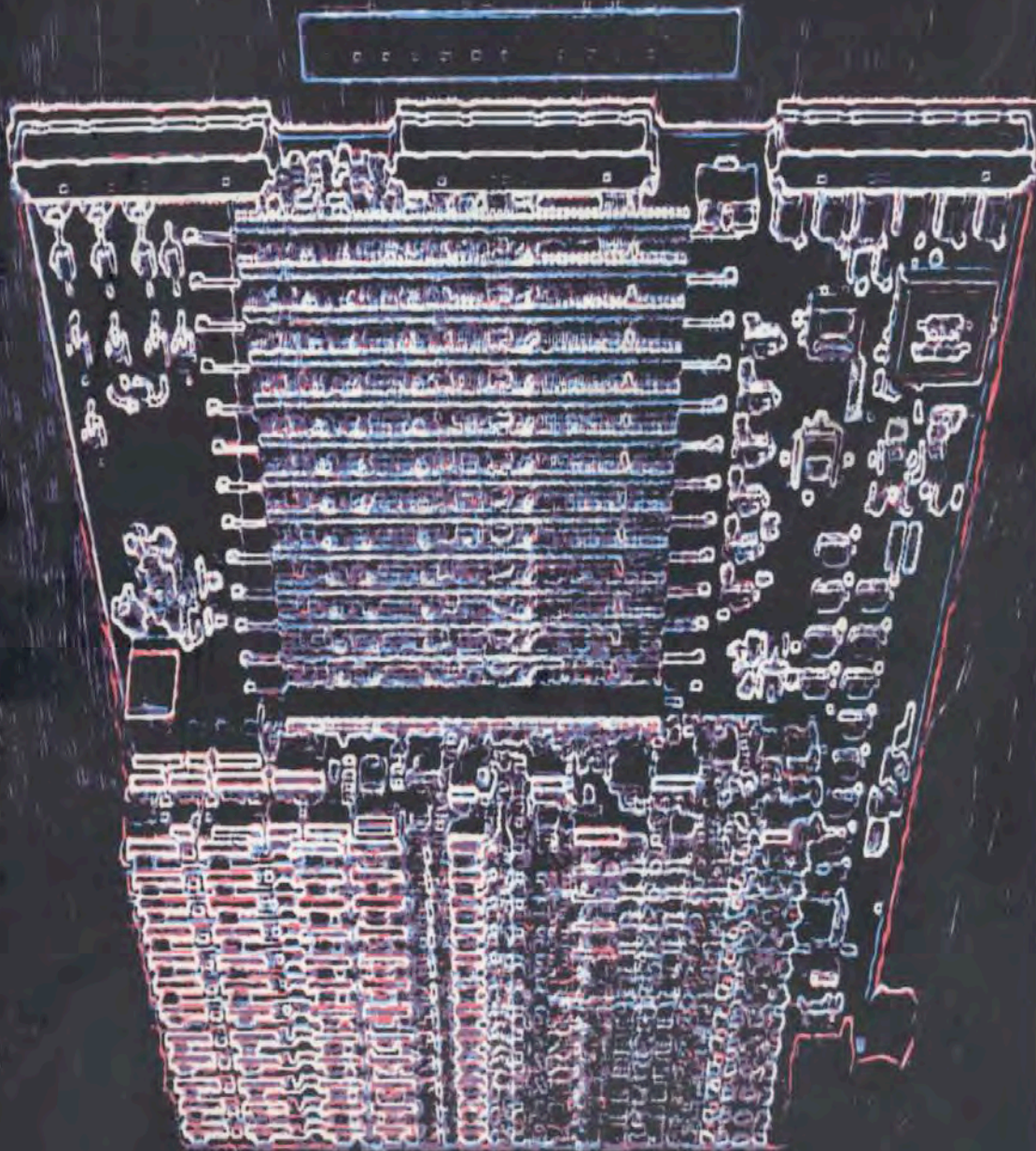# TECHNICOLOR

Race, Technology, and Everyday Life

EDITED BY ALONDRA NELSON AND THUY LINH N. TU
WITH ALICIA HEADLAM HINES

Sound Effects

Tricia Rose Interviews Beth Coleman

In this dialogue, Tricia Rose, author of *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, one of the earliest scholarly analyses of hip hop music and culture, interviews the electronic musician Beth Coleman, who DJs under the name M. Singe, about the gendered nature of music production and DJ-ing; technology and aesthetics; and the "diva" history in black popular music.

Tricia Rose: Your musical activity is interesting in a number of ways. In our conversation, I'd like to explore the interplay of gender, race, aesthetics, and technology. But before we get into that, let's talk about how you started DJ-ing and how you came to found the SoundLab collective.

Beth Coleman: I was working as a writer, I hadn't started graduate school yet, and I was looking for a community in a weird way. (It seems like a funny thing to say—can you really be looking for a community?) I had been hanging out with a crew of people in the early nineties who were doing "experimental parties"—events where you'd have four or five different DJs all playing at once. This is when I started working with Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky, and others of the "illbient" New York scene.[1] A lot of these parties happened on the Lower East Side, everyone was welcomed, and the party line was, "It's open, it's flow." But it was always the men playing during the party and the women cleaning up at the end, as if these things were set in stone. I wasn't really with that. I didn't want to participate within those boundaries, but I also didn't feel like being by myself writing all the time.

I started playing my first sets when my friend Howard Goldkrand and I started SoundLab in 1994. It was our party—we ran it, we set it up, we designed it. Every SoundLab event ended with a "jam" and this was a great opportunity to practice playing live without having to run a whole set. When I started playing, I got to play a little at the beginning or the end of an evening. But this isn't always the way to get to play full sets, because they'll certainly let anyone, particularly female DJs, play the opening or the closing until the cows come home. To play a whole set, you have to make some kind of jump—grab some space as it were.

After these parties became popular, the Kitchen [a New York City performance space] called me up and said, "We're doing an all-women's music night. Do you want to play?" And I asked myself, "Now, why is it that I only get called when it's an all women's night?" But I said yes, because I had to play, and that's really what it came down to. So that's how I started. And now, several years later, I am invited to places like Vienna, Istanbul, and Berlin.

Tricia Rose: How did you plan parties and set up events? Where did you get the equipment?

Beth Coleman: It was an elaborate process. We would start out at around three in the afternoon, go to pick up all the equipment, and then move it all. We borrowed a lot of it from friends; some of it we rented. We'd cobble things together by renting pieces of a sound system and borrowing somebody's decks.

Once we had the equipment, the next thing we did was cover the floor with vinyl and tape it down because dancers were also using the space for rehearsal and we had to make sure that the floors didn't get damaged. Then we set up the equipment and put in a visual installation. There were two or three people, tops, doing all this setup. I had to learn about all this equipment because there was so much to do and hardly anybody else to do it. I carried it; I plugged it in; I made sure the signals showed up on the mixing board; I learned about eq-ing; I learned about sound systems; I learned about turntable technology.[2]

The event would go from eleven o'clock until about five in the morning. Then we'd break all the equipment down, roll the floor up, and leave, at around nine or ten. It's about an eighteen to nineteen-hour event, nonstop.

Tricia Rose: Do you practice putting together sets at home, or lay out whole sets in advance?

Beth Coleman: If I'm really nervous about a gig, I'll basically lay a set out because I don't want to have to kick myself afterwards for not being prepared enough. But those aren't necessarily my best sets; my best sets are usually when I've got a group of records that I'm familiar with, I've been playing them in and out, and I feel loose enough that I can go with instinct and put something together. So that's the best for me and that's also experientially the most fun.

Tricia Rose: Why did you choose the name M. Singe? What is your interest in the name and how does it represent what you're about?

Beth Coleman: It came from a nickname in college. We were reading *The Signifying Monkey* and a friend of mine starting calling me "the little monkey."[3] "Singe" is a play on this nickname; it is French for monkey. But in English, "singe" also means to burn, or incite, which was the kind of flavor that I played. I try to incite things, to blow it up in some ways. In fact, I play a lot of things with explosive sounds in them.

When I started in 1995, I spun a kind of roughneck style of dub and jungle—lots of hard-kicking break beats, deep bass, and killing noise—Prince Far-I, Christoph de Babylon, Merzbau, and that ilk. Recently, I've been playing a more stealth electro sound (Underground Resistance, Basic Channel, DJ Assault)—lots of fat, dancy beats and dirty words. I don't play one style of music because I don't think there is so much of a difference between drum and bass, hip hop and hard-core that you can't play them all together. There are definitely people and many DJs who argue that these things are genre-specific and you're not supposed to try to blend and cross-pollinate. But my style is more than a particular rhythmic or dance style.

Being a DJ is like being a cipher of the most radical kind. In each place you play, the audience takes a new face and so do you. Sometimes I make subtle shifts between rhythm patterns—going from a jump-up drum and bass roll to some funky electro booty-shaking business without losing the sonic thread. Sometimes I make a more radical shift between styles and venue—I'll play a moody, ambient set for a performance with Butch Morris and the next night play on a big system for a thousand kids. Not everyone wants to play in such varied contexts. I imagine these variations to

be like the "morphing" power possessed by Anyanwu, a character in the Octavia Butler novel *Wild Seed*, who changes her identity to meet each situation. But no matter what form she takes, there is still some kernel of "herself" she holds on to that preserves her sensibility. DJ-ing is shape-shifting like that.

Tricia Rose: SoundLab and Cultural Alchemy, the artist collective, have a reputation for being sort of intellectual musicians, and you are working toward a Ph.D. in comparative literature. What is the relationship for you between this kind of complex analytical language and the music? And what would you say to someone who might ask you why you need such a complex verbal apparatus to describe sound? Shouldn't sound be able to stand on its own terms?

Beth Coleman: Well, a lot of the analytical materials that I've been reading and thinking about, in terms of my academic work, have to do with where things break and then turn back on or reflect themselves. I do think that's one thing that you hear in the music that I play. It's a beauty of speed: something speeding up and then stopping or, literally, a thick cut going to an entirely different soundscape—different but somehow "right." You accumulate speed by halting. It's a phenomenon of getting to the point where you're pushing the system and pushing the system until it breaks. But it isn't enough to simply "cause wreck"; there has to be some reflection about what's going on. So this is what I've pursued as a writer and sonically.

Tricia Rose: So you have a theoretical interest in the relationship between kinds of continuity, rupture, and self-reflexivity that you can explore through music. What, then, do you think about technology? Does the technology enable you to reach other creative goals or is mastering/manipulating the technology a goal in itself?

Beth Coleman: The work that I've done has all been with certain technologies—turntables, mixing boards, digital samplers, or different digital audio programs like ProTools or Logic. With this technology you have to know what you're doing because if you don't know how to do certain commands, or how to initiate certain programs, the process can seem more intimidating than picking up a guitar to write a song. But my experience with technology is that I find it incredibly freeing. Once you understand some of the structures and limitations that you are working with, then of course you try to figure out how to get around them. Sometimes, sitting in the

studio you can come upon these accidents, but you think, "oh that's the bomb" and then you just flow like that. (Flow, in this case, includes working like hell to get the mix tight after the initial point of inspiration.)

One of the properties of a sampler is it gives you the ability to make an absolute reproduction; you can choose to have no distortion. You can take a Led Zeppelin riff and sample it directly and you get absolute clarity in reproduction. Or sometimes the music itself disappears because you get to work on such a tiny level, tweaking it, changing its sound around, adding a phrase to it; the sampler becomes the instrument that is being played. Some of this music you'd be bedeviled to try to play live, because you can make these weird breaks and sutures with these types of machines that are virtually unplayable.

I think the music is particular to the technology. The technology allows us to create new musical structures, like the break beat where you go back and forth between the drum solo on two records. I find that this structure—this kind of flow and cut—which is a very black, a deeply black structure, to be really resonant in this technology.

Tricia Rose: It seems as though you believe that technology is a means to an end and sampling enables a kind of aesthetic expression that has its origins elsewhere. So the cuts, breaks, and collages we hear in music such as hip hop are enabled by recent technological developments but are not the result of these developments. In this way, the technology becomes a vehicle for already existing aesthetic desires. And yet the technology also stages these musical ideas and can therefore be understood as having an impact on them.

Beth Coleman: Yes, for example, much of funk music was about people's fantasies of turning into robots and machines, before these fantasies became more easily manifest through technology. Now you can be a robot by putting your voice through a vocoder like Dr. Dre and Tupac's in their Mad Max–inspired music video, "California Dreamin'."

Tricia Rose: It's funny that you mentioned Dr. Dre and Tupac in reference to the vocoder because I thought of Roger Troutman, of "I Wanna Be Your Man" and "Computer Love" fame. Perhaps this has to do with the permanency of late adolescent musical memories!

Beth Coleman: Oh yeah, that's what Dr. Dre and Tupac were riffing on, that's what they were sampling. It's become a classic sound.

Tricia Rose: Troutman's use of the vocoder takes place in a different moment, and enables an entirely different narrative, sonic aesthetic, and type of human connection than Dr. Dre. Troutman is coming out of the mid-1970s when a more traditional set of assumptions about community, romance, intimacy, and connection was operating, and he uses this technology to articulate these more traditional narratives. For example, "I Wanna Be Your Man" is basically a traditional R&B tune about romantic desire narrated by this high-pitched electronic voice. It has the effect of increasing the sense of longing in his voice. Troutman is using the vocoder on top of what some might consider to be pre–high-tech narratives of "whole" "unmediated" human relationships. On the other hand, I would say that the opposite is true for Dr. Dre. He is using the vocoder (and sampling equipment more generally) to narrate mediated and fractured relationships and to enhance the effects of a more apocalyptic vision.

Beth Coleman: That song and that video in particular are like sample culture run amok. They're sampling a movie, *Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome*, with Mel Gibson and Tina Turner, and they're sampling a sound, a sound that was crucial to early hip hop but that sounds retro at this point. With these music technologies it becomes difficult to determine where one thing ends and another starts.

Tricia Rose: In other words, technologies foster a kind of creative expansion that breaks or gets around boundaries. But it is still true that we need some distinctions between reality and fiction for political reasons. We do not want to say that there is no distinction between actually shooting folk and using the notion of murder as a metaphor to describe one's musical prowess. I think this is an important distinction because people leap very quickly from supporting aesthetic freedom to imagining that artistic production is without political consequences. This is a deeply complex problem for hip hop as it approaches its twentieth year of commercial success. It can no longer be thought of as a form that simply reflects social realities. It also produces them. I think it would be very difficult to argue that some of the more disturbing elements in hip hop are not assisting in the production of dysfunctional and anti-social identities for black people. If it did not have such potential,

then how could it possess the possibility to produce social change or enable resistance? It has to be enabling—in both progressive and regressive ways—otherwise the agency that drives the notion of cultural politics is gone.

Beth Coleman: I think that this is a very strong argument you're making and it's not necessarily a popular one.

Tricia Rose: Yes, it is not popular among hip hop supporters because right-wing cultural voices have deployed this argument against hip hop, creative black expressions, and black people in general. This argument is not used as a way to seriously consider the complexity of cultural forces in society, but to dehumanize black people and sever the existence of black suffering from its roots in a national system of economic and racial inequality.

Cross-Fade

Tricia Rose: What types of music and sounds do you sample?

Beth Coleman: In the middle of the "Stereophonic Retina Mix," an ambient piece SoundLab created for the Whitney Museum [of American Art in New York City], there was a sample of Pigmeat Markham. Markham was an early vaudeville performer; he did classic black comedy and a number of his recordings survived. I think you can hear the whole history of vaudeville in ten or fifteen seconds of listening to his voice. So I enjoyed throwing that in the mix and seeing people respond to it.

Tricia Rose: Let me ask you about the recognition of cultural history in a sampled context. On a public radio program, I exchanged comments with a music professor who expressed enormous enthusiasm about the intertextual possibilities of new musical technologies. While there's a part of me that completely supports his reasoning, I find myself wondering about how aesthetic intertextual reference works when most people have little access to black cultural history? In other words, what about people who don't really know the history of Pigmeat Markham? Is this history in the sound of his voice or his story, or do you have to have an enormous degree of cultural literacy to be able to understand it?

Beth Coleman: I was on a panel with David Henderson and Steve Canon [of the 1960s poetry collective UMBRA and more recently,

the Gathering of Tribes] and a young poet. This poet felt strongly about upholding "traditional black history." He said hip hop was hell's music and that you shouldn't be able to mix and cut because people won't know what it is you're talking about. The best I could say was we have to fight for people to have as much space as we can and we also have to teach each other so we don't forget.

Tricia Rose: The fight for freedom of cultural expression is an enormously important one. But we can't make a political statement and argue that it has political resonance if there is no collective recognition of the statement's politics. It is at this point that cultural literacy becomes of the utmost importance.

Beth Coleman: Yes, but it's a dangerous thing to assume too much about your audience. I don't believe I have to say, "Here's the mix for the museum and here's the mix for my black brothers and sisters."

Tricia Rose: Right, this is a difficult issue—who do you imagine your audience to be? And I am not sure the general Whitney Museum audience has any idea who Pigmeat Markham is anyway! Since he is a vital part of a black folk tradition there are many black people who have heard him or at least of him. But younger black people may not necessarily have heard of him given the difficulty of maintaining collective black cultural literacy in a nation that does not at a fundamental level value black popular traditions. This is not to say that you only sample something people already know—that is a vicious circle that only shrinks the referential domain.

Beth Coleman: So then everyone has to sample Sting?

Tricia Rose: You're talking about that Puff Daddy song ["I'll Be Missing You"], the one where he uses a popular Sting sample ["Every Breath You Take"], right? This seems quite different from sampling Markham to me. Pigmeat Markham was an underground critic of American society. In contrast, I would not say that Puffy is claiming he's making a political, cultural recuperation of the history of black people in Sting's sound, so it's a very different move.

Beth Coleman: It's not different.

Tricia Rose: Oh, I think it's a completely different move. There are critical distinctions between Puffy's frequent celebration of money and luxury commodities and someone who claims they're making a politically resistant statement in such a market-driven society.

Subsonic

Tricia Rose: Let's talk about gender a bit. Why do you think that women are still so enormously marginal in the electronic and technological aspects of music production?

Beth Coleman: There have always been women in hip hop, but always in smaller numbers. And of course, there are more women DJs now than there were women in the indie-rock scene. I believe that more women are going to be "naturally" drawn to electronic music than we've seen before. This is partly a sign of the times because electronic music *is* the youth culture medium of our time. Even now, at the beginning stages of electronic music, there are already more women participating in this form than there were in early rock n' roll and early hip hop.

Tricia Rose: But I'm not comparing degrees of marginalization. I am making a broader point, which is that overall, numerically speaking, music production is male-dominated, particularly when it's more technologically mediated.

Beth Coleman: In the studio sometimes you learn things directly; sometimes you pick things up because you're around. This combination of being around and being inconspicuous enough, like being someone's younger brother, fitting in the woodwork, and picking up information, is crucial. Many females don't get a chance to be someplace, be quiet for a while, listen, watch—they don't get to have this kind of osmosis learning. They have to learn by direct instruction or hire engineers, who come in and dominate the production process. It's the same with DJ-ing. Male DJs often sit around the studio with their boys, and when the DJ takes a break, one of his friends can have his first opportunity to see what it means to crossfade. This sort of casual learning relationship is often not available for females because the studio is a very stratified space. And also people tend to hang out at the studio until late at night, which may also be a problem for young women.

Tricia Rose: What you're really pointing out is the complex ways that a certain kind of patriarchy operates. It is not really a matter of women being excluded from the technology necessarily; what they lack is a casual way into this very localized culture of informal apprenticeship where they can be "inconspicuous," as you put it. This apprenticeship takes place especially in a homosocial world.

Imagine a sixteen-year-old girl who just happens to be graced with more developed breasts, trying to fade into the woodwork among eleven sixteen-year-old boys sitting around experimenting with the technology. Adolescent forms of male sexual objectification of young women can be very disabling to female freedom of expression.

Beth Coleman: But there are also ways women acquiesce to this behavior because to act as if this just goes on and women have no agency is crazy. And also to believe that these men are all only sexist is also not true. So there also has to be individual initiative.

Tricia Rose: Yes, we do want to avoid overgeneralizations and recognize strategies to get around these obstacles. But there are many factors—beyond individual behaviors—that contribute to the limited access that young women have to these spaces. For example, family and societal expectations of young women frequently have a stultifying effect on their creative development, especially in nontraditional outlets such as DJ-ing. Parents are far more anxious about how their daughters represent themselves and who they spend their time with than their sons. All of this helps to close down creative spaces in general, but definitely limits access to the sorts of spaces you mentioned earlier. This is a problem few seem to be able to address—the difficulty for women to create large pockets of collective creative production. Literature is one of the few places where women can be creative. Why? Perhaps because it is a solitary enterprise?

Beth Coleman: Or you just have to be the diva.

Tricia Rose: Perhaps the diva is a response—a "feminine" performance of power and mastery in spheres that hinder female collectivity.

Beth Coleman: And while I have respect for singing and the voice because it's a crucial part of black music, women shouldn't be limited to singing.

Tricia Rose: Women are channeled toward singing as one of the only ways for them to be creative in the music industry. (Strikingly, like literature, it is a primarily soloist domain.) The kind of masculine power associated with mastering technology is not allowed them.

I would like to hear your take on what may be an impossible question. When you have an environment in which women are relatively isolated and marginal, how might this impact cultural production in general? It would be virtually impossible to repro-

duce aesthetic traditions without some form of collective identity and spaces in which to create. One African American in Des Moines is not likely to do a lot of black cultural reproduction all by him or herself. I think it's very interesting that progressive cultural thinkers are generally comfortable talking about racialized aesthetics, but shy away from the possibility of gendered aesthetics, even those produced by social context.

Beth Coleman: We can say black music or black art without flinching, but I still think "women's culture" sounds like you're talking about white women.

Tricia Rose: Yes, it does. And that puts black women in an especially difficult position.

Beth Coleman: I'm not sure how to address that question because the discussion invariably leads into one about exemplary individuals and not a collective of women. DJ-ing is very competitive. You don't necessarily want to kill the person that plays before you or after you, but you do want to show that you've got skills. Men are able to play with each other with a level of toughness, of competitiveness, that doesn't have to be murderous. But the competition between women can get fucked up really quickly. And it's because of this ongoing theme of "I have to be the only one, because I'm exceptional. I'm doing something exceptional, and I'm the queen."

Tricia Rose: And so that identity, that positionality is a by-product of marginality. And it seems to me that one of the only ways to get around that is to produce collectivities of female creativity.

Beth Coleman: But I don't want to have to produce a female collective that has to be put together, because in many of these male collectives people come together because they have shared interests, and not just because they are men.

Tricia Rose: But there is a way that collectivities are produced, they're not always organically formed. Sometimes you look for people, or you ask about people, or you network in certain ways to bring people together. And I'm not suggesting you should be doing this, or that this is your vision, or something. It's just I think that when you combine your other points with this diva issue, particularly those about access—that wonderful phrase you used about sort of being invisible and learning by osmosis—it becomes important to try to produce a network, especially until these networks are more likely to come together more spontaneously.

NOTES

1. Coined by Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky, illbient is a style of electronic music. It is similar to ambient music in its use of sounds and noises, but unlike ambient, it is less atmospheric and ethereal and more experimental and incorporates grungier, urban soundscapes.

2. Eq is an abbreviation for equalizer, a device that allows one to adjust the emphasis of sound frequencies.

3. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).