

UC Riverside

UCR Honors Capstones 2023-2024

Title

AFROPUNK-ISM: THE AFROFUTURISTIC PURSUITS OF BLACK HARDCORE PUNK

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/79f8b5pg>

Author

Jimenez, Michael Y

Publication Date

2024-07-24

AFROPUNK-ISM: THE AFROFUTURISTIC PURSUITS OF BLACK HARDCORE PUNK

By

Michael Yosef Silvestre Jimenez

A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

May 09, 2024

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Dr. Richard T. Rodríguez
Department of English

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair
University Honors

ABSTRACT

The focus of this project is assessing the critical connections which may be viewed between the musical works of Black artists during the 1970's and 1980's which served as the genesis of the genre of hardcore punk and the foundational theories which created the cultural phenomenon, aesthetic, and critical lens that is Afrofuturism. In doing so, this project highlights forms of African American speculative thinking and defines Afrofuturism itself through the works of these musicians. Furthermore, by pulling out these connections, this research begins the process of seeing the genre of hardcore punk—its uniquely African American form, sound, and purpose integral in this—as a necessary strand in Afrofuturism, to be viewed in the larger stream of African American approaches towards speculativity in the 20th century. To achieve this goal, this essay will analyze primarily Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, a foundational text of sound studies, in relation to musical works by the bands Bad Brains, Pure Hell, and Death, among others. Additionally, this research seeks to draw upon a history of scholarly approaches towards Afrofuturism itself through citing works by authors including Mark Dery, Stuart Hall, Stefano Harvey, and Fred Moten, alongside the necessary perspectives of scholars and critics working in the proximity of music, including Daphne Brooks and José Esteban Muñoz. This research posits the work of these aforementioned musicians alongside these authors, providing through its totality a viewpoint into Afrofuturism altogether absent in scholarly works.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I give my greatest acknowledgements to my faculty mentor, Professor Richard T. Rodríguez—thank you for enthusiastically joining me in my research project, providing me with readings and advice, and supporting me in my exploration of this subject. Through this work, I have been granted the ability to research the music and literature which I love, and it was only through your guidance and support that I was able to find this field of research and knowledge. I would also like to thank my mother, not only for providing me with readings, support and inspiration for this project, but for a lifetime of support which granted me an initial love for music and English literature—thank you for all of the language. Thank you, as well, to both my sister and father for their support and presence; you both inspire me in ways you don't know. My appreciation to the UCR English Department, University Honors program, and the variety of friends that I have made here, as well: thank you for making UCR home.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Capabilities of Attali's Noise	7
Tracing the Speculative Networks of Noise	14
Refusing and Redefining Attali's "Noise"	16
References	23

Introduction

It goes a long way back, some forty years where, nestled in the heart of New York's Country, Blues, and Bluegrass venue¹—an American “promised land” for alternative genres ranging from new wave to art rock—sound accompanied fury in the presence of hardcore punk pioneers, Bad Brains.² Arranged for three weekend nights in a row between the dates of December 24th and 26th, 1982, the band headlined a series of performances displaying an emerging sound—hardcore punk—that possessed a far more indignant sense of consciousness and a louder, harsher sonic construction when compared to its contemporaries.³ Noise bursted and boiled over with a boastful cadence back-to-back-to-back over the three nights, and it is here that the band's performances waged insurrection against the nest of an institution with a peculiar sound, one once described by music critic and scholar Daphne Brooks as “white noise supremacy.”⁴ In these headlined sets, which supported the release of their eponymous debut album in February of that year, Bad Brains performed a role further described by Brooks as *being* the archive, rather than being “for the archive.” Brooks states, “[Black artists often performed] *as* archives, as the innovators of performances and recordings that stood in *for* and *as* the memory of a people.”⁵ In the shoddily-recorded, out-of-focus, and out-of-phase tapes of their performances, Bad Brains stands as archives, recalling details of African-American history told and identified in the works of Audre Lorde and Henry Louis Gates Jr. Bad Brains (of Washington, D.C.), furthermore, is just one such example of how Black musicians created the genre of hardcore punk late in the 1970s and early in the 1980s—other bands, including

¹ Hereafter referred to as “CBGB's.”

² Bad Brains' original lineup, which persisted through the late eighties, consisted of Gary Miller, Darryl Jenifer, Paul Hudson, and Earl Hudson, four Black men.

³ Johnson, Christopher, “Making Music History: Bad Brains at CBGB, 1982” (NPR, 2006).

⁴ Brooks, Daphne A. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual life of Black Feminist Sound*. (Massachusetts, Belknap Press, 2021), 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4

Michigan's Death and Philadelphia's Pure Hell also saw Black musicians joining together to create music which would later be contextualized as some of the earliest examples of hardcore punk. Together, these bands signal within their noise a consciousness of a scattered memory, which may be located in critical theory as a disciple of Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. A scholarly model of theoretical approaches towards "noise," Attali's work contextualizes and validates these artists' desire to "[announce] a vision of the world" within their work, asserting this urge as being possible only within the proximity of "noise."⁶ As equally as the sound exhibited in the bands' performances may be found and asserted as critically relevant within past theoretical approaches, it may also be contextualized within the context of contemporary works. Verily, the importance of the noise of Black hardcore punk lies in how it foresaw the future in the cataclysm of sound it saw fit to display. Loud as it was leashed, the music—which Bad Brains found "Banned in D.C.,"⁷—was as conscious as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's descriptions of the Undercommons as introduced by Jack Halberstam: "Listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond to the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us."⁸ Yet, before the two gestured towards this space, Black hardcore punk musicians created it, amplifying it from Marshall stacks which could erode white noise supremacy with distorted waves, all while creating a vivid aural potentiality—a grating "what if?" Through understanding the work and play of these artists as early disciples of Attali's theories surrounding "noise," while simultaneously asserting them as a pragmatic application of Moten's theorized "Undercommons," their efforts in performing and releasing their sound, experienced as nothing other than an infernal din by those who heard it, crystallizes into an

⁶ Attali, Jacques, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. (Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6.

⁷ "Banned in D.C.," Bad Brains' most popular song referenced here, was written after the band was banned from Washington, D.C. music venues for the intensity of their live shows.

⁸ Halberstam, Jack, "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, edited by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. (New York, Minor Compositions, 2013), 7.

unmistakable strut towards Afrofuturism. Bad Brains would release their noise to the world first in the compact chassis of a tiny, yellow cassette, titled *Bad Brains*, and would signal alongside the earlier creations of Death and Pure Hell something particular about this new genre they were creating—it was a Black construction which retold the past in the same breath in which it prophesied the future, synthesizing this knowledge for the purposes of “sailin’ on,” past conventions, undisturbed.

Capabilities of Attali’s Noise

Noise, to Attali, is the unregulated and unorganized substructure which predates music: a wild, flung tool which “bears the mark of its time,” reflecting “the manufacture of society,” and imagining in its reflective surface “radically new theoretical forms, in order to speak to new realities.”⁹ Noise is the sound of nature and the world before it is refined by humans—before it is regulated, made into a site of commerce, repeated, and continually polished with the goal of the impossible, exponentially perfect recording, available for extended consumption and re-consumption. Music is the organized superstructure which is built on the substructure of noise; it is the walls and ceilings which are shored up under the blueprints of noise, which is something far more primal and free.¹⁰ Yet, as illuminated by the genre of hardcore punk, exhibited by Bad Brains and others,¹¹ the two definitions are not only capable of existing in mutually exclusive and pure forms of themselves—*either* all of the noise of nature or all of the organized music of society—rather, they may draw upon one another, and music may allow degrees of unrefined “noise” into its polished product, valuing its uncultivated harvest for the purposes of creating “any organization of sounds.”¹² Attali evokes this nuance through citing

⁹ Attali, *Noise*, 4, 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ Black contributions to hardcore punk exist beyond the work of Bad Brains—other all-Black bands, including Death from Michigan and Pure Hell from Philadelphia, significantly contributed to the formation of the genre. This essay focuses on Bad Brains as the primary instrument of its analysis to enable the completion of its narrow focus.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz's "On the Radical Organization of Things": "[the mix of] dissonance with harmonious chords [stimulates] the hearer... to sting him, as it were, so that he becomes concerned about the outcome."¹³ Dissonance, here, is the employment of noise: a subtle reminder that even in a polished form, music may still exhibit the freedom of pre-colonialism.

Music, then, whenever it is created, is always a decision made continually within the context of noise: any musical creation is either a denial of the noise of the outside world, or an allowance of a certain degree of that noise into a polished product. Attali, a French economic theorist, views these aforementioned origins and understandings of music and noise as being capable of signifying future political economies and Marxist modes of production, presupposing the importance of viewing any combination of music and noise to be a product of its society. Attali states that, "Janis Joplin, Bob Dylan, and Jimi Hendrix say more about the liberatory dream of the 1960s than any theory of crisis," and attributes this uniquely descriptive and speculative power of music and musicians to the simple truth that, "Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise."¹⁴ He, furthermore, sees support through the works of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, who announce, too, that noise, which may be inscribed through music, represents the clattering din of nature mankind is required to organize into a societal production.¹⁵ So, Attali's approach of this word, "noise," begs a question: what is signified by the amount to which we allow our music to incorporate noise? Furthermore, what is allowed by the extent to which we permit our noise—that potentiality of our sound to be unrestricted—to invade our music? How much of the external world, especially as it is experienced by the curators of noise who create music, is inscribed in this polished societal production? This ability—to derive music from the tool of noise, a product of nature which represents the primal freedom of voice outside of

¹³ Wilhelm von Leibnitz's, Gottfried, "On the Radical Organization of Things," qtd. in Attali, *Noise*, 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

colonial society—is the ability which Black hardcore punk views so essentially. It is, furthermore, an explanation as to why noise is a fundamentally Black tool from which Afrofuturism draws to blueprint its essential construction.

As music is a continual decision to either allow in or lock out the noise of the external world, we find that music is an extension of the living archive. The living archive is “on-going, continuing, unfinished, open-ended”—it exists as not an “inert museum of dead works,” but rather as a continual project which does not arise “out of thin air.”¹⁶ The living archive, in the same vein as music, is a continual decision, which takes in a “relatively random collection of works, whose movement appears to be propelled from one creative production to the next,” and refines them into something made richer as a sum.¹⁷ The living archive refines the noise of this collection of works, and it refines them into its own music. Music, thus, does the function of the living archive, and the living archive is representative of the process of the refinement of noise into music. As such, it becomes undoubtable that the performances and sounds of an artist such as Bad Brains can be anything but a living archive: the band performs and plays the music which does the function of the task which they are assigned. There is an inherently speculative nature to the functions of both music and the living archive, then: just as music is a continual and ongoing decision, the living archive is “never-completed;” it owes itself to the future.¹⁸

Another certain capability of noise is its use as “a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality.”¹⁹ This idea goes alongside Attali’s most fundamental claim—that music is not an “autonomous production;” it is always “effectively submerged within a larger totality.”²⁰ Attali continues, “[Music] is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more

¹⁶ Hall, Stuart. “Constituting an Archive.” *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (2001): 89

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Attali, *Noise*, 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

generally, it is an attribute of power in all of its forms. Therefore, any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form.”²¹ Herein lies the essentiality of Black hardcore punk to Afrofuturism—itsself a Black cultural lens which reevaluates current and past standings of power to create a “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture.”²² Through viewing noise, a key element of music, as being an aspect which allows Black artists to bring a pre-colonially free nature into their music, and connecting this to artists including Death, Bad Brains, and Pure Hell, we become responsible for asserting their work as being within the gestures of Afrofuturism. Noise in the punk and hardcore punk music created by African Americans who pioneered the genres become an essential strand of the Black cultural lens, and, lest we desire to leave Afrofuturism an incomplete theory of power, the inclusion of noise in the works of Black hardcore punk becomes essential.

In his artisanal theorization on noise, Attali recognizes that these aforementioned functions of noise—to signify unrefined freedom, to show the inextricable connections between music and the time of its creation, and to create communities in physical spaces—may exist, still, alongside their products of sound, as “only a detour on the way to addressing man about the works of man, to hearing and making audible his alienation, to sensing the unacceptable immensity of his future silence and the wide expanse of his fallowed creativity.”²³ Attali’s concern, here, is constituted of fundamental Afrofuturist perspectives, namely those which recognize the state of things as being “on the way” to other things. Furthermore, as excerpted here, Attali displays awareness that music is only a stop on the continuing pathway to the future,

²¹ Ibid., 6.

²² Dery, Mark. “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose.” *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery, (Durham, Duke University Press, 1994), 183.

²³ Attali, *Noise*, 6.

and in acknowledging this fact, Attali begs the nature of what is a fundamentally Black question. There is a sense of Blackness—of the undisputable nature of postcolonial Black existence—in Attali’s pondering of the failure of the world’s ability to hear “his alienation,” in the threat of what may be his bleak “future silence,” and in the hopeful “what if,” of the latent ability of his “falloved creativity” to take him beyond the structures of subjugation which woe him so. What Attali describes here as being the product of the functions of noise is the fundamental nature of Black American existence: one which reconciles with alienation from American society as it was enforced through slavery, legal violence, and segregation; one which re-enacts the origins of Afro-pessimism in its fear of “future silence;”²⁴ and one which sees the Afrofuturist space-making potential in acts of creativity. These Black musicians’ “falloved creativity” explain their urge to reach beyond the standard productions of music—what was then “white noise supremacy”—to create a new music which would be marked by its ability to draw on noise in a unique way.

In drawing on noise as a tool, however, early Black hardcore punk artists also play intentionally off the denigration of their music into being just “noise,” a criticism they received for their “hardcore” sound, marked by “intensity,” “loud volumes,” and “abrasive vocals,” as described by Sarah F. Williams for Bloomsbury’s *Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*.²⁵ Music critic Jeremy Shatan corroborates, retelling his early encounter with Bad Brains, circa 1980, as follows:

We had no idea what to expect when four African-American dudes took the stage, bald heads gleaming in the spotlights, and launched into...something. It sounded like an uncomfortable combination of pure noise and jazz fusion played at lightening [sic] speed.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Williams, Sarah F. “Hardcore” in *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World, Volume VIII: Genres: North America*, edited by David Horn. (London, Bloomsbury Music and Sound, 2012), 259.

We were alternately intimidated by their look and aggression and amused by what we perceived as their complete incompetence.²⁶

It is here, within this uncomfortable space created out of a concentrated noise which is uninterested in earning neither a position within the traditions of American popular music nor an acknowledgement of validity from an institution whose understanding of popular music criticism is “grossly skewed,”²⁷ according to Brooks’ account—that the work of Black punk and hardcore punk musicians create what Attali forementioned as “a community, a totality.”²⁸ This space is built *intentionally*, using the tool of noise—something which Pure Hell shows clearly in the lyrics to “Noise Addiction,” the opening track from their 1978 album of the same name:

We’ve got our high-watt toys
Now we’re going to make some noise
Noise, noise, noise, noise,
noise, noise, noise, noise, noise, noise, noise, noise, noise²⁹

Pure Hell’s display of noise—centering it in their album title and the title of its first track alongside the literal noise which two loud and abrasive electric guitars make—serves as one example of how Black hardcore punk re-enacts Audre Lorde’s theorization on tools of insurrection, presented in “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” an essay from just a year later—1979—which, ironically, finds itself in Lower Manhattan, less than a mile from CBGB’s. In the essay, Lorde details her disparaging experiences presenting at feminist conferences at New York University, wherein her academic expertise and empirical knowledge which prove the centrality of lesbian Black female life in painting a full picture of feminist theory is tossed aside. Her unique, intersectional viewpoint, within these conferences, embodied the potential of academia—primarily a white institution in the United States—to begin the work of legitimately dismantling the “master’s house,” as it is a tool which this primarily

²⁶ Shatan, Jeremy. “How Low Can Punk Get?” in *Rock and Roll Globe* (2019).

²⁷ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 5.

²⁸ Attali, *Noise*, 6.

²⁹ Pure Hell, “Noise Addiction,” track 1 on *Noise Addiction*, Pure Hell, 1982.

white institution cannot lay claim to. It lies outside of the master's toolbox, as it is not valued for its capacity to function as a tool to begin with. Without its function, the work of this conference—dealing with “the role of difference within the lives of American women,”—is unfeasible.³⁰ In Lorde's words, “[The master's tools] may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”³¹ How can, then, the tools of a white American soundscape be the methodology for Black insurrection? If it is to be achieved, it will be within the proximity of the dissonance of jazz, the soul of blues, and the noise of this emerging Black hardcore punk. If it is understood that insurrection is possible within sound—Attali's theory is relevant here, as he states that “noise, or even music, can destroy a social order and replace it with another,”—it must be enacted in tools which are not originated from the household built with the tools of white supremacy.³² Black hardcore punk, like that of Pure Hell and Bad Brains, employs noise as a “tool outside of the master's toolbox,” for the purpose of enacting its own freedom in underground, clandestine venues, where it becomes a kind of “invisible man,” taking planks from the master's house to build its own. In enacting its freedom secretly and away from the systems of dispersing which white American sound abided by, Black hardcore punk avoided the conventions of the lifespan of sound described by Attali in his theorization of the “networks” of musical production.

Tracing the Speculative Networks of Noise

Noise is built upon four foundational “networks” which describe the stages of musical distribution, each correlating to the development of different modes of production within a society which grew towards its capitalist impulses. The first, named “sacrificing,” grows as a

³⁰ Lorde, Audre. “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.” In *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. (New York, State University of New York Press, 2015), 94.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

³² Attali, *Noise*, 33.

response to the “terror of noise,” a dissonance which Attali describes as “violence.”³³ In this stage denoting pre-history, music—established previously as organized noise—becomes organized for the purpose of a collective societal reassurance which results from a fear of noise: “the whole of traditional musicology analyzes music as the organization of controlled panic, the transformation of anxiety into joy, and of dissonance into harmony.”³⁴ However, in allowing the noise of nature to be shelved in this manner, the “freedom” which noise provides is left behind, or “sacrificed” for the purpose of a collective feeling of safety—“joy” and “harmony.” During this stage, music exists exclusively in the form of oral presentation, before systems of written notation, recording, and reproduction influence how the vast majority of society experiences music itself. In the second network, “representing,” music turns into a spectacle which goes beyond singular presentation; music, which now may be written and transcribed, is presented and “re-presented.”³⁵ Here, music becomes representative of the modes of production in a given society, as it is made into a site of commerce by the enamourment which its audience has with its spectacle.³⁶

The existence of music as a function of a capitalist society continues in the third network, “repeating,” which is birthed alongside 20th century advancements in sound-recording technology. This stage, which sees the innovation of the phonograph and vinyl record as enabling a new dispersing of music throughout society, makes possible “the individualized stockpiling of music...on a huge scale.”³⁷ Here, music has a depreciation value—as it attempts to replicate an original recording, it only becomes more alien to the source material, losing the value which comes with the proximity to perfection. As Attali states, “[a music listener now] has a solitary

³³ Ibid., 28, 26.

³⁴ Ibid., 27.

³⁵ Ibid., 31-32.

³⁶ Ibid., 32-33.

³⁷ Ibid., 32.

relation with a material object;” furthermore, “the consumption of music is individualized...no longer a form of sociality.”³⁸ Whereas previous networks found value in the inseparable relationship between musician and music, here, the value of music is tied, rather, to its price in a marketplace. Therein lies the problem for musicians: “Their music signified lack and organized their own solitude. They no longer vibrated in a world over which they had control, but in a reality foreign to their visions.”³⁹

Though a final network, “composing,”—where music is performed for the exclusive goal of self-gratification—exists, it is the third network where music may get caught and die: “Music, exploring in this way the totality of sound matter, has today followed this its path to the end, to the point of the suicide of form. As Jean Baudrillard writes: ‘In every spectacle (of gigantism), there is the imminence of catastrophe.’”⁴⁰ Spectacle, which is created in the second network, “representing,” is the mark of this suicide; it foreshadows it with “imminence.” This suicide, then, occurs when music exists as something individual that has separated itself from its performer, this being an obstacle forced under the capitalist modes of society the third network present. The production of Black hardcore punk bypassed this “suicide” of form altogether by avoiding the produced spectacle which arises out of the “representing” network. Spectacularity, a tool of the “master’s house,” was kept out of the hands of this alienated race and lies far outside of the reach of Black hardcore punk. Instead, the genre lived underground, in dreary and dingy venues, and in a space closer to the antithesis of spectacle: what the work of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten would later identify as the Undercommons.

Refusing and Redefining Attali’s “Noise”

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 83.

In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Moten and Harney write, “She disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong.”⁴¹ Here, enlightenment is found underground, enacting revolution in disappearance. In concealing themselves in the Undercommons, Black hardcore punk artists such as Bad Brains perform as an “invisible man” while working to “destroy a social order and replace it with another,” a function which they enact through a re-evaluation of the place of noise within music.⁴² This destructive ability is described in Plato’s *Republic*:

This is the kind of lawlessness that easily insinuates itself unobserved [through music]...because it is supposed to be only a form of play and to work no harm. Nor does it work any, except that by gradual infiltration it softly overflows upon the characters and pursuits of men...and from these relations it proceeds against the laws and the constitution with wanton license till finally it overthrows all things public and private.⁴³

Black hardcore punk artists court the Undercommons as a place to avoid spectacle, foretelling death, and here, they become invisible. Yet, in this act of self-cloaking, they simultaneously uphold a false appearance which hides their actions as, in Plato’s words, “only a form of play.”⁴⁴ This appearance—exemplified by what critic Jeremy Shatan prior observed as the “complete incompetence” of Bad Brains—creates a front which allows for the “gradual infiltration” of the band’s lawlessness to become invisible and persist. To the denigrative words of fooled critics, it would appear that Bad Brains are, as Attali would have it, representative of the noise of nature, unrefined and primitive: a continual attempt to enter into the light. Yet, the band’s noise, an infiltration, is something closer to what Harney and Moten might illuminate as an intellectual

⁴¹ Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, (New York, Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

⁴² Attali, *Noise*, 33.

⁴³ Plato, *Republic*, qtd. in *Noise*, 33-34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Black response; a movement towards fugitive enlightenment with the goal of relocating the band entirely within Attali's theories of noise for the purpose of self-preservation.

The Undercommons is constructed as both a cloak under which Bad Brains is able to avoid spectacle and the ensuing suicide of music and a metaphor for the actions of intellectual Black Americans, who may enter into the space of the Undercommons through beginning the process of fugitive enlightenment. In *The Undercommons*, Harney and Moten state "the only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one;" likewise, for Bad Brains, the only possible relationship to the networks of music is a criminal one.⁴⁵ Because the relationship to these institutions must begin with the refusal of the orders of an institution which has refused them the label of "music," and in it denied them respect, criminality predates Bad Brains' interactions with music.⁴⁶ Music has practiced refusal against Black musicians since before the dawn of hardcore punk—look only, for example, towards Daphne Brooks' historiography of Black feminist sound in *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, which pulls figures as disparate as Mamie Smith and Poly Styrene together in its lasso of counter history. Brooks' presentation of popular music criticism's distortion of Black contributions to the modern world is an exhibition of denial: of the refusal of "the utopic and the transformative."⁴⁷ Refusal, then, a criminality, is integral to the formation of the Undercommons. In the introduction to *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Jack Halberstam states, "when we refuse the call to order...we refuse order as the distinction between noise and music, chatter and knowledge, pain and truth."⁴⁸ Black hardcore punk artists such as Bad Brains, in their approach towards music, draw towards strategies of refusal rather than those of order, and thus begin their process of

⁴⁵ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 26.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁷ Brooks, *Liner Notes*, 1.

⁴⁸ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 9.

re-evaluating the values of the networks which Attali theorizes. In this initial step, the band asserts that the production of order does not necessitate a choice between noise and music. In this decision, they enter these networks from the beginning as a problem: a refusal or a rupture which engages in self-theft from Attali's networks of music.⁴⁹

Though Harney and Moten's text, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, centers around pedagogy and the institution of the American university, its function of detailing the intellectual Black response to the actions of primarily white institutions is deeply intertextual with *Noise* and the sounds of artists such as Bad Brains, Pure Hell, and Death. The Undercommons demonstrates how an artist such as Bad Brains exhibits an intellectual Black response to the primarily white institution of American sound. As Harney and Moten state, the Undercommons is a place created by subjugation which gathers intellectual curiosity: "To enter this space is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal...on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back."⁵⁰ In their performances at venues such as CBGB's, Bad Brains create a space or refuge that engages in the practice Moten describes here as "fugitive enlightenment"—what can be more fugitive than creating a space for the proliferation of noise after being banned from D.C.? These spaces of performance are then "where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons."⁵¹ This reciprocal nature of refuge and the commons is granted through the sense of speculativity which informs their being, which is a unification provided by a reaction to one's surroundings and a shared hope for the future. The zone of the Undercommons, moreover, exists before us—a call which enables a response, a rejoinder to the productions of the outside world, a reaction to one's environment. In José Esteban Muñoz's "The

⁴⁹ Moten, Fred. *Black and Blur*. (Durham, Duke University Press, 2017), 67-68.

⁵⁰ Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 28.

⁵¹ *Ibid*.

Wildness of the Punk Rock Commons,” this idea—that commons and refuge are enabled by one’s surroundings—is established to enable the sound of speculation, described as a “twitchy anticipation for something and something else” as it is heard through the voice of Exene Cervenka of punk-rock band X. Muñoz shows how Cervenka begs us to “imagine vaster, [of] a punk commons, consisting of the people who have been picked on because they really have the beat.”⁵² Cervenka’s voice organizes a “punk commons” which enables this imagination, a speculativity which functions as an inherent shield from alienation. Through their performances which harness noise in dingy and dreary spaces, Bad Brains organizes their own Undercommons, united by the central goal of “sailin’ on.”⁵³

This “primitive” noise—reminiscent of Attali’s network of “sacrificing”—creates the Undercommons, a refuge which promises Black futurity and fugitive enlightenment. Yet, to successfully put to sea, Black hardcore punk artists must avoid the attention of those whom they are stealing from, their act of theft being a self-theft which brings them to their location beyond the linearity of Attali’s theories of music and noise. Black hardcore punk begins this act in creating its Undercommons, which initiates an alienation which they practice towards Brooks’ “white noise supremacy,” exemplified in the sound of critics who fall for their act, believing them to be just “noise.” In creating the occasion for their foolishness while performing their great question, “what if?” Black hardcore punk simultaneously plays into the act of “signifying,” an African-American spoken tradition. Henry Louis Gates Jr. states, “Signifyin(g), in other words, is the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning...[it] presupposes an ‘encoded’ intention to say one thing but to mean quite another.”⁵⁴

⁵² Muñoz, José Esteban, “The Wildness of the Punk Rock Commons,” in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (2018), 657.

⁵³ “Sailin’ On,” track one from Bad Brains’ eponymous debut album, is referenced here and throughout the paper.

⁵⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), 82.

Through their performances, Black hardcore punk artists such as Bad Brains signal an awareness of the historical network of “sacrificing” and its proximity to “noise,” and draw upon this to create a unique sound—an action which signifies one thing to “white noise supremacy,” and another to those who are clued into the Undercommons. In their signifying, they exhibit a labor to further cement themselves as oral, “living archives” which move forward to create new stages of African American history with a knowledge and consciousness of what came before; their music exists as a pragmatic application of the values which doing so enlightens. In this process of signifying, they begin to steal themselves away from the later networks of music which were being reached in the late 20th century, finding themselves closer to “sacrifice” than anything else.

In a similar fashion to Bad Brains’ denial of Attali’s second network of music, “representing,” where they refuse spectacle outright, they exhibit a similar rejection of the third network, “repeating,” wherein the skulk of capitalism begins to lay a dangerously autonomous claim to music. “Don’t Need It,” the third track from Bad Brains’ little-yellow-cassette, is aware of, and seemingly resentful towards this prowl which encourages materialism:

Don't need no ivory liquid
Don't want no afro sheen
Don't need the latest fashions
Don't want my hair to smell clean

Don't need no first class
Don't need no second class
All of the best of
All that can kiss my ass⁵⁵

The band’s disavowing of these costly extravagancies—the “latest fashions” and the luxuries of “first class”—becomes a mechanism in their methodology of self-preservation alongside their measured repugnance for spectacle and disinterest for music which lacks a noise to signal to a

⁵⁵ Bad Brains, “Don’t Need It,” track 2 on *Bad Brains*, Bad Brains Records, 1982.

“wild beyond to the structures we inhabit.”⁵⁶ Death performs a similar evaluation in

“Rock-N-Roll Victim,” declaring the following:

Establishment don't want no part of us
Except to make themselves the real big bucks
You're a rock 'n' roll victim and I know this is true
'Cause I'm a rock 'n' roll victim, too⁵⁷

Their declaration displays a similar sentiment of disillusionment compared to that of Bad

Brains—within the song, they perform an evaluation of their role in a musical economy which values musicians for their abilities in an industry, separating themselves from the

“establishment” which they understand victimizes them. Bad Brains, similarly, performs a conscious evaluation of the products of the capitalist growths of society in “Don't Need It,”

resulting in their declaration of satisfaction in luxury's absence. In this refusal which Black hardcore punk stages, the third network, “repeating,” is rejected as a step in gradually

re-evaluating the values of the individual networks which Attali theorizes. It is through this that they further signal their desire to move into Attali's first network of “sacrifice.” Yet, despite

Black hardcore punk's every exhibition of the traits which denote the stage of “sacrificing”—an awareness of the proximity to the primal noise of nature, a usage of music as an oral archive, and

an indifferent attitude towards capitalist modernity—they lack entirely the most fundamental aspect of this first stage: the actual act of sacrificing.

Attali states of this aspect that, “*Noise is a weapon and music, primordially, is the formation, domestication, and ritualization of that weapon as a simulacrum of ritual murder.*”⁵⁸

The sacrifice of noise is a point of maturation for music, signifying that those who sacrificed it have now entered into a period denoting a society capable of order and reason. Noise is a threat, then, to these values—it must be sacrificed for the proliferation of the society itself. Black

⁵⁶ Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons,” 7.

⁵⁷ Death, “Rock-N-Roll Victim,” track 2 on ...*For The Whole World To See*, Drag City, 2009.

⁵⁸ Attali, *Noise*, 24 (italics in original).

hardcore punk makes no attempt to silence or deaden its noise, however. Instead, it embraces its dissonant screech. Moreover, this very action is what engenders the creation and subsistence of its communities, which procure self-preservation through the form of the Undercommons. How, then, can we assert that Black hardcore punk conducts noise, sound, and performance within Attali's theory of networks at all? Is it not more logical to believe that it has departed—allowing the machinations of white noise supremacy to advance into the inevitable suicide of form, yet ensuring its shrouded sustenance in actualized Afrofuturist potential? If so, what is this new network of sustenance and proliferation, created by music and cloaked by noise, called? In reference to track one of *Bad Brains*, I designate this state, “sailin’.”

REFERENCES

- Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Bad Brains. "Don't Need It." Bad Brains Records, 1982. <https://open.spotify.com/track/0TrGNIBKj3oFBpUPurIhBU?si=e90edc0f229e4000>
- Brooks, Daphne A. *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021.
- Death. "Rock-N-Roll Victim." Drag City, 2009. <https://open.spotify.com/track/5lo1A59pPtjn83neE2jpOh?si=719574a8864f4575>.
- Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery, Durham: Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 179-222.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Halberstam, Jack. "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons." In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, edited by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 5-12. New York: Minor Compositions, 2013. <https://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf>.
- Hall, Stuart. "Constituting an Archive." *Third Text* 54, no. 15 (2001): 89-92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576903>.
- Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions, 2013. 10.5070/H372053213.

<https://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf>.

Johnson, Christopher. "Making Music History: Bad Brains at CBGB, 1982." NPR. October 12, 2006.

<https://www.npr.org/2006/10/12/6250173/making-music-history-bad-brains-at-cbgb-1982>

Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 94-97. 4th ed. New York: State University of New York Press, 2015.

Moten, Fred. *Black and Blur*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Muñoz, José Esteban. "The Wildness of the Punk Rock Commons." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 3 (2018): 653-658. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-6942219>.

Plato. *Republic* 424a-424b. Quoted in Jacques Attali. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 33-34.

Pure Hell. "Noise Addiction." Pure Hell, 2010,

<https://open.spotify.com/track/7kuJBKhNTmeYhswN9TKAAM?si=d995613dcec34658>.

Shatan, Jeremy. "How Low Can Punk Get?" *Rock and Roll Globe*. March 25, 2019.

<https://rockandrollglobe.com/hardcore/bad-brains-and-the-legendary-black-dots/>.

Wilhelm von Leibnitz's, Gottfried. "On the Radical Organization of Things." Quoted in Jacques Attali. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 33-34.

Williams, Sarah F. "Hardcore." In *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World, Volume VIII: Genres: North America*, edited by David Horn, 257-260. London:

Bloomsbury Music and Sound, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501329203-0012762>.