
***Pitchfork*, Race, Collaboration, and the Making of “Indie Rap”**

ABSTRACT This essay historicizes the moment in popular music when rap music and indie rock began conversing with one another. It shows how *Pitchfork* received, what is referred to as, “indie rap” by drawing a particular line of influence: from indie rock to rap music. *Pitchfork* is thereby shown to have contributed to the historical whitening of Black music. Drawing on the work of Fred Moten, this essay argues that *Pitchfork* established the “white avant-gardism” of indie rock through the construction of a series of binary oppositions that associated Black rap music with pastness and the commercial and “white” indie rock with futurity and the experimental. Such a critical bifurcation is revealed through a close reading of *Pitchfork*’s reception of the artist most representative of “indie rap:” Kanye West. This essay shows how *Pitchfork* understood West as needing to appropriate “European” music to move from the past into the future and become experimental. It counters this antagonistic racialization by situating West’s use of Auto-Tune within a lineage of Black radical aesthetics that includes the experimental vocal manipulations of artists ranging from Stevie Wonder to Drake. This essay seeks to recover the collaborative spirit that defined “indie rap.” It focuses on West’s collaborations with Justin Vernon (of Bon Iver), showing how they labored together to produce an “indie rap” that crossed the musical and racial lines established by *Pitchfork*. This essay concludes that, if West epitomized an ethos of collaboration before his reactionary turn, it is Vernon who now carries forward this collaborative spirit.

KEYWORDS Rap, Indie Rock, Indie Rap, *Pitchfork*, Collaboration, Race, Black Aesthetics, Kanye West, Justin Vernon, Bon Iver

In a critical review of Jay-Z’s *The Blueprint 3*, *Pitchfork*’s Ian Cohen made a broader claim about the state of rap music in 2009 when he suggested that “hip-hop could learn a thing or two from indie rock.”¹ In making this suggestion, Cohen emphasized that he was simply echoing Jay-Z’s own sentiments, writing that Jay-Z is “probably right about his claim.”² Earlier that year, Jay-Z had been spotted attending a Grizzly Bear show at Brooklyn’s Williamsburg Waterfront alongside Beyoncé and Solange Knowles where he famously swayed to “Ready, Able.” Not long after this show, Jay-Z had expressed the hope that bands like Grizzly Bear would “push hip-hop to go even further,” describing the

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1. Ian Cohen, “Jay-Z: *The Blueprint 3* Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, September 14, 2009, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/13445-the-blueprint-3/>.

2. Ibid.

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ongoing “indie rock movement” as “very,” “really” “inspiring.”³ With the recent release of *Veckatimest*, Grizzly Bear had, like their peers in indie rock, begun garnering previously unprecedented commercial and critical attention during a moment when rappers like Jay-Z were understood to be releasing their “weakest” music to date.⁴ If indie rock could “have a run,” it might, Jay-Z hoped, “force hip-hop to fight to make better music.”⁵

This famous encounter represents only a specific instance of what was at the time a much broader and more interesting conversation occurring between rap and indie rock. In fact, just a year later at the 2010 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, Jay-Z, again alongside Beyoncé, attended the day show of a different indie rock band: Beach House. For their own part, Beach House later that day during their evening show performed a cover of Gucci Mane’s “Lemonade.” Kendrick Lamar would then, on *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, sample Beach House’s “Silver Soul” on “Money Trees.” During this same time, Drake collaborated with a number of indie rock artists on the mixtape, *So Far Gone*, that would propel him to fame, using songs from the likes of Lykke Li and Peter Bjorn and John. *Pitchfork*’s Tom Breihan credited Drake for not simply rapping over Lykke’s “Little Bit,” but instead structuring his own version of that song like a duet, with him and Lykke “slowly circling each other and admitting their crushed-out feelings.”⁶ In an instance of an even more sustained collaborative relationship, Kanye West (who changed his name to Ye in August 2021) worked with Justin Vernon (of Bon Iver) on several of his critically acclaimed albums, most notably *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and *Yeezus*.

The music that emerged during this seminal moment in the history of popular music when the seemingly disparate genres of rap and indie rock began conversing with one another will be referred to as “indie rap.” This essay, in exploring the influence that *Pitchfork* exerted in the formation and development of this genre, offers the first sustained critical assessment of this highly influential publication, which has been labelled “the first major Web-based tastemaker.”⁷ *Pitchfork* rose to prominence with indie rock: it was a review of Radiohead’s *Kid A* that “put *Pitchfork* on the map,” with the site becoming recognized for “a kind of earnestness and purple-hued prose” that offered an alternative to “the stylized snark” of zine writing and the “lean” reviews published in magazines at the time.⁸ Soon thereafter, *WIRED* magazine wrote a piece about the “Pitchfork effect,”⁹ that is, the immense effect that positive *Pitchfork* reviews had in propelling the careers of once

3. James Montgomery, “Jay-Z Hopes Bands Like Grizzly Bear Will ‘Push Hip-Hop,’” *MTV*, August 31, 2009, <https://www.mtv.com/news/wcwtzd/jay-z-hopes-bands-like-grizzly-bear-will-push-hip-hop>.

4. Ian Cohen, “Jay-Z: *The Blueprint 3* Album Review.”

5. *Ibid.*

6. Tom Breihan, “Drake: *So Far Gone* Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, June 29, 2009, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/13238-so-far-gone/>.

7. Kiera Butler, “Listen to This,” *Columbia Journalism Review* vol. 45, no. 1 (May-June 2006): 54.

8. Ryan Dombal et al. “The History of Pitchfork’s Reviews Section in 38 Reviews,” *Pitchfork*, May 25, 2021, <https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/the-history-of-the-pitchfork-reviews-section-in-38-important-reviews/>.

9. Dave Itzkoff, “The Pitchfork Effect,” *Wired*, September 1, 2006, <https://www.wired.com/2006/09/pitchfork/>.

relatively obscure indie rock bands, such as Arcade Fire and Broken Social Scene. For instance, after *Pitchfork* awarded Arcade Fire's *Funeral* a 9.7 rating, it achieved "unprecedented" success, according to their publicist Martin Hall, going out of print for about a week due to overwhelming demand.¹⁰ By the time that "indie rap" emerged, *Pitchfork* had become prominent enough and had developed a recognizable enough critical style to have been parodied numerous times: from Sub Pop hosting a fake *Pitchfork* homepage on its website to an *Onion* article spoofing a fake *Pitchfork* review that gave music a score of "6.8" to Fred Armisen playing *Pitchfork* founder, Ryan Schreiber, on *Portlandia*.

Pitchfork engaged with the moment of "indie rap" by drawing a particular line of influence: from indie rock to rap music. In his review of *The Blueprint 3*, Cohen credits Ed Droste (the lead singer of Grizzly Bear) with providing the biggest PR boost in the buildup to the release of Jay-Z's album. According to him, seeing Jay-Z in the same room as Grizzly Bear had generated more buzz and excitement than hearing him collaborate with pop stars such as Rihanna and Drake. For *Pitchfork*, it was rap that needed indie rock, not the other way around. In drawing this line of influence, *Pitchfork* contributed to the ongoing historical *whitening* of Black music.¹¹ The criticism published by *Pitchfork* during this historical moment understood Black rappers as appropriating the musical styles of white performers. Rap music thereby began to give way to a *whiter* "indie rap."

Such a line of influence has been evident in the popular press since the early days of rap music. In 1986, Run DMC famously collaborated with Aerosmith on "Walk This Way" in what Jeff Chang describes as "a racial crossover of historic proportions."¹² Tricia Rose has shown how the press read Run DMC's engagement with rock music as a sign that rap was "maturing" and "expanding its repertoire."¹³ Yet, as Rose points out, it was Run DMC who brought these "strategies of intertextuality" into the mainstream.¹⁴ Indeed, samples of rock and a wide range of musics had always been imbedded in rap, with Run DMC having recorded live rock guitars years earlier. This specific example supports Perry Hall's more general contention concerning the dynamics of appropriation that emergent forms of Black culture after an initial phase of unsuccessful suppression are "absorbed" "in ways that minimize their association with 'Blackness.'"¹⁵

This essay begins the work of writing a *counter*-history of the moment of "indie rap." What Jay-Z was trying to do when speaking to MTV about rap music being pushed by

10. Greg Kot, "The New Tastemakers," *Chicago Tribune*, April 3, 2005, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2005-04-03-0504020384-story.html>.

11. This essay extends Jack Hamilton's work showing how "Black" rock and roll gave way to "white" rock; see Jack Hamilton, *Just Around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

12. Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005), 245.

13. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 51.

14. *Ibid.*, 51–52.

15. Perry A. Hall, "African-American Music: Dynamics of Appropriation and Innovation," in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, ed. Bruce H. Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 32.

indie rock was to situate this particular moment within a longer dialectical process: “When rock was the dominant force in music, rap came and said, ‘Y’all got to sit down for a second, this is our time.’ And we’ve had a stranglehold on music since then [. . .] So I hope indie rock pushes rap back a bit, because it will force people to make great music for the sake of making great music.”¹⁶ Here, Jay-Z does not, as Cohen suggests, propose that only rap music has something to learn from indie rock. Rather, what he proposes is that genres like rap and rock should (as they have done in the past) continue to push and inspire one another to make great music. It is through such reassessments of this historical moment that this essay begins the work of conceptualizing “indie rap” less as “*indie rap*” (emphasis on the “indie”) and more as “*indie rap*” (emphasis on the “indie” and the “rap”) in order to recover an ethos of collaboration that in actuality defined this especially spirited moment in music history.

More specifically, this essay shows how *Pitchfork*, rather than thinking dialectically, constructed binary oppositions between indie rock and rap. Having risen to prominence with indie rock, *Pitchfork* over time came to defend an aesthetic grounded in the values of futurity and experimentation that it found in indie rock. By contrast, the criticism it published associated rap with pastness and the commercial. This essay reveals how such a binary opposition is evident in *Pitchfork’s* understanding that rappers needed to appropriate indie music to gain access to futurity and become experimental. It then deconstructs this binary through the reconstruction of a lineage of experimental Black music, with a focus on vocal manipulation. This essay concludes by demonstrating how “indie rap” crossed the musical and racial lines established by *Pitchfork*: it does so by focusing on the interracial collaborations that made “indie rap.”

PITCHFORK AND RACE

When Jay-Z—a man who famously declared himself to be not a “businessman” but rather a “business, man”—suggested that “hip-hop could learn a thing or two from indie rock,” he likely had the opposing economic fortunes of these genres on his mind. Writing in 2007, Ta-Nehisi Coates noted that Jay-Z’s *Kingdom Come* had sold well its first week (680,000 copies) before seeing its sales decline by some 80% the following week.¹⁷ Coates used this specific example to point to a broader trend: rap sales had dropped 44% since 2000 and were down 33% thus far that year.¹⁸ Jay-Z’s engagement with indie rock supports the argument made by Keith Negus that rap music—due to rappers not being allowed in the same way as other musicians to move from the “streets” to the executive suite—has had to generate alternative resources by continually redefining itself through the crossing of social and cultural barriers.¹⁹

16. Montgomery, “Jay-Z Hopes Bands Like Grizzly Bear.”

17. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Hip-hop’s Down Beat,” *TIME*, August 17, 2007, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1653639,00.html>

18. *Ibid.*

19. Keith Negus, “The Music Business and Rap: Between the Street and the Executive Suite,” *Cultural Studies* vol. 13, no. 3 (July 1999): 504.

Rap music was in a crisis not only commercially but also critically. Erik Nielson writes that not only had sales “been in a nosedive for the last several years, with recent declines doubling those for the recording industry overall,” but that there had “been mounting discontent among fans, who [had] grown frustrated with the tired, gangsta-inspired lyrics that glorify violence, materialism, and misogyny at the expense of a more socially conscious agenda.”²⁰ Nielson cites the assessment of Michael Eric Dyson, who lamented that the “noble verbal art” of rap had “been replaced by the mindless redundancy of themes we’re all too familiar with: women, weed, wine, cars, and jewelry.”²¹ At the end of 2006, Nas had, as Nielson points out, gone even further by titling his album, *Hip Hop is Dead*.

It was indie rock that ascended during this moment of transition in popular music,²² moving steadily towards the mainstream. In 2009, Jay-Z favorably compared what the indie rock movement was doing to the beginnings of rap music: “These concerts, they’re not on the radio, no one hears about them, and there’s 12,000 people in attendance. And the music that they’re making and the connection they’re making to people is really inspiring.”²³ If rap music needed to create a “new and improved product,”²⁴ as Coates had suggested it should, the burgeoning genre of indie rock would at this moment have held much appeal for someone like Jay-Z as a commercial and creative partner. Vampire Weekend—who were, as *Pitchfork*’s Mike Powell put it in a review of *Contra*, “more digestible than Dirty Projectors but also more exciting than the relentlessly sophisticated Grizzly Bear,”²⁵ outselling both of these bands—best exemplified the growth of indie rock: their music was optioned for major-motion-picture soundtracks, they played the *Late Show with David Letterman*, and even appeared in *Vogue* magazine. Described by Powell as “semi-popular and sincerely idiosyncratic,”²⁶ it was this particular blend of marketability and artistry that appealed not just to rappers but also to pop stars.²⁷ Shakira covered the xx’s “Islands”; Caroline Polachek (of Chairlift), and Ezra Koenig (of Vampire Weekend) co-wrote songs with Beyoncé, while Father John Misty did the same with Lady Gaga. Soon Arcade Fire’s *The Suburbs* and The Decemberists’ *The King is Dead* followed *Contra* in reaching No. 1 on the *Billboard* 200 chart, with *The Suburbs* even winning the Grammy for Album of the Year in 2011 and Bon Iver garnering Grammy wins (Best New Artist) and nominations (Record and Song of the Year) a year later.

20. Erik Nielson, “‘My President is Black, My Lambo’s Blue’: The Obomafication of Rap?,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* vol. 31, no. 2 (June 2019): 37.

21. *Ibid.*, 37.

22. Jayson Greene notes that the record industry collapse of the 2000s had by 2011 become “so dismal that albums were routinely breaking records for hitting the top of the charts with the lowest number of units sold”; see Jayson Greene, “How Indie Went Pop – and Pop Went Indie – in the 2010s,” *Pitchfork*, October 17, 2019, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/2010s-decade-how-indie-rock-went-pop-bon-iver-grimes-james-blake/>.

23. Montgomery, “Jay-Z Hopes Bands Like Grizzly Bear.”

24. Coates, “Hip-hop’s Down Beat.”

25. Mike Powell, “Vampire Weekend: *Contra* Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, January 11, 2010, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/13807-contra/>.

26. *Ibid.*

27. For more on the collaborations between indie acts and pop artists, see Greene, “How Indie Went Pop.”

In collaborating with indie rock artists, rappers engaged with a genre of music that Sasha Frere-Jones, in a controversial article,²⁸ racializes as “white.” Frere-Jones admits that accusations of essentialism are often warranted when discussing the racial pedigree of American pop music, but he suggests that the 1990s were a moment when the contributions of white and Black musical traditions became easier to measure and sort. He argues that by the mid-90s Black influences “had begun to recede, sometimes drastically, and the term ‘indie rock’ came implicitly to mean white rock.”²⁹ Frere-Jones traces a genealogy of indie rock. First, he shows how a foundational band such as Pavement was influenced by obscure folk groups, and how later, more commercially successful bands such as the Flaming Lips and Wilco drew on the whiter genres of the ‘60s such as psychedelic music and country rock. Then, he shows how the music of an even more contemporary band such as Arcade Fire contains no traces of soul, blues, reggae, or funk. What is missing from the music produced by these indie rock bands are, for him, syncopated patterns as well as swing, empty space, palpable bass frequencies—the attributes, he argues, of African American popular music. Frere-Jones identifies the leading influence of Brian Wilson—a musician he describes as “indie rock’s muse” and as having only “a tenuous link to American Black music”—on popular indie rock acts, such as Panda Bear and Surfjan Stevens, with their “beatific, multi-tracked harmonies.”³⁰ It is Grizzly Bear that are cited as a sort of culmination of this historical trajectory: with “no apparent links to Black American music—or any readily identifiable genre,” their sound, for Frere-Jones, “suggests a group of eunuchs singing next to a music box on a sunken galleon.”³¹

By contrast, rap music continues to be racialized as “Black.” The music industry and rap moguls have, as Loren Kajikawa shows, “put their money on Black,”³² whether through the cultivation of Black male rappers or the promotion of Black masculine identity. Yet, Kajikawa notes that this racialization encompasses not just the skin color of popular practitioners but also how these practitioners construct racial authenticity: that is, how they construct what it means to be “real.”³³ The great value that rappers and fans alike ascribe to such authentic expression is evident in the use of phrases like “keeping it real”—which Kajikawa defines as “the practice of staying true to one’s culture and values”—and in the title of songs like Jay-Z’s “Real Niggaz.”³⁴ If rap music has yet to become “white” in the way that rock and roll once did, it has much to do with how “realness” continues to be associated with Blackness.

28. For a roundup of the backlash to Sasha Frere-Jones’s article, see “Finally, Some Outrage Over Sasha Frere-Jones’s Latest Column!” *Vulture*, October 18, 2007, https://www.vulture.com/2007/10/finally_some_outrage_over_sasha.html. Hamilton situates this backlash within a longer historical aversion toward discussions of race in rock discourse; see Hamilton, *Just Around Midnight*, 12.

29. Sasha Frere-Jones, “A Paler Shade of White: How Indie Rock Lost Its Soul,” *The New Yorker*, October 15, 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/22/a-paler-shade-of-white>.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 5.

33. Eric Harvey historicizes the gangsta rap – or more specifically, what he refers to as “reality rap” – of the late-1980s and early-1990s alongside reality TV as part of a revolution of popular entertainment as a truth-telling medium; see Eric Harvey, *Who Got the Camera?: A History of Rap and Reality* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2021).

34. Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*, 5–6.

The criticism published by *Pitchfork* during this period reproduced such a dyadic, Black-and-white notion of race. Fred Moten, in his work on the aesthetics of the Black radical tradition, has written about what he refers to as “fetishistic white hipsterism.”³⁵ Moten is critical of how such white hipsterism fetishizes Blackness in order to gain access to an imagined authenticity. He reveals how white hipsterism creates a series of binary oppositions: Black and white, authenticity and commodification, and somewhat less obviously straight and gay. Moten also writes about the “flipside” of white hipsterism: “a white avant-gardism whose seriousness requires either an active forgetting of Black performances or a relegation of them to mere source material.”³⁶ For him, if white hipsterism fetishizes Blackness in order to gain access to “authenticity,” white avant-gardism relegates or forgets Blackness in order to gain access to “seriousness.”

Pitchfork's construction of the white avant-gardism of indie rock through such a relegating or forgetting of Black music is evident in its critical reception of Kanye West's early albums: from *The College Dropout* to *808s & Heartbreak*. West is the artist most representative of “indie rap,” with his music having been described as “blubbery Notwist-like bedsit indie.”³⁷ West crossed racial lines from the very beginning of his career: he appeared in the guise of a “backpack rapper,” a type that in being defined by nerdiness, lyricism, and a lack of street credibility offered an alternative to the focus in commercial rap music at the time on, what West described as, “money, hoes, and rims.”³⁸ Yet, West did not simply reject such commercialism but rather explored the contradictions of Black social life. As West put it, he was the first rapper with “a Benz and a backpack.”³⁹ Edward P. Comentale argues that West, in presenting himself as torn between the worlds of the nerd and the gangsta, the backpacker and the hitmaker, made rap “accessible in ways that crossed racial lines.”⁴⁰ Where West radically crossed lines both musically and racially, *Pitchfork* reinforced these lines by constructing a related but different series of binary oppositions than the ones discussed by Moten: Blackness and whiteness, pastness and futurism, commercial and experimental. *Pitchfork* defined “white” genres of music such as indie rock as futuristic and experimental by situating Black music in the past. Black rappers such as West came thereby to be understood as engaging in a kind of reversal of white hipsterism—what will be referred to as “fetishistic Black hipsterism”—as they were understood as needing to appropriate whiteness in order to become futuristic and experimental.

This essay turns to the moment of “indie rap” for a model of interracial solidarity. It counters *Pitchfork*'s critical bifurcation of indie rock and rap by optimistically considering how the collaborations between West and Vernon led to a crossing of musical and racial

35. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 149.

36. *Ibid.*, 149.

37. Scott Plagenhoef, “Kanye West: *808s and Heartbreak* Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, December 2, 2008, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/12498-808s-and-heartbreak/>.

38. West, Kanye, “Breathe In Breathe Out,” *The College Dropout*, Def Jam Recordings, 2004.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Edward P. Comentale, “Dorking Out with Kanye and Taylor: Nerd Pop via Erving Goffman and the Performance of Stigma,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* vol. 28, no. 1 (February 2016): 20.

lines. By hearing Black and white artists *together*, this essay follows the methodology found in the work of Jack Hamilton in attempting to “recover the resonances and possibilities in musical compositions, performances, and recordings, piecing together previously missed connections.”⁴¹ What results resembles the American culture that Ralph Ellison envisions in which musical traditions when juxtaposed begin “irresistibly to merge.”⁴²

Some readers may criticize the situating of West’s music within a tradition of Black radical aesthetics. West has made a series of antisemitic statements and embraced white nationalists.⁴³ Coates argues that West’s embrace of Donald Trump should have cast a negative light on his past, suggesting that West’s desire for “light-skinned girls” “deserved more scrutiny,” that his embrace of the Confederate flag “warranted more inquiry,” and that his criticism of George W. Bush and interruption of Taylor Swift were not driven by “keen insight” and “righteous anger,” respectively.⁴⁴ For Coates, West did not simply come to desire whiteness but rather always did so. While a close examination of West’s politics is beyond the scope of this essay, it suggests by contrast that the West who embraces Donald Trump and the West who once criticized Bush are different. Harmony Holiday supports such a claim, writing that West “as we knew him went missing.”⁴⁵ West even emphasizes such a break on “I Love Kanye” when he distinguishes his present self from “the old Kanye.”⁴⁶ As Coates admits, it was West’s desire for the “disconnected freedom” of the white “I” that led him over time to liberate himself from the responsibilities of the Black “we.”⁴⁷ This essay thus attempts to remain attuned to the flexibility and lack of determinacy of racial identifications.

FUTURITY AND WHITE AVANT-GARDISM

West rose to prominence by appealing to nostalgia. His early productions put his own distinctive spin on a technique that had previously been employed by the Wu-Tang Clan’s RZA: the use of sped-up soul and R&B vocal samples. West’s “chipmunk soul,” as it came to be referred to, found acceptance on pop radio: his production on “Izzo (H.O.V.A.)” earned Jay-Z his first top 10 single on the *Billboard* Hot 100 as a lead artist, while three songs that West produced appeared in the Top 20 during the week of the release of his first album, *The College Dropout*. Such a sentimental brand of rap music resonated as well with hip-hop purists: *XXL* magazine gave the album a rare and coveted

41. Hamilton, *Just Around Midnight*, 5–6.

42. Ralph Ellison, “Living with Music,” in *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2002), 14.

43. Andrew Limbong, “Ye says ‘I see good things about Hitler’ on conspiracy theorist Alex Jones’ show,” *NPR*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/02/1140218872/ye-antisemitism-alex-jones-podcast>.

44. Coates, Ta-Nehisi, “I’m Not Black, I’m Kanye,” *The Atlantic*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/05/im-not-black-im-kanye/559763/>.

45. Harmony Holiday, “Ask Me About God: On Ye West,” *The Paris Review*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2023/10/13/ask-me-about-god-on-ye-west/>.

46. West, Kanye, “I Love Kanye,” *The Life of Pablo*, Def Jam Recordings, 2016.

47. Coates, “I’m Not Black, I’m Kanye.”

“XXL” rating. West’s music also appealed, as Rob Mitchum writes in his review of *The College Dropout* for *Pitchfork*, to reactionary rock critics. Mitchum points out that West was not the first of his contemporaries to find success in branching out from producing records to being a lead artist, citing the examples of Pharrell Williams and Timbaland. What surprises him is that, where these other producers found success with “much more adventurous sounds,” West did so with a “sugar-high soul technique” that although “addictive” was “far less future-vision.”⁴⁸ Far from surprising, it is this very appeal to nostalgia that made West popular with these critics as it allowed them to situate West’s music, rap music, and Blackness more generally in the past.

This situating of West’s music in the past is made clearer in the reception of his next album, *Late Registration*. It is producer Jon Brion who is credited in a review by *Pitchfork*’s Sean Fennessey for its success: Brion is said to have taken West’s “chattering, seemingly unrealistic ideas” and transformed them “into an expansive, imperfect masterpiece.”⁴⁹ Without Brion, it is suggested that *Late Registration* “probably sounds a lot like its predecessor, *The College Dropout*—full of tough horns, jacked soul, and flashes of brilliance.”⁵⁰ The song “Hey Mama” is offered as an example of Brion’s “ability to inflate and infuse West’s ideas with even more life”: where the initial version is referred to as “basically a trad-Kanye production,” the version that Brion produced is deemed an improvement for adding “a moaning vocoder, tin pan alley drums, a xylophone solo, and cascading synth coda.”⁵¹ What is suggested here is that West would have remained stuck in the past if not for Brion pushing him into the future. As Fennessey puts it, Brion gives West’s music “new resonance” by allowing him to “think even bigger” than acclaimed singles like “Jesus Walks.”⁵²

This review is emblematic of the ways in which *Pitchfork* received rap music more generally: the line of influence drawn here runs from Brion to West, with West understood as revolutionizing his sound not by collaborating and forming a mutually beneficial partnership with an admired colleague but rather by appropriating his aesthetics. West’s “adventurous collaborative spirit”⁵³ becomes re-articulated, here, as an *appropriative* spirit. To draw on Moten’s terms, West is understood as engaging in “fetishistic Black hipsterism”: he appropriates whiteness in order to gain access to futurity.

What *Pitchfork* establishes are a series of binary oppositions that associate Blackness with pastness and whiteness with futurity. Such a binary is made explicit by Mark Pytlik in his review for *Pitchfork* of West’s third album, *Graduation*. West’s music is again at first situated in the past, with his previous albums said to mostly function as “contagious nostalgia trips.”⁵⁴ Pytlik then goes on to credit West for “looking out to the world” to

48. Rob Mitchum, “Kanye West: *The College Dropout* Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, February 20, 2004, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/8767-the-college-dropout/>.

49. Sean Fennessey, “Kanye West: *Late Registration* Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, August 28, 2005, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/8768-late-registration/>.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Mark Pytlik, “Kanye West: *Graduation* Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, September 11, 2007, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/10658-graduation/>.

discover “a brand new set of influences.”⁵⁵ The two styles of music that Pytlik understands West as splicing together are distinguished through racialization. On the one hand, there is West’s “well-articulated production style” with its “familiar strings and brass, helium vocal samples, and warm soul samples.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, there is West’s introduction of “corroded rave stabs, vinegary synth patches, and weirdly modulated electronic noises,” which Pytlik racializes as “European.”⁵⁷ Pytlik notes that West’s interest in French house and rave extends beyond the album’s lead single, “Stronger,” which noticeably samples Daft Punk’s “Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger.” He offers a number of examples of West splicing together his familiar samples with such “European” sounds, which range from the “frizzy synth lead and alien-sounding keys” on “I Wonder” to the “gypsy music and detuned electronics” on “Drunk and Hot Girls” to the “Bond-worthy coda” on “Flashing Lights.”⁵⁸ Pytlik commends West’s appropriation of “European” music for bringing an “undercurrent of experimentation”⁵⁹ to his music: if West’s previous albums were “nostalgia trips,” it is through the appropriation of these new, “European” influences that his music comes, for Pytlik, to be understood as experimental.

Yet, Pytlik immediately deconstructs the very racial binary that he seeks to establish when he points out that the seemingly European music West introduces to his productions “[i]ronically” have their “roots in West’s hometown of Chicago.”⁶⁰ Frere-Jones has critiqued the argument that Daft Punk’s *Discovery* was “one of the first post-sample albums,” noting that hip-hop producers such as DJ Premier and J. Dilla “routinely atomized records and assigned those bits to the pads of an Akai MPC and created songs that bore no resemblance to their sources.”⁶¹ The binary opposition that would associate Blackness with pastness and whiteness with futurity thereby becomes troubled. Frere-Jones demonstrates that Black American producers “got there way before,”⁶² pointing out that they supplied most of the samples on *Discovery*. Indeed, on “Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger,” Daft Punk samples Edwin Birdsong’s “Cola Bottle Baby,” a master of which was used on the final version of “Stronger.” While West may have sampled Daft Punk on *Graduation*, he had already, as Frere-Jones notes, employed the technique of looping a patchwork of samples in his production on Jay-Z’s “Takeover.” In other words, West did not need to appropriate the aesthetics of Daft Punk to engage in experimentation.

Deconstructing such a binary allows for the work of *re*-constructing a radical tradition of Black music to begin. What Pytlik fails to note is that West was influenced not just by European music but also by the music of contemporary Black American producers. It was Timbaland whom West solicited to help fix the “sonics” of the kick drum on “Stronger,”

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. Frere-Jones, “How Does It Feel,” *Sidecar*, March 3, 2021, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/how-does-it-feel>.

62. Ibid.

which had been irritating West because he felt that it was not “knocking.”⁶³ Such a collaboration extends the lineage of the Black radical aesthetics that contributed to the production of “Stronger”: from Edwin Birdsong’s funk to Kanye West’s chipmunk soul to Timbaland’s “futuristic disco.”⁶⁴ If West was able to avoid the temptation of nostalgia, he did so by appropriating not just “European” music but also a “futuristic” tradition of Black radical aesthetics.

AUTOTUNE, EXPERIMENTALISM, AND BLACK RADICAL AESTHETICS

If West’s first three albums comprised a nominal trilogy connected by a “chipmunk soul” style of music, *808s & Heartbreak* would mark a radical departure due to the use of a contentious production technique: West sang, rather than rapped, through the pitch-correction software, Auto-Tune. What this technology offered West was a means to broaden the emotional content of his music: namely, it allowed him to express the personal grief that he was feeling at the time. In November 2007, his mother, Donda West, died following complications from cosmetic surgery. A few months later, he split from his fiancée, Alexis Phifer. On “Coldest Winter,” West laments the loss of an undefined “friend” and questions whether he will “ever love again.”⁶⁵ As West put it, “808s came from suffering multitude losses at the same time—it’s like losing an arm and a leg and having to find a way to keep walking through it.”⁶⁶ West’s grief was worsened by the fact that he “blamed himself”⁶⁷ for his mother’s death. Specifically, he blamed his own desire for fame and wealth, the very achievements he had boasted about on *Graduation*. It is to Auto-Tune that West turned to formalize his mounting sense of alienated fame.

Scott Plagenhoef, in his review of *808s & Heartbreak* for *Pitchfork*, situates West’s Auto-Tuned vocals within a lineage of vocal manipulation that includes only white artists. Plagenhoef suggests that vocal manipulation has acted as a “signpost” for “futuristic” music since Joe Meek’s *I Hear a New World*.⁶⁸ Plagenhoef goes on to provide a number of more recent examples: from the “screwing with vocals” on Radiohead’s *Kid A/Amnesiac*, the Knife’s *Silent Shout*, and Daft Punk’s *Discovery* to the “trick of shifting pitches and speeds” revived by Battles and Dan Deacon to Vernon’s practice of singing through a vocoder.⁶⁹

The construction of such a lineage of white vocal manipulation is made possible through a dismissal of Black vocal manipulation as commercial. Auto-Tune-enhanced

63. ProduceThatSoul, “Kanye West & Timbaland In The Studio Working On ‘Stronger,’” YouTube, January 30, 2009, video, 6:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Nl2Wn1pjrs>.

64. Luke Bainbridge, “Timbaland, *Shock Value* Review,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/mar/18/urbanmusic.shopping>.

65. Kanye West, “Coldest Winter,” *808s & Heartbreak*, Def Jam Recordings, 2008.

66. Greene, Jayson, “The Coldest Story Ever Told: The Influence of Kanye West’s *808s & Heartbreak*,” *Pitchfork*, September 22, 2015, <https://pitchfork.com/features/overtones/9725-the-coldest-story-ever-told-the-influence-of-kanye-wests-808s-heartbreak/>.

67. Plagenhoef, “Kanye West: *808s and Heartbreak* Album Review.”

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

singing was common among rappers before the release of *808s & Heartbreak*. It was T-Pain who popularized this production technique, scoring a string of top-10 hits that began with “I’m Sprung” in 2005. The “T-Pain effect,”⁷⁰ as it came to be known, was soon used by rappers such as Lil Wayne and Young Jeezy on “Lollipop” and “Put On,” respectively, to great commercial success. Noting that “[s]tylized Auto-Tune seems to be on about every third song on top 40 radio these days,” Plagenhoef dismisses such vocal manipulation as a “radio fad.”⁷¹ He even criticizes the guest verses by Wayne and Jeezy on *808s & Heartbreak* as the “low points”⁷² of the album.

A binary distinction emerges here between Black and white vocal manipulation: where the vocal manipulations of white artists are commended as “futuristic,” the vocal manipulations of Black rappers like Jeezy are dismissed as a “fad” and thereby situated in a present that is already receding into the past. West is commended for being not “an opportunist or a bandwagon-jumper” like these Black rappers but rather a “master assimilator” who is again looking out to the wider world for cultural and artistic influences.⁷³ What Plagenhoef fails to account for in making such a claim is that West’s vocal manipulation was influenced by the very “radio-ready rap”⁷⁴ he dismisses. Indeed, West began experimenting with Auto-Tune while performing his collaboration with T-Pain, “Good Life,” live and then “fell in love”⁷⁵ with Auto-Tune while working on remixes of the Wayne and Jeezy songs. West’s guest verse on “Put On” troubles the binary distinction that Plagenhoef seeks to establish as it was on this apparently commercial song that West first began his radical experimentation with Auto-Tuned vocals as a means to express the grief that he felt after his mother’s death.

What the construction of such a white experimentalism requires is the forgetting of Black radical aesthetics. Ian Penman has critiqued the prominent belief that techno would not have emerged from the inner-city areas of Detroit without the influence of the German synthesizer group Kraftwerk. Penman notes that many early adopters of synth/beat-box technology “weren’t so pale,”⁷⁶ citing the examples of Timmy Thomas, Shuggie Otis, Sly Stone, Stevie Wonder, and Lee Perry. It is the vocal manipulations of such Black musicians that are missing from Plagenhoef’s partial history. Specifically, the influence that Wonder’s vocal manipulations had on *808s and Heartbreak* has yet to be explored.⁷⁷ What Wonder did for synthesizer music on *Talking Book* was, as Carol

70. Reynolds, Simon, “How Auto-Tune Revolutionized the Sound of Popular Music,” *Pitchfork*, September 17, 2018.

71. Plagenhoef, “Kanye West: *808s and Heartbreak* Album Review.”

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.

75. Reid Shaheem, “Kanye West’s *808s & Heartbreak* Album Preview: More Drums, More Singing, ‘No Typical Hip-Hop Beats,’” *MTV*, October 15, 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20081020035949/http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1597139/20081015/west_kanye.jhtml.

76. Ian Penman, “Vorsprung durch Techno,” *London Review of Books*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n17/ian-penman/vorsprung-durch-techno>.

77. West’s most direct engagement with Wonder’s music thus far has been a cover he performed of “They Won’t Go When I Go” at the Museum of Modern Art in 2011.

Cooper argues, to “humanize it to a greater extent than ever before.”⁷⁸ Cooper considers the meaning of tiny shifts in inflection, whispered asides, and improvised solos, noting how Wonder warms the vocals on “Blame It on the Sun” just enough to give the impression of “unshed tears.”⁷⁹ Similarly, West should be understood to have humanized Auto-Tune, using this technology to signify grief and alienation. Simon Reynolds equates the “wracked shivers” that shoot through West’s vocal delivery of the “how could you be so” refrain on “Heartless” to “a trembling lip or twitching eyelid.”⁸⁰ What Wonder and West represent through the manipulation of their vocals is, what Kevin Quashie refers to as “quiet.” Quashie introduces this concept to expand the racial category of Blackness, which he argues tends to be understood as expressing publicness and thereby resistance. “Quiet” articulates instead the “expressiveness of the interior.”⁸¹ By vocalizing tears that are unshed or lips and eyelids that are trembling and twitching, Wonder and West represent the broad scope of inner life that is a person’s “quiet.”

A lineage of radical Black vocal manipulation begins to reveal itself here. This lineage extends from Wonder to West and would later extend further to some of the most acclaimed and successful musicians of the past two decades. Just a year after the release of *808s & Heartbreak*, Drake rapped over a sample of West’s “Say You Will” on “Say What’s Real” from *So Far Gone*. His collaborator and frequent producer, Noah “40” Shebib, explains how “impactful” it was “to hear [Drake] spilling his heart over that kind of production.”⁸² He admits that they “ran with that sound.”⁸³ Such a lineage temporalizes Black experimentalism by imbuing it with a past as well as a future. Indeed, *Pitchfork* even wrote a more glowing retrospective of *808s & Heartbreak* in 2015, admitting that it had “become a touchstone for musicians interested in exploring emotional and artistic upheaval”⁸⁴ and citing its influence on rap music through artists ranging from Soulja Boy to Chief Keef to Dej Loaf and Lil Durk, among others.

What is missing from the consideration of West’s music thus far is a focus on the collaborative spirit that allowed for its creation. West has stated in reference to collaborators Kid Cudi and Mr. Hudson, who are both featured on *808s and Heartbreak*, that “we created this sound.”⁸⁵ The number of collaborators increased dramatically on this album: *Late Registration* and *Graduation* had four and eight co-producers, respectively; on *808s & Heartbreak* there were at least five co-writers on nearly every song. As producer Jeff Bhasker tells it, there were eight writers in the room

78. Carol Cooper, “Stevie Wonder: *Talking Book* Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, February 27, 2022, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/stevie-wonder-talking-book/>.

79. Ibid.

80. Reynolds, “How Auto-Tune Revolutionized the Sound of Popular Music.”

81. Kevin Everod Quashie, “The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet,” *African American Review* vol. 34, no 2-3 (Summer/Fall 2009): 330.

82. Greene, “The Coldest Story Ever Told: The Influence of Kanye West’s *808s & Heartbreak*.”

83. Ibid.

84. Greene, “The Coldest Story Ever Told.”

85. Carlos Gómez Haslam, “Kanye West - 808s & Heartbreak Live @ Hollywood Bowl (High Quality Audio),” YouTube, May 10, 2020, video, 1:17:42, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5U-PC_OUuYg.

during the making of “Love Lockdown.”⁸⁶ This “creative CEO”⁸⁷ method of album-making would be used by West again: most famously for *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. If a lineage of Black radical aesthetics has thus far been reconstructed, Black and white artists will now be shown to have labored together to produce the radical aesthetics of “indie rap” through a consideration of the interracial collaborations of West and Vernon.

THE COLLABORATIVE SPIRIT OF “INDIE RAP”

Vernon first collaborated with West on West’s “Lost in the World,” which features a prominent sample of “Woods” from Bon Iver’s early EP, *Blood Bank*. Vernon explains that he labored with West to change and manipulate the sample: the song “was kind of bare,” so Vernon “added some choir-sounding stuff” and “thicked out the samples” with his voice.⁸⁸ They would, as Vernon puts it, “just sit there and collaborate,”⁸⁹ with Vernon eventually working on about 10 songs during the recording of West’s fifth album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. Vernon describes how West would play songs in the studio and ask Vernon, “Can you do something here?”⁹⁰ As he tells it, their method consisted of listening to songs a couple times and then “going back and forth.”⁹¹

West and Vernon epitomize the collaborative spirit of “indie rap.” While West was a more successful and acclaimed artist at the time, their collaborations were based on a mutual admiration: West has referred to Vernon as his “favorite living artist,”⁹² while Vernon has referred to West as an “inspiration.”⁹³ Vernon has described how “encouraging” he found West’s admiration: “We were listening back to ‘Lost in the World’ and Kanye said, ‘That’s Justin singing that thing.’ Nicki [Minaj] just looked at me, like, ‘Him? Right on . . .’ It was a really rad thing.”⁹⁴ Vernon explains that West is the “executive” when working with others, but that “he gives you room to explore yourself and to express whatever. Whatever’s the best for the song, he’ll get to that. By any means necessary, however it happens, he’s down for it, and that means sometimes he’s steering, and sometimes he’s letting go.”⁹⁵ Such a freedom to explore, or what Vernon describes as a “very open artistic vibe,” is evident in Vernon’s vocal techniques on “Lost in the Woods:” what West wanted was for Vernon to continue using Auto-Tune “in a different

86. Greene, “The Coldest Story Ever Told.”

87. Ibid.

88. Ryan Dombal, “Justin Vernon Talks Kanye Collaboration, Gayngs,” *Pitchfork*, August 13, 2010, <https://pitchfork.com/news/39752-justin-vernon-talks-kanye-collaboration-gayngs/>.

89. Ibid.

90. Logan Hill, “Bon Iver’s Justin Vernon on Recording Kanye’s *Dark Fantasy*,” *Vulture*, November 24, 2010, https://www.vulture.com/2010/11/bon_ivers_justin_vernon_on.html.

91. Ibid.

92. Adam Lujan, “Kanye West says Bon Iver’s Justin Vernon is his ‘favorite living artist,’” *Entertainment Weekly*, August 2, 2016, <https://ew.com/article/2016/08/02/kanye-west-bon-iver-justin-vernon/>.

93. Grayson Currin, “Bon Iver,” *Pitchfork*, June 13, 2011, <https://pitchfork.com/features/interview/7989-bon-iver/>.

94. Hill, “Bon Iver’s Justin Vernon.”

95. Ibid.

kind of way.”⁹⁶ A song like “Lost in the Woods” offers an ideal of collaboration: it is the product of a collective labor of individuals whose mutual contributions through a process of exchange cease to be differentiable.

This collaboration between West and Vernon produced a new, indefinable sound. Critics have noted that “Lost in the Woods” combines the disparate elements of rap and indie rock so seamlessly that it transcends the boundaries of each genre. Frere-Jones admits that, while the song does contain rapping, he has a hard time “figuring out what kind of music this is.”⁹⁷ For him, West’s music originates within hip-hop but has come to include “so many varieties” of music that it can most accurately be referred to as “simply Kanye.”⁹⁸ Vernon echoes these sentiments when he describes West as “bigger” than hip hop: for him, West is simply making “records.”⁹⁹

The “indie rap” that West and Vernon produced counters what Frere-Jones identifies as the primary fault of contemporary music: the decline of interracial collaboration. Frere-Jones, as discussed earlier, has lamented the influence that a singer with only a tenuous link to American Black music like Brian Wilson has exerted on indie rock. Mark Richardson echoes these sentiments, identifying the Beach Boys as “the primary touchstone for layered vocals in indie music.”¹⁰⁰ Yet, Richardson singles Vernon out from his peers as having outgrown such influences: Vernon’s “timbre comes from somewhere else entirely,” according to Richardson, as it evokes “the grain and expression of soul music” as well as “the mythological echoes of folk.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, Vernon’s vocal timbre has been likened to that of his Black contemporaries in indie rock like TV on the Radio’s Tunde Adebimpe.¹⁰² It is the racial uncertainty of Vernon’s voice that would have appealed to West, who invited Vernon back as a collaborator when recording his next album, *Yeezus*. As Mike Dean, a producer on the album, put it, Vernon “doesn’t fit in with any genres—you never know if he’s gonna sing like the Bee Gees or some crazy distorted thing.” Vernon’s vocals on *Yeezus* serve to formalize West’s aesthetic interest at that time in crossing lines both musically and racially. The “indie rap” produced by West and Vernon creates what Josh Kun refers to as an “audiotopia.” Kun defines this concept as “the space within and produced by a music element that offers the listener and/or the musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world.”¹⁰³ In other words, the interracial collaborations between West and Vernon create a musical space where utopian longings are enacted through the bringing together of racial identities deemed incompatible.

96. Ibid.

97. Frere-Jones, “Anytime, Anywhere,” *The New Yorker*, November 28, 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/12/06/anytime-anywhere>.

98. Ibid.

99. Dombal, “Justin Vernon Talks Kanye Collaboration, Gayngs.”

100. Mark Richardson, “Bon Iver: *Bon Iver* Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, June 20, 2011, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15551-bon-iver/>.

101. Ibid.

102. Stephen M. Deusner, “Bon Iver: *For Emma, Forever Ago* Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, October 4, 2007, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/10709-for-emma-forever-ago/>.

103. Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 22–23.

West and Vernon reveal that an “audiotopia” can be the best place but also *no* place. The last song that they worked on together was Francis and the Lights’ “Friends,” which was released in 2016. West and Vernon have since drifted apart due to their growing political differences, with Vernon stating in 2019 that he “can’t really kick it with [West] anymore on a personal level.”¹⁰⁴ West once made songs like “Lost in the World” that moved from Vernon’s solitude to Gil Scott-Heron’s ruminations on the African American experience—from, that is, the personal to the political, the “I” to the “we.” But as Frere-Jones points out,¹⁰⁵ West on *Yeezus* was already beginning to focus on an isolated “I.” “Blood on the Leaves” samples Nina Simone’s “Strange Fruit” but has nothing to say about lynching or slavery. Even “New Slaves” focuses mainly on West’s personal issues with critics and record-label executives. What is increasingly missing from West’s music today is the recognition, as evident on “Lost in the World,” that the personal is embedded in the structural. Instead, the political has, for West, come to be reduced to personal slights and grievances.

It is Vernon who today carries forward the collaborative spirit of “indie rap.” Vernon first learned how to run a collaborative recording session from West. He describes how working with West got his “mind spongy enough” to “invite [. . .] players and see what happens.”¹⁰⁶ Where “Woods” featured Vernon harmonizing with just himself, after working with West, Vernon began to place more emphasis on his band on *Bon Iver*, the follow-up to *Blood Bank*. By the time Vernon came to compose “iMi” from *Bon Iver*’s fourth album, *i,i*, he was employing 28 different people to create one song.¹⁰⁷ This ethos of collaboration is evident in the thematic content of Vernon’s music. He has explained that the title of *i,i* refers to two selves: “I” and “I.” For Vernon, beginning with the plural rather than the singular, with a connected “we” rather than a solitary “I” emphasizes the responsibility we all have to one another: as he puts it, “you are me, and I am you.”¹⁰⁸ He stresses that “when we hurt ourselves [. . .] it has a reaction to others.”¹⁰⁹ In Vernon’s work, the collaborative spirit of “indie rap” has thus become a mature ethic: life itself necessitates collaboration. ■

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109. *Ibid.*

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