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Sound matters: postcolonial critique for a viral age

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ABSTRACT

This essay proposes a reorientation in postcolonial studies that takes account of the transcultural realities of the viral twenty-first century. This reorientation entails close attention to actual performances, their specific medial embeddedness, and their entanglement in concrete formal or informal material conditions. It suggests that rather than a focus on print and writing favoured by theories in the wake of the linguistic turn, performed lyrics and sounds may be better suited to guide the conceptual work. Accordingly, the essay chooses a classic of early twentieth-century digital music – M.I.A.'s 2003/2005 single "Galang" – as its guiding example. It ultimately leads up to a reflection on what Ravi Sundaram coined as "pirate modernity," which challenges us to rethink notions of artistic authorship and authority, hegemony and subversion, culture and theory in the postcolonial world of today.

Introduction: diasporic matters of sound

In Toni Morrison's masterpiece *Beloved*, there is one passage in particular which summons with poetic clarity the vitality of sound for any conception of the black diaspora. In a pivotal moment towards the end of the novel, a group of 30 black women assemble in front of Bluestone Road 124 to drive out the mysterious child woman Beloved, a character whose identity remains ambiguous throughout the text, yet whose manifestation is unquestionably tied to the collective traumata of the middle passage and plantation slavery. Here is how Morrison frames the exorcism of Beloved:

> In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning there was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. […] the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees.[1]

The first thing to observe here is that Morrison places her narrative universe firmly beyond a logocentric view of the world. She consciously echoes the ur-scene of linguistic constructivism in John 1.1 – "in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God" – only to deny that, indeed, the word was first. For the women in front of Bluestone Road 124, at least, the beginning lies in a common heritage of sound.

What reads like a metaphysical meditation at first glance is in fact a very mundane reflection on the historical conditions of the black diaspora. For the women in Morrison's novel, the legacy of language was crucially and brutally interrupted by the middle passage; the linguistic system at their disposal, therefore, is indeed secondary. It is a system overwhelmingly imposed on them by the coloniser, and while it is for them a (creolised) *mother* tongue, it is at the same time, in Paul Celan's famous aporia, the *murderer's* tongue.

The power of language – here, of the English language – is thus highly contested and ambivalent in any diasporic context and closely tied to questions of accommodation and appropriation across the colonial difference. In Morrison's memorable and poetic phrasing, the coloniser's tongue can only become functional, therefore, when indeed the (colonial) "back of words" is broken, and it is here that sound crucially matters. Other than the denotative aspect of words, sound – that is the qualities of timbre and pitch, of rhythm and prosody, yet also of the communal, ritual, antiphonic organisation of performance – did survive the middle passage, albeit undergoing the multiple translations of creolisation. It is in sound, therefore, that a fragmented sense of continuity with the past along the multiple routes across the Atlantic may be retraced and that a sense of local rootedness can be negotiated to envision a diasporic future. The core message of *Beloved* revolves around the notion that only in the sonic and polyphonic *performance* of words, the death of slavery – here evoked by the "deep waters" of the Atlantic and Southern "trees" whose strange fruit Billy Holliday so powerfully lamented – can be confronted and ultimately overcome.

I am using Morrison as a starting point as her insistence on attending to the fundamental role of sound and performance in diasporic situations does not resonate widely in canonical postcolonial theorising. Instead, there is a prevailing tendency to hang on to the neo-Platonic logocentrism which Morrison so powerfully unsettles in *Beloved* – be it in the giant footsteps of Said's riffing on Foucauldian *discourse* analysis, Bhabha's Lacanian musings on colonial *signs* taken for wonders, or Spivak's Derridian reflections on the disabling and enabling violations of language. If sounds matter, however, if it is indeed the sound that breaks the back of words, then postcolonial critique will have to attend more systematically to concrete, materially embedded performances of language beyond discourse and chains of signification. One of the most productive fields in which this has taken place in the past is in the (cultural) studies of global music and lyrics: for lyrics, more emphatically and obviously than writing, even writing as "jazzthetic" as *Beloved*,[2] confront us with language that is saturated in and experienced through sound. Lyrics foreground the physical, medial and material embeddedness of language in actual performance. They elude the pervasive logic of textual autonomy in postmodern criticism, insisting instead on concrete intersubjective encounter. And yet they equally elude – with the advent of recording technology and the analogue and digital revolutions in particular – the competing logic of romantic organicism and immediacy. They encourage us to trace the complexity of sound and language through an increasingly complex system of technological mediation and offer a grounded view of their material production, distribution and consumption.

Such a perspective is particularly vital for a global age and a postcolonial disposition in which digital code rather than printed text has become the medial dominant. The global dynamics of cross-cultural exchange have been utterly transformed by the global spread of analogue and digital technologies over the past few decades. While these technologies have obviously affected the North, it is vital to remember that they have led to nothing less

than a sea-change for populations in the South, by offering "people ordinarily left out of the imagination of modernity, technology and the global economy ways of inserting themselves into these networks."[3] By more often than not side-tracking the global designs of legal doctrines set by the industrialised world, what Ravi Sundaram coins as "pirate modernity"[4] has paved entirely new avenues of access to global cultural flows. Such avenues were opened by the spread of the four-track tape machine across Asia, Africa and the Americas in the late 1970s; by the introduction of various video formats since the late 1980s, or the increasing distribution of recycled computer hardware in the 1990s. The new millennium, finally, set into motion a dramatic acceleration of media mobility with the global dissemination of the internet, peer-to-peer technologies, social networks and, not least, the mobile phone. I refer to this latest stage of the analogue and digital revolution as the "viral age": the "viral" intricately resonates with the "porous legalities"[5] of the twenty-first century; realities which have radicalised dynamics that allow users to not only consume, but to produce, share and reproduce media in infrastructures that are often informal and volatile, yet which have facilitated a velocity of media content which increasingly renders difficult if not obsolete any attempts to control it and prevent it from travelling.

In attempting to come to terms with the conceptual as much as with the geopolitical complexities of this viral age, I argue, postcolonial studies benefit greatly from embracing the medially and materially embedded performance of sonic practices, performances which are in themselves already intricately conceptual. In doing so, however, postcolonial critique also needs to overcome a tacit analogue nostalgia in readings of sound matters which I find at work in some of the most powerful critiques of Atlantic sounds in particular. What I will do in the following, therefore, is take one of the early classics of twenty-first-century digital music production to think through some of the complexities and challenges of postcolonial critique in a viral age. I have chosen a song for these purposes which straddles the Black Atlantic circuit with the Indian Ocean, and more specifically, the Tamil diaspora. The track in question is "Galang," by Sri Lankan-British artist M.I.A.

M.I.A. and the politics of the viral

M.I.A. probably no longer needs an introduction since she made it, among other things, into *Time* magazine's "Time 100" list of the world's most influential people, and since *The Rolling Stone* cited her as one of eight artists who musically defined the noughties. Still, it is difficult to place M.I.A.'s music without some cursory attention to the commonplaces of her biography, which she has very consciously and ambivalently played with in the staging of her medial identity. M.I.A. was born in London as Mathangi "Maya" Arulpragasam but at the age of six months relocated to her parents' native Sri Lanka, where her father was engaged in the Tamil revolutionary struggle. She returned to London with her mother and siblings at the age of 11, claiming refugee status, and grew up in a council housing estate in a part of South West London shaped by earlier Caribbean and later South Asian immigration. Her artistic career actually started in the visual arts as a graduate from Central St. Martins College of Art and Design with an award-winning book of graffiti-inspired collages. Her musical career kicked off in 2003 when "Galang" was released as her first single in a limited edition of 500 vinyl copies. After substantial exposure via airplay, at fashion shows and clubs, yet especially via file-sharing and M.I.A.'s Myspace site, it was re-released by XL Records in late 2004 as the second single from her 2005 debut album

Arular. Still before the official single release, "Galang" also featured prominently in the first two tracks of a mixtape titled *Piracy Funds Terrorism* by M.I.A. and her producer Diplo with versions of the *Arular* material; in a crude raggaeton remix titled "Galangaton" and as a mashup with NY-based Jamaican dancehall artist Lil Vicious.

I am relating the rather unorthodox release history of "Galang," here, to point towards the fundamental embeddedness of "Galang" in the viral logic of the digital age. For many, indeed, M.I.A. is one of the first and still undisputed sonic icons of the twenty-first century whose rise has been intricately entangled with the rise of blogging and file sharing, with social networks like Myspace, Facebook and Twitter and their avenues for artistic self-fashioning and viral dissemination, yet without, apparently, displacing a radical political agenda anchored somewhere in the "real." Astute music critic Simon Reynolds, for instance, wrote in 2009:

> MIA adroitly straddled the residual demand for a Clash/Public Enemy-type hero and the twenty-first century pop reality that is organised around the virtual and the viral, where a pop brand is built through blog buzz, mix-tapes circulating on the web […], remixes and mash-ups.[6]

This praise, however, comes as a bit of a change of mind on Reynolds part. Four years earlier, he had still suggested that it is precisely the situatedness of M.I.A. in the viral twenty-first century which *subverts* her political integrity. While The Clash or Public Enemy still had what he calls "local character," Reynolds argued, M.I.A. is "a veritable vortex of discourse catalyzing fevered debate around most likely irresolvable questions concerning authenticity, postcolonialism, cultural tourism, appropriation, and dilettantism."[7] Let me in the following try to disentangle some of the unspoken assumptions behind Reynold's early challenge that M.I.A. *failed* to keep it "real," but that her work is more like a "dissertation […] given fine fleshly form" – a challenge which by way of M.I.A. is thus also mockingly levelled at academic engagements with postcoloniality (including the text you are just reading) and their more pathetic "vortex[es] of discourse."

Reading "Galang" (2003/2005)

What, then, are the discourses "Galang" triggers? The track's lyrics suggest that its basic theme is a postcolonial revision of the received figure of the metropolitan flaneur. They consistently tap into the power of second person address, the "very essence" of which, according to Brian Richardson, "is to eschew a fixed essence."[8] The lyrical "you" of the song, in other words, may at once be read as referring to a specific fictional persona or protagonist, as addressing a specific implied or real listener, as staging an impersonal representative "you," or, last but not least in the split authorial logic of performed song,[9] as referring to the performer herself. None of these "yous" in "Galang," however, are quite in line with Baudelaire, Simmel or Benjamin's self-reflexively detached urban ponderings about modernity at large and the place of man in an age of accelerated socio-technological change.

M.I.A.'s "you" walks the city in a stumbling state of paranoia which is partly dope-induced, as the chorus rather unmistakably pushes home: "Blaze a blaze Galang a lang a lang lang/Purple Haze Galang a lang a lang lang." More fundamentally, however, the same paranoia is based in a deeper condition of illegality, which relates to the world of immigration as much as to the world of dope and crime. Illegality is the core theme of

the first verse, playing on the fear of having being tracked by federal police through a 1471 return call: "Who the hell is huntin' you?/In the BMW/How the hell they find you?/1 4 7'd you/Feds gonna get you/Pull the strings on the hood/One Paranoid you/Blazing through the Hood." The second verse, in turn, comes as an alienating list of well-meant advice for surviving the urban jungle: "They Say/River's gonna run through/Work is gonna save you/ Pray and you will pull through/Suck-a-dick'll help you/Don't let 'em get to you/If he's got one, you've got 2/Backstab your crew/Sell it out to sell you." The immigrant's perspective in all this is not immediately obvious, yet it is constantly implied on various levels. The first is certainly linguistic, as the title's "Galang" is Jamaican patois for "go on," and its repeated stuttered call in the tune calls up the restlessly paranoid stumbling of a – possibly illegal – migrant who "speak[s] the slang." There are persistent allusions to patois phrasing and toasting in the vocal performance which confirm the validity of a strong Caribbean-British axis, which is moreover underlined by the dominant musical references to dance-hall and jungle beyond more local variants of electroclash and punk. This axis, however, is complicated by a second, Asian-British one which operates beyond simplistic biographical readings.

On the level of lyrical content, the paranoia of the song's "you" is rather unmistakably linked to the experience of war, most notably evoked in the onomatopoeic rendition of machine gun fire in the lead-up to the chorus: "Slam Galang galang galang/Ga la ga la ga la Lang ga Lang ga Lang/Shotgun get you down/Get down get down get down/Ge-d Ge-d Ge-d Down G-down G-down/Too late you down D-down D-down D-down/Ta na ta na ta na Ta na ta na ta." The production of the track coincided with Britain's entry in the War on Terror and the staged paranoia of the song certainly speaks toward the overt islamophobia and fear of "brown" people in post-9/11 Britain. More specifically, however, the visual paraphernalia of the recording in the booklets and the video clearly allude to the Sri Lankan civil war. Among a more universal repertoire of animated tanks, bombs and burning palms next to council estate blocks and other signifiers of urbanity in Day-Glo spray paint, there is wallpaper in Tamil script, and of course there is the unmistakable tiger as the emblem of Tamil nationalism.[10]

In a move typical of M.I.A.'s first two albums, the song consequently confronts visions of first world paranoia and immigrant alienation with a more general vision of third world revolution. After a break at 2:30, the voice of the song – just as M.I.A. graphically multiplies in the video – expands into a collective chorus of multiple "yous" who begin to plainly intone a chant ("Ya Ya haaaaaa etc.") which Sasha Frere-Jones has described (slightly clichéd) as "a voice from a place where kids throw rocks at tanks, where people pull down walls with their bare hands."[11] The transcultural contact zone of M.I.A.'s urban London is thus intricately linked to a larger and thoroughly neocolonial global modernity, and M.I.A. does not leave a doubt with whom she sides. "I bongo with my lingo/beat it like a wing-o/from Congo to Colombo," she opens on "Sunshowers," her first single release from *Arular*, and much of her lyrics on the first two albums indeed revolve around what Frantz Fanon would refer to as the psychopathology of (neo)colonial violence in the Global South.

Ethics of antiphony in a viral age?

Sounds like serious political stuff. So what do we do with Simon Reynolds's initial verdict that M.I.A.'s zeal of "putting people on a map that never seen a map"[12] is not serious, but

rather performed in the commodifying mode of a "cultural tourism"? The main argument, again, was that M.I.A.'s art and politics lack "local character": character that still pervaded the analogue stances of The Clash, or the pre-viral digital sampling aesthetics of Public Enemy. Let me for a moment redirect Reynolds's claim that M.I.A. merely produces a "vortex of discourse" lacking (inter)subjective agency and substance from M.I.A.'s viral art and politics to the implied vehicle of Reynolds's critique: for what I myself have performed until now is a mere focus on *discourse* in my reading of "Galang": I have attended to the lyrics as text and their paratexts, I have added my own reading to the logocentric vortex; yet I have failed to really address any aspect of sonic performance.

Yet surely, the lyrics of "Galang" are given the full body of M.I.A.'s voice to which we as audience physically relate; and this embodied voice inevitably shapes a temporary social space of intersubjective encounter. I have referred to this space elsewhere as "performance arena,"[13] which in live experiences of song coincides with the actual live venue. Yet I would argue, following Simon Frith among others, that it operates, too, beyond the immediacy of liveness, and similarly applies to mediatised performances. Such performance arenas set up generic frames which crucially prefigure our social, intellectual and, not least, somatic engagement with songs and music; yet they are themselves in need of regular lyrical and musical triggers to maintain their functionality.

The opening lines of the lyrics of "Galang" already set a range of such performative keys: "London Calling/Speak the Slang now/Boys say Wha-Gwan/Girls say Wha-What." The first phrase sets a concrete *place* of lyrical enunciation – M.I.A.'s native London, anchoring the song in concrete socio-historical space. At the same time, however, the opening call also triggers specific generic frames: it performatively places the song in legacies of conventionalised formal interaction, yet is also a part of a kinaesthetic, social, technological, economical and institutional conversation. The first of these generic frames, here, is a more internationalist variant of politically engaged "punk" by quoting the most famous of all lyrical lines by The Clash; this legacy, however, is short-circuited in complex ways with Afro-Caribbean musical styles, as "London Calling" is clearly phrased and intonated in a Jamaican-inflected urban patois calling up the legacies of ragga and dancehall rather than cockney punk. The lyrics of "Galang" are thus effectively situated in an (imagined) performance arena which combines the low-fi technological and anti-capitalist thrust of punk with the slack polyrhythmic physicality of dancehall or reggaeton. More crucially, still, the arena draws from Caribbean musicking, with an emphasis on the antiphonic engagement between performer and crowd: it taps into the communitarian traditions of Atlantic sound cultures built on the principle of call-and-response. In this reading, the lyrical line "Boys say Wha-Gwan/Girls say Wha-What" would be anything but a juvenile routine, but a more sincere key to what Paul Gilroy defined as "the ethics of antiphony"; to a foundational Black Atlantic epistemology that is deeply grounded in "the experience of performance with which to focus the pivotal relationship between performer and crowd, participant and community."[14]

To my knowledge Paul Gilroy never commented on the work of M.I.A. Yet I suspect that he, like Reynolds in his 2005 review, would take issue with the sincerity and "character" of "Galang" in view of both M.I.A.'s "third world internationalist" punk stance and her adaptation of antiphonic styles: Gilroy has repeatedly expressed his reserve against post-reggae black musics such as hip hop, dancehall, jungle or grime in which he finds a "regression of performance" that he firmly associates with the digital revolution. His ambivalence about

digital technology in black musics is most fully expressed in *Against Race*, where he argues that it has facilitated a crucial lack of authorial control over vernacular styles and the concomitant proliferation of a musical dilettantism which eschews "performance and its antiphonic rituals." "The citation and simulation of [vernacular] cultures," he writes, "do not reproduce their extensive ethical investment in the face-to-face, body-to-body, real-time interaction."[15] Gilroy's main worry is that Black Atlantic culture is thus up for grabs in the commodifying designs of corporate multiculturalism: indeed, a mashup-version of "Galang" from the *Piracy Funds Terrorism* mixtape found its way into a Honda Civic advertising campaign (which M.I.A. felt compelled to defend by arguing that Civics were after all "poor people's cars" …).

What fascinates me about Gilroy's work on Black Atlantic sound cultures, though, is that it combines a reflexive, if heavy dose of analogue nostalgia with rare insights into a concomitant emancipatory potential that is inherent in the depropriating capacities of viral dissemination in the digital age. Thus he remarks on digital black musics in the very same context in which expresses his deep reserves:

> Chaotic cultural dissemination in more and more elaborate circuits itself enjoys a complicated relationship to the technologies that have conquered distance […]. This art is dispatched in provisional and unfinished forms that anticipate further input and flow in a communicative economy in which creative recycling rather than immoral disposability is the regulative norm.[16]

For the remainder of this essay, let me further explore Gilroy's intimations of "chaotic cultural dissemination," "provisional and unfinished forms" and the vitality of "creative recycling," to explore the relevance of "Galang's" investment in the medial and material realities of pirate modernity.

Pirate modernity and postcolonial critique

The notion of "pirate modernity" as coined by Ravi Sundaram in a study of *Delhi's Media Urbanism* takes account of the fact that for the larger part of the global population, access to the transnational flow of goods, technology and ideas does not follow the regulative norms of transnational property rights regimes set primarily by the WTO, but is increasingly and overwhelmingly situated in porous legalities. This is true both for cultural production, that is, for technologies of copying or recycling, which intricately challenge predominantly Western notions of authorship and cultural authority, and for technologies of distribution and reception after the analogue and digital revolutions. While such cultural practices are of course situated in the economic North as much as in the economic South and passionately debated in Western media as much as in academic discourse, the revolutionary changes of what I refer to as "postcolonial piracy" for the Global South are not yet widely acknowledged in much postcolonial critique.[17]

M.I.A.'s "Galang" poses valuable questions to discourses on pirate modernity, in view of both cultural production and its dissemination and reception. Regarding the production end, it is interesting to note that while the instrumental sounds of "Galang" were programmed on a Roland MC-505 sequencing machine, the vocal tracks were recorded and dubbed on a simple 4-track tape recorder. This is vital, as the almost nostalgic use of an analogue four track machine in this context clearly nods at the revolutionary

beginnings of recycling music in the Caribbean in the late 1960s, where it allowed avatars like King Tubby to isolate the drum and base backbone of existing (soul and other) recordings, and to thus not only start the legacy of dub culture but to mark a sea change in popular music production across the planet. Yet it also points at the veritable cultural revolutions triggered by what Peter Manuel has referred to as *Cassette Culture* across the Global South and in South Asia in particular. Manuel's prime example is India, where the mass manufacturing of analogue tapes since the 1970s and their distribution in local cornershops ultimately broke the monopoly of the British-controlled Gramophone Company of India, leading to an unprecedented renaissance and local differentiation of popular styles.[18]

In terms of the interfaces of piratic production and dissemination, it is less the officially released 2005 single of "Galang" that is of particular conceptual interest, but the unofficial mashup versions of the track, released on the *Piracy Funds Terrorism* mixtape a year earlier. *Piracy Funds Terrorism* was never officially distributed because none of its wide range of samples was cleared; it was therefore distributed hand-to-hand only, yet nevertheless became a global sensation which boosted M.I.A.'s popularity even before the release of her first album. This success overwhelmingly owed a debt to the viral logic of the web where the mixtape was shared widely on P2P platforms (to the effect, not least, that Honda picked the second "Galang"-mashup for its 2006 Civic campaign).

This episode is revealing for the light it sheds on the ideological pitfalls of current debates around postcolonial piracy in the West, which very roughly fall into three camps: A first camp radically opposes any form of piracy as intellectual and economic theft with devastating financial consequences for artists, industries and, ultimately, states alike.[19] What the title of M.I.A.'s mixtape nods at more specifically, here, is that advocates of this camp have habitually harped on piracy in the Global South in particular, by sweepingly conflating it not only with organised crime but, more recently, with global terrorism. As Nitin Govil and Kavita Philip have shown, after 9/11 Western media reports about pirate culture in South and East Asia have gradually shifted from patronising perspectives in which piracy is described as a symptom of cultural backwardness which will be resolved once China or India have fully come of age as genuinely "modern" nations, to an increasingly hostile rhetoric which equates the war on piracy with the war on global terror.[20] This rhetoric was fuelled by reports on al-Qaida financing practices, yet on a deeper level, it intricately speaks of a fear of Euro-American decline, as it has now dawned upon Western observers that the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in particular are not at all inclined to unreservedly follow the proscribed road to modernity universally laid out by the old West. Piracy is thus staged not only as a mere economic problem, but as a threat to a whole "way of life."

Intriguingly, very similar conclusions have been drawn by prominent members of a second camp which fervently defends pirate culture from the libertarian position of the Western technophile avant-garde.[21] The prevalent argument here is that copyright restriction imposed by states and monopolists blocks the creative powers of late modern network societies in which all consumers are potential creators.[22] Accordingly, advocates in this camp variously promote an extension of fair-use regimes, "thin protection" or alternative copyright systems such as Lawrence Lessig's "Creative Commons." Yet Lessig, as the most prominent spokesperson of the free culture movement, is also representative of a tacit distinction between "acceptable" and "bad" piracy, the latter of which

he has habitually located outside of the West. While calling for changes in the copyright regime where so-called "transformative" uses (e.g., remix culture, culture jamming etc.) are concerned, Lessig sweepingly lumped together "Asian piracy" as uninspired piracy, staging a spectral and debilitating "pit of Asian sameness" against the enabling difference which gears free market exchange.[23]

M.I.A.'s strategies of artistic production and distribution under the label *Piracy Funds Terrorism* thus intricately tease both the corporate anti-piracy lobbies and the libertarian free culture movement by vocally aligning with "bad" piracy, in a move that should by all means sustain the revolutionary stance of her lyrics. Why may it be, then, that critics like Simon Reynolds still did not buy into the sincerity of her political ambitions? An argument that is difficult to challenge, here, is the frequent allegation that M.I.A. does not really speak from the perspective of the Global South despite her biographical credentials as a daughter of a guerrillero Sri Lankan and civil war refugee, but that her primary speaking position is that of a London art school graduate, fashion victim, and, more recently, ex-resident of Brentwood, LA, and ex-partner of Benjamin Bronfman, the eldest son of Warner Music Group's billionaire CEO Edgar Bronfman Jr. (in the darkest heart of imperial music capitalism).[24] I would hold, however, that this argument is deeply entangled with a more fundamental and unspoken concern, namely that M.I.A. does not really fit the ideological format cherished by a third camp of critics of postcolonial piracy who wish to enlist its practices for a more straight-forward politics of anti-capitalist resistance. In other words, M.I.A. does not really allow an uncomplicated (neo)Marxist celebration of pirate culture along the line of critics such as Ronald Bettig, Laikwang Pang or Adam Haupt,[25] who defend piracy as a bastion of subversion and resistance to the capitalist world system which both the anti-piracy and the free culture movements support alike.

The problem, here, is that most practices of postcolonial piracy across the Global South unsettle neo-Marxist readings such as Haupt's, for instance. He intriguingly sets select practices in South African hiphop into dialogue with Hardt and Negri's conception of multitude. As Ramon Lobato outlines in the context of a wide range of case studies across the tricontinental sphere, piracy hardly ever operates against, but overwhelmingly within capitalist (sub)systems, ranging from highly local and regional to elaborate transnational circuits of production and distribution. To make things worse, the "cockroach capitalist" networks of piracy are hardly disconnected from the formal economies of corporate capitalism. Lobato notes that "there is a great deal of traffic between the formal and the informal over time and space, and between different parts of a production or distribution system. Formal economies can become informal and vice versa."[26] It is in this light that the simultaneity of M.I.A.'s anticolonial alignment with the wretched of the earth and her indulgence in self-commodification and pop stardom are perhaps less an irresolvable paradox than an intricate reflexion of the medial and geopolitical realities of our times.

Conclusion

What does this mean, ultimately, for contemporary readings of postcoloniality? It does not mean, certainly, that the viral twenty-first century has disabled more traditional modes of postcolonial critique, engagement and resistance. These matter more than ever before in a world in which the Euro-American hegemony of the twentieth century is displaced and complicated by new global players, yet in which colonial and neocolonial legacies still

prevail and in which social justice between North and South as much as within the North and the South is nowhere in sight. What the examples of M.I.A. and pirate modernity nevertheless highlight, is that any theoretical engagement with the world as it today is must take the intricate medial and material realities of the twenty-first century into account to more fully understand how concrete cultural practices actually "perform." Let me stress the vitality, again, of concrete, embodied performance under concrete medial and material conditions. Arif Dirlik, Benita Parry, Simon During, Tim Brennan and many others have already commented on how easily theories of globalisation which bypass materiality in favour of the linguistic, systemic or rhizomorphically immanent emergence of difference may be accommodated within a pervasively neoliberal perspective on global modernity. The example of pirate modernity also shows, however, that it is equally problematic to sweepingly enlist postcolonial practices for uncomplicated narratives of subaltern resistance. What I have tried to show is that sound matters in all this: that it is through careful transdisciplinary readings of the performed sounds and voices of a viral age that we might come to realign our paradigms accordingly.

Notes

1. Morrison, *Beloved*, 259, 261.
2. See Eckstein, "A Love Supreme."
3. Liang, "Porous Legalities," 12.
4. Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity*.
5. See Liang, "Porous Legalities," 15. Liang remarks: "Porous legalities are created through different forms and materials, but primarily through a profound distrust of the usual normative myths of the rule of law, such as rights, equality, access to justice, etc. The lived experience of most people, instead, points to a network of different day-to-day negotiations with power that renders vacuous any neat binary of legal/illegal. The idea of a legal system as being a porous one enables an alternative imagination which takes into account the myriad forms of legality, from state legalities to non-state legalities and from individual acts of illegality to social networks that transgress the law."
6. Reynolds, "Notes."
7. Reynolds, "Piracy."
8. Richardson, "Second Person Narrative," 311.
9. See Eckstein, *Reading Song Lyrics*, 49–57. The lyrical authority in the song is inevitably split between performer and writer/composer. Different musical genres tend to foreground one or the other in the attribution of lyrical meaning. While pop typically encourages the identification of lyrical content with the persona of the singer, art music tends to forbid such identification by foregrounding the composer. Folk genres also tend to foreclose the identification of lyrical content with the performer who is cast in the role of storyteller whereby lyrical authority rests within collective tradition. I have argued that these three options merely mark the cornerstones in a continuous, inter-generic field in which the lyrical authority of song may be located.
10. For the music video, director Ruben Fleischer animated material from M.I.A.'s Alternative-Turner-Prize-winning visual art work produced at St. Martin's College of Art and Design.
11. Frere-Jones, "Bingo in Swansea."
12. M.I.A., *Kala*.
13. Eckstein, *Reading Song Lyrics*, 87–103.
14. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 203.
15. Gilroy, *Against Race*, 252. He continues: "The distinctive privilege accorded to the process of performance and its rituals is already under pressure from the de-skilling of instrumental competences. Digital technology has precipitated a different notion of authorship and promoted a

sense of culture that cannot be confined to legal and habitual codes that imagine it to be individual property."

16. Ibid., 251–252.
17. An attempt to redress this is Eckstein and Schwarz, *Postcolonial Piracy*.
18. Manuel, *Cassette Culture*.
19. See, for example, Choate, *Hot Property* or Paradise, *Trademark*.
20. Govil, "War"; Philip, "What is."
21. See, for example, Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*; Lessig, *The Future*; *Free Culture*; *Code*; *Remix*; Mason, *The Pirate's Dilemma*; McLeod, *Freedom of Expression*.
22. See Castells, *The Network Society*; Sassen, *Global Networks*.
23. See, especially Lessig, *Free Culture*; Philip, "What is," 212. As Kavita Philip writes,

> Asian pirates serve as his limit case: the limit point of difference from bourgeois law […] – abandon those lifelines and we fall into the pit of Asian sameness. We lose the difference […] that makes us creative, successful, and technologically productive.

24. See Eckstein, "M.I.A.'s 'Born Free'."
25. Bettig, *Copyrighting Culture*; Pang, *Cultural Control*; Haupt, *Stealing Empire*.
26. Lobato, *Shadow Economies*, 41.

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