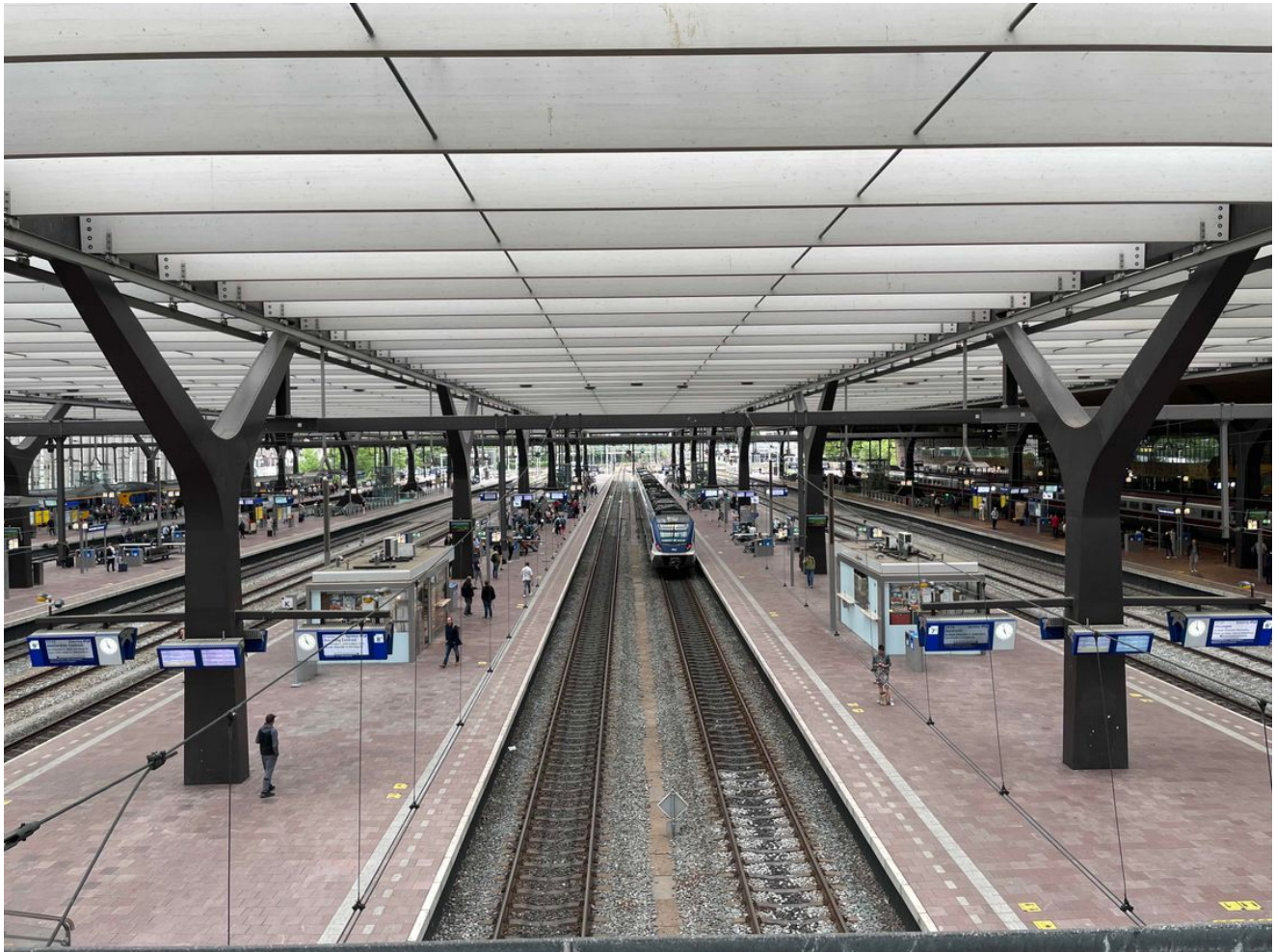


# #9: black counter culture

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January 8, 2023



This edition of the STASIS newsletter is about black counterculture, techno and cultural appropriation.

In early 2022, I was interviewed by researcher and journalist **Doriana La Monaca**, who was writing a story about the whitewashing of black culture. One of the reasons for her to talk to me was the article I wrote in the summer of 2020 about the situation around **De School** in Amsterdam. Visitors and employees of the club accused the owners of being racist and deliberately creating a hostile environment for minorities. As a consequence, De School closed its doors. My article was a plea to listen to each other before judging and taking irreversible actions.

Sectional thinking, as opposed to intersectional, leads to isolation, and that's one of the main features of neoliberalism. As **Mark Fisher** pointed out (and before him, **Herbert Marcuse** and **Theodor Adorno**) in his work, when people are isolated, they are easier to control and manipulated to turn on each other.



Focussing on similarities, what binds, instead of the differences, is the key to counter neoliberalism. Coalition through affinity, as **Donna Haraway** wrote.

In *Assembling A Black Counter Culture*, **DeForrest Brown, Jr.** argues that techno music has black roots but also is a global phenomenon commodified by neoliberalism.

Nearly all electronic music is referred to as techno, which clouds the specifically black history of the genre, argues DeForrest Brown, Jr. His *Assembling A Black Counter Culture* is not an easy book to read. The author tries to cover every inch of the cultural history of black America, explores the mechanisms of the cultural industry with the help of the theory of the **Frankfurt School**, dives deep into the Detroit-Berlin axis and extensively quotes makers and thinkers. That approach leads to a narrative that is, in a way, directionless. There is so much information in the 430 pages that a slick and tight story, like for instance, **Kodwo Eshun** told in his *More Brilliant Than The Sun* (1999), is impossible.



Book cover of Assembling A Black Counter Culture

In issue #159 (September/October 2020) of the Flemish magazine **Gonzo Circus**, DeForrest Brown, Jr. stresses that his upcoming book should be a(n) '[f]actual and truthful history' of techno. The author generally succeeded. The amount of information is dizzying, and the relationships he establishes between socio-cultural, musical and economic developments are well substantiated. As the narrator, DeForrest Brown, Jr. remains in the background. Others do the talking, and they are mostly not the usual suspects. For example, the ideas of sociologists Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno are told from the perspective of the Afro-American philosopher **Angela Davis**, a student of both thinkers in the late

1960s. She is critical of the white and male perspectives on capitalist culture. More is needed to understand techno-culture and African-American counterculture than the intellectual, white, Western male gaze.



Angela Davis was a student of both Marcuse and Adorno

Those slightly different perspectives are the red thread throughout the book's ten chapters. Each chapter is a fine mixture of theoretical and historical information. The central theme is the emergence of techno in Detroit during the 1980s. From there, DeForrest Brown, Jr. wanders back and forth through the past and the present. His starting point is the 'Belleville Three' (**Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson and Derick May**). The developments in Berlin get special attention. The parallels between both cities are undeniable: both imploded and became dystopias under the influence of neoliberal industrial capitalism.

Another essential starting point is the ideas of futurist **Alvin Toffler** - particularly from the book *The Third Wave* (1980), from which Atkins got the term 'techno'. For the author, Toffler's description of techno is the best way to interpret Afro-American culture in the 21st century: culture as an industrial-technological activity.



The Belleville Three

That is a clear indication of the nuanced way he tackles culture: culture is not some static given associated with one particular sub-culture but a liquid and organic entity constantly changing. For DeForrest Brown Jr. a term like cultural appropriation is like focusing on the irrelevant excesses and asking the wrong questions. Black counterculture and techno express the inherent trauma that black youth have carried with them for centuries. Blending these traumas, in the form of stories, with machines is a (maybe the only) way out:

"Techno [...] was the technical process of conducting and composing rhythm and soul music with hot-wired, unquantized electronic instruments. Not specifically or necessarily limited to the production and financialization of arranged frequencies and beats, techno was intended to contain the sound of machines being possessed with the concentrated expressions of soul, blues, jazz, and funk." In a way, techno launches a specific process of elevating and liberating black consciousness.

Without machines, no techno. No liberation.

*Assembling A Black Counter Culture* by DeForrest Brown, Jr. is published by Primary Information, New York (2022).