

legitimate and transparent ways possible'. His rejection of horizontalism is therefore largely based on historical precedent (look: it fails) and efficacy (it fails because it is not as effective). But there is also an interesting further argument against horizontalism, which emerges briefly and that deserved further space in the book. Horizontalism is also poor because it is *too individualistic*, and in this it reflects a pathological neoliberal subjectivity. Everybody wants to be the leader, everyone wants to have their own understanding of why they are protesting, nobody will sacrifice a portion of their autonomy to be part of a broader, organised movement. It becomes an impotent cult of collective individuality. I would have been interested to have seen this argument fleshed out further.

Personally, I am convinced by Bevins that what is required, learning from the 2010s, is democratically structured organisations, with clear representatives, who are committed to strategic thinking. Thinking about what happens the day after the regime falls matters. When the power vacuum emerges: how are progressive groups going to ensure their values and policy aspirations win

the day? For too many groups there was a naïve belief in the glorious victory following the fall of the dictator. As Egyptian activist Mahmoud Salem described it, there was a sense that everything would melt away when Mubarak had gone. Salem compared his innocent belief to a view that all evil would instantly be purged from the kingdom, akin to the destructions of the forces of Sauron when the ring is thrown into Mount Doom in *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Bevins is obviously correct: history shows that is not what happens. Left-activists must strategise how to take control of the political vacuum, merely creating one does not guarantee a progressive future. As Bevins argues, you cannot just burn your car and just hope a better one will come along and replace it. Detailed, situation-specific, dynamic and adaptive strategising is required. In light of insurgent neo-fascisms and the impending existential threat of climate change, and the total failure of neoliberal parties to engage with either meaningfully, the questions Bevins poses are only going to become more relevant for left activism in the years ahead.

Neal Harris

Streaming hammers

Paul Rekret, *Take This Hammer: Work, Song, Crisis* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2024). 200pp., £36.00 hb., 978 1 91338 016 8

The headphones come off. Sore ears. The promise of lively distraction wears thin, and playlists lose their already limited lustre. The troubled relation between labour and leisure spirals, unresolved, forever onward. In *Take This Hammer: Work, Song, Crisis* Paul Rekret mines this familiar tension, tracing the unease with which we encounter music both as circulating commodity and as aesthetic experience which *might* move us against the near-universal drudgery of waged and unwaged labour.

Take This Hammer draws its title from the 'hammer songs' of primarily Black, predominantly forced, labourers across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, each sung to 'animate and pace a hammer striking steel, an axe splitting wood, a hoe shaping soil'. In the titular variation a worker exclaims in rejection: 'This old hammer killed John Henry / But it won't kill me, Oh boys, won't

kill me.' Rekret posits that in this chronicle of social life in flight from the brutality of segregation, there is no attempt at reconciliation with work, but instead only an insistence on escaping from labour altogether. In varied meditations on 'the song', moving from synthetic New Age experimentation to the equivocations of Vaporwave, Rekret sketches how any such oppositional culture may still be heard in the disorienting space-time of our post-financial crisis economy. As an 'unstable vessel', which bears that which is 'unallowed, insurgent and perverse', he attempts to make sense of how 'the song' may yet still continue to function as a site of struggle. With a commentary on the fragmentary paths of modernism as a background, this is above all suggested by Rekret, albeit at points elliptically, in how music may initiate a 'different experience of time' that in myriad ways opposes

the 'capitalist-time discipline' which formats the uneven flows of daily life.

Concerned less with any untempered philosophical speculation on 'pure sonority' and sound, it is the violence and antagonism which conditions music, and casts its horizons, that comes to the fore. If Theodor Adorno famously fretted over our capacity for a poetic celebration of the 'actuality of nature' when the din of jet engines clouded all but 'the most remote forests', Rekret worries over the truth contents of an aesthetic practice whose object is rapidly collapsing: how are the artistic practices of field recording – attempts to document and represent the sound of the natural world – mutating as its source is facing total ecological devastation through the proliferation of the 'lithium and copper mines, the chip-board assembly plants, [and] e-waste dumps' necessary to sustain its own musical infrastructures? The social violence which underpins our recording and listening practices are interrogated in a related vein: how can we ever imagine them to be free of capitalism's imprint when neo-colonial regimes ensure music technology is primarily 'produced, assembled and disposed of in the global South' and the 'overwhelming majority of the world's intellectual property is held in a small number of over-developed states in the global North'? Housing crises, financialised debt and the 'racialised and gendered global division of the pleasures and pains'; all are suggested as inextricable from any assessment of the shapes of contemporary music, and the implications and costs of autonomous expression are to be accounted for.

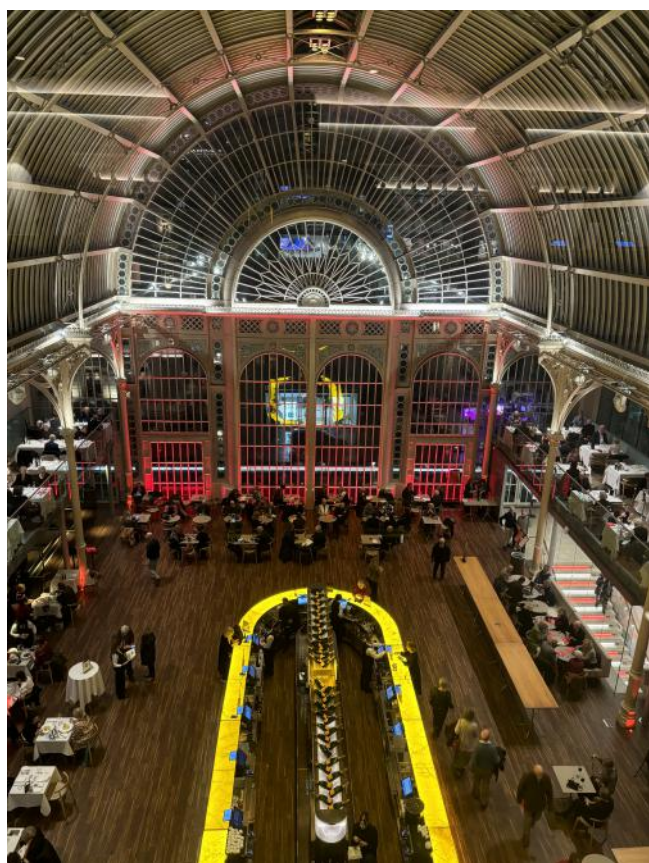
Rekret's range of interlocutors in the book is certainly wide, and extended engagements with feminist theory and thinkers from the Black Radical Tradition structure Rekret's analysis throughout, as he works to consider how the social reproduction of life under perpetual economic crisis and exclusionary violence is resisted and registered in music's expressive forms. This is most acutely felt in his reading of trap music and its ascent into pop hegemony. Although hip-hop and its many sub-genres all reflect upon capitalist crises in distinct ways, Rekret posits that 'only trap... explicitly starts from the problem of work' through its producers' multi-valent focus on the compulsive tempo of making and spending money in US cities and suburbs. This specific question of work is also, however, necessarily folded into a wider address of capital's transformation of the US's spatial

reality. The name of the genre itself originates from the mass of foreclosed and abandoned houses which have proliferated since the early 2000s, and Rekret situates the genre in relation to a profoundly unequal system of housing almost totally subsumed under racialised and market logics. Trap is, ultimately for Rekret, a genre which 'accumulates a seemingly contradictory load of premises' in that it simultaneously 'gestures at a mode of life within and against capital' through resistance to capital's disciplinary regimes, at the same time as it is abstracted into a musical commodity and channelled toward mass commercial influence.

This complex dynamic of production and commodification is further excavated through Rekret's reading of 'authenticity' and its place within the political economy of 'new world music'. A 'ceaseless pursuit of an Other' currently fuels sections of collector-oriented, tourist-like network of labels and archival projects which circulate recordings from musicians, primarily outside the West, which tend toward compositional and technical experimentation in hybrid forms. Rekret highlights that one primary consequence of this mode of consumption is how it promotes a total evacuation of the political stakes of the music itself, rendering it invisible or just as an additional selling point; the complexity of Francis Bebey's oeuvre, for example, is compressed into a simple 'eccentricity' that can be enjoyed at a distance, where his extensive participation in decolonial cultural politics, musical as well as novelistic and pedagogical, is continually disappeared.

While sites like clubs are a prominent setting for Rekret's study, the collective dimensions of music today are unfortunately addressed in less detail. We might want to consider, for example, the dynamics of an ever-growing but always fraught live music sector in the UK, and its social function as a site of both pleasure and obstinate toil. Given 'refusal' is articulated through both individual and shared practices, and often in a messy blend of the two, the place of music within our vanishing shared lives is left somewhat unclear; our enjoyment of music both emboldens modes of communality which work against the seriality insisted upon by capitalism's divisions of labour, while also threatening to reinforce the intrusion of isolation into all spheres of life. I'm reminded of a development which Laleh Khalili records in her intimate account of life on tankers and ships, *The*

Corporeal Life of Seafaring, where she notes how ships' crews increasingly disappear into the solitude of their cabins for online streaming, when they might have once endured stormy seas through late-night sing-alongs. Access to a karaoke machine was previously demanded by workers as a condition for their work, but now mutual revelry in song and performance increasingly dissipates through ubiquitous satellite internet connection.



On this, Rekret's engagement with streaming culture is perhaps more clarifying, as he documents the perpetual encroachment of streamed music as a functional salve to the hardship of precarious jobs and socio-economic instability. With the rise of the curated playlist as a background presence for life's every moment, Rekret sees the ambient-ification of our experience of music at large: shorter songs, less key changes and front-loading of hooks to ensure listening beyond the 30-second mark which triggers payment to an artist. A predictability in sound and style seems to be a compelled telos of our current musical epoch. While the logic of experimentalism

which guides ambient music itself has always been up for debate, with the expansion of 'chill' into every terrain, Rekret sees primarily an extension of digital capitalism's mechanisms of capture. Computational algorithms collate songs through quantitative meta-data, all transmitted through 'ambient computing' systems that can ensure constant access, with an appropriate playlist always at hand and ready for consumption. It is through these hostile conditions that the radical, propulsive force of any music, popular or otherwise, will have to sound out. What to think, then, as I sit on my daily commute, gladly accompanied by the gentle intensity of ambient recording works like KMRU's *Peel* or *Dissolution Grip*, with the sampled city noise of Nairobi and Berlin blurring with the drone of London? Engaged, momentarily, in escaping the clatter of one metropolis for another and, hopefully, able to reckon with the clear insight of the projects themselves, even if a practice of refusal feels highly uncertain.

Rekret himself does not rally toward any specific aesthetic programme, or pose any politically-inflected imperatives. The grandeur of political or musical strategy or polemic would likely stick out awkwardly within the book's critical gaze. Given his recurrent stress on the universalising, but differentiated, effects of capital's subsumptive processes, a wider global, comparative frame of contemporary listening practices and musical cultures may be a further track to follow, particularly in relation to current movements of struggle and revolt (as a way of making sense of the important place of song and sound in on-going solidarity movements against the genocide in Palestine, for example). Left without a definitive balance-sheet of our musical moment, the lack of a concluding chapter perhaps instead extends the open form of the song, which he suggests may still yet harbour a negativity capable of affirming life beyond capital's rhythms, but which cannot be foreclosed, or easily systematised. No easy answers, of course. Yet, as the crises Rekret foregrounds continue unabated, we will need fresh tools and texts to make sense of future compositions of music and resistance that may come to mediate the dissonance of everyday life - and *Take This Hammer* should be amongst them.

Dante Philp