# On Poetry and the Turntable

by Kevin Beasley & Fred Moten

Digital Project Published on August 18, 2015

**FRED MOTEN** Tonight we're going to talk about value and improvisation in music, but we're also going to sound it out. We'll think about it while we hear and feel it. We're hoping that you will join us; perhaps we'll figure out some new ways to think about value, and also to think about that which is invaluable—which seems like a good thing to talk about in a museum.

**KEVIN BEASLEY** One of the first emails I sent to you, Fred, linked to a video of a producer and DJ from Detroit, Theo Parrish, talking about the value of vinyl. He talks about the physicality of the record, how it works as a medium, what kind of information is embedded in the grooves, and how people react and respond to vinyl. He considers his decision to collect and DJ vinyl as a way of embracing artistry over convenience.[1] This video made me think about what it means, now, to produce sound in such a physical format. I wanted to create a collection of sounds and music that contains a certain kind of value.

One track is from a compilation representing a style of music and dance called footwork, which originated in Chicago in the 1990s. You can compare it to B-boys and B-girls battling, except footwork has also occasioned the creation of a distinct genre of music. Teenagers produce beats inspired by a group of dancers; those dancers are in constant motion, their arms and legs are moving maniacally. Footwork has evolved into a separate subculture and, for a lot of young kids, an alternative to being out on the street. The kids meet at abandoned storefronts or at someone's house: The dancers keep telling the DJ to play the music faster, faster, and the intensity ramps up. Producers started taking samples of tracks and speeding them up, then bringing them back to these battles. The value of that experience inheres in the music.

I'm also including some jazz made in Detroit in the mid-1970s. In the early 1960s, the city of Detroit began an urban-renewal campaign, primarily to make way for I-375 and I-75, the Chrysler Freeway. One of the neighborhoods destroyed in the process was Black Bottom, a center of culture and commerce for black residents. A lot of jazz venues were lost, as well as dentist offices, grocery stores, pharmacies, and other businesses that served the black community. Many of them were concentrated on Hastings Street. One track on this collection is from a record called *Hastings Street Jazz Experience*, made by Detroit Jazz Composers Ltd. in 1976. I'm using a lot of jazz from that area, that time.

What I like about that James Brown track, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag Part 2," is that even though it's an instrumental, there's no way for Brown not to be on the track. He is one of the instruments. Even without singing, Brown is trying to communicate the soul embedded in the funk of the instrumental groove by giving it everything he has—beyond his singing voice. In *Eddie Murphy Delirious*, released in 1983, Murphy talks about James Brown. He says: "When James Brown said, 'Hey!' he wrote that down. That was a lyric!" Brown's utterances and breathing have a certain mass, a certain weight, and they become definitive, iconic. I can only describe those vocalizations as invaluable.

The following track is by a DJ and producer called Actress. He mines a lot of nuances vocally, emulating the atmosphere of a location, the texture of a space, and the subtle sounds and

conditions of a body moving through particular environments, especially in the 2014 album *Ghettoville*. On one track, “Street Corp.,” which I didn’t play, he talks about the correlation between the corporation and the street. He talks about giving money to homeless people in order to keep the street going. It’s difficult for me to expound on what’s happening sonically in the mix, and on the context, but this makes me think about the relationship between minimalism and dispossession. Minimalist works come under fire for being “lacking” in some way—empty, or cold. And then when artists come from a place of dispossession, I also see the question “What makes this valuable?” being lobbed at their work. Although they exist on different planes, minimalism being a highly valued aesthetic form, the value of both these kinds of work is ultimately determined by perception. They’re both affected by the same kind of forces.

One of the last tracks was by a DJ named Big Strick, from Detroit. You hear stories about these black men and what they experienced growing up; you hear them unpack it from a personal, familial perspective. The track is actually of these guys having a conversation about being called a nigger, a particular experience that is close to home for all of them. I don’t have those same kinds of stories. I didn’t grow up where they grew up, or during the same decades. I have dealt with overt racism before, but my childhood circumstances were different from these guys in Detroit. But when I hear these stories pressed onto vinyl, embedded within a track, I can recognize a correlation: Oh, that’s something my uncle or aunt would say. Listening to this music in a club is really strange: The record places so much weight on how you move and how you think. What is the value of these stories being channeled from the vinyl into your body? Listening to the track while sitting in this intimate room with you all opens it up to more focused listening and potentially imagining ourselves in the positions of the people whose voices we hear on the track.

**BILL CORBETT** There’s a lot here, to these seventy-year-old ears, that connects to the world I’ve inhabited. Charles Olson once said that writing poetry, for him, was like dancing sitting down. In the context of this museum, it is inevitable that we think of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Canyon*. In the early 1950s, when Rauschenberg was living downtown, he impulsively picked things up from the street. A friend had a studio across from Carnegie Hall called him and said, “There’s a stuffed eagle here!” Rauschenberg knew right away that he wanted the eagle, so he brought it home. Now, in *Canyon*, the eagle is adjacent to a pillow and words taken from political posters of the time; these provide a context. We can connect this to John Cage. You said something about James Brown’s “Hey!” There’s a vast language that we never write down: “hm,” “unh.” These words aren’t in the dictionary, so they’re often thought to be disposable. Like Rauschenberg, you’re working with all of the things that are thought to be disposable. A poet like Clark Coolidge, who has some of the greatest ears of my generation (and who is also a jazz musician), writes poems that are built out of the particular qualities of words, of syntax.[2] Ashbery does much the same in his poem “Europe.”[3]

**AUDIENCE MEMBER 1** Fred, when you were reading your poem, you said something about “meaning as accent,” which to me really relates to Kevin’s set. How does this “accent” stand in relation to meaning? Meaning as accent to what?

**FRED MOTEN** I was thinking about James Brown’s screams and grunts. Not only are these not dictionary words, but from a conventional linguistics point of view these sounds have no meaning—which is to say they have no value. But rather than say, in response, “No, they do have value!” I’d say, “You’re right: They’re invaluable.” These sounds do not accumulate. But they do have features, which turn out to infect or inflect the words that do have meaning, that do have value. In other words, these sounds are unmistakably, irreducibly uttered, right? When we utter the word, we infuse it with precisely the breath, soul, or anima of that invaluable thing Brown is constantly distilling for us in his vocal performances—we do that when we give our words in, and as, sound. Imbuing the word with sound can grant it a

rhythmic feel. The accent: maybe not “accent to” but “accent on,” you know? You build something, in a way, that is analogous to what Bill said about Clark Coolidge’s use of language. When my kids build structures in Minecraft, their freedom has to do with a lack of concern with adhering to some preconceived sense of the value of what they’re doing.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER 1** One of the phrases in Fred’s poem that stood out to me described words as “not … concertized”; they “resist concertization.” And yet this is precisely a concertized situation! We are sitting quietly, watching you perform.

**FRED MOTEN** You should have all been drinking!

**CLAIRE BISHOP** We felt obliged to sit down and be quiet as you were performing, but the impulse to move was huge. This must have been a very conscious decision on your part. And yet it seems very ironic in a series organized by a choreographer. What do you think is gained and what is lost in this concertized situation?

**KEVIN BEASLEY** When you listen, you often feel the impulse to move; that’s what the music incites. But what happens when you can’t move? What do you think about? Consider the Big Strick track: The dance rhythm is a form of resistance to the Detroit auto factories and repetitive working-class jobs that drove the city’s economy and politics. Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson began making techno music as a way to find the human spirit within the machine, as a kind of escape from the gridlock of industry. I’m curious about the space between the rhythm track and the vocal samples—the space we reside in as listeners who can’t dance to the rhythm nor ignore it and simply contemplate the meaning of the words. To sit down and listen, to resist the impulse to move, can open up a new possibility for listening and understanding more of where the artist is coming from. Maybe you’ve heard some of these tracks, maybe not. Maybe you’ve heard the Gene Russell version of Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things,” which was released by Black Jazz, the label Russell started in the early 1970s. Russell said the label “represented a new and fresh alternative to traditional jazz, embodying the spirit of the black urban awakening of the civil rights period.” That kind of deliberation is fundamental to jazz, but I feel like it’s rare to sit down and absorb this aspect of the music, such that it informs the way you move to the music.

**ADRIENNE EDWARDS** I was thinking about exhaustion in relation to your work—stemming from repetition, a sense of duration—and about footwork, the demand to play the music faster and faster, the question of how long a dancer can last. James Brown’s utterance—“Hey!”—exists within a black vernacular, which also has to do with exhaustion.

**KEVIN BEASLEY** I’m constantly trying to exhaust something, or get to the point of trying to exhaust something—and that is exhausting. To be able to consider and to be sensitive to all of these things is very athletic. Many of the musicians whose work I was playing push themselves to a point of no return. Think of Sly getting high until he’s totally gone, in another world, where he can create this funky madness. The first line of “Time” is “Time needs another minute.” That’s an exhausting thought.

**RALPH LEMON** To me this has to do with a certain kind of cultural or psychic inebriation. When I was researching blues in the South I discovered how important it was to be literally drunk as well as figuratively drunk on those specific sonic forms. When you played Sly, Kevin, I immediately remembered being sixteen or seventeen, and how important it was to be really high when listening to his music. We were in my friend’s basement, we were all smoking pot, and it was perfect. I felt like the music was also on pot—it’s Sly music, so of course it is. But I felt like we were somehow, culturally, in on the same joke. I wasn’t thinking about race; it was really just a matter of sharing the inebriation. Of course it was black music, and my friends and I were black, and we were in a basement, and we were smoking pot, so I feel like we were

communicating on a different level. That communication is very much a part of all the music you were playing. Fred, what do you think?

**FRED MOTEN** One of Deleuze's last essays is called "The Exhausted," or that's how it's translated—the French title is "L'épuisé." It's about Beckett's television plays. Deleuze makes this distinction between being exhausted and merely being tired. To be tired is to still operate within a system determined by the opposition between the possible and the impossible, but to be exhausted is to no longer be able to imagine the possible, or to operate within its protocols or even its negation.[4] I think about this in relation to a culturally specific question of value. Listen to Jesse Jackson's mantra: "I am somebody." What I think he's trying to articulate and assert is a certain possibility, one that emerges out of the experience of being devalued. His refrain suggests another: "I must be respected, I must be protected." This implies that we have been conceived as not valuable and so have been not protected, not respected.

It's similar to the musician who is saying, "Our thing is not a concertized thing." They didn't respect our music; they didn't value our music: They saw so little value in our music that they would drink over it.

But then I think of the great Mingus album *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*, in which he basically simulates a club environment. Mingus hated the sound of drinks tinkling when he played. He wanted a pristine sonic space that wouldn't be interrupted by the kind of behavior that devalued the music. But he also wanted the feeling of the club! So on the album he actually announces the songs as if he's at a club. That social situation, marked by disrespect, turns out to be a condition of the music that Mingus wants to play.

Maybe exhaustion has to do with a system structured by the distinction between people who have value and people who don't; a system in which to not have value is tantamount to having been assigned a price. *I have no value; they bought me*. This particular system of devaluation, which operates by way of the ascription of value, ought to be exhausted. We're exhausted by it. And that means we don't simply turn around and say, "I am valued; I have value." The music is always trying to figure out some other way of responding to this situation; the music doesn't establish itself in relation to a preconceived idea of what constitutes value. And Mingus's music does this in concert, or in a kind of subconcert: the underground concert of the club, a social space that blurs the distinction between performer and audience, where the music is neither exalted by the prevailing valuations that correspond to being concertized in the normative way nor ashamed of its radicalization of the concert. The music is always exploring what it is to be invaluable, to exceed the given structure of value. Obviously there's a social insurgency that accompanies that exhaustion, that desire to exhaust the system and make something else.

**BRENT EDWARDS** Kevin, who was the musician in the interview you played, who was talking about playing in clubs and recording for Impulse?

**KEVIN BEASLEY** That was Albert Ayler.

**BRENT EDWARDS** I thought it was Ayler. Playing that interview gave us a sense of the self-reflexivity—what George Lewis calls "extramusicality"—that's intrinsic to, or that underlies, the music: an awareness of the complex dialectic between concertizing and clubbing. Mingus says: I don't like the glasses clinking; I don't like the commercialization of music. And yet what he's saying is: I've recorded enough; I've let myself be circulated so much that I can withdraw myself from circulation; I made these records so that I could earn enough money to not play in clubs. That awareness is part of the fabric of the music. I felt like you were staging a relationship between Ayler's remarkable articulacy and what wasn't said, between how Ayler positions himself and the musical fabric—the role of what the poet Nathaniel Mackey calls the

"telling inarticulacy" of James Brown's grunts and of Sly's falsetto, which go beyond language but nevertheless say something.

**KEVIN BEASLEY** There's an Ayler box set, *Holy Ghost*, which has a series of interviews with a Japanese producer. I'm interested in why a lot of black jazz musicians, especially those who played free jazz, were more prominent in Europe and Japan than in the United States. In one of the interviews, Ayler, who lived in Paris for a long time, says, "I haven't played in New York! And I'm not gonna play in New York!" This has to do with the venues where he was able to play, the available contexts for his music. Ayler also talks about his performances being "pure energy," whereas Coltrane waxes really smooth. Maybe Ayler was just isolated, or maybe he couldn't locate venues that would let him express himself as openly and freely as possible. In this selection of music there are many variants of that situation, which Ayler articulates in a really poignant way.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER 2** That could have been called, and may at another time have been called, a poem. Eliot began to write "The Waste Land" when the telephone was being invented and there were suddenly disembodied voices traveling great distances. Not for nothing is Ayler's record called *Holy Ghost*: Ayler is a ghost but he is present, calling forth such an extraordinary variety of sounds. To me, the music is like poetry or collage.

**FRED MOTEN** I have a question for everybody. In the past few days I've been feeling utterly convinced that the university is dead or dying. I love the university, insofar as it has exposed me to things I wouldn't otherwise have encountered, but now I feel like the university is collapsing under the weight of its own accumulation. Do people feel similarly about the museum? Or is MoMA going to last forever?

**KATHY HALBREICH** No way.

**RALPH LEMON** Why not, Kathy?

**KATHY HALBREICH** Nothing lasts forever. This institution will die like other institutions do.

**RALPH LEMON** What does it mean that MoMA will "die"?

**KATHY HALBREICH** I came back once from Rome and I said to Glenn [Lowry, MoMA director], "What are we making now that will last as long as those things from a more ancient time?" But in fact, I don't actually think there's great value in something lasting forever.

**FRED MOTEN** What I'm trying to ask is: Can an institution like MoMA bear the weight of its own value?

**KATHY HALBREICH** Sometimes it's crushed by that weight.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER 3** Fred went to the same school as Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Emerson had the same concerns in the 1830s. Rather than rely on great books, he thought we should mine our own experiences, write our own sentences. I think we all feel like collapsing under the weight of what we've accumulated as we get older: This is not about institutions; this is about who we are as people.

**FRED MOTEN** It's hard for me to believe that Emerson could have ever felt as sure that he was right as I feel that I am right. I don't say this out of despair; I just mean to preface a practical question, which Emerson also asked: If you had a particular experience at a university, which feels unlikely to be possible in the future, how do you smuggle that experience into the world so that it continues to develop? I'm not so much despairing as asking a question about making plans.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER 3** Look at what you just did! Additionally, you're publishing essays and writing poetry.

**FRED MOTEN** Maybe there's another way to ask this question: The museum is designed to hold what we consider to be invaluable, but it operates by assigning a value to these things. Can this contradiction be sustained? Then again, this contradiction has to do with the emergence of conceptual art. On the one hand, how does a museum become a place for performance? On the other, doesn't performance begin to produce a way of thinking about art that exceeds what museums can do? But, you know, we're here, even if we're just visitors.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER 4** Kevin, what you were playing, my background contextualized what you were playing, and what I resonated to, and then there was stuff I had no idea about but I was resonating to it because you were. And then the same thing with Fred, but it seems like you're talking about value as if it's something like, well, you talked about exhaustion, and that makes me think of duration. Can I be of the same duration? Isn't there a kind of value in which no matter how much of something there is, it isn't any less valuable?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER 5** Does value only exist within a context?

**FRED MOTEN** I'm interested in making a claim for what is invaluable, which is different from criticizing the way in which someone is, within a certain context, determined not to have value. Part of what black studies means for me is dealing with a paradox: You're talking about people who are also commodities. The very way in which you are conceived of as having no value—that is precisely because you have been assigned a value. Literally: a price. That paradox is something I feel like I want and need to work through.

We were listening to Black Flag before this started, to that song "No Values." Ron Reyes is screaming, "Got no values, nothing to say." I guess maybe I was trying to think about value by way of that punk thing. I keep getting hoodwinked into being on Facebook—it's not my fault, I have "friends," you know?—and there's a certain way of thinking and talking about things, and a certain way of talking about, for example, Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis according to a general formulation that the lives of young black males are devalued. That's the first axiom of a certain kind of analysis. I think that analysis is faulty. I think the problem is the valuation of black life. I think the problem is that we operate within a system of valuation, that we put prices on things. I don't mean to say that the price of black lives isn't low, but if and when that price were raised—for me, the valuation would still be the problem.

My wife and I were sitting in bed and talking about Lucy Lippard and the dematerialization of the art object—we have that kind of relationship. It struck me that conceptualism took that which we conceive of as invaluable, namely the making of art, and detached it from the objects in which the invaluable congeals as value. You can link this to the kind of minimalism that Michael Fried tried to scandalize by designating as "literalism": Fried talks about the experience of seeing or of being in the presence of one of Tony Smith's cube sculptures as if he were being "mugged" by it; he talks about Smith's cubes as if they were Trayvon Martin and he were George Zimmerman—Fried didn't have a gun, but he had a typewriter, and he wrote "Art and Objecthood" to kill that shit, basically. But he couldn't kill it! Fried's beef with the cube was precisely that it was anthropomorphic, that it stood in relation to him as if it were another body, but precisely in such a way that it could never be mistaken for another body, another self. He didn't want to be confronted with what Denise Ferreira da Silva would call this no-body; when he looks at a work of art he wants to see himself, through or in some "other." But the insistent, literal presence of this nonsubjective, countersubjective, subsubjective thing ruptures the discreteness that allows us to talk about selves and others, and the operations of valuation and accumulation that brutally attend them, in the first place. It was as if in that cube Fried caught a glimpse of the end of man, not so much as Derrida or Foucault more or less

ambivalently imagines, but rather as Sylvia Wynter urgently demands.[5] My point is that this interplay between conceptualism and minimalism has to do with the emergence of performance art in which animated flesh—in its activity, in the improvisational instant—marks the work, the labor of artists. Think of Adrian Piper's proposed performance *A Slave to Art*, which would have entailed selling herself to the museum director and collector Pontus Hultén.[6] For a minute, people were interested in making artworks that were basically exhausted by this system of buying and selling, and which allow us to imagine ourselves outside of that system.

Art makes it possible to ask this question. You could say the question is impractical, childish, or naive, but I still want to ask it: How might we organize ourselves outside of the system of buying and selling?