional situation that is desire, which, Anne Carson says, is about what we are never going to have; it is about what never comes.

Thinking and feeling in an emergency listening to "Blue Suede" (I had a little nursing baby, my marriage was crumbling), it spoke to me from a place of pure feeling, raw nerves; it spoke to me in that place. This teenaged rapper from California (!) caused something new to begin in me; the sounds he made sounded like life, sounded like now. I was at a loss for words to say what this song was and was not to me and for me. How to say this tripped out singularity blows my mind, but I do not rely on it. How to say what I learn from this is caution; I can take no strategy from this, poetic or otherwise for thinking a better social life as an artist or human being. And this twist, the energetic fright Vince gives, is exhilarating.

At this point it's useful to invoke Emily Dickinson.

There is a pain - so utter -
It swallows substance up -
Then covers the Abyss with Trance -
So Memory can step
Around - across - upon it -
As One within a Swoon -
Goes safely - where an open eye -
Would drop Him - Bone by Bone - (Franklin 515)

Dickinson works in an emotional shorthand, she develops her own affects and “cadence” around a relatively slim repertoire of words, number of words. She reforms, represses, reorganizes the meaning of those words by moving stresses around, deforming the ballad form, performing a kind of lyric screaming. She composes on a field upon which she is the only player in broad strokes, made over top the primary practice of what is called poetry and outside its game. Dickinson is, therefore, an example of a privacy and singularity that is entirely foreclosed by the invocation of the “blackness” of any art practice. In rap music there is no inner space, no privacy, no singularity; there is, far in the future, the destruction of these conditions; there is the future. For us, Dickinson’s an example of nothing. Yet we hear her ripping sound in our mind’s eye as a harbinger of what could happen, yet.

If what is called “flow” is the shared ground between Dickinson and Staples, the mechanism of flow should obviously be brought out (explained?) to explain the connection and defuse the explosive hierarchical possibilities that inhere in setting Emily up against Vince. This is not obvious to me. In a perfect song, lyric and sound lock together as flow so that the sensuous element, the mode of delivering the pleasure

of the song, the way it enters the body and can be enjoyed, can't be separated from lyrics which ostensibly "describe" the rapper's "life" or "feelings" or "thoughts." "All I wanted was them Jordans with the Blue Suede on em." This is so easy to hear. Jordans, the adolescent wish for special ones, blue suede ones, Elvis, love and theft. "Flow" is something we have to get rid of in the effort to make sense of how love can be found in and through this music.

A song like "Blue Suede" attempts to work in Dickinsonian ways; it cannot, although it SOUNDS like it does. Vince's dexterity, his flow, his dark dark humor, the stuttering/scratchy grind that attempts to perforate the wail that swallows up loudness (producer=Marvin "Hagler" Thomas); these language and sonic acts work in the register of command. But achieving the "commanding certificate" (as Emerson says) is a cheap rap music trick that attempts to circumvent the grammars of race and structural poverty. (Ain't nobody triller than Metro / ain't nobody triller than Scooter; If Young Metro don't trust you / Ima shoot you.) There's an emotional and ideological grid that Vince Staples has access to, but hasn't built. That grid is structured by the axes of being / living as black and the practice of representing blackness. Vince hasn't built it – and it's not his fault – yet he plays or practices a black game which is also the game of *repeating what we already know, repeating facts to which it is possible to nod our heads, facts such as "the music and the people is the same."* We watch him work a terrifying manipulation of ideological and emotional materials that are fundamentally out of his control and so drop him, Emily says, BONE by BONE. That is what is to look, if you look, into the abyss, the organized inside space of blackness.

Which is whatever you want it to be; it is a "trap" in the same sense that trap music proposes as authentic black life

the deadly workaday circuit of street-level drug dealing to pay the bills and, with luck, hard work and a ride-or-die trap queen, bootstrap up to the (clownish) status of rich nigga.

Future's "I Serve the Base" from 2015's *DS2*:

They should've told you I was just a trap nigga
I'm in the White House shootin' craps niggas
I gave up on my conscience gotta live with it

[...]

They should've told you I was on the pill
They should've told you I was on the Lear
I serve cocaine in some Reeboks
I'm full of so much chronic, need a detox
I serve the base, I serve the base
I serve the base, I serve the base

Whatever you want. I serve that, for money, for a nihilistic, endlessly repetitive and narcotized kind of peace. I surround us with the call to recede into the persona of whatever it is one serves.

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