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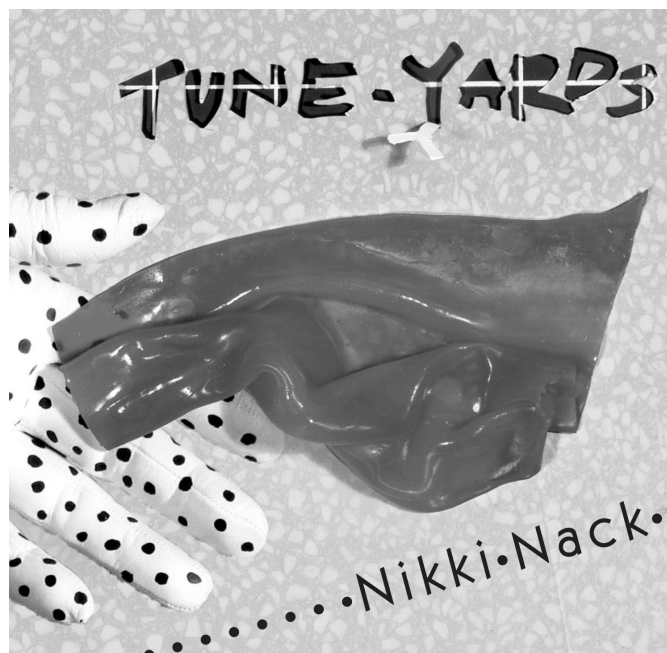
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Lullabies, Schoolyard Hijinks, and Alterity: tUnE-yArDs Returns with *Nikki Nack*

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Merrill Garbus writes music from the rhythms of social experience. From her days in Putney, Vermont at the Sunglass Theater improvising outlandish scenarios with her homemade hand puppets to her travels to Lamu, Kenya studying *taarab*, human engagement across borders and ages has served as her principal catalyst for creativity. The spontaneity of individual and communal expression is rarely captured adequately in the pop format, and if successful attempts can be located they are typically far removed from the use of *musique concrète*, electronic percussion loops, disjunct melodies, and lyrical non-sequiturs. Yet this is exactly what Garbus and bassist/collaborator Nate Brenner have in mind for their project, tUnE-yArDs, as they write songs that are machinic, sporadic, and at times frightening, yet simultaneously warm, exuberant, and carefree. These contradictions have played a role in transforming the duo—along with their small, backing saxophone ensemble—from coffee-shop and record-store heroes to Arcade Fire tourmates.



Merrill Garbus and tUnE-yArDs
Photo from album cover *Nikki Nack*

With their economic capital catching up to their cultural capital, tUnE-yArDs's release of their third and most recent album, *Nikki Nack* (May 2014), brings in more chefs than have typically been allowed in Garbus's kitchen, most notably producers John Hill and Malay. Perhaps as a result, notable extensions of their highly acclaimed sophomore recording *who kill* (2011) can be found, including a greater reliance on Brenner's spacious and groove-driven bass lines, a freer use of choral interjection and hard panning, a mixing and matching of verse-chorus form and flash refrains, and a propensity for climactic textural accumulation near songs' conclusions. These novelties work in concert with the characteristics that define Garbus's idiolect, including her skip-rope-rhyme, boisterous vocal delivery, dark lullaby poetry, and a keenness for non-Western ways of structuring time. Her instant and unpredictable oscillation between uninhibited yawping and sinuous, mellifluous shadings imbues the music with a sense of extemporized mischievousness. *Nikki Nack* couches aspects of identity, Otherness, and violence in alliterative

and consonant soundscapes, embedding social critique in the innocence and power dynamics of playground antics. You can dance to it, too.

Although signing to the label 4AD in 2009 has provided tUnE-yArDs with access to increasingly sophisticated options for creating and editing sound, Garbus's compositional methods have hardly changed since her first self-produced album, *BiRd-BrAiNs* (2009). Roughly four months after its release, Garbus revealed her process of "improvised recording" in an interview with the Dedicated Ears music blog's Tony Rusniak. Garbus's strategy

tUnE-yArDs Returns (cont.)

entails sampling environmental sounds—the sound of a ferry in the case of “Lions,” for example—and spontaneously selecting fragments of them for use as rhythmic layers to undergird her vocal protrusions.¹ In her formative years living in Montreal (and perhaps later in Oakland as well), Garbus was armed with little more than a modest, hand-held Sony ICD-ST25 digital voice recorder, a copy of GarageBand, and a plan to stand out via unconventional capitalization.² With a snare drum on her left, a floor tom on her right, a ukulele at hand, and electronic toys such as the Boss RC-2 looping pedal, Garbus embarked on a national tour of her own design, eventually catching the ear of 4AD. Label affiliation would force reconciliation between her methods and the technological options newly opened. Her aim was clear: embrace the ability to capture and create sounds with more fidelity while maintaining the sense of improvisation so essential to her method. As it turned out, *who kill* (2011), originally conceived as *Women Who Kill*, did that and much more.

who kill transformed tUnE-yArDs from solely an artistic manifestation of Merrill Garbus’s veritable imagination to a collaboration project with Brenner.³ The album received numerous accolades, including positive reviews from *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and *The New York Times*. In 2012, it was named the number one album of 2011 by critics in *The Village Voice*’s annual “Pazz and Jop” poll. As Sasha Frere-Jones wrote shortly after the release of *who kill*, “Garbus needs none of the fetishized authenticity of [BiRd-BrAiNs’s] lower fidelity to charm anybody: she is a musician of startling range, and a better recording of her is simply better music.”⁴ Amongst a sea of indie hopefuls, Garbus was able to distinguish herself as no mere passing fad, an artist whose work had more to it than its DIY immediacy.

Much attention was given to *who kill*’s singles, “Bizness” and “Gangsta.” The former features a high-register ostinato—which gets doubled in the sax section towards the song’s end—constructed from vocal interlocking. A sparse bass riff underlies the timbre of Garbus’s expressive, hostile shout-speech, which projects refrains defiantly, pleadingly, and exuberantly as if performed outside for ritual dance. Lines like “If you just press your fingers down under my skin (go on and do it)/Lift up, dig up, dig up and bleed for me/I say, I’ll bleed if you ask me/I’ll bleed if you ask me/That’s when, that’s when, he said no” thematize victimization, perhaps of a sexual nature, while reversing normative gender performativity.⁵ “Gangsta” contains fragments of Aka pygmy-sounding yodeling—presented in a lo-fi timbre that emulates a field recording—with numerous vocal phrase repetitions over an infectious rock groove. The saxophone section is featured here as well, twirling out of tune around lyrics that address a privileged subject’s process of acclimation and acculturation in a foreign environment. This is suggested in lyrics such as “Bang-bang, boy-ee/Never move to my hood/’Cause danger is crawlin’ out the wood.” We may speculate that experiences in Oakland and Africa solidified an awareness of issues related to class and race, but regardless, we hear anger, strength, satire, and perseverance.

“Gangsta” provided one of the first unmistakable contexts in which tUnE-yArDs’s appropriation of the music of central Africa became most evident, an aspect of Garbus’s music that has not gone unnoticed by critics.⁶ This is a complex issue, too dense to be explored adequately here, but inescapable nonetheless. As ethnomusicologist Steven Feld pointed out in “Pygmy POP: A Genealogy of Schizophonic Mimesis,” the commodification of pygmy field recordings, through their reinterpretation in pop and art music, creates a series of unintended histories for the performance practices of Central African forest nomads.⁷ Feld article offers four “critical ostinatos,” one of which collects these histories of the pygmy pop “genre.” He writes, “From Afri-nationalism to Euro avant-gardism, from electro-acoustic modernism to digital postmodernism, from highbrow to low, there’s a pygmy product to fit every viewpoint on authenticity and collaboration, every celebration of roots and hybridity.”⁸ Garbus’s work, which certainly falls within the realm of “digital postmodernism” and is much more than a simple pygmy appropriation, nonethe-



Merrill Garbus and tUnE-yArDs
Photo from album cover *who kill*

tUnE-yArDs Returns (cont.)

less reifies a “complex humanity... fixed as a tape loop in the machine of both postcolonial devastation and primitivist fantasy.”⁹ Garbus’s dress, use of the LP-timbre of Aka yodeling, two-against-three polyrhythms, bell patterns, and dance are certainly in danger of evoking the “primitivist fantasy” about which Feld writes, and Garbus is clearly aware of it.¹⁰ The presence of these elements in Garbus’s music places her in dialogue with the many other artists who have done the same, albeit in different ways. We may ask what it means for African music to be transformed and transmitted to a mass audience by a white woman who grew up in the Connecticut suburb of New Canaan and attended Smith College. In so doing, we may also interrogate what these appropriations mean as a method for articulating alterity, that is, as a means of exposing alienating structures of power.



Merrill Garbus and tUnE-yArDs
Photo from single cover Wait for a Minute

Garbus currently lives in Oakland, and even in the days before the arrival of notoriety, she likely faced fewer financial and social obstacles than the majority of those around her. To express alterity through a reinterpretation of the local—of adult, urban, African-American cultural signifiers—could potentially be considered a disingenuous and exploitative measure. Detached from an African cultural history (and thus a shared social and somatic memory), there are no authenticating links between the African Diaspora and Garbus’s experiences and upbringing. Although well known by (ethno)musicologists, the musical practices and sounds of the pygmies are much more obscure to the average consumer of popular music. As such, they offer a more distant, less hegemonic arena within which Garbus is able to explore the structures of power that confine her agency as a white woman. Her interest in the function of music as a

vehicle to interrogate Otherness offers an opportunity to change the conversation from viewing music *in* a context of cultural appropriation (and thus perhaps exploitation or fetishization) to functioning *as* a context for exploring power dynamics through the topics of nationality, childishness, and living with fear.

An example that calls into question the notion of belonging is found in the song that opens *who kill*, “My Country.” The first lyrics heard on the album are “My country, ’tis of thee/Sweet land of liberty/How come I cannot see my future within your arms/Your love it turns me down/Into the underground/My country bleeding me; I will not stay in your arms.” Nationhood here is potentially conflated with sexual preference and the United States’s ambivalent attitude towards the subject. After a childlike teasing (“NAH-nah, nah, NAH-nah”/“nah, nah, nah, nah, NAH-nah”) intoned by a small choir, Garbus pointedly speaks solo: “The worst thing about living a lie is just wondering when they’ll find out.” By couching a pointed critique of the nation’s collective attitude on the support of popular music and the acceptance of “alternative” lifestyles in the putative innocence and ignorance of children’s song, Garbus’s message remains effective in its opacity, plasticity, and multidimensionality.

Nikki Nack continues to explore Otherness through careful distancing, with the innocence of schoolyard negotiations of dominance being even more pervasive. We would do well to first pause over two texts that assign a more important identity-forming function to these social dynamics than is typically acknowledged. Marina Warner’s introduction to Iona and Peter Opie’s 1959 book *The Lore and Language of School Children* situates the oral tradition of children’s verbal melees as an extension of street smarts and masculinity: “The typical sounds of children’s vernacular belong in the street, not the parlor, and they tap into demotic Anglo-Saxon, not Greek or Latin; musically plosive and guttural, with end-stopped consonants rather than mellifluous, open, ‘feminine’ rhymes...”¹¹ Warner goes on to claim that such linguistic sparring is vital to a subject’s articulation of socio-economic identity: “Verbal play and trickery also define borders; they impart discrimination in alliances

tUnE-yArDs Returns (cont.)

and they pass on prohibitions, building the scaffolding of social identity, and the sense of belonging.”¹² Further, in *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, Kyra D. Gaunt offers an updated and corpo-centric exploration of these issues in a different context, as she demonstrates “how black musical style and behavior are *learned* through oral-kinetic practices that not only teach *an embodied discourse of black music expression*” but also inform a “*discourse about appropriate and transgressive gender and racial roles*” in African American populations.¹³ Gaunt inverts the assumed unidirectionality of the flow of influence between African American popular genres and such social practices, claiming that the latter may offer much to the former.

Whether tying the music-making practices of children to an urban, contemporary setting to reveal how they articulate gender, race, and identity, or inspecting these practices for their more general socializing capabilities, the above texts help contextualize Garbus’s use of children’s orally transmitted musical practices. Indeed, these youthful expressions are to be found across the entirety of tUnE-yArDs’s modest catalogue and capitalize on the potentialities opened up by articulating Otherness through the playground’s rhythms, repetitions, alacrity, and combativeness.¹⁴ For example, “Find a New Way” opens *Nikki Nack* with a hybrid 8-bit electronic harpsichord rising in arpeggios to a statement of the eponymous phrase. It seems right away that Garbus alludes to the complexities of identity and the drive to reconcile self-conception with outside perception: “Oh, but I trip on the truth when I walk that wire/When you wear a mask, always sound like a liar/I tried to tell him

all the reasons that I had to never sing again/And he replied ‘You better find a new way.’” This critique of everyday performativity is multifaceted, as Garbus provides listeners a perspective from which to recognize the multiplicity of their performative selves, especially as they engage gender and sexual orientation.¹⁵



tUnE-yArDs Nikki Nack tour poster

The jump-rope neologisms through which these themes are filtered—for example, “Oh, change-o, strange-o”/“Nother rearrange-o”—provide a tone of jousting and mockery. Embellishing sixteenths in beat three of every other iteration of these lyrics mimic the kind of flagrant jeering that asserts dominance. (Again, we may hear the “Nah-nas” of “My Country” reinterpreted.) Garbus’s delivery of politically charged lyrics as vocalized schoolyard exuberance is reminiscent of the downplayed vocalization of lyrics in the folk/rock of Bob Dylan, who is of course channeling Woody Guthrie. The climactic accretion of textural density *all’improvviso* towards the end of “Find a New Way” offers a sense of teleology not commonly found in the first two albums, however. I find it plausible that this technique—common in EDM and featured on other tracks such as “Water Fountain” and “Time of Dark”—is at least partly the new producers’ voices coming out. The

prevalence of choral interjections in all their assonant, soulful glory (“Little white LIES/You rode my SIGHT/When I look into his EYES so”) is also a welcome touch, one that can be found in other tracks such as “Hey Life” (“I don’t KNOW where to GO/But I can’t seem to GO SLOWly, NO).

With its hopscotch feel and clave propulsion, the single “Water Fountain” directly follows. Accompanied by a video akin to a tribal, dance-infused, pastel-colored episode of *Pee-wee’s Playhouse*, Brenner’s simple, ostinato bass line holds up syncopated choral exclamations that create a sense of levity and repetitive motion. In this song in particular one really feels transported to the playground, “Miss Mary Mack” hand claps and all. Textures, like conversations, become thickened by the polyphony of overlapping voices and then suddenly dissipate just as quickly as they amassed. Also clearly present here is her penchant for incessantly repeated words or phrases

tUnE-yArDs Returns (cont.)

(“A lyrical round-and-roundandroundandround”). Although Garbus invokes the American traditional song “Old Molly Hare,” “Water Fountain” provides a global critique. Garbus reveals, “[“Water Fountain”] is about my anxiety over the collapse of our societal infrastructure and the lack of drinkable water. It’s a childlike chant, but the words are about heavy topics.”¹⁶ “Left Behind” similarly engages a politicized critique of power structures through its text while simultaneously being sonically playful (“Nikki Nikki Nack”/ “We said we wouldn’t let ’em take our soil/ These days don’t it just make your blood boil”).

The juxtaposition of “heavy” lyrics and “childlike” delivery becomes apparent in Garbus’s other children’s song vernacular, the nursery rhyme. The interlude “Why do we Dine on the Tots?” features Garbus telling a story, “doing all the voices” as if back in her days as a nanny. This Dr. Seuss-like tale recalls the tinny, electronic harpsichord of “Find a New Way,” but with various modes of vocal processing deployed—most obviously vocal doublings at different degrees of asynchrony. The harpsichord and Garbus’s jocular role-playing exist in an anempathetic relationship to the song’s rather terrifying semantic content and the clearly inhuman, erratic modifications of the timbre and repetitions of her voice.



Merrill Garbus and tUnE-yArDs
Photo from single cover Water Fountain

At other times Garbus’s critique emerges from another channel: soul. “Real Thing” drips with sarcasm as it addresses unrealistic ideals of body type (“While you worry about chest size six/They’re winning the tricks/ those tricks, those tricks, oh” and “Ugly one be you, who you are”), as well as maintaining a celebrity persona. As she draws out “I’m the real thing” with a chorus in tow, her insolent ridicule of the critical concern over authenticity is foregrounded. This is particularly relevant given her own position as an up-and-coming “indie” star, legitimate talent, and white female appropriator of the music of Africa and the Diaspora. The same tone permeates “Time of Dark,” an open, mixed-meter groove that uses the verse-chorus form to great effect. With verses composed of ten-beat vocal phrases and a chorus in 6/4, Merrill and her chorus belt out and overlap distorted dissonances of defiance.¹⁷

The album ends with its most overtly critical track, “Manchild.” The song decries complacent attitudes towards sexual assault through a synth warble and a metallic, electronic, patchwork drum ostinato that incorporates intrusive dissonances. The sonic result expresses the filth and brutality of rape. In an interview with *The Village Voice*’s Dan Weiss, Garbus averred, “It does seem so fucking simple, but students are raping girls on college campuses, just things that we can’t believe are still happening. What comes across as like a radical agenda...the radical agenda that girls on college campuses should be protected from rape?”¹⁸ Garbus raps an MIA-infused refrain, “Don’t beat up on my body,” which is laid on top of a sixteen-pulse time-point pattern and is one of the more overt adoptions of the *yanvalu* rhythm she studied in Haiti in preparation of *Nikki Nack*. As the last song on the album, tUnE-yArDs clearly wants this chant-like call-to-arms to serve as an aural after-image.

Although Garbus and Brenner have created a strong response to *whokill*, the first half of the album is considerably more packed with memorable moments than the second half, and overall there is not very much new there. *Nikki Nack* is also more lyrically dense than its precursors, but the additional text has little effect on the songs’ messages or meanings. It is, however, a good sign that tUnE-yArDs has hardly backed down from the challenge of producing an impressive answer to their “break-through” second album. The frontwoman seems more confident than ever, asserting her professionalism on tour (with sound guys who assume she’s inept because she’s a woman), shooing off unconstructive criticism, and sticking with other strong female artists like St.

tUnE-yArDs Returns (cont.)

Vincent (Annie Clark) who likewise doesn't understand the basis of questions that begin with the phrase, "As a woman, how..." Now a producer, skilled percussionist, vocalist, and songwriter, Garbus, backed by Brenner, will likely continue to enact social and political criticism through the pollyanna, filter-free tone of youthful fun-poking.

Notes

¹ "An Interview with Merrill Garbus of tUnE-yArDs (101509) Dedicated Ears Music Blogs," 3 November 2009, video clip, accessed 2 May 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcnR9iy15fE>.

² The unusual typography used for the duo's name and title of the first two albums derives from Garbus's plan to force those who would search for her on the once-thriving Myspace.com to depress additional keys (namely, shift and the space bar) at unpredictable—and thus memorable—times.

³ Although not technically members of tUnE-yArDs, saxophonists Matt Nelson, Noah Bernstein, and Kasey Knudsen have been fixtures in tUnE-yArDs's live performances since joining the *w h o k i l l* tour in 2011.

⁴ Sasha Frere-Jones, "World of Wonder: How Merrill Garbus Left the Theatre and Took the Stage," *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, accessed 1 May 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/musical/2011/05/02/110502crmu_music_frerejones.

⁵ A great many tUnE-yArDs songs—particularly on *w h o k i l l*—contain the words blood, bleed, or bled. Another recurring theme is water, which we can only speculate emerges from Garbus's extensive experience near it (in Montreal, Oakland, East Africa, and Haiti, for example).

⁶ For example, see Caitin White, "Album Review: tUnE-yArDs—Nikki Nack," *Consequence of Sound* Album Reviews, last modified 6 May 2014, <http://consequenceofsound.net/2014/05/album-review-tune-yards-nikki-nack/>.

⁷ The most typical sources by far were the LPs made by Colin Turnbull and Simha Arom in the 1960s and 1970s.

⁸ Steven Feld, "Pygmy POP: A Genealogy of Schizophonic Mimesis" *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 28 (1996): 26.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ This is evidenced in an interview given at the 2011 Pitchfork Music Festival where Garbus notes, "I think that what's been important to me is just to talk about it and talk about the fact that it is complicated to be a white girl who grew up in an upper-middle class household, with many privileges, a university education, you know, taking this music from cultures that I really know nothing about." See 8:13 of "tUnE-yArDs Backstage at the Pitchfork Music Festival 2011," 15 July 2011, video clip, accessed 3 May 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcnR9iy15fE>.

¹¹ Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of School Children* (New York: The New York Review of Books, [1959] 2001), ix–x.

¹² Ibid., x.

¹³ Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴ One particularly robust illustration of Garbus's tendency to focus on the childhood games of girls can be found in a YouTube clip embedded in a log of her trip to Haiti, which is posted on the website, The Talkhouse. See Merrill Garbus, "Merrill Garbus (Tune-Yards) Talks Haiti and Exploring a Non-Western Musical Tradition," *The Talkhouse: Musicians Talk Music* 1 June 2013, accessed 5 May 2014, <http://music.thetalkhouse.com/talks/merrill-garbus-tune-yards-talks-haiti-and-exploring-a-non-western-musical-tradition/>.

¹⁵ The reference to gender construction may be somewhat of a response to Chuck Klosterman's 2012 dismissive review of *w h o k i l l* in which he negligently and egregiously conflates androgyny and asexuality. See Chuck Klosterman, "The Pitfalls of Indie Fame: On tUnE-yArDs and the Perils of Critical Adoration," 27 January 2012, accessed 2 May 2014, <http://grantland.com/features/chuck-klosterman-tune-yards/>. The lyrics "find a new way" may also allude to Garbus's intent to develop stylistically. Under the "about" section, the tUnE-yArDs's Facebook page contains the quotation, "I [Garbus] thought, 'OK, if I'm going to grow as an artist, I need to do this differently'."

tUnE-yArDs Returns (cont.)

¹⁶Nina Liss-Schultz, “tUnE-yArDs Went to Haiti, and All We Got was this Brilliant New Album,” 28 April 2014, accessed 2 May 2014, <http://www.motherjones.com/mixed-media/2014/04/tune-yards-haiti-nikki-nack-merrill-garbus-water-fountain>.

¹⁷The fifth track, “Look Around,” also establishes a groove outside of the normative pop/rock 4/4 as it slouches in a Spiritualized-ish 9/4.

¹⁸Dan Weiss, “tUnE-yArDs Uses her Lungs,” *The Village Voice*, 7 May 2014, accessed 1 May 2014, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2014-05-07/music/tune-yards-nyc/3/>.