

Critical Sonic Practice: Decolonizing Boundaries in Music Research

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Introduction

African-American music is one of the greatest art forms of the past century but research on this music's composition is underrepresented in scholarship and education. In the Americas, during the era of slavery, African language and culture groups were separated to avoid Africans retaliating; music, however, was more easily subverted and at times, religiously converted, away from the ears of the oppressor. African music, with its complex polyrhythms, improvisation, vocal harmonies and unique timbres was parsed as noise to European invaders and this lack of understanding persists. This lack of representation and self-representation is reflected in indigenous and local music research across the colonial and neo-colonial world. For example, in the United States of America, the education system often omits indigenous musicians, such as Native American and First Nations musicians, as well as influential global styles such as African-American trap and drill, or Latinx musics, such as reggaeton. As composer-theorist, my auto-ethnographic research centers on music producers in Accra, their process, influences, mentorship and sites of listening that have repercussions on the study of similar black electronic musics. Hence, the musical split in academic disciplines between white, black and

indigenous peoples is part of a legacy of suppressing bodies, minds and culture, including music.

The musico-epistemological remnants of colonial legacies place boundaries and | barlines | across artforms, processes, methodologies and geographies. I argue that revealing afrological, local and indigenous music innovation in music scholarship through 'critical sonic practice' expands the project of anti-colonialism, clarifying the entirety of influences of music in the United States, Europe and other diasporan countries. Judging music through historic European norms of notation, rather than recordings and live music, continues to marginalize music-makers from oral traditions. The racial split between who we think of as 'composers' and what types of music we research was founded in the colonial and empirical experiment. Black composers' writing gives us an entry point to the continuum of improvisation and composition, or what I begin to call "process". Reclassifying research in music composition, theory and technology to include all types of process--including participatory music, live performance and music technology--radically expands music research including that of black and indigenous musics of the world.

Poetics and hip-hop share knowledge of trans-African musics where history books fail. From talking drums to slave songs, black music, as a set of signs, symbols and gestures, experientially informs throughout the ages. Or, as, Kendrick Lamar schools, "I've got royalty, got loyalty inside my DNA." Teetering on the razor's edge of the unknown, the black radical thought contained within improvised music has attracted me to improvisation scenes for over two decades. The newness of this music and thought, in-built community, ways of living, political thinking, books and albums--living art as a way of life. Perhaps these fluidly moving forms attract dancers and poets to improvised musics as well. I went to see Amiri Baraka give a talk in Rome, where I lived at the time. I met him and he knew me – in my eyes – in the way that only black people do. The dedication in my copy of *Tales of the Out & the Gone*, is "For Leila, Unity & Struggle, A Baraka, 11/2/08." Was that the beginning? Was I time travelling already? Or was I always time travelling? In "Monk Story" about seeing Monk's spirit, ghost, person, or dopplegänger, Baraka asks: "How old are you?" Monk's spirit asks: "Hey, man, I don't tell my age... You should stop telling yours too. People start to believe you believe in time!" I'm reading Moten and he pulls Baraka back into my existence. The surrealist conclusion is that I am time traveling. So, I pull out my book with a dedication. This morning, reading Moten calling Thelonius 'Felonius,' I start to lose my grasp on stolen time and enter hip-hop time, or Munoz' Cuban time blurred through Moten. Rhythm traveling through Baraka, riffing on the Molecular Anyscape:

"Now I added Rhythm Travel! You can disappear & reappear wherever and whenever that music is played."

"What?"

"So if you become "Black, Brown & Beige" you can reappear anywhere and anytime that plays."

"Go anywhere?"

"Yeh, like if I go into "Take this Hammer," I can appear wherever that is, was, and will be sung."

"Yeh, but be that song and you be on a plantation."

"I know." He was grinning. "I went to one." He was staring me down, winking without his eye. "I seen some brothers and sisters digging a well. They were singing this and I begin to echo. A big hollow echo, a sorta blue shattering echo. The Bloods got to smiling because it made them feel good, and that's the way they heard it anyway. But the overseas and plantation masters winced at that. They'd turn their heads sharply back and forth, looking behind them and at the slaves. Man, the stuff I seen!"

"You mean you been Rhythm Traveling already?"

"Yeh, I turned into some Sun Ra and hung out inside gravity. You probably heard of the Scatting Comet. Babs was into that."¹¹

...

"Hey, brother. Ain't no danger. Just don't pick a corny tune."

The idea of singing the past into the present and future through music is a constant in black music. In *Space is the Place*¹², the film of Sun Ra's music named after the iconic tune, the opening scene features Sun Ra in full Egyptian regalia with a mirror-faced hooded being, bubbles and psychedelic plants in an alien landscape. Ra intones: "The music is different here – not like Planet Earth. We could set up a colony for black people, bring them here – through transmolecularisation, or teleport the whole planet here through music." What could Moten's rhythm traveling, or musical teleportation to Ellison, Nkrumah and Fanon have to say to each other through Armstrong? Moten's "sunset chapel" of "diasporic practice" delves into the Wailerian Blackheart of the matter:

Isn't it hard not to think that Armstrong's performance of "Black and Blue" in Kwame Nkrumah's presence and in his honor at the celebration for Ghana's foundation as an independent state is that to which Fanon obliquely indexes, in "On National Culture," as the prototypical "jazz lament hiccupped by a poor,

miserable 'Negro' [which] will be defended by only those whites believing in a frozen image of a certain type of relationship and a certain form of negritude"? Sometimes I think placement of Fanon under such duress is necessary prologue to a new kind of contrapuntal, pan-African groove, some blue rhapsodic panorama given in and as ensemble's beautiful division and collection, whose venue is the sunset chapel where The Blue Riders hang, all for you, as Extra Terrestrial Mensah said. Go see if you can hear them in the space they make, as that space makes them, our Crepuscule with Ofili. This is what Brent Edwards calls diasporic practice. We could also call it diasporic prayer.^{iv}

As if frozen in time for us to visit from parallel dimensions, black music is the liquid mercury form of museum glass. If this sounds like chaos to you, listen again to the spaces in between the sound. This "frozen form of negritude" offers a glimpse into thinking about black music and scholarship. Moten's words, constantly hiding in writing and enticing in speech, hint at meanings through poetics, as does music. Hip-hop sampling history, poetry, decolonial thought, blues and the diaspora. Moten's musico-poetic tools of fugitivity elicit scenes of Sayidah Hartman's radical archiving through the middle passage. Black radical thought and politics are embodied in the improvised music scene. Ornette Coleman shows that this clear link between African-American culture, language and history disconnected due the trans-Atlantic slave-trade, "Being black and a descendent of slaves, I have no idea what my language of origin was."^v Derrida asserts that this is the same for him; instead of English, Derrida's family of Algerian Jews faced French linguistic colonialism. If we upset the empirical and colonial project by studying black music, what types of other disruptions happen?

As a composer-theorist and recording artist appearing on over thirty albums, I disassemble boundaries between improvised music, notated music, and electronic music. In my research I add black authors and music-makers to the discussion of music theory, composition and music technology research through my term and practice "critical sonic practice." As a classically trained composer, I was taught to split musics into different fields: composition, jazz, world music etc. As a practitioner in the fields of composition, improvisation, gamelan and my own bands, I knew that these genre and practice limitations were simply untrue. My research on the continuum of improvisation in the music production in Accra, Ghana,^{vi} and embodied listening^{vii} began to fit with other forms of black electronic music. I first gave a talk on critical sonic practice in 2019 "Critical sonic practice takes a lens of curiosity to view the collaborative, practical, space of the music studio... for conceptual music

creation”.^{viii} In 2020, I went on to begin the Critical Sonic Practice Lab at NYU with an inaugural symposium of interdisciplinary musicians, scholars, writers and other members of the music industry.

Black thought is audible in music recordings and performances but sorely missing in music composition scholarship. There is little research by black composers, though notable exceptions were written by former AACM members, composer-improvisors and pedagogues: Anthony Braxton (b. 1945), George E. Lewis (b. 1952) and Wadada Leo Smith (b. 1941). Smith describes music as “creative thought,” keenly advocating for black people to “self-conscious” in the documentation of their work, lest it be “dissected” by others later.* Furthermore, although Ornette Coleman (b. 1930, d. 2015) was one of the most forward-thinking figures in jazz history, his style did not fit jazz norms and received criticism and praise in within and outside jazz circles. His 1961 album *Free Jazz*, coined the name for the new movement, and Coleman also named the process of ‘harmolodics’ for his style of composition and improvisation. Entering into a conversation between Derrida and Coleman, I posit myself as a musician in 2021 exploring composition, improvisation, notation and process.

This article troubles the split between composition, notation and improvisation due to colonial, empirical and racial boundaries. I also describe theory behind critical sonic practice and propose reclassifying music composition terms as an ongoing and fluid discussion. Declassifying categories of music: theory, ethnography, composition, improvisation, audience participation, and dance as necessarily separate entities -- critical sonic practice recognizes the part of colonial history (and current repercussions) of these false separations which far outweigh the subject of music. Through this lens of critical sonic practice, we ask: Is music a black language? How might pre-conceived notions of indigenous people as the ‘noble savage’ trope cause implicit bias in music research and criticism? What outcomes are caused for communities of colour by these exclusions? Moreover, how do we amplify the positive outcomes of the black music and process and fix negative outcomes? What participatory action research enables our communities to progress and create and what questions do we, as researchers, need to ask ourselves? What would a black, indigenous and diasporan music theory and composition practice look like instead of a white colonial one? Hence, critical sonic practice investigates and practices music-making as a continuing decolonizing discourse, centering on marginalized music and music-makers.

Race and Place in the Music Academy

It is clear that black thought, and by extension, black music, is a complex, yet tangible category. Braxton uses the terms 'trans-African' and 'creative music in the black tradition,' Lewis refers to 'afrological thought,' Paul Gilroy writes about the 'Black Atlantic' as a larger concept and Moten says he considers New York to be a part of the Caribbean.^x There is, however, an historic assumption of difference causing cognitive dissonance in the chronology of African music and Western Classical music that is symptomatic of colonial thought about the African continent and indigenous peoples in general. Black authors struggle against essentialist perceptions of black culture while arguing musical and cultural similarities. Cultural similarity and difference, however, does not seem so difficult in a majoritarian setting. Orwell's "England Your England" section (Orwell, 1940) for example, troubles the cultural questions around whether all peoples are the same, how the English are different, as well as the many habits that exhibit 'Englishness.' As a musician (composer-performer, improviser and producer) and woman of colour, I am most interested in the notes, rhythms, and patterns that musicians are playing, the kinds of music theory that we speak about in the rehearsal room or the studio. What chord is that? What time signature is that in? Are you playing on the off-beat? Is it in the pocket, or behind the beat? Did you turn the beat around? What harmony do you want me to sing? Simply put, there has been scant in-depth musical analysis of black music, and indigenous musics. So, what makes black music so hard to write about?

After Africans arrived in the Americas for the trans-Atlantic slave trade, their music, especially rhythms, were restricted. African rhythms, blue notes and harmonies were forced underground into the blues as devil's music, or overground into gospel with Christian texts. African music, with its complex polyrhythms, improvisation, vocal harmonies and unique timbres was heard as noise to European invaders. Kofi Agawu explains that the field of music is not an exception to the biased rule against Africans:

The idea that, beyond certain superficial modes of expression, European and African knowledge exist in separate, radically different spheres, originated in European thought, not in African thinking. It was (and continues to be) produced in European discourse and sold to Africans, a number of whom have bought it, just as they have internalized the colonizer's image of themselves. Presumption of difference, we have said repeatedly, is the enabling mindset of many musical ethnographers, and one such difference – perhaps the ultimate one – embraces our respective conceptual realms. The

history of European thinking since the eighteenth century is replete with such presumption, itself nourished by racist and racialist sentiments.^{xi}

Folk musics of the world tend to be non-notated, engage in repetition and may be composed collaboratively. African-American musics, such as rock, jazz and hip-hop, have infiltrated nearly every realm of music in the world today. In contrast, much-studied Western classical notated music focuses on development, and is composed solo, preferably by 'the great composers.' Jazz, being slightly similar in complex development of tonic-dominant harmony has spurred books and a realm of music research (the music notation being sorted out by its students faithfully transcribing the jazz greats). Hence, jazz is the main field of black music research, where analysis of harmony, rhythm, and structure is concerned.

African-American and African diaspora genres such as the blues, rock n'roll, hip-hop, calypso and even jazz, have also been considered 'popular music.' Although the word 'popular' may simply mean that the music is commercially successful or well-liked; it has a double meaning that also signifies 'music that is not as serious as classical music.' Most popular styles of music, such as jazz, rock n' roll and blues are well-regarded as having their roots in African scales, harmonizing, rhythm alongside the performative element of dance. (The main outlier is country music, which was thought to be both white and popular in the discourse; though this is also not as 'serious,' perhaps due to its perceived roots as white but working-class or poor). However, the split between popular and serious music means that these styles are studied in different ways. Embracing current and past black music genres into the discussion dissolves barriers in research and understanding for all world musics.

Exceptionally, there is a large amount of writing on the cultural and musical field of hip-hop, but, music analysis focuses on lyrics and flow, as opposed to underlying music. Kendrick Lamar's album *DAMN.* received the 2018 Pulitzer Prize in Music, which shows that there is a growing recognition for hip-hop has high art. On one hand, hip-hop has typically fallen into the same bucket as other non-white musics, such as world music, which has been studied more ethnographically than theoretically. On the other hand, much of this interdisciplinary scholarly work on hip-hop, such as performance studies, comparative literature and musicology and hip-hop studies (augmented by non-academic writing on the subject) tempered the need for strict musical analysis, thus allowing for more writing. Although scholarship on hip-hop lyricism and culture abounds, a blinding absence of theoretical and compositional music research on black electronic music harmony, pitch and timbre prevails.

Contemporary classical musics suffer from similar issues of racial divide. The scholarly focus on notated musics, such as classical music and its later forms, such as 20th century music and new music that are *considered* to be white, have bifurcated the genres of music between notated and non-notated, and for the most part this is also divided between racial lines. Some of this is a problem of definition, or classification. There has been a lack in performers and music authors in high paid 'high arts' such as classical, 'new music' and the university system. George Lewis outlines the scant funding for jazz resources in comparison to classical ones with white composers in the "music" category gaining as much as ten times more price money from the National Endowment of the arts (NEA) than their black counterparts in the "jazz/folk/ethnic" category.^{xii} Furthermore, although dominated by white composers, the more recent trends of American minimalism and post-minimalism also have roots deeply buried in Africa. Minimalist pioneer Steve Reich directly used Ghanaian rhythms after seeing AM Jones' transcriptions of Ghanaian rhythms followed by a subsequent trip to Ghana, also noting the staggered entry of percussion in music. Reich and others developed their own style, but the use of repeated, and syncopated African rhythms, and polyrhythms, focus on percussive instruments, as well as the staggered entry of percussion, remain at the foundation of the minimalist genre today. It is of note that African-American composer Julius Eastman has seen a righteous resurgence in popularity, with burgeoning recordings and performances many years since his death, with his performances alongside the 'great composers.' It is, however, deeply disturbing that Eastman has been left out of the classical canon until now. Much focus is put onto Eastman's identity as a black gay man; Eastman was, however, a musical activist. There is no doubt that Eastman is a leader in the field of minimalism, with unconventional scores, and improvised (or aleatoric) elements. Simply put, he is the right composer to highlight. But since he has passed away, is his music being played for the right reasons? Is programming Eastman's music at this point somehow *easier* than hearing from a current black activist male composer? What would Eastman say now?

Composer and cultural theorist George Lewis reconnects a racially divided music history. In his book, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and Experimental Music* shows interviews with major figures of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, their beginnings, their movements (including his own) as well as touching on other similar movements around the country. "AACM musicians developed new and influential ideas about timbre, sound, collectivity, extended technique and instrumentation, performance practice, intermedia, the relationship of improvisation to composition, form, scores, computer music technologies, invented acoustic instruments, installations, and kinetic sculptures." (Lewis, 2008 p.ix) Lewis

meticulously describes the types of local creative music mentorship such as learning music through military bands, family members and the church; as well as noting the difference in funding in the 80s for classical versus jazz music. Moreover, Lewis acknowledges the false separations in the fields of experimental music:

The development of a notion of “experimental” and “American” that excludes the so-called bebop and free jazz movements, perhaps the most influential American experimentalist musics of the latter part of the twentieth century, is highly problematic, to say the least... Thus, for some time, historians of experimentalism in music have stood at a crossroads, facing a stark choice: to grow up and recognize a multicultural, multiethnic base for experimentalism in music, with a variety of perspectives, histories, traditions, and methods, or to remain the chroniclers of an ethnically bound and ultimately limited tradition that appropriates freely, yet furtively, from other ethnic traditions, yet cannot recognize any histories as its own other than those based in whiteness. Thus, following Southern, I see my work on the AACM, as well as my work on experimental music more broadly, as an interventionist project, an activity aimed at encouraging the production of new histories of experimentalism in music.^{xiii}

Anthony Braxton's *Tri-axium Writings* (1985) also emphasizes the importance of research into creativity round the world, specifically pointing out the need to focus on the music: “the realness of African creativity has much to offer this period in time if it can be reassessed with regards to what is happening with the music, rather than the people analyzing the music” (Braxton 1985, p.21). Braxton also says that research on black music is distanced from what is happening in black creativity at the time, showing the need for current black music research. Addressing this egregious lack deepens knowledge of all musics. But, history is history. Why does this racial and genre split remain? Vijay Iyer's research links the fields of neuroscience and music both critiques this split and hints at the reasons behind it.

“We stand to learn more about music's origins by attention to humankind's vernacular and folk musics, which are participatory almost by definition. Just as we humans have not evolved very much in the millennia since writing was introduced, we certainly haven't evolved significantly in the century since recordings became popular, or even in the last few centuries since composers started writing for orchestras.” (2016, p.84)

Iyer refers to a study in which an all-white subject group displays little or no empathy towards non-whites, compared with their empathy for whites. Iyer deepens this concept thinking through race records from the past as “music-without-bodies.” He proposes the possibility that people were less judgmental of black music because they could not see their skin colour in these records, (Iyer, 2016, pp.81-82). A startling connection both in clarity and ugliness; a catastrophic juxtaposition between the deadly white gaze compared with the friendly white ear regarding black body.

Colonially and empirically motivated racial splits created exclusions informing the who is deemed to be a ‘composer’ and the types of music that have been considered as scholarly material for analysis and in the classical music canon. First, seemingly civilized classical music sits alongside an extreme colonial and empirical history, that physically and culturally suppressed its non-white musical counterparts. Second, fields that include underrepresented musics do not necessarily focus on music (harmonic, rhythmic, timbral, structural and procedural) analysis. Third, in cases where Western music theory is applied to black and indigenous music, this theory tends to hermetically focus on past popular music styles, as opposed to current ones. Fourth, contemporary musics, such as electronic music is also split in the academy into “computer music” which is a follow-on from classical music and is typically white as well. Computer music often side-steps the black birthplaces of Detroit techno, Chicago house and Jamaican dub. Notably, there is a lot of writing about hip-hop; this tends, however, to focus on lyrics and flow, as opposed to the underlying music track. Therefore, the split in research between black and white musics persists across genres and has repercussions in universities and music conservatories filtering down into formal music organizations, the education system and funding.

Collaborative Frameworks in Writing Music/Words (Coleman/Derrida)

In music analysis and writing, the author is expected to maintain neat distinctions between genre, music-making method and geography, notated music and improvised music and so on. However, through music-making and teaching in my own communities, I have almost never found these distinctions to be relevant. Poets, thinkers and musicians have defied these colonial, empirical and metaphysical borders across creative disciplines. In *The Other's Language: Jacques Derrida Interviews Ornette Coleman, 23 June 1997*^{xv} Coleman agonistically names his 1997 Lincoln Centre concert series “Ornette Coleman: Civilization.” Coleman’s musical version of civilization mixes genres and instrumentation through quartet, orchestral and electronic works. Derrida echoes Coleman, invoking Coleman’s ‘Civilization,’ his use of different genres, bringing in European classical instruments such as large

string sections, signifies gravity, importance, and historic importance of his music. Inserting himself into musical spaces that shunned him, at times by a jazz establishment that should have embraced him, Coleman's act of defiance is a regal creative superiority that flew over the heads of critics. I enter Derrida and Coleman's conversation as an intertextual method straddling the worlds of music, thought and theory.

The written word is the document, as is the notated classical music score or the recorded performance – fluid in its conception and evolution, unchangeable in its final state. Whereas, improvising live music, or the act of composing in the moment, is a discussion, maybe with some prepared questions, maybe not.

JD: Perhaps you will agree with me on the fact that the very concept of improvisation verges upon reading, since what we often understand by improvisation is the creation of something new, yet something which doesn't exclude the prewritten framework that makes it possible.

OC: That's true.

JD: I'm not an "Ornette Coleman expert," but if I translate what you are doing into a domain that I know better, that of written language, the unique event that is produced only one time is nevertheless repeated in its very structure. Thus, there is a repetition, in the work, that is intrinsic to the initial creation – that which compromises or complicates the concept of improvisation. Repetition is already in improvisation: thus when people want to trap you between improvisation and the pre-written, they are wrong.

OC: Repetition is as natural as the fact that the earth rotates.

A bird's eye view of this conversation clarifies the fixity of the written word. If this were improvised writing, I could say as such to Derrida. Were this passage an improvised performance, I would question Derrida's claim that the framework is truly akin to the written word. The 'framework' of music telling us how many times to repeat a section of music, or which chords to play is closer to a form of writing, such as a haiku form telling us how many syllables we are allowed. We can improvise within this form. However, if this were an improvised piece of music, I could replay this written speech and interject. I'd be part of the discussion, could echo Coleman, and ask Derrida a question. I could tell him that improvised musical frameworks --from jazz, to pop, to experimental -- all let us add our parts, our tone colours, our voices, our altered harmonies, our counter-rhythms, our calls and responses. But, here we are left with silence.

Or are we? These studied notes, crossings outs, underlines, post-it notes in books, book marks, revelations, asterisks in the margins, quotes, citations and musings copied texts into notebooks, and typed to view on the computer screen. The editing, the cutting and pasting, the deleting. Are these acts of love and commitment to the written word, cousins to the improvised music piece?

When Coleman says that repetition is “as natural as the earth rotates,” as a classically trained composer and an informally trained improviser, I find myself in my own form of rhythm traveling. Studying music composition in Wellington New Zealand in the 1990s, parts of my university education were still deeply rooted in the serialism of the second Viennese school (Schoenberg, Webern and Berg). Horrified by World War II, early 20th Century European composers sought to dismantle the anthemic and patriotic music composed in the region before and during the war. Dismantling through throwing out tonal harmony and rhythm; major and minor intervals were eschewed for discordant major seventh or minor ninths, simple chords turned to seconds and augmented fourths. Think of it: in 1990’s New Zealand, it was drilled into us that we were supposed to avoid repetition at all costs! Although we were not expected to use solely serial techniques, we were taught to use retrograde or inversion or other techniques to avoid this barbaric musical practice of simple repetition. To my mind, these atonal techniques from the New Complexity school had become an audible style, and quite apart from their original purpose. The fact that these techniques could become a style instead of a method would, most likely, be abhorrent to the second Viennese school. Naturally, I gravitated towards composers at the university who composed from the heart, or looked to musics of the world such as gamelan which heavily engages in complex rhythms, repetition and abrupt change... an act of defiance at the time. Though musical defiance too, can become a style trap.

In improvised music we can do three things with the musical framework: contrast, repeat (mimic, or vary what the self or other has played), or be silent. The French translation of “rehearsal” is *répétition*, and the very nature of music is ‘rehearsal,’ whether improvised, personal practice, or to a written score. In cognitive neuroscience, the phenomena of ‘entrainment’ — copying an action from one person to another — is well-established. People with advanced stage Alzheimer’s can often remember songs, and people with Parkinson’s or a stutter may be able to sing words that they cannot speak. The depth of repetition in prosody and melody, then, is ingrained in our bodies and minds in ways that we are still coming to understand.

Coleman implodes the continuum of composition and improvisation with his own form of process. Coleman notes: “I’m trying to find the concept according to

which sound is renewed every time it's expressed." When Derrida picks up on Coleman's description of sound as "democratic," Coleman notes the complexity of the perception of freedom free jazz:

OC: Most people thought that I just picked up my saxophone and played whatever was going through my head, without following any rule, but that wasn't true.

JD: You constantly protest against the accusation.

OC: Yes. People on the outside think that it's a form of extraordinary freedom, but I think that it's a limitation.^{xv}

Stop for a moment. Consider freedom as a limitation. How so? In improvised music, we are still confined by music that we have heard, music that we have played in our muscle memory, and music that we are capable of imagining and playing. This is true of individuals playing alone, or together. It is tempting to make an analogy between visual art, or the written word. But, music is special in the way that it is equally a solo, or a group activity, closer to written *and* improvised theatre, comedy, or dance. When Derrida and Coleman discuss compositional process, Coleman points out that what we are capable of imagining is extended, rather than restricted by the imposed limitations of the composer. The composer's composition can extend the player's imagination.

Coleman augments this collaborative creative process by receiving new information from the players and students once they have already read and played the piece. Derrida asks if these musicians act "even to transform the initial writing?" First, Coleman says that he composes music "that I can have them analyze"; second, he plays this music with them; third, he gives them the score. Finally, at the following rehearsal he asks them what they have found. "What's really shocking in improvised music is that despite its name, most musicians use a "framework [*trame*] as a basis for improvising." For instance, he describes his recorded project with Joachim Kühn, as music that: "has two characteristics: it's totally improvised, but at the same time it follows the laws and rules of European structure. And yet, when you hear it has an improvised [*air*]." ^{xvi} Contrastingly, Coleman discerns that when writing for the New York Philharmonic instead of jazz musicians, he had to write out parts, photocopy them, and then go to the score organizer. The musicians warned him that he needs to show the scores to the score organizer, so as not to disturb the orchestra. Coleman is surprised that the Philharmonic is more interested in the symbols (music notation), as in his eyes "it had nothing to do with the music or sound."

If we liken notating/writing music to writing words, where does the document stand? At the beginning, or at the end of the process? Derrida asks if Coleman acts as a composer or musician. Coleman says he wants to stimulate musicians by giving them new music to play, instead of expecting them to accompany him with music that he has previously recorded to 'keep that [recorded] music alive.' Favouring live performance resists the commercial norm of the music industry: record first - promote the album second. Coleman's stance begs the question: is the album a document of the performed composition, or is the performance a document of the album? Moreover, how important is the collaborative input of the musicians — the human music computer of many mind-bodies collecting complex material to make a compositional and improvisational whole?

JD: First the musician reads the framework, then brings his own touch to it.

OC: Yes, the idea is that two or three people can have a conversation with sounds, without trying to dominate it or lead it.^{xvii}

The oneness within the whole. The creativity of the classical musician is in their expressive interpretation; whereas the improviser has different levels of control over the melodic line, harmony, rhythm, and at times the structure. Therefore, Coleman's improvised music expresses the guidance of a holistic music composition, while at the same time allowing for the creativity of the individual musician.

Radical Reclassifying & Recording as Critical Sonic Practice

Critical sonic practice began as a means to trouble this split between composing, improvising, electroacoustic/computer/electronic music, research and practice; connected to neo/colonialism, ethnicity, and genre. In 2019, I gave a MARL (Music and Audio Research Lab) talk *Critical Sonic Practice: An intersectional approach to electronic music theory and composition* through my own perspective across these fields:

I'll define the term "critical sonic practice," which is derived from Jane Rendell's architectural term "critical spatial practice." Rendell states "critical spatial practice – a term which serves to describe both everyday activities and creative practices which seek to resist the dominant social order of global corporate capitalism."^{xviii}

Rendell continues to define that:

Critical theories aim neither to prove a hypothesis nor prescribe a particular methodology or solution to a problem; instead, in a myriad of differing ways critical theorists offer self-reflective modes of thought that seek to change the world, or at least the world in which the inequalities of market capitalism, as well as patriarchal and colonial (or post-colonial) interests, continue to dominate. I extend the term 'critical theory' to include the work of later theorists – poststructuralists, post-colonialists, feminists and others – whose thinking is also self critical and desirous of social change.^{xix}

The “spatial” of “critical spatial practice” refers to critically engaging in art outside the gallery, in urban and public architectural spaces. When we talk about critical *sonic* practice, the “sonic” spaces for investigation could refer to the music performance, whether that is a physical stage, or a recorded medium.^{xx}

This talk contextualized my earlier research in the fields of composition and improvisation in the music studio production in Accra, and helped to frame the proposed work to come. Music research from a non-majoritarian perspective actively dismantles subconscious biases, or assuming difference and “otherness.” Empirical research methods of music analysis (transcriptions, harmonic reduction and analysis, ecological acoustics, and timbral research) can help to reduce potential implicit biases. Researching living composer’s music, through interviews with the music creators themselves, is also an avenue to reduce bias. In my research on studio music, I questioned the definitions of “composition” and improvisation in the studio process of two Ghanaian music producers, Appietus and DJ Breezy. I questioned who we think of as “composers” and “improvisors” and what styles of music these producers create. This reflects the ways that we analyze black music and music from the global South, as well as popular electronic styles, such as hip hop and electronic dance music (EDM). Although these producers refer to the rapper, or singer as “the artist” they show us that in the field of EDM, hip-hop and other studio musics, that the producer well deserves the term, demanding re-categorization of the title “producer” to include both composer and improvisor.

Critical sonic practice invites a musical version of Saidiya Hartman’s historic and poetic practice of ‘radical archiving.’ As an historian and African-American Hartman engages in meticulous investigation of the historic record along the trans-Atlantic slave route. Hartman combines this record keeping with writing and re-experiencing. She continues the passage in a visit to – a mute past that cannot speak for itself – the slave halls of Elmina Castle in Ghana:

The exchanges between persons and things, or property rights exercised in people, were common modes of acquiring wealth in Africa. Unique to the Atlantic slave trade was the immense scale of accumulating persons and the great violence and death required to produce wealth; and this predatory accumulation was often described by the enslaved in the language of “being eaten” or as sorcery. And to their eyes, the Europeans were sorcerers of the worst kind. Who could deny that white men gained their strength from black flesh?

...But there were no corpses that I could tend in Elmina. There were no bodies draped in fine cloth, or rum poured down the throat of the dead, or dirges sung around the laid out figure... No one did these things for them, or fasted, or held a wake for two nights with drumming and dancing. No one placed burial gifts alongside the corpse or whispered messages that were to be delivered to the dead relatives in the land of ghosts.^{xxi}

Indeed, researching this incomplete history of recorded music bullet-holed by colonial invasion and slavery, involves time-traveling and healing the wounds through this living, breathing and dancing artefact, the music.

Critical analysis of geographic and racial splits in music composition demands reclassifying music terms, to continue the process of the radical archive of black music innovation, expanding the music research landscape to include afrological and indigenous thought. Music composition at university has always consisted of composition and theory; composition teachers were the first theory teachers. Although all theorists are not composers, most composers to a certain degree are theorists. Other forms of musical research trump composing and creativity. Majoritarian music that is often notated, can withstand this break; non-notated musics of the world cannot. By splitting the field in two, practices that have traditionally been fused together are blown apart. Critical sonic practice reintegrates the fields of composition, music theory and technology so that it encompasses research of electronic musics of the world. This research uses hybrid methodologies and social engagement as tools of anticolonial and antiracist (or, simply what George Lewis calls the ‘creolization’ of) research. Examining the reasons why music has been left out of categories of composition and research acknowledges these false historic ontological boundaries. The goal of actively reclassifying music is neither a static, nor fixed definition; rather, critical sonic practice invites discussion, research and practice of contemporary musics by composers in the margins. Reclassifying music terms rectifies some of these past imbalances, encouraging space for research and discourse, as follows:

Electronic Music: The history of electronic music in the university setting is 'electroacoustic music' in the UK and commonwealth and 'computer music' in the United States. These genres are primarily white. Including electronic musics such as dub, house, and techno, reintegrates global musics made on a computer.

Producer: This term is all-encompassing for many roles in the studio. Notably, the 'producer' in hip-hop and other studio musics is also the composer, and sometimes the artist as well. Study of music producers opens up the discussion for harmonic, rhythmic and timbral music analysis of global black and indigenous musics.

Western-European Christian Harmony: Colonial, post-colonial, and neo-colonial education system assumptions about harmony affect the ways that music is described. 'Western harmony' euro-centrally implies that Europe of the centre (west of where?) Words like 'functional harmony' and 'tonal harmony' are helpful for other similar musics, but omitting the cultural history of Western-European Christian harmony implies that other musics do not have their own functions, or are not 'tonal.' Georgian and Russian musics have their own harmonies, and the author's research posits that Ghanaian music does too. Hence, by specifically naming the music theory that is underlying most musics, from classical, to jazz, to popular musics, other music research is made more possible.

Critical analysis calls for a reclassification of musical terms thus radically expanding the landscape to include afrological musical thought. Marginalized people of the world are used to code-switching. Critical sonic practice emphasizes global trans African innovation in music technology, through electronic music and hip-hop. Interviews with producers also showed the influence of Ghanaian and African-American music creators. Music analysis revealed new harmonic theories in Ghanaian music relate but are different to its 'Northern European Christian harmony.' When studying Ghanaian hiplife music, analyzing Akan female vocal music harmonies was part of my process. The harmonies are sung live, with in collaboration with the song's creator. This tradition runs throughout African musics, soul, rock n' roll, and gospel. Hip-hop beats, too, are often composed and performed by a whole team of music producers. Through my research into Ghanaian harmony, it is clear that harmony and scales are not homogenous. The harmony is complex and specific, created through composing, improvising, and collaborating. The same goes for Ghana's nuanced scale system, which is not equal-tempered. Global

harmony and scales are individual. But, technology uses MIDI notes (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) and computers to limit musical thought. Pop music from Europe and the United States has long been a globalizing force through radio and TV, augmented by ringtones and the internet. It is possible, therefore, that Western-European Christian scales and harmony will take over from their African, Arabic and Asian counterparts. There were some advantages to creating music in the studio in Accra but these were outweighed by difficulties.

For all that can be said of black and indigenous musics, much of the same can be said about women's music. Val Smith contextualizes intersectional spaces for women, whether they are in the picture, or not: 'I prefer the formulation "theorizing black feminisms" to the deceptive and monolithic category "black feminist theory."^{xxii} The fact that women composers are slightly more visible than black composers does not mean that the work has been done. More so, the intersections of black female music creators in jazz and experimental musics have typically been marginalized as well. There is a growing movement of female artists and expat Ghanaians changing this and the Critical Sonic Practice Lab's current work explores compositional tools for Ghanaian female music producers. Therefore, a true critical sonic practice is intersectional: examining the music of marginalized composers, as well as the gaps in research between these intersections.

Recognizing the economic and social conditions of marginalized music creators, critical sonic practice is intersectional, taking race, class, gender, indigenous epistemologies and the environment into account in research and projects. The research found ways in which Ghanaian producers were environmentally and economically disadvantaged through currency exchange rates, copyright, abilities to travel, buy music gear, and use reliable electricity. Further research into listening-environments in Accra, disrupted the album or notated score as the documentation of music, and looked at sites of listening, such as clubs, indoors and outdoors restaurants, public transport in Accra, weaving the threads together between music creator and audience through "embodied listening".^{xxiii} In 2021, the Critical Sonic Practice Lab held the inaugural Critical Sonic Practice Symposium, which brought together composition, improvisation and research projects. Finally, the critical sonic practice symposium brought together artist-thinkers such as Vijay Iyer, Michael Veal, Fred Moten, TYGAPAW, and BON through discussion, poetry, music performance, videos and DJ/VJ party with access for disabled participants. Rather than subscribing to a 'new normal' the symposium sat with the discomfort of the new abnormal. Disrupting the traditional academic meeting, Critical Sonic Practice Symposium screened and commissioned *Elegy*, an audio-visual concert commissioned by music creators to acknowledge the black

and brown bodies disproportionately lost, enhancing the public service aspect of music. *Elegy* responded to the black lives matter police violence protests invigorated by the murder of George Floyd, to all families experiencing loss in the pandemic and the extra impacts of COVID-19 on these same black and brown communities.

Conclusion

Decolonizing musical thought and analysis of marginalized trans-African music creators requires examining the social and economic factors that are relevant to music processes. Music's globalization through the internet ties into historic and present forms of power imbalance, such as colonial economic destabilization of the global south. These factors are mirrored in the United States of America with its imbalances between race, genre and class. Whether music is more influenced by local music, or music from overseas, tech globalization enforces musical neo-colonialism. Previously suppressed rhythmic complexity, repetition, collective improvisation, and embodied listening through dance have blossomed throughout the world, calling into question the hegemonic globalizing force of Western-European harmony. Trans-African commonality of collaborative composition and music-making exists across the black Atlantic from past to present.

Addressing this egregious lack in representation deepens knowledge of all musics and helps to rebalance equity in music education by representing and self-representing black music in the education system, which could affect people and politics of the future. Critical sonic practice calls for new educational music resources expanding *who*, *what* and *how* we study. For example, assessing the impact of globalization on this music in Accra, my research in Accra showed that Youtube and video tutorials and internet disseminations were potential sources of equity. Recognizing that online mentorship could be compounded by open source music technology software, Critical Sonic Practice Lab's participatory action research insight project is collating existing music production tools and designing new open access ones for future female music creators in Accra. A close reading of Derrida's interview shows Derrida's fine-tuned incisions into Coleman's process; reconnecting improvisation, performance, composition and collaboration. Wadada Leo Smith argued for self-documentation, as does the written work of black music creators and fellow AACM members Anthony Braxton and George Lewis. These marginalized researchers require freedom to write about marginalized musics, as opposed to writing about the reasons for this research being valid. Schooling and educational pipelines do not necessarily support underrepresented artists. Culturally relevant education, however, boosts underrepresented students. Role models of awards and fellowships given to established underrepresented music creators are helpful for

representation. These high achievers, however, may contribute to the tropes of a necessitated form of black excellence, rather than an assumed participation in a holistic music education. Simply put, the music does the work and has been doing the work. Tomorrow's critical sonic practice fluidly invites decolonizing and intersectionality into all realms of musical practice, thought and education. Creating equity in the music education system through representation and self-representation creates space for decentred music creators, and thereby affecting the people, histories and politics of the future.

Critical Sonic Practice Lab, its projects and symposium show the possibilities for and necessities of this work. It is important to consider the positive and non-white forms of globalization through the study of global music and current electronic trends. Critical sonic practice analyzes music — to safeguard the musical knowledge of these emergent forms new and electronic music with traditional roots. Whether in the global south, or in underrepresented communities in the global north, recognizing accessible technologies can open doors to music creation that were previously closed to the poor. However, 'theorizing black feminisms' from an intersectional black feminist perspective looking at financial disparity, race and gender showed that there were no female music producers in Accra at the time. Hence, critical sonic practice necessitates decolonizing data-sets, using unbiased music analysis and interaction with music creators considering the cultural environment and compositional process.

Notes

ⁱ Adu-Gilmore, 2016

ⁱⁱ Baraka, 1995, pp. 163-164

ⁱⁱⁱ Newman & Coney, 1974

^{iv} Moten, 2017, pp. 231-232

^v Derrida & Coleman, 1997, p. 325

^{vi} Adu-Gilmore, 2016

^{vii} Adu-Gilmore, 2021

^{viii} Adu-Gilmore, 2019

^{ix} Smith, 1973

^x Moten, 2020

^{xi} Agawu 2007

^{xii} Lewis 2008, p. 332

^{xiii} Lewis, 2008 p. xviii

^{xiv} Timothy S. Murphy, the translator notes: "'Ornette Coleman: Civilization' was a series of concerts Coleman gave in mid-July 1997 under the aegis of the Lincoln Center Festival '97. It included performances of his orchestral work *Skies of America*, trio performances with Charlie Haden and Billy Higgins, who were members of his original quartet, and a concluding performance by Prime Time, his electric group." (Murphy, 2004).

^{xv} Derrida & Coleman, 1997, pp. 320-321

^{xvi} Derrida & Coleman, 1997, p. 321

^{xvii} Derrida & Coleman, 1997, p. 322

^{xviii} Rendell, 2009, p.2

^{xix} Rendell, 2009, p.3

^{xx} Adu-Gilmore, 2019

^{xxi} Hartman, 2007, pp. 69-70

^{xxii} Smith, 2009, p. xix

^{xxiii} Adu-Gilmore, 2021

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