

Time Out of Joint: Hauntology, Nostalgia, and Inter-Artistic Longing in Joanna Newsom's *The Milk-Eyed Mender* and Frank Ocean's *Blonde*

Maude Lemay

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English Literature)

at Concordia University  
Montréal, Québec, Canada

April 2025

© Maude Lemay, 2025

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY  
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Maude Lemay

Entitled: Time Out of Joint: Hauntology, Nostalgia, and Inter-Artistic Longing in Joanna Newsom's The Milk-Eyed Mender and Frank Ocean's Blonde

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (English Literature)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Examiner

\_\_\_\_\_  
Examiner  
Dr. Katherine McLeod

\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Supervisor(s)  
Dr. Stephen Ross

\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Supervisor(s)

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Nathan Brown, Graduate Program Director    Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Pascale Sicotte

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean Faculty of Arts and Science

## Abstract

Time Out of Joint: Hauntology, Nostalgia, and Inter-Artistic Longing in Joanna Newsom's *The Milk-Eyed Mender* and Frank Ocean's *Blonde*

Maude Lemay

This thesis explores the spectral presence of the past in contemporary music through the lens of hauntology, focusing on Joanna Newsom's *The Milk-Eyed Mender* (2004) and Frank Ocean's *Blonde* (2016). While contemporary music is often shaped by nostalgia, hauntology offers a nuanced framework—one that captures the past's stubborn refusal to fully disappear, disrupting linear time and unsettling our sense of the present. Drawing on Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher, I explore how these albums engage with hauntological aesthetics not only through sonic elements but also through their lyrics. While Fisher primarily developed hauntology in music as a sonic concept, I argue that lyrical elements can equally contribute to its effect. What this thesis specifically suggests is that inter-artistic longing—tensions between different artistic mediums within the lyrics—creates a hauntological quality. In Newsom's work, literary intertextuality generates a tension between literature and music, while Ocean's fragmented, cinematic narratives blur the boundaries between music and film. By analyzing these inter-artistic tensions, this thesis demonstrates how Newsom's and Ocean's lyricism evokes a spectral past that remains both familiar and elusive. Situating these albums within broader cultural and political contexts, I demonstrate how hauntology in lyric-driven music reflects unresolved personal and collective histories, as well as shifting cultural landscapes in the United States from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my deepest gratitude goes to Dr. Stephen Ross. You saw the shape of this thesis before I did and gently guided me toward it, helping me assemble hundreds of scattered, fragmented thoughts into a cohesive whole—one that I am deeply proud of. Your support, wisdom and encouragements gave me the momentum I needed to see this through and your unwavering belief in my project made all the difference.

A heartfelt thank you to Dr. Katherine McLeod, who took the time to read my thesis and offered invaluable insights as well as kind, thoughtful advice. Your generosity and expertise made this work stronger.

William, Mathilde—thank you for standing by my side over these past few years, through all the moments when I lost track of time. Thank you for your patience and understanding when I disappeared into writing, and for always being there when I reemerged. Your support, humour, and kindness mean everything.

To my parents, Paulin and France. Papa, Maman, votre soutien inébranlable m'a porté à travers mes études. J'espère de tout cœur que je vous rends fiers, parce que cette réussite, c'est aussi la vôtre.

And to Jack—thank you for being my constant, the steady presence that quiets the noise. When days blurred together and I lost track of beginnings and endings, you anchored me. You are the rhythm in my days, the sunlight that filters through when time is out of joint.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Hauntology, Nostalgia, and Inter-Artistic Longing	4
Literary Nostalgia in <i>The Milk-Eyed Mender</i>	7
Cinematic Nostalgia in <i>Blonde</i>	21
Conclusion	33
Works Cited	36

## Introduction

Contemporary music has long been haunted by the past: this preoccupation with what once was manifests as recycled trends, innumerable interpolations, and what has been termed in popular culture as a “lazy sample epidemic”—a phenomenon wherein pop songs sample cult hits that evoke a nostalgic familiarity rather than introducing fresh, new elements. This reliance on the past, driven in part by the pursuit of commercial success on the Billboard charts, infuses today’s musical landscape with the lingering spectral presence of history, influencing the present in ways that are both subtle and haunting. While this phenomenon is frequently described as nostalgia, hauntology offers a more nuanced framework: rather than a wistful longing for a lost past, hauntology captures the past’s refusal to fully disappear, lingering as an unresolved and spectral presence. In this sense, hauntology—the guiding concept of this thesis—could be understood not as a distinct form of nostalgia but as an aberrant form of it, one in which the lost object stubbornly refuses to fade away, disrupting the linear flow of time and unsettling our sense of the present.

This hauntological, stubborn presence of the past is particularly apparent in the works of American musicians Joanna Newsom and Frank Ocean, whose albums *The Milk-Eyed Mender* (2004) and *Blonde* (2016) share a haunting, nostalgic quality despite substantial sonic and lyrical differences. Newsom’s music evokes what I will call a “literary” nostalgia, while Ocean employs cinematic imagery in his lyrics to construct a unique, “visual” nostalgia. Both albums, though rooted in distinct artistic traditions, reflect a similar aesthetic aim of blending past and present in a way that makes the listener feel the presence of something familiar, yet that appears distant.

This spectral presence is shaped not only by artistic decisions but also by broader cultural and political forces. In the early 2000s to mid 2010s in the United States, the transition

from the Bush administration to the Obama era, a period marked by themes of loss, longing, and unfinished histories, provides a fertile ground for the emergence of hauntological qualities in Newsom and Ocean's music.

While *The Milk-Eyed Mender* and *Blonde* differ musically and thematically, they converge in their hauntological sensibilities. As Mark Fisher asks in *Ghosts of My Life*, “Is hauntology ... simply a name for nostalgia?” (32). This thesis argues that hauntology emerges in these albums, both widely regarded as nostalgic, through the inter-artistic nature of their lyrics. In Newsom’s work, storytelling and literary references create an intertextual longing between literature and music, while Ocean’s use of cinematic techniques fosters a hauntological bridge between film and music.

*The Milk-Eyed Mender* features evocative storytelling, using folk traditions and complex poetic lyrics to construct intricate narratives reminiscent of great literary works. Its intertextual approach merges literature and music to create a prime example of how literature and music can come together to form a uniquely nostalgic, hauntological work. In contrast, *Blonde* adopts a modern, genre-bending style that draws heavily on cinematic imagery and fragmented narratives to convey meaning. Ocean’s use of visual techniques in his lyrics, coupled with hauntological sonic elements, produces a similarly spectral effect. The album juxtaposes intimacy with grandeur, mirroring the layered complexity of cinema and creating a unique experience where the past is both remembered and unattainable.

Examining these two albums enhances our understanding of how hauntology operates in contemporary music, particularly through lyrical techniques. While much of the music Fisher considered hauntological was instrumental or minimally lyrical,<sup>1</sup> *The Milk-Eyed Mender* and

---

<sup>1</sup> Fisher was particularly interested in the works of Burial and The Caretaker, two electronic musicians exploring memory, its deterioration, and time through their mostly instrumental music. See *k-punk*, especially Part Three.

*Blonde* place lyrics at the forefront, demonstrating how lyrics themselves can generate a spectral effect. The ways in which Newsom and Ocean manipulate language —through literary allusions, fragmented storytelling, and evocative imagery—demonstrate that lyrics are not secondary to melody but integral to a song's meaning and effect. As Matt BaileyShea argues, “the sounds of the words matter. The patterns of accent matter. The phrasing, the connotations, the narration and address all contribute to the musical effect of the entire song” (2-3). Rather than viewing lyrics as interchangeable or insignificant, their specific textual and sonic properties shape the emotional and aesthetic experience of a song, reinforcing its hauntological qualities (BaileyShea 4).

Moreover, the interdisciplinary nature of lyrical analysis demands an approach that accounts for both poetic and musical dimensions. Instead of examining lyrics in isolation from their musical contexts, scholars such as Lars Eckstein emphasize that they must be understood as works of “performed literature” (19) which, unlike poetry, “cannot be conceived outside of the context of their vocal (and musical) actualisation – i.e. their performance” (10). This perspective aligns with the hauntological tendencies of *Blonde* and *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, where the past's persistence is articulated not only through sonic textures but through words themselves; words that, when sung, transform into echoes of lost time. By exploring the interplay between words and sounds, this thesis contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to bridge the divide between literary and musical studies, underscoring how lyrics function as a central site for hauntological expression in contemporary music. To understand how hauntology arises in these works, we must first define the concept and its relationship to nostalgia. As theorized by Jacques Derrida and later by Fisher, hauntology engages with the past not as a site of idealization but as an absence that lingers and resonates through time as it unfolds.



## Hauntology, Nostalgia, and Inter-Artistic Longing

First conceptualized by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1993), hauntology examines that which repeats without ever being fully present. Derrida describes the spectre as “what seems to remain ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum” (10). The new term, a pun on “ontology,” combines the French *hanter* (to haunt) and *ontologie*, building upon his earlier concepts of *différance*—the idea that meaning always differs spatially and is deferred temporally—and *la trace*, which suggests that everything carries the mark of what precedes it.<sup>2</sup> With hauntology, Derrida extends these ideas by arguing that meaning and coherence emerge through absence: traces of the past, dissipated possibilities, and the lingering presence of what can never fully materialize.

Hauntology frequently intersects with nostalgia, as both involve a continual return of the past. Nostalgia, often broadly understood as a longing for the past, has undergone significant shifts in meaning throughout history. While references to emotions resembling nostalgia have appeared as early as Hippocrates and the Bible, the term itself was first coined in the 17th century by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, who described it as a pathological condition akin to homesickness (Sedikides et al. 304). The literary origins of nostalgia can be traced back to Homer’s *Odyssey*, where Odysseus, despite being offered immortality by Calypso on the distant island of Ogygia, chooses to return home, expressing an overwhelming yearning for Ithaca and his mortal wife, Penelope. This moment encapsulates nostalgia’s essence, derived from the Greek *nostos* (return home) and *algos* (pain), signifying a “suffering due to relentless yearning for the homeland” (Sedikides et al. 304). Over time, nostalgia has been redefined countless times, shifting from its first definition as a feared fatal disease to a psychiatric disorder, and eventually

---

<sup>2</sup> See *Margins of Philosophy*.

to an inherent part of the human experience. Thinkers interested in nostalgia like Svetlana Boym identify it as an often bittersweet “yearning for a different time” (xv), where sadness heightens the pleasure of recollection (Davis 14). Fred Davis further emphasizes that nostalgia idealizes the past, filtering out pain and disappointment through a forgiving lens of “it-was-all-for-the-best” (14). Boym further explains that nostalgia superimposes contrasting images —home and abroad, past and present, dream and reality—producing a sense of temporal dissonance, wherein “the nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space” (xiv).

Unlike nostalgia, which idealizes the past, hauntology emphasizes the persistence of loss and the spectral nature of history. It disrupts the linear progression of time, foregrounding absence and unrealized possibilities. Rather than relegating history to the past, hauntology highlights its lingering influence, challenging the notion of progress by exposing the ways in which history continues to haunt the present (Fisher, *k-punk* 738). In cultural analysis, hauntology frequently describes music, film, and literature that evoke nostalgia while simultaneously unsettling it by revealing the past as unfinished or inaccessible. In music, hauntological aesthetics often emerge through degraded sound, echoes of lost eras created through vocal manipulation, and eerie sonic features such as analog crackle, white noise, and reverb. This approach differs from straightforward nostalgia, which seeks comfort in the past, as it instead emphasizes temporal disjunction and reinforces the idea that the past is neither wholly present nor fully absent.

Derrida often drew on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to illustrate this concept, citing the ghost’s declaration that “time is out of joint” as emblematic of hauntological temporal dislocation, where past and future are entangled with the present (1.5.195). In this framework, haunting exists in a state of deferral: neither entirely present nor absent, like a ghost, it is bound to both what has

passed and what has yet to happen. Fisher elaborates on this by distinguishing between two hauntological dimensions: “that which is no longer,” which persists as a virtual presence, and “that which has not yet happened,” which exerts an influence on the present as an anticipated future (*Ghosts of My Life* 27).

Fisher applied the concept of hauntology extensively to cultural analysis, particularly in music. He defines it as the study of that which haunts without ever being fully present, noting that in hauntological works, “place” functions synonymously with “time” (*k-punk* 163). Central to his analysis is the notion of lost futures: “things which never happened but which could have” (*k-punk* 648). This perspective provides a critical framework for understanding how *The Milk-Eyed Mender* and *Blonde* operate hauntologically. Both albums engage with temporal disjunction, using lyrical techniques to blur the boundaries between past and present, evoking an absence that lingers and a longing that remains unresolved. By examining these works through the lens of hauntology, we gain insight into how contemporary music negotiates its relationship with the past—not merely by reviving it, but by exposing its spectral traces, unfinished narratives, and the persistent echoes of what could have been.

Though hauntology is profoundly linked to music in Fisher’s work, it need not be confined to sound alone; it can also emerge through inter-artistic references, where music engages with literature, cinema, and visual arts, creating a spectral yearning that disrupts the boundaries between them. This longing, persistent and unresolved, generates a unique tension between distinct art forms that can never fully merge. While hauntology is often associated with sound, its presence extends beyond the auditory realm and into the interplay of artistic media, where nostalgia arises not only from lost time but also from the separation between these art forms. Like interdisciplinary and hybrid art forms such as sound art, which exist in the liminal

space between forms, music can evoke a longing for literature or film—as seen in *The Milk-Eyed Mender* and *Blonde*—generating a hauntological presence that lingers between them. This yearning stems from an inherent separation: music, literature, and film remain forever distinct, unable to reunite, yet they reach toward one another in an endless cycle of reference and influence. The tension mirrors hauntology’s core logic: an oscillation between past and present, a temporal dislocation that recalls what is lost while simultaneously propelling new artistic possibilities.

This longing is also deeply tied to time, as each of these art forms engages with temporality in distinct ways. Music, like film, is explicitly structured through time: measured in beats, frames, and sequences; while literature, though less rigidly bound, unfolds in temporal layers. Unlike music or film, where time is embedded in the experience, literature grants the reader control over pacing, allowing them to pause, reread, or skip ahead, thus shaping the speed at which the narrative unfolds before their eyes. Yet literature still operates within time, both in its narrative structure, shaped by the author, and in the act of reading itself. When music reaches toward literature or film, this temporal nature of artistic experience amplifies hauntology’s effect. It disrupts linear time, creating a longing that is not only for the past or future but also for an unattainable artistic unity—an echo between mediums that can never fully converge.

### **Literary Nostalgia in *The Milk-Eyed Mender***

In the musical landscape of the early 2000s, a new genre known as freak folk emerged as a distinctive outlier within an already flourishing indie folk scene. Drawing inspiration from 1960s and 1970s psychedelic folk, freak folk represented a countercultural movement, described

by Simon Reynolds as an anthology of a “vanished era of cultural identity that was both national and deeply local” (344). Deviating from the more polished, conventional sounds of modern indie music, freak folk embodied an aesthetic that was raw and unconventional. Reynolds further characterizes the genre as an “archive-raiding style,” as it draws heavily from decades-old folk music (407). Reynolds further argues that freak folk musicians “take great pains to get a vintage sound and use the right period instrumentation . . . The freak-folk outfits want to bring the past into the present, like time travel” (xxxiii-xxxiv). This deliberate revivalism aligns with hauntology, as the genre’s emphasis on acoustic textures and analog warmth conjures a lost era of music. Reynolds describes freak folk as a “fabulous simulation” built around the act of listening to records, which constitutes a nostalgic act itself, in an era defined by the vertiginous digitization of music and media (xxxv). The engagement with physical media like vinyl records, cassette tapes and CDs—a process increasingly relegated to the past—reinforces this sense of longing for a lost era and is also a main feature of hauntological music with its analog pops, crackles, and white noise.

While artists like Devendra Banhart and Animal Collective popularized the freak folk genre, one figure in particular rose to prominence: Joanna Newsom. In 2002, at only twenty years old, the California-born harpist, singer, and songwriter self-released two EPs, catching the attention of independent label Drag City. Her 2004 debut album earned her a cult following and solidified her place within the genre. *The Milk-Eyed Mender* was met with mixed feedback, with praise for its originality tempered by reactions to Newsom’s unconventional voice and complex lyrical style. Inspired by singers like Texas Gladden and Karen Dalton, Newsom’s voice is intentionally unrefined: in a 2004 interview with *Tiny Mix Tapes*, she described her voice as “out of [her] control, [unrefined] beyond its own naked and untrained color” (Newsom). This raw

vocal delivery became a defining characteristic of her music, setting her apart from her contemporaries and establishing her music as an experience that evolves over time, requiring patience to fully understand and appreciate, while also reinforcing her alignment with the freak-folk ethos of imperfection and historical reimagining.

Newsom's debut album reflects a diverse array of musical influences that further connect her to the freak folk's archival tendencies. Appalachian folk stands out as a touchstone, exemplified by the general sound of the album and by her adaptation of the traditional Appalachian song "Three Little Babes." However, *The Milk-Eyed Mender* is not merely a nostalgic recreation of the past; it also incorporates elements of West African kora music, Bulgarian folk polyphony, Venezuelan harp traditions, and the experimental compositions of Ruth Crawford Seeger, whom Newsom admires for blending art music with folk traditions (Newsom, *The Believer*). In bridging these historical and global influences, Newsom's music, like freak folk itself, resists temporal categorization—existing between past and present, tradition and experimentation.

Beyond her musical influences, Newsom's work is profoundly shaped by her literary background. An avid reader and lifelong writer, Newsom cites Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets, Vladimir Nabokov, and Ogden Nash as key inspirations.<sup>3</sup> She also expressed admiration for Nabokov's way of "stringing words together, and his sense of how different words impact each other when they bump up at the edges. Like a really long strange word next to a really small, colloquial, and familiar word" (Newsom, *Dusted*). This influence is evident in her intricate and playful approach to lyricism. Her songs are filled with internal rhymes and innovative wordplay: "calm canaries," "caw and claw," "warp-woof-wimble," and "a

---

<sup>3</sup> See the *Dusted* (2004) interview.

thimblesworth of milky moon,” heard in “Bridges and Balloons,” create a song that is whimsical both sonically and lyrically, infusing it with a distinct literary quality.

Newsom’s lyrics are also notable for their complexity and poetic depth. She skillfully weaves together evocative, vivid phrases such as the haunting juxtaposition of “salty pyre” and “fauns and ferns” in “Sadie,” or the striking imagery of “lateen sails,” “catenaries,” and “dirigibles” on “Bridges and Balloons.” These intricate constructions are more than just lyrical embellishment: they invite multiple interpretations, each line layered with meanings that reveal themselves only through careful analysis. The use of antiquated words like “dirigibles,” and references to pre-industrial objects like “thimbles” give the song an antique, “sepia” tone, as if it belongs to a time that never quite existed, evoking an aching sense of nostalgia for an unrealized past.

The richness of these images transforms Newsom’s lyrics into literary works of their own right, demanding an active engagement from the listener to unpack their full significance. This experience is integral to *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, where literary traditions and musical storytelling converge, fostering a sense of longing that is both inter-artistic and hauntological. However, the effect of Newsom’s music extends beyond the lyrics themselves. The shimmering, cascading harp in “Bridges and Balloons” evokes a profound feeling of childhood nostalgia—a sensation of childhood memories just out of reach, drifting toward sentimentality. Her voice is bright—almost babyish and lispy—yet unexpectedly commanding, pressing against the lyrics in unexpected ways, layering them with tonal contradictions that enrich the emotional texture of the song. These sonic elements, both tender and unsettling, transforms the album into an active, immersive experience, one that is deeply tied to memory and time. This interplay between sound and meaning transforms Newsom’s songwriting into something deeper than music or poetry

alone: it becomes a spectral space where literary echoes and melodic fragments intertwine. Her lyrics, filled with internal rhymes and nonlinear storytelling, resist straightforward narrative structures, embracing a more fluid, associative form of meaning-making. This refusal to conform to traditional songwriting conventions makes listening to *The Milk-Eyed Mender* feel like wandering through a half-remembered story, where time bends, and interpretation is never fixed. By embedding literary qualities within the fleeting, ephemeral form of music, Newsom evokes a haunting artistic tension—one where the past lingers, the present feels permeable, and the future remains an open question.

“Peach, Plum, Pear”, a perfect example of these qualities, unfolds as a series of vignettes that reveal fragments of a love story without a clear beginning, middle, or end. The song opens abruptly, immersing the listener in a fleeting meet-cute with a former love interest: “We speak in the store / I’m a sensitive bore / You seem markedly more / And I’m oozing surprise.” The absence of exposition invites the listener to piece the narrative together: Newsom is surprised and self-conscious; her ex seems disinterested. Reflecting on their relationship, Newsom laments how “what was golden went gray,” a metaphor for a love that once flourished but has since faded. The next verse uses galloping horses to symbolize the loss of control in their relationship: “we were galloping manic / to the mouth of the source.” Newsom later brings the metaphor full circle with a simile, saying she “bolt[ed] like a horse,” abruptly leaving the relationship. The song ends with Newsom acknowledging change, both in herself and in the bond that they once shared: “Now it’s done / watch it go,” signaling the irretrievability of those moments. At first, “Peach, Plum, Pear” seems like a nostalgic reflection on a past love—an encounter with an ex, filled with longing for what once was. Yet, the subtleties of the lyrics imbue the song with a deeper literary and hauntological quality. Phrases like “sensitive bore,”



“markedly more,” and “oozing surprise,” along with clever alliteration and consonance, remind us of her Nabokovian influence because of their unlikely pairing. These poetic devices enhance the song’s haunting nature, creating echoes that resonate within the language itself. The line, “Unlike the story / it was written to be,” points to a future that was once imagined but never realized, encapsulating the essence of hauntology: the longing for lost futures and the tension between what was and what could have been.

Newsom emphasizes the effects of time passing with the lines “and you’ve changed some / water running from the snow,” a vivid and kinetic image illustrating the passage of time: the melting snow and running water evoke a rise in temperature, usually indicating the natural transition from winter to spring. This seasonal change mirrors the ending of their relationship, an event as inevitable as the natural rhythm of seasons. The phrase “you’ve changed some,” repeated twice, can be interpreted in two ways: first, as something she says to her former lover in the store; second, as something her lover says to her, with “some” potentially acting as wordplay on her last name, where “’som” could be interpreted as a nickname. If read this way, the song’s conclusion suggests that, alongside the passage of time and the end of their relationship, both individuals have changed so deeply that they are no longer recognizable to each other, bringing a bittersweet and nostalgic feeling to the encounter. These repeated lines, along with the imagery signifying the inevitable passage of time, underscores the irretrievability of the past and the bittersweet nature of the song.

The bridge of the song, a repetitive “oh, na na na na,” punctuates these scenes, acting as a cyclical anchor rather than a forward-moving literary device, reinforcing the song’s fragmented and nonlinear storytelling. Unlike traditional bridges that introduce new ideas and push the narrative forward, this refrain loops back, mimicking the way in which memories and nostalgia

operate: circular and unresolved. This repetition mirrors the way time doesn't always move in a linear fashion but instead loops back on itself, creating an ongoing sense of longing.

Sonically, "Peach, Plum, Pear" also presents a hauntological element: Newsom's voice is heavily layered in the lines "And I was blue / I am blue and unwell," evoking a sense of multiple selves coexisting across past, present, and future timelines. This layering disrupts the linear flow of time, suggesting that these different versions of Newsom are haunting the song, reinforcing the sense of longing. This effect deepens the emotional depth, illustrating that the past is not merely remembered but actively lingers in the present, creating a spectral presence that blurs the distinction between what was, is, and could have been. Additionally, choosing the harpsichord as the main accompanying instrument further reinforces the hauntological atmosphere, contrasting with the gentler harp and piano sounds heard throughout the album. This shift in instrumentation aligns with the song's exploration of temporal dislocation, deepening the overall sense of nostalgia and emotional repetition that permeates the track.

Similarly, the narrative of "Sadie" also alternates between past and present, intertwining memories of Newsom's childhood dog with existential reflections: "Bury this bone to gnaw on it later; / gnawing on the telephone, and / 'Till then, we pray and suspend / the notion that these lives do never end." Newsom juxtaposes mundane moments, "all day long we talk about mercy" with existential pleas, "lead me to water lord, I sure am thirsty," creating a narrative that reads like a stream of consciousness. This stream-of-consciousness quality once again disrupts linear time, as the listener is transported from one thought to the other with little to no temporal markers. This style creates an introspective and literary quality that defines Newsom's lyrics and storytelling: their natural focus on memory and reflection fosters a natural sense of nostalgia that extends throughout her work.

Beyond the inherently nostalgic framework of the freak-folk genre and sound, Newsom's *The Milk-Eyed Mender* evokes a profound sense of longing through its vivid storytelling and descriptive lyrics. In "Bridges and Balloons," the opening track of the album, Newsom reflects on the joys and endless possibilities of childhood, recalling how she "sailed away on a winter's day / with fate as malleable as clay." The use of the word "malleable" to describe her fate, along with the imagery of clay, captures the pliability of childhood, a time when possibilities feel limitless, with a future that seems open and unshaped. In this stage of life, fate is fluid, not fixed, and the potential to transcend limitations or shape one's destiny appears endless. The imagery of "sailing away" further evokes a sense of freedom—both in movement and in thought—suggesting an unburdened journey into a bright future.

The past tense in "we sailed away" subtly reveals that the narrator is recalling a childhood memory, and the use of the pronoun "we" introduces ambiguity: it could refer to a shared experience with a companion, an imaginary friend, or simply the self and its own unspoken thoughts. This ambiguous notion of companionship, whether real or imagined, complicates the memory, blurring the lines between imagination and lived experience and adding layers of complexity to the narrator's nostalgia. It raises questions about whether the recollection is based on reality or on a nostalgic fantasy, rooted in the past or shaped by the present. The cyclical nature of the memory, as the chorus repeats this shared fantasy, emphasizes how the past continues to haunt the present, lingering in the space between history and wistful longing.

The second verse is punctuated by internal rhymes and alliteration, evoking the nursery rhymes and playful language that are often central to childhood imagination: "bridges and balloons," "calm canaries," "caw and claw," "brace and buoy," and "warp-woof-wimble." These repetitive sounds not only enhance the song's playful tone but also evoke the rhythms of a child's

early speech or glossolalia. This language serves a dual purpose: it nods to the soundbites found in hauntological music, as discussed by theorists like Fisher or Reynolds, while also recalling a time when the world was shaped by sound, rhythm, and creative expression—anchors to a past both personal and universal.

As the opening track of *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, “Bridges and Balloons” introduces the album’s overarching hauntological tone. The song blends poetic lyricism with dreamlike imagery, evoking the reverie of childhood daydreams. This interplay between imagination and memory mirrors the album’s larger exploration of literary nostalgia. Through intricate wordplay, archaic diction, and layered references to poetic traditions, Newsom creates an aesthetic that feels both timeless and out of time. Her songwriting, which reaches toward the qualities of literature, crafts lyrics that beg to be read as much as they are heard. The result is a spectral effect, where her words echo lost literary traditions while resisting strict categorization as either song or poetry. This “in-betweenness” enhances the hauntological quality of the album, where the past—whether personal, artistic, or literary—lingers, never fully present yet never fully gone.

In “En Gallop,” like in “Bridges and Balloons,” Newsom reflects on the impermanence of life and the coming-of-age period, a stage of life marked by a high level of nostalgia.<sup>4</sup> The lyrics suggest autobiographical elements, as Newsom sings about “walk[ing] from a higher education / for now, and for hire,” evoking the uncertainty and wistfulness of early adulthood. Newsom’s imagery of a place that is “damp and ghostly,” with halls lined with “the disembodied and the dusty wings, / which fell from flesh gasplessly,” evokes haunting literary allusions, recalling gothic literature and Greek mythology, with what may be a reference to the story of Icarus and Daedalus. These subtle intertextual references instrumental in crafting the song’s

---

<sup>4</sup> See Batcho and Shikh.

“literary” nostalgia, which ties together personal reflection with the weight of cultural narratives, suggesting a deeper, layered longing for both personal and collective pasts.

As the song unfolds, Newsom juxtaposes fantastical imagery with wise, mature insights. The lines— “palaces and stormclouds / and the rough, straggly sage, and the smoke”—are rich with alliteration and consonance, evoking fairy tales, childhood stories, and classic poetry. This playful, rhythmic language recalls the innocence of childhood, while the following lines— “and the way it will all come together / in quietness, and in time”—introduce the inevitability of change and the transition from innocence to the responsibilities of adulthood. The alliterative sounds in these moments and their rhythmic, playful qualities reminiscent of nursery rhymes serve as markers for childhood, pulling the listener back in time through sound as much as through lyrical content, enhancing the effect of nostalgia. The recognition that time is linear and irreversible adds weight to the song’s melancholic tone, as Newsom expresses resentment toward societal structures in lines like, “you laws of property / you free economy / you unending afterthoughts / you could’ve told me before.” This lament underscores the harsh realities of early adulthood and deepens her nostalgic longing for a time depicted in “Bridges and Balloons,” when life seemed more malleable.

The song’s final verse offers two pieces of advice: “never get so attached to a poem / you forget truth that lacks lyricism; / and never draw so close to the heat / that you forget that you must eat.” By delivering —to the listener or to herself— life advice through the metaphor of poems and lyricism, Newsom highlights the interplay between art and reality. The inter-artistic tension emerges as she uses music to reflect on literature, using one medium to engage with the other as a means of grappling with reality. Her deeply poetic and literary lyrics bridge the realms

of literature, music, and lived experience, blending them together and dissolving the lines that usually separate them with a spectral hauntological atmosphere.

“En Gallop” further exemplifies hauntology with its portrayal of Newsom wandering through ghostly halls, haunted by the presence of “disembodied wings.” She declares herself “already gone,” creating a complex fusion of nostalgia and spectral presence, and suggesting a nostalgia that is both anticipatory and tied to a place she has already left. This creates a sense of the past lingering in the present, as Newsom contemplates the unfulfilled potential of staying behind. She becomes both the *haunter* and the *haunted*—her spectral presence lingering in a space she has physically left behind, underscored by her departure from “higher education.” The song’s instrumentation mirrors this theme of temporal disruption: the repetitive, polyrhythmic harp passages at the song’s opening and closing are interrupted by Newsom’s voice, creating a sense of dissonance and breaking the trance-like rhythm. This disruption in sound mirrors the song’s exploration of time and memory, enhancing its overall hauntological effect.

In “Bridges and Balloons” the reference to Cair Paravel, the fictional capital in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, deepens the nostalgia and the sense of escapism that permeate the song. The narrator not only yearns to escape reality but seeks to do so in a world that is fictional and literary. This desire is reflected in both the poetic and imaginative language that Newsom uses and in the allusion to Cair Paravel, which underscores the longing to escape to the realm of fantasy that exists within literature. As the opening track of the album, “Bridges and Balloons” establishes a thematic thread with literary references that reoccur throughout the record, appearing subtly in “Sadie,” “En Gallop,” and “Inflammatory Writ”, and more explicitly in “This Side of the Blue.” In “Sadie,” the literary intertextual references are more nuanced, with subtle allusions to the Bible. The third verse introduces a biblical motif: “And all day long we talk

about mercy: / lead me to water lord, I sure am thirsty.” The imagery in these lines evokes Psalm 23:2, “He leadeth me beside the still waters,” which conveys that, even in the most challenging times, faith can be a place of refreshment and renewal (*New International Version*, Psalm 23:2). With these lyrics, Newsom thus does not suggest a physiological thirst, but rather a thirst for spiritual fulfillment and guidance from God. Religious references like this one are rare throughout *The Milk-Eyed Mender* but would go on to become recurring motifs in Newsom’s work over the years.

Biblical themes and intertextual references in Newsom’s work are significant because they deepen the song’s emotional and philosophical resonance, linking personal grief to broader literary and spiritual traditions. In the context of “Sadie,” this spiritual thirst becomes particularly significant in moments of grief, as Newsom reflects on the death of a childhood dog and, in mourning, utters a prayer that remains unspoken (Newsom, *Tiny Mix Tapes*). The song’s religious undertones continue in the second-to-last verse, where Newsom sings: “And I’ll tell you tomorrow / Sadie, go on home now / And bless those who’ve sickened below; / And bless us who’ve chosen so.” These lines resonate with verses from the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (*New International Version*, Matthew 5:3-5). By invoking this biblical language, Newsom transforms her personal loss into something universal, drawing on sacred traditions to frame her grief within a broader, almost liturgical context. This interplay between the personal and the sacred creates a layered nostalgia—one that connects her own past to a textual and spiritual tradition. Beyond biblical allusions, Newsom’s work often engages with literary intertextuality, further reinforcing a hauntological longing between music and literature. In “This Side of the Blue,” she explicitly

references Albert Camus: “See him fashion a cap from a page of Camus; / And see him navigate deftly this side of the blue.” This direct nod to existentialism through Camus, coupled with her earlier biblical references, situates her music within a complex literary framework where faith and existential doubt coexist. Such intertextual layering imbues her songs with a spectral quality, where past and present, the personal and the literary, blur into one another. This tension is subtly maintained in “En Gallop,” as discussed previously, with its use of haunting imagery and metaphors that recall gothic literature and Greek mythology. Through these devices, Newsom shapes a distinct literary nostalgia, crafting a sonic world where memory lingers, unresolved—much like the literary echoes that permeate *The Milk-Eyed Mender*.

In “Inflammatory Writ,” Newsom sings about the frustrations of a writer’s block, and in the last verse, compares it to the death of an animal: “While across the great plains / Keening lovely & awful / Ululate the lost Great American Novels.” Here, the anthropomorphizing of the “lost Great American Novels,” likens their fate of being lost to the lamentation associated with the death of an animal. Her mourning of the lost—nonexistent, unwritten—Great American Novels creates a longing for the literary that never was, a nostalgia for what could have been. Music and literature here exist in a dialogue, with music expressing a desire for the permanence and weight of literature, while literature, through her lyrics, aspires to the ephemeral and emotional resonance of music. This dynamic tension, created in the push and pull of the interaction between music and literature, imbues Newsom’s songs with a unique, nostalgic quality. Her music, filled with intertextual references and literary elements, yearns for the gravitas and timelessness of literature. Conversely, the literary dimensions of her work long to transcend their static form and inhabit the fluidity and immediacy of music. This fascinating interplay underscores the depth of Newsom’s artistry while also highlighting the inseparable



nature of these two art forms in shaping the nostalgic landscape that defines *The Milk-Eyed Mender*.

Newsom's mourning of the lost Great American Novels that were never written reinforces the hauntological theme of spectral presence and lost futures already present in the album. Simon Reynolds, in a chapter exploring hauntology, suggests that a "properly American equivalent of hauntology" might be found in the freak-folk movement to which Newsom belongs. Reynolds describes this movement as a "self-conscious, emotionally ambivalent form of nostalgia that sets in play the ghosts of childhood" (343), further noting that the invocations of the "old weird America" in freak-folk point to a vanished era of cultural identity that was simultaneously national and deeply local (343-344). These qualities are evident in Newsom's album, most obviously in her rendition of "Three Little Babes," a traditional Appalachian folk song recorded by Texas Gladden in the early 20th century. The lyrical theme of "Three Little Babes" exemplifies the hauntological aspects of Newsom's album. In the song, Newsom sings about a grieving mother visited by the ghosts of her three children on Christmas Day. The mother, unable to let go of her loss, spreads them a bed of winding sheets, but the children beg her to release them, declaring, "For I shan't stay here, in this wicked world / When there's a better world for me." The mother's longing for her children and her inability to accept their deaths evoke a spectral presence—an embodiment of the hauntological tension between holding onto the past and yearning for lost futures. Sonically, "Three Little Babes" is a clear outlier in the album, clashing in both vocal and musical style against the other songs. As a cover of a traditional Appalachian song, it serves as a reminder of the past that continues to haunt, with Newsom acting as a vessel through which this lingering past is channeled.

We have considered how Joanna Newsom's work evokes a hauntological longing through its literary lyricism, baroque instrumentation, and evocations of childhood reverie. Now we turn to Frank Ocean, an artist who approaches these themes from a different vantage point. His music similarly inhabits a space of temporal dislocation, weaving together fragmented memories, but does so from a cinematic point of view that interweaves what I will call "visual" qualities with deeply personal yet elusive narratives. Like Newsom, Ocean blurs the boundaries between art forms and between past and present, yet his sonic and lyrical landscapes emerge from a distinctly modern, R&B-infused aesthetic. If Newsom's hauntology is rooted in folk traditions and poetic density, Ocean's manifests through vocal manipulation and unconventional storytelling that is both cinematic and nonlinear. Both artists, however, engage with inter-artistic longing, crafting songs that exist between forms, longing for a lost past while gesturing toward imagined futures.

### **Cinematic Nostalgia in *Blonde***

Twelve years after Joanna Newsom's *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, another enigmatic and genre-defying work reshaped its musical landscape. Frank Ocean's *Blonde*, released in 2016, redefined the boundaries of alternative R&B, much like Newsom's folk-inspired debut had disrupted conventional singer-songwriter norms. Departing from the formulaic, radio-friendly sounds and hip-hop beats that dominated R&B in the mid-2010s, *Blonde* embraced a more experimental, introspective aesthetic, solidifying Ocean's reputation as one of the most innovative artists of his generation. Ocean had already established himself in the R&B scene with his first mixtape *Nostalgia, Ultra* (2011) and album *Channel Orange* (2012), both of which foregrounded themes of nostalgic longing and memory. Reflecting on *Nostalgia, Ultra*, Ocean

told *BBC News* that he approached the project with a cinematic vision, aiming to capture the visual and emotional qualities of “certain movies that are shot with a summer haze, that look like the best part of summer” (Ocean). This interplay between sound and imagery, and past and present, became a defining feature of his work. As Cole Cuchna observes in his *Dissect* podcast episode “S3E1 – Frank Ocean: A Man of Art and Mystery,” Ocean’s artistic identity is shaped by “the juxtaposition between old and new, the nostalgic longing for the simplicity of childhood against the harsh realities of adulthood and contemporary life” (Cuchna 22:03). From the outset of his career, Ocean positioned himself as a conceptual artist deeply invested in nostalgia and nonlinear storytelling. He explained to *Complex* that the title of his mixtape, *Nostalgia, Ultra*, reflected a “longing for the past” while underscoring its modernity, particularly in its sonic choices (Ocean). Across both works, Ocean builds intricate connections between lyrics, samples, and musical motifs, creating a dreamlike, cinematic atmosphere that immerses the listener in a fluid, almost surreal experience. As Cuchna further notes, Ocean’s work conveys “a sense of someone attempting to align the conscious and subconscious experiences of the past and present, attempting to connect the emotional dots in one’s life in order to move more successfully into the future” (Cuchna 35:28). This ability to merge temporalities and evoke haunting memories contributed to Ocean’s growing cult following and critical acclaim, setting the stage for the groundbreaking experimentation of *Blonde*.

After four years of silence, Ocean made a bold return. As he revealed to Jon Caramanica of *The New York Times*, the release of *Endless* (2016), a visual album, marked the conclusion of a “seven-year chess game” to free himself from his contract with label Def Jam (Ocean). *Endless*, available exclusively on Apple Music, served as his final obligation to the label. The next day, Ocean independently released *Blonde*. This album, the checkmate move to this battle

with Def Jam, was met with critical acclaim and commercial success. It debuted at the top of the Billboard charts, securing Ocean's position as one of the most influential artists of his generation.

What distinguishes *Blonde* both from Ocean's earlier works and the broader alternative R&B landscape of the mid-2010s is its minimalist instrumentation, ambient textures, and deeply personal storytelling. Moving away from the intricate fictional narratives and fantasy-filled imagery of *Nostalgia*, *Ultra* and *Channel Orange*, the album embraces a raw, autobiographical approach. As Ocean himself states, "There's no fantasy on [*Blonde*], it's all for better or for worse autobiographical."<sup>5</sup> As Cuchna describes in his *Dissect* episode "S3E8 – Nikes by Frank Ocean," *Blonde* functions as a "a kaleidoscopic expression of childhood, teenage thrill, drug-induced summer nights and early mornings, romantic loves won and lost. It's a chronicle of the fleeting memories of youth, a nostalgic look in the rearview of adolescence" (Cuchna 2:00). Ocean echoes this sentiment in a written prologue posted on his Tumblr blog the day *Blonde* was released, reflecting on his teenage years: "maybe that part had its rough stretches too, but in my rearview mirror it's getting small enough to convince myself it was all good. And really though... It's still all good" (Ocean, *Pitchfork*). This retrospective lens, in which time blurs and the past is reshaped through memory, establishes the album's hauntological quality: an exploration of nostalgia not just as longing, but as a space where personal history is continuously reinterpreted.

Ocean's ability to collapse timelines and perspectives is evident in his masterful manipulation of sound. Through haunting textures, layered vocals, and pitch-shifting, he blurs past, present, and future, embodying different versions of himself—childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Ocean explained that these vocal distortions heighten emotional resonance, stating, "Sometimes I felt you weren't hearing enough

---

<sup>5</sup> See *Dissect* "S3E8 – "Nikes" by Frank Ocean."

versions of me within a song” (Ocean). Cuchna further notes that the pitch-shifting on tracks like “Ivy” and “Nikes” was designed to make Ocean sound younger, reinforcing the album’s themes of memory and self-reflection. This technique extends to “Self Control,” “Nights,” and “Futura Free” further distorting time, allowing a younger version of himself to emerge at key moments. In “Pretty Sweet,” pitch shifting is put aside in favor of an eerie children’s choir evoking playground taunts, as if a fragment of Ocean’s childhood memory is tangibly resurfacing through the children’s voices to haunt the present. The album’s sonic aesthetics also align with Fisher’s concept of hauntology, particularly through its use of analog textures. Fisher describes hauntology’s “principal sonic signature” as the crackle and surface noise of analog recording, arguing that “Crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint; it won’t allow us to fall into the illusion of presence” (*Ghosts of My Life* 29). This effect appears at the end of “White Ferrari,” achieved through tape recording, as well as in the subtle tape hiss of “Seigfried,” adding depth and reinforcing the album’s preoccupation with the fragility of memory. This spectral quality is amplified by Ocean’s use of vocal layering and distortion. Tracks like “White Ferrari” and “Self Control” feature juxtaposed vocal lines that create a hazy, dreamlike effect, mirroring the way memories fade and overlap. In the outro of “Ivy,” Ocean’s voice multiplies and distorts as he sings, “I’ve been dreaming of you, dreaming of you,” evoking a sense of disembodiment—perhaps representing the fractured selves that exist across time, or the many nights spent longing for a past lover.

Beyond its sonic elements, *Blonde* also engages with hauntology through lyrical interpolations. In “Self Control,” the pitched-up line “keep a place for me” recalls Prince’s “When You Were Mine,” which carries a similar sentiment of longing and loss where he sings, “I never was the kind to make a fuss / When he was there / Sleeping in between the two of us,”

remarked by Cuchna on *Dissect* episode “S3E12 – Skyline To + Self Control by Frank Ocean.”

“Seigfried” directly echoes Elliott Smith’s lyric, “This is not my life / It’s just a fond farewell to a friend,” an especially haunting reference given Smith’s tragic death. The track also subtly samples The Beatles’ “Flying,” embedding another spectral trace of the past into the album’s sonic landscape.

Through these techniques—vocal manipulations, analog textures, eerie choral elements, and spectral references—*Blonde* transcends traditional autobiographical content. It becomes a fragmented meditation on selfhood, time, and memory, capturing the way the past lingers and distorts, refusing to fully disappear, and thus imbuing *Blonde* with a hauntological sound. This sense of fragmentation extends beyond sound to the lyrics themselves, which construct a collage-like exploration of nostalgia. Memories of coming-of-age experiences, childhood friendships, and first loves unfold in a nonlinear fashion, painting a vivid yet elusive portrait of the past. Ocean’s spectral lyricism invites listeners into his perspective, offering glimpses of moments that feel both deeply personal and universally resonant.

A song like “Ivy” exemplifies this fragmented approach, opening with the wistful line, “I thought that I was dreaming when you said you love me.” Ocean seamlessly transitions from a sweet memory to reflecting on it with the clarity of hindsight: “the start of nothing,” acknowledging in retrospect that what once seemed significant ultimately led nowhere. The lyrics then shift to another memory: “I had no chance to prepare, I couldn’t see you coming,” before returning once more to “the start of nothing.” This repetition serves a dual function: it recalls the past while simultaneously anchoring the listener in the present moment of reflection. The chorus further solidifies this structure, as Ocean firmly roots the narrative in the present time: “Ooh, I could hate you now / It’s quite alright to hate me now,” before concluding with a

sentiment that acknowledges the enduring nature of his feelings: “The feeling still deep down is good.” His repetition of “now” underscores the immediacy of the present, while maintaining a connection to the past, resulting in a bittersweet retrospection that leans more toward acceptance than regret.

This quick movement between memories, reflections on those memories, and present-day emotions not only defines the song’s thematic content but also shapes its structure. While the lyrics engage with nostalgic subject matter, Ocean manipulates time in a way that embodies nostalgia itself. His ability to move the listener backward and forward through time so effortlessly mirrors the experience of nostalgia: a temporal disorientation where past and present exist in constant ebb and flow.

This effect is further heightened by the song’s subtle grammatical shifts. “Ivy” describes the ghostly afterimages of a past relationship, unfolding in the past tense until the present tense phrase “you love me” emerges, creating a momentary glitch that disrupts temporal continuity. This grammatical slip creates a hauntological effect, blurring the boundary between past and present. Instead of the past simply receding, the present intrudes upon it, disrupting any clear temporal distinction. The predominant past tense firmly situates the song in retrospection, yet these occasional shifts make it feel as though Ocean remains suspended in the past, caught between disjointed timelines that seem to blend together.

The song’s narrative unfolds in a series of intimate vignettes, with the listener cast as an outsider, given access only to select fragments of a deeply personal story. Ocean directly addresses his former lover, reflecting on shared memories that need no explanation between them, leaving the audience with only a partial view of their relationship. This deliberate

ambiguity underscores the song's intimacy: it belongs to Ocean and his past lover rather than to the listener. Instead, the listener receives evocative fragments of a story.

Throughout the song, Ocean juxtaposes safety and vulnerability, stability and turbulence. He recalls feeling “safe in [his] rental like an armored truck” before shifting to movement with “driving to Syd’s.” Later, another grammatical shift occurs—this time from present to future—reinforcing the album’s fluid treatment of time: “I ain’t a kid no more / We’ll never be those kids again.” The move from present to future here reflects a quiet resignation, an acknowledgement that the past cannot be reclaimed. The song closes by circling back to its opening theme: “I’ve been dreaming of you, dreaming of you”—a final manipulation of temporal dislocation, pulling the listener back into the past just as the track ends.

A similar interplay between time and memory emerges in *White Ferrari*, where Ocean recounts a painful farewell: “I let you out at Central / I didn’t care to state the plain / Kept my mouth closed / We’re both so familiar.” As in “Ivy,” verb tenses subtly shift from past to present with “we’re both so familiar,” contributing to the song’s ghostly, lingering quality. Ocean navigates these memories from two perspectives—the moment they originally occurred and the clarity that comes with hindsight—suggesting a reconciliation with the past, even as it continues to haunt him.

This fragmented approach extends beyond individual songs to *Blonde*’s structural elements, including its use of skits and interludes. Tracks like “Be Yourself,” “Good Guy,” “Facebook Story,” and “Close to You,”—each lasting only about a minute—feel like fleeting thoughts or quick memories surfacing and vanishing. In “Be Yourself,” Rosie Watson, the mother of Ocean’s friend, delivers a cautionary message about adulthood, discouraging the use of drugs and alcohol. By incorporating another person’s voice to convey a lesson about authenticity,



Ocean momentarily withdraws from his role as the storyteller, further contributing to the album's fractured narrative.

These interludes, with their ephemeral quality, mirror the transitory nature of memory itself, evoking the feeling of flipping through a slideshow of nostalgic moments. Ocean's careful curation of fragmented imagery—whether in “Ivy,” in the interludes, or elsewhere—permeates *Blonde*, shaping both its lyrical and sonic landscape. This is particularly evident in two other standout tracks, “Pink + White” and “Nights,” which we will analyze more in depth, where the interplay of memory, time, and emotion continues to define the album's immersive, deeply introspective atmosphere.

Nostalgia in *Blonde* is woven not only into its themes—coming-of-age experiences, childhood friendships, and first loves—but also into the album's fragmented, collage-like structure of its storytelling. Ocean crafts a narrative that shifts fluidly between memory and present-day reflection, revisiting lost relationships, pre-fame struggles, and existential musings on time and identity. Given his deep inspiration from film while making *Nostalgia, Ultra*, it is unsurprising that *Blonde* carries a similarly cinematic quality. The album's fractured narrative unfolds through vivid vignettes, evoking strong visual imagery that makes the songs feel almost like scenes from a film.

Ocean's lyrics guide listeners through temporal shifts, seamlessly moving between past experiences, reflections on those moments, and present thoughts. This interplay between memory, identity, and time creates a unique nostalgic effect, immersing listeners in Ocean's recollections while simultaneously prompting them to reflect on their own. He achieves this effect through fragmentation at both lyrical and sonic levels—nonlinear storytelling transports listeners across time, while lyrical repetition generates echoes that blur the boundary between

past and present. Summer emerges as a recurring motif throughout the album, appearing in songs like “Skyline To,” “Self Control,” “Pink + White,” and “Solo (Reprise).” This repetition reinforces a visual and emotional backdrop, much like the setting of a film, further enhancing the album’s dreamlike, cinematic quality.

In “Pink + White,” summertime memories emerge in a fragmented yet fluid progression, unfolding through vivid, impressionistic imagery. The second verse is particularly evocative of a visual quality, with Ocean recalling memories from his youth through lush imagery: “In the wake of a hurricane / Dark skin of a summer shade / Nosedive into flood lines / Tall tower of milk crates,” and “Cannonballs off the porch side / Older kids trying off the roof.” These snapshots capture childhood summers in New Orleans—where Ocean grew up—a city known for its hurricanes. Rather than focusing on their destruction, Ocean highlights the joy and resilience found in these moments, framing them as warm, nostalgic recollections rather than tragedies. By doing so, he transforms these memories into an optimistic celebration of youth, reinforcing the album’s cinematic, dreamlike storytelling.

This interplay between fleeting childhood memories and deeper reflections on life runs throughout the song. Lines like “If you could die and come back to life . . . you’d kneel down to the dry land / Kiss the earth that birthed you” add a contemplative, almost cinematic weight, resembling an emotional montage set against the song’s lush soundscape. The outro further enhances this effect, evoking the feel of rolling credits present at the end of movies. The opening lines: “Remember life, remember how it was / Climb trees, Michael Jackson, all ends here” immediately situate the listener in a space of recollection, where fragmented memories of childhood resurface in a dreamlike sequence. The imagery of climbing trees and listening to Michael Jackson gestures toward a time of innocence and youthful joy, but the phrase “all ends

here” abruptly puts an end to this nostalgia, signaling an awareness of time’s passage and the inevitable loss that comes with it. The mention of specific names: “Say what up to Matthew, to Shoob / Say what up to Danny / Say what up to life, immortality” further reinforces this reflective tone. These names, likely references to childhood friends, function like a personal roll call, as if Ocean is saying his goodbyes to the past while simultaneously preserving it in his memories. This sentiment deepens in the following lines, where Ocean recalls brief yet evocative glimpses of his past: “Bending up my Nikes / Running out of Melpomene, nicotine / Stealing granny cigs / Gimme something sweet.” The image of bent Nikes suggests a worn-in, well-loved pair of sneakers, perhaps a symbol of restless youth and the passage of time. The mention of Melpomene, likely a reference to the Melpomene Projects, a housing complex in New Orleans, grounds the song in a specific geographic and emotional space, hinting at how the spaces we grow up in become a crucial part of our personal histories. The juxtaposition of “nicotine” and “stealing granny cigs” captures the rebellious parts of adolescence, while the final plea—“Gimme something sweet”—echoes with a subtle yearning for the comfort of childhood’s simple pleasures lost to time. Like flashes of memory at the end of a film, these fleeting recollections create a sense of time slipping away, reinforcing *Blonde*’s inter-artistic longing.

In “Nights,” Ocean keeps using this fragmented narrative style. The song’s first half reflects on past relationships, with Ocean addressing someone from his “past life” and recounting memories of dropping a partner off before his night shift. These recollections are interspersed with seemingly unrelated, fleeting memories—lines such as “I’ll buzz you in, just let me know when you’re outside” and “still got some good nights memorized” evoke a visual kaleidoscope of emotions and moments. The beat switch in the second half of the song introduces new fragments: reflections on marijuana, mortality, family, and Hurricane Katrina.

These shifts in content create a sense of temporal dislocation, mirroring the fragmented nature of memory. Ocean reinforces this fragmentation through lyrical repetition, creating an echo-like effect that resembles ripples of memory. Words like “night/right,” “you,” and “shit/shift” reverberate throughout the song, generating a mantra-like quality that heightens the album’s introspective and nostalgic mood. This not only amplifies the emotional weight of *Blonde* but also establishes it as a masterful exploration of memory and nostalgia leading to an inter-artistic tension between the lyrics themselves and the visual quality they evoke.

In “Solo,” and particularly in the second half of the song, temporality shifts fluidly, with the narrative oscillating between past and present approximately every four lines. The verse starts in the present time, as Ocean describes his current habits: “skipping showers and switching socks, sleeping good and long,” and references his marijuana use: “white leaf on my boxers, green leaf turn to vapors for the low / And that mean cheap, cause ain’t shit free and I know it.” This present-tense reflection abruptly transitions into a past memory, as if triggered by the previous line: “even love ain’t cause this nut cost, that clinic killed my soul.” Here, Ocean uses unfiltered language to convey the emotional toll of an abortion. The narrative then returns to the present with “Now your baby mama ain’t so vicious / all she want is her picket fence,” before shifting back into past recollections a few lines later: “I wanted that act right in Colorado that night / I brought trees to blow through, but it’s just me and no you / Stayed up til my phone died.” This ebb and flow between past and present creates a dreamlike quality, reinforcing the song’s nostalgic effect. The fragmented structure mirrors the way memories come to mind unpredictably, shaping the song’s temporal fluidity and emotional depth.

This fragmentation is what deeply infuses the album with not only nostalgic, but also hauntological qualities, especially through its disjointed sense of time, themes of absence, and

sonic aesthetics. The intertwining of past, present, and future not only generates nostalgia but also reinforces the spectral presence of memory and loss. This temporal disjunction aligns with the concept of a “chronological fracture,” a key characteristic of hauntology brought up by Fisher, that conveys the sense of time being disjointed (*k-punk* 739). Ocean structures *Blonde* in a way that embodies this feeling, emphasizing recollection, uncertainty, and impermanence. Ocean conveys this chronological fracture through the fragmented structure of *Blonde* and through his thematic obsession with memory.

Another key hauntological concept present in *Blonde* is the “presence of absence.” As Fisher explains in *Ghosts of My Life*, Derrida’s notion of hauntology builds upon the ideas of *la trace* and *différance*, suggesting that “nothing enjoys a purely positive existence” and that everything is defined by the absences that precede and surround it (Fisher 26). This sense of absence permeates *Blonde*, manifesting as lost love in “Ivy,” “Self Control,” and “White Ferrari,” the fading innocence of youth in “Pink + White” and “Skyline To,” and the fractured identity of adulthood in “Solo,” “Nights,” and “Siegfried.” Ocean frequently sings about moments that exist only in recollection, as in White Ferrari’s “You left when I forgot to speak,” which evokes both literal absence and the inability to hold onto the past, or Self Control’s “Now and then, you miss it, sounds make you cry,” capturing the other end of this spectrum, the melancholic weight of nostalgia. Both songs feel suspended in time, not only because of their lyrical content but also due to their minimal instrumentation, which amplifies the sensation of memories slowly slipping away. This spectral, elusive sonic effect is further reinforced through Ocean’s vocal layering and distortion techniques discussed earlier

Finally, *Blonde* mourns lost futures, another hallmark of hauntology. As Fisher asserts, hauntology reflects “things which never happened but which could have” (*k-punk* 648). This

theme is evident in “Siegfried,” where Ocean contemplates an alternate version of his life: “Maybe I should move and settle / Two kids and a swimming pool,” which echoes throughout the song. The unresolved structure of the song mirrors this sense of liminality, as if suspended between multiple possible futures, none of which feel fully real. Similar moments appear throughout the album, such as “White Ferrari’s” “I’m sure we’re taller in another dimension” and “Ivy’s” “All the things I didn’t mean to say, I didn’t mean to do.” These lyrics encapsulate the spectre of unrealized possibilities—the “what ifs” and “what could have been”—that haunts both the album and the artist himself (Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* 33).

*Blonde* thus operates within the framework of hauntology, embodying its core themes of temporal disjunction, absence, technological mediation, and lost futures through its use of fragmentation. Ocean’s fragmented storytelling, spectral vocal production, and melancholic reflections on memory and identity position the album as a sonic exploration of time’s instability, making it a striking contemporary example of Fisher’s hauntological aesthetic.

## **Conclusion**

This hauntological interplay between art forms is similarly evident in Joanna Newsom’s *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, which constructs a hauntological atmosphere through its poetic, unique lyricism, intricate rhyme schemes, and frequent intertextual references. Like Ocean, Newsom crafts a space where the past and the present are intertwined, raising broader questions about how contemporary music functions as a site of hauntological exploration. If both *Blonde* and *The Milk-Eyed Mender* so vividly embody these disruptions of time, where else might we find similar spectral traces of lost futures?

First, it is essential to mention Newsom's subsequent album, *Ys* (2006), which expands upon the literary and hauntological qualities present in *The Milk-Eyed Mender*. The tension between literature and music becomes even more salient in Newsom's second album: composed of five songs, each ranging from seven to sixteen minutes long, the album's lyrics unfold like epic poems, meticulously building intricate narratives that blend myth, folklore and personal reflection. This invites a deeper analysis of Newsom's work, particularly in terms of *Ys*'s overarching cohesiveness, which contrasts with the more fragmented, self-contained narratives of *The Milk-Eyed Mender*. Examining how *Ys* approaches nostalgia, intertextuality, and temporal disjunction in different ways would enrich the discussion of Newsom's spectral qualities.

It would be interesting to examine how hauntological aesthetics arise across more genres. Hip-hop albums such as Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) and *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012) explore temporal disjunction in their respective storytelling as well as the lingering ghosts of systemic oppression, while MF DOOM's intricate wordplay and alter egos create spectral echoes of past selves and lost identities in *Madvillainy* (2004). Meanwhile, singer-songwriters such as Elliott Smith, Nick Drake, Bon Iver, and Sufjan Stevens craft deeply personal hauntological spaces, relying on voice and lyricism to conjure the ghosts of memory and loss.

Electronic and club music also provide a strong basis for hauntological analysis, as demonstrated by Fisher in his examination of artists such as Burial and The Caretaker. Artists like SOPHIE, Sega Bodega, Eartheater, Grimes, Arca, and A. G. Cook construct soundscapes that feel simultaneously futuristic and nostalgic, filled with spectral remnants of past musical forms. The club scene, with its repurposed samples, distorted vocal processing, and cyclical

structures, becomes a space where hauntology thrives—where the past is continually reanimated in new yet ghostly forms.

Ultimately, the exploration of hauntology in contemporary music reveals not just an engagement with the past but an active reshaping of time itself. Through Ocean's fragmented and cinematic dualities, Newsom's literary quality, and the spectral echoes found across diverse genres, music continues to serve as a site where lost futures stain the present, and the past refuses to fade—a site where time is out of joint.



## Works Cited

- BaileyShea, Matt. *Lines and Lyrics: An Introduction to Poetry and Song*. Yale University Press, 2021.
- Batcho, Krystine Irene, and Simran Shikh. "Anticipatory Nostalgia: Missing the Present before It's Gone." *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 98, 2016, pp. 75–84, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.03.088>.
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.
- Cuchna, Cole. "S3E1 — Frank Ocean: A Man of Art and Mystery" *Dissect*, 15 May 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/13qF2rux7ahDDtfz1kfCkN?si=db8daa1a6436408f>.
- Cuchna, Cole. "S3E8 — Nikes by Frank Ocean" *Dissect*, 10 July 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4lLWfsZXDEqb28CZyCHxca?si=3d00c0ec7b284fa0>.
- Davis, Fred. *Yearning for Yesterday*. Free Press, 1979.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Routledge, 2006. <https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.4324/9780203821619>
- Eckstein, Lars. *Reading Song Lyrics*. Rodopi, 2010.
- . *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Fisher, Mark. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Zero Books, 2014.
- , et al. *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)*. Repeater Books, 2018.
- New International Version*. Biblica, <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/matthew/5/>. Accessed 28 December 2024.

*New International Version*. Biblica, <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/psalms/23/>. Accessed 28 December 2024.

Newsom, Joanna. "An Interview with Joanna Newsom." Interview by Judy Budnitz. *The Believer*, 1st June 2004, <https://www.thebeliever.net/an-interview-with-joanna-newsom/>. Accessed 18 December 2024.

———. "Harp's Delight - An interview with Joanna Newsom." Interview by Michael Cramer. *Dusted*, 19 April 2004, <http://www.dustedmagazine.com/features/243>. Accessed 18 December 2024.

———. "Joanna Newsom: Of Narwhales, Zeugmas, and Will Oldham." *Tiny Mix Tapes*, 30 January 2006, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/joanna-newsom>. Accessed 18 December 2024.

———. *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, Drag City, 2004. Bandcamp, <https://joannanewsom.bandcamp.com/album/the-milk-eyed-mender>.

Ocean, Frank. *Blonde*, Boys Don't Cry, 2016. Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/album/3mH6qwIy9crq0I9YQbOuDf?si=Za0Ve6F7R2a37ZDPNqHe7Q>.

———. "Frank Ocean Is Finally Free, Mystery Intact." Interview by Jon Caramanica. *The New York Times*, 15 November 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/arts/music/frank-ocean-blonde-interview.html>. Accessed 10 January 2025.

———. "Frank Ocean Shares Notes About the Making Of Blond and Boys Don't Cry Magazine." Article by Noah Yoo. *Pitchfork*, 20 August 2016, <https://pitchfork.com/news/67685-frank-ocean-shares-notes-about-the-making-of-blond-and-boys-dont-cry-magazine/>. Accessed 4 February 2025.

- . “Sound of 2012: Frank Ocean.” Interview by Ian Youngs. *BBC News*, 5 January 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-16390456>. Accessed 10 January 2025.
- Reynolds, Simon. *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past*. Faber and Faber, 2011.
- Sedikides, Constantine, et al. “Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 17, no. 5, 2008, pp. 304–07. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20183308>.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. *The Norton Anthology of Drama*, edited by Peter Simon, 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2010, pp. 333-428.