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Knowing Manufacture of an RnB Feeling

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An essay on RnB as an aesthetic structure of feeling as thinking. Based around a response to the work of Free.Yard and Simone White, the essay moves through debates in the field of black diasporic intellectual production concerning the politics of class, form and gender.

Still from Free.Yard, *REGNORTS (N22 MOMENTATION MIX)*
https://vimeo.com/351421708

"Music makes an image. What image?"

Amiri Baraka, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)"

Part 1

Somehow it is possible to be so right about RnB and at the same time get *Black Music* so wrong. I discovered this by reading Simone White's essay-poem "Dear Angel of

Death", which makes up the second half of her 2018 collection that shares the same title. A revelation of this type only seems to produce a set of conundrums: if such a generative retuning of the case for RnB as a vehicle for feelings can be made by White whilst she conducts what appears to be – if read generously, a careless; if read honestly, a willful – mishandling of Amiri Baraka's 1966 essay "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)" that closes his 1968 text *Black Music,* then where does this leave us with both black music (as a living continuum) and Black Music (as an intellectual tradition of thinking and writing about blackness)? In part, the basis for such a conundrum lies in her decision to take up the essay-poem as mode. I certainly do not think it is the mode as such, but rather White's use of it, which allows so much to go right and yet so much to go wrong in "Dear Angel of Death".

Let us begin with the signature case made by White for another way of listening to and writing about RnB. It is in the course of "casting" around for a route into thinking the "qualities" of black music that White hits upon "Black radio".[1] Referring to an institution as much as a means for broadcast, Black radio is a technology of reminiscence, a repository of memory that is indicative of the way "We make culture… entirely in retrospect".[2] For White, assembling black diasporic culture through "recollection", "remembrance" and "review" means an unavoidable contention with "rejection" and "revulsion" as part of the deal.[3] It is the cohabitation of "persistent contextual negativity" with "consistently pleasing immemorial connection" that brings RnB into the picture.[4] Generally understood as a social music fecund with private affairs, RnB's very thickness is a condition of the way it ignores the slicing up of the spatial and ideological. In White's listening the "open access" structure of RnB brings along with it as its condition of possibility "a soft disgust".[5] Audible across artists as varied as Kleer and Ann Peebles, Rufus and Hall & Oates, Madonna and Luther Vandross, The Isley Brothers and Aaliyah, what RnB does is establish "a spread for affective recon, where everybody is pressed together and recovering from pressing".[6] The double register of "pressing" is White's focal point: the thing that makes RnB what it is is the fact that given the materials out of which the music is constructed, the line between being pressed together and recovering from pressing relies upon muddying the waters of the historical and sensual. Open access or soft disgust? Consistent pleasure or persistent negation? Reminiscence or repulsion? RnB can do without neither.

White's torquing of RnB's registers carries some heavy Hartmanian overtones: black performance as the diffusion of black negation (as opposed to its transformation), thus

allowing such negation to become part of the general racial economy of pleasure.[7] The double register of pressing turns into a question of availability in RnB. The music's allures cannot avoid pulling on a deeper sense of the available: "(I am open I am open to you I am available I am available to you my body is yours I am available to be stolen)".[8] Within this troublesome seductive zone of the pressed and the available, one White understands "as simultaneously an act of gauging and erotic softness or exchange and of being inside the felt pleasures of others", RnB is more than capable of producing its own pied pipers: "You don't like it; it's not for you; yet nothing is wrong with it – R.Kelly peeing on people."[9]

The proposition White is making for RnB as a modality of listening and thinking rests on holding seduction and disturbance together. Everything about the music that heightens our sense of overnourishment is conditioned by a horrifying fungibility. RnB is so open with its intimacies because it emerges from a history of material availability. Hearing RnB in this manner requires "thinking about Black Music as a tradition that cause[s] revulsion", where pressing, togetherness, and availability coalesce in a socio-musical "feeling of unwanted feeling".[10]

In this re-presentation of the mechanics of RnB feeling, it is inevitable and necessary that White chooses to move through (and looks to break with) Amiri Baraka. There are innumerable ways of describing his multi-modal poetics, but if considered through the lens of "Dear Angel of Death" we could say that Baraka set the terms for modern discourse on black music as the locus for the production (and theorisation) of black social, aesthetic, political and philosophical feeling (otherwise known as Black Music). And it is Baraka's terms White is looking to situate herself in relation to, in order to initiate a deviation away from them.

It is important at this stage to remind ourselves that the purpose of "Dear Angel of Death" is not to make a better case for RnB than those already on the table. The stated aim of the essay-poem is to use the open access/soft disgust dynamic of RnB (as an established musical vehicle for previous instantiations of black social feeling) to make a claim on the dominant black social music of the current African-American conjuncture: trap. For White, if black music is the insistent and incessant producer and register of present black social feeling, and if a system of thinking called Black Music has been constructed around attempts to think black music (i.e. Black Music as a theorisation of black social feeling heard in the music into an aesthetic and political philosophy), then the historical form of Black Music is inadequate to the present state of black music in the guise of trap. The accepted logics of Black Music have been

assembled through a careful listening of prior (and preferred) musical forms, and for White it has not been suitably updated to deal with the conditions and feelings carried in trap. Her sense is that there is not a desire to undertake such a renewal. The source of the blockage is the overbearing presence of Baraka.

For the large part of "Dear Angel of Death", White proceeds to identify the ways and means by which Baraka, and the progeny he has constructed, prove insufficient to the immediacy of trap. In fact, she spends far more time on this endeavour – unable to "get *off* this page" – than making the case for trap on its own terms (a task which only really begins in the essay-poems last ten-to-fifteen pages, and in a somewhat cursory manner).[11]

Critiques of Baraka are nothing new.[12] One half of her two-pronged interrogation of him and his influence works off the back of some fairly well-established – and for the large part legitimate – lines of argumentation. This rests on the way Baraka built an edifice, a structure of thinking called Black Music, both through whom and how he cited (W.E.B Du Bois), and those who went on to arrange sections of his writing on their own pages (Nathaniel Mackey and Fred Moten being the primary apprentices in this engineering scheme). The result is a "history of ideas as murmurings between…..the masculine order of black writing…an order that values being seen together".[13] As a masculine history of ideas, the edifice known as Black Music is built on scenes of transcription. What occurs when Baraka hails Du Bois, and then in turn Mackey and Moten hail him (and each other), is for White, not simply the construction of methods for listening to black music, but the construction of an intellectual space in which men speak to each other about the nature of Black Music:

> That what is at stake in music-centred theories of black art/making black art is indeed "a new kind of morality" – a communal/cultural practice in itself, for itself; these men giving language to each other as its own kind of wanting to be together and wanting to be loved.[14]

All of this coalesces in White's concept-metaphor of the "author/ship".[15] By now also including Wilson Harris, Paul Gilroy and Ralph Ellison, the intellectual space these authors have built is more akin to a ship, one they use to hold themselves together and navigate the choppy waters of black diasporic music. The choice of metaphor is of course no happy accident on White's part: the ship being the vessel that generates and conditions the historical structures of black existence in the diaspora, and thus generates and conditions the existence of the music. The good "author/ship" Black

Music is manned by a motley crew, all of whom in White's reading possess indissoluble authority, no matter how much they claim to disperse it.

Although Angela Davis, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Daphne A. Brooks, Jayna Brown, Shana L. Redmond, Tsitsi Jaji and Thulani Davis might take some issue with the claim that the arena of Black Music is "some obsessive old-boys club", it is not gender in and of itself that is the object critique in "Dear Angel of Death".[16] Class and taste are the means by which White really looks to go to work on Baraka as the ship's captain. In her reading of "The Changing Same" she takes the position that the defining problem of Black Music as it has been constructed by Baraka and his crew, and which prevents it functioning as a generative hermeneutic for the present conditions of black music (understood by White to be held entirely by trap), is the intellectual overdetermination of "New Black Music" (Baraka's term referring to the aesthetic project initiated by Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane and others) or "black art music" (White's term which is ascribed in passing to Matana Roberts as an exemplary instance).[17] As the founding document in the construction of Black Music, "The Changing Same" contains an originary flaw which White believes has not only gone largely unacknowledged but has been reproduced. This flaw is the opposition Baraka apparently sets up between RnB as indicative of "black popular music as viscerally pleasurable, roots and yet philosophically inadequate for thinking black life beyond the scope of its propertyhood" and "the distinctive expressive actions of black genius, present in the 'free' music he adores".[18] Baraka, according to White, is dismissive of the "mundane", "run-of-the-mill", "small-minded romantic hysteria of regular feeling" of the RnB that dominated black popular music in 1966.[19] The logic of "Dear Angel of Death" is that Baraka makes these intellectual manoeuvres solely in order to exalt the more obscured "self-consciously avant-garde" attempt by a cohort of black musicians to pursue what White reads as Baraka's desire for a higher ideal of freedom.[20] White proposes that this is the problem with "The Changing Same" which has been reverberated and tightened across generations in the continual work on the ship Black Music, and what it has led to is a self-elected group of "experimental music people" who are unable to critically respond to the mass presence of trap or even rap (these terms become interchangeable in "Dear Angel of Death", a warning sign for readers if nothing else).[21]

To label Baraka a "poet legislator" is for the most part a fair comment, although I would prefer to think of him as an adjudicator, issuing fiery, wild judgments under constant revision.[22] But to say he makes a class distinction between RnB and New

Black Music in order to indicate the route Black Music, as the vehicle for black aesthetic and political philosophy, should take, is an argument from Simone White that simply does not hold if we go back and do our homework on “The Changing Same”. This charge not only applies to White, but needs to be extended to two of her readers, Danny Hayward and David Grundy. In their respective reviews of *Dear Angel of Death,* Hayward and Grundy appear to be so eager to praise White’s reading of Baraka that they restage the wilful carelessness of the essay-poem. Hayward describes her writing as “reminiscent of that of Amiri Baraka, with whom she otherwise so consistently and brilliantly disagrees”.[23] Simply flicking through the most recent Baraka collection, or picking up his comrade Sean Bonney’s dissertation on Baraka, would lead Hayward to, at the very least, rethink his claims of reminiscence and resemblance.[24] Grundy looks to reinforce White’s claim that Black Music (the intellectual tradition engineered by Baraka) “seems to stop short at hip-hop” and thus is definitively unable to take full account of trap as a music which refuses bids for freedom.[25] Again, I would suggest Grundy needs to go back and do some further reading here. He should perhaps think about the ways in which the “tradition” underwent a renewal at the hands of Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, Robin D.G. Kelley and R.A Judy’s (to name a few) attentiveness to the variety of forms and possibilities gathered under the heading of “hip-hop”.[26]

In short, the task here is simple: if we read through Baraka’s essay carefully, listen to it faithfully, we begin to wonder what it is that is going on with “Dear Angel of Death”. Take for instance the closing paragraph of “The Changing Same” as an exemplary concentration of the intricate argument he has spent the previous thirty pages weaving:

> The separations, artificial oppositions in Black Music resolved, are the ditty strong classic (Ditty bop). That is, the New Black Music and R&B are the same family looking at different things. Or looking at things differently. The collection of wills is a simple unity like on the street. A bigger music, and muscle, for the move necessary. The swell of a music, of action and reaction, a seeing, thrown in swift slick tone along the entire muscle of a people. The Rhythm and Blues mind blowing evolution of James-Ra and Sun-Brown. The growth to include all the resources, all the rhythms, all the yells and cries, all that information about the worlds, the Black ommmmmmmmmmmmmmm, opening and entering.[27]

If he is trying to do anything in the essay, it is not to draw hard, impermeable lines of class, taste and revolutionary propriety between RnB and New Black Music. Rather, Baraka is looking to understand them in their distinctiveness *and* show how they are

drawing water from the same well. Both RnB and New Black Music are “redistributed” elements of a core impulse, they are launched from the same “place”.[28] Throughout “The Changing Same” he is at pains to point out that despite surface alterations in “direction” and “intent”, these should not be understood as fixed delineations of form and content between RnB and New Black Music.[29] Unfortunately this is precisely the portion White chooses to omit in the lengthy section she cites from Baraka’s essay as apparent evidence of his elitism:

> The differences between rhythm and blues and the so-called new music or art jazz, the different places, are artificial, or they are merely indicative of the different placements of spirit.[30]

Therefore, it comes as no surprise to find Baraka praising “the high poetry in the final character of their delivery” when writing of Smokey Robinson and The Miracles, Dionne Warwick, The Supremes, and Jimmy Ruffin.[31] This is no affection or empty platitude. He concretely followed through on this claim in the only way possible: by producing a record. *Soul and Madness* was made in 1968 at The Spirit House in Newark, New Jersey, with a group (“Black and Beautiful”) made up of Freddy Johnson (Lead and Tenor), Leonard Cathcart (Tenor), Aireen Eternal (Second Tenor), Gilbert Monk (Baritone) and Yusef Iman (Bass) accompanying Baraka (Spoken Word).[32] It features a cut, “Beautiful Black Women” which “used Smokey Robinson’s OOOH Baby, Baby as a model”.[33] Listen to it, and you hear Baraka and his crew paying homage to another collective of poets, a group who exemplify a style of music (RnB) White accuses him of condescending to. The organisational principle behind the performance and recording of “Beautiful Black Women” is self-evident: any sense of revolutionary black poetry, of militant black “word-music” Baraka had was derivative, a secondary rhythm, moving in the slipstream of RnB.[34] If anything, that is the crux of the argument in “The Changing Same”. Despite the appearance of formal radicalism in New Black Music, it is really coming back to a place RnB never left and is itself continually revising. New Black Music, in its detour through and theft from avant-gardism “hopes to arrive at expression and spontaneity. The R&B begins with expression and spontaneity as its end. Which are the ends of any Black Music” (p202). In his listening out for “*Unity Music”*, in the audible hints he was catching of “*people-leap”*, Baraka is convinced RnB is ready and waiting. It is the New Black Music that needs to catch up and synthesise.[35]

As I said, this leaves us with the puzzle, the conundrum, of “Dear Angel of Death”. If the grounds of the essay-poem’s calls for a new hermeneutic of Black Music - due to an ingrained class prejudice the crew of the ship has towards the mundane in black popular music in favour of black art music - are built on such a poor fulfilment of critical responsibility to the words on the page, then what does that say about the stance White takes? To be honest, I am not totally sure, but one way of reading “Dear Angel of Death” is to say that despite its claims to the contrary, what might be at work here is an implicit suggestion that those who White designates as living aesthetic lives on the block are incapable of accessing anything which sounds like her particular sense of art and music, even if they come from the same neighbourhood.

But the object here is not to get up in Simone White’s face. I doubt we move in the same circles anyway. Instead, what I would like to do is borrow the terms of “Dear Angel of Death” and take them on a walk, perhaps never giving them back, or even if they are returned they are likely to be inoperable for White. Because there is another way of accessing the sense and sensuality of RnB. The music can be heard and thought about without requiring anyone to leave the block, without relying on an opposition between the seemingly run-of-the-mill and a highly stylized rendering of art. I have been taught all of this by taking walks with Free.Yard. In their social world, and in their social work, a walk is always a mix. With *REGNORTS (N22 MOMENTATION MIX)* we get a lesson on the structural principles of RnB as a people’s art that is art precisely because it is populated. *REGNORTS* is made up of three components: a 2002 recording of the British RnB act Sugababes performing their hit “Stronger” on the now decommissioned Top of the Pops television show; their performance is activated on a Sony PSP Player, a now defunct piece of mobile leisure technology; and Sugagbabes are being broadcast on the PSP as they float in the middle of the screen, superimposed over footage of the streets of Wood Green Shopping centre in the N22 postcode, North London. If we pay attention to the way Free.Yard pays attention, if we handle *REGNORTS* the way it carefully handles Sugababes, the PSP and all the people out on their daily business, another route to RnB is opened up. The means by which Free.Yard reveals to us another way of seeing the street as a hearing of the music by blocking the field of vision contains the answers to another conundrum, one buried in Baraka’s essay: “Music makes an image. What image?”.[36]

Part 2

To get started with Free.Yard we are going to have to go over ground already covered, but this time in a different style. What I mean by this is that to hear the way they hear

the Sugababes, we need to take a detour through another poet's essay, where the poet too is concerned with the question of RnB. Anne Boyer's meditation on Mary J. Blige and Lyn Hejinian through their shared ruminations on the phrase "my life", feels like its moves close enough to *REGNORTS* to hold Free.Yard's hand.

Like White, Boyer's speculation on RnB also rests on identifying a sensual cohabitation that serves as a critical paradox in the music's realisation of itself. Perhaps one of its most recent powerful renderers, Mary J. Blige exemplifies the way in which RnB is a music conditioned by open expressions of intense interiority. For Boyer, she is able to craft a performative schema that shows RnB to be music which unashamedly explores the intricacies of psycho-social sensations, and it does so without recourse to the escape hatch of irony: "the general suffering unmaking narrative and unmade narrative unmaking what is 'personal' about the personal and the unmaking all of it making the sounds, achronic and disarticulate, of calling what isn't or can't yet be."[37] Absolutely genuine in the depth of its transmission of joy, desire, betrayal and pain by complicating the demarcation between these emotional states, the ability of Blige to work on (and work over) such modes of interiority lies in the knowledge she and other RnB artists have of the music as a constructed space: "My Life's aren't *lives:* they are made things. These made My Life's are made mostly of sound. The sounds are made, sometimes, out of calling, so this is about calling, too.".[38] Like all great black popular music, RnB operates entirely on the basis that it is synthetic, it has been put together by choice. The presentation of the music as natural is a finely tuned family affair, which is not to say that RnB artists are disingenuous, far from it. Their expressive intentions are faithful, it is just that they know feeling is their primary material, and the first step to becoming an artist is knowing how to craft it, to get feeling to operate at its fullest effect.

Boyer's theorisation of RnB through Mary J. Blige does not rest upon an idea of the music as autonomous. What Blige shows us is that RnB only becomes what we know it to be once it lives in the ears and minds of its population. Whilst the music's discourse on interiority is expertly constructed by the artists, it is only when received by its congregation that the overwrought syntheticism of RnB becomes the sustainment system for something very real, something felt. Thus, if we follow Boyer, it is in the improvised, impoverished zone of public contact that RnB dissolves any idea of itself as music which stands alone and transforms into the assembly point for a populous. Hence, the adoration Boyer and Free.Yard share is not simply for particular RnB artists, but for RnB as art form. They both know the nature of their respective attachments are not specific to them, are not something they alone can lay claim over.

The tighter they hold Mary J. Blige and Sugababes to themselves, the more chance they have of meeting others like them out in the open. RnB becomes the venue for a composition of living in public.

Boyer has more to say about Blige, and thus about RnB, which I would like to think Free.Yard would find themselves nodding along to in enthusiastic agreement. Blige's 1994 hit "My Life" concentrates all of the dynamics of RnB set out above because it makes manifest in the most intoxicating ways possible the sensuous paradox between the interior construction of life and the social sustainment of life. For Boyer, the genius of Blige lies in her ability to compact the entire gambit of RnB (understood here as feeling realised as aesthetic strategy) into the exhaustion of "life" as a signifier. Such a proposition requires careful unpacking, so that it is not misheard. According t Boyer, Mary J. Blige's "My Life" – as an exemplary instance of RnB as artform – "wrecks the word at the place the word promises".[39] She hallucinates the word "life" by playing on it over and over again, coming at it from different angles, making it sing in multiple registers, so it never stays still:

> Mary J sang the words "My life, my life, my life" in obsessive, despairing repetition, a repetition in which all certain things indicated by My Life (by the words My Life, by the cultural-historical promise My Life, by the formal structure My Life, by the feeling of My Life, by the naming of My Life and what isn't *My Life*) faded, shifted, cycled, reversed, detached, re-attached, corroded, undermined, sickened, dizzied, ached.[40]

In doing so, Blige bypasses the cliched idea of RnB as depthless music built upon empty romantic platitudes. Whilst the object of RnB's capacity for wreckage and exhaustion at the level of content is the beloved, it is also a formal exhaustion of the idea of life as autonomous by those who are thought to have limited access to life. As Boyer says, this means Mary J. Blige and her comrades in RnB are putting some serious propositions on the table. Not only is RnB constructing and wrecking the idea of RnB as music which transmits apparently over-emotional images of pain and desire, it is also through the intensity of the social attachments to its populous making alternative claims upon living:

> My Life's are about calling what isn't a *life* a *life* and calling what isn't *mine mine.* My Life's are about calling what isn't a life a life repeatedly, semi-preposterously, industriously, over decades. They are about calling too, "My Life" what doesn't resemble it, at least not entirely: not just calling what is not a life a life, but calling

> “My Life” something that isn’t the “My Life” that was called it before, and now calling it again, even as it has begun again.[41]

If in Boyer’s listening it is Blige’s wrecking, exhaustion and hallucination of the possibilities contained in “life”, with Free.Yard and their feeling for Sugababes, “stronger” is the place for “the knowing manufacture of an improving feeling, felt in the together, summoned to obscure”[42]. In this respect, it is noticeable that they chose a recording of the group’s live performance of their 2002 hit, rather than the version released on *Angels with Dirty Faces*.[43] Whereas on the album the song is presented in a Massive Attack derived setting of brooding unobstructive rhythm and sweeping strings, for Top of the Pops the only accompaniment Sugababes have is acoustic in the form of piano and guitar. With everything stripped back, their voices exposed and open, the group’s word-music gets amplified. Their occupation and internal reorganisation of “stronger” allows for the emergence of other, previously unnoticed registers of strength. In the Sugababes choir, “stronger” becomes not a measure of individual perseverance, but a social power waiting to be activated.

We cannot, though, get lost in the Sugababes performance, as mesmerising as it is. It is vital to pay attention to the way *REGNORTS* is put together, because Free.Yard is telling us something. Sugababes are not simply presented as they are, on their own terms. They have been reassembled and rearranged with specific intent. Free.Yard’s medium of choice is the Sony PSP Player, a mobile technology which in our current conjuncture is a derelict leisure device, but was contemporaneous to the moment in which Sugababes were at their peak. Though, even if Free.Yard is memorialising the group, reminiscing not only what it felt like to hear but also to see them, what they are also doing is misusing the PSP, a device in which the primary function was the playing of video games.

Here we can find another companion for Free.Yard and Anne Boyer as they meander around the ends in N22.[44] Alexander Weheliye, like Boyer, is not concerned with RnB as a singular, stable, musical system, but rather as a technological style primarily manifested through its interactions with everyday market leisure devices. Weheliye’s thesis on RnB is constructed through a riff on a set of distinctions Samuel R. Delany draws between two modalities of the technological: the exorbitantly financed, socially inaccessible white boxes of corporations; and the readily available, portable black boxes of the street. It is Delany’s thinking on the latter which allows Weheliye to make the case for RnB as technological style, because with the types of technology found on

the block, tactility takes primacy over content. Feel and colour becomes as important as capability:

> body-to-body communication does not vanish in mobile communication but (re)materialises in both the participants' respective location and in the apparatus itself. Put simply, mobile devices are bodies too, even if they exist chiefly in relation to and in symbiosis with humans.[45]

Similarly, because of the proportions and dimensions of black boxes, they can be put to use as part of the process of occupying and reconstructing public space. Thus, for Weheliye, RnB functions as a technological style where the lines of race and class converge. He argues that there is a point where the fuzzy, textural, embodied dynamics of mobile street technology come to be amplified through the sensuality of RnB as a music "acutely concerned, both in content and form, with the conjuring of interiority, emotion and affect".[46] If we take Boyer's case for RnB as congregational venue, where words are wrecked and exhausted in order to be hallucinated into populated feeling, and feed it through Weheliye, then in the case of RnB, mobile technology is never an empty medium of transmission, but instead generates a constitutive vagueness which performers and listeners gather around:

> Black musical formations relish the artificiality of cell phones and other mobile gadgets as much as making these a vital component of the performed body. They achieve this by transforming the sounds of mobile telephones into rhythmic patterns vital to their musical texts, which made audible how humans and mobile machines form a relational continuum. [47]

Almost everything Weheliye teaches us about how the touch of technology and the fecundity of sound takes up form in RnB could be understood as a specific instantiation of a general principle in modern black diasporic music. Fumi Okiji shows this to be the case in her own walking seminar on the double movement of indispensability and inadequacy that imbues the question of jazz and the technological. For Okiji, the very idea of jazz is inextricably tied to the jazz record. Jazz is realised through its recordings, such material objects are its memory: "While what is written about jazz musicians and the scene is shrouded in myth and half-truth, the jazz record gives us what is most often considered the indisputable document of the tradition".[48] Unpacking this claim, she states that the recorded object is only a dormant carrier of jazz's memory, and such memory is in real terms made manifest when activated through the gramophone. Such a situation has implications for the nature of the

memory of jazz, and in particular how it serves a pedagogical purpose. For the student of jazz, what the record does – when picked up, handled and placed on the gramophone – is recompose the concept of the teacher:

> Demonstration is heard on record alongside (and in some cases rather than from) an in-person teacher. Through recordings, musicians are free from a reliance on a telephone game in which they are only able to receive information several hands old. The antiphonic principle of oral pedagogy is updated and deepened as musicians listen and respond not only to their near contemporaries but also to work that would have traditionally been out of their earshot.[49]

Through tactile access to the memory vault of the music, the student can take the fallibility of the flesh and blood teacher out of the equation and instead exhaust the knowledge contained in the record, until it too eventually (but at a much slower rate) starts to decompose. The possibility of tapping into the scope of jazz's memory by gathering and passing around a collection of records means that contemporaneity is no longer a feature of the music's pedagogical scene.

Okiji though introduces a note of caution to her analysis. Critical as the jazz record is as the touchable bearer of the music's memory, "as a document of the creative processes of jazz, they are also inadequate"[50]. The continual revision – the live play – out of which jazz is crafted, is not permitted within the space of the recording:

> In live jazz the idea of a hermetic, closed off, completed whole is not always/necessarily useful. At the end of a jazz piece one is often left with the impression that it actually continues in some other dimensions or that it could be picked up again where it was left, that the piece has not – or cannot – end.[51]

When in the studio – as opposed to the club, concert stage or rehearsal space – the musicians are placed under the time pressure of the available space on the material record, as well as the requirement for them as artists to deliver a definable object – a *thing* which can be presented as the jazz work. What this puts on the table is a highly potent paradox according to Okiji. It goes something like this: the jazz record defers the open work of the jazz performance, yet the very same record (as an object which can be handled and handed around) is the only means by which the memory of jazz is sustained, and thus it is the only available resource for the generative extension of jazz as improvisation. Such a paradox is, for Fumi, the structuring principle of jazz as an aesthetics of blackness: a physically instantiated technology which on the surface

appears to individuate, but carries within it a latent affordance that allows for lived incompleteness as its condition of possibility.

The chasm between RnB and jazz, the regular and the experimental, is not so apparent if understood along the terms set out by Weheliye and Okiji. People leap the border from one to the other all the time, rubbing out the demarcation as they cross back and forth. While it might seem like a detour, the past few paragraphs offer us something critical in terms of grasping what is at stake in *REGNORTS* as an artwork which is made of RnB music. In *REGNORTS,* the PSP is not present as a blank canvas, an empty device upon which Sugababes are transposed. Instead it functions as a memory vault, something Free.Yard recalls holding and therefore feeling in the palms of their hand, just as they are holding and feeling Sugababes in their palms. But Free.Yard is not looking to take possession, rather they are holding in order to protect, taking care to shield the interiority of “Stronger”, so it can be passed around the congregation out on the street. “Stronger” becoming choreography for the show of public strength that is the shopping centre.

Part 3

To hear what is going on in *REGNORTS*, we have got to be ready to take a walk with Free.Yard. It appears like it could be a cloudy early Spring afternoon in Wood Green Shopping Centre, but judging by everyone’s clothing, it is more like the overcast, close, pressing humidity you occasionally get in a London summer. Their route passes along a short stretch of the High Road, taking in the humdrum markers of British retail (Aldi, WHSmith, Primark, Specsavers, The Post Office). Standing out amongst this as a kind of anomaly is Charlies Café and Bakery, holding onto its spot whilst the locals await the arrival of Kervan Sofrasi and its Turkish Grill. Floating down the High Road like an oil tanker, we see the number 29, the public bus being one of the last refuges of genuine motleyness in London.

But don’t mistake Free.Yard’s walk through the Shopping Centre as the sort of love letter to post-war public architecture that determines the imaginative limits of whatever you usually find in the pages of the London Review of Books. Instead, Free.Yard’s love is for the people who people the shopping centre, who make it sing a certain type of Rhythm n Blues. To see what Free.Yard wants us to sense, they have to conduct a particular style of walk. Reversing back through space, rather than propelling teleologically forward into it; using the PSP Player as a visor that enhances sense perception rather than a piece of scrap impeding the view; hearing a dance between children clinging to their parents; directions to a place somewhere off screen

being shared; sways; furrowed brows; contemplations; absent-minded phone conversations: all of this means *REGNORTS (N22 MOMENTATION MIX)* operates more like a portal than an art object.[52] Capture or containment is not the goal here. Instead what seems to be happening is a minor rearrangement of the protocols of sense perception. A suggestion of another way of looking, listening, seeing and thinking about how to look, listen, see and think, all at the same time, but never in a hurry. No need for delirium here.

The feeling Free.Yard is manufacturing finds kin in Dipesh Chakrabarty's thoughts on the consciousness of shopping centres. Reflecting on the thirty-year anniversary of the publication of Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India,* Chakrabarty notes that in modern Indian history one of the primary locations of collective disorder and insurgency has been the bazaar.[53] As a bricks and mortar entity the bazaar was built through the confluence of trade and urban formations. These are places where people travelled to and gathered in order to exchange. Although officially all that is traded are goods, the bazaar also sees the exchange of rumours, ideas and experiences, due to the combination of proximity and anonymity they offer. Thus the bazaar became the locus for the manufacturing of insurgent consciousness, disorders, riots.

The premise of Guha's *Elementary Aspects* as Chakrabarty sees it, is as follows: in the European historiography of riots the task of the historian is similar to that of the state. The rioting crowd is broken up into mentionable, identifiable individuals so that culpability and

Images from Free.Yard, *MEDICATED SUMMERS / BENEFITS TRAP / ENDS PORTALS*

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responsibility can be assigned. For Chakrabarty, Guha's theorisation of the bazaar shows us that the reality of the crowd and the riot is that agency is collective and evanescent. The insurgent consciousness of the crowd in the bazaar is not being issued

from inside the head of a series of individuals. Instead, what we have here is an evanescence which does not refuse individuation, because refusal would imply recognition of the interpolative act, and hence a relation to the category of "individual". Rather, the evanescent consciousness of the crowd going about their daily riotous business is structurally incapable of saying: "I did it".

As well as being a theorist of the technological, Samuel R. Delany is also a thinker on the bazaar. Taking New York City as the basis for considering the consciousness of street scenes, Delany makes a series of delineations between discourses of "safety" and the fact of inter-class contact, between metaphors of "chains" (the former) and "nets" (the latter).[54] "Safety" has been a policy strategy used in New York since the 1990s to generate highly artificial and inauthentic social forms that Delany argues take on the structural appearance of a "linear chain linkage".[55] In that respect, "safety" is deployed to explicitly attack and bombard modes of inter-class contact, inter-class contact understood here as a "net" (as opposed to a "chain") of experiences which are defined by "pleasure in the most generalised form"[56]:

> Contact is the conversation that starts in the line at the grocery counter with the person behind you while the clerk is changing the paper roll in the cash register. It is the pleasure exchanged with a neighbour who has brought her chair out to take some air on the stoop. It is the discussion that begins with the person next to you at a bar. It can be the conversation that starts with any number of semi-officials – mailman, policeman, librarian, store clerk or counter person. As well, it can be two men watching each other masturbating together in adjacent urinals of a public john – an encounter that, later, may or may not become a conversation.[57]

Delany and Chakrabarty seem to be telling us that pleasure in the most generalised form in the bazaar has its own music. The run-of-the-mill and the regular are where subalternity and queerness set off a type of audible romance and a felt hysteria. Free.Yard uses this music, known to us as RnB, as a soundtrack to a heightened choreography of all the art already in motion on the ground in N22. Therefore, the realisation of Sugababes essay on strength through the PSP as it is superimposed over the crowd scene in the shopping centre is not functioning as mediation, filtering and blockage. Rather in their very layering they become enhancements, operating together to allow us to sense a living evanescence on the streets of Wood Green. But Free.Yard does not really require Chakrabarty's lexicon. They have a perfectly suitable terminology ready and waiting closer to home. As a methodological imperative, "momentation" is a product of Free.Yard's extension of Mariah Carey's – another

monolith of RnB – multi-dimensional theorisation of “moment” as a mode of temporality[58]:

> The Mariah “moment” interests me as she is taking this one word – the “moment” – this unit of time, and creating her own kind of disidentifying linguistic stylings, in order to open up and expand on what a “moment” could be and how it exists in our lives in myriads of ways. And I guess after seeing that it just latched on to me really and made me start paying more attention to the “moments” in my everyday life. The Mariah “moment” is a queered kind of poetics, and maybe even an anti-capitalist refusal of time as we are coerced into relating to it. I would also add that Mariah has officially been recorded as having the largest ranging vocabulary within a survey of the song writing of the world’s hundred most successful pop artists.
>
> Another well-known example of this practice of word remixing or whatever, of what you might call linguistic remixing or mash-up, would be by the eminent philosopher and linguist M.J. Blige, in her famous 2001 treatise titled “Family Affair”, in which she states, and I quote: “Don't need no hateration, holleration, in this dancerie”. This of course inspired my use of the word “momentation”, which just like Blige’s use takes the suffix “ation”, used to denote an action or an instance of. A “momentation” is a pronounced moment with a specific purpose or desire attached to it. And it highlighted the action and movement, the moving spirit, existing in various moments.
>
> But where this kind of expression of language has purpose for me more concretely in everyday life is that I find it helps me to dwell on certain things that I witness in my everyday life that I might not otherwise. And also think about actual potential there is within that extended dwelling.[59]

What else is there left to say, other than in as much as Free.Yard is making work about the aesthetic structure of everyday public feeling that is RnB, they are unavoidably caught up in its riotous net too. Critical distance, at least the type thought to be essential to the figure of the artist, is not operative here, which means thinking can peel away from the postures of criticality and get back to the ends. I am not entirely sure where I am heading, but it is something to do with the way in which Free.Yard cannot only ever be a name because it is also always an invitation. A call to everyone to come on over, make whatever you can out of my place, Free.Yard is somewhere to pass

through in order to have contact pass through you, never getting too settled, eventually moving on without ever having to leave the neighbourhood.

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Footnotes

1. Simone White, "Dear Angel of Death", *Dear Angel of Death* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018), p71 ↩
2. Ibid ↩
3. Ibid ↩
4. Ibid ↩
5. Ibid, p72 ↩
6. Ibid ↩
7. "I'm interested in the phenomenon of taking certain avant garde practices in black music as having left us with the only understanding we have or that we are ever likely to get about how black people (or, really anybody willing to adopt blackness as an ally) can get out of the subjectivity bind we find ourselves in, a bind that is to do with having been bound, strapped down literally, and also tethered to the symbolic work of representing every kind of abjection and unfreedom that could be nightmared-up by the architects of ideal democracy. Saidiya Hartmann is the best source on what there is to fear about this.", Simone White, *Leslie Scalapino Memorial Lecture in Innovative Poetics, with Divya Victor* (June 1, 2014) http://xpoetics.blogspot.com/2014/06/leslie-scalapino-memorial-lecture-in.html ↩
8. Ibid, p75 ↩
9. Ibid ↩
10. Andy Fitch, "Questions of Inside and Outside: Talking to Simone White", *Blog / Los Angeles Review of Books* (13th April 2018)

https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/interviews/questions-inside-outside-talking-simone-white/; Simone White, “Dear Angel of Death”, p75 ↩

11. Simone White, “Dear Angel of Death”, p89 ↩
12. Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Robert F. Reid-Pharr, “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection and The Production of Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity”, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Duke University Press, 1997) ↩
13. Simone White, “Dear Angel of Death”, p79 ↩
14. Ibid, p85 ↩
15. Ibid, p91 ↩
16. Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (Vintage Books, 1998); Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (The Free Press, 2001); Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Duke University Press, (Harvard University Press, 2021); Jayna Brown, *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2021); Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (NYU Press, 2014); Tsitsi Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Thulani Davis, *Nothing But the Music: Documentaries from Nightclubs, Dance Halls and a Tailor’s Shop in Dakar* (Blank Forms, 2021); Andy Fitch, “Questions of Inside and Outside” ↩
17. Simone White, “Dear Angel of Death”, p132 ↩
18. Ibid ↩
19. Ibid, p133, p134, p135 ↩
20. Ibid, p133 ↩
21. Ibid, p141; “I’m starting to think that as a framework for thinking about what blackness is and what it might be, belief in black music is misplaced: that we might be starting to be wrong about the music’s *contemporary centrality*; that, in fact, the

complexity and importance of the poetic project of theorizing the practices and meanings of black music far surpasses the expressive capacities of contemporary black music, -- a strange corporatized thing that gets by by way of the fetishization of black depth and fast access to critique by way of the black body. That we are, in fact, clinging to an ideology of black music that denies the coming, already done come, of the black Shakespeare; an ideology of black music that blinds us to the finest and wildest qualities of such a person's work; that we are living is a strange attitude of denial about how long this figure has been with us; that that denial reinvigorates the isolation of the black artists, the black arts that we practice. That we are eating our tail, so to speak, in continuing to circle back to the Music." Simone White, *Leslie Scalapino Memorial Lecture in Innovative Poetics, with Divya Victor*↩

22. Ibid, p134 ↩
23. Danny Hayward, "Tradition vs Grid: Danny Hayward on Simone White's 'Dear Angel of Death'", *Texte Zur Kunst* (117, March 2020) ↩
24. Amiri Baraka, *SOS: Poems 1961 – 2013* (Grove Press, 2014); Sean Bonney, *Tensions Between Aesthetic and Political Commitment in the work of Amiri Baraka* (PhD Thesis submitted to Birkbeck, University of London, October 2012) ↩
25. David Grundy, "Zero Hour: Simone White and D.S. Marriott", *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures* (Vol 3, No 2, Dec 2019) ↩
26. Greg Tate, "In Praise of Shadow Boxers: The Crises of Originality and Authority in African-American Visual Art vs. The Wu-Tang Clan", *Souls* (Vol 5, Issue 1, 2003); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Robin D.G. Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles", *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (The Free Press, 1994); R.A.T Judy. "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity", *boundary 2* (Vol 21, No 3, 1994) ↩
27. Amiri Baraka, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)", *Black Music* (Da Capo Press, 1998/1968), p211 ↩
28. Ibid, p180, p183 ↩
29. Ibid, p188 ↩
30. Ibid, p189 ↩

31. Ibid, p190 ↩
32. Black and Beautiful, *Soul and Madness* (SonBoy Records, 2009/1968) ↩
33. Ibid, liner notes ↩
34. Ibid ↩
35. Amiri Baraka, "The Changing Same", p210, p209 ↩
36. Ibid, p185 ↩
37. Anne Boyer, "My Life", *Cesura // Acceso,* 1 (October 2014), p24 ↩
38. Ibid, p23 ↩
39. Ibid, p25 ↩
40. Ibid, p31 ↩
41. Ibid, p28 ↩
42. Ibid, p29 ↩
43. Sugababes, *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Island Records, 2002) ↩
44. "Fluctuating between and within research, artistic and curatorial practices free.yard works across drawing, sound, performative/gestural moments and promiscuous research methodologies. During their residency, free.yard will continue to develop various strands of a versatile mode of research coined 'ends theory', as well as new sonic compositional, drawing and sculptural works." *FREE.YARD: PRAISE N PAY IT / PULL UP, COME INTO THE RISE,* South London Gallery, 23rd March – 27th May 2018: https://www.southlondongallery.org/exhibitions/free-yard-free-yard-praise-n-pay-pull-come-rise/ ↩
45. Alexander G. Weheliye, "Rhythms of Relation: Black Popular Music and Mobile Technologies", *Current Musicology,* 99-100 (Spring 2017), p109 ↩
46. Ibid, p107 ↩
47. Ibid ↩
48. Fumi Okiji, "Postscript: Some Thoughts on the Inadequacy and Indispensability of Jazz Records", *Jazz As Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford

University Press, 2018), p87 ↩

49. Ibid, p88 ↩

50. Ibid, p89 ↩

51. Ibid ↩

52. Adam Farah / Free.Yard, *MEDICATED SUMMERS / BENEFITS TRAP / ENDS PORTALS,* Flatness: https://flatness.eu/contributors/adam-farah/ ↩

53.
"Subaltern Studies Panel Discussion on 30 Years of Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects*"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXKyxc6pzb4&t=3309s ↩

54. Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (NYU Press, 1999), p121 ↩

55. Ibid, p122 ↩

56. Ibid, p121 ↩

57. Ibid, p123 ↩

58. "Mariah Carey Needs a Moment" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ka_b9sB1GmA ↩

59. Adam Farah, *The Experimenta Debate,* BFI London Film Festival 2020: https://whatson.bfi.org.uk/LFF/Online/default.asp?BOparam::WScontent::loadArticle::permalink=experimentadebate2019 ↩