Financial Music

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Tech is finance in drag

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"[T]he aggressive discursive framing of Spotify's operation as being primarily technological has tended to obscure its long-term entrepreneurial, financial, and culture-changing strategies…. [I]n line with the company's intensifying relations to finance … Spotify's prevalent classification as a tech company is somewhat obscure."

—*Spotify Teardown*

Spotify Teardown is, in part, a book about method: how does one study someone who doesn't want to be studied and (unlike Spotify's users) has the power to enforce that wish? How can scholars research a firm whose business model rests, at least in part, on proprietary quantitative human behavioral research and holds its own privacy above that of its users/research subjects?

"Teardown" is the authors' answer to this question. They claim that they borrow their method "from reverse engineering processes" where one "disassembles" or tears down the object of study to see how it works. As Nick Seaver notes in his review, rather than cutting into and disassembling its object of study, the project exhibits a "methodological commitment to exteriority." *Spotify Teardown* isn't a disassembly so much as a genealogy in Friedrich Nietzsche's sense. As Michel Foucault explains in his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," the genealogical method

> follow[s] the complex course of descent … to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion ... to identify the accidents, the minute deviations — or conversely, the complete reversals — the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us.

In other words, the genealogical method traces the far from smooth and linear series of events that have brought us to where we are today. Explaining that "[t]his book traces, on various levels, the process of Spotify's becoming" such as "the ... manifold transactions … [and] the process that allowed Spotify to grow from micro- to macrosize," the authors echo this idea of the genealogical method. The sense of significance is what distinguishes a genealogy from the less evaluative "history" that Spotify originally proposed the team write. As Nietzsche explains in section 17 of the Second Essay in *On The Genealogy of Morals*, the "so

what?" or "value for what?" question is always central to genealogical methods.

The overall structure of the book reflects this genealogical approach. The first chapter tells Spotify's history, which the authors break into periods that reflect significant shifts in the company's funding and business model, which they call

> a principle of dividing time that is based … on *financialization* as a structuring principle of media history. The main question asked in this chapter is how Spotify has managed to receive new funding for running its operations at ever larger losses for over a decade.
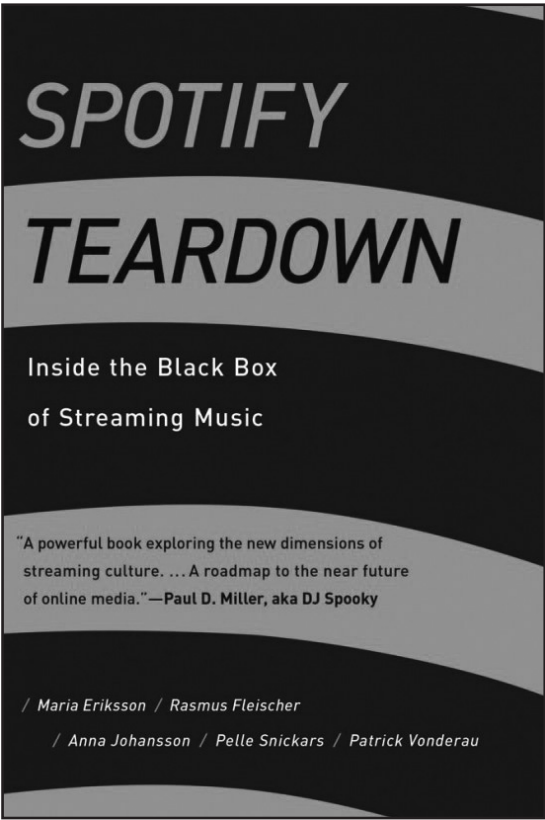
The answer is an ever-increasing "dependence on financial speculation." Spotify survived by adapting to the basic practices of financialization, such as the shift away from traditional asset-based value to what scholars such as Lisa Adkins and Louise Amoore call "promise"-based value. In this promissory model, what investors or creditors care about isn't the probability of your ability to repay a debt or turn a profit, but "promise" in the sense of an auspicious future performance due to belief in your capacity to overcome present limitations. Arguing that "Spotify would not be valued at several billion dollars — and would not have had its losses repeatedly covered by venture capital — if there were not a story connecting its open-ended past to a certain and positive future," the authors point to one way Spotify adopts the basic principles of financialization. If the chapter's central question and argument focuses on its alliance with and dependence upon financial capitalism, this helps us interpret what otherwise may seem like a curious

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title for a historical chapter: "Where Is Spotify?" Though it may present itself as a tech company, it is more accurately located in the finance sector.

The remaining chapters examine the most significant consequences of the company's attempts to adapt to its evolving business model(s). Chapter 2, "When Do Files Become Music?," addresses decisions and changes made during Spotify's "platformization" and integration with Facebook. Arguing that "[d]ata files become music on Spotify in various ways," this chapter is less about the "when" in its title and more about "what types of data exchanges are mediated by the service and how these affect the ways in which music is distributed and consumed." The short answer is that there are a lot of different kinds of exchanges because "Spotify's data infrastructure is built on layers of interrelated services, streams, and exchanges." An aggregation of sections on Spotify's data infrastructures, music aggregation services, and an experiment studying the frequency of track repetition in Spotify radio, this chapter struggles to hang together coherently.

Chapter 3, "How Does Spotify Package Music?," studies the effects of the "turn toward algorithmic and human-curated recommendations." The choices made in these various recommendation functions "promot[e] certain values and identities over others" and "constitute a politics of content through which the delivery of music implicates

prescriptive notions of the streaming user." Studying both the visual and rhetorical construction of the interface and the recommendation algorithms (with bots), the authors find that Spotify centers a user who is "a happy, entrepreneurial subject — young, urban, middle-class." This ideal user is then subject to "two types of disciplining logics": a "gendered discourse of positive psychology" on the one hand, and "[t]he molding of users into taste profiles … as an expression of … 'soft biopolitics.'" They get this notion of "soft biopolitics" from John Cheney-Lippold. It's important to recall that "soft" here doesn't refer to diminished severity of control, but to the diminished rigidity of "fuzzy" or recursively redefining boundaries of identity categories. Notably, though their findings — especially those related to gender and mood — parallel those of the leading music journalist studying Spotify, Jen Pelley, she is never cited in the book.

The fourth chapter, "What Is The Value of Free?" considers what it means for Spotify to understand itself as no mere distributor but "a *producer* of musical experiences [emphasis added]." According to the authors, the idea that Spotify is a market in free music is a red herring that directs attention away from the primary market in which Spotify participates, "the most important of which (finance) extends far beyond music." Spotify doesn't traffic in the value of music, but in the value of itself as an investment: "Spotify — like Facebook — had literally become capital or 'financialized stock.'" This has trickle-down effects on the other markets — in advertising, in music — "stacked" within this primary market. The authors argue that Spotify's use of financialization has shaped internal practices such as its "production chain." The experiment described in this chapter studies the firm's use of programmatic advertising practices — basically, ad buying analogous to automated stock trading. Bringing the authors' argument full circle, this chapter establishes in more concrete detail chapter one's claim about where Spotify is: it's deeply imbricated in financial capitalism. Here and in the conclusion the authors imply (but never directly state) that the real black box here isn't technological, but capitalist. Private property, not algorithms (the traditional referent of the "black box" metaphor), is the real culprit here, because private property relations like the one created in Spotify's Terms of Service agreement are

what's responsible for Spotify's opacity to users, musicians, and academic researchers. The authors' genealogy of Spotify's gradual financialization does get us inside *that* black box, at least a bit. As a genealogy, the book clarifies why this process of gradual financialization matters: the ethical and political questions that listeners, artists, and researchers have regarding Spotify aren't unique to streaming technology, but are features of broader shifts in capitalism.

The book is not so much a nuts-and-bolts analysis of *how* Spotify works so much as a critical account of *why* it works the way it does today. The book's answer to this why can also help unpack the main question the authors address in the conclusion: though in violation of Spotify's Terms of Service (ToS), was this research project unethical? (The irreducibility of the ethical to the legal is Ethics 101 stuff.) Spotify exists in its present form because of decisions made to make it valuable in a specific kind of (financialized) market. From its origins in music piracy to its current use of user data in programmatic advertising, these decisions often involve Spotify asserting a property right over stuff that doesn't belong to it. For example, the ToS is a contract that creates a property right: Spotify owns data recording user behavior. Perhaps the authors violated that property right, but it's clear the property right is itself unjust and exploitative (see also Carole Pateman and Charles W. Mills's *Contract and Domination* [2007]). Though some might argue two wrongs don't make a right, others might argue that it's good to break unfair and unjust rules, especially if that rule-breaking gives us insight into how and why this injustice works.

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Monster Mash

Rone Shavers

BLACK LEOPARD, RED WOLF
Marlon James
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www.penguin.com/publishers/riverhead/
640 pages; Cloth, $24.00

Perhaps the best way to begin describing *Black Leopard, Red Wolf,* the fourth and latest novel from Booker Prize-winning author Marlon James, is to mention how creatively recombinant the book is, both in terms of its African-based setting and its literary approach. That is to say, yes, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is literary fiction, but it also makes use of key elements of mystery and detective novels, fabulist and fantasy stories, the picaresque, macabre horror, the quest novel, and several other popular fiction genres to tell its tale. Furthermore, James' geographical and social references aren't limited to one specific African region or culture. Instead, they crisscross the continent to make the imagined land of the North Kingdom, where the book is set, read like a slurry of African-based cultures, languages, fashions, religions, and legends.

The book is narrated by a man known only as "Tracker," a bounty hunter whose sense of smell is so acute that it allows him to find and follow people across great distances. Tracker is the eponymous "Red Wolf" of the title — the other half of the title refers to "Leopard," a literal black leopard who can shapeshift to human form, and who becomes Tracker's trusted friend and occasional lover. It's best to read *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* almost as a series of interlinked novellas, each functioning as a sort of thematic bildungsroman wherein Tracker details either key points in his life, his quest to find a missing child, or sometimes both. The novel opens with Tracker a prisoner in jail, recounting aspects of his mysterious past to an unnamed interlocutor and servant of the South Kingdom, geopolitical rival to the North. Tracker tells the so-called "Inquisitor" of his attempts with a constantly changing — and individually ethically challenged — group of mercenaries to track down a mysterious boy. To say why the boy is so important and why he must be found would be ruin one of the mysteries of the novel, but what can be mentioned is that the significance of Tracker's quest and the completion of it is what drives the novel's plot.

(SPOILER: It's quickly revealed that the boy has been captured by monsters, a coven of vampires, to be precise, all drawn from different regional African legends. It should also be noted that the monsters in the novel, those made up as well as those drawn from legend, are worth mentioning because many of them are so well described, well used, and horrific enough as to inspire nightmares. James takes great pains to connect these monsters to the book's overarching tropes and themes, and the result is a dense, sprawling text where dozens of characters — and indeed, some of the monsters serve as antagonistic characters in their own right— come and go, weave in and out of Tracker's wandering, elusive, and at times obfuscating narrative).
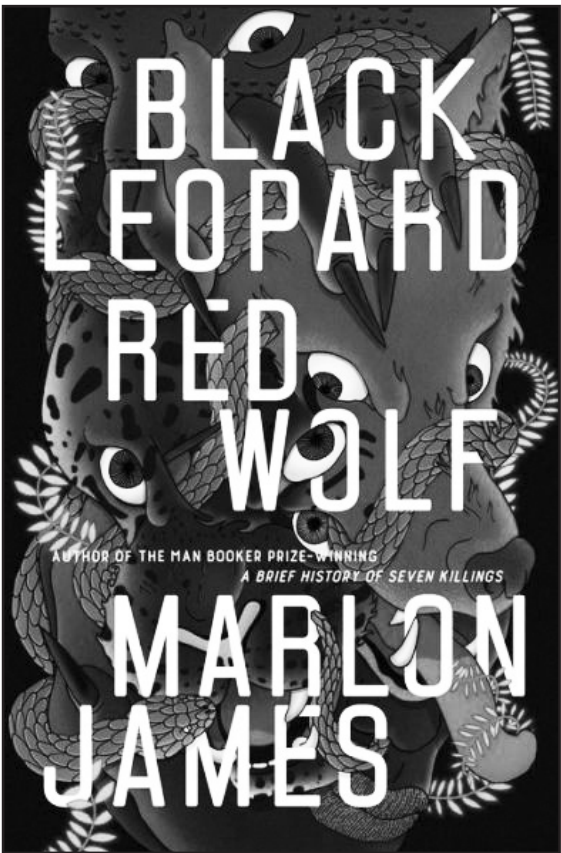
That said, early on in the novel Leopard bluntly tells Tracker that "No one loves no one," hinting at the power of and destructive nature of intimacy, or lack thereof, that ultimately forms one of the novel's core themes. It's this idea, the idea of love as both a healing and a destructive force, that animates most of the characters and explains their motivations. "No one loves no one" is ultimately something that Tracker sets out to simultaneously

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prove and disprove, and part of what *Black Leopard* is about, then, is not only the things we will do and lengths we will go in order to love and be loved, but also what happens when we fail to succumb to the emotional fragility required to love other people.

But of course, love's opposite also makes an appearance in this text. That is to say, another theme that emerges in the work is how hatred and violence changes and dehumanizes us. Almost all of the principal characters have lived through a corrosively violent act and can now be said to be going through some form of post-traumatic stress, stress that they've then chosen to pass along by Inflicting violence upon someone else. In this way, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* not only illustrates how violence begets violence, but also how love, especially obsessive, unrequited, or covetous love, can foster violence, too. Ultimately, what *Black Leopard* does, then, is highlight the limit(ation)s of love, as well as the benefits, however fleeting, of daring to test the boundaries of those limits.

Still, it would be remiss of me to speak of love without making note of one of the novel's most remarkable aspects: Tracker is gay, most of the major characters are sexually adventurous (at best) or sexually ambivalent (at worst), and the book contains a host of hints and mentions of the fluid nature of sexuality as an everyday commonplace in both abstracted theory and enthusiastic practice throughout the North Kingdom. The inclusion of so many carefully rendered, richly constructed, incredibly complicated transgressive and queer relationships is something to be commended. To see such a thing in a mainstream text is long overdue, but alas, to say that the open attitudes towards sexual orientation and sexuality depicted in the novel are somehow indicative of an enlightened narrative is simply, patently, totally false.

In other words, a feminist text this is not. This is a novel of men recounting and reacting to the deeds of other men, and the novel is unfortunately too enamored with its depictions of the burdens and pitfalls of manhood to thoroughly flesh out the several highly important women characters who populate its pages. Thus, despite several strong overtures and obvious gestures toward positions indicative of female empowerment, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* reinforces — and in many instances, normalizes — the sexist, misogynistic, jaundiced point of view of Tracker, its narrator. Basically, while the male characters are portrayed in ways that underscore the uneven mix of emotional complexity that's associated with manhood, the novel's women initially appear as complex beings, but scene by regressive scene, these women eventually get reduced to inhabiting the role of betrayer, whore,