

“Musical Echoes: Diasporic Listening and the Creation of a World of South African Jazz”

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In his introduction to *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (2000), philosopher Manuel de Landa generates a series of metaphors drawn from recent scientific knowledge about the dynamics of matter and energy to suggest novel, non-linear, non-evolutionary possibilities for thinking anew about historical explanation as it pertains to the past one thousand years. De Landa explores these metaphors through the lenses of economic, biological, and linguistic narratives beginning in the year 1000 A.D. Because he is concerned with the dynamics of a specifically materialist history, the philosopher pays no attention to sound. Nevertheless, just as de Landa writes against the teleology of evolutionary progress—the achievement of fittest design in biological terms or a state of equilibrium in thermodynamics—he provides a useful point of entry, even a habitus of possibilities for those of us striving to constitute a rhetorical space and a mechanism for writing into being a worldwide past in twentieth century jazz (and popular music).

Put in its crudest form, the problem with writing about a world of twentieth century jazz is that THE history of jazz (one located almost exclusively inside the geopolitical boundaries of the United States) has already been written, and repeatedly replayed, reproduced, and displayed. It has created for itself a state of equilibrium. While there are some who have been critical of its “canon”—of its evolutionary, “fittest design” style, others of its exclusions—of women, of musicians from other cities inside the United States—and recently, even of its “other histories” that have been performed elsewhere in the world, few have rendered viable alternatives to the evolutionary “fittest design” paradigm for writing a more representative past in jazz that addresses the critique.

Harnessing de Landa’s central notion of “non-linearity” I propose that the acoustical phenomenon of the “musical echo” generated by its associated phenomenon of “listening” (Nancy 2007) and the “production of presence” (Gumbrecht 2004) as aesthetic experience provides an innovative entry point into the constitution of histories of twentieth century musical styles: histories that by definition have to encompass mass-mediation as a core factor in cause and effect. What I suggest is that this more comprehensive account of American originating, but globally disseminated musical styles, needs a different launching subject: in this case, rather than the composer/performer it is the listener/consumer who in turn may become a creative originator of musical style and innovation alone or in dialog with other similar individuals at home or abroad, stretching out THE history of a musical genre or style, geographically and temporally, into a vast network or web of mutations and reinvention. While I cannot begin to write such a past alone, in this paper I use my work on South African jazz history to illustrate the usefulness or resonance of the musical echo as an innovative strategy for writing a worldwide jazz historiography.