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## The "Amen" Breakbeat as Fratriarchal Totem

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## The 'Amen' Breakbeat as Fratriarchal Totem

It is generally accepted that music *signifies*: “that it can sound happy, sad, sexy, funky, silly, ‘American,’ religious, or whatever” (McClary 20-21). Notably, music is *engendered*; it is read as signifying specific embodied subjectivities, and also hails an audience it constitutes as so positioned: it “inscribes subject positions” (Irving 107). Thus rock music in the West is invariably considered a “male culture comprising male activities and styles” (Cohen 17). However, this is not *innate*, rather:

sonic gestures *become* codified, having gendered meanings ascribed to them over a period of time and generated through discursive networks, and those meanings are mutable according to the cultural, historical, and musical context of those gestures, and the subsequent contexts into which they are constantly reinscribed (Biddle and Jarman-Ivens 10-11).

Musical genres are not inherently “male” or “female”; they are *produced* as such, or more precisely, *coproduced* (Lohan and Faulkner 322). Music is a key resource in the constitutive performance of gender, and vice versa.

Like other sorts of cultural texts, then, music *works* for us, as fans, as performers, as listeners and producers, and it is crucial to ask what kind of work it does and how this work is achieved (Badley xiii). Over the following pages, my intention is to demonstrate how a particular sample, the *amen break*, can be productively understood as a *fratriarchal totem*: in its work as an element in cultural politics, as a mode of social practice, and as an element in a signifiatory system. This statement requires some unpacking and contextualisation, over the course of which I will draw on a number of resources, including totemism as we find it in classical sociology.

Totemism played a key role in the theories of Durkheim and Freud, the “founding fathers” of sociology and psychoanalysis respectively (Friedland 239). Indeed, among some academics, the *Elementary Forms* and *Totem and Taboo* themselves possess a value bordering on the totemic. This is despite the empirical and theoretical difficulties around totemism as presented in these classic accounts (Jones). Totemism has recently been compellingly deployed, for instance, to account for and critique such facets of contemporary life as war and nationalism (Marvin

and Ingle) and advertising and consumer culture (Sheffield). However, I will draw on theories of totemism, in the memorable phrase of Lévi-Strauss: “not because they are ‘good to eat’, but because they are ‘good to think’” (*Totemism* 162).

### Introducing the amen

There are a number of terms to clarify at the outset. The amen is a *sample*, a particular segment of a sound recording, where such samples are the component elements in the mode of musical production referred to as *sampling*: “an electronic music technique that involves storing and repeatedly playing a sound fragment” (Bates 283). As Bates points out, one of the consequences of contemporary music production is that it is no longer possible to speak strictly of “sample-based genres”, *all* music is now sample-based to the extent that it is produced with the aid of digital technology. Nonetheless, and although there is a continuum here, we can differentiate genres assembled and composed largely or exclusively from samples drawn from *previously existent* music, from genres where instruments are played with some degree of “liveness”, recorded, and those recordings then digitally ordered.

The concern here is with the former category, electronic music genres which draw heavily on samples of earlier recordings. This compositional mode is, in Lacasse’s term, *hypertextual*: it generates new texts (hypertexts) from previous ones (hypotexts) (40). It is also *autosonic*: utilising actual fragments of previous recordings, rather than their abstract musical features. Sampling is autosonic, whereas cover versions, for instance, are *allosonic* (*ibid* 39-40). Works so produced have been referred to as *plunderphonic*, partly because they are often in (sometimes politically motivated) violation of copyright (Oswald). They can also be described as “metamusic – music about music” (Chanan 277), because they are interventions, dialogues, and disruptions; deconstructing the meanings of the “original” works they are “decomposed” from.

The amen is a sample, then, it is also a sample of a specific sort of musical event, a *breakbeat*: “the section of a funk or reggae track where pitched instruments drop out, leaving drums and percussion to play unadorned for a few bars” (Toynbee 137). Although there are other famous breakbeats in electronic dance music, the amen is generally considered to be the most sampled piece of recorded sound in the history of Western music, which is to say, musicians subsequently have reproduced (sampled) this segment of this recording in their own compositions, and they have done so with the amen more than with any

other recording.<sup>1</sup> The amen has become a canonical, genre-constitutive sample. It can be heard in hip-hop, happy hardcore, gabber, and drum and bass, but also in Top 40 pop, commercials, and the *Futurama* theme song (Harrison). It has had its most profound influence in jungle, and more recently, in breakcore (“breakbeat hardcore”), the genre on which this discussion will focus.<sup>2</sup>

The amen originates with a band called the Winstons, who in 1969 released a single, “Color Him Father”, with a track called “Amen, Brother” on the B-side. “Amen, Brother” is an *allosonic hypertext*, a reworking of Curtis Mayfield’s “Amen” (1964), which was itself based on Jester Hairston’s “Amen” (1963). “Amen, Brother” also incorporates elements of Mayfield’s “We’re a Winner” (1967). The drummer on “Amen, Brother” was the late Gregory Coleman; he had previously played with Otis Redding, the Marvellettes, and Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions. “Amen, Brother” is relatively short, at just over two and a half minutes. However, around one and a half minutes into it, there are four bars (about seven seconds in duration) where the other players fall silent while Coleman’s drumming continues: this is the amen break.

When sampled today, the amen is read “backwards”; it is doubtful that many breakcore practitioners today were alive at the time “Amen, Brother” first appeared – indeed, some were not even around the *second* time the amen appeared (initially in hip-hop, around 1986). It is through its current ubiquity that its history is retrospectively constructed; those who sample it now can be said to be in dialogue (and in competition, as we shall shortly see) with others who have previously sampled it, rather than with its more historically distant moments. The agglomerated meanings it has picked up along the way, then, reverberate along with it, and play an important part in its continuing circulation, *perhaps* the most

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is impossible to formally quantify, given the ease with which electronic music is now produced and distributed, and the ensuing quantity thereof. It is evident, however, that the amen far surpasses other samples in ubiquity. Samples with similar claims to constitutive presence include the “funky drummer” in early hip-hop, the “battery brain” in baile funk, and the “dem bow” in reggaeton (Marshall).

<sup>2</sup> Representative examples of the sort of uses of the amen in breakcore with which this chapter is concerned can be found in the work of Bomb20, Bong-Ra, Cardopusher, Donna Summer/Jason Forrest, Drumcorps, Duran Duran Duran, Dysphemic, Ebola, Enduser, Epsilon, FFF, Fidel Villeneuve, FRX, Gabbenni Amenassi, Gunslinger-R, Igor, Istari Lasterfahrer, Jahba, Kowareta Hyoushi, Krumble, Lisbeth and Bent/Lisbent, Maladroit, Misanthrope, Ove-Naxx, Oxygenfad, Parasite, Patric Catani, PZG/Depizgator, Rotator, Shitmat, Soundmurderer, Stivs, Strog, and Venetian Snares. In many cases works by these artists are freely available online. Sociopath Recordings and Illphabetik are two free netlabels which may serve as useful starting points.

important part. However, in order for it to pass this tipping point, there must have been features of the amen itself which contributed to its snowballing appeal. The amen has an unmistakable timbre and grain, and a gritty, compressed, slightly metallic sound.

The most accessible way of representing the amen textually is as follows:

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-----|-----|-----|-----C-----
H-H-H-H-H-H-H-H-|H-H-H-H-H-H-H-H-|H-H-H-H-H-H-H-H-|H-H-H-H-H-H-H-H-
---S--s-s--S---|---S--s-s--S---|---s-s-----S-|---S--s-s---S-
K-K-----kK----|K-K-----kK----|K-K-----K-----|---kK-----

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where C: crash cymbal, H: hi hat/ride cymbal, S: snare drum, and K: kick/bass drum. The pattern is striking, as is the manner in which it was played and the momentum of that playing: Coleman had plenty of what Keil terms “distinctive tap” (124). But the amen’s popularity cannot be reduced to this, given that it is invariably chopped up and *resequenced* (the individual hits of the amen assembled into new orders, sped up, slowed down, modified and treated with digital effects and so on).

It seems that the *sound* of the amen thus overrides the original pattern in importance, and this sound is the result of a combination of features: the ring of the hi hat or ride cymbal has a high and even wash, similar to white noise; the kit itself seems to be tuned to the hi hat, such that combined hits, close in tone, appear almost as a single sound; the grain and pitch of the snare produces an extremely distinctive “pop”; the way it was compressed, with analogue technology (producing a “vintage” grain); and finally recorded, apparently with overhead rather than close microphones, which further adds to the unitary sound of the kit overall (Rhythm Hacker). The consistent volume levels, combined with Coleman’s even playing, have the unintended consequence that individual hits can easily be isolated and re-ordered (something which can be difficult with several other classic breaks). The length of the individual hits and the *differences between them* are also pertinent, as it has been suggested that the amen follows the “golden ratio” (Schneider). In addition, the fact that there are “ghost” hits (indicated in the lower case above) on both snare and kick drum (“off-kicks”), while producing propulsive momentum, also gives the sampler a rich variety of hits to work with: across the snares, kicks and hi hats there is surprisingly subtle variation in timbre and tessitura. While this goes some way towards accounting for the amen’s original appeal, it does not quite explain how the amen, as a “sonic gesture”, came to have *gendered* meanings.

Of course, it helps that breakbeats are samples of *drums*. Drums “express the loudness and power that is central to ... an occupation of sonic space coded masculine” (Clawson 201). As Fast points out:

drummers materialize the concept of music making as manual labor to a greater extent than most musicians through the kind of physical gestures they make: repeated blows to the instrument (this might also be equated with a kind of primitiveness or naturalness of the instrument and its players) (149).

Drums, one might say, are inscribed with a gender (and indeed often with racialised characteristics). For similar reasons, McClary characterises the backbeat of rock as “phallic” (154). This semiotic system may rest on and mobilise essentialist notions of gender, but it is also persistently audible, and drawn on with varying levels of explicitness by both listeners and producers. The pitch and depth of the sound, and the size of the instrument, generally determine the “gender” of that instrument, and the process of gendering starts early:

studies of how band and orchestra instruments are chosen find both parents and children preferring the smaller, higher-pitched flute, clarinet, and violin for girls, with the drums, trombone, French horn, acoustic bass, and tuba identified as especially appropriate for boys. Instruments are imbued with gender connotations grounded in broader conceptions of gender difference ... these relate especially, to the assumed polarities of masculine and feminine bodies – large versus small, low pitched versus high, strong versus weak (Clawson 204).

It is thus possible to argue that, merely by being an extremely funky breakbeat, from the outset the amen signifies *hard*; and what it signifies, solely at a sonic level, seems to be a mode of oppositional authenticity which is extremely *cool*, “masculine” by default, and implicitly “black”. Of course, to describe something as an *extremely funky breakbeat* is to operationalise on some level just such a model of authenticity, which is indicative of the complex circularity involved in the constitutive interrelations between musical forms and gendered positions. This is to say nothing as of yet concerning the semiotic baggage the amen has picked up in the interim, through its longstanding association with seminal gangsta rap texts in the mid to late 80s, in combination with samples of male Jamaican dancehall vocalists in jungle, and juxtaposed with an alarming variety of other genres through contemporary breakcore’s vociferous “cultural cannibalism” (Hosokawa 235).

This baggage has at various times reinforced, inflected, appropriated, compounded, undermined, accelerated and *almost* completely collapsed the originary referentiality of the amen: “the very force of repetition can, as it were, obliterate the significance of content” (Middleton 166).<sup>3</sup> From

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<sup>3</sup> Among the first wave of (hip-hop) producers to sample the amen, there were likely politico-cultural connotations in play concerning the civil rights and Black Power movements; “Amen, Brother” is certainly a dialogue referring to and arising in this context. The extent to which current deployments of the amen are cognisant of this is debatable.

our vantage point, it is probably not really possible to isolate the “original” meanings of “Amen, Brother” from those the amen has currently, though we can speculate on what they might have been. I say this as someone particularly susceptible to this charge, as I have been listening to amen variations for about 15 years. It can sometimes seem that the amen and samples like it are simulacra, analogous to those objects described by Lash and Urry, which “are emptied out both of meaning (and are postmodern) and of material content (and are thus post-industrial)” (15). In some sense the amen exists and thrives due to its differential role in juxtaposition with other sonic signifiers, and beyond this, its repetitive insistence and subcultural vitality as a mark of “insiderdom” when contrasted with other genres in which it is not used.

It is a completely pliable and flexible, but nonetheless instantly recognisable sound, which seems to succeed and survive not so much on the basis of *what* it “says”, but of *how* it signifies in relation to the other sounds with which it is put into dialogue. Goodwin similarly suggested 10 years ago that the “‘cold’ mechanical drumming of today’s jungle sound is affective ... not because of its inherent features, but because of its function within a system of difference” (132). As Lévi-Strauss says of the various forms of totemism found around the world, “*it is not the resemblances, but the differences, which resemble each other*” (*Totemism* 149). So it is with the amen, a successful defining characteristic of genre, and of authentic identity, a locus of meaning determined through juxtaposition, repetition, and difference. In this regard, and as a sonic marker of masculinity, the amen has analogues in other genres: the characteristic “blast-beat” drumming and ultra-guttural vocal techniques of death metal, the distorted 4/4 kick drums of gabber techno, and the use of feedback and distortion in power electronics.

While recuperating the amen’s “original meaning” is difficult (and perhaps besides the point), the amen now is quite a *stable* element in routine *détournement*, not a simulacrum. Its constancy is indicative of the fact that it *does* signify. Unlike those analogues in other genres, the amen is *autosonic*, not a technique or a means of treating or producing sound. And while it arguably refers now to the soundscape of its previous deployments more than its original context (accruing those meanings along the way), it *still* refers to the place and time at which it was first recorded, and to the *people* who recorded it, to Richard Spencer’s band, the Winstons, and their drummer, Gregory Coleman.

## Breakcore in context

Detailed overviews of electronic dance music culture can be found in Gilbert and Pearson, Reynolds, and Thornton. Toynbee discusses the evolution of jungle in some detail, and I have addressed the emergence of breakcore and its vexed filial relations with jungle elsewhere (Whelan *Breakcore*). For current purposes, it is sufficient to situate the emergence and popularity of breakcore in terms of social context, because it is in this context that the amen became the extraordinarily visible – or rather audible – marker and signifier which it is today. A number of intersecting social, cultural and technological developments have played a part over the last 8 years or so, and these are generally tied to changes associated with networked computing. The adoption of peer-to-peer music distribution put access to unprecedented amounts of music, and “cracked” or “pirated” music production software, into the hands of (seemingly) anyone interested in music and/or music production (Whelan *Produce*). Extremely extensive collections of music, which had previously been the esoteric and *expensive* domain of collectors and DJs, were now widely accessible, as were the means of musical production:

Anyone with access to the relevant computer software can now engage with recorded music in a creative and productive sense ... The combination of P2P exchange and the technology of the computer dramatically extends the creative potential for active consumers to add value to intellectual property (Rojek 367).

We might say that *connoisseurship* was democratised, alongside access to the software required to produce music, which would otherwise be prohibitively expensive. One of the consequences of this was that the amen went *overground*, and was no longer restricted to the specialised knowledge of insider obsessives, DJs, and producers. It is in this cultural ecology that we find the proliferation of bedroom producers, netlabels, and MySpace pages showcasing the work of “amateurs”. Indeed, at this juncture the plausibility of a strict distinction between producer and consumer breaks down, and in its place we find the *prosumer* and *vernacular scenes* (where producers and consumers are coterminous).

These developments produced an extraordinary proliferation and diversification of musical styles: much of the digital “metamusic” currently being produced can only properly be understood in terms of this musical superabundance and its effects on conventional musical signification. They also occurred simultaneously with significant shifts in the cultural and political landscape in which sample-based musics operate. The well-publicised mobilisation of the Recording Industry Association of America and related bodies against music “piracy” had the effect of reconfiguring online file-sharing – a consumption practice – as



“leisure resistance” (ibid 368). The extension of copyright legislation had consequences, however, for production as well as consumption, such that plunderphonic compositional techniques were now strongly associated with “illegal art”, music characterised by flagrant copyright infringement. The most spectacular example of this was hip-hop producer Danger Mouse’s *Grey Album*, which combined Jay-Z’s *Black Album* with the Beatles’ *White Album*. The legal controversy over this album and the litigious behaviour of EMI towards anyone hosting it online led to “Grey Tuesday”, when the album was downloaded approximately 100,000 times (Ayers; Duckworth). Less spectacularly, these developments fed through to the practice of countless bedroom producers, who were now well aware that their already marginal creative cultural practice had effectively been criminalised. They responded through the further expropriation of what one breakcore producer calls “C.R.A.P.” (Corporate Rap And Pop), in an instance of what may be characterised as “c/overt resistance” (Schilt 81). In this regard it is notable that the Winstons (unlike, say, James Brown, whose drummer, Clyde Stubblefield, was responsible for several canonical breakbeats) never sought remunerative damages for the reproduction of their work: this “public domain” status seems to contribute to the “underground” authenticity of the amen.

Cumulatively these changes are arguably aspects of the ongoing *privatisation* and *spatial reconfiguration* of “resistance” broadly construed. Where rave (from which jungle and thence breakcore emerged) had been a public, mass phenomenon, establishing “temporary autonomous zones” in squats, disused warehouses and greenbelt fields, breakcore is effectively diffuse, despatialised and rhizomatic, surfacing as a collective “face-to-face” experience only periodically in club and bar nights, or in areas with well-established and longstanding raving traditions and spaces. Where the social practices around jungle were eventually criminalised by the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994, which contained a notorious clause (63.1.b) dealing with music “wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats” (Office of Public Sector Information), breakcore is a “subculture that exists parallel to the mainstream consumer culture and just beneath the radar” (Eng 3). The breakcore “scene” occurs mostly online, and is produced by and in the system it ostensibly critiques; mass cultural musical artefacts are the medium through which it is articulated. Analogously, then, the countercultural politics identifying that which is to be “opposed” or “rebelled against” have shifted, to the extent that some commentators have argued that practitioners in subcultures like breakcore

engage in a purely postmodern simulation of politics: a retro-politics of free speech, privacy, and so on enacted on old stage sets of antigovernment and anticonsumerist protest. They act up everywhere but in the workplace where such issues now make the most difference in tangible quality of life (Liu 274).

Whether or not what we are witness to in such scenes is indeed the “death of the political” is a point to which we will return.

Of course, the online environment has had profound and irrevocable effects on many genres of music, and there are other niche genres or “cybersubcultures” which largely find their “home” online (Caspary and Manzenreiter 63). This impact is particularly strongly felt in electronic music genres however (unifying as it does the means of musical production, consumption, distribution, and communication concerning all of the above), and in breakcore it is constitutive, for: “Technology changes not only the sonic nature of the music it produces but it also changes the landscape of the music scene by allowing more people to produce music at a near-professional level” (Roy 6-7).

The “‘musicalisation’ of bedroom space”, as Lincoln terms it (402), privatises in the aforementioned sense, but it also has crucial implications in terms of *who* participates. The democratic promise of networked technology is belied by the fact that “intimacy with technology and intimacy with other men around technology ... largely exclude women and are thus interpreted as part of patriarchal power around technologies” (Lohan and Faulkner 324). As Gilbert and Pearson suggest:

the social and cultural effects of any given technology are almost entirely dependent on the actual uses to which it is put, and this is dependent not on the technology itself but on the socio-cultural context which produces it and in which it is deployed (139).

The persistent and mutually compounding associations between technological accomplishment and (white) masculinity on the one hand (Lohan and Faulkner), and an obsession with musical detail and control over music as a feature of masculinity on the other (Straw), contribute to the fact that the majority of bedroom producers are in fact invariably male.<sup>4</sup> The bedroom producer as a social (stereo)type also mobilises the pre-existing discourse around the producer as *auteur* or composer, “bedroom producerness” to some extent draws on that identity and the associated values of virtuosity, creativity, and technical ability: “the producer’s role has remained a male domain” (Mayhew 149). This is despite the fact that many of the pioneers of electronic music were women (for instance, Delia Derbyshire and Daphne Oram, whose

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<sup>4</sup> This is a point on which I would like to be proved wrong, and there are a small number of female producers and DJs associated with breakcore, including Cobra Killer, Doddodo, Hecate, Mutamassik, Princesse Rotative, DJ Ripley, and Toxic Lipstick.

legacies cannot be overstated). Breakcore might be a scene in which women simply have little interest in participating *as producers*, but this does not imply that it would be any easier for them to do so than in other musical genres similarly informally “policed”.

Thus, a confluence of material, social, cultural, and discursive factors combined to produce a musical subculture remarkable in its aesthetic, technological and cultural repercussions, which is nonetheless, as emergent from this confluence, always already homosocial and fraternal in its organisation. It is in this context that the totemic power of the amen is best understood.

### Totemism and the totemic amen

Totemism is a symbolic system and a mode of social organisation according to which *phratries* are defined in relation to totems, customarily animals, plants, or other entities. The totem, however, is not always “organic”; Lévi-Strauss cites instances of “such odd totems as laughing, various illnesses, vomiting and a corpse” (*Totemism* 134). Hence totemism does not necessarily formalise relations with plant and animal species of empirical interest because edible or otherwise of functional value.

The totem, among other things, is a classificatory mechanism for ordering the social and material worlds (and their contents) simultaneously: “if totemism is, in one aspect, the grouping of men into clans according to natural objects (the associated totemic species), it is also, inversely, a grouping of natural objects in accordance with social groups” (Durkheim and Mauss, *Primitive* 17-18). Totemism differentiates and sorts elements of the material world, just as it differentiates and sorts the people who occupy it. For example:

people who have the drum as totem possess the following powers: they have the right to conduct a ceremony which consists in imitating dogs and beating drums; they supply the magicians who have to secure the multiplication of tortoises, assure the banana crop, and divine the identities of murderers from the movements of a lizard; and, finally, it is they who impose the snake taboo. It is thus possible to say ... that to the drum clan belong, in certain respects and besides the drum itself, the snake, bananas, dogs, tortoises, and lizards. All these are under the control, at least partially, of the same social group, and consequently, the two terms being basically synonymous, belong to the same class of beings” (ibid 29).

Crucially, the totem also distinguishes the *profane* material world from the domain of the *sacred*. Indeed, “it is in connection with it that things are classified as sacred or profane. It is the very type of sacred thing” (Durkheim 119). Sacred totemic power or *mana* inheres in all

things, in the *phratry* individually and collectively, in the totem animal, plant, or object, and most especially in graphic *representations* of the totem. This is why Lévi-Strauss suggests that “there is no such thing as the real totem; the individual animal plays the part of the signifying, and the sacredness attaches neither to it nor its icon but to the signified, which either can stand for” (*Savage* 239). The signified here is *mana*: “totemism is the religion, not of such and such animals or men or images, but of an anonymous or impersonal force, found in each of these beings but not to be confounded with any of them” (Durkheim 188). In Durkheim, then:

- (a) the totem symbolizes in visible and outward form the totemic principle, *mana*, that is, the god;
- (b) the totem also marks off one clan from another: it is the “flag” of the clan (Pickering 237).

In Durkheim’s account, religion is society hypostasised: society is “the real”, the totem is the emblem of society, and religion is the symbolic expression of it. Religion is the socio-moral, “anonymous or impersonal” force of society externalised, objectified and rendered sacred. Totemism is the *clan worshipping itself*: “the totem is the flag of the clan, so the clan member who worships the totem, in fact, worships the clan (society)” (Sheffield 46). Through this metonymic transcoding, the totem binds the collective: “The totemic principle, the nucleus of the most primitive religion, is the clan itself reflected in the psyche of the individual” (Goldenweiser 217). This role of the totem in the constitution of individual identity has some bearing for the *amen clan* and its cultural practices (or religion, if you prefer). The totem, Durkheim and Mauss note, plays a constitutive role in the articulation of subjectivity:

Because this anonymous force is entirely moral, that is to say made up of ideas and sentiments, it can only live and act in and through particular *consciences*. Accordingly, it permeates them, and in so doing assumes individual characteristics. The fragment which each of us carries within him takes on a particular aspect by the very fact of being intermingled with our individual life, of bearing the imprint of our organism and of our temperament. Each of these fragments is a soul ... the soul is merely a particularized form of the totemic force among these peoples (*Frazer* 179).

Thus those with longstanding engagements in jungle and breakcore become members of the *amen clan*, in endless pursuit of an internalised *imago*, “held tenuously in place as a generic signifier by the competing imperatives of returning to and moving on from the one sound” (Toynbee 107). The *amen* “speaks” through them, and they through it, always returning to, reproducing, and further inflecting its changing same through this ritual poesis.

Durkheim was concerned about what he called *anomie* in industrialised urban societies: normlessness, the collapse of shared values

consequent on such processes as the fragmentation of traditional communities, an increasingly specialised division of labour, and the decline of religious sentiment. He held that “civil religion” would in modern societies have to take the place of the old gods (Northcott 196). And indeed, through listening to things like the amen, it becomes possible to argue that society is profoundly totemic, and social interaction is ritually mediated by symbols which are ostensibly “secular” but nonetheless treated as sacred – this, in fact, is Goffman’s approach. The amen would not have surprised Durkheim and Mauss, who maintained that “society produces sacred things at will and then stamps on them the characteristics of religion” (*Frazer* 179). In fact, the issue for Durkheim might have been not that there was *not enough* totemism, but rather that there was *too much* of it, too many clans with not enough shared features to bind them together. The potential for describing Western societies as totemic did not go unnoticed in early responses to the *Elementary Forms*. Writing in 1923, Richard argued:

In the deserts of Central Australia, where a few scattered families occupy large territories, the gathering together of a few men around a stone or tree is enough to arouse within them a collective emotion which at once takes on a religious character of the most definite kind. Imagine then the situation in our colossal cities with their closely packed populations where the masses gather so quickly. Think of all the centres of “religious” emotion offered by all the cinemas, department stores, music halls, skating rinks, lecture halls, and labour exchanges! (248).

While Richards is arguing that totemism in Durkheim belittles Catholicism, we can agree that totemism is hardly solely the preserve of “primitives” on this account. Consider the 42nd or “Rainbow Division”, a U.S. military unit operating in France during the First World War. So named because the division was composed of units from so many states that their uniforms were eponymously colourful, the Division informally adopted the name and a rainbow insignia, and in this regard it was in keeping with the rest of the U.S. forces in Europe. So much so, in fact, that by the end of the war, it was possible to speak of these forces as observing:

- (1) segmentation into groups conscious of their identity;
- (2) the bearing by each group of the name of an animal, thing, or natural phenomenon;
- (3) the use of this name as term of address in conversation with strangers;
- (4) the use of an emblem, drawn on divisional weapons and vehicles, or as personal ornament, with a corresponding tabu on the use of the emblem by other groups;
- (5) respect for the “patron” and the design representing it;
- (6) a vague belief in its protective role and in its value as augury (*Lévi-Strauss Totemism* 76; Marvin and Ingle 21).

The fourth and fifth points above are of particular interest, because they highlight one of the most intriguing aspects of totemism: the role of *representation* within it. The *emblem* of the totem is an *element in a symbolic code*, inscribed upon items and thereby sacralising them (just as in nationalistic countries, or cults of personality, we find flags or images of the leader everywhere): “The nobles of the feudal period carved, engraved and designed in every way their coats-of-arms upon the walls of their castles, their arms, and every sort of object that belonged to them; the blacks of Australia and the Indians of North America do the same thing with their totems” (Durkheim 113-114). It is this *representation* of the totem which is pre-eminently holy, not the totemic animal (Durkheim and Mauss, *Frazer* 178). The symbolic sacred realm in which totemic emblems circulate is *above* and *opposed to* the everyday, and *exceeds* language: “against the ordinary profane language there is another language, and when it acts it marks the ordinary language in a special way ... in effect it finds ordinary language a surface to write on, a surface among many” (Gane 81).

Similarly, sonic space is a surface to sequence amens over, a space awaiting the inscription of amens, and the sounds breakcore consumes and regurgitates can be thought of as the profane language ritually redeemed through plunderphonic “hardcorification”. Noise, in short, is power (Attali). Although the amen certainly refers, it is after all a *sample* of a recording: it has a historical source (*ancestor myth*) but it doesn't really have “an original”, so it is unsurprising that the representation should be the source and expression of the sacred:

the force of totemic sacrality does not inhere in a thing, a place or in a person but *in the mark*. This mark can be extended to any number of heterogeneous elements through ritual practice; objects only possess the power of the sacred once they have been transformed by a collective apparatus of inscription that actually connects things (including persons) to the totemic mark and hence to the constitutive element of social life (Datta 291).

To refer to something as a *fraternal totem* is something of a tautology: totemism is by definition fraternal in Durkheim. This is despite the fact that there are cases of “sexual totemism”, where both genders have their own distinct totems (Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* 106-107). The term *fraternal* is used here to underscore totemism in its homosociality. This is evident if we consider how the distinction between sacred and profane is operationalised under totemism. Among the Arunta, the Australian tribe with which Durkheim was so preoccupied, there are artefacts upon which the emblem of the clan is inscribed; these are called *churinga*. The *churinga* are considered sacred precisely because they bear the totemic emblem; they are treated with reverence

and stored in a special location away from social sources of possible contamination:

Profane persons, that is to say, women and young men not yet initiated into the religious life, may not touch or even see the *churinga*; they are only allowed to look at it from a distance, and even this is only on rare occasions (Durkheim 120).

Women and the uninitiated were likewise barred from participation in the ceremonies involving *churinga*: “the rites which are connected with a totem can be performed only by the men of that totem” (ibid 117).<sup>5</sup> Thus the “energy of the totemic principle is homosocial, bonding between men” (Friedland 247). A common objective in these rites was assuring the reproduction of the totemic species: “a masculine fertilization, an all-male sexual act” (ibid 249).<sup>6</sup> Notably, the *spirits of the ancestors* occupied some *churinga* (and some *churinga*, incidentally, were *musical devices* for use in ritual ceremonials, such as bull-roarers and didgeridoos).

There are other aspects of fraternal organisation worth elaborating in relation to the amen as totem. Between phratries “there is a sort of rivalry or even a constitutional hostility” (Durkheim 146). Totemic organisations are in ritual competition with each other. Fraternity is *adversative* in form, where, as Ong has pointed out, “in a contest, ‘against’ and ‘with’ come to the same thing” (33). Maffesolian tribes, in this case music subcultures, are also in competition with each other, for instance: *gabbers hate trance*; emo is constituted as pariah caste; punks despise hippies; mods and rockers engage in formal combat and so on. This competition is evinced by the stance breakcore takes towards other genres. But the ritualised conflict also occurs *between* the members of the clan, who strive to out-do each other in the extent to which they are hierophants, personally representative of the clan, expert in its rituals and mythology and so on. *Churinga* and the emblems emblazoned on them play a role in this, for a *churinga* has all sorts of magical properties:

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<sup>5</sup> In a different context, Rodgers suggests that in the fraternal “men’s house”, “women were given a *space for listening but not for seeing or being seen*” (47). Similarly, we often find women listening, dancing, distributing flyers, “manning” the till at the door, we less often find them producing or DJing.

<sup>6</sup> A Freudian reading of amen totemism is also possible: it would perhaps emphasise the founding patricide which gives rise to fraternity in Freud’s allegory, characterise Coleman as the totemic father of the clan, and describe the ubiquity of the amen as the ritual homosocial re-enactment of the patricide – having “killed” Coleman, the amen clan simultaneously hides this fact from itself and celebrates it by ritually partaking in the father’s power (the amen). Regrettably, there is insufficient space to develop such a reading here.

it gives men force, courage and perseverance, while, on the other hand, it depresses and weakens their enemies. This latter belief is so firmly rooted that when two combatants stand pitted against one another, if one sees that the other has brought *churinga* against him, he loses confidence and his defeat is certain (Durkheim 121).<sup>7</sup>

Thus there is competition between members of the amen clan, and this competition is articulated *through* the amen. When we listen to the amen, we are immersed but also critical listeners, we must assess each instance in regard to what we know of the rest of the canon. The compulsive, generative repetition of the amen is in this sense *relational* (Rycenga 237). Each individual instance speaks to us through what it says in relation to the rest of the canon. Producers who use the amen accept this challenge and assert that they have a contribution to make with it, that they are sufficiently skilled and literate to do something “original” with it, and thus further contribute to the cult. This is characteristically fraternal, this demonstration of virtuosic ability with the amen, and is also similar to the preoccupations around the guitar in other genres, where the “imperative of command is often expressed through an obsession with technique and with competition over technique” (Clawson 204). To use the amen is to drape oneself in the flag, as it were, to claim kinship and totem ancestry and draw on and deploy the *mana* of the totem, but it is also to participate in the rite of engaging and passing on this adversative challenge.

The amen is a hard taskmaster and the apprenticeship is time-consuming and difficult:

About the time of puberty, as the time for initiation approaches, the young man withdraws into a distant place ... There, during a period varying from a few days to several years, he submits himself to all sorts of exhausting and unnatural exercises (Durkheim 162).

Becoming an adept and harnessing the totemic power entails a great deal of listening, learning, and experimentation with samples and with music software. Meticulously sequencing the amen and successfully producing the impression of dynamic movement with it is a laborious process, through which the emblem is absorbed into or *inscribed upon the body* (at the site of production, as well as in dance at the sometime site of consumption). This is not dissimilar to other practices involving protracted periods of time in front of a monitor, mouse in hand, but the process, in the focus, concentration, and attention to detail, in pursuit of a solely audible result, nonetheless produces decidedly disciplinary

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<sup>7</sup> If we replace *churinga* in this passage with *dubplate* we have a summary of the symbolic conflict endemic in DJ cultures influenced by the Jamaican soundsystem tradition, such as jungle and dubstep, where the objective is to “kill” the opposing “soundboy” through the deployment of superior “dubplates”.



consequences for the body hunched, ears cocked, at the computer. Initiation into the amen clan thus mirrors the practice of *hikikomori*, (“confining oneself indoors”); through which participants in the Japanese noise scene achieve authenticated group membership (Caspary and Manzenreiter 73n11). Through this process, *bedroom producer* initiates become simply *producers*.

### The enchanting amen

On the basis of the above, it should be evident that totemism as a heuristic device is indeed *good to think*:

When an exotic custom fascinates us in spite of (or on account of) its apparent singularity, it is generally because it presents us with a distorted reflection of a familiar image, which we confusedly recognize as such without yet managing to identify it (Lévi-Strauss, *Savage* 238-239).

Breakcore is a genre and subculture that is, like many others, largely produced by young men. In this regard there is little that is particularly remarkable or “new” about it. The breakcore community, such as it is, is not in any sense actively or explicitly opposed to the participation of women. Again, like other such genres, there are features both of the social and sonic organisation of the genre that serve to render and perpetuate it as a homosocial domain. Rather than condemning breakcore on these grounds, I have tried to highlight some of the senses in which it can be productively understood in terms of the classic model of homosocial organisation, the totemic *phratry*. However, I would like to sound a note of caution. I don’t want to reproduce the

uncritical and essentially narcissistic tendency in masculinity studies (especially, but not exclusively, studies of heterosexual men by heterosexual men) to reproduce the power relations that feminism in its most radical moments sought, and continues to seek, to overturn (Biddle and Jarman-Ivens 4).

We must be careful not to reify the conception of masculinity we mobilise, because masculinity is a set of mutable performative practices, rather than an essential trait of a certain form of embodiment. Masculinities, like amens and the other gestures which constitute them, are cultural resources available to anyone, but this is just why it is so important to think through how these resources work and how access to them may (perhaps unwittingly) be constrained: “masculinity belongs to no single gender, sexuality, race, or discipline. There are therefore valid reasons for considering how homosocial bonds and desires operate and structure all aspects of culture” (Hawkins 279).

Breakcore may be characterised as a subculture organised fratriarchally around a totem, which functions as a signifier of a mode of cool coded as masculine, and in itself further operates as a means of inculcation into the subculture, and of articulating that mode of masculine cool. But to assume on these grounds that it is not *possible* for women to participate in the communion of the amen is to essentialise the consequence of dynamic historical processes, to disregard the experience of the women who *do* participate, and to reproduce the worst tendencies of subcultural exclusion. As Fast puts it:

It is much easier always to begin from the premise that the music and images are sexist and macho because not only is it a comforting notion that this kind of semiotic stability might exist, but it also locks out the dangerous possibility of woman as sexual and powerful – simultaneously (201).

I wish to describe the homosocial tendencies at work in breakcore, and through doing so offer a critique, because I believe the subculture is politically, culturally and aesthetically important. But in offering this critique and description I don't want to further dehistoricise and sediment the tendencies in question, which are simultaneously contingent and pervasive. In attempting to produce a space of authentic identity for themselves, breakcore practitioners draw on, adapt, and in some cases intensify the techniques and tactics they find around them in society at large, with the predictable consequences I am referring to.

While contemporary breakcore fans and producers cannot be said to be particularly interested in altering the embedded aspects of their own subculture that have exclusionary consequences, the cult of the amen is nonetheless legible as a project with profound intent: the intent to *enchant* a rationalised, alienating and frightening world. Enchantment, Luke reminds us, originates etymologically in song, in *chanter* (Old French), and prior to that in *cantare* (Latin), both of which mean *to sing* (53). Breakcore is an attempt “to transform the nothing that pervades our everyday lives into something” (Ritzer 91). This use of *nothing* is rather idiosyncratic: *nothing* is “a social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content” (ibid 36). *Nothing* consists of the mass-produced, superficial, interchangeable, and essentially empty *nongoods*, *nonservices*, *nonpeople* and *nonplaces* characteristic of contemporary capitalist hyperconsumer culture, where:

daily encounters are a series of scripted people, impersonal interactions, artificial environments, phone menus, lines, drive-thrus, fast-food meals, “fast-food” situations and people, computer spam, self-service duties, commercial images and advertising ... a series of encounters with what is unreal, unfulfilling and often the source of considerable frustration and anger (Halnon 457).

Breakcore is an indigenous glocal scene; it emerges from within this culture and is a strange, hybrid, and sometimes-subversive response to it. Langman and Halnon suggest that

Subcultures emerge when the larger culture fails to meet people's needs – for example, to provide resources or meanings – so that some people find fault with the culture and form their own identity-granting communities of meanings. Large numbers of young people today have been rendered “surplus” populations with dim economic prospects. Many others find the meanings and values provided by global capital and its culture industries shallow, empty, vacuous, or dehumanized (273-274).

The objective of subcultures in their fraternal aspect, Reynolds and Press suggest, is to ritually redeem “a world gone to ruin thanks to the dereliction of political fathers” (80). Breakcore provides meaning and invites participation in the cohesive production of meaning, in the face of the general absence of meaning. It is not a “civil religion” but a *cult*, an invented tradition with a myth of origin, a craft mode of production, a criteria for distinguishing between insiders and outsiders and thus for fostering a sense of belonging, and a meritocratic, DIY ethos. The deep suspicion of commodification in breakcore and the anger and cynicism concerning possibilities for social change serve to privilege meanings transmitted solely through sound. The persistence of the amen in the face of the extraordinarily high turnover of other popular musical styles and sonic signifiers is a disavowal of depreciation, a rejection of obsolescence.

The “debilitating disengagement of gender from labor” in postindustrial societies, Biddle notes, has produced a situation in which “every invocation of gender seems always already crass, always already exhausted, worn out, ghostly” (142). Amen totemism is in part an attempt to deal with this loss through the continued sonic projection of a phantasmatic, disembodied (comforting and reassuringly persistent) ideal of authenticity, of cool, of masculinity. But it is precisely in this capacity that the nature of the game is revealed.

Despite its aspect as oppositional and as somehow beyond the commodity form, as an element used in critique of the commodification of music, the magical and enchanting authenticity of the amen is partly derived from its point of origin, and thus from *undead labour* (Luke 46). Just as the *churinga* may possess the spirits of the ancestors, so music which samples the amen is invested with the spectral trace of Coleman's original physicality.

The c/overt, privatised, technological labour of the bedroom producer, with all the associations it has with unmanly and sedentary nerditude, seeks validation through the continued referentiality of a drummer whose seven seconds of immortality, in retrospect, occurred at a time when a

stable ideal of potent masculinity could be located in the physical labour of a black male body. In this way, perhaps the most enchanting feature of the amen is what it shows/hides about the precarious fragility and redundancy of contemporary subcultural masculinities, and their elision of themselves as positions of power as they come to be disembodied and technologically expressed. In fighting against their own uselessness and obsolescence, ironically, the amen *phratry* clings tenaciously to precisely the signifier which highlights this irretrievable loss, of an original that was never there.

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