

Hearing into Hyperpop: Exploring Production Aesthetics within the Musical Style

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## Abstract

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Hyperpop, a microgenre of pop music named and made famous by a Spotify-generated playlist, is a hyper-referential form. Sonically, it borrows elements from a wide variety of musical styles, while lyrically and aesthetically it calls upon various internet cultures and their attendant forms of content. Memes, internet slang, and samples of nineties hits can all exist in one Hyperpop song. As such, the genre is simultaneously capable of being lauded by the music press as the countercultural sound of the decade and praised by Fox News anchors as some of the best new music of the moment. All the while, the musical style is embedded in and shaped by the conditions of the music industry's ubiquitous platforming. Instead of attempting to litigate which of these sources gets the genre right or trying to uncover some true essence of the musical style, this thesis develops concepts in relation to specific production practices within Hyperpop. Drawing on a methodology of "philosophy through music" put forth by Robin James, this thesis interprets Hyperpop as a speculative form of popular music that both reflects and critiques the conditions from which it emerges (21). It investigates production aesthetics within specific Hyperpop songs, and their attendant media ecologies, such as practices of covering, remixing, sampling, and reference. In relation to these practices, it puts forth the concepts of musical memeing and speculative nostalgia.

**Keywords:** pop music, production aesthetics, Hyperpop, microgenre, remix, sample-based music, cover song, memes, nostalgia

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## Introduction

### Hyperpop: Fox News' New Favourite Musical Genre

As I was beginning to write this introduction, a clip from Fox News' panel show *The Five* went viral, at least on my corner of the internet. The clip, which quickly gained over 200k views on TikTok and over 35k likes on Twitter, seems at first blush fairly unremarkable (Short; captain brian). It features a news segment coming to a close, and a camera zooming out as transition music plays. The song's refrain repeats the phrase "the most wanted person in the United States" atop a jangly keyboard, while a photo of Joe Biden is pictured on the screen behind the hosts, alleging a connection between the President and some sort of criminality. To most viewers, this clip may seem like standard Fox News fare, denouncing Biden for whatever issue of the week it may be. Yet, to a certain subset of those watching, me included, the clip was confounding, perhaps even incomprehensible. For, the news network was not just playing any old outro music, they were playing *Hyperpop*. More specifically, Fox News had just played "The Most Wanted Person in the United States," a 2023 release by the duo 100 geecs.

This choice of music was controversial, but Hyperpop often finds itself in these strange situations. For, the genre is chameleonic; it often borrows elements from a wide variety of extant music styles in ways that can leave it up to interpretation. In the case of 100 geecs song mentioned above, for example, the duo samples the early nineties hip hop track "Insane in the Brain" as well as a baseline pre-set taken from the Casiotone MT-40 keyboard.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps these classic sounds were what spoke to the music programmers at Fox News. This is not to say, however, that the genre does not have its own distinct set of features. The musical style often pairs its musical-melange with heavily processed and Auto-Tuned vocals, software synthesisers, and a vast trove of cultural references, ranging from the aesthetics of the early aughts to the rapidly propagating memes of today. In one song, such as Fraxiom's "scawy monstews and nice spwites :3," one can hear references to musical genres like dubstep, as well as allusions to old YouTube videos, Twitter slang, and even other Hyperpop stars themselves. Perhaps because of this, Hyperpop has been positioned by the mainstream music press as a sort of "zeitgeist-baiting" musical style, one that has a particular resonance with, and maybe even reflects the "extremely online," hyper-referential sensibilities of the Zoomer (aka Generation Z) youth of today (Kornhaber, para.5; Yalcinkaya, para.2)

What made Fox News' choice of music so confounding, however, was not just the musical style's niche status, its zany sounds, or its resonance with "the youth," but rather, its purported politics. For, since initially gaining popularity in 2019, Hyperpop has largely been lauded by the mainstream music press as an innovative, experimental form, subversive not only in its treatment of sound, but also in its "distinct[ly] queer" sensibilities (Moulton, para.14; Enis, para.1). As the press often highlights, the genre was not only pioneered by trans women such as SOPHIE, Arca, and 100 geecs' own Laura Les, and taken up by LGBTQ+ listeners in tow, but also often directly experiments with, and pushes back against, essentialist strictures of gender and sexuality in both form and content (Moulton, para.14; Yalcinkaya, para.10; Enis, para.18; Madden, "How Hyperpop," para.16; Galil, para.6). While this initial description of the genre and its position vis-a-vis queer culture paints with broad strokes, it is to say that the music press characterises the musical style as capable of ushering

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<sup>1</sup>The Casiotone MT-40 "rock" bassline pre-set sampled by 100 geecs is somewhat notorious in that it is the source of what has come to be known as the Sleng Teng riddim. The Sleng Teng riddim is a reggae instrumental derived from a sample of the Casiotone MT-40 "rock" bassline pre-set, which has, to date, been used in hundreds of reggae songs, and is largely thought to have ushered in a new digital mutation of reggae itself (Katz, para.1; Trew, para.9)

in more than just a sonic shift. Rather, the microgenre, with its spotlighting of queer artists and its blurring of boundaries, be they of gender or genre, is painted as a progenitor of social change as well.

Fox News has, in contrast, built a reputation for itself as a right-wing news network, one that platforms reactionaries and stokes the flames of conservative culture wars. Greg Gutfeld, the anchor who not only played 100 geecs on his show, but also went on to recommend the musical duo to his viewers, himself recently railed against the “trans movement” and its purported dangers (Factora, para.6).<sup>2</sup> So why was he playing this music? Did Fox News, as one Twitter user put it, just not “know how transgender 100 geecs is” (pudding person)? Or is this song – perhaps even the genre more broadly – so slippery in its signification that it could mean anything to anyone? What is at stake if so?

The Hyperpop-Fox-News-crossover-moment is but the latest attraction in the genre’s fraught and bizarre existence. These strange collisions of worlds, these instances of the purportedly subcultural rubbing up against the mainstream, the independent against the corporate, the queer against the reactionary, have, from the genre’s very inception, been endemic to the musical style. Musicians working within the genre have gone from making songs that contend with, and perhaps even satirise, the relationship between pop music and product, to licensing their songs for use in McDonalds commercials, or even starring in Apple commercials themselves.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, mainstream musicians such as Charli XCX have mutated from pop stars with multiple Top Ten hits to mother figures within the new musical style, almost engaging in the dreaded act of selling out in reverse. Within the genre, it is as if the once-ratified norms of musical scenes or subcultures no longer apply.

This strangeness is perhaps due to the fact that the genre is very much the product of astute business analytics and platform logics. For, despite the press’ portrayal of the microgenre as some unique, subversive, even “countercultural” force, as briefly touched on above, Hyperpop is the GMO-baby of the digital streaming platform (DSP) Spotify (Kornhaber, para.1). It was formed by data analysts, who found the genre’s name in the company’s metadata and applied it to a platform-curated playlist formed in response to the 2019 virality of 100 geecs (Dandridge-Lemco, para.7). While the music itself has roots back in the early 2010s in London’s PC Music scene, and certainly draws from “real” or “organic” musical contexts, the current iteration of capital “H” Hyperpop owes its popularity, coherence, and even its name, to Spotify’s curatorial prowess.

In many ways, then, the musical style, with its platform-origins and Fox News crossovers, feels illustrative of some of the more concerning trends in the music industry, even culture writ large, today. On the one hand, Hyperpop very much reflects “the platformization of cultural production,” and the increasing power that platforms have in shaping the content that proliferates within their bounds (Nieborg and Poell 4276). Relatedly, Hyperpop hints at a data-informed acceleration of what Mark Fisher would call the “precorporation” of culture (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 9). That is, while nascent cultural forms such as Hyperpop may seem “alternative” or “independent,” even new, they are always and already pre-shaped by the dominant culture from which they were born (Ibid.). The genre, with its seemingly “countercultural” music that draws upon past styles in strange and unique ways is perhaps better understood as a focused-grouped form, one that is aimed at signifying subversion, but is already from the outset drained of any charge (Kornhaber,

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<sup>2</sup> Gutfeld has actually played the duo more than once. The songs “Doritos and Fritos” and “Dumbest Girl Alive” also appeared on *The Five* (Factora, paras.4, 5).

<sup>3</sup> Both SOPHIE and AG Cook were members of QT, a musical group designed around the promotion of a semi-fictional energy drink, DrinkQT. Within a year of releasing the project, SOPHIE’s song “LEMONADE” was featured in a McDonald’s commercial. More recently, AG Cook soundtracked and starred in an Apple commercial.



para.1; Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 9). In this context, the Fox-news-crossover is perhaps less shocking. Cobbled together by a DSP, and thus lacking the internal coherence to perhaps even have a politics, the genre can, it seems, mean anything to anyone.

Given the genre's "pre-emptive[ly] formatt[ed]," platform-generated status, then, how are we to make sense of the musical style (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 9)? Do we dismiss it as a sort of (post)postmodern drivel? A sign of the new horrors that have befallen us as an ever-more-algorithmic culture? Or do we examine it as an exercise in hearing how platform power works? A means of sounding out the mechanics of Spotify's curatorial command and its consequences? My initial research questions were formed along these lines and went as follows: how does Hyperpop, a genre of music that is avant-garde, boundary pushing, decidedly queer, and often subversive, simultaneously exist as an at least partially corporately created and defined entity? Moreover, what does Hyperpop's complicated status say about the current state of music genres, especially in relation to the increasingly platformed nature of our digital landscape?

While these inaugural prompts may have helped me to identify certain conundrums raised by the genre, they nonetheless fell short. As noted in my thesis proposal defence, these questions were naive, too broad, and most likely unanswerable. In the process of researching and writing this thesis, of even thinking through how to potentially revise these questions, I moved from a general concern with the genre in relation to these sweeping questions about culture to a more concerted engagement with specific production aesthetics found within the musical style itself. As such, in lieu of a definite research question and an attendant answer, in this thesis, I develop concepts in relation to particular production aesthetics within specific Hyperpop songs. This approach seeks to move beyond my initial research questions, which were perhaps more interested in litigating whether Hyperpop was a good (uniquely subversive) or bad (wholly co-opted) object. Instead, it is motivated by questions like: how do these production aesthetics make meaning? What does this meaning making do? And how might these production aesthetics critique or speculate beyond the fraught set of cultural conditions they are simultaneously bound up in?

### **On Pop Music and Method**

This project, of hearing into Hyperpop, necessitates taking pop music seriously. I mean this in a dual sense, in that I seek to take pop music seriously as both a site of speculation, analysis and critique, and as a site that *may itself* speculate, analyse, and critique. This approach to popular music is largely inspired by Robin James' method of "philosophy through music," as put forth in her work *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (21). It emerges from the premise that popular music might simultaneously "reflect" the assumptions, conditions, and frameworks of the culture in which it is embedded, and also "respond to, critique, and rework them" (Ibid.). This method is therefore a means of thinking "with and through musical works," of using music to probe a particular moment, but also potentially to hear beyond it (James 22).

In one sense, James' method is straightforward textual analysis: she examines pop songs, videos, and performances, and puts forth an argument for their interpretation (James 21, 22).<sup>4</sup> Her method involves engaging with a text's formal elements and "historical and cultural contexts," as well as bringing various theoretical frameworks to bear on the musical text in question (22). Importantly, this method does not aim at a historical or an ethnographic

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<sup>4</sup> In my thesis proposal, I initially framed my method of inquiry as hermeneutics, with James' work serving as an example of hermeneutics as applied to pop music. As I conducted my research, I found James' method, as opposed to hermeneutics broadly, to be a better descriptor for my approach. Moreover, although her method, like hermeneutics, concerns itself with the interpretation of texts, I find that textual analysis is a better descriptor for James' approach.

account of a musical work (although it may take certain historical or ethnographic facts into account), nor is it an attempt to uncover the true intentions of a song's maker (Ibid.). Rather, James' method aims at offering a theory of how a text works, what it means, and how it might relate to larger "social structures," or what she calls "dominant concepts, ideals, and structures" (Hawkins, para. 1; James 22). The theory or interpretation of a text that arises through this methodology is thus but one account of a musical work, one that is inevitably informed by the interpretive biases of the researcher as well as the theoretical texts that inform the act of interpretation (James 22).

For James, however, works of pop music do not simply exist as texts that may either "reflect and/or challenge" the conditions of their production (Hawkins, para. 1). Rather, works of pop music themselves might be "doing" something. For, pop music, in its ability to "articulate, revise, and critique philosophical concepts" is, in a sense, engaged in the act of doing philosophy, in an act of production (James 21). Tuning into pop songs, in this case, is not simply a question of discerning what cultural values or operations of power may be encoded and embedded within them, as might be the case in a straightforward textual analysis. Thinking "with and through musical works" requires being attuned to the excess of what pop music *does*, what it might, in a sense, allow for or produce (James 22).

As such, we can conceive of pop music as a site *about which* to speculate, and as a site that *engages in* speculation. This is a broadening of James' notion of philosophy to include considerations that are decidedly pop, emergent, and contemporary. Here, I am thinking along Patricia Reed's lines, and positing that pop might be an important means of probing both what *is* and what *could be* (Reed, "Freedom and Fiction" 10). Thinking "with and through" pop, then, necessitates keeping one ear attuned to how a musical work might reflect, even reproduce, the present, and another open to how it might be a "fiction...that reveals[s] its incompleteness" (James 22; Reed, "Freedom and Fiction" 12). This is to say that pop music does not just reflect our world but might actually be a tool with which we think it.

## Chapter Outline

In Chapter 2, I put forth the concept of *musical memeing*. Through an examination of practices of covering, remixing, and sampling within the genre, I advance the notion that memes function not just around Hyperpop, but rather, as an integral part of the music style itself, and its concomitant practices of meaning making and negotiation. I wager that practices of citation work not only to continually define and revise the sounds of Hyperpop, but also, litigate who might be qualified to understand the genre itself. As such, I draw on work from scholars studying memes and networked cultures, such as Limor Shifman, Raphaël Nowak, and Andrew Whelan, as well as José Esteban Muñoz' work on disidentification. I analyse songs by the artists Fraxiom, GFOTY, 99jakes, umru, George Daniel, Charli XCX, and food house.

In Chapter 3, I explore what I term *speculative nostalgia*, looking at how practices of sampling and reference within Charli XCX's "1999" and Fraxiom's "fly with ü" remediate the recent past. Paying attention to the ways these works approach both time and technology, I contend that the genre's form of revisitation is not simply the result of algorithmic culture obsessed with re-presenting the recent past, nor does it arise from a desire to return to some pre-technological Eden. Rather, I wager that these nostalgic artistic practices can be considered speculative attempts to imagine alternative paths taken, particularly with regard to technology. In this chapter, I make use of Fredric Jameson and Mark Fisher's respective critiques of nostalgia, as well as work by the Laboria Cuboniks collective on their concept of xenofeminism.

In my conclusion, I return to the Fox News example and, furnished with the discussions in the rest of this thesis, I suggest that the incident is not the indictment it might

seem. Far from being the ultimate impeachment of the genre, or an illustration of the dissolution of meaning in the now, I wager that the moment points to the necessity of tuning into Hyperpop's forms of reappropriation and resignification, of listening closely to the off-key ways that the musical style rings out.

## Chapter 2: Musical Memeing










THE HYPERPOP ALIGNMENT CHART			
	<b>FANBASE PURIST</b> (Artist became known in the pop scene in the late 2010s through lgbtq/indie pop scenes)	<b>FANBASE NEUTRAL</b> (Artist is predominantly followed by experimental pop and lgbtq fans)	<b>FANBASE ANARCHIST</b> (Artist is followed by pop fans)
<b>SOUND PURIST</b> (Music is energetic pop affiliated with PC music)	<b>HARDLINE TRADITIONALISTS</b>  "100 geecs are hyperpop"	<b>SOUND PURIST, FANBASE NEUTRAL</b>  "Charli XCX is hyperpop"	<b>SOUND PURIST, FANBASE REBEL</b>  "Carly Rae Jepsen is hyperpop"
<b>SOUND NEUTRAL</b> (Music is upbeat pop with experimental production)	<b>SOUND NEUTRAL, FANBASE PURIST</b>  "Kim Petras is hyperpop"	<b>TRUE NEUTRAL</b>  "Grimes is hyperpop"	<b>SOUND NEUTRAL, FANBASE REBEL</b>  "Crazy Frog is hyperpop"
<b>SOUND ANARCHIST</b> (Music is pop that is distinct from mainstream pop)	<b>SOUND REBEL, FANBASE PURIST</b>  "Rina Sawayama is hyperpop"	<b>SOUND REBEL, FANBASE NEUTRAL</b>  "Peppa pig is hyperpop"	<b>RADICAL HYPERPOP ANARCHY</b>  "Alvin and the Chipmunks are hyperpop"

Fig. 1 Alignment chart meme posted to r/pcmuisce, a Hyperpop-adjacent subreddit. hihiyo. "Hyperpop Alignment Chart." R/pcmusic, 12 Jan. 2021.

There is a common meme format that has emerged in certain Hyperpop-adjacent internet spaces in recent years. It goes as follows: someone will post a song, often an amateurish sounding pop song or other musical work left to the dustbin of history, and claim that it is, in fact, Hyperpop. The meme above, which inserts Peppa Pig, Crazy Frog and Alvin and the Chipmunks into the genre's oeuvre is but one instance (see fig. 1). Early 2000s ringtones, bizarre yet spellbinding output from Tiffany Trump, and Auto-Tuned musings from a five-year-old girl have also all been wedged into Hyperpop's canon in this memetic manner (Million Dollar Turkey; Haasch, para.1; DiscoSocialism). The memeing does not just stop there. Rather, the proliferation of memes about, and adjacent to, Hyperpop abounds. In fact, artists working within the genre often include memes in their work, either citing them lyrically, as is the case for SEBii's "JEEPErrS CREEPrs" or including them on album covers, as is the case for the cover of Fraxiom's "scawy monstews and nice spwites :3," which both imitates the form of a meme, and includes a meme in its bottom left-hand corner (see fig. 2). The genre even plays host to Rebecca Black, the much memed and much maligned singer known for her viral 2011 song "Friday," who re-released the track as a Hyperpop remix in 2021.



Fig. 2 Album art for Fraxiom's "scawy monstews and nice spwites :3."

Journalists have also caught on to the close relationship between memes and Hyperpop, often likening the music's genre-bending sonic experiments to the semiotic chaos of memes themselves. Per *Vice*, Hyperpop is "the musical equivalent of shitposting," an edgy, nonsensical, and low-fidelity form of memeing (Madden, "How Music Fell in Love With Shitposting," para.5). According to *Pitchfork*, the genre "embod[ies] the randomness of meme culture" (Nast, para.3). Hyperpop and memes are so intertwined, in fact, that the musical style is included as an entry in the popular online meme-explainer and database "Know Your Meme." While the website seeks to document both "internet memes and viral phenomena," and includes other musical genres from Trap to EDM in its encyclopaedia, that Hyperpop is listed on the website is nonetheless provocative ("About," para.1). Can Hyperpop itself be considered a meme?

Memes – which, for now, we can understand as digital texts which are created, altered, and repeated by multiple participants across various online arenas – are now an integral feature of how we communicate, and as such have become an important aspect of the popular music landscape (Milner 1). Music charts, for example, have become populated with the songs that soundtrack TikTok meme trends, creating conditions wherein the popularity of a song is typically tied to its viral meme-ability (Radovanović 61). Moreover, within the digital contexts of contemporary music culture, memes, whether used as a marketing tool or the grassroots by-product of fan cultures, are more and more a part of how artists develop both an identity and a following (Viñuela 447; Waugh 212, 213). In fact, the digital conversations that take place about music online, oftentimes involving the use of memes, have become an important means by which DSPs such as Spotify classify the music on their platforms (Prey, "Musica Analytica" 33; "Trap Queen and the Data Scientist," para.3; Morris, "Platform Fandom" 358).

The interplay between Hyperpop and memes can thus be understood to simply reflect a new memeified norm, one of a music industry that concerns itself with, and has quite successfully harnessed, the memetic hype of participatory fan culture. By this logic, all the

memeing around and within Hyperpop is not an inherent feature of the genre, but rather the expression of the conditions it finds itself in. While this is to a certain extent true, the sheer number of memes that proliferate within and about the genre is an intersection that nonetheless bears further consideration. What, for example, does all this memeing say about the genre, and can its memeification be said to function as more than meta or paratextual discourse around the genre, but within the music itself? What happens if we take seriously the notion discussed above that Hyperpop is itself a meme? Could the genre's development and spread on Spotify then be considered itself memetic, something akin to the way traditionally understood internet memes might spread on platforms like Twitter or Instagram?

This chapter takes up these questions and considers the relationship between Hyperpop and memes, advancing the notion that memes function not just around the genre, but rather, as an integral part of the music style itself, and its concomitant practices of meaning making and negotiation. Much like the case discussed above, wherein internet users memetically insert songs into Hyperpop's canon, I posit that Hyperpop artists themselves engage in a similar process of genre definition and canon creation through practices of musical memeing such as covering, remixing, and sampling. In so doing, Hyperpop artists enact a form of what Raphaël Nowak and Andrew Whelan term "genre work," a type of democratic and continual musical self-definition that simultaneously pushes beyond, yet is nonetheless embedded within and bound by, what Robert Prey terms Spotify's "curatorial power" (Nowak and Whelan 452; Prey, "Locating Power in Platformization" 3).

As such, this chapter explores similar themes to those discussed in Chapter 3, namely how the genre might open past cultural objects for alternative uses. Moreover, it engages with the broader, overarching questions taken up by my thesis, particularly those concerning how Hyperpop works to both reflect and critique the conditions it is nonetheless a product of. Namely, this chapter considers how Hyperpop, through its memeing, works to push beyond, yet is nonetheless bound by, the curatorial and definitive powers of Spotify itself.

In the first section of this chapter, drawing on work within meme studies, I propose that memes are becoming an increasingly important lens with which to understand contemporary popular music. I note how, despite early definitions of memes, which often cite musical or sound-related examples, there remains a relative dearth of literature concerning memes as they pertain to musical practices themselves. As such, in the following section of the chapter, I consider the role of music as meme, and wager that remix, covering, and sampling are strategies of auditory memeing within Hyperpop. Through a close reading of select songs, I consider how the genre's musical memeing engages in a form of "genre work," one that helps to solidify the vernacular meanings of the musical style on the part of its artists (Nowak and Whelan 452). In this light, I draw on Muñoz to consider how covers function to memetically pull antecedent musical works into the genre's canon in such a way that nonetheless qualifies them through a process of disidentification. Similarly, I examine how remixing works as an act of genre-definition on the part of Hyperpop artists, often by pushing the genre in more experimental and avant garde directions. I then examine how sampling simultaneously qualifies past works at the same time as it engenders particular audiences. Finally, drawing on work by Patricia Reed, I consider how Hyperpop's musical memeing functions as a meme war, one that ultimately works in Spotify's interest above all else.

In bringing memes to bear on Hyperpop, I hope to draw attention to the increasing importance of memes within the landscape of contemporary popular music, while also attempting to excavate how they might simultaneously be a tool that pushes beyond the industry logics they have nonetheless been tamed by. Especially as music cultures, online cultures, and platforms have become increasingly intertwined, how might an approach

adapted from the study of internet memes – forms of culture which are native to these digital contexts – help to sound out the limits and possibilities of music’s digital conditions?

### Defining Memes and Acts of Musical Memeing

Since Richard Dawkins coined the term meme in 1976, both the concept, and the discourse surrounding it, has significantly shifted. Originally, the term was conceived as a means of describing how certain aspects of culture transfer between people, and in the process, may replicate, mutate and change, much like the genes from which they get their punny name (Dawkins 192; Wiggins and Bowers 1889; Shifman, *Memes In Digital Culture* 2). The pseudo-biological theory of culture that sprung up around Dawkins’ notion of the meme - memetics - was from the outset highly criticised and frequently dismissed by academics due to its reductionism and ambiguity (Shifman, *Memes In Digital Culture* 2; S. Goodman 139). Since its original conception, and subsequent dismissal, however, the term meme has come to enter the popular lexicon in a significant way, this time to connote a particular type of text that propagates amongst internet users (Shifman, *Memes In Digital Culture* 2). As such, the study of memes has moved from Dawkins – who has, ironically enough, become an internet meme himself – and his scientific model of cultural transmission, and into the realm of communications (see fig. 3, 4).

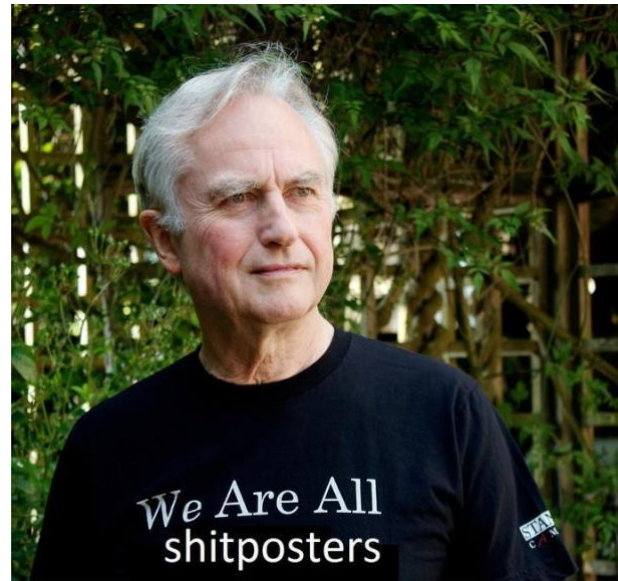
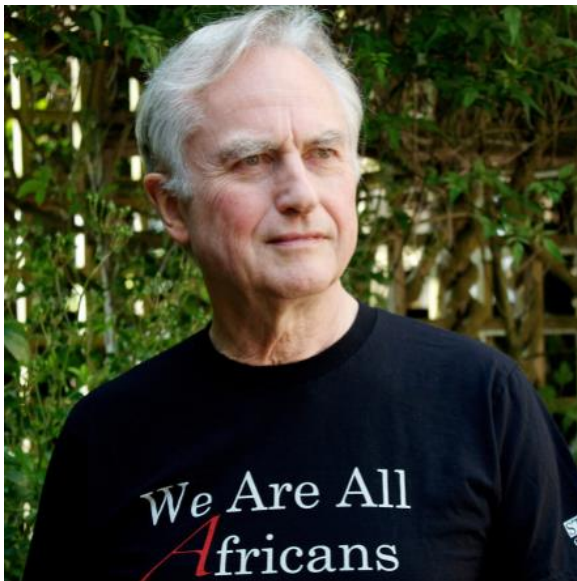


Fig. 3 Dawkins’ original post (left). lolnyny. “We Are All Africans.” *Know Your Meme*, 21 Aug. 2016, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/we-are-all-africans>.

Fig. 4 A meme derivative (right). lolnyny. “We Are All Africans.” *Know Your Meme*, 21 Aug. 2016, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/we-are-all-africans>.

Although the term is slippery, and what we consider an internet meme (hereafter simply referred to as a meme) continues to evolve, the Dawkins meme is a useful example with which to illustrate what exactly a meme is before continuing to a discussion about the study of memes within communications. In 2014, the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science released a T-shirt bearing the slogan “We Are All Africans” (lolnyny). Dawkins uploaded a photo of himself wearing the shirt to Twitter, along with a Tweet wherein he clarified “Genetically we are a v uniform species. Shun racism” (Richard Dawkins “We are all”). The mixture of Dawkins’ milquetoast liberal platitudes paired with the ridiculously self-serious photo of an old white man wearing a shirt emblazoned with a claim to African heritage sparked the internet’s creativity. The photo turned into a meme,

with various internet users photoshopping a variety of phrases onto Dawkins' T-shirt and posting them across websites (see fig. 4). Oftentimes, meme makers would reference other memes in their versioning of Dawkins' T-shirt slogan, adding another layer of meaning to the re-written text. Again, memes are slippery and evolving, and notably, they are not always static images. This example, however, emphasises some of the key features of memes, namely their iterative, referential, and spreadable qualities, and is thus useful to keep in mind as we continue to unpack exactly what memes are.

While there are multiple differing definitions of memes within the field of communications, accounts of memes tend to highlight similar aspects of the cultural form, namely their sociality and intertextuality. Regarding their sociality, Milner notes that memes tend to traverse across "countless cultural participants," whereas Wiggins and Bowers emphasise their roots in "participatory digital culture" (Milner 1; Wiggins and Bowers 1891). When describing the profound intertextuality of memes, scholars note how they are often remixes or parodies of extant cultural objects or phenomena and derive much of their meaning or humour from the connections they create between texts (Wiggins and Bowers 1892). Importantly, however, memes are iterative or "aggregate" objects, and thus they are also intertextual to the extent that they often relate to, reference, or draw upon one another in at times intricate ways (Milner 2; Shifman, *Memes In Digital Culture* 2). In other words, the intertextuality of memes does not just stop at their riffs on popular culture but extends to their treatment of other memes as possible intertexts to be referenced and mined, something illustrated by the frequent references made to other memes within the Dawkins meme discussed above.

Nooney and Portwood-Stacer touch on these two aspects of memes in their concise definition of the cultural form, found in their introduction to the *Journal of Visual Culture's* special issue on memes. For them:

the designation meme identifies digital objects that riff on a given visual, textual or auditory form and are then appropriated, re-coded, and slotted back into the internet infrastructures they came from (1).

Limor Shifman, one of the leading scholars of memes, defines them similarly. She emphasises their intertextuality, noting that memes are made "*with awareness of each other*" as well as their sociality, describing how they are "circulated, imitated and/or transformed" by many internet users (Shifman, *Memes In Digital Culture* 8). Taking these definitions into account, memes can thus be understood as profoundly intertextual cultural objects that propagate within digital spaces through social processes of sharing and circulation, as well as creative processes of remaking and imitation.

It is of note that Shifman adds an additional criterion in her definition of memes, one that goes beyond notions of sociality and intertextuality. Namely, she notes that groups of memes share similar qualities of "content, form and/or stance," and it is these things that are imitated as memes propagate across digital spaces (Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World" 367). Content connotes the "ideas and ideologies" communicated by a text, whereas form is, of course, a work's organising patterns, including its "visual/audible dimensions" (Ibid.). Stance, on the other hand, is slightly less straightforward, and describes the "discursive orientation" of a text in relation to its proponents and addressees (Ibid.). Stance is further broken down into a text's participation structure (meaning "who is invited to participate and how"), its keying (meaning its "tone and style"), and its communicative functions (meaning the aim of communication) (Ibid.). As any of these elements of "form, content and/or stance" are replicated or remixed by a memetic text, they can, of course, be altered to convey alternative meanings – even those that may completely underwrite the original (Ibid.).



Shifman's additional contention thus aids not only in defining and unpacking memes, but also underscores how memes do not just involve the repetition and sharing of texts, but rather, concern the communal negotiation of shared meanings (Ibid.). This point is similarly emphasised by Wiggins and Bowers in their assertion that memes are "akin to a continued conversation between and among members of participatory digital culture" as well as Taylor, who notes that memes function to "reanalyse" and even deconstruct "language and statements in popular culture" amongst members of the community in which they spread (Wiggins and Bowers 1884; T. D. Taylor 110). In the context of the chapter at hand, Shifman's theory of how memetic texts create meaning is useful in understanding how Hyperpop's musical memeing may work to either uphold, reject, or amend the texts to which the genre might simultaneously refer. Additionally, the notion that memes involve the negotiation of meaning is particularly relevant to Hyperpop's "genre work," as will be discussed later in the chapter (Nowak and Whelan 452).

### *The Silence of Meme Studies*

While the study of memes has now become somewhat well-established within the field of communications, discussions surrounding the form often tend to focus on the strictly visual side of internet memes. Although scholars ranging from contemporary proponents of communications studies all the way back to Dawkins, who cited a "tune" as an example in his early definitions of a meme, acknowledge that memes may be auditory or sonic, much of the contemporary literature on the topic has a decidedly visual skew (Milner 1; Dawkins 192). The relative dearth of sound-related discussions of memes is surprising, particularly considering that, in their definitions and discussions of memes, many scholars have highlighted strategies such as remix, reappropriation, and imitation as central aspects of the form (Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World" 365; A. S. Taylor 109; Milner 5). While, of course, in a (post)postmodern culture, these elements have become so ubiquitous as to not belong to any one medium, it is of note that these features so definitive of the meme are also strategies with both origins and widespread use in contemporary music. In the next section of this chapter, I consider the ways that music and memes have been studied in relation to one another. I note that the extant literature often considers the sonic in relation to memes in such a way that continues to give primacy to the visual components of a meme. The notion that music itself can function as a meme, I posit, is relatively underexplored, either mentioned only in passing, or subject to the trappings and pitfalls of traditional Dawkinsian memetics.

Broadly speaking, explorations of the relationship of music to memes tend to fall into one of two categories: studies of visual memes as musical paratexts or discussions of the role of music within audiovisual memes. With regard to the former category, scholars have increasingly venerated online spaces as objects of sound-related study, looking at how memes are involved in processes of meaning making and star creation on the part of both fans and artists (Waugh 209; Born and Haworth 602). Both Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth as well as Andrew Whelan and Raphaël Nowak, in their respective discussions of memes made by music fans, note how memes are an important means by which the meanings of musical genres are created and solidified (Born and Haworth 611; Nowak and Whelan 460). Born and Haworth see these paratextual elements as so important to the way genres are constituted, in fact, that they posit these forms of participatory culture may be considered as a creative act in line with the "co-present socialities of musical practise" itself (Born and Haworth 611). Similarly, Joana Freitas considers how memes function to negotiate the Western classical and art music canons, noting how the form at times upholds, and at times works against, the white, masculinist attitudes often attributed to these genres (Freitas 437). For these authors, then, traditionally understood internet memes are an important means by

which the meanings of music and genre are vernacularly negotiated by music fans and meme makers alike.

Yet, as Michal Waugh's work on rapper Young Thug contends, memes may also be harnessed on the part of artists, and the industry that surrounds them, as well. Waugh notes how memes, and social media more broadly, have played a central role in the success not just of Thug, but of artists working in the same genre as him, namely rap and hip hop (Waugh 209). In fact, Waugh goes as far as to contend that the immense success of these genres on streaming platforms is partially related to their command of the participatory affordances of social media (Waugh 212). As music culture has become "increasingly driven by audience participation and...hype," the author posits, memes have come to take on a central role within music cultures and industries, becoming an important factor in an artist's success (Ibid.). Given the contemporary conditions of the music industry, with memes propelling songs, such as Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's "WAP" among others, to the top of the charts, considerations of how memeing works to create meaning on the part of both fans and artists are certainly pertinent (Viñuela 447; Freitas 430; Waugh 209). Moreover, as the online discourse that surrounds music becomes more and more a part of how music itself is classified on DSPs, discussions of the role played by memes as musical paratexts are particularly relevant to the broader concerns of my thesis regarding the power of platforms in shaping contemporary popular music.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in presenting memes as strictly visual paratexts, these authors leave the notion that music may function as a meme, or that it might be produced memetically, relatively uninterrogated.

Work that considers sound in relationship to audiovisual memes often gets closer to a conception of music or sound as itself memetic, yet nonetheless maintains the primacy of the visual in relation to memes. In their respective studies of audiovisual memes on YouTube, Jean Burgess, Barnaby Goodman, and Eduardo Viñuela, for example, all note the similarities between the logics underlying memetic and musical works. Burgess contends that "iteration and incremental innovation" are fundamental to both music and memes, while Goodman emphasises the ways that audiovisual memes often employ "musical principles of construction" to achieve their desired effects (Burgess 92; B. Goodman 25). Moreover, Goodman notes how the techniques of hypermediacy employed by memes, ones that draw attention to a medium or text's formal codes, also have a history in the avant-garde compositional practices of artists like John Cage (B. Goodman 15). Viñuela also briefly touches upon the notion that certain aspects of music may function like a meme in his discussion of "the lick," an eight-note motif with roots in blues and jazz improvisations that can be identified across works from Stravinsky to Santana (Viñuela 449). In fact, he notes how, in its identification across so many musical works, this musical phrase itself effectively "became a meme" (Viñuela 450). Despite gesturing towards the notion that music itself may function as a meme, however, these authors focus solely on audiovisual texts and as such only consider sound as it works in tandem with the visual to create meaning.

Such is also the case for discussions of the audiovisual memes that propagate on TikTok. Crystal Abidin, in her work, puts forth the term "audio meme" as a means of describing the viral sounds that propagate on, and in fact form the "organizing principle" of, the app (Abidin 80). Yet, the term audio meme is misleading, as the memes Abidin describes are strictly *audiovisual*, relying on the interplay between sound and image to create meaning (Ibid.). Bojana Radovanović also considers "audio memes" in her comprehensive work on sound and TikTok (Abidin 80; Radovanović 66). The author explores the ways that the

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<sup>5</sup> Spotify not only has a playlist dedicated to viral songs called "big on the internet," but also algorithmically classifies music according to its digital footprint via its proprietary Echo Nest software. See Morris, "Curation by Code" 454; Eriksson et al. 103; Prey, "Musica Analytica" 33 for further discussion.

platform's audiovisual memes have come to exert a strong influence on "processes of contemporary music making," listening habits, and the music industry writ large (Radovanović 69). Noting how music is incentivised to become increasingly "hook-y," often including sonic elements or lyrical phrases that can easily be turned into catchy TikTok sound snippets, the author's work is an important reminder of the co-constitutive relationship between audiovisual memes, the platforms they multiply on, and popular music (Radovanović 61). Yet, despite noting the memetic qualities of the sounds that populate the app, the designation meme is applied solely to the audiovisual (Radovanović 69). Once again, the notion that music can itself be a meme is left largely uninterrogated, prompting the question: can music only be considered a meme when it works in tandem with the visual?

Literature that moves beyond the centrality of the visual in relation to memes is itself sparse. In her work on music education, Lauri Väkevä offhandedly mentions that notorious samples such as the Amen Break may function as memes in their multiplication across various musical texts (Väkevä 59, 60).<sup>6</sup> The author's linking of music to memes, however, is not taken up in a significant way in her work. Michael S. O'Brien more explicitly considers the role of music as a meme in his writing. Looking at the evolution of an Argentinean soccer chant, the author posits that the song can be considered a "sonic meme," in that it co-opted a piece of popular music, and spread throughout the country both online and offline through processes of "re-use, remediation, and re-signification" (O'Brien 117). While the author's contention that music may function as meme is certainly pertinent to the project at hand, his work tends to concern itself with the sociology of political protest more so than a theory of memes as they relate to music.

The notion of music as meme has also been explored through the lens of Dawkinsian memetics. Steven Jan, in his book *The Memetics of Music: A Neo-Darwinian View of Musical Structure and Culture*, for example, attempts to create a musicological theory of memetics, one that conceptualises musical ideas as memes in a strictly Dawkinsian sense (i.e., as units of culture that function like genes and as such evolve through a process akin to natural selection) (31). As will be discussed at further length shortly, and as noted above, given the shortcomings of a Dawkinsian approach to the study of culture, I will not be taking up Jan's work here.

Instead, I wish to consider alternate avenues for thinking through music in tandem with memes, ones that I believe to date have been sorely underexplored. In the next portion of this chapter, I aim to take seriously the notion that music itself may be memetic. How, for example, can a tune, sample, cover, or other sonic element function like a meme that is circulated, repeated, and built upon? How might music itself be produced memetically through processes of reference, citation, and revision? In this sense, then, my contention that music may function as a meme, particularly as it pertains to Hyperpop, is to note that processes of both reception and production may function according to meme logics. In other words, that meme studies might not only help to understand the practices of meaning making that Hyperpop enacts, but that it might also help to unpack specific production techniques at play as well.

Before moving on to my exploration of music as meme, however, I wish to note that the notion that music may be studied as a meme has been criticised. Scholar Steve Goodman, in his work *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear*, notes that memetic analyses of music tend to be plagued by the same reductionism and cognitivism as Dawkins' original theory (S. Goodman 137, 138). For Goodman, the notion that music can function

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<sup>6</sup> The "Amen Break" is a drum sequence found on the Winstons' 1969 song "Amen, Brother," and has become one of the most used samples of all time (Väkevä 59). It can be heard in songs ranging from Salt-N-Pepa's "I Desire" to Slipknot's "Pulse of the Maggots" and was a definitive aspect of genres like drum and bass, breakbeat, and early hip-hop music.

memetically “neglects to account for the body, affect, and change” and thus is not capable of accounting for the ways that sound may engage in strategies that operate on an immensely affective level (S. Goodman 139). As an alternative to memes, Goodman proposes the concept of audio virology, a methodology that operates “at the level of affective cognition” in contrast to the “cognitive epidemiology of memetics” (S. Goodman 196).

While Goodman’s criticism of Dawkins’ memetics as applied to music is certainly warranted, his rejection of the study of memes within music is focused on the analytical shortcomings of Dawkinsian memetics specifically and does not necessarily apply to contemporary studies of internet memes. It is of note, for example, that as the study of memes has come to be synonymous with the study of internet memes, the role of affect and change have come to be central components of their discussion (RAQS Media Collective 344). As Shifman maintains, it is possible to use memes as a “prism for understanding certain aspects of contemporary culture” without necessarily ascribing to all the intellectual or cultural baggage they may carry (Shifman, *Memes In Digital Culture* 6). As such, one may take up contemporary understandings of memes and relate them to music without necessarily falling into the quagmires of Dawkins-style memetics.

Just because this chapter does not concern itself with Dawkinsian memetics, however, is not to say that there are no conceptual limitations to engaging with music through the lens of meme studies. For example, there are difficulties that come with transferring a largely visual mode of analysis to the realm of the sonic. Moreover, the application of theories of “signification in image and text” to sound has been criticised within the field of sound studies (Chang 145). While theories of visual texts do not translate to the sonic in a one-to-one way, I wager there is still use in thinking through these frameworks alongside sound, particularly given that Hyperpop is embedded within meme culture and as memes are increasingly intertwined with music cultures and industries more broadly.

### **Genre, Memes and Meaning in Hyperpop**

With all this being said, how should we consider memes in relation to music, and to Hyperpop in particular? Given that so many scholars of memes have pointed to remix as an essential aspect of the form and how it spreads, it is tempting to take up this claim and conduct an act of one-to-one translation (Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World” 365; A. S. Taylor 109; Wiggins and Bowers 1892). If memes are engaged in a form of visual remix, then musical remix is the auditory equivalent of traditionally understood internet memes, end of story. Yet, as remix has become a central aspect of cultural production, the word has become untethered from strictly musical practices. Instead, the term has taken on a vernacular meaning, one that connotes the act of “mixing together various known elements into a new form,” and it is in this sense that remix is taken up in scholarship regarding memes (Navas 3; Waysdorf 1135). This does not mean we have to declare the forms of remix that animate internet memes as incompatible with the logics of musical remix. Rather, it is to say that just because remix is mentioned as an element of memes does not mean that all musical remixes necessarily function memetically, or that musical memes operate through remix alone.

In the next section of the chapter, going back to my initial definition of memes as immensely intertextual objects that are riffed upon by multiple proponents, sharing qualities of “content, form and/or stance,” I attempt to retune the internet meme so as to account for Hyperpop’s sonic practices (Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World” 367). I consider how musical practices of remixing, covering, and sampling function, within Hyperpop specifically, as auditory, or sonic memes. In considering these musical practices, following Shifman, I take up how each “memetic dimension” of form, content, and stance is either applied or rejected as a means of understanding a text’s overall meaning (Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World” 363). How, for example, might a song comment upon its source material

through the specific ways it treats or incorporates its referent? If one considers memes as “continued conversation[s] between members of a participatory culture,” how might these musical practices be considered similarly (Wiggins and Bowers 1884)? Especially as music has come to be increasingly embedded in digital culture, and as its consumption increasingly takes place within the bounds of platforms, how might Hyperpop’s acts of musical memeing constitute a vernacular, even participatory, cultural practice that acts similarly to more traditionally understood internet memes?

Taking up these questions, I posit that Hyperpop’s practices of musical memeing enact a form of what scholars Raphaël Nowak and Andrew Whelan term “genre work” (Nowak and Whelan 452). In continually defining and “delineat[ing the] boundaries” of the genre, this form of memetic “genre work” runs alongside and against what Robert Prey terms the “curatorial power” of Spotify (Nowak and Whelan 452; Prey, “Locating Power in Platformization” 3). Yet, these forms of musical memeing do more than just “*assert, dispute or finesse*” the meaning of the musical style (Nowak and Whelan 452). Far from being instances of complete and ironic deconstruction, these acts of musical memeing, rather, allow the genre to assert an (oftentimes queer) politics, reusing the cultural archive in memetic ways, all the while continually insisting that the sediments of meaning that come to build up like a thick sludge around us are always, no matter how hardened, capable of being formed anew.

Towards this end, after defining both “genre work” and curatorial power, in the next section of this chapter I draw on Jose Muñoz’ notion of disidentification (Nowak and Whelan 452; Muñoz 4). I consider how practices of covering remake the canon of Hyperpop in ways that extend beyond the limits of Spotify’s playlist by calling upon, but also oftentimes qualifying, antecedent musical texts. Following this, I consider how forms of remixing push the genre in increasingly experimental directions, functioning to manage the boundaries of the genre on the part of its artists. I then go on to consider sampling as a strategy of musical memeing, one that straddles the work done by both covering and remixing. Finally, I consider Hyperpop’s musical memeing as a form of content production and consider how the process simultaneously works to bolster Spotify itself.

### *Genre Work and Curatorial Power*

As noted in the above section, memes do not just repeat texts, but rather, work to negotiate and develop shared meanings within the communities in which they circulate. “Genre work,” a term put forth by Nowak and Whelan in their writing on digital music communities, describes a similar process. Namely, the term connotes how the discourses around and about a genre come to solidify its meanings, and to define what is in and out of its bounds (Nowak and Whelan 452, 456). While Whelan and Norwalk, in their elaboration on “genre work,” largely focus on how the digital dialogues that emerge around a genre function to “*assert, dispute, or finesse a particular and singular meaning and coherence* for a musical style,” I employ the term to understand the boundary management that the music itself enacts (Nowak and Whelan 452). In other words, whereas Nowak and Whelan may focus on how internet memes about a genre work to manage its meanings, in line with the larger project of this chapter, I consider how music as a meme performs a similar task (Ibid.). Much like memes may be considered as “continued conversation[s] between members of participatory digital culture,” I posit that practices of musical memeing may be understood similarly, as a continued musical conversation between artists working within Hyperpop (Wiggins and Bowers 1884).

As a foil to “genre work,” which functions to negotiate the bounds of the genre on the part of its practitioners, I invoke Robert Prey’s term “curatorial power” (Nowak and Whelan 452; Prey “Locating Power in Platformization” 3). Per Prey, in the context of a music

industry wherein musicians and record labels are “increasingly dependent on landing on Spotify-curated playlists,” the platform itself has come to gain, and exercise, what the author terms “curatorial power” (Ibid.). This power consists of the ability to set what Tiziano Bonini and Alessandro Gandini identify as “listening agendas,” through the collation and curation of content, and therefore “to advance [the platform’s] own interests, and affect the interests of others” in so doing (Bonini and Gandini 2; Prey, “Locating Power in Platformization” 8). Thus, platform-curated playlists, such as the “hyperpop” playlist, which work to cement and define what constitutes a genre, are an important means by which this power is exercised. As such, whereas “genre work” may be understood as a more grassroots or bottom-up means by which the meanings and bounds of a genre are negotiated, curatorial power is its top-down, platform-helmed counterpart (Nowak and Whelan 452). In the following pages, I consider how Hyperpop’s memeing, understood as a form of “genre work,” runs counter to and alongside Spotify’s curatorial power (Nowak and Whelan 452). In line with the broader considerations of my thesis, I explore how Hyperpop may both reflect and critique Spotify’s curatorial prowess, simultaneously pushing beyond, yet subject to, the platform powers it is nonetheless a product of.

### *Covers and Canonization*

A musical cover is “essentially an adaptation” of an antecedent work, one that does not shift medium, but instead engages in an act of musical translation (Plasketes 150). Within the context of popular music, the practice of covering has practically, from the outset, always been integral to the form, but became standard practice in the fifties as many white artists covered the work of black artists, notably without giving the latter credit (Plasketes 144, 145). Like traditionally understood internet memes, covers are hypertextual artistic forms, meaning they “rework” earlier texts, creating new versions of their referents (Wragg 98). Unlike remixing or sampling, which will be discussed shortly, covers reproduce the lyrics, structure, and composition of a previous musical work not through the appropriation of previously recorded material, but through a process of remaking and imitation.

Within the world of Hyperpop, covers, and by extension interpolations, abound. A.G. Cook, for example, released his own take on Tommy James and the Shondells’ 1968 song “Crimson & Clover,” whereas That Kid and 100 gecs put out their respective renditions of Soulja Boy’s 2008 track “Kiss Me Thru the Phone.” The practice even occurs amongst Hyperpop artists, with d0llywood1 interpolating Ecco2k, Bladee, and Thaiboy Digital’s “Western Union” in their song “ihonestlymightjustgiveup.” Taking it one step further, food house interpolates their own song “Thos Moser” in their song “mos thoser.” Given that I cannot account for all the covers and interpolations within the genre, in the following pages, I take up two instances of covering to examine the precise ways that Hyperpop engages in practices of musical memeing and “genre work:” Fraxiom’s “scawy monstews and nice spwites :3” and GFOTY’s “CREEP (UR A)” (Nowak and Whelan 452).

In altering the form, content, and stance of their referents, I posit that these covers constitute a memetic versioning of their respective original songs. In citing and revising these musical works, each cover simultaneously claims the antecedent musical text as one of Hyperpop’s many tributaries, yet through a process of remaking, qualifies or alters it. As such, these works modify their original texts’ respective “participation structure[s],” meaning who the text invites to participate and how, to amend their potentially exclusionary machinations, and through a process of memeing, even make the form explicitly queer and/or feminist (Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World” 367). As such, these covers can be said to disidentify with an antecedent cultural form, remaking it so as to account that which it could not previously account for, yet “lovingly retain[ing]” its presence (Muñoz 31).

The first of these works, “scawy monstews and nice spwites :3,” is a cover of Skrillex’s “Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites,” one of the definitive works of the genre that has come to be known as brostep. Brostep is an oft-criticised offshoot of dubstep, which is a genre of dance music with roots in South-London’s garage and dub scenes. While some criticisms of the subgenre were certainly merited, namely those that noted the ways that it whitened and hyper-masculinised dubstep itself,<sup>7</sup> much of the vitriol surrounding the genre arose from its explicit use of digitally generated sounds, with critics and musicians alike dismissing the genre as “computer music” (Sloan and Harding 128, 130). Despite this, or perhaps because of this, brostep itself has emerged as an important touchpoint in Hyperpop’s sound, with musicians often invoking its digital timbres and harsh sonic palette, as well as its song structure, which often contains large, anticipatory bridges. Moreover, various Hyperpop artists, from Bladee and Yung Lean to 100 geecs have collaborated with Skrillex himself, the one-time poster boy of the brostep genre.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the form of Fraxiom’s cover, the artist remains faithful to the melody and timbres of Skrillex’s original. Yet, Fraxiom adapts the main synth melody of Skrillex’s song in service of their vocal melody, using a vocoder to give their voice a similar quality to Skrillex’s synth. As such, whereas the original song is largely instrumental, Fraxiom fills Skrillex’s melody with their own lyrics, thus repopulating the content of the song. As Fraxiom sings about various internet memes, references Hyperpop artists Dorian Electra and 100 geecs, and boasts about spending their streaming checks on their “queers,” they alter the original text’s stance by changing its participation structure (Fraxiom, “scawy monstews” 0:53). Lyrics such as:

With my thembo, summer team will be a movie  
 Hmm, yeah  
 Flights out to Chicago, yeah  
 Rights for bottoms will be revoked

for example, with their citation of specific internet memes would be opaque for those who are not immersed in a particular, queer side of the internet (Fraxiom, “scawy monstews” 0:23-0:35).<sup>9</sup> Much like memes are often created and propagated within particular contexts, relying on specific intertextual connections to enact what Miltner terms “in-group boundary establishment and policing,” Fraxiom’s lyrical citations play off of a shared cultural milieu (Miltner 1). To fully “get” this Hyperpop take on the brostep anthem, one must be a part of the online spaces in which these various memes or terms circulate.

Fraxiom, however, alters the participation structure of the song in more explicit ways as well, ones that do not necessarily rely on a certain “in the know” knowledge that might be required by the more referential aspects of the song. This is done particularly through their use of samples. While sampling as a practice of musical memeing will be covered at greater length later in the chapter, it is worth interrogating here in relation to the cover’s meaning broadly speaking, and practice of disidentification particularly. In contrast to the self-serious

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<sup>7</sup> See Mike D’Errico’s critique of the “ultra-macho, adrenaline-pumping performances of masculinity” that abound within brostep (D’Errico, para.10).

<sup>8</sup> In 2022, Skrillex collaborated with 100 geecs on their 2022 song “Torture Me” as well as Yung Lean, Bladee and Ecco2k on “Summertime Blood.” The following year, he collaborated with Bladee and Yung Lean on “Ceremony,” as well as on “Real Spring,” which only featured Bladee.

<sup>9</sup> “thembo” is a non-binary play on the words “bimbo” or “himbo,” which are often used slang words, particularly on Twitter and TikTok. “Rights for bottoms” is an internet-refrain that is used ironically to either campaign for or against rights for bottoms. Internet users might say “rights for bottoms who can’t drive” or respond “I’m revoking rights for bottoms” to a particularly over the top photo.

sound design of Skrillex's original, Fraxiom's cover toys with the absurd, adding in samples of cats and dogs barking during the build-up to the song's final chorus (Fraxiom, "scawy monstews" 1:00-1:03). Moreover, the artist ends their song with the declaration "gay sex is normal," a sample taken from a viral video rant about the absurdity of heterosexuality (Fraxiom, "scawy monstews" 1:33-1:35; "Scawy Monstews and Nice Spwites :3 "). The declaration is stuttered so that it follows a similar pattern to the "d-d-d-d-drop the bass" refrain so commonly heard in brostep that it actually became a meme itself (Don para. 1). Much like traditionally understood memes may carefully straddle the ironic and the sincere, the provocative and the profound in ways that make them slippery, confounding, and thus ripe for use to both progressive and reactionary ends, it is difficult to parse through the deluge of content being thrown at us. Is this gleeful semiotic play aimed at the destruction of all meaning? A type of musical shitposting whose sole aim, absent a coherent politics, is to provoke above all else?

Instead of dismissing Fraxiom's musical memeing as a derivative form of shitposting, I posit that the artist's cover constitutes a form of disidentification, one that allows them to simultaneously cite and push back against, "scramble...and reconstruct" the meaning of both the song itself and the genre it belongs to more broadly (Muñoz 31). In ending their cover of a Skrillex song with a play on the brostep "drop the bass" call to arms, for example, Fraxiom memetically "*re-cyle[s]* or *re-form[s]*" a cultural object already cemented with meaning, adding another layer of meme-like sediment to its bedrock (Muñoz 39). Understood as an act of musical memeing, which plays upon a format it nonetheless reveals as compromised or lacking, Fraxiom claims the genre as a part of Hyperpop's canon at the same time as they qualify it, enacting a definitional form of "genre work" in so doing (Nowak and Whelan 452). Brostep is canonical, the cover asserts, but must be made to articulate differently, to sound queerly, should it wish to be a part of Hyperpop's oeuvre. The format of the musical meme thus allows Fraxiom to engage in a general, genre-wide form of critique in their citation and reuse of the generic conventions of brostep, at the same time as they engage in a specific act of memeing and revision of one song in particular. All the while, this form of sonic scrambling revisits "bad" cultural objects and imbues them with new meanings, asserting the always ad hoc, contingent nature of cultural forms, something Hyperpop more broadly tends to concern itself with.

GFOTY's cover of Radiohead's "Creep" similarly claims and amends the band's experimental yet radio friendly alt-rock. Regarding the form of the original song, GFOTY's cover remains true to its chords and structure, however it shifts the genre from Radiohead's alt-rock and into the realm of drum and bass, a form of fast-paced, breakbeat-based dance music that emerged out of the UK in the nineties. Moreover, GFOTY changes the original song's lyrical mode of address, from the first person to the second; "I'm a creep/I'm a weirdo," for example, becomes "You're a creep/You're a weirdo" (Radiohead 1:00-1:10; GFOTY 0:40-0:50). These changes in form have important implications for the content and stance of the cover. For, Radiohead's original song has become somewhat of an incel anthem in recent years, given that it is a song about a presumably male protagonist who bemoans his feelings of inadequacy when compared to the object of his desires. In changing the lyrical mode of address, GFOTY alters the content of the original, turning her cover into a commentary on the objectification inherent to the original song.

Similarly, in changing the genre of the song, from alt-rock to dance music, GFOTY's cover changes the original's "participation structure" (Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World" 367). Whereas before, "Creep" was bedroom listening for the self-conscious loner, GFOTY's dance music informed version brings the song into the communal space of the club. The original's self-pitying lyrics thus become a taunting refrain, a communal chant for those who have been on the receiving end of unwanted advances. GFOTY, through this memetic



versioning, thus engages in a form of disidentification, one that “scrambles and reconstructs the encoded meaning of a cultural text,” neither completely rejecting nor fully embracing it (Muñoz 31). In so doing, she exposes the underlying “universalizing and exclusionary machinations” of the object, but operates upon them, enacting a 2-Step surgery to make them sound differently and express alternatively (Muñoz 39). The text is not totally rejected, but as a meme, worked upon to express and allow for other desires and alternative commentaries, ones that may not have been included within the original. In her versioning, GFOTY claims Radiohead’s work as a part of Hyperpop’s lineage, but, like Fraxiom’s cover, performs a form of “genre work,” qualifying how it can be incorporated within the genre (Nowak and Whelan 452).

Much like the Hyperpop memes discussed in the introduction to this chapter, covers within Hyperpop mine past musical works, inviting them into the pantheon of the genre. Yet, in their repetition and rejection of various elements of form, stance, and content, the Hyperpop covers under consideration simultaneously reveal their referents as lacking, in need of further consideration. This form of “genre work” simultaneously enacts a bottom-up definition of genre, one that runs counter to and alongside Spotify’s curatorial power even as it is nonetheless bound by it (Nowak and Whelan 452).<sup>10</sup> In citing these songs, Hyperpop artists assemble their own canon, one that extends beyond the limits of Spotify’s definitive “hyperpop” or even “Hyperpop Classics” playlists, creating a retroactive account of the genre’s development.

At the same time, covering within the genre allows Hyperpop to memetically articulate and assert a politics, particularly through the ways it alters the “participation structures of past texts” (Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World” 367). In this sense, therefore, these musical works may be said to engage in a process of disidentification to the extent that they neither reject nor wholeheartedly accept the cultural objects to which they refer (Muñoz 11). As such, although distinct from Hyperpop’s speculative nostalgia, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, covering nonetheless similarly reappropriates past texts, oftentimes capturing them imperfectly, optimistically, and wistfully, not as they were, but as Hyperpop imagines they could have been.

### *Deep Fried Remix*

Remix functions similarly within Hyperpop, to memetically manage the bounds of the genre. In contrast to covering, remixing involves the incorporation of previously recorded sonic material into a new song, thus creating “a second mix of something pre-existent” (Waysdorf 1129; Navas 67). Within the genre, the practice of releasing a partially or fully remixed version of an album is common, with major artists working within Hyperpop, like 100 geecs, Hannah Diamond, Doss and Caroline Polachek, to name a few, all releasing LPs or EPs full of remixed music.<sup>11</sup> This is not a total break with the trends of the music industry writ large, wherein the act of releasing a fully remixed version of an album is now fairly commonplace. These remix albums have a dual promotional purpose; they increase an artist’s catalogue on streaming services and allow more mainstream acts to adopt some of the subcultural capital associated with more underground artists and genres (Waysdorf 1131,

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<sup>10</sup> In this context, it is of note that GFOTY’s cover cannot be streamed on the platform, presumably due to copyright and licensing issues. While artists have found ways to work around this, by uploading their unlicensed works as podcasts instead of songs, that “CREEP (UR A)” cannot exist on the platform is nonetheless a pertinent reminder of how the affordances of the DSP have a hand in shaping what forms of content proliferate on it.

<sup>11</sup> See Hannah Diamond’s *Reflections Remixes*, 100 geecs’ *1000 Geecs and the Tree of Clues*, Doss’ *4 New Hit Songs \*Remixes*, and Caroline Polachek’s *Standing At The Gate: Remix Collection*.

1132).<sup>12</sup> Yet, whereas within popular music more broadly, the remix often creates a more danceable version of the original track, within Hyperpop, remix often works in the opposite way, creating versions of a song that are more eccentric or experimental than the original. Moreover, while mainstream artists often tap artists working within other genres to participate in their remixes, oftentimes working with dance music producers or even Hyperpop artists themselves as is the case with Dua Lipa and Lady Gaga,<sup>13</sup> within Hyperpop, remix often occurs within the bounds of the genre itself, with Hyperpop artists often remixing other Hyperpop artists.

In the following section of this chapter, I consider how these forms of intra-Hyperpop remixing perform “genre work” in their continual revision and redefinition of the bounds of the genre (Nowak and Whelan 452). Much like with covers, since remixes abound within Hyperpop, I consider select cases of remix within the genre, calling upon two examples of more “extreme” or experimental remix, “xXXi\_wud\_nvrstøp\_ÜXXx (99jakes Remix)” and “Ocean of Tears - umru Remix,” as well as a more straightforward remix “Welcome to My Island - George Daniel and Charli XCX Remix.” I posit that, much like in internet meme communities, wherein the proliferation of memes into increasingly obscure and esoteric forms functions as a means of preventing “normies” from infiltrating the community, Hyperpop’s memetic remixes act similarly, to continually push and expand the horizons of the genre, oftentimes away from more mainstream or palatable sounds.<sup>14</sup> Particularly, I examine how practices of altering a song’s speed and pitch, as well as adding elements of distortion work to create deep fried sonic memes, ones that often render the remixed version more obscure.

While remixes may have a multitude of functions, the forms of remix that initially entered the popular consciousness were specifically to do with dancing, with disco DJs creating extended versions of songs to be played on the dance floor (Navas 85). Nowadays, although the notion of remix has spread into other elements of culture, as discussed above, within the realm of music, remix is still often associated with dance music (Waysdorf 1137). Within the context of Hyperpop, the relationship between dance and remix is pushed to its limits, and even subverted, with the remixed version often speeding up a song to the point where it becomes *harder* to dance to. Within “Ocean of Tears - umru Remix,” the range of the original song’s beats per minute (BPM), which sits at about 77 BPM, is catapulted into the realm of 206 BPM. Similarly, “xXXi\_wud\_nvrstøp\_ÜXXx (99jakes Remix)” takes the original song from 155 BPM into the territory of 254 BPM. For reference, the BPM of genres of dance music like house and techno often stays within the realm of 120-140 BPM. This moves the Hyperpop remix’s rhythm almost beyond the realm of dancing; to keep up with the track’s speed, the dancer’s body must either thrash around or move in half-timed unison. As such, the practices of significantly speeding up the BPM of a song through remix alter the new version’s “participation structure,” in that they significantly change “how” one is invited to participate or engage with a text (Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World” 367). In so doing, they push the genre in increasingly experimental directions, challenging the expectations of both remix and Hyperpop itself.

Of course, this is not always the case, with songs such as George Daniel and Charli XCX’s remix of Caroline Polachek’s “Welcome to My Island,” for example, creating

<sup>12</sup> Dua Lipa’s 2019 *Club Future Nostalgia*, a remixed version of her smash hit *Future Nostalgia* album curated by DJ/producer the Blessed Madonna is an illustrative example of this phenomenon.

<sup>13</sup> Oklou remixed Dua Lipa’s song “Fever,” while Hyperpop artists Arca, Rina Sawayama, Charli XCX, A.G. Cook, Shygirl, Mura Masa, Doss, and Dorian Electra all feature on Gaga’s *Dawn of Chromatica* remix album.

<sup>14</sup> A normie, short for normal, is a somewhat pejorative term for a person who is decidedly mainstream or outside of any given subculture, often used by people on the internet. See Pauliks as well as Literat and van den Berg for discussions of memeing practices in relation to the normie.

significantly more dance-able versions of their referent in their alteration of its speed. Yet, even as Hyperpop remixes do not experiment with tempo, they nonetheless often toy with other elements of the original song's form. This leads me to my second consideration of remix within Hyperpop, namely the frequent use of distortion, noise and other sonic elements that could be classified as abrasive. Within the 99jakes and umru remixes, both artists make use of heavily distorted kick drums, which, as noted above, are programmed in rapid tempo. Distortion often arises when the volume or gain of an instrument is too loud, and thus the peaks and troughs of the sound wave become cut off or "clipped" and thus warped or altered. Although this process can add warmth or depth to a sound, it can also produce unpleasant sounding, inharmonic tones. Distortion as applied to kick drums often creates a pronounced rattling sound, and while the use of distorted kick drums is somewhat commonplace in genres of music like techno, gabber and even trap, it is nonetheless a harsh sounding sonic element, one that is infrequently used in Top 40 pop.

In addition to using distorted kick drums, these tracks also push the form of their originals in more experimental directions through other sonic means. Umru, on the one hand, pitches and alters Polachek's vocals, bringing her operatic soprano into the realm of a death metal scream (0:54). 99jakes, on the other hand, pitches up Les' vocals to the point where they become piercing squelches (0:29-0:37). Although perhaps not as overtly abrasive, even XCX and Daniel's remix similarly makes use of experimental production techniques, manipulating XCX's vocals to make them sound pulled or stretched, and employing a gate effect on the song's main synth, causing its volume to decrease and then return to normal in sudden spurts (0:42-1:10).

These changes to the form of these Hyperpop remixes' respective referents are not unlike the process of deep frying a meme. Deep frying is a technique of overlaying a meme with multiple filter effects to give it a grainy, distorted quality, often in the service of generating increasingly warped images that act as almost ironic meta commentaries on the memes themselves. The album cover of Fraxiom's "scawy monstews and nice spwites :3" in fig. 2 is an example of a deep fried image. In contrast to what are referred to as "normie memes," deep fried memes are experimental forms of memeing, often immersed within an "'in-group' of those who can read and create memes within the given parameters" (Kowalchuk, para.3). Seen along Shifman's lines, deep fried memes alter the form of their referent through various means of image distortion in order to cement a particular "participation structure" aimed at including those that "get" deep fried memes, thus excluding normies (Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World" 367).

Much like these memes revel in aesthetic extremes not only to generate their meaning, but also to distinguish themselves from normie posters, I posit that Hyperpop remixes often revel in sonic extremes in ways that aim at a similar esotericism. In creating more abrasive, distorted, or experimental versions of their referents, Hyperpop remixes alter an original song's form, often pushing it in more obscure directions. While Hyperpop might not explicitly be trying to turn away normies to the same extent as deep fried memers, remix nonetheless works to maintain a certain experimentalism within the genre itself. Whereas covers may have altered the forms of their referents to attribute alternative meanings to the songs that they cite, remixes alter them to refute a "singular...coherence for [the] musical style" itself, leaving Hyperpop as much open to experiment with Top 40 sounds as it is with noise music (Nowak and Whelan 452). Much like memes, per Wiggins and Bowers, may be understood as a "continued conversation between and among members of a participatory digital culture," these remixes, understood as a form of musical memeing, similarly constitute conversations about the directions and limits of experimentation regarding the sound of the genre itself (Wiggins and Bowers 1884).

### *Sampling and Shared Archives*

Like remix, sampling involves the reuse and reappropriation of previously recorded sonic material. Sampling differs from remix in that it often, but does not always, involves the appropriation of smaller amounts of a recorded work. For example, the song “mos thoser” by food house makes use of a snippet of Crazy Frog’s “Axel F” that is less than a second in length (Frog 0:13; food house “mos thoser” 0:39). The Hyperpop remixes as discussed above, on the other hand, appropriate a significantly larger portion of their referent. Moreover, within the context of sample-based music, that material was appropriated from an external source is often not quite so explicit. For example, whereas the word “remix” will often appear in parentheses at the end of a remixed song’s title, samples oftentimes go uncredited, relying on astute listeners to recognise that something is being reworked.<sup>15</sup> To this extent, one could argue that when scholars use remixing as a means of describing the reproduction and replication involved in traditionally understood internet memes, what they really mean is sampling, particularly since these forms of visual culture rely on a viewer’s extant, specified knowledge to create their meaning or humour.

With this all being said, sampling encompasses what Behr et al. term a “spectrum of activity,” from the appropriation of more “recognisable chunks” of a song, to the practice of precisely lifting a singular drum hit from an obscure record (229). Moreover, sampling recruits multiple actors and influences, from the crate-digging musician to the casual listener, in its creation of ever-shifting, context dependent meanings. To fully account for sampling is beyond the scope of this chapter.<sup>16</sup> My above discussion is instead an attempt to offer a working definition to work as I consider the practice in relation to Hyperpop.

Within the context of Hyperpop, I wager that the practice of sampling, understood as a form of musical memeing, both reforms cultural objects in a manner similar to that done by covers, at the same time as it continually revises the bounds of the musical style in a fashion similar to remixing. As noted above, as with visual memes, samples oftentimes go uncredited. As such, to identify and catalogue all the samples employed across Hyperpop absent musician-provided lists of samples used, which themselves are also often incomplete, is a huge undertaking outside the scope of this chapter. The following account is therefore by no means comprehensive. Rather, I offer it as an initial attempt to parse some of what certain instances of sampling within Hyperpop might do, and how they function memetically. I return to sampling in Chapter 3 and discuss it in relation to other forms of remediation, particularly of the cultural past. In the following pages, I discuss sampling in relation to two Hyperpop songs, the aforementioned “mos thoser” by food house and “Delicious feat. Tommy Cash” by Charli XCX.

As noted above, “mos thoser” makes use of a sample of Crazy Frog’s somewhat notorious work “Axel F.” Given that “Axel F” was an early viral phenomenon, described as the first “ringtone hit,” the sample is already loaded with memetic meaning (Gopinath 136). Most recently, for example, these acts of memeing have deemed Crazy Frog both a trans

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<sup>15</sup> There is a longstanding history of actively attempting to obscure the source of one’s samples within sample based music (Ratliffe 102). One could argue that, as sampling has become enmeshed within “commercial (and much other) popular music practice,” and is no longer necessarily only a part of specific, sample based scenes or communities, this culture of obstruction and niche sample finding has shifted (Behr et al. 224). Moreover, as commercial sample repositories such as Splice, for example, have become integrated into popular practices of music production, the equation of sampling with the search for obscure material has been further severed. Still, it remains that samples are not often credited explicitly, and thus are usually only recognizable to certain listeners.

<sup>16</sup> For further reading on sampling see: Behr et al. 223-240; Chang 143-159; Chapman 243-261; Rodgers 313-320.

icon, and a Hyperpop artist (see fig. 1).<sup>17</sup> As noted in the first section of this chapter, memes often play off the meanings already attributed to the texts that they incorporate, creating at times nebulous webs of intertextual connections. In incorporating such a notorious sample into their work, and in making no attempts to obscure the sound in its incorporation, food house necessarily, though this act of sonic memeing, becomes intertwined in these memetic webs.

Much like memes more broadly, however, the logic of this memeing is fuzzy. Is food house's inclusion of the work an attempt to reconfigure Frog's "Axel F" as an innovative act of music making, one that serves as a precursor to Hyperpop's experimental pop? Or is it, like memes may often be, an act of irreverence or ironic deconstruction, one whose sole aim is to riff on the deluge of internet content, to create a sonics of digital detritus? The context of the rest of the song gives us some clues, but also opens new areas of ambiguity. Much like Fraxiom, who is a member of food house, refers to a particular queer side of the internet through forms of lyrical citation in "scawy monstews and nice spwites :3," they similarly populate "mos thoser" with highly specific forms of lyrical reference to queer internet culture and memes. With references to "themboification" and the assertion of the phrase "God is Trans" the song could be read literally, as a mere repetition of digital pith, an edgy and provocative assertion of internet connoisseurship (food house "mos thoser" 0:49, 1:09). In this case, the inclusion of a sample of the internet's much-memed "Axel F" simply reflects this tone.

Yet, like the memes which assert that Crazy Frog is trans, the seemingly irreverent musical shitposting belies a more profound assertion. In the case of the trans frog memes, could we consider Crazy Frog a "bad trans object" along Cael M Keagan's lines, one that confounds and threatens norms of essentialist sex categorisation even as it may nonetheless be fraught and complicated in its politics (Keagan)? Similarly, if we take food house's memetic sampling seriously, could the inclusion of the "Axel F" sample call into question the bounds of taste, popular music, even Hyperpop itself? Taking this one step further, I posit that "mos thoser," through this musical memeing, does more than simply negotiate the bounds of the music style, or cite music previously dismissed as trash as canonical. Rather, the sample's incorporation, alongside the lyrical citation of various other memes, also brings up considerations of who is qualified to get the music itself.

Thinking along these lines, these forms of hyper-referential music making can perhaps be understood as a means of creating queer sonic worlds, what Muñoz might call "affirmative utopia[s]," in their forms of highly referential memetic web weaving that rely on a certain in-group knowledge (Muñoz 31; Miltner, para.1). I wager that, in the context of "mos thoser," the use of the highly recognisable sample functions like the song's broader lyrical citation of various internet memes: either you understand the distinct internet sludge these assertions and citations are couched in, or you do not. Much like remixing, which functions to continually push the bounds of experimentation within the genre, this form of sonic memeing is perhaps a means of engendering a certain audience, of managing who can fully engage with or comprehend the music. In other words, of subtly managing the music's "participation structure" (Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World" 367). To the casual listener, or normie, "mos thoser" is a zany work of pop music, one that reflects or speaks to the chaos of the contemporary internet. Yet, to those that can unpack these various forms of memetic citation, "mos thoser" becomes somewhat anthemic, a work that speaks to a shared cultural archive and its implicit, even secret, meanings.

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<sup>17</sup> In 2019, after a Twitter user posted an unverified screenshot of the record label Warner Records allegedly claiming that Crazy Frog was trans, the hashtag #CrazyFrogTrans briefly trended on the website. Since then, multiple Twitter users have cheekily claimed Frog as a "trans masc icon" and advocate for trans rights (Crooks & Nannies [@Crooks\_and\_nans]; rock star raemun [@tofusmell]; fooly [@fooly\_cooly])

Like forms of intra-Hyperpop remixing, forms of intra-Hyperpop sampling also function to continually assert and manage the bounds of the genre itself. In Charli XCX's "Delicious feat. Tommy Cash," for example, the artist samples the chorus of her previous, chart-topping hit "Boom Clap." The sample, filtered to sound like a call over a supermarket PA system, interjects abruptly into "Delicious feat. Tommy Cash" after the song's third chorus, accompanied by the sound of a loud intercom-like beeping (2:29). In altering the form of the sample in this way, I posit that XCX cheekily plays with notions of her own mainstream success. For "Delicious feat. Tommy Cash" is one of XCX's more experimental works, one that exploits the glitchy sonics of Auto-Tune and makes use of metallic SuperSaw synths. In the middle of the song, her past, chart-topping-self interjects, the treatment of the sample's form indicative of a somewhat ironic stance towards her past sounds. "Call for pop on aisle four," it seems to say, reconfiguring past projects as pure product.

Yet, like the case of "mos thoser" incorporating Crazy Frog's "Axel F," XCX's sonic self-memeing is perhaps not a total dismissal, but rather, a memetic, tongue-in-cheek embrace. The incorporation of the sample, with its supermarket treatment, seems to suggest that the artist can be both product and progenitor. If, as Whelan and Nowak contend, memes might be mechanism with which internet communities determine the meanings and bounds of genres, and as such are a means by which cultures contend with what it means for a genre to go mainstream, XCX's sonic self-memeing engages in similar provocations (455). Following the sample, XCX's voice is panned quickly so that it bounces around a listener's speakers or headphones, giving the impression that there are multiple pop singers floating around in space (2:50). The song's stereo image underscores the multiplicity of XCX initiated by her self-memeing, presenting her as at once pop diva and experimental progenitor, aware of her place as pop product and provocateur. Unlike other genres of music, which see selling out as a "kiss of death," for Hyperpop, and XCX in particular, it becomes yet another avenue for memetic meta-commentary, an opportunity for more, rather than less, sonic experimentation (McLeod 70).

Sampling, when used in the service of musical memeing, relies on specific, in-group knowledge to fully resonate. As such, Hyperpop's memetic sampling allows it to speak out of both sides of its mouth, appealing to a wider pop audience of normies, while more subtly nodding to a particular shared cultural archive. Like covering, this form of citation and revision enlists past cultural objects, at times amending them to sound differently, to account for that which they previously did or could not (Muñoz 31). Like remixing, this form of sonic appropriation engenders a distinct audience, allowing the music to speak to a certain in group even as it may appeal to a wider audience of normies. food house's "mos thoser," for example, through its memeing, can only fully resonate with listeners who are immersed in a specific, queer side of the internet. XCX's self-sampling, on the other hand, riffs on the artist's own ability to appeal to a wide array of audiences. In her self-citation, the artist memetically contends with her mainstream crossover status, deep-frying past hits through a process of self-sampling. All the while, these memetic forms of sampling, like the forms of covering and remixing discussed above, allow Hyperpop artists to perform a sort of "genre work" in their continual management of the genre itself. The artists not only contend with how the music can, perhaps even should, sound, but importantly, with whom it can resonate (Nowak and Whelan 452).

### **Musical Meme Wars: A Complication, A Conclusion**

As this chapter has argued, memes are a useful concept with which to understand musical practices of citation and reproduction such as covering, remixing, and sampling. While scholarship has increasingly venerated music-related and audiovisual memes as objects of sound-related study, there exists a relative dearth of literature concerning how music and

its attendant production practices may operate according to memetic logics or as memes themselves. As I have noted, an account of how music may function as meme can elucidate the ways that artists, particularly those working within the same genre, negotiate the meanings of cultural texts in ways that are similar to practices of memeing within online cultures. In the context of Hyperpop, I discussed how practices such as covering, remixing, and sampling allow artists to “*assert, dispute, or finesse a particular and singular meaning and coherence for [the] musical style*” (Nowak and Whelan 452). I posited that this form of “genre work” runs in contrast to, or as a counterpart of, the top-down definition of the genre imposed by Spotify (Nowak and Whelan 452).

In this sense, then, Hyperpop’s musical memeing constitutes a meme war, a semiotic struggle over the direction and meaning of the musical style itself. Hyperpop artists, in their various, winking, forms of musical memeing, work to define the genre, its attendant sounds and audience, in ways that work alongside and counter to the platform-imposed label. Before concluding this chapter, however, I wish to nuance this original dichotomy, between platform power and memetic “genre work,” that I initially set up (Nowak and Whelan 452). For, if we take seriously the notion that music may function as a meme, it is imperative to consider the conditions of its circulation in the context of contemporary platforms and the forms of the data extraction and monetization they enact. In other words, if Hyperpop is indeed engaged in a meme war, it is necessary to consider the terrain of its battlefield, and the stakes of this semiotic engagement to begin with.

### *A Complication*

Here, it is useful to turn to Patricia Reed’s work on memes, and to bring her scepticism regarding their political or tactical merit to bear on the discussion at hand. Drawing on Jodi Dean’s notion of communicative capitalism, Reed notes that for platforms, “it matters only that something is circulated, and not what is circulated” (Reed, “Meso-Memetics” 283). Put differently, that data can be extracted, amassed, and collated from the content that circulates, and the corresponding user actions that occur, within the bounds of a platform is of greater import than the content of the content itself (Srnicek 10; Reed, “Meso-Memetics” 282). Thus, in the context of Spotify, a song matters mostly to the extent that, on the one hand, data about its musical and social characteristics can be extracted and classified via its proprietary software and, on the other, that user actions taken regarding the song, such as listens, skips or saves, can be collected and monitored (Morris, “Curation by Code” 454; Prey, “Musica Analytica” 33; Eriksson 420).

The forms of “semiotic transmission” a meme/song might enable, therefore, are relatively inconsequential when compared with the data it generates (Reed, “Meso-Memetics” 283). As such, Reed declares meme wars an “interim tactic” at best, one that, absent more material forms of intervention, ultimately “only economically benefits the increasingly few,” namely those who own the data (“Meso-Memetics” 282). Seen in this context, then, Hyperpop’s musical memeing ultimately works in the service of producing data, data which is then used to “defin[e] and microtarget...audience segments” for Spotify to then sell off to advertisers as a part of its platform business model (Eriksson et al. 195). Hyperpop’s musical memeing, in other words, ultimately provides data for Spotify to then turn into profits.

While Reed’s critique of memes sees the “semio-labor” they perform as secondary to the data they generate, in the context of Hyperpop, this memetic “semio-labor” may actually have additional benefits for Spotify itself (Reed, “Meso-Memetics” 283). Considering that the genre emerged inorganically, discovered because of the platform’s massive data repositories and astute analytics, the “genre work” that Hyperpop’s memeing engages in ultimately works to cohere and maintain the sound of a musical style that was largely

imposed (Nowak and Whelan 452). This is not to say that the musical scenes and genres that were brought in under the Hyperpop moniker, such as London's PC Music scene for example, did not emerge from more "real" or "organic" cultural contexts (i.e., contexts that were not the by-product of platform marketing). Rather, it is to note that these scenes and sounds were stitched together by Spotify in a way that might not have occurred had the playlist note been developed. In this context, Hyperpop's "genre work" can be considered a form of musical suture maintenance, a management of the genre's sound that continually revises and updates the musical style on Spotify's behalf (Nowak and Whelan 452). Reed's work thus usefully illustrates how memes, as forms of content, oftentimes ultimately work to support the platforms on which they spread, even if they may simultaneously be engaged in genuinely interesting or subversive forms of semiotic negotiation.

### *A Conclusion*

Taking the aforementioned considerations into account, it becomes evident that Hyperpop's musical memeing is fraught. On the one hand, Hyperpop's memeing enables a form of "genre work" that allows artists to define and hone the musical form (Nowak and Whelan 452). On the other, it provides not only content for Spotify to monetize, but more interestingly, works to maintain a genre that the platform cobbled together. Instead of using the latter point to dismiss Hyperpop, I wager that memes, when used as a "prism" with which to understand the genre, allow us to hold space for the genre's dual existence as both content and critique (Shifman, *Memes In Digital Culture* 6). While Hyperpop may not directly intervene into what Reed terms the "means of enablement," which in this case would be DSPs such as Spotify itself, the music's "genre work," understood as a meme war, is nonetheless an interim tactic, a form of contestation over the meaning of cultural forms (Reed, "Meso-Memetics" 282; Nowak and Whelan 452).

Working from the premise that pop music is certainly not a material intervention, bringing the study of memes to bear on the sounds of Hyperpop thus aids in accounting for the ways that the genre might nonetheless be involved in important acts of symbolic negotiation, even as it is bound by, and might ultimately work in the support of, platforms like Spotify. Moreover, the concept of musical memeing helps to account not just for the ways that these practices of citation might reframe or reconsider past cultural forms, but also actively work to create small enclaves of communal meaning that nonetheless assert that all cultural forms are capable of being reformed anew. In the next chapter of this thesis, which puts forth the concept of speculative nostalgia, I take up similar themes. In particular, I examine how forms of reuse and reappropriation within the genre might be a tool of de-fossilisation, of asserting the malleability of the present and the desire for other futures.



### Chapter 3: Speculative Nostalgia

#### Hyperpop: the Sound of the Now?

Hyperpop has, despite its relative obscurity, been declared the “sound of the now.” Per the music press, it is the “countercultural sound of the 2020s,” “the new sound for a post-pandemic world,” maybe even “the future of music” (Madden, “How Hyperpop,” para.5; Kornhaber, para.1; Yalcinkaya, para.1; Jolley, para.1). These declarations are partially derived from the music itself. For, even a cursory glance at the genre exposes a certain contemporaneity and an associated technophilia: songs are named after iPhones, lyrics are replete with references to forms of online culture, and album covers are often digitally altered or digitally rendered in total (see fig. 5, 6, 7, 8). Moreover, the genre has an inherently digital, even “futuristic” sound, driven in part by the use of virtual music production technologies such as Auto-Tune.



Fig. 5 Album cover for Himera’s *Sharing Secrets*.



Fig. 8 Album cover for caro’s *Heartbeats / Heartbreaks*.

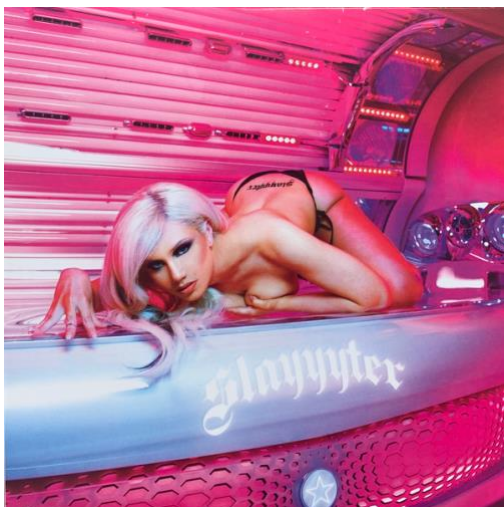


Fig. 6 Album cover for Slayyyter’s *Slayyyter*.



Fig. 7 Album cover for SOPHIE’s *OIL OF EVERY PEARL’S UN-INSIDES*.

Yet, Hyperpop is deemed the “sound of now,” and maybe even the future, not just because it reverberates in innovative or “futuristic” ways, but because it is linked with a certain Zoomer sensibility.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the genre seems to speak to, or arise from, the “Extremely Online” tendencies of Zoomers themselves (Pritchard, para.10). Hyperpop is the soundtrack to numerous TikToks and the subject of message boards and Discord servers (Madden, “How Hyperpop,” para.2; Dandridge-Lemco, para.14; Hyun Kim, para.4). Moreover, as discussed at further length in Chapter 2, the genre is steeped in meme culture; songs reference memes in their lyrical content, and memes about the musical style abound.

Hyperpop and Zoomers, however, are intertwined through more than just a shared affinity for the digital. The mainstream press also links Hyperpop to Zoomers because the genre reflects their purported politics (Enis, 2020a; Galil, 2020; Madden, 2021; Yalcinkaya, 2021). For, if Gen Z is purportedly the most queer, “most online” generation, the press paints Hyperpop as its natural cultural expression, the inevitable output of a crop of open minded digital natives (Nast, 2021). In much the same way as Gen Z has been invested with a supposedly unique political proclivity – for instance, they are often characterised by the mainstream press as the most “social-justice-minded, purpose-driven generation yet” (Moore, para.2) - Hyperpop is cast as a distinctly subversive musical niche, one capable of breaking down the barriers of genre, of spotlighting queer artists, of “rearranging the mainstream ” (Enis, para.18; Galil, para.6; Madden, “How Hyperpop,” para.1; Yalcinkaya, para.10). As noted in the introduction to this thesis, if Hyperpop is the “sound of the now,” perhaps, as the buzzy press asserts, it is also the harbinger of a brighter musical future to come.

Despite Hyperpop’s correlation with a particular “nowness,” the genre has a considerably more complicated relationship to temporality and to technology than is often ascribed by its cultural commentators. Far from being completely new, Hyperpop frequently references the sounds and aesthetics of the past. Moreover, the musical style’s disposition towards technologies is hardly an outright celebration; technologies often appear haunted, disappointing or anxiety inducing, even as they may nonetheless feature heavily. Towards the former point, while Hyperpop may be “the sound of the now,” the genre constantly evokes, and is perhaps even nostalgic for, past times, particularly the late nineties to early two-thousands. Popular Hyperpop artists 100 geecs, for example, call to mind emo AIM screennames in their song title “xXXi\_wud\_nvrstøp\_ÜXXx.” Rico Nasty, in her “IPHONE” music video, refers to Aphex Twin’s 1997 “Come to Daddy” (see fig. 9, 10). Sonically, the genre calls back to the period either through samples, like Food House’s “mos thoser,” as discussed in Chapter 2, which contains a sample of Crazy Frog’s 2005 hit “Axel F,” or by incorporating elements from genres popular at the time. This can be heard in the trance-like synth arpeggios on *daine* and *ericdoa*’s “boys wanna txt,” heavy nu metal guitar riffs on *Rina Sawayama*’s “STFU!” and syncopated ska rhythms on 100 geecs’ “stupid horse.” While

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<sup>18</sup> This Zoomer (aka Generation Z) sensibility consists of a sort of meme-filled digital affectation that straddles the ironic and the sincere, the authentic and the inauthentic. See Jay Owens’s “Post-Authenticity and the Ironic Truths of Meme Culture” as well as Joshua Citarella’s *Politigram and the Post-left* for further discussion.

Hyperpop may update or revise these aesthetics or sounds in novel ways, the genre nonetheless draws heavily from the styles of the past.



Fig. 10 Still from Aphex Twin's "Come to Daddy" music video.



Fig. 9 Still from Rico Nasty's "IPHONE" music video.

Moreover, while Hyperpop is often viewed as a musical style that embraces technology, both in its association with online communities as well as in the digital timbres of its music, its relationship to technology is much more ambivalent than the discourse surrounding the musical style may lead one to believe. In the aforementioned "IPHONE" video, screens become haunted, whereas in daine and ericdoa's "boys wanna txt," endlessly scrolling messages encroach upon the music video's frame, crowding in on the artists. 100 geccs' song "ringtone," on the other hand, tells the tale of online obsession atop frenzied guitar riffs, positioning notifications as slippery sonic signals of both anticipation and intense

rejection. As much as Hyperpop may be “inspired by everything on the internet,” it seems it is also weary of the increasing embeddedness of technologies into our lives, simultaneously drawn to and fearful of the contemporary technologies that it nonetheless takes as inspiration (Hyun Kim, para.1).

In this chapter, I examine the genre’s complicated relationship to both time and technology. I do this through a close engagement with Charli XCX’s hit “1999” as well as Fraxiom’s lesser known “fly with ü” and their respective music videos. Both songs, characterised by a nostalgia for the trends and technologies of the late nineties to early two-thousands, present the present as lacking, ultimately proposing not a return to some luddite past but rather, an acceleration into some (as yet un-envisioned) technological future. As such, in this chapter I toy with the concept of *speculative nostalgia* as a means of understanding this techno-revisionist mode. In line with the broader concerns of my thesis, this chapter considers how Hyperpop’s forms of revisitation and revision might be shaped by the conditions the genre finds itself enmeshed within, at the same time as it attempts to sort through and move beyond their very logics. Along these lines, this chapter takes up themes similar to those explored in Chapter 2. Namely, it examines how Hyperpop might remediate the cultural past so as to make it sound anew and to continually assert that the meanings attributed to cultural forms are always up for negotiation and reuse towards different ends.

In the first section of this chapter, I consider accounts of nostalgia as they relate to the work of art more broadly, and music in particular. I put forth the concept of speculative nostalgia as a means of understanding Hyperpop’s form of remediation. I posit this speculative nostalgia enacts a xenofeminist project, one that simultaneously engages in types of semiotic intervention at the same time as it concerns itself with the reappropriation of technologies themselves. I then contend with how Hyperpop’s speculative nostalgia may be a product of, and bolstered by, Spotify’s business practices, as well as a risk averse contemporary culture obsessed with revisiting the cultural past more broadly. Following this, I turn to Charli XCX’s “1999” and Fraxiom’s “fly with ü,” and their respective music videos. Paying particular attention to practices of reference and sampling within each work, as well their portrayals and use of technology, I tease out how each work de-fossilises the present to suggest not only that the now is not enough, but that it is possible to imagine beyond it.

## Speculative Nostalgia

### *The Nostalgia Mode*

Nostalgia, in its most common usage, often references a sense of longing for a return to some past time or condition. In my own investigation of speculative nostalgia, I draw upon Frederic Jameson and Mark Fisher’s respective critiques of the concept. In presenting nostalgia not as some psychic state but rather as the product of *material conditions* under which culture is produced, both Jameson and Fisher’s accounts of the concept illuminate how Hyperpop’s speculative nostalgia may be both shaped by and formed in response to the conditions from which it emerges. As such, their work helps to tease out the potentially regressive or reactionary elements inherent to nostalgia itself, in turn providing a foil, or some sort of grounding force, against which to advance the concept of speculative nostalgia, something I posit as a nostalgia that mines the past in the service of de-fossilising the present, and of imagining desired otherworlds.

For Jameson, the “nostalgia mode” consists of the depiction of style over that of “‘real’ history,” and thus deprives the subject of any ability to organise the past or future into a “coherent experience” (67, 71). Put another way, the “nostalgia mode,” particularly through its use of pastiche, does not involve a critical retelling of history, but instead presents an image, or simulacra, of another epoch as a means of communicating some hazy notion of

“pastness” (Jameson 67). As such, the past and present come to congeal as a sort of eternal sludge, or “glossy mirage,” something Jameson sees as dangerous, given that it does not position people as active makers of history (Jameson 68). Within this “nostalgia mode,” the present unfolds as what always was, the only differences between then and now limited to the realm of the aesthetic in such a way that obfuscates different political, social, or economic realities (Ibid.).

Mark Fisher takes up Jameson’s critique of nostalgia within his writing, positing that the “nostalgia mode” has only intensified since the latter first identified it. In fact, it has done so to such an extent that the constant “montaging of earlier eras” is now a dominant mode of cultural production, so commonplace as to hardly be noticeable (Jameson 67; Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 6). Fisher posits that this is, in part, due to the conditions of “total recall” brought about by the ubiquity of digital technologies, as well as neoliberal economic policies which have “systematically deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new” (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 2, 15). Fisher proposes that this constant recycling of past material masquerades as newness, but in actuality is the mark of a culture in stasis, a culture wherein any coherent idea of future is, for one reason or another, in the process of slowly waning (*Ghosts of My Life* 6). For these authors, then, nostalgia, especially within the domains of artistic production, is a blight: it numbs the critical capacities of the audience, obfuscates changing historical conditions, and is the product of a society wherein the creation of the new has, for one reason or another, become untenable.

Taking into account a landscape of popular culture that has become populated with what seems like endless remakes and franchise expansions - see, for example, the ever-increasing Disney-platformed Star Wars and Marvel universes - and reactionary political calls to return to some imagined past, to, for instance, Make America Great Again, it is perhaps worthwhile to heed the criticisms brought about by Jameson and Fisher. Where popular culture now seems thoroughly obsessed with the formal repetition of pre-established codes and conventions, what might be made of Hyperpop’s own expressions of nostalgia? Is this genre simply, as Jameson might assert, the artistic extrusion of late capitalism, something that has only been intensified by increased economic precarity and internet access? Or can nostalgia within the work of art become a critical tool - a retelling of the past in the hope of actualizing different futures? Perhaps both are true. For, Hyperpop’s revisitation of yesteryear is certainly not a total break with the economic logics underwriting contemporary music’s ubiquitous platforming, as will be discussed shortly. At the same time, to dismiss Hyperpop’s forms of reference and revisitation as a sort of postmodern drivel does a disservice to the minor ways the genre may open new imaginaries, in part through the use of nostalgia. Although the musical style’s revisitation of the past is certainly not without issue, I wager that, through Hyperpop, it is possible to sound out the ways that nostalgia can operate in excess of the “nostalgia mode” (Jameson 67).

### *Hyperpop as Hauntological?*

Fisher offers one means of incorporating the past without descending into the “nostalgia mode” in his elaboration on Jacques Derrida’s concept of hauntology (Jameson 67). A portmanteau of haunting and ontology, Derrida used the term to refer to the ways that past elements may persist in ghostly ways (Derrida 10). Hauntology differs from nostalgia in that it is not motivated by a desire to return to some bygone time. Rather, it foregrounds the temporal and ontological disjunctions of the present; the now, in other words, is always haunted by the spectres of what once was, and what might be (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 18). Working from this concept, Fisher figures hauntology as a form of spectral revisitation, one that refuses to relinquish a “desire for the future” (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 21). For Fisher, then, hauntology marks a longing to resume radical political processes, ones oriented towards

“democratisation and pluralism” for example, which have been taken up in earlier eras (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 27). As such, hauntology can be understood as an active, critical form of nostalgia, one that does not simply consist of the repetition of codes for repetition's sake, but rather deploys repetition toward specific political ends.

Fisher's discussion of Mark Ronson and Amy Winehouse's song “Valerie,” in contrast to his reading of the works by artists such as Burial, is illustrative of the distinction he makes between the hauntological and nostalgic modes, as well as his preference for the latter. Whereas the sounds of Winehouse's take on sixties soul are mere digital “simulation[s]” of earlier technologies and sounds, and thus operate in the dreaded “nostalgia mode,” the use of samples of the “crackle” of vinyl by hauntological artists serves to highlight a temporal disjuncture, creating cracks where the political imaginaries of bygone eras may break through (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 11, 21; Jameson 67). For Fisher, this example of hauntological sampling is productive, critical, even political, but nostalgia's simulation is regressive, its verisimilitude allowing the listener to fall into the “illusion of presence” (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 21). In other words, whereas hauntological music evokes the dashed hopes of times past, simultaneously refusing to settle for the now while also calling up the phantasms of some better future, the nostalgia of pop music is implicitly “timeless,” turning past/present/future into an eternal, immutable condition (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 11, 21).

Fisher's notion of hauntology perhaps gets closer to a conception of nostalgia, or of artistically reconfiguring the past, as more than a sort of cultural cud-chewing. Through the filter of hauntology, the evocation of bygone eras within a work of art is not an indication of the dissolution of past/present/future into some muddled nothingness. Rather, the calling up of the past is reframed as that which is invested in both recognizing the residues of history and actualising desired otherworlds. The concept, however, is not without issue. Firstly, Fisher's hauntology is itself haunted by a sort of modernist distaste for pop culture, one that veers on the edge of creating a dichotomy between pop (bad) and art (good). Could Winehouse's “simulation[s]” not be said to be strange, uncanny, and disjointed as well? Even Fisher himself notes how these retro sounds of Winehouse's pop lead to the feeling that something is “not quite right” - could this not lend itself to the sense of time being “out of joint” in a fashion similar to hauntological music (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 11, 21)? Secondly, hauntology itself has been used to name a genre of music, one that came to prominence in the mid-2000s, and as such has its own set of sonic and aesthetic features. Hauntology, in this instance, refers to a subgenre of electronic music that uses samples of crackling vinyl, remediates the elements of sixties and seventies British visual culture, and makes use of analogue or obsolete instruments and recording devices, all of which lend the genre a distinctly anachronistic sound. Hyperpop shares very little in common formally with hauntological music, even if, as I intend to argue, it is nonetheless similarly interested in remediating the cultural past, in recovering the hopes vested in previous cultural forms, and also in refusing to relinquish the desire for a future (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 21).

As such, I put forth the term *speculative nostalgia* as a conceptual gesture that retains the spirit of Fisher's account of the ways that hauntological music mines the past in the service of creating temporal ruptures and speculative futures, while also departing from the concept in order to understand what processes, hopes, and alternatives Hyperpop may attempt to excavate from the past and conjure into some as yet unrealized future. Through an examination of processes of sampling and reference in Hyperpop, I seek to put forth a conception of what this revisitation might do. Here, nostalgia, particularly within the context of Hyperpop, is thus conceived of as processing a speculative charge. To rehash or recall the past is, then, both a means of probing the now and of teasing out questions of the future, even if those questions are ultimately left only to the realm of speculation, to asking “what if?”

*Speculative Nostalgia, Technology and Xenofeminism*

The notion that Hyperpop may be linked to some sense of the future is not all that new. As discussed at the outset of this chapter, the mainstream press often portrays the genre as a unique force capable of in some way, somehow, bringing about a (supposedly brighter) tomorrow. I wish, however, to differentiate speculative nostalgia from the mainstream press' glossy accounts of Hyperpop's purported future-bearing proclivity. For, my contention here is not that the genre will somehow actualise a utopian horizon. Rather, it is to note that, in contrast to, or rather, in excess of, the "nostalgia mode," the genre uses the styles of the past as a means of probing the present and the habituated, and of sounding out other imaginaries (Jameson 67). In particular, through forms of sampling and reference, the genre often disrupts or de-fossilises the hardened place of iconographies and technologies, characterising them as mutable and placing them up for grabs. To this extent, I wager that Hyperpop's speculative nostalgia operates at a distinctly *xenofeminist* frequency.

As Laboria Cuboniks develop in their *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, any sort of feminism, and any sort of liberatory politics more broadly, fit for the twenty-first century must be situated within today's technological milieu. Like many feminists before them, the collective explores the way in which the emancipatory prospects of technologies have been curbed by their exclusive use in the interest of capital (Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, paras.0x03, 0x08). In contrast to other feminist approaches, which may at times take on a nostalgic charge, one that longs to return to some supposed pre-technological Eden, Laboria Cuboniks is decidedly and explicitly pro-technology (Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, para.0x07). As such, a key refrain within the xenofeminist project is that, in order to realise its full potential as a feminist tool, technology should not be discarded, but instead must be linked with "collective theoretical and political thinking," that which foregrounds the role of "women, queers, and the gender non-conforming" (Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, para.0x02). A means of doing this, they posit, is to "redeploy existing technologies" towards other ends, and to recover the latent possibilities in today's technologies in service of ulterior futures (Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, para.0x07). The Cuboniks collective thus underscores how both alternative *uses* and alternative *users* of technologies may not only bring about, but are necessary for, the construction of, "a new world," one free from the limits of "white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, para.0x19).

Cuboniks' calls, however, entail more than just material intervention. Oriented by a speculative charge, one that relies on the power of collectively held beliefs to bring about future events, Cuboniks' xenofeminist demands underscore the necessity of finding what they term a "better semiotic parasite," or, a type of fiction that elicits a more utopian world (Cuboniks, "Revisiting the Future," para.17; Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, para.0x18). In other words, semiotic forms of intervention, such as reappropriation or resignification, are taken as important strategies in the xenofeminist project, capable of latching onto and intervening into the quotidian fictions that undergird and shape the present (Ibid.). In this way, there is a symbiosis between Cuboniks' call to arms and Muñoz' notion of disidentification, which was discussed in Chapter 2. Much like Cuboniks' parasite, Muñoz' disidentification works not simply by pointing to the semiotic operations of power, by, for instance, identifying or deconstructing them (Muñoz 31). Rather, it consists of parasitically latching onto signs, and using them as a "raw material" with which to articulate an alternative politics (Ibid.). Both texts, then, point to the ways that the reuse of antecedent cultural texts, objects, or forms, what Jameson might dismiss as forms of nostalgia, may be mobilised as instruments of speculation and critique.

Refracted through a xenofeminist orientation, Hyperpop's speculative nostalgia is one invested in parasitically latching onto elements of eras past to purport utopian fictions and

conjure up desired otherworlds. In contrast to Jameson and Fisher's respective accounts of nostalgia, a xenofeminist filter emphasises the ways that strategies of remediation and revisitation are capable of more than simply a pastiche of the past. Rather, these artistic strategies may actively intervene in our sensemaking practices in the present. Moreover, the collective's work underscores the necessity of tuning into how technologies themselves are deployed in these acts of speculative nostalgia. For, as the genre revisits the past, signs or styles are not the only thing that may be made to operate at a new frequency. Rather, technologies may be taken up in new ways, and towards different ends. In other words, acts of speculative nostalgia may interrogate the place of technologies not just through forms of re-fictionalisation but also in the very ways that technologies are utilised. Hyperpop, then, may speculate on the role of technology, and use technologies as tools of speculation themselves.

### *Post-Piracy Precarity and Platformed Nostalgia*

Thus far, I have positioned speculative nostalgia as a form of revisitation that operates in excess of the "nostalgia mode" (Jameson 67). Instead of merely repeating the styles of the past, this form of nostalgia mobilises bygone forms as a means of de-fossilising the present, and of conjuring desired otherworlds. To this extent, I wagered that speculative nostalgia, particularly in the context of Hyperpop, operates at a decidedly xenofeminist frequency. Before I continue on to elucidate the operation of speculative nostalgia within specific Hyperpop works, I want to briefly situate the genre's reuse of past styles within the context of the contemporary music industry. For, it is imperative to consider how the genre's rehashing of the past may be bolstered by the risk-adverse logics that have come to dominate since the widespread adoption of file sharing, as well as the algorithmic logics that have come to the fore as a result of music's platforming.

In a post-piracy landscape, wherein the music industry's profits are no longer quite as assured, new artists or musical forms are potentially risky investments (Mazierska et al. 7). As such, nostalgic musical strategies like remixing, covering, and sampling have become increasingly valuable to the record industry (Mazierska et al. 8). In other words, the more a song sounds like other successful songs, the more likely it is that the music industry writ large is willing to take a chance on it. This could help to explain what seems like a recent explosion of musical revisitations of the past. As just one of many examples, in 2022 alone Elton John participated in two separate interpolations of his past hits: "Cold Heart (PNAU Remix)," a Dua Lipa helmed reprisal of 1972's "Rocket Man," and "Hold Me Closer," a revision of 1971's "Tiny Dancer" alongside Britney Spears.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the recycling of past musical material not only mitigates the risk of releasing new work,<sup>20</sup> but also serves as a lucrative venture for rights owners themselves. In the case of the Elton John example, John not only receives publishing *and* master royalties from the new songs, but he also benefits from the increased awareness, and thus streaming of, his original tracks, a common consequence of interpolations (Millman, para.10). In fact, interpolation has become such a lucrative venture for rights owners that publishers are now hosting pop song writing bootcamps with the explicit intention of getting songwriters to reuse their songs (Ibid.). Taking this into account, Hyperpop's recycling of the sonics and aesthetics of eras past is perhaps simply the result of a music industry both fearful of deviation from a fool-proof

<sup>19</sup> Notably, these songs mined other tracks within John's discography as well. "Cold Heart (PNAU Remix)" interpolates "Sacrifice," "Where's the Shoorah" and "Kiss the Bride" in addition to "Rocket Man" (Garcia, para.4). "Hold Me Closer," on the other hand, draws upon "The One" and "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" alongside "Tiny Dancer" (Cragg, para.1).

<sup>20</sup> Regarding "Cold Heart (PNAU Remix)," the risk of reprising this song was, in fact, mitigated twofold, since Young Thug successfully put a sample of "Rocket Man" to work in his 2018 track "High."



norm, and with a vested financial interest in the reuse of old materials. If the past seems like it is back in a big way, perhaps it is simply because the present is overdetermined by risk-averse logics bent on producing a financial future for their shareholders.

At the same time, the technologies used by streaming services themselves also have a hand in propagating this phenomenon. The algorithms employed by DSPs like Spotify, for example, help to facilitate this “more of the same” approach to music in their attempts to present listeners, and thus potential advertising recipients, with music that sounds similar to what they already like (Mazierska et al. 8). Much like the technologies employed by social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube tend to facilitate feedback loops or echo chambers in their bundling of their users into market segments, so too do the algorithmic tools of DSPs (Prey, “Musica Analytica” 32; Fry 280). Spotify wants to keep users on the app, and one means of doing so is to ensure that users are being presented with more of what initially drew them there in the first place. If users are being fed songs that Spotify’s algorithms assume they will like, and even the platform’s editorial playlists are being informed by algorithmic data, it follows that songs that harken back to the sounds of the past, sounds users may already know, have a higher chance of performing better within that environment.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, with Spotify’s algorithms programmed to feed users content that sounds like that which they have already heard, and even human-run editorial playlists informed by those algorithms, it makes sense that Hyperpop’s nostalgic longing finds a home on the platform. Moreover, per Fisher, it also follows that, at the same time as these codes are being endlessly circulated and repeated, artists are being deprived of the resources to create new ones (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 15). Spotify, for example, has repeatedly come under fire for its paltry pay-outs (Billet, para.4). As such, in the context of a music industry less willing to take chances on new artists, less and less artists are even receiving these measly resources to begin with. Those that do are incentivised to participate in Spotify’s nostalgia games should they wish to be remunerated by the platform.

Taking this into account, it becomes evident that Hyperpop works within, and is shaped by, a fraught context. As such, its speculative nostalgia is invariably formed, delimited, even produced, by the conditions of Spotify and the music industry more broadly. Far from using this as grounds to dismiss Hyperpop and its forms of revisitation, I seek to amplify the speculative frequency at which it operates, while keeping an ear to the humming of the industry and algorithmic logics within which it is nonetheless engulfed. In the following section, I examine Hyperpop’s speculative nostalgia through a close engagement with two songs and their respective media ecologies, seeking to take seriously the critiques made by each. What type of past do these songs attempt to revisit? What future, if any, do they gesture towards? And, in so doing, how might they intervene in the now?

### **Speculative Nostalgia in Hyperpop**

Both Charli XCX’s “1999” and Fraxiom’s “fly with ü” survey the present and find it coming up short. Unsatisfied with the now, XCX wants to “go back, back to 1999” (“1999” 0:01-0:05). Fraxiom, on the other hand, is darkly ambivalent towards the context of the now, they “don’t know if [they] wanna die / Hyperpop playlist Spotify” (“fly with ü” 0:30-0:34). In contrast to merely depicting the “sound of the now,” each artist represents the past, in particular the time of the late nineties to the early two-thousands, as a salve to the present, a moment of immense possibility, particularly regarding technology. XCX references the cultural and technological trends of the turn-of-the-millennium in her music video’s series of vignettes, wherein she recreates scenes from *Titanic*, chats on AOL’s instant messenger, and

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<sup>21</sup> While the “hyperpop” playlist itself is an editorial, as opposed to a strictly algorithmic playlist, it is nonetheless informed by and embedded within Spotify’s algorithmic infrastructure.

poses in a variety of advertisements for popular nineties products like Sketchers. The DIY greenscreen of Fraxiom's music video, on the other hand, revisits the aesthetics, Flash design and computer programs of a comparable moment. Sonically, XCX draws on the traditions of Eurodance and turn-of-the-millennium pop, while Fraxiom makes use of a sample from Gigi D'Agostino's 1999 hit "L'amour toujours." Whether through processes of reference or direct sampling, each work longs for the past, attempting, stylistically to gain access to it.

Given this description, one would perhaps not be mistaken to dismiss both "1999" and "fly with ü" as instances of Jameson's "nostalgia mode" (67). From this perspective, these works of Hyperpop are directly engaged in forms of pop cultural pastiche, ones that consist of the depiction of the styles of the past over some "'real' history" (Ibid.). Not so ready to dismiss these songs, I propose that both "1999" and "fly with ü," alongside their respective media ecologies, engage in a form of speculative nostalgia, one that presents a purported past to de-fossilise the present and imagine more desirable otherworlds. As I will argue over the coming pages, each work cobbles together a mythical historical era. Much like the "semiotic parasite[s]" of Cuboniks' writing, each work latches onto the cultural iconography and enthusiasms of the past, causing them to portray not some historical reality but rather the fictions they desire (Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, para.0x18). While both artists do this through various forms of reference and sampling, I posit that they also repurpose technologies themselves as tools of speculation. As such, in their cheeky speculative nostalgic reimagining of Y2K era trends and technologies, ones that often incompletely or strangely capture the past, XCX and Fraxiom simultaneously reposition time and technology as back up for grabs, creating a series of ruptures that intervene in the seeming inevitability of the present.

#### "1999:" *Deep Faking the Past*

In the music video for "1999," we first see Charli XCX as she waits for her rideshare to pick her up. As she gets into her Lyft, the popstar puts on her Beats by Dre headphones and texts on her iPhone. Aside from being obvious (perhaps even tongue-in-cheek) product placements, the technologies that feature in the intro to the video also function as temporal signposts. If the now is presented as dull, worthy of escape, XCX, at least in part, indicts contemporary technological accoutrements. This is as much evident in the video as it is in the song's lyrics, which express the longing for a time with "no phone / no cares" (XCX "1999" 1:04-1:06). As the camera zooms in on XCX's phone, the bouncing bass of "1999" begins and, with a sample of the sound of dial up internet, the video transports viewers through a digital blackhole of ones and zeros back to the era about which XCX croons.

Now in the popstar's imagined 1999, we first see XCX dressed as Steve Jobs (see fig. 11). While XCX's video consists of a series of vignettes wherein the singer dresses up as various cultural icons, this scene is notable for being the only gender-bent revision of the past, something that underscores this scene's fictitious remediation. In positioning popstar as technological innovator, the artist quite literally puts herself at the helm of "technoscientific imagination," rewriting a past that cheekily posits a "what if" (Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, para.0x02). What if a pop star had been Steve Jobs? If the technological present has not lived up to the liberatory dreams initially vested in cyberspace, XCX provides a solution by putting herself in charge. The speculative future XCX is nostalgic for is not one where technologies

are done away with, one wherein we return to some pristine, pre-technological Eden. Rather, it is one where the potential of technologies is put in pop hands.



Fig. 11 Still from "1999" of Charli XCX dressed as Steve Jobs.

In fact, in her use of deep fakes to remediate the cultural past, XCX quite literally reappropriates technologies. Deep fakes are a form of synthetic media that use artificial intelligence and machine learning to create audio or video that did not previously exist (Kietzmann et al. 138; Siekierski 1). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the technology has also been widely adopted in the service of generating synthetic celebrity porn as well as in the creation of “fake news” (Siekierski 1; Vincent, para.1). In the case of Charli XCX’s “1999,” deep fake technology was instead used to transplant the heads of XCX and featured artist Troy Sivan onto the bodies of backup dancers in sequences which imitate Spice Girls and Backstreet Boys videos respectively (see fig. 12, 13) (Vincent, para.2). In one sense, this reappropriation acts somewhat prefiguratively, intervening in the present by quite literally “redeploy[ing] existing technologies,” ones used either for the creation of reputation threatening pornography or fake news, in the service of a pop spectacle (Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, para.0x07). If XCX revisits the past to speculate as to what technologies could look like had they been placed in other hands, her use of deep fakes enacts this very intervention in the present. At the same time, in contrast to aesthetic forms of nostalgia that might portray a glossy “pastness,” the uncanny qualities brought about by the use of the technology work to denaturalise the images painted of yesteryear (Jameson 67). For, deep fakes create a strange disconnect between the head and the body, leading to an almost Brechtian quality to the work’s historical presentation. This is not the past as it was, the deep fake asserts, but rather, the past as it has been imagined.



Fig. 12 Still from "1999" which imitates the Spice Girls using deep fake technology.



Fig. 13 Still from "1999" which imitates the Backstreet Boys using deep fake technology.

Yet, importantly, the strategies deployed by XCX are not simply used for the purpose of deconstructing the past ad nauseam, nor do they present audiences with a smirking simulacrum. Rather, the revisionism within “1999” works much like the “semiotic parasite[s]” of Cuboniks’ writing, latching onto the symbols of eras past and making them signify differently, causing them to “arouse the desires [they] want to desire” (Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism*, para.0x018). This is as much the case in XCX’s Steve Jobs vignette as it is in the boy band section. In transporting the head of a gay pop artist onto the bodies of boy band members, the video’s use of deep fakes hooks onto the iconography of the past, in turn illuminating the latent “queer potentialities” of boy bands themselves (Gregory 3). While this

is a less explicit techno-revisionism than that of XCX as Steve Jobs, the work in this instance harnesses the glitches of contemporary technology to dually queer, as in make strange and make queer, the image of the boy band, enacting a sort of queer-inflicted revisionist nostalgia, one that seizes upon “previous cultural players” and “transfigure[s]” them (Muñoz 39). Far from presenting the past as some eternal phantasm, as Jameson’s “nostalgia mode” might do, XCX’s speculative nostalgia is an active form of remediation, of meddling with and re-presenting the past as a series of utopic provocations (67). This is not how things really went, but through its parasitic reappropriations, the video speculates as to what things might have looked like if they had. If the present is not what we want, “1999” wonders if imagining other pasts can perhaps help to conceive of desired otherworlds.

Musically, XCX’s work similarly scrambles our sense of time. Its catchy hooks recall the chart-topping sounds of yesteryear, and its plucky, synthesised chords evoke the timbres of the once popular genre Eurodance.<sup>22</sup> Yet, at the same time, the work sounds too digital, too contemporary to be the product of any time but the now. For example, the song makes use of a crisp snare sound commonly found in trap music, a subgenre of rap whose influence on musical production became somewhat ubiquitous in the 2010s.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, then, “1999” appears as precisely the type of anachronistic pastiche that we should be weary of. Contemporary enough to sound fresh on the radio, yet referential enough to be a safe bet, the song fits squarely within the context of streaming algorithms and risk averse music industry logics. Perhaps this is why the song became somewhat of a mainstream hit, spending six weeks on Billboard’s Mainstream Top 40 chart (“XCX Chart History”).

Considered as an instance of Hyperpop’s speculative nostalgia, however, I posit that “1999” revisits the pop sounds of yore in a move that refuses to settle for the present. Here, it is useful to turn back to Fisher’s exploration of hauntology, particularly as it relates to music, and to contrast XCX’s revisitation of past sounds with that of artists Bebe Rexha and David Guetta, who call upon a similar pop period with their work “I’m Good (Blue).” As Fisher notes, in hauntological music, artists often evoke the hopes embedded in past sounds, implicitly acknowledging that the future these past genres dreamed of no longer seems tenable (*Ghosts of My Life* 21). Yet, for the author, this melancholic evocation simultaneously “constitutes a refusal to give up on the desire for the future,” an inability to settle for the “mediocre satisfactions” that the now has to offer (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 21, 22). The past, therefore, is evoked to ruminate on, and enliven desires for alternatives to, the present.

As much as “1999” is an ebullient pop song, one that gleefully revisits the past, the work is similarly haunted by the unrealised futures of contemporary life. XCX finds the present untenable, she desperately wants to go back in time, but she cannot. This theme is evoked as much in the lyrically (“I just wanna go back, back to 1999”) and in her choice of Eurodance-inspired sounds, as it is in her use of a post-chorus (XCX 0:01-0:05, 2:43-2:57). Typically, pop songs follow a verse-chorus form, wherein one musical section, the verse, is followed by another, the chorus. Often, the chorus sounds, in some way, markedly different than the verse. A post-chorus, in contrast, is a musical section inserted after the chorus of a song and often sounds similar to, or riffs off of elements from, the chorus. In other words, a

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<sup>22</sup> Eurodance is a form of dance music that combines elements of pop, such as a chorus-driven song structure, with the arpeggiated synths and dance floor focused rhythms of genres like acid house and techno. It reached peak popularity around the turn of the millennium, where its relatively high tempos, “empowering, life-affirming lyrics,” as well as its cyber futuristic aesthetics resonated with popular audiences (Malek 1). Although Eurodance is often derided by dance music purists, who dismiss its outright pop sensibilities and seemingly asinine lyrics, as electronic music writer Miriam Malek notes, embedded in the genre is a profound sense of hope, from its “messages of peace, love, uniter, respect” to its heart-wrenching melodies and rapturous crescendos (Malek 17).

<sup>23</sup> Ariana Grande’s 2019 hit “bad idea” is an illustrative example of this trap-infused pop sound.

post-chorus is a musical structure that intervenes in the typical flow of a song, and quite literally goes back and musically revises that which just happened, refusing to swiftly move on. If XCX wishes she could go back in time, this longing is therefore enacted the post-chorus. Haunted by the unrealised promise of imagined past times, XCX is unable to swiftly move back to the flow of the song, to, like the hauntology of Fisher's writing, settle for the present (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 22). As such, although the artist may not articulate a specific vision of the future, the desire for otherworlds permeates the very structure of the song. "1999" thus musically engages in speculative nostalgia not by revisiting the past to present a specific fantasy for the future, but in its adamant assertion of the necessity of imagining beyond the now.

This runs in stark contrast to Rexha and Guetta's "I'm Good (Blue)," a work of 2023 pop that interpolates Eiffel 65's 1998 Eurodance song "Blue (Da Ba Dee)." Although the artists revisit similar times to XCX, their work remains steadfastly in the present. Calling upon EDM-pop tropes, the song is structured so that a pre-chorus works to build up anticipation which is then swiftly resolved and released by the massive dance sounds of the chorus. Any notion of futurity, of longing for something beyond the now, that may have been built up in the pre-chorus, is just as swiftly brought back into the present and contained by the chorus itself. The song's lyrics reflect a similar immediacy: Rexha is happy in the now, "[she's] good (yeah) [she's] feeling alright" (0:13-0:17). Rexha and Guetta's work thus reaffirms the present even as it revisits past sounds. To this extent, the song can be said to exist firmly within the "nostalgia mode," for, the past and present within the work come to congeal as an immutable, stable, and eternal condition (Jameson 68). XCX's speculative nostalgia, in contrast, despite similarly combining past sounds with contemporary pop tropes, is haunted by the past in such a way that does not allow it to settle within the present, that leaves it circling back and longing for more.

*"fly with ü:" Flash Euphoria and Auto-Tuned Imaginaries*

Much like XCX revisits the ecstatic output of the late nineties, so too does Fraxiom, in their song "fly with ü," which also attempts to recapture the euphoria of eras past. The song itself draws heavily on Gigi D'Agostino 1999 Eurodance song "L'amour toujours," deriving its main instrumental motif from a sample of the nineties track and interpolating the past hit within its chorus. The music video also returns to the aesthetics, Flash design and computer programs of a comparable time. In revisiting both the sounds of Eurodance and what Ankerson terms the "internet euphoria" of the late nineties to early two-thousands, Fraxiom evokes the dashed technological hopes of past times, drawing on internet lyrics and iconography to show how they have become unrealised in our technological present (25). For, if the initial hopes for turn-of-the-millennium communications technologies were manifest in the euphoric pop cultural output of the time, Fraxiom's angst ridden work emphasises how these hopes have been precluded in the now (Ankerson 4). Yet, as will be discussed further below, much like XCX refuses to relinquish a desire for the future, so too does Fraxiom, particularly in their use of Auto-Tune.

Much like the acts of musical memeing as discussed in Chapter 2, Fraxiom's highly referential use of a sample from "L'amour toujours," plays off the embedded associations of its referent.<sup>24</sup> To this extent, the use of the sample can be thought of as a memetic form of speculative nostalgia. This form of sampling differs from the musical memeing as discussed in Chapter 2, however, in that does not concern itself as explicitly with the creation of shared

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<sup>24</sup> Four bars of the main synth melody of D'Agostino's original are imported practically wholesale to Fraxiom's version. Moreover, the original song is referenced not only in Fraxiom's title, but also in the bridge of "fly with ü," which interpolates the Eurodance track's vocal melody.

archives, or the engendering of particular audiences. Rather, the artist's use of the sample plays upon the past euphoria embedded in the once popular, but often ridiculed, genre of Eurodance. In turn, Fraxiom brings the hopes of the antecedent musical form into stark contrast with the anxieties of the present. For, in speeding up and distorting a sample from "L'amour toujours," the artist allows a tinge of unease to ooze in. The past is not repeated exactly as it was, but instead is altered and deformed, so as to resonate differently, even abrasively, within the now. In contrast to works within the "nostalgia mode," whose imitation of antecedent style blurs the past seamlessly into present, the artist's sampling highlights disjuncture (Jameson 67, 68). Like a bad comedown after a rave the original song may have soundtracked, Fraxiom's update is haunted by the ecstatic excesses of the past.

This unease is made even more sonorous by the drum programming on, and structure of, the track. In contrast to the uniform rhythms of the original song, "fly with ü" forgoes a "four-on-the-floor" pattern.<sup>25</sup> Instead, the Hyperpop song veers chaotically between different kick drum patterns, never maintaining a consistent drum pattern for more than 30 seconds. This jumbled tension is made more explicit by the fact that the song forgoes a typical verse-chorus structure, as discussed above, in favour of a series of crescendos, or musical build ups, all of which eventually culminate in a final, dissonant breakdown. All the while, Fraxiom sings about various internet cultures, controversies, and memes, even going so far as to cite the "hyperpop" playlist directly with the phrase: "I don't know if I wanna die/Hyperpop playlist Spotify" ("fly with ü" 0:30-0:34). While, of course, the lyrics may seem like a jejune reflection of angst, they explicitly, albeit cheekily and self-referentially, connect feelings of unease with the technological present. If the danceable rhythms of Eurodance songs of the past were made for keeping in step, Fraxiom's revision suggests this is no longer tenable. In the chaos of the now, as the quick changing rhythms of the kick drums suggest, it is increasingly difficult to get one's bearings for long enough to get into the groove. Whereas "1999" gleefully and wistfully attempted to revisit a remade history, Fraxiom's sampling of a similar temporal period resounds modern-day anxieties in its sonic form. If the initial hopes vested in the internet manifested in even the most commercial sonic output of the time, Fraxiom makes audible, using sampling, how the anxieties of contemporary internet, in contrast, manifest in the present.

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<sup>25</sup> Four-on-the-floor is a commonly used drum sequence in dance music wherein the kick drum hits on every beat, causing it to have a steady groove that is easy to dance along to.



Fig. 13 Still from Fraxiom's "fly with ü the m♫sical ☺️."

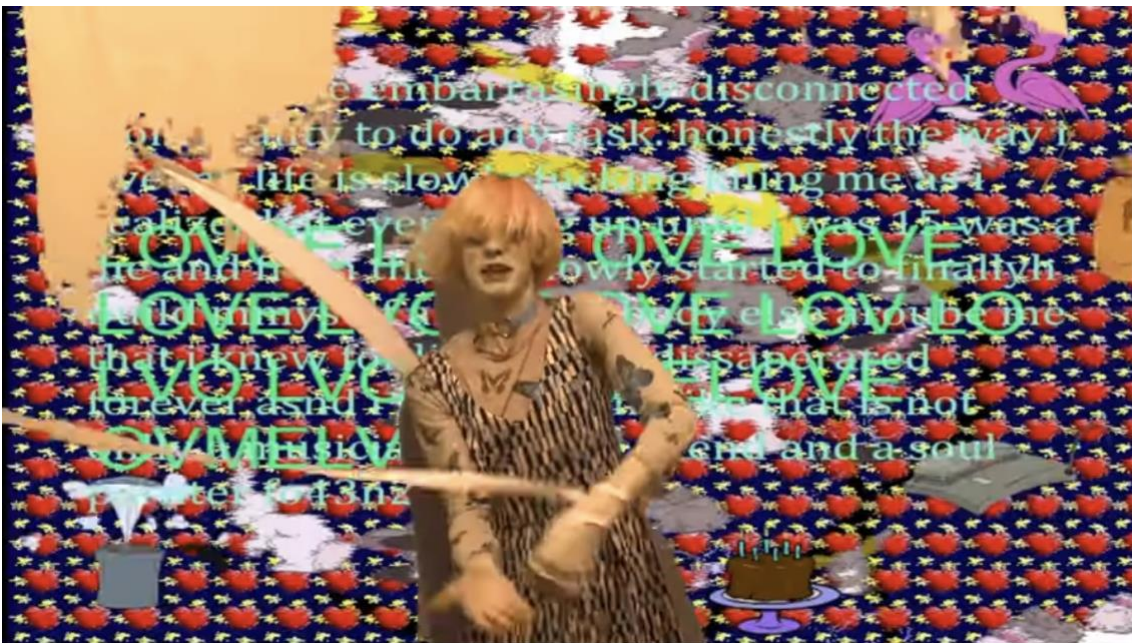


Fig. 12 Still from Fraxiom's "fly with ü the m♫sical ☺️." The top-left corner of the frame features a glitch in the video's greenscreen.

The song's accompanying music video is similarly referential and also revisits an imagined past to lament the present. In contrast to sampling the sonics of bygone eras, however, the video concerns itself with a sampling of the aesthetics of technologies past. Filmed in a quintessentially DIY fashion, the video depicts the artist, recorded on a low-quality camera, in front of a sheet that serves as a makeshift greenscreen (see fig. 14). Various stock images, videos and 3D assets appear behind the singer, many of which are taken from KidPix, an early 2000s drawing software that was the staple of the computer labs that much of Gen Z grew up in. As Fraxiom sings in a nasally, Auto-Tuned vocal cadence, a flood of Flash art and other internet debris surrounds them. Much like the song itself samples the euphoric timbres of Eurodance, its accompanying music video samples the "internet



euphoria” embedded in turn-of-the-millennium web design, a time before Web 2.0’s focus on usability brought about more utilitarian cyber aesthetics (Ankerson 125). Just as XCX presents a utopic, technicolour imagined past, Fraxiom’s greenscreen revisits the fantastical web aesthetics of previous iterations of the internet. Yet, much like XCX’s off-kilter presentation simultaneously denaturalises its portrayal of history, so too do the glitches in Fraxiom’s DIY greenscreen serve as a reminder of the constructed nature of the presentation (see fig. 15). As an act of glitchy, nostalgic speculation, Fraxiom’s DIY sampling of the past does not present a past reality, but instead attempts to cobble together an imagined internet utopia, to fantasise about what it might look or feel like.

Once the song descends into its chaotic outro, however, there is a transition from the sampling of digital and internet *images* to the use of the very recognizable *icons* of apps, like Reddit, Facebook, and Instagram (see fig. 16). Fraxiom is pictured writhing around and swinging a mallet as the song grows ever climactic, and the icon’s movement more frenzied. On the one hand, there is a near obsessive reverence of digital technologies and the contemporary internet within Fraxiom’s work. At the same time, there is a weary and apprehensive nostalgia that haunts the song, a seeming desire to return to the simplicity of a still networked, but not yet hyperconnected past. There is a sense that something has gone wrong, that things have not quite panned out as initially hoped. Much like XCX wishes she could go back in time, Fraxiom’s use of app icons and direct lyrical citation of the “hyperpop” playlist suggest that they too wish they could go back in time, although this time, not to a specific year, but rather to a previous iteration of the internet.

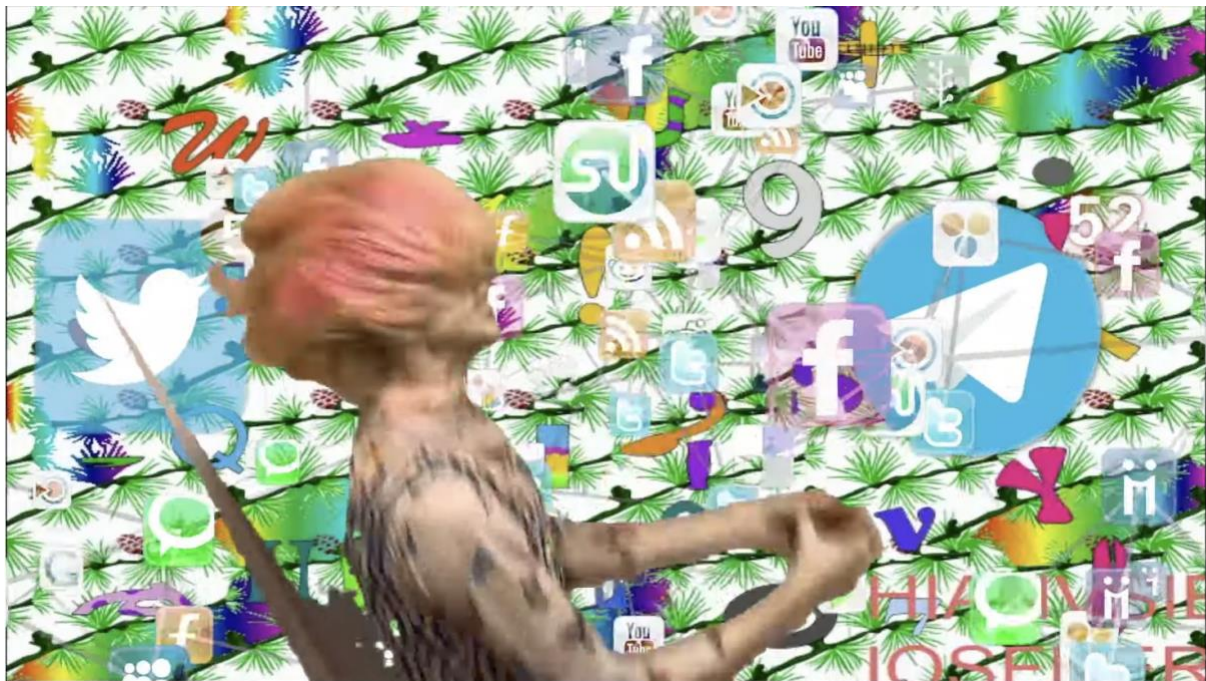


Fig. 14 Still from Fraxiom's "fly with ü the musical 🎵."

“fly with ü” longs for the hopes vested in the technologies and trends of turn-of-the-millennium culture, but also suggests that these things are not totally recoverable. In this way, Fraxiom’s work might seem to offer a stark reflection of the platform nihilism of the present, or what Lovink identifies as a collective “disenchantment with the internet,” one that recognizes its failed ability to live up to the hopes initially vested in “the potential of information technology” during the late nineties to early two-thousands (Lovink 13; Ankerson 4). Yet, much like XCX, Fraxiom goes a step further, and brings these imagined enthusiasms to bear on the present, calling attention to technologies as something mutable,

with the potential to be utilised in alternative ways, and for alternative purposes. This is exemplified through the artist's use of Auto-Tune, which, I posit, is used as means of speculating as to the limits of the voice itself.

In particular, I wager that Fraxiom uses Auto-Tune as one means of speculating on non-binary gender subjectivity. As multiple scholars have noted, in its strange, cyborgian melange of human and machine, Auto-Tune has the power to blur long-held binaries, between for instance, the organic and the inorganic, the real and the artificial (Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen 120; Prior 94). Fraxiom, in their own reflections on the technology, notes that it served as a central aspect in their own exploration and formation of their nonbinary gender identity (Enis, para.16). While of course Auto-Tune can be used towards myriad ends, its timbral and pitch correcting characteristics can allow the user to blur, mutate or amplify, characteristics typically associated with a gendered voice (Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen 121).<sup>26</sup> In harnessing the characteristics of the software, Fraxiom's use of Auto-Tune actively takes up technologies for speculative purposes. What was once a tool of pop perfection becomes a mechanism of exploration and experimentation.

As such, much like Charli XCX's use of deep fakes, Fraxiom's use of the technology also works prefiguratively, as an exercise in adopting technologies and using them towards alternative ends. If the techno-enthusiasms of the past appear as a distant utopia, one far removed from the material realities and platform nihilism of the technological present, Fraxiom and XCX alike suggest that it is in not the total rejection of technologies that we find the answer. Rather, through the recovery of imagined pasts, the speculation into what alternative users and alternative uses of technologies could look and sound like, the artists attempt to de-fossilise the present, to suggest not only that the now is not enough, but that it is possible to move beyond it.

## Conclusion

Hyperpop's speculative nostalgia is not so much about the complete retrieval of the technological enthusiasms of the past, or the representation of past times with total fidelity, but instead serves as a reminder that things were not always as they are, or even as they were. While the genre may, like works within the "nostalgia mode," fail to purport some "real" history," its speculative journeys into the past nonetheless serve as pertinent provocations, as prompts to imagine desired otherworlds (Jameson 67). Particularly for Zoomers, who grew up online, it is hard to envision that the web could have ever been anything other than the walled gardens of Web 2.0. Hyperpop, through its reference to and sampling of the past, as well as its appropriation of contemporary technologies like deep fakes and Auto-Tune, breaks through the determinism and nihilism that permeate the technological imaginaries of the present. Much like the musical memeing discussed in Chapter 2, the genre's speculative nostalgia attempts to re-pitch and retune past forms, refusing to relinquish a desire for otherworlds and asserting, in minor ways, that all forms have the potential to be formed anew.

In its nostalgic versioning of past times, Hyperpop certainly engages in the trends of platform pop, representing the past in digestible and quirky new ways. Moreover, its optimistic revisionism glosses over many aspects of the period it invokes; for example, the dot.com bubble was in full effect and the threat of a full Y2K meltdown loomed on the horizon. The genre is, in other words, far from a perfect object and its sonic interventions alone will not lead us to some utopia. Yet, as the technological hype cycles hawk the latest advancements, Hyperpop's nostalgic calls serve as a timely invitation to interrogate the place of technologies in our lives. Are Bored Apes and Chat GPT really all that are on offer, or is it

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<sup>26</sup> See Geffen and Provenzano for a further discussion of the relation between Auto-Tune and gender.

possible to imagine alternative ends to which the technologies that surround us may be put? Hyperpop, in its fantastical, wistful, and decidedly speculative mode offers us ones means of testing alternatives out.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I developed concepts in relation to particular production aesthetics within specific Hyperpop songs. I set out to understand how these production aesthetics might contribute to the overall meaning of the works in which they were featured, but also, what this process of meaning making might do, what it might allow for or produce. In Chapter 2, I examined practices of covering, remixing, and sampling, and put forth the concept of *musical memeing*. I noted that these production aesthetics, understood as acts of musical memeing, not only comment upon or amend the source material they incorporate but also act, as memes, to litigate who is able to fully unpack or understand these forms of citation or revision themselves. I posited that this constitutes a form of “genre work” in that it functions to negotiate the sounds, meanings, and importantly bounds of the musical style more broadly (Nowak and Whelan 452). To this extent, I wagered that musical memeing, like traditionally understood internet memes, allows the genre to engender a particular audience even as it might speak to a broader contingency of normies. Additionally, I contended that this memetic negotiation allows the genre to enact a sort of self-definition that runs both alongside and counter to Spotify’s curatorial power. All the while, this form of sonic scrambling continually asserts that the sediments of meaning that come to build up like a thick sludge around us are always, no matter how hardened, capable of being formed anew.

In Chapter 3, I put forth the term *speculative nostalgia* and considered practices of sampling and reference to turn-of-the-millennium sounds, aesthetics, and technologies. I noted that this production aesthetic is not totally distinct from what Jameson termed the “nostalgia mode,” nor does it operate entirely in opposition to platform or music industry logics (Jameson 67). In fact, Hyperpop’s penchant for the past fits somewhat seamlessly into a culture bent on reproducing already-proven formulas. Yet, I wagered that these production aesthetics nonetheless contain a speculative charge, one that operates in excess of the nostalgia Jameson critiques, or that undergirds these industry logics. For, far from presenting the past as that which always was, the works I examined use history as a means of *de-fossilising* the present; they suggest not only that the now is not enough, but that it is possible to move beyond it. I argued that this de-fossilisation has a distinctly xenofeminist current to it and thus both actively speculates about the role of technologies and uses technologies themselves as tools of speculation. While Hyperpop might not have a unique capacity to lead us to some desired otherworld, some better state of things, its speculative nostalgia, I wagered, is a tool for sounding alternatives out.

This thesis has, therefore, largely concerned itself with strategies of reappropriation and resignification within Hyperpop. In examining particular production aesthetics, I listened to the minor ways the musical style asserts that all forms are always capable of being reformed anew. Although the genre echoes the conditions of music’s ubiquitous platforming, I heard the cracks that these production aesthetics, these processes of de-fossilisation, might yield. Now, in the final pages of this thesis, and with this notion of de-fossilisation in mind, I want to return to the Fox News incident that I outlined at its outset.

### **Fox News, De-Fossilisation, and Being Chicken Little**

It seems that meaning has become very slippery. Cartoon frogs go from memes to hate symbols and back to memes again at breakneck speed (de Seta 390). Catholicism has become an “alt status symbol” (Jennings, para.1). Hyperpop is played on Fox News. Perhaps, in the now, what we are confronted with is not a struggle over the meaning of signs, but rather, what Geert Lovink terms a “loss of semiology” in general (Lovink 11). As things as disparate as Hyperpop and Catholicism are turned into respective subcultures, lifestyles, identities, and/or marketing groups, and then distributed widely across networks, maybe the connection between signifier and signified has been so abstracted that forms of resignification

cannot hold (Ibid). In this context, perhaps Hyperpop's de-fossilisation is better understood not as means of creating cracks from which the new can emerge, but rather as a process of gradual dissolution, a decomposition of past forms into a crude sludge. That the musical style was played on Fox News is simply the end result of this process, the movement of sound from dust to dust.

When confronted with this slipperiness, with the speed with which culture churns, it is difficult not to declare, with Chicken-Little-like vigour, some equivalent of "the sky is falling." Meaning is waning! Nothing is sacred! Admittedly, after spending months researching and writing about the musical style, this was my first instinct when confronted with the Fox News incident. Perhaps, this was the nail in the coffin for Hyperpop and its attendant practices of resignification and reappropriation. I wondered if these forms of de-fossilisation that I had spent the past months focusing on were so slippery that they could not really mean anything at all. In fact, maybe their only real impact was that they generated data for Spotify to extract, analyse, and turn into profits. In this context, I contemplated if what was actually required of culture in the now was a movement away from content and into silence, not a retuning of previous forms.

Yet, on further reflection, these apocalyptic pontifications do not ring completely true. In fact, I wager that the Fox News moment points to the necessity of unpacking these strange chains of meaning, of listening closely to the off-key ways that things are made to sound out in the now, of wading further into the weirdness. Under conditions wherein signs not only slip so easily, but also wherein critique and resistance are so closely bound up in the logics and conditions that they seek to overcome, it is now more important than ever to sort what holds potential, what sounds anew, from that which does not. In other words, what this current juncture requires is not a total dismissal of forms of resignification and reappropriation, of what I term de-fossilisation, but rather an increased attention to their operation. It is a matter of sorting that which frees up what is hardened, from that which liquifies all it touches into a muddied goo.

This is not to say that, in listening better or more closely or from a wider variety of perspectives, we can somehow, through pop music, be guided into some better world. I highly doubt, for example, that hearing 100 geecs on Fox News is going to alter the politics of the station's viewership and lead to some pop-induced kumbaya moment. Rather, it is to note that the world we are currently in requires more vigilant forms of listening. Now, we must be more agile, more tuned into the hushed tones and the subtext, more capable of laughing with things, and of laughing things off. In this thesis, I have tried to maintain this vigilance, to straddle Chicken Little impulses and Pollyanna popitism. Pop is not going to lead us out of the various cruxes we find ourselves in, but in this thesis, I take it as a potential sounding device, something that can both probe a moment and hint at something in its excess.

Hyperpop has, perhaps, had its time. PC Music, the label that inspired much of the genre's sounds, just announced that it would no longer be releasing music as of this year (Corcoran para. 1). This comes almost two years after Charli XCX put out the question "rip hyperpop?" on her Instagram account, an act that could be read as akin to Frankenstein dismissing his monster (@charli\_xcx). Yet, there is still work to be done regarding genre and the concerns it raises, as well as the concepts I developed in relation to it. It may, for example, be salient for future scholarship concerning Hyperpop to take an ethnographic approach to the genre and to consider accounts of the music from both artists and fans. Moreover, there is certainly more to write on the role that Spotify and other platforms have in shaping music more broadly, something that functioned more as a backing track in this thesis than a main melody. My initial attempt at a conception of musical memeing may be of use in this regard, a means of teasing out what and how music means in these increasingly networked and platformed contexts. While my concept of speculative nostalgia may have less

application outside of the context of Hyperpop, it points to a need to continually examine the speculative capacity of popular culture itself - to think through how forms of culture might not just account for or reflect something about the now, but how they may indeed operate in its excess. Pop music is, after all, an excessive medium.

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