

Beats to Relax/Study To: Contradiction and Paradox in Lofi Hip Hop (1)

Emma Winston

Goldsmiths, University of London
e.winston@gold.ac.uk

Laurence Saywood

Goldsmiths, University of London
lsayw002@gold.ac.uk

Abstract

Lofi hip hop is a musical genre which is distributed and mediated entirely via the internet, and which, to our knowledge, is currently unexamined academically. This article serves as an introductory investigation into the genre, which we hope may inspire further research and perhaps call into question existing trends in the analysis of “internet-born” music genres, which, as Adam Harper (2017) notes, often emphasize the degenerative effects of digital technology. We briefly define lofi hip hop stylistically and aesthetically, before exploring its contradictory relationship with nostalgia. We then consider the genre’s mediation and reception in terms of its participants’ relationship with the material conditions of late capitalism. We conclude that lofi hip hop is characterized by a series of complex paradoxes navigated effortlessly by its listeners, highlighting a shift in everyday reality amongst a generation of young people for whom the social internet is simply an ordinary part of life.

KEYWORDS: internet music, lofi hip hop, social media, subculture and scene, music in everyday life

Introduction

Lofi hip hop, named for its producers’ deliberate introduction of “low fidelity,” analog-style sonic imperfections into their digitally produced tracks, is a musical genre traceable to the mid-2010s which has stylistic roots in 1990s instrumental or

experimental hip hop, and which, to our knowledge, currently remains unexamined in academic publications. Lofi hip hop tracks appear to be mediated almost entirely via the internet, with its enthusiasts congregating across multiple online social networking platforms. The genre enjoys particular popularity on the video platform YouTube, where 24/7 livestreams and curated lofi hip hop mixes are broadcast by numerous channels. The purely online distribution YouTube facilitates seems to enable channels from a range of geographical locations to rise to popularity: a sampling of some of the accounts displaying on the first page of an anonymous YouTube search for the term “lofi hip hop” shows that channel ChilledCow (2019) appears to be based in France; College Music (2019) and the bootleg boy (2019) in the United Kingdom; InYourChill (2019), Syros (2019), and Ambition (2019) in the United States of America; Mellowbeat Seeker (2019) in South Korea. The channels we have just listed each have between hundreds of thousands and millions of subscribers; ChilledCow, notably, appears to be the most popular lofi hip hop streaming service on YouTube, and possesses more than three million subscribers, with the bootleg boy close behind at two million subscribers. ChilledCow’s most popular stream, “lofi hip hop radio - beats to relax/study to” (2018), received an estimated 126.4 million views between August 2018 and August 2019 (Socialblade, 2019). In writing this paper, we initially planned to refer to lofi hip hop as a “microgenre”, but abandoned this upon realizing that by these metrics it is far from a niche, underground style of music; we are left to assume that the genre’s disintermediation from the music industry at large, outside of social networking sites, has contributed to its neglect (it is worth noting that we use the term ‘genre’ here, despite lofi hip hop’s arguable position as a subgenre of hip hop more broadly, because we believe it to be comparable in significance and popularity to the internet musics discussed in the work of Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth (2017), which are referred to throughout as ‘genres’). This article, therefore, serves as an introductory investigation into lofi hip hop, which we hope may pique interest in the genre. We aim, here, to briefly define lofi hip hop stylistically and aesthetically, before performing a more detailed analysis of a track to explore the genre’s complex and contradictory nostalgic relationship with the past. We follow this with a consideration of how lofi hip hop’s mediation and reception reflects and expresses its listeners’ and producers’ ambivalent relationship with the material socioeconomic conditions of post-Fordist late capitalism.

We theorize that lofi hip hop produces its meaning for listeners, at least in part, through a series of seemingly mutually exclusive, contradictory paradoxes: it relies aesthetically upon an elaborated form of what Svetlana Boym (2002: 49) refers to as “reflective nostalgia”, which engages both with hyper-specific memories of popular media which may have been consumed during, or at least associated with, a listener’s childhood, and, simultaneously, with a vague, abstract longing for a past which the listener *is fully aware never existed*; its impossibility is accepted, even cherished, and is valued in its own right. It also speaks of an equally paradoxical compliance with, and resistance against, the large corporate structures of contemporary social media, and the erosion of boundaries between work and leisure characteristic of late capitalism. Our participant-observation activities in the comments sections and live chat of several lofi hip hop channels, in particular the live chat for “lofi hip hop radio - beats to relax/study to”, left us with the impression that many of the genre’s most enthusiastic participants are current school or university students, who may be using the music simultaneously for its stated functional purposes of productivity and relaxation, for the emotional exploration which both its often supportive and caring social structures, and its complex use of nostalgia, facilitate. Born and Haworth’s (2017) work on internet music identifies

what we believe to be a series of predecessors of this genre, but in contrast to these earlier genres, lofi hip hop eschews many of the tendencies which scholars have previously identified within “internet-born” music; we suggest that this might call into question the often cynical narratives applied to these musics, and provide an alternative lens through which to view online musical participation. We ultimately conclude that the contradictions which characterize lofi hip hop might be expressive of a particular contemporary mindset; lofi hip hop’s student participants are among the first generation too young to remember a time before what Jonathan Crary (2014: 8) refers to as “the paradoxes of the expanding, non-stop life-world of twenty-first-century capitalism...inseparable from shifting configurations of sleep and waking, illumination and darkness, justice and terror, and...exposure, unprotectedness, and vulnerability”. If twenty-first-century normality is characterized by “systemic impossibility” (ibid.: 127), then, perhaps, engaging with the impossible through popular culture is simply a way to make sense of everyday life.

Defining lofi hip hop

Since lofi hip hop appears to be unexamined in academic writing, we will first endeavor here to provide a brief description of its sound and historical lineage for unfamiliar readers. Lofi hip hop is almost exclusively instrumental; it rarely features rapping or emceeing and rarely features sung vocals. As a general rule, the only voices heard in lofi hip hop livestreams or playlists are occasional snippets of speech, frequently extracted from the soundtrack of films or television shows, which are most often positioned at the very beginning or end of a track to evoke a particular mood, and not repeated (Alemoru, 2018). Although the term “hip hop” is now conventionally associated with rapping over an instrumental, as Joseph G. Schloss (2014: 2) notes, the earliest hip hop took the form of live performances in which a DJ and a master of ceremonies took “relatively discrete” roles; the DJ played rhythmic parts of popular records on a turntable while the master of ceremonies communicated with the audience, encouraging them to dance. Schloss describes an evolution in complexity of these roles as hip hop made its way to recorded media, in which MCs’ speech became increasingly rhythmic and narrative-based, and DJs, later referred to as producers, began using technologies other than turntables in a studio context, eventually including digital sampling. Schloss’s emphasis is upon producers and the processes they use to “make beats”; although many work alongside rappers, others do not, and although lofi hip hop’s predominantly instrumental nature is a distinguishing feature of its style, its practices nonetheless represent a continuation of hip hop music production techniques more generally. The tempo of lofi hip hop tracks is usually relatively slow, between 70 and 85 BPM, by our own sampling. In terms of instrumentation, its sound tends to foreground acoustic or electroacoustic instruments; the instrument most frequently heard in the hours we spent engaging with ChilledCow was the acoustic piano (see “Yawn” by Jinsang and Two Sleepy, 2017). The electric piano, particularly the Fender Rhodes, also appears to be common (see “Sum loops” by Spliff Jacksun, 2017; “Sweaters are for introverts (instrumental)” by Aixion, 2018; “Waves” by Philanthrope, 2016), as does the guitar, which is usually either a nylon-stringed classical guitar or a hollow-bodied electric, often processed through a vibrato or chorus effect (see “Let me tell you about her” by Aimless, 2017; “Springtime Loop” by Kuranos, 2018; “I just wanna be happy” by Karson, 2018). Less common, but still occasionally heard instruments include the harp (see

“Waking up at night to get some food.” by Sky.High, 2018), ukulele (see “I have love for everyone besides myself” by Barnes Blvd, 2018), and samples of orchestral instruments, particularly string sections, are also sometimes heard (see “Riva []” by J^p^h, 2016; “Drwn” by Ramsey, 2017). Harmonically, lofi hip hop tracks frequently use jazz-influenced extended chords, perhaps because jazz is a popular source amongst beatmakers for samples (see “Jazz & rain” by Nymano, 2015; “Night Ride” by Eddie Rohosy, 2017; “Letting go” by Soho, 2017a).

Lofi hip hop’s *hip-hop* lineage, as it were, is perhaps most aurally evident in what Mike D’Errico (2015: 280) refers to as “experimental hip hop”, which initially emerged in the early 2000s, is generally instrumental, and which he suggests is characterised in its production by rhythms which are unquantized (that is, not locked perfectly to the beat), heavy sidechain compression (in which the sounding of a particular instrument or frequency in the mix, often the kick drum, triggers another instrument, often a melodic line, to momentarily dip in volume) to give the track a “pumping” feel, and control of digital software with hardware peripherals. D’Errico attributes experimental hip hop’s unquantized drums and sidechaining to the practices of J Dilla, a producer active in the mid-1990s Detroit underground hip hop scene, and who Elijah C. Watson (2019) notes is viewed by lofi hip hop enthusiasts as ‘a veteran’ and ‘the godfather of lofi hip hop.’ Dilla’s signature production style was achieved by hand-playing beats on an Akai MPC digital sampler, resulting in a rhythmic flexibility which foregrounds what Reynolds (2009) describes as a “looser, human feel, fitful and fallible, sometimes pushing ‘off-beat’ to the edge of plain wrong”; although sampled hip hop from the 1980s and onwards, as Schloss (2014: 141) notes, tends to “seek a balance between sounding mechanically precise and overly loose” to establish a sense of groove, Dilla’s style took microrhythmic variation to an extreme. The ‘human feel’ Reynolds describes is noted and valued, too, by practitioners; Kanye West, in Hypebeast (2017) praises the ‘organic feel’ of Dilla’s MPC beats, comparing them to a production session by veteran jazz producer Quincy Jones. D’Errico (2015: 287) also notes that, along with his compatriots such as Flying Lotus, Dilla’s use of sidechaining, which causes the amplitude of the overall track to duck at moments of heavy bass frequency, gives his tracks a “wave-like sonic quality that...disrupts the listener’s sense of solid rhythmic pacing”. This increased rhythmic fluidity results, D’Errico suggests, both from the absence of an MC requiring a strictly timed track to rap over, and from a move away from the traditional turntable-based sampling methods of earlier hip hop, towards dedicated samplers, and, ultimately, digital audio workstations. The rhythmic shifts and flexibility D’Errico and Reynolds discuss, though not as pronounced as in some of Dilla’s work, are almost universal in lofi hip hop tracks; sidechaining melodic elements of the track to the kick drum, resulting in a rhythmic rise and fall of volume, can be heard in any number of tracks (see “Springtime Stroll” by Secret Crates, 2015; “Be your girl” by Eugene Cam, 2016; “Egyptian pools” by Jinsang, 2015), as can slightly loose, rhythmically relaxed drums, particularly the kick and the snare (see “Soulful eyes” by Hoogway, 2019; “Moss Garden” by Chef Boy RJ, 2019; “Her eyes” J’san, 2018; “Tired” by Chief, 2017). Dilla’s use of jazz samples in tracks such as Fun Cowboys’ (1997) “Life” also finds a parallel in many lofi hip hop tracks (see “Jazz & rain by Nymano, 2015; “Night Ride” by Eddie Rohosy, 2017; “Letting go” by Soho, 2017a).

Lofi hip hop, like the experimental hip hop D’Errico describes, also relies upon repurposing samples of pre-existing music to create loops upon which to build something new. Schloss (2014: 136) attributes the use of looping samplers in hip hop to the earlier practices of turntable-based DJs, who would manually manipulate their records to repeat and extend the most danceable, rhythmic drum breaks from

soul and funk records in live performances. When samplers became widely used in beat-making, the practice of repeating single sections of more extended compositions continued. The process of “creating a cycle out of linearly-conceived melody,” suggests Schloss (138), remains a core feature of hip hop, and lofi hip hop is no exception; the central melodic elements of tracks are usually extracted from pre-existing recordings, repeated and recontextualized over drums usually made up of individual samples. There is also a tendency within the genre to seek out obscure melodic samples, often extracted from jazz or popular media soundtracks. This, too, has its lineage in earlier hip hop practices. In *Retromania*, Simon Reynolds (2011: 363) describes the development of a “crate-digger” culture in hip hop, in which producers would scour thrift stores for records containing obscure samples to repurpose, in what he refers to as a process of “reverent exploitation”; both lofi hip hop’s musical and speech samples are collected and repurposed in a process mirroring crate-digging, albeit facilitated by the availability of music in a digital format online.

D’Errico (2015: 282) suggests that experimental hip hop artists deliberately position themselves as “post-turntable,” but the “lofi” in lofi hip hop’s name, referring to low-fidelity recording and playback technologies, denotes a rather different approach. Lofi hip hop tracks frequently feature digital processing to artificially age and distort samples which would otherwise be decidedly high-fidelity; this usually takes the form of deliberately filtering out the higher frequencies of a sample, and, at times, layering a crackling vinyl sound effect over the track (see Too Ugly, 2018), to give the impression of a loop taken from a vinyl record; Izotope’s free VST plugin Vinyl seems to be the method of choice for many producers. This practice may also be traceable to J Dilla’s work; in *Wired* (2014), drummer Questlove describes Dilla’s use of cassette tape hiss samples in tracks produced as late as 2002 to introduce an ‘amount of imperfection’ to his sound. Similarly, despite its almost completely online distribution, one of the stylistic hallmarks of the genre is the emulation of pre-digital methods of recording and playback, by introducing imperfections not present in the original track. This creates a kind of timelessness in many lofi hip hop tracks; it is frequently difficult to tell whether a loop is extracted from a mid-20th-century recording of a jazz standard or from a YouTube video whose audio is digitally distorted in post-production. Despite being “post-turntable,” producers seem, at times, unwilling to let go of the past. This combination of digital production and online distribution with the application of artificial analog effects is the most obvious aural indicator of lofi hip hop’s complex and contradictory relationship with nostalgia and the past; we will now discuss the particular quality of this nostalgia, and begin to explore the first of the paradoxes which, in our opinion, characterize the genre.

Nostalgia in lofi hip hop

Although lofi hip hop’s aesthetic engagement with the past may represent a deviation from the disavowing of turntablism D’Errico describes in experimental hip hop, it also appears, at least superficially, to conform to Svetlana Boym’s descriptions of nostalgia as produced in an online context. “Cyberspace,” suggests Boym (2002: 482), “makes the bric-a-brac of nostalgia available in digital form, appearing more desirable than the real artifacts.” By artificially aging audio to imbue it with a patina of a non-specific past, then, lofi hip hop seems to be doing nothing new. But to cease an analysis here is to ignore what we believe is the underlying complexity of the genre’s approach to nostalgia and meaning, which,

we propose, far from a superficial engagement with the past, actually more resembles an extension and development of Boym's (2002: 82) definition of "reflective nostalgia", which seeks neither to engage only superficially with nostalgia, nor to recreate a perfect copy of a past life, but embraces the fragmentation of memory and defers any actual homecoming, "enamoured of distance, not the referent itself" (Boym, 2002: 82). We suggest that lofi hip hop engages its listeners and producers simultaneously in nostalgia for their memories of childhood, but also for what is acknowledged to be an imagined past, not only unreachable in the present, but never experienced in the first instance. We will illustrate this with a brief analysis of Netherlands-based producer Eevee's (2017) track "I wonder if we're dead," as well as a discussion of its reception.

We have already alluded in this paper to the sampling of spoken-word audio from popular media, a frequent trope in lofi hip hop tracks. However, the use of film and TV as a source for samples is not limited to speech; although classical and jazz recordings are commonly sampled for musical material, loops extracted from popular media are also not infrequently heard, and bear particularly interesting implications for nostalgia and affective potential. "I wonder if we're dead" samples, as its primary loop, the soundtrack of *The Legend of Korra*, an animated series which aired between 2012 and 2014 on TV network Nickelodeon. YouTube channel Dreamwave's (2017) repost of "I wonder if we're dead", like virtually all lofi hip hop tracks on the platform, leaves the origin of its sample unstated in its video or description, but its comments section reveals that, in spite of this, many of its listeners are aware of its provenance, and includes several public discussions of the show and its soundtrack. The sample itself is composed of two rising string-section phrases, which Eevee has processed through a low-pass filter to remove most of the original recording's high frequencies, giving it a muted and softened tone. This appears to be a stylistic choice, rather than being driven by the limitations of analog technology; in an interview from 2017, Eevee notes that her production workflow takes place primarily in the DAW Fruity Loops on her laptop (Kurkdjian, 2017). The effect is particularly pronounced because the sample is orchestral; it suddenly sounds aged and timeless despite the show's relatively recent release, and could be drawn from a recording made any time in perhaps the past fifty years. As such, the loop at the center of "I wonder if we're dead" performs a dual nostalgic function: first, it taps into personal memory of *The Legend of Korra* for any listeners familiar with the sample's source.

Semiotically, this nostalgic mechanism operates at what Charles Sanders Peirce (2014: 103) refers to as the "indexical" level, in which a sign relates to its source through experience. Thomas Turino (1999: 229) notes that an index of this kind can have "special potential for creating direct emotional effects" when tied to personal memories such as those from childhood because they are perceived as "real", or "true", parts of the experiences signified. The effect on the listener is personal; it is bound up with individual lived experience, and with reality. Simultaneously, however, a different kind of nostalgia is evoked. The artificial aging of the sample, in a kind of "performance" of low fidelity, positions it in a non-specific past, in an age of analog recording technology, which dates to well before *The Legend of Korra*. We suggest that the distortion and aging of the sample work to position it in an imagined past that never existed, and that the very act of transparently fracturing the sample serves to evoke nostalgia in its listeners, just as Boym's (2002: 49) reflective nostalgia "cherishes shattered fragments of memory." For listeners personally unfamiliar with *The Legend of Korra*, a glance at the repost's comments section informs them of the sample's source, and allows them to share in the childhood memories of those who have visited the page and listened to the track

before them; we suggest that the knowledge, alone, of the sample's repurposing from a children's cartoon may be sufficient to recall their childhoods. A few commenters note that despite having never seen the series from which the sample is taken, hearing it nonetheless evokes a sense of familiarity: "This sounds familiar to me...people are saying *Korra*, but I never got around to watching that," states one commenter. "I've never seen *Korra*, but remember it from when I was a kid," notes another (Dreamwave, 2017). We wonder whether, for these listeners, the imagined past we discuss might also blend with their memories of childhood, blurring the boundaries between their own lived experiences, and those of others with whom they have come into contact only via YouTube's comments section.

Lofi hip hop is not by any means the first "internet-born" genre to evoke nostalgia in order to make meaning; Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth's (2017) article on internet-mediated music positions four earlier genres of internet music (hauntology, hypnagogic pop, chillwave and vaporwave) in what they refer to as "the nostalgia genre continuum", the focus being the "recovery, re-imagination and remediation of past popular-cultural media epochs", closer to Born's conceptualization of "restorative nostalgia", in which the reconstruction of the past is emphasized more than the loss of the past itself (Born and Haworth, 2017: 625). Born and Haworth identify kitsch and irony as key elements in the creation of nostalgia within these genres. Adam Harper (2017) identifies three narratives of 'digital degeneracy' frequently named in analyses of internet music by its critics: digital maximalism (after Simon Reynolds, identifying a perceived "excess of complexity and referentiality"), kitsch (resulting from a claimed "impoverishment of culture caused by populism", and uncanny representations of humanity (referring to a perceived eeriness elicited by the electronic manipulation of sounds associated with the organic or authentic). Although Harper questions uncritically emphasizing these narratives, the genres Born and Haworth describe seem especially at risk of inviting analysis in terms of the uncanny. Vaporwave, in particular, frequently makes use of the stylistic trope of slowing and pitching down often familiar songs, emphasizing "glitches via repetition or audio effects such as distortion, pitch shifting, and high doses of compression," by Grafton Tanner's analysis (2016: 10-11). Tanner, in line with Harper's critique, suggests that vaporwave's treatment of audio evokes "uncanniness" and emphasizes a feeling of alienation (ibid). The distortion applied to lofi hip tracks, as in "I wonder if we're dead," is qualitatively completely distinct from vaporwave; instruments and voices remain recognizable, and the aging of audio which takes place generally seems to pursue an imitation of the experience of listening on analog media. It is difficult, therefore, to see how Harper's identified qualities of kitsch or digital maximalism could even be applied to the track or others like it by critics; timbres in lofi hip hop tend to be kept relatively minimal, entirely unlike the glossy, futuristic pop considered in Harper's paper, and the genre's approach to nostalgia is warm, relaxing, and, ultimately, a cocoon of sound which does not demand unease from its listeners; to analyse it in terms of the narratives of digital degeneracy Harper describes seems, to us, to be difficult if not impossible. Although the past it evokes is an imagined one, it is blended with the real (or at least *a* real), and there is, seemingly, acceptance and cherishing of its loss. We suggest, then, that as a seeming stylistic outlier amongst the genres of "internet music" to which academic attention has so far been turned, lofi hip hop might strengthen Harper's problematizing of the degeneracy narrative, and might be a fruitful site for further analysis of music mediated online and its attendant social structures.

The track's reception in the comments of Dreamwave's repost reveals not only a nostalgia for an imagined past amongst listeners but a transparent fictionalization of it, as several pseudonymous users post emotional narrative microfiction in response to the track:

This song has like a off-gloomy-uneasy (sic) feel at the beginning to me, and then gradually turns into a bittersweet vibe. I imagine someone after a big climax in their life rushing home upset, yet not exactly sure how they feel. It is pouring outside as they go to their little apartment and scribble all their unexplainable feels (sic) in a journal and as they slowly get the intense feelings out, the song slightly changes and fades out. In the end the sun is coming out again, but it's still rainy. (Anonymous comment, Dreamwave, 2017).

Here's what this song makes me think of. Months after the bomb, your rations run low. You have to go out there, or at least go out with a bang. You step into the UV rays, and walk along the fence of the roof. You feel the rusted metal run across your finger tips (sic). Then, the audio fades, and the screen cuts to black. (Anonymous comment, Dreamwave, 2017).

Clinching (sic) my cold frail hands into the fence I look around watching everyday people pass by with ease. I regret my existence, but I continue to push along as a shallow shell of a human being. My feet press down firmly on the rooftop ground and I imagine myself preparing to be abducted and carried away by extraterrestrial life from beyond, that I will come to call my family. (Anonymous comment, Dreamwave, 2017).

Comments like these are frequent across lofi hip hop tracks on YouTube, and we read them as a kind of "playing along," a suspension of disbelief. This, we propose, is a deeper level of engagement than Boym's "bric-a-brac of nostalgia"; the track's meaning functions both through the knowledge (or discovery) of its relatively recent popular source, which may be tied to personal, affective memory, and at the same time through a process of reflective nostalgia, repositioning it in an imagined past; the track and its comments section collapses timelines so that mentions of the sample's source and emotional microfiction are consumed adjacent to one another. We also suggest that these functions interoperate, so that the specific, personal nostalgia becomes merged, in real-time, into a past which the listener *already knows* never to have existed; the impossibility of hearing the *Legend of Korra* sample as an artefact of a past before it existed merely serves to strengthen the sense of fragmentation upon which reflective nostalgia relies. D'Errico (2015: 283) proposes that, through repetition, microrhythmic shifts and chopped samples like those found throughout J Dilla's work (and throughout lofi hip hop) become stabilized. "Cutting, chopping and slicing," he suggests, "are normalized in the context of a stable and repetitive loop," in what Tricia Rose refers to as an "equilibrium inside the rupture." Rap, suggests Rose (1994: 102), "highlights points of rupture as it equalizes them." In lofi hip hop, this temporal rupture takes place not only on the microlevel of rhythmic musemes, but on the macrolevel of recording technology and era of sample provenance. If a longing marks reflective nostalgia for something that can never be retrieved, we suggest that what is seen in lofi hip hop is an elaboration on this tendency, so that not only is the nostalgic object acknowledged and cherished for its irretrievability, but for the very fact that it was never experienced in the first place. Lofi hip hop transparently fictionalizes the past, then openly celebrates that fictionalization in a complex and apparently

contradictory meta-reflection that is engaged in effortlessly, even thoughtlessly, by its enthusiasts.

Lofi hip hop and late capitalism

We have proposed, then, that lofi hip hop is characterized by a contradictory and simultaneous relationship with both a hyper-specific real past, and a vague imagined one, and that listeners and producers of the genre make meaning through a dialectical and self-conscious engagement with both. But we also note a similarly contradictory dualism in lofi hip hop's primary modes of mediation and dissemination, which we believe positions the genre as reflective of lived experience within the material conditions of post-Fordist late capitalism, particularly amongst young people. We suggest that this analytic lens might help to contextualize and explain the genre's engagement with nostalgia and the past, which we have already discussed, but also that it might represent a fruitful starting point for consideration of the changing nature of music and subculture in the age of the contemporary internet. In brief, post-Fordism describes an economic model of work under which, following the automation of much conventional industrial labour, "affective labour: is foregrounded. Affective labour, in theorist Paolo Virno's (2004: 107) terms, is work which centers around communication, emotion, and intellect; "thoughts and discourses...function as productive 'machines'." If the Fordist economy is characterized by workers performing predictable, mechanical tasks in a production line, the post-Fordist one requires infinitely more adaptability and, in turn, emotional and personal investment. Malcolm Harris (2017: 76) suggests that the increasing prevalence of affective work in the post-Fordist economic model is accompanied by a corresponding increase in emphasis upon preparing for the labor market which extends as far back as childhood; those who are millennials and younger, claims Harris, are being raised to work with their emotions as soon as they begin school, drilled to understand that "efficiency is our existential purpose". Lofi hip hop, we argue, expresses and reflects a simultaneous investment in and divestment of post-Fordist structures amongst its listeners, for whom the "extraordinary developments" of late capitalism "have always been the way things are" (Harris, 2017: 68).

Although lofi hip hop YouTube channels like Dreamwave's, which post individual tracks or curated playlists to be played back at a viewer's leisure are common, the most popular single platform for consumption of lofi hip hop is the channel ChilledCow, in particular the 24/7 livestream "lofi hip hop radio - beats to relax/study to" (ChilledCow, 2018), which YouTube analytics tool SocialBlade (2019) claims has received more than 130 million views since its inception. The looping animation which accompanies the stream, a girl in headphones studying at a cozy desk, has become something of a symbol of the genre, with numerous other channels adopting similar artwork; a collaborative campaign in 2019 led by lofi hip hop channel College Radio and the Samaritans used a variation of the animation to raise awareness of mental health resources for students (Erickson, 2019). Rather than a comments section, the livestream features a perpetually active live chat, which races past at high speed as participants interact with each other; as the title of the stream suggests, the majority of viewers appear to be studying either at school or university, and use the livestream as a tool to aid productivity in their work. By one reading, then, lofi hip hop operates as functional music, which serves a purpose for students or workers to improve their concentration and performance. Based upon the topics of discussion within the ChilledCow chat, in particular, a

substantial number of listeners use it for exactly this purpose; we observed that studying, deadlines and school or university work were among the most frequently discussed topics by participants in the chat, and it appeared that many users tuned into the channel specifically when they had work to complete.

This might be considered a form of what Anahid Kassabian (2001, paragraph 15) dubs “ubiquitous listening,” a passive, inattentive form of listening which she suggests is a result of the omnipresence of music in contemporary life, and which is characterized by people “living in industrialized settings...listen(ing) ‘alongside’ or simultaneous with other activities”. Ubiquitous listening is also, Kassabian proposes, “one vigorous example of the non-linearity of contemporary life.” Jonathan Crary (2013: 84) suggests that this non-linearity is a particular feature of late capitalism — or as he puts it, “24/7 capitalism” — which is “not simply a continuous or sequential capture of attention, but also a dense layering of time, in which multiple operations or attractions can be attended to in near-simultaneity, regardless of where one is or whatever else one might be doing”. In this sense, lofi hip hop might be interpreted as a natural product of these socioeconomic tendencies, symptomatic of a new form of listening and of a new approach to work. By the same token, we were struck by the casual juxtaposition in the stream’s title of “relaxing” and “studying,” as if the two were viewed as interchangeable. Sandra L. Hofferth and John F. Sandberg (2009) suggest a continuous trend of increased hours spent on homework for school students in the United States of America between 1981 and 2003, as well as an increase of time in school; work’s encroachment into the hours previously used for relaxation becomes the norm. Gilles Deleuze’s (1992) concept of a “control society” details a late 20th century tendency for surveillance and regulation of social life to extend outside of institutions such as work and school; where previously individuals were relatively institutionally unregulated outside of specific boundaries times and spaces, in a society of control these boundaries are lost. Lofi hip hop streams might, therefore, be read as one means to navigate collapsed boundaries and the expectation of self-regulation in a control society. It is notable, also, that lofi hip hop streams like ChilledCow’s rely on large corporate platforms such as YouTube (owned by Google’s Alphabet parent company) which are supported by targeted advertising; as Crary (2014: 47) puts it, late capitalism is also characterized by “passively and often voluntarily...collaborat(ing) in one’s own surveillance and data-mining”.

Despite this, and despite the fact that many listeners certainly appear to use the channel explicitly as a tool for self-regulation to increase productivity, at the same time, participants’ communication in the live chat of “lofi hip hop - beats to study/relax to” reveals, we suggest, something beyond numbed, impersonal compliance in preparation for a continuously intensifying labour market. Kemi Alemoru (2018) notes that the tone of lofi hip hop chatrooms is “uncharacteristically friendly,” and we too noted the overall supportiveness and community feel of the chatroom on the ChilledCow stream; listeners struggling with their workload were met with immediate support from their compatriots. “Here we go. I’ve got 3 homework to finish before 7pm”, said one user as we observed the chat, instantly met by another user with the reply “stay focused you got this.” “Guys ive (sic) exam tomorrow wish me good luck,” stated another user, met with a chorus of well-wishers that raced up the screen. Not all communication in the chat is work-focused; many users seem to use the chat primarily as a *distraction* from work and socioeconomic pressures, and as a way of socializing when in-person interaction is unavailable. “I didn’t feel like going to school today, I wasn’t feeling it today. If I had company all the time I wouldn’t be here” “Ok sister all the best, we’re here for you,” ran one exchange we observed. Participants in the live chat also often discuss

their mental health with others on the channel. Alemoru recalls a supportive conversation between two users during his observations of the channel, and suggests that the chat is constructed specifically to serve as a relatively safe anonymous online social space:

“I try to sleep but I can’t,” writes one user. “I pray for your wellness brother. I might go out anytime but I want you to know that I care for you,” replies another...The channels aren’t overrun with trolls or the obnoxiously righteous, and the channel owners add filters for bots and bring moderators on-board to keep the chat clean. (Alemoru, 2018).

We also speculate that the frequently emotive titles of lofi hip hop tracks might be acting as subtle prompts for listeners to share confessions and worries; “Things will be better by morning” by Jonas Langer (2018), “I have love for everyone besides myself” by barnesblvd (2018), and “Safe, now” by Aso and Harris Cole (2018) were three of the tracks on rotation during our observations of the channel exemplifying this tendency. If a Deleuzian control society is characterized by the disappearance of the spaces between institutionally regulated sites, the ChilledCow lofi hip hop chat appeared to us to hijack the heavily-surveilled YouTube platform to force a gap — at least for a brief moment — between (even within) those regulated spaces, facilitated by relative anonymity and consequence-free interactions between strangers in which affective labor is redirected away from work, and towards interpersonal care. We also suggest that the contradictory forms of nostalgia expressed in both the production and reception of much lofi hip hop might represent, at least on some level, awareness and acceptance that any perceived gap between control sites is temporary and impossible to maintain within the reality of wider socioeconomic structures. Lofi hip hop, for its young producers and listeners, is both a constant soundtrack to navigate real life and a means of escaping from it; it is both a tool with which to self-regulate alone and to connect with others. Far from being absent from the digital, reflective nostalgia, “enamoured of the distance, not of the referent itself” (Boym, 2002: 82), immersed in both the imagined and the real at once, seems an appropriate way to engage with a reality in which impossible expectations are simply the fabric of ordinary life.

It is worth noting also that these ambivalences are mirrored in participants’ relationship with the YouTube platform and wider music and media industrial structures. YouTube, like most other streaming platforms, relies upon algorithmically-generated suggestions to keep users on its site; the platform “learns” a user’s preferences and patterns of engagement, and (by default) will automatically forward them to a video selected to keep them on the site when their existing viewing or listening material has finished, and ultimately to maximize overall revenue for the platform itself. Yiannis Mylonas (2012: 4) warns that “the Web 2.0 user has no control over the usage of his/her material by third parties to generate economic value. Profit from users’ unpaid work is generated primarily through advertising... what is being dispossessed in Web 2.0 is users’ creativity, imagination, communication, and autonomy”. In the case of lofi hip hop livestreams like ChilledCow and College Music, tracks are submitted for potential playlisting on YouTube via direct messaging away from the platform itself, then sorted through and curated by a human listener, before eventually being uploaded to the stream to be broadcast (Winkie, 2019). Based on our observation of the livestreams over time, uploads appear to happen in batches usually approximately every few weeks, so that at any given time a channel has a large predetermined series of tracks on rotation which can be swapped in and out with new batches in

a similar manner to a traditional radio station. ChilledCow's YouTube channel is ad-supported and, therefore, still bound to the platform's existing revenue structures, but its 24/7 live-streaming structure means that it subverts YouTube's auto-forwarding (since its video is never "finished") and its content will always be human-selected rather than algorithmically chosen by surveillance. Some lofi hip hop producers seem happy to attempt to exploit the prevailing revenue structures of streaming platforms; we observed in the Facebook group "Lo Fi Hip Hop Community" that, while many producers share their music requesting (and receiving) constructive criticism, posts also periodically appear from users offering to give producers priority on streaming playlists for a fee. We also noted, however, that this practice did not go unquestioned; one survey was run in the group asking members how they felt about "people who ask for a fee to add music to their playlist," with suspicion of the practice ultimately winning 31 votes to 13. Lofi hip hop producers find themselves in a materially as well as artistically complex position; their practice both relies upon and subverts the structures of large corporate streaming platforms, just as their engagement with the music itself seems both to lean into and resist against late-capitalist notions of productivity and value.

Conclusion

This article represents more of a beginning than a comprehensive review or theory of the lofi hip hop genre. Future analysis of this genre would do well to include, non-exhaustively, more in-depth ethnography including one-to-one interviews, more detailed analysis of sound, style and sample provenance (particularly in relation to the resurgent popularity of vinyl records and analog recording formats), and consideration of copyright and fair use in the age of automated sample detection on online platforms including YouTube. An exploration of lofi hip hop's positioning within the marketization and commodification of nostalgia also seems an obvious direction in which to expand upon our work, but the complexity we have described here of the genre's relationship to both nostalgia, and to traditional music industry structures, leaves it a larger task than we felt it possible to accomplish in this paper. Primarily, we argue here in favor of the musical and theoretical depth of the genre, and to exhort musicologists, ethnomusicologists, sociologists, and others to take it seriously and to believe in its value. We also wish to highlight lofi hip hop's potential to call into question existing trends of analysis. Adam Harper notes that studies of internet music frequently foreground a questionable narrative of the degenerative effects of digital technology, and it may be the case that the greater emphasis upon restorative nostalgia in the earlier genres Born and Haworth (2017: 636) describe, as well as the "ironic and meta-reflexive concern" of genres like vaporwave (Harper, 2017: 95–96), contribute to this. Lofi hip hop, we suggest, breaks this model of analysis. It is both a product of and an escape from socioeconomic pressures; its meaning is derived from both fantasy and reality, engaged in with equal sincerity; it is experienced alone, but used as a means of interpersonal care and connection; it both acknowledges the loss of a past never experienced or known, and immerses itself comfortably in that past and its loss, repurposing it *within* the present rather than using it to self-consciously critique that present. We suggest that this may be a result of lofi hip hop's community being made up primarily of producers and listeners too young to remember a time before Web 2.0; for them, technology may simply be an axiomatic aspect of normality to be navigated, and to even attempt to apply a narrative of degeneration to their experience is to assume a prior state of being which they, themselves, are fully

aware they have never experienced, and will never experience. Contemporary studies of fandom, subculture, and scene cannot simply ignore this shift in lived experiences of ordinary reality, and we hope that this article might serve as an opportunity to rethink and explore issues in this area from a new angle.

Endnotes

(1) We chose to format the term ‘lo-fi’ in its unhyphenated form, ‘lofi’, throughout this paper because, although the hyphenated form is more common in academic writing, the artists we refer to in this study almost without exception use the unhyphenated form where it appears in track and playlist titles. This might be seen as a reflection of the genre’s ambivalent relationship with its aesthetic predecessors, as simply an arbitrary shortening for convenience in the informal context of social media platforms, or some combination of the two; we felt that attempting to determine precisely which was beyond the scope of the current study. The use of ‘lofi’ in its unhyphenated form is, however, sufficiently universal amongst the genre’s producers and enthusiasts themselves that we also felt it would be inappropriate to ‘correct’ it to a more academically common formatting, and have instead elected to reproduce it in our own writing on the genre.

References

Bibliography

- Alemoru, K., 2018. Inside YouTube’s calming “Lofi Hip Hop Radio to Relax/Study to” community. *Dazed*, 14 June. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/40366/1/youtube-lo-fi-hip-hop-study-relax-24-7-livestream-scene>. Accessed 27 September 2019.
- Born, G., Haworth, C., 2017. From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre. *Music and Letters* 98: 601–647. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcx095>
- Boym, S., 2002. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Crary, J., 2014. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso Books.
- Deleuze, G., 1992. Postscript on the Societies of Control. *October* 59: 3–7. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315242002-3>
- D’Errico, M., 2015. Off the grid: Instrumental hip hop and experimentalism after the golden age, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 280–291.
- Erickson, M., 2019. Mental Health Support from VICE. *Vice*, 30 April. https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/qv7b4q/mental-health-support-from-vice Accessed 16 September 2019.
- Harper, A., 2017. How Internet music is frying your brain. *Popular Music* 36, 86–97. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143016000696>
- Harris, M., 2017. *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Hofferth, S.L., 2009. Changes in American children’s time - 1997 to 2003. *Electron Int J Time Use Res* 6: 26–47.
- Kassabian, A., 2001. Ubisub: Ubiquitous Listening and Networked Subjectivity. *ECHO: a Music Centered Journal* 3.
- Kurkdjian, G., 2017. Eevee. *Wern*, 20 November. <https://wern.com/2017/11/interview-e-e-v-e-e> Accessed: 10 September 2019.
- Mylonas, Y., 2012. Amateur Creation and Entrepreneurialism: A Critical Study of Artistic Production in Post-Fordist Structures. *tripleC: Communication*,

- Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 10, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v10i1.287>
- Peirce, C.S., 2014. Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs, in: *Photographic Theory: An Historical Anthology*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.
- Reynolds, S., —
 2009. The cult of J Dilla. *The Guardian: Music*, 16 June. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2009/jun/16/cult-j-dilla>. Accessed 27 September 2019.
 2011. *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past*, Main edition. London: Faber & Faber.
- Rose, T., 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Schloss, J., 2014. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip Hop*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Tanner, G., 2016. *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave And The Commodification Of Ghosts*. Alresford: Zero Books.
- Turino, T., 1999. Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music. *Ethnomusicology* 43, 221–255. <https://doi.org/10.2307/852734>
- Virno, P., Lotringer, S., 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Semiotext[e], Cambridge, Mass; London.
- Winkie, L., 2019. How 'Lofi Hip Hop Radio to Relax/Study to' Became a YouTube Phenomenon. *Vice*, 25 March. https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/594b3z/how-lofi-hip-hop-radio-to-relaxstudy-to-became-a-youtube-phenomenon. Accessed 16 September 2019.

Discography

- Aimless. 2017. "Let me tell you about her," *for you*. United Common Records, 4 August. United States of America.
- Aixion. 2018. "Sweaters are for introverts (instrumental)," no album: self-released, 30 May.
- Barnes Blvd. 2018. "I have love for everyone besides myself," *Last Summer*. Self-released, 9 April.
- Chef Boy RJ. 2019. "Moss Garden," *Benchmark*. Self-released, 9 May.
- Chief. 2017. "Tired," *Coffee*. Self-released, 19 July, United States of America.
- Eddie Rohosy. 2017. "Night Ride," no album. Dreamwave, 29 January.
- Eevee. 2017. "I wonder if we're dead," *ep seeds*. Vinyl Digital, 1 May.
- Eugene Cam. 2016. "Be your girl," no album. Self-released, 12 November.
- Harris Cole and Aso. 2018. "Safe, now," *colors*. Self-released, 26 September.
- J'san. 2018. "Her eyes," *Her*. Self-released, 30 March, France.
- Hoogway. 2019. "Soulful eyes," *A cup of lofi #2*. Jazzhop Caf , 9 April.
- Jinsang. 2015. "Egyptian pools," *meditation [ep]*. Self-released, 23 April, United States of America.
- Jinsang and Two Sleepy. 2017. "Yawn," no album. Blossom Music, 22 October.
- Jonas Langer. 2018. "Things will be better by morning," no album: self-released, 18 September.
- J^p^n. 2016. "riva []", *[spoils]*. Self-released, 30 July.
- Karson. 2018. "I just wanna be happy," no album. Self-released, 25 June.
- Kuranos. 2018. "Springtime Loop," *loft livin (beat tape)*. Radio.Wavs, 27 May.
- Nymanos. 2015. "Jazz & rain," short stories. Self-released, 14 August.
- Philanthrope. 2016. "Waves," *Cloudfiles*. Dirty Beauty, 23 March, Germany.

- Funky Cowboys. 1997. "Life," *Funky Boots*. Diggers' Vault Records, reissued 14 March 2017, Germany.
- Ramsey. 2017. "Drwn", Russian Province. Lo-fi Opposition, 13 April.
- Secret Crates. 2015. "Springtime Stroll," no album. Self-released.
- Sky.High. 2018. "Waking up at night to get some food.", no album. Self-released, 28 March.
- Soho. –
 2017a. "Letting go," *letting go (beat tape)*. United Common Records, 23 March. United States of America.
 2017b. "Questions," *letting go (beat tape)*. United Common Records, 23 March. United States of America.
- Spliff Jackson. 2017. "Sum loops," no album. Self-released, 24 November.
- Too Ugly. 2018. "Longed For," *Too Ugly*. Bonito, 26 September.

Videography

- Ambition, 2019. Ambition - YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4X7J9D6VbTlwnFDfNkfQ1A/about>.
 Accessed 8 October 2019.
- Bootleg boy, the, 2019. The bootleg boy - YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0fiLCwTmAukotCXynqfj0A/about>.
 Accessed 8 October 2019.
- ChilledCow, 2019. ChilledCow - YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSJ4gkVC6NrvII8umztf0Ow/about>.
 Accessed 8 October 2019.
- ChilledCow. 2018. Lofi hip hop radio – beats to relax/study to [Online video livestream]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHW1oY26kxQ>. Accessed 27 September 2019.
- College Music, 2019. College Music - YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWzZ5TIGoZ6o-KtbGCyhnhg/about>.
 Accessed 8 October 2019.
- Dreamwave. 2017. Eevee – I wonder if we're dead [Online video].
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28kbEitWE-A>. Accessed 27 September 2019.
- Hypebeast. 2017. Uncut Kanye West Interview From 2013 [Online video].
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJAobv6NKEI>. Accessed 13 November 2019.
- InYourChill, 2019. InYourChill - YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCncxHd8o_VhhHAJ7QqB5azg/about.
 Accessed 8 October 2019.
- Mellowbeat Seeker, 2019. Mellowbeat Seeker - YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCO1jhQjMhil0YrHUGHyev7A/about>.
 Accessed 8 October 2019.
- Socialblade, 2019. ChilledCow Most Viewed YouTube Videos. *Socialblade*.
<https://socialblade.com/youtube/channel/UCSJ4gkVC6NrvII8umztf0Ow/videos/mostviewed>. Accessed 15 August 2019.
- Syros, 2019. Syros - YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9mFio7rXEgtRQAholeGAew/about>.
 Accessed 8 October 2019.
- Wired. 2014. Love Music Again: Questlove on J Dilla, Vinyl Snobs & Lo-fi Hip-Hop. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vN4hO-xcwgk>. Accessed 13 November 2019.