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Conversations:

Lights Out at the White Supremacist Theory Disco

by Annie Goh & Anthony Iles

Reflections following the presentation and discussion 'From White Brothers with No Soul to Feminist Prometheans: Lights Out at the White Supremacist Theory Disco' at the Ultimate Leisure Workers Club, Sat 28 Nov 2020

Annie Goh: Sitting down to have an email conversation at the end of this year about the politics of 'discos', nightclubs and gigs seems slightly surreal, given that in 2020 few of such activities did or could take place because of the pandemic, which only seems to be getting worse with a new variant of Covid-19 spreading rapidly in the South East of the UK, causing London to make a U-turn on Christmas guidelines, with the EU among other countries in turn moving toward travel bans on the UK; meanwhile we're heading towards what could well be a no-deal Brexit.[1] But no less a reason than any, perhaps, to theorise the 'white supremacist theory disco,' as you helpfully coined for the event on 28 November. The global pandemic of this year has exacerbated socio-economic inequalities and although very little joy was had this year by most of us in the form of dancing and other communal musical experiences at gigs and/or nightclubs, discos and such spaces; the prospects of their eventual return remains a glint of light at the end of the tunnel for those of us so-inclined.

Anthony Iles:

Thanks Annie. That's a good emphasis to begin with. In retrospect, our approach to these topics may appear a little 'puritan,' given the context you raise of the common and practical interest we share in dance culture as an expression of rebellious collective joy directed against the externally constructed barriers of class, racism, sexism and the compulsion to work. In the past year the Ultimate Leisure Workers' Club has faced an excruciatingly barren terrain for the exploration of the transformative dancefloor. However, perhaps the

distance between the dancefloor and us, was productive for this brief moment. For instance, the resources you shared ahead of our discussion, in combination with the distance from that familiar place of assembly, certainly allowed some fresh and critical perspectives to sink in… and it focussed my attention to the ways you have been connecting theories of the dancefloor, new political movements and a certain staleness, maleness and paleness of specific tendencies in dance culture for which this was an opportune moment to address.

AG: The conversation we had on 28 November online was an attempt to join the dots between the critique of Xenofeminism I wrote for Mute Magazine 'Appropriating the Alien: A Critique of Xenofeminism' and some of the work I had done as a curator within CTM Festival (formerly club transmediale) in Berlin circa 2013–2016, particularly as part of its discourse programme. Compiled into the reading list for this event (alongside the Mute Magazine piece) were: 'Tekknologic as Tekknowledge' QRT aka Markus Konradin Leiner (Merve Verlag Berlin 1999) an excerpt of which I translated in 2013; an interview I conducted with Alexander G. Weheliye based on his work entitled 'White Brothers With No Soul: UnTuning the Historiography of Berlin Techno' in 2015; Luis-Manuel Garcia's RA feature 'An alternate history of sexuality in club culture' from Jan 2014 (and the related unabridged interview with Terre Thaemlitz on Queer Nightlife with LMG (4 Feb 2014) and a short but poignant blogpost by Discwoman co-founder Frankie Decaiza Hutchinson, from August 2020 entitled 'Business Techno Matters: how those who have the most sacrifice the least'.

The QRT text was one I had almost completely forgotten about, but when we met to plan the

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[1] In the end, a so-called 'no-deal Brexit' was avoided due to final-hour negotiations

event, something about the framing of the Ultimate Leisure Workers' Club reminded me of it. I had come across Markus Konradin Leiner's work when I was programming the Death of Rave events at CTM Festival in 2013-2014 and at the time I was quite drawn in by his theorisation of the techno dancefloor. QRT himself was seemingly quite an enigmatic character, who alongside writing worked as a comic illustrator, drug-dealer, musician and actor before dying of a heroin overdose aged 31 in 1996. I wasn't aware of many theories of techno at the time and the melange of 90s media theory (from which one can feel strong influences at different times from Virilio, Baudrillard, McLuhan, Flusser) appealed to me at the time, particularly somewhat cyberpunk romanticism around the 'disappearance of the organic body into speed' and the sensory overstimulation of sound and light on the techno dancefloor as a way to build physiological/psychological resistance to the so-called 'media-war'. I think I was reading a lot of Virilio et al at the time! Proposing the DJ as the 'officer' of the dancefloor and the idea of dancers, bouncers, bartenders, drug dealers all being part of a larger machinic techno-economy must have tickled me, given the superstar status of DJs now. Adorno's infamous tirade on 'popular music' had a section denouncing rhythmical/beat-driven music for bringing about rhythmic obedience and 'mechanical collectivity'. QRT was undoubtedly taking this to its extreme in his description of the techno dancefloor, as a big fuck you to Adorno. Re-reading the text now, I was appalled on several fronts: at its horrific ableism, kitschy recourse to problematic arch-imperialist anthropology tropes (the section on ritual, 'savage thought' and the techno dancefloor as the electrification of initiation rites), unabashed endorsement of militarism and its overall utopian-dystopian futurism, all of which leave it unfortunately dated. I think at the time I was looking for a textual anchor to the German context of post-reunifica-

tion rave culture and this is what I found – made additionally attractive for its obscurity. The part on techno being 'anti-ideology' sticks out at me as being especially naive and wrong, given the Weheliye interview I conducted about a year after translating this text and in light of the other assembled texts by Luis Manuel-Garcia, Terre Thaemlitz and Frankie Decaiza Hutchinson. The whiteness of the dancefloor QRT writes of is quite glaring, seen in this context. The exclusions that Weheliye points to, both physical (and violent) and narrative, in the historicisation of Berlin techno are evident in the QRT text, which reifies a white cis-male able-bodied subject of the techno dancefloor.

AI: Reading the text you produced with Alexander G. Weheliye on race, music, technology and critical theory in the context of the Berlin techno scene after our extended discussions around Xenofeminism's false universalism(s), was really illuminating. For me it builds really interesting bridges between primarily US-centric discourses of Afro Pessimism and Black Optimism with anti-nationalist critique in the German context. This therefore brings together and develops the critique of the universality of whiteness with the critique of the false universalism of the state. It provides a framework for thinking through and criticising the 'whiteness' of Berlin techno, and situating the narratives that circulate around electronic music in Berlin as part of a continuum of national identity in Germany, by which 'Berlin techno, Germany and German-ness are continually being imagined as white.' Weheliye relates this continuum both to the ongoing myth-making and selective historiography around the Berlin scene, which specifically omits the significant history of 'Black music cultures in GI discos and other clubs that played Black music in West Berlin before the fall of the wall. In these narratives, there is definitely a move to disassociate Berlin techno from Black musical influences.' Equally, narratives which

thread together techno, the fall of the wall and re-unification into an image of positive 'coming together' erase the violent racism of both the casual everyday violence directed to non-white Germans and organised pogroms (e.g. Rostock in 1992) in the immediate post-unification years. Notably, such criticisms resonate with events that transpired over the pandemic summer of 2020. For example the coincidence between a demo organised by Berlin clubbers to 'save the Berlin club scene' – who as reported by Peter Kernbe were behaving like anti-maskers – and a Black Lives Matter demo on the same day organised to highlight the twin danger to black lives of racist policing and the poor handling of the pandemic (Kernbe). This provides a present-day Berlin local instantiation of the inability for 'business techno' to respond substantially to the Black Lives Matter movement which joins up nicely with Frankie Decaiza Hutchinson's synthesis of examples from both Europe and the US. Beyond the German/Berlin context, Weheliye provides a conceptual structure for thinking through the currents of racism, heteronormativity and whiteness at work in business techno and in the remaking of dance music history more broadly. Electronic music culture in neoliberal capitalism is building clubs at which one can be apart rather than come together. In its centre is the lab-coated white master engineer, who produces a white smokescreen that acts to blur out non-white, non-hetero actors; burying the the mess of their historical contingency, particularity and difference as to make room for the bleached unity of metalised, white and almost identical dancing bodies.

AG: Weheliye's voice was a much-needed intervention at the time, especially as the historicisation of Berlin techno was happening around this time, such as in Sven Von Thülen and Felix Denk's Der Klang der Familie and the numerous documentaries recounting that era such as We Call it Techno!, in a manner which was seamless

with an affirmative state narrative (celebrations of 25 years of the fall of the wall were omnipresent).There was a lot of pushback and negativity to Weheliye's presentations at the time, which further proves the point he makes about Germans' stubborn self-understanding as open and liberal; ugly fissures appear when brought face-to-face with the non-understanding of anything other than German-ness (and European-ness) equals whiteness.

I like the image you've conjured around there being historical, political, cultural messes buried underneath the dancefloor. Given the exclusivities of dancefloors, reinforced by selective door policies – notorious at clubs like Berghain but evident as long as there have been nightclubs – there's something insightful about theorising dancefloors as surfaces with long, complex stories of oppression brutally buried or submerged beneath them. However, I'd say that it's not so much that dancefloors are no longer a place to come together under neoliberal capitalism, but rather that the dynamics of 'togetherness' and 'apartness' play out wildly different depending on various class-based, racialised, sexualised, gendered and ability-based factors. This is what exasperates Thaemlitz when she says as DJ Sprinkles, 'House is not universal…House is hyper-specific' and scoffs at 'greeting card bullshit' which oppressively universalises euphoric escapism.

AI: On the topic of specificity, its important to emphasise that 'savage thought' in QRT's account has none. Indeed it is stripped of historicity, just as 'savages' have been stripped of possessing history through the projection of fetishism upon them by European colonists. This is a problem that the tradition of European ethnography, even in its anti-colonial guise, in fact continued to reproduce. Take Jean Baudrillard's hybrid Marxist/anti-Marxist text *The Mirror of Production* (1975). The fantasy incubated in the

text of a completely transposable and profoundly unhistorical theory of experience, is uncritically celebrated by QRT under the guise of Marxist anti-colonial/anti-capitalist credentials. However, this celebration extends only so far as 'savage thought', as embodied on the dancefloor as 'the neutral aesthetic of dance', is further 'purified' and not 'watered down'. This language belies conflicting metaphors, both indicating a desire for immunisation against particularity or embodiment and 'dilution', e.g. by specificity, linguistic claims, history or the wrong 'impure' bodies. Indeed, this pairing of purification and techno appears logical, but it is obviously a tendency that has been steered off course over and again. The drive towards this purity of experience gains a sinister resonance in light of Frankie Decaiza Hutchinson's analysis, that 'business techno [is a] community that fundamentally pretends that oppression doesn't exist', and that platitudes like, 'its just about the music', which were in the past mobilised to defend the culture against criminalisation are now mobilised to mask, 'the gross reality that business techno is merely a tangent of white supremacy and capitalism and not counter to it.' The whitening of techno via this purification imperative at first glance manifests as an organic movement, but in retrospect can be seen to be shaped by a sequence of power moves that worship the inorganic and denigrate the expressive, joyful and different.

QRT's approach repeats a move in Enlightenment philosophy, notably the work of Immanuel Kant, where the capacity for critical judgement is predicated on a freedom from hunger and other bodily needs. The savage in turn is expelled from the sensus communis, not capable of aesthetic experience and not capable of critical judgement, as they are bound by their sensuality. QRT inverts this for techno, encoding 'savage experience' as direct sensuality without cognition through carrying over the immunisation against

particular need, or particular personhood, into this newly aestheticised experience. Any gender or race – that is any gendering or racialisation which marks the subject also marks them out with the filth of need, or inequality – disqualifying them from the purity necessary for an enjoyment which is rather like that of Odysseus bound to the mast listening to the sirens. QRT's raver, then, finds themselves bound by inaction in order to maintain 'neutrality', no wonder… so many militaristic metaphors start to flow… the hardened body both open and totally closed to the experience of beauty.

AG: I mean… yes, it makes sense that the onto-epistemological subject of the white supremacist theory disco aligns with Kant! I think the dynamic to highlight is how the 'neutral' unmarked subject, capable of critical judgement etc, has the ability to deliberately descend into 'savage' activity on the weekends: it's a choice and a temporary one at that. It's an experience you can buy a la Burning Man.

AI: Yes, and returns as a business entrepreneur in the week!

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AG: Right now in London, local activists in Brixton are fighting a multi-million pound regeneration project which threatens to destroy multiple working-class black and brown communities. Notably, the project is spear-headed by a billionaire property-developer who is also a DJ. And it's not at all a coincidence that this figure is both

a businessman and a DJ. The type of lifestyle and concept of leisure of this businessman-DJ, as Hutchinson speaks of in the article, make it abundantly clear that in business techno the dynamics of white supremacy and capitalism are intimately entwined. The pandemic exacerbates existing inequalities and it is laid bare within club culture whose leisure continues and in what manner.

AI: I think this was what Horkheimer and Adorno were getting at with the figure of Odysseus as the quasi-transhistorical (actually historical) bourgeois subject, his journey is an allegory of the voyages of merchants who travel the mediterranean interacting with monstrous others only to transform these experiences into a viable traffic in commodities. He appears to risk himself body and soul, but in fact is hard-wired to survive, to overcome both his own nature and that of others. Even the loss of self through musical and narcotic experience are subjected to restraint in order to further the project of social control.

> The fettered man listens to a concert, as immobilized as audiences later, and his enthusiastic call for liberation goes unheard as applause. [...] Between the cultural heritage and enforced work there is a precise correlation, and both are founded on the inescapable compulsion toward the social control of nature.[2]

Counter to QRT's futurism, this is a form of rational subjectivity and a model of experience which is not new, not suddenly available through a breakthrough in technology and breakdown of large state formations, rather it has haunted the long unfolding of enlightenment, and has shadowed it as the threat of its undoing; in turn integrated into it and neutralised.

The effort to hold itself together attends the ego at all its stages, and the temptation to be rid of the ego has always gone hand-in-hand with the blind determination to preserve it. Narcotic intoxication, in which the euphoric suspension of the self is expiated by deathlike sleep, is one of the oldest social transactions mediating between self-preservation and self-annihilation, an attempt by the self to survive itself. The fear of losing the self, and suspending with it the boundary between oneself and other life, the aversion to death and destruction, is twinned with a promise of joy which has threatened civilization at every moment.[3]

I find these analogies pertinent to the white supremacist theory disco, even if I would severely question the race politics driving Adorno's remarks on jazz as 'popular music' which were echoed in the racist and homophobic demonisation of disco that peaked in the 1970s with a series of 'Disco Demolitions' taking place at stadium events in Chicago, with artists like Terre Thamelitz encountering its residues into the 1980s. On the other hand, the dynamic QRT's text explores parallels the experience of Odysseus – a model of the bourgeois subject, who abandons himself to self-annihilation only to remaster himself, 'nature' and dominate others – is definitely something intensified in modernity. We see an early articulation of this dissolution of the human into the machine in the first world war writings of Ernst Jünger and in the work of the Italian Futurists. This connection with Futurism is something noted by Benjamin Noys in his book *Malign Velocities*, naming this 'mutated and modulated futurism, which [...] straddles [...] genres, forms, and cultural domains', 'cypherpunk phuturism.' On the other hand, this is

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[2]   Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* 27

[3]   Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* 26

a theme explored intensively, within Surrealism, and notably by several notable female Surrealists, provoked by the horrific scarring endured by returning soldiers, they reflected much less affirmatively on destruction and deformation of the human body in capitalism, and indicated that this logic was extended by commodification, rather than imagining transcendence through machinic 'perfection'. Indeed, error, dance, the uncanny, machines, is something Charlie Chaplin already worked on in a highly popular form. Perhaps this provides us another way to reconsider the seemingly mechanical choreography massified through rave as not simply a unidirectional becoming machine but rather a parody of industrial work and robotic, macho, machine-like conformity. Rave choreography in turn has a way to embrace err, or the glitch, as a way of breaking with the devastating congealment of power in industrial society.

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AG: I'm interested in what differentiates these two poles of the white supremacist theory disco, the business techno pro-capitalist and the cyberpunk futuristic (purportedly) anti-capitalist. If the temporary loss of self – heightened through intensive music/sensory stimulation and psychoactive substances – only reaffirms the bourgeois (cis-white-male) subject and both sides might experience a similar sort of jouissance as a forbidden pleasure in such activities, then where is the scope and what are the conditions for a transformative anti-capitalist, anti-racist, non-patriarchal politics of the dancefloor to occur? I don't have any easy answers but clearly we have to begin with abolishing/tearing things down!

For the ULWC discussion I revisited a generative audiovisual composition and net-art project I made around 2013-14 called The Banality of Affect. It began as an investigation into trance music – as in: the largely Dutch, commercial electronic dance music genre – euphoria and the commodification of affects and emotion; attempting to create a system of sonically-induced euphoria based on various data streams from Twitter and the Dutch stock market. At the time when I presented the project, I had to emphasise that it wasn't in any way a simplistic derision of trance music or its related cultures (mass raves, superstar DJ-worship), but I was then and remain fascinated in the intersections between sonic articulations of emotions such as ecstasy and euphoria, and masculinity, whiteness, leisure industries and neoliberal mood-regulation. I suppose I created a space for this to be contemplated.

AI: Psychedelic trance would appear to be the antithesis of cold hard techno, or drum and bass. Aesthetically it makes claim to a vacant spirituality, tends towards the organic or at least fungal, feminine or at least seemingly aligning with female or androgynous deities... however, trance is orientalising of an imagined eastern other, much-beloved in macho cultures e.g. recent military conscripts in Israeli culture, and associated with the kind of contained white heterosexual hedonist transcendence which appropriates, but dare not actually engage with, the other. As your installation allegorises, trance mystifies social relations of exploitation, inequality and true difference in order to provide a temporary escape from them, all the better to put the back-from-holiday rational agents to work amidst all those forces in

the name of naked self-interest. Its distance from economic reality is what makes it quietly the most lucrative of the business techno pantheon. Again, this returns us to the theme of escape, which was explored in the Club through the image of the prince's castle in Poe's 'Masque of the Red Death', where the ruling class wall themselves within to create a realm of safety and revelry during the pandemic. This fantasy-space turns out to be entirely dependent on the exploitation of subordinated class others, therefore the plague – a metaphor for the social question of inequality and exploitation, work but also pleasure and joy – returns, breaching the castle's walls, to terrorise the ruling class would-be-escapees. The party peaks with an orgy of biological hubris as they succumb to the threat of the faceless 'red' death.

END

Links

Annie Goh, '"White Brothers With No Soul" UnTuning the Historiography of Berlin Techno: An interview with Alexander G. Weheliye', January, 2015, LINK

QRT, 'Tekknologic, Tekknowledge, Tekgnosis – Ein Theoriemix' Merve Verlag Berlin 1999 (Excerpt Translated by Annie Goh), LINK

Mike Urban, 'Privilege, wealth and power: Brixton landlord Taylor McWilliams and his Housekeeping DJ Collective' 26 May, 2020, LINK

Frankie Decaiza Hutchinson, 'Business Techno Matters: how those who have the most sacrifice the least', August 2020, LINK

Annie Goh, The Banality of Affect, 2013-14, LINK

Annie Goh, 'Appropriating the Alien', July 2019, LINK

Luis-Manuel Garcia, 'An Alternate History of Sexuality in Club Culture', January 2014 LINK

Luis-Manuel Garcia, Terre Thaemlitz on Queer Nightlife: the Unabridged Interview' February, 2014, LINK

Peter Kirn, 'No Love Parades this time: in the midst of crisis, an image of tonedeaf ravers in Berlin', June, 2020, LINK

Video footage of a Disco Demolition event in Chicago in 1979 LINK

'Disco Demolition: The Night They Tried to Crush Black Music', July 2019, LINK