Sounds of the City: Dramaturgy, Space, Identity

critical-stages.org/24/sounds-of-the-city-dramaturgy-space-identity/

Katie Beswick and Javon Johnson

Katie Beswick* and **Javon Johnson****

Abstract

This article offers a response to the question, “How can we think about cities within the frame of a dramaturgy of sound?” Drawing on our scholarly interest in cities, we, the authors, consider how city meanings are produced and transmitted through music cultures. We tentatively explored this question previously, in a “Salon” discussion, recorded and available as part of the Aural/Oral Dramaturgies project, curated by the editors of this special issue at the website www.auralia.space. We recommend you listen to that discussion, here, before reading this article. Here, we reflect further on the relationship between sound and cities, offering a mixtape of tracks and parsing our personal experiences in relation to them to make sense of the ways music has shaped cities in our experience. The reflections below blend personal and critical perspectives to offer city stories, and stories of ourselves in the city. We have drawn upon notions of urban dramaturgy (Donehower; Ferdman) to find a style of writing which, “plays with the structure rhythm and flow of the city” in order to begin untangling questions of “what our cities are and for whom” (Dramaturgs’ Network, 2015).

Keywords: Urban dramaturgy, space, place, cities, music cultures, aural dramaturgy

Opening Thoughts

We are both city people. Growing up in London and Los Angeles respectively, we were formed within metropolises and influenced by their affective qualities. Cities are perhaps curious texts to subject to dramaturgical analysis: as dynamic spatial entities they cannot properly be framed “as” performances. A city is not a dramatic work, like a play text or staged performance—but cities are nonetheless implicated in a narrative logic, and can, therefore, be positioned as complex cultural objects that produce, sustain and transmit meanings. To approach the city as a site of analysis is to think with spatial theories, but we might also call upon traditions of dramaturgical analysis that consider, in the words of Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, “the ways in which levels of meaning are orchestrated,” “their compositional logic” and “what is being presented and how” (29).

Metropolises and “world cities,” in particular, such as London and Los Angeles, as the work of Edward Soja makes clear, exist not only as real, geographical sites but as affective concepts that circulate beyond themselves to create meaning and replicate that meaning elsewhere. This might be understood as a dramaturgical process. In other words, cities are not only stable and located but also exist as a series of ideas, events and feelings constructed as narratives. Such narratives are both deliberately fashioned (through for example city planning, tourism initiatives, architectural interventions) and incidental (resulting from the informal ways cities are practiced, embodied and experienced by their inhabitants).

Cultural products such as film, television and, perhaps, especially music, emit transient atmospheric affects which further produce the narratives of particular cities and cities in general that sustain and stabilize meanings. This dynamic process, wherein space is produced through interactions between distinct registers, is what Henri Lefebvre calls the *production* of space. Doreen Massey refers to a "fixation of meaning" (20) that attaches itself to specific places and, as Mark Augé and others have pointed out, creates a fixed place identity (whose permanence is, of course, illusionary) (45). Fixed place identity is possible not only because of what happens in specific places, but also because of how the felt ideas about places transmit elsewhere and are thus stabilized and reproduced. In this article, we contribute to understandings of space identity by reflecting on dramaturgies of sound: that is, how sound cultures shape city meaning.

For us, the (re)production of city spaces happens, perhaps most viscerally, in the realm of daily life, through music and sound cultures. These cultures are experienced within the city but speak out to the world beyond, shaping our social, cultural and political experiences. We, thus, position music cultures as features of urban dramaturgy that narrate, shape and imbue cities with enduring meaning— using this article to illustrate the ways urban dramaturgy is practiced and performed in quotidian, daily life.

Unlike many other cultural performance forms, music is impossible to avoid. And in the cities where we have lived and which we know most intimately, music is everywhere, bending and creating the culture: spilling from the windows of passing cars and open shop doorways and from the mouths of teenagers on buses or the subway; bleeding out of headphones on the underground; booming from the speakers at bars and nightclubs. Music culture touches you, moves you, enfolds you in its logic, whether you seek it out or not. Popular and underground music practices both express and transmit the feeling of a city, as well as shaping and reflecting located political meanings—they also enable individuals to make sense of their identities and their relationships to others within cities, offering physical and creative possibilities for practicing city space.

Coming to know oneself in a city or cities, through music, is an ambivalent, aural "dramaturgical" process, then, which we have attempted to parse below. We do so through a mixtape selection of tracks (with links), which we use as a mode of reflection on wider musical cultures and their social and political implications. We connect these tracks to specific cities and to ideas about cities, such as notions of cosmopolitanism and nation. The overarching city or theme provides the section title, with the tracks and our reflections on them beneath.

As you will see, our reflections begin to reveal how sound cultures make meaning and construct narratives within cities and beyond. However, our reflections also point to tensions and contradictions: we do not perceive the musical and attendant social and political cultures under discussion in precisely the same way, and our experiences (as a white British female living in England and as an African American man living and working in a range of U.S. cities) begin to illuminate how perception is not neutral but conditioned by our distinct perspectives born from geographical, cultural and embodied knowledge, and from structural conditions that do not condition everybody in the same way. We have deliberately left such contradictions unresolved; we are not attempting here to build a

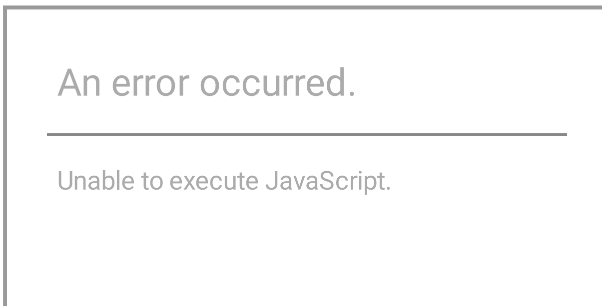
logical theoretical argument piece by piece to offer a neat reflection on urban tensions. Rather, our personal accounts of city-space, of individual tracks and of wider musical cultures begin to reveal the unresolved ways in which personal as well as place identities are implicated in processes of urban dramaturgy, and how factors such as race, ethnicity, class and sex might modulate our experiences of music and contribute to our narrative "sense of self."

We invite readers to engage with the article by listening to the title tracks, reading our reflections and making their own links between the accounts that follow, and the sensory, emotional and political resonances of the tracks themselves. We also suggest that where a particular theme or idea speaks to you, you may gain further insight into the ideas and cultures we discuss by listening to the supplementary tracks embedded in the prose.

We offer this article in the spirit of a mixtape, which Jared A. Ball positions as a "radical form" (5) that seeks to push against colonial and capitalist power-structures. As Ball argues, the mixtape offers a site in which stories might be told "from the perspective of community members, in ways that are not possible in the context of the mainstream media that targets their communities" (129).

Our reflections thus reveal the role that aural urban cultures play in helping us to shape and make meanings about our cities, our communities and ourselves. Our reflections also reveal how music can facilitate both understanding and finding means of withstanding the wider social and political realities that structure and produce our urban spaces, in all their inequitable reality.

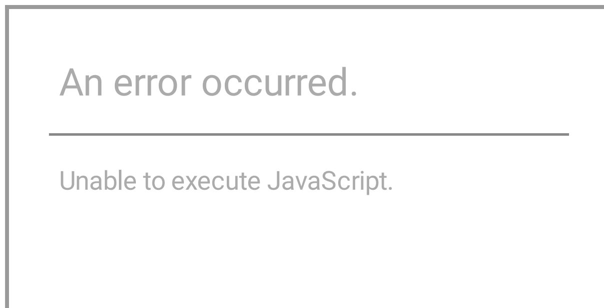
Los Angeles (Javon)



Ice Cube, "It Was A Good Day" (1993)

Ice Cube's "It Was A Good Day" is the 1993 hip hop single that sampled the Isley Brothers" classic "Footsteps in the Dark." The easy drum riff that pairs sublimely with that funky yet smooth guitar made the ballad ripe for Cube and the many others who sampled and, pun intended, followed the footsteps of the greats Isleys. Debuting in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings (or "riots"), Cube's "It Was A Good day" was a welcoming contrast, a reprieve even, from his other tracks on the album *The Predator* (1992), and yet, at the end of the song's official video, the LAPD still militarily convened on Cube and his home. The once jheri-curled rapper ignores the dozens of police, their bullhorns, their guns and helicopters—a campy yet serious theatre of state power—reminding us of the precarious nature of Black life; that even when we have a good day, the state might very well end our lives because it can, because it requires and even hungers for Black death.

Refusing heavy-handedness, Cube ends with no Black death, no arrests, but a simple “To Be Continued . . . ,” as if to say that Black life continues, even as the state and its foot soldiers enter a home that I, to this day, imagine he was somehow no longer inside. In some ways, “It Was A Good Day” was a Black Los Angeles anthem. It was, to cite Shana Redmond, a “sonic production” that was “not ancillary, background noise” but “absolutely central to the unfolding politics because [it] held within [it] the doctrines and beliefs of the people who participated in [the] performance” of Black joy as a (not the) politics and a tactic of Black life and livability (8).



Tevin Campbell, “Can We Talk” (1993)

Despite the importance of Cube’s “Good Day,” I often feel like we overuse hip hop to discuss the 1990s, as if there weren’t also an entire army of crooning and begging Black boys and men. To (mis)use poet Tongo Eisen-Martin’s brilliant line, I wonder if hip hop ever asks:

> “You just going to pin the 90s on me?”
> —all thirty years of them—

In this way, I want to pin a few of those “thirty years” that took place in the 90s on R&B.

As a boy in 1993, one who rode public busses to and from school while listening to my off-brand Walkman, it was Tevin Campbell’s silky desire to “talk for a minute” that occupied a great deal of my time. Indeed, R&B gave me and my friends “this sense,” to cite Kodwo Eshun, “that most African-Americans owe nothing to status of human” (192). As young boys, while we did not always know how to name disenfranchisement, structural poverty, racial capitalism, state sanctioned violence and more, we knew them to be true, to be cold and lifeless.

On some levels, R&B countered that—it gave us a way of being, it allowed for a softness, an intimacy, a shared vulnerability that moved up and against the vile harshness of the anti-Black death machine known as the U.S. nation state. R&B gave us space to be smooth, to be fresh or cool, to be harmonious souls in ways that would make Boyz II Men proud, and this was the most important part of identity. It was not necessarily an intentional rejection of the concept of the human, but the soulful yearning for connection not only smashed the myth of 1990s nihilistic young Black America it also refused the Eurocentric notion of individualism as a core tenant of “the human,” making space for collective being.

London (Katie)

An error occurred.

Unable to execute JavaScript.

Sweet Female Attitude, “Flowers” (2000)

How can I write about London at the close of the twentieth century without considering garage music? A retrospectively weird mash-up of U.S. hip hop, R&B, 1970s disco and distinctively London samples and voices, this was the precursor to grime. Garage was grime’s smooth, pretentious, dressed up uncle. But while grime “set out to portray the gritty, ‘grim(e)y’ reality of life in London’s council estates in an almost ethnographic fashion” (Fatsis 3), garage celebrated and created a distinctive club culture: aping the glamourous champagne and cocaine lifestyle that was fetishized in some of the most egregious examples of U.S. Gangsta rap excess (Rose 61–74).

Garage was a utopian movement rather than an ethnographic one insomuch as it was about inventing its own spaces, which were better than the ones we lived in. If this wasn’t evident in the lyrics—which were frequently love songs (Craig David/Artful Dodger’s “Fill Me In,” Love Station’s “Teardrops“ and “Flowers” by Sweet Female Attitude are prime examples) and were often remixes or heavily sampled versions of familiar tracks—then it was evident in the wider culture and smooth optimism of the sound.

With a distinctive two-step rhythm, late 90s garage incorporated elements of hip hop culture such as the emcee and the flair for style, but largely avoided hip hop’s grassroots politics. In garage emceeing, mostly London voices would narrate over upbeat tracks, offering characterful, charismatic delivery and witty autobiographical lyrics, which later paved the way for the more narrative and directly political social commentary that came to distinguish grime (here’s MC Vapour with “Skool“):

> I remember when I woz at school/ They treated me like I woz a fool/ Punished me for try’na act cool/ They sat me in a classroom facin the wall/ Others had a laugh but no fun for me/I had maths when they had P. E./ I practised for my G.C.S.E/ I woz told the rest were better than me/ In English/everyone got C/ Not me they gave me a G).

An error occurred.

Try watching this video on www.youtube.com, or enable JavaScript if it is disabled in your browser.

Oxide and Neutrino, “Bound 4 Da Reload” (2000)

If grime was explicitly political, and if grime came to be associated with the most famous Black, male emcees who innovated the form (people such as Wylie, Dizzee Rascal, Skepta and Stormzy), garage echoed the post-political, multicultural London that was the veneer of the New Labour movement. Big names on the garage scene were from all manner of races—MC Vapour, Craig David, Oxide and Neutrino, Daniel Beddingfield and, unlike commercial grime, included prominent women too—the group Mis-Teeq, Lisa Mafia, Miss Dynamite. This was not a scene that tapped into burgeoning activism or elevated the struggles of any one identity position; rather, it celebrated the neoliberal culture we were living under, concealing the harms of the system and selling back to us versions of ourselves who could be realised through capitalism. "We're all middle class now," Tony Blair's deputy John Prescott declared before a landslide victory for labour in the 1997 election—and garage tried to package that reality. As Dan Hancox writes, "UK Garage crystallized the idea of social mobility into sparkling four-minute pop songs—or a single transcendent evening out—and served it with Cristal."

From my perspective as someone immersed in U.K. garage culture, living in a working-class community, there was a genuine sense of optimism in the music itself, and we really did feel, at least those of us who were white and not living in poverty, that the racism, social inequality and political unrest of the past two decades would not come to shape our futures. We were free to pursue hedonism and indulge our own desires. Of course, those desires were conditioned by the system we were living under—capitalism compels consumption. We wanted glamorous things: designer clothes and shoes, our names on the club's guest list, branded alco-pops and ecstasy, preferably the kind not cut with talc.

In other words, garage was club culture and high fashion, and we wanted in. For the men, looking like you were in required wearing crisply ironed shirts and designer loafers (you couldn't get entry to most of the clubs we went to back then with jeans and trainers). As young women, we were expected to wear clothes that exposed our youthful bodies and to be enthusiastic in our sexual availability. Tiny skirts and skin-tight trousers. High-heeled stripper shoes that were too painful to dance (or indeed walk) in. We were extremely sexualized and expected to be so (As Lonyo's "Garage Girls" explains, "these garage girls are so fine/ they're really blowing my mind").

The objectification of women and our enjoyment of that objecthood (notwithstanding the harm some of us are still untangling in therapy, decades later) were obviously part of the scene and ran through the music. Indeed, the hyper-sexualization of women ran through the whole of 1990s/2000s popular culture, often disguised as something emancipatory, but (as the #metoo revelations from women who looked like they were having a good time in the 1990s have revealed) very rarely delivering what women actually wanted—or developing a consciousness that would enable us to find what we needed on our own terms.

Cosmopolitanism (Javon)

An error occurred.

Unable to execute JavaScript.

Jay-Z, “Jigga What, Jigga Who” (2001)

At the outset of his dazzling chapter “My Passport Says Shawn,” African Americanist Mark Anthony Neal asks of Jay-Z, “Can a nigga be cosmopolitan?” (35). Here, nigga is a particular formation that reduces Black folks, not by Neal’s doing, to fungible non-beings that only have the capacity to perform “within the essential tropes” of Blackness (37). Indeed, Neal maps out the ways in which Jay-Z consistently moves through, past and even evades the ever-limiting core Black tropes.

Given how Black as racial construct was born as commodity, as object, as animal but not quite so, I wonder if a nigga was always cosmopolitan, always of the world. Or, perhaps better put, I wonder if a nigga exceeds the very category of cosmopolitan. Thinking through Richard Iton’s *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, in which he argues that Black folks engaged the dominant political order through art and creative measures, I am suggesting that the nigga in question, always already a cosmo, a global construct—a thing “made” in part by being trafficked to the so-called new world—not only seeks the polit, the citizenship, but through creativity continually moves past, beyond the cosmopolitan.

An error occurred.

Unable to execute JavaScript.

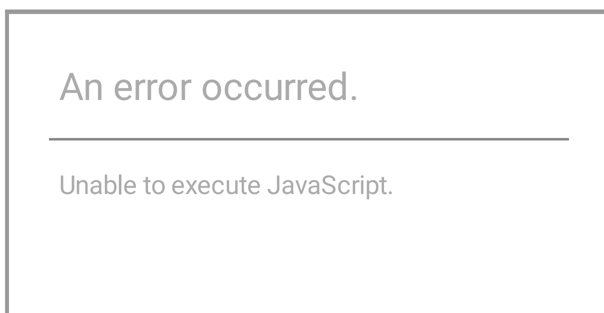
Kanye West, “Diamonds from Sierra Leone (Remix)” (2005)

Take Kanye West’s “Diamonds from Sierra Leone (Remix).” Released in 2005, a year before the film *Blood Diamond* starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Connelly and Djimon Hounsou, West’s track is, from the start, global. The song makes use of Wales native Dame Shirley Bassey’s “Diamonds Are Forever,” the theme song for the homonymous Bond movie, with verses from the Brooklyn born Jay-Z and the Chicagoan West, while the original video was shot in Prague and directed by African-American and Honduran Hype Williams in order to tell the story of conflict diamonds and violence in Sierra Leone. Certainly, the Prague location choice was an aesthetic one, however, I suggest it was also political. The video features old European Christian architecture and happy white people gifting and buying diamonds, only for their hands to become bloodied later, illustrating the violence of racial capitalism. But West does not stop there: in the first verse of the remix, just after making connections to the Vietnam War and the diamonds in his Roc-A-fella

Records chain, he says, “Though it’s a thousand miles away, Sierra Leone connect to what we go through today/ Over here it’s a drug trade, we die from drugs/ Over there, they die from what we buy with drugs.” That Jay-Z has frequently referenced the U.S. role in the illicit drug economy throughout his career, makes Kanye’s line that much more global.

I am suggesting that Kanye West and friends skilfully painted a picture of white violence, racial capitalism and the global displacement of Black folks at a moment when a new generation of Afrofuturistic artists began to yearn for and create alternative worlds that often exceeded the desire for any type of citizenship whatsoever. Perhaps this is another reason why Kanye, in his first album, *The College Dropout*, asked for a spaceship and why *Graduation Day* features his now famous bear being shot into outer space.

New York (Katie)



Wiki, “NMIM” (2017)

The album *No Mountains in Manhattan* was released by New York rapper Wiki in 2017. It is an extended metaphor, where the city becomes a mountain at the end of the penultimate, eponymous track. The mountain symbolizes both the physical landscape and the embodied experience of New York life, offering a vertical representation of “scaling” the city that is reflected in the rhythmic peaks of the record and Wiki’s vocal performance delivery (or “flow”), with its whining up and down qualities and aggressive peaks and troughs. “Mo Mountains” references other cultural touchstones where vertical perspectives of the city frame the spatial imaginings in one way or another (such as the movie *Mean Streets* and the television series *Seinfeld*) and shape New York for those of us elsewhere, in thrall to its distinctive brand and what it promises as the ultimate cosmopolitan global metropolis. Music has long played a part in New York’s affective circulation. When I visited the city with my mother for the first time in 2014 (as tourists), my dad sent daily song recommendations that might enrich our trip (Sinatra’s “New York, New York,” The Pogue and Kirsty McColl’s “Fairytale of New York,” Jay-Z’s “Empire State of Mind”).

I returned to the city the following year in a different role. This time as a researcher, there in a professional capacity to undertake an ethnographic study of a subway culture that had caught my attention on that first trip: litefeet. The practitioners of litefeet call the form “the evolution of hip hop through dance”—and although dance is certainly a primary element of litefeet, which sees the dancers use the floor and poles of the subway car to perform gymnastic feats in which they scale the city from the underground—litefeet is

also a music culture. Like hip hop it involves rap, mixes, samples and is a grassroots street culture pioneered by Black and Hispanic men and boys living in Harlem and the outer New York boroughs. It is distinctive for its energetic upward-lifting melodies.

Everything about litefeet ("light on your feet") emphasizes the elevation of the practitioner, from the jumping, climbing movements of the dancers to the bouncing rhythm keeping time under the tracks. For the practitioners, litefeet has been a way to elevate themselves from often extremely impoverished circumstances. For the litefeet crew I worked with, the form was a means of Black resistance to an overarching racist system that placed them, as working-class men of colour, at the bottom of the social ladder, marginalized in city life. (My brother, visiting me at the end of this trip noted how "Black" New York is in comparison to the films, movies and TV programmes we've come to know the city through. "Wow," he said, "It just goes to show you how whitewashed our idea of New York has been.")

An error occurred.

Try watching this video on www.youtube.com, or enable JavaScript if it is disabled in your browser.

Kid the Wiz, "Woke up in London" (circa 2015)

In this context, as the litefeet crew played me a song one of them had written, which samples Jon Bellion's "An Immigrant" (with the lyrics, "Woke up in London with you next to me/ Made love in Brixton with both hands around your neck"), I was brought up against power dynamics at play in our ethnographic exchange. The crew knew I was from London and had the knowledge and experience of the city that kept me safe while I was with them (and I did feel safe).

I am acutely aware of the colonial imbalance inherent in ethnographic practice and know that however much one attempts an ethical approach this cannot be overcome—and my white, European affluence is obvious. I'd travelled internationally to reach New York, some of the crew couldn't afford the subway fare to travel to scheduled performances. But I was also aware of the always-present danger for a woman who tries to find equality with men—and the struggle of that. The mountain we scale in daily exchanges. Here are the notes from my research diary, grappling with these issues:

> 16th April
>
> I spent yesterday (15th of April) with the crew as I had asked to see some of their performances. They were filming outside Yankee stadium for Channel 12, a Bronx local news channel—the interview was about the new legislation, which makes it more difficult for them to dance on the subway (as I understand it, they now risk a Misdemeanor A charge of reckless endangerment, for which they can be jailed for a year. The criminalization of Black dance). The eventual news clip was a minute long and was mainly a vox pop of public opinions on subway dancing. But the group used the opportunity to attempt to lobby for some negotiation with the city officials who have implemented this.
>
> "Litefeet is a whole culture we're trying to expand. We're trying to be the regeneration of hip hop through dance."
>
> When the news presenter asks them about policy the self-appointed crew spokesperson says that they don't mind if there is regulation, but they want to be able to dance. "We don't want to run around getting arrested for something positive. Dance is positive. Something that has to be acknowledged is that there's positivity coming out of the five boroughs every day."
>
> I must be careful not to romanticise the culture I am studying, even though there is something I find extremely appealing about its energy and activism. Extreme sexism and hyper-masculinity are clearly a part of litefeet culture (as they are of hip hop culture more generally, and other music cultures like R&B). Some sexual comments are made towards me, although not threatening, more banter and maybe to do with a difficulty of young men and boys not knowing how to speak to women without that . . . although I have to say so far, the boys have been lovely to me. Really accommodating and friendly and looking after me—making sure someone walks me to the subway offering to escort me places etc. (which is probably still undercut with sexism but still). They are much more sexualized towards girls and women in the street though, "Hey! You with the big butt! Text me! Here's my number, text me on my phone." (I want to say something here about this kind of sexism and how it feels familiar, comfortable, how you learn to speak to and behave with the opposite sex—how far and whether it is harmful? How do you counteract it when you are not part of that culture—is it your place? What is my role here—how do you negotiate an identity/position that balances the reality of your authority with the reality of your vulnerability?)

St Louis (Javon)

An error occurred.

Unable to execute JavaScript.

Kendrick Lamar, “Alright”

A little over two years post the state-sanctioned murder of Mike Brown, I attended the Black Performance Theory convening in St. Louis, Missouri. A relatively small conference, it functions more as a gathering or a symposium whereby we perform, talk theory, network, and create new work on the spot. On the last night, most of the conference goers attended a planned after party. I danced arm and arm with brilliant and beautiful Black colleagues like Jeffrey Q. McCune, Jasmine Johnson, Christina Knight, Tommy DeFrantz, Nia Witherspoon and Amber Johnson. I laughed with Julius Fleming, La Marr Jurelle Bruce, Shanté Paradigm Smalls and Lisa B. Thompson, while DJ Peoples, a.k.a Assistant Professor Gabriel Peoples of Indiana University, curated a masterpiece on the ones and twos. It was parade of unapologetic and brilliant Black folks controlled by nothing but the beat. When it seemed the night had hit its peak, DJ Peoples dropped the music, gave us five seconds of silence, which somehow felt like forever, and then:

> Da Da Da Da
> Daaaaaaaahh
> Alls my life I has to fight, nigga
> Alls my life I
> Hard times like God
> Bad trips like “God!”
> Nazareth, I”m fucked up, homie, you fucked up
> But if God got us we then gon’ be alright
> Nigga, we gon’ be alright
> Nigga, we gon’ be alright
> We gon’ be alright
> Do you hear me, do you feel me, we gon’ be alright
> Nigga, we gon’ be alright
> Huh, we gon’ be alright
> Nigga, we gon’ be alright
> Do you hear me, do you feel me, we gon’ be alright

Black fists were in the air as if they were holding up the sky. We jumped up and down, held each other, screamed every lyric as if we were campaigning for Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” to be the new National Black Anthem, and, for a moment, we knew we were going to be alright. For a moment, we knew what freedom felt like. This too is intimacy; it is a survival strategy. This too is Black joy.

The seventh song on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar's third studio album, "Alright" is both festive and defiant. In *Rolling Stone*, cultural critic Greg Tate writes, "Thanks to D'Angelo's *Black Messiah* and Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*, 2015 will be remembered as the year radical Black politics and for-real Black music resurged in tandem to converge on the nation's pop mainstream." After the string of high-profile murders of Black people such as Rekia Boyd and Trayvon Martin in 2012 (not by police), Renisha McBride and John Crawford in 2013, Tamir Rice and Mike Brown in 2014 (by police), Black artists produced work that questioned, challenged, and called for the dismantling of White supremacy and its relationship to the U.S., and Kendrick was no different. More still, that Ezell Ford was murdered by the Los Angeles Police Department in 2014 just miles from the Compton neighborhood in which Kendrick Lamar was raised, means that "Alright" is both national and local, it is as much about the recent wave of state sanctioned Black death as it is the entire history of the brutally violent and racist Southern California police departments detailed in songs such as Ice T's "Cop Killer," N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police," and the lesser known Toddy Tee's "Batterram" decades before.

K. Dot's "Alright," however, is so much more than a simple proclamation over a nice beat; it is sonic theory, an aural politics and a mode of being purposely entangled in Black joy, fugitivity, and hope. During a protest I attended in Los Angeles, one young Black woman grabbed the bullhorn, shared a vulnerable and rousing narrative about police violence, and then yelled, "When you know, we been hurt, been down before." She, using Kendrick to gesture towards a history of white supremacy, state violence (redundant, I know), and of Black struggle for liberation. Situating 2015 in the long lineage of anti-Black racism, she continued, "and we hate Popo, wanna kill us dead in the street for sure." Opting to skip the rest of the hook, she put her Black fist in the air, and yelled, "but we gon' be alright." The crowed joined in and our chant was as important as "No justice. No peace."

All the songs I have mentioned here, like Kendrick Lamar's "Alright," were born in particular material conditions that made them possible and/or necessary. More still, rejecting the clean and direct correlation between a political moment and the art produced at the time, I argue that whatever a specific political era establishes, art remixes and remakes and has the capacity to produce new worlds and new possibilities. When certain songs are turned on and turned up, Black people turn up, we catch each other's glimpse and smile so large you can see the forever in our faces. This too is intimacy; it is a survival strategy. This too is resistance. This too is Black joy. This too is how Blackness continues on in spite of . . .

Conclusion

> The rethinking of ethnography as primarily about speaking and listening, instead of observing has challenged the visualist bias of positivism with talk about voices, utterances, intonations, multivocality. . . . Listening is an interiorizing experience, a gathering together, a drawing in. . . . Vulnerability and self-disclosure are enabled through conversation. Closure, on the other hand, is constituted by the gaze.
>
> *Conquergood 87*

In an increasingly divided world, the city offers a space through which we might use Conquergood's call to vulnerability and self-disclosure through listening as a means of making meaning—and of understanding meaning making. If this article has offered a somewhat fragmented and chaotic account of city-dramaturgy, then that reflects the chaotic, fragmented and ever-emerging ways that cities are experienced—as well as the ways in which we as global citizens with the privilege to travel encounter city space.

To riff on Michel de Certeau's pithy phrase, we suggest that "The long [song] of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be . . ." (101). Whether it was 1990s R&B, U.K. garage culture, hip hop cosmopolitanism, litefeet or Kendrick Lamar's aural protest, music or the sounds of the city, opened up ways, on some level, for us to reject the "spatial order" or cities like London, Los Angeles, and New York in favor of different "enunciations" and "rhetoric[s] of walking" (98, 99).

Music, however, is more than a backdrop, a political score for or in response to the political city, it gives another way to consume and remake the city. Inasmuch as dominant forces work to maintain the city as a stable structure, a coherent system with a given set of logics, sound and music "cuts across," consistently pointing to other logics and ways of doing that destabilizes what Janet Abu-Loghod might call the frontstage "façade" of the city (100).

The performance and politics of sound gifts us the ability to understand Los Angeles beyond its idyllic beaches and proximity to Hollywood, to move past London's synecdochical relationship with the crown and the bright lights of New York. Amongst other things, the dramaturgy of sound has the capacity to expose the performance of the city, how such performance maps and orders, as well as how folks resist and reorder. Music gifts us a means of moving "from sight and vision to sound and voice, from text to performance, from authority to vulnerability" (Conquergood 87) and, in so doing, creating fragments of meaning through which we might bridge the divides that threaten to destroy us.

Bibliography

Abu-Loghod, Janet. *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities.* Ann Arbor: U of Minnesota P, 2001.

Augé, Mark. Translated by John Howe. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso. 1992.

Ball, Jared A. *I Mix What I Like!: A Mixtape Manifesto*, AK Press. 2011.

Conquergood, Dwight. "Rethinking Ethnography." *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, edited by Patrick Johnson, The U of Michigan P, 2013.

De Certeau, Michele. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* U of California P, 2011.

Donehower, Joanna Kathleen. *Toward a Dramaturgy of Feminist Spatial Curiosity: Urban Performance Creation in Montreal.* 2021. Concordia U, PhD dissertation.

Dramaturg's Network. "Urban Dramaturgy." *Dramaturg's Network,* 2015.

Eisen-Martin, Tongo. "Two Poems by Tongo Eisen-Martin." *Literary Hub,* 13 Nov. 2017.

Ferdman, Bertie. "Urban Dramaturgy: The Global Art Project of JR." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art.* vol. 34, no. 3, 2012, pp. 12–26.

Eshun, Kodwo. *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. Quartet. 1999.

Fatsis, Lambros. "Grime: Criminal Subculture or Public Counterculture? A Critical Investigation into the Criminalization of Black Musical Subcultures in the U.K." *Crime and Media Culture*, 28 June 2018, pp. 1–15, doi: 10.1177/1741659018784111.

Hancox, Dan. "Mature Ravers Only: The Story of UK Garage Fashion." *Redbull Music Academy Daily,* 13 Feb. 2019.

Iton, Richard. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era.* Oxford UP. 2008.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Wiley-Blackwell. 1991.

Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. SAGE. 2005.

Neal, Mark Anthony. *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities*. NYU Press, 2013.

Radosavljević, Duška, Flora Pitrolo, Tim Bano, Katie Beswick, Javon Johnson. "LMYE Salon #1: Katie Beswick & Javon Johnson—Sounds of the City." *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. 2020.

Redmond, Shana. *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidary in the African Diaspora*. NYU Press, 2013.

Rose, Tricia. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—And Why It Matters*. Basic Civitas, 2008.

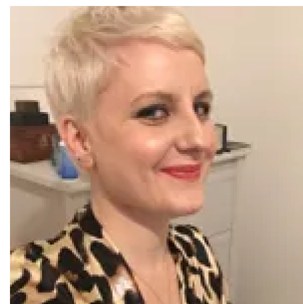
Soja, Edward. *Thirdspace: Journies to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1996.

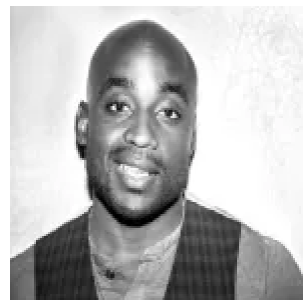
Tate, Greg. "To Pimp a Butterfly." *Rolling Stone*, ND.

Turner, Cathy, and Synne Behrndt. *Dramaturgy and Performance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

***Katie Beswick** is a writer and academic, currently Senior Lecturer in Drama at the University of Exeter, she is the author of *Social Housing in Performance* (Methuen, 2019) and *Making Hip Hop Theatre* (with Conrad Murray, Methuen, 2022), as well as author and editor of numerous articles, chapters and special issues on subjects including housing, class, hip hop and performer training.

Javon Johnson is a poet, performer and Assistant Professor and Director of African American and African Diaspora Studies at UNLV. He is the author of *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*, *Aint Never Not Been Black* and the editor of *The End of Chiraq: A Literary Mixtape*.





Copyright © 2021 Katie Beswick and Javon Johnson
Critical Stages/Scènes critiques e-ISSN: 2409-7411

This work is licensed under the
Creative Commons Attribution International License CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.