Sonic Spacings of the Self: Listening for Healing and Race in New Age and Autophysiopsychic Music

By

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DEDICATION

To Nico, welcome to Planet Earth!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the intersections of music, healing, and concepts of the self, particularly in the context of race and capitalism. I focus on three areas of music: Steven Halpern's pioneering New Age records; the 1997 re-issue of the New Age compilation *Pure Moods Vol. 1;* and Yusef Lateef's musical and educational output. In each, music figures as an avenue for healing by connecting body, mind, spirit and environment. First, I turn to Halpern's entrainment methods, in which certain frequencies are promised to tether restful states of consciousness to pulsating frequencies in the earth's atmosphere. Does this entrainment offer rest and escape from the attention economy? Or does it recuperate the body for future labor? Second, in *Pure Moods,* I turn to the concept of white innocence. Innocence, in *Pure Moods,* is depicted as an avenue for achieving an inner, disalienated authenticity that promises multicultural connection. However, I propose it also generates feelings of spatial entitlement endemic to whiteness and neoliberal global capitalist relations. With this energizing music in mind, I also point to white innocence's specifically blissful constitution, which must be addressed if whiteness is to be challenged. Finally, I turn to Lateef's use of the half-step in his creative and therapeutic self-expression. A titan in black music making, Lateef mobilized this small musical interval to generate overlapping real and imaginative musical spaces. This sonic-spatial nesting, I argue, challenges geography's traditional tendency to fix identity and place, particularly in gazing outward at its Others (McKittrick 2006). In each of these diverse cases of musical healing, the small is made to connect the listener with a wider world: whether through low-amplitude brainwaves, the return to a child-like innocence, or a tiny musical interval. I coin this tendency "condivergent," and ask how this particular musical spatiality offers renewed ways of theorizing the subject's need to tend to both inner and outer worlds, and what risks and promises this framework carries.

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION: MUSIC, SPACE, AND HEALING

This dissertation explores the relationship between music, space and the self in the context of healing. To do so, I engage the music of Drs. Yusef Lateef and Steven Halpern, as well as a 1997 compilation of New Age music titled *Pure Moods Vol. 1.* Bringing a critical geographical lens to these sounds, I explore the complex ways they are situated both within and against the logics of capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism, particularly in regards to the individualizing effects and foundations of these systems of power. I am also interested in how music might conjure liberatory modes of feeling, thinking and listening that enliven "the self's" inherent intertwining with other people, places and things. To begin, I turn towards a peculiar feeling music induces in me. It can make me feel expansive and yet, somehow, also held, even enclosed. I hazard the term *condivergent* to describe inward and outward seeking musical spatiality. It is a recurring, non-Cartesian movement in this work.

To start, consider the song "On a Clear Day You Can See Forever" (this is one of my favorite pieces to play on piano). It debuted in a 1965 Broadway production by the same name. The plot centers around a young woman who undergoes hypnosis to quit smoking, only to learn that she possesses the remarkable power of ESP. The plot's "far-out" devices anticipate some of this dissertation's interest in fringe New Age sound technologies. In any case, pay attention to the song's lyrics

> On a clear day, rise and look around you
>
> And you'll see who - just who you are
>
> On a clear day, how it will astound you
>
> That the glow of your being outshines every star

You feel part of every mountain, sea, and shore

You can hear from far and near a world you've never heard before

And on a clear, on that clear day

You can see forevermore

And on that clear day on that clear clear day

You can see forever and ever and ever and evermore (Sinatra, 1966).

The tune was written by Burton Lane, with lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner. It has been recorded by Frank Sinatra, Barbara Streisand and others. I favor Oscar Peterson's version, from his 1968 album *Girl Talk.* Though instrumental, it best conveys, I think, the words' unbridled optimism, openness and clarity – a feeling that strikes, out of the blue, "on a clear day," when things particularly align. The reader will note the geographic quality of the words: "the mountains, sea and shore" beckon. Or, even more magically, the stars, in a kind of cosmic fold, are held in the "glow of your being." On the recording, Peterson's piano overflows with life. His lines cascade, saunter, romp while Sam Jones and Bobby Durham propel the music forward on bass and drums.

This feeling of extension preoccupies one half of this dissertation's musical-spatial analysis. The other is the sense that music also brings you home. It gathers and holds. As Maya Angelou (2009, p. 3) writes, "Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness." Music's tenderness. It's sympathy. Note Angelou doesn't say music helps her stride *away* from loneliness. Rather she crawls and curls, almost as if her departure from loneliness occurs by holding herself in it. Such is the alchemical power of music. It can create a feeling of safety even in the bleakest of circumstances.

The reader may already sense that the turn inward is also a turn outward and vice versa. As an aid to day-dreaming, music creates what Gaston Bachelard calls "intimate immensity"

(1994, p. 182). A hushed expansiveness in which quietude animates a topology of reverie: close, like a whisper, or, in the same moment, distant, like a melody barely cresting the horizon. Silence is even more important for sonorous day-dreaming. Quiet and silence invite the listener to participate in sound, to occupy Angelou's "the space between the notes" in which the listener becomes with the sound.

1. The Promises and Perils of Condivergent Music

Cartesian representations of space, in which people and things occupy discrete, indivisible points on an infinitely extended plane, has long attracted critique in geography and elsewhere for being colonial, capitalist and inadequate to describing place and subjectivity in an era of global interconnectedness (Massey 2005, Allen 2011, Smith 1999, Mills 2012). However, just because music appears to offer glimpses of a kind of subjectivity that is neither discrete, autonomous, nor disembodied does it mean that it automatically exceeds the power structures that rely on and reproduce individualism. This dissertation is inspired by the possibility that the "strange ontologies" of musical space can serve as an inspiration to reimagine social space (Wakefield 2011, p. 14 quoted in Born 2013, p. 14), but it proceeds cautiously, turning primarily to the dangers associated with the spatial-musical figuration just presented. The term I tentatively propose is *condivergent* – that listening inaugurates a convergent sense of relation premised on divergent spatialities.

Music geographies have tended to view music's connective power, its resonance, and its affect allure as politically positive. Hofman (2020) offers a general reading on the allure of critical scholarship's "romance with affect" and music. For Hofman, this romance is driven by the desire to find new ways of theorizing political collectivities. When political movements formed around readymade identifications with class, race, nation and gender have failed to

overturn neoliberal hegemony, sound and music's seeming ability to glue people and places together in novel ways offers a vision. Referencing the work of LaBelle (2018), Hofman sums up her interpretation of the broad thrust of the meeting of music and affect thusly:

> Music and sound's agentive potential is not rooted in their message or content but in their deeper, more affective and hidden ontology. They demonstrate an ongoing urgency for political potentiality inscribed into the invisible resistance of sound that can exceed power relations. As a pre-subjective intensity, affect has been recognised as a force that can exceed power relations and break through them, offering a glimpse into a better world, with new ways of being and doing (Gill and Pratt 2008:16). (Hofman 2020, p. 309)

Music and sound here appear to offer a deeper answer to modern problems of identity, ideological conditioning, and oversaturated political messaging, creating new potentials for political becomings. Waitt et al (2014) pursue this track, arguing "visceral politics of sound" that creates ephemeral, contingent political formations – in their case, in the unfolding of a protest. One review of a sound installation characterizes sound as existing "on an ontological level that precedes psychology, memory-models and instrumentality. In fact, it precedes any kind of individuation altogether and therefore necessarily also evades semantic determination" (Van der Wielen-Honinckx 2021, p. 94).

Certainly, sound offers multiple productive ways of theorizing collectivity. However, the overemphasis on music and sound as operating at a vibrational "base-layer" (Gallagher 2016, p.43) risks naturalizing sound as is. Worse, the pretense of accessing sound this way whether through artistic, theoretical or spiritual means, creates the illusion of transcending historical and

geographical specificity, in a colorblindness or willful obliviousness to matters of power, music and sound (Thompson 2017, Cardew 1971/2004).

As Johnathan Sterne (2003) expertly evacuates, this idea of music as transcendent is itself historical, reappearing at different times in tandem with collective desires and anxieties, as well as technological change. I turn to the Romantics, whose interest and faith in music anticipates that of music geographers' (including me). The Romantics who were fascinated by the simultaneity of musical opening and closing. Romantic composer and polymath E.T.A Hoffman considered the musical turn inward as nothing less than a gateway to transcendence. "Curiously, the further inward one goes, the less personal one gets, with interior exploration ultimately opening out onto the infinite reaches of the sublime," as Watkins sums it (2021, p. 203). For Hoffmann, this near mystical quality imparts itself despite – or rather because – of music's lack of (subordination to) words. As a famous 1808 Hoffman review of Beethoven's 5th Symphony puts it, the composition forces one to leave behind "all feelings that can be determined by concepts… in order to devote oneself to the unsayable." (Hoffmann 1988, p. 23 quoted in Bowie 2009 p. 245)

Intuitively, the move away from the personal appeals to me since hyper-individualism is a hallmark of white supremacy (Berg 2012). So does the Romantic critique of reason, as the overreliance on a universal template for reason is a hallmark of coloniality (Smith 1999, Mbembe 2017). However, the philosophical inheritances of Romantic music pose several dangers, two of which I'll briefly mention. The first is that Romantic music's indebtedness to German idealism broadly means that it presumes that musical sense enlivens cognitive, aesthetic and spiritual capacities thought to reside *a priori* in the individual subject alone, overloading this individual with capacities that might actually be better understood as traversing it (Jackson

2016). Second, the *long durée* of Western thought has scripted these powers in the image of the white European male, actively rendering the West's Others as less than human. This has been well documented from a number of angles (Wynter 2003, Hartman 1997, Da Silva 2014). Jean-Luc Nancy traces the continuity between a Romantic conception of music, through Schopenhauer to Nietzsche and Wagner, as animating Nazism's adoration for pure will, a will in which the subject identifies himself with pure expansion. He writes, "Music… could be characterized as… the art… of expansion… But it harbors this resource most dangerously exactly when it presents itself as, and when it sets out to be, expansion-outpouring, overflowing, dilation and sublimation, the propagation of a subjectivity" (Nancy, 2007 p. 51).

This dissertation, motivated by the allure of music, proceeds cautiously, considering three problematics that the legacy of the Romantics cues up for musical and geographic thought.[1] First, there is a long history of belief, in the West, that music accesses a deeper truth of some kind. Second, that this truth can fix the problems of modernity. And third, that this investment in music can subtly or strongly reinforce modernist commitments, despite intentions otherwise (James 2019). In the case of the Romantics, music was thought to overcome an over-reliance on reason. Yet Romantic works plumbed Orientalist sensibilities in a complex process of shoring up both rationality and colonialism for European publics (Head 2003). Works such as Georges Bizet's *Carmen* propped up colonialism's Others as emotional or irrational, innocent and nature-bound, reinforcing a contradistinctive European sense of self. Further, Romantic music, as with many contemporary artistic practices such as travel writing, fueled the desire for imperial expansion (Pratt 2008) (some of these themes reappear in chapter 2).

[1] For more on this legacy see Tang (2008) and Taylor (2021)

What about interiority? Part of what animates this work is to think of the turn inward not only as a way to fuel up fantasies of selfhood and infinity. When "the self" is largely suspect for its reification of neoliberal social relations, it may also be productive to hold out the possibility that drawing inwards in some capacity can enliven mutual relationships with others and the world in the long run. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the refrain is helpful here. For them, the refrain is a small kind of repetition that acts like a small territorializing force. They describe it as a barely hummed tune that keeps one safe on a dark walk home. Something "to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space," in which "sonorous or vocal components are very important: a wall of sound, or at least a wall with some sonic bricks in it" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 311).

This, however, does not describe the only power of the refrain, which can also stabilize an intra-relationship so as to *allow* opening. They write,

> Finally, one opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets someone in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself, launches forth. One opens the circle not on the side where the old forces of chaos press against it but in another region, one created by the circle itself. As though the circle tended on its own to open onto a future, as a function of the working forces it shelters.

We could think of a group, or even a self, as the circle here, not in the sense of their pre-existing in advance of the circle drawn, but coming to form by the very act of drawing (from singing a refrain). A territorializing praxis of dynamic, ongoing individuation that can then actually effect a greater relation: "One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures from home on the thread of a tune" (Deleuze and

Guattari, p. 311). Consider the refrain as a tool, taken up by music, to effect both a worldly entwining and the need, every now and then, "to come home to ourselves."

The refrain then, can both effect territorialization and deterritorialization. Again, as Deleuze and Guattari warn, echoing Nancy above, neither is inherently politically progressive, in fact their union can be quite dangerous. There are political risks when a group or self and world come together in a closed immanence that maps itself outward, uninhibited, onto others: expansionisms of all kinds; capitalist and supremacist vitalities; and spiritual fascisms. As Deleuze and Guattari mention, music has a fascistic quality, drums and trumpets drawing "people and armies into a race that can go all the way to the abyss" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 302). Generally, as I will explore in this dissertation, my findings were less extreme. Music's power can animate subtle entitlements, proprietary identifications, and privileged escapisms almost as instantaneously as it ignites liberatory lines of flight or recuperative safe havens and refrains (Saldanha 2007).

My goal, then, is not to seek a transcendental musical ideal, even while I'm aware of the work that this allure does to create exclusions and entitlement (Johnson-Williams 2021). At the same time, I resist the urge to "instrumentaliz[e] musical production as being a mere cipher for larger issues" (Fraser 2011 p. 13), believing that it contains powers that challenge, if not exceed, logico-centered, text-based analyses as well as discourse-based grids of representation. Music, I believe, contains or ignites what Harrison (2007, p. 590) calls "an irreducible nonthematisability within... dimensions of corporeal existence" that may indeed work to remake subjectivities pressed in by race and class, perhaps in ways that are not yet determined or have been theorized.

Broadly, my research centers around music and subjective formations that cluster around

whiteness, capitalism and coloniality, tackling, in the three subsequent chapters, rest and individualism, white innocence and multiculturalism, and objectivity as a norm in geographic thought. I look specifically at the ways that the inward-outward pull of music both upsets and shores up various forms of individualism and Cartesian representations of space. Sometimes, the examined music both challenges and reinforces the status quo. I turn now to a discussion of self-care and music, which animates these tensions.

2. Music, Healing and the Self Under Capitalism and White Supremacy; the Paradox of Self-Care

Music's challenge to Cartesian divisions of space enables music's aliveness, its mixing of interiority and exteriority, of subject and environment, of listener and sound (Rodaway 1994). This dissertation wonders how this enframing can help heal or model healing from certain effects of capitalism, white supremacy and colonialism. I'm drawn now to a particular conundrum that could be framed as the problem of self-care.

Self-care is a slippery practice when it comes to resisting the powers that be. On one hand, self-care might serve as a means of escape, keeping people "cocooned," as angel Kyodo Williams puts it, "in a narcotic sense of safety" (Kelly 2022, xiii). This option secures whiteness and capitalist forms of individuation, and shields them, reanimating their individualizing and alienating effects. Self-care co-opts holistic practices of wellbeing, with roots in black feminism, for a capitalist wellness industry (Hassan 2023, Lorde 2022), as reflected in the proliferation of self-help literature, seminars and meditation apps (which often feature musical or sonic elements), all of which now amounts to a 4.5 trillion dollar-a-year industry (Kelly 2022, p. 70). This booming industry must be considered alongside continual threats to healthcare, such the one trillion-dollar cuts expected in Trump administration's omnibus tax bill (Galewitz et al 2025).

Self-care risks becoming the neoliberal response to decaying public infrastructure, a public downgrade which disproportionately affects people already neglected by the system. It is what Robert Crawford famously calls "healthism," a perspective that "reinforces the privatization of the struggle for generalized well-being" (Crawford 1980, p. 365). It foists upon people a toxic notion of personal responsibility that mixes with harmful racialized, gendered and able-bodied norms.

On the other hand, self-care might provide tactics for addressing feelings of dissociation, fear and exhaustion that characterize life under duress. Today's power structures routinely deny access to one's full, disalienated sense of self, for a myriad of reasons which might include overwork, forms of repression, control and normalization; from outright violence, or from deeper held traumas (Haines 2019, Menakem 2017). Slowing down, meditating, therapy, listening to music, forms of ritual and prayer, or cooking a good meal can all help people gain access to suppressed forms of embodied wisdom, the capacity to dream and feel for each other (The Crunk Feminist Collective 2019). Embodied wisdom and recuperation can help people become *response-able* to those around them, as Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) writes in *Borderlands: La Frontera.* Asker, drawing on Anzaldúa's work in her call for "mindful geographies," writes that "self-care is vital" (2024, p.7). She goes on to quote Barker and Iantaffi (2021, p. 42 in Asker 2024, p.7) that it,

> help[s] us to slow down and notice when we want to accelerate, when we're not paying attention to ourselves or others, when we're perpetuating patterns of oppression and abuse in our everyday lives and relationships, while being dedicated to and passionate about eradicating them.

Furthermore, it ‘reminds us that we are connected, not just to other humans but also to the broader ecosystem’ (Barker and Iantaffi, 2021, p. 96, quoted in Asker 2024, p.7). The turn inward can occasion reminders of our essential interrelatedness, positioning future action towards the collective, while alerting us to the ways we have internalized oppressive ways of thinking and doing. Indeed, some version of internal reflection is critical for sustained relationality and solidarity. Meena Mangat (2025, p. 243) writes of white allyship, drawing on Kramarae & Winkelmann (2018):

> If one’s intention is to authentically engage with solidarity movements, grounding or stillness practices like meditation and mindfulness ‘can help [one] recognize, internalize, and integrate [a] sense of our human interconnection…foster loving-kindness for the self and others…move us to deeper senses of the isolation-generating dangers of white privilege and, contrarily, the joy of human connection that can sustain us for the long-term struggle against the oppression of others.’ (Kramarae & Winkelmann, 2018, p. 49)
>
> Instead of reverting to performativity to cover discomfort, white guilt, or fragility, contemplative practices can allow for a leaning toward ‘uncertain wisdom, a way of being open to what arises in the moment, [letting] go of opinions, expectations, fixed ideas, the desire to explain or be right… [and refraining] from whitesplaining, white defensiveness, white sensitivity, white tears, [and] white rage.’ (Kramarae & Winkelmann, 2018, p. 49).

At this point, self-care becomes less about shoring up the self, and more about the mutual encounter between self and others, to tap into the “joy of human connection that can sustain us

for the long-term struggle against the oppression of others." (Kramarae & Winkelmann, 2018, p. 49, quoted in Mangat 2025, p. 243)

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My own interest in self-care, music and healing has come about with my own encounter with how my body has been socialized into white capitalist masculinity. This awareness came to me when I had an explosive bout with obsessive compulsive disorder that started in May 2021. Without going into much detail, I will say that it alerted me to how little I knew myself at an embodied level. OCD is characterized by obsessive ruminations – I quickly realized I had to let go of my overreliance on my mind to figure out what I wanted or needed in life (Friedrich 2015, p. 5). I learned I was addicted to working, and literally did not know how to relax, and that I had wrapped up my self-worth with productivity. Relatedly, I became aware that I had been socialized in subtle but powerful ways in my whiteness, my masculinity, and my class. Such socializations were not news to me, intellectually, but I began to feel how they moved me and moved in me, bodily, a jarring and unsettling experience. These revelations were just the beginning. Healing occurs and shifts over time. But I can say my relationships with myself and with other people feel more authentic, open, honest, and fulfilling.

Then and now, music has played a role in helping me access parts of myself that need tending. Right after my struggles with mental health kicked off, music took what I considered irresolvable contradictions in myself and orchestrated them into sound. Music that could put me both here and there. Joanna Brouk, William Parker, Sun Ra, Louis Hardin (aka Moondog), Beverly-Glenn Copeland, Raul Lovisoni, Pauline Oliveros, Annea Lockwood, Shirley Horn, Don Cherry, Loving, Don Pullen… and of course Yusef Lateef and Steven Halpern.
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Music continues to be a part of how I live with an awareness of myself and in connection with the wider world. Right now I am listening to "Ceremony" by Steven Halpern and Georgina Kelly, from their album *Ancient Echoes* (1978). I close my eyes, I notice the need to slow down, and a tension in my shoulders that won't let me feel the full scope of my fatigue. At the same time, I look out my window, I see the linden tree surging forth to meet me outside my upper floor bedroom. Beyond, more trees, the occasional roof. The sounds of the harp from the record seem to skip from branch to branch. The plaintive quality of the music makes me sad I'm not outside. I feel a surge of energy in my feet. They want to plant themselves in dirt. …Now I glance at my iPhone and look at the thumbnail for the album on Spotify: a pyramid hovering over an undulating desert. I feel my desires pull back. The awareness that they are fed to me through this streaming platform, and shaped by possibly Orientalist tropes, makes me suspicious of my yearning for connection, dampening it.

Such moments of withdrawal are themselves, I think, useful. They highlight a kind of embodied critical apparatus that adds shades of questioning or understanding to how I feel, my desires, anxieties and values. My own journey has made me more curious about how my body, mind, and spirit are connected, and how music enlivens their connection. It is this compartmentalization – of mind, body, and spirit – that is one of the kinds of violence inflicted by exploitative, oppressive and extractive systems, as noted across several disciplines and resistance movements, including Black feminism (Lorde 1984, brown 2019), disability justice (Price 2015), decolonial thinking (Smith 2013), and Eastern alternatives to Western medicine (Chan et al 2002). For white men such as myself, disembodiment can look like the bypassing discomfort, avoidant self-settling, and the need to be in control (Raffo p. 67). My own reconnection with myself has looked both entailed joyously letting go and also facing things that

are difficult to face: my own acquiescence to power, my comfort with complicity and some harmful patterns and behaviors. This journey, both the joyful and painful parts, inform much of this work, as it has urged me to grow more curious about whiteness, especially in the ways it resides in things I hold dear, like music.

How does whiteness work? Whiteness is about attaching value to white skin, but it is more than that. It refers to a cluster of norms, behaviors, and beliefs that accrue power to people racialized as white, a process that happens historically (Painter 2011). Whiteness is neither static nor monolithic (Peach 2000). As Baldwin puts it: "whiteness *moves,*" and this helps maintain its futurity (Butler 2012, p. 183). Indeed, it is helpful to think of whiteness less as a rigid category and more as something that legitimates hierarchy. Whiteness protects people perceived to be white, or in proximity to whiteness, from the inherent harms and unevennesses that characterize the ongoing extraction, exploitation, dispossession and policing that subtend neocolonialism, settler colonialism (Bonds and Inwood 2017) and racial capitalism (Gilmore 2002). It names a set of justifications – sedimented into and remade through practice – about who is entitled to reap the bounty of various forms of domination. In this whiteness invariably intersects with other axes of difference, be it gender, sexuality, ability, class and so on, in an ongoing social contestation about who deserves wellbeing and resources in the social distribution of life and death chances (Gilmore 2002). It is integral to interrogate the policies and practices, as well as discourses and feelings that sustain – and subvert – whiteness.

One way whiteness operates is in contradistinction to ways of being that are "not-white:" whiteness derives its power from a hierarchical differentiation. This differentiation – always contested and dynamic – happens at a spatial register (Lipsitz 2011, Anderson 1987), at the psychic level, as shown most forcefully in Fanon's (1952) work, and sonically (Stoever 2019).

This differentiation is maintained, in part, and somewhat paradoxically, because whiteness is not remarked upon. Whiteness aspires to be the norm: "special" but unmarked, proliferating in its wake a host of Others for dissection and control. It derives some of its power from what Fiske calls "exnomination":

> Exnomination is the means by which whiteness avoids being named and thus keeps itself out of the field of interrogation and therefore off the agenda for change.... One practice of exonomination is the avoidance of self-recognition and self-definition. Defining, for whites, is a process that is always directed outward upon multiple 'others' but never inward upon the definer. (Fiske 1994, p. 42 quoted in Lewis 1996, p. 100)

Invisible, whiteness is shielded from critique.

This dissertation is interested in undoing whiteness by looking at its own racialization (Schönfeldt-Aultman and Mendieta 2024). Chapters one and two look at the unity of whiteness and productivity, and whiteness and innocence. Granted the presence of whiteness is mostly implied in chapter one as I focus mostly on labor, ability and capital. In the associations explored in these chapters, the self – a liberal, individual and autonomous self – plays an important cohering role. Thus, my vision – indebted to black feminist thought, black Caribbean thought, black studies, and black geography – of what a world without white supremacy looks like is not one in which the privileges of the self are extended for more to be included into the core of liberal hegemony, but in which the self itself is radically reconfigured, in as-of-ways-yet-unknown, or perhaps abandoned (Wynter 2003, Hartman 1999, Da Silva 2014, Chandler 2008, Weheliye 2014). That said, the self reappears in chapter three in a different way, in which black self-expression troubles white conceptions of geography as objectively transparent and fixed.

As discussed, music and the self have a long history. Consider a few more examples of how race interacts with music's inward and outward drawing capacity. To start, compare two interpretations of music and recuperation, which can be read through the lens of whiteness. Anderson's early work on music and affect used music to understand spaces of hope (Anderson 2006). He explores the relationship between music and hope under the despairing conditions of deindustrialization as experienced by lower-middle class Brits. For Anderson, hope here is not an excess of good feeling that, perhaps naively, pins desires to the future. Rather, hope is a momentary condition of respite felt with and in the despair of the now, something that allows his subject to reorient herself to the bleak landscape outside her window. In contrast, Burdon (2023) might view Anderson's account of affective recuperation as an example of "immunological" self-regulation. Burdon argues that music has the capacity to soothe listeners by enveloping them in a sonic bubble. This bubble lets listeners bypass the need to develop relations with the external world, keeping them "safe" while facilitating their capacity for capitalist productivity. Neither explicitly mention whiteness, but one can see how affects such as hope or soothing can inform white subjectivities. As in these examples, this dissertation examines moments where it is an open question whether the music studied acts as an escapist fantasy, a neoliberal mode of bodily recharging, and/or a refugee from a hostile public sphere.

At a different register, consider the practice of what George Lipsitz called "burrowing in." Lipsitz draws inspiration from the work of Los Angeles jazz pianist Horace Tapscott, who eschewed a mainstream audience to focus on healing his local community through his music. Lipsitz writes that "burrowing in is the strategy of reducing the scale of space, carving out limited zones of freedom too small and too hidden to be vulnerable to their enemies" (Lipsitz 2011, p. 53). Tapscott's memoir, *Songs of the Unsung* reveals that over time, his musical and

political activity in the 1960s did indeed attract the attention of the police, the FBI and other enemies of racial justice. But Lipsitz's point holds, that this burrowing in is pursued as a survival tactic that was at the same time a space to dream up and plan for new ways of communal living (Moten and Harney 2013). In Tapscott's words, his music was literally saving lives, cooling tensions in an environment under intense surveillance (Tapscott 2001, p. 123). By bringing people together in a cramped space, it also facilitated the pursuit of a global black coalitional consciousness.

Tapscott's remarkable story reiterates that as pervasive as the disembodying effects of coloniality, heteronormativity, patriarchy and capitalism are, such pressures are not even. Concurrently self-care is not available to all equally. For example, black communities experience higher rates of sleeplessness (Biggers and Sandoiu 2022) and have lower access to therapy (Mercer et al 2019) all while daily negotiations of racism would require greater need for taking care of oneself. If the music studied below can heal, it does so on a very complex and fraught terrain. Moreover, as a healing modality geared towards one group's health, the music examined can be entangled with another's exclusion or ill-health (Loyd 2021). The entanglement of healing, violence and race can be found in Arun Saldanha's work *Psychedelic White* (2007). Though not focused on healing per se, his work introduces the psychedelic as a modality that resonates with healing and wellness practices. Saldanha illustrates how white people claim dance, spiritual mysticism and drug use – all of which could be considered part of an alternative healing toolbox – as their exclusive property (even when borrowed from cultures not their own). As Saldanha notes across several examples, this gatekeeping is racialized and class based. Saldanha describes this microfascistic tendency as the process whereby oppositional flights from

white middle-class norms can reterritorialize in even more rigidly and affectively charged exclusions (Saldanha 2007, p. 89).

To explore such dynamics, I turn to music and musicians themselves. How do they conceive of healing, of race, of the self? I turn to Steven Halpern, and Yusef Lateef, as well as a compilation of music called *Pure Moods Vol. 1.* I will introduce these figures as well as the outline of this dissertation in the chapter outline next.

3. Chapter Outline

My own investigations, in chapter one, start with the question of rest. Recent popular and scholarly debates position rest as an antidote to too much working (Hersey 2022, Han 2015). The political valences of rest are varied, and it remains an open question whether rest is plugged into discourses on "work-life balance" that ultimately position rest as a way to recuperate the body for further (self) exploitation under ableist frameworks of endless capacity – or, can rest enliven bodies to ways of being and knowing that reject this condition? I turn to the music of Steven Halpern to explore these questions. Halpern is a pioneer in New Age music, and helped popularize the association between healing and this genre for a mass audience. Versions of his soft, open-ended piano improvisations are now commonplace where healing officially happens: meditation retreats, spas, and yoga studios. Moreover, it is commonplace on streaming apps and playlists promising relaxation, focus and recuperation. Interestingly, Halpern also brings a spatial component to his approach, especially where entrainment is involved. Entrainment is a vibrational technique used to induce physiological change in Halpern's listeners. These changes are thought to literally resonate the human body with the earth, creating a powerful image for holistic healing. Though his musical and geographical evocations of rest might present it as a

self-evident good, there are ways it shores up neoliberal and ableist attachments to hyper-individualism.

The second chapter turns to the 1997 re-issue of the New Age compilation *Pure Moods Vol. 1* (Various Artists 1997) *to* examine the relationship between innocence, whiteness and bliss. Many contemporary debates on white innocence today present it as an evasion of guilt. I point out that innocence also has a blissful component, drawing on the album's tracks and their attendant music videos, specifically Enigma's "Return to Innocence," Deep Forest's "Sweet Lullaby" and Enya's "Orinoco Flow." I argue that this blissful component must be accounted for if we are to understand what is appealing about innocence as an attachment that is substantial in and of itself. To understand this bliss, I generate an affective profile of *Pure Moods* that connects innocence to universality, vividness and wholeness, particularly as they pertain to spatial imaginaries of multicultural globality and global colonial spatial entitlements. With this profile of bliss in mind, I consider its connections to white aggression and white withdrawal. Turning to Du Bois' *The Souls of White Folks* (1987), and Gilmore's 'dialectics of innocence' (2017), I propose the need to abandon innocence altogether. Instead, drawing on the work of Sedgwick (2003), I propose adopting curiosity about white shame.

Chapter three enters into dialogue with the work of Yusef Lateef. Chapter three takes the most musical approach to thinking through place and race, focusing less on specific affects. Lateef was a titan in black music whose music was geared towards the spiritual attunement of his community, and who, furthermore, invested his music with a highly developed spatial sensibility. Lateef is considered one of the first to play "world music," as far back as the 1950s. In 1988 he was awarded the second ever Grammy in the New Age category for *Yusef Lateef's Little Symphony.* Generally marketed as a jazz musician, Lateef rejected the term for

"autophysiopsychic" music, which means music played from the whole self (auto), one's body (physio) and spirit-mind (psychic). Today the autophysiopsychic mantle is being carried forward by the likes of clarinetist-composer Angel Bat Dawid, composer-guitarist LuFuki, and members of Lateef's bands who continue to make music, such as drummer Adam Rudolph and saxophonist Ralph Jones III. I show how Lateef used the half-step – the smallest interval in the equal temperament twelve tone system – to evoke multiple overlapping spatialities, from the Delta, to Detroit, to the Middle East and even to speculative science fiction landscapes. Lateef's use of the half-step suggests black creative practice recreates the interrelated dynamic between material and imaginative place, in which dreams of freedom collapse easy boundaries between an unbearable "here" and a utopian "elsewhere." Moreover, drawing on Clyde Woods' blues epistemology (Woods 2005), I show how Lateef's music contributes to creative legacies of black art to model alternatives to geography's traditional tendency to fix black identity to place (McKittrick 2006).

Chapters one and two are more specifically about affect – rest/ease/peacefulness and innocence and bliss – while chapter three centers geography as a system of knowledge. Certainly, chapter three centers "the blues," which is often mistaken as a kind of affect: despair or lament. As Woods shows, this is a racist reduction of blues feeling. Moreover, for Woods, and to a greater extent for Lateef, the blues is arguably more about how to *stage* affect – musically, spiritually – as a critique of social science's commitment to its version of objectivity, which, as Woods and others show, naturalizes systems of domination "as is." Geography replicates this commitment in its general submission of affect to transparent, systemizable orderings of thought. This can happen even when affect is the object of analysis.

In the conclusion, I offer a summary of the previous chapters and draw links between them, while also considering what it would take to bring the autophysiopsychic to bear further on geography. I turn to geographies of listening for this aim (Kanngieser et al 2024, Bennett et al 2015).

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I had originally intended this work to offer a genealogy of New Age music, especially where it overlapped with jazz. I meant to anchor New Age's early, subcultural origins with Halpern's story, while *Pure Moods* would have highlighted the genre's commercial stage. As for Lateef, his music is not particularly associated with the genre. His Grammy award in 1988 would have marked a moment where the genre was trying solidifying itself into the mainstream. Comparing his music to the genre writ large would have offered an opportunity to understand why certain associations with the genre proved durable, and others, not as much. I wondered how looking at this moment might unsettle conventional understandings of New Age and jazz, and the political, healing and racial discourses they enroll? And how might it shed light on associations between sound, embodiment and personal and social transformation that continue today? Lateef himself was neither shocked by nor expectant of the award. As told to me by his collaborators Adam Rudolph and Ralph Jones III (personal communication, July 2nd, 2025), he had always considered his music "new" and of the "age" in which he was performing and composing.

As the project moved forward, I became more engrossed in the minutiae of the music, and how it operated according to the beliefs, drives and skills of each musician, especially regarding Halpern and Lateef. My desire to follow through on the links between musical and geographical theory (and musical theories of space) precluded my earlier aim to draw concrete
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links between the musical expressions in a genealogical and cross-cultural timeline. No matter, a few connections are worth mentioning.

First, both Halpern and Lateef are compelled by a belief in a fundamentally vibrational reality that allows sound to penetrate the body in healing and unknown ways. In Lateef's *Method on How to Perform Autophysiopsychic Music,* he writes, "Sound has an effect on each atom of the body, for each atom resounds; On all glands, on the circulation of the blood and on pulsation, sound has an effect…" (Lateef 1979, p. 5). This quality can lead to embodied self-knowledge: "Music, in one sense, is the shortest, the most direct way to self-realization, but one must know what music [is] and how to use it" (Lateef 1979, p. 5). Similarly, Halpern writes that "We live in a world alive with sound. Whether we are aware of them or not, sounds exert a tremendous influence over our physical, psychological and spiritual states of being" (Halpern 1978, p. 1). On this note, both were inspired by mystical authors such as early 20th century Sufi writer Hazrat Inyat Khan, who viewed music as a pathway into relating to life's inherently vibratory foundation: "The whole of life in all its aspects is one music, and to tune one's self to the harmony of this perfect music is the real spiritual attainment" (Khan 1996 p. 109). The two shared some overlapping beliefs.

Second, there are direct musical connections between the two as well. On his first album, *Christening for a Listening,* Steven Halpern recorded with fellow New Age pioneer, Iasos, in 1975. The two remained friends for years. In the 2010s and 2020s, Iasos would go on to be a guiding figure for a revamped New Age scene in Los Angeles, collaborating with percussionist Carlos Niños, a central figure in that scene (Iasos passed in 2024). Niños himself would record with percussionist Adam Rudolph, a long-standing partner of Lateef's before Lateef's passing in

2016. Additionally, Niños co-produced André 3000's debut studio album *New Blue Sun* (2023), and has hired percussionist Adam Rudolph for some of their live shows.

Despite the overlaps, the seeming divergence between New Age music and jazz also makes their cross-section a compelling invitation for thinking and feeling through the politics of race, space, music and embodiment. One hears that New Age is anodyne, simple, and complicit with neoliberal capitalism: the epitome of white bourgeois lifestyle spirituality. A 1987 New York Times article describes New Age music as "a restricted kind of dream: smooth, assured, cushioned, imperturbable, safe…" a music that "promises an exotic sanctuary, but it's a sanctuary furnished like a playpen" (Pareles 1987, para. 21). Jazz on the other hand is challenging and complex, inherently collective – even radically democratic – and deeply tethered to struggles for black freedom, as described by many of the music's spokespersons (Marsalis 2009, Crouch 2006).

By recreating the connections between these sounds, I sought to ask how a productive encounter of their differences might shed light on commonly held associations between sound, race, embodiment and personal and social transformation. While this dissertation still approaches these questions, it is not through a thoroughly comparative analysis. This is due in part because of the level of musical specificity that I stayed with in my research. So, for example, entrainment is not a part of Lateef's work, and the half-step is not a big part of Halpern's work, (though I do not want to foreclose possible research avenues that might seek these such connections). Instead, each chapter searches for theoretical and spatial interpretations on how music can draw a person both inward and outward, and what this movement means for subjectivizing listeners in regards to their healing, in the context of race.

There are a few areas that this dissertation does not cover. First, one might be surprised that I do not address jazz's group method of improvisation, in which the individual is often portrayed as finding means of self-expression within the collective, a formula that has been theorized thoroughly as a model of democracy (Marsalis 2009, for critiques see Boynik and Viitahuhta 2019, Okiji 2017). While this is a fruitful line of inquiry, my focus on Lateef's compositional development left little room for an investigation into his live playing dynamics. Second, I also limit any substantial conversation to the racial dynamics of whiteness and blackness, neglecting to discuss in detail neither the relationship between indigenous North American communities, music, land and settler colonialism (Robinson 2020), nor the influence of East Asian artists, spirituality and music on the genres of jazz and New Age (Powell 2020). Both are considerable omissions considering the centrality of both groups in contributing to, shaping and rejecting both mainstream and subcultural conceptions of healing, embodiment and music, some of which appear in these pages (Larson 2012, Aldred 2000).

Finally, I'll add that each chapter is meant to stand alone. A revised version of each will be submitted to geography journals. Chapter one, titled "Cruel Optimism of the New Age: Rest, Entrainment and Healing," will be submitted to *cultural geographies;* Chapter two, "*Pure Moods:* White Innocence, Bliss and Multiculturalism" will be submitted to *Emotion, Space and Society;* and chapter three, "'Where is here?' The Blues Epistemology of Yusef Lateef*"* will be submitted to the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers.* It is to these chapters I now turn.

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CHAPTER ONE: CRUEL OPTIMISM OF THE NEW AGE - REST, ENTRAINMENT AND POST-FORDIST LABOR

Popular debates on rest are on the rise, given a pervasive sense of burnout, with more critical appraisals connecting burnout to toxic modes of individualism endemic to capitalism and colonialism (Kelly 2022). Thus, rest is sometimes presented as an exit from capitalism (Hersey 2022, Han 2015). However, rest is something of a political paradox under its conditions. On one hand, it can be a means of escape from production. On the other hand, it can be reappropriated as a means to recharge for future labor, or, as an escape from political engagement that might challenge capitalism. An inflection point for these tensions are New Age music practices that foster rest. This paper explores the problematic through the career of Steven Halpern. His artistic evolution, career aspirations, and research interests prefigure and animate some of the paradoxes of rest under capitalism. I argue that New Age rest can animate forms of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) – that is, an attachment to neoliberal forms of health centered on hyper-individuality, the very thing that wears people out. At the same time, his music offers some ways of thinking and feeling for forms of connectivity and ease that exist to the side of this conundrum.

1. Rest, Slow Death and Cruel Optimism

In December 2020 durée & company, a marketing firm located in Fort Lauderdale and Aspen, posted two guided meditations online. Offered deep in the first covid lockdown, the meditations are presented as options for self-care. The meditations are produced by Susie Levan, an author and self-described "spiritual warrior" who has shared the power of meditation on Martha Stewart Living, yahoo.com, and other outlets. They are produced in tandem with Steven Halpern, a Grammy nominated artist in the New Age category. *Meditation for Healing Stress*

starts with a drone on the perfect fifth, with pleasant harmonies slowly shifting underneath a voice reminding the listener that “God has your best interest at this time.” Breathe in, breathe out. “Know that God gives this light freely, this is the light from above” (Levan 2019).

The site also laments that “the hustle and bustle of today’s world doesn’t always leave much time for yourself” and that “...Creating and maintaining a fulfilling life outside of work helps improve work performance and reduce stress,” suggesting that self-care, ultimately, services productivity (durée & company 2020). This paper explores these dynamics, in which rest is tied up with productivity. Are there other ways to think of rest?

Geographical articles that theorize rest, neoliberalism and post-industrial capitalism are few (Kanngieser et al 2024), perhaps because rest itself is scarce under conditions of academic labor (Askins 2008). It is more frequently discussed obliquely through exhaustion, which is a byproduct of life under conditions of precarity, overwork, and various forms of political vulnerability (Todd 2023, Stel 2021). Bissell (2021, p. 145) notes that exhaustion has always been a feature of capitalist labor, but one that has shifted in inflection over time. Under industrial forms, bodily taxation has been primarily conceived as physical, wearing down limbs, musculature, bones and various physiological systems in which the body is prone to progressive breakdown. Post-industrial labor, on the other hand – and here he takes a cue from Marxist autonomist thought (Berardi 2009) – incurs a different kind of exhaustion that draws on a wider oeuvre of capacities centered around “emotional, linguistic, cognitive, and imaginative energy” (Bissell 2021, p. 145). This is due to the preponderance of economic activity focused on services, media, marketing, spectacle, and a general trend towards the manufacture and management of subjectivities. As such, leisure activities that were once viewed as exterior to labor processes, are

now enrolled with them. This is especially apparent in the continual tethering of attention to economic valuation through social media and the internet (Martorell et al 2024, Franck 2019).

There is a pervading sense that individuals in the attention economy cannot "turn off." As Jenny Odell (2019, ix) writes in her popular critique, in hours off from work there remains "a certain nervous feeling, of being overstimulated and unable to sustain a train of thought." She goes on,

> The villain here is not necessarily the Internet, or even the idea of social media; it is the invasive logic of commercial social media and its financial incentive to keep us in a profitable state of anxiety, envy, and distraction. It is furthermore the cult of individuality and personal branding that grow out of such platforms and affect the way we think about our offline selves and the places where we actually live.

This constant engagement with the economy has a psychosomatic toll: depression, anxiety, burnout (Han 2015).

Can simply resting provide an exit from this situation? Wilkerson and Ortega-Alcázar (2019, p. 164) posit that "weary withdrawal may be a way in which to survive" capitalism, while exposing the limit where the body confronts capitalism's demand, awakening the body to other modes and ways of being (Crary 2014). Others take a slightly more proactive stance – turning to rest *before* exhaustion sets in, "as a vehicle for racial, social and disability justice, as resistance" (Kanngieser et al 2024, pp. 7-8). Drawing on the work of Audre Lorde (2022) and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) and Tricia Hersey (2022), Kanngieser et al (2024) elevate rest as something that honors the need for a sanctuary away from the capitalist grind, particularly for Black women, people of color, and queer, disabled and trans communities. As Tricia Hersey remarks in the opening passage of her widely popular book, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*

> Your body is a site of liberation.
>
> It doesn't belong to capitalism.
>
> Love your body.
>
> Rest your body.
>
> Move your body
>
> Hold your body.

Similarly, as activist and yoga teacher Octavia F. Raheem writes, on today's compounding crises and the overwhelming collective sense of unsettling political change,

> We can no longer outrun this without collectively slowing down. We cannot profit from this without the bottom meticulously falling out. We cannot package, sell, or otherwise capitalize on this without paying with our very own lives (Raheem 2022, p. xv)

For Hersey, Raheem and others, rest is somewhat pro-active. Rest can be thought of as anticipatory – resisting burnout and reclaiming embodiment before it is wrecked by capital and the pressurized environment of racism and ableism.

There are two related reasons why achieving rest is difficult. First, resting may simply not be an option. Working keeps people alive. Under capitalism, many prefer to work and be exploited than to not work and join the ranks of the unemployed, the discarded and the abandoned – the surplus population (Adler-Bolton and Vierkant 2022). If one is employed, however, capitalist forms of production channel gains in ease or efficiency in the workplace into more profits, not fewer hours. This extends to the body itself, wherein increased medical, technological and lifestyle capacities of the individual are recouped for profit. This creates a situation where neoliberalism demands ever increasing abilities – work harder, more efficiently – that it pitches to an ever-receding horizon. This treadmill creates the condition "where life

building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable," as Lauren Berlant calls it – or "slow death" (Berlant 2007, p.754). Insurance industries, pharmaceutical companies, and carceral institutions are all sectors in the industrial-medical complex that profit from slow death, and they target more vulnerable populations for dispossession, profit-oriented management, exploitation and extortion (Johnk and Khan 2019, Willse 2015). (So intertwined are vulnerability and profit making that racism, understood as "the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 2007, p. 247) is itself central to the mechanics of profit, to capitalism (Robinson 2000)).

Rest, then, is hard to come by. There is a second, related, reason why rest is difficult to achieve. As hinted above, people are attached to work. Capitalist labor enervates us in forms of addiction and even pleasure, especially as work has subsumed leisure practices (Amirthalingam and Khera 2024). It operates as a stand-in for social and moral values, too. Connolly (2008 p, 33, emphasis in original) writes that, paltry as the awards of capitalist individualism have become, it still offers *"compensatory entitlements"* that are seductive enough to lure people into its ranks. These entitlements merely amount to an identification with late capitalism's "most visible models of prowess, creativity, and power": self-made entrepreneurs. When we think of social media and the rise of influencers, we can see how this identification bleeds into addiction. For individuals to find actual sustained security in this model is rare. Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism names the tendency to form affective attachments to capitalism when it is the very thing making us insecure. Cruel optimism is a doubling down on attachments to capitalist modes of work in order to surmount the alienating effects of these modes of work – to pursue "the continuity of its form" – capitalist individuation – as it "provides something of the

continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" (Berlant 2011, 24).

Cruel optimism helps us better address the question of rest. Can rest subvert hyper-individualism? Or, to what degree is hyper-individualism proposed as a gateway to restfulness, when that is the very thing that is keeping people disconnected and unwell? Or is it a mix of both?

2. New Age Music and Rest

I turn to New Age music to help delineate this problematic, specifically the music of Steven Halpern. Halpern was one of the first to produce the kind of static, immersive and gentle music that many associate with the New Age. Free floating piano improvisations[2] that are now commonplace across endless ambient and New Age streaming playlists, and in meditation and Yoga centers. He labeled his music variously as an "anti-frantic alternative" and "music R_x" and his music gives us an opportunity to understand popular associations between rest, healing and music. To start, we need to turn to the New Age movement itself.

New Age music grew out of the New Age Movement, a disparate spiritual phenomenon that came into its own in the 1970s, building on Theosophy, 60s counterculture, UFO religions, and more. It privileges embodiment, personal discovery, and often has ecological overtones. It is a decentralized and diverse movement, yet some common themes cut across New Age beliefs. It locates divinity in the individual. Of particular relevance for this paper is the New Age Movement's emphasis on healing the body-mind duality as a pathway to more divine awareness.

[2] This is not the only style associated with the genre. New Age music can feature the swirling, bombastic synth orchestrations of Kitaro, or ambient musings of Laraaji – and everything in between. Halpern's sound is one within the broader consort of sounds.

Books such as the classic *The Relaxation Response* (1975/2001) by Dr. Herbert Benson stress that Western emphasis on rationality alone, it goes, has suppressed the wisdom and healing capacities of the body. Practices to tap into healthier "energies" include modulating the body through meditation, prayer and movement (Philo et al 2015).

Music figures strongly in New Age approaches to healing the body-mind-earth connection. New Age musicians were part of a larger trend wherein artists were rediscovering and appropriating indigenous, nonwestern, and folk forms of musical healing, through travel, study or with gurus, often Westernizing them (Farley 1986, Kumpft 2021). An early survey of New Age music titled *Through Music to the Self* notes that Westerners were turning to Kirtan, Buddhist chants and Indian classical music to accompany "psychologically-inspired use of breathing, sensitivity-training and collective vocal improvisation as an aid to mediation…" and other "ever-more-widely practised methods of deep relaxation" (Hamel 1976, p. 2).

Rest then, is central to New Age spirituality and music. Yet, rest is often framed within New Age music as a way to recuperate the self for deeper involvement in the capitalist system. It can also be interpreted as a way to avoid social complexities (Burdon 2023). By the 1980s New Age music had become big business, and its countercultural aura was replaced with the general perception that it was a bit anodyne, somewhat chintzy, and detached from social realities. Further, it was charged – rightfully – like the movement as a whole, for appropriating the wisdom and music practices of colonized and minoritized peoples (Aldred 2000).

Is New Age doomed, a cheap imitator of more thorough art forms, or worse, something "safe" for mostly white consumers addicted to feel-good spiritual materialism? —Or are there other ways to interpret and listen to it? Recently, New Age music has had a revival that has brought new and old artists into the mainstream, such as Beverly Glenn-Copeland, Carlos Niños,

and André 3000, who inject New Age music with a subtle sense of social praxis, one that mirrors the reclaiming of rest practices in subcultures born of the Black Lives Matter Movement, mutual aid responses to Covid-19, and witchy queer and trans spiritualities.

Instead of providing definitive answers to these kinds of questions, what follows is an attempt to highlight certain connections, possibilities and risks by a close reading of the work and life of Steven Halpern. His 1976 album *Spectrum Suite* helped launch a genre that would come into its heyday a decade later. He has released close to ninety albums, and was one of the first to popularize connections that seem typical today. For example, his drawing associations between chakras and sound can be found in echoes across the New Age spectrum, including in the music of Glen Velez and Kay Gardner. He has shared his findings in two books, *Tuning the Human Instrument* and *Sound Health,* and numerous articles.

I was drawn to Halpern's studies into biofeedback and entrainment, which anticipate research avenues in music therapy and neuroscience (Halpern 1978, 1985, Levitin 2024). Halpern seeks to entrain, in his listeners, alpha and delta brainwaves, which run between 2 and 14 hertz, by essentially simulating subsonic frequencies in his music that also run in this range. These brainwaves are associated with meditative and intuitive states of activity. Halpern claims exposure to 7.8hz connects the body to the ionosphere of the earth, which also pulses at this rate. Here the body is figured as a "bio-cosmic resonator" in harmony with the "song of the whole earth" (Halpern 1979 p. 87-88).

The paper is ordered as follows: I turn to Halpern's early days to position his relaxation music both in the hippie counterculture from which it emerged, and in evolving forms of lifestyle capitalism to which it became attached. I then narrow in on Halpern's use of brainwave entrainment to pose questions as to how his music and music inspired by his work is resistant to,

or compliant with contemporary forms of the attention economy. I elaborate upon these questions in the final section.

In addition to pursuing a close reading and listening of his materials, I conducted five interviews with Halpern over the course of a year. I chose to view Halpern as an expert on music, but also someone knowledgeable about music's wider social impact and meanings (Porter 2002, p. xiii). This includes framing sound and music with spatial and geographical knowledges outside of formal academic circuits (Gallagher 2015).

3. New Age Music in the Cradle of the Human Potential Movement

Halpern was born in New York City to a middle-class Jewish family who relocated to Valley River, Long Island, in 1950. Halpern went to SUNY-Buffalo in 1964 to study dentistry, however, his real interest was in music. At Buffalo he played in several jazz combos and took classes in performance and ethnomusicology, including one class where bassist Ron Carter guest lectured. Upon graduation, Halpern committed himself to deepening his music connections, eventually co-forming the New Chicago Lunche Band, a high-energy blues-rock jazz fusion group. Gearing up for a career in the music business, the band secured their first studio recording session in New York City. However, the label switched producers on the band at the last minute, which led to a failed session. Finding himself with two weeks off for the first time in two years, Halpern decided to take a trip to the Bay Area.

He wound up looking for work at a retreat center in Santa Cruz County called the Bridge Mountain Community. His first day there, Halpern went for a walk, suddenly feeling an intense urge to meditate amongst the towering Redwoods. Sitting in the forest shade, Halpern started hearing music in his head. It floated – as if channeled from the forest itself, or beyond. It was the music that he had been "praying to hear. Music that is healing in the 20th century…. This music

had no rhythms. I've never heard music like this. There wasn't music like this." In time, Halpern drifted back to the compound. He walked into a room empty save a grand piano. Halpern, still buzzing from his meditation, sat down to play. "I sit down at the piano and go into light trance, and I don't hear what I'm playing, but I am off into the music in the spaces between the sounds. I don't hear what I'm playing." Some people walked in and started meditating, doing yoga. Halpern's music, it seems, made an impression. "I've never felt so relaxed. This is the best I've ever meditated," some said. Halpern was hired to do cooking and maintenance, as long as he also played. He felt as if he was floating above the keyboard, in between the notes. It was a feeling he would pursue again and again as he launched his career as a New Age artist and music healer.

Halpern's shift to pioneering New Age sounds was motivated by his own healing. He describes himself as "brash, an Aires, from New York," someone who didn't talk much about his feelings or allow himself to relax until his move to California. As a young hustling trumpeter, Halpern was stressed, confirmed by a 1973 visit to his doctor:

> Both as a musician and as a person [I] found out that I live at a very high stress level… like the doctor said to me, if you don't learn how to reduce your stress, you're going to burn out at a young age. And I said, 'well, this is my normal state.' He said, 'well, you better learn to do something about it, because you have problems.' And that got my attention.

Part of his healing was to eventually drop the trumpet to focus on the piano. He reports:

> The trumpet, by its nature, is suited to that kind of music [jazz-rock]. To play the instrument, you had to have your embouchure right, your diaphragm support, it was a physical act, in addition to the scales and the physical dexterity of your fingers. It's a bit like athletics…

> Whereas the piano, you can drift your fingers over the keys, and stay in the meditative state without breaking out of it by taking a breath of air. So the instrument is very much part of the music.

The milieu at Bridge Mountain was also conducive for reorienting his own embodiment. His arrival places Halpern's contribution to the origins of New Age music at a pivotal time and place in the white counter-culture, which saw a burgeoning association between embodiment, healing and the self. Bridge Mountain, formed in 1957, was a lesser-known sibling of the Esalen Institute, founded in 1962, a famous haven for therapeutic and psychedelic experimentation (Anderson 2024). Esalen's founders Michael Murphey and Richard Price were central in the Americanization of Eastern religious practices such Tantra, Mediation, and Yoga. Regulars at Esalen were Abraham Maslow, Alan Watts, Aldous Huxley, and Timothy Leary. Other Esalen figures included Dr. Krippner, mostly known for his dream telepathy studies; John C. Lilly, inventor of the sensory deprivation tank. This group was loosely gathered under the term the Human Potential Movement (Grogan 2012).

Krippner and Lilly met Halpern at Bridge Mountain and encouraged him to apply to graduate school at Sonoma State University, which he did. There, they insisted, Halpern could study his own music in a laboratory setting, to prove that it had relaxing benefits. Sonoma was central in the formalization of humanistic psychology, the academic branch of the Human Potential Movement. Both movements advocated corporeal and spiritually infused forms of therapy that departed from the hitherto dominant mind- and cognitive-centered interventions of psychoanalysis. Turning to corporeal experience, these groups were invested in what historian Jeffery Kripal of *Esalen* calls the enlightenment of the body (Kripal 2008, p. 22).

Maslow is one of the main figures in this development. He viewed psychoanalysis as conformist and based on the presumption of pathology. In contrast, he sought to initiate therapies from the belief that people were inherently good, aiming his interventions towards self-actualization (a term he borrowed from German holistic thinker Kurt Goldstein), rather than curing neurosis. Self-actualization sat on top of Maslow's well-known hierarchy of needs, a peak reached through a ladder of fulfillment, starting with basic needs such as food and sex, and working up towards safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem and finally self-actualization, or one's calling. He described this drive to ascend as this: "This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow 1943, p. 382, quoted in Weidman 2016, p. 113).

An article published in *The Journal for Humanistic Psychology* that details the *modus operandi* at the Bridge Mountain Retreat center (where Halpern first played New Age music) captures the prevailing mix of embodiment and self-actualization:

> The Community *affirms* that every man can realize his own authority in life. That the natural organism contains the ability to know its needs and the creativity to meet them. That each man is therefore sufficient in life. That as we return to the naturalness of the organism we discover that we alone are the authority in our lives, and we also discover within ourselves the sense of authority which allows us to operate effectively as our own authority. (Tart and Creighton 1966, p. 55)

This mix was standard for the Movement and for humanistic psychology.

Into the 1970s and beyond it proved quite malleable for corporate managers interested in increasing personal productivity in the workplace (Curtis 2002). Maslow himself sought to bring his ideas to corporate America, with the belief he could affect positive change. One 1968

industrial psychology manual characterizes the uptake of his ideas as "one of the most meaningful developments in many years," and one that "cannot be overstated." (Blum and Naylor 1968, p. 332). One chapter titled "Motivation and Work" examines the fulfillment needs of middle-managers using a tweaked version of Maslow's hierarchy. The study includes a survey of managers' feeling of satisfaction in their "autonomy needs,"

IV Autonomy needs

7. The *authority* connected with my management position

8. The *opportunity for independent thought and action* in my management position

9. The *opportunity* in my management position *for participation in the setting of goals*

10. The *opportunity* in my management position *for participation in the determination of methods procedures.* (Blum and Naylor 1968, p. 332)

While this category was added by Porter, and is not a traditional part of Maslow's hierarchy, it fits well in the spirit of the times – recall Bridge Mountain's mission to "*affirm[...]* that every man can realize his own authority in life" (Tart and Creighton 1966, p. 55). The overlay of self-actualization, autonomy, and capitalist work culture would continue to strengthen and change in the 1970s and 1980s.

4. *Enhancing Success* and Lifestyle Capitalism

Halpern's own trajectory mirrors, in some ways, the uptake of 60s and 70s counterculture into the mainstream. Consider his first album *Christening for a Listening.* It features seven tracks of diatonic solo Rhodes piano improvisation, plus three ensemble tracks that are more rousing, featuring trumpet, bass and drums in a psych-jazz setting. Each of the Rhodes improvisations are associated with a color and a Chakra keynote associated with each note of C major scale. Halpern struggled to gain a consistent audience for the album, hand-distributing his music to

New Age books stores, or selling his merchandise after playing at New Age festivals and peddling his music at health food stores. Growing feedback led Halpern to narrow the sound on *Christening for a Listening:*

> What I knew is people would write things that we love your album, except for that fast sort of side two [the psych-jazz side]. We have to get out of bed if we're making love. We have to get up, you know, if we're giving a massage.

It occurred to Halpern that people were listening for a specific purpose, in this case for intimacy. So, he decided to delete the psych portions of his album for a reissue that focused on the record's relaxing function. He rereleased it as *Spectrum Suite* and replaced the old cover, which was a psychedelic Kirlian photo of a leaf, with a gentler image of a swirling piano keyboard. Still, it wasn't selling like Halpern thought it could. Towards the early 1990s, he dished out several thousand dollars to take workshops with marketing guru Jay Abraham, where he learned he needed to make visually explicit what was always at the center of his music: healing, alignment, health and other aspects of self-actualization. Around this time his album names registered a shift, from the more astral sounding *Zodiac Suite* (1977), *Starborn Suite* (1978), *Rings of Saturn* (1981), and *Radiance* (1988), to more activity-oriented branding. In addition to albums for self-healing, massage, and meditation, he has released music for *Accelerating Learning* (1991), *Enhancing Success* (1994), *Overcoming Substance Abuse* (1994), *Recovering from Co-Dependency* (1994), *Safe Driving* (1994), *Stop[ing] Smoking* (1997), *Achieving Your Ideal Weigh*t (1997), and *Attracting Prosperity* (1997). Most of these promises are filtered through relaxation: under the basic premise that if you are relaxed, your body's self-healing abilities will increase, and you can manage life's challenges with greater ease.

Halpern's success and his messaging mirrored shifts in the New Age economy. Major labels had picked up on the profitability of the genre in part to the upstart success of New Age label Windham Hill, which in 1988 was a $30 million a year business after starting in the founder's garage a few years earlier (Stewart 1988). A 1987 article from the St. Petersburg Times captures the spirit of the times:

> The arrival of New Age would seem a sign of the times: music as a salve for a stressed-out society. By and large, the instrumental style is calm, sedate, contemplative, floating, introspective and impressionistic - but almost never harsh…
>
> Philip Aaberg, who records for New Age's pre-eminent label, Windham Hill, said in a recent phone interview, "I think that some of this music is definitely functional. One of its functions is to create a balance 'cause there's a tremendous amount of stuff that we listen to, that we're forced to listen to, that is incredibly jarring and physiologically affects us… (Snider 1997, 1E)

The article further links New Age Music's ability to manage stress with its mass market appeal, as the New Age appeal moves "from aging hippies to upwardly mobile yuppies, from herbal tea and tofu to white wine and brie." The music was being channeled into the lifestyle economy, in which middle class consumption of New Age lifestyles helped sustain the economy in its transition from industrial to post-Fordist labor (Curtis 2002, Heelas 2008). Its functional aspect was also aimed at increasing productivity. Halpern's CD *Enhancing Success* (1994) contains subliminal affirmations that read:

> Success is your natural state.
>
> You attract success like a magnet.
>
> You stay focused and concentrate on what you are doing.

You are a winner.

You increase your efficiency and productivity every day.

You enjoy being successful.

You are a peak performer.

You now manifest your unlimited capacity for peak performance.

[...]

You now accomplish far more than ever before.

The nexus of healing, spirituality, sound and capitalist individuation are explored next in Halpern's use of entrainment.

5. 'Man is a bio-cosmic resonator!' Entrainment and Health

The mix of productivity and the self, as well as Halpern's emphasis on ease and relaxation would carry forward with his use of entrainment. Before visiting this technique, recall Halpern's switch from trumpet to piano. He also heavily incorporated the Rhodes keyboard. Invented by Harold Rhodes in 1965, the Fender Rhodes was built from years of experimentation using metal tines to produce notes in a portable keyboard. These tines are, according to Halpern, essentially tuning forks.

You'll find a lot of people now who do programs and workshops, etc., just using tuning forks, they do that in their therapeutic office. Well, my keyboard was like, literally a series of tuning forks, but I could play with my fingers instead of, you know, striking its tuning fork individually, one at a time. [It is therapeutic] for the purity of the tone.

In other words, one can simply play a chord on the Rhodes and its frequency will envelop the listener in a healing sound bath (I can attest that it is hard to play something that sounds wrong on the Rhodes, it is a very pleasing sound). The point is that Halpern's instrumentation is

geared towards his concept of healing. This is highlighted in his later use of software, specifically around entrainment.

In the 1980s, Halpern began to experiment with brainwave entrainment. Entrainment is the observable phenomenon that nearby oscillating bodies will, given the right conditions, begin oscillating at the same frequency. It was originally described by Dutch physicist Christiaan Huygens in 1665, who observed that if he offset the pendulums on his grandfather clocks, over time they would resume swinging to the same rhythm. It has come to mean the tendency towards synchronization across several physical and biological systems. In the brain, entrainment refers to the synchronization of brainwaves. Brainwaves are oscillating electrical voltages produced by firing neurons. Entrainment is thought to play a role in boosting the processing power of the brain both locally and across regions in the brain (Headley & Paré, 2017). Brainwave voltage is minimal: “the electrical field generated by millions of discharging neurons in the cerebral cortex is 10,000 times smaller than that provided by an AA battery” (Buzsáki 2006, p. 20).

While neurons entrain to each other, it is also possible to entrain neurons collectively through external stimulus. This drives the basic logic behind Halpern’s approach to brainwave entrainment: if these frequencies are exposed to a listener, the brain will be entrained to them. This is desired because certain wavelengths are associated with more relaxing states. Drawing from Cidral-Filho et al (2025), there are five brainwaves associated with states of the brain. They are: Gamma (35hz and above), Beta (12-35Hz), Alpha (8-12Hz) Theta (4-8 Hz) and Delta (0.5-4 Hz). Gamma is associated with problem-solving and concentration; Beta with business, external attention and often anxiety; Alpha with relaxation, easeful and passive state of attention; Theta with deeply relaxing, introspective, and drowsy states; and Delta, with dreaming and deep sleep. Thus, it is thought, certain restful states can be induced.

However, human hearing ends around 20 Hz and most brainwaves oscillate below this threshold. To circumvent this, one strategy is to play two tones, one in each ear, whose difference in frequency matches that of the desired brainwave. For example, in Halpern's words:

> If I want a 12 hertz brainwave or 10, I would just dial in whatever frequency I needed. So that one channel would be, let's say, 100 cycles per second, and another one might be 110 cycles per second on the other channel.

The brain then "fills in" the difference, in an "illusory" but nonetheless actual stimulation of the desired frequency.

Since 2010 Halpern has turned to the use of digital software, primarily Pro Tools, to achieve brainwave entrainment with more ease, opposed to his older practice of manually detuning synthesizers. Most of his albums released since 2010 include the insertion of brainwave entrainment, and most of his top streaming tracks on Spotify, as of this writing, feature brainwave entrainment. His one Grammy nomination is for Deep Alpha (referencing the brainwave), from 2012.

Halpern was first exposed to the concept of entrainment by Itzak Bentov while at Sonoma State. Bentov was an Israeli-American inventor who also wrote on consciousness. His book *Stalking the Wild Pendulum: on the Mechanics of Consciousness* was a direct influence on Halpern. For Bentov, the body's micromotion, determined by the rhythms of the cardiovascular system, runs from 6.8 to 7.5 hz. This corresponds to the frequency of the earth's ionosphere (called the Schumann resonance, named after the scientist who discovered it), which is a shell of electrically charged atoms and electrons that circles the earth about thirty to six hundred miles above the earth, and is important for the transmission of radio signals. Bentov claims that the body itself *entrains* to the earth's ionosphere, especially when the body is in a meditative state.

This happens because when meditating, the body is no longer subject to interference waves. These waves – which are the result of normal activity such as walking or cooking – diminish the amplitude of the body's cardiovascular micromotion. Without them, this motion's amplitude grows, permitting entrainment (Bentov 1988, p. 44).

The implications are that the body, and the earth, are in harmony when this happens. Writes Halpern in *Tuning the Human Instrument*,

> It seems no mere 'coincidence' that the fundamental harmonic of our planet is identical to the fundamental harmonic of a tuned human body, not to mention its similarity to those brain waves that lie in the range we call 'alpha.' (Halpern 1978, p. 88)

He goes on to quote another inventor: "The Earth itself has a brainwave. There is no longer any question that Man is a bio-cosmic resonator!"

The use of musical entrainment to induce various states of consciousness has spurred numerous scientific studies, which remain inconclusive (Aparicio-Terrés et al 2025). Buzsáki (2006) catalogues all of the kinds of activity and researchers have tried to link experimentally with brainwave states, ranging from attention, memory, motivation, and navigation, to REM sleep, anxiety, swimming and sniffing for theta oscillations alone, concluding that "to date, there is still no agreed term that would unequivocally describe behavioral correlate(s) of hippocampal theta rhythms" (Buzsáki 2006, p. 20). David Levitin, musician, neuroscientist and author of the popular *This is Your Brain on Music* is more blunt (Levitin 2024, 9), "There is no scientific evidence that music's ability to heal, or to cause changes in mood, or any other cellular effects, derives primarily from the specific frequencies of tones used; this has been exhaustively studied."

But entrainment itself is a physical fact, and the coincidences between the alpha and theta brainwaves and the ionosphere are real, spurring continued interest in entrainment for healing purposes (Rusov et al 2012, Ingendoh et al 2023).[3] Consider the submarket for Pulsed Electromagnetic Field Therapy (PEMF Therapy), an alternative medicine technology. What is PEMF? One practitioner writes that it is "a cutting-edge treatment that harnesses the power of electromagnetic fields to promote healing and wellness." Essentially through electrically charged mats or hand-held devices, PEMF shoots tiny electromagnetic waves through the body to improve various bodily oscillations. Customers have turned to PEMF to treat Parkinson's and arthritis symptoms, and for general pain management, and some clinical studies have shown symptom improvement for neurocognitive disorders (Vadalà et al 2015).

Putting aside the clinical efficacy of entrainment and PEMF, consider the electromagnetic earthbound logic that unites them. One popular Parkinson's blog features a piece that endorses PEMF. It recalls that the earth's electromagnetic field is in the 0-30 hz range, which matches most brainwave frequencies, as well as the rates at which cells vibrate. The blog insists that "these facts are not co-incidental, since humans evolved to thrive and survive in the environment of the Earth's EM fields" (outthinkingparkinsons, 2018, para. 8). Furthermore, the blog continues, illness decreases brainwave and cell vibration voltages, so exposing sick people to these frequencies will help recharge their bodies. This logic drives another popular manual called "PEMF: The Fifth Element of Health" by Bryant Meyers (2014), who has appeared on ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX channels nationwide. He writes,

[3] Where Levitin and Halpern might agree is the ability of music to connect both hemispheres of the brain, something shown to produce meditative and compassionate states (Halpern 1978, 96; Levitin 2024, 88), and that has been of interest to musicians interested in more intuitive forms of playing (Kapusta 2021). For Levitin this hemispheric connectivity links both experiential fusion with the environment and meta-awareness, a feeling of becoming one with the world without feeling completely dissolved into it.

> The earth's magnetic field not only serves as a protective shield from the sun, but its Schumann and geomagnetic frequencies are an ESSENTIAL element for health, just like food, water, sunlight and oxygen (along with a balance of activity and rest)." (Meyers 2014, p. 16)

PEMF literature thus replicates the general New Age belief (and one found in the Human Potential Movement) that healing is not just about fixing specific pathologies, it is about restoring a natural balance so as to promote overall thriving (Hanegraff 1998, p. 42).

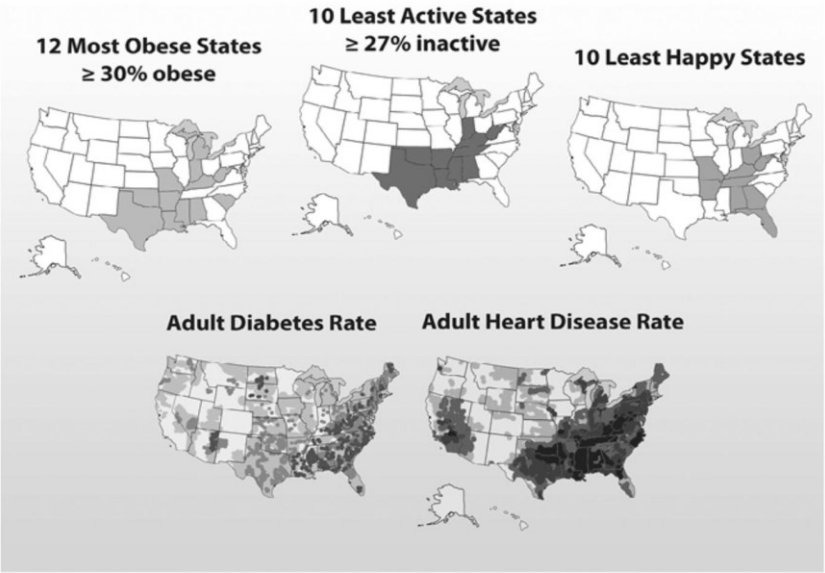

Figure 1. Map from Meyer (2014, p. 15), showing distribution of various demographic health and mood indicators

Because this restoration exceeds specific illnesses, health becomes about one's whole lifestyle. An excerpt from Meyer's book reads,

> The base cause of disease could be outlined simply as a physical and energetic disconnect from nature and the five essential elements (including the earth's PEMFs); AND getting too much stress and toxicity from bad foods, pharmaceutical and recreational drugs, bad

> water quality and dehydration, poor air quality, lack of exercise, not enough sunlight, not enough sleep, too much electrosmog, and overall too much emotional and psychological stress. And as we'll see, our reliance on the current allopathic medical system is part of the problem as well. (Meyer 2014, p. 14)

The flip side of this logic is that things that get in the way of this thriving become unnatural or pathologized, including one's own disease or inability to overcome that disease. In Halpern's own work feeling uneasy, becomes pathologized, even spirituality so. He writes, "**Put another way, where there is stress, there is dis-harmony. Where there is dis-harmony, there is disease (dis-ease).** Clearly what we need is more-ease" (Halpern 1980, 50 bold in original). Such frameworks recreate ableist norms around enforced positivity. It also risks blaming individuals for processes or events that may be making them unwell that they do not have complete control over.

For a final example, take Meyer's insistence on "reliance" in his PEMF manual. Why does he insist on reliance? "Because many people do not take responsibility for their health and are always looking for symptomatic relief, magic bullets and quick fixes" (Meyer 2014, p. 14) He pairs this comment with several maps of the United States showing different health indicators, failing to mention the visual correlation or what that might mean in terms of class, race, or geography (Figure 1). Eliding structural and social determinants of health, PEMF relies on a more transcendental geography of the earth to motivate potentially impossible metrics of personal responsibility.

6. The Politics of Rest and Entrainment: Spiritualizing Neoliberalism or Remaking Agency?

As explored in the introduction, capitalism keeps people in a constant state of overwork. Gains in productivity and bodily capacity are recuperated for profit, not leisure or downtime. Indeed, cognitive forms of capitalism invade every sphere of life, leading some to propose rest, sleep and even exhaustion as possible exits (Hersey 2020, Crary 2014, Wilkerson and Ortega-Alcázar 2019). Yet New Age forms of rest are often geared towards future labor. The added danger to New Age healing is that it *spiritualizes* neoliberalism. Paulo Virno, in *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004), anticipates this condition when he characterizes post-industrial labor as immeasurable. Virno quotes Italian author Luciani Bianciardi:

> There is an easy measuring stick for the worker and for the peasant, one which is quantitative… In our professions it is different, there are no quantitative measuring sticks. How does one measure the skill of a priest, or of a journalist, or of someone in public relations? *These people neither produce forms from scratch, nor transform.* They are neither primary nor secondary. Tertiary is what they are and what's more, I would dare say … even four times removed. They are neither instruments of production, nor drive belts of transmission. They are a lubricant, at the most pure Vaseline. [...] No, we have no other yardstick in this case than the one which can measure one's capacity to float above water, and to ascend even higher, in short, to become a bishop. (Bianciardi 1962, p 57 emphasis in original, quoted in Virno 2004, p. 58):

Post-Fordist forms of production mean that one starts thinking of themselves in metaphysical, or spiritualized terms – "one's capacity to float above water, and to ascend even higher, in short, to become a bishop." This mentality was also central to the Human Potential Movement and humanistic psychology movements out of which New Age music was born.

This state – the constant striving for an almost omnipotent selfhood – is personally untenable, Byung-Chul Han argues in *The Burnout Society* (2015). The burnout society is characterized by achievement, an environment of agreement to do more and to say yes: "Unlimited *Can* is the positive modal verb of achievement society," where people become "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Han 2015, p. 8, emphasis in original) This creates a situation of continual let-down. In contrast to Maslow's optimistic attachments to self-actualization, the outcome of the achievement society is depression: "The depressed individual is unable to measure up; he is tired of having to become himself" (Erhenberg 2010, p. 4 quoted in Han, 2015, p. 6). When couched in healing language, the cruel optimism of New Age music may be that it falsely promises the individual the personal capacity to overcome his inability to overcome. It pathologizes this inability, or worse, classifies those who are "unable" as spiritually sick. I touch on the eugenicist dangers of this more in the conclusion.

A generous critical reading would characterize his music as a reprieve from the attention economy. Cognitive forms of capitalism invade every sphere of life. It is not simply that Halpern's music is relaxing, but it promises a neurological hack that triggers modes of restful consciousness that extended capitalist focus denies. These are kinds of consciousness that, ostensibly, literally enmeshes the mind with the world, providing a feeling of connectivity to earth systems that operate to the side of capitalist rhythms. But it is not just connectivity. It is potentially a *giving over to* something larger than the individual, and his, her or their capacity.

Consider a brief distinction between resonance and entrainment. The two are closely related. Both describe the phenomena where one vibrating body creates vibrations in another. However, in resonance, this occurs when the second body vibrates because its sympathetic resonant frequency matches the frequency of the first body. In entrainment, a stronger oscillation

will pull a weaker oscillation into its same frequency. Stronger here can mean bigger in amplitude. Higher frequencies also tend to entrain lower ones (Clayton et al 2004, p. 2). The two terms are used somewhat interchangeably in Halpern's work but the distinction points to a subtle inflection for how entrainment produces rest. Resonance is often portrayed as a kind of distributed agency. Rosa (2018, p.2) describes resonance as the capacity to be affected by the world and to respond at a visceral level. This happens through the body: "by developing goose bumps, an increased rate of heartbeat, a changed blood pressure, skin resistance, and so on" as biophysical markers that recognize our inherent interconnectivity. In entrainment, something more specific could be said: it is a *surrender* to our inherent interconnectivity. As Erik Davis puts it *In a Brief Defense of New Age Audio* (2019), "New Age audio, at least in its most experimental and intensive forms, is also a music of operational ecstasy that does not soothe the subject so much as teach it to probe its own inevitable dissolution – in death, in merger, but also in those ecological and cultural collectivities without which we are toast" (Davis 2019, p. 188). Entrainment then, induces the felt sense that the listener is not in charge.

A certain aspect of New Age's self-directed interiority then, might facilitate magical reconnection with the world (Coggins 2019), one that challenges the sanctity of neoliberal forms of agency. It may be that Halpern's music simply gives people permission to slow down, including Halpern himself. Halpern entrains *himself* in order to create. Finding the right frequency, "became my focus and my key to get me in the mood, to get me in the zone with the music, which would start flowing more easily to me, and I got more creative." To float between the notes.

7. Conclusion

This paper used the music and work of Steven Halpern the way rest, music, and entrainment are situated within the discourses of the Human Potential Movement and broader neoliberal norms. While this work generally conforms to neoliberal conceptions of health, there is a way in which the music can offer an exit out of hyperactive modes of attention, including in its offering to literally enmesh the listener with larger earth processes through entrainment. In entrainment, brainwaves are thought to be given over to the oscillation of the earth's ionosphere, providing a compelling image for New Age sound healing methods. However, entrainment discourse can also be an instance of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011), overpromising an individual's capacity to heal themselves while eliding more widespread critiques of health inequities. There is no single interpretation of New Age listening, entrainment, resonance or rest. As James puts it, "Sound, even resonance, can be a productive model for theorizing if and only if it models intellectual and social practices that are designed to avoid and/or oppose the systemic relations of domination that classical liberalism and neoliberalism create" (James 2019, p. 6). Future studies could investigate music, rest and entrainment in settings that are explicitly collective (Brown 2023), geared towards anti-capitalist and anti-ableist modes of being.

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CHAPTER TWO: *PURE MOODS* – WHITE INNOCENCE, BLISS AND MUSICAL MULTICULTURALISM

Today, white innocence is often portrayed as an evasive maneuver – something that is called up like a diversion that masks the task of acknowledging one's complicity. I argue that while this happens, white innocence also contains a blissful, ecstatic component that promises to make (white) listeners whole, which must be understood if geographers want to tackle the task of undoing attachments to white innocence. I draw on the spatial imaginaries of Pure Moods, Vol. 1, a New Age music compilation saturated in innocence to build a profile of the bliss of white innocence as tied to multiculturalism. From there I offer a theorization of three different shades of white innocence, each which centers bliss, aggression, and withdrawal, respectively.

1. Introduction

Recently, white innocence has become a framework through which geographers understand the persistence of white supremacy (Inwood 2017, Pulido 2023, Gilmore 2017). Building on insights from critiques of settler colonialism (Tuck and Yang 2012), anti-racist theorizing (Baldwin 1995/1962), and critical race theory (Leonardo 2009), geographers identify white innocence as something white people and institutions claim, in a mix of guilt-avoidance, cynicism and ignorance, to maintain white privilege. This important work highlights the ongoing need to situate white norms in a broader history and geography of white supremacist violence (Bonds and Inwood 2016).

What is also needed is an account of a celebratory form of innocence that feels expansive, spiritually charged, and exuberant (Luger 2022). We need an account for what is attractive, not just evasive, about innocence, if white innocence is to be dismantled. To pursue this goal, I build

a profile of the bliss of white innocence through a close reading of three tracks and music videos from the 1997 issue of the compilation *Pure Moods, Vol. 1*, a widely popular New Age and pop disc (various artists 1997). This material builds a strong case for white innocence as promising wholeness, unity, and vividness alongside the erasure of racial conflict that characterizes multiculturalism. Drawing on psychoanalysis, I trace possible connections between multicultural bliss, liberal withdrawal and more identitarian forms of white *jouissance.* Finally, I end with a call to abandon innocence altogether for a curiosity towards white shame, drawing on the work W.E.B. Du Bois and Eve Sedgewick.

2. White Innocence as Evasion

As Laura Pulido writes (2023 p. 1060) there is, in this country, "a deep investment in white innocence and a desire to preserve it at all costs." Innocence can be understood as the state of being free of blame. How does innocence do work*,* given this definition? If institutions, people, or imagined communities such as the nation are construed as innocent, then by definition they cannot be challenged for redress, reconciliation or abolishment. Innocence shields from critique and change (Pulido 2023). Pulido's work focuses on the National Historic Landmark system. This network of landmarks buttresses settler colonial innocence by denying mention of settler genocide against indigenous peoples.

Drawing on James Baldwin (1995/1962), Inwood (2017) describes how by automatically shielding white society, white innocence also presumes nonwhite criminality. He quotes Baldwin (1962 p. 6, quoted in Inwood 2017, p. 7) that "it is the innocence which constitutes the crime." Gilmore makes a similar argument, that any time innocence is applied to a group of people, those that fall outside of this group risk being marked as not innocent. This "dialectics of innocence" (Gilmore 2017, p. 254) suggests a relationship between innocence and power, where who is not

deemed innocent designates who is and is not marked for surveillance and punishment (thus modulating systems of surveillance and punishment, and changing the course of who is innocent, and so on).

Inwood, Gilmore and Pulido's analysis operates primarily at a discursive level, making observations about how institutions and people represent themselves and are represented by others. White innocence also operates through a psychic and visceral deflection. The influential work of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang's (2012) "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" connects the dots between the institutional denial of white supremacy and the mental and embodied deflection that takes residence in white people. For Tuck and Yang white settlers seek innocence to secure their footing in "premature attempt(s) at reconciliation" (Tuck and Yang 2012 p. 9) between settler and indigenous societies. However, indigenous-led decolonization is fundamentally about land reparation, and to repatriate land would fundamentally disrupt settler society. It would look more like an overturning than a reconciliation. Given the guilt settlers face in benefiting from violence against indigenous peoples, such moves also help settlers "hurry toward any reprieve" (2012, p. 9), while, it should be said, maintaining their centrality in academic and social justice circles.

Outside of the academic press, writers and commentators have also pursued this line of thinking, that innocence masks guilt. For example, in 2015, George Yancey, professor of philosophy at Emory University, penned a letter in the *New York Times* called "Dear White America," extolling readers to challenge their attachments to white innocence. The letter was intended as an opportunity for white readers to confront the "lies that you tell yourself so that you don't feel the weight of responsibility for those who live under the yoke of whiteness, your whiteness." (2015, no page). The popular writer and anti-racist facilitator Robin DiAngelo makes

similar propositions, that white innocence is mobilized to avoid white discomfort (DiAngelo 2018 p. 133). In other outlets, white innocence has become an object of discussion, particularly following Trump's election and re-election (Peck 2024). Indeed "Make America Great Again," pretends to an innocence that masks and thus legitimates a history of brutalization, from indigenous genocide, to slavery, to imperial global domination.

Clearly white innocence is a roadblock to a whole host of reparative, abolitionist and social justice projects when it is claimed by both anti-racist, liberal and fascist elements alike. This is why it demands close scrutiny. What the above analyses miss is innocence's internal attraction. What I want to highlight is that pursuing innocence is not just an evasive or shielding tactic. Certainly, white innocence is "attractive" because it helps protect material gains. But innocence also holds appeal as a belief loaded with positive feeling: vividness, possibility, peace, even bliss. To approach such feelings, I turn to music.

3. Music, Affect, Innocence and Universality

Music is a good way to feel for affective attachments because music itself for its unique ability to solicit emotion, desire, feeling and pleasure (Anderson 2006), as it enlivens subjects' visceral engagements with place and with each other (Waitt et al 2014). Music elevates "sensuous geographies" (Rodaway 1994), where the subject is interwoven with the sonic environment, and not just represented in or by music (Paiva 2018). In this vein, music's power can augment, diminish or alter affective ties to one's experience or identity (Revill 2004). Take, for example, Cockayne and Martin (2023) exploration of the shifting affects in a Canadian choir. This choir, all white, is commissioned to sing a song about the difficult migration experience of the piece's Iranian-Canadian composer. While their singing elicits conviviality between

members (Doughty and Lagerqvist 2016), their positionality also generates uncertainty. They hesitate to express a relatively traumatizing experience that is far removed from their own.

Often, music bypasses this kind of reflexivity. Lousley (2014) explores music's universalist pretensions in the context of Band Aid, the charity organization and supergroup formed in the 80s to raise funds for famine relief in Ethiopia and Sudan. She builds on the critique that Band Aid commodified charity and legitimated Western intervention abroad. For Lousely, this was enabled by the self-evidently positive feelings of love, supercharged through music – a feeling that could subsume critical debate on the nature of the uneven political terrain upon which Band Aid rested, obscured and ostensibly reproduced. Importantly, this feeling of love was both enabled by and enabled the imaginary of a global sense of unity.

Johnson-Williams suggests that music's emotional sway, affective immediacy and allure make it susceptible to such transcendental notions. She writes (2023, p. 44):

> Music is an artform that is particularly vulnerable to presumptions of and pretensions to innocence, precisely because of its transient properties, its subjective possibilities for beauty in the face of ugliness, and the myriad subtle uses (and abuses) of music that can all-too-easily be brought to aid utopian fantasies.

This paper turns to music's vividness, its sense of possibility, universality, connection and fantasy to understand the attractive side of white innocence at an affective level. To do this I turn to *Pure Moods Vol. 1,* a New Age music compilation with strong pop, dance and world music influences. First released simply as *Moods* in the UK in 1994, it was re-released as *Pure Moods Vol. 1* in 1997 in America, with a slightly different track line up. I turn to this compilation now.

5. Listening and Looking for White Innocence in *Pure Moods*

Pure Moods Vol. 1, was ubiquitous in the 1990s, its late-night infomercial appearing on countless American television sets.[4] It was a commercial success, a product of Virgin Records "cleverly mining its back catalog for profit" (Schonfeld 2024), with editor Ashley Abrams cobbling together some of their biggest hits, including Mike Oldfield's "Tubular Bells," Geoffrey Oryema's "Makambo" (a successful world music single out of Uganda) and the theme from X-Files. I focus on Enigma's "Return to Innocence," Enya's "Orinoco Flow," and Deep Forest's "Sweet Lullaby," the first three, and arguably the most famous, tracks on the compilation. The odd combination of tracks trouble easy identification with the genre of New Age music, but the appellation gelled with the 90s marketing imperative to "chill" (Schonfeld 2024), while also reflecting the commercialization and popularization of New Age music itself, which had grown out 70s counterculture to become a worldwide phenomenon in the late 80s (Snider 1997).

In addition to the music itself, I pay attention to their attendant music videos. I also examine the promotion and advertising surrounding the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, which used "Return to Innocence" as its theme song.[5] This material is positively saturated with innocence. As a "piece woven with some wear into the silk of the popular unconsciousness" (Tavakoli 2020), analyzing *Pure Moods* will help create a bigger picture regarding how innocence operates. Children on tricycles and babies under pear trees create an image of the globe held together through a seamless celebration of diversity – a celebration that obscures the uneven

[4] The re-issue sold 1.4 million copies in the U.S. (certified platinum) (PURE MOODS certifications and sales 2025).

[5] Music and video have not frequently been studied together in geography, with some exceptions (Landau-Donnelly 2025, Rossetto and Andrigo 2018). They help understand the circulation of affect and representations of place in popular culture.

economic and racialized structuration of the music industry (Yúdice 2004). The compiling of these tracks themselves reproduces the affirmative yet flattening aesthetics of multiculturalism found in the music and the videos. In a sense, *Pure Moods* mobilizes innocence to fetishize its own production process.

Marx used the fetish to describe the commodity's magical appearance, its seeming agency and self-sufficient value. *Pure Moods* provides an opportunity to do something similar for whiteness. That is, dissecting *Pure Moods* can help disentangle the psychic, affective and symbolic overloading of innocence as something that self-evidently cohered with whiteness. So while *Pure Moods* is definitively situated in 90s, when Western economic and political triumph was gelled to celebrations of multiculturalism – connections that have weakened in today's far right ascendance – it is worth looking at because it represents what is just a momentary affective intensification of a centuries-long accumulation of associations between whiteness and wholesomeness that continues to justify domination and subordination, extraction and exploitation (Bernstein 2011, Wekker 2016). By looking at whiteness as bliss in *Pure Moods* we can begin to understand other modes of white innocence – including innocence as evasion, which characterizes depictions of white innocence in mostly liberal circles, as well as more aggressive expressions of whiteness. The point isn't to draw hard lines between them, but to show possible continuities for the long-term project of undoing whiteness altogether.

I reserve the bulk of analysis to the first three tracks of the *Pure Moods* 1997 reissue, starting with "Return to Innocence" by Enigma. Enigma is the brainchild of Romanian-German producer Michael Cretu, who first composed the track for the 1993 album *Cross of Changes*. The song opens with an unauthorized sample from Indigenous Amis singers from Taiwan, husband and wife duo Difang and Igay Duana. This sample constitutes the song's hook, which is

interspersed with the song's English lyrics. At the height of the song, singer Angel X belts: "don't care what people say, just follow your own way." Later his partner Sandra enters, speaking the following words, "That's not the beginning of the end / That's the return to yourself / The return to innocence." These lyrics in particular pair well with the video, where we see that, for Enigma, innocence follows a "return." Their music video delivers this message by following the life of a European peasant, but in reverse: death under a pear tree, old age, work, marriage, first love, childhood. The message is magnified by the filmic effect of actually playing these scenes backwards: pears float back up to their branches, a piece of bread reconstitutes itself in the fists of a peasant; a unicorn trots backwards. Eventually we see the old man as a toddler, under the tree he will later die beneath, a pear emerging whole from his mouth.

Enya's "Orinoco Flow" is a synth-harp laden track about sailing away across the globe. It was originally released on Enya's second studio album, *Watermark,* from 1988. The song was unusual for its production style. Enya's layered vocals create a lush, ethereal wash that blends expertly with a minimal but rousing arrangement. The main hook of the song features Enya simply singing *sail away, sail away, sail away,* while in the verses she breathlessly lists places both real and mythical she yearns to escape to, enrolling the listener in her desire. …Ebudae and Khartoum; the Sea of Clouds and the Island of the Moon; Bali to Cali, the Coral Sea; Bissau, Palau, Avalon; the Yellow Sea, Peru, Cebu, Babylon…

As in "Return to Innocence," this music video is a fascination for forms in a magical landscape. Unlike *Return to Innocence,* no children are present. But we do see what a child might fix her gaze upon instead, in a watercolor point-of-view: a bird, rain pattering against ground cover, the cap of a wave surging between rocks, roses. *Orinoco Flow* does depict one

sign of human activity against this Edenic backdrop: colonial era clipper bulging against the waves.

Themes of travel also accompany "Sweet Lullaby," by French duo Eric Mouquet and Michel Sanchez, under their moniker Deep Forest. Like "Innocence," it samples an ethnographic field recording. The sample is of "Rorogwela," a traditional Baegu lullaby from the Solomon Islands about an elder sibling comforting her baby brother after the death of their parents, assuring the child that the love of their parents still watches over them. The original melody was performed by a singer named Afunakwa. As in *Innocence,* the vocal melody is harmonized using Western conventions, though Sanchez's choices are shiftier and jazzier than in the previous two songs. There are no English lyrics or vocals, though Deep Forest overlay the original recording with additional unison vocals, creating an anthemic chorus effect that builds over time.

The video, directed by Indian director Tarsem Singh, accentuates this "we-are-one" vibe. The video opens with an older sister cradling her younger sibling in her arms, a reference to the Baegu lullaby mentioned above. The young sibling, played by Singh's niece, then embarks on a tricycle ride past famous global landmarks – such the Taj Mahal, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Sagrada Famil**í**a and the Great Wall of China. She also encounters gestures – rubbing one's eyes, or twirling one's hair – that are repeated in every corner of her travels. These are, as one commentator puts it, "shapes and actions the semiotic equivalents of which can be located in her very homeland" (Bahadur 2016, n.p). Our cyclist also pedals past monuments to political power: a mural of Lenin, a portrait of Mao, and the looming hull of a U.S. aircraft carrier.

6. White Innocence as Universality, Vividness, and Wholeness

This media assemblage offers a picture of innocence that is far removed from it as a guilt-ridden evasion. Here innocence is seen in forms of magic, universality, expansion. Consider the reversed montage in "Innocence," which seems to suggest that in death, after all the joys and pains of living, there remains a spirit of innocence, the same innocence that nakedly imbues life at birth. In "Sweet Lullaby," this is an innocence that transcends earthly problems. The child is unphased by the monuments to power she passes, scarcely indulging, for example, the Kremlin a glance as she pedals by. In this juxtaposition and indifference her innocence is constituted. As a child she is too pure to be concerned with the geopolitics swirling around her – she represents humanity in its unbothered everydayness. In "Orinoco Flow," there is no child *per se*, but the camera's attention likewise signifies a lack of concern for human affairs, such a colonialism, which the clipper might signify. Rather it dwells on a fascination for forms in a magical landscape, and innocence is preserved. The camera moves as if a child is bent over close to the moss and rock along the shore, and looks up in awe at a helm heaving against the white caps, dreaming about the map in her head, in which real places – many of them former colonial possessions (Palau) – mix with fantastical ones (Island of the Moon). In all the videos "sentimental childlike innocence manifest[s] through the performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender, and… race." (Bernstein 2011 p. 6).

The sounds and image match a shift registered by Joshua Clover in his analysis of post-cold war pop. It's pop that moves away from music that documents or hopes to compel social struggle, to a music that celebrates a world free from antagonism (Clover 2009). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, futurity in Western pop music was supplanted by pure feeling, elevated by moments of (manageable) excesses. This era of pop registers *the end of history.* Clover borrows this phrase from the title of Francis Fukuyama's popular 1992 book by the same name in which

the political scientist argues that worldwide liberalism marks the end to tyranny and, by extension, social struggle. In other words, "we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist" (Fukuyama 1992, p. 46). The cultural corollary to Western triumphalism is that pop music, "need say nothing, nothing but that this is the moment*, right here, right now*, in which the uncontainable excess of history itself flashes up and vanishes" (Clover 2009, p.4 emphasis in original). Where Clover stresses history, here we can see the subsumption of geographic difference, which is not destroyed *per se*, but rendered moot through integration: peoples and cultures flicker into existence, marking their inclusion into the common pool of (capitalist) humanity.

Discourses of neoliberal triumph and multicultural inclusion do more work to sustain uneven economic relations than they reflect global equality. As Melamed (2011, p.6) argues,

> Multicultural reference masks the centrality of race and racism to neoliberalism. Race continues to permeate capitalism's economic and social processes, organizing the hyperextraction of surplus value from racialized bodies and naturalizing a system of capital accumulation that grossly favors the global North over the global South. Yet multiculturalism portrays neoliberal policy as the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity.

One needs only to look at the production of "Sweet Lullaby" to see this. In 1992, when Deep Forest released "Sweet Lullaby," the GDP per capita in the Solomon Islands was 782 dollars. Just fifty sales at $15 a CD would have equaled a year's income for the average islander. Deep Forest sold thirty-five million CDs worldwide, on top of numerous product placements, performances, and sales of other merchandise (Taylor 2003). The point is "Sweet Lullaby" put neo-colonial cultural extraction in action, where the vastly unequal material gains between Deep

Forest and Afunakwa reflected and reinforced the uneven geopolitical relations these artists occupied in the world system. Ironically, Eric Mouquet and Michel Sanchez of Deep Forest have presented themselves as defenders and unifiers of global music (Zuckerman 2004).

Really, it is the other way around: the Western music industry needs the Global South to match their material plunder with spiritual vividness. Take Deep Forest's often quoted byline from their debut album: "Somewhere, deep in the jungle, are living some little men and women. They are our past. And, maybe… Maybe they are our future" (Deep Forest, 1992). This music replays neo-Romantic conceptions of innocence as an affirmation of plentitude and connection to nature, spirit and humanity, by drawing on both future visions and memory of a Golden Age (Bowman 1995). The peasants in "Innocence" and the little girl in "Lullaby" seem either untouched or unphased by industrialization, urbanization, warfare, the marketplace, or even language. These are figures unsullied by the effects of modernity, allowing the consumer to play out fantasies of tactical proximity to various exotic landscapes. As Veit Erlmann puts it, quoted in Steven Held's exhaustive study of "Lullaby": ''The global musical pastiche is more an attempt at coating the sounds of the fully commodified present with the patina of use value in some other time and place.'' (Erlmann 1999 p. 103, quoted in Held 2000 p. 197)

To conclude this section, consider the 1996 Olympics, held in Atlanta Georgia, which used "Return to Innocence" as its theme song, here innocence, universality, and vividness unite to pin desire to neoliberal capitalist relations. The Olympic opening credits start with the words

COMPETITION

FAIR PLAY

FRIENDSHIP

UNITY

PEACE

Meanwhile, Difang's voice song soars while the bodies of international athletes thrum with effort and emotion. It is enough to make you cry, as attested by several YouTube viewers watching two or three decades later, to watch these human bodies buckle against and ultimately beyond their own capacities. Global camaraderie on full display: "bringing the world together," as the official tagline goes. (ARCHIVE Sport, 2020)

These themes of universality, togetherness and transcending limits seamlessly bleed into the advertisements that accompanied the game broadcasts. "Imagine a world without limits" went one AT&T advertisement (VCRchivist, 2010c, 0:00) Another for International Paper featured border guards and a checkpoint literally dissolving into thin air, while a disembodied voice muses: "A world in which all people are closer together, every two years, for a few glorious weeks, it becomes easier to imagine…" (VCRchivist, 2010b, 0:55). Children and music help glue together this vision: a Coca-Cola advertisement directed by Tarsem Singh (the same director of the *Sweet Lullaby* music video) features children playing cricket in the shadow of the Taj Mahal, refreshing themselves with the soft drink while Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's "Mustt" plays in the background. (VCRchivist, 2010a, 0:30)

This boundlessness is presented as inherently good: "Picture everybody fitting in," says Kodak. "Picture being ready for anything that comes along. Picture not having to deal with the negative" (VCRchivist, 2010a, 1:45). Que quick shots of smiling people from around the world. The inclusion of "Return to Innocence" at the Olympics itself hinged on the confluence of spirituality, exoticism and universality. A producer on the project for the promotional video said: "We listened to several pieces we felt had something spiritual and timeless about them. . .. In

addition, ‘Return to Innocence’ seemed to work in conjunction with the ideas expressed in the video of fair play, peace, unity, etc.” (Taylor 2003, p. 67)

The next session deepens an analysis on white innocence by trying to understand how it cuts across different kinds of white subjectivities, keeping in mind that whiteness itself is not monolithic (Peach 2000), and, if it is to be dismantled, we must understand how “whiteness moves” (Butler 2012, p. 183). I focus in particular, on how white innocence moves from bliss to shame and aggression. Underneath these movements is a deeply held commitment to the individual. Given the scope of this paper, these accounts are gestural, but they point to the need to abolish innocence itself.

7. Slowing the Mobility of White Innocence

To start, I’d like to tie together vividness, universality, and innocence through the concept of the “the oceanic feeling.” This term entered critical discourse through Freud’s opening passages of *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud 2010/1929), the book Freud wrote on the function of religion in the life of the common man. The term emerged through his exchange with Romain Rolland, a French literary persona, friend and mystic who corresponded frequently with Freud. In their correspondence, Rolland asked Freud to apply a psychoanalytic reading of the sense of eternity experienced by persons often in religious or mystical states. Freud’s response was that such a feeling was little more than illusory wish-fulfillment – a temporary return to pre-linguistic states in which the infant conflates his affects and his ego with the swirling world around her (Parsons 1998).

In “Return to Innocence,” this pre-linguistic connectedness reemerges through regression – the music video is played backwards towards birth. This can be read in psychoanalytic terms as a return to primary narcissism, where there is no separation between the self and its Others.

Where, before the development of the ego, and the perception that one's self is distinct from Others, activity is felt as an extension of one's drives in seamless continuity with one's surroundings. What happens in "Innocence," "Orinoco Flow" and "Sweet Lullaby" is that this narcissistic, infantile belonging is grafted onto the globe. This works through a strong affective identification with transcending one's own self and "landing" as it were, across the whole surface of the planet.

In a paper titled "Speaking of Whiteness: Disrupting White Innocence," Griffin (1998) describes white innocence as "grounded in notions of forgetfulness, erasure, denial," in line with the geography discourse cited above. She also writes that it contains a feeling of "*transcendent, all-subsuming 'freedom' or entitlement*" (p. 4, quoted in Inwood, p. 7 emphasis added). As an educator, Griffin makes note that when her white students talk about race, they exhibit "the integrationist dream," that is, "the dream of dissolving limits. It speaks of merger and harmony, of loss of painful racial consciousness, even of dissolution of racial or gender definitions" (Griffin 1998, p. 6). Spatially, this boundlessness evokes what Sharron Sullivan (2006) calls the "ontological expansiveness" of whiteness, a socialization into spatial entitlement that operates at an unconscious and psychosomatic level. At its maximum it is an imperial orientation towards one's environment that Sullivan describes thusly: "whiteness is ownership of the earth" (Sullivan 2006, p. 122).

As George (2014) elaborates, the paradoxical nexus of individualism and merger, and the bliss it generates, is constitutively anti-black. Drawing on Fanonian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, George (2014, p. 370), deepens the connections between a psychosomatic analytic of white totality and white supremacy. His starting point is *jouissance.* Coined by Lacan, *jouissance* is often translated as enjoyment, but it is something more than that. It signals an

embodied enjoyment that transgresses a limit. While this limit throughout the course of Lacan's oeuvre, for Sheldon, whiteness is sustained by the promise of a *jouissance* that resides in the bliss of the perfect human who transcends the limit of the human itself, to become "godlike." Merger becomes violation. Sheldon traces this delusion to plantation slavery and the conceit of unchecked domination, which is restaged in continual spurts of white brutality (George 2014, p. 362). This violence is not directly present in *Pure Moods*, but it lurks in what its affects legitimate: unchecked access to the world.

The hidden presence of this violence is an occasion to think deeper about how aggression and bliss are related. Du Bois gleans the importance of innocence and entitlement in a passage in the *Souls of White Folks.* His insightful passage on white charity, in his *The Souls of White Folk,* originally published 1910, is worth quoting at length.

> The first minor note is struck, all unconsciously, by those worthy souls in whom consciousness of high descent brings burning desire to spread the gift abroad, — the obligation of nobility to the ignoble. Such sense of duty assumes two things: a real possession of the heritage and its frank appreciation by the humble-born. So long, then, as humble black folk, voluble with thanks, receive barrels of old clothes from lordly and generous whites, there is much mental peace and moral satisfaction. But when the black man begins to dispute the white man's title to certain alleged bequests of the Fathers in wage and position, authority and training; and when his attitude toward charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity; when he insists on his human right to swagger and swear and waste, — then the spell is suddenly broken and the philanthropist is ready to believe that Negroes are impudent, that the South is right, and that Japan wants to fight America. (Du Bois 1987, p. 925)

Asserting this "human right to swagger and swear and waste" challenges the tightly woven sanctity of innocence itself, after which the:

> …the descent to Hell is easy. On the pale, white faces which the great billows whirl upward to my tower I see again and again, often and still more often, a writing of human hatred, a deep and passionate hatred, vast by the very vagueness of its expressions (Du Bois 1987, p. 925).

This threat to innocence sends this man into paroxysms of rage. The outburst recalls Mills' (2012) characterization of white ignorance of racial violence. For Mills, white ignorance, when confronted, becomes "*militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly"* (2012, p. 14, emphasis in original). Du Bois also witnesses a recalcitrant, violent ignorance. But it is a willful ignorance of the frailty of innocence itself. For Du Bois, white belief in innocence writ large is a precondition for white innocence. This is logically obvious but points to a tricky problem in undoing the latter – it might require shedding attachments to the idea of innocence itself (Gilmore 2018).

Consider the problems that arise from following assumptions about the efficacy of guilt in addressing social change. To recall Tuck and Yang (2012) and Yancey's (2015) discussions on innocence above, white people cling to it to avoid guilt. There is the implication that if white people own up to their guilt, they would change their ways. On the other hand, white guilt is noted for inducing a state of paralysis in which white people are rendered unable to think or act clearly about race. Why? One possible answer lies in distinguishing between guilt and shame, where white shame might be a better frame of analysis.

For the sake of argument, I adopt a common distinction between guilt and shame, which is that guilt is tied to the failure to live up to external value systems, whereas

shame derives from the betrayal of one's deeply internalized identification (Herzbog 2025). When one is guilty of something, one can take action in the external world to make amends for one's past behavior. Whereas shame paralyzes the whole person. One could trouble this inside/outside distinction between external and internal value systems – where does the internal one come from? – but the basic insight is that the stronger one identifies with a version of themselves, the harder it is to let go of mistakes that fail to meet one's standards for self-evaluation.

Because whiteness stresses hyper-individualism (Berg 2012), it breeds shame. Steele argues that white guilt – though I would use shame here – triggers a kind of all or nothing response. It opens up "the *vacuum of moral authority* that comes from simply *knowing* that one's race is associated with racism" (Steele 2006, p. 24, quoted in Sullivan 2014, p. 126). This creates a spiral between shame and whiteness, as shame shuts down curiosity about understanding one's complicity in white supremacist structures (which redoubles that complicity). If white people aren't innocent, they must be Evil. The primary disservice of this equation is that people of color then become "good," and white people become obligated to them, making "black and other nonwhite people responsible for white redemption and deliverance from racism." (Sullivan 2010 p. 129). Or, as Brennet (2014, para. 7) puts it, "What a privilege, to concern yourself with seeming good while the rest of us want to seem worthy of life."

Adopting an all or nothing response in a tricky situation like this will only reproduce shame, which is why Sullivan, in her analysis of white shame and guilt, calls for focusing on white self-love instead. This is because shame, for Sullivan, is a negative affect. It shuts down relationality. Love on the other hand, will enable white people to move through the world with more dignity and self-awareness in which real relationships with themselves and with black

people is possible. She sums up her views of shame like this: “In the case of shame, people constituted by negative affects tend to be too psychosomatically depleted to do much that is active and yet extremely dangerous because they resent others’ liveliness and health and so try to destroy them” (Sullivan 2014, p. 141).

But what if shame wasn’t always bad? In contrast, to Sullivan, Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank note that shame is rhythmically related to taking an interest in the world (2003 p. 97). They draw on psychologist Silvan Tomkins who posits that interest and shame are closely related, that shame expresses an interest in something (recall the example from the intro, in which a white choir first feels conviviality for singing an Iran-Canadian composer’s piece, then feels uncertain about whether or not they were the best performers to execute it). Tomkins observed that shame emerges in infancy out of a break in the reiterative mimetic cycles between mother and child, when the baby first experiences the moment when her mother does not return the child’s expressions. When this happens, the baby lowers its head and eyes, and turns away. This happens before the cognition of taboo and prohibition. Shame, in other words, is not an internalization of repressive norms, but a sign pointing towards disconnection. Often shame is presented as feeling unworthy of connection, a notion that quickly becomes self-evident because the shame itself is “proof” of this. Thinking of shame as a sign pointing towards missed connection, however, makes it easier to avoid “shaming shame” and entrenching it. It offers an opportunity to view shame to “as a productive and relational process” (Probyn et al 2019).

On this note, a more generous reading of white expansiveness is that it is the forcing of a desire for connection through the narrow channel of neoliberal individualism. Exuberance or expansiveness are not inherently violent or narcissistic orientations. Rather, innocence,

particularly for those socialized into white individualism, hijacks "positive" affects, solidifying our potential for animating a possessive and overdetermined identification with the self.

With this in mind, bliss might reenter the picture as a way to actually undo white innocence. This is the question Jackie Wang poses in a 2021 talk titled *Oceanic Feeling and Communist Affect.* In this talk Wang reprises Freud's interpretation of the oceanic feeling as regressive. In contrast, Wang is interested in how the oceanic feeling might pose connective tissue for novel social constellations wherein "our bodies are never isolated, are always enmeshed in shifting patterns of relations." Can the oceanic feeling alert us to our own interdependency as we ourselves are "scattered across space, [and] trace connections ethical but unseen." (Wang 2021, 17:40) Quoting Nerval, she seeks an understanding that "Everything lives, moves, everything corresponds."

This corresponds with Rolland's original critique of Freud, when he argues that the oceanic feeling cannot be sequestered diachronously as return to an infantile stage. Rooney writes,

> Freud's looking back to the infant's undifferentiated consciousness might be plausible; however, what is slightly problematic for the analysis to be developed here is that Freud couches this originary state in egocentric terms. He states: "originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world for itself" (68). I want to suggest, though, that the ego as a centralising consciousness cannot be assumed to be there, or very much there, to begin with: that is, it is not that the world is all within the infant so much as that the infant is immersed in its ambient world.

For Wang, communistic affect tied to the oceanic feeling occurs through "psychedelic drugs, participating in a riot, fasting, sleep deprivation, tantric sex, BDSM, chanting, emotional pain and grief, physical pain, exercise, prayer, music, experiences of collective euphoria…" (Wang 2021, 26:46). Indeed, Rolland and Wang's positive appraisal of the oceanic feeling gels with some contemporary understandings of sound. If sound brings a listener back to a pre-linguistic state, it is also true sound *still* envelops us, always, as a reminder of a material exteriority that resists symbolization and is nonetheless intimately experienced (Cox 2009).

While I agree with the spirit of Wang's effort to delineate communist affect through bliss, her structuration is based on the distinction that, "One the one hand we have a notion of the oceanic as defensive, infantile, and dissociative. On the other we have a notion of the oceanic as joyful, connective, and integrative" (Wang 2021, 2:41). Heuristically they may be helpful to separate, but onto-affectively it is possible to conceive that these versions collide, oscillate and fold into one another cutting across various subjectivities and political identification, which Wang discusses in her treatment of trauma, which I won't discuss here. My focus has been on white subjectivity and white pluralities, specifically between celebratory multicultural forms, guilty liberal forms, and overtly white supremacist form. The effort has not been to draw hard lines between these forms, but to show the possible affective continuity between them.

8. Conclusion

My effort has been to build a scaffold of white innocence through its highly visible and affectively charged presentation in *Pure Moods Vol. 1.* The compilation is hopelessly 90s. Its celebration of multiculturalism is outdated – not only from a popular

critical perspective, but also given the far right's suspicion of globalization and their popularization of tribal national sentiments. So too, have forms of liberal and neoliberal economic arrangements come under greater scrutiny both from the left and the right. Nonetheless, *Pure Moods* presents an iteration of a longstanding association between whiteness and innocence. This coherence, I argue, generates a feeling of bliss, just as bliss helps keep this coherence in play by making this coherence desirable. Delinking bliss from the self at a psychic and affective and even musical register self may point towards ways of undoing whiteness.

"What would it mean to socialize or communize the oceanic feeling?" (Wang 2021, 17:05) Wang asks. "Affective states that take us beyond the boundaries of the self," she says,

> and grant us contact with the infinite have the potential to open up new modes of relationality. On this view, the oceanic could be considered a revelation, the illumination of the already-existing communalism and the direct experience of our embeddedness in the world (Wang 2021, 15:54)

Perhaps loosening the association between bliss and the self would undo white attachment to innocence.

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CHAPTER THREE: "WHERE IS HERE?" THE BLUES EPISTEMOLOGY OF DR. YUSEF LATEEF

This article explores the use of the half-step in the music of Dr. Yusef Lateef. Lateef was marketed as a jazz musician but called himself both a blues and an autophysiopsychic musician. I show how Lateef used the half-step – the smallest interval in the equal temperament twelve tone system – to evoke multiple overlapping spatialities, from the Delta, to Detroit, to the Middle East and even to speculative science fiction landscapes. Lateef's use of the half-step suggests black creative practice recreates the interrelated dynamic between material and imaginative place, in which dreams of freedom collapse easy boundaries between an unbearable "here" and a utopian "elsewhere." Moreover, drawing on Clyde Woods' blues epistemology (Woods 2005), I show how Lateef's music contributes to creative legacies of black art to model alternatives to geography's traditional tendency to fix black identity to place (McKittrick 2006). This article also raises the question of whether there is a properly musical component to the blues epistemology that exceeds the purview of traditional geographic research, itself beholden to Cartesian residues in spatial thought. I advocate for a compositional approach to black geographies, in which the space within *musical composition becomes fodder for thinking and feeling alternative spatialities in a more traditional sense.*

1. Introduction

Dr. Yusef Lateef dedicated his life to expanding the musical and spiritual horizons of his listeners. As a multi-reedist, composer, educator, writer and spiritual philosopher who thought deeply about black music and the blues, he contributed to the music's evolution over the course of his sixty-year recording career. In addition to releasing over seventy albums, Lateef wrote

several educational pieces, most notably his *Method on How to Perform Autophysiopsychic Music* (1979), and his monumental *Repository of Scales and Melodic Patterns* (1981). He also published fictional works, philosophical and spiritual tracts, and was a visual artist. Marketed as a jazz musician, Lateef rejected the term for the way it pigeonholed his music and the music of his peers. Instead, Lateef preferred to call himself an *autophysiopsychic* musician, which means someone who plays from the self (auto), from his whole embodied (physio) and mental and spiritual being (psychic). Lateef carried the torch of the blues throughout his life, recording countless blues pieces such as "Endura" (*Prayer for the East,* 1957), "Blues for the Orient" (*Eastern Sounds,* 1962), "Bamboo Flute Blues" (*Psychicemotus,* 1966), and the "Symphonic Blues Suite" (*Suite 16*, 1970). Many of these also gestured towards other cultures. As a thinker with a wide corpus of musical and written work, and a deep personal and spatial philosophy, Lateef presents an opportunity to bridge musical and spatial thought in the context of geography in general, and black geographies more specifically.

The method I pursue is to position Lateef's music alongside attempts within and outside of geography to define the "blue note." Specifically, I trace the mobilization of the *half-step*, or minor second, in Lateef's oeuvre. It is the half-step between the major and minor third, as well as the major and minor seventh (and sometimes between the perfect and augmented fourth) that so fascinated scholars and critics – mostly white – in their attempts to figure out what was unique to African-American sonority (Chodos 2018). In contrast, Lateef rarely used the term blue *note.* Rather, in a personal style saturated with a blues aesthetics and philosophy, he set blues conventions to work in expanding a melodic and harmonic palette, in which new conventions emerged out of and with the old. I argue that experimentation with the half-step was a kind of

engine that drove the reterritorialization of his music. As I hope to show, this reterritorialization was also properly spatial in the way it congealed imaginative and creative black spaces.

While Lateef himself was not pressed to definitively set the blue note a position within a scalar or harmonic network, he was a systemic thinker with a commitment to codifying his thought. Lateef was a meticulous student and educator who spent many hours putting his musical vocabulary to paper, particularly in his *Methods* and his *Repository,* the latter of which offers two hundred and seventy pages of scales, exercises and etudes. Lateef work allows us to see how the blues moves "as a genuine expression of the spirit," as told to me by his pianist Alexis Marcelo (personal communication, July 5, 2025). Indeed, part of what I hope to accomplish is to show how the movement of music exceeds Cartesian imaginations of space to open up onto multiple overlapping real and imagined spaces. This might open our ears to what sound can do in upsetting geography's claim to represent music and identity alike while turning to the inexhaustible potential of musical space – that is, the work that the space between musical notes – the intervals – can do to generate place and spaces in a more traditional sense.

2. Black Geographies, a Black Sense of Place, and Music

Geography as a discipline has been built on historically colonial practices of fixing black people through coercion and surveillance (McKittrick 2006). Despite growing claims for a decolonial and anti-racist geography, it would amount to "conceit to presume geography can simply emerge unblinking from the shadow of empire" (Nayak 2025). Geography's structural and epistemic orientations tend to revert to a "ghettoization of difference," in which processes of racialization and blackness alike are seen as only supplemental to the production of space (McKittrick 2006, 11). Difference here is rendered "mere" localized ephemera in the ordering of the world built out from the center of a white discipline, which itself includes few geographers of

color (Bruno and Faiver-Serna, 2022, Pulido 2002). Under the ruse of traditional forms of geography, if a black sense of place exists, it is chalked up to an ethnographic particularity that cannot engage the discipline except as a token of otherness. The myopia of geography makes feeling for a black sense of place challenging, as blackness struggles to find a place in capital-G Geography. This puts the discipline in consort with an anti-black state apparatus. Since the slave trade, the persistent denial of a black sense of place has reappeared in various guises: in the plantation, the prison complex, in urban containment and more (McKittrick 2011).

In addition to a kind of blanket oppression and erasure, the ongoing violence the state adopts towards black communities also results in several contradictions when a black sense of place is pursued. This is a sense of place which must lay claim to black emplacedness while fighting captivity; seek the freedom of mobility while fighting dislocation; resist both invisibility and hyper-visibility; and square local particularity with global anti-racist struggle. These entanglements mean that cultivating a black sense of place is an "im/possibility." (Noxolo 2022), seemingly impossible but achieved nonetheless.

Music has been central to fostering a black sense of place, both materially and imaginatively. During the Haitian revolution, drumming and singing were used to coordinate revolt (James 1989, p. 18). It continues to literally congeal people together, forging conviviality in cramped spaces. Shabazz (2021) and James (2024) have explored this powerful, insurgent component of black music in the context of hip hop and the Minneapolis Sound[6], respectively. It also feeds the spirit, fostering a collective felt-sense about how to live joyously, despite difficult circumstances. In music, the material and spiritual combine to help sustain what Robin DG Kelley (2008, p. 11) calls the "Freedom Dreams" of the Black Radical Tradition, in which music

[6] The sound popularized by Prince and his cohort in the 1980s.

> created a world of pleasure, not just to escape the everyday brutalities of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, but to build community, establish fellowship, play and laugh, and plant seeds for a different way of living, a different way of hearing.

The creative outpourings of jazz, soul, reggae, funk, hip hop, house, techno, and the blues, have all consistently revived "renegade reinventions of Blackness within the world of sound" (James 1670). As Bernice Johnson Reagon, song leader in Sweet Honey on the Rock, professor, and composer puts it, as quoted in Brown:

> Black culture empowers you to know you are a child of the universe – and produces a strength because so much had to be done. You may not have land or houses and you are enduring dark times, so the culture provides the strength to produce a voice or voices resonating about our specialness in the universe. *We really had to use whatever territory we could create to take care of the business to making a people and often that territory was not land, often that territory was cultural which is why African American culture is one of the most powerful in the world because we had to get so much business done.* (Brown 2010, p. 24, emphasis added)

So, just as the creation of black music has been borne of pressurized geographies, its currency operates through imagined elsewheres. These are imaginative spaces built out of a commitment to protect concrete creative space (Dalphond 2018) such that imaginative and material geographies are co-constituted, one impossible without the other. As Shabazz (2021, p.451) writes of the early inventors of hip hop: "They turned to art not just to make beautiful things (which they did). They created art to save their lives."

To not be of this earth, while still making a place in it, describes the "nonworlds" that black geographies inherits from black studies (Wright et al 2024, Moten and Harney 2013). This

spatial puzzle is not *resolved* through black creativity, but animated, investigated and put to tactical and strategic work. Part of the work this music does is to repurpose these contradictions or paradoxes through sound. It helps create a black attachment to place while also challenging the fixity of identity to place. It alchemizes the disorientation of displacement. It helps assert presence while denying subjugation. In other words, music flows through "paradoxical" spacetimes that exceed, even if partially borne out of, the inherent paradoxes of white supremacist geographical worldviews (Rose 1993).

3. The Blues Epistemology and Blues Music

This capacity for music to hold multiple truths that exceed the capacities of academic research is explored thoroughly in Clyde Woods' blues epistemology. Woods develops this epistemology in *Arrested Development: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (2005), the discipline's most ambitious and successful attempt to link geography, music and ways of knowing, and a foundational text in black geographies. Woods details the mutable strategies that white elites have employed to maintain their positions of power against the black working class. Planter geographies are characterized by the enforcement of "the color line" through containment, exclusion, segregation, and surveillance, as well as forced dislocation. On the other hand, Woods describes how black working class has consistently challenged and subverted the planter worldview. Included among the many forms of Southern advocacy and organizing is the blues musical tradition – a way of knowing that undoes the Machiavellian worldview of white supremacy.

This blues epistemology points to the deluded shortcomings of planter epistemology while also holding and alchemizing the contradictory experience of Black life after reconstruction, something I'd like to highlight through an examination of blues mobility.

Mobility was a fraught experience in the post-Emancipation South. On the one hand, material wealth was scant, as the plantation proper gave way to a system of sharecropping that all but replicated the conditions of slavery. Mobility was one of the few tangible forms of freedom afforded ex-slaves and their descendants (Davis 1999, p. 66). On the other hand, forced dislocation was a prime tool for controlling black populations whether through direct terror or through more distributed structural changes. Throughout the early 20th century, hundreds of thousands of displaced farmers left the Delta to seek both job opportunities and a less harsh, but by no means sanguine, racial climate in the North, Midwest and West.

The blues held together and expressed contradictions of mobility and place, as the vast array of hardships present in the Delta led to many tormented decisions to leave. Woods quotes blues singer Bumble Bee Slim:

> Well, I'm blue and evil, so many things to learn,
> So many days to worry, so many ways to turn,
> I had so much trouble, swear my nerves is weakenin' down
> I would swing on a freight train, but I'm afraid to leave the ground.
> Whistle keeps on blowin' an I got my debts to pay,
> *I've got a mind to leave my baby, Lord I've got a mind to stay.* (quoted in Woods 2005, p. 131 emphasis added)

Note that this tension was both spatial and emotional. As Hirsch writes (2021, p. 818). "Black mobilities and emotions circle[...] around each other, amplifying and detracting from one another." This dance is dramatized musically in the blues itself, in which the cyclical form of the blues creates an impression of departure and return, yearning, loss and safety. Other artistic

aspects of the blues contribute to this dynamism. Jazz critic Albert Murray on the matter, as quoted in Woods:

> Blues music is always an artful combination of incantation and percussion. …the essential message is usually conveyed by the music, whether vocal or instrumental… [However, if] the lyrics laments but the music mocks, that statement is not one of lamentation but mockery... The words may bemoan the loss of a lover, but if the singer is also involved with such choreographic gestures as finger popping, shoulder rocking, and hip swinging all the while, the statement can hardly be considered a form of bereavement. (as quoted in Woods 2005, p. 35)

Indeed, I would go further than Murray to say that lamentation and mockery, bereavement and freedom, mobility and placedness *coexist* in the combination of music, lyric and performance.

4. Compositional Space for Music in Black Geographies

Music can transmute, reflect and theorize a black sense of place. What follows is an attempt to augment this ability by zeroing in on the smallest of components in this musical lexicon: the half-step, a single interval, and the smallest on any Western twelve tone equal tempered scale. In this I follow McKittrick, who writes,

> I focus on the waveforms, rather than solely on lyrical content, to draw attention to the ways an ungraspable resonance—sound—allows us to think about how loving and sharing and hearing and listening and grooving to black music is a rebellious political act that is entwined with neurological pleasure and the melodic pronouncement of black life. (2016, p. 20)

Focusing on the tremendous work a small interval can accomplish is, in part, empirical in the sense that Lateef did indeed make use of this interval consistently. But it is also meant to

highlight the power, work and mobility that inheres in a single intervallic relationship. This, I hope, gives a sense of the irrepressible abundance afforded by something so "small," signaling the uncontainable power of black music to generate spatial-sonorous-emotional resonances. Such abundance does not conform to geographical standards of transparency.

As Wright et al state,

> To ethically engage legacies laid by generations of Black communities, geographers must consider the geographical pronunciations of Black social life (McKittrick 2016). This, we believe, will require alternative optics, analytics, and methodologies, necessities that hardly accompany traditional schools of thought. (Wright et al 2024, p. 869)

How can music fit into this call? As it pertains to a black sense of place, music is not reducible to more standard geographic categories of analysis such as the economy, identity, or even place itself. The creative musical impulse comes alive through formal compositional approaches, collective, artistic and ancestral creative heritages, and the malleability of sound itself. Indeed, music warrants its own geography – as in what are the spacings, boundaries, and movements within music, not just in performance, circulation, consumption, and representation, but also within the tools, lexicon and materials of the craft, in its compositional field (Born 2013, p. 9)? "Musical form itself is spatial," as Kirby (2021, p. 574), writes. In other words, if interdisciplinarity is central to black geographies (Hawthorne 2019), how do we think of music as an ontological force in and of itself that requires its own processes of experimentation, technique and listening – not separate from more traditional geographical concerns, but not reducible to them either?

In Lateef's work, that half-step animates and enfolded real and imagined spaces: from the Delta to Detroit to other real and imagined locales of the African Diaspora. By observing

Lateef's handling of this one interval, we can begin to see (or hear) how the smallest tweaking of musical material might explode into diverse and divergent spaces that nonetheless congeal in momentary stabilizations. As I will show shortly, the half-step is closely related to the "blue note," a central part of the musical materiality of the blues epistemology.

5. Early Appraisals of the Blue Note

Before turning to Lateef, what, exactly is a blue note? Central to Woods' and many others' conception of the musical power of the blues lies in the use of "blue notes." He positions the blues as a material response African dislocation in the New World:

> Aaron Copeland has also noted the technically specific nature of the blues scale and feels that this African element is a most unique contribution to American music. The blue or flattened note, sung just under the note as it should have been sung on the Western musical scale, has become almost the hallmark of the blues . . . Blue notes are not notes played out of tune but notes played in a specific way. It was created when slaves tried to fit African scales to European scales. (Oliver, 1989, p. 4, quoted in Woods 2005, p. 35):

Woods also positions this ethnomusicological reading to the blues' dissident power. "The use of blue notes was at the heart of the blues sound; they gave it a subversive character, a dissonance instantly recognizable in both vocal and instrumental renderings." (Barlow 1989, p, 325, quoted in Woods 2005, p. 288). In these quotes, Woods hints at what the blue note might mean at a musical level. First, it is the meeting of Western scales with African scales, the former usually presented as diatonic, meaning a seven-note major or minor scale (think of all the white keys on the piano, from C to C, for a major scale), whereas African scales are often thought of as pentatonic, or five note scale (C-Eb-F-G-Ab). The superimposition of these scales creates a special blend that results in blue notes – for example, where the "flattened" Eb exists alongside

the E, and the flattened Bb exists alongside the B. This rub is sometimes characterized as what gives the blues its power to express the contradictions of life, with one scholar calling them "rebellious" (Krehbiel, quoted in Baraka 1963, p. 24).

Amiri Baraka's earlier reflections on the blues anticipate aspects of Woods' reading of the blue note in Baraka's (then LeRoi Jones') seminal *Blues People* while questioning some of the general framing of the blue note. He quotes writer Ernest Borneman (1959, p. 13 quoted in Baraka 1963, p. 24):

> Although indigenous variants of the diatonic scale have been developed and preserved in Africa, modern West Africans who are not familiar with European music will tend to become uncertain when asked to sing in a tempered scale. This becomes particularly obvious when the third and seventh steps of a diatonic scale are approached. The singer almost invariably tries to skid around these steps with slides, slurs or vibrato effects so broad as to approach scalar value.

Amiri Baraka concludes that "these sliding and slurring effects in Afro-American music, the basic 'aberrant' quality of a blues scale, are, of course, called 'blueing' the notes." However, his tone is skeptical. He questions whether they must be slotted into a diatonic frame of analysis – it could simply be that a non-diatonic, non-western sensibility is required. Jones suggests that the notes are only aberrant if one listens with a Western ear.

A lot of blues scholarship has been concerned with either slotting African and African-American into white European frames of reference or reducing the blues to a primitive art form. One of the first white chroniclers of the blues was sociologist Howard Odum, who espoused avowedly white supremacist views on the blues in the 1910s and 1920s (Woods 2005, p. 100). By the 1960s such views had become marginalized, and "softer," liberal forms of paternalism

took center stage in an effort to assimilate the blues into an Anglo-American aesthetic sensibility. Asher Tobin Chodos (2018, p. 145) analyzes the history and eventual institutionalization of blues knowledge, drawing on Leonard Bernstein and others. Bernstein's 1939 dissertation at Harvard sought to formulate a properly American musical idiom. For Bernstein, this meant absorbing African-American music which, in his frame of reference, showed music promise but would remain tedious and underdeveloped unless it was integrated into the white concert music establishment. Interestingly, Bernstein includes a blues scale in his work, which, like Jones and Woods, highlights the flattened third and flattened seventh (as well as the flattened fifth).

Whether liberal or more avowedly racist appraisals of the blues, both rested on the inconceivability that blues musicians could construct a self-aware system of critique. Woods quotes Henderson on the matter:

> While one may admit to the existence of 'folk poetry' or of a 'folk' poet, the category of folk critic is unthinkable . . . on the assumption that unlettered people lack sufficient capacity for judgement, even of the works which they create themselves . . . Folk poetry is thus a lower form of expression which must be subjected to the informed discursive intelligence before it becomes a great literature or 'real poetry.' (1981, unpaginated, quoted in Woods 2005, p.37)

Thus, this branch of blues scholarship replicates a highly subjective and suspect commitment to objectivity, positioning white academic research as an authority that affixes rigid and disempowering characterizations upon the living cultural tradition of the blues, a tradition that has radical critique at its core.

Black musicians have consistently resisted this fixity and subordination. In the time period considered here, roughly from WWII to the 1960s, when blues institutionalization was

underway, modernist black improvisational musicians resisted the unilateral way black music was positioned as assimilating *to* European music, instead drawing European music into a corpus of black music-making consisting of scalar, harmonic and rhythmic ingenuity.

6. Afro-Modernism: Urban Life and Global Struggle

This self-determination occurred in part through a reevaluation of "blue notes" away from their association with flattened thirds and sevenths. This occurred during a period of heightened cultural sensibilities that Ramsey calls Afro-modernism, which he defines in this way:

> For black politics and culture in America and internationally, the period between the 1940s and the 1960s was a watershed moment. The term "Afro-modernism" is useful to express many of the political, social, economic, and artistic changes that occurred, capturing all of the activities and social energies that made these times so dynamic and relevant. "Afromodernism" identifies how blacks throughout the world responded to the experience of modernity, globalism, and anticolonialism as well as to the expanded sense of artistic experimentation and visibility of black expressive culture. (Ramsey 2022 p. 134)

Central to this experimentation was the fact that "the music being produced right in the pocket of the blues aesthetic was undergoing changes that would cast a long shadow into the future." (Ramsey 2022, p. 146). Indeed, musicians and thinkers of this time period resisted the ways in which the associations between blue notes and black experience were becoming ossified.

For example, Magee (2007) analyzes the late 1940s and 1950s output of trumpeter Miles Davis as a paragon of bebop innovation. Magee argues that Davis and others were innovating the blues by downplaying blue notes while focusing on harmonic density and rapid virtuosic playing

characteristic of the bebop revolution. He points to the Davis composition “Sippin’ at Bells,” which is typical of complex harmonic overlay over the basic blues form, meant to showcase modernist bebop skill. Politically, Magee argues that this musical development included an attenuation of the “blues” notes, something that marked a distance from the plantation economy, and the loaded associations between place, social status, race and mood that black communities were negotiating at the time. Magee focuses on a famous anecdote from Miles Davis, who was a student at Julliard in the 1940s:

> At Juilliard Davis could not abide [by] his music history teacher, a white woman who, he claimed, insisted that black people played the blues “because they were poor and had to pick cotton.” …He remembered having risen in class and declared “I'm from East St. Louis and my father is rich, he's a dentist, and I play the blues. My father didn't never pick no cotton and I didn't wake up this morning sad and start playing the blues. (Magee 2007, p. 6).

In Miles's statement we can see how afro-modernism was a challenge to impositions on black music itself, including through an attempt to undo white ownership of the music in education, criticism and performance.

This artistic reclamation grappled with geographic plurality. Magee (2007, p. 27) positions Afro-modernism as something where “tradition and innovation, rural and suburban, south and north, [and the] downhome and cosmopolitan” meet. Magee argues that jazz musicians in the industrialized north were poised to put into music the shifting geographic realities of the black communities of which they were part. Bebop musicians – many of whom were born in the south, including Dizzy Gillespie (Cheraw, South Carolina), Thelonious Monk (Rocky Mount, North Carolina), and Yusef Lateef (Chattanooga, Tennessee) – were remaking the blues to

reflect the rapidly changing urban experiences of a growing number of black families who partook in the Great Migration. The new bebop blues, developed in places like Kansas City, New York, St. Louis, Chicago and Detroit, reflected places that were urbane, cosmopolitan, and the center of a rising black middle class. This urban geography gave the blues a new inflection that departed from the blues of the Delta.[7] At the same time, the realities of life up North still confronted families with pervasive casual and systemic anti-black racisms.

A Snapshot of Lateef's Early Years in Detroit, 1932-1959

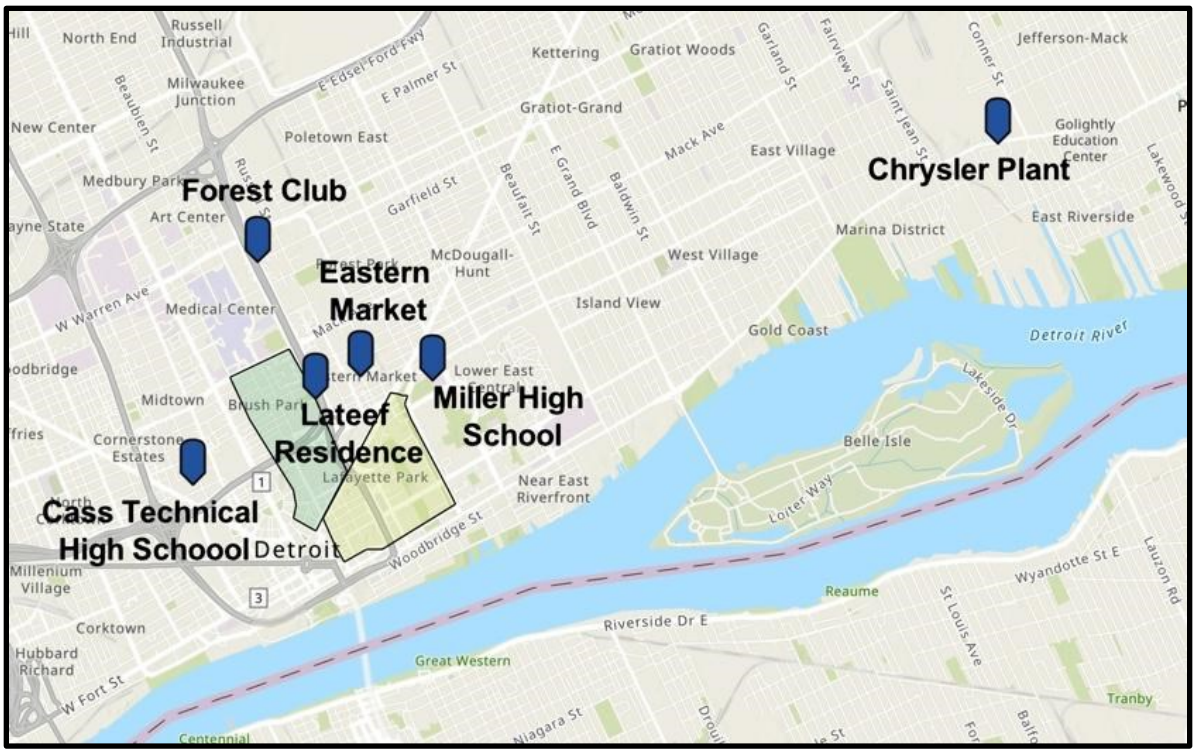

Figure 2. Map of Lateef's earlier years in Detroit, from approximately ages twelve to thirty-five. The green neighborhood is Paradise Valley, the lime green is Black Bottom, Detroit's two primary black neighborhoods. From left to right: Cass Technical High, alma mater to Ron Carter and Donald Byrd; Forest Club, one of the many venues Lateef performed at after high school; Lateef residence on Hastings St. on the demarcation line between Paradise Valley and the adjacent white neighborhood; Detroit's Eastern Market, where Lateef found an argol, a double reed instrument, at a Syrian spice shop; Miller High, Lateef's alma mater; and the Chrysler plant where Lateef worked in the early 1950s while gigging and taking classes at Wayne State University. Map by author.

[7] Another, and perhaps better-known thread, is the electrification of the Delta blues in places like Chicago, through the work of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and others associated with Chess Records and related labels.

In many ways, Lateef's own story follows the afro-modernist one. He was born in Chattanooga Tennessee in 1920 with the name William Huddleston, "not far from the neighborhood where [blues singer] Bessie Smith was born… and raised" (Lateef and Boyd 2006 p.1) His family first relocated to Ohio before settling in Detroit in 1925, where Lateef's father sought work in the automobile industry. The family settled in Paradise Valley, a neighborhood – in addition to Black Bottom – where most of Detroit's black families were concentrated. They relocated to 2424 Hastings Street when Lateef was twelve (Figure 2). This house was right on the demarcation line between black and white neighborhoods, a fact that caused Lateef some fear when Detroit's 1943 race riots broke out, which sent mobs of armed white youth into black neighborhoods. Though the immediate cause of the riots was attributed to a rumor that a white mob had killed a black woman and her baby on Belle Isle, deeper causes stemmed from unequal access to the war economy, lack of housing, and police brutality (Capeci and Wilkerson 1990). Like many Black families leaving the South, Lateef experienced a mix of promise as well as renewed confrontations with white supremacy.

On Hastings, Lateef was also surrounded by music. Detroit historian Herb Boyd writes, "From the standpoint of music, particularly the blues, there was no comparison to Hasting Street… the blues… emanated from every keyhole and peephole on Hastings…" (Boyd 2017, p. 3). Lateef's interest in music developed through listening to the radio, watching local bands, and through playing in the city's many Pentecostal churches (Lateef and Boyd 2006 p. 1-12). At Miller High, Lateef took lessons in oboe before adopting the tenor saxophone. Other notable alumni from Miller include vibraphonist Milt Jackson, his bassist brother Alvin, trombonist Frank Rosolino, and guitarist Kenny Burrell. Cass Tech and Northwestern were nearby schools that also produced world class musicians, such as Ron Carter and Donald Byrd (Cass Tech) and

Roy Brooks and Charles McPherson (Northwestern). After graduating high school Lateef started his first music gig in 1940. This decade also included a stint with the Dizzy Gillespie Orchestra.

By the early 1950s Lateef was working full time at the Chrysler Motor Car Company, taking night music classes at Wayne State where he studied music and absorbed the work of European classical composers such as Beethoven, Rachmaninoff, Sibelius, Respighi, Borodin and others (Lateef and Boyd 2006, p. 76). He was gigging and raising his two kids while working at the Chrysler plant in the lye tank and hood deck, extremely hard work that was usually reserved for black and nonwhite workers (Lateef and Boyd 2006 p. 62). Eventually, gigging replaced the factory line, with Lateef a regular at places such as the Blue Bird and Forest Club, and above all, Klein's Bar, where Lateef held a five-year residency as the house band leader. Lateef's first album, *Jazz Mood,* came in 1957 (at the age of 37 – old for many musicians of his era).

In 1948, Lateef converted to Ahmadiyya Islam, a sect of Islam that was started by Mirza Gulam Ahmad in 1889 in India. His attraction fits a larger trend of artists moved by a growing awareness of decolonial movements abroad and the African Diaspora in general. Black experimentalism engaged in a novel and rich mix of sound, spirituality and politics that reflected a growing awareness of black internationalism.

By the mid-20th century Ahmadiyya had spread globally. Of the movement Robin D.G. Kelley writes:

> By World War II, Harlem was home to several competing Islamic or 'proto-- Islamic' groups, although the Ahmadiyya mission, in particular, had become a magnet for young musicians politicized by racism, the proliferation of black nationalist movements, and the growing interest in Eastern spirituality. Black musicians found the Muslim Brotherhood

> attractive because it rede-fined so--called Negroes from a national minority to a world majority, embracing both Africa and Asia as part of a 'colored' world. It bestowed upon black American culture a sense of dignity and nobility that appealed to the creators of a new variant of modern jazz the press labeled 'bebop.' (Kelley 2012, p. 95)

As Kelley remarks, not all bebop musicians who converted to Ahmadiyya, like Art Blakey or Ahmad Jamal directly embraced Islamic music, "For most of these artists, conversion was primarily about worship, self-- discipline, and about changing one's identity, escaping the degradation of being 'Negro' in order to become human and, for better or worse, *exotic."* (Kelley 2012, p. 96) (emphasis in original) However, this wasn't entirely the case; Lateef and Abdul-Malik being notable exceptions, artists who mixed nonwestern musics into jazz. As producer Orrin Keepnews writes on Lateef's 1960 album *The Three Faces of Lateef,* "When Yusef embraced the Moslem religion, it was a whole-hearted move… More than perhaps any other jazzman-convert, he made use of Eastern themes, feeling, and even instrumentation in his playing" (Keepnews 1960).

In total, this brief survey of the Afro-modernist evolution of black music through the blues to bebop and beyond points the co-constitution of sound and space, in which changing geographic conditions were reflected in the music, as much novel musical approaches occasioned the continued conviviality of black music making. What follows is a deep dive into the peculiar way the blue note, as a half-step, reterritorialized sound and space alike, when used as a creative tool by Dr. Yusef Lateef.

By the 1950s Lateef was not only adopting the bebop innovations of afro-modernists like Charlie Parker or Miles Davis, he was actively developing, codifying and challenging them. Lateef's association with pianist Barry Harris best encapsulates the formalization period of his

approach to modern black music. Lateef considered Harris "the high priest of music in Detroit" and played with him frequently, including on what is perhaps Lateef's most famous album 1962's *Eastern Sounds* (Lateef and Boyd 2006, p. 66). The two also collaborated on Lateef's *Into Something* (1962), and on several Donald Byrd and Louis Hayes recordings. Born in Detroit in 1921, Harris was a mentor to many Detroit musicians, and would go on to record with Lateef, Cannonball Adderley, Illinois Jacquet, Lee Morgan and Hank Mobley. Later in life Harris gained increased recognition as an educator.

7. Afro-Modernism in Lateef and Barry Harris

I want to focus on Lateef and Harris's collaborations on scalar theory. Lateef credits Harris with exposing Lateef to the workings of the "Seventh Scale and how it related to chords" (Lateef and Boyd 2006, p. 68). Barry Harris did not invent the Seventh Scale alone, rather he derived it through close listenings to earlier beboppers, pianist Bud Powell and saxophonist Charlie Parker, whose playing exhibited a Seventh Scale tonality. With Harris's help Lateef would systemize the Seventh Scale in his 1979 *Method on How to Perform Autophysiopsychic Music.* In 1969 Lateef graduated from the Manhattan School of Music with a bachelor's in music with a major in flute. In 1970 he returned to teach. This *Method* was inspired by Lateef's interactions as a teacher there. Wanting to provide an easy but thorough introduction to playing autophysiopsychic music and the blues, Lateef breaks down several scales players use to improvise.

The main scale in question is the Seventh Scale is an Ionian or major scale, with a flattened seventh. In *Method,* Lateef offers students exercises for developing melodic ideas out of the scale, which are then applied to various blues progressions. Then, over the course of an additional six lessons, Lateef systematically modulates the Seventh Scale by placing a half step

note between different scale degrees. This offers a wider range of expressivity by gradually introducing denser chromatic language that can help students play over the bebop or modernist blues progressions Lateef presents in his manual. He marks these half-steps with an 'X.' They adopt the quality of "passing notes," notes moving between pitches, offering the soloist an expanded vocabulary for melodic movement (Figure 3).

Besides presenting a diversity of blues forms, Lateef explores harmony in another way. He urges students to learn each triad and seventh chord built out of the seventh scale (Lateef 1979 p.8). Meaning, if you take every other alternating note from the Seventh Scale and play them at once, you get a triad, a basic harmonic building block. Add the next alternating note and you get a seventh chord (C-E-G-Bb in a C Seventh Scale). Now move up a whole step to D, and

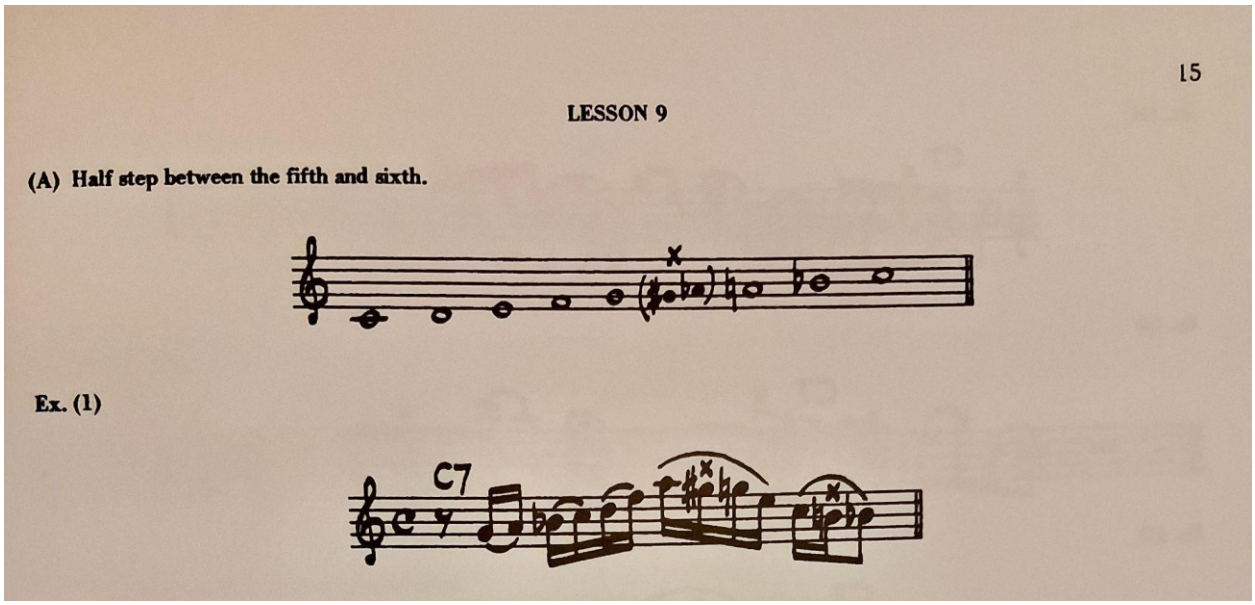

Figure 3. Lesson 9 from Lateef's *Method On How To Perform Autophysiopsychic Music* (1979, p. 15). Lateef inserts a half-step in Barry Harris's scale to create a richer chromatic language for soloing. The half-step insertion also creates new harmonic language when the scale is harmonized. Photo by author.

you can build the next chord from the scale: D-F-A-C. Then E-G-Bb-D, F-A-C-E and so on (Figure 4).

Lateef does not ask students to harmonize the Seventh Scale alterations that he presents. However, this is a common practice that follows Barry Harris's own harmonization methods (Rees 1998). Harris is widely known for his meticulous and elegant approach to harmonizing. Take the Seventh Scale with the flattened Sixth added (Lateef 1979 Lesson 9, p. 15), and, for the sake of argument, harmonize the chord with the sixth degree instead of the seventh, so starting with C-E-G-A instead of C-E-G-Bb (this is the standard Harris approach). The chords you get by building harmony from this scale become: C-E-G-A, D-F-Ab-Bb, E-G-A-C, F-Ab-Bb-D, G-A-C-E, Ab-Bb-D-F. A close reader will note that these are simply two chords alternating – C-E-G-A (also called a C6 chord), and Bb-D-F-Ab (a Bb7 chord). Though their notes are rearranged (inverted) their "quality" remains the same. This symmetry gives the player access to a fluid

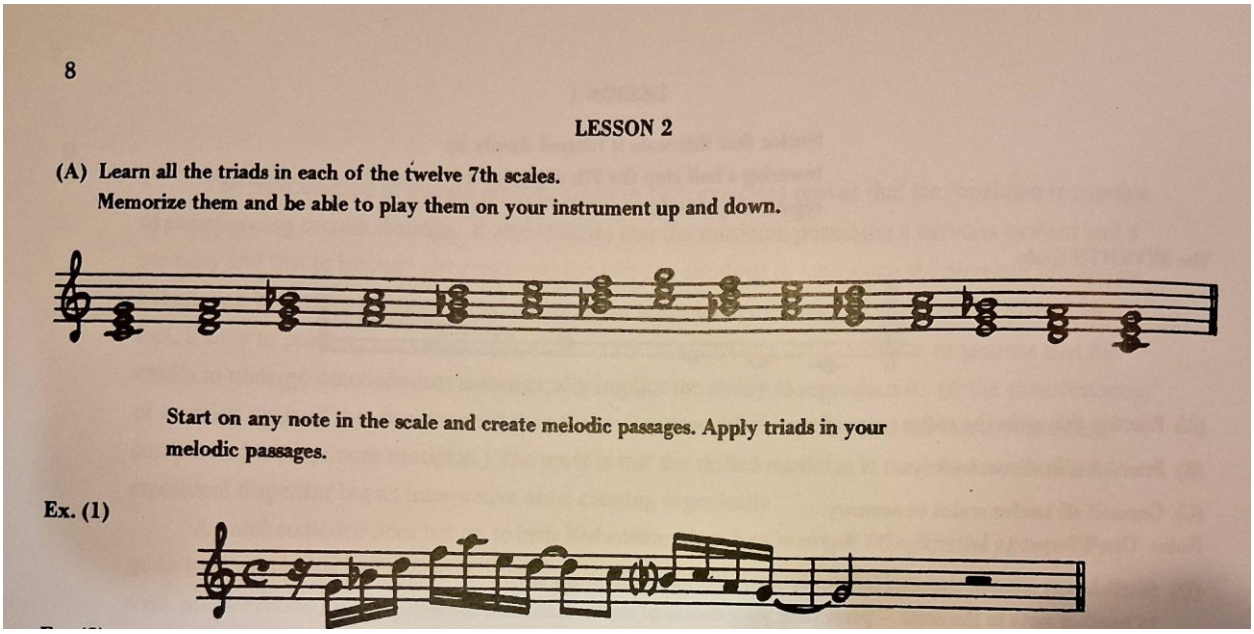

Figure 4. Lesson 2 from Lateef's *Method On How To Perform Autophysiopsychic Music* (1979, p. 8) depicted a common method for harmonizing scales, which Lateef would use, sometimes stacking scales in this manner to create novel triads. Photo by author.

approach to harmonic movement and melodic development. Harris's system is perhaps most well-known for harmonizing a slightly different scale, one in which Harris keeps the flattened sixth while raising the flattened seventh back up to its major position (C-D-E-F-G-G#-A-B) (Rees 1998). In this case, the built harmony looks like this: C-E-G-A, D-F-Ab-B, E-G-A-C, F-Ab-B-D and so on. This means alternating between a C6 chord with a diminished chord. This alternation perhaps provides even more fluid movement than the example given in this paper, given the diminished chord's ability to modulate to different key centers, opening up the improviser's path towards harmonic change with an almost exponential variability. It also positions the half-step not necessarily a "rub" against diatonic scales, but as an engine for functional harmony that is drawn from European harmony but recentered in an afrological approach to improvisation and composition.

Lateef's association with Harris situates him in the center of Afro-modernist reappraisals of the blues. The half-step expands the vocabulary of the blues beyond "dissonance," towards a proliferation of both chromatic melodic ideas and harmonic complexity. In this way, the half-step draws out a sonic-geography that spans the Delta with the urban.

8. The Half-Step in "Exotic" Scales

Urbane sonorities are found in Yusef Lateef's track "Plum Blossom," off of 1962's *Eastern Sounds,* with an added "exotic" coloration. On this track, one of Lateef's most well-known, the composer plays a simple five note melody on a Chinese globular flute called the xun, which he found in New York's Chinatown. Bassist Eddie Farlow plays the rabat, a Middle Eastern string instrument, creating a one note ostinato on the instrument. The song alternates between two chords, A7 and B half diminished over F. The simple alternation of

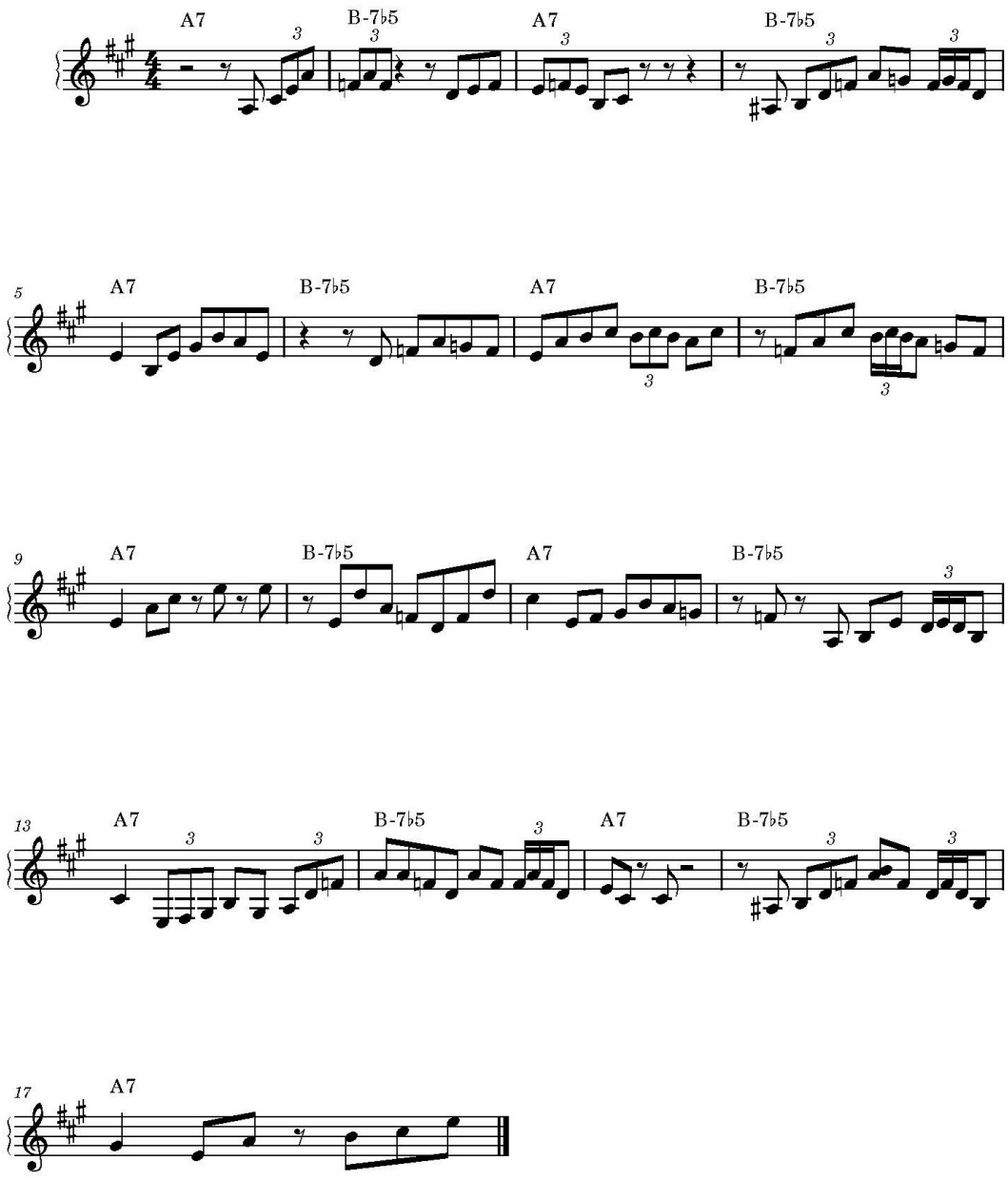

Figure 5. Author transcription of first thirteen measures of Barry Harris's solo on "Plum Blossom" of off *Eastern Sounds* (1962) by Lateef. Here Harris demonstrates mix of modal and bebop language with slight exotic overtones, especially in the use of the flattened 6th. Interestingly, Harris inverts common, earlier depictions of the blue note as playing the flattened 7th over a major diatonic tonality. Here, in measures 5, 11, 13, 17, he plays a major 7th in his solo, on top of the flattened seventh in the harmony.

chords places the tune in line with modal experiments happening at the time (associated most strongly with Miles Davis' 1959 album, *Kind of Blue).* This modal character is accentuated by the Rabat's continual pulse on the A tonic note, which also adds an "exotic" character. Barry Harris's solo is full of the "linear, elegant" Detroit piano sound (Lateef and Boyd 2006, p. 105), running through Seventh Scale variations that accent both the flattened 6th and the leading tone between the flattened 7th and the tonic. Interestingly, Harris's choice to play this leading tone over a dominant chord (measures 5, 11, 13, 17), which includes the flattened 7th, not the natural 7th, inverts standard "blue note" characterizations as being the flattened 7th rubbing against the natural. The opposite is the case here. The flattened 6th also gives the solo a slightly "exotic" feel (Figure 5).

Lateef would dive into exotic scales more fully in his monumental *Repository of Scales and Melodic Patterns* from 1981, which features over nearly a hundred scales and scale types; accompanying practice patterns, as well as small etudes and compositions demonstrating the scales in action. It includes several pages devoted to the Seventh Scale – and much more. It was inspired in part by Nicolas Slonimsky's 1947 *Thesaurus of Scales and Patterns,* a tome that circulated widely among jazz players, and may have inspired John Coltrane's tune "Giant Steps" (Waters 2010). The *Repository* shares Slonimsky's interest in contemporary European modernism, for example, in their shared exploration of twelve-tone patterns (page 142 in the *Repository* explores tone rows from Alban Berg's Violin Concerto). Lateef's reach is wider, and includes scales compiled from various global musics, featuring Chinese, Mongolian, Greek, Japanese, East Indian, Pygmy, Hungarian, Egyptian, Arabian and Persian scales. As in *Method,* Lateef honors Barry Harris for whom he "owe[s] an especially heavy debt of gratitude [for]... introduc[ing] me to his concept of improvisation based on the seventh scale." Lateef also

acknowledges lesser-known bassist Steve Neil for acquainting him with the seventeen-tone Arabian scale. Other musicians appear in the work: saxophonist Eric Dolphy's synthetic scales are included. Additionally the book's opening pages feature a famous diagram John Coltrane gifted to Lateef, which details the circle of fifths. The *Repository* represents Lateef's codification of a musical effort born out of the collective ingenuity of his peers and mentors. Besides these attributions, Lateef does not trace the origins to most of the scales. Their veracity cannot be taken at face value as representing national or regional cultures. Rather, they reflect Lateef's imaginative desire – one that existed at a cross section where the wider norms of Orientalist fantasy met Lateef's transnational effort to compile and compare various world music cultures, a move that provincialized European scalar dominance while replicating European depictions of its Others.

The half-step is not mobilized as legibly as it is in the *Methods,* in which Lateef clearly inserts it to generate various autophysiopsychic vehicles for improvisation. However, the *Repository* reproduces some common associations between the half-step, place and identity that have long circulated in the Western imagination, especially in relation to "exotic" locales. For Derek Scott, alterations of the minor and augmented second interval make for *the* primary musical signifiers of foreignness. Scott traces the mobilization of the half-step in European concert music to represent Turkish, Gypsy, Hungarian, Peruvian and Spanish cultures, in a cultural milieu that was largely Orientalist. That is, Western composers from Mozart to Liszt to Berlioz have made use of the half-step to attach mystery, strangeness, sensuality and spirituality across a range of colonized Others. For example, the Phrygian mode, with its half-step between the first and second scale degree, has so become associated with a "Spanish" tonality that "a

guitarist today can quickly and easily suggest Spain by playing a vigorous rhythm on the chord changes E major to F major to G major and back again" (Scott 1998, p. 319).[8]

Lateef's own music could be read through the lens of Orientalism. This is especially true when consumed alongside certain visual representations, as in the cover to *Prayer to East,* which features a cobra rearing its head, or in the use of Papyrus-type fonts, as in *Eastern Sounds*. However, to map this colonial power relationship onto Afro-Asian encounters is potentially problematic, as Powell argues (2020 p.3). Certainly, European music has sought to replenish itself through its Others (Kahn 1999 chapter 2) but the realities of musical sharing in the wider Afro-Asian milieu trouble frameworks that might reduce all power dynamics to a unilateral politics of Orientalism. Rather, such efforts to connect sonic geographies – even through fantasy – can and should be read more subtly, as attempts at solidarity that may in fact unsettle dominant music structures or cultural norms (Powell 2020). For example, consider the song "Oasis" off of the 1967 *Golden Flute,* which contains an exotic tonality. It was inspired by Lateef's own visit to Saudi Arabia to complete the Hajj, and evokes his impression of the Saudi desert landscape. As per the discussion on Ahmadiyya above, this piece could be read as part of Lateef's search for cultural and spiritual grounding outside of the white establishment even if it trafficked in some of its common tropes.

Moreover, to reduce exchange to appropriation alone risks denying the agency of musicians in relatively lesser positions of power who may be navigating a difficult musical terrain that is not entirely in their control. For example, it is interesting that Lateef, who eschewed the term jazz, labelled his own music exotica, at times. His archives at Vanderbilt

[8] The augmented second is perhaps more aligned with Western musical Orientalism than even the minor second, or half-step (Scott 1998). That said, the augmented second generates two half-steps, as between the tonic and the minor second with the major third and fourth, or also commonly between the fifth and minor sixth with another between the major seventh and the tonic.

carry several original scores and handwritten manuscripts that appear to be retroactive documents of his work.[9] For example, his lead sheet for "Ching Miau" (*Eastern Sounds,* 1962) calls for a "Medium Exotic Rhythm." Lateef also labels his pieces "Jungle Fantasy" (*The Centaur and the Phoenix,* 1962) and "Luxor*" (Live at the 20th Montreux Detroit Jazz Festival, with Eternal Wind,* 1999*)* "exotica." Clearly there was an embrace of the exotic and exotica as a sound, perhaps in an effort to get his music an audience. The *Repository* may also be interpreted as inverting the center of musical "expertise," reclaiming it from the white establishment and European musical norms. Noticeably absent is the blues scale itself, suggesting that Lateef was striving towards a global vision of scales in which each is a vehicle for expressing the blues. Indeed "Plum Blossom" and the *Repository* suggest that Lateef was interested in the continuity between Afro and Asian and modernist tonalities, seeking points of connection above and beyond creating strict categorizations. We move on sounds that approach an atonal palette. Interestingly, this palette emerges in part out of the exotic.

9. Recombinations of the Exotic

An interesting reterritorialization of the Oriental occurs when Lateef harmonizes his exotic scales. For example, on page 117 of the *Repository,* Lateef lists three scales, the Iraq (Arabian Scale), the Isfahan (Arabian Scale), and the Hebrew Scales. The first and third of these sales rely on half-step intervals between the first and second scale degrees, conforming to the unity of association between the half-note and "the Orient." However, the "clarity" of these sonic-spatial imaginaries is obscured when Lateef pursues a specific harmonic technique. Recall that in the *Method,* Lateef asks his students to harmonize the Seventh Scale. In the *Repository,*

[9] As he writes that this composition is from the *CD Eastern Sounds*, it is clear this lead sheet was written some decades after *Eastern Sounds* was released on vinyl in 1962.

Lateef harmonizes these three scales *atop* each other. These create shifting, open and angular type sonorities, specifically: Eb-G-C#; Fb-A-D; G-Bb-F#; Bb-D-G; Cb-Eb-A; Db-F-B; Eb-F#-C; Fb-G-C#. He does a similar thing to the Seventeen Arabian Scale, shown to him by bassist Steve Neil. This scale is non-sequential – it moves up and down the octave. Its opening three notes are the same as the opening three notes in the Hebrew scale higher up on the page. He harmonizes the scale with a retrograde (backward) version of itself.

Lateef's archives point to more techniques he pursued in reterritorializing scales, in this case through the use of matrices. Instead of presenting single linear scales, matrices arrange several transpositions of the same scale along an X-Y axis, providing a decision tree for note selection that offers players two to four options for sequential note selection, based on their position in the matrix. For example, in Figure 6 he "matricizes" the Egyptian scale, in which the notes across represent the scale, and the notes going down are transposed in sequence moving up a tritone and down a major third for most of the matrix. Adam Rudolph, Lateef's percussionist and collaborator, worked with Lateef to develop matrices, and says the pair were inspired by the use of matrices in the works of serial composer Schoenberg and post-serialist Toru Takamitsu (Rudolph 2022, personal communication, August 21, 2024). Scalar rerouting and recombination are also detectable in "Meditation III." Consider the synthesizer bassline that runs throughout the piece. It appears to work through a non-repeating kind of tone pattern. If you abstract the bassline by sequencing the notes linearly up the staff and getting rid of repeated notes, the scale matches this one: C-D-E-F-F#-G-G#-A-A# (Figure 7). While this is not a scale in Lateef's *Repository,* it is possible to conceive of this scale as three Japanese tetrachords stacked one on

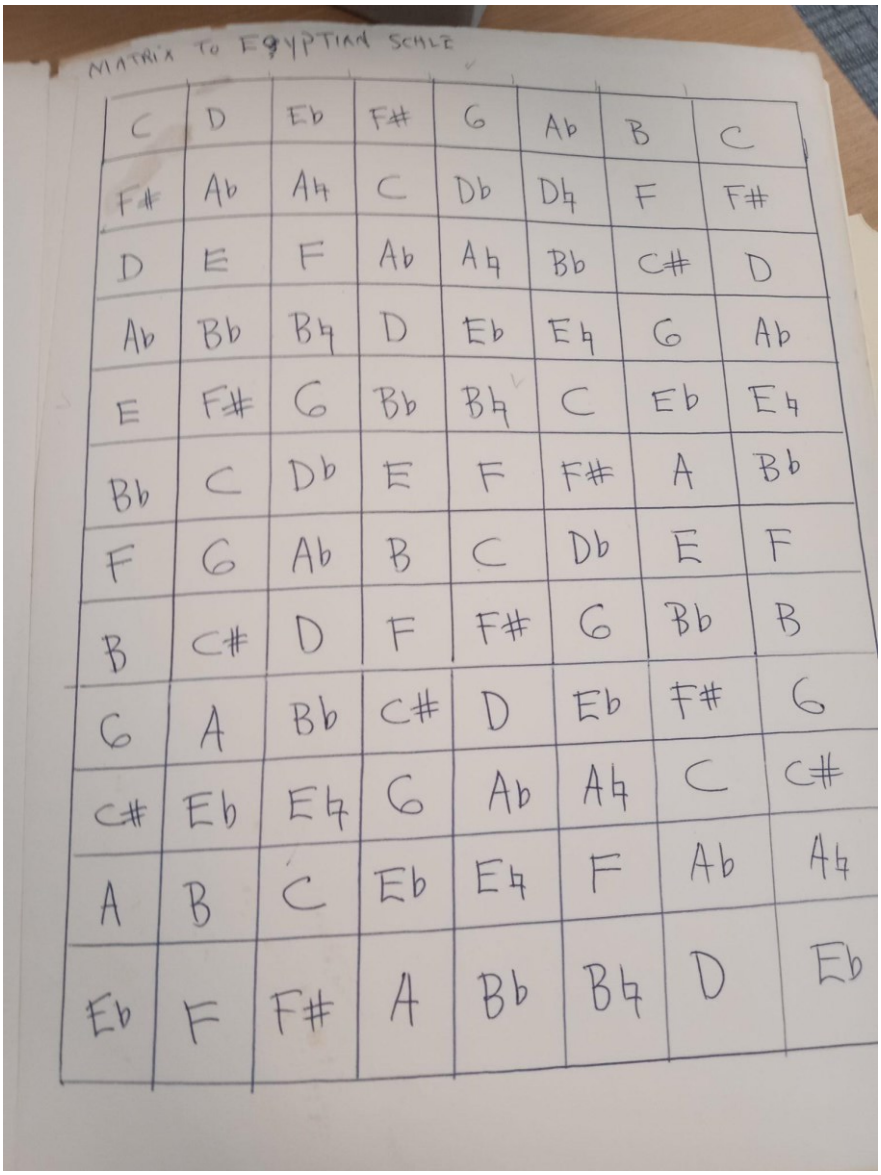

Figure 6. Matrix built out of the Egyptian scale. In matrices such as these, performers are instructed to play only notes that are adjacent to each other. The matrix is inspired in part by serialists and post-serialists including Arnold Schoenberg and Toru Takemitsu. Matrix housed at the Vanderbilt University Yusef A. Lateef Archives, photo by author.

top of the other: F-F#-A#-C; G-G#-C-D; A-A#-D-E. A tetrachord is simply the first four notes of a typically eight note scale, and Lateef explores tetrachord stacking, including for his Japanese scale, on pages 227 through 236 in his work. The “Meditations III” bassline, as complex and

angular as it is, does not *have* to be conceived as tetrachord stacking, but such a methodology was certainly present for Lateef, as he pursued his methodological intervallic recombinations.

By folding, stacking and harmonizing musical scales that signify "the Orient," Lateef begins to build a harmonic language that is atonal and ambiguous, delinking these scales from their geographies. These more obscure tonalities became most prevalent in Lateef's later work, starting with 1987 *Yusef Lateef's Little Symphony*, which also heralds a time period in which Lateef made ample use of electronics and studio effects, and encompasses *Concerto for Yusef*

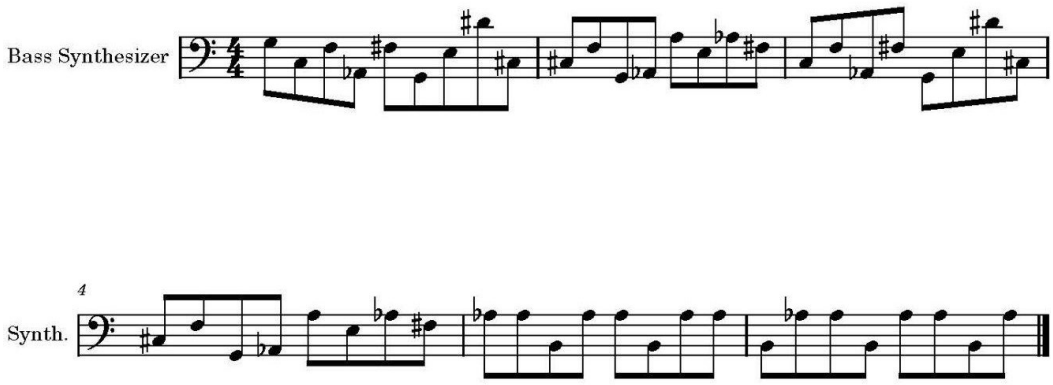

Figure 7. "Atonal" bassline from "Meditations III," from *Meditations* (1990). The scale from this bassline, if the notes are placed sequentially from C, would be C-D-E-F-F#-G-G#-A-A#. It is possible to conceive of this scale as three stacked Japanese tetrachords (F-F#-A#-C; G-G#-C-D; A-A#-D-E), a compositional technique Lateef develops on pages 227 through 236 in his *Repository* (1981).

Lateef (1988), *Nocturnes* (1989), and *Meditations* (1990) and *Yusef Lateef's Encounters* (1991). Consider the brief expert from the end of Movement One: Larghissimo off of *Yusef Lateef's Little Symphony.* The passage occurs at 6:50 minutes into the song. Lateef's melody harkens to bebop and swing language. First outlining an Ab minor tonality with an intervallic pattern, the chromatic approach from Ab to G to Gb to F suggests a ii-V to Db7 in Gb. However, the synth

harmonies underneath, a EbM7#5 to a G+/Db then to an Ab-/Db point to harmonies that, in a traditional bebop setting, might be considered clashing, but here represent Lateef's harmonic explorations and interests (Figure 8). Note this composition is preceded also by a flute solo using the Egyptian scale, and ends with a brief, complex electronic soundscape.

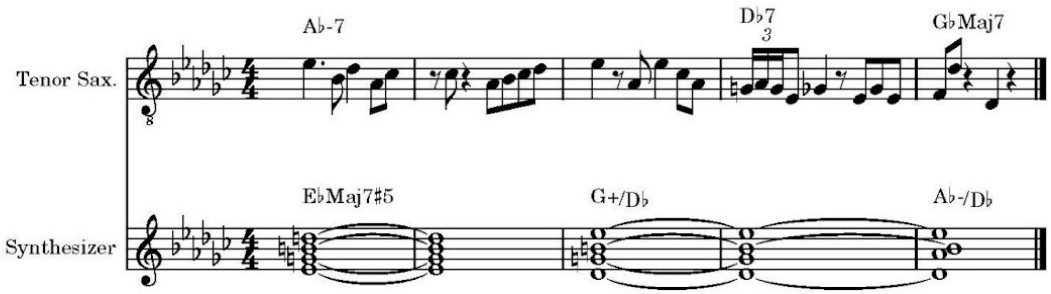

Figure 8. The synthesizer plays more adventurous harmonies while Lateef's solo harkens to more traditional bebop and swing language. I've included the implied harmonies above Lateef's solo with the played harmonies of the synth, to show how Lateef was superimposing and combining different musical languages.

In the *Little Symphony* liner notes, the half-step reappears in a new futuristic setting, where pitches adopt personalities. I refer to the liner notes for *Little Symphony,* which details a surreal story of three pitches hovering in space together. I've reproduced the first paragraphs, which makes for about a fifth of the whole text. Notice the pitches in question are a "half-step" apart:

> Three pitches are sounding along a street. They sound side by side, affecting each other by their timbre. They are about a half-step apart and probably the same loudness: higher than 500 hertz. The one in the center, moreover, is slightly louder than the other two.

> Except for these three pitches, the sum is quiet. The buildings are fairly old, uncared for, free of paint and window panes, drooping sadly from deterioration which seems unending to the eye.
>
> … There is not a single overtone in the phase relations of the components. Nor is there any vibrato. The duration is sustained, without a trace of decay.

Later in the text, the three pitches start speaking to each other, remarking on an encroaching pair of pink and white noises:

> 'It's the frequency shifter,' says the pitch on the left. The white noise sounds on their right. When the white noise decays, they hear nothing further. The three pitches still sound side by side, affecting each other by their timbre. In front of them the pink noise, only a few modulations away, is suddenly overcome by a voltage controlled amplifier. The pink noise reverberates and decays. …
>
> …'Maybe it isn't the modulator,' says the middle pitch, 'maybe we didn't hear the pink noise, before…'
>
> 'We would have heard it the same as the white noise,' answers the pitch on the left side.

This piece, in which three pitches hover almost spirit-like in a decayed urban setting is also found, in a slightly different version, in Lateef's 1988 novella, *Night in the Garden of Love* (1988). The difference in the book version is that it is situated in the life-story of one of the work's protagonists, Mr. Scorpii, who works at a recycling plant (echoing Lateef's work in the Chrysler Plant). One day, leaving the plant, he stops by the side of the street to pick some flowers for his wife. It's then that he encounters the three pitches hovering like orbs in the street. Lateef adds a few more details on the pitches in the story version:

> So the triadal sound extends always farther and seems at the same time to grow purer, to vary in intensity, to blend with each other. This spiritualizes the street throughout its length and comes to an ubiquitous state in a natural movement everywhere, occurring as if in an angelic position – the consonant sounding and reverberation of three vibrato-less pitches.

I want to highlight three things. First, Lateef describes three half-step pitches side by side as "consonant" and "angelic." Recall earlier discussions of the blue note half-step as "dissonant," or "aberrant." Here Lateef brings harmonic alterity into angelic consonance, one that "spiritualizes" the street.

Second, the story suggests that the three pitches "blend" with each other. In contrast, elsewhere in the story, the pitches maintain autonomy. At times, each pitch is presented as having *no* effect on the other: "Nor… are they marginally excited by each other's frequencies" (p.25). Yet at other times they seem "appear as if integrated" (p.25) and "blend" (p.25). Ultimately, the story reconciles the tension by maintaining the pitch differences *and* their unity: "The three pitches, different in essence, now sound alike." As the story concludes, Scorpii "gathers his last white flower," while "On the right, on the street, three pitches, about a half step apart and always of the same purity, endure" (p.28). It is as if the notes hover between harmonic unity and melodic autonomy.

This futuristic and dreamlike story, in which pitches talk and listen while "insects – now flying, buzzing, now crawling –... advance around them," toys with pitches as being alive, in constant concatenation with each other. It also potentially reflects Lateef's deepened engagement with African musics. *Yusef Lateef's Little Symphony* was his first record after a four year stay in Nigeria, studying music there. When relaying my interpretation of this story to Adam Rudolph,

he suggested that it was wiser to think of the blue note as a *pitch area,* rather than a discrete interval (personal communication, July 2nd, 2025). Rudolph cites Kubik's text 1999 *Africa and the Blues,* in which Kubik suggests the blue note emerges out of a cluster of potentialities that gravitate around zones within a scale, but do not have predetermined frequencies on it, a modality he links to both blues musicians and African musical cultures (e.g., Zande music from the Central African Republic). Batya Sobel, oboist and student of Lateef's at Hampshire College, also gestured towards nonwestern music in our discussion of the half-step, highlighting the collapse between pitch and harmony in Lateef's use of the argol and other nonwestern musics. The argol has two double reeds, giving it a very rich and thick sound, so that "no matter what you do, it's blaring out minor second chords at all times" (personal communication, May 28, 2025) You can hear this on Lateef's 2010 album with percussionist Adam Rudolph. The first track is titled and opens with Rudolph playing a driving groove on the sintir, a three stringed lute associated with the Gnawa people of Morocco. Next enters Lateef, who alternates between playing the umsthingo flute and singing the blues lines: "I'm gonna catch the first train, I'm gonna catch the first train, never feel the same, what you say?" The piece is carried through by swelling string arrangements by Rudolph. The flute playing feels neither harmonic nor melodic, instead, it vocalizes tightly packed pitch clusters. It is important that the flute's complex note clusters, like a harmonica's, almost resemble those of a train horn, tying Lateef's African and futuristic explorations with blues mobility and culture.

10. Conclusion

Lateef was an evolutionary thinker, constantly striving to remake his music so that he could express himself while reflecting times and places in which he found himself. When he was awarded the New Age Grammy in 1987, he was not familiar with the genre *per se*, but welcomed

the phraseology: his music had always been about the "new age," which is why he rejected the term jazz. It had become ossified. A summary of Lateef's experiments with the half-step confirms this creative drive. First, the half-step is presented in a traditional branch of blues scholarship, including in Woods' *Arrested Development,* as a half-step "rub" against European diatonicism, painting sonic colors that speak to the contradictions of Delta life. By the forties and fifties, modern jazz musicians like Miles Davis and Charlie Parker were expanding the harmonic and melodic language of the blues, to build a sound that was both urban and rural, often by attenuating the "bluesiness" of the blues. Lateef, with his mentor and collaborator Barry Harris, systematized some of this new language by repositioning the half-step, not as a point of dissonance, but as a key that unlocked smooth voice-leading possibilities with a firm footing in European harmony, but expanding it. Lateef explicitly positioned this development as the blues.

Lateef's interest in global musics utilized scales in which, historically, the half-step – particularly between the tonic and the flattened second signifies "the Orient." At the same time, Lateef's formal experiments – harmonizing, folding, and matricizing scales – detached these scales from any overdetermined geographic signification, leading Lateef towards more atonal soundscapes, influenced in part by European modernism. Lateef was also drawn to half-step clusters, perhaps motivated by his visit to Nigeria. African musical cultures, like the blues, emphasize pitch areas rather than discrete intervallic relationships. Lateef considers all of these explorations the blues, not as an "aberration" to European or, likewise, jazz norms, but as a central driving idiom in the pursuit of autophysiopsychic expression. As Lateef writes in *The Method,*

> From an observation of the world's known musical forms it is evident that the Blues has duly taken its place among the many noble forms such as the Motet, Chorale, Concerto

> Grosso, Sonata Allegro, etc. The Blues form is simply a canvas for the performer to paint his/her musical picture, a mold into which the musician spontaneously pours his/her creative energy. The melody, harmony and rhythm will be directly proportionate to the autophysiopsychic ability of the performer. (Lateef 1979 p. 4)

Thus, rather than codifying the blue note, Lateef viewed notes as mechanisms for survival, imagination and expression that congealed overlapping real and virtual spaces.

Returning to a black sense of place, it is first of all clear that Lateef resisted the marginalization of black music as an ethnic particularity. Through his own prodigious output and codification attempts, such as the *Repository,* he brought European practices into the blues idiom. His vision was also global. In this, the half-note both mobilizes and is mobilized by a black sense of place, in which emplacement is in a dynamic relationship with relocation and mobility. Lateef was deeply interested in and committed to the roots of his music, whether planted in the Delta, in Detroit or in Africa. These roots were both grounding and rhizomatic, nourished on all the musics that spoke to Lateef's heart, ranging from serialism to Japanese shakuhachi. He was also an evolutionary thinker, but not a linear one, often revisiting parts of more traditional idioms while rarely returning to old forms in their entirety. For example, the "First Movement: Larghissimo" from *Little Symphony,* contains use of the Egyptian Scale on flute, half-step note clusters played on synthesizer, and a bebop inspired tenor sax solo.

My analysis of the half-step was motivated by and I hope, reflects, Lateef's own deployment of this interval. But both Rudolph and Jones warned against typifying Lateef's music too strongly in that direction. Ultimately, Lateef's music is about living an engaged and spiritually grounded life. Music is a pathway towards spirituality (Lateef 1979). For Lateef, a

devout Muslim, this entailed learning to speak from one's whole self as a way to relate with others. As such, the half-step is only a tool. As Marcelo told me,

> So he had the blues, the bebop intervals, and he just, instead of copying the sound of these things, he implemented the structures behind the music, you know, more than the actual music itself… what he was really doing was getting to the core of this music, the spirit of this stuff, you know, right? (personal communication, July 5th, 2025)

For Lateef, this "core" was centered on the heart. If I had to sum up his approach to music and life it'd be this: "love while there is time… the heart… beats and bleeds within the chest, it whispers, it speaks the truth – listen!" (Lateef, N.D.). A devout Muslim and spiritual practitioner, Lateef was a religious seeker. Note that part of his conversion to Ahmadiyya, Lateef adopted his known name: "I took Yusef after the prophet Joseph, and Lateef means gentle, amiable and incomprehensible" (Lateef and Boyd 2006 P. 61). Indeed, Lateef's musical career dwelt in a constant contact with his own indecipherability, something reanimated again and again through sound. This self-expression troubled any easy Cartesian, objective or sociological view of space or identity. As Ralph Jones relayed to me, Lateef was known to ask, "where is here?" Another phrase that Jones offered me was this: "I feel so good, I must have the blues." Together, these suggest a link between the blues' emotive power – its ability to hold multiple feelings at once – and Yusef's compositional ability to evoke multiple places at once.

I pursued the half-note to also demonstrate how small a piece of musical materiality could explode into various sonorous spaces. Wright et al (2024) view the need for interdisciplinarity for black geographies as coming from the long-accumulated histories of black communities forging alternative spatialities to white supremacy. It is quite possible that compositional space within music – the space between notes, for example – provides clues for

enlivening black geographies. However, this is not a call to make music more transparent. Musical precision might, in contrast, elude the capacities of geography's routinized epistemologies, keeping in mind that music has troubled capture by the written word (Abbate 2004). I would posit that rather than position music against geography as competing regimes of expertise, a compositional approach could, for starters, engage actual composers in verbal dialogue as partners in interdisciplinary thought experimentation.

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CONCLUSION: AUTOPHYSIOPSYCHIC GEOGRAPHIES?

This dissertation explored the relationship between the self, healing and race in three musical contexts. In each of these discussions the music twists subjectivity in loops that extend it outwards as much as they draw it inward. In the intro I suggested the term "condivergent" to signal this relationship between space, sound and subjectivization.

In each exploration, this kind of movement is presented by the artists at hand as healing, in the way it modulates and reunites the body, the mind, the spirit, and the earth. For Halpern low level brainwaves tether consciousness to the planet, in *Pure Moods,* the return to childhood innocence is tied to a vividness that parlays into global multiculturalism, and for Lateef, the smallest interval does work to create various nested spatial imaginaries wherein therapeutic forms of self-expression have room to play. These are expressions of the spirit that animate a black sense of place that elides geography's tendency to affix place and identity to one another. As Adam Rudolph put it: "and the fact of the matter is between C and C sharp is infinity."

Across these explorations, not every claim to heal does, in fact, heal, or that the healing presented is uncomplicated, so that while music might induce soothing, solace, connection, or critique, it might also induce dissociation and escapism, or also entitlement and proprietary ownership. Music even troubles pitting these terms against one another. By holding this complexity, I have not positioned music as redemptive. The condivergent is not reconcilable to any predetermined political or spiritual promise. It keeps a space open for viewing (or hearing) the comings and goings of otherwise irreconcilable political, spatial, affective and subjective orientations.

Consider the tensions inherent in working for structural transformation. In *Radical Dharma,* Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens and Jasmine Syedullah put it this way,

"our healing cannot wait until the structures acquiesce, are dismantled, or come undone. We must take a seat" (Williams et al 2016, 19). Rejecting a binary, linear opposition between common struggle and personal healing, they write,

> Each community possesses, as Gandhi offered, a piece of the truth, of Dharma. When we seek the embodiment of these truths [the need to "take a seat"], giving ourselves permission to be more honest, more healed, more whole, more complete— when we become radical—neither the path of solely inward-looking liberation nor the pursuit of an externalized social liberation prevails; rather a third space, as-yet-unknown, emerges.

Turning away from the either/or of personal versus social transformation they make room for a "third space, as-yet-unknown" that is called into frame by the body's own spontaneous yearnings. This wholeness does not reach for a pure, finished, subject, but rather a desire to be alive to what exists, "to investigate what our lives depend on," which is not necessarily an easy or always pleasant process – rather, it is one that, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes, "would prompt me to unlearn myself." (2020 p.x). Can the imaginative, affective and perceptual power of music's simultaneous inward and outward drawing power enliven a concept of healing in which there is room for both tending to one's interior and tending to the external world without presuming what either is?

Spurred on by this intuition, my research led me to places where healing strained against quick fixes and automatic – that is to say, capitalist, individualist and white supremacist – ways of relating to the world. The first two chapters weighed the relationships between self and healing against the gravitational pull of neoliberal individuation. Chapter one focused on the possibility of rest given the pressures of post-Fordist forms of labor under the attention economy. Rest has been proposed as a way to sense into the knowledges and healing capacities that

overwork and various forms of oppression smother or override. However, the normalization of neoliberal individualism captures rest for labor recuperation. I weigh these contrasting uptakes of rest through an examination of the work and biography of Steven Halpern and his use of entrainment. On one hand, entrainment provides an imaginary for delinking states of consciousness from capitalist enervation. However, the uptake of entrainment also contributes to the cruel optimism of neoliberalism, endowing individuals with near magical powers that recenter the individual as the source of overcoming exhaustion. This approach is bound to fall short. Furthermore, the uptake of entrainment and healing music runs the risk of pathologizing states of unrest, or "dis-ease," contributing to ableist narratives in which ease is prioritized above all else and the individual is blamed for their unwellness.

In chapter two I explored the compilation *Pure Moods Vol. 1,* which presents its own version of holism of the self as a subtle legitimation of forms of power and coercion. In this piece, the self, innocence and whiteness merge under the guise of multiculturalism, which masks relations of domination in the global (music) economy. My main focus, however, is on critical geographical characterizations of innocence itself, which present it mainly as an evasion of guilt. Instead, I suggest that bliss, through feelings of universality, connectedness and vividness, also help congeal white innocence. My hope is that this insight can offer finer tools for dismantling white innocence. In particular, I draw connections between bliss, shame, and aggression, suggesting that bliss becomes shame and aggression through an over-identification with the self. I ask if bliss itself can subvert the self, and the white innocence.

Part of my effort in this chapter was to show how the onto-affective felt-sense of innocence both cuts across inflections in subjective comportment that are all "white" but not all the same: in Du Bois' telling, white attachment to innocence, when challenged, flies into a rage,

whereas readings of more liberal dis/attachments to whiteness often result in a withdrawal into shame. The singling out of liberal white innocence is not to elevate it against more aggressive forms. The opposite is the case: there is a continuity. This is the point of Melamed's critique of multiculturalism – it is functionally white supremacist (Melamed 2011). To fully fledge out this possibility today, however, would require a return to the political-economic conditions of the moment, in which neoliberal multiculturalism is under threat from both far-right identitarian movements and the left (Cornelissen 2025). *Pure Moods* represents a post-Cold War moment that for the West that is arguably gone. As an assemblage, it presents a particular scaffolding that can serve as a point of comparison for current and future mutations of white innocence.

The mainstreaming of today's far right also calls for an analysis of fascist elements within sonic entrainment practices. There is a long association between wellness, "naturalness," and Darwinian notions of bodily perfectibility that gel well with fascist ideologies (Blei 2017, Edgley and Brisset 1990). To be clear, neither Halpern, Bentov or Meyer endorse fascist ideas. This is not meant to suggest that in any way. But their ideas do resonate. A history of the fascist elements of yoga puts it this way,

> fascist ideas of the perfected body and earth generated enduring cultural memes for holism, embodied spirituality, and health. Those memes, sanitized of their explicit politics, carry jagged edges of perfectionism and paranoia about impurity. And that double message—your body is divine, but it is also under attack — has become standard in the commodification of yoga and wellness. (Remski 2021, pp. 8-9)

Sonic entrainment is open to such dangers. Much New Age music has been about restoring order to the body (Keyes 1973, p. 67), often through the exposure to esoteric secret frequencies. For example, if you look up entrainment on Spotify, you'll find tracks such as "2222Hz Angels Will

Guide You Through Unknown Terrain" or "888 Hz Wealth and Prosperity Frequency." The tendency towards symmetry and wholeness betrays the New Age tendency to "mystify the idea of 'systems' into a new spiritual ideology of holism" (Davis 2019, p. 230), often with ableist undertones. Matt Marble, author, archivist and fellow at Yale Institute of Sacred Music has traced the confluence of frequency, the divine, and ableism to contemporary eugenicist conspirituality (American Museum of Paramusicology, N.D.). Keeping these risks in mind, future research could also investigate healing and sound practices with an ear towards healing justice practices (Farrow 2023); sound performance and communist forms of subjectivization (Mattin 2020); or the cross between brainwave entrainment, music composition and communal health (Machover et al 2024).

Chapter three takes a different turn. There I examined Yusef Lateef's use of a tiny interval – the half-step – across his oeuvre. This small bit of sonic materiality had the effect of conjuring and congealing real and imagined sonic spaces in a way that denied any single fixing of sound, place and identity. Future research could consider Lateef's work as part of quantum black creative geographies, in which the half step opens up onto what Noxolo (2025) describes as the "superposition" of Black life – the ability to be in more than one place at once. Here Noxolo draws on the indeterminate positionality of elementary particles as observed in quantum physics. I've shown how the half-step, as a musical "elementary particle," creates multiple positions. For now, I conceived of his use of the half-step as a challenge to the blue note, in the sense that Lateef rejected the anxious tendency on part of mostly white musicologists to fix this note a position on a scale. Instead, it became a method of sonic de- and reterritorialization. This is a testament to Lateef's commitment to his craft. Furthermore, his ingenuity – which he consistently placed in a living and ancestral lineage – is an example of black music as a creative

epistemology that denies the presumed transparency of geography as a social science (Woods 2005, McKittrick 2006).

The self enters into the picture through Lateef's conceptualization of the autophysiopsychic. I had been drawn to the half-step because it holds a particular place in Lateef's oeuvre. I also saw how something so miniscule could do so much work, and the choice also points to the inexhaustible specifics of music material to generate spatial thought. An analysis of timbre across Lateef's many reed instruments could do as much work to stimulate novel ways of geographic reasoning – so could the minor third or the diminished chord, or a deep dive on musical matrices (instead of scales). Each in their own way could be paired with and against traditional geographic concerns.

For Lateef, above all, these were tools for self-expression. In the autophysiopsychic, self-expression is derived from an inseparable connectivity between self (auto), body (physio) and the mental and spiritual (psychic), which includes heart-wisdom. Eric Porter gives the best summary of this approach, citing *Yusef Lateef's Methods* from 1970 (very similar language appears in *Method On How To Perform Autophysiopsychic Music* published nine years later, the manual where Lateef employs the half-step to create different scales). First of all, self-expression is not the realm of emotion contra thought. Porter on Lateef:

> He describes the jazz community's common expression 'you have got to say something' as a directive to 'incorporate a proper balance of thinking and feeling.' … The term 'autophysiopsychic,' then, not only describes the self-consciousness, emotional and spiritual depth, and physical abilities required of the successful improviser but also rejects a narrow definition of jazz as the product of emotion. (Lateef 1970, p. 4, quoted in Porter 2002, p. 244)

Moreover, emotion itself is a craft:

> Lateef concludes his assessment with a discussion of 'emotional memory,' which he describes as 'a vital tool in the science of improvization.'[10] Through emotional memory, a musician attempts to access a 'highly emotional experience' from his or her past and use it to produce a sonic expression of feeling in the present. Lateef describes this practice as a self-conscious enterprise involving the coordination of intellect, emotion, and physical skill. (Lateef 1970 p. 3 quoted in Porter 2002, p. 244)

This practice is both outward looking, in the effort to create expressive music, and inward, in its ability to give the musician a perspective on his own life:

> 'The musician . . . is expected to skillfully filter his profoundest sensations in order to extract their properties and recompose them in performance. This is a process which compels the musician not only to recall his feelings but, to analyze and understand. If we look at the emotion-memory squarely, we see not only an improvizational tool but, a great boon for the ego, a therapeutic toy.' (Lateef 1970, p. 6 quoted in Porter 2002, p. 244)

So, the technical, the spiritual and emotional converge.

The self here is not presumed, in an ideal or future sense, but restaged and re-performed in the commitment to music. This contact is therapeutic for Lateef, because it gives way to analysis and understanding, not fixing, which helps him connect better both with himself and his audiences.

Could there be an autophysiopsychic geography? In many ways Lateef is saying what feminist and geographers of color have been saying for decades, that mind is not separate from

[10] Lateef spells improvization using different spellings in this work, sometimes with a 'z' sometimes with an 's.'

the body, enjoyment and healing are not separate from knowledge, and the personal is not separate from the political (Rose 1993, Lorde 1984). Given Lateef's intense focus on both the musical and emotional craft, what would be the parallel in music geography? Can his musical procedure be applied to research and writing? Can the researcher use music to "skillfully filter his profoundest sensations in order to extract their properties?" But instead of "recompos[ing] them in performance" or even knowing how they are composed, since musical performance is not a stipulated requirement for spatial research, what would be available for geographers (Hawkins 2019)?

De Nora (1987, p. 93) offers a simple and useful framework for geography as a discipline, in which a musicological or musical sensibility is not strictly required, even for music geographies. And that is that meaning comes from what a person derives from the shape, pace and color of music. What does it bring up? She writes that music is "a sonic version of a rorschach ink blot, upon which various 'words may be hung.'" (De Nora 1986, p.93). Music can act as a sounding board for thinking-feeling spatially (Schulze 2017). This openness requires both attention to the music and a consideration, as one might during an ink blot, of one's own desires, positions and anxieties. Thus extra-musical meaning is "not 'received' but is *achieved*, the product of interactive work" (De Nora 1986, p.93, emphasis in original).

For Jean Luc Nancy, this interaction requires a bit of a leap of faith, a giving-over, a suspension of meaning. He formulates listening as an ongoing responsivity to the meeting of sound and sense. This responsivity, to one's own bodily reaction to sound, in awareness of the music, he pairs against mere hearing/understanding:

> If 'to hear' is to understand the sense (either in the so-called figurative sense, or in the so-called proper sense, to hear a siren, a bird or a drum is already each time to understand at

> least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text), to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible. (Nancy 2007, p. 6)

For Nancy, the impulse of Western philosophy is to resolve the possible meaning that music brings alive in the body, its myriad colors and sensations. Instead, he wonders, is it possible to dwell in the opening of music, its constant falling back into possibility, its alive overturning of its own sonorous propositions? (Nancy 2007, p. 66). This, he proposes, keeps the subject alive to openness as well.

Fred Moten makes a similar proposition that connects listening with the fact that it triggers a felt sense of openness that then comes in contact with the impulse for a kind of closure to meaning. However, he substitutes Nancy's "openness of possible meaning" with pleasure. He writes, in *Black and Blur:*

> Imagine incessant listening. It might provide great pleasure and, in so doing, produce great consternation and anxious questioning about the nature of such pleasure. Those questions might concern the psycho-political effects or politico-economic grounds of the submission of oneself to such pleasure. (Moten 2017, p. 28)

Both Nancy and Moten ponder over the kind of palpitation that music causes for thought or analysis, a worry over its animating force. Like Nancy, Moten wants to stay in the moment. "Some attention to the song's flavor and my pleasure in it is required" before it is politically analyzed (Moten 2017, p. 29)

For Nancy openness and possibility are solidified into philosophical meaning; for Moten pleasure, flavor, "anima and aroma," precede political meaning (Moten 2017, p. 29). For someone like Lateef, the procedure is a bit different. The autophysiopsychic method assumes the

interpenetrability of body, spirit and mind. Playing, for Lateef, was a congealing, not a sequencing of thought and sense. When Lateef asked Thelonious Monk how to play over certain chords, Monk told Lateef, "Yusef, you just play ideas," advice that impacted Lateef profoundly. (Lateef and Boyd 2006, p. 150).

Moten writes that "impenetrability and interpenetrability are one another's animation" (Moten 2018, p. 164). In the auto-physio-psychic, each component penetrates the other, rendering the self and thought opaque, not in the sense of their being beyond a threshold, untouchable, or buried, but in the sense that they are on the move, open questions. For Lateef, the autophysiopsychic is a lifelong craft that hones in on the "therapeutic toy" that is music making, in pursuit of the sweetness that is central to the blues epistemology: "I feel so good I must have the blues." It is a version of what McKittrick calls method-making, centered in the interdisciplinarity counter-logics of black geographies, that allows for escapes beyond the categorical and fixing of blackness and the notion of identity in general (2021, p. 45). McKittrick:

> Many black musical texts, to give an obvious example, are lyrical and sonic critiques of colonialism, racism, structural inequalities, and other forms of violence. What one can also take from black music, importantly, are the ways these counter-narratives to colonialism and racist violence are psychic and physiological experiences. Black creative texts are therefore narratively oppositional, but something else is going on that cannot be easily captured by an analytic of oppression/resistance. As studies on neurobiology and creativity show, the act of making and listening to and engaging creative texts — music, visual arts, and so on — brings neurological, affective, physiological pleasure, sadness, and reparative possibilities. Black creative work is, I put forth, all at once, resistance,

> critique, method- making, praxis, and a site of neurological and physiological experience. The bundling of narrative, praxis, and corporeal feeling repositions blackness: the biologics of race are not a location of *a priori* oppression; instead, we glimpse how the creative and intellectual physiologies of black life are relational. McKittrick (2021, p. 51)

Returning to the blues, the autophysiopsychic cannot be pigeonholed as a music of lament of despair, even as it does not shy away from those feelings. Something happens to them when they touch music, troubling such an easy categorizing of affect. This is the epistemological promise and challenge of black music.

Is there such a craft through which geography itself could become autophysiopsychic with and through music? This entails moving away from music as an object of analysis towards a method, which might start with the ability to listen openly, with mellowed judgement. Kanngieser et al offer a "protocol" for listening within the Not Lone Wolves writing collective, a group formed to “conceive of and enact relationality” (Kanngieser et al p. 2). This protocol starts: “Close your eyes and get comfortable. Take a few deep breaths. Begin to notice your body and how it is feeling; trace up from your toes to the top of your head. As you do this, tune into the sounds/vibrations of your body: your breath, stomach gurgles, ringing in your ears.” For these authors, who cultivate listening together, “The protocol of listening is generative…. it moves listening from an automatic and unconscious sensing of the world to an intentional engagement with the complexities and nuances of being in place” (Kangeisser et al 2024, p. 4). Rose (2010, p. 509) writes how holding out space for the “sacred” “offers one way to listen – one means to hear the silences that solicit the subject to speak,” that is, to voice what both constitutes and exceeds the subject, with the awareness that “to be listening is then always to be doubled, folded, a return to be outside and inside, opened from without and from within” (Simpson 2009,

p. 2567). Music could enter the picture more directly: through collective music listening, dancing and performing, conversations with musicians and composers, and interdisciplinary modes of research and presentation. All could be ways to encounter the autophysiopsychic.

On the one hand, this dissertation was borne from a conviction that, as one music reviewer puts it, "realizing that music bears an irrevocable force alters its perception, forever" (Horton 2007).[11] As Nancy and Moten remark, music operates at speeds that challenge thought. To experience this requires a level of "submission" (Moten 2017, p. 28) that disrupts the pace of capture and sociological and philosophical transparency, and asks of a listener to surrender immediate meaning for a sensuous, embodied intelligence. On the other hand, this dissertation attempted to slow down the speeds of music just enough to point to where their spring-loaded trajectories might lead. These trajectories do not necessarily explode beyond or exceed the grids of the status quo. Indeed, by slowing down these trajectories, the function of this writing and researching this dissertation was, I hope, to also inflect these trajectories, bending them towards affective and mental configurations that delink healing from individualism, capitalism and whiteness. For Lateef, the autophysiopsychic grew out of his deep engagement with the blues, a collective effort to create a black sense of place, often under extreme duress. As black music becomes a method for conceiving of and doing space, how do geographers ensure listening does not submit to neo-Romantic hungers for affirmation, vitality, and authenticity?[12] Especially when the "listening ear" of whiteness (Stoever 2016) seeks out listening practices and epistemologies

[11] For saxophonist Joe McPhee's 2007 album, *Soprano,* which feature the tracks "Response-ability Pt 1" and "Response-ability Pt 2"

[12] Dylan Robinson's *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (2020) coins the term "hungry listening" in the first chapter to denote the settler desire to consume indigenous song as symbolic and commodified artifact, and to deny the ontological functionality that song holds in indigenous law. The way I am using hunger here broadly relates in identifying the white desire to maintain white futurity by appropriating non-white music, but my inflection is somewhat different.

that appear, by tapping into music's unruly power, to offer all-too-easy exits from whiteness. I have cautioned against both the dangers of escapism and retreat and the dangers of unchecked expansionism, showing in fact how they condiverge. Boundaries are as important for collective healing as is connection. Listening from one's positionality, as Kanngieser et al (2024, p.4, emphasis added) write, "necessitates a careful cultivation of relation *and* acceptance of non-relation." Future research could explore the liveliness of such boundaries. Silence is one avenue for exploring such a possibility: where silence as refusal meets silence as opening.

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