

GENRE IN CRISIS, CRISIS AS GENRE:
CONTEMPORARY DISRUPTIONS AND CONSTRUCTIONS
IN BODIES OF POPULAR MUSIC

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Communication.

Chapel Hill
2023

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ABSTRACT

Kevin Alexander Pabst: *Genre In Crisis, Crisis As Genre: Contemporary Disruptions And Constructions In Bodies Of Popular Music*
(Under the Direction of Michael Palm)

During the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, musical activities and practices, from creation to consumption to performance, began to cohere around some distinct trends, and an emergent body of music known as “pandemic pop” came into shape. This research project takes the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism as its contextual focal point, analyzing the relationship between genre and crisis. Specifically, this dissertation asks “what can be gleaned from reading the discursive frameworks of genre and crisis through each other?” In order to answer this question, this project interrogates two phenomena – genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre – to suggest new understandings of the narrative dimensions of both genre and crisis. This dissertation unfolds over three case studies across three chapters: Chapter One analyzes the controversy surrounding the removal of Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” from Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart as an instance of genre-in-crisis; Chapter Two studies the above-mentioned formation of “pandemic pop” during the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of crisis-as-genre; and Chapter Three folds these phenomena together through an interrogation of “Lose Yo Job,” a 2020 viral remix of a recording of Johnniqua Charles, a Black woman, as she was being detained by law enforcement. These chapters use a combination of textual, musical, and material analysis, and is informed by scholarship on genre theory, Janet Roitman’s framework of crisis as a discursive formation, and my own framework of “format materialism.” Ultimately I argue that reading genre and crisis through each other opens new possibilities for

the popular and critical understanding of both of these concepts. Such understanding, I suggest, could be beneficial to scholars of both genre and crisis, offering new approaches to the study of old phenomena.

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INTRODUCTION

CRISIS MUSIC

As the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread rapidly across the United States in the early months of 2020, I, like many, found myself turning to music to help manage my mood. I had been listening to Brittany Howard's recent debut solo album, *Jaime*, on repeat when schools began closing for the semester, work began transitioning to at-home, and lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing began to mark the norm. The album is a musically diverse triumph that often deals in themes of family trauma,¹ intersectional identity-based struggles and pains, and the dark history of racial discrimination central to the American south where Brittany grew up. But there are also moments of joy, love, and peace that characterize Howard's autobiographical opus. As I attempted to calm the feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and distress brought on by COVID, I kept returning to *Jaime*'s standout single "Stay High." The back half of the song's lyrics is worth printing here in full:

'Cause where I come from / Everybody frowns and walks around

With that ugly thing on their face

And where I come from / We work hard and grind and hustle all day

(Yes we do)

There comes a time, there comes a time / at night, where we get to play

And we smile and laugh and jump and clap and yell and holler and

¹ The album itself is named after Howard's sister, who died at the age of thirteen from a rare form of eye cancer.

Just feel great

I just want to stay high with you

So don't question my state of mind / I'm doing wonderful, just fine, thank you

(thank you)

Everything is everything and everything is beautiful

(how did it get like that?)

See all I do is keep it cool and don't worry 'bout what everyone is doing

I already feel like doing it again, honey

I just want to stay high / I just want to stay high / I just want to stay high

With you

The composition and performance of “Stay High” is just as fundamental to the effect it produces as its lyrics. The chord progression is fairly simple, switching routinely between the same two chords throughout the intro and verses, and adding two additional chords in the chorus, all in the key of A major. While it utilizes a fairly upbeat tempo at 122 beats per minute (BPM), the 6/8 time signature, with acoustic guitar strumming triplets and bass and percussion hitting the 1 and the 3, create a peaceful, wave-like, floating feel to the song. Swelling harmonies, celesta instrumentation, and Howard’s signature soulful voice, exuding joy and contentment on this track, coalesce into something greater than the sum of its parts. A song lyrically about finding and savoring moments of peace and joy during hard days certainly had optimistic relevance to the global pandemic creating such hardship for so many, but it was the musical composition, instrumental arrangement, and vocal performance that kept bringing me back to this song. For three minutes and eleven seconds, I could close my eyes and feel relief, calm, soothing.

While I was not alone in my pseudo-meditative use of music to control my mood in uncertain times, I began to notice some interesting trends in music practices during the pandemic. They began with uplifting displays of community: citizens in lockdown staging balcony performances for their neighbors, popular musicians offering free live-stream virtual concerts, and Spotify users sharing tongue-in-cheek “End of the World” and “Sounds of the Virus” playlists. But while browsing through a few new singles to hear what contemporary musicians were releasing (and sometimes also writing) during lockdown, I heard something that startled me: a cough. And then another, and another – the same cough, actually, repeating in a loop, as a percussive beat built around it and a voice began singing. It felt...almost violent.

Mind you, this was still in the early days of the pandemic, when quarantines were just being issued, when mask-wearing had not yet become hyper-politicized, when my mom was still wiping down every door knob in the house twice a day. At that time, a cough was one of the most frightening and paranoia-inducing things you could hear. And here it was in a song, used as a gimmicky sample? It turned out not to be an isolated incident. As I listened through the tracks on this playlist, I heard more and more sounds of sickness woven into music released over the past few weeks, all of them explicitly about COVID-19, all of them produced and released fairly quickly, all of them lyrically deploying a dark sense of humor. A far cry from my relaxing and peaceful “Stay High.” *What is going on?* I thought to myself.

While I was listening to Brittany Howard in order to help control my emotional response to the crisis of the coronavirus pandemic, it became clear to me that many others were turning to music, either as composers or consumers, to make sense of the crisis, to make it legible. There was a connection becoming increasingly visible between music as a form of communication and crisis as an experiential state of being, and it is this connection that forms the focus of my

dissertation. As I dug more and more, it seemed that the questions I was interested in asking went beyond “how do people use music to understand the crises they find themselves in?” Such a question implies a simple and somewhat linear relationship between music and crisis, when in reality, the two are entangled in a far more complex way. As COVID-19 illustrated, music wasn’t just being used to make sense of crisis – crisis was indeed giving birth to entire new bodies of music, new musical practices and behaviors and activities, a development not unprecedented nor unique to crisis specifically, but fascinating nonetheless. As I followed the development of these musical trends during the pandemic and thought more about musical activity during times of crisis, I started asking myself a number of questions: What does it mean for humans to be in crisis? Who experiences crisis? What does music do during crisis? How is crisis audible in music? These COVID-inspired questions ran into longer-standing questions that have interested me about music and its classification: How do bodies of music come to be recognized as distinct categories? What role does format play in the formation of music genre? The more I thought about these questions, the more I realized how thoroughly genre and crisis intersect and inform one another, how much they have in common as concepts. Both are categorical entities that conditions, situations, and music are discursively assigned to, prescribing certain narrative, rhetorical, cultural, or artistic meaning upon said conditions, situations, or music. And so I started asking myself, if crisis and genre can be understood as functionally parallel concepts, what can be learned by reading crisis as genre, or genre as in crisis? What new light can be shed on music released during or about times of crisis by stacking these conceptual lenses on top of each other? This forms the central focus of my dissertation: what can reading crisis and genre through one another illuminate about contemporary bodies of popular music during unstable times?

To answer these questions, I study the effects of crisis and musical genre on each other through the dual considerations of genre being thrown into crisis and crisis functioning as a musical genre, or, “genre-in-crisis” and “crisis-as-genre,” phenomena I detail thoroughly below. I’m interested in what conceptual dimensions of crisis can be applied to genre and vice versa, and how this conceptual cross-fertilization can help open up new ways of understanding music genre, its formation, and its implications.

My study of musical genre and crisis unfolds over three case studies across three chapters. In Chapter One: Genre-in-Crisis: The “Old Town Road” Controversy and the Crisis of Country Music’s Identity, I examine the removal of Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” from the Hot Country Songs chart by Billboard in 2019 as a case study of genre-in-crisis. This is a contemporary example of a fairly traditional occurrence: gatekeeping a new transgressive star or hit. But as I examine, the state of the music industry in the streaming era and the affordances of the digital format for artists and consumers create new implications for this old occurrence. This case study enables an examination of music genre being thrown into crisis while considering how format materially impacts both genre and crisis. Additionally, it studies the systemic racism built into the music industry and how genre functions as a tool of segregation. The genre of country was thrown into crisis when that segregation was challenged, and thus, when the music industry’s control over genre and what it signifies was disrupted.

Chapter Two: Crisis-as-Genre: COVID-19 and the Emergence of Pandemic Pop, studies musical activities and creations during the coronavirus pandemic – specifically the formation of “pandemic pop” as a recognizable body of music – to illustrate the functioning of crisis-as-genre. Across new music created by professional and amateur artists alike, remixes, re-recordings, and re-purposings of already-existing songs, the genre “pandemic pop” emerged and contained music

that spanned many different genres: pop, hip-hop, rap, country, rock, indie, and many more. Pandemic pop was recognized popularly as a distinct body of music not because of any distinct musical traits, but because of songs' relation to the pandemic. Crisis was the organizing feature that cohered this body of music together, and as such, pandemic pop represents an example of crisis-as-genre. The formation of this body of music was unprecedented, as COVID-19 was the first global pandemic to occur during the age of the internet. The combination of digital technology used to create and disseminate music and a global health crisis makes pandemic pop truly unique.

Chapter Three: Genre/Crisis: "Lose Yo Job," Black Lives Matter, and A Crisis for Whom? is an examination of the messy relationships between genre, crisis, genre-in-crisis, and crisis-as-genre through the case study of "Lose Yo Job," an impromptu song performed by a Black woman named Johnniqua Charles as she was being detained by a security guard. The song was turned into a remix, used as an anthem at Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police movements during the summer of 2020, and became a viral hit, all while Johnniqua remained powerless over its use and the profits it generated. The consequent problematics of ownership and the broader tradition of the remix open up an examination of genre-in-crisis, and Johnniqua's personal situation, the larger history of racialized police violence and music about it, and the disturbing tradition of the meme-ification of Black distress, offer an opportunity to interrogate crisis-as-genre. This case study complicates distinctions between genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre, ultimately considering that perhaps the two are inseparable.

These three case studies all occurred within the same two-year span and represent tumultuous times for both music and society more generally. As the crises of COVID-19, systemic racism, and police violence swept the country and the globe, contemporary music found

itself in and with crisis. The summer of 2020 saw much discourse on the “twin pandemics” of the coronavirus and structural racism: the National Academy of Medicine held an annual symposium on the effects of and responses to the twin pandemics;² Papers were published;³ Universities introduced classes and held forums.⁴ A study of crisis music and the dual phenomena of genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre can help bring into focus the links and relationships between these twin pandemics. While Chapter One focuses on the systemic racism of the music industry and Chapter Two examines the COVID-19 pandemic, Chapter Three interrogates the twin pandemics together.

To set up my case studies, in the remainder of this introduction, I will provide first some important definitions, clarifying my conceptual framework for crisis, crisis music, genre-in-crisis, and crisis-as-genre. Next, I transition into a fuller literature review that details three key areas of study that inform my theoretical approach to this dissertation: sound as communication, format materialism, and genre theory. I detail why and how these three bodies of research drive my thinking on subjects of crisis and music. I then discuss the methods I use in this dissertation, which vary slightly by chapter but ultimately cohere under the approaches of music analysis, textual analysis, and format analysis. Finally, I provide a more in-depth chapter outline for each of the three case studies listed above.

² National Academy of Medicine, “Medical Education and the Twin Pandemics: COVID-19 and Structural Racism,” 2020 Annual Meeting, <https://nam.edu/event/medical-education-and-the-twin-pandemics-covid-19-and-structural-racism-interest-group-09-2020-annual-meeting/>

³ Alison L. Bailey et al, “Introduction to Twin Pandemics: How A Global Health Crisis and Persistent Racial Injustices are Impacting Educational Assessment,” *Educational Assessment*, 27:2, pp. 93-97, Aug 5 2022

⁴ Santa Clarita University, “Twin Pandemics Forum Addresses COVID-19 and Racial Injustice,” Sep 25, 2020; Duke University School of Medicine, “How Can We Navigate the Twin Pandemics of COVID-19 and Systemic Racism?” Dec 1, 2020

Crisis Music

I define “Crisis music” as music (live or recorded) or musical activities (such as performing music or creating playlists) that is staged during a crisis and that is in some way about that crisis. Not all music created or performed during a crisis is necessarily crisis music, and not all music about a crisis is necessarily crisis music; both qualities of “during” and “about” crisis must be met in order for a piece of musical material to qualify as crisis music. (For example, Brittany Howard’s *Jaime*, while motivated by hard times, loss, and personal crisis, was not written nor produced during them, and thus would not meet the definition of “crisis music” for this dissertation.) The “during” may be somewhat easier to qualify: as long as a crisis is popularly understood to be presently occurring or ongoing, music staged within that window meets this criterion. “About” is a little trickier to nail down, as music’s meaning is often interpretative, and artistic objective is often not apparent. As such, if a song (or musical activity) is publicly made to be about the current crisis – be it by the artist, music critics, or consumer communities – then it meets this criterion. Artist and critic interpretation of a piece of music being “about” a crisis is typically documented and easy to reference, either through interviews, reviews, or other popular press. But consumer construction of a piece of music as about crisis occurs through other means. The most significant of these means that I reference heavily in chapter two, about pandemic pop, is the (sometimes collaborative) creation and shared consumption of playlists. By grouping songs around a specific theme or subject, there is an implicit understanding of those songs being “about” something, and consumption of that playlist by others indicates a shared or growing understanding of that about-ness. But consumer construction of music meaning can be staged through other means as well, such as activity on

social media (such as TikTok, where songs are often used to score dance routines) or discussion on online platforms (such as Reddit, where users will often build threads about a single piece of pop culture with hundreds of comments).

So if crisis music is music or musical activity that occurs during and is about crisis, what is crisis? My approach to crisis is informed greatly by Janet Roitman's work in *Anti-Crisis*, which interrogates crisis as an idea rather than a moment or historical event. Roitman's work starts with the recognition that the meaning of the term "crisis" has evolved into something "more than a historical conjuncture" or a "critical, decisive moment," that its contemporary use indicates that rather than a historical event *being* a crisis, moments in history are characterized *as* crisis, and social life is said to be *in* crisis.⁵ In other words, Roitman suggests, the term "crisis" signifies not a singular moment, but a condition, a state of affairs, an experiential category, a persistent state of ailment and demise. Roitman lists a number of examples in which crisis qualifies the nature of events: "humanitarian crisis, environmental crisis, energy crisis, debt crisis, financial crisis, and so forth."⁶ She summarizes the aim of her book early on, stating "I am not concerned to theorize the term "crisis" or to come up with a working definition of it. Rather than essentialize it so as to make better use of it, I seek to understand the kinds of work the term "crisis" is or is not doing in the construction of narrative forms."⁷ Narrative then becomes a vital dimension to the conceptual workings of crisis. The characterization of certain events or conditions as in crisis enables certain narrative possibilities while foreclosing others; dubbing something a "crisis" privileges the telling of a certain type of story about that thing.

⁵ Janet Roitman, 2013, *Anti-Crisis*, Durham: Duke University Press.

⁶ Ibid, p. 3.

⁷ Ibid, p. 3

In many ways, genre functions similarly: it operates as a rhetorical, discursive, and semantic device, in that through naming a particular piece of music to a particular genre group, certain possibilities for that music, its creators, and its communities are enabled while others are closed off. Similarly to how Roitman opts away from theorizing and nailing down a hard definition of “crisis” and instead examines where and how the term is used in popular discourse and how those uses function in the construction of narrative forms, genre scholars like David Brackett and Fabian Holt maintain that genre cannot be essentialized,⁸ and that for students of genre, the better approach is to examine the naming practices that surround specific genres, where and how specific genre terms and categories are used, and what functions such citations enable/disable.⁹ Much of the scholarship that I draw upon (and that I outline in the literature review section of this introduction) views genre through a sociological and cultural lens, maintaining that it is the collaborative social and cultural activities of various groups of actors that establish genre’s formation and function. While this understanding does not preclude genre’s rhetorical dimensions, it does privilege a certain way of viewing genre. But I argue that, similar to Roitman’s understanding of crisis, genre is not a naturally-existing *thing*, but an *idea* of a thing, a concept, and that it is the socio-cultural activities of various groups of actors, as well as how those activities are documented and discursively (re)constructed, along with rhetorical and narrative activities, that give shape to that concept. Both crisis and genre function as experiential

⁸ David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2016; Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011; Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010; Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007; Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*, Berkley: University of California Press, 2015; Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, London: Routledge, 1999.

⁹ I have used this approach to genre elsewhere: Max Dosser and Kevin Pabst, “Who Lives, Who Dies, He Tells the Story: Hip-Hop, Antagonist-Narrators, and the Impact of Musical Genre on Storytelling,” in *Rise Up: The Revolutionary Rhetoric of Hamilton*, eds. Luke Winslow, Nancy J. Legge, and Jacob Justice, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022, 169-83.

conditions, as semantic organizational tools, and as concepts that imply certain im/possibilities for whatever experiences or musical activities that are named to them. So then, can applying Roitman's basic framework of crisis to genre do anything for our understanding of genre?

This is where the frameworks of "genre-in-crisis" and "crisis-as-genre" come into play. Roitman mentions humanitarian crises, environmental crises, financial crises, and more, relying on where public discourse (such as news reports and press coverage) explicitly uses the terminology of "crisis" to examine how popular understanding of crisis as a narrative form colors the historization of these specific conditions that are said to be "in crisis." While some such rhetoric may be apparent at times with genre (such as popular magazines speculating on (a) genre's breakdown or collapse¹⁰), identifying a genre-in-crisis can be trickier than looking for instances of the term's use in popular discourse. I maintain that genre-in-crisis occurs when the above-mentioned established "concept" of the genre is threatened to such a degree that the entire idea of what the genre is becomes unstable. The occurrence of such a phenomenon includes the rise of popular discourse of "crisis," "collapse," "death," and other related terms, but it is also signaled by other discursive and socio-cultural activities that highlight a tension between how the genre is conceived by different parties. The friction between the music industry's idea of a genre and an artist's performance of or participation within that genre, for instance, may signal the beginnings of a genre in crisis, as is the case in Chapter One of this dissertation, about "Old Town Road." This of course raises the question, when disruptive moments like "Old Town Road" occur, for whom is a genre in crisis?

¹⁰ For example, Carrie Battan, "'Old Town Road' and the overdue death of genre," *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2019; Sam Goldner, "The 2010s were the decade that genre collapsed," *Vice*, November 5, 2019; Jack Hamilton, "Spotify has made all music into background music," *The Atlantic*, October 6, 2021.

The answer to that question is most frequently “whoever is in control over the genre and profiting from its boundaries being discretely maintained.” While, as I mentioned above and shall elaborate upon below, the idea of a genre is collaboratively constructed by various groups of actors, there is nonetheless still a power hierarchy of those groups of actors. Someone at the top of the hierarchy still holds onto an authority to claim “this *is* X genre, and that *is not*.” In the example of the “Old Town Road” controversy that I study in Chapter One, that someone is explicitly Billboard, claiming that the song did not contain enough elements of the contemporary country genre to be considered a country song, but it is also other music industry gatekeepers and arbiters, like record labels who benefit from hard-drawn genre lines, and vaguely defined “Nashville country music gatekeepers” from whom Billboard was allegedly “under pressure” when it removed the single.¹¹ The ensuing public debate indicated that not only did the artist Lil Nas X have a differing idea than Billboard of what the country genre is, but so did large swaths of country listeners and music critics. This lack of consensus over the idea of the country genre is what threw it into crisis. And while it can be (and is) argued that, as so many different parties are involved in the construction of a genre, there is never a complete and perfect consensus over what any one specific genre is, in most cases, the power hierarchy of control over the genre remains intact. What is unique about the “Old Town Road” controversy and what signals a genre-in-crisis is the fact that for a moment, control over the country genre by those at the top of the hierarchy – the music industry – seemed to be threatened. Their conception of what the genre was, was challenged. It ultimately stabilized and the status quo was maintained, but the pushback against Billboard’s ruling over genre lines was so strong that it seemed like its idea of country

¹¹Chris Molanphy, “The “Old Town Road” Controversy Reveals Problems Beyond Just Race,” *Slate*, April 12, 2019. <https://slate.com/culture/2019/04/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-billboard-country-charts-hot-100.html>.

might be forced to change. The crisis was one of power. A genre-in-crisis is a moment where the hegemonic idea of the genre is threatened and might no longer be the dominant understanding of that genre. As such, it is most often a crisis for those at the top of the power hierarchy over a genre.

While “Old Town Road” represents a familiar case with new aspects of music industry power brokers being challenged by a transgressive new hit – a case of genre-in-crisis – the relationships between genre and crisis run in both directions. Crises external to genres also affect their contours, and can even give rise to new ones, which brings me to crisis-as-genre. While, again, multiple parties participate in the formation of a genre, the idea of the genre that arises is reliant on certain key features that a piece of music must have in order to be considered part of that genre. Such features can be musical (such as rock music utilizing electric guitars, or country music containing lyrics about certain southern themes, hip-hop being rhythm-driven, the blues being characterized by the blues scale and specific types of chord progressions, etc.), cultural (such as jazz’s origin within African-American communities, or punk’s association with working class and anti-establishment communities), or a number of other types. Crisis-as-genre comes into picture when crisis is the most significant and clear feature that coheres a body of music together. Crisis as a feature of music is simply defined as when that music is explicitly about or made to be about a specific, typically ongoing crisis. I examine this closely in Chapter Two through a case study of the genre “pandemic pop.” This body of music contained songs that spanned various different already-existing genres: pop, rock, rap, hip-hop, country, indie, and many more. With so many different genres represented within this body of music, the key feature that united them was not a musical or a cultural one, but that of crisis itself. From new songs with lyrics that were explicitly about the COVID-19 pandemic to decades-old songs that were

given new meaning by consumers as being relevant to or expressive of experiences during the coronavirus, what united these songs together as a cohesive body of music was their relevance to crisis. As such, crisis functioned as genre.

I expand upon how genre, its formation, and its functions are understood in the literature review below, but it is worth noting here that, for the purposes of this dissertation, I consider pandemic pop *as* genre. Whether or not it *is* genre, or a sub-genre, or just a trend, is contested and dependent upon what definition of genre one uses. I am not concerned with the empirical question of whether or not pandemic pop *is* genre; rather, I take up the critical concern of what looking at a body of music *as* genre, through the lens of genre, can do. I argue that the understanding of genre that a study of crisis-*as*-genre opens up suggests that pandemic pop can and should be read *as* genre, regardless of whether or not it *is* according to professional or industry or popular or certain academic standards. In the conclusion to this dissertation, I return to this question and this case study, considering the ways in which pandemic pop has and has not cohered as a genre in the years since its initial formation in 2020. The inconclusive “end” of the coronavirus pandemic makes it difficult to demarcate music produced *during* and about the crisis. Is pandemic pop still being made? Has it morphed into something else, a post-pandemic pop? Has it faded out of the cultural zeitgeist entirely? I consider these questions in the conclusion, as well as questions that arise in Chapter Three’s study of “Lose Yo Job.” With the conceptual phenomena of genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre explained and interrogated across Chapters One and Two respectively, Chapter Three blurs the lines between them, examining the relationship not just between genre and crisis, but between genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre. Are they indeed inseparable, always already present within each other? I consider the implications of this messy relationship in the third chapter and the conclusion.

Literature Review

I draw primarily from literature across media studies, science and technology studies, musicology, streaming studies, and sound studies in order to form the basis of my conceptual framework for this dissertation. This nexus of disciplines affords a study of crisis music across socio-cultural, material, sonic, musical, and discursive dimensions. As someone interested in the art, work, and culture of music, I have found that these fields offer productively distinct perspectives that are complimentary when taken together in the study of music, and the key texts and scholars I highlight below help inform my research questions. As such I present their insights here in the form of three overarching scholarly concerns (rather than in the form of distinct fields or disciplines) that shape my approach to crisis music: sound as communication, format materialism, and genre theory.

Sound as Communication

Music is certainly not the only medium through which responses to and expressions of crisis are staged, so what makes it significant in a study of crisis and pop culture? How does music uniquely make sense of these experiences? What kinds of meanings and understandings surrounding crises does music enable? How is music constituted by crisis? How is crisis made legible through sound? I draw here from sound studies, media studies, musicology, performance studies, and cultural studies. I am perhaps foremost indebted in my thinking about music and sound as communication to Steven Feld's seminal work on acoustemology. As this framework is central to my approach to studying crisis music, it is worth quoting Feld's original definition here in full:

"Acoustemology, acousteme: ...the potential of acoustic knowing, of sounding as a condition of and for knowing, of sonic presence and awareness as potent shaping forces

in how people make sense of experiences. Acoustemology means an exploration of sonic sensibilities, specifically of ways in which sound is central to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth. This seems particularly relevant to understanding the interplay of sound and felt balance in the sense and sensuality of emplacement, of making place. For places are as potentially reverberant as they are reflective, and one's embodied experiences and memories of them may draw significantly on the interplay of that resoundingness and reflectiveness."¹²

Feld suggests that one of the reasons why sound is such a powerful meaning-maker has to do with the very physiology of how sound is experienced and processed in the body. The intricate coordination between brain, nervous system, head, ear, chest, muscles, and respiration required to absorb and decipher sound forms a "special bodily nexus for sensation and emotion."¹³ In other work, Feld details how sound – and more specifically, listening to, playing, and recording music – functions as a means of getting past language barriers and facilitating dialogue with those from other cultures.¹⁴ The framework of acoustemology highlights the epistemological and communicative possibilities of sound and music, and these are the possibilities that help focus my work across this dissertation. Be it genre-in-crisis or crisis-as-genre, the relationship between crisis and music illustrates how human experiences of crisis are often communicated and made sense of through music. Music doesn't just represent crisis; as the insights of acoustemology highlights, music is a way of being-in-crisis.

With acoustemology providing a baseline for my approach to sound as communication, I turn my attention next to the unique communicative links between music and crisis. In his collection of essays in *Small Acts*, Paul Gilroy argues that music contains a "capacity to express the inexpressible and communicate the effects of a history of barbarity that exhausts the

¹² Steven Feld, "Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea," in *Senses of Places*, eds. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, 1996, p. 97

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Feld, "Nii Otoo Annan: from toads to polyrhythm via Elvin Jones and Rashied Ali," in *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra*, 2012.

resources of language.”¹⁵ In this way music does not just offer a means of making sense of and finding community in crisis; Gilroy suggests music is a uniquely effective way of doing so, that it is capable of expressing what other means of communication cannot. Such effectiveness, Feld might suggest, is grounded in the distinct ways in which sound is felt and experienced in the body. Gilroy also offers a descriptive understanding of racism-as-crisis, suggesting that it is multidimensional, layered, onion-like, around the core of Black cultural expressions; that crisis is both lived and systemic; that it is comprised of the macro-structural and economic conditions that shape the locations in which Black creativity develops.¹⁶ Additionally, Gilroy argues that “The contemporary musical forms of the African diaspora work within an aesthetic and political framework which demands that they ceaselessly reconstruct their own histories, folding back on themselves time and again to celebrate and validate the simple, unassailable fact of their survival.”¹⁷ In this way, Black musical bodies such as jazz make the past actually audible in the present. History is not simply understood or represented through music, it is actively created and re-created. Gilroy also details how musical movements, like the Soul music of the 1960s, operate as forces that bind listeners together in moral political communities, that create radical declarations of self-respect, and that extend spaces for social autonomy. *Small Acts* illustrates how the expression and collaborative understanding of crisis is intrinsically linked to pop cultural forms like music, and furthermore, how music and its material properties (such as afro-futurist art on vinyl sleeves) enable those affected by crises to form communities, create spaces for autonomy, and challenge dominant narratives. The relationship between music and crisis that

¹⁵ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts*, London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993, p. 5.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 37

Gilroy's work interrogates is particularly useful in Chapter Three's exploration of the crisis and protest music of the Black Lives Matter movement. I rely on Gilroy's understanding of music's community-building, space-making, and embodied experience-sharing dimensions, particularly within communities that have lived in and through the violence of racism, to examine how the musical practices of BLM add an important nuance to the picture of crisis music I build in this dissertation.

Other works similarly explore how music, specific musical formats, and compositional or performative trends in music create space and community for those living in times of adversity and struggle. For example, Andrea Bohlman's interrogation of the production and distribution of cassette tapes in Poland under the state socialism of 1944 to 1990 "[explores] the work of crafting tapes and shaping histories that we can hear when we take the time to listen to these heavily edited and sedimented recordings. Read across the written and sonic archive, these little stories on tape and about tape offer a window into networked epistemologies of sound under state socialism."¹⁸ Magnetic tape's unique material conditions (low cost, standardized measurements, rewrite-ability, mobile listening capability, user-driven) made it a ubiquitous and powerful tool for underground circulation of sonic information in ways that other forms of communication simply could not achieve. Bohlman's work illustrates how shared cultural expression and meaning-making during times of adversity are uniquely enabled by music – the form of music and the format of magnetic tape provided citizens living under state socialism with a means of communication and knowledge-sharing that other methods could not. For me, this helps answer the question, why music? Genre exists across other pop cultural forms – film, television, literature, video games, etc. Why not study crisis culture more broadly? I choose to

¹⁸ Andrea Bohlman, "Making Tapes in Poland: The Compact Cassette at Home," *Twentieth-Century Music*, 14:1, 2017, p. 122

focus on music genre specifically not only for logistical and personal interest reasons, but also because the distinct affordances granted by music and music format make it worthy of studying on its own. As will come into shape in chapters two and three specifically, the type of network-building, knowledge-creating, and space-making practices that music affords, and the unique ways in which it affords it during times of crisis, that Bohlman studies provides a driving focus for this dissertation.

Additionally, Jesse Stewart's work on nested looping structures and diatonic patterns within traditional African percussive rhythms as sonic expressions of the African diaspora¹⁹; Daphne Brooks's analysis of Black female vocal performances as dialects of Afro-sonic dissent engaged in a paradigm of noisy cultural disruption²⁰; Fisher's examination of the defiant declaration of indigenous kinship across physical barriers such as wrongful imprisonment through the use of radio²¹; and numerous other works²² illustrate the unique affordances of sound in general and music in particular to create space, to exercise agency, and to formulate shared meaning. With Feld's acoustemology providing a framework for sound as a way of knowing and being in the world, the insights of Gilroy, Bohlman, Stewart, Brooks, Fisher, and others across cultural studies, musicology, and sound studies shape my theoretical thinking on the

¹⁹ Jesse Stewart, "Articulating the African Diaspora through Rhythm: Diatonic Patterns, Nested Looping Structures, and the Music of Steve Coleman," *Intermediality: history and Theory of the Arts, Literature, and Technologies*, 2010, p. 176.

²⁰ Daphne Brooks, "Afro-sonic Feminist Praxis: Nina Simone and Adrienne Kennedy in High Fidelity," in *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, p. 219.

²¹ Daniel Fisher, *The Voice and Its Doubles: Media and Music in Northern Australia*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

²² Marie Abe, *Resonances o Chindon-Ya: Sounding Space and Sociality in Contemporary Japan*, Middletown, Connecticut Wesleyan University Press, 2018; Jerome Camal, "Touristic Rhythms: The Club Remix," in *Sounds of Vacation: Political Economies of Caribbean Tourism*, eds. J. Guilbault and T. Rommen, Durham: Duke University Press, 2019; Wayne Marshall, "Treble Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies, Volume 2*, eds. S. Gopinath and J. Stanyek, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Jessica E. Teague, "Black Sonic Space and the Stereophonic Poetics of Amiri Baraka's It's Nation Time," *Sound Studies* 1 (1):22-39, 2015.

communicative capabilities of music during times of crisis. Music does not simply respond to crisis; it is a way of knowing and being in crisis; a method for making crisis legible, or even re-creating it; a tool for survival, community-building, and space-making in crisis. This is how I approach the communicative affordances of music-in-crisis-times in this dissertation.

Format Materialism

Many of my research interests (both relative to and outside of this dissertation) have long been focused on music format and the unique ways in which the materiality of formats effects the work, art form, and industry of music-making. It is the central research concern with which I began my doctoral program, and it has shaped my thinking on nearly every music-related writing I have undertaken. Format is often taken-for-granted or outright ignored within everyday popular consumption of music, but it is the very thing that enables and structures our entire experience with recorded music, from the making of that music to its distribution to its individual consumption. The very first recorded format is what made a musical performance re-producible and re-consumable, and the evolution of format over the last century has fundamentally altered the way in which we engage with music. The work I conduct in this dissertation is both explicitly and implicitly influenced by scholarship on format and its material affordances – in Chapter One, I provide a brief historical accounting of this century-old evolution of format and its significance to contemporary genres-in-crisis; in Chapter Two I consider how pandemic pop was even able to emerge as a distinct body of music due in large part to the affordances of the modern digital format; and in Chapter Three I dig into how the contemporary digital music landscape has had messy implications for structures of ownership over musical material. To this end, I here outline works from media studies, musicology, streaming studies, science and technology studies, and

digital labor studies in order to illustrate the framework of what I call “format materialism” that has become so central to my identity as a scholar.

“*Format*,” writes Jonathan Sterne, “denotes a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience and workings of a medium. It also names the rules according to which a technology can operate.”²³ As music formats have evolved over the last century, so too then have the associated looks, feels, and experiences of music-listening, as have the rules governing music technologies’ operations and their consequences. While Sterne uses the term *mediality* to evoke “a quality of or pertaining to media and the complex ways in which communication technologies refer to one another in form or content,”²⁴ I approach the subject of music formats through the lens of materiality, which enables an examination of music formats on the basis of their physical properties and consequent affordances.

Mark Katz’s *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music* details the ways in which evolving sound recordings and their material conditions have transformed modern musical life. He does this through an examination of “phonograph effects” – “any change in musical behavior – whether listening, performing, or composing – that has arisen in response to sound-recording technology. A phonograph effect is, in other words, any observable manifestation of recording’s influence.”²⁵ One clear example Katz provides is the composition of music written explicitly to fit within the time constraints of 78-rpm record sides in the 1920s. Whereas prior to the advent of recorded sound, compositions were not dictated by time constraints, once records could capture music, any composer who desired to have their works recorded had to make them

²³ Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2012. p. 7

²⁴ Ibid. P. 9

²⁵ Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2010. P. 2

fit within the time constraints of the record. In this instance, format had a phonograph effect on the very composition of music. Yet Katz stresses the two-way street of impact, emphasizing a relationship between music technology and users wherein both influence the other. Furthermore, a phonograph effect arises from “the differences between it and what it supersedes, improves on, or extends, and – crucially – the way users respond to those differences.”²⁶ In other words, a phonograph effect is felt when new technology in some way changes what it replaces. Katz’s explication of the phonograph effect provides the most significant groundwork upon which I build my own understanding of format materialism. I take Katz’s work – which is primarily focused on *recording* technology – and extend its insights into other links in the recorded music industry such as *distribution* technology, as I understand format as not just what music is recorded on, but what it is reproduced, distributed, and consumed on – links in the chain that are connected but still distinct.

Format materiality is also highlighted through the use of format *methodologically*. For example, Bohlman and McMurray draw attention to the unique affordances of tape by questioning “What happens when we rethink history according to tape’s mechanisms and materialities?”²⁷ They use the material functions of tape as a method through which to challenge the “phonographic regime,” a set of assumptions and claims about what “sound recording” is that adhere to a cultural music lineage beginning with the phonograph, whose media logics “stand in for sound recording broadly understood – and more often than not celebrated.”²⁸ Unique among tape’s material conditions are its abilities to be manipulated, its simultaneous stability and

²⁶ Ibid. 4.

²⁷ Andrea F. Bohlman and Peter McMurray, “Tape: Or, Rewinding the Phonographic Regime,” (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2017. P. 3-4

²⁸ Ibid. 8.

erasability, and reusability. Recording, re-writing, and erasing all use the same “record” operation, distinct only through sonic context. Furthermore, the button-interfaced operations highlight physical engagement of humans with material technology, and “rewind” specifically offers “a path backward into history.”²⁹ Thus, as a methodological framework, the material conditions of tape enable intervention into the way history is recorded, rewinding backwards into time, and the hitting “record” to simultaneously erase and rewrite what has already been recorded. By using format materialism to structure an argument and provide a methodological framework for analysis, Bohlman and McMurray in turn highlight how the material conditions of formats, often overlooked or taken for granted for their mere ubiquity, fundamentally structure the way that music is made, interacted with, and understood. As such, a consideration of format is imperative for any study that focuses on human interaction with music. While format does not comprise my explicit methodology or structure in this dissertation, I nonetheless keep this kind of thinking in mind in this project. What might applying the logics of format to other cultural practices and formations outside of music illuminate? I return to this approach more explicitly in Chapter Three, where I interrogate the remix as a format that uniquely challenges the boundaries of genre and the power hierarchies that govern it. In this chapter, I turn to Margie Borschke’s work on the remix, in which she discusses the culture of unauthorized and creative use that troubles notions of authenticity, authorship, originality, and the relationship between audience and listener.³⁰

The field of Science and Technology Studies also provides helpful theoretical groundwork for my thinking on format materialism. Langdon Winner’s theory of technological

²⁹ Ibid. 9.

³⁰ Margie Borschke, *This is Not a Remix: Piracy, Authenticity, and Popular Music*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

politics “draws attention to momentum of large scale sociotechnical systems, to the response of modern societies to certain technological imperatives, and to the all too common signs of the adaptation of human ends to technical means.”³¹ Winner argues that technological artifacts can indeed contain political properties in and of themselves, through two possible means: “technical arrangements as forms of order,” in which technology is designed and built in such a way that it dictates the settlement of a particular issue within a particular community, intentionally or unintentionally; and inherently, as certain types of technology are simply inflexible in regards to their political consequences and innately demand a very specific power structure. Winner ultimately argues that more critical attention should be paid to technical objects themselves while not subtracting any attention to the social contexts and histories under which they arise. This dual focus on the innate politics of artifacts and the socio-historical context in which they are situated is fundamental to my own study of crisis music, especially in Chapter One, where I consider how music format has historically been inherently structured to maintain hegemonic control over music genre and its cultural meanings.

While Winner does not use musical examples in this work, a study of technological artifacts’ political properties, both arranged and inherent, is applicable to a study of music format materialism. Winner’s argument that technology is not necessarily neutral, but rather, often designed for specific purposes that produce specific consequences, offers a unique angle into studying music formats. In addition to analyses from musicology which provide insight into cultural and social effects of musical formats and the rhetoric surrounding them from music, legal, and professional industries, Winner’s work prompts analyses into specific format artifacts themselves, what they were explicitly and implicitly designed for, and what social orders they

³¹ Langdon Winner, “Do Artifacts have Politics?” *Daedalus* 109: 121-136, 1980.

might arrange. This approach is quite complimentary to Bohlman and McMurray's work critiquing the "phonographic regime" and using magnetic tape and its inherent political properties to challenge such orders, and plays a significant role in my study of format as a means to control genre (and by extension, to control music's social and cultural meanings) in Chapter One.

Other works in STS help to build my interdisciplinary approach to the study of crisis music. Pfaffenberger's "Technological Dramas" outlines a model for the interrogation of the technological construction of political power and resistance to it,³² which proves particularly fruitful in analyzing format evolutions by situating the politics, functions, and consequences of these transitions through the lens of a technological drama. Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology* examines the "New Jim Code," "the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era."³³ Her insightful work on how discriminatory practices have become deeply embedded within the sociotechnical infrastructure of everyday life, yet rendered invisible, is relevant to analysis of how music formats have been instrumental in segregating sounds and ordering popular music along racial lines.³⁴ Tarleton Gillespie's work on digital rights management (DRM) technologies and their restrictions on user autonomy compliments musicological works on copyright law and previously mentioned works on technological politics through a critical examination of the material properties of digital music

³² Bryan Pfaffenberger, "Technological Dramas," *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 17(3): 282-312, 1992.

³³ Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, (Medford, MA: Polity Press), 2019, p. 19

³⁴ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2010.

software and hardware that preempt and prevent specific user behaviors.³⁵ And recent work on Platform Studies, such as van Dijk, Poell, and de Waal's *The Platform Society*,³⁶ interrogate monopolistic digital ecosystems that connect users primarily for commercial exchange, providing useful insight into the material functions of the most modern music format, streaming. Thus, while most works in STS do not directly address *music* materialism, or at least are not primarily concerned with it, the unique approaches of the field add depth to a study of technological materialism through an emphasis on politics and power structures. As I stated above, a study of crisis and genre mandates a consideration of power, and as format materialism is so central to the way that power has been constructed and maintained over the years, the politically-minded approaches of STS prove fruitful here.

Genre Theory

How do distinct bodies of music come to be recognized as distinct bodies of music? Specific bodies of crisis music are indeed recognized as distinct categories of music in popular press and fan communities, as evidenced through popular and professional discourse, the formation of playlists, and other musical activities. What are the musical and discursive processes that constitute such recognition? What thresholds must be met for a group of songs to achieve widespread popular understanding as a unique body of music? I draw mainly from musicology and media studies to answer these questions as they provide insight into specifically *music* genre.

³⁵ Tarleton Gillespie, "Designed to 'Effectively Frustrate': Copyright, Technology and the Agency of Users," *New Media & Society*, 8(4): 651-669, 2006; D. L. Burk and T. Gillespie, "Autonomy and Morality in DRM and Anti-Circumvention Law," *Cognition Communication Co-operation*, 4(2): 239-245, 2006.

³⁶ Jose van Dijk, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2018.

While the bodies of crises music that I analyze in this project were and are not always recognized, by fans or critics or musicians or industry professionals, as necessarily meeting the level of *genre*, per se, a rich body of literature on genre theory nonetheless is important for the part of my dissertation focused on the formation and recognition of groupings of music. Additionally, as explained earlier and as will come into shape in Chapter Two, I still choose to study these bodies of crisis music *as* genre, as the work I detail below can and should be applied to bodies like pandemic pop. With the origin of its modern usage emerging in the mid-nineteenth century in reference to new forms of popular culture such as fiction and painting, the term “genre” eventually became foundational in music vocabularies.³⁷ Commonly understood at its most basic level as “a type of category that refers to a particular kind of music within a distinctive cultural web of production, circulation, and signification,”³⁸ or “a sort of social contract between musicians and listeners, a set of conventions that can more or less guide the listening experience,”³⁹ genre nonetheless has functions well beyond the mere classification of music and is constituted by more than strictly musical qualities. Genre functions as and means different things to different communities, including the musical creators who operate within, between, and outside of genres; the corporate and industry forces that use genre to mediate music consumption and marketing and to exercise control over the music product; fan communities who identify and engage with genres through style, behaviors, and social activities; demographics of people who played roles in the cultural development of genre or who are inaccurately or stereotypically identified with specific genres; and critical and academic

³⁷ Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 2007.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

³⁹ Joana Demers, *Listening Through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2010, p. 10.

communities that have historically used genre to specific social ends. More importantly than whether “pandemic pop” qualifies as a genre, or whether it will continue to cohere as such, Scholarship on genre theory is useful toward understanding the formations of bodies of crisis music like pandemic pop and how these bodies function and mean differently within/to different demographics.

“Genre culture” (or “genre as culture”) is one sociological concept popular in genre theory, succinctly defined by Negus as “the complex intersection and interplay between commercial organizational structures and promotional labels; the activities of fans, listeners and audiences; networks of musicians; and historical legacies that come to us within broader social formations.”⁴⁰ This definition highlights the contested landscape of genre and the varied forces that participate in the construction of a genre and its popular understanding, and is widely accepted amongst genre theorists as one of the more holistic and insightful frameworks for analyzing genre, as evidenced by their use of the concept within their own works⁴¹. Genre culture foregrounds an understanding of genre as collectively creative, rather than the result of an individual author. The role of “commercial organizational structures and promotional labels” highlights how genre operates as a mediator of musical experience in the marketplace; “the activities of fans, listeners, and audiences” highlights the constitution of genre through consumption, as those who listen to and engage with music in specific ways contribute to the popular understanding of a particular genre; “networks of musicians” points to the more traditional understanding of genre along strictly musical terms, but also indicates genre’s

⁴⁰ Negus, *Music Genre and Corporate Cultures*, p. 29-30.

⁴¹ Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*; David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

dimension of citationality, wherein texts (songs, albums, and other musical performances) performatively construct genre; and “historical legacies that come to us within broader social formations” foregrounds the important function that social, cultural, and political conditions play in the constitution of genres, such as the processes of sonic segregation Miller emphasizes, and the ways in which genre has historically been used to essentialize race. The activities of all of these different groups of actors highlight how genre is not a fixed entity decided upon by one party, but a constantly-moving, perpetually shape-shifting idea that is negotiated collectively by multiple parties with different interests and motivations.

This understanding of “genre cultures” and its constitution by multiple parties affords an emphasis on the contingent and unfixed nature of genre. From the multiple levels of and across genre that Brackett suggests⁴² to the generative liminal spaces between genres that Fellezs examines⁴³ to the shifts in industry-ordained billings of genre that Negus⁴⁴ interrogates, one of genre’s signature components is its fluidity, its inability to be pinned down, its refusal to stay still. But genre is not just ever-shifting, as most scholars agree that it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw rigid boundaries around a genre even if one were able to take a snapshot of it at a fixed point in time. Genre is not only fluid, it is also hazy, a fuzzy container whose outline cannot be definitively placed. I return to this broad framework of genre culture frequently throughout my dissertation, particularly in Chapter Two’s interrogation of pandemic pop, as a way to understand how bodies of music come to be recognized as such and how they are inherently unfixed categories, despite efforts by those in power to fix them.

⁴² Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*

⁴³ Fellezs, *Birds of Fire*

⁴⁴ Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*

However, as I mentioned earlier, the genre culture framework privileges a sociological view of genre's formation and maintenance. I expand upon this understanding throughout the dissertation by bringing other approaches to bear – specifically, more discursive- and narrative-focused lenses. Additionally, the case studies of “Old Town Road” and “Lose Yo Job” in chapters two and four highlight the gaps in genre culture that must be filled by other approaches more attuned to power and racial dynamics. In these moments, I turn to works that more explicitly engage genre's role in racialization within the music industry. Loren Kajikawa's *Sounding Race*⁴⁵ and Tamara Roberts's work on sono-racialization⁴⁶ help to ground an interrogation of how genre is often used as a tool of segregation, as the booting of “Old Town Road” from the country charts demonstrates. Jessica Teague's study of Black sonic space⁴⁷ and Daphne Brooks's conceptualization of Afro-sonic dissent⁴⁸ bring into focus how music and sound can function toward space- and home-making ends for Black artists and listeners, as the use of “Lose Yo Job” and other songs at Black Lives Matter protests exemplifies.

All of these understandings of genre, taken together, allow for a more nuanced and holistic view of genre and how it functions across different industry, social, and cultural spheres. A fluid and collectivist understanding of genre has the value of avoiding reductive trait-based and exemplary works-based approaches, which oversimplify genre as a mere constellation of musical qualities (timbre, rhythms, instruments, etc.) that can be epitomized by quintessential

⁴⁵ Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015

⁴⁶ Tamara Roberts, *Resounding Afro-Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 2016.

⁴⁷ Jessica Teague, “Black Sonic Space and the Stereophonic Poetics of Amiri Baraka's *It's Nation Time*,” *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1, (2015): 22-39

⁴⁸ Daphne Brooks, “Afro-sonic Feminist Praxis: Nina Simone and Adrienne Kennedy in High Fidelity,” *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 204-222, 2014.

works or authors. As Brackett suggests, “removing the idea of authorial intention from an understanding of genre also has important implications for how we understand authorship and creativity.”⁴⁹ Genre culture takes power over a genre’s formation out of the sole hands of musical authors and disperses that power to other communities involved in the creation and maintenance of a genre as well. What genre culture allows in a study of crisis music is a calculated consideration of the actions and roles of various actors – musicians, fans, critics, and industry professionals – in the cultural formation of a grouping of music that is discursively recognized as a distinct body, such as “pandemic pop” and the role of online content creators, music consumers on streaming platforms, and popular press music publications played in its formation.

These three scholarly concerns – sound as communication, format materialism, and genre theory – informed by the insights of various disciplines and scholars, form the basis of my theoretical approach to the study of crisis music. They help establish crisis music’s social, discursive, rhetorical, and cultural dimensions; they illustrate the material impact that technology and format have on musical creations and activities; they demonstrate the hazy and dynamic ways in which bodies of music originate and function. Together, these scholarly concerns drive my approach and shape my thinking throughout this dissertation.

Methods

This project utilizes a combination of historical, material, textual and music analysis (such as the one conducted at the start of this chapter on Brittany Howard’s “Stay High”) in order to make sense of the web of connections between genre and crisis and to interrogate my concept of crisis music. The main research question that guides this dissertation is, how can the

⁴⁹ David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, p. 14

conceptual categories of crisis and genre be read through each other, and what can they tell us about musical activities during contemporary crises? This question points to the importance of engagement between crisis and music, the affordances and limitations of format, and the formation of genres. In each chapter, my aim is to engage each of these key focuses through the use of historical analysis and material analysis (a term I use here to refer to the interrogation of format materialism's impact on music's production, distribution, and consumption) of crises and the musical bodies associated with them, as well as through the use of textual and music analyses of specific songs.

David Brackett's *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates* provides an inspiring blueprint for a project with my goals. In the preface to his survey on American popular music and the various discourses that surround and construct it, Brackett states:

“...I began to ponder ways to explore the interconnections among popular music, musical techniques, current events, and social identity...I wanted to find material that could address several particularly compelling questions: How did the musicians who made the music explain it? What did the music sound like? Who listened to it? Why did they listen to it? How did they react? What was the dominant impression made by the music to society at large? Why do some types of popular music still matter today?”⁵⁰

While the scope of Brackett's project is much wider than my own, many of the same questions guide my own research, attuned to the specific context of crisis. *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* presents a carefully-selected curation of primary and secondary texts surrounding popular music over the last one hundred years, including excerpts from general interest magazines, music magazines, newspapers, music industry publications, interviews with musicians and industry professionals, autobiographies of musical figures, and scholarly publications. The book is organized into genre-specific chapters within chronologically ordered parts for each decade of

⁵⁰ David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, 4th Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. xiii-xiv

the American popular music industry, and the reading selections offered in each chapter are sourced from both publications released during the time the music was being made and more retrospective contemporary writings. The benefit for Brackett is that while conventional narrative histories emphasize continuity, an anthology of source readings provides a productively disjunctive narrative, as different voices may compete, conflict, or compliment one another.

I find this approach to data collection incredibly stimulating and exciting. The productive tension of primary and secondary sources across fields and time creates not only a more holistic view of the music I study, but also highlight areas of controversy that proves insightful in a study of pop culture's relationship to crisis. Brackett also provides detailed historical analyses for each chapter, contextualizing the social and political climate for each body of music. Part of Brackett's work that I enact in my own examines how music is differently interpreted not only across different discursive realms, but across time as well. The way music of the past is remembered and written about is often contrary to how it is perceived at the time of its release. It is my aim to utilize such push and pull between primary and secondary sources to uncover a more holistic understanding of crisis music as a phenomenon that both lives at the time of its release and has long-lasting repercussions on music and pop culture. As such, the *Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* provides a strong example of how I collect and contextualize data in my own project.

My approach to data analysis takes cues from various scholarly publications that interrogate the relationships between music, culture, technology, and context. Auner's "Reich on Tape: The Performance of *Violin Phase*" considers how the use of magnetic tape in traditional performances of Steve Reich's *Violin Phase* inherently impacts the way the piece must be practiced and performed, and that the use of other playback technology (such as digital

interfaces) fundamentally transforms the experience of both playing and listening to the piece.⁵¹ The material analyses by Bohlman and Katz detailed above similarly focus on how format shapes not only musical production and distribution, but musical knowledge and meaning. As such, a material analysis of music format is fruitful for not just contextualizing these bodies of music, but for examining how their respective formats construct and guide understanding of the content they deliver.

Karl Hagstrom Miller's *Segregating Sound* examines how semantic categories and public discourses inflect an understanding of music that is contrary to the way musicians themselves played and heard it⁵²; Keith Negus's "Authorship and the Popular Song" interrogates public perceptions of the relationship between author and song⁵³; Tamara Roberts *Resounding Afro-Asia* explores the creation, performance, and consumption of music that combines Black and Asian traditions, and the strategies artists of such music deploy to push against dominant racial divisions and racist structures in both their lived everyday experiences and within discourses that surround music⁵⁴; Jesse Stewart's "Articulating the African Diaspora through Rhythm" considers the use of rhythm to express the experience of the African diaspora⁵⁵. While these works draw from different theoretical fields and have different academic concerns, they all draw from primary music texts as well as secondary texts and discourse surrounding said music to offer insights into the relationship between bodies of songs, the contexts surrounding them, and what

⁵¹ J. Auner, "Reich on Tape: The Performance of *Violin Phase*," *Twentieth-Century Music*, 14:1, pp. 77-92, 2017.

⁵² Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011

⁵³ Keith Negus, "Authorship and the Popular Song," *Music & Letters*, 92, no. 4, pp. 607-629, 2011

⁵⁴ Tamara Roberts, *Resounding Afro-Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁵⁵ Jesse Stewart, "Articulating the African Diaspora through Rhythm."

they mean to the various communities who are involved in their creation and consumption. I mirror this methodological approach in my own project.

With these approaches forming the basis of my overall methodology, each chapter relies upon additional distinct methods specific to the central case study. I detail these additional methods below in the summary of each chapter.

Chapter Outline

My study of genre and crisis unfolds over three case studies across three chapters: 1), Genre-in-Crisis: The “Old Town Road” Controversy and the Crisis of Country Music’s Identity; 2), Crisis-as-Genre: COVID-19 and the Emergence of Pandemic Pop, and 3), Genre/Crisis: “Lose Yo Job,” Black Lives Matter, and A Crisis for Whom?

Chapter One: Genre-in-Crisis: The “Old Town Road” Controversy and the Crisis of Country Music’s Identity

Chapter One examines genre-in-crisis through the case of Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” and the controversy surrounding its removal from the country Billboard charts. In 2019, after Lil Nas X’s self-released single “Old Town Road,” which combined country, hip-hop, and trap music sounds, topped download charts and began climbing the Hot Country Songs Chart, Billboard removed the single, claiming that it did not feature enough hallmarks of modern country music. This decision sparked outrage amongst other musicians, music critics, and consumers who defended Lil Nas X and “Old Town Road” as country, arguing that the song’s obvious country music roots, as well as the presence of other singles on the Hot Country Songs chart that similarly featured the sounds of other genres, indicated that Lil Nas X’s identity as a

Black man from Atlanta was actually the key motivator behind the song's removal. This in turn also sparked outrage amongst reactionary fans, or who Max Dosser dubs "anti-fans,"⁵⁶ and social media users who defended Billboard's removal of the song and attacked those who attacked Billboard. In the words of Bo Burnham, "The backlash to the backlash to the thing that's just begun..."⁵⁷

The controversy sparked many public conversations in pop culture outlets such as *Rolling Stone*, *Slate*, *Vox*, *Vulture* and many others on the murky lines that separate genres, the role of identity in the formation and industry maintenance of genre, and the impact of the digital music format on musical production and classification. As a highly visible example of the increasingly unclear lines between genres, the lopsided ways in which such lines are enforced, and the breakdown of genre's meanings and functions in a still novel and largely un-explored digital era, "Old Town Road" is an ideal case study through which to examine genre-in-crisis.

The phrase "genre in crisis" itself has been used in popular publications and social media forums, from *The New Yorker* to *Magnetic Magazine* to *Rolling Stone* to *The Guardian* to Reddit, as have similar phrases, like "the breakdown of genre," "music genres are dying," and "streaming is killing the music industry."⁵⁸ While such narratives are certainly not new (indeed, the "death of music" cry is almost as old as the music industry itself), using Roitman's framework of crisis helps shed new insight onto an old narrative. I choose to focus on the "Old

⁵⁶ Max Dosser, "When Puppies Start to Hate: The Revanchist Nostalgia of the Hugo Awards' Puppygate Controversy," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, forthcoming.

⁵⁷ Bo Burnham, creator, "That Funny Feeling," *Inside*, Josh Senior, 2021, *Netflix*.

⁵⁸ Carrie Battan, "'Old Town Road' and the Overdue Death of Genre," *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/old-town-road-and-the-overdue-death-of-genre>; Magnetic, "Are Music Genres Really Dying?" *Magnetic Magazine*, May 6, 2022; Peter Robinson, "Pop, Rock, Rap, Whatever: Who Killed the Music Genre?" *The Guardian*, March 17, 2016.

Town Road” controversy for its format and identity dimensions: it highlights the new possibilities, new problems, and unprecedented nature of the digital music era, and it also highlights the longstanding and historic role that race, identity, and gatekeeping along such lines have played in the music industry since its inception. As such, “Old Town Road” presents an entry point to studying genre-in-crisis along multiple lines: the contemporary crisis of the music industry and genre in the digital era, and the historic crisis of the music industry’s and genre’s relationship with race.

This chapter begins with a historical analysis of two parallel narratives: the history of genre as a method of racial segregation within the music industry, and the evolution of music format and its function within the maintenance of hegemonic control over the recorded music product. These two narratives contextualize the landscape of the modern music industry, and through a historical analysis of genre and format, I am able to demonstrate how the industry got to a place where a single artist – Lil Nas X – was able to throw a genre into crisis. I then utilize music analysis of contemporary chart-topping country songs and the activities of Black artists in the country genre to demonstrate that Billboard’s decision to remove “Old Town Road” from the Hot Country Songs chart was solely rooted in race. I argue that as the evolution to the digital format has eroded much of the industry’s power over music and its social and cultural meanings, gatekeepers like Billboard have doubled down on genre as a tool of segregationist power to keep certain identities separated.

Chapter Two: Crisis-as-Genre: COVID-19 and the Emergence of Pandemic Pop

Chapter Two examines music during the COVID-19 pandemic as a study of crisis-as-genre. Through balcony performances, virtual concerts, and emerging new bodies of music such

as “pandemic pop,” the coronavirus pandemic presents a clear example of crisis being expressed through music. This chapter asks, when crisis becomes the key defining feature of a distinct body of music, what does it mean for crisis to operate as genre, and how does Roitman’s framework of crisis and its emphasis on narrative form influence the workings of genre?

This chapter starts by providing relevant background for the COVID-19 pandemic, its impact on social life, and its political dimensions in order to establish the context in which surrounding crisis music operated (and in many ways continues to operate). Here I further discuss the “twin pandemics” of COVID-19 and structural racism mentioned earlier, noting how longstanding racial and economic inequities disproportionately exacerbated the impact of the coronavirus for Black and Hispanic people. While race’s centrality to this chapter is less overt than the other two, these inequities nonetheless motivated and influenced much of the pandemic pop and crisis music released. With an understanding of COVID-19 and structural racism as crises established, I then turn my attention to various bodies of music and musical activities connected to the coronavirus pandemic. These include the aforementioned balcony performances and virtual concerts, as well as other online and viral musical products, and bodies of pandemic pop, which include new original music produced during and explicitly about COVID-19, and already-existing popular music that was repurposed during COVID-19 to help people make sense of and express themselves during the global pandemic. I rely upon a Burkean method of representational anecdotes by selecting “exemplar” songs to focus my music analysis on, highlighting trends in lyrical content, musical motifs, artistic objectives, and public reception in order to paint a picture of what this music does. Furthermore, I divide the genre of pandemic pop into two sub-genres, each of which is comprised of two to three sub-sub-genres: original music (songs by established artists and songs by amateur artists) and derivative music (re-recordings,

remixes, and re-purposings). This organization not only helps to lend structure to the vast body of pandemic pop music, but it also spotlights just how diverse and varied the songs that comprise it are, underlining even further how pandemic pop coheres as a body of music not along musical traits, but through crisis-as-genre.

These various musics and musical activities form a larger body of what I call “crisis music,” as relevance to the COVID-19 crisis is the key shared feature amongst them. However, as I shall expand upon in the chapter, pandemic pop does not comprise the entirety of crisis music surrounding COVID-19: other activities, such as the balcony concerts neighbors performed for one another during lockdown, virtual concerts hosted by professional musicians, and shared playlist creation on platforms like Spotify, all also represent embodiments of crisis music, but do not necessarily qualify as pandemic pop. As such, a case study of coronavirus crisis music enables a critical examination of when crisis functions as genre, what the implications are for both crisis and genre in this formation, what popular narrative forms are enabled and foreclosed, and thus, ultimately, how crisis-as-genre influences popular understandings of both crisis and genre.

Chapter Three: Genre/Crisis: “Lose Yo Job,” Black Lives Matter, and A Crisis for Who?

Chapter Three combines the dual focuses of genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre through examining the Black Lives Matter movement and the musical trends and activities associated with it, specifically through the case study of “Lose Yo Job.” In 2020, a homeless, addiction-battling Black woman named Johnniqua Charles was detained by security outside of a strip club. A recording of her singing an impromptu original song with the lyrics “you about to lose yo job,” while handcuffed, went viral and was subsequently remixed into a popular song that was

performed at Black Lives Matter rallies. This case study enables an examination of both genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre together, considering how the phenomena are entangled and challenging some of the neatness of the first two chapters, while also raising the important question, for whom is a crisis a crisis?

Similar to the pandemic pop and other musical activities of COVID-19, the protest music of the BLM movement represents another body of crisis music, and thus another example of crisis as genre. BLM crisis music includes a number of different types and activities: already-existing pop songs repurposed for protests, already-existing protest songs from the Civil Rights movement era and others taken up yet again, new original music written specifically about police brutality and everyday experiences of racism, and collaborative musical activities staged during protests, such as chants, a cappella group singing, and dance and step routines. But additional types of music associated with the BLM movement represent instances of genre in crisis, specifically, remixes, samples, and digitally-produced sounds. These musics not only break from longstanding popular notions of what genre is, but defy the idea of genre (as it is popularly understood) altogether. The breakdown and throwing-into-crisis of genre by this body of crisis music is particularly fitting, as while the BLM movement continues the fight for civil rights, the music often used to score this fight pushes against genre norms that have long been used to segregate Black artists, essentialize race, and minimize Black creativity. Indeed, these types of musical techniques – remixes, sampling, etc. – have strong histories within Black communities, and also have histories of being dismissed as “not real music.” In this instance, music that can be categorized as “music of a crisis” is also music that challenges Western Euro-centric ideals of what music and genre is/is not. This breakdown of genre thus bears similarity to the “Old Town Road” controversy discussed in chapter one.

As I have reiterated many times now, this study of genre and crisis mandates a consideration of power: who gets to determine what is/is part of a genre, who gets to decide what is/is not in crisis, and who has to comport themselves I response to such declarations? An important dimension to such power structures that I dig into in this chapter is ownership: who gets to own and benefit from a piece of music? I use the case study of “Lose Yo Job” to offer an analysis of different recognitions of ownership over the song across legal, popular, and social spheres, noting important implications for each. Specifically, I note how Johnniqua Charles was denied any form of legal ownership or authorship over the remix to her song, the resultant support for her right to be recognized as an owner in the popular realm, and the troubling of notions of ownership altogether in the social realm. This contextual analysis of “Lose Yo Job” and its function across these different spheres highlights how ideas of ownership often complicate ideas of both genre and crisis.

Across all of these chapters, central to a study of genre and crisis is an interrogation of race and power. Genre’s identity crisis with “Old Town Road” and Lil Nas X’s standing in the country music industry; Crisis’s emergence as a genre during the COVID-19 pandemic and the musical creativity of aspiring Black artists trying to break into the music business; The genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre that BLM protest music represents and the ownership denied of Johnniqua Charles over her own voice; the case studies in all of these chapters reveal that a collision of crisis, be it situational or ongoing, and an industry built on a power hierarchy, tends to have significant implications for the people who have been at the bottom of that hierarchy. As such, a key concern for this dissertation at large is a consideration of how genre and crisis are negotiated by those who are the objects of such power rather than the holders of it.

CHAPTER ONE

GENRE-IN-CRISIS: THE “OLD TOWN ROAD” CONTROVERSY

AND THE CRISIS OF COUNTRY MUSIC’S IDENTITY

A title card establishes the year: 1889. Across the screen, two outlaws gallop on horseback down a dirt road, large bags of money in tow, cowboy hats flapping in the wind, a sheriff and two deputies in pursuit. After outrunning the law, the apparent bandits dismount at a remote cabin, their western attire dusty from the chase. The older one, a fifty-something white man with a beard and long hair, says to the younger, “This should be fine. We’ll settle in here for the night.” “I don’t know man,” responds his companion, a Black man in his early twenties. “The last time I was here they weren’t too welcoming to outsiders.” The older man assures him, “You’re with me this time, everything’s gonna be alright,” as the owner of the cabin, an elderly white man shielding his young daughter behind him, sneaks around the side, shotgun loaded, and fires at the bandits (Figure 1). The young Black outlaw runs for a mine entrance as bullets nip at his feet, crawls down a dark tunnel, and is deposited in an urban neighborhood in 2019. The residents, old and young, all Black, stare at the Black cowboy having crashed out of the sky from the past.



Figure 1: Lil Nas X - “Old Town Road” (Official Movie) ft. Billy Ray Cyrus, Vevo (Screenshot)

Thus begins the official music video for Lil Nas X’s smash hit “Old Town Road.”⁵⁹ If the brief bit of dialogue seems pointed, that’s because it is. The short intro and the imagery of the video are a tailor-made send up of a race-based controversy that met the song’s initial release and threw the country music genre into a state of crisis. In December of 2018, the young Atlanta-based artist Montero Lamar Hill, aka Lil Nas X, released the genre-blurring “Old Town Road” on YouTube and SoundCloud. The self-described “Country Trap” tune features a twangy banjo sampled from Nine Inch Nails, lyrics that walk the line between celebration and satire of country music tropes (with references to horses, cowboy apparel, tractors, bull-riding, etc.), and a

⁵⁹ “Lil Nas X – Old Town Road (Official Movie) ft. Billy Ray Cyrus,” YouTube video, 5:08, posted by “Lil Nas X,” May 17, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2Ov5jzm3j8>

percussive hip-hop beat underpinning it all.⁶⁰ The single was released in the height of the “Yeehaw Agenda” – a cowboy/cowgirl meme trend – and took off on social media platforms such as TikTok, where predominantly Black users posted videos of themselves dressing up as cowboys and cowgirls to the score of “Old Town Road.”⁶¹

As the popularity of “Old Town Road” spread from meme culture to mainstream music culture, it began to climb the country Billboard charts, debuting at No. 19 on the week ending March 16. A week later, under alleged pressure from Nashville country music gatekeepers, Billboard pulled “Old Town Road” from Hot Country Songs, claiming in a statement released to *Rolling Stone* that the song “incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery [but] does not embrace enough elements of today’s country music to chart in its current version”⁶². Ironically, this removal and declaration of the song’s non-countriness helped skyrocket “Old Town Road” into the music stratosphere, as media coverage debating the song’s country de/merits and the role of Lil Nas X’s race in the assignment of such gave the hit a second wave of attention, as it leaped from No. 15 to No. 1 on the Hot 100. A remix of “Old Town Road” featuring Billy Ray Cyrus was then released by Columbia Records, Lil Nas X’s new label, in a move to express support of the single as a country song, accompanied by the music video described above. It was not welcomed back to the Hot Country Songs chart. However, the remix replaced the original on the Hot 100 after one week, where it remained for an additional

⁶⁰ Lil Nas X, “Lil Nas X Talks ‘Old Town Road’ and the Billboard Controversy.” Interview by Andrew R. Chow. *TIME*, April 5, 2019. https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html.

⁶¹ For more on the Yeehaw Agenda, see *Rolling Stone*, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/welcome-to-the-yee-yee-club-bitch-805169/> and *GQ* for its connection to “Old Town Road” and Black culture, <https://www.gq.com/story/old-town-road-yeehaw-agenda>

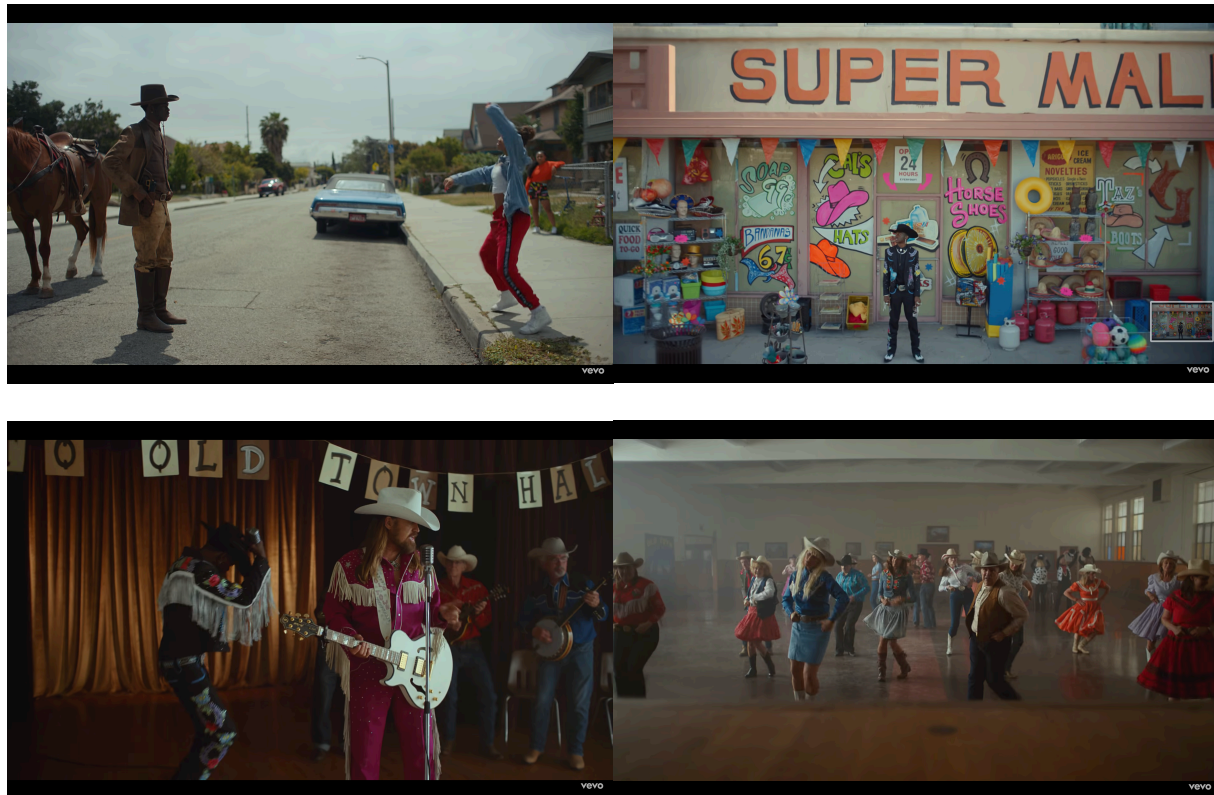
⁶² Elias Leight, “Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ Was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed It’s Mind,” *Rolling Stone*, March 26, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/>

eighteen, totaling an unprecedented nineteen weeks at number one, setting chart history.⁶³ This was also the version that received three Grammy nominations and two wins, including “Best Pop duo/Group Performance” for Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus and “Best Music Video” for the time-traveling cowboys short film.

The pointed nature of the music video becomes apparent in light of the controversy surrounding the original single. Lil Nas X, in full cowboy regalia, expresses his fear at not being accepted by the country western setting in which he has found himself. Though Billy Ray Cyrus, who plays the older outlaw in the music video, assures him that he’ll be fine now that he has a white, bona fide country escort, the cabin owner (an apparent representation of Billboard) chases Lil Nas X, not Billy Ray Cyrus, away with gunfire and into an urbanized setting, seemingly protecting his young daughter – who, I argue, represent country music listeners – from a dangerous Black intruder. Lil Nas X struts down the modern-day street on horseback as Black residents stare in confusion and excitement. Apparent similarities between the country setting from which Lil Nas X traveled and the city streets in which he lands are then highlighted: Lil Nas X line dances while a young girl trap dances (Figure 2); he races on horseback against a man in a sporty car; he walks out of a Super Mall store advertising cowboy hats and horseshoes, now wearing fancy sunglasses, jewelry, and a new cowboy getup decorated with colorful prints and bling (Figure 3). When Billy Ray Cyrus arrives in 2019 to pick up Lil Nas X in a red convertible, he takes him to “The Old Town Hall,” where a large room full of elderly, country-dressed men and women are playing bingo. Billy Ray then begins his featured guest verse (Figure 4), and everyone line dances (Figure 5). The music video is a playful critique of the controversy

⁶³ Andrew Unterberger, “19 Weeks of ‘Old town Road’: A Week-by-Week Look Back at Lil Nas X’s Historic Run at No. 1 on the Hot 100,” *Billboard*, August 20, 2019. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/8524232/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-week-by-week-number-one>

surrounding “Old Town Road’s” removal from the Country Hot Songs chart, the seemingly arbitrary and outdated lines drawn around music genres, and the suggested culture clash between such genres. But while the music video ribs such strict and ridiculous cultural boundaries along music genre lines, the practice of using genre to maintain cultural segregation is not new to music industry gatekeepers.



Figures 2-5: Lil Nas X - “Old Town Road” (Official Movie) ft. Billy Ray Cyrus, Vevo (Screenshots)

I contend that the “Old Town Road” controversy represents a tipping point for long-brewing tensions within the country music genre, operating as a catalyst moment pushing the genre into crisis. This chapter will detail the historical and narrative trajectories of the country genre and its entanglement with various systems of power, establishing how it reached a boiling point, how “Old Town Road” functioned as a catalyst throwing the genre into crisis, and what it means for a genre to be in crisis. As I will illustrate in this chapter, although genre is a fluid

entity, gatekeepers and arbiters like Billboard seek to establish structure and boundaries around it in order to control it. These boundaries may be flexible and are often challenged or pushed, but as long as control over a genre's identity is maintained, such transgressions are often allowed by gatekeepers. It is when a total loss of control over a genre's identity by gatekeepers occurs, when the gates break down and the fluid genre contained within spills out (or perhaps, more significantly, other genres spill in), that genre is thrown into crisis. Not a crisis for the music itself, or the artists producing it, or the consumers listening to it, necessarily, although the implications of the crisis for these parties are certainly not insignificant. There are indeed stakes at play within this controversy for "Old Town Road" as a single, for Lil Nas X as an artist, and for mainstay and prospective fans of country music. But the crisis that I study in this chapter is one for those who have historically controlled what a genre is and what it means. That catalyst moment of throwing-into-crisis is what this chapter seeks to address through the case study of "Old Town Road." The response to this song by the industry brings to light how the digitization of the music value chain has exacerbated genre's function as a tool of segregationist power. As I shall illustrate, the histories of format and genre within the music industry are histories of power localization, and the control that both format and genre have granted gatekeepers has been used to develop and maintain what Karl Hagstrom Miller calls "the sonic color line."⁶⁴ Billboard's reaction to "Old Town Road" makes the sonic color line plainly visible, as it highlights that the lines drawn around "country" as a distinct body of music are not musical lines, but racial ones.

The booting of "Old Town Road" from Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart is just one entry in a long list of exclusions of Black artists from the genre. From Ray Charles' 1962 album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* (which gave country music at large a popularity

⁶⁴ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2010

boost, despite being turned away by the genre⁶⁵) to Beyoncé's 2016 song "Daddy Lessons" from the album *Lemonade* (which was denied consideration in the country genre at the Grammys), the history of Black artists being denied entrance into the country genre is long and still very much ongoing, as I detail in this chapter. While many white artists embrace other genre styles that do not resemble "elements of today's country music" but nonetheless top the country music charts, such as Taylor Swift's pop-laden "country" or Florida-Georgia Line's rock-pop "bro country" that even features rap artist Nelly (both of which I return to later), Lil Nas X has been turned away. And while Billboard insists the decision has nothing to do with his race and is merely about the music, numerous historical narratives and contemporary "certified" country hits reveal otherwise.

Crucial to this debate over what precisely qualifies as country is the fact that there exists no official regulation on what exactly constitutes an "element of today's country music," or any other genre for that matter. Lyrical content, musical composition, race and gender identity, industry gatekeepers like record labels, institutional arbiters like Billboard, audience taste, authenticity, and countless other factors all have a hand in defining genre, and all in different degrees to different groups of people. The boundaries of genre have always been fuzzy and difficult to classify, due to cultural, artistic, and market elements,⁶⁶ but in modern music, with the aid of digital platforms, they have become even hazier. Chart and streaming algorithms, complications of ownership and authorship, and the affordances offered to musicians to create

⁶⁵ Music critic Daniel Cooper asserts in the booklet to the box set *Ray Charles – The Complete Country & Western Recordings: 1959-1986* that the album raised the profile of the country genre by attracting new listeners, while Willie Nelson stated in an interview for Country Music Television that the album "did more for country music than any one artist has ever done."

⁶⁶ Y. Panagakis, C. L. Kotropoulos, and G. R. Arce, "Music Genre Classification via Joint Sparse Low-Rank Representation of Audio Features," *Transactions on Audio, Speech, and Language Processes*, 22, no. 12 (2014): 1905-1917.

and distribute music independently from labels, all further muddy these already murky waters. With so much flexibility between, dipping into, and borrowing from genres, Billboard's hyperbolic reaction to "Old Town Road" begs insight into just how it really defines country, which of these contentions over genre it's really responding to, and what boundaries have been broken to throw the genre into crisis.

In order to address these questions, I must first offer two important historical narratives that detail genre's (broadly and country specifically) entanglement with systems of white power. The first narrative outlines popular music genre's roots in racialized segregation. While this logic of segregation has become more discreet, it has nonetheless lasted into the present day, baked into the very DNA of genre as it is defined and used by gatekeepers. The second narrative examines how format has historically operated as a mode of power for control over genre. From wax cylinders to CDs, the music industry has not only adapted to evolving formats, but used them as a means of control over genre. But the arrival of what I call the "Digital Disrupture" at the turn of the 20th century presented unprecedented challenges to gatekeepers, and control over the music product and genre formations gradually began declining. Over decades, these two narratives have intensified and intertwined, eventually reaching a boiling point primed for crisis.

After detailing these narratives, in order to illustrate how contemporary country music is maintained along strict racial lines, I provide an analysis of modern chart-topping country hits – all by white artists – and the musical traits they feature, alongside a consideration of Black artists' activity within the genre. This interrogation reveals that whiteness is the primary organizing feature of the country music genre, not any specific musical traits, and that Black artists have strict rules of entry into the genre that do not apply to white artists. Next, I show how "Old Town Road" functioned as the catalyst to officially throw the country music genre into

crisis, as Lil Nas X did not abide by these rules. Lil Nas X entering the country genre on his own accord, using new formats and platforms, namely TikTok, to walk right past gatekeepers and declare himself country without approval, marks a moment where the histories of genre as a tool of segregation and format's relationship with power over genre finally reach an untenable tipping point. Gatekeepers' lack of control over genre's identity in this case threw country into crisis. In fact, country musical activity associated with "Old Town Road" not only broke down conceptions of the country genre, but illustrated a shifting of the tide, as those locked out of the genre for generations began a process of reclaiming a musical culture. I examine these developments in the conclusion in order to consider how genre-in-crisis opens new possibilities and opportunities for those who have historically been the object of control.

The story of the "Old Town Road" controversy is the story of a long-existing genre facing a threat to identity, a story of one of the oldest bodies of popular music reaching a potential point of collapse. This is what genre-in-crisis means, as I see it. The following chapter on pandemic pop, conversely, provides an inverse narrative: the story of a new body of music coming into formation. Whereas this chapter considers the potential breakdown of a genre due to a crisis, chapter two is about the emergence of a new genre out of a crisis. In this way, these chapters reveal mirror narratives of music genre's relationship with crisis. Additionally, a major focus throughout this chapter that bears relevance to later chapters is the consideration of how power is centralized and maintained within the music industry, how crisis challenges that power, and how those who wield power respond to such challenges. Chapter Three's interrogation of "Lose Yo Job" and crisis music's role in the Black Lives Matter era considers such power relations in a different, more complicated formation. Indeed, each of these chapters gets progressively messier. "Old Town Road" is a productive starting point for an examination of

genre and crisis in contemporary music, because as far as crises go, the narrative is fairly clear. This chapter provides a foundation for later chapters, as the concepts of genre, crisis, and power, and their entanglements with one another, are made solidly legible through the case study of “Old Town Road.” This foundation enables later chapters to consider genre formations, crises, and power structures that are less-easily-digestible, more nuanced, messier.

“Ridin’ on a horse, you can whip your Porsche” – Genre’s History as a Tool of Segregation

I draw upon the work of the genre scholars mentioned in my introduction chapter – Fabian Holt, David Brackett, Keith Negus, Karl Hagstrom Miller, and Kevin Fellezs – in order to establish 1, the inherent instability of genre as a classificatory tool, 2, the connections of genre to cultural practices and identity, and 3, its roots within systems of segregation.⁶⁷ The scholarship of Holt, Brackett, and Negus make clear at least five significant features of genre: relationality built upon a system of difference, wherein meaning is only apparent in relation to other genres; citationality, wherein genre is constructed performatively by individual texts; levels of and across genre, wherein the traits associated with genres shift and overlap over time; collective creativity, wherein genres functions as an ongoing dialogue that individual contributors enter into and participate with one another; and fluidity, wherein popular understanding of genre and what it signifies is unfixed. What becomes evident across these features is that genre is not an innately existing *thing*, but rather, an *idea* of a thing, conceived of and contested over by various groups of actors over time. Additionally, as the feature of relationality proves, a genre is

⁶⁷ Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*; David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, (Oakland: University of California Press); Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, (London: Routledge), 1999; Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2010; Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2011

understood not only through what it *is*, but through what it *is not*. For a genre to exist, there must be types and pieces of music that do not qualify to be part of it. But if genre is an idea that is built upon notions of what it is and what it is not, then the controversy surrounding “Old Town Road” raises an important question: who gets to determine what that idea is, and how do they determine it?

This section is focused on providing an answer to that question by outlining who has historically drawn such genre boundaries and along what lines. While the origins of this narrative can be traced back much further, I choose to start at the beginning of the 20th century, as it is around this time that music begins to be recorded and distributed, and thus that it begins to be named to genres by an industry marketing it to distinct audiences. Karl Hagstrom Miller’s *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* is essential to this timeline, establishing how the categorization of music into genres, particularly in late nineteenth and early twentieth century southern music, was not only reductive of the diverse and nuanced musical cultures and practices, but firmly fixed to racial and ethnic identities, resulting in the creation of a “sonic color line.” Miller argues that “segregating sound” took place as scholars, artists, industrialists and consumers compartmentalized southern music according to race, and genres emerged not from musical styles or practices, but from racial and ethnic identities: “The blues were African American. Rural white southerners played what came to be called country music. And much of the rest of the music performed and heard in the region was left out.”⁶⁸ A

⁶⁸ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2010, p. 2. Miller explains how the development of the “sonic color line” occurred through a number of late 19th century innovations: the processes of segregation in legislation, the Supreme Court, and other legal regimes; the strategic growth of folklore as a legitimate university field that produced authoritative discourse on race and cultural authenticity; and the development of sheet music publication and the talking machine, which revolutionized how people made and heard music. Eventually, the belief in a firm correlation between racialized music and racialized bodies was solidified in public, scholarly, and music industry discourse, despite the fact that southern music performance, composition, and repertoires were by no means adherent to such a sonic color line.

century before Lil Nas X was booted from country due to his Blackness (and, as I will illustrate later, his non-assimilation to white cultural norms), “country” was being defined as a genre along strict lines of whiteness.

Importantly, Miller’s work is not intended to undermine the role that certain cultures and demographics have historically had in developing certain genre traditions and styles. Rather, *Segregating Sound* illustrates the ways in which genres have historically been retroactively enforced upon groups of people as a means of segregating identities, regardless of their actual music practices. This is exactly what happened to Lil Nas X: he debuted as country, and the industry retroactively removed him, segregating the genre along lines of racial identity rather than musical traits. Miller’s work may be focused on the industrial origins of genre over one hundred years ago, but the controversy surrounding “Old Town Road” reveals that such machinations are still very much alive today. “Country” was constructed as a strictly white music genre at the start of the 20th century, and while the music industry may have gotten (marginally) better at concealing this fact, Billboard’s removal of “Old Town Road” from the country chart plainly exposes that country is still explicitly and intentionally constructed as a white body of music in the 21st century.

Fellezs also stresses how audiences shape genre, suggesting “fans’ and the music industry’s ever-shifting interests perform substantial roles in shaping genre categories...Yet...an unreflexive racialized logic maintained its hold in popular music discourse, helping to restrict certain genres to primary if not exclusive participation by particular racialized groups.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, he argues that external relationships among various musical genres were often articulated through hegemonic cultural hierarchies that reflected elite cultural values. Through a

⁶⁹ Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire*, p. 21.

cyclical process then, rhetoric about genre produced practices of genre that reinforced that rhetoric, leading to a self-reinforcing logic wherein the relationship between racialized groups and musical sounds became naturalized through industry practices. The ways in which genres become identified with not only music, but cultural values, traditions, and groups of people becomes subsumed within the genres themselves. I argue that this is one way in which the music industry has become adept at hiding the segregation that was more blatant one hundred years ago but still alive today: the ideas about what a genre is and isn't have been so repeated and re-inscribed into music that they have virtually become invisible. Country's whiteness is not recognized (at least popularly) as an explicit and ongoing practice of racial segregation; rather, it is (again, popularly) seen as a genre that is implicitly, inherently, naturally built on a specific set of cultural values and aesthetics. What "Old Town Road" does is make the invisible visible. It exposes the still-at-work segregation of genre, and by making the implicit explicit, throws the genre into crisis.

Fellezs's work examines the productive, dissonant value of fusion music through its ability to "rub against the grain of generic conventions, unmasking genre's veiled racialized or gendered assumptions."⁷⁰ He suggests that the musicians at the center of his study – Tony Williams, John McLaughlin, Joni Mitchell, and Herbie Hancock – indeed intentionally use the productive "broken middle" space between genres to draw attention to and challenge the racialized boundaries often drawn around genre. Similarly, Tamara Roberts suggests that Afro-Asian music (itself a liminal music category between African and Asian musical traditions) and its creators access the "broken middle" to "push against dominant racial divisions, as well as the

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 22.

longstanding racist structures that ignore, obscure, or challenge their success.”⁷¹ Roberts argues that the cementing of music within “Black” or Asian” categories occurs through a process of sono-racialization, “the organization of sound into taxonomies based on racialized conceptions of bodies...because race is assumed to be of the body, racialized sound retains a link to its attributed producer or whom it is supposed to represent, even if it has nothing to do with the actual cultural expressions of those bodies.”⁷² Sound, in this process, becomes incorporated into racial hierarchies, and genre, through sono-racialization, is implicated in the essentialization of race through sound.

Both Fellezs and Roberts maintain the existence of a segregationist, racialized process at work in the industrial maintenance of music genre, and both argue that such racialized genre constructions are exposed and challenged through the existence of music that operates in between genres, utilizing musical styles and practices that are neither-nor/both-and, highlighting unnatural and racist boundaries drawn around bodies of music by the industry. This is precisely what “Old Town Road” does as well. The song draws from country music practices as well as those of rap, hip-hop, and trap. It exists “in the broken middle” between genres, and in doing so, reveals how industry forces like Billboard use genre as a tool of segregation.

Genre’s implication in the essentialization of identity can be seen in other ways as well. As much of the already discussed work points to the role of the audience in the construction of genre, audience participation is likewise fundamental in generic construction of identity. Sean Murray examines the tradition of “Jumping Jim Crow” and other early blackface performances, suggesting that the performance of both cognitive and physical disability was almost always

⁷¹ Tamara Roberts, *Resounding Afro-Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 2016, p. 4.

⁷² Ibid.

involved in performance of blackface. The concept of disability in this manner was taken up to justify discrimination of other groups by attributing disability to them, and such performances of a deformed, grotesque, and disabled Black body were rooted in the pleasure audiences derived from watching the spectacle of disability performed by presumably able-bodied individuals.⁷³ The performance of Blackness and disability, as Miller notes, constructed not only racially segregated genres, but the very ideas about race that themselves influenced such segregationist constructions. Furthermore, Loren Kajikawa examines how reviews of rap music in popular press rely on racial code words to convey meanings, using the example of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" and countless journalistic descriptions of it that construct an image of Blackness symbolizing social conflict to illustrate an effect she dubs "sounding race." In this sense, music criticism and other forms of popular discourse fix racial markers within sonic qualities, much like Roberts's process of sono-racialization. Racial segregation of genre is not maintained just by the industry then – listeners, critics, and other consumers also play a role in this formation. And this is yet another reason why "Old Town Road" specifically threw contemporary country into crisis: consumers did not play along. After Billboard removed "Old Town Road" from the country charts, had fans and critics reinforced the decision, everything would have been business as normal. But because these parties that have historically been implicated in the segregation of genre, in this instance, pushed back against racialized genre maintenance, the implicit was made explicit, the invisible visible, and country found itself in crisis.

Miller, Fellezs, Roberts, Murray, Kajikawa, and others all make clear that genre is not innate, but manufactured – explicitly along racial lines that are invented and maintained by those in power (industry gatekeepers like Billboard) and reinforced by the rhetoric and activities of

⁷³ Sean Murray, "That 'Weird and Wonderful Posture': Jump 'Jim Crow' and the Performance of Disability, in Blake Howe et al (eds) *Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2015.

consumers, critics, and artists. “Old Town Road” broke these racial lines and defied the segregationist function of genre, pushing country into crisis. But before I can fully interrogate that crisis, I must first look to another historical narrative that illustrates how such a challenge to longstanding power structures is made possible through format.

“Cowboy Hat from Gucci” – Genre in the Digital Music Landscape

One of the ways that gatekeepers have historically maintained power over genre is through format. From the earliest days of recorded music, the music industry has been able to exert power over what genre means, what it sounds like, and who is allowed to participate in it through the materiality of the music format itself. Through various format evolutions – from wax cylinder to vinyl to tape to CD – the industry has adapted to maintain control over format and thus maintain control over genre. But at the turn of the 21st century, the industry was presented with an unprecedented format evolution, a transition I call “The Digital Disrupture.” This forms the second key narrative that illustrates how the country genre got to the point of crisis: whereas potential crises of new format had been averted in the past, the Digital Disrupture brought new challenges that the industry was not as effective at responding to, causing a gradual decay in power over genre to the point that a moment like “Old Town Road” could throw it into crisis.

Digitization of the music value chain has been written about extensively for the last two decades.⁷⁴ As the last section established, genre has been used to construct and maintain cultural boundaries long before the advent of the MP3. But the affordances of the digital music landscape

⁷⁴ Examples include M. David’s *Peer to Peer and the Music Industry: The Criminalization of Sharing*, London: SSGE Publications Ltd, 2010; Jonathan Sterne’s *MP3: The Meaning of a Format (Sign, Storage, Transmission)*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012; T. J. Anderson’s *Popular Music in a Digital Music Economy: Problems and Practices for an Emerging Service Industry*, New York: Routledge, 2014; David Arditi’s *ITake-over: the Recording Industry in the Digital Era*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014; and D. Hesmondhalgh’s and L. M. Meier’s “What the Digitalisation of Music Tells us about Capitalism, Culture and the Power of the Information Technology Sector” in *Information Communication & Society*, 21, no. 11, 1555-1570, 2018, to name a few.

have highlighted the disconnect between how genre is used and maintained by the industry and how music is made and consumed. As this narrative illustrates, previous music formats enabled greater and easier enforcement of specific genre styles/sounds by the music industry, but as the digital era has granted more and more power to music creators and consumers, industry conceptions of genre have become more and more visibly outdated. In effect what this does is highlight genre's function as a tool of segregationist power: previous music formats enabled a strict enforcement of genre ideas in a way that was not entirely visible to the public, thus creating the illusion that such a thing as a "natural" genre existed; but in today's landscape of digitally-empowered music creators and consumers, when genre is still used to name and classify music in ways that do not make total sense, its function as a tool of control becomes more apparent. As such, through the Digital Disrupture Narrative, I illuminate the music industry's slipping control over the recorded music commodity. Through highlighting the various responses the industry took to try to maintain power in the digital music landscape, I show where traditional exertions of power over format failed, and where new responses to new technology similarly fell short. The industry's doubling down on genre as a tool of power over music where other tools have been stripped away then reveals the long-standing yet previously-obscured problematics of genre, all of which helps to ground an understanding of how "Old Town Road" came to throw the country genre into crisis.

Every evolution in analogue format has ultimately fit more or less cleanly into a continuation of institutional control over music and genre, but the explosion of the MP3 in the late 90s caused a major disruption unlike any before it, as it upheaved the entire business model of the industry.⁷⁵ Vinyls, cassettes, and CDs were all able to slide right into the longstanding

⁷⁵ F. Moreau, "The Disruptive Nature of Digitization: The Case of the Recorded Music Industry," *International Journal of Arts Management*, 15, no. 2 (2013): 18-31.

business model, one in which artists were dependent upon exclusive deals with record labels (which held the most power and the most profit) to cover the exorbitant costs of producing, manufacturing, and distributing music on these formats, sold physically at brick-and-mortar retailers.⁷⁶ Record labels controlled the resources necessary to create and distribute the musical product, and therefore easily maintained a status quo control over the product itself through simple economics of scarcity.⁷⁷ Thirty-plus years ago, it took the support of major labels to produce and distribute music. But Lil Nas X self-produced “Old Town Road” on a budget of \$30 and distributed it to millions of listeners for free, operating outside of the industry and thus outside of any rules over what his music had to sound like. Format progressions prior to the MP3 were sustaining innovations that upheld the business model of the industry, but the digital format called for an entire rethinking of the very way the music industry would make money.

A compressed format born of a desire for efficiency, the MP3 was taken up by consumers as a way to circumvent institutional control of music consumption.⁷⁸ For the first time, music consumers (in a widespread manner) were able to access a vast inventory of music without having to participate in the traditional business model and power structure established by the institutions. While some suggest that the impact on the music industry in the wake of the MP3 (specifically, between 1999 and 2003, prior to the launch of the iTunes Store) was not as severe

⁷⁶ J. C. Bockstedt, R. J. Kauffman, and F. J. Riggins, “The Move to Artist-Led On-Line Music Distribution: A Theory-Based Assessment and Prospects for Structural Changes in the Digital Music Market,” *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 10, no. 3 (2006): 7-38.

⁷⁷ Hughes, J. & Lang, K. R. “If I Had a Song: The Culture of Digital Community Networks and its Impact on the Music Industry,” *International Journal on Media Management*, 5, no. 3 (2003): 180-189.

⁷⁸ Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format (Sign, Storage, Transmission)*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2012.

as it was made out to be,⁷⁹ the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) nonetheless had quite an obstacle to overcome in order to reassert control over the industry. Crisis loomed. It responded by spreading panic over the state of the music industry and the future of music itself. The Piracy Panic Narrative was born, as Arditi dubs it,⁸⁰ which positioned those who downloaded music on Peer-to-Peer (P2P) sites⁸¹ as “pirates” and “criminals” stealing from artists, and the industry itself as an innocent victim. The RIAA pushed the narrative that such piracy could have fatal consequences for music, putting record labels and artists out of business, and destroying the very music industry itself, effectively scaring a large portion of music listeners out of participating in P2P sites and into continued participation in the RIAA’s model in order to protect the art form they loved, as well as the artists who create it.

But the hyperbolic, “end of music as we know it” narrative was not new to the digital format. The initial popularity of recorded music itself was met with similar fear and doomsday rhetoric about the impending death of live music and the dangerous threat to the livelihood of

⁷⁹ David Arditi, *ITake-Over: The Recording Industry in the Digital Era* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), 2014. Arditi suggests “Far from being passive victims of technological shifts in the recorded commodity form, the RIAA has been an active player in creating novel ways to profit from new modes of commodification, and it has used the change in commodity form to consolidate major record label power to get the public and the state to invest in “saving” music” (p. 15). One major element of this was the “Piracy Panic Narrative,” rhetoric from the record industry to scare consumers into purchasing music legally rather than downloading it illegally. Others (Joanna Demers, *Steal This Music: How Intellectual Property Law Affects Musical Creativity*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006; Sterne, *MP3*; Alex Sayf Cummings, *Democracy of Sound: Music Piracy and the Remaking of American Copyright in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Garofalo, “Power, Production and the Pop Process”) have also discussed the record industry’s use of copyright law, piracy panic, and other methods of curtailing the reach of music piracy, and have also detailed the sharp decline in physical music sales that accompanied the rise of the MP3 format and P2P sites; however, as all of these authors note, musicians and songwriters were not typically the ones taking financial hits, like the RIAA liked to suggest in their spread of the piracy panic narrative.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ P2P sites enable direct connection between users rather than a standard model of connection between web servers and users. Such sites, like Napster, Limewire, the Pirate Bay, MegaUpload, Morpheus, KaZaA, and others, allow for “faster download speeds, more powerful file encryption, and increased user anonymity” in the file sharing of music, according to Garofalo, “Power, Production and the Pop Process,” 115.

performing musicians who may lose the drive to ever write or perform any new music again,⁸² a concern that seems laughable in retrospect. And in the wake of the MP3 and Peer-to-Peer (P2P) music sharing sites, the major labels were nonetheless adept at adapting to the new digital format in order to maintain control of the industry, similarly spreading a narrative of the death of music at the hands of the MP3, which is similarly laughable today. The RIAA manipulated this change in format to rally the public and state to invest in “saving” music⁸³. And while the MP3 may have cut sales of physical products, the industry was ultimately able to embrace this evolution and cut costs at the production and distribution levels. So the Piracy Panic Narrative worked, to an extent. Profits dipped, but the industry maintained control. Crisis averted, for now. But the landscape that enabled Lil Nas X to challenge genre and the gatekeepers who maintained it was coming into shape, and it wouldn’t be long before even more circumventions of industrial control were opened up.

Successfully selling the Piracy Panic Narrative, the RIAA moved to institute intellectual property and copyright laws to prevent user circumvention of its profit system and restrict circulations that threatened the legitimacy of the recording industry’s monopoly on distribution.⁸⁴ Another strategy was the deployment of digital rights management (DRM) technologies, which regulated access to digital content in order to prevent unauthorized use of it, as a lower-cost substitute for or supplement to intellectual property law that imposed preemptive constraints on user autonomy⁸⁵. These technologies were designed to both limit use and, moreover, to weaken

⁸² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The meaning of Style*, (London: Routledge), 1979.

⁸³ Ardit, *ITakeover*.

⁸⁴ Sterne, *MP3*

⁸⁵ D. L Burk and T. Gillespie, “Autonomy and Morality in DRM and Anti-Circumvention Law,” *Cognition Communication Co-operation*, 4, no. 2 (2006): 239-245.

the agency of users and to prevent the potential for future tampering and circumvention⁸⁶. Thus, though the first digital format would pose some challenges to institutional power and issue some blows to profits, the RIAA was ultimately effective at responding and more or less maintaining control of the music industry and its market. However, the circumvention afforded by the MP3 and P2P sites would prove to be a mere hint of the challenges to come.

The RIAA would scramble even more to maintain its monopoly with the launch of the Apple iTunes store in April 2003. Though this platform steered consumers back toward buying music rather than downloading it for free, it nonetheless was not a distribution model officially ordained by the music industry, but rather, a company to emerge out of the information technology (IT) sector. Yet again, the music industry found itself struggling with a crisis of power and eventually having to adjust to a new development it did not itself herald. The major record labels reluctantly acquiesced to Apple's terms, as even though it meant handing over some control of the industry to the IT sector, the sacrifice was able to stabilize market control. In so doing, the music industry was forced to shift from its traditionally-held paradigm of physical product manufacturer and distributor business model to a service provider business model⁸⁷. The iTunes store took the technology that enabled consumers to circumvent the established power of the music industry and reworked it back into an institutionally controlled business model. The RIAA had no choice but to embrace it, as even though it meant handing over some power to another industry, it also meant keeping power out of the hands of consumers and maintaining an established market relationship between institution and consumer. Consumers would yet again

⁸⁶ T. Gillespie, "Designed to 'Effectively Frustrate'": Copyright, Technology and the Agency of Users," *New Media & Society*, 8, no. 4 (2006): 651-669.

⁸⁷ V. L. Vaccaro and D. Y. Cohn, "The Evolution of Business Models and Marketing Strategies in the Music Industry," *International Journal on Media Management*, 6, no. 1 & 2 (2004): 46-58.

attempt to circumvent this power structure by sharing digital copies of their iTunes downloads, yet Apple would respond with DRM technology built into the iTunes software within the digital library and built into hardware in the iPods themselves. Again, crisis averted.

In 2008 the industry was yet again thrown into a struggle for power as streaming services such as Spotify launched and digital platforms gave music consumers and creators more control than ever before. The iTunes store had enabled listeners to purchase by the song rather than by the album, granting them more power in their music purchasing choices than they had previously. And with the growth of platforms like YouTube and the music-sharing occurring on them, listeners were able to dictate more and more how and where they listened to music and how much they would pay to do so. In order to reassert control, the music industry would have to cater to a digitally empowered audience and give them more control over their music listening experience. Thus, the music industry embraced a consumer-oriented appearance that branded itself as serving users rather than selling to them in order to maintain market control. I established in the previous section that music consumers' complicity in the industry's racialized maintenance of genre contributes to its continuance, but as digital formats began granting consumers more and more control over their music listening practices, such complicity began fading, setting the stage for a song like "Old Town Road" to truly challenge industry boundaries around genre with the support of artists, critics, and consumers alike.

Digital platforms posed a challenge to the institutional powers of the industry not only in control over distribution and consumption, but in regards to music creation as well. Previously, producing professional-quality songs consumers would be interested in purchasing (or downloading) was impossible without access to outrageously expensive equipment and professional recording studios, complete with the sound engineers who had the expertise to

operate them. Access to these resources meant being signed by a major label, which meant these labels were able to largely dictate not only which artists became successful, but what type of music the artists were allowed to produce.⁸⁸ This gave the major labels huge control over the shape of musical genres and their boundaries, allowing the continued formation of supposedly clear and distinct genres that existed organically but in reality were carefully constructed and controlled⁸⁹. The control of the music commodity by a handful of big corporations shaped what kinds of sounds were allowed to be produced and heard – oppositional and anti-materialist content was severely restricted, and the sounds and themes allowable within institutionally defined genres was tightly regulated⁹⁰. But as computer, recording, and sound technology became more and more affordable in a digital age, artists for the first time in history were able to create professional quality music in their own homes, without the need to purchase expensive studio time. As has been suggested, the ability to record sound is power over sound,⁹¹ and as that ability has been made more widely accessible, so has that power. Broad accessibility and relatively cheap digital platforms have made the entire value chain of music – from creation to production to distribution to consumption – something artists can undertake independently,⁹² just as Lil Nas X did. Freed from control of institutions dictating what sounds to produce, artists in

⁸⁸ Bockstedt, Kauffman, and Riggins, “The Move to Artist-Led On-Line Music Distribution.”

⁸⁹ Even today this is still apparent. After “Old Town Road” climbed the Billboard charts, Columbia Records quickly signed him (another strategy for maintaining control that record labels employ: waiting for artists to become successful and then signing them to a contract) and discouraged him from submitting “Old Town Road” to country playlists, asserting “If he wants to be a rapper [later], you can’t put country under his title – he will never be accepted [by hip hop fans].” Leight, “Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ Was a Country Hit.”

⁹⁰ Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*.

⁹¹ S. Jones, “Music and the Internet,” *Popular Music*, 19, no. 2 (2000): 217-230.

⁹² Hughes and Lang, “If I Had a Song.”

the digital age have had unprecedented ability to combine, cross between, and transcend longstanding conceptions of genre. Tensions building, crisis boiling.

To expand upon those last components of the value chain – distribution and consumption – the digital economy has also granted artists easier access to platforms of discovery through social media and streaming services. Streaming services allow artists to share music independently, freeing them of need of representation on major labels. Whereas platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music are theoretically geared towards helping consumers find music, others like Bandcamp and SoundCloud, which is where Lil Nas X uploaded “Old Town Road,” are more geared toward helping music producers find audiences. Additionally, social media sites enable artists to connect with consumers in a two-way interaction,⁹³ as platforms like TikTok do not merely enable consumption of music, but encourage engagement with it. This is exactly how “Old Town Road” went viral – through user interaction with the song on TikTok. As there is now a pathway to success and discovery without the need for labels, musical creators are no longer as creatively restricted by conceptions of “what sells” and are able to produce music that does not necessarily completely adhere to a set of genre standards – at least not ones set by the RIAA or other traditional music industry institutions.⁹⁴ While genres have always been fuzzy containers and musicians have long fused elements of different genres together,⁹⁵ the digital era

⁹³ J. Salo, M. Lankinen, and M. Mantymäki, “The Use of Social Media for Artist Marketing: Music Industry Perspectives and Consumer Motivations,” *International Journal on Media Management*, 15 (2013): 23-41

⁹⁴ Rather, the very platforms that enable circumvention of traditional industry conceptions of what music should be, establish new standards. For example, much has been written in popular and academic outlets about how TikTok has set new rules for success for aspiring artists, who tailor their songs to be TikTok-friendly through brevity, catchy hooks, and danceable rhythms.

⁹⁵ White music groups in particular have long borrowed the sounds of other genres and cultures to acclaim. The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* famously uses Indian instruments and compositions, Paul Simon’s *Graceland* was recorded in South Africa with local musicians such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo and incorporated a strong South African musical influence, and Steely Dan has made an entire career out of fusing many musical traditions together, such as jazz, Latin music, R&B, and blues, and all three are hailed as groundbreaking and revolutionary musical groups. New genres and sub-genres continually arise at the intersection of two or more

has seen more transcendence of and transgression against genre. Put another way, as the industry has increasingly lost more and more control over music format, so too has it lost control over genre, and thus, over bodies of music and their consumers, clearing the way for a song like “Old Town Road” to come along and throw an entire genre into crisis.

To complicate the understanding of genre even further, the distribution and consumption of music over digital platforms creates algorithmic categorizations of music that often seem to defy genre. For example, Taylor Swift’s 2012 hit “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together” not only topped the Hot 100, but set a record for most weeks in the top slot by a female artist on Billboard’s Top Country Songs after nine weeks at No. 1, despite the fact that the song does not appear to possess any “elements of today’s country music” (and arguably possesses far fewer than “Old Town Road”). Though Swift debuted as a country artist in 2006, by this point in her career in 2012, it was well reported that she was in the process of transitioning to pop, a transition she embraced as fully complete by her next studio album, *1989* (2014).⁹⁶ Her established status as a country artist may have played a role in Billboard allowing “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together” to stay on the country charts, and, as will become clear in the next section, her whiteness definitely did, but how did it even end up there in the first place?

previously standing ones, such as funk rock, garage punk, raggaeton, pop rap, progressive rock, and countless others. And musicians often release singles that achieve success across multiple genre-specific charts – country in particular has a long history of crossover success into pop, from Dolly Parton’s and Kenny Rogers’s duet “Islands in the Stream,” which topped both the country and pop charts in 1983, to modern artists such as Taylor Swift and Florida Georgia Line, who I return to later in the paper.

⁹⁶ Indeed, Swift’s breakthrough second studio album *Fearless* (2008) and the two hit singles it contained (“Love Story” and “You Belong with Me”) in particular were crossover country-pop hits already. Her third studio album, *Speak Now* (2010), drew upon more rock influences, and *Red* (2012), on which the single “We are Never Ever Getting Back Together” is featured, continued the draw from rock along with dance, dubstep, and electronic influences, hardly pillars of the country genre. Swift’s eponymous debut album was her most traditionally country, and by 2014, she announced her “first documented, official pop album” in *1989*. Brian Mansfield, “Taylor Swift debuts ‘Shake it Off,’ Reveals ‘1989’ Album, *USA Today*, August 18, 2014. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2014/08/18/taylor-swift-yahoo-live-stream/14242387/>

By 2012, Billboard had started to incorporate digital downloads and streams into its charting methodology.⁹⁷ Previously, what charted in genre-specific charts was determined by what consumers of that specific genre consumed most – e.g., the more a particular song was requested specifically on country radio stations, the higher its rise on the country charts. Interestingly, this gave fans of a specific genre a more active voice in determining what the boundaries of that genre were. Historically, radio has been a significant mediator, perhaps the most significant force, in determining and outlining genre.⁹⁸ But on digital platforms, there is no such thing as a genre-specific iTunes or Spotify. While you can listen to genre-specific playlists on these platforms, there is no station you can call into and request songs, so there is no way to distinguish what country fans specifically want to hear. Thus, data collection from digital sales and streams is not limited only to core fans. Fans of pop music can download a song by an artist who is tagged as country, driving that song’s overall digital numbers up, while core country fans are not doing the same, leading to a skewed representation of country as conceived of by fans. Furthermore, the plummeting popularity of previous data-collection sources like radio is making it more and more difficult to formulate an organic data pool of genre-specific fans.

Without an easy and direct way to calculate who comprises “core” country fans and collect data from them, digital music platforms make the classification and categorization of genre a murkier process. Thus it is apparent how a song like “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together” can chart on the country Billboard. Flash forward seven years to 2019, and this genre categorization process had become even more difficult. With the rise of social media sites and

⁹⁷ Chris Molanphy, “The “Old Town Road” Controversy Reveals Problems Beyond Just Race,” *Slate*, April 12, 2019. <https://slate.com/culture/2019/04/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-billboard-country-charts-hot-100.html>.

⁹⁸ M. Michelsen et al, *Music Radio: Building Communities, Mediating Genres* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic), 2019.

dominance of the meme economy,⁹⁹ songs can go viral before official arbiters can identify and assign them to genres. The landscape is primed for a crisis of genre.

Like Taylor Swift's 2012 hit, Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" climbed the country charts due to digital streams and downloads. When Lil Nas X released the song on SoundCloud, he tagged it as "country," which in part was purely strategic, as the rap genre in which he truly wanted to participate was oversaturated and he was much less likely to get noticed there¹⁰⁰. But unlike "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together," "Old Town Road" was removed from the country charts after it started gaining prominence. The lopsided, retroactive enforcement of genre borders on one song after it already gains popularity in a particular genre, but not on others, embodies a power struggle over who has the right to make what under what label.

The dominant institutions' desire to maintain control over the market forms of the music industry makes clear economic sense, yet its drive to continue to contain genre boundaries is a little more complex. While controlling genre in a pre-digital age was beneficial for marketing and selling music to specific demographics guaranteed to purchase it, as digital platforms have allowed greater travel between genres and demonstrated that there is still a market for music that

⁹⁹ DJ Baauer's career was launched by his single "Harlem Shake," which went viral in 2013 thanks to a trend that saw countless listeners posting videos of themselves dancing to the track on YouTube; Rae Sremmurd's "Black Beatles" became popular after becoming the official anthem for the Mannequin Challenge viral video trend in 2016; and dance and electronic artist Oshi skyrocketed to mainstream popularity after singer Lorde tweeted a link to one of his remixes in 2016. These examples (along with "Old Town Road" and many others) illustrate how musicians can rise from total obscurity to superstar overnight through social media, memes, and viral online trends.

¹⁰⁰ Leight, "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road.'" It's also worth noting the heteronormativity and homophobia that characterizes much of rap's genre policing. Although Lil Nas X was not publicly out when the "Old Town Road" controversy occurred, response to his later hit "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)," a song that explicitly engages in LGBTQ themes (especially in the music video) suggest that the rap/hip-hop genre is also not eager to embrace the artist. *Billboard* described the song as "a flamenco-like track with a subtle trap beat" (Gil Kaufman, "Lil Nas X Lap Dances in Hell," *Billboard*, March 26, 2021) while music magazine *Consequence of Sound* described it as "flamenco and reggaeton dipped in pop" (Nina Corcoran, "Lil Nas X Releases New Single 'Montero,'" *Consequence of Sound*, March 26, 2021). The genres of rap and hip-hop don't appear to be associated with the single by the industry at all. Whether or not "Old Town Road" would have even been accepted by the rap/hip-hop genre had Lil Nas X tagged it as such is up for debate.

fuses sounds, control of genre appears less about control of market and more about control of cultural signifiers. Furthermore, as institutions have lost industry and economic forms of control over the musical product, its creators, and its consumers, genre has become a means of reasserting that control on an ideological level. As I will show next, the industry's handling of genre in the case of "Old Town Road" reveals just that function: a tool of power not only over music, but over racialized bodies and what musics they are allowed to participate in.

"Hat is matte black, got the boots that's black to match" – Black Sounds in Contemporary Country Music

The first narrative established genre's history as a tool of segregation, and the second narrative established music format's role in maintaining such cultural boundaries and its erosion in the digital era. These two narratives illuminate building tensions over time, as the music industry has struggled to maintain control over format (and by extension, genre, and by extension, music's cultural and racial identities) in an age where format is increasingly difficult to control. And that is exactly the crisis point that "Old Town Road" represents: a loss of control over a genre's (in this instance, Country's) boundaries.

But one more piece is necessary to fully establish what this crisis of control was really all about. I turn here to an analysis of chart-topping contemporary country songs – specifically, Florida-Georgia Line's "Cruise (2012), Sam Hunt's "Body Like a Back Road (2017), and Bebe Rexha's "Meant to Be" (2017), the songs with the top three (in ascending order) most weeks spent at number one on Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart – and the careers of Black artists working in country in order to show why Billboard decided to remove "Old Town Road" from the Hot

Country Songs chart. As this section will illustrate, the crisis was not one of control over country's *musical* identity; it was primarily a crisis of control over *racial* identity.

First, it is helpful to establish some of the traditional conceptions of the country music genre to then illustrate its gradual dissolution in the digital era. Negus outlines the two archetypes of the country musician that have been most dominant since the genre's early days. On one side, there is the hard-core, which emphasizes a strong accent and "southernisms," a lyrical focus on concrete personal life experience, an unelaborated "roots" instrumental style, and a strong hillbilly visual apparel in plenty of denim and leather, creating an overall, down-to-earth, warts-and-all aesthetic¹⁰¹. On the other end of the spectrum is the soft-shell performer, which features an accent-free American English vocality, a lyrical focus on more generic situations described in a general way, an instrumental use of contemporary pop styles, and a more mature visual apparel that is "folksy but not folk," creating a less distinct overall aesthetic, yet one which can still appeal to a (particularly young) country fan base¹⁰². Negus suggests a dialectical tension between these two archetypes, creating a "continual pendulum swing between the two styles and a series of reactions against one another"¹⁰³.

Both of these traditions (particularly the soft shell) are still apparent in modern day country, though there is now more middle ground, synthesis, and incorporation of other musical styles than Negus argued there was at the time of his writing. This makes sense: Negus's work was published in 1999, just prior to the dawn of the digital era, wherein, as detailed earlier in this paper, genres became much fuzzier as artists became more empowered to defy generic rules.

¹⁰¹ Examples include Ernest Tubb, Hank Williams, and Loretta Lynn. Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, 109.

¹⁰² Think Patsy Cline, Crystal Gale, and Kenny Rogers. Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Nonetheless, in the hard core tradition particularly but also in the soft shell archetype, the aesthetic of country is one of a white, rural, blue-collar working class. Furthermore, this aesthetic, the visual style, and the lyrical content of country forms an ethos rooted in an ideal archetype of the “real, authentic American” – a patriotic citizen who upholds traditional nuclear family values and gender roles, who works hard to provide for the self and the family, who forms the backbone of the country, and who provides the golden standard for how to be a model American.¹⁰⁴ While the musical sound of country has become more varied in the last twenty years, this ideological, white aesthetic of country music has remained fairly fixed, and thus, I argue, is what truly operates as the basis of Billboard’s and other gatekeepers’ understanding of genre.

It’s also important to note that in addition to being rooted firmly in a white aesthetic, country music is also overwhelmingly male-dominated. Male artists still disproportionately outnumber female artists in festival lineups and on the charts, and as per Billboard itself, female artists receive only thirteen to fifteen percent of air time on country radio stations.¹⁰⁵ White male musicians dominate the country genre at the expense of non-white and female artists, who have historically produced and continue to produce some of the most innovative sounds in country.¹⁰⁶

And yet, the contemporary country genre is indeed embracing more innovative, unique, and fresh sounds within its officially ordained genre borders – just so long as white artists

¹⁰⁴ Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Harley Brown, “Study Finds ‘Alarming’ Gender Representation on Country Radio,” *Billboard*, April 26, 2019. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8508885/study-finds-alarming-gender-representation-country-radio>

¹⁰⁶ Before Lil Nas X’s unique fusion of country and trap music, Black artists were introducing unique combinations of country and other traditions, from Ray Charles’s blues-infused *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* to Lionel Richie’s bona fide country-R&B smash hit “Stuck on You,” both of which faced resistance from the country music gatekeepers. White women pushing the envelope, from Dolly Parton with her extravagant style and often queer music to Kacey Musgraves with her staunchly progressive music, enjoy more acceptance within the country genre as afforded by their whiteness, yet remain outliers rather than norms.

produce them. The country genre has evolved in the digital era, in part due to the muddying of genre boundaries by digital platforms, in part due to less-restrained artists able to step outside of hard lines, and in part due to what type of music most easily gets discovered on digital platforms. Two trends in particular are apparent in much contemporary country: the embrace of pop music and the incorporation of rap and hip-hop sounds. While Negus does mention some embrace of pop elements in the soft-shell country archetype, the pop music of today is starkly different from any strands of pop music present in country twenty-plus years ago. Both of these trends represent a clear break from traditional musical conceptions of the country genre.

Florida Georgia Line's (FGL) 2012 "Cruise," Sam Hunt's 2017 "Body Like a Back Road," and Bebe Rexha's (featuring FGL) 2017 "Meant to Be" are the songs with the top three (in ascending order) most weeks spent at number one on Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart, and all of them embrace pop music elements (arguably even more than country elements). Music critic Jody Rosen asserts, "Like much of today's country, 'Cruise' has hooks that lean toward pop and hefty guitars that tilt toward rock" and positions it as the foremost example of his self-coined sub-genre "bro country," "music by and of the tatted, gym-toned, party-hearty young American white dude."¹⁰⁷ "Body Like a Back Road" was released on American hot adult contemporary radio before becoming a crossover single promoted on pop stations.¹⁰⁸ And "Meant to Be" is described by Billboard itself as "country-pop"¹⁰⁹ and is the work of a self-

¹⁰⁷ Rosen, Jody. "Jody Rosen on the Rise of Bro-Country," *Vulture*, August 11, 2013. <https://www.vulture.com/2013/08/rise-of-bro-country-florida-georgia-line.html#:~:text=The%20top%20country%20hit%20of,in%20its%20own%20modest%20charm>

¹⁰⁸ Gary Trust, "Sam Hunt's Country Hit "Body Like a Back Road" Speeds to Pop Radio," *Billboard*, April 7, 2017. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/7752390/sam-hunt-body-like-a-back-road-country-song-pop-radio>.

¹⁰⁹ Chuck Dauphin, "Florida Georgia Line's 15 Best Songs: Critics Picks," *Billboard*, February 15, 2019. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/country/7990518/florida-georgia-line-songs-best-hits-list>.

identified sexually fluid,¹¹⁰ bipolar¹¹¹ New Yorker who previously worked as a songwriter for Eminem, Selena Gomez, and Nick Jonas.¹¹² Given the success of these songs, Billboard's conceptualization of "elements of today's country music" thus clearly includes pop-tinged and even pop-dominated sounds, as well as artists whose identities fall well outside of the traditional hardcore or soft shell country archetypes.

But in addition to pop, contemporary Country chart-topping songs have also embraced rap and hip-hop sounds and artists – just so long as they are produced by white artists. In 2012, FGL released a remix of "Cruise" featuring American rap artist Nelly, who raps in the middle of the song. This was not an unprecedented move, as country-rap collaborations had been occurring for a while by this point: Tim McGraw's 2004 "Over and Over" features Nelly, Jason Aldean's 2010 "Dirt Road Anthem" received a remix with Ludacris, Willie Nelson collaborated with Snoop Dog on the 2011 "Superman," and countless other country hits feature guest verses performed by rap and hip-hop artists. Rapping and hip-hop sounds (such as an auto-tune aesthetic and trap beats) have also made their way into country music through white artists such as the unfortunately named Bubba Sparxxx, whose albums have peaked on R&B, rap, and country charts. Thus, there is certainly ample precedent for country not only allowing, but openly embracing the musical elements of rap and hip-hop. The success of pop-, hip-hop-, and rap-infused songs on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart highlights not only the lack of any clear, contemporary definition of "elements of today's country music" (and by extension, the lack of

¹¹⁰ Jeff Nelson, "Bebe Rexha on Dating in the Spotlight and Defining Her Sexuality: 'I Consider Myself Fluid,'" *Health*, May 7, 2019. <https://www.health.com/celebrities/bebe-rexha>.

¹¹¹ Desiree Murphy, "Bebe Rexha Reveals She's Bipolar: 'I'm Not Ashamed Anymore,'" *Entertainment Tonight*, April 15, 2019. <https://www.etonline.com/bebe-rexha-reveals-shes-bipolar-im-not-ashamed-anymore-123416>

¹¹² Leardi, Melissa. "7 Songs You didn't Know Bebe Rexha Wrote." *Billboard*, August 9, 2016. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/list/7461938/bebe-rexha-songs-wrote-songwriter>

any clear and official conceptualization of country as a genre), but also the racialized manner in which that defense is deployed.

All of the above-mentioned examples, for all their would be musical transgressions, still center a white, working class, blue-collar aesthetic. Across the bro-country of FGL and Jason Aldean, the pop-country of Bebe Rexha and Taylor Swift, and the rap-country of Bubba Sparxxx and featured rap artists, the singular unifying element of today's country music that determines whether or not a song is allowed on Billboard's Hot Country Songs is whiteness. Black rappers are allowed to be *featured* on tracks that are still seen as owned and created by white artists. And trap beats, auto-tune, and rapping by the primary artist (not the featured artist) are permissible so long as it's still a white artist performing them. Though there are a few exceptions, Black artists are only allowed to bring rap and hip hop into country when it's a collaboration with a white artist, though white artists are still allowed to utilize traditionally Black musical styles without Black musicians.

Furthermore, when Black artists are successful in country (as country artists, not as featured hip hop or rap artists), it is primarily through assimilating to traditional white country aesthetics. Darius Rucker, Jimmie Allen, and Kane Brown, perhaps the most prominent modern Black country artists, all adhere to fairly traditional country sounds and aesthetic codes—even *more* strictly country than the white artists embracing pop- and rap-infused trends of late. The sound of the music itself, the twang in the voice, and even the apparel of baseball caps, t-shirts, jeans, and flannel are all emphasized. Their music videos stick to typical white country themes. Essentially, their Blackness is supplemented or downplayed by their strict adherence to the traditional cultural norms of a white working class country. Thus, Black artists appear to have two main entry points into country available to them: either through a one-time hall pass into the

genre as a “featured artist” on a track, accompanied and overseen by white artists, or through a near-total assimilation to a traditional white country aesthetic. Both entry points preserve a centralized white aesthetic and uphold a white domination of country. There are of course exceptions, such as Cowboy Troy and others in the “hick-hop” genre, but these are few and far between,¹¹³ and notably are not fully accepted as “country” artists, but rather, are given their own sub-genre separate from country.

And so we return to “Old Town Road.” Billboard claimed that the song simply did not possess enough elements of modern country music “in its current form” to be considered a country song, yet as we have seen there exists a plethora of songs that have embraced the same non-country elements “Old Town Road” does that have been allowed to remain on and top the country charts. Clearly, the defining factor is not any specific country music element, but something else. Much literature on music genre classification systems rely on a “bag-of-features” approach that simply aims to identify specific rhythmic, pitch, and instrumental features,¹¹⁴ yet the battle over “Old Town Road” and its classification reveal another layer of features at play. Indeed, the very name of a genre does not always necessarily point to a particular music style or sound.¹¹⁵ Classification systems like genre draw lines around what is let in, but, in the process, inherently distinguish what is to be excluded, which extends beyond mere musical content. Genre isn’t just what music sounds like, but what music is *about*, and as such, genres are

¹¹³ As the categorization of “hick-hop” suggests, artists such as these are often relegated to sub-genres rather than accepted within the larger classification of country.

¹¹⁴ See Panagakos, Kotropoulos, and Arce, “Music Genre Classification.”

¹¹⁵ For example, the Indie genre that gained prominence in the 1990s was the first to take its name from the form of industrial organization behind it, one that embodied new relationships between creativity and commerce. Indie labels and the indie genre embody an ideology of less bureaucracy and more artistic freedom. While Indie might serve as the most blatant example, other music genres are just as much driven by an ideology and culture as they are by a collection of musical features. D. Hesmondhalgh, “Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre,” *Cultural Studies*, 13, no. 1 (1999): 34-61.

associated with social boundaries such as race and gender just as much as they are associated with musical boundaries.¹¹⁶

Billboard's decision to oust "Old Town Road" from the country charts has less to do with the actual musicality of the song and more to do with the cultural identity threat that Lil Nas X poses to the country genre. Perhaps more than any other genre, country is obsessed with its identity. Country artists continually assert their countryness not only directly through lyrics (checking off the boxes of tractor-ownership, horse-riding abilities, mama-loving-ness, etc.), but also through blue-collar fashion and southern accents – authentic, exaggerated, or completely feigned. As illustrated through the numerous examples throughout this paper, for the country music gatekeepers, the genre is not really about musical sound, but rather, the thematic content and identity politics that appeal to the core fan base (even if that base is getting harder to identify in the era of digital platforms). The pop country of Bebe Rexha and Sam Hunt; the straight pop of Taylor Swift; the traditional country of Darius Rucker, Jimmie Allen, and Kane Brown; and the bro country of Florida Georgia Line featuring Nelly do not severely transgress that identity. But Lil Nas X's country trap does.

Without a white artist to welcome him into country and without strictly adhering to traditional white country aesthetics, Lil Nas X's self-declaration of countryness is a violation against the genre. That transgression poses a racialized threat to country music, what the genre signifies, and what it means to be a country consumer. But moreover, it's a direct challenge of gatekeepers' authority over the genre, which has thrown it into a crisis of control as well as a crisis of identity. That identity crisis is not rooted in geographic location, with Lil Nas X's hometown Atlanta (a city more quickly identified with hip-hop and rap than country) at odds

¹¹⁶ V. Schmutz, "Social and Symbolic Boundaries in Newspaper Coverage of Music, 1955-2005: Gender and Genre in the US, France, Germany, and the Netherlands," *Poetics*, 37, no. 4 (2009): 298-314.

with the rural south of country: Bebe Rexha is from New York and Keith Urban is from Australia, yet both have been welcomed into country despite origins rooted outside the rural south precisely because their whiteness allows them to seamlessly slip into that identity. Not to mention Atlanta is still a southern city situated in Georgia, the peachiest state of the south.¹¹⁷ The identity crisis is not even rooted in political identity or right-wing ideology or traditional country lyrical content: Taylor Swift is an outspoken feminist; Bebe Rexha is sexually fluid, an LGBTQ rights advocate, and bipolar; Tim McGraw and Faith Hill were outspoken Obama supporters; and Kacey Musgraves sings about weed and gay love and casual hookups.

The identity crisis Lil Nas X poses to country is singularly rooted in race. “Old Town Road” boasts the prototypical lyrical content of a standard country song, the twangy instrumentation of a standard country song, the rock- and blues-infused chord progression and melody of a standard country song, and even the affected accent of a standard country song, but Lil Nas X does not embody the accepted cultural identity of the country genre. “Old Town Road” presents no transgression against country musically, lyrically, politically, or ideologically that has not already been accepted by countless other artists. But Lil Nas X is a Black musician claiming to be country without a white escort and without assimilating to a totally white aesthetic. Thus, “Old Town Road” cannot be considered country.

With the identity threat posed by Lil Nas X made clear, the critique at the heart of the music video to “Old Town Road” is even more evident. Intentionally or not, the “Old Town Road” remix featuring Billy Ray Cyrus reinforces the structure in which Black artists playing Black music are only allowed into country with a white escort, which is made only more glaring by the fact that the remix was purportedly meant to “support the song as country” (now that it

¹¹⁷ Georgia is home to a large host of country music superstars, such as Jason Aldean, Luke Bryan, Sam Hunt, Tyler Hubbard of Florida Georgia Line, Thomas Rhett, Zac Brown, Sugarland, Alan Jackson, and many others.

had an established white country musician¹¹⁸ on it). The remix nonetheless failed to be welcomed back to the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart, because while following the white escort logic, it still did not satisfy the rule: the remix was a Lil Nas X single *featuring* Billy Ray Cyrus, not a Billy Ray Cyrus single featuring Lil Nas X.

Interestingly, even though the remix was a seemingly failed attempt to utilize the white escort hall pass to prove “Old Town Road” was indeed country, the music video appears to critique this very strategy. Immediately after Billy Ray tells Lil Nas X, “You’re with me this time, everything’s gonna be alright,” the cabin owner (and surrogate for Billboard/music gatekeepers in general) opens fire on the Black cowboy, even though he’s accompanied by an older white one, suggesting that everything will *not* be alright and that even with a white escort, a Black man assuming the identity of country is still a threat. When sent forward in time to 2019, Lil Nas X brings country to the urban inner city, illustrating not only how one cultural and aesthetic code can appeal to another, but highlighting the commonalities between them (such as dancing, racing, and a passion for fashion). And when Billy Ray Cyrus shows up to take Lil Nas X to the Old Town Hall full of white senior citizens, everyone dances to “Old Town Road,” similarly suggesting hip-hop’s appeal to traditional conceptions of country and commonalities between the two.

While these scenes seemingly suggest significant blurriness between and transcendence of genre lines, and while the western opening scene critiques the notion of the hall pass mode of entry for Black musicians into country, the music video nonetheless highlights how escorts are still needed to successfully bridge music genres. Lil Nas X is the one who introduces country aesthetics and sounds to the Black members of the urban city to which he is transported, and

¹¹⁸ Don’t break his heart, his achey-breaky heart.

Billy Ray Cyrus is the one who introduces hip-hop aesthetics and sounds to the elderly white bingo-players at the town hall. The confinement of Black people to the inner city and white people to the town hall, a governmental building and location of power, suggests that a strict segregation still exists within the music industry and elsewhere. The scenes in the city and at the town hall indicate that the music industry requires escorts to bridge segregated communities while also hinting that such segregation makes little sense to begin with, as these musical communities contain significant overlap.

Furthermore, the music video is bookended by dialogue that calls for the freeing of Black musicians from segregationist regulation. In the old west, as Lil Nas X rides off evading the law, the sheriff (played by Chris Rock) exclaims “When you see a Black man on a horse going that fast, you just got to let him fly!”, indicating that music gatekeepers ought not restrict or draw circles around Black music makers and just let them do what they do so well. The impressiveness of Lil Nas X’s craft is further noted by the sheriff in a coda to the music video, when he continues “Never seen nothing that fast in my life. Never. Riding faster than a speeding bullet. Faster than a speeding bullet with grease on it!” Rock’s praise of Lil Nas X’s speed is analogous to praise of Black art and creativity more generally, and his claim that “you just got to let him fly” is a demand not to place restrictions on what Black art can and cannot be.

These bookends offer another valuable insight: Chris Rock, a Black actor, plays the sheriff in the old west (both of whose deputies are also Black), while the cabin owner who attacks Lil Nas X in an act of supposed vigilantism, operating outside of an official state-sanctioned position of power, is white. As I detail in the conclusion of this paper then, the music video to “Old Town Road” is not just a critique of boundaries around music genre and the function of musical escorts, but also an act of reclamation of stolen Black culture.

“Can’t nobody tell me nothin’” – Reclaiming a Stolen Culture

This cultural maintenance of country by hegemonic institutions through technological means is exactly what “Old Town Road” (and the Yeehaw Agenda memes through which it rose to viral popularity) attempt to combat.¹¹⁹ The Yeehaw Agenda primarily presents itself as a fashion trend aimed at a reclamation of cowboy and cowgirl culture by the Black community. This cowboy/girl culture has predominantly been packaged and portrayed (by Hollywood, radio, and other mainstream cultural arbiters) as unwaveringly white, despite the significant role that African Americans have played in its history. “Old Town Road” became the unofficial theme song of this agenda through the #YeehawChallenge, in which Black social media users transform into cowboys/girls on the social media platform TikTok.

While country music is credited as having originated in Tennessee in the 1920s and is predominantly packaged and marketed as a white cultural expression, like many American musical genres, the sound of country is one that has significant origins in Black musical traditions and performers.¹²⁰ The birth of country music, as with the origin of cowboy/girl culture, is one that has its roots in Black cultural expressions, hoisted from these communities without due credit and rebranded as white. Thus, through its function as part of the YeeHaw Agenda on TikTok and by the critiques and commentary evident in its music video, “Old Town Road” can and should be read as an attempt to reclaim the country music cultural identity by the group from which it was stolen in the first place. The song, as well as the Yeehaw Agenda more

¹¹⁹ Importantly, the second step of Pfaffenberger’s technological drama is technological adjustment, in which the people negatively impacted by artifacts or processes attempt to compensate for their losses through use of contradiction, ambiguity, or inconsistency within the hegemonic frame of meaning in order to validate their actions and to gain access to that which they have been denied. B. Pfaffenberger, “Technological Dramas,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values*, 17, no. 3 (1992): 282-312.

¹²⁰ Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out*; Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

broadly, operates as a technological adjustment for Black artists and consumers to gain access to a musical genre, a cultural identity, and a form of work which they have been denied. Indeed, recent scholarship points to the changing landscape of country music, as the presence of LGBTQ, Indigenous, and Black artists is growing, largely as a result of the affordances generated by streaming platforms and social media.¹²¹ As Nadine Hubbs and Francesca T. Royster note in the introduction to their special issue on the matter, “Probably the most significant changes underway in country music and commentary lie in the accelerating recovery and expansion of African American presence.”¹²²

The many think-pieces published on the “Old Town Road” controversy suggest various “solutions” to clinically-identified problem of genre classification. *Slate* proposes a return to an audience-based determination of genre boundaries prominent in the days of radio data collection, where core fans of a genre have more say in determining what constitutes that genre¹²³. *The New Yorker* suggests doing away with the very conception of genre altogether, as so much cross-pollination between musical forms has occurred that the lines of genre are too blurry and muddled to be useful anymore¹²⁴. While neither of these suggestions are particularly ideal (nor practical, nor novel, really), “Old Town Road” and the long history of country’s contentious relationship with race raises questions of where the boundaries of genre are drawn and who gets to draw them.

¹²¹ Nadine Hubbs and Francesca T. Royster, “Introduction: Uncharted Country: New Voices and Perspectives in Country Music Studies,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 32, no. 2 (2020): 1-10

¹²² Hubbs and Royster, “Introduction,” 2.

¹²³ Molanphy, “The ‘Old Town Road’ Controversy.”

¹²⁴ Carrie Battan, “‘Old Town Road’ and the Overdue Death of Genre,” *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/old-town-road-and-the-overdue-death-of-genre>

In the age of digital platforms, these lines have indeed become blurrier and far less distinct (and they were already blurry and indistinct to begin with). The complications and complexities with genre classification have been well discussed and researched within academic literature, but such issues and their implications are less openly addressed by gatekeepers and arbiters of the music industry. One alternative to genre classification that has risen in popularity in the Music Information Retrieval community is that of music annotation, in which musical pieces are annotated with a set of tags that describe genre, mood, instrumentation, style, etc.¹²⁵ Whereas more traditional methods of genre classification are confined to the specific semantic category of genre, music annotation allows for a wider swath of categorization and classification types to be applied to a piece of music. While the use of genres in the music industry is certainly not going anywhere, the annotation spirit of thinking might serve gatekeepers well. Lil Nas X's very labeling of his own song as "country trap" embraces the ethos of annotation: the possibility of multiplicity. So long as genre classification within the music industry is approached from the perspective of singular possibility, specifically in regards to identity and ideological markers of genre, "Old Town Road" will certainly not be the last controversy to which country music has to respond.

Since the release of "Old Town Road," Lil Nas X's identity as a musician has only been further severed from the country music genre. The short film won the Grammy for Best Music Video, and the remix of the single with Billy Ray Cyrus won the Grammy for Best Pop Duo/Group Performance, showing that even outside of Billboard, other music gatekeepers refused to acknowledge the song as country. The song was nominated for and won various other awards, including the American Music Awards, the *Billboard* Music Awards, the MTV Video

¹²⁵ Z. Fu et al. "A Survey of Audio-Based Music Classification and Annotation," *Transactions on Multimedia*, 13, no. 2 (2011): 303-319.

Music Awards, the People's Choice Awards, the BET Hip Hop Awards, and others – but none of them recognized “Old Town Road” as a country song, instead classifying it as rap, hip-hop, pop, or even rock. The only recognition it received as a country song was by the Country Music Association Awards for the Musical event of the Year, which is given to a collaboration of two or more people, either or all of whom are known primarily as country artists. By this definition, the song itself does not even need to necessarily be a country song, it just needs to feature at least one country artist.

After “Old Town Road” topped the Hot 100, Lil Nas X signed with Columbia Records. A few months later on June 21, 2019, he released the extended play (EP – a musical record that contains more tracks than a single but fewer than a full album) ⁷, which included only one other country song, “Rodeo,” with the remaining tracks combining hip hop, pop, rap, trap, and R&B sounds. His debut album, *Montero*, released September 17, 2021, eschews country altogether in favor of the above-mentioned genres as well as hard rock and stadium ballads. Lil Nas X's public image has also drifted far from country aesthetic, with music videos and live performances that draw heavily on pop and hip-hop imagery while also emphasizing queer representation, as Lil Nas X came out as gay while “Old Town Road” was atop the Hot 100 (making him the only artist to do so while having a record at number-one). This identity might factor into his situation as a pop artist rather than a hip-hop, rap, or country one, as these genres have a history of snubbing queer artists. Additionally, Lil Nas X's identity as a gay man encourages a re-thinking of “Old Town Road” itself. While he suggested that he tagged the song as country for purely strategic reasons, thinking it more likely to get recognized there than in hip-hop, this very tagging can be read as an act of queering country. As queering twists, turns, and deviates away from the expected, asserting “Old Town Road” as a country song queers country.

At the end of the day though, it appears that little has changed. Numerous music publications and popular press think pieces criticized Billboard's removal of "Old Town Road" from the Hot Country Songs chart, many calling the decision overtly racist. Prolific music journalist Robert Christgau wrote "Taking 'Old Town Road' off the country chart strikes me as racist pure and simple, because country radio remains racist regardless of the Darius Ruckers and Kane Browns it makes room for."¹²⁶ And yet, Billboard, the various awards bodies, and the music industry at large successfully ousted Lil Nas X from the country genre and reasserted control over its cultural and identity boundaries, however outdated, nonsensical, and outright racist those may be to musicians, critics, and consumers. The music video for "Old Town Road" was just as much predictive as it was prescriptive. Even as control over music has been eroded by evolving digital formats, dissolving consumer notions of what genre is and isn't, increasing artistic freedom and experimentation, and multiple other factors, at the end of the day, there will still be an old white man to chase away the people who don't look or sound like him.

¹²⁶ Robert Christgau, robertchristgau.com, June 18 2019.

CHAPTER TWO

CRISIS-AS-GENRE: COVID-19 AND THE EMERGENCE OF PANDEMIC POP

“Guess what bitch?” queries an animated Cardi B, leaning in with worried eyes and a broad smile. You don’t have to wait long to find out what, as she cackles a “Ha ha ha!” with her tongue out and then answers “Coronavirus!” with a shout and a dip. Then, for emphasis, another “Coronavirus!”, with a higher pitch and a lower dip. This time her voice echoes, the reverb builds and she twists back and forth, almost singing “Shit is real! Shit is getting real!” as the footage begins to cut and repeat, her cries of “Coronavirus” and “Shit is real! Shit is getting real!” forming a loop while electronic music swells and a chorus of “Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!” creates a rhythm behind her. The footage cuts to the opening shot from Childish Gambino’s 2018 single “This is America,” a tracking camera moving in on Donald Glover from behind, and as the beat explodes into the mix, there is another cut to a shot of *Sesame Street*’s Elmo dancing on top of the moon. For the next minute, Cardi B’s repeated cries continue, over and over, while the trap music plays on to various other shots, mostly of Black celebrities and citizens dancing.

This is the viral remix of Cardi B’s viral Instagram post from March 11 2020, produced and released on Instagram by Brooklyn DJ Brandon Markell Davidson, a.k.a. DJ iMarkkeyz. There was nothing groundbreakingly novel about this remix. iMarkkeyz had already developed a following remixing viral videos, all of the sonic techniques used in the Cardi B remix were already fairly common within the larger body of remixes of non-musical material, and even the footage used in the accompanying video was similar to the types of shots used in other remixes –

in fact many of the exact same shots would be used again by iMarkkeyz in another remix just a few months later, which I examine in the next chapter. But while the “Coronavirus (Remix)” seemed fairly routine, even predictable, it formed what many would come to recognize as the true launch of a new body of music that erupted over the following months: “pandemic pop.”¹²⁷

During the outbreak of, quarantining during, and eventual acclimation to the coronavirus, musical creations and activities were referred to by a number of names, including “social distancing tunes,” “quarantine soundtrack,” “hot vax summer songs,” “quarantunes” and more, but perhaps the most prominent among these was the title “pandemic pop.”¹²⁸ The phrase began appearing in popular publications, in music criticism magazines, across social media, on music streaming platforms like Spotify, and more. There seemed to be an increasing recognition of pandemic pop and a distinct body of music – but just how exactly was that body defined, and how were songs determined to be a part of it? This formation of music spanned many already-existing genres, such as rap, hip-hop, country, pop, rock, and more. It included brand new original tunes by both established and amateur artists as well as already-existing songs, many of them decades old. It included remixes of non-musical material and re-recordings of songs with new arrangements and/or lyrics. Whatever the sound, form, or context, the key feature unifying these musics under the same semantic term of “pandemic pop” was their relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, whether that relation was explicit within the song or constructed by artists and listeners.

¹²⁷ While other pandemic pop songs were released before “Coronavirus (Remix),” the Cardi B – iMarkkeyz single was the first to achieve viral fame, and as I illustrate, spawned a number of imitators, kickstarting the genre.

¹²⁸ As I will detail later, playlists by such names became prominent on Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube and other streaming services, as these “genre” titles (for current lack of a better term) also trended across social media sites like TikTok and Instagram. Additionally, popular, critical, and industry music press – sites such as *Pitchfork*, *Billboard*, *The AV Club*, to name a few – also discussed such monikers and their growing popularity as musical trends.

This chapter examines the rise of pandemic pop as a case study of crisis-as-genre. Crisis functions as genre when the key organizing trait that unites a body of music together is not necessarily a musical, cultural, or geographical one, but crisis itself. Pandemic pop is a prime example of just that: the songs recognized as belonging to “pandemic pop” are diverse and utilize the techniques and styles of various different genres, music traditions, and forms, but are united as a body of music because they share the core organizing trait of being about (or being made to be about) crisis. Studying crisis-as-genre is important because it illuminates new (or, at least, under-emphasized) ways of understanding and studying genre. As I demonstrate in this chapter, Roitman’s understanding of crisis not as a thing, but as a concept that enables and forecloses certain narrative possibilities is fruitful when applied to genre. The understanding of genre culture that I establish in the introduction chapter heavily relies upon collective social and cultural activities and practices to dissect how genres are formed and how they function. Viewing genre through the lens of crisis emphasizes the narrative forces at play within its formation. While the framework of genre culture is not necessarily exclusive of narrative and rhetorical dimensions, it does privilege a sociological approach to genre. I argue not that one approach is “correct” or better than the other, but rather, that such approaches must both be used, together, in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of genre.

I begin this chapter by offering context for the COVID-19 pandemic that spawned the crisis-genre¹²⁹ of pandemic pop. While much of this history may already be known to readers, it is worth briefly detailing, with emphasis on the information most relevant to the music created during this crisis. Next, I summarize the different musical activities that became most prominent

¹²⁹ I use the phrases “crisis-as-genre” and “crisis-genre” more or less coterminously. While crisis-as-genre refers to the larger phenomenon of crisis operating as the key organizational force in the formation of a genre, crisis-genre refers to a specific instance of that phenomenon, like pandemic pop.

during the pandemic – including balcony performances, viral videos, and virtual concerts – as well as the overall function that music performed, specifically within the quarantining stage of COVID-19. While I do not consider these musical activities to be *pandemic pop*, they do represent a formation of *crisis music*, a distinction I make clear. Furthermore, the overall functions, effects, and impacts of music during the coronavirus provides an important contextual backdrop for the bodies of pandemic pop that I analyze. This is where I turn my attention lastly. After discussing song selection and my method for music analysis, I offer a critical examination of pandemic pop across two types: completely original music produced about and during the coronavirus pandemic by both established and amateur musicians, and derivative music comprised of remixes, re-recordings, and re-purposings of already-existing songs or sonic material. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of crisis-as-genre and the major insights that pandemic pop illuminates, specifically regarding the narrative dimension of genre. Understanding crisis as a narrative tool, as Roitman does, suggests that genre is also formed by narrative forces in addition to social, cultural, and musical ones. I consider how crisis’s central narrative of a deviation from and desire to return to normalcy, colors the formation of pandemic pop. Furthermore, I consider the implications of understanding genre as a narrative tool, returning to the case study of “Old Town Road” to interrogate what narrative possibilities are enabled and foreclosed when a song or artist is named to a specific genre.

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic was the first health crisis of global magnitude to occur in the age of the internet. The closest precedent to COVID is the Spanish Flu of 1918, more than one hundred years before the outbreak of the coronavirus and right at the onset of radio broadcasting.

The complex communicative landscape that shaped the discourse surrounding COVID made possible the fast and far-reaching spread of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and paranoia, but also life-saving information, helpful resources, and a sense of connection. In other words, the viral spread of COVID-19 was paralleled by the “viral” nature of how communication itself is understood to occur today (or how “information” or “content” is understood to spread), something that extended to the music that sound-tracked the moment. What follows is a brief context of the coronavirus outbreak, America’s disastrous response to it, and the subsequent spread of misinformation surrounding the pandemic. These details are important for understanding the socio-political context in which pandemic pop developed, as well as for understanding the parallels between the modes of distribution of pandemic pop music, the coronavirus, and communication – including dangerously false information – that surrounded it: virality.

The first confirmed infections of COVID-19 were recorded in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, most likely as a result of a spillover infection from wild bats. The World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed human-to-human transmission in January 2020, as the virus spread to other Chinese provinces, and on January 30, declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The next day, the first confirmed cases outside of China were recorded in Italy, although evidence indicates that COVID-19 had already spread to Europe¹³⁰ and even the U.S.¹³¹ by the end of 2019. The arrival of the coronavirus in America was publicly confirmed in Washington State at the end of February, and by March, WHO officially

¹³⁰ Platto S, Xue T, Carafoli E (September 2020). "COVID19: an announced pandemic". *Cell Death & Disease*. 11 (9): 799.

¹³¹ Mike Baker, When Did the Coronavirus Arrive in the U.S.? Here’s a Review of the Evidence, *The New York Times*, May 15, 2020.

declared COVID-19 a pandemic, schools began closing, quarantining was beginning, and the U.S. had overtaken China and Italy with the highest number of confirmed cases in the world.

Despite this, the federal response to COVID in America was disastrous. Through a compilation of interviews with scientists and public health experts, *Scientific American* outlines seven key mistakes made by the U.S. in its response to COVID, including: the minimization of the threat of COVID by the Trump administration; slow and flawed testing; failure to effectively enforce safety measures like contact-tracing and quarantining; slowness to recommend face masks to the public (and eventually, the derision and politicization of them by the Trump administration¹³²); the underestimation of the significance of airborne spread; and the leaving of pandemic response to state and local levels, resulting in inconsistent, uncoordinated, and ineffective policies.¹³³ All of these mistakes characterized the landscape in which pandemic pop would soon emerge, one in which coronavirus spread rapidly while national, state, and local governments seemed completely inept at or unwilling to address it, allowing fear and paranoia amongst a terrified public to fester.

But perhaps the most significant failure of the U.S. government's response to COVID-19 that the *Scientific American* outlines is the role that systemic racism played in the pandemic's spread. The deep-rooted racial and economic inequities that already plagued the country were highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic, leading to disproportionately high rates of infection and death amongst Black and Hispanic communities. This type of structural racism that has long existed in America but became even more pronounced during COVID-19 forms one of

¹³² For more, see Candi S. Carter Olson and Aleksander Nelson, "'Masculinity,' femininity and a pandemic: gender and belief in myths around COVID-19," *Feminist Media Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2056756>; Tavishi Bhasin et al, "Does Karen wear a mask? The gendering of COVID-19 masking rhetoric," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 40, no, 9/10 (2020): 929-937

¹³³ Tanya Lewis, "How the U.S. Pandemic Response Went Wrong – and What Went Right – during a Year of COVID," *Scientific American*, 11 March 2021.

the two “twin pandemics” mentioned in the introduction chapter. As I detail later in this chapter, much of pandemic pop music that was released by Black and Hispanic artists – particularly aspiring and amateur hip-hop artists – was characterized by fear, paranoia, and hopelessness, as opposed to the optimism, encouragement, and hopefulness of much of the music released by white and established artists. This underlines the vastly disparate effect that the coronavirus pandemic (and the government’s response to it) had on Black and Hispanic communities, the intensification of longstanding racial and economic inequities, the impact of the twin pandemics.

Considering the disastrous government response to COVID-19 in America, along with the politically fraught landscape of fake news, alternative facts, and conspiracy theories that colored the Trump administration and campaign, it is no wonder that mis- and disinformation¹³⁴ about the coronavirus pandemic did not take long to spread. In fact, so severe was the spread of mis/disinformation that the WHO declared an “infodemic” that itself presented serious global health risks, with Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declaring in February 2020 at the Munich Security Conference, “Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous.”¹³⁵ And while conspiracy theories and mis/disinformation were not new phenomena, the context of coronavirus pandemic elevated the potential adverse health and safety risks of such an infodemic. Furthermore, the nature of the internet enabled mis/disinformation to travel faster and reach more people than in previous national/global crises occurring before or at

¹³⁴ Nina Schick distinguishes misinformation – false or inaccurate information spread unintentionally – from disinformation – false information intentionally spread by malicious actors. *Deep Fakes: The Comin Infocalypse*. Hachette Book Group: New York. 2020.

¹³⁵ Natasha Kassam, “Disinformation and Coronavirus,” *The Interpreter*, 25 March 2020.

the beginning of widespread internet use, and the increase in volume and spread of fake news had grown to unprecedented levels during the Trump administration.¹³⁶

As such, 2020 saw the growth and spread of not only twin pandemics, but also parallel epidemics: the COVID-19 pandemic, and the infodemic of mis/disinformation, both of which were marked by their extreme levels of virality. While this chapter is not primarily concerned with the infodemic of mis/disinformation, and while most pandemic pop and COVID crisis music encouragingly did not engage with such conspiracy theories and fake news, their existence is still important context. While ineffective government responses allowed the pandemic to spread and intensify, and racial and economic inequities exacerbated its impact for minority groups, mis/disinformation had disastrous effects on public understanding of and discourse surrounding the coronavirus, provoking doubt and uncertainty, promoting dangerous and deadly ignorance, and inflaming (often politically motivated) anger and outrage.

Musical Functions and Activities during the Coronavirus Pandemic

As I mentioned earlier, not all of the crisis music of the COVID-19 pandemic necessarily qualifies as pandemic pop specifically. I define crisis music as “musical activities, products, and behaviors that are created during and in explicit response to a crisis.” Many musical activities staged during the coronavirus pandemic fall within this camp of “crisis music,” including live performances, viral videos, and virtually-hosted live-streamed concerts, all of which I discuss in

¹³⁶ Such conspiracy theories included, but are not limited to: Bill Gates had advance knowledge of or even intentionally caused the pandemic; The virus was a biological weapon developed by China that escaped the lab; COVID-19 does not exist but is rather a hoax designed by the globalist elite to take away freedoms; The pandemic was manipulated by the “deep state” to undermine Trump’s presidency prior to the 2020 election; COVID-19 was plotted by Big Pharma; and many, many more. While it is not the goal of this paper to outline and debunk conspiracy theories, it is worth noting their prominence and spread during the pandemic, as the virality of their distribution mirrors the virality of COVID-19 itself, music in the digital era, and contemporary mass communication and media more broadly.

more detail below. However, while all of these activities are inherently musical, they don't innately qualify as pandemic pop, which is a categorical body of music that refers to songs that are either explicitly about the coronavirus pandemic or have been repurposed to mean something new/specific to the pandemic. While the use of the term "genre" to describe what pandemic pop is is imperfect, pandemic pop does function on a genre-like level, as it names a distinct group of songs that are seen as belonging to the same semantic division. These other forms of crisis music, however, are *activities*, and not necessarily a *sub/genre*. Furthermore, pandemic pop describes a group of songs; it's not necessarily about performance of music as much as it is the musical product/unit (the song) itself. However, the activities I mention as crisis music are precisely that: activities. Sure, live or streamed musical concerts may well include performances of pandemic pop songs, but what I focus on in this section is not necessarily the set list or individual song selections of such performances, but the performances (or other musical activities) themselves.

This is an important distinction. This chapter aims to study the phenomenon of crisis-as-genre, and as such, it is important to untangle the music that contributes to the forming of that crisis-genre from other musical activities that took place during that crisis. These other activities are still important: they provide insight into how everyday music consumers negotiated their being in crisis through music, which lays crucial groundwork for understanding the broader functions of and meanings attributed to the crisis-genre of pandemic pop. But although they help shed some light on pandemic pop, they are nonetheless not pandemic pop, and so I consider them separately. With this distinction in mind, I here turn my attention toward crisis music activities before shifting my primary analytical focus on pandemic pop.

As America and the rest of the world entered lockdowns and began quarantining and taking other safety measures, people across the globe were sharing a near-universal and unprecedented experience. Daily life changed radically; fear, anxiety, stress, and paranoia skyrocketed; all senses of normalcy and social interaction disappeared for many. As the world faced such dark and frankly terrifying times, many turned to music in order to try to assert some semblance of joy and connection back into their lives. Musical activities and the social functions they performed took on new forms during the pandemic, or at least, the significance and degree to which they served such functions increased dramatically.

Balcony Performances

Internet virality played a fundamental role in establishing how discourse around the COVID-19 pandemic was staged, and in informing popular understandings of crisis. Additionally, music played a role in both of these functions of information virality, as became evident in the early days of the pandemic. Individual music consumption behaviors changed, with more people using music as a means of mood regulation and managing levels of worry, stress, and anxiety.¹³⁷ And while independent music-listening was a means of regulating negative feelings for many, other music-related practices proved helpful in other ways. One study found that music-making was used as a replacement for social interaction, providing a sense of belonging to a community and operating as a method for self-reflection.¹³⁸ This was evidenced by the abundance of balcony concerts that occurred during the early days of quarantining. As

¹³⁷ Emily Carlson et al, “The Role of Music in Everyday Life During the First Wave of the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Mixed-Methods Exploratory Study.” *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4 May 2021.

¹³⁸ Max Planck Institute, “How Music Helped People Cope with COVID-19 Stress,” *World Economic Forum*, 21 August 2021.

Italy entered lockdown in March of 2020, citizens played music for and with their neighbors from apartment balconies, on guitars, flutes, violins, trumpets, keyboards, and more. Countless recordings of such performances quickly spread online,¹³⁹ marking an early indicator of the overlapping virality of music and pandemic that would become even more prominent in the following months. Balcony concerts spread to America as well when social distancing and quarantining measures were enacted,¹⁴⁰ as well as to Spain, Iraq, France, Lebanon, India, Germany, and more.¹⁴¹ Classically-trained musicians performed with sheet music, casual musicians played pop songs and improvised, opera singers performed a cappella, professional and amateur DJs blasted sets with their laptops, and even non-musicians sang together and made music using household items, such as kitchen utensils and pots for percussion. And many a think-piece was published detailing the “healing power of music,” the “ability of music to bring people together in times of hardship,” the “universal language of music,” and other musical aphorisms.¹⁴² As I detail later, a large chunk of pandemic pop music was characterized by optimism and encouragement, with lyrics about appreciating “the important things in life” like community and family. These balcony performances actively embodied this type of hopefulness and togetherness.

¹³⁹ Yuliya Talmazan and Matteo Moschella, “Italy made its own entertainment on Coronavirus lockdown,” *NBC News*, 21 March 2021; Emily St. James, “Watch: Quarantined Italians are singing their hearts out. It’s beautiful,” *Vox*, March 13 2021; Stephania Taladrid, “Meet the Italians Making Music Together Under Coronavirus Quarantine,” *The New Yorker*, 19 March 2020.

¹⁴⁰ David Rolland, “In the Age of Social Distancing, Balcony Concerts Keep Miami’s Urban Core Entertained,” *Miami New Times*, April 6, 2020.

¹⁴¹ Alan Taylor, “Music and Encouragement from Balconies Around the World,” *The Atlantic*, 24 March 2020.

¹⁴² All of the above cited articles on balcony concerts contain such proclamations.

Viral Videos

These balcony performances spread quickly online, and it didn't take long for similar "off the cuff, from the home" type performances to be constructed and recorded explicitly for the virtual space, skipping the "for the neighbors" part altogether. Perhaps the most notorious among these was the infamous celebrity cover of John Lennon's "Imagine." Supposedly inspired by a recording of an Italian trumpeter playing for his neighbors, *Wonder Woman* actress Gal Gadot recruited numerous celebrities – including fellow *Wonder Woman 1984* stars Pedro Pascal and Kristin Wiig, among many others – to each sing a line a cappella of Lennon's opus, which she edited together with a preceding message about the virus "affecting everyone across the world" and echoing already-tiresome sentiments of "we're all in this together." The video was immediately reviled across social media and popular press outlets, which labeled it "peak cringe"¹⁴³ and "proof that even if no one meets up in person, horribleness can spread."¹⁴⁴ The video was likened to a wannabe super-group inspirational charity tune, like a knock-off "We Are the World" or "Do They Know It's Christmas?", only without any of the financial backing to a respective cause. And significantly, it was also critiqued for its tone deaf-ness, as the compilation of wealthy celebrities smiling self-satisfyingly from the comfort of luxurious homes and beautiful gardens was in stark contrast to the reality of self-isolation and quarantining that most people were experiencing. As cultural critic Brian Moylan put it, "a bunch of rich celebrities imagining a world with "no possessions" while people around the country suffered a social, health and economic crisis wasn't what the world needed at the time."¹⁴⁵ The self-seriousness

¹⁴³ Brian Moylan, "Gal Gdot's 'Imagine' Instagram video was peak cringe. A year later, here's what's changed." *NBC News*, 21 March 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Jon Caramanica, "This 'Imagine' Cover is No Heaven," *New York Times*, 20 March 2020.

¹⁴⁵ Moylan, "Gal Gadot's "Imagine" Instagram Video" *NBC News*

and earnestness that seemed to characterize many of the performances in the video was off-putting to many, who found the proclamation of solidarity from those whose exorbitant lifestyles are unobtainable to the vast majority, disingenuous. The racial and economic inequities that exacerbated the pandemic's impact for so many were only highlighted through the video.

While the celebrity "Imagine" video may seem tangential to the larger picture of pandemic pop as a distinct body of music, this collage of tone deafness on multiple levels reveals a couple of apparent trends relevant to this study. Primary amongst these is the state of virality. During a time when movies were not being released and concerts were not being staged, the only means through which famous celebrities, actors, and musicians could reach the numbers they were accustomed to reaching and maintain the public consciousness they were used to maintaining was through online media – in this case, a video explicitly designed to go viral. COVID-19 shifted pop culture even more into an online – and more specifically, a viral – sphere, as social media, digital platforms, and viral content became one of the only ways for content creators to reach audiences. Many of the above-cited articles critiquing the "Imagine" video noted that it reeked of a desire to be in the spotlight and at the center of public conversation.

This fame-seeking, moment-capitalizing, designed-to-go-viral quality was indicative of much of the digital content being produced during 2020. From parents (staying home and spending time with their families more than ever) staging, filming, and sharing their children on social media, to the endlessly-repeated and -recreated dance trends and other challenges on TikTok,¹⁴⁶ to musical remixes (and remixes of remixes) of already viral content, to, as I will

¹⁴⁶ Indeed, TikTok inherently functions on fast-spreading and fast-dying virality, and its popularity only grew over the pandemic. As the viral COVID-19 spread and infected millions, so too did the viral content of TikTok. *Forbes* notes that by the end of 2020, the number of users on the platform was up 75% from the beginning of the year: John Koetsier, "Massive TikTok Growth," *Forbes* 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkoetsier/2020/09/14/massive-tiktok-growth-up-75-this-year-now-33x-more-users-than-nearest-competitor/?sh=6818af734fe4>

discuss in much more detail later, numerous amateur musicians attempting to achieve fame by producing songs and music videos that depict universal struggles of COVID-19.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, much of this digital content was similarly characterized by racial inequities and power hierarchies. TikTok has come under fire for the abundance of white influencers going viral, getting rich, and receiving opportunities by popularizing dances that were originated by Black performers.¹⁴⁸ For example, Charli D’Amelio and Addison Rae both became famous on TikTok and went on to receive lucrative opportunities in film and television – D’Amelio had her own Hulu docuseries and a Snap Original Reality show, and Rae began a music career and starred in the Netflix film *He’s All That* in 2021. But their initial TikTok fame was built on dances that were largely stolen from Black TikTokers, who received no credit and no compensation for the dances they created that made these white influencers rich and famous.¹⁴⁹

While it is difficult to draw hard lines between seeking connection and community through viral content and seeking fame and the spotlight through the same, it is hard to deny that the latter characterized much of the digital (and specifically, musical) content produced during the pandemic. This designed-for-virality element is visible in this type of crisis music activity, but as I expand upon later, it also characterizes much of the pandemic pop created by aspiring and amateur artists.

¹⁴⁷ Lil Nix, Psychs, Gmac Cash top the list for the transparency of their viral-seeking efforts, but they and many more will be detailed in due time.

¹⁴⁸ Lea Zora Scruggs, “Black TikTokers are Tired of Not Getting Paid for the Moves You Stole,” *Vice*, Dec 1, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/g5qqkw/black-tik-tok-tired-of-stolen-dances>; Sharon Pruitt-Young, “Black TikTokers are On Strike to Protest a Lack of Credit for Their Work,” *NPR*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/01/1011899328/black-tiktok-creators-are-on-strike-to-protest-a-lack-of-credit-for-their-work>

¹⁴⁹ Charlotte Colombo, “Charli D’Amelio was Criticized by ‘The View’ Host Sunny Hostin,” *Insider*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.insider.com/tiktok-charli-damelio-sunny-hostin-the-view-black-creators-dances-2021-6>; Jen Juneau, “Addison Rae Responds to Backlash after Performing Dances without Crediting Mostly Black Creators,” *People*, April 6, 2021, <https://people.com/tv/addison-rae-responds-performing-tiktok-dances-not-crediting-black-creators-fallon-tonight-show/>

Virtual Concerts

Beyond impromptu balcony performances, music played an important cultural role during the onset of quarantining through virtual and often free concerts put on by established pop artists. Post Malone hosted a Nirvana Tribute livestream concert on YouTube in April 2020; Billie Eilish hosted a “virtual, multi-dimensional, interactive, and immersive” livestream concert in October 2020; Gorillaz, which was already something of a virtual band long before COVID hit, premiered the one-night-only virtual experience *Song Machine Live from Kong* in December 2021; Erykah Badu hosted a series of livestreamed shows called the Quarantine: Apocalypse series throughout 2020 and 2021; DJ D-Nice hosted Club Quarantine, a virtual gay club based in Toronto that hosted online parties during the pandemic; Sam Smith, Keith Urban, John Legend, Chris Martin, Lady Gaga, and many others also gave free livestream concerts over YouTube, Instagram, and other online forums. And while virtual concerts and livestream performances were not new to the quarantine era, 2020 did mark the first year in which it was the dominant method of consuming “live” music by mainstream pop stars. Since the advent and widespread use of the MP3 in the late 1990s, music distribution and consumption norms have been steadily moving to more virtual and digital methods¹⁵⁰. During this time, live in-person shows became a more important source of revenue for musicians losing profits to the decline of hard format sales. In a way, in-person shows were one of the last bastions of the non-digital popular music industry

¹⁵⁰ For more, see T. J. Anderson, *Popular Music in a Digital Music Economy: Problems and Practices for an Emerging Service Industry*, New York: Routledge, 2014; David Arditi, *ITake-Over: The Recording Industry in the Digital Era*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014; Alex Sayf Cummings, *Democracy of Sound: Music Piracy and the Remaking of American Copyright in the Twentieth Century*: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Maria Eriksson et al, *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019; Anja N. Hagen & Marika Luders, “Social Streaming? Navigating Music as Personal and Social,” *Convergence: International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 23, no. 6 Pp. 643-659, 2017; Leslie M. Meier & Vincent R. Manerolle, “Rising Tides? Data Capture, Platform Accumulation, and New Monopolies in the Digital Music Economy,” *New Media & Society*, 21, no. 3 Pp. 543-561, 2019; Keith Negus, “From Creator to Data: the Post-record Music Industry and the Digital Conglomerates,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 2018, to name a few.

of the 20th century. With the mandates of pandemic-induced quarantining, the music industry saw an even stronger fusion of nearly all aspects of music creation/consumption with the virtual world, to the point that even “live” music was mediated through screens and digital spaces. In-person music events have come back in the aftermath of the global vaccine roll-out, but the nature of music during the COVID-19 crisis was nonetheless still characterized by an unprecedented virtual context.

All of these musical forms during COVID-19 – balcony performances, viral videos, virtual concerts – are iterations of crisis music, as they are musical expressions and activities that have taken shape in response to and during an ongoing crisis. While on the surface, a viral recording of a balcony performance might not seem that different from the typical viral recording of an unknown musician playing in public, or the “Imagine” video might not seem that different from the typical cringey celebrity controversy, or the virtual concerts might not seem that different from the typical live-televised/streamed musical/media content, the manner in which these performances, videos, and concerts came about, and the function they served during COVID-19, reveal some important insights on the relationship between music and crisis.

In many ways these musical expressions and artifacts continued and expanded already existent/emerging trends within the digital music landscape – in particular, the use of music as a form of mood regulation has been well documented in streaming studies, and evidenced by one of the prevailing forms of music organization across streaming platforms – around moods rather than genres, eras, or musicians. As musicologist Remi Chiu highlights, “During the global lockdowns, researchers found that mood management was one of the primary functions of music. People reported in surveys that they have spent more time listening to (and performing) music

last year, and they reported more positive views of the impact of music on personal well-being.”¹⁵¹ Chiu notes that such mood management is similar to the functions previous bodies of crisis music have played during pandemics of the past, explaining how fifteenth and sixteenth century doctors recommended avoiding bad news and gathering to sing and play music with friends and family as a means of coping with the plague.¹⁵² This method mirrors the official guidance published by the CDC for coping with stress during COVID, which recommended taking breaks from reading about the virus and making time for hobbies and recreation.¹⁵³ Between these documented historical practices, contemporary research, and modern medical advice, the real and practical emotional benefits of music during times of crisis are well established.

But beyond the increased migration of musical activities to digital spaces and the increase in practices related to virtual music consumption, crisis music during COVID-19 has functioned in ways distinct from a pre-pandemic digital music landscape. Chiu also explains how what I’m calling crisis music has been useful in dealing with the social isolation felt by many, noting that musical practices such as balcony performances and virtual concerts, as well as other music-related activities such as collaborative playlist making and sharing, provided a means of social interaction that was safe and demonstrated compliance with quarantine rules (and thus a belief in the importance of social isolation for the wellbeing of everyone) in a time when few such opportunities existed.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, COVID-19 crisis music functioned as a tool for

¹⁵¹ Remi Chiu, “Face the music: Loyola musicologist discusses the benefits of music during COVID,” *Loyola University*, 18 August 2021, interview with Andrew Aldrich.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Mental Health: Coping with Stress” <https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/stress-coping/cope-with-stress/index.html>

¹⁵⁴ Chiu, “Face the music”

communicating useful and even life-saving information, akin to public service announcements describing causes, symptoms, and preventative safety measures related to coronavirus.¹⁵⁵

However, while these functions of crisis music during the COVID-19 pandemic are certainly worthy of attention, in order to study the overlap between crisis and genre and examine crisis-as-genre, I must here turn my attention to pandemic pop, as it is the genre(-like) formation of a distinct body of music that enables interrogation of such interests. The important distinction here is, although these balcony performances, viral videos, virtual concerts, and other crisis music forms embodied many of the themes that the pandemic pop below illustrates, my focus on them to this point has been on the level of musical *activities* during a time of crisis. With pandemic pop, I am able to consider *crisis-as-genre*, which is more about how different songs come to be seen as belonging to the same body of music through their relevance to crisis, rather than how individuals use music to negotiate their being in crisis.

Pandemic Pop

Origins

On March 11, 2020, rapper Cardi B shared a forty-six second long video on her Instagram expressing her fear of the Coronavirus pandemic. Days later, Brooklyn DJ and producer Brandon Markell Davidson, known professionally as DJ iMarkkeyz, released a hip-hop remix of the video on Instagram and YouTube which promptly went viral. Though Cardi B's initial Instagram post was filled with confessions of being scared, frustrations with others not taking the virus seriously, and critiques of the Trump administration's handling of the pandemic,

¹⁵⁵ A Vietnamese PSA "Ghen Co Vy" about washing hands and avoiding crowds turned into a popular TikTok dance video and was shared by comedian Jon Oliver on *Last Week Tonight*, and numerous teaching songs for children were recorded, including one by The Wiggles entitled "Social Distancing."

iMarkkeyz's remix repeated one segment of her rant for the majority of the song: "Coronavirus! Shit is real! Shit is getting real!" That line repeated over a beat produced on Ableton (a digital audio software for composing, recording, arranging, mixing, and mastering) and was accompanied by videos of people and fictional characters (such as Elmo) dancing. While iMarkkeyz was already known for his remixes of viral videos and meme content, "Coronavirus (Remix)" struck a nerve with listeners and music industry professionals, as it was praised for its ability to sonically capture the collective panic and paranoia beginning to be felt across America and the world¹⁵⁶. It skyrocketed on digital download charts across the globe¹⁵⁷, spawned covers and social media challenges, and inspired many similar tracks from other DJs and musicians, such as Gmac Cash's "Coronavirus," Lil Nix's "Corona Virus," Ariel de Cuba's "Quédate en Casa" ("Stay Home"), Psych's "Spreadin'," and many others, marking the start of a new musical category dubbed "pandemic pop" by music critics and streaming platforms.

This category, pandemic pop, became further codified as a distinct body of music through the curation of songs across streaming platforms like Apple Music and Spotify into playlists like "The Sound of the Virus," "Now That's What I Call Quarantine Music!," "Coronavirus Self-Isolation Playlist," "Apocalypse Radio – End of the World Playlist," and "Pandemic Pop – The Ultimate Corona Playlist." These playlists included many of the new tracks and remixes explicitly about the pandemic, but also featured older pop songs with lyrics, sounds, or other meanings that could be ascribed to COVID-19, such as Blue Öyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper," Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence," The Police's "Don't Stand So Close to

¹⁵⁶ Zoe Haylock, "2020 Looked Bleak. Then DJ iMarkkeyz Remixed it." *Vulture*. 21 Dec 2020; Lindsay Zoladz, "How Cardi B's Off-the-Cuff Video Became a Coronavirus Anthem," *The New York Times*, 17 March 2020; Emma Specter, "Cardi B's Unforgettable Coronavirus Rant is Now an Unforgettable Song," *Vogue*, 19 March 2020.

¹⁵⁷ The single hit No. 9 on the iTunes hip-hop chart and No. 1 in several countries. Haylock.

Me,” Britney Spears’s “Toxic,” and REM’s “It’s The End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine).” Whether applied to new songs explicitly about COVID or older tunes seen as applicable to the experience of COVID, the term “pandemic pop” was spreading across music streaming platforms, professional and popular music publications, music and pop culture websites, and fan discourse, and its contours as a category of music were coming into shape, if (still) somewhat amorphous and inconsistent. The re-purposing of already-existing songs as expressive of the COVID-19 pandemic in playlists alongside brand new songs gave pandemic pop an emergent coherence.

The music creations and curations of pandemic pop were staged in a digital space, emphasizing the significance of format for the emergence and codification of this body of music. I expand upon the parallels between the virality of coronavirus and the virality of musical content later, but streaming, platforms, and the digital infrastructure as music format are all important constituting factors for coronavirus crisis music broadly and pandemic pop specifically. As I established in my literature review, one of my guiding research questions for this project is “how does format restrain and enable the meanings that music gives to crisis and that crisis gives to music?” Simply put, pandemic pop would not exist as it does without the digital mediascape. Crisis music activities like the viral videos and virtual concerts mentioned above took place in digital space, and even in-person music activities like the balcony performances were recorded, shared, and went viral online. The virality of the pandemic mandated that much cultural activity of the time take place digitally. But this mandate, and the unique affordances and constraints of the digital format, gave fundamental shape to pandemic pop as a body of music, which forms a primary point of focus moving through the rest of this analysis.

I turn my attention here first to the pandemic pop music created during and explicitly about the COVID-19 pandemic, and then shift my focus to remixes, re-recordings, and re-purposing of already-existing pop songs as pandemic pop, while paying careful attention to the role of digital format materialism during both sections. Studying how various separate bodies of music are categorized as “pandemic pop” reveals the connections between my approach to crisis (informed centrally by Roitman) and the scholarship on genre I outlined earlier: the absence of specific musical features as a cornerstone for “pandemic pop” supports the notion of genre as an idea rather than as a thing, and the concept of “crisis” as the key unifying factor across this music exemplifies my concept of crisis-as-genre.

Pandemic pop songs have come from a wide variety of musical genres, including rap and hip-hop, country, rock, indie/alternative, dance pop, and more. I structure my analysis of pandemic pop not along the lines of these genres (although I will offer some thoughts on how different genres have approached the creation of original music about COVID-19 throughout the analysis), but rather, through organizational sub-genres defined by originality and derivativity, which are further divided into two-to-three sub-sub-genres, as I detail below. I analyze each sub-genre of pandemic pop through lyrical themes, musical motifs, artistic intent, and public reception.

As pandemic pop is an already enormous (and continually growing) body of music, a complete survey and analysis of every identifiable pandemic pop song is a logistical impossibility for the purposes of this study. Rather, I take inspiration from Kenneth Burke’s representative anecdote as a means of conducting analysis of and drawing conclusions about pandemic pop.¹⁵⁸ Burke suggests that “dramatism suggests a procedure to be followed in the

¹⁵⁸ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, Cleveland World Publishing Company, 1962 (original work published 1945).

development of a given calculus, or terminology. It involves the search for a ‘representative anecdote,’ to be used as a form in conformity with which the vocabulary is constructed.”¹⁵⁹ As Brummett explains of the method, “the anecdote is a method used by the *critic*. The anecdote is a lens, filter, or template through which the critic studies and reconstructs the discourse. The critic *represents* the essence of discourse by viewing it as if it follows a dramatic plot.”¹⁶⁰ In other words, analytical observations about a discourse or body of texts are drawn through the study of individual texts that are effective representations of the whole, or, to borrow another Burkean term, synecdoches. Brummett argues that the representative anecdote is a methodological tool well-suited for media analysis and criticism in particular, and indeed its use as such has been effective in both academic research and popular culture criticism.¹⁶¹

Thus, in order to analyze pandemic pop, I first constructed my criteria for identifying representative anecdotes – or, as I refer to them here, “exemplars” – in the form of individual songs. However, as pandemic pop is comprised of multiple sub-genres, all of which being worthy of study, each would require its own set of criteria for identifying appropriate exemplars. I have classified pandemic pop into two broad sub-genres, each of which can be broken down into two-to-three sub-sub-genres: original music (which contains established artists and aspiring artists) and derivative music (which contains re-recordings, remixes, and repurposings).

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 49.

¹⁶⁰ Barry Brummett, “Burke’s Representative Anecdote as method in Media Criticism,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1, (1984): 161-76, p. 163.

¹⁶¹ Barry Brummett, “The Representative Anecdote as a Burkean Method, Applied to Evangelical Rhetoric,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 50(1); Bryan Crable, “Burke’s perspective on perspectives: Grounding dramatism in the representative anecdote,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Volume 86, Issue 3, 2000, pp. 318-333; Max Dosser, “Streaming’s Skip Intro Function as a Contradictory Refuge for Television Title Sequences,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 90, Fall 2022, pp. 38-50; Nwilson, “Kenneth Burke’s Representative Anecdote & the Cult of the Kill,” *The Critical Comic*, 30 July 2020, <https://thecriticalcomic.com/kenneth-burkes-representative-anecdote-the-cult-of-the-kill/>; Robyn Bahr, “Critic’s Notebook: How Animated Film is Indicting Toxic Masculinity,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 1 March 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/how-animated-film-is-indicting-toxic-masculinity-1190399/>

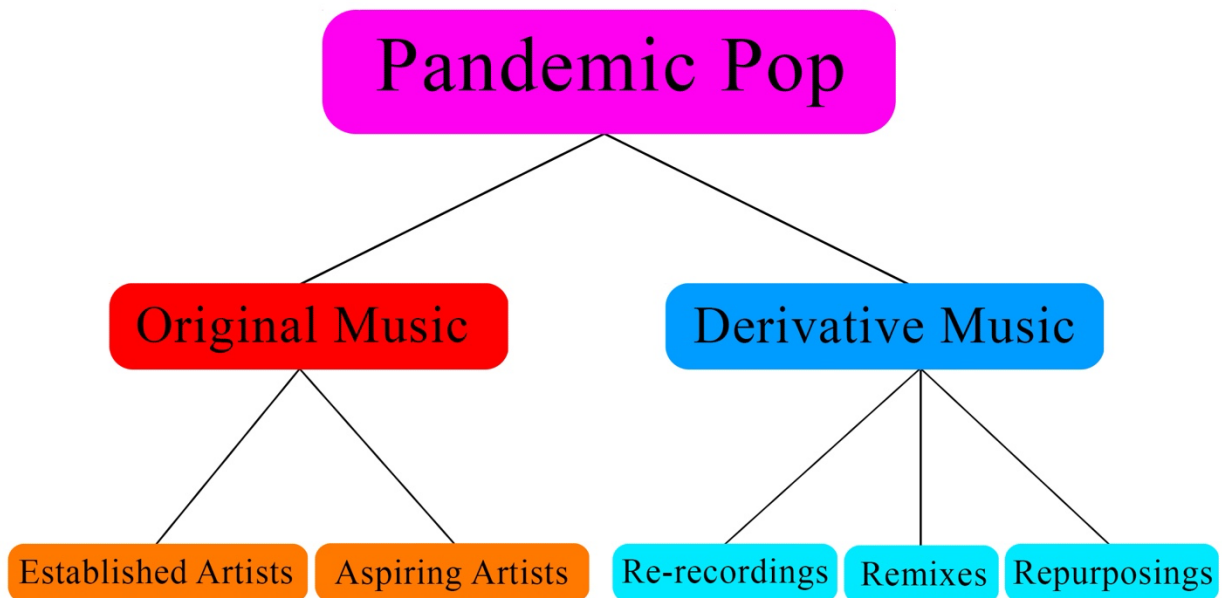


Figure 6: Sub-genre breakdown of Pandemic Pop

I wish to clarify each of these classificatory terms. By “original” and “derivative” music, I in no way wish to impart any (e)valuative judgments of songs. In other words, “original” does not indicate praiseworthy terms like “novel” or “fresh” or “inspired,” nor does “derivative” reference negatively evaluative terms like “unimaginative” or “conventional” or “hackneyed.” Rather, “original music” simply means “new musical compositions written during the COVID-19 pandemic,” and “derivative music” references “songs that have been written or recorded prior to the pandemic or that are comprised of individual components recorded prior to the composition of the song.” Within the sub-genre of original music, there are the categories of “music by established artists” – that is, songs by *professional* musicians who are signed to a label, have released studio-cut albums, have significant album or single sales, or otherwise have some significant standing as well-established within the industry; and “music by aspiring artists”

– amateurs who do not possess the above but who are trying to break into the industry and make music their profession. And within the sub-genre of derivative music, there are the categories of “re-recordings” – songs written prior to the pandemic that are re-recorded during the pandemic by the same or a different artist in a way that expresses relevance to the pandemic, through altered lyrics, arrangement, performance or other means; “remixes” – songs that sample already-existing songs, viral videos, loops, and other sonic material and mix them together and/or alter their original state to create a new piece of media; and “repurposings” – pop songs that existed prior to the pandemic that are identified (by consumers, musicians, or industry professionals) as “pandemic pop” and consumed within a context that imbues them with new meaning relevant to the pandemic.

Each of these five sub-sub-genres – original music by established artists, original music by aspiring artists, re-recordings, remixes, and repurposings – required their own set of criteria for identifying a set of exemplars for analysis. The following five sections, which unfold in the above order, detail selection criteria, the representative anecdotes chosen, and analysis of said anecdotes. For each song, I conducted a four-pronged analysis: rhetorical analysis of lyrics, musical analysis of composition and performance, paratextual analysis of interviews with the artists and promotional materials of the songs, and textual analysis of songs’ reception in music criticism publications and popular public discourse. The conclusions I draw from the first of these two approaches come from my own analysis of the music, but with consideration of artistic intent and public reception, my analysis is both self-conducted and informed by public discourse. I used commentary from music magazines and online listener forums (such as social media sites) to help inform my own critique of how the music was received, which is what I present here, rather than a full picture of the public response. Through critical interrogation of each of these

dimensions of each exemplar song, I was able to identify trends across lyrical themes, musical attributes, expressed artist intents, and critical and public receptions within each sub-genre of pandemic pop.

Original music by established artists

To select exemplar songs for original pandemic pop music by established artists, I considered three criteria. First, status as a professional musician. To consider a musician a professional, music (either writing, recording, performing, or a combination thereof) must be their primary source of income. Second, establishment. Beyond mere status as a professional, for the purposes of this sub-genre, I was primarily interested in songs by musicians who have a significant degree of popularity. For some musicians, such as Pitbull, Bono, and Bon Jovi, status as a superstar is evident. For other artists, particularly more contemporary ones, other considerations helped in determining the degree of establishment within the modern music landscape. Streams on Spotify and other music platforms, followers on social media accounts, trends on social media (TikTok in particular), presence on charts, and reviews in industry publications like *Rolling Stone* and *Pitchfork* all helped to create a picture of an artist's popularity. While there was not necessarily a specific threshold I was looking for to determine whether or not an artist had maintained a sufficient degree of establishment, the better their numbers were across these factors, the stronger their chances were of being selected as a representative anecdote. Finally, to create as full a picture of original pandemic pop by established artists as possible, I was intentional about pulling exemplars from various genres.

The most-streamed genres of both 2020 and 2021, in descending order, were R&B/hip-hop, Rock, Pop, and Country,¹⁶² so I selected songs from each.

It is important to note that I identified, listened to, and took notes on far more songs than I choose to present here. For the sake of space, I have limited myself to discussion of a handful of exemplars, the ones that I studied the most intently. The musical trends and analytical insights I share do not come solely from these songs, but rather, are further rooted in the plethora of music I studied beyond what is discussed in this chapter. Original music by established artists comprised the largest sub-genre of pandemic pop, and as such, contained the most exemplars in this study: ten songs for each of the four most popular streaming genres, forty songs in total, presented here graphically for the sake of conserving space.

<u>R&B/Hip-Hop</u>	<u>Rock</u>
“Corona Clap” – Dee-1 “Gold and Chrome” – Curren\$y & Harry Fraud “Good Job” – Alicia Keys “I Believe That We Will Win (World Anthem)” – Pitbull “Lockdown” – Anderson .Paak ft. Jay Rock “Nowhere to Go (Quarantine Love)” – Snow Tha Product “Quarantine” – Black Soprano Family & Benny the Butcher “Quarantine Clean” – Turbo, Gunna, & Young Thug “Sing for Life” – will.i.am, Jennifer Hudson, Bono, Yoshiki “Toxic” – Kehlani	“All That’s Left is Love” – Angels & Airwaves “Better Days” – OneRepublic “Do What You Can” – Bon Jovi “Don’t Give Up” – Alice Cooper “Eazy Sleazy” – Mick Jagger & Dave Grohl “Let Your Love Be Known” – Bono “Life in Quarantine” – Ben Gibbard “Lockdown” – Mike Campbell “Quarantine” – Blink-182 “Quarantine Together” – Drive-by Truckers

¹⁶² “Distribution of streamed music consumption in the United States in 2021, by genre,” *Statista*, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/475667/streamed-music-consumption-genre-usa/>; “Nearly a third of all streams in the US last year were of hip-hop and R&B artists,” *Music Business Worldwide*, 2021, <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/nearly-a-third-of-all-streams-in-the-us-last-year-were-of-hip-hop-and-rb-music/#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20says%20MRC%20Data,across%20on%2Ddemand%20streaming%20platforms>

<u>Pop</u>	<u>Country</u>
“Back to the Basics” – Erika Ender “Ballad of a Pandemic” – Matt Maltese “Claws” – Charli XCX “Epiphany” – Taylor Swift <i>Inside Special</i> – Bo Burnham “Level of Concern” – Twenty-One Pilots “Nobody’s Love” – Maroon 5 “PDLIF” – Bon Iver “Spaceman” – Nick Jonas “Stuck with U” – Ariana Grande & Justin Beiber	“Be A Light” – Thomas Rhett ft. Reba McEntire, Hillary Scott, Chris Tomlin, Keith Urban “Better Than Me” – Riley Green “Eachother” – Grace Potter “Hey World” – Lee Brice “Six Feet Apart” – Luke Combs “The Optimist” – Kelleigh Bannen “The World Goes On” – Jamie O’Neal “Together (We’ll Get Through This)” – Steven Curtis Chapman ft. Brad Paisley, Lauren Alaina, Tasha Cobbs Leonard “Quarantined” – Old Crow Medicine Show “When Life is Good Again” – Dolly Parton

The analysis I provide here is informed by these songs, and the majority of the insights I offer are trends observable within them as a body of music. I offer some specific examples of such trends to illustrate them, as well as point to the occasional counter-example from this group. A few songs merit further individual analysis, as they represent significant or particularly meaningful entries within the body of pandemic pop for various reasons; these reasons are explained when these songs are discussed. I now discuss my findings from original pandemic pop music by established artists, organized along each of my four main analytical focuses: lyrical content, musical motifs, artistic objectives, and public reception.

The most overwhelmingly common lyrical topic for this sub-genre of pandemic pop was optimism, hope, and encouragement. Songs that expressed this sentiment, one of overcoming the struggles of COVID-19 through unity and togetherness, were typical across R&B/Hip-Hop, Rock, Pop, and Country. Lyrical rhetoric in this vein often focused on looking ahead to a brighter future, keeping high spirits, and the oft-repeated line not only within music but across seemingly any and every industry with any degree of public relations, “we’re all in this

together.” Songs like Pitbull’s “I Believe That We Will Win (World Anthem)” epitomized this type of omnipresent and often hollow-feeling rhetoric of optimism and togetherness. Pitbull repeats the eponymous line ten times per chorus (of which there are three, for a grand total of thirty “I Believe That We Will Win”s), hammering a vacant message of optimism (what does “winning” even mean or look like in the context of a global pandemic that, at the time of this writing, has killed over 6.8 million people?) that, at the time of its release in April 2020, had little grounds on which to be so insistently optimistic (particularly within the context of America’s handling of the virus during this time, as detailed earlier).

Within this lyrical trend, there were less-shallow-feeling songs that pled for finding silver linings, counting one’s blessings, and focusing on the good in the midst of all the bad in order to stay resilient. Grace Potter’s “Eachother” stresses “we’ve got each other, and for now that’s enough,” and Snow Tha Product sings in “Nowhere to Go (Quarantine Love)” about reframing the isolation of quarantining as an opportunity to relax and take a break from the business of the normal world. Others offer hope through words of advice and encouragement, lyrics about “[being] a light” in “a world full of hate,” or requests to “please don’t live in fear,” or a simple expression of “good job” to frontline workers who don’t hear it enough. The claims that “we are all in this together,” both within music and other discourses, felt and continue to feel so hollow due to the vast inequities that COVID-19 itself has in many ways highlighted and exacerbated, challenging how “together” we all are and even how “in it” many are, and thus making the claim feel entirely disingenuous. But of the songs of lyrical hope and optimism, those that appeal not to a broad and false-feeling sense of “universal togetherness” and instead attempt to offer encouragement on an individual, personal level resonate more genuinely.

On the other side of hope, optimism, and encouragement though, many songs had lyrical themes of dismay, sorrow, and loneliness. The varied experiences of quarantining was a huge lyrical focus for many artists, from Blink-182's focus on the boredom of lockdown in "Quarantine" to Nick Jonas's feelings of isolation in "Spaceman" to Luke Combs's expressions of simply missing people in "Six Feet Apart." In particular, Ben Gibbard's (of Death Cab for Cutie fame) "Life in Quarantine" effectively captures the dismay, dread, sorrow, and mundanity of the early days of COVID-19's breakout in America. The song begins by describing the deserted ghost-town like feel of public spaces during lockdown: "The sidewalks are empty / the bars and cafes too / the streetlights only changing / 'cause they ain't got nothing better to do." The emptiness of some spaces is contrasted with the chaos of others: "The airports and train stations / are full of desperate people / trying to convince the gate agents / that not all emergencies are equal / then inside the safeway / it's like the Eastern Bloc / people have a way of getting crazy / when they think they'll be dead in a month." Gibbard sets an almost apocalyptic-like scene in these verses and then immediately returns to the emptiness and silence of the residential neighborhood, describing a discomfotingly peaceful "wind through the trees."

"Life in Quarantine" was one of the first pandemic pop songs, released in March 2020. Gibbard manages to sing of a universal experience without slipping into pandering or appropriative territory (something I dig into more later), capturing the contradictory feelings of peace, discomfort, fear, and panic without needing to explicitly state such emotions. While it does a better job than most at expressing the experience of quarantining, it is an example of what pandemic pop is at its best: not preachy or hollow, but authentic and relatable.

Musical motifs across this body of songs tended to compliment the lyrical themes. In particular, many of the hope and optimism songs utilized sentimental ballad sounds. Most were

slower in tempo, had a musical arrangement that emphasized melody and harmony, and used primarily acoustic instrumentation. Many songs, such as Luke Combs's "Six Feet Apart," Bon Jovi's "Do What You Can," and Bono's "Let Your Love Be Known," to name just a few, were entirely acoustic and bare in instrumentation, utilizing only an acoustic guitar and the voice. Vocal performances within the sentimental ballad trend utilized both downplayed-yet-emotional and powerhouse singing techniques. For example, in "Eachother," Grace Potter sings in a mostly soft voice, low in volume, simple in ornamentation, demonstrating the downplayed approach. In "Good Job," Alicia Keys delivers a characteristically signature vocal performance that encompasses a broad range of volume, passion, and impressive ornamentation. And in "Epiphany," Taylor Swift utilizes a multitude of harmonies to build a swelling chorus of voices. All are typical of the sentimental ballad sound, and all use expressive emoting in the performance, specifically tones that communicate sorrow, sympathy, and poignancy.

While the sentimental ballad was by and large the most common musical sound used in hope, optimism, and silver linings songs, the tunes that had a stronger lyrical focus on stress, anxiety, or despair more frequently utilized other musical motifs. Sometimes the stress of the lyrical content was mirrored in stressful musical compositions, arrangements, and performances, such as Blink-182's "Quarantine," which utilizes loud electric guitars, dissonance and distortion, and fast-paced unrelenting percussion to create a punk rock song that communicates the feelings of frustration, insanity, and restlessness that lead singer Matt Skiba sings about. Other tunes used high energy dance floor sounds, like Pitbull's "I Believe That We Will Win (World Anthem)", Twenty-One Pilots' "Level of Concern," and Charli XCX's "Claws."

Whatever the lyrical theme or musical sound, the vast majority of original pandemic pop music by established artists seemed to originate from a genuine desire on the part of the artist to

help people during the pandemic. Many of these artists – including Ben Gibbard, Twenty-One Pilots, Angels & Airwaves, Dolly Parton, Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande, Bon Iver, and more – donated most or all of the proceeds from their songs to various charities and relief organizations dedicated to helping those impacted by COVID-19. Some were local, some national, some global; some were directed at specific areas like food security, some were directed toward specific communities like first responders. Many musicians also made it clear, either in interviews with popular publications, press statements, or spoken directly to the camera in the video recordings of their songs, who they were dedicating the music to: Alicia Keys dedicated “Good Job” to the frontline workers, who “work so hard and never hear the words ‘good job,’” and Bon Jovi explicitly thanked nurses and first responders and dedicated “Do What You Can” to those working in his home state of New Jersey. And in addition to donating proceeds and making dedications, many artists also revealed publicly their intent to inspire, encourage, and lift the spirits of anyone who listened. Tom DeLonge, front man of Angels & Airwaves, communicated across multiple public statements his desire to instill hope, compassion, and connection through their single “All That’s Left is Love.” Thomas Rhett told Billboard that his song “Be a Light” “was really just about being a light in a dark place; being an encouragement to people.”

Another trend amongst this group of artists was the sharing of work before it was completed. Multiple musicians took to social media to share a recording of or livestream a performance of a song they were in the middle of writing. Grace Potter shared an in-progress acoustic guitar-only recording of “Eachother” on social media, stating that she had only started writing it that day; Bono first live streamed “Let Your Love Be Known” on Instagram an hour after writing it. Both songs were later recorded with a full band and featured guest artists

(Jackson Browne, Marcus King, and Lucius performing on “Eachother,” and will.i.am, Jennifer Hudson, and Yoshiki performing on “Let Your Love Be Known,” retitled “Sing for Life”) and released as singles.

But similar to the lyrical shallowness many of the hope and optimism songs, some artists did not come across as quite so genuine in their intents. For example, in an interview with MTV promoting the release of “I Believe That We Will Win (World Anthem),” Pitbull stated “As an artist, music being my motivational force, I’m on the front line fighting for the world and letting them know that don’t worry, no matter what, we got this.” While it is difficult to determine Pitbull’s true intentions with this song and his meaning behind these statements, his rhetorical positioning of himself as a frontline worker during the pandemic feels unearned and self-congratulatory, to say the least. Combined with the vacant and hollow impression the lyrics of the song leave, the extremely conventional and repetitive nature of the song’s composition itself, and the title’s self-declaration of being an anthem for the entire world, “I Believe That We Will Win (World Anthem)” reeks of a degree of self-promotion and exploitation. Pitbull’s not alone though, as other songs, like Mike Campbell’s “Lockdown” and Maroon 5’s “Nobody’s Love” also give off a distinct impression of capitalizing on a moment of universal hardship for personal gain, through the emptiness of the songs themselves and the language the artists use to describe their songs in the press. For example, Adam Levine stated that “This song was done with the whole world in mind... Whether you are an essential worker on the front lines, an outspoken citizen fighting for social justice, or just someone who needs a break to remember the potent power of love, this song is for everyone.” However, the song is a prototypical pop love song about a loving a woman and hoping she never leaves the male narrator, or else he’ll never be able to love anyone else. How exactly Levine hoped lyrics like “You’re the only hand in my

back pocket / if you ever left I'd go psychotic" could "give *everyone* a moment of peace and reflection during this unprecedented moment in our world's story" is anybody's guess.

What this music ultimately breaks down to is songs/artists that feel genuine in their desire to provide comfort, encouragement, and monetary relief to people who are struggling, and those that feel disingenuous, fronting the same objectives as their motivations while in actuality capitalizing on or taking advantage of a global catastrophe to further their own careers. Authenticity is an extremely loaded term in the discussion of music, and the evaluation of an artist's, song's, or body of music's (in)authenticity has a history of not only being incredibly subjective, but often couched in racism and misogyny. Nonetheless, perceptions of (in)authenticity persist in public opinion, and consideration of such perceptions are important for the analysis of a music's overall function and impact within popular culture.

Original music by amateur artists

The body of identifiable pandemic pop songs by amateur artists is notably smaller than that of established artists, yet it is still large enough to merit study, particularly considering the musical trends of this body of music were more uniform across songs. In particular, there was a key emphasis on virality amongst amateur music. The sonic aesthetics of this segment of pandemic pop mirrored the sonic aesthetics of the coronavirus itself, as sounds of sickness and virality were audible in the form of rhythmically-tracked coughs and sneezes. Furthermore, these songs seemed to be explicitly constructed to go viral and achieve internet fame, as I shall elaborate upon below. As such, original music by amateur artists was largely characterized by virality across sonic aesthetics and the desired mode of distribution.

To identify exemplars in this sub-genre, I had to determine how to identify an artist as “amateur.” In a pre-digital music landscape, distinguishing amateur from professional musicians was a much neater process. But in the streaming era, this is a messier undertaking. Money has been a longstanding determinant in this distinction, as professional musicians (as stated above) have music as their main source of income, while amateur artists do not make enough for music to be considered their career. While this still holds true in many instances, the profit scheme of music-making is much more complicated today and muddies this distinction somewhat. Not only are there vastly more means and opportunities by which artists can make money from their music today, but many of those income options arise from music indirectly. As Negus has written about, in a streaming industry where music is structured as content rather than as profit, the musical unit (in other words, the song) is leverage that is used in a way that it can be monetized rather than as a “thing” that is sold directly.¹⁶³ In essence what this means is that determining the amount of money an artist makes off of their music is much more complicated now. While it is evident for established professional musicians that their musical activities form their main source of income, it is often difficult to determine whether or not less renown or newer musicians are sustaining themselves financially through their music.

So if income is not the clearest indicator of amateur status, what is? I suggest that exposure is a more useful criteria for distinguishing professional from amateur musicians. Professional musicians not only get paid like professionals and have strong name recognition, their music and musical activities also have great exposure – on radio, on Billboard charts, on not just one but all streaming platforms, in live concerts and music festivals, in interviews with popular sources, and even still on physical media sales. Amateur artists may well make a

¹⁶³ Keith Negus. “From Creator to Data: The Post-Record Music Industry and the Digital Conglomerates,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 2018.

sustainable living off of their musical activities, and they may even have some degree of recognition, such as a large amount of plays on YouTube, or a lot of shares on TikTok. But it is exposure across multiple of those musical areas that elevate artists from amateur to professional status. Therefore, when looking for pandemic pop songs by amateur artists, I primarily considered exposure as a key criteria.

The majority of amateur music I found for this body came from the R&B/Hip-Hop genre. This is not surprising, as, as I mentioned earlier, it was the most-streamed genre in both 2020 and 2021, and it is the genre that sees the most new artists per year and thus has the most competition for aspiring and amateur artists. And by and large, the majority of these hip-hop pandemic pop songs featured the same type of lyrical content, the same type of musical motifs, and the same apparent artistic objectives. Therefore, I choose to present just three exemplars of this body of music in order to analyze them more closely: “Coronavirus” by Gmac Cash, “Corona Virus” by Lil Nix, and “Spreadin’” by Psychs. I also consider “Between Me and the End of the World” by Adam Hambrich and “Goin Viral” by Eric T. Brandt as counter-exemplars.

The lyrical focus of the majority of amateur pandemic pop songs (especially by hip-hop artists) was fear and anxiety. The frequently-repeated chorus in Gmac Cash’s “Coronavirus” commands “Move, bitch, you got coronavirus / ooh shit, you got coronavirus / We ain’t finna do shit with this coronavirus / I ain’t finna take a trip with this coronavirus.” In “Corona Virus,” Lil Nix claims “We all gonna die from a flu” multiple times throughout the song while singing about his fear over how quickly the virus spreads and describing the unpleasant and deadly side effects of COVID-19. And while Psychs’s “Spreadin’” begins by describing the impact of the virus and the social activities that have been lost (like “no more footy,” which is British slang for football or “soccer”), as the song progresses, Psychs begins frantically pleading for people not to get near

him, touch him, hug him, cough or sneeze on him, as his initial sadness for not being able to do things with others evolves into a fear of being around anyone.

These songs represent the overwhelming sense of fear, stress, and anxiety that so many amateur artists present in their pandemic pop songs at much higher rates than the pandemic pop songs by professional artists. This makes a lot of sense: the majority of professional artists enjoy incomes that make quarantining and lockdowns much easier to endure. Not only do they possess the financial security to not have to work, but the living conditions for many of them are much more comfortable than, say, the average lower-middle-class American. Amateur artists – even though they may earn their primary income from their music – rarely have the sort of wealth that professional artists have, making the experience of quarantining and lockdown much more difficult. And in the cases of artists who do not make the entirety of their living off of their music and thus have to work other jobs, the risk of exposure and anxiety over that risk are much greater. The overwhelming lyrical focus on hope, encouragement, and optimism in the pandemic pop of professional artists is recast in this light, as it comes from a place of comfort, security, and privilege. The lyrical focus on anxiety, fear, and stress in the pandemic pop of amateur artists is rooted in a much different experience of the pandemic. Additionally, much of this anxiety, fear, and paranoia-focused music comes from aspiring hip-hop and R&B artists, most of them Black, further underscoring the racial and economic inequities that mark the twin pandemics.

But while the lyrical content of these songs might align amateur artists more with the non-celebrity/superstar/uber-wealthy class, the musical motifs and artistic objectives reveal a desire to reach that well-established, high-exposure status. I suggest that the underlying drive of this body of music is the same as the pandemic it is about: virality. A desire to go viral seems to be at the heart of so much of the pandemic pop music produced by amateur artists, and

consequently, sounds of viral sickness are embedded within the music, as if that desire to go viral is manifesting sonically. Lil Nix's "Corona Virus" begins with a cough, which is then looped to create a rhythmic base for the track. Similarly, Gmac Cash's "Coronavirus" also begins with the sound of a woman coughing, then a cartoonish "a-choo!," and finally more coughing before a piano riff that sounds akin to John Carpenter's *Halloween* score kicks in. In the music video to the song, the title "Coronavirus" appears over the piano in a dripping *Goosebumps*-like font, as Gmac Cash's eyes grow wide in fear at the sight of a woman coughing, further establishing a connection to both sickness and horror aesthetics, albeit in a very campy manner. Gmac Cash released a number of other pandemic pop songs, such as "Stimulus Check," "15 Days of Quarantine," and "At Home," all of which also use humorous lyrics and joke about experiences specific to COVID-19. Given the sheer quantity of songs about COVID-19 he produced, as well as their emphasis on internet-friendly humor, it seems clear that Gmac Cash was attempting to create a viral hit, often through the use of the sonic aesthetic of sickness. I mentioned earlier DJ iMarkkeyz's "Coronavirus (Remix)" as a trend-sitter amongst hip-hop pandemic pop songs, as its viral success established a template for other artists aspiring to achieve such virality. Beyond the hip-hop genre music traits, "Coronavirus (Remix)" also features meme-like humor (both in its sampling of an animated Cardi B rant and through the accompanying music video featuring gifs of famous people and fictional TV show characters dancing) and the sounds of sickness with a well-timed cough forming a rhythmic break halfway through the track. These techniques were replicated by Gmac Cash and others, using sonic aesthetics of sickness in a humorous manner to achieve virality.

Thus, Gmac Cash's "Coronavirus," Lil Nix's "Corona Virus," and Psychs's "Spreadin'" all exemplify, a common artistic intent across original pandemic pop music by amateur artists

was the pursuit of virality. Through lyrical content that featured widely-appealing humor and focused on universal experiences being shared by so many, this body of music seems set on replicating what I call “The Lil Nas X Factor.” When Lil Nas X released “Old Town Road” (which he produced for just \$30), the Yeehaw Agenda (basically, the sharing of cowboy/girl memes, particularly amongst Black content creators/consumers) was already extremely popular and trending heavily on social media. Lil Nas X capitalized on a fad that was already in place and had high engagement from a sizable consumer base by releasing a piece of content that not only fit into the trend, but could add another dimension to it. “Old Town Road” became *the* anthem to the meme trend and skyrocketed in popularity due to its use as the score to virtually every video within the trend posted from that point on. This creation of a theme song to an already-popular online discourse seems to be the intent behind many of these pandemic pop tunes by amateur artists, particularly early in the pandemic when the internet was flooded with them. Young and hungry artists were locked in a race to create the theme song to the pandemic, the anthemic track that would score the social media content creation around COVID-19. Such objectives seem implicit in many songs, but are also expressed explicitly in others. The opening lines to Psych’s “Spreadin’” are “Spreadin’ / you could say that it’s COVID-19, like the virus / this year I’m trendin’.” Virality is not only the sonic aesthetic of both coronavirus and pandemic pop produced by amateur artists, it is also the mode of distribution of both as well.

Re-recordings

While many artists wrote and released new original music to address experiences being had and emotions being felt during the pandemic, others did the same through re-recording already existing songs. Such re-recordings generally fell into two camps: musicians putting new

(pandemic-related) words to their own old songs (e.g., Gloria Estefan re-recording her 1989 hit single “Get On Your Feet” with the lyrics “Put Your Mask On”), and musicians (often in groups and collaborations) covering other artists’ songs identified as meaningful to the pandemic in some way (e.g., Justin Bieber, Michael Buble, Sarah McLachlan and more teaming up for the collective initiative ArtistsCAN to cover Bill Whithers’s “Lean On Me”). Additionally, some artists chose to re-release songs they had already recorded in the past without any changes or re-writes, determining the original version to bear enough relevance to the pandemic (e.g., The Rolling Stones’ “Living in a Ghost Town,” Norah Jones’s “Tryin’ to Keep it Together,” and, for some reason, Brad Paisley’s “No I in Beer”). The overwhelming majority of these re-recordings and re-releases were done to raise money for charities and organizations providing relief for those impacted by COVID-19. While a sizable enough trend to merit mentioning, this sub-genre of pandemic pop proved to be the smallest and perhaps least-meaningful of the five I discuss here. The apparent motives and objectives of this body of music bear much in common with the body of original pandemic pop songs by established artists: to lift spirits, encourage listeners, and raise money to donate to relief organizations.

Remixes

As discussed earlier in this chapter, it was a remix that really kicked off the entire genre of pandemic pop, or at least, it was a remix that first gained pandemic pop widespread international attention and signaled the emergence of a new trend in contemporary popular music. DJ iMarkkeyz’s remix of rapper Cardi B’s “Coronavirus” Instagram post was the first hit single of the pandemic pop genre, and as such, it inspired many of the trends of the genre as it developed, particularly amongst amateur and aspiring artists. The up-tempo percussion beat,

simple and easy to sing-along-to lyrics, catchy central hook, use of humor, sonic aesthetic of sickness, and expression of fear all became hallmarks of pandemic pop being produced by young aspiring hip-hop artists, as well as guiding traits for other professional DJs releasing their own remixes of viral COVID-related content. Cardi B's "Coronavirus" post itself was quickly remixed by other artists, such as French producer DJ Snake, iMarkkeyz's remix broke onto the Billboard charts, and soon TikTok and Instagram were flooding with recreations and covers by users and celebrities alike. As its meme currency strengthened, iMarkkeyz's remix gained steam as both a social media trend and a hit single, and "Coronavirus (Remix)" was dubbed by numerous popular sources as "the anthem of COVID-19."¹⁶⁴

For these reasons, as perhaps the most-streamed, highest-charting, most-memed, and most well-known song in the entire pandemic pop catalogue, I choose to for this section solely focus on iMarkkeyz's "Coronavirus (Remix)" as my primary exemplar. The traits listed above constitute the primary trends that "Coronavirus (Remix)" set into play. The only lyrics used from Cardi B's original Instagram post are "Coronavirus! Coronavirus! Shit is real! Shit is getting real!", which are looped without melodic manipulation, played in the natural cadence and tone of her voice when she first said the words. The simplicity and brevity of the lyrics make them easy to remember, and the lack of a "traditional" melody (not that there is no melody, but rather, the way it is performed has more of a talking/chanting quality to it than a singing one) make them easy to sing along to. The intonation of that melody is nonetheless still catchy, lending the song a distinctive ear-worm quality. Yet in addition to being catchy, her vocal delivery also expresses a

¹⁶⁴ Lindsay Zoladz, "How Cardi B's Off-the-Cuff Video Became a Coronavirus Anthem," *The New York times*, 17 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/arts/music/coronavirus-cardi-b.html>; Gwen Aviles, "Meet the DJ behind Card B's chart-topping coronavirus hit," *NBC News*, 16 March 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/meet-dj-behind-cardi-b-s-chart-topping-coronavirus-hit-n1162901>; Jody Rosen, "Pandemic Pop: At home and around the world, dark-humored new songs about coronavirus go viral," *The L.A. Times*, 20 March 2020 <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-03-20/cardi-b-coronavirus-dj-imarkkeyz-pandemic-pop>

very real fear. Cardi B posted her original video to Instagram on March 11, 2020, during the early days of the virus's spread in the United States, and the video clearly demonstrated the anxiety and terror she felt at the time. That fear is preserved in iMarkkeyz's remix, and the scariness of a deadly virus rapidly spreading comes through. The speed of the virus's spread is paralleled by the pace of the song. These lyrics play over a 168 beats-per-minute percussive track, with a syncopated bass line and a chorus of "hey"s played on the 2 and 4 beat, creating a fast-paced forward-moving rhythm. This beat breaks occasionally, with all percussion and instrumentation cutting out for a beat or two to allow a cough to rhythmically fill the space, introducing the sonic aesthetics of sickness into the composition of the track. The listener quite literally hears sickness moving quickly.

But there is a distinct element of humor to the remix as well. Cardi B's vocal delivery pairs her fear with an amusingly energetic intonation, and the phrase "shit is getting real!" creates a humorous juxtaposition of deadly serious pandemic discussed through informal slang. But the most significant humorous factor comes through the accompanying music video. iMarkkeyz released the remix first on Instagram, which is a primarily visual social media platform (as opposed to TikTok, SoundCloud, or YouTube, more audio-focused platforms that tend to be favored by musicians releasing musical content). On Instagram, the track could not be released just as a recorded music single; it needed a visual component. And so iMarkkeyz cut together a collection of footage to accompany a one-minute version of the song, featuring famous celebrities and fictional characters dancing in sync to the beat. These characters included Donald Glover as Childish Gambino (from the music video to his single "This is America"), Elmo (the ticklish red puppet from *Sesame Street*), Beyonce, a crowd of Black men and women dancing in a neighborhood parking lot, fans dancing at a music concert, a group of dancing

people wearing Michael Meyers masks (of the *Halloween* variety, not the *Austin Powers* variety), Bugs Bunny, and more.

I suggest that this video was critical to the song's success, and ultimately came to inform the approach many of the young aspiring amateur artists took in the creation of their own pandemic pop songs, as well as many of the broader trends of pandemic pop itself. Social media content lives and dies by user interactivity – likes, hearts, shares, re-tweets, re-posts, re-creations, etc. And contemporary social media content in particular thrives off of the latter half of those activities – shared posts and re-creations of a video allow trends to travel further and faster than mere liking does. And iMarkkeyz's "Coronavirus (Remix)" video was primed for just that. Featuring famous modern superstars like Beyonce and Childish Gambino along with well-known and nostalgically beloved childhood characters like Elmo and Bugs Bunny made the video incredibly internet-friendly. Cardi B's original post had already gone viral just a few days prior to the remix, and the video presented a highly entertaining, fun, and catchy contribution to the online activity surrounding Cardi B's post. It was primed for high-volume sharing. Furthermore, it also invited, even encouraged users to re-create the video, which is exactly what happened. From everyday social media users to pop superstars like Miley Cyrus, posting one's own dance to the remix on TikTok started trending. Through shares and re-creations, "Coronavirus (Remix)" went even more viral than the original Cardi B Instagram post. And the video of dancing characters that accompanied the remix was absolutely vital to that virality.

As I argue above, this is what inspired many of the amateur artists. One of the key motivating factors driving the creation of original pandemic pop by amateur artists was a desire to go viral and achieve widespread internet fame. iMarkkeyz provided a blueprint for how to do that. He successfully re-created what I earlier referred to as the "Lil Nas X Factor." Just like Lil

Nas X astutely identified a growing meme trend (The Yeehaw Agenda) on the precipice of peak virality and quickly released a short, catchy, humorous, internet-friendly song that would enable the trend to grow in new ways and encourage users to post and re-post the song, iMarkkeyz similarly saw opportunity in a piece of viral content (more so the Cardi B video than the coronavirus itself), quickly seized on that moment and added something new to the online activity surrounding it that encouraged widespread sharing and re-posting of the song. This is exactly what artists like Lil Nix, Gmac Cash, and Psychs wanted to do, and iMarkkeyz had shown them exactly how to do it. As such, the use of repetitive and simplistic yet catchy choruses, fast-paced beats, the sonic aesthetic of sickness, and both humor and horror came to characterize the bulk of this sub-genre of pandemic pop (original music by amateur artists). But as becomes even more apparent in the final sub-genre, that merging of humor and horror marks much of the overall body of pandemic pop music.

Repurposings

Finally, the last substantial sub-genre of pandemic pop is the body of popular songs that had already existed before the pandemic but that took on new meanings in the way they were used during COVID-19: repurposings. While old songs (and by “songs,” here, I specifically mean recorded songs, not performed songs) took on new meaning relative to the coronavirus in a variety of ways, particularly on social media, the primary framework I’m interested in studying here is their representation on playlists. Earlier, I mentioned in my discussion of crisis music relative to COVID-19 (as musical activities distinct from pandemic pop) that communal playlist-creation was one of many ways in which musical activity thrived during the pandemic. While I there focused on the act of playlist-creation, I here turn my attention to the artifact of playlists

themselves. This is because playlists essentially do the work that I've been doing in selecting which songs to represent each of the respective other sub-genres of pandemic pop: they present a curated list of songs that are exemplars of the subject (be it a genre, a mood, an experience, a musical style, or a number of other things) the playlist is about. On the major music-streaming platforms – Spotify and Apple Music – playlists are created and shared by a number of actors: users, algorithms, and employed playlist curators. And during COVID-19, a great number of playlists were generated about the pandemic specifically. Apple Music had a number of playlists generated by users that were built around key terms like “Pandemic Pop,” “Quarantine,” and “Coronavirus”; Playlists generated by the platform itself such as “Quarantine Prom,” curated specifically for a socially distanced, digitally-staged prom in a year when “IRL prom is cancelled,” and “Social Distancing Social Club,” curated specifically for kids; playlists curated by other businesses, such as Craft Recordings’ “Quarantine Blues” and “Rage Against the Quarantine,” Virgin Hotels’ “Quarantine Dance Machine”; and playlists curated by celebrities as part of Apple’s “At Home With” series, such as “At Home With Billy Porter” and “At Home with Anderson .Paak.” Spotify similarly had user-generated playlists, such as “The Sound of the Virus,” “Apocalypse Radio – end of the world playlist”; Business-generated playlists such as The Times and the Sunday Times’ “Coronavirus Self-Isolation Playlist” and The Late Show with Stephen Colbert’s “Now That’s What I Call Quarantine Music!”; Spotify-generated playlists, such as “Social Distancing Mix”; and label-generated playlists/compilations, such as Burning Girl Productions’ “Pandemic Pop – The Ultimate Corona Playlist.” This last playlist is worth noting for the thumbnail alone:



Figure 7: Pandemic Pop – The Ultimate Corona Playlist, Burning Girl Productions via Spotify

In the image, a pale woman, whose face is covered in grotesque welts and whose eyes are wide and sunken, reaches toward the viewer with blood-covered hands, evoking iconic imagery of film zombies, a horror trope often associated with disease outbreaks, epidemics, and virality. The camp-horror aesthetic is further played up with the neon-toxic-green font of “Pandemic Pop” wiggling across the thumbnail and blood splatters staining the letters and the woman’s

clothes. The visual rhetoric of the playlist thumbnail not only suggest a comparison of COVID-19 to a zombie outbreak and emphasize aesthetics of sickness, it also underlines two common motifs audible across much of the pandemic pop music discussed so far. First, the horror imagery gives a face (and a film genre association) to the fear, anxiety, and paranoia expressed in many songs. But second, that horror imagery is of a distinctly camp sub-genre. The artistic style of the image is pure pulp, and the zombie-esque woman is more at home within the lexicon of classic yet now-campy Universal monsters like Dracula and The Creature from the Black Lagoon than she is within the halls of contemporary horror icons like demons of James Wan's *Conjuring* films or any of A24's steady gallery of nightmare fuel. This distinctly campy dimension of the horror imagery also visualizes another trend across much pandemic pop music: the use of humor. Humor and horror have often complimented each other in film, they are a common pair in pandemic pop music, and they are partnered in this playlist cover.

While the compilation cover thumbnail boasts the inclusion of well-known pop hits, like U2's "With or Without You," R.E.M.'s "Everybody Hurts," Simon & Garfunkel's "Sound of Silence," and Blue Oyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper," all of the recordings are covers by other artists (for example, The Previews, The NoReasons, Mary Travers, and Alixandrea Corvyn, respectively, all artists on the Burning Girl label). While covers of popular songs technically fit under my "re-recordings" sub-genre of pandemic pop, this Pandemic Pop playlist itself is still useful for helping to identify the types of already-existing songs being repurposed within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus still supports the analysis of these songs (both by their original artists and their cover artists) as pandemic pop, particular considering many of these songs appear on other playlists as well.

From the plethora of playlists across Spotify and Apple Music, I primarily looked for those which received the most likes and streams by users to identify which playlists to use as exemplars. From there, I took note of the songs that appeared most commonly across multiple playlists. These songs broke down into four main categories: songs about being lonely (such as Simon & Garfunkel’s “Sound of Silence,” Elvis Presley’s “Are You Lonesome Tonight?,” and Roy Orbison’s “Only the Lonely”); songs about how crazy the world is right now (e.g., “Mad World” by Tears for Fears, “This Year” by The Mountain Goats, and “Life During Wartime” by The Talking Heads); songs about hope and optimism (“Don’t Worry Be Happy” by Bobby McFerrin, “Three Little Birds” by Bob Marley & The Wailers, “Bright Side of the Road” by Van Morrison); and songs that are in some way humorous through the context of being “about” COVID-19. This last category was by far the largest and itself contained many identifiable sub-categories, such as songs about loneliness in a melodramatic or otherwise funny way (“Everybody Hurts” by R.E.M., “Dancing With Myself” by Billy Idol, “All By Myself” by Celine Dion), songs that suggest a morbid sense of humor (“Don’t Fear the Reaper” by Blue Oyster Cult, “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)” by R.E.M., “Take My Breath Away” by Berlin), and songs with punny titles about sickness and/or health practices (“I’ve Got You Under My Skin” by Frank Sinatra, “U Can’t Touch This” by MC Hammer, “Don’t Stand So Close to Me” by The Police).

These common playlist tracks not only mirror many of the lyrical and musical trends apparent in other sub-genres of pandemic pop, they also align with the broader functions of music during the pandemic identified by researchers earlier in this chapter: to help manage mood. While mood-maintenance has been a well-documented function of playlists in the music streaming era long before COVID-19, the daily use of music to help control, ease, or express

moods and emotions increased during the pandemic, a trend these playlists reflect. Be it the goal of lifting spirits and improving mood, the cathartic embrace and expression of sadness and loneliness, or the coping mechanisms afforded by humor, the different types of songs present on pandemic pop playlists all seemed to represent some degree of mood maintenance.

Conclusion

So with a clear understanding of the history, growth, function of the various sub-genres of pandemic pop, I return to the question: what does it mean for crisis to function as genre? How does the narrative form of crisis impact public understanding of genre, and vice versa? Put another way, how does crisis, as the central unifying factor of this body of music, complicate understandings of what genre is and how it is defined? I return to both Roitman's work on crisis and musicology scholarship on genre cultures and history to answer these questions.

As detailed in the introduction, a musical "genre culture" is "the complex intersection and interplay between commercial organizational structures and promotional labels; the activities of fans, listeners and audiences; networks of musicians; and historical legacies that come to us within broader social formations."¹⁶⁵ Negus's understanding of genre as collectively creative foregrounds the roles that a variety of forces play in the formation of a genre, from the industry to fans to musicians to social history. And certainly, those forces are visibly at work in the formation of pandemic pop as a distinct body of music. The existence of "pandemic pop" playlists on streaming platforms and the use of the term in popular music publications like *Billboard* illustrate how the industry has been involved in the construction of the category; the further creation of even more playlists by users of streaming platforms and use of the term across

¹⁶⁵ Negus, *Music Genre and Corporate Cultures*, p. 29-30.

social media reveal the codification of “pandemic pop” as a body of music by fans; the creation of new music by professional and amateur artists alike to perform specific, intentional functions distinct from previously existing musical trends highlights how the activities of music-creators have been foundational in the rise of pandemic pop; and COVID-19 itself, the experiences necessitated by it (such as social distancing, quarantines, and lock downs), and the broader history of national and global health crises and musical responses to them all establish the role of social and historical context in the formation of genre.

But considering Roitman’s work on crisis as a narrative form that enables and forecloses certain narrative possibilities, there seems to be another force at work in this complex intersection of genre culture that is not explicitly noted in Negus’s definition. A generous interpretation of Negus’s meaning of “broader social formations” could well include contextual elements like crisis; indeed, I even note it as such in the paragraph above. And “the activities of fans, listeners and audiences” certainly includes the discourse generated by these actors. But what neither of these clauses recognize is the rhetorical power of narrative. For Roitman, crisis is not simply a historical event that contextualizes social activity; it is a concept that has semantic and narrative power. Crisis is not a naturally-existing/occurring thing that has power over human understanding of an event or experience by its very existence. Rather, it is a human-created idea, and its power comes from its rhetorical use, which creates narrative forms that help to guide and frame our understanding of the thing that we name to be a/in “crisis.”

This is where I seek to expand upon Negus’s definition. Negus’s definition of genre culture is rooted in social activities: genre is produced by different communities of people and social histories. But as Roitman’s work and the example of pandemic pop illustrate, to that understanding we must add discursive activities. The rhetorical, semantic, and narrative

functions of crisis as a concept drive the formation of crisis music broadly and pandemic pop specifically. While “the activities of fans, critics, music creators, and industry forces” that Negus examines could be seen to include discourse generated by these communities, his understanding of these activities’ impact on the formation of genre is nonetheless framed through a more sociological approach. His very term is genre *culture*, not genre *discourse* or genre *narrative*. Furthermore, what I suggest is not that Negus’s definition is exclusive of such rhetorical, discursive, or narrative activities, but rather, that they should be more strongly emphasized within this understanding of genre, not merely as dimensions that fall under the purview of social activities, but as shaping forces of genre within their own right.

During COVID-19, the language used to describe, make sense of, make light of, and navigate the unprecedented experience of living through a global pandemic in the age of the internet was extremely powerful in enabling specific narrative forms. Roitman argues “when crisis is posited as the very condition of contemporary situations, certain questions become possible while others are foreclosed.”¹⁶⁶ What she means is that our very understanding, or the possible understandings, of a situation is/are constituted by that situation’s framing as a crisis, that in naming a situation a “crisis,” certain narrative truths and un-truths are immediately made possible and impossible. Such narrative truths about a situation being a/in “crisis” include a deviation from times of “normalcy,” certain events or conditions being responsible for that disruption, and certain events or conditions being necessary for a recovery from the crisis. The specifics of these narrative possibilities indeed change from crisis to crisis, but the overarching contours remain the same. Crisis is an unsustainable and detrimental deviation from the normal, and narratively, there must be a cause for that deviation and there must be an attempt to return to

¹⁶⁶ Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, p. 41.

normal, as the crisis was not always so and remaining in it is not viable. So what bearing does this have on pandemic pop? I first offer a few words on how Roitman's work on crisis can be useful in the understanding of genre formation before turning to the specific example of pandemic pop and how crisis as a narrative form shapes the musical discourse that arises from it.

I suggest that Roitman's focus on narrative possibility is an important consideration in understanding genre formation. As I have mentioned before, Roitman does not seek to define crisis, but rather, looks to where instances of the term "crisis" are popularly invoked in order to draw conclusions about what narrative work the term does, which bears similarity to how many music scholars approach genre: not as a definable pre-existing entity or thing, but as a semantic, naming technique that enables certain understandings about a body of music. And yet, while this attention to genre as a naming practice is detailed in some scholars' work, the explicit narrative dimension of Roitman's work is still absent from much discussion of genre. When a piece of music is declared to be "country" or "hip-hop" or "pop," certain narrative possibilities about the song and the artist, genuine or not, are opened and closed to certain communities.

Let's return to the example of "Old Town Road." When considering genre as a narrative form (in the way that Roitman considers crisis a narrative form), to name "Old Town Road" as "country" immediately enables and forecloses specific narrative possibilities for both the song and Lil Nas X. For Billboard, the narrative form "country" means a certain set of rules pertaining to identity, specifically along racial lines and aesthetic codes of whiteness. But Lil Nas X did not meet those rules. The narrative demands of "country" were not met, and so it was ruled that the song and the musician must not be country. I discussed in the last chapter how this song led to a break down in genre, as it meant different things to the different actors Negus names as constitutive in a genre formation. The industry, fans, and musicians were at an impasse, fighting

over a genre's meaning rather than collectively creating it together, throwing the genre into crisis. What is further evidenced through "Old Town Road" is that genre takes on a narrative and discursive dimension, although the specifics of it may well be different to its different participants. To be a specific genre means that a piece of music must be X and must not be Y. That is what it means to see genre as a narrative form. But as "Old Town Road" demonstrates, the narrative meaning of a genre can be greatly contested, and in those moments, the entire foundation of the genre can be thrown into crisis.

So with the specific example of pandemic pop, what are the narrative forms that are made possible and impossible? From the music I have outlined above, there seem to be two main narrative forms at work within pandemic pop. The first of these indeed follows similarly along the lines of the crisis narrative evident in Roitman's work: a deviation from and drive to return to normalcy. This is the narrative enabled by much of the hopeful, optimistic, things-will-get-better pandemic pop music. From the professional artists releasing original songs to lift spirits and raise money to the playlists created to help manage mood during stressful times, the overarching narrative privileged is the return to normal. The other primary narrative evident within pandemic pop is much more complex. This is the narrative that arises out of the darker side of pandemic pop, the amateur artists attempting to go viral, the playlists built on morbid humor, the songs about fear and paranoia and anxiety. Interestingly, many of these songs eschew the framework of "crisis" and instead adopt the rhetoric of apocalypse. From playlists using titles like "The End of the World" to lyrics repeating phrases like "We all gonna die from a flu," the narrative from this corner of pandemic pop does not privilege the "return to normalcy" that the crisis form enables, as there can be no return to normal: this is it. This is the end of days. Whereas the crisis narrative enables a sense of encouragement and optimism, because with a crisis, there is a return to

normal, and thus there is reason to be hopeful, within the end of the world narrative, no such return is possible, and thus no such hope is reasonable. Rather, the options are to give into fear of death, or to go out laughing. The crisis narrative of one half of pandemic pop enables hope, but the end of the world narrative only enables fear and dark humor.

So what does it mean to see crisis-as-genre? It means recognizing that there is a narrative dimension to genre, not just a social one. It means accepting that that narrative dimension makes genre even messier and stickier and harder to nail down, and will itself likely mean that genre gets thrown into crisis even more often. But it also enables another way of studying genre. Be it crisis, the end of the world, or any other number of narrative forms, this discursive level of genre grants yet one more lens through which to study how a body of music comes into formation. This lens is not focused on economic and market forces that drive industrial influence over genre; it is not focused on artistic objectives that drive musicians' creation over genre; it is not focused on cultural histories and practices that drive social forces' impact upon genre; and it is not focused on the community formation that drives consumers' influence on genre. This discursive, narrative lens is focused on the stories that are rhetorically constructed and give shape to what a genre is and is not. None of these lenses are fully sufficient for understanding genre alone – they all privilege certain ways of reading genre and contain their own blind spots. But by stacking these lenses on top of each other and looking through them all at once, a more holistic view of genre formation comes into focus. As detailed throughout this chapter, pandemic pop was generated from within a great variety of musical corners: professional artists, amateur artists, internet-age remix DJs, hip-hop, country, pop, social media users, streaming platform users, fans, etc., and they all participated within their own already-existing genres while also contributing to the creation of a new one in pandemic pop. With the tool of another lens through which to study

genre – the narrative form – it can be just a little bit easier tracing and understanding how this messy, complicated, inter-genre body of music came to be.

CHAPTER THREE

GENRE/CRISIS: “LOSE YO JOB,” BLACK LIVES MATTER,
AND A CRISIS FOR WHOM?

In early 2020, Johnniqua Charles was detained by a security officer outside of a strip club in South Carolina. The security guard, Julius Locklear, later told news outlets that he had detained Charles for trespassing after he had twice asked her to leave.¹⁶⁷ But Johnniqua maintained she was simply trying to get back into the club after it had closed because she left her purse there. An argument commenced between the two, and as Johnniqua told *Buzzfeed News*, “I told him to suck my dick, and that is the moment he basically put the handcuffs on me and tussled with me a little bit.”¹⁶⁸ As Locklear detained Johnniqua, he had a colleague film the incident because his body camera was not working, and as she was being filmed, Johnniqua began to perform an impromptu song: “You about to lose yo job! You about to lose yo job!”, pausing to tell the filming onlooker, “get this dance.”¹⁶⁹ In the video, Locklear visibly tries to restrain a smirk and looks away from the camera while he waits with Johnniqua for law enforcement to arrive.

¹⁶⁷ Julia Reinstein, “The Woman in the “Lose Yo Job” Video Told Us How It Changed Her Life,” *Buzzfeed News*, June 8, 2020. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/juliareinstein/lose-yo-job-viral-video-woman-johnniqua-charles>.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ “Johnniqua Charles: You about to lose yo job, black lives Matter,” YouTube video, 0:50, posted by “MyDream MyLife,” June 9, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqPWeOserYw>.

Deputies did eventually arrive on the scene, but Johnniqua was ultimately let go due to the fact that, as she explains, “He didn’t have anything to charge me with.”¹⁷⁰ While the date of the recording is uncertain, the video was first posted to Facebook on February 5th, by none other than Locklear himself. The caption to the video noted, “Okay, “IM NOT POSTING THIS TO BE FUNNY TOWARDS THIS SUBJECT”!!!! I’m posting it cause that rap was lit 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔 like I wish I could put a beat to it lol.”¹⁷¹

The post received over 1,000 reactions and over 500 shares, but it wasn’t until a few months later in the wake of nationwide protests surrounding George Floyd’s murder at the hands of police in Minneapolis that the recording of Johnniqua went viral. The video received hundreds of thousands of views across Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. #YouAbouttoLoseYoJob started trending on Twitter. A Lose Yo Job dance challenge started taking off across Instagram and TikTok, and recreations of the original video started appearing across multiple platforms. Furthermore, the display of humor and resiliency in spite of being physically restrained combined with the frankness and catchiness of the phrase “Lose yo job” proved to be well-suited for the political moment of national social unrest. “Lose yo job” appeared in the form of chants, sign slogans, and dances at protests across the country, and *The Atlantic* declared the song the “defining anthem” of the Defund the Police movement.¹⁷²

Then, on June 3rd, DJ Suede the Remix God and DJ iMarkkeyz released a remix of Johnniqua’s impromptu song looped to a trap rhythm. The accompanying music video featured

¹⁷⁰ Reinstein, Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Julius Locklear, “Okay, IM NOT POSTING THIS TO BE FUNNY TOWARD THIS SUBJECT!!!!” Facebook, February 5, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/julius.locklear.7927/posts/197076461488191>.

¹⁷² Spencer Kornhaber, “Defund the Police Gets Its Anthem,” *The Atlantic*, June 9, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/06/lose-yo-job-perfect-protest-song-today/612844/>.

much of the same footage of various people and characters dancing, from Donald Glover to Beyonce to Elmo to Bugs Bunny, that iMarkkeyz's "Coronavirus (Remix)" had used just a few months prior.¹⁷³ In fact, as I discuss later in this chapter, the "Lose Yo Job" remix had almost the exact same music video as the "Coronavirus" remix did, and was incredibly similar musically as well. Both DJs had previously and have since had success releasing trap remixes of viral videos, including DJ Suede's remix of "Cash me outside," in which a troubled teenager on *Doctor Phil* challenged the audience to a fight¹⁷⁴; DJ iMarkkeyz's remix of Cardi B's viral Coronavirus rant; and another collaboration by the two, a remix of the moment in the 2020 Vice Presidential debate when Mike Pence interrupted Kamala Harris, who calmly responded "Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking." The "Lose Yo Job" remix was released at the height of the original video's virality, and then grew it even more. The music video was shared across social media millions of times over. TikTok and Instagram dances were now recorded to the remix. Protestors across the country started blasting the remix instead of just chanting the phrase.¹⁷⁵ In the wake of the 2020 presidential election, another video of the remix went viral, featuring footage of various democratic party leaders dancing in celebration of Trump losing his job, including Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Barack and Michelle Obama, John Lewis, and Bernie Sanders.¹⁷⁶ It was shared across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook to the tune of millions of views, likes, and

¹⁷³ "iMarkkeyz x DJ Suede The Remix God – Lose Yo Job [IG VideoVersion]," YouTube video, 1:26, posted by "iMarkkeyz #ThisIsKeezy," June 4, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=800Jpb5zWo>.

¹⁷⁴ Interestingly, the white teenager, Danielle Bregoli, began a rap career after her remix went viral, taking up the stage name Bhad Bhabie. Her posts on Instagram and other social media platforms as "Bhad Bhabie" were soon met with much criticism, as she was accused of blackfishing – the darkening of one's skin in order to appear Black – and cultural appropriation: Natasha Jokic, "Bhad Bhabie Looks Very Different in Her New Instagram Posts, and People are Accusing Her of Blackfishing," *Buzzfeed*, April 6, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ "You About to lose your job (during protest)," YouTube video, 0:15, posted by "High 2shine," June 11, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtFQ1x3jyQ8>.

¹⁷⁶ Teri in New York (@terinewyork), "We just have one last thing to say to Trump..." Twitter, November 6, 2020. <https://twitter.com/terinewyork/status/1324738648970010627>.

shares. The video was even recreated on *Saturday Night Live*, when Jim Carey as Joe Biden and Maya Rudolph as Kamala Harris danced to the remix during an acceptance speech. For the entire second half of 2020, “Lose Yo Job” saturated pop culture and the social consciousness. It was everywhere.

But where was Johnniqua Charles in all of this? The original video recording of her went viral, and not quite in the way that many video recordings of Black people being detained, harassed, or violently attacked by law enforcement go viral – as damning and haunting evidence of an institution that systematically brutalizes racialized bodies – but rather, as an image of joyful, playful defiance of state-sanctioned violence. Her impromptu song was turned into a remix that was front-page viral internet content for months, a highly-downloaded and streamed music single, and a mainstay feature of Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police protests across the country in the summer that they reached their most widespread. One of the primary focuses of the Black Lives Matter movement is racialized police brutality, which is itself a crisis that is both particular and systemic, as it has existed in America for as long as police have existed. And it has been the release and subsequent virality of videos of police brutalizing or murdering Black and Brown people (almost always taken by onlookers rather than police body cameras) that has often fueled the movement and protests across the country. The original “Lose Yo Job” recording was yet another video in this lineage and represented the exact type of experience that Black Lives Matter seeks to challenge. This situation squarely within the context of Black Lives Matter and the subsequent function as a sort of anthem for the movement indelibly ties “Lose Yo Job” and BLM together.

While DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz clearly enjoyed having a hit on their hands that even cracked onto Billboard while being played at BLM protests across the country, Johnniqua

Charles did not get to enjoy the same type of financial success. DJs iMarkkeyz and Suede are on the copyright to the remix, as are their given names, Brandon Markell Davidson and Keenan Webb, respectively, along with producers Dion Norman, pseudonym Devious, and Derrick Ordogne, pseudonym Mellow Fellow.¹⁷⁷ But Johnniqua received no credit on the copyright, and no legal financial compensation. And she sure could have used it.

Prior to the original video and subsequent remix going viral, Johnniqua was homeless, battling a drug addiction, doing sex work to stay afloat, and hadn't spoken to her family in years, who were taking care of her three-year-old son.¹⁷⁸ When her sister, Andrea, saw that Johnniqua had gone viral, she realized there might be an opportunity to use that fame to get her some help. She created an Instagram and a GoFundMe campaign in order to get Johnniqua off the streets and provide her with rehabilitative care that raised over \$55,000.¹⁷⁹ Johnniqua was reunited with her family and son and told multiple news outlets that her viral video was exactly the breakthrough she needed. As she told *HuffPost*, "...it's been a breakthrough for me in my addiction, no one understands how much this is changing my life in a lot of ways, emotionally and mentally. Knowing I can take care of my son – I have before – but I haven't always been the mother I can be, and now I can be."¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ "Lose Yo Job," Public Catalog United States Copyright Office, June 8, 2020. https://cocatalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?Search_Arg=lose+yo+job&Search_Code=TALL&PID=0ezA48SsKcxDmfXK5yJiK3oHM8ZLw&SEQ=20201119103714&CNT=25&HIST=1

¹⁷⁸ Reinstein, *Ibid*.

¹⁷⁹ "Johnniqua Charles "Lose Yo Job,"" GoFundMe, June 6, 2020. <https://www.gofundme.com/f/johnniqua-charles-quotlose-yo-jobquot>.

¹⁸⁰ Jamie Feldman, "A Video of Johnniqua Charles Being Detained Went Viral. She Wants Cops To Learn From It," *HuffPost*, June 19, 2020. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/johnniqua-charles-you-about-to-lose-your-job_n_5eeb68dbc5b645146c2363bd.

But while the GoFundMe campaign helped Johnniqua out of her immediate situation at the time, the disparity between the popularity of the remix and her (nonexistent) payout from it only continued to grow. The 2020 presidential election video saw streams of the “Lose Yo Job” remix increase by 586%, growing DJs Suede’s and iMarkkeyz’s single,¹⁸¹ but Johnniqua struggled to make anything come of her viral fame. As she told the *Atlanta Black Star* in November 2020, “I have been in control of nothing that’s been going on with ‘Lose Yo’ Job’ over the last past three or four, maybe five months, that’s why the world has seen nothing.”¹⁸² She explained how her sister Andrea, who created the instagram and GoFundMe, was acting as her manager, but that the two had since had a falling out. Andrea allegedly locked Johnniqua out of the Instagram account, which had amassed over 55,000 followers. In a July, 2021 interview with *The Washington Post*, Charles was doing well – she was off the streets, had regained custody of her son, was pregnant with another child with a fiancé, and was healthy and had put her addictions behind her.¹⁸³ But she still was not being officially compensated in any way for the profits of her song.

Johnniqua Charles’s relationship to the remix of her song is messy and complicated. The remix’s relationship to the Black Lives Matter movement and the public discourse surrounding police brutality is messy and complicated. Accordingly, this chapter is messy and complicated, as it applies the concept of crisis music to these relationships. Whereas Chapter One considered a

¹⁸¹ Kayla Reefer, “YG’s ‘FDT’ up 475% in Streams After Joe Biden’s Election Victory,” *Billboard*, November 9, 2020. <https://www.billboard.com/amp/articles/business/chart-beat/9481015/yg-fdt-streams-joe-biden-election-victory>.

¹⁸² Ashley Williams, “‘You About to Lose Yo’ Job’ Creator Says Life Has Been a Roller Coaster Since Going Viral,” *Atlanta Black Star*, November 7, 2020. <https://atlantablackstar.com/2020/11/07/mmj-you-about-to-lose-yo-job-creator-says-life-has-been-a-roller-coaster-since-going-viral/>.

¹⁸³ Piper Kerman, “The Voice in the Viral Video,” *The Washington Post Magazine*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2021/07/22/johnniqua-charles-biden-victory-meme/>

contemporary case study of a genre being thrown into crisis, and Chapter Two considered crisis as the organizing principle in the creation of a new genre, the relationship between crisis and music genre is not so neat in this case study. Some similarities are apparent: the primary form of “Lose Yo Job” that has been so popular – the remix – represents an interesting manner of genre-being-in-crisis. The song itself, as originally performed by a homeless, drug-addicted Black woman being handcuffed and detained, was quite literally born in a moment of crisis, again representing an instance of crisis as the organizing principle of a piece of music. These types of relationships between genre and crisis that drove chapters one and two also inform this chapter, and as I shall elaborate upon later, the insights of this case study complicate these relations and ideas as well.

There are also significant differences between this case study and the others. While “Old Town Road” threw the specific genre of country into crisis because of its transgressions against racist identity politics and the threat to the music industry’s control over them, the form of the remix has been steadily challenging notions of what a genre in a broader sense even is for a long time. And whereas the organizing crisis of Pandemic Pop was the COVID-19 coronavirus, a global pandemic, the crisis at the heart of “Lose Yo Job” is at once deeply personal and situational, and representative of the widespread crisis of racialized police brutality experienced by so many. Additionally, other factors complicate the relationship between crisis and genre in the case of “Lose Yo Job”: there are various different spheres of ownership over the song bumping against each other; and the remix of the original video recording of Charles’s detainment is at once representative of the problematic history of meme-ifying Black distress while also challenging the troubling trend. There is a lot going on here that makes it difficult to structure this case study into an easily digestible narrative.

Chapter One examined genre-in-crisis, and Chapter Two studied crisis-as-genre. This chapter studies both of these phenomena together: genre-in-crisis is approached through a study of how broader understandings of genre writ large are challenged by competing notions of ownership and creative music-making practices like the remix, which defies traditional industrial constructions of genre; crisis-as-genre is considered through the specific example of “Lose Yo Job” being literally born in a moment of crisis for author Johnniqua Charles, establishing it as perhaps the most literal example of a “crisis song” that there is. Ultimately I consider that perhaps the two phenomena of genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre are inseparable. Studying genre through the lens of crisis and vice versa highlights the many similarities between the two conceptual categories that I detail in the introduction, as well as some important differences that I reflect upon in the conclusion. But ultimately what this chapter’s case study enables is new ways of understanding both genre and crisis. What this chapter seeks to consider is: does a genre-in-crisis always contain, at its core, a crisis-as-genre? And does a crisis-as-genre always imply a genre-in-crisis? Is it possible to have one without the other? Do these new ways of understanding genre and crisis suggest that the phenomena of genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre are always already present within each other?

Additionally, this chapter is concerned with the central question, “a crisis for whom?” The case study of Chapter One was interrogated as a crisis for the music industry, and the case study of Chapter Two abstracted crisis as a global experience being had by virtually everyone, albeit radically unevenly in terms of risk and damage. But this chapter is focused on the distinct crisis of police brutality in America, and while this crisis affects many groups of people, including Caucasians, I am primarily focused on its distinctly severe, often deadly, racially targeted impact on African American and Black citizens. Importantly, I approach this crisis not

only on the level of a large-scale crisis impacting an entire demographic, but also on the scale of an individual, personal crisis impacting one specific person. Similar to using representative anecdotes in the last chapter – exemplar songs whose trends and techniques can be said to be representative of larger bodies of music – I here take the individual personal crisis of Johnniqua Charles as representative of the crises that many Black and Brown people experience so commonly in interactions with law enforcement in America. The focus on one person affords a level of specificity and detail in the accounting of crisis that considerations of it on a large scale sometimes miss.

First, I offer further background and context. I start with Johnniqua Charles’s personal situation building up to and including the time of the recording of her detainment, establishing how she was “in crisis” when her song was created and went viral. I then detail the competing spheres of ownership and authorship associated with the various embodiments of “Lose Yo Job” across legal, popular, and social dimensions. In this section I also consider N.W.A.’s “Fuck Tha Police” (1988) and Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” (2015) as musical antecedents to “Lose Yo Job” within the context of Black protest generally and against police violence specifically, turning to work on Black sonic space, Afro-sonic dissent, and Black nation-making to draw these connections. Second, I consider the case of “Lose Yo Job” as an example of genre-in-crisis. I analyze how the remix – both of “Lose Yo Job” specifically and the broader history of the tradition of the remix – throws genre into crisis. The role of ownership and authorship becomes important in this consideration, as the crisis of who has the right to own and profit off of pieces of music (similar to the crisis of who has the right to belong to a body of music in the case of “Old Town Road”) destabilizes genre. Third, I consider “Lose Yo Job” as an example of crisis-as-genre. I connect Charles’s personal crisis to the larger historical crisis of police brutality in

America, and conceptualize music born out of and in response to experiences of racialized police violence as a crisis-genre, with the activities of movements such as Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police providing fruitful examples. Additionally, I consider the phenomenon of meme-ified Black distress – musical remixes of viral videos of Black people in moments of distress – as itself an example of crisis-as-genre, and how “Lose Yo Job” both fits into and breaks the trend. While this is something of a tangent, as it diverges from how I consider “Lose Yo Job” in relation to the case studies of chapters one and two, telling Johnniqua Charles’s story without contextualizing it thusly would feel incomplete and unjust. A discussion of the meme-ification of Black distress is necessary here. This chapter ultimately reveals that the connections between genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre are much messier and more difficult to untangle than the neatness of the previous two chapters may imply.

Who’s in crisis?

It is worth noting that for quite a while, not much was popularly known about Johnniqua Charles. The GoFundMe in the wake of the remix and her sister Andrea’s comments raised some awareness of her situation, but in 2020 – the year that the original video was recorded and went viral, the year that the remix of her song was released and charted on Billboard and became an anthem for a movement, the year that her voice was shared millions of times in celebration of Trump’s election loss and heard on national television on *Saturday Night Live* – Johnniqua Charles ostensibly was only interviewed a handful of times: by *BuzzFeed* and *People Magazine* in June, and by *The Atlanta Black Star*, a publication focused on African American perspectives and politics, in November. These interviews focused on how Charles’s life had changed in the wake of her video going viral, being remixed, and becoming an anthem for Black Lives Matter

and Trump's election loss. But they were all focused on exactly that: how her life had changed, improved, turned around, what new opportunities had opened to her, what she was focused on doing next. None of them got into the nitty gritty of where she had come from, beyond brief mentions of homelessness and addiction; none of them discussed in detail what little legal rights Charles had to the content produced from her original performance; and none of them got into the institutionalized weeds of state sanctioned violence against Black people or the myriad of other manifestations of systemic racism that contextualized Johnniqua's positionality when the video was first recorded, or after it went viral and others were profiting off of her creation. All of the interviews were framed through an optimistic, "getting back on her feet" perspective. Furthermore, as I conducted research for this chapter, it was surprisingly difficult to find any information beyond the main talking points covered in these interviews and re-printed in other publications or the pieces that covered the initial virality of the remix. And I could only find *one* article detailing where Johnniqua Charles is now and what's become of her life a few years removed from 2020, which I detail soon.

That all being said, it is vitally important to have as full a picture as possible of the woman whose voice was at the center of some of the most viral, widely-shared content of 2020. So many have listened to the "Lose Yo Job" remix, chanted the phrase at protests, heard it on television via news coverage, *Saturday Night Live*, and other outlets, and consumed, created, or shared memes based on it on the internet. But so few know much of anything about the woman behind it all and the context that constituted its first utterance. Not only is the personal crisis Johnniqua experienced representative of the crisis of police brutality that impacts, harms, and kills so many; but the subsequent use of her original creation and disregard of her authorship over it is also representative of the long history of erasure of Black artists in their appropriation.

Furthermore, given the context in which “Lose Yo Job” was first composed and performed (which I detail below), it is the most literal example of a “crisis song” that there is. Therefore, I dedicate space here telling a part of Johnniqua’s story, establishing how it is sadly not a unique one, but rather, one that is representative of many Black women across the country, and illustrating the crisis that “Lose Yo Job” was born in.

The most recent information about Charles that is publicly available is from an interview with *The Washington Post Magazine* from July 2021, and it also happens to be the most thorough and intimate look into Johnniqua’s life prior to and immediately following her viral remix.¹⁸⁴ Growing up “sheltered” in a religious household, Johnniqua struggled being away from home when she left for college in 2011, began battling depression, and was eventually persuaded into dancing at strip clubs by an older friend who worked at one. She explains in the interview, “to make myself feel comfortable with doing the dancing, I would take a drink or two.” She began using cocaine, got arrested on campus for public intoxication, and left college. After being attacked by a stranger who attempted to coerce her into the sex trade at gunpoint, she fell deeper into drug-use and eventually addiction. Cycles of depression and addiction fed into one another as she experienced more and more exploitation and endangerment by “vicious” men. Johnniqua had multiple arrests for disorderly conduct “and two short stays in jail for low-level felonies, once for burglary and once for third-degree assault.” While locked up once in the Florence County Detention Center in Effingham, a jail plagued by misconduct allegations, Jonniqua was strapped to a restraint chair and tasered.

It was shortly after Johnniqua was released from that jail that the video of her first went viral. After the “Lose Yo Job” incident first occurred, Johnniqua said “the drugs hit an all-time

¹⁸⁴ Piper Kerman, “The Voice in the Viral Video,” *The Washington Post Magazine*

low...I kept falling into depression, and it was like I never recovered from it. I would just Band-Aid over it, and the Band-Aid was slowly starting to rip off. And you know you keep using the same Band-Aid, it's never going to really stay on." Throughout her years of trauma and addiction, Johnniqua's family had tried to get her to come home to no avail. When the video went viral, they spent days searching motels near a NASCAR racetrack in Darlington where they thought she might be, and eventually found her. With the help of her family and the money raised by the GoFundMe, Johnniqua was able to start taking steps toward recovery from her addictions and "regain her sense of self."

Until recently, Johnniqua Charles has been in crisis for the majority of her adult life. She has been the victim of drug and alcohol addictions, sexual assault, gendered violence, depression, and the numerous violences of law enforcement. As Kerman argues in the *Washington Post* interview, "Johnniqua's experience with police and jails is not unique...For Black women, mass incarceration has represented an expansion of police practices and behaviors that never protected them in the first place and weren't ever designed to do so." She notes that for decades, women have been the fastest-growing segment of America's incarcerated, and that Black women in particular are more likely to be policed, arrested and punished than white women. Sarah Haley's *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* further details how law enforcement has held a significant role in controlling Black women's economic, family, and sexual lives since Emancipation.¹⁸⁵ As the work establishes, "Black women's very existence was framed in terms of "waywardness" from the social norms established for White women, no matter their behaviors and conduct."¹⁸⁶ Such "waywardness" –

¹⁸⁵ Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2016

¹⁸⁶ Piper Kerman, "The Voice in the Viral Video"

inebriation, sexual activity, defiance of white authority figures – would characterize Johnniqua’s years of addiction and sex work and homelessness, yet “waywardness” itself is not only popularly defined by law enforcement, but often exacerbated or even explicitly fueled by it as well. The policing of waywardness ignores the fact that for many, to be wayward is a necessity for survival, and that such necessity is often created by the conditions of institutionalized systemic racism. Saidiya Hartman defines waywardness as “a practice of possibility at a time when all roads, except the ones created by smashing out, are foreclosed.”¹⁸⁷ Kerman argues that the perspective of such wayward Black women is often left out of public discourse, even when their lives are at stake, and that “the voice of a woman like Johnniqua Charles – and the hundreds of thousands in similarly tough situations – is most likely to be heard only by the random chance of a well-scored video remix on social media.”¹⁸⁸

Kerman’s article further details numerous statistics on mass incarceration in America, its disproportionate effect on women of color, and its roots in racist practices and policies that stretch back to the days of slavery. The experiences of racism, incarceration, homelessness, addiction, exploitation and sexual assault that contextualized Johnniqua’s original impromptu performance of “Lose Yo Job” were not just personal struggles – they were and are national crises that impact women of color in particular. The song “Lose Yo Job” was thus born out of crisis. It is perhaps the most literal example of a “crisis song” that there is. The original recording of Johnniqua’s performance, the remix, the election video, and countless other memes and “Lose Yo Job”-based content were viewed and shared millions of times over. But how many of those views or shares recognized the crisis at the heart of the hook? Reflecting on the use of the song

¹⁸⁷ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2020.

¹⁸⁸ Piper Kerman, “The Voice in the Viral Video”

in the 2020 presidential election celebration video, Kerman notes “I couldn’t help but feel how painfully ironic it was for a criminalized Black woman’s defiant song to be the celebratory soundtrack to the ascendancy of a longtime architect of mass incarceration policies and an enthusiastic prosecutor of the same.”¹⁸⁹ But it’s not just the election video that should raise eyebrows. Julius Locklear, the security guard who detained Johnniqua, had his fifteen minutes when his post of the recording went viral. DJs Suede the Remix God and iMarkkeyz, two already successful musical artists, used the recording to create a hit single that earned them a healthy paycheck. *SNL* used that remix, featuring Johnniqua’s voice, in a nationally-televised episode. But while Johnniqua’s voice was exploited by others for profit and heard so often by so many, her name and her experience remained largely unknown. While perhaps not a professional musician, Johnniqua Charles should nonetheless still be considered as only (one of) the most recent in a long lineage of Black musical artist erasure and appropriation. From Robert Johnson to Ma Rainey to Big Mama Thornton to Otis Blackwell to Luther Dixon to Lorraine Ellison to Richard M. Jones, Black musicians’ compositions and musical stylings have long been exploited and appropriated for profit by others while their names have been erased and forgotten. The song “Lose Yo Job” became extremely well-known by many in 2020. But the name “Johnniqua Charles” did not.

Spheres of Ownership

As I have already established, while Johnniqua Charles was the beneficiary of a \$55,000 GoFundMe campaign, she has ostensibly received zero credit in any official or legal manner for the content produced from her performance. In this section I analyze different fields of

¹⁸⁹ Piper Kerman, “The Voice in the Viral Video”

ownership over “Lose Yo Job” content across legal, popular, and social spheres. While such consideration might seem tangential to a study of crisis and genre, the function of ownership is actually quite significant to both, and it has already played an important factor to the previous case studies. Billy Ray Cyrus was brought on for the “Old Town Road” remix in a move to legitimate the song’s country-ness by putting an established country star into an authorial role over the single. The song that more or less kickstarted the pandemic pop genre, “Coronavirus (Remix),” deals with issues of ownership similar to the ones studied here, although with some key differences, all of which I detail soon. And as later sections of this chapter illustrate, ownership over musical creations can play an essential role in the throwing of genre into crisis (similarly to how matters of control and power threw country into crisis in the case study of “Old Town Road”), and it is important context in studying crisis-as-genre. As power hierarchies play such a significant role in the functioning of genre and crisis, dedicating space to studying ownership is important. Thus, I offer brief definitions of legal, popular, and social ownership as well as explanations of how each were assigned in the case of “Lose Yo Job.”

Legal Ownership

The Cornell Law School defines ownership as “the legal right to use, possess, and give away a thing. Ownership can be tangible such as personal property and land, or it can be of intangible things such as intellectual property rights.”¹⁹⁰ With the case of music specifically, legal ownership is established through the possession of a copyright. As Demers explains, “the copyright holder controls the public life of a work. A copyright holder can choose how the work

¹⁹⁰ Cornell Law School, “Ownership,” 2021, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/ownership#:~:text=Ownership%20is%20the%20legal%20right,such%20as%20intellectual%20property%20rights>.

is to be published and disseminated and can charge others a fee for the right to reprint or borrow from the work.”¹⁹¹ Simply put, in the case of “Lose Yo Job,” legal ownership would be assigned to whoever holds the copyright. Viral videos are a relatively new concept within the legal framework of intellectual property rights, and the status and application of such laws to such material is often unclear. Generally speaking, when someone records a video and saves it to their own personal device, they retain ownership of the video. But when they upload the video to the internet via a platform like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, or TikTok, they consent to complex licensing agreements implicit within the user agreement signed when first joining the service.¹⁹² Such agreements typically grant the site full licensing rights, the right to sub-license and share the content with other websites, the right to re-distribute the content, and the right to profit from viewership of the video. While Julius Locklear retains ownership of the original video he recorded, the video itself is not copyrighted. But the remix created from it is.

In an interview with *Pitchfork*,¹⁹³ DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz reveal that they saw the recording of Charles as it spiked in virality in the heat of BLM protests sweeping the country in the summer. Suede explains that fans were tagging him on social media to remix the video, so he reached out iMarkkeyz, who had seen it himself already and thought it would be a timely remix, given his own participation at protests. When asked about the process of remixing “Lose Yo Job,” DJ Suede admitted “It was already a song, so we just had to sauce it up.”¹⁹⁴ He explains

¹⁹¹ Joanna Demers, *Steal This Music: How Intellectual Property Law Affects Musical Creativity*, University of Georgia Press, 2006. P. 14.

¹⁹² Jay Leonard, “Is a Viral Video Subject to Intellectual Property Law?” *Business 2 Community*, December 8 2022, <https://www.business2community.com/brandviews/avvo/viral-video-subject-intellectual-property-law-01497806#:~:text=In%20all%20likelihood%20a%20viral,media%20or%20file%2Dsharing%20platform.>

¹⁹³ Cat Zhang, “How the Viral Protest Anthem “Lose Yo Job” Came to Be,” *Pitchfork*, June 9, 2020. <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/lose-yo-job-protest-anthem-interview/>.

¹⁹⁴ Zhang, *Ibid*.

that they talked to Johnniqua and her sister Andrea “to get the business straight,” then released it as a single. What exactly “getting the business straight” entails is not discussed in the article. Andrea Charles revealed that the DJs supported the GoFundMe,¹⁹⁵ but gave no indication that Johnniqua had received any sort of official payout for the song. Suede’s own claim that “Lose Yo Job” was “already a song” indicates recognition of Johnniqua’s authorship, as well as recognition that “Lose Yo Job” the remix is the conceptual product of Johnniqua Charles, just “sauced up” (and owned) by the DJs. Despite this recognition of creative authorship, Johnniqua Charles is not listed on the copyright to the song, which is owned by Suede, iMarkkeyz, and producers Devious and Mellow Fellow.¹⁹⁶

All other “Lose Yo Job” content – like the election video, the *SNL* sketch, and various internet memes – uses either the original video or the remix. They do not possess copyrights to the song. Thus, legal ownership of “Lose Yo Job” belongs solely to the DJs and producers who created the remix. As discussed earlier, the legal status of ownership over “Lose Yo Job” is thus reflective of the history of erasure and appropriation of Black musical creativity. However, as I expound upon below, the fact that DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz are both Black artists and that they remixed “Lose Yo Job” explicitly for “Black Lives Matter,” a movement that addresses and fights the crisis of police brutality that “Lose Yo Job” was born out of, complicates this history of appropriation. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Johnniqua Charles is denied any sort of legal compensation for her creative work. But there seems to be widespread popular acknowledgement that she ought to.

¹⁹⁵ Kornhaber, Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Public Catalog United States Copyright Office, Ibid.

Popular Ownership

Ownership and authorship are distinct concepts. While ownership is a legal status of who has the right to possess and use a thing, authorship can be understood as the status of who created the thing in the first place. While a musician might write the music and lyrics to a song and thus forever be its author, if they sell the copyright, ownership belongs to another entity. I posit the term “popular ownership” as a concept somewhat in between authorship and ownership. The concept of popular ownership is based on widespread public and popular recognition of someone’s moral right to ownership based on their authorship. In other words, popular ownership occurs when a large portion of the general public recognizes that an author of a thing who has been denied legal ownership ought to own it. The author is seen as a wronged party who is the “true” owner of a thing, despite their lack of legal ownership.

While Johnniqua Charles has not been legally recognized as an owner of “Lose Yo Job” in its various forms in any financially meaningful way, public understanding of her authorial position over not just the original viral video, but the remixes and the aforementioned 2020 election celebration video as well, is strong. Across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, posts of the original video, remixes, and election video are filled with comments expressing support for Johnniqua and desire for her to receive recognition, financial and otherwise, for her creation.

This sentiment is embodied in the responses Andrea Charles received when she first started the Instagram and GoFundMe. As she told BuzzFeed back at the beginning of June, “The only reason that the GoFundMe and those platforms were created were people were begging to donate to her. Once I made her Instagram, people were flooding in saying, ‘How can I bless her? She just blessed my day so much. She just made my day.’ So the only reason it was created was

so people could bless her life.”¹⁹⁷ The mere fact that the GoFundMe raised over \$55,000 indicates widespread public support for Johnniqua and understanding of the monetary dues she is owed yet losing out on legally. And that number is likely even larger. After the GoFundMe campaign ended, the song continued to receive attention in the wake of the election and public outpouring of support for Johnniqua increased, with many sharing her Venmo account and other donation links, calling on anyone who enjoyed the song to send money to Johnniqua.

Popular recognition of Johnniqua’s ownership extends beyond financial support. Social media users also consistently commented in high numbers on her creative authorship of “Lose Yo Job,” with many noting her impressive improvisational skills, the natural sonic timbre of her voice, her inspiring and uplifting sense of humor, and her overall musical skills. Many users across Twitter and Instagram even suggested she be nominated for a Grammy. So while legal recognition of her authorship has been nonexistent, popular understanding of her authorial position and creative ownership over “Lose Yo Job” in all its forms has been much more prominent. This also complicates the history of erasure of Black artists within the appropriation of their music. In the immediate wake of the success of “Lose Yo Job,” recognition of Johnniqua’s name and authorship was not completely ignored. Although it is difficult to calculate the exact extent to which her due recognition spread, it was apparent. At least, it was for a little while. As I mentioned earlier, public information about her whereabouts dropped sharply in the years after 2020. The bulk of professional popular press covering her story focused on the life-changingly positive impact of the recording’s virality, not on her right to any sort of ownership over it. And like everything that gets spotlighted on the internet, the consumer and user-generated discourse about her – which is where the majority of calls for her rightful

¹⁹⁷ Reinstein, Ibid.

ownership over “Lose Yo Job” originated – was ultimately short-lived, and despite its intensity, did not amount to any changes in legal ownership. Thus, while the construction of popular ownership of “Lose Yo Job,” primarily built online by social media users and music consumers, temporarily challenged the history of Black artist erasure and appropriation by suggesting that perhaps Johnniqua Charles would not be so quickly forgotten, it eventually faded. Legal ownership lasts a long time, but popular ownership is not so enduring.

Social Ownership

So far I’ve discussed two fields of ownership: legal ownership, which belongs to DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz, and popular ownership, which encouragingly is granted to Johnniqua Charles. A third field of social ownership can be broadly understood as the life an artifact takes on when it leaves the hands and control (legal or otherwise) of its creators or owners. I conceive of social ownership as occurring when a thing becomes so significant and meaningful to a group or demographic of people – often in some sort of representative fashion, as if the thing personifies or embodies something about the community – that it is seen as *belonging* to them more so than just the legal owner. For example, the song “We Shall Overcome,” which admittedly has a complicated history of legal ownership, originating as a gospel folk song in the early 1900s, became so strongly associated with the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1950s and 60s, sung at protests across the nation to the point of becoming the movement’s key anthem, that there emerged a sense of social ownership over the song by the movement broadly and the people the movement represented. The song is to this day most strongly associated not with Charles Albert Tindley, the author of the hymn from which the song descended, nor with the Lucille Simmons-led tobacco workers who first sang the modern version of the song, nor with

Pete Seeger, whose organization People's Songs held the first copyright; "We Shall Overcome" is most strongly associated with no single author or owner but with a movement, and its social ownership belongs to the people who participated in and were represented by that movement.

A similar case can be made for the role of "Lose Yo Job" within the Black Lives Matter movement. There are some important differences between "We Shall Overcome" and "Lose Yo Job": the former was a folk song with no single identifiable author, but created and re-created and re-written and re-arranged and passed down by numerous different groups of people, primarily through live performance, that eventually came to be associated with subjugation in general and then the Civil Rights Movement specifically, and that arguably came to be the definitive anthem of the movement; the latter was an impromptu song performed during an active moment of crisis by a specific, singular person, remixed into a hip-hop single by two well established professional DJs with the explicit intent of it being played and sung at BLM protests, and distributed and consumed on the internet. It also, as I dig into later, turned out to be short-lived, despite its intense popularity during the summer of 2020, and became just one of many songs associated with the movement rather than its defining anthem. (There are also important differences between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement, from the specific embodiments of racism addressed to tactics used to organizational structure to communication context, but these differences are so varied and nuanced that it could take an entire additional chapter to parse through them all.) But both songs nonetheless took on significant meaning within the context of protest relative to these movements, and ownership of these songs' meaning and significance did not and does not belong to any one author.

The crisis I described earlier that contextualized Johnniqua's performance of the song – harassment by law enforcement, unjust mass incarceration, numerous other manifestations of

systemic racism, but perhaps most importantly, police brutality – is representative of the crisis Black Lives Matter seeks to address. Johnniqua has been incredibly supportive of and moved by the use of “Lose Yo Job” at protests, telling *NBC* “It’s just heartwarming to know that my song is being used for something so powerful. It’s just amazing to me. Very humbling.”¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, the remix of the recording was made specifically with BLM in mind¹⁹⁹. DJ iMarkkeyz is the nephew of Eric Garner, the 43-year-old Black man who repeated “I can’t breathe” eleven times before being killed by police in Staten Island with a chokehold. He has been a long-time supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement and felt that Johnniqua’s song could speak to the experiences had by so many others. However, the power and function of “Lose Yo Job” within the context of protest takes on a life beyond a clever impromptu song by Johnniqua Charles or a professionally produced remix of it by some DJs, and ownership over that new life and its function belongs to not just Johnniqua Charles or DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz. Here, I turn to work on Black Sonic Space, Afro-sonic dissent, and the Black Nation-Making enabled by both to situate “Lose Yo Job” within the larger context of Black Lives Matter. These paradigms help to illustrate the transformative power of “Lose Yo Job” and the socio-cultural ownership of that power.

Jessica Teague explores the possibilities of Black sonic space, an “imaginative forum for both political and social thought,” through Amiri Baraka’s 1972 album *It’s Nation Time*, which “[pried] open new sonic spaces for poetic protest – a *space* in which a new Black Nation could

¹⁹⁸ Gwen Aviles and Sarah Kaufman, “‘You About to Lose Yo Job’ Creator Talks about how the Viral Video has Changed Her Life,” *NBC News*, June 16, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/you-about-lose-yo-job-creator-talks-about-how-viral-n1231117>.

¹⁹⁹ Zhang, *Ibid*.

be born.”²⁰⁰ Her work uses *It’s Nation Time* as a case study of how Black nation-making can occur through music, not just through lyrics and genre sounds, but through format and material strategies as well. For example, Teague notes how sound mixing and levels are used to create a sense of distance for the listener – African drums and other traditional instrumentation and singing feel farther away in the mix through manipulation of volume and resonance, while more contemporary sounds and voices, like R&B stylings and keyboards, sound closer, creating an association between sound and geography. Through such techniques, *It’s Nation Time* is able to construct sonic landscapes that construct a space for Black nationhood and freedom. While Johnniqua Charles’s original performance of “Lose Yo Job” may not have been performed with Black nation-making in mind, the remix certainly was. As established, both DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz produced the remix explicitly for the Black Lives Matter movement, releasing the single to show support for the movement by musically voicing the sentiments of so many across the country, and in the process creating a sonic space for Black nationhood and freedom.

Considerations of Black sonic space and the Black Nation-making it enables complicates understanding of LYJ’s ownership. Sure, as a hit remix single, “Lose Yo Job” is legally owned by DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz. As a musical creation, “Lose Yo Job” is popularly recognized as authored by Johnniqua Charles. But as a powerful political sentiment organizing voices at Black Lives Matter rallies, as an expression of the Black experience in America, as a sonic facilitator of Black Nationhood, assigning singular ownership of it might not be so easy. Unlike many other songs played at protests, including popular hits that primarily function as humorous and entertaining (such as Ludacris’s “Move Bitch” being directed by protestors at police officers) and energetic and upbeat music used to keep energy and spirits up and synchronize marching

²⁰⁰ Jessica Teague, “Black Sonic Space and the Stereophonic Poetics of Amiri Baraka’s *It’s Nation Time*,” *Sound Studies* 1, no. 1, (2015): 22-39. P. 23.

rhythms, “Lose Yo Job” is not a pre-existing popular song re-worked to fit within the context of Black Lives Matter; rather, it is a song that originates from within the very cultural experience that Black Lives Matter seeks to address. A more fitting antecedent for it might be N.W.A.’s “Fuck Tha Police” (1988), which explicitly protests police brutality and racial profiling and became tied to the L.A. Riots in the aftermath of the Rodney King beating just a few years later, or Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright” (2015), which expresses hope amid the struggles of institutionalized racism and features depictions of police brutality in the music video, and which became an anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement itself. But unlike “Fuck Tha Police” or “Alright,” “Lose Yo Job” was not written and recorded in a studio, but in the active moment of crisis, handcuffed in the street in the middle of the night. It is not a song that merely speaks to the crises that Black and Brown people face daily; it *is* the very experience of that crisis – it was performed and recorded during an encounter with law enforcement. It is a vivid illustration of Paul Gilroy’s argument that Black music makes the past audible in the present, that it actively creates and re-creates history: as he suggests in *Small Acts*, “The contemporary musical forms of the African diaspora work within an aesthetic and political framework which demands that they ceaselessly reconstruct their own histories, folding back on themselves time and again to celebrate and validate the simple, unassailable fact of their survival.”²⁰¹ The function “Lose Yo Job” performs and the sonic space it opens up situate the song as something larger than a pop music single or a viral internet remix. Within this context, as a powerful tool for locating freedom within a sonic space, who does “Lose Yo Job” belong to?

Additionally, Daphne Brooks argues that Black women’s sonic performances and phonic expressions should be read as always already engaged in a dialectic with one another across

²⁰¹ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts*, London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993, p. 37.

space and time. As a variety of timbres, textures, grains, and other vocalities are heard as occurring simultaneously, a form of Afro-sonic dissent emerges. These Afro-sonic expressions create a noisy chatter with one another, a choir of discordant contours and nuances that create a resonant ensemble while still preserving individual voices. These kinds of ensembles in turn generate interpretative paradigms of noisiness that disrupt cultural expectations of normative Black female audibility. Brooks examines this paradigm through the example of avant-garde artist Adrienne Kennedy and singer Nina Simone. Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* was staged just one year before the recording of Simone's "Four Women." Brooks argues that these two texts are turbulently entwined with each other, giving way to a noise that interrupts, revises, and converts the hegemonically constructed discourses of "suffering" associated with Black womanhood into creative agency.²⁰² The noise that these voices create in dialect with each other "amplifies the exigencies of breaking free of how and where Black women *sound* in social space and the cultural imaginary."²⁰³ Similarly to Teague's analysis of Black nation-making, Brooks is concerned with the affordances of sonic space. But additionally, Brooks sees sonic space as stretching across time and physical space. The noise that emerges from this creates a powerful force of disruption, dissent, and agency that enables an Afro-futurist space for Black women. Brooks's work specifically focuses on Black *female* voices, as the crisis she interrogates is one of Black womanhood, the idea of Afro-sonic dissent can be studied within a slightly broader context. "Lose Yo Job" has been taken up in response to the crisis of police brutality against Black people regardless of gender, and the noisy dialect it is entangled with includes other Black

²⁰² Daphne Brooks, "Afro-Sonic Feminist Praxis: Nina Simone and Adrienne Kennedy in High Fidelity," in *Black Performance Theory*, edited by Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez. 204-222. Durham: Duke University Press. 2014.

²⁰³ Ibid, p. 212.

female voices, yes, but also Black male voices, Black nonbinary voices, and Black transgender voices. While Johnniqua Charles's voice can and should be heard as one in a choir of Afro-sonic feminist praxis, engaged with other "wayward" Black women, it can and should *also* be heard within a choir of non-gendered Afro-sonic dissent. As the crisis of police brutality at the center of this case study is one that affects all Black bodies, I choose to focus more on the latter here.

The life "Lose Yo Job" has taken on as a rallying cry at Black Lives Matter protests illustrates the creative and transformative agency of Johnniqua Charles's voice when heard in noisy chatter with these other Black voices across the country. As Brooks suggests, while the individuality of Johnniqua's voice remains, her cry of "Lose Yo Job" should be read as one voice in a choir of Black noise across time and space. Within the tradition of Afro-sonic dissent, "Lose Yo Job" must be considered as always already engaged in a dialogue with other Black voices. Brooks notes that individual voices "are both of their bodies and elsewhere, perceived as evoking through sound a kind of material thickness that is still, however, evocative of "unspeakable" histories which instead must be sung."²⁰⁴ The paradigm of Afro-sonic dissent is not meant to belittle or minimize individual voices and their unique creations, but rather, to draw attention to the possibilities of hearing these voices in concert with one another. "Lose Yo Job" and its iteration as a unifying chant/slogan/dance at Black Lives Matter protests is emblematic of Afro-sonic dissent in praxis. While Johnniqua's voice is her own, the noisy dissent in which her song is situated does not "belong" to any one person. Ownership, Brooks might suggest, isn't even the right way of thinking about it. The dialect is collectively constructed. It's not about who "owns" it, but what kind of sonic space it affords to those who participate in it.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 219.

What ownership essentially comes down to is a question of power, and as I illustrated in Chapter One's case study of "Old Town Road," when power is destabilized or challenged, the opportunity is rife for musical structures like genre to be thrown into crisis. As such, I next turn my attention to how "Lose Yo Job" represents just such an instance of genre-in-crisis, starting with a consideration of the remix (both broadly and of "Lose Yo Job" specifically) as a destabilizing force, then moving onto a consideration of how the above-detailed variances of ownership contribute to such crisis. Then I examine how "Lose Yo Job" exemplifies crisis-as-genre, through public recognition of the viral-video-cum-hip-hop-remix format, and the meme-ification of Black distress. Finally, I consider whether these two phenomena – genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre – are inseparably entangled.

Genre-in-Crisis

The Remix

Margie Borschke defines a remix as "a new arrangement, an alternative mix of a composition...it signifies a return, or a repetition of sorts. It is recursive."²⁰⁵ She explains in *This is Not a Remix* that the history of the musical practice is notoriously imprecise, but is generally agreed to have its roots in 1960s Jamaican "versions" of songs made for the dance floor. It rose to mainstream prominence during the 1970s New York City disco scene and eventually came to be associated with dance, club, and youth cultures in the 80s and 90s with the rise of house, trance, and dubstep music. Borschke notes that in popular-music and cultural studies, "this culture of unauthorized and creative use meant that dance remixes were seen to be undermining questions about authenticity, troubling notions about authorship and originality, and upending

²⁰⁵ Margie Borschke, *This is Not a Remix: Piracy, Authenticity, and Popular Music*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

our understanding of the relationship between audiences and performers of both live and recorded music.”²⁰⁶ Borschke’s work interrogates the use of the term “remix” as a metaphor for growing online and digital cultures, and its development as and signifier for “all that is new, digital, and participatory,” challenging and critiquing such notions. But her account of the meaning of the *musical* remix (which she distinguishes from the *metaphorical* remix, the concept that receives the bulk of her criticism) is helpful for understanding how songs like “Lose Yo Job” threaten musical structures like genre.

All three of my case studies have featured a remix at the center of genre/crisis: Lil Nas X remixed his own “Old Town Road,” as his then-newly-signed label Columbia Records released a version with Billy Ray Cyrus in order to support the song being recognized as country. The move functioned to at once challenge Billboard’s decision to remove the single from the Hot Country Songs chart while simultaneously attempting to appease Billboard’s understanding of what is/is not country by incorporating more “elements of today’s country music.” As discussed at length in Chapter One, the remix’s music video also playfully critiqued Billboard’s arbitrary drawing of genre lines and highlighted the similarities between country and hip-hop cultural forms. With “Coronavirus (Remix),” DJ iMarkkeyz remixed another artist by editing Cardi B’s Instagram video into a sonic loop and matching it with a beat. The song essentially kickstarted the emergence of a new genre of music, pandemic pop, and also featured a music video that blurred the lines between different cultural forms and genres, with the presence of Black hip-hop superstars like Childish Gambino and Beyonce, children’s show figures like Elmo and Bugs Bunny, horror movie icons like *Halloween*’s Michael Meyers and *Scream*’s Ghostface, 1990s sitcom characters from the show *Martin*, and crowds of citizens all dancing together. As

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

discussed in Chapter Two, many of the musical techniques and features of the “Coronavirus (Remix)” would be emulated by other amateur artists seeking viral fame. And a few months later, DJs iMarkkeyz and Suede the Remix God remixed a non-famous Black woman, with virtually the same beat and instrumentation and almost exactly the same music video. They both begin with the original clips of Cardi B and Johnniqua Charles respectively, which then get looped on top of very similar syncopated high-hat hip-hop beats with “hey!”s on the 2 and 4, hype sound effects, and the same BPM. Both videos feature the exact same shots of Childish Gambino, Elmo, Buggs Bunny, and actress Tichina Arnold dancing in the show *Martin*, and different clips of Beyonce dancing at different concerts and crowds of people dancing in streets.

All three remixes had implications for genre and crisis. “Old Town Road (Remix)” challenged and attempted to appease Billboard’s enforcement of genre lines, and public response to it presented a crisis for the country genre. “Coronavirus (Remix)” used the aesthetics of health crisis to go viral and essentially kickstart the emergence of a new genre. And, as with much of the rest of this chapter, “Lose Yo Job (Remix)” had much more complicated and messy entanglements with genre and crisis. On the one hand, the remix exploited the personal crisis of Johnniqua Charles for the personal gain of other DJs and producers. But on the other hand, the remix was created with the explicit purpose of drawing attention to the larger crisis of racism and specifically police violence that Johnniqua’s experience was emblematic of, and to support the Black Lives Matter movement that sought to combat that crisis. At the same time, the remix continued many of the trends of pandemic pop, and as it was released while COVID’s initial outbreak was still ravaging the globe and pandemic pop was still emerging as a distinct body of music, and as the crisis of racism was intrinsically linked to the way that the coronavirus impacted Black and Brown people, the song could be argued to belong to the pandemic pop

genre itself. On another other hand, the questions and concerns of ownership, authorship, originality, and lines between performer and listener that “Lose Yo Job” raised, presented the potential for a crisis for the remix-as-genre.

The Crisis of Ownership

In Chapter One’s analysis of “Old Town Road” throwing the country music genre into crisis, I argued that the catalyst for crisis was identity. Lil Nas X claimed to be a country artist without abiding the rules for Black musicians implicitly established by music industry gatekeepers like Billboard and the RIAA. The status quo that was challenged was essentially over who has the right to belong to and participate within a specific body of music. In regards to “Lose Yo Job,” I contend a similar type of catalyst exists. In this instance, the status quo that was challenged was over who has the right to own and profit off of a piece of music. Copyright holders DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz represent that status quo as the legal owners of the “Lose Yo Job” remix. But the widespread public recognition of Johnniqua Charles’s popular ownership of the song challenges that status quo, and the social ownership of the song’s significance within the context of Black Lives Matter challenges not just the current arrangement of the status quo, but the very concept of ownership behind its existence. These challenges pose the threat of throwing into crisis not a specific genre, but the very structure of the contemporary digital music industry itself. However, just like the country music genre was able to avoid crisis by permanently ousting Lil Nas X from the Billboard chart and denying him re-entry, even after he remixed “Old Town Road” with country music star Billy Ray Cyrus, in the case of “Lose Yo Job,” crisis is similarly averted. Why? Because Johnniqua Charles has largely disappeared from public discourse.

As I established earlier, very little public information is available on Johnniqua Charles beyond the slew of articles in the immediate wake of “Lose Yo Job”’s initial virality. The *Washington Post* interview I detailed indicates that, at least as of mid-2021, she was doing well – off the streets, recovering from her addictions, reunited with her son, and living with her fiancé. But beyond that, I was unable to find any information about how she is doing now. But one thing is clear: the status quo of ownership is still upheld. Johnniqua is not on the copyright to “Lose Yo Job,” she is ostensibly not receiving any sort of official payout for the song’s success or any other legal recognition of her authorship, and DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz, along with two other producers, maintain full legal ownership and control over the song. The outpouring of support for Johnniqua in the form of the GoFundMe campaign got her the help she needed to get off the streets and recover from her addictions, and the widespread popular acknowledgement of her authorship and rightful ownership of “Lose Yo Job” was an encouraging sign that the public was aware of the problematics surrounding the erasure and appropriation of Black artists. But it ultimately amounted to nothing regarding the status quo of ownership in the music industry.

Furthermore, the song’s social significance within the Black Lives Matter movement was similarly important and inspiring but ultimately short-lived. After its heavy saturation in the summer of 2020 – played and sung at protests, shared and viewed millions of times over on the internet, written about abundantly in popular press and music magazines – it just fizzled out. “Lose Yo Job” began its public life as a viral video, and then became a viral remix of an already well-known piece of viral content. And like most viral content, “Lose Yo Job” had its fifteen minutes and then people moved on to the next piece of viral content. Unlike “Old Town Road,” which was a song that went viral, “Lose Yo Job” (and “Coronavirus (Remix)”) was viral content that got turned into a song. Its song life was an extension of its viral content life, and viral

content tends to have an expiration date for its virality. So “Lose Yo Job” didn’t turn out to have the same staying power that “We Shall Overcome” or “Fuck Tha Police” or “Alright” did. While both the popular ownership and social ownership of “Lose Yo Job” presented a hypothetical threat to the stability of legal ownership – and thus, to the stability of the power structure organizing the digital music industry – neither were able to materialize fully to the point of causing a crisis.

The status of ownership over “Lose Yo Job” is unique when compared to the songs at the center of the other two chapters of this dissertation. For “Old Town Road,” Lil Nas X purchased a beat from a 19-year-old amateur Dutch producer Kiowa Roukema, known professionally as YoungKio, which sampled a banjo part from Nine Inch Nails’ “34 Ghosts IV.” Both YoungKio and Nine Inch Nails frontmen Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross are officially listed as songwriters for the track, and when the song exploded in popularity and Lil Nas X signed with Columbia Records, he renegotiated the contract for his purchase of the beat so that YoungKio would have a bigger share of the revenue, and helped him get his own contract with Universal Music.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, iMarkkeyz’s other viral remix of 2020 – the Instagram video of Cardi B sharing her concerns about COVID-19 that became “Coronavirus (Remix)” – officially lists Cardi B as a “featured artist,” although she is not on the copyright as a writer or performer.²⁰⁸ In both of these instances, recognition of authorship was given by the artists (Lil Nas X and iMarkkeyz) to the people whose original creations provided the raw material for their songs (YoungKio and Cardi B) to some degree. But Johnniqua Charles received no such legal or official recognition.

²⁰⁷ Deena Zaru, “Lil Nas X bought ‘Old Town Road’ beat for \$30: The story and the movement behind the record-breaking hit’s making,” *ABC News*, August 2, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/lil-nas-bought-town-road-beat-30-story/story?id=64511949>

²⁰⁸ ASCAP Ace Repertory, <https://www.ascap.com/repertory#/ace/search/title/Coronavirus?at=false&searchFilter=SVW&page=1>

Furthermore, the conditions of ownership surrounding these three songs illuminate the inherently exploitative and capitalist power structure of the music industry. Across all three songs (“Old Town Road,” “Coronavirus (Remix),” and “Lose Yo Job”), there was an artist (Lil Nas X, DJ iMarkkeyz, and DJ Suede the Remix God and DJ iMarkkeyz) and an author whose creation formed some basis of the song (YoungKio, Cardi B, and Johnniqua Charles). In the case of “Old Town Road,” both the artist and the author were young amateurs with no power or status in the industry. When the song took off, the artist ensured the author received a fair share of profits and helped him start his own professional career. They both saw overnight transformation from struggling amateur artist to popular music industry professional. In the case of “Coronavirus (Remix),” both the artist and the author were well-established industry professionals with comfortable careers. Although it seems that Cardi B at least considered suing for royalties, both she and iMarkkeyz pledged to donate all proceeds from the song to those suffering during the pandemic. Both continued to maintain popular and profitable careers afterwards, and although Cardi B is not on the copyright, she was still legally recognized as an artist on the song and enjoyed the increase in popularity and public attention for its success. In the case of “Lose Yo Job,” the artists were well-established popular music industry professionals, but the author was a virtually unknown homeless woman. This is the instance where the greatest degree of exploitation occurred, as the established professionals enjoyed all of the legal rights and profits while the non-established woman whose labor produced the hit single received nothing (legally).

I take this slight detour down the road of ownership for two reasons. One, as a clear dimension of power-structuring within the music industry, ownership is a force of stability and maintenance of a capitalist status quo. And as I have detailed, a challenge to power within the

music industry presents the greatest threat of crisis. Both genre and ownership are tools that uphold power hierarchy, and thus when they are thrown into crisis, what is at stake for the industry is control. Two, the specificities of ownership across “Lose Yo Job,” “Coronavirus (Remix),” and “Old Town Road” raise a vitally important question: who is in crisis? Studying genre-in-crisis (or ownership-in-crisis, or the-music-industry-at-large-in-crisis) means studying how systems of power are challenged and to what end. It means studying how an established structure can get thrown into crisis. But the flip side of this dissertation, studying crisis-as-genre, means studying how a crisis emerges as an established structure. It means studying how a shared crisis comes to organize creative expression and shape a new mode of communication. It means studying who is in crisis. In Chapter Two’s case study of pandemic pop, that “who” was virtually everyone, albeit in vastly uneven ways stemming from racial and economic inequality. But the “who” of this case study is more targeted, as the crisis that shapes the genre is one that specifically impacts Black Americans at risk of police violence.

Crisis-as-Genre

Public recognition

Much of this dissertation has been guided by the question “how does a specific body of music come to be recognized as a genre?” One of the possible answers to this question established in the literature review of the introduction is Keith Negus’s conceptualization of the “genre culture”: “the complex intersection and interplay between commercial organizational structures and promotional labels; the activities of fans, listeners and audiences; networks of musicians; and historical legacies that come to us within broader social formations.”²⁰⁹ Negus’s

²⁰⁹ Negus, *Music Genre and Corporate Cultures*, p. 29-30.

emphasis on “the activities of fans, listeners and audiences” is particularly helpful here, as these very activities help to establish a public recognition of crisis music as a distinct genre.

Prior to DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz releasing the “Lose Yo Job” remix, there were countless requests for the original recording of Johnniqua Charles to be turned into an “official” song. In the very first post of the video online, Julius Locklear stated “I wish I could put a beat to it lol.”²¹⁰ As DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz themselves both acknowledged, fans of their music reached out to them and explicitly asked for a remix of the “Lose Yo Job” video.²¹¹ There was not only public recognition of Johnniqua’s performance as a song, but a clear, widespread understanding of just what that song should sound like, what instrumental features it should have, what musicians should “song-ify” it, what type of music it should be. There was a strong idea of what genre “Lose Yo Job” belonged to. These public responses indicate a popular recognition of a specific type of crisis music as an existing genre, even if the label “crisis music” is not necessarily used.

But the crisis-as-genre body of music to which “Lose Yo Job” belongs is distinct from the pandemic pop genre of crisis music discussed in the previous chapter. That music largely originated from the creations of musicians responding to a universally shared (but unevenly experienced) health crisis and was codified as a categorical body of music through the creation of playlists on streaming platforms. The emergence of pandemic pop as a genre did stem in significant part from the participation from music listeners, but its manifestation was also largely driven by musicians and industry forces. The formation of the distinct body of crisis music that

²¹⁰ Julius Locklear, “Okay, IM NOT POSTING THIS TO BE FUNNY TOWARD THIS SUBJECT!!!!” Facebook, February 5, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/julius.locklear.7927/posts/197076461488191>.

²¹¹ Cat Zhang, “How the Viral Protest Anthem “Lose Yo Job” Came to Be,” *Pitchfork*, June 9, 2020. <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/lose-yo-job-protest-anthem-interview/>.

“Lose Yo Job” represents is more squarely rooted in the actions of fans, listeners, and audiences and less indebted to the creations of musicians or industry forces. Not only did fans immediately recognize what type of song the “Lose Yo Job” recording was from the start, but their use of the song at protests to fight police brutality after it was officially remixed cemented the guiding role that they have in the development of this type of crisis music as a genre.

The crisis from which “Lose Yo Job” is born and to which it responds is the crisis of racialized police brutality and the broader infrastructure of institutionalized, systemic racism in which it resides. While pandemic pop, as a body of music, largely offered emotion-based reflections on COVID-19 and its impacts, and at times attempted to encourage, lift the spirits of, or help those affected by it, the body of crisis music born out of racialized police violence does something different: it attempts to stare down, defy, and fight the crisis itself. I choose to call this body “Black Lives Matter Music.” While there already exists a handful of genres that share similar objectives and respond to similar (and even the same) crises, such as conscious rap and political hip-hop, the term “Black Lives Matter Music” indicates a slightly different, though not mutually exclusive, body of music. As I asserted above and will continue to elucidate upon soon, BLM Music becomes visible through the activities of fans, listeners, and audiences. Socially conscious rap and hip-hop music often is anti-racist and directly addresses police brutality, but as I define it for the purposes of this chapter, BLM Music is not just music that is written from an anti-racist perspective or that is explicitly about the crisis of racialized police violence, but that is further taken up and utilized by non-music professionals toward anti-racist ends. This body of music may very well include conscious hip-hop/rap, such as Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright,” but it also includes “Lose Yo Job,” an impromptu song by a non-professional that was remixed by internet-famous DJs, and even something like Ludacris’s “Move Bitch,” a song that does not fit

within the purview of conscious hip-hop and is often interpreted as having no real significant meaning whatsoever. What unites these distinct musical creations within the same categorical body of music is not the sounds of their hip-hop instrumentation, but the way in which they are used by audiences and the meaning they take on to the people they represent.

“Alright,” “Lose Yo Job” and “Move Bitch” were all played, performed, sung, and danced to at Black Lives Matter protests across the nation in recent years, as were many other songs. While music is often played at protests and rallies merely to entertain and keep spirits and energies high, or to help guide participants to march in sync, or a number of other micro-purposes, it nonetheless aids in the macro-mission of the protest. “Alright” was sung to profess resilience in the face of unspeakable atrocities; “Lose Yo Job” was sung to declare consequences for those who commit such crimes; “Move Bitch” was sung to show defiance against oppressive state powers. All of these songs functioned to lend momentum to the Black Lives Matter movement, to give participants a means to participate, to forward the goals and objectives of the movement. All of these songs were used to respond to the crisis of racialized police brutality by people who had experienced it. All of these songs are Black Lives Matter Music.

Meme-ification of Black Distress

While “Lose Yo Job” illuminates the crisis-genre of anti-racist music, there is also another separate genre of crisis-music it represents. I’m speaking to the long lineage of found public discourse recordings that go viral and receive remixes. In 2013, Cleveland resident Charles Ramsey discovered and helped rescue three Cleveland women who had been kidnapped and imprisoned by his neighbor.²¹² In 2012, Oklahoma City resident Kimberly Wilkins narrowly

²¹² “Charles Ramsey original “Dead Giveaway” interview in HD,” YouTube video, 3:11, posted by “News 5 Cleveland,” May 5, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPoA2f11UPk>.

escaped a fire that had engulfed her apartment.²¹³ In 2010, Huntsville resident Antoine Dodson saved his younger sister from an intruder attempting to sexually assault her.²¹⁴ In all of these cases, the individuals named were interviewed on local news stations and gave lively and memorable responses to questions, which then went viral on YouTube and were subsequently adapted into auto-tuned remixes. The phrases “Dead giveaway,” “Ain’t nobody got time for that,” and “Hide yo kids, hide yo wife” by Ramsey, Wilkins, and Dodson respectively, all formed hooks for songs constructed from their interviews. And they aren’t the only ones. 2013 coverage of a hail storm in Houston, a 2012 Oakland news special on modified vehicle exhaust pipes known as “whistle tips,” a 2008 news report of a seven-year-old who took his grandmother’s car for a joyride in West Palm Beach, 2006 news coverage of an alleged leprechaun sighting in Mobile, Alabama, and many others, all feature economically disadvantaged Black residents being interviewed, and all of them received auto-tuned remixes. Like Johnniqua Charles, all of these people were filmed by others while they were in crisis – as their apartment building caught fire, in the aftermath of a home invader breaking in and attempting to sexually assault family members, or simply existing in systemic poverty.

There is enough of a pattern established through these and many other examples that the auto-tuned remix of a viral video of Black distress emerges as an identifiable genre of music. Additionally, as the raw material from which these remixes are constructed (the interview) originate in moments of personal crisis, this genre is an example of crisis music. But it differs from the Black Lives Matter Music discussed earlier and the pandemic pop covered in Chapter

²¹³ “Sweet Brown on apartment fire: ‘Ain’t Nobody Got Time for That!’” YouTube video, 0:41, posted by “KFOR Oklahoma’s News 4,” April 11, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydmPh4MXT3g>.

²¹⁴ “Antoine Dodson ‘Hide Yo Kids, Hide Yo Wife’ Interview (Original),” YouTube video, 2:02, posted by “Crazy Laugh Action,” April 11, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzNhaLUT520>.

Two in a significant way: what is crisis for some is hilarious entertainment for others; what is an honest expression of distress for some is just material for monetizable content for others. The viral videos of Charles Ramsey, Kimberly Wilkins, Antoine Dodson, and many others in moments of clear distress – of crisis – were appropriated (through remixes) by mostly white YouTubers for views and likes. The crisis music of the autotuned remix is not original music being written in direct response to a crisis, like much of pandemic pop. It is not music that is taken up and used to address and fight a crisis, like anti-racist music. It is the exploitation of crisis for profit, for personal gain, for internet fame. If the question that began this chapter was “for whom is a crisis a crisis?”, then the question that this body of music raises is “what is a crisis to those who aren’t actively in it?” Something to be monetized and profited from? Or maybe, additionally, something more insidious?

In an article for *Slate* analyzing “the Troubling Viral Trend of the “Hilarious” Black Neighbor,” Aisha Harris suggests this phenomenon “has something to do with a persistent, if unconscious, desire to see black people perform” that “plays into the most basic stereotyping of Blacks as simple-minded ramblers living in the “ghetto,” socially out of step with the rest of educated America.”²¹⁵ Regardless of such a desire, conscious or unconscious, the meme-ification of poor Black people reacting humorously in moments of distress is clearly damaging in its persistent construction of Black people as farcical caricatures. This culminates in the autotuned, songified adaptations of these videos, wherein these individuals lose ownership of their own words and become ventriloquist dummies for mostly white YouTubers manipulating their vocal pitches to turn them into hip-hop songs that are played for laughs. These remixes are yet another example of the history of the appropriation and erasure of Black creativity.

²¹⁵ Aisha Harris, “The Troubling Viral Trend of the “hilarious” Black Neighbor,” *Slate*, May 7, 2013. <https://slate.com/culture/2013/05/charles-ramsey-amanda-berry-rescuer-becomes-internet-meme-video.html>.

This is a troubling trend, and one that has been written about extensively in popular discourse, along with the broader trend of the meme-ification of Black people and its roots in minstrelsy, anti-Black respectability politics, and misogynoir.²¹⁶ And while at first glance, “Lose Yo Job” might appear to follow in a similar tradition, there are some key distinctions that might signal the song as a diversion from such a problematic depictions while still perpetuating the deprivation of ownership from Black subjects of viral videos.

Most evidently is the fact that Johnniqua Charles’s original performance of “Lose Yo Job” was already a musical performance. The remix of the original video was not created for laughs by a white YouTube comedy group. Instead, by the admission of DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz themselves, the remix was essentially just a musical and percussive accompaniment to an already-existing song created by Charles. It’s important to remember too that DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz are both Black artists who created the song explicitly as a contribution to BLM protests. Rather than taking a Black interviewee out of context and autotuning their non-musical humorous soundbite into a novelty remix crafted solely for laughs, “Lose Yo Job” the remix keeps the sentiment and character of the original video intact, and arguably only more fully and professionally realizes the impromptu song that Johnniqua conceived. However, in the process, Charles still loses control over her own voice, is left off the copyright and denied any form of agency over how her likeness and voice are used, and her recorded moment of distress is used to benefit the careers of online content creators.

Another distinction between Johnniqua Charles and her meme-ified predecessors is her reception by the public. Whereas Charles Ramsey, Kimberly Wilkins, Antoine Dodson, Michelle Clark, Bubba Rubb, Latarian Milton, and the citizens of Mobile, Alabama were crafted into

²¹⁶ Harris, *Ibid.*; Kornhaber, *Ibid.*; Laur M. Jackson, “Memes and Misogynoir,” *The Awl*, August 28, 2014. <https://www.theawl.com/2014/08/memes-and-misogynoir/>.

punchlines and laughed at (and by some, such as Aisha Harris, defended), Johnniqua Charles has publicly been celebrated as joyful and resilient and as having her own sense of humor. She has been widely recognized as an artistic creator and as an important voice in the Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police movements. And she has been financially supported, not by any media industry, but by people impressed by her musical talent. Much in the collective social conscious has changed since those meme-ified auto-tuned remixes went viral that could account for the vastly different public reception Johnniqua Charles has received. As evidenced by the tremendous financial support and creative credit coming from social media users, one of those things might be popular understanding of ownership over creative content and to whom it is and is not legally granted. Now if only the industry could catch up. White YouTubers like Schmoyoho and The Parody Factory have profited from the voices and creative expressions of Charles Ramsey, Kimberly Wilkins, Antoine Dodson, and other Black citizens in moments of crisis. It shouldn't take publicly-funded Kickstarter campaigns for these people to receive compensation for the music that wouldn't exist without them.

“Lose Yo Job” the remix is legally owned by DJs Suede and iMarkkeyz. All of the media products created from the original video are popularly recognized as authored and owned by Johnniqua Charles to some extent. And the role of “Lose Yo Job” as an anthem of the Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police movements situate its social and cultural ownership in the hands of a public fighting oppression. The original viral video, taken on a phone camera with a shaky hand in a dark, empty parking lot by security guard Julius Locklear's friend (who has remained unnamed), has luckily avoided the same minstrelry-rooted meme-ification that has infected previous viral videos of disadvantaged Black citizens in moments of distress. Rather, it has taken on life as a driving anthem of a social conscious dedicated to fighting the racism that

underlies such memes, in addition to underlying so much else. And while Johnniqua Charles has seen a measurably more positive outcome from her viral fame in her personal life than the subjects of her auto-tuned remix predecessors, she still has no legal ownership over the use of her own voice. While the result of Black distress going viral has in this instance caused some inspiring outcomes, Johnniqua Charles, like so many before her, still has no control over or legal right to the fruits of her own performance.

Genre-in-crisis-as-genre-in-crisis-as....

It has been clear to me from the start of my work on this dissertation that genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre are phenomena that are connected in some way, but what “Lose Yo Job” has made me question is if they are indeed inseparable. While Chapter One focused on how “Old Town Road” threw the country genre into crisis by subverting and defying industry-established “rules” and threatening the power over genre held by those in control, the phenomenon of crisis-as-genre is apparent as well. Given the fact that the genre “rule” that was broken was solely one of racial identity, and the subsequent implication that genre is used by those in power as a tool of racial segregation, I argue that the genre of country *is* a genre of crisis. The crisis of racism forms the backbone for how the genre is policed by industry forces, and segregation becomes just as central a feature of the genre as any musical, lyrical, or geographical component. Additionally, Chapter Two studied crisis-as-genre through the example of pandemic pop’s emergence as a distinct body of music during the coronavirus pandemic, but similarly, the phenomenon of genre-in-crisis is also evident. The mere fact that pandemic pop was represented by so many different types of music (rap, hip-hop, country, rock, pop, indie, and more), so many different modes of music-making (original songwriting, remixing, repurposing, re-recording, collaborating, etc.), so

many different decades of music (from songs recorded in the 1960s to songs released in the 2020s), suggests that perhaps the very notion of genre itself is not as stable as industry forces would hold it up to be. If the lines between so many different musical genres can collapse so quickly, and all these different bodies of music can be seen as belonging together rather than as inherently separate, does that indicate a crisis for genre-at-large? And of course, this chapter has been focused on how the case of Johnniqua Charles and “Lose Yo Job” entangles the phenomena of genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre in an even messier knot. But what does this mean? Why is it significant if genre and crisis and genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre are so tied up together? I consider these questions and other major insights from this dissertation in the conclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

Summary

This dissertation has taken as its driving question “how can the conceptual frameworks of music genre and crisis be read through each other, and what can doing so illuminate about contemporary bodies of popular music during unstable times?” Central to this question are other concerns: what does it mean for humans to be in crisis? Who experiences crisis? What does crisis mean to those who are not in it? What does music do during crisis? In order to answer these questions, I conceptualized a framework of “crisis music” – music and/or musical activities that are staged during and are (explicitly or implicitly) about an ongoing crisis – and studied it through the dual lenses of genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre, applying Janet Roitman’s framework of crisis to music scholarship on genre and vice versa.

My dissertation unfolded across three case studies in three chapters. Chapter One examined the phenomenon of genre-in-crisis through the case study of Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road,” its removal from the Hot Country Songs chart by Billboard, and the subsequent controversy that decision raised. Chapter Two studied the phenomenon of crisis-as-genre through the case study of pandemic pop, the distinct body of music – both new and old – that formed during and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. And Chapter Three combined the phenomena of genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre through the case study of “Lose Yo Job,” a viral recording of a then-homeless Black woman named Johnniqua Charles as she was being detained by security guard, which was subsequently turned into a remix, became a hit single, and

took on life as an anthem at Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police protests across the country.

Genre and Crisis Together

In Roitman's framework, crisis is not a naturally-existing thing, but an idea of a thing; crisis does not just happen – events or conditions are said to be “in crisis.” This discursive move creates and forecloses certain narratives, shaping understanding of the thing that is said to be “in crisis” and thus shaping the behavior of those acting from within or in relation to it. I argue that the same is true of genre: it is not a naturally-existing thing, but a construction – pieces of music or musicians are said to be in or of a genre. This conceptual overlap has driven much of this dissertation, but one big difference between crisis and genre must be noted. Crisis by definition indicates a deviance from a state of normalcy, a period of dangerous or even life-threatening abnormality, from which there is eventually a recovery. Without th, crisis becomes apocalypse. Genre, on the other hand, does not indicate a departure from a state of normalcy, but rather, implies what the state of normalcy is. A genre is an idea, a collection of features and traits and practices and cultures and other ingredients, collaboratively generated, that establishes what the normal is for something within that genre. And while a genre may evolve or change or morph over time, it does not necessarily end, even if some do eventually fade out of relevance. So what does this fundamental difference mean for studying genre-in-crisis and crisis-as-genre?

I believe that studying these frameworks through each other means applying these very differences. Conceiving of genre-in-crisis means asking “What if genre was *not* an ongoing, lasting entity, but something that could cease to be?” And studying crisis-as-genre means asking “What if crisis was not impermanent, but itself the norm?” Genre's quality of endurance and

being a barometer is replaced with instability and rupture; crisis's quality of abnormality and ephemerality is replaced with ordinariness and immutability.

This carries significant implications for the part of Roitman's work that focuses on narrative possibility. If crisis and genre both afford and foreclose certain narrative possibilities for whatever things are said to be in crisis or in a genre, then seeing crisis-as-genre or genre-in-crisis opens up new narrative possibilities. Applying the rhetoric of crisis to racism implies those narratives of ephemerality and abnormality, that experiences of racism are departures from a more stable norm, and that eventually, we will be out of the crisis of racism. But seeing crisis-as-genre affords a different narrative understanding, one of racism's terrifying ordinariness. Similarly, seeing country as a genre implies that it whatever is deemed "country" is the prototypical, normal way of being country. But understanding country as in crisis means that it is unstable, that within that rupture there is space for something different and seemingly abnormal to be country. In essence, this entire dissertation has been about considering new ways to understand old concepts. If we apply another conceptual framework to the study of the phenomenon of genre or crisis, then we can offer new narrative possibilities for the things said to be within a genre or crisis.

Putting crisis and genre in dialogue with one another enables new theoretical approaches to their study. Music studies have approached the study of genre through the lens of Negus's genre culture (or similar frameworks) for a while, but adding the framework of crisis and its emphasis on narrative into the mix allows the exploration of different corners of genre. Genre culture implies an unfixed, fluid, and instable nature, but one that is nevertheless still ongoing and consistent to some degree. But crisis upends and opens up that instability in exciting ways. Negus sees genre culture's collectivity as collaborative, but crisis reframes it as contested and

combative: different parties don't necessarily always work together or even just concurrently; they are often actively fighting over genre's contours and meanings. Genre culture's fluidity is replaced with volatility and explosive dynamism. Changes in genre don't necessarily always happen gradually or through the activities of multiple different parties; they can happen suddenly and be sparked by a single catalyst.

I am not suggesting that Negus's work on genre culture should be disregarded, but rather, that the framework of crisis can offer scholars of genre another way in, an additional lens through which to consider genre activity, and one that is complimentary of other existing work on genre. Elsewhere in this dissertation I have discussed work on sono-racialization and sounding race as alternative approaches to genre that in many ways contradict the collectivity, fluidity, and haziness of genre culture, suggesting instead more explicitly racial power hierarchies that govern how genres are shaped and who has mobility between them. Crisis helps to add another dimension to these approaches, because, as Gilroy notes, crisis is "a combination of danger and opportunity."²¹⁷ If genre has artificial lines drawn around it by racially motivated power structures to segregate Black and Brown bodies, then crisis offers a way out, an opportunity to not only cross but break those lines and topple that power structure, as Lil Nas X and "Old Town Road" very nearly did. Although that case study focused on a very specific moment of genre-in-crisis, I suggest that scholars can approach genre as always already in crisis. The frameworks of sono-racialization and sounding race illustrate that the lines drawn around genre are not organic, but contrived in explicitly racist ways and enforced by structures that are losing power in the digital landscape. Whereas institutions like Billboard and the RIAA and others may have had a strong chokehold on genre and what it signifies in the past, that grasp has

²¹⁷ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts*, London: Serpent's Tail, 1993, p. 5.

become increasingly weak. The threat of these lines being crossed and this power breaking down is already there. Genre is already in crisis. The opportunity for those within genre to break it already exists.

Conversely, the flip side to this can be seen as well, as the narrative function of crisis, when applied to genre, implies the opposite: that opportunity exists for those external to a crisis or genre, but is denied to those within it. The narrative possibilities of crisis and genre have significant implications for those who exist within them: how crisis and genre are understood guide the ways that those in crisis or those participating in a genre behave. But what is crisis and genre to those who don't experience it, who aren't directly within it? As I have established throughout this dissertation, crisis and genre share a similarity in that they are both power structures: there are those who declare what is a crisis or a genre, and those who have to comport themselves in response to those constructions. Additionally, Roitman maintains that, as a narrative form, crisis opens up certain possibilities while foreclosing others. One way of understanding this, which is directly contradictory to the understanding explained above, is that crisis/genre opens up possibilities for those who are not directly in it, while foreclosing possibilities for those who are. Chapter One illustrated how genre, in its use as a tool of segregation, was deployed to restrict the creative and cultural agency of Lil Nas X, while granting power to industry institutions like Billboard, who construct genre but do not themselves have to behave accordingly within it (and can even bend or break their own rules when it suits them). Chapter Three examined how the personal crises of homelessness, addiction, and detainment that faced Johnniqua Charles caused her pain and struggle on many levels, but were used as raw content for profit and online fame by a couple of DJs who were not actively experiencing them.

So what is genre/crisis to those who are not objects of it? Opportunity. For power, profit, mobility, yes, but for something more encouraging as well. In the case of “Old Town Road,” countless actors outside of the dominion of the country genre – from TikTok users to professional critics to other musicians participating in different genres – critiqued and condemned Billboard’s decision to segregate Lil Nas X outside of the genre. As an artist attempting to participate within the genre, Lil Nas X challenged the power structure from within the belly of the beast. But as actors outside of the specific country genre power structure, these consumers, critics, and artists were also presented with an opportunity to challenge genre in unique ways, exterior to the hierarchy. Critical reviews and think pieces, posts and videos on social media, public showings of support for Lil Nas X, and various other activities generated a widespread public, popular discourse that critiqued the country genre from the outside. A similar show of support is visible in the case of “Lose Yo Job,” as detailed in the section on popular ownership in Chapter Three. Popular publications, social media users, and other artists communicated support for Johnniqua Charles and her claim to authorship over the remix, and over \$55,000 was raised to assist Johnniqua during her time of crisis. Not subject to the crises of homelessness and addiction, these actors were presented with the opportunity to help someone who was. Those who are not subject to the power structure of genre or crisis, who are not beholden to its narrative demands, have the opportunity to challenge them.

These reflections are not meant to be definitive accountings for how hierarchies of genre and crisis categorically play out. Rather, these are some of the insights that arose for me while writing this dissertation. As I have noted many times over all of these chapters, genre (and by extension, crisis) is a fuzzy entity that is difficult to nail down and define conclusively. As such, the above observations serve only as additional possible lenses through which to study these

conceptual frameworks. I maintain that genre can be studied both as a rigid embodiment of a power structure that forecloses opportunities for artists and communities within it while enabling opportunities for those outside of it, *and* as a volatily instable entity that is always already in crisis and thus rife with opportunity for those within it. Considering the impossibility of nailing the phenomenon of genre down with a single universal definition, I argue it is more effective to conduct studies that privilege genre-*as* rather than genre-*is*. The study of genre that crisis makes possible includes various different genre-*as* approaches, each offering a distinct understanding.

Where to next?

My unanswered questions mainly arise out of the complications with nailing down a hard and fast definition for genre or crisis, as mentioned above. There are multiple approaches to the study of these concepts, and I have noted many throughout this dissertation. And while I generally propose the stacking of these lenses on top of one another for a more holistic view of genre/crisis, there are times where different approaches feel contradictory rather than complimentary. The public (re)invention and performance of identity through genre and the policing of it has important ramifications for the understanding of genre outlined in the introduction chapter that highlight some of these contradictions. Whereas the understanding of genre culture that appears across the works of Holt, Brackett, Miller, Negus, and Fellezs stresses the creative collectivity (through the participation of commercial structures, fan groups, musicians, and historical social formations in the construction of genre), fluidity, and haziness of genre, the processes of sono-racialization that is evident through the actions of Billboard and other industry forces indeed suggest a different vision of genre. Though a certain degree of collectivity may still be apparent through this lens of sono-racialization, there is nonetheless a

more blatant power at play between such communities engaged in the construction of genre, as racialized groups of people made into the object of a genre. The degree of haziness that genre culture suggests is also restricted, as firm genre lines do arise through sono-racialization – perhaps not around specific musical qualities, but rather, around racial qualities made to be distinct and rigid and linked to a particular genre. Genre culture’s fluidity is also limited, as these race categories are made to be immovable. Rather than fluidity between, among, and within genres over time, a kind of mobility among privileged participants emerges. Genres do not move as much, but performers can move between them, performing racial authenticity with the use of sono-racialized identity codes to produce and perform “Black sounds,” among others (such as the white country artists utilizing rap and hip-hop sounds in their songs mentioned in Chapter One). The competing lenses of genre culture and sono-racialization highlight the contradictions between collectivity and power hierarchy, un-fixedness and fixedness, fluidity and sono-social mobility.

These are just some of the differences between theoretical approaches that are difficult to reconcile. The narrative dimension of genre that I discuss at length at the end of Chapter Two and the messy entanglements of genre and crisis discussed throughout Chapter Three also complicate understandings of these concepts. Future studies of crisis and genre could do well to consider these contradictions and interrogate what new insights they generate. Additionally, as the study conducted in this dissertation was narrowly focused on contemporary music bodies and controversies, there is much to be gained by applying the approaches of this work to more varied historical examples.

There also remains the question of where are we now? What has happened to the country genre and how does Lil Nas X navigate his artistic identity in the years since “Old Town Road”?

Is pandemic pop music still being made, and with the benefit of hindsight, did it ever really reach the level of genre, or was it just a trend? Where is Johnniqua Charles today, and has anything changed regarding ownership of remixed viral content? What would all of these outcomes mean for the understanding of crisis and genre built throughout this dissertation?

Many of these questions are still difficult to answer at this point. While Lil Nas X has made a successful career for himself with a primarily pop musician identity and has challenged other genre lines through fusion, it is still very early in his career and unclear what his lasting impact on country specifically and genre more broadly might be. The inconclusive end of the coronavirus pandemic makes it difficult to tell if pandemic pop is technically still being made, or if the body has shifted to a sort of post-pandemic pop configuration, or whether it ever really amounted to a full on “genre.” The public discourse surrounding remixes of viral content evolved in the wake of “Lose Yo Job,” but it remains unclear if any legal changes to ownership of remixed material will occur. All of these matters are still in flux. In a way, they are all still in crisis.

My decision to focus on contemporary popular music case studies was driven by a desire to foreground this project’s significance within popular understandings of genre and crisis. As each of these case studies has illustrated – “Old Town Road,” pandemic pop, and “Lose Yo Job” – there are real world implications for the meanings we assign to these terms. Genre is still used by the industry and certain groups of fans and consumers to segregate people and cultures; the narrative form of crisis is used to shape public understanding and reaction to the thing said to be in it. But if more public discussions can be staged viewing these concepts from different angles – like the ones that have surrounded “Old Town Road” and “Lose Yo Job” – there is real potential for the power structures that govern the objects of genre and crisis to be challenged.

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