SAMPLES
Open Access Journal for Popular Music Studies
GFPM
German Society for Popular Music Studies e. V.
Ed. by Katharina Alexi, Eva Krisper, and Eva Schuck
https://gfpm-samples.de/index.php/samples/issue/archive
Volume 22 (2024) – Version of 17 October 2024
Group Analysis Special – Guest Editors Ralf von Appen, Samantha Bennett, André Doehring and Dietrich Helms

# PARTYING AND PROTESTING WITH TUNE-YARDS' »WATER FOUNTAIN«

*Kjetil Klette Bøhler, Nick Braae, Steven Gamble, Andrei Sora and Tanja Veverka*

## INTRODUCTION

Let's get something straight, right from the start: tUnE-yArDs' »Water Fountain« is not an easy song. Listeners inevitably compare their encounters with new music to previous listening experiences, often in service of understanding stylistic norms (Green 1988: 32-44; Moore 2012: 119-20). In this way, we may feel that we know what to expect from any given track. Well, good luck with that for »Water Fountain«. Experimental-folk-hip-hop-world-pop music? Perhaps, in the absence of clear style-defining characteristics, we might find stable harmonic ground? A recognisable structure? Predictable production? No, no, and … no. Even writing the artist's name is a challenge.

Difficulties aside, or perhaps even because of them, there is something intoxicating about the musical qualities of »Water Fountain«. Through collaborative and interpretive listening to the song, this chapter aims to elucidate why this is the case. In doing so we analyse the toying with formal conventions, the layering and dovetailing of tonal centres, the aggressive mixing techniques, the intricate groove formed from rhythmic fragments, the evocative lyrical imagery, the contrast between flat and animated vocal delivery, and the bustling textures, all of which offer a startling musical experience. »Water Fountain« may demand much from the listener, but it is generous in return: the song is ripe for enjoyment, analysis, and interpreta-

tion. The aim of this paper, in simple terms, is to explain how and why this is so.

First, however, some background information on »Water Fountain« and tUnE-yArDs may be useful. Released in March 2014, »Water Fountain« was the lead single from *Nikki Nack*, tUnE-yArDs' third full-length album after *BiRd-BrAiNs* (2009) and *W H O K I L L* (2011). tUnE-yArDs is the music project of Merrill Garbus, a New England native who moved to Oakland, California in advance of *W H O K I L L*. tUnE-yArDs' *modus operandi* has been relatively consistent across the three albums. A multi-instrumentalist and vocalist, Garbus constructs songs in the studio from a range of percussion, instrumental, and vocal loops, to which her recent collaborator Nate Brenner adds bass guitar and synth parts. Other musicians contribute to tUnE-yArDs on a relatively *ad hoc* basis. In »Water Fountain«, for instance, Thao Nguyen is credited for providing extra vocals, while live performances often feature a larger selection of players in order to recreate the rhythmic layers. Although only modestly successful from a traditional commercial perspective—*Nikki Nack* reached numbers 54 and 27 on the British and United States album charts, respectively—tUnE-yArDs has proven to be a favourite of critics over the past five years, receiving warm praise from several major publications (Daly 2014; Hermes 2014; Hutchinson 2014; Powell 2014; Sherburne 2014).

Much of tUnE-yArDs' output is characterised by its perceived subversive tone. The stylised forms of titles can be viewed as a miniature act of resistance against the conventions of written English. There was originally a plan for *W H O K I L L* to be titled *Women Who Kill* and feature only female collaborators (Brownstone 2012). Furthermore, songs from that album address issues such as economic inequality (»My Country«) and gender power relations (»Powa«). As Garbus told the *Song Exploder* podcast, »I want my music to be a product of the world that I am growing up in, and growing older in« (Hirway 2015).

»Water Fountain« appears to fit this profile. The refrain lyric (»No water in the water fountain«) ostensibly addresses the issue of water shortages, which is no great surprise given that both Garbus and Brenner live in Oakland, California, where such concerns have been prevalent in the past few years. Further, in various interviews (e.g. Hirway 2015), Garbus has noted that this specific context influenced her writing of the song. That said, we are also drawn to »Water Fountain« in terms of broader socio-political critiques. On the one hand, the »water fountain« may be emblematic of public goods and social welfare generated by taxation; historically, a town's water fountain was a public space where welfare was provided to citizens. The emptiness

of the »water fountain« could thus be understood as a critique of modern capitalism: if people seek only personal monetary gain and do not pay taxes, then there will be no money to furnish public goods and social welfare. On the other hand, the track may be felt to act out issues around the allocation of the world's finite resources, with the titular »water fountain« acting as a metaphor for power, oil, food, and so forth. If listeners develop this narrative, they may need to position the song's characters: essentially, who is taking what, and from whom? In this respect, we may hear the song as a protest against neo-colonial attitudes, with the repeated chorus line, »We're gonna get the water from your house«, imagining a larger power helping itself to resources from smaller powers (or vice versa).

How about another interpretation altogether? For us, »Water Fountain« also offers the characters, setting, and atmosphere of a house party. On the surface, this latter reading seems problematic: the frivolity of a party is far removed from the seriousness of a cultural critique, which, by the way, is how Garbus hears it (Hirway 2015). There are a number of reasons why we nonetheless feel entitled to hear the song this way, and present multiple interpretations of it. First, we do not uphold the assumption that authors inscribe meaning into a text, thereby removing any agency from the listener.[1] Second, we do not argue that there is a »correct« interpretation that listeners should try to find. Third, there is substantial evidence that songs afford multiple meanings for multiple listeners, from everyday discussion to online fora such as Genius.com or SongMeanings. Our first time hearing »Water Fountain« together, and sharing the wildly different ways that we made sense of the track, is all the empirical evidence we should need to reject any authorial claims of a singular meaning.

With these ideas in mind, the remainder of this chapter proceeds through four major sections. The first three have an analytical focus, insofar as each is concerned with understanding how the contrasting interpretations arise from interaction with the musical text itself. That is, through identifying and investigating specific musical details of the song, we argue how this content affords the readings presented above. The first analytical segment, therefore, will address those features that predominantly create a sense of »uncomfortable tension« for us; the second analytical segment considers the protest reading more closely; and the third analytical segment details the alternative hearing of »Water Fountain« as a celebratory party

1 Critiques of this view have long been made: Wimsatt/Beardsley (1954) characterise it as the »intentional fallacy«, and Barthes' (1977) commentary on this position is widely cited in the humanities.

song. Along these lines the study thus aims to develop interpretative observations as drawn from empirical observations about the music.

These analytical discussions lead to the fourth section, which does not necessarily address the individual readings themselves, so much as the relationship between them. That is, on what grounds, musically and theoretically, does »Water Fountain« afford hearing both a party and a protest? And what is the significance of this observation? We propose explanations using theories of dialogism and intertextuality, as well as through references to the musical traditions of Latin America and the Caribbean, in which spirited and lively music often masks strong political urges (see Bøhler 2013, 311-341). Thus, although we are concerned with understanding aspects of »Water Fountain« (what the song means to us, and why), the issue at the heart of this essay is the act and process of analysis and interpretation—or, when, how, and why we come to understand the song in particular ways.

## UNCOMFORTABLE MUSICAL TENSION

An appropriate analytical starting point is the formal, textural and harmonic structure of »Water Fountain«, as these details provide much of the uncomfortable tension that is at the heart of the song. Changes in texture and harmonic centres also help to demarcate formal boundaries, and thus there is a strong mutual relationship between these traits. »Water Fountain« does not match an established song template, such as AABA, verse-chorus-bridge, or others outlined by Covach (2005), but neither does it eschew formal conventions. The song is constructed in a regular manner out of eight-bar modules. Of the ten modules, four may be regarded as choruses given the repeated title lyrics and melodic line; a four-bar coda presents the same lyrical material. The remaining six modules could be labelled verses given that the musical textures vary widely and the lyrics differ over varying vocal phrases. At the same time, both »verse« and »chorus«, and the subsequent »verse-chorus form«, connote not only musical and lyrical functions, but also certain temporal configurations; namely, one expects semi-regular patterns of successive sections (e.g. V-V-C-V-C). The basic sectional procession, however, in »Water Fountain« is as follows: C-C-V-V-C-V-V-V-V-C/V-Coda. To add to this unusual overall structure, the penultimate section, which we have labelled a simultaneous chorus-verse, includes elements of previous choruses as well as much material from the preceding verse module. Thus, a strong sense of structural disruption may be experienced as the song develops. Although constructed from units that behave and function

much like verses and choruses, the song can hardly be described as being *in* a clear-cut verse-chorus form.

Textural and harmonic details support this formal tension. Following Butler (2006: 301ff), Figure 1 presents an excerpt of a bar-by-bar texture diagram, covering the third to the sixth verses.

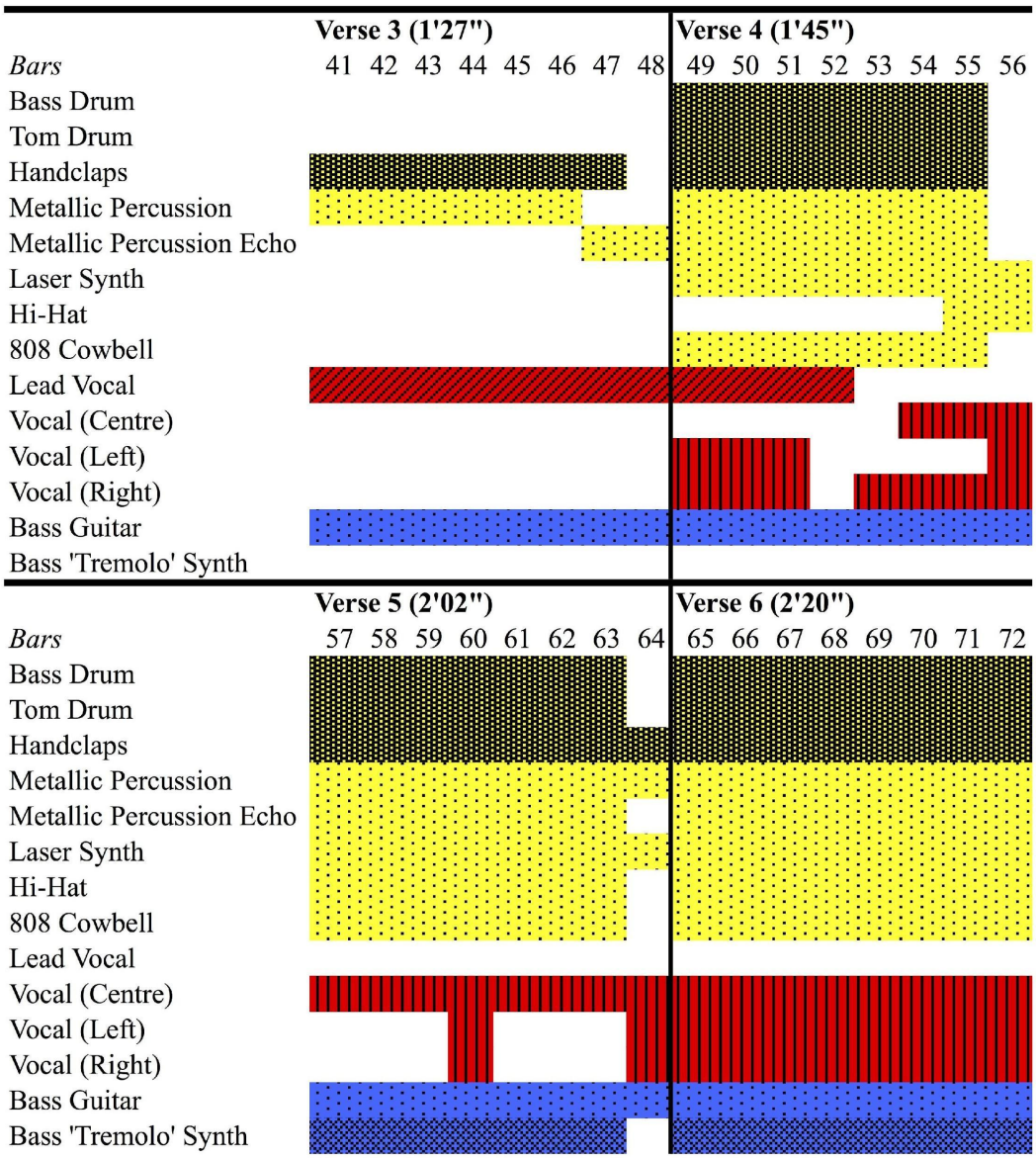


Figure 1. »Water Fountain«, Texture Map, Verses 3-6 with bar numbers and timings

Although there are subtle textural variations within each segment, the significant changes occur abruptly across the boundaries of each module. Indeed, it is this trait that allows us to describe each eight-bar unit in sectional terms—the introduction of the »laser synth« in the fourth verse; the introduction of the 808 cowbell and bass synth in the fifth verse; and the consistent

presence of the supplementary vocal parts in the sixth verse. This is not a clear-cut example of what Spicer has termed an »accumulative« texture (Spicer 2004), for the reason that it is difficult to hear each individual piece as being a piece of an overarching textural jigsaw. Neither does »Water Fountain« follow the pop song model of creating a textural hierarchy between, say, the verse and chorus sections.[2] Instead, the process is one of both addition and transformation, whereby each successive section develops from the previous one.

The harmonic structure contributes to this unusual formal approach, although in speaking of »harmony« in this context, we are referring to chord structures implied by the bass and vocal lines. Moore (2001, 2012) analyses the texture of popular songs in terms of four functional layers—beat, bass, melodic, and harmonic filler—with different instruments typically associated with a primary function, such as the drum kit and beat layer. »Water Fountain« is notable for the relative absence of a harmonic filler layer—there are no keyboards, no guitars, and the synthesizers are primarily percussive, sparse, or single lines only.

This has several consequences. First, it draws attention to the few points of the song in which there is a more perceivable vertical construction, such as the three-part vocal harmonies that outline an F major chord in the sixth verse (more on this below). Second, it encourages the listener to construct imagined harmonic structures from the vocal melody and the bass line. Third, it disrupts notions of »tonality« or »modality« with which a listener may approach the song, given there is little harmonic information to confirm the status of a particular tonic note. Nonetheless, one may still usefully speak of »tonal centres«, with respect to pitches that take on the appearance of greater importance by virtue of their placement within phrases (see Capuzzo 2009, 158-161). From these assumptions, it is then possible to refer to keys and modes (even if not established in conventional terms), by virtue of relevant pitch collections in given parts.

»Water Fountain« begins on a tonal centre of D♭. This is made clear through the bass line, each phrase of which starts on D♭, and the vocal melody, most phrases of which end on D♭. In terms of an overall tonal or modal category, these sections of »Water Fountain« could be regarded as floating between D♭ major and D♭ Mixolydian: the C-natural is heard in the verse vocal melody; the C-flat is prominent in the bass synthesiser of the third chorus

2 Queen's »Save Me«, for example, typifies the pattern in which the first verse features an »acoustic« instrument, while drums and electric guitars enter for the first chorus, and the second verse drops the electric guitars but leaves the drums in place, thus creating the textural hierarchy (top-bottom): chorus-verse II-verse I (Braae 2015).

(1'10").[3] We should note that other tonal characteristics, such as cadences, are not forcefully implied. That is, the bass line in the chorus drops from D♭ to A♭ in each bar, which might otherwise suggest a I-V progression; but, the vocal melody concurrently returns to D♭. Similarly, in the first verse (0'35"), the vocal melody moves from C-D♭ (i.e. leading note-tonic) but then rises to F, as the bass guitar lands on the A♭. This temporal incongruity does not detract overly from the general invocation of a major mode (of some description), but does mean that it is sometimes difficult to establish a singular mode that governs the harmonic procedures of these sections.

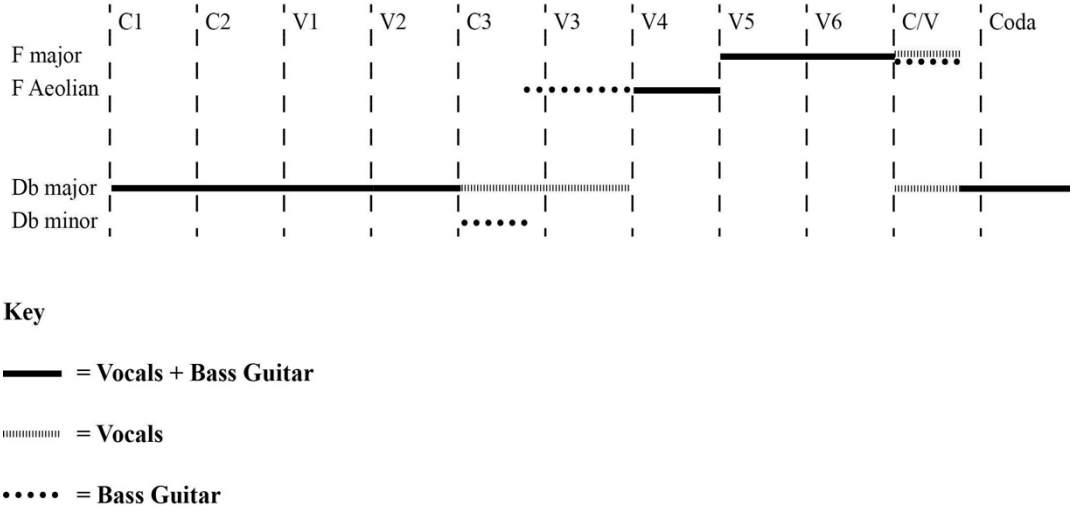


Figure 2. »Water Fountain«, Tonal structure as articulated by vocals and bass guitar

As the song progresses, this harmonic stability is undermined through a series of unsettling and unconventional techniques. Figure 2 provides a tonal map of the song, and highlights the manner in which the bass guitar and vocalists follow each other from one tonal centre to the next, but not necessarily at the same time; the designation of D-flat major is intended as shorthand for the major/Mixolydian combination. An instance of this feature comes in the third iteration of the chorus (1'11"). Here, the vocal melody is the same as previously heard, thereby continuing to suggest a major mode in D♭. In the bass line, there is a slight change so that the F natural of the previous choruses becomes an F♭ (E-natural). It is possible to read this clash between the vocal and bass lines in several ways. Given that the bass synth enters into the mix playing a C♭ (B-natural), one might suggest that this section unfolds a $D♭^{7(\#9)}$ chord—D♭, F, A♭, C♭, E-natural, otherwise known as the

3 We might leave the final qualification of this mode to the individual listener if they wish to settle upon a specific hearing. It is possible but also debatable whether listeners would make such sectional adjustments in their modal/tonal appraisals while listening.

»Hendrix« chord. The problem with this reading lies in actually hearing this full sonority as implied through the section, partly because of the lack of vertical construction, and partly because of the unusual harmonic voicing (i.e. with the C♭ in the lower register).

A third view is that this section presents two keys simultaneously, with the vocal melody projecting D♭ major, and the bass guitar projecting the parallel minor. This reading aligns well with the details present at the time, and the material that follows. In the third verse section (1'28"), the bass line moves up a third, so that this part is now based around the notes F-A♭-E♭-F. The vocal melody remains tied to the phrasing and pitches that suggest D♭ major. Because both parts share the same pitch collection, the tension is not as marked as the F-natural/F♭ clash in the previous section. Nonetheless, there is some ambiguity around the harmonic relationship between the bass guitar riff and the vocal line—it could imply a D♭/F harmony for the entire section; or, it could suggest a similar layering of D♭ major and F Aeolian. In the fourth verse (1'45"), the ambiguity recedes, as the vocal melody also changes, such that the lead vocal clearly stresses the F note, along with C and A♭, thus consolidating F as the tonal centre and Aeolian as the local mode.

At the start of the fifth verse (2'02"), there is another parallel modulation, with the vocal melody and bass guitar riff now featuring the A-natural instead of A♭. In the sixth verse (2'20"), this shift is emphasised as the full complement of vocalists fill out an F major triad, the first moment in the song at which there is an explicit articulation of a tonic chord. This detail is important in capturing the tone of »uncomfortable tension«. Up until this point, the listener has been offered only fragments and teasers of keys; further, when any notion of stability is established, the song quickly moves through a new modulation. Finally, there is some harmonic clarity, and yet it occurs at the point of furthest harmonic distance from the opening key area. As can be seen from Figure 1, the sixth verse also represents the culmination of instrumental growth through these consecutive modules. This captures the interplay between textural and harmonic elements in developing the overall shape of the song, a point to which we will return shortly.

What follows is even more striking. In the penultimate module (2'37"), there is a layering of both verse and chorus material, and in yet another interesting parallel to the first »key« change, the lead vocal and stereo spread of backing vocalists re-enter with material in D♭; the other vocalists continue to sing parts in F major, and the bass guitar also stays in this key. This section thus presents the clearest exposition of the suggestion of multiple tonal centres that had been brewing throughout the song (hence the division of

vocal and bass markers in Figure 2 above). Where previous instances of this feature had involved a shared tonal centre or pitch collection, the two vocal sections and bass of the penultimate module juxtapose not only the D♭ and F tonal centres, but also the A♭ (in the lead vocals) and A-natural (in the bass) of the respective pitch collections.

To tie these analytical strands together, the texture, structure, and harmony each present their own form of tension. From structural and textural perspectives, there are deviations from the norms of Western popular song, which may unsettle the listener. From a harmonic perspective, the tension lies primarily in the lack of tonal clarity, as well as in moments where two modes and/or tonal centres are layered between the vocal and bass parts. It is from the confluence of these three elements that we find the fundamental and underlying musical tension of »Water Fountain«.

One can argue that the song projects an overarching sense of linearity, insofar as it departs from a »stable« starting point and returns to that same place by the end. But, through the middle of the song, there is a constant flow of musical movement further away from this initial point, in terms of texture, harmony, and thematic material. Moreover, such steps along this path are not necessarily even—the textural expansion between verses four and five is much greater than that between verses three and four; similarly, verses five and six introduce new thematic material, compared with the relative consistency of verses three and four; and, the bass guitar changes key part-way through an eight-bar module, leaving the vocals to catch up. The net effect of these features may be that the song's structure appears to be evolving almost constantly, and not in a predictable manner. While »Water Fountain« can be understood structurally in terms of modules of harmonic and textural content that transform across the song, it is possible to extend this appraisal and describe the form in multiple ways: in terms of an »intensifying structure«, whereby the strength of texture and harmonic dissonance increases throughout the track; or, in terms of a *de*formative structure, as if the musical foundations are being eroded the further we progress into the song.

## PROTEST INTERPRETATIONS

To draw on the work of Moore (2012: 179-207) this structural, environmental tension interacts and even intervenes with the lyric; in other words, we may be encouraged to hear the lyrics in terms of a socio-political critique, because of the dissonant and intense nature of the musical environment. The

critique we hear in »Water Fountain« resembles something of a protest against neo-colonialism or imperialism. As noted above, the line »We're gonna get the water from your house« can be interpreted as pillaging resources from a weaker country. Perhaps it is the wild, dynamically expansive vocals which encourage us to hear the protagonist as the pillager or oppressor rather than as a threat from below. Numerous other lines point to violence as a means of acquisition—»He gave me a dollar // a blood-soaked dollar« … »Your fist clenched my neck« … »You will ride the whip // You'll ride the crack // No use in fighting back«—and to the unsavoury nature of those taking the resources—»Greasy man come and dig my well« … »Your fingers in my hair« … »Serve me up with your homegrown rice«. In this interpretation, the vocals appear to caricature those in power, and those who have exploited poorer societies.

The apparent presence of multiple personas in the track is also important in fostering the sense of protest: now, perhaps, a physical protest of which the listener is a part. This plays out in two ways, which we discuss using the soundbox (the »virtual space within which sounds can be located through«), developed by Moore/Dockwray (2010, 181). First, one can identify multiple vocal parts over the course of the song. As shown in Figure 1, there is a »lead« vocalist, who sings the opening verses and is positioned in the centre of the sound-box; in the opening choruses, this voice is supported by a stereo spread of backing vocalists. From the third verse onwards, one can identify three further singers positioned across the sound-box; this encourages the listener to hear them as separate personas,4 who come together to share their anger. The listener may hear distinct voices on all sides, unified in disgust for colonial practices. Second, the rhythmic layer of the track is constructed from numerous percussive fragments. At the heart of this layer are three interlocking parts—a handclap pattern that articulates quaver and semiquaver divisions of the beat like a hi-hat; a bass drum stomp that imitates a Bo Diddley beat (Everett 2009: 307); and, a higher-pitched tom drum that adds regular semiquaver clattering. Even though we might learn that such layers were produced by a single performer (i.e. Garbus) in the studio, when we hear them as part of the song, we imagine some physical performer(s) making these sounds; as Moore puts it, recordings bear »the genuine aural trace… of the musicians themselves«, a trace that »cannot help but have an impact on the sense we make of the track« (Moore 2012: 10-11).

4 One could contrast this with, say, the double-tracking of Lennon's voice in The Beatles' »Dear Prudence«, which appears to warp and distort a single voice. The extreme spatial positioning makes it difficult to conceptually blend these personas into a single protagonist (Moore 2012: 253-8).

We may thus hear »Water Fountain« as the musical product of many vocalists and percussionists (not to mention, other instrumentalists); this assists in encouraging us to hear a protesting sentiment, as if the song presents many people together and unified in their fight against the stronger powers.

This narrative world is unspecific in the lyric, but afforded with potency by the bustling musical grooves. Our protagonist provides more of a love story, parodying unfair international relations by saving money, giving them to the »special guy«, only for him to please himself and return a »blood-soaked dollar«. The naivety of the transaction is compounded by the simple stepwise vocal melodies, reminiscent of children's play-songs. In short, the musical fabric may be heard to act out the exploitation of resource rich, developing countries by Western superpowers. Furthermore, the song's rhythmic layers offer a cocktail of international musical references, many of which are centred on Latin America, the Caribbean, and West African styles. The handclaps imitate (along with a hi-hat) the maracas and wood block patterns common in salsa and rumba styles (Bøhler 2013); the initial bass drum pattern articulates a conga rhythm; the pattern played on the glass bottle (like a cowbell) is effectively a son clavé rhythm (ibid). Because these rhythmic patterns are not limited to a single non-Western style or dance type, it is not likely that a listener would hear these percussion layers as belonging to specific musical cultures. Rather, such features act as genre synecdoches for »non-Anglophone« or »Latin« (or »Caribbean« or »West African«) music (Tagg 2013: 524-8). Similarly, in the fourth verse, one of the vocalists inserts a short cry in Haitian creole, »se pou zanmi mwen«, which translates as »be my friend«; most Western listeners will surely hear this in the same »non-Anglophone« manner. This musical appropriation of Latin American (and related musical cultures') rhythmic patterns may be heard to reinvoke the long history of colonisation by Western nations in these regions. One can thus hear this Latin American voice in opposition to Anglophone popular voice in the song, which, in turn, fosters a multiplicitous sense of cultural division and conflict when heard in conjunction with the lyrics.

The conflict over colonisation is afforded by the developmental form of the track. Throughout »Water Fountain«, there is an accumulation of electronic elements, which contrast with the »natural« percussion and vocal sounds. This growth may be narrativised as a first-world power invading a smaller nation, as the digital effects intrude on the less processed stomps, claps, and voices. The destructive impact of the technology is first evident after the second verse (1'09''): as the vocalist appears to be choked (»Your fists round my neck«), her voice is artificially cut before the end of the phrase, and her protest has literally been silenced through technological means. A

clear comparison can be made to the way manual labourers are silenced by companies in developing nations, all in service of Western capital: the politicians and peoples of global superpowers do not have such distant concerns, and just want »homegrown rice, anything make me shit nice«, as the lyrics of the song state.

The conflict comes to breaking point in the sixth verse and penultimate module, at the point where the tonal relationships are also at their most dissonant. In these sections, there is a flurry of ecstatic vocal activity. The wide spread of voices across the stereo image reinforces their appearance as a mobilised crowd of protesters: are the labourers rising up against oppressive working conditions? Against this, the song's texture is crammed full with synthesizer parts, such that the overall mix of the track pushes hard against a brickwall limiter. The highly distorted breakdown at the end of the sixth verse (2'35") captures this struggle as the two sides—acoustic voices of the people and the synthesisers' technological economy—fight for space and, therefore, for power. The conflict rapidly dissolves into the introductory groove along with voices who only repeat the lines »No water in the water fountain« and »we're gonna get the water from your house«, back to the innocent (or oblivious) starting point. It is as if every other sonic element is chaotically dominated, as if the musical environment and, indeed, the protesting personae have been beaten into submission.

## THE PARTY INTERPRETATION

As noted above, part of our protest interpretation relied on the associations that we drew between the song's rhythmic construction (that is, layering of fragments) and voices, and the idea of a group of protesters. But, what if we associated the same sounds with different imagery and contexts? Or, what would happen to our meanings for the song, if we focused our attention on other details not already mentioned? This is not to say that as listeners we made conscious decisions as to what we listened to at any given point; nor did we try to conjure specific and different associations from one hearing to the next. But it is the answers to these types of questions that inform and underpin our hearing of »Water Fountain« as a kind of party anthem—a celebration of friendship, aided, no doubt, by copious amounts of alcohol and drugs.

To start with the rhythmic layering, we have already argued that it may evoke a crowd of people. Initially, there is no indication that these people might be protesters. Further, because the timbres of the percussion instru-

ments are not precisely defined (compared with, say, a drum kit), one can imagine the groove as being created by a group of partygoers, some of whom have grabbed a nearby object to go with the claps. The relative imprecision of the percussion groove at the microtemporal level also encourages this reading because it conjures the idea of amateur music-making. By this, we do not necessarily mean »unskilled« musicians; rather, the percussionists give the impression that the act of creating the groove is more important than any quantifiably precise rhythms, the type of attitude that one might expect amongst a group of people at a party.

The vocal melody and style contribute to this reading. On the one hand, the melodies of the choruses and opening verses possess a child-like simplicity—they tend to skip along the major scale, and either begin or end phrases on the tonic. The melodic range is mostly confined to a fifth (scale degrees 6 to 3), with brief excursions only as high as the Mixolydian seventh scale degree. In other words, the primary melodies of the song are easy to sing. Again, this fosters a sense of community, as if everybody would be capable of singing along. The singer's tone does little to dispel this idea. In some situations, her unaffected delivery may be interpreted as a sign of nonchalance or apathy, but here it seems to convey an air of naivety or charming mediocrity. She could well be one of the partygoers who has decided to initiate the singing. If the other voices later in the song do not make the same »amateur« impression, then their flexibility of timing—the voices panned left tend to drag behind the beat—suggest the singers are part of a relatively disorganised group, rather than a rehearsed ensemble. This wide spatial layout of the voices may also encourage the listener to locate herself at the party, positioned in the centre of the room, with revellers on all sides.

Upon hearing »Water Fountain« unfold in this type of environment, the key lyrics take on a different appearance. The titular object could represent a punch bowl, such that »no water in the water fountain« is understood as »we've run out of alcohol«. Following the slightly shambolic communal discussion, which takes place during the song, the protagonists eventually resolve to get more »water«—the vital party resource—from »your house«, where the party can restart.

## DIALOGISM, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND MULTIPLICITIES OF MEANING

Following iterative listening of »Water Fountain« over multiple hearings, it was not the case that one of the interpretations given above superseded

the others. Rather, we found it possible to hear both the protest and the party interpretations simultaneously, with different listeners favouring different readings in different proportions.[5] The remainder of this chapter addresses two questions stemming from these observations: what is the theoretical basis for these multiplicities of meaning? And what is the significance of »Water Fountain« affording these specific meanings?

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism offers one potential response to the first question. Bakhtin argued that all signification is dialogic—that is, the signs that comprise particular systems are constantly in dialogue with others to acquire their meaning. The consequence of this dynamic process is that »there are no limits to the dialogic context … Even *past* meanings, that is those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable … they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue« (Bakhtin 1986: 170). Walser illustrates this idea in a musicological context:

> *We might say that a C major chord has no intrinsic meaning; rather, it can signify in different ways in different discourses, where it is contextualized by other signifiers, its own history as a signifier, and the social activities in which the discourse participates (Walser 1993: 27).*

Further, Bakhtin developed the notion of dialogism to the concept of heteroglossia: »the co-existence of numerous voices … or socio-ideological contradictions that intersect and interanimate one another« (Kim 2004: 55). Accordingly, »heteroglossia or ›multiple meanings‹ can be … stated as the creative elaboration as a result of dialogical interaction between differing world views and voices« (Kim 2004: 55). Because the meanings of particular signs are never fixed, discourses in all genres are »mixed through and through with heteroglossia … and are necessarily polyphonic (›many-voiced‹, incorporating many voices, styles, references, and assumptions not a speaker's ›own‹)« (Irvine 2004). These ideas of heteroglossia and polyphony thus allow for the possibility of ambivalences, dissonances, and multiplicities of meaning of any given sign.

Such ideas inform the basic tenets of intertextuality, of which the fundamental principle is to emphasise the relation of any signifying element to others. Hence, the meaning of a cultural text, whether a film, a novel, an artwork, or a song, is shaped through its dialogue with other texts and contexts. Scholars have long argued that theories of intertextuality are vital in the

5 By this, we mean that some listeners continued to hear »Water Fountain« primarily as a party song, while others became more concerned with uncovering details that afforded the protest reading.

study of popular music; from McClary and Walser, the understanding of »different semiotic codes is crucial, both for grounding musical procedures … in terms of various discursive practices and for explaining how the music produces socially based meanings« (McClary/Walser 1990: 290; see also Tagg 1987: 284-91). Further, a number of analysts have demonstrated the ways in which songs acquire musical meaning for listeners through reference to other songs and styles (Covach 1991, 1995; Spicer 2009, 2010; Moore 2006; Moore/Ibrahim 2009). The notions of dialogism and intertextuality offer an explanation for why we draw (even contrasting) multiple meanings concurrently from »Water Fountain«. Texts afford a range of meanings, so their interpretations will also differ, depending on the context in which they are subconsciously placed, which, in turn, depends on the experiences and expectations of the individual listener herself.

The »woo-hah« chant of the chorus encapsulates this multiplicity: it could be interpreted as a battle-cry, a drunken cheer, a schoolyard chant, a nod to hip-hop, and more. These interpretations are neither independent, nor static, but available to all, according to the wider references each listener brings to the track. In live performances of »Water Fountain«, the persistent drumming, hollering, and war-painted faces of the performers are likely to encourage one to hear »woo-hah« as a war cry. The chant may also be heard as a reference to Al Pacino's military character in *Scent of a Woman*, or to a number of other popular songs of the past two decades. Busta Rhymes' »Woo Hah!! (Got You All In Check)« is the archetypical example; other tracks featuring this call include Linkin Park's »Forgotten« and Limp Bizkit's »Show Me What You Got«, while Blur's »Song 2« famously features a close variation, »Woo hoo«, as its lyrical hook. Thus the track represents Bakhtin's notion of dialogism well in that it bustles with intertextual references; it seems to invite the listener to catch certain sounds, voices, or words, and consciously compare them to other experiences.

The contrasting readings of the rhythmic layering also highlight the pertinence of intertextuality in explaining the multiple interpretations of »Water Fountain«. Here, we were not necessarily drawing connections with other texts, so much as associating the musical technique with different contexts. What is crucial in this instance is the impact our intertextual readings had on subsequent interpretations of the other features of the song. That is, if one hears the rhythms as being constructed by imaginary partygoers, then that will probably shape one's understanding of the lyrics; if one hears the rhythms as coming from a group of protesters, then this may induce a different appraisal of the words. We would add that this process operates in reverse too (and, perhaps, sideways and upside-down); that is, upon devel-

oping a protest reading from, say, the lyrics, other details (such as the »conflict« between aspects of production) may begin to acquire new or alternative meanings as well. Of course, it is very difficult to account for this exact process, but the theories of dialogism and intertextuality allow for this continual creation and recreation of meaning through ongoing engagement with the text.

But how did »Water Fountain« afford this pair of meanings? Why a party and a protest at the same time? First, we would argue that the feelings which listeners experience in our two main interpretations—that of being at a party and being in conflict—are not contradictory. Indeed, participants in both contexts share a state of heightened emotion—the excited energy shared by celebration and political statement. The difference, of course, lies in the ends to which that energy is directed. Second, »Water Fountain« can be heard as drawing from a long line of Latin and Caribbean styles in which social and political diatribes are conveyed through musical textures that are accessible and pleasurable to listeners, creating what has been described as a »hidden protest« (see Moore 2006, 225-251; Perna 2017). For instance, in the 1930s, Cuban political parties used the boisterous grooves of the carnival music style, La Conga, to repeat and disseminate political slogans among a dancing crowd in the wake of modern broadcasting (Bøhler 2013). »Water Fountain« can be argued to employ a similar strategy, insofar as it offers a politically charged narrative while simultaneously offering listeners rhythmic, bodily pleasure.

The irony of a Western artist appropriating non-Western sounds to protest Western exploitation of non-Western countries is not lost on us. Indeed, one reading of the track is that, for all its apparent progressiveness, it still relies on treating Latin American musical styles as an exotic »other« for the purpose of conveying its message. The techniques of these musical traditions are lifted from their original context and placed in service of an Anglo-American-oriented political narrative (as articulated by Western popular music foundations and language). It is further worth acknowledging that this reading of exoticism does not go mentioned in critical and fan accounts of the track, which likely also reflects the Anglo-American bias of the song's target audience.[6] A second understanding of the song is in terms of Rancière's (2004) politics of aesthetics, whereby the aesthetic experience has the potential to create new political communities that disrupt, change or criticise the traditional order of politics as, for example, defined by a state. From this perspective, we may argue that the various musical ingredients of

6 It is probably for similar reasons that we, as authors, did not quickly pick up on this reading.

»Water Fountain« that generate sensation in the listeners act as perceptual strategies through which the politics of the song are expressed. This idea also resonates with Bakhtin's notion of »carnivalesque discourse«, which is simultaneously comic and tragic. Carnivalesque discourse »breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest« (Kristeva 1986: 36); it further »creates the chance for a new perspective and a new order of things«, as well as »an alternative social space, characterised by freedom, equality and abundance« (Robinson 2011). One can hear this idea play out in »Water Fountain«, particularly in the way formal, harmonic, and textural conventions are disrupted, which, in the process, assists in articulating the forceful political statements.

## CONCLUSION

It is possible, indeed likely, that one may hear »Water Fountain« as fun and also as a socio-political statement. Further, we would argue that it is the experiential pleasure of listening to the song that renders this form of politics possible. Put another way, the details that captured our initial interest and afforded the party interpretation are precisely those that encouraged us to explore »Water Fountain« in greater depth, thus affording us the time and space to hear the song's social critique.

And that, to us, is the crux of the interpretative matter. The party reading, broadly speaking, represented our initial view of »Water Fountain«. Admittedly, the sense of a raucous party was always tempered by the suspicion that it was a slightly disturbing gathering of people, even if it was not possible from the outset to articulate how and why the song was structurally and sonically dissonant. Amongst other qualities, it was this uneasiness that prompted further investigations into the track, which led, ultimately, to the protest interpretation. Equally, it would be short-sighted to overlook the fact that this was a song that we *wanted* to listen to, again and again, as part of discovering what—and how—it meant to us.

Although one never stops the process of interpretation, the protest narrative feels like the end of a road. Based on a close examination of the vocal performance and a host of »uncomfortable« structural and production traits, it seems as though the song expresses deep dissatisfaction with those charged with solving problems concerning the world's resources. Moreover, in live performances, the musicians use dress and dance to capture the song's frenzied and aggressive nature. At this point, it would be tempting to

simply leave the party behind. After all, we use analytical techniques as a means of getting closer to the heart of the text, to uncover richer details, to find the nuances of a piece of music. It follows that we might expect the same from the interpretative process; the longer we spend with a song, the more subtleties we appreciate, the closer we get to locating the »truth« of that particular musical experience.

This is not intended as a critique of close analysis and readings, but the fascinating issue within this study of »Water Fountain« was the dialogue between our two distinct interpretations—how they continually informed and contradicted each other. At no point was there ever a sense that the song could be defined by one particular meaning. »Water Fountain« is neither a »party song« nor a »protest song« alone. Rather, it is both (and more), and the way in which one hears it will be dependent on how certain details are understood and placed within wider intertextual contexts, which is, we believe, exactly the point.

If the primary aim of this chapter was to elucidate particular meanings of »Water Fountain«, then a subsequent goal was to illuminate aspects of the analytical and interpretative process. The song is an excellent example of how the discovery of musical traits can lead to rich and nuanced interpretations. But it also demonstrates how interpretation involves a constant dialogue between different perspectives, with any »truth« or »real« meaning discarded in favour of listeners' rich and varied viewpoints. And, perhaps above all, »Water Fountain« reminds us that first impressions matter.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1986). *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Barthes, Roland (1977). »The Death of the Author«. In: *Image Music Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. Fontana Press, 142-148.

Bøhler, Kjetil Klette (2013). *Grooves, Pleasures, and Politics in Salsa Cubana: The Musicality of Cuban Politics and the Politics of Salsa Cubana*. PhD diss., University of Oslo.

Braae, Nick (2015). »The Development of the ›Epic‹ Queen Sound«. In: *The Journal on the Art of Record Production* 10. https://www.arpjournal.com/asarpwp/the-development-of-the-epic-queen-sound/ (accessed 7 November 2017).

Brownstone, Sydney (2012). »On tUnE-YarDs, Chuck Klosterman and the End of the High Fidelity Era of Music Criticism«. In: *The L Magazine* (25 January). http://www.thelmagazine.com/2012/01/on-tune-yards-chuck-klosterman-and-the-end-of-the-high-fidelity-era-of-music-criticism/ (accessed 4 January 2016).

Butler, Mark (2006). *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Capuzzo, Guy (2009). »Sectional Tonality and Sectional Centricity in Rock Music«. In: *Music Theory Spectrum* 31 (1), 157-174.

Cook, Nicholas (1987). *A Guide to Musical Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Covach, John (1991). »The Rutles and the Use of Specific Models in Musical Satire«. In: *Indiana Theory Review* 11, 119-144.

Covach, John (1995). »Stylistic Competencies, Musical Humor and ›This Is Spinal Tap‹«. In: *Concert Music, Rock, and Jazz Since 1945: Essays and Analytic Studies*. Ed. by Elizabeth West Marvin and Richard Hermann. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 399-421.

Covach, John (2005). »Form in Rock Music: A Primer«. In: *Engaging Music*. Ed. by Deborah Stein. New York: Oxford University Press, 65-76.

Daly, Rhian (2014). »Tune-Yards—›Nikki Nack‹«. *NME*. https://www.nme.com/reviews/reviews-tune-yards-15277-310864 (accessed 1 May 2018).

Everett, Walter (2009). *The Foundations of Rock*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Frere-Jones, Sasha (2011). »World of Wonder«. In: *The New Yorker* (2 May). http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/world-of-wonder (accessed 6 January 2016).

Green, Lucy (1988). *Music on Deaf Ears: Musical Meaning, Ideology and Education* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Hermes, Will (2014). »Tune-Yards ›Nikki Nack‹ Album Review«. In: *Rolling Stone*. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/nikki-nack-20140506 (accessed 1 May 2018).

Hirway, Hrishikesh (2015). »Episode 38: tUnE-yArDs«. In: *Song Exploder*. http://songexploder.net/tune-yards (accessed 23 September 2015).

Hutchinson, Kate (2014). »Tune-Yards: politics, pop and Pee-wee's Playhouse«. In: *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/may/02/tune-yards-nikki-nack-merrill-garbus (accessed 1 May 2018).

Irvine, Martin (2004). *Mikhail Bakhtin: Main Theories*. Georgetown University. http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Bakhtin-MainTheory.html (accessed 8 January 2016).

Kim, Gary (2004). »Mikhail Bakhtin: The Philosopher of Human Communication«. In: *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology* 12 (1), 53-62.

Klette Bøhler, Kjetil (2013). *Grooves, Pleasures and Politics: The Musicality of Cuban Politics and the Politics of Salsa Cubana.* PhD diss., University of Oslo.

Kristeva, Julia (1986). »Word, Dialogue, and Novel«. In: *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. by Toril Moi. Oxford: Blackwell, 35-61.

McClary, Susan / Walser, Robert (1990). »Start Making Sense! Musicology Wrestles with Rock«. In: *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*. Ed. by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin. London: Routledge, 277-292.

Moore, Allan F. (2001). *Rock: The Primary Text*. 2nd ed. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Moore, Allan F. (2006). »What story should a history of popular music tell?«. In: *Popular Music History* 1 (3), 329-338.

Moore, Allan F. (2012). *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.

Moore, Allan F. / Ibrahim, Anwar (2009). »Sounds like Teen Spirit; identifying Radiohead's idiolect«. In: *Strobe-Lights and Blown Speakers: Essays on the Music and Art of Radiohead*. Ed. by Joseph Tate. Aldershot: Ashgate, 139-158.

Moore, Robin D. (2006). *Music and revolution: Cultural change in socialist Cuba*. Vol. 9. Berkley: University of California Press.

Perna, Vincenzo (2017). *Timba: The sound of the Cuban crisis*. New York: Routledge.

Powell, Mike (2014). »Tune-Yards: Nikki Nack Album Review«. In: *Pitchfork*. https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/19314-tune-yards-nikki-nack/ (accessed 1 May 2018).

Rancière, Jacques (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London: Continuum.

Robinson, Andrew (2011). *In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power*. https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/ (accessed 5 October 2017).

Sherburne, Philip (2014). »Hear tUnE-yArDs' Burbling ›Water Fountain‹«. In: *SPIN*. https://www.spin.com/2014/03/tune-yards-water-fountain-4ad-nikki-nack/ (accessed 1 May 2018).

Spicer, Mark (2004). »(Ac)cumulative Form in Pop-Rock Music«. In: *Twentieth-century music* 1 (1), 29-64. doi: 10.1017/S1478572204000052.

Spicer, Mark (2009). »Strategic Intertextuality in Three of John Lennon's Late Beatles Songs«. In: *Gamut* 2 (1), 347-375.

Spicer, Mark (2010). »›Reggatta de Blanc‹: Analyzing Style in the Music of the Police«. In: *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music*. Ed. by Mark Spicer and John Covach. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 124-153.

Tagg, Philip (1987). »Musicology and the Semiotics of Popular Music«. In: *Semiotica* 66 (1), 279-298.

Tagg, Philip (2013). *Music's Meanings: a modern musicology for non-musos*. New York & Huddersfield: The Mass Media Music Scholars' Press.

Walser, Robert (1993). *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Hanover: University Press of New England.

Wimsatt, William K. / Beardsley, Monroe C. (1954). »The Intentional Fallacy«. In: *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Ed. by William K. Wimsatt. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 3-18.

## DISCOGRAPHY

tUnE-yArDs. 2014. »Water Fountain«. *Nikki Nack*. MP3.