

## Listening to the Unsung and the Quiet Imagination

*A conversation with DJ Lynnée Denise*

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### INTERLUDES

*I met DJ Lynnée Denise at the Rich Mix in London in 2015. I had just started my PhD at Goldsmiths. At the time, DJ Lynnée Denise was a BijlmerAir artist in residence in Amsterdam, where she was researching the global Black '80s. We have since developed an ongoing collaborative relationship on the intersections between DJ Scholarship, the role of archives and transnational feminist and queer movements in the diaspora.*

*DJ Lynnée Denise is an artist, scholar and writer whose work reflects on underground cultural movements, the Black 1980s, migration studies, theories of escape and electronic music of the African diaspora. This experimental dialogue brings together several conversations, interventions, and artistic work.*

DJ Lynnée Denise's ear was shaped by her parents' record collection and the tracing of sonic migrations. She uses the title "DJ" intentionally and interchangeably with "Dr." as a form of acknowledgement of decades of rigorous study, careful listening and selective sharing. The title also pays homage to DJ Lynnée Denise's years of chasing samples across time and place. A love affair with Sade and Massive Attack led to a trip to Bristol in 1998. Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's radical fashion choices and the technological brilliance of South African house cultivated a lifelong relationship with Johannesburg. When you meet Lynnée Denise, she will ask where are your people from. What did you grow up listening to? She will then map new constellations based on a polyrhythmic understanding of your ancestry and family's migration history. She was born in Pacoima in the San Fernando Valley region of Los Angeles and grew up during the '80s. Every student in her classroom can testify that studying the '80s generated its own kind of pedagogy. Where collective (un)listening becomes a form of healing. Lynnée Denise used to ride with her sister, all the way from Pacoima to Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles just to listen to big bass sound systems on Sunday night. A weekly thirty-mile situation across the California freeways.<sup>1</sup>

1. Crenshaw cruising culture was a weekly affair. Only recently, in the last ten years did the city crack down on the gathering of car clubs on Crenshaw Blvd., due to the complaints from neighbors from the surrounding community.

**“We drove thirty miles just so that we could park, watch the car clubs flex their low riding vehicles, and listen to the big bass sound systems on Sunday nights.<sup>1</sup> ‘I’m Housing’ by EPMD was our theme song and loving it included the work of memorizing lyrics and predicting when the kick drum would land, so that we could match it with a proper head bob and the right movement of our feet. I was only thirteen, but felt grown about indulging LA culture to the sounds of the New York streets.”**

She holds an MFA in creative writing from UC Riverside, where she submitted the manuscript “DJ Scholarship: A Musical Writing Practice.” Lynnée Denise does not write (or spin) for a white gaze. Her words, musical essays and mixes are a record of her people. The way she blends images, sounds, and even her intentional use of a comma, speak to the world building she does between the two and the four. For Lynnée Denise, who is currently tuning into the quiet registers of DJ Scholarship, the work is about creating structures that hold the complexity of global Blackness.

Where our work and worlds collide is in tracing the movement of people, concepts, ideas and objects. What does it mean to pause with the stories of exchange, connection and tension in the diaspora? And what does it mean to rearrange the ways in which these stories are told? We ask similar questions of different histories of empire. I am Dutch South African Indian, and my work explores migratory feminist and queer histories in the Netherlands. In our conversations, we ask what it means to challenge the hierarchies that center North America in the telling of stories on transnational exchange. Listening for the sound of place, Lynnée Denise questions the hyper-presence and appropriation of Black American music and sound in different places in the world. Offering a layered and historic reading of the white supremacist foundations of the American music industry, she reminds that music migration is global and shaped by racial capitalism. And so, she tells her students to not just chase the sample, but to look at who owns the masters. Taking inspiration from Angela Davis and Clyde Woods, she offers tribute to the people who disappeared from communities of color for reasons that include HIV/AIDS, mass incarceration and xenophobic immigration policy. In the title ‘DJ’ is an honoring of those who disappeared from dancefloors and the DJ as witness.

The praxis of DJ Scholarship concerns itself with exploring what is created out of grief without making Black suffering a primary entry point. Her latest musical essay and response is called *Toni Morrison Inna London: Sonic Connections and the Literary Imagination*, in which she offers an audio-visual response to the 1986 Guardian talk with Toni Morrison at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Incorporating video work in her explorations of Black Atlantic sounds is an extension of the quiet work she is doing. Inviting the viewer to engage with gestures and still images, she is thinking through the different tonalities of Black sound. Working with Kevin Quashie’s “The Sovereignty of Quiet,”<sup>2</sup> Lynnée Denise collapses musical and literary genres in her work. A lingering shot of Toni Morrison smoking with the drum machine as undercurrent, invites viewers to be still with the space between

2. K.E. Quashie, *The sovereignty of quiet: Beyond resistance in black culture*. (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2012). [<https://vimeo.com/icalondon/review/421490619/e89f165bb>].

Morrison's words and the technological punctuation of Drum and Bass. Lynnée Denise pulls the life worlds of Black women artists and scholars from the margins to the center.

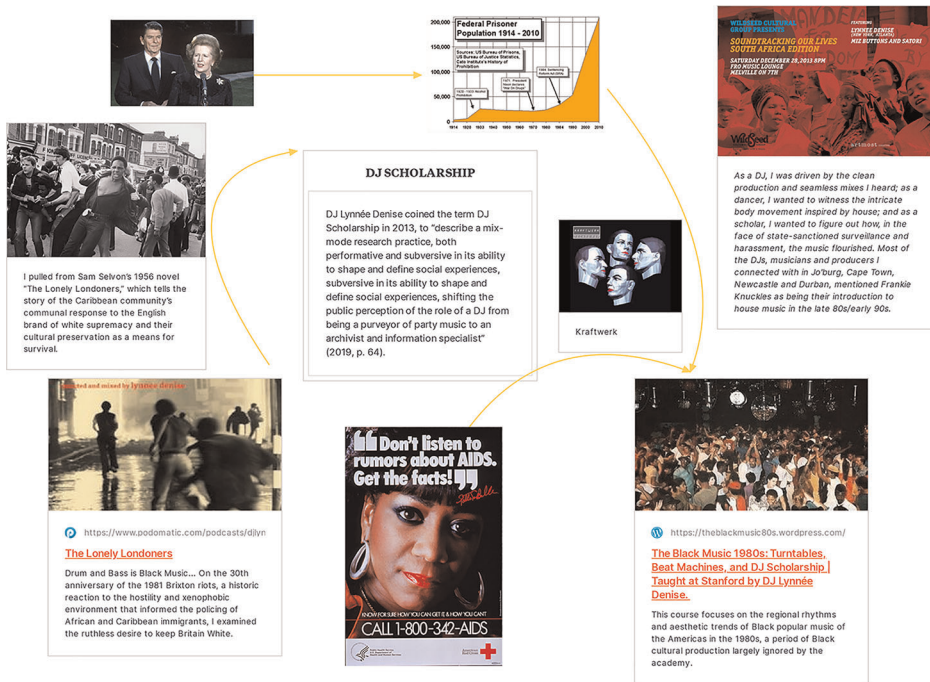
DJ Scholarship tends to the unsung and invites deeper investigation of the erasure of Black women and queer people from the public records. Lynnée Denise is interested in undoing the limitations that reside in the notion of resistance. Her oeuvre is best described as a circle formation. She asks questions of the “ancestors in her line of work.”<sup>3</sup> What do James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry and Nina Simone offer each other? How does Baldwin's speech about Black English and “the tyranny of grammar” in 1980 shift how Aretha Franklin can be listened to? How does the juke box echo the tapping of feet in a South African shebeen? DJ Scholarship does not lend itself to scholarly review. That is not to say that the practice isn't scholarly, but that western academic constructs tend to be unimaginative in the way that they attempt to capture the expansive possibilities of DJ Scholarship.

We are both interested in time. In our conversations on the use of archives, as a theoretical, conceptual and physical site, we consider how time is racialized and creates processes of classification that render diasporic stories to the margins. Lynnée Denise does not just dig through the crates to reach back into the past, but rather she shifts the tempo by changing our relationship to the present. The temporal journeys embedded in DJ Scholarship are humanizing. Telling stories beyond resistance requires a different kind of cadence. For Black people and people in the Global South are already imagined to be out of time—caught in the temporal loop of forever catching up to modernity. Modernity is not just interested in the stasis of suffering, but also built its world around limitation. Restrictions of imaginaries, words, tempos, and timing. DJ Scholarship is made out of its own kind of technologies; a vessel for untimely stories. We ask what it means to unfix time and how to let go of static and monolithic readings of presence.

With tender care to the simultaneous presence and absence of Black artists in the archives, who died prematurely, Lynnée Denise arranges a different kind of memorialization. In her multi-disciplinary work, “State Funeral,” she explores complex questions of exploitation, fame and durability in the music industry. She speaks of the structural systems of inequality that encouraged Black musicians “a certain kind of numbing to survive.” The work has been shown in galleries and museums, but she is mindful of how loud the language of addiction and Black suffering becomes in white spaces.

**“I want to write using a love language that doesn't play up or demonize addiction. I want to discuss the proverbial fall from grace while looking at the entertainment industry and structural systems that encourage a certain kind of numbing to survive and thrive. I'd like to propose a state funeral, a royal ceremonial acknowledgement of the fallen Black musicians who lived within the borders of brilliance, decadence, and pain management in all its forms.”**

3. Referring to Alice Walker's phrase “ancestors in my line of work” to describe the motivation behind her quest to restore the legacy of writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston.



I wanted to ask Lynnée Denise questions that match the circularity in her work, questions that go beyond where DJ Scholarship is now, but explore how it’s lived and imagined, where worlds are built inside the practice, and how this worlding brings us new insights and imaginations. In many ways, Lynnée Denise uses DJ Scholarship as a mode of Black speculation. This is perhaps where the quiet is taking her, into exploring all that happens before the one—by which I mean, that moment before the first beat of the bar comes in. It’s where she dwells and resides in worlds of what is to come.

**CHANDRA: DJ Scholarship is about different modes of listening and receiving – why did you feel like something needed to shift in the ways that DJs work?**

**LYNNÉE DENISE:** I was bored to death with the practice and what it had become in a post-turtable digital DJ world. I found that people were less involved in the development, pursuit and mastery of craft in terms of investigating the history and building a diverse musical knowledge base. We were moving away from presenting new and rare music to our communities as opposed to music that is popular on the radio. DJ Scholarship is also about asking questions about the health and wellbeing of the artists who enjoy heavy rotation on our collective sets. Like many other industries, the music industry was born out of the institutional and structural exploitation of Black artists and built on Black labor. With a deep listening practice comes a necessary commitment to engage Black music beyond its entertainment value.

**CHANDRA:** Engaging Black music beyond its entertainment value is such an important point. What kind of care praxis does that require? I started thinking about the

politics of care more deeply in relationship to exhibitions I've curated that address the lingering and pervasive legacies of Dutch colonialism. Care practices demand asking what or who do we care for? What does it look like to care? How does a radical care praxis trouble the idea of productivity? A praxis of care outside the confines of racial capitalism requires us to slow down and to rethink the pace in which we expect production. What is worthy production? What care structures are there when Black artists are burned out? I think especially in this current climate, where we are dealing with the ongoing implications of Covid-19 on BIPOC communities globally, there needs to be a rigorous undoing of the structures that are built on exploitation. We need to ask how future-oriented our practices of care are since the world is not just burning but also burned out. So, to propose the kind of listening you do is to offer a praxis of care within the broader anti-Black climate, which you address in your work. It's pedagogy you offer.

**CHANDRA: In your work, you often speak about the importance of chasing a sample or story and then from there, you start to build a world. Can you speak more about how DJ Scholarship shifts how we come to learn about music?**

**LYNNÉE DENISE:** What DJ Scholarship does is challenge epistemological hierarchies that say that knowledge production happens solely in the academy. I coined the term "DJ Scholarship" in 2013, to describe a mix-mode research practice, both performative and subversive in its ability to shape and define social experiences, shifting the public perception of the role of a DJ from being a purveyor of party music, to an archivist and information specialist. As DJs, we assess, collect, organize, and provide access to music determined to have long-term value. Record store as graduate school. DJ Scholarship is a way for me, a Black queer woman, to spin a blend of thoughts and ideas about race and gender into the dominant narrative of what a DJ is in the collective imagination—a cis heterosexual man. I've identified four cultural practices that evolved out of diasporic sound cultures that are actively combined to make DJ Scholarship possible and they are; Chasing Samples, Digging Through the Crates, Studying Album Cover Art, and Reading Liner Notes. I've used Aretha Franklin as a guide to think through how these practices are at work.

DJ scholarship recognizes sampling as a citational practice. I've written about how hip-hop is one of our institutions of memory and how DJs, through the work of chasing samples and digging through the crates, are curating hip-hop's holdings. Samples have been described as a manifestation of lost and found objects. DJ Spooky speaks of sampling as an omni-genre. He reinforces sampling as a conceptual approach to sonic organization rather than a particular sound itself. So, in chasing in samples you are chasing layers, chasing histories, chasing ideas, chasing people, chasing references that help to contextualize the music and open up new worlds for you. Chasing samples becomes a metaphor but is also a critical practice that helps to build and diversify our music collections. The other cultural practices all make DJ Scholarship worldbuilding possible. Working at record stores such as Tower Records throughout high school taught me how catalogue, categorize and file music. Digging through the crates, studying album cover art and reading liner notes all shape sonic knowledge production. So yes, DJ Scholarship is rooted in the commitment to shift what knowledge is and how we come to understand technical and musical literacy outside of white ethno/musicology.

**Soulful Critical Thought: bell hooks and the Making of a DJ Scholar**

"Your heart has to be ready to handle the weight of your calling," is what she said casually over Korean BBQ, and for this reason and more I grew up reading bell hooks. "Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery" was my first dance with her mind.



WillisLoud, Cultural Group presents... Soulful Critical Thought: bell hooks & the Making of a DJ Scholar. Mixed and Selected by DJ Lynnée Denise

*DJ scholarship recognizes sampling as a citational practice. It understands that hip-hop with all its homosocial and misogynistic flair doubled as a place where, through sampling, Black women's intellectual property was being actively cited.*



"I've identified four cultural practices that evolved out of diasporic sound cultures that are actively combined to make DJ Scholarship possible and they are";  
Chasing Samples, Digging Through the Crates, Studying Album Cover Art, and Reading Liner Notes.

I wanted to leave listeners with the opportunity to feel a sense of hope. To operate from a place of abundance and not the despair normally attached to the business of struggle. I selected a song inspired by something I heard bell hooks say in an interview. She shared that through his life as a farmer and with his profound appreciation of the earth, her grandfather taught her about the importance of life beyond suffering. She took from him that people of color needed to move away from what can feel like a commitment to misery and shift our focus towards self-sufficiency, pleasure, joy and self-care. Aretha Franklin's "How I Got Over" from the "Amazing Grace" album worked perfectly for these words.



**CHANDRA:** The way that you describe the sample, it feels at once permanent and fleeting?

**LYNNÉE DENISE:** Absolutely, that is how I would define a sample. As a fleeting permanent and sonic timestamp that allows you to be present in multiple worlds. You can be present at the time that the sample or the original music that gave us the sample was made or repurposed. Then you can be taken back to various places when you hear the sample or recording again in a different time and place.

**CHANDRA:** The fleeting permanence of the timestamp makes me think of the kinds of constellations you build within the framework of DJ Scholarship. I've always felt like your work offers a kind of orientation and mapping that makes palpable that the sample is a multi-sensory journey and experience. It creates new spatial relationships but also requires labor from the listener. The sample asks something of us—perhaps something beyond recognition or familiarity—a new kind of affective relationality. What I'm also interested in, coming back to some of our earlier conversations on well-being and care, is how chasing the sample is also about finding a sense of home in centuries yet to come.

**CHANDRA:** You often use this beautiful quote by Alice Walker when she talks about being in conversation with "the ancestors in her line of work". How do you commune and generate dialogues between "the ancestors in the line of your work"?

**LYNNÉE DENISE:** I've been struck by the relationship between James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry and Nina Simone, all of whom I consider to be "ancestors in my line of work". By looking at their interconnectedness I'm interrupting this dominant social movement narrative that we are all familiar with, which privileges southern, Christian, and heterosexual voices over the cultural kinship networks that were led by artists, women and queer activists. The comradeship between Baldwin, Hansberry and Simone, which I've written about, allows to see how their work is in conversation



<https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/dilyn>

**The Children of Baldwin  
(Live and Direct from Paris)**

I woke up in Paris this morning reflective and excited about how I found my way here, I'm in Paris because I'm a DJ and because I fell in love with house music enough to ask questions about its roots.

"It makes sense that Aretha met Lorraine Hansberry and Nina Simone at the intersection of politicized art with her 1972 release of the album *To Be Young Gifted & Black*."



When Alice Walker coined the phrase "ancestors in my line of work" she did so to describe the motivation behind her quest to restore the legacy of writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. In her 1975 essay, "Looking for Zora," Walker recalls posing as Ms. Hurston's niece in order to find traces of the writer's existence in her childhood town of, the all-Black Eatonville, Florida. Most of what we know about the cultural work of Zora Neale Hurston today is due in part to the efforts of Alice Walker and her relentless search to reverse what she pronounced to be "the symbolic fate of far too many Black writers in America — to die alone, impoverished, and in an unmarked grave." Hurston's absence from the discussion of notable artists from the Harlem Renaissance was impetus for Walker's self-directed, investigative, and archival practice.



My work as a DJ led to the development of research skills and I've applied those skills to unearthing the stories of hidden black artists and communities—from the areas of dance, film, literature, and music. If we don't, who will? I'm here in Paris to shift the way people engage and understand the role of a DJ. I'm here to share the sonic stories of people buried beneath the shallow histories that place less value on the cultural contributions of women and gay folks from Black and Brown America. James Baldwin is included in my life work and I was here in Paris to present a paper titled "Don't Let me be Misunderstood: The Personal Relationship Between James Baldwin, Nina Simone and Lorraine Hansberry," as part of a conference titled, "A Language to Dwell: James Baldwin, Paris and International Visions," at the American University of Paris.

with each other and how their work opposed popular movement strategies. What happens when we put *Giovanni's Room*, *A Raisin in the Sun* and "*Mississippi Goddam*" in conversation with each other as a cultural interruption? Each of them introduced important sounds, characters and insights to us. In Baldwin's essay *Sweet Lorraine*, which he wrote after Hansberry's passing, he describes their meetings as "down home sessions". An average evening would include whiskey, chain smoking, and conversations about history, politics and gender. The use of "down home" really moved me, the phrase is typically used by Black migrants from the South who fled their homes, but here it takes on a new meaning that is testament to their friendship. In turn, Baldwin and Hansberry took part in Simone's feminist politicization process. Hansberry's play "*To Be Young Gifted and Black*" would later become the title of Simone's 1972 album. There is a queering here that I recognize in terms of friendship, becoming home to each other, and the kind of Black intellectualism that grows in these constellations. Black geniuses are made by the genius communities from whence they come.

**CHANDRA:** What an ancestral communion! This is the kind of mapping and constellation work I was referring to earlier. I'm really moved by how you allow for the flows and exchanges between people, music and ideas to come alive. We've often spoken about what it means to tell these histories from a US point of view within the diaspora. You ask, who are the Baldwins of Ethiopia, Namibia and Trinidad? Where some of our work converges is asking how and why it matters from where we tell stories. For instance, in my work on the Black, Migrant and Refugee Movement, I explore what it means to tell feminist and queer stories from a Dutch diasporic context. How does that shift our frame of mind—even in thinking about what constitutes transnational feminism and which stories and people are left out of this framing. DJ Scholarship conjures some of these transnational connections through sound, which indeed make clear how kinship travels through sound or literature.

**CHANDRA:** You coined the term “misery resistance” in 2013, which is the composition of a complex set of feelings to navigate the anti-Black climate, could you say more about how you think about this term now?

**LYNNÉE DENISE:** I am actually working on a piece right now, in which I’m officially retiring this expression and that is mainly because of the guidance I’ve received from Toni Morrison, which is to not allow racism and white supremacy and all the channels and arms through which it operates to distract me from my work, and by my work I even mean my humanity. So, what I am trying to do now with misery resistance, is move away from a life of resistance, so that I might be present for a life of living creation—less reactionary. In my recent studies of the blues, Daphne Duval Harrison, a Black woman music scholar introduced me to the term “optimistic audacity”, which makes more sense for the direction I’d like my work to move in. Similarly to Elizabeth Alexander, I am invested in exploring the interior world of Black people, not as a form of resistance, but just as an extension of our humanity. I’m also in conversation with the work of Kevin Quashie’s *The Sovereignty of Quiet* to think about Black life outside of a certain kind of identifiable public resistance. This is to say, that DJ Scholarship now concerns itself with the quietness of a listening practice, that divine solitary space that cultivates or makes possible transcendence on the dancefloor.

**CHANDRA:** This feels like a poignant note to end on. Thank you for offering this gathering within the world of DJ Scholarship.