

# WHERE CAN A RECORD TAKE US? USING 'A'S COPY OF *FEAR OF A BLACK PLANET* TO EXPLORE 'NOMADIC MATERIALITY'

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A's Copy of *Fear of a Black Planet*, inscribed by Paul Nataraj

## Introduction

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In 2001, I received a knock at my front door. It was the weekend and early in the morning, so it came as a bit of a surprise. It was 'A', an acquaintance of mine from my hometown of Blackburn, Lancashire. We had met a couple of years earlier, at a small bar in the town where I had been the regular DJ. We had spent time there, listening to music and naively putting the world to rights.

Now 'A', a tall man wearing a short afro, was huddled into my terrace's doorstep, with early morning damp clinging to his clothes. He had a small box of thirty or so vinyl records at his feet, shielded from the drizzle by baggy jeans and long legs. Over a coffee, 'A' explained that he had recently fully committed to his Islamic faith, so he no longer had the need for his records, as music

was 'haram'. He said that he was going on a pilgrimage to the Middle East, but mysteriously didn't specify where, or when he would be returning. So, his instruction for the records was to, 'just keep 'owd of 'em lad'. I did as I was asked. One of the records in the box was *Fear of a Black Planet* (FOABP) by Public Enemy (PE).

In this article I seek to tell the story of this particular record. I consider how reading it through the lens of New Materialist thinking – especially in relation to ideas around 'nomadism' – catalysed the production of an artwork that I made from it in 2018. I aim to chart some of the complex lines of material connections and associations which make up the life of the record to show how the multiple materialities of the vinyl record can open up the potentials of creative practice in reimagining the object and our relationship to it. In elucidating my creative intervention, I redraw the record not simply as a reproductive sounding object, but as a highly productive one whose energy has catalysed new modes of artistic and musical practice. By drawing on the multiplicity of meanings embedded into its groovy surface, I argue that the record has a 'nomadic materiality', whose unique combination of material states allows for a creatively productive dialogue between various relational ontologies.

Previously I have argued that the record is a labile object whose life cycle is intimately connected to our own (Nataraj 2021). By using and keeping a record over time it becomes a material manifestation of our 'mnemonic imagination' (Keightley and Pickering 2012). Its presence in one's life opens up musical listening to a wider range of deeply entangled positionalities than if one were just simply hearing a piece of music. Whether the record is actively reproducing sound, whilst being played, or is just 'resting' (so to speak) as part of a collection, it is acting in a number of different registers. Because of its unique physical form, its historiography and acquired 'cultural capital', bringing along with it different sets of complex interconnected relationships through the ontologies of its use, that are tied into the narrativisation of our life stories.

For Bartmanski and Woodward the interconnected relationships which accrue around the vinyl record produces, 'a way of extending the self into the material object and related technological assemblages of music consumption' (2015: 47). I am particularly interested in this idea of the record being an 'extension of self'. I intend to show that, in terms of the vinyl record, 'related technological assemblages' are not the only spaces through which the self is extended. I argue that both self and record extend one another at different times over the lifetime of ownership or usage.

Within this article, I hope to show how working creatively with and through this 'nomadic materiality' highlights and establishes the potentials of the record as a critical and 'vibrant' object (Bennett 2010), helping to uncover the complexity of these 'extensions of the self'. Could the record act as a conduit to shed new light on some of the more difficult relationships that shape our world, if we see it as a marker of both our interconnectedness and our otherness? Furthermore, I ask how the record's unique materiality has engendered extensions in musical and artistic practices, that could be read in Braidotti's terms as, 'the relocation of identities on new grounds that account for multiple belongings'. [1] As Hall (1991) argues, identities are constantly in flux, being relocated across, through and beyond the porous boundaries of cultural material and temporalities. For me, the record becomes a symbol of such intertwining, as its own materiality oscillates between physical and phenomenological states, where 'a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological' (Braidotti 2012: 33) can be found. Borrowing from Deleuze, Guattari and Braidotti, I use the phrase 'nomadic materiality' as an attempt to explain this state of material flux. I will now attempt to contextualise the use of this term, with reference to New Materialist thinking.

## Nomadic Materiality

One of the starting points for New Materialist scholars like Braidotti to develop critical methodologies 'that account for multiple belongings' (2012: 181), has been Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizomatic assemblage. As they explain, 'there are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines' (1987: 8). The idea of connected lines allows for a multiplicity of meanings to be encountered, encompassing the diversity of relations affecting meaning making. Deleuze and Guattari provided the concept of 'nomad thought' as an attempt to break out of the 'constraints of gridded state space into a nomadic space that is smooth and 'rides difference' (Massumi, 1987: xii), thus creating a philosophical space allowing for boundless relations to be explored.

Rhizomatically connected meaning should not be constrained by binaries or the boundaries of disciplinary silos. Instead, 'nomad thought' gives equal status to multiple connections and relations as productive in meaning making. This presents an opportunity to both human and non-human actors to play their role. In her work on 'nomadic subjectivity' Braidotti takes up this idea, writing that '[t]he point of nomadic subjectivity is to identify lines of flight, that is to say a creative alternative space of becoming'.<sup>[2]</sup> This 'nomadic' project questions the given power relations which construct the world in homogeneity. Braidotti makes the point that despite the apparent diversity of mediation – or 'scattered hegemonies' which ought to give opportunities for tolerance and impartiality – inequalities and injustices are rife and cultural homogenisation is stark.

By applying a 'nomadic' approach, however, we can 'provide more accurate complex accounts of the different locations and to link them to cartographies of power so as to transform the very terms of their specification and of our political interaction'.<sup>[3]</sup> In light of this, I would like to posit that my reading and subsequent creative practice with 'A's copy of FOABP is consistent with this attempt to re-constitute relational power dynamics, in order that the ethical power of 'multiple belongings' is not lost in the constant churn of mediated materials. Braidotti also describes the application of such 'nomadic' ways of thinking, tracing lines of agency and points of contact between actors in an assemblage, as being actively creative. For example, she makes the case that, 'creativity entails the active displacement of dominant formations of identity, memory and identification and so open them up to alternative genealogical lines, which often entail a switch to other languages'.<sup>[4]</sup> Braidotti is speaking here about the act of writing, and therefore the power of translation to displace boundaries of subjectivity, where the act of creation positions the 'writer' or artist as 'an *other within*' (Braidotti).<sup>[5]</sup> I would argue that such a concept could also be applied to my creative work because I have worked in dialogue with this particular vinyl record assemblage, which constitutes a series of translations of form and materials.

I have had to be inside 'A's copy of FOABP as an outsider to translate the material in an 'active displacement of dominant formations of identity, memory and identification' that Braidotti describes. In the years since I was entrusted with 'A's copy of FOABP, the record has been in motion. When I re-examined it with the thought of using it as the site for a creative intervention, it had become something else entirely than it was when it was placed in my care. Yet it had not travelled to this becoming in a straight line. It had meandered through different visions of itself, picking up intensities and resonances from its myriad paths along the way. As I meet the record it is still in the process of becoming, as am I in my interaction with it. At some point within the process, I become an artist, perhaps a musician, a translator, a writer, yet only fleetingly.

The record is constantly splitting between a set of micro interactions between it and the story of 'A', his musical taste, cultural positionality, religious observance, migration, our shared space of Blackburn, and my relationship with him. Also, between my listening habits, my racial identity, my record collecting, and my life's ontology and topology. Yet the record also existed and

continued to exert force over, a macro geo-political space of racism, nationalism, oppression, murder, state control of the racialised body, political and physiological otherness, global flows of capital and the human effect of wars waged on its behalf, religious belief, the historiography of borders, and so on, all of which sets of relationships are different in character now than they were at the point of the record's initial becoming.

The ways in which these contestations might be materialised in sound had also travelled. The sonic aesthetics of rebellion which PE engaged with at the time of writing the music pressed into the record's surface had new boundaries, operated within new value systems and performed in new sites of contestation. Moreover, the aggregated ideas of what the record could do were also now changed. The format itself had undergone a complete energetic shift, with the advent and proliferation of digital media. FOABP had shifted in scalar, commercial, aesthetic, and temporal paradigms, and capturing this 'nomadic materiality' meant that all of the traces of these changes were available for exploration in 'A's copy.

From this perspective, the object is seen as being heterogenous, simultaneously able to be considered in relation to and affecting different paradigms of relationality at the same time. As we share in its constant activity, we bring these manifold relations into the present. The idea of a 'nomadic' state which 'rides difference' (Deleuze & Guattari 2016) and 'accounts for multiple belongings' (Braidotti[5]), provides a mechanism, albeit creative and perhaps poetic, within which the splitting of spatiality and temporality allows us to apprehend something of the true complexity of our relationship with the objects of our musical lives. Describing this record as having 'nomadic materiality' is an attempt to capture something of these agential movements.

## Groovy and Biographical Scratches

Braidotti opines that 'a nomadic body is a threshold of transformations. It is the complex interplay of the highly constructed social and symbolic forces. The body is a surface of intensities and an affective field in interaction with others' (2012: 33). The vinyl record presents the opportunity to interact with a 'body' where this 'complex interplay' is openly apparent. I would also argue that the record itself is a 'threshold of transformations' because it is constantly moving through material states, in both its functionality and its life cycle, moving across paradigms of sociality and symbolism. In this way, owners, listeners, artists have to engage with a number of different material registers in their 'intra-actions' (Barad 2012) with the record. In this next section I will consider the idea of the scratch as part of this series of 'intra-actions'. One could argue that the scratch is where '[t]he material and the discursive mingle and mangle' (Bolt 2013: 3), which I have classified in four ways, as 'groovy scratches', 'biographical scratches', 'musical scratches' and 'artistic scratches'.

Scratches come hand in hand with a record. The two are materially interconnected. On the record musical sound is stored as a scratch in the form of the groove. This is a curved spiralling valley of vibration cut into being through the translation of sonic energy shifts. This groove is a mysterious scratch. It is an industrially permitted scratch, made to the specification of the assemblage of forces that constitute a source of commodification of recorded musical material. Yet it is also music's 'ur' language, constantly in tension with its own material fragility. When the structure of the groove is compromised so is its ability to materialise the sounds captured in its form, as the sonic replication that was originally intended. Indeed, if the groove is broken, cut through or scratched, we hear the specific materiality of the record in its direct connection to the world. The groove is an enfolding of sonic and physical material, which over time, can become

disorganised, as the world leaves its mark on the material, rendering a voice frail and losing its ability to sound as it once did. The wear of a record creates a material and therefore discursive shifting. As Eisenberg explains, 'surface noise could turn any piece of music into such a struggle of order against chaos, of the human spirit against the flailing of the blind, but far from mute universe' (Eisenberg 2005: 212). In the moment of purchase, the groove moves from its solely industrial status, and starts to be imbued with and accompanied by 'biographical scratches'.

The accumulation of surface marks and scratches, and the temporal degradation of the groove are an integral part of the vinyl records' unique materiality. Each scratch has a story. Those particular marks of degradation are entirely yours because we age together with the records that we keep. Their placement on the surface, their relationship with the song, the depth of each mark, how they came to be, are directly connected to your relationship and listenership of that particular record. Rendering copy, uniquely yours, sometimes shared, sometimes passed on, but inscribed with your shared biography.

These marks and fractures of the groove are also replicated in the playback of the record and therefore have an effect on our relationship with the music stored on the record's fragile surface. For example, the skip at a certain point in the playback is remembered as part of the song, and as Estep says, 'the vinyl record becomes a palimpsest that has a history of layered marks that you can't erase, incidental scratches become a natural part of the piece, not a mistake but integral to its meaning and composition' (Estep 2001: 39). These 'biographical scratches' that graze the record's surface are the instantiated rendering of the record collecting us as we collect them. As Bartmanski and Woodward attest 'physical records record more than just sounds. As their obdurate condition allows them to last and outlast their owners, they can record history, personal and collective' (2015: 176).

## Musical Scratches

The 'obdurate condition' of vinyl's materiality which Bartmanski and Woodward describe, was one part of a material assemblage which allowed for the development of the 'musical scratch'. In the early days of hip-hop, the records that were being used by DJs to mine for breakbeats (the instrumental sections of records that were skilfully collaged together to provide a continuous backing track to accommodate a rap), were often records that had lived alongside the family, plundered from parent's collections. DJ Kool Herc, the person attributed with throwing the first ever hip-hop party said that '[m]y mother was studying in New York, and she used to bring back records from Motown, Smokey Robinson...James Brown' (Herc 2002: 25). These biographical records provided a point of 'extension' from which the sound of hip-hop grew. Toop also makes the point that 12-inch singles, with their wider groove and hand sized surface, allowed for the manipulation of records on a turntable with greater ease than a 7-inch single (Toop 1984). This brought together the human, the record and the turntable into a creative post-human assemblage, the record as an 'extension of the self' (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015). This manipulability was exploited by Grandmaster Flash, who first invented the practice of cutting between two copies of the same record to extend the breakbeat section. His technique of live looping engendered the foundational structure of all hip-hop to this day, and fundamentally changed music forever. Flash's protégé, Grandmaster Theodore, accidentally found that he could take this technique a stage further. Whilst holding the record as his Mum shouted for him to turn the music down, he heard the sound of the record moving in his headphones and recognised this as being musically expressive. As he explains, '[w]hat I did was give a rhythm; I made a tune out of it, rubbing it three, four minutes, making it scratch' (Theodore 2020: 63).

Since its accidental invention and adoption into the sonic landscape of hip-hop and subsequently the majority of pop music forms, the 'musical scratch' has spawned an \$500 million DJ industry. Even hybrid DJ equipment that plays mp3s, still replicate the traditional DJ set-up where two vinyl records are manually controlled in order to manipulate music to the desired effect of the DJ. The 'musical scratch' is a nomadic intervention which de-territorialised the record and its sounds, extending the record and its captured sounds, away from its given function of reproduction, into new modes of communication. In doing so the 'musical scratch' has shifted our understanding of musical material too. As Eshun writes, the scratch, 'destratifies voice and vinyl into new textures standing on the border between solid and liquid. It turns beats into sonic matter in flux' (1998: 15). Dragging a needle down the cleave of the groove, with effervescent manual dexterity to create fragmentary percussive explosions of sound changed the communicative language of recorded music.

This practice shifted the record into a virtuosic expressive register, developing a sophisticated language of its own, that became known as 'turntablism', energising new lines of flight in musical practice. The record provides an interface to catalyse a cultural rupture which has consequently changed the way in which we perceive and use musical material. It has also shaped the way the record has subsequently been culturally constituted, that calls for envisaging vinyl material as immanent and 'vibrant' rather than set or static. Here, in the act of the 'musical scratch', energies are flowing between modes of materiality, producing different intensities dependent on 'the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces' (Bennett 2010: 21).

Throughout PEs work there is an awareness of this power of the vinyl record, which consequently becomes an important entanglement in the assemblage of the creative process. For example, we are told and bear witness to the fact that Terminator X 'speaks with his hands', however his hands are attached to vinyl records in order to make his language audible. In fact, X's scratching represents a state of violence in PE's music as 'his role is to sharpen the scratch into a cutting device, until it incites an edge of panic' (Eshun 1998: 18). Scratching upsets the status quo. It is an irreverent practice, that plays in the space of authorship. It questions a given hierarchy of objects and our relationship with the industry that produces them. Panic is elicited by the creative rubbishing of normative states of being and de-territorialising black bodies, human and vinyl. At the time of FOABP, rap itself was under scrutiny, as predominantly white critics questioned whether hip-hop could be allowed to be classified as music at all. Its new compositional techniques of slicing and dicing pre-recorded music on vinyl discs, were founded on seeing records in a new way, collaborating with discs and their musical material as a creative resource, to be manipulated and reappropriated as acousmatic voices to be re-authored and brought into new dialogic sonic space. These practices were developed because normal musical paths were often closed in the social environments hip-hoppers inhabited, so new creative trajectories had to be initiated, and the record was readily available to be opened up for reinterpretation.

### Artistic Scratches

As with the invention of the 'musical scratch' the unique materiality of the record has given rise to many new articulations of the partnership of sound and form, producing remarkable creative and cultural work. Celant (1977) Khan (1999; 2001), Cox and Warner (2006), Rice[7], Schoonmaker (2013), have made commendable efforts to document and trace the lineage of 'recordworks' (Celant 1977). Such works are too numerous to mention here, however it would be remiss of me not to give mention to Maholy Nagy, Toch and Hindemith, Christian Marclay, Graham Dolphin, Janek Schaefer, William Cordova, Laurie Anderson, whose ideas and creative practice are points on the

map that have reframed the creative potentials of the vinyl record. More recently Graham Dunning, Maria Chavez, Evecshen and Mariam Rezaei have significantly pushed the boundaries of the vinyl record as an object of art and as an instrument, scattering the energy of hip-hop DJing into many different paradigms of sculptural and sonic creation. The scope of this paper prevents me from exploring all this work in more detail, however, I would like to focus briefly on the work of Milan Knizak, whose early compositional affirmation of vinyl's creative possibilities, allows us to 'hear sounds that were unheard of previously' (Braidotti [8]).

In his trailblazing work *Broken Music* from 1963, Knizak provided the template to completely negate the reverence sometimes associated with the vinyl record. He took the record and destroyed it, in a variety of inventive ways. In his artist's statement he explains that he wanted to, 'achieve the widest variety of sound' (Knizak 2019). He saw his art as providing a new means of communication that would 'provide revolution in everyday life' (Mezzone 2009: 82). He explained it is not the object that is the result of the act of creation but instead 'the results are the changes in everyday life of every person who is affected by these things' (Mezzone 2009: 82).

Early adopters of the record as a platform for experimentation were often using it for its ability to create new sounds through its kinetic manipulation, however, Knizak, brought about the transformation of the material of the 'thing' itself. In the *Broken Records* work Knizak burns, breaks, cracks, paints on, scratches, and engages in a wholesale vandalism of the record. The blobs of glue, cuts, paint, breaks and cracks, all prevent and invent simultaneously. In their newly manifested indeterminacy, the records produce a new relationship between the thingness of the recording in its plastic materiality and the thingness of sound itself.

The records respond to their individual vandalisms behaving in significantly different ways, therefore Knizak is remoulding the process of signification through listening. He creates a new model for treating the grooved inscription of the original recording, so the lines of communication between the object and listener have been spun away into a new paradigm. By vandalising these records Knizak takes the 'stockpiling' (Attali 1985) function of the record and produces it as being unique once again. He re-communicates the record, as did Grand Wizard Theodore through his interpretation of the scratch, outlining the materials' agential qualities.

The scratch is a co-constituted entanglement between the material affordances of the vinyl record, playback technologies, new cultural frameworks, and enfolded ingenuity in sonic creation. It is important to note that in order for these sound artists to bring the scratch into being in the first place the record had clearly demanded attention, outside of its normative space of consumption and reproduction. The record existed in the environment of these artists, maybe in a state of quietude but certainly not silent. All of these different manifestations of the 'scratch' mark the 'nomadic materiality' of the vinyl record, ever reconstructing itself. This 'scratchy' mark making also constitutes the fundamental artistic gesture which grounds my creative intervention with 'A's copy of FOABP.

The scratch is one line by which to trace the 'nomadic materiality' of 'A's copy of FOABP, which could make up the object as a 'material-semiotic generative node' (Haraway 1988: 595). The musical content of Public Enemy record itself, provides another site from which to explore further sets of the vinyl record's material entanglements, that I wish to outline below.

## Fear of a Black Planet

The FOABP album is itself a complex assemblage of human and non-human actors intra-acting to manifest powerful agential musical and physical material, which has been catalysed, in part, by the 'nomadic materiality' of the vinyl record. The musical materials which the album uses as its basis have been gathered from vinyl records brought into the studio by different members of the group

and skilfully collaged together in a musical and social dialogic continuity. Braidotti argues that the 'nomadic subject is a materially embedded and embodied, affective and relational collective assemblage, a relay point for a web of complex relations that displace the centrality of ego-indexed notions of identity' (Braidotti [9]). I would suggest that the vinyl record is one of these 'relay points' in the collective assemblage of FOABP, both at the point of musical production and at the subsequent moments of public and private reception.

Schloss makes the point that, '[i]n order to operate effectively in American society, African American people tend to be conversant with both African American and European American cultures, languages and symbolic systems. As a result, these individuals would naturally tend to be attuned to the multiplicity of interpretations that may be drawn from any given interactions (social, musical or otherwise), not to mention the value of being able to control those interpretations' (2005: 160). The sounds on FOABP have been plundered from an archive of black music stretching back from the 1960s, using funk and soul records by James Brown, Sly Stone, The Supremes, The Jackson Sisters, and The Temptations to name a few. However, these sample choices were not so extraordinary for late 80s and early 90s hip-hop. For example, James Brown drum samples were used often by producers like Marley Marl and the 45 King. But the way in which they were used by PE in their imaginative combinations, and often indecipherable layers was altogether different. Hank Shocklee, a member of 'The Bomb Squad' production team, says that the 'music had to be disruptive, it had to be something that jarred the senses' (Shocklee 2020: 319) to express the pain of racism faced by the black community, and to give the energetic impetus to resist social oppression.

For Rose the '[e]motional power and presence in rap are profoundly linked to sonic force' (98: 1995). PEs music and FOABP in particular harnesses this force with great mastery of these fragmented sonic elements. The album is peppered with samples from speeches by the leader of the Nation of Islam, Minister Louis Farrakhan, which give a further potency to the affective power of each track. A good example of the amalgamation of these speeches and musical samples in unique combinatory compositional prowess is the track 'War at 33.3'. Just by outlining the content of the first few seconds of the track we can highlight how the production style of The Bomb Squad fit into Eshun's description of PEs productions as 'postwar schizophonia' creating an acousmatic sound world that was '...orchestrated into the information explosion' (1998: 115).

This track begins with a sample of Louis Farrakhan shouting 'Yo! move on em!'. This immediately segues into the start of the track proper which is led by a funk drum break, and a strange sounding guitar line which bubbles along percussively on sixteenth notes but has been processed with reverb to give each note less staccato clarity and gives a repetitious yet meandering quality. Playing simultaneously with the kick drum hit on the first note of the bar, we hear Farrakhan again, shouting 'Grab his soul and get the black mind back!'. At the start of the next bar, again placed on 'the one' is another sample of Farrakhan, saying 'they hope that he'll never wake up! Because they don't want to meet him on the battlefield'. We know that this sample has been taken from a different source as the low-end frequencies have been filtered, with the sample sounding like it's been taken from a lower quality recording than the first. As Farrakhan says 'hope', which has been placed on the first snare hit of the second bar, a 'musical scratch' by Terminator X responds. He scratches a distorted noisy 'ahhh' sound which he chops into four pieces as Farrakhan says, 'never wake up'. X allows the full two note duration of the sample to fill the space between the two phrases of Farrakhan's speech sample, in a call and response structure. At the same time as this musical scratch is ending, we hear Flavour Flav's voice for the first time, elongating his delivery of the word 'Listeeeeeeeeen', which overlaps into the start of Farrakhan's second phrase, 'because they never want to...'. This is underpinned again by another musical scratch which plays a  $\frac{3}{4}$  syncopation in the spaces between the kick and snare, meaning that



across this bar all three are in dialogue with one another. Also, another voice is layered beneath these elements at the end of the fourth bar, which is hard to pick out but starts by saying 'what is your opinion...', however, the rest of the sample is lost beneath Chuck D's entrance to the song, intoning a frustrated sounding and swelling 'ahhhhhhhhhh'. This starts on the third beat of the bar marking the rapper's introduction to the track and allows him to come in with the first word of his rap on the first beat of bar five with the word 'WAR!'. At the same time that Chuck enters the frame, another male voice backs him with a pained and fracturing scream that then lasts for two and half bars and drops out to leave Chuck rapping together in dialogue with just the musical elements of the track, saying, 'with this list my fist pumps chumps / and don't miss!' (PE 1990).

What I have described above is just the opening seventeen seconds of this track. As the piece progresses it becomes further complicated by other samples in more complex and rhythmic movements. However, just considering this opening snippet of the song gives a clear indication as to ways in which FOABP can be seen as a deterritorialised 'information explosion' (Eshun 1998) with all the affective power which is engendered therein. During this very short section, we hear the voices of Minister Louis Farrakhan, Chuck D, Flavour Flav, and two other anonymous interlocutors. We also have Terminator X's musical scratching, drums taken from multiple sources, guitars from another, and processed bass which sounds likely to be a product of the SP 1200 drum machine being cleverly used to elicit some new frequencies from a drum sample. In PE's sound world all of these elements have equal value and are musically and socially intra-related. Their power is further amplified when placed into dialogue with each one another in this multi-layered sonic assemblage. The sampling process not only collapses the given temporalities of each piece, but their prior symbolic structures are also transformed. In doing so new relations are created that, one could argue, allow for Braidotti's 'multiple belongings' to be heard.

FOABP is a great example of the transformative and creative power of sampling. Sonic material is as manipulable as paint and used in this context also becomes a pedagogic and political material for producer and listener. As Daddy-O from eighties rap group Stetsasonic, says 'we learn a lot from sampling; it's like school for us' (Rose 1994: 79), not to mention those who were listening to the results. One could argue that the sample is like the accent, passed on from speaker to speaker which for Braidotti is the trace of the 'nomadic subject' in transition. The accent carries with it cultural resonances, as do samples, mobilising them as vehicles to negotiate social change, and identities in flux. The sample is a cultural voice moving between materialities with sound as its conduit. In FOABP the samples trace a lesser-known line of flight through the history of race relations. The samples and their creative amalgamation constitutes the contemporary sound of post-colonial subjectivity.

Chuck D's, raps delivered with a powerful baritone were the voice of sonic black militancy. His lyrics are a no-holds barred account of the social injustices suffered by African Americans in the late 80s and early 90s and raised awareness of these structural inequalities. Thirty-three years after its release his raps still have powerful relevance to current race relations across the world. The songs on FOABP presented scathing attacks on the prison system, public services, health care provision, the war on drugs, colourism, poverty, the media industry and representation, paucity of education for minority communities and so on. Indeed, the press release of the album included a fifteen-page pamphlet which outlined Frances Cress Welsing's, 'Colour Confrontation Theory' which posited that white genetic maintenance was the driving force behind white supremacist thinking, meaning all social systems are contrived to maintain this racial hierarchy by emasculating the black man. It is this theory which gives rise to the album's title. In this way PE were actively courting controversy through their political positioning by trying to shock their audience into resistant action. Their stance 'marked a significant break in rap's dominant discursive terrain' (Rose, 1993: 276), that, despite a couple of exceptions, had previously focussed on partying or

the competition between hip-hop crews. The discursive evolution of hip-hop through the late 80s and into the genre's so-called golden age between 92-97, was in part driven by the stance taken by PE in their music. Lyrical advocacy for the teachings of Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam (NOI), and in particular a sect called 'The Five Percenters', was prevalent at this time. This led to what Reddie describes as a turn to a reductive expression of Islam which he refers to as 'Muslim Chic', where 'revolutionary talk was mere style over substance' (Reddie 2009: 195). It was this newly awakened Islamic discourse in hip-hop, that PE manifested through their music, which provides yet another nomadic journey in the life of A's copy of FOABP.

### 'A' Leaves the Record Behind

The thread of Islam is an important one in the story of A's copy of FOABP, because it ties PE's music, A's own spiritual and physical journey, my autobiographical connection, and the political space of the record together. This particular line of flight sees the record as an extension of not just the 'self' of ownership but the selves of 'multiple belongings' drawn into its 'nomadic materiality'.

'A' and I, had been listening to the cut-up sermons and Nation of Islam rhetoric of FOABP and other hip-hop records made around this time, in the small town of Blackburn, in Lancashire, England, pressed into vinyl and distributed internationally by the globalised musical industrial complex. Paor-Evans makes the point that 'through facts and narratives delivered through hip-hop records, provincial headz were learning about the black diaspora, slavery and oppression' (2020: 268). Importantly for our story, he adds that 'not only was hip-hop signposting and delivering an education outside of the remit of the institution, it was encouraging its audience to explore their own cultural circumstances' (2020: 269).

This conception speaks to the idea that the records that we own provide a catalyst for critical thinking, resistant conversation, and social critique to emerge (Paor-Evans 2020). One could therefore argue that our exposure to the politics of resistance and racial political argument on FOABP set us on a path of resistance to 'liberate ourselves and our bodies from this socius, this hierarchical order of society where power is distributed vertically' (Ibrahim 2015: 15). The complex intersections and often contradictory and controversial politics of FOABP, coupled with its tense and cacophonous musical aesthetics became an important teacher in our lives. Listening to hip-hop, and especially the work of PE gave us a critical positioning and language with which to articulate our minority status in a media landscape where black and Asian representation was extremely rare. Interestingly too, we were both minorities within a minority, him being black and me being mixed race. Through the medium of records and their connected sonic material as connector, we met at intersections of personal, local, racial and national identifications. 'A', Black and Muslim, and me, mixed race and secular, both drinking in a pub owned by a Polish immigrant, situated at the edge of the longest standing Pakistani community in Blackburn surrounded by post-industrial deprivation. Our shared musical taste allowed us to claim a space of 'blackness', imagining what that wasn't or what could be. This negotiation with music, space, place, identity, religion and politics was soundtracked by FOABP and delivered to us across the grooves of the vinyl record.

The relationship between hip-hop and religion provides an important node here too, because its role in our resistive identifications is resonant, yet it also leads to 'A' leaving the record with me. Reddie makes the point that hip hop could have been taken up by many Black Muslims because 'the genre revolves around the speaking voice and beats, it avoids the controversy about the legitimacy of music in Islam' (Reddie 2009: 210). However, for 'A' it would seem that ultimately this justification did not carry any weight. I was presented with his collection of records because he made the decision that music should no longer be a part of his life. By moving away, to pursue his faith with a more strict observance, he was rejecting in its entirety, neo-liberal Westernised late

modernity and rejecting its trappings, one of which is music and its connected materialities. Indeed, some critics of the moment of 'Muslim chic' which took hold in the hip-hop world just after the release of FOABP, may well have argued he was doing the right thing. The underlying reasons for his emigration were not discussed at the time he left the records with me. They evidently constitute a very complex set of personal, religious and social relations which it is not within the bounds of this discussion to unpack. Suffice to say that the strength of feeling needed to make such a move is unquestionable.

In terms of the 'nomadic materiality' of the vinyl record however, there are a couple of interesting points to be made here. This record had been passed on by A, not tossed into a skip. I would suggest that this is an important distinction because as Bennett reminds us, 'a vital materiality can never really be thrown "away", for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity' (2010: 6). The fact that 'A' decided to pass on these objects and not just throw them away despite his rejection of their musical content arguably tells us something of their agential qualities and biographical power. Junking something arguably allows the object to engage in a new set of relations, accreting yet more threads of entanglement into the fabric of its 'vibrating' self. Many hundreds of thousands of records exist in the world, but the agential materials required to make this particular one will never be found again.

Deleuze writes, 'the nomad is not necessarily someone who moves, there are stationary voyages, voyages in intensity ... in order to stay in the same place while escaping the codes' (20: 1997). Whilst apparently languishing on my record shelves, I felt the record was actually progressing through its agential meanderings. I hoped to add a new voice to map some of these movements in order to bring about an intermingling between the material conditions of the vinyl record and the discursive practices around it. A's copy of FOABP had begun undoing different modes of materiality through connecting and dislodging the porous spaces between cultural, personal, public, private, religious, political, and inter-personal modalities of listening, sounding and being. I read the static record in its immanence, as 'a mobile entity, an enfolded sort of memory that repeats and is capable of lasting through sets of discontinuous variations, whilst remaining faithful to itself' (Braidotti 2000: 159).

### Inscribing *Fear of A Black Planet*

The sculptural work I engaged with on the surface of A's copy of FOABP is an act of resistance that falls somewhere between the 'biographical', 'musical' and 'artistic' scratches that I detailed above. By inscribing the surface of the record, I hoped to draw on the 'nomadic materiality' of this object. Seeing the record in my collection continued to connect me to the ongoing assemblage of its entangled relations. I continually experienced the moment when 'the mute idol speaks' (Bennett 2010: 2). The record spoke to me of all of the intra-connections some of which I have attempted to outline above; the life of the scratch, musical innovations catalysed by the record, contestations over identity, autobiographical memory, social relations with musical material and so on. However, the word it was shouting at me over and over again was 'resistance'.

Therefore, for my 'artistic scratch', I took A's record and inscribed the names of over four hundred people who had lost their lives at the hands of state authorities. These lives had been lost whilst people were being held in custody, in detention centres, refugee holding centres, or they were people who had been unlawfully killed whilst being arrested or even just suspected of committing a crime. I inscribed these names in 2018, during a moment when populist political discourse was openly nationalistic and xenophobic. There was a worldwide trend towards nationalism in the wake of the Brexit campaigning in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US. In the UK the consequences of such rhetoric were being felt daily by minority communities and

the instances of racially and religiously motivated hate crime increased by a quarter from 2015-2017, with a spike in August 2016, just after the Brexit referendum result (O'Neill 2017). The openly hateful and divisive tenor of political discourse was nothing new but reached a bitter zenith at this time. Its legacy has been long lasting deeply politically embedded as the current UK government policy on migration is as hard line and divisive as ever. Conversations about the ongoing institutional and structural racism oppressing diaspora, were the same ones that had been the target of PE's vitriolic critique on FOABP nearly thirty years prior. In this environment Chuck D's anthemic call to 'Fight the Power' felt as crucial now as it did all those years ago.

FOABP is an angry record, it rails against injustice through its emotionally charged sonic innovations and new discursive directions. My inscriptions are also violent and could be seen as 'taboo' (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015). By 'destroying' or breaking the record in this way I was also engaging with an industrial discourse around value, authorship and commodification. The act of sampling also held these issues up to scrutiny, and so my scratch, although abstracted, is an homage to hip-hop's deterritorialization of musical material, through writing the names, to speak the voices of the powerless.

Inscribing these names directly into the physical material of the groovy surface, brings about both a visual and sonic change. When David Toop first heard the cut and paste aesthetic of early hip-hop, he wrote that the 'high speed collaging of musical fragments leaves you breathless, searching for reference points. The beauty of dismembering hits lies in displacing familiarity' (1984: 18). This displacement of familiarity reminds me of Braidotti's idea that 'creativity entails the active displacement of dominant formations of identity' (Braidotti [10]). Through these inscriptions I have actively displaced what is familiar, aesthetically and in practice, and shifted a dominant formation of what the record can be. This follows through into the consequent sonic material which now emanates from this broken disc. Now the sound is fractured and distorted with the listener having to hear through the interference which these inscriptions have introduced. The record becomes a collection of fragments, indeterminately collaged through the relationship between material and the playback technology. The record has been 'dismembered', physically cut up, and trying to find reference points in the wreckage, in the flux of a disrupted identity can leave the listener 'feeling breathless'. The needle, which is supposed to guide our ear through the 'ur' language of the groove, is displaced. Its connection to its prescribed trajectory has been interrupted, its constantly being thrown off course, helplessly screaming out for guidance, but finding new ways of communicating through the obstacles. The stories of these victims is also one of fighting through the noise, families pulling themselves back together after their losses. Disrupted and fractured lives railing against the systematic injustices which are consistently ignored as noise.

With this practice I sought to de-territorialise the record by pushing its surface into a new state of being. Bringing together the physical, social, and symbolic onto the material into a new set of resistant yet fluid relations. Although one might argue that the carving of these names has actually reterritorialised the record, that this practice has set the record into the space of the art object, to be looked at from afar and never to be touched. However, this is not my intention, the record should continue to be played as much as possible. Because when the record is brought into relation with the machines designed to read the groove, a process of deterritorialisation takes place again, meaning this record is always in flux in ways akin to the lives of those affected by racial hatred and violence. Now, as the record plays, it makes its own sense, it follows an indeterminate path, its jumps and loops, skids and crashes, releases fragments of discernible sound, stretches of noise, crunches and crackles its way through our senses, taking its sounding qualities into a new sets of relations on each spin.

## Conclusion

Borrowing from the work of the 'new materialist' thinkers, I have sought to show how the story of A's copy of FOABP constitutes an example of 'nomadic materiality'. This phrase attempts to show the fluidity and agential power of the vinyl record. My argument is that the record can be read as a 'relay point' for a set of constantly intra-weaving, laterally combining series of connections positioning the object in a realm of multiplicities, forming vibrant assemblages. Although the record is to be found in different paradigms of use, the vibrancy, as Bennett describes, 'owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materials that constitute it' (2010: 34). By approaching the record as an 'material nomad' in this paper, a fuller, richer, and dynamic set of relationships opens up. I have highlighted the ones which expose the ongoing creative potentials of the vinyl record. Tracing this 'nomadic materiality' has taken 'A's copy of FOABP across the intersections of musical, creative, social, religious, and autobiographical contexts.

Admittedly I was only able to give light to some of the many voices that intra-act in the ongoing life of the record, omitting many more in the vast assemblages of which it is part. However, by drawing on some of the connections I have found from thinking through A's copy of FOABP from this perspective, I hope to have given some conceptual ground for my subsequent creative intervention with this unique object. I wholeheartedly admit this is not the whole story, although however thin this may be, I hope that it provides some new ways of considering the record and its vibrant agency. The act of inscription, drawing new scratches into the surface of the record opens up a question of its productive potential. Both 'musical' and 'artistic' scratches degrade the musical material embedded into the 'groovy scratch' of the record. I hoped to have shown here that these acts of creative practice constitute a productive positioning of the unique materiality of vinyl, where the playback of this material engenders new sound worlds which are in dialogic relation to the already existing recorded musical material of the originally pressed onto the disc.

As I have shown, FOABP is full of energetic flows which – through my creative intervention – I have tried to unearth and re-enliven. By inscribing this record with those hundreds of names, the interconnected energies, tensions and problematics embedded in the story 'the scratch' of 'A's copy of FOABP, and the stories of those now memorialised on its surface, can go some way to reconsidering our notions of 'otherness'. Vinyl is a transformative material and has a tradition of being transformed. I hope to have shown here that its unique combination of material states allows for a creatively productive dialogue between various relational ontologies. In doing so highlighting that, 'art is a co-collaboration, not a form-matter synthesis and matter as much as the human has responsibility for the emergence or art. (Bolt 2013: 6).

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## Endnotes

1. 'Nomadic Subjects' available at <https://www.diaphanes.net/titel/nomadic-subjects-4356> (Accessed: 3.8.23).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. 'A Brief History of Anti-Records and Conceptual Records', available at <http://www.ubu.com/papers/rice.html> (Accessed: 13.7.23).
8. 'Nomadic Subjects' available at <https://www.diaphanes.net/titel/nomadic-subjects-4356> (Accessed: 3.8.23).
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

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