# 2020: Planet of Drums



The person cringes with each large beat, as if the drum mallet descended upon his very skull; he ricochets about the peristyle, clutching blindly at the arms which are extended to support him, pirouettes wildly on one leg, recaptures balance for a brief moment, only to he hurtled forward again by another great blow of the drum. The drummer, apparently impervious to the embattled anguish of the person, persists relentlessly; until, suddenly, the violence ceases, the head of the person lifts, and one recognizes the strangely abstracted eyes of a being who seems to see beyond whatever he looks at, as if into or from another world.

—Maya Deren, "Drums and Dance" (1976)

Since at least the blues, much of the most urgent, modern music on the planet has emerged from the bruised and bleeding edges of depressed urbanism. Contemporary configurations of rundown global urbanism are described in Mike Davis's prophetically grim recent text, *Planet of Slums.*[1] Yet it is necessary to complement *Planet of Slums* with a cartography of the *planet of drums* (or rather drum machines.) At the close of his *The Ecology of Fear,* Davis zooms out to a satellite orbiting Earth. The satellite is producing thermal images of the United States. During the Los Angeles riots of 1992, he remarked, the city ablaze would have been perceived as a "unitary geophysical phenomenon." "No other urban area on the planet so frequently produces "large thermal anomalies." Seen from space, the city that once hallucinated itself as an endless future without natural limits or social constraints now dazzles observers with the eerie beauty of an erupting volcano."[2] Imagine for a second a parallel satellite monitoring

low-frequency vibration, not just the seismic activity of tectonic plates, the boom of heavy industry and traffic, but also the pulsing bass cultures of the sound system diaspora of the Black Atlantic. It is this imaginary map of vibration that will be charted here, adding the dimension of aesthetic and cultural tactics to offset, perhaps just a tiny bit, Davis's all-encompassing dystopic characterization.

So what sonic cultures are incubated within the emergent urbanism of the *Planet of Slums,* and what tactics of frequency do they deploy? What affective mutations of the urban environment are activated where slum, ghetto, shantytown, favela, project, and housing estate rub up against hypercapital? By constructing vibratory ecologies and pirate economics, otherwise predatory locales subject to significantly unequal development are temporarily taken over. While liberals lament the politically incorrect vocal content of planetary mutations of hip-hop and Jamaican dancehall, these bass cultures press on with Fela Kuti's declaration that music is still "a weapon of the future." Perhaps, however, it is mostly a weapon at a subpolitical level. In both white and black musical traditions of the twentieth century, the politics of music has often been reduced to "what is said": its content, meaning, the narrative superimposed on top of its form, or the extent to which it was supposed to represent an exterior political reality. But a more basic power of organized vibration is usually overlooked. This subpolitical power of music to attract and congeal populations, within the examples that follow, will be tagged *bass materialism.* Bass materialism, it will be argued, is enacted as the microrhythmic production and occupation of space-times by collectively engineered vibration.

In *Planet of Slums,* the topology of unequal development noted by world systems theory is extended. Core and periphery are tightly enfolded. Islands of the hypercapitalist core rise up, fortressed within developing regions of the world, while basins of periphery encircle the core of the developed world. Davis's book argues that rather than the high-tech city of cybernetic control, we should be looking elsewhere to gauge the future shape of cities. As opposed to the finely tuned, preemptive modulation of hypercontrol in the core, there coexists a peripheral urbanism of an unprecedented scale and density, often characterized by predatory locales in which fear is ingrained into everyday life due to underdevelopment, a deregulated economy of violence, drug wars, gang factionalism, and abject poverty. Davis's depictions are particularly bleak not just because of their realism, but also because they ignore some of the cultural pragmatics that make existence bearable.



So it is useful to force Davis's dystopic urbanism into confrontation with the modus operandi of pirate media and sound system cultures in the neighborhoods of underdeveloped cities. In otherwise hopeless situations, collective excitement is produced and local youth cultures activated in kick-starting microeconomies. Despite representing a multiplicity of socioeconomic configurations, ethnic specificities, colonial legacies, and complex musical histories, there are some commonalities to be found in the sound system pragmatics and pirate economics of many of these synthetic music cultures of the periphery: their construction of temporary bass ecologies to hijack through sonic dominance—a rhythmachinic takeover of space-time. How do these sonic war machines, through pirate economics and affective mobilization, transduce, even temporarily, pervasive fear and exorcise dread into momentary joy through the ritualization of aggression in collective dance?

In *Planet of Slums,* Davis outlines how the demographics of urbanization on twenty-first-century earth are in terminal transition. The digital flashfloods of viral economics are paralleled by the massive exchanges of migrant populations, highlighting the frayed edges of McLuhan's global nervous system as it undergoes cellular decomposition, molecular mutation, and trade in sonic fluids. The key agents in the emergent global configuration are the "new megacities with populations in excess of 8 million, and, even more spectacularly, hypercities with more than 20 million inhabitants,"[3] as the result of massive unilateral rural-to-urban migration. For the first time in the evolutionary history of the human species "cities will account for all future world population growth, which is expected to peak at about 10 billion in 2050."[4] As Davis's rival, H. de Soto, notes in *The Mystery of Capital,* radio has functioned as a magnet in this process, advertising the opportunities of urban living across the rural world.[5] Radio, McLuhan's "tribal drum,"[6] acts as a mobilizing call to urban replication. *The Planet of Slums,* for Davis, is composed of "interchangeable and spontaneously unique" components, "including the bustees of Kolkata, the chawls and zopadpattis of Mumbai, the katchi abadis of Karachi, the kampungs of Jakarta, the iskwaters of Manila, the shammasas of Khartoum, the umjondolos of Durban, the intra-murios of Rabat, the bidonvilles of Abidjan, the baladis of Cairo, the gecekondus of Ankara, the conventillos of Quito, the favelas of Brazil, the villas miseria of Buenos Aires, and the colonias populares of Mexico City."[7]

The sonic anarchitecture of these emergent urban entities has usefully been tagged by music blogger Woebot (Matt Ingram) as "shanty house theory," referring to the coincident music network that has arisen out of these planetary

locales, from the grimy pirate radio stations of East London, Crunk from the southern United States, dancehall from Jamaica, baile funk from the Brazilian favelas,[8] kwaito from South Africa, reggaeton from Puerto Rico, and others. For Ingram,

> Shanty House is the new strain of post World Music engaging in the same cultural and social dynamics that have given us Crunk and Grime in the first world and Dancehall in JA. Detractors might bemoan the need to give Favela Funk, Kwaito and Desi a brand name. However, like it or lump it these forms are always going to exist on the peripheries of most people in the west's experience of music. If they aren't called something specific then they'll be less absorbable in their own right, and conversely will be viewed as an extension of World music. The concept of "World Music" is inextricably intertwined with concepts of the natural, the earthen, and the rooted. However, the new wave of global urban music is mercilessly hooligan in its agenda, synthetic by choice and necessity, often produced in a crucible of urban existence yet more extreme, precarious and violent than that which characterizes the temperature of New York, London, Berlin.[9]

In a somewhat condemning article in the *Village Voice* on M.I.A, the artist whose work masquerades as a "conference all" between these degenerate locales of the *Planet of Slums,* Simon Reynolds elucidated the condition of shanty house theory as

> world-is-a-ghetto musics: impurist genres . . . that typically suture bastardized vestiges of indigenous folk forms to pirated elements of rap, rave, and bass 'n' booty. Locally rooted but plugged into the global media sphere, these scenes don't bother overmuch with sample clearances, and vibe-wise they typically project ruffneck raucousness leavened with party-up calls to shake dat ass. They also speak, vividly if obliquely, of a new world disorder where Tupac Shakur vies with Bin Laden as a T-shirt icon and terrorists keep in touch via text messaging.[10]

A more literal description was offered by blogger, ethnomusicologist and DJ Wayne Marshall, who labeled the web woven by those DJs like himself who connect these disparate music cultures as "global ghettotech."[11]

From Brazil, the strain of these mutant musics that has attracted most attention overseas is known as baile funk or favela funk. Typically deploying huge do-it-yourself sound systems at a party, the "walls shake, the concrete under our feet rumbles and below, on the dance floor, some 2,000 dancers gyrate beneath a powerful strobe."[12] The DIY ethic extends beyond just the soundsystem to define the aesthetic of the music, splicing Miami Bass with any music whatsoever pillaged from film soundtracks and America pop. "People make funk like they build houses in the favela, using whatever material is available."[13] It would be naive to pretend that there is a necessarily politically progressive agenda behind



the organization of baile funk parties. As Neate and Platt point out, "It's often the drug factions that promote and finance the baile. Their motivations are twofold: first, the parties are popular within the communities, thus securing their power base; second, they draw customers for the drug trade into the favela."[14] Yet funk is also a mass musical movement. An interesting contrast is possible with Rio de Janeiro's Afroreggae movement, which, with a more explicit political agenda, has attempted to bridge gang divisions within favela residents, especially young men, via drum workshops and other techniques of musical mobilization.[15] One question illuminated in this contrast, a question common in grassroots musical movements around the planet, is whether aesthetics need be sacrificed at the altar of a political cause.

So is this a *planet of drums* to accompany Davis's Planet of Slums? What makes these Afro-diasporic music cultures key here, aside from their content as music, is that they generate bass ecologies within underdeveloped zones of megalopian systems. As such, they have cultivated, with Jamaican sound system culture as the prototype or abstract machine, a diagram of affective mobilization with bass materialist foundation. Taking the staples of popular electronic music, from hip-hop to house and techno, and mutating them to their local desires, spraying them with local voices, these musics also, hand in hand with their pirate economics, propose models for affective collectivity without any necessary political agenda. Parallel sonic wars (in the age of pirate replication) are being waged across the planet by an array of these virosonic microcultures. Their abstract machines are never purely sonic. They always possess a power of transversal application into other aesthetic, sociocultural, and economic fields. Perhaps the contagiousness of such cultures and their analog and digital sonic transmissions make them an audio portal, offering innovative techniques for synthesizing modes of collective assemblage, production, and distribution through the construction of temporary and mobile vibrational ecologies. These musical war machines are perhaps most accurately conceived as subpolitical. Rather than diminishing their importance, their subpoliticality is in fact crucial, potentiating an affective mobilization, underneath the segmentation of belief into ideological, territorial, affiliative, or gang camps, providing a vibrational infrastructure or platform for collectivity that supplements the picture painted in *Planet of Slums.* At the same time, their often subpolitical and microcapitalist nature confounds cultural studies' attempts to claim that every quantum of cultural production should be construed as an act of resistance or opposition to capitalism.