

Greater than Man's Technology: On DeForrest Brown Jr.'s "Assembling a Black Counter Culture"

 lareviewofbooks.org/article/greater-than-mans-technology-on-deforrest-brown-jr-s-assembling-a-black-counter-culture

April 4, 2023

ASSEMBLING A BLACK Counter Culture, DeForrest Brown Jr.'s 2022 critical history of techno music, departs from a simple, unassailable, yet widely disavowed assertion: techno is part of the centuries-long tradition of Black practices that reject the terms of white history and its entrenched world-making power. The book intends, as Brown puts it, to “detach the term ‘techno’ from the electronic dance music culture industry and the British lexical standard of the hardcore continuum to reconsider its origins in the community of Detroit and its context within African American history.” Over the ensuing 400-odd pages, Brown presents a dense genealogy, from techno’s prehistory in the various musical and economic conditions of 20th-century Detroit to the music’s coalescence around key players in the 1980s and ’90s, and the tendrils of influence, innovation, and appropriation of the word and its sonic referents through the early 2020s. It is an expansive, thoroughly researched text, poised to make a crucial intervention in the historicization of Black ingenuity and survival.

The broad strokes of the story Brown tells are as follows: at the dawn of the neoliberal era that saw white people’s withdrawal from Detroit’s industrial economies and the consequent dilapidation of physical and social infrastructure, Black kids got their hands on devalued electronic music instruments and pushed the sounds of funk and soul into a switched on future-present. Juan Atkins, who with Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson comprised the famously foundational “Belleville Three” (named after the Detroit suburb where they went to high school), called their music “techno.” As Brown frequently notes, Atkins took the word from white pop-futurist Alvin Toffler’s 1980 book *The Third Wave*, a pontification on how different populations might endure the transition to a cybernetically unified, technologically ascendant global society.

In the late 1980s, Europeans tuned into the new music coming out of the American Midwest, ignored its regional and racial specificity, overstated its relationship to German electronic music like Kraftwerk, and claimed its sonic strategies as their own. A “second wave” of Detroit techno artists, including Carl Craig, Underground Resistance, and Drexciya, made inroads in the international music market. But by the mid-1990s, “techno” was a catch-all for music produced with drum machines and synthesizers, closely associated with a European party culture that turned the sound into a massively popular commodity—without substantial acknowledgment of or payment for its Black progenitors and practitioners back in Michigan. The EDM of the 2010s, then, was a full fruiting of the classic Euro-American tactic of exploiting Black cultural products for surplus value while discarding their history. Meanwhile, the originators, their protégés, and their allies continued to create their own music on their own terms—albeit with far less commercial reach.

As Brown demonstrates, those are just the story's outlines. To talk about Detroit is to talk about Motown and Ford. To talk about 20th-century industry is to talk about the role of the US military in the development of electronics technology, the conscription of poor Black people, and post-World War II globalizing economies—which leads to Japan and the dominance of the Roland company's drum machines, but also has to do with free-market trade policy and the fall of the Berlin Wall. And, because the world in which techno appears was shaped by the Atlantic slave trade, it cannot be understood without mention of other Black diasporic electronic musics, like Jamaican dub and dancehall, New York hip-hop, Chicago house, and British Caribbean sound system culture.

The genealogical threads proliferate and tangle. *Assembling a Black Counter Culture* accounts for a staggering amount of them. Tales of the Detroit trailblazers encountering racist Madchester denizens, Drexciya's brilliant counterhistories of the Middle Passage, and scenes of bedroom discoveries of now-ubiquitous sounds are vivid. Elsewhere, Brown offers a lyrical cultural analysis that animates his rigorous familiarity with the subject matter, evoking the strategies of crucial works on Black music by Amiri Baraka, Angela Davis, Kodwo Eshun, and—especially in early chapters that lay out connections between local cultures and structural drivers of global history—Clyde Woods.

While the details are engrossing, the form in which they appear can make for a rocky read. Instead of paragraphs, the text comes in long stretches with countless block quotes. Frequent footnotes irrupt into most pages. Sometimes someone is referred to by their last name after a brief mention pages earlier; sometimes a major player is introduced many times as if it's the first. The references to all manner of thinkers and the authorial voice's emphatic conviction suggest that this is a work of historically grounded theory—but while many theories are summarized, they aren't argued toward new concepts. There is enough initiatory material for a general audience and more than enough esoterica for the heads, but the exhaustive documentation of names, dates, and album titles (all priceless information) and the unremitting quotations (mostly fascinating) proceed with an associative vigor that bucks expectations of the organizational clarity for which books with this level of scholarly intensity usually strive.

Like all histories of real people doing real things, the jumble of chronicled events and subjective accounting can't actually submit to the linearity, compression, and circumscription proper to conventional archives. Some genres tolerate more tension with their format than others, whether on the level of expression, like fiction or art books that experiment with typography and images, or on the level of content, such as with poetry's ambivalence toward unambiguous meaning. *Assembling a Black Counter Culture*, however, is not written in a style that's particularly outré, even at its most Eshun-like rhapsodic. It looks and proceeds like an encyclopedic narrative, a mode that is exactly the stuff of books qua books, and one that generally succeeds as a source of knowledge through its effective acquiescence to the rules of discursivity. Most of the time, that's achieved through common editorial choices that are absent here, like paragraph breaks and accessibly arranged citations.

All this being said, if I take seriously that this book has been published as Brown envisioned, and if I am committed to the urgent truths about history, race, and music that are his premise, then *Assembling a Black Counter Culture* is not at all contained by its noncorrespondence with the editorial norms of genres it might resemble. When it comes down to it, modern Western discursivity's aesthetic and epistemological mandates were made in coeval progression with colonial history. Brown's work is a mythopoetic instantiation of techno music's Black radical potency. In spite of its appearance, it is positioned against the hierarchizing, rigidifying taxonomization of Western institutional knowledge.

Control over that knowledge is racialized and works through subtle insinuation as often as blunt exclusion. To demystify its procedures, abolitionist scholar Dylan Rodriguez offers the concept of "white academic raciality," describing it as "the unspoken, assumptive agential and mediating epistemic position that is prepared to engage [...] 'desubjugated' and 'insurgent' knowledges." That is, white academic racially "assumes a posture of generally unquestioned authority" that licenses its regulation not only of what gets identified by or incorporated into officially recognizable institutions of Western knowledge, but also of what constitutes a legitimate critique of, or even an outside to, that knowledge. This is indispensable to the project of patriarchal, capitalist white supremacy that seeks an everlasting totality for its (white) form of being.

Which is to say, my desire for a type of argument, citation, and formatting is evidence of my bind to the presumptions of white academic raciality. I'm white, but the presumptions would still be at work if I were not: Brown's book, as published by art-world (i.e., white institutional) press Primary Information, would always already be bound to obligations enforced by what Rodriguez calls "the veritable monopoly position for the making of proper knowledges as such." With this perspective, my editorial quibbles become a question about what's going on when a Black author like Brown accomplishes an extraordinarily comprehensive feat of research and writing but it's released without the editorial intrusions toward clarity that publishers customarily expect from writers and insist they deserve. Primary Information says they always want to realize the author's vision as fully as possible, but that is an aim usually claimed to explain the meticulous editing of a book as packed with scholarship as Brown's. Why not here? Was scrutinous, caring attention—which is a material resource in the economy of texts prepared for sale—abandoned for fear of it slipping into a kind of policing, the form of attention most comfortably installed in the paradigmatic encounter between white power and Black intellect? I say this not in a spirit of accusation, but to get at where white raciality might be in play, however submerged. I want its contingencies and vulnerabilities to be exploited toward its absolute decomposition.

Rodriguez develops his concept to make sense of the last five or six decades of the post-Civil Rights era as a time of "White Reconstruction," in which the unvanquished powers of Euro-American colonial imperialism reconfigured and consolidated their terms of appearance and operation to effectively maintain the structure of the world system. Thinking in these terms

puts in relief white being's always-ongoing outsides and oppositions, the long and ever-active traditions of Black radicalism and anti-imperialist abolition. Rodriguez offers his work to these traditions, frequently appealing to the likes of Frantz Fanon, Cedric Robinson, and Sylvia Wynter.

Assembling a Black Counter Culture unquestionably belongs, as well, to that lineage that runs in difference to white dominance, the cultures of its title of which Brown is already a part. Brown is a remarkable producer-musician himself, and his book is a piece of his wider multimedia initiative of performances, lectures, and merchandise that exhort the imperative to "Make Techno Black Again." MTBA precisely subverts the white supremacist rationale of the slogan it refers to: whereas America was never great, techno has always been Black. The project anticipates a question Rodriguez asks: "What if white raciality—including its academic variations—was subjected to *others'* intrusive, disruptive, and epistemically destructive genealogical narratives?" As Brown charts techno from, as his book's blurb says, "a Black theoretical perspective," he provides a textual supplement to music that has long directed percipient hostility toward the authority of white forms of being, doing, and knowing. The book itself is an index. Its theory isn't argued; it is decided.

At an event in New York celebrating the book's publication, Brown talked with Ytasha Womack, whose scholarship on and practices of Afrofuturism are very much in conversation with *Assembling a Black Counter Culture*. A question came up that led the two to a short, somewhat familiar exchange about whether the surges and distensions of movements for Black liberation in the last half millennium might inspire a hopeful investment in progress or an angry divestment from the world-as-such. In a follow-up email, Brown wrote, "I'm no longer interested in hope or the future because these concepts seem to work much like a candle burning at both ends in which, for every progress made by Black people, society copies the innovation and uses it as an escapist infinite jest."

If the question is whether there's anything recuperable about a world system that requires the unevenly distributed death and immiseration of populations unto the limit of planetary annihilation, the truthful conclusion of "No" is anything but a submission to the system's oblitative bloodthirst. Rather, it situates the opposition of optimism and pessimism within the dualistic logics that yield the system's official, sanctioned history and its violent realities: white/Black, live/dead, man/woman, rich/poor, us/them, in/out, etc. The difficulty in thinking otherwise, of creating a concept that moves without the all-or-nothing aporia, is the bread and butter of white academic raciality, and it's a feature of the discursive premise of any text—in the sense of its oft un-self-reflexive representation of the workings of the particular order of knowledge that produces it, and in the sense of the essential linearity in going from one thing to another that forecloses alternate paths. Text can name its outside, but then it is not what is outside.

Music isn't like that. Music does have a dimension fully containable by discourse, the dimension by which we find descriptive words for timbre and rhythm and melody and so on, organized under the signs of genre. We can talk about techno music, what it sounds like, how it has been made, who does it, and what it means in various contexts. But none of that touches the material iteration of the sounds, their movements that affect the bodies who may or may not do any talking about it, the feelings beyond meanings that have always been other to dualistic whiteness, and the secrets of the myriad fleshly, harmonic, and hardware technologies that make Black life possible in a world that demands and enjoys its devastation. Black music evinces and engenders a reality beyond the ends of this world. Fittingly enough, techno as such renders Alvin Toffler's pseudo-eschatological, so-called futurism—which presupposes the totality for which colonial history strives, orienting toward a what's-to-come that elides the unending vitality of countless histories that can't be encompassed by a "past" that doesn't know them—a dismissible joke.

We are in a moment that extends the wake of the 1960s' global decolonial and civil rights upsurges through another fleeting period of direct confrontation between anti-racist uprisings and repressive state response. White reconstructive strategies after the hypervisible rebellions of 2020 run from the bilious tragicomedy of politicians kneeling in kente cloth to the pathetic hot bother over critical race theory to the supervision of the Black "voices" included in the ultimately white-controlled institutions of TV, advertising, and publishing. White people embrace books like *Assembling a Black Counter Culture*, write about them in their magazines, ban them from school curricula. There is another product of this moment on my desk, Blank Forms' 2022 reprint of the late-1960s Black music magazine *The Cricket*, in which luminaries of the Black Arts Movement said it already, and never for the first time: "The history of Black Music is a history of a people's attempt to define the world in their own terms." This is nothing new.

It is key that Brown's book announces itself as an assemblage—of historical information, critical ideas, and people's stories. To look for all of its points of articulation on the page, as if book-bound signifiers and editorial maneuvers could communicate the relating parts that mean and mobilize techno, is wrong. The music itself is the pivotal thing. It ruins white being.

✕

Nicholas Nauman is a musician, cook, and writer.